

THE A-LIST REBELS SERIES

MADD
LOVE

MISTI MURPHY

MADD LOVE

An A-List Rebels Novel

Misti Murphy

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Big List of Books

Thank you!

I wish I never had to leave you.

If I could only see you one last time...

I would tell you that I love you.

I will always love you.

CHAPTER ONE

Rogue

It's late, really late, as I drive through the city toward Ivy's. Palm tree shadows ink the road under the glow of lights from cars and lamps.

The Impala's engine roars as I press my foot down on the accelerator, cruising across the intersection while I listen to Ivy's voice through the speakers.

"You've reached Ivy. Sorry I can't answer right now. You know what to do." The inevitable beep follows.

"Damn it." I end the call and smack the heel of my palm against the steering wheel. I've called her a dozen times since I left my brothers and Summer at that stupid party in Malibu.

A dozen and one times and she hasn't picked up. About half an hour ago it stopped ringing all together and started going straight to voicemail.

She doesn't know that I know about Rebel being T-fucking-Swift. I was so angry and hurt that she kept me at a distance

and hid the truth about Alec. I wouldn't listen to her. I turned my back on her. On us.

The pulsing ache in my jaw sharpens as the pain in my chest intensifies. I reach across to the passenger seat and feel around for the cigarettes I threw there. I keep my eyes on the road as I retrieve one out of the pack and stick it between my lips. It sparks with the second roll of my thumb on the lighter wheel. Inhaling, I let it fill my lungs and ease the tension between my shoulder blades. This is my last one. I'll quit.

It's just I can't breathe when my own flesh and blood has betrayed me. My fucking twin not only kept secrets from me, he talked the woman I would protect with my life into facing off with that psycho.

I could swear I'm having a panic attack when I think about Ivy taking on Alec. Trying to get him to confess. Putting herself in harm's way. After some of the things that she's volunteered about her brother... I scrub a hand over my whiskers. My gut has been churning since I left Rebel in my dust.

My phone screen lights up the interior of the car. My heart leaps. Finally!

My knuckles turn white in their grip when I see Rebel's name instead of Ivy's. The tires squeal while they try to maintain their grip on the bitumen as I take another corner too fast.

I have no intention of dealing with that asshole any time soon.

My only objective tonight is to talk to Ivy. Lay everything out on the table. Get her to do the same. Once and for all. I love her and I think she loves me, but I need to hear her say it. I need her to tell me everything she's afraid to admit. It's not like she can possibly be hiding anything worse than Alec, so what can get between us now?

A black SUV speeds past as I turn onto the street outside Ivy's place. I find an empty parking space beside the Mercedes I bought her to replace that piece of junk she was driving when we met. Sit there with the motor running while I finish my smoke.

What if I threw away any chance of her trusting me? She opened up to me and I broke up with her because I was afraid she couldn't truly be in love with me. What if by doing that I made her realize that she doesn't want to be with me? Like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I take a deep breath and shut off the motor along with my doubts. There is no other choice but to face our demons. I can't stand the idea of my life without her in it.

Grabbing my phone, I jump out of the vehicle and let the heavy door close behind me.

It's late and there aren't any lights on in the apartment. If I were anyone else, I would probably come back in the morning. But I haven't slept in two days. Haven't thought of anything but her. Haven't been able to shake the pain in my chest that her absence causes. We can sleep wrapped around one another

once we've hashed this thing out. I won't lose another moment.

I lift my fist to pound on the door.

A dog barks. A siren sounds in the distance. My phone starts to ring in my other hand.

I shut off the call and switch the device to silent. Turning on the torch function, I move to a window and shine the light inside. Senses on high alert, I scope out a living room that seems perfectly normal. But something doesn't sit right. It's too dark inside the apartment.

My heart moves to my throat and my skin crawls along my spine. Ivy is scared of the dark. The only time she's slept with the light off has been when she's been curled up in my arms. Where she felt safe. Where she was safe. Where nothing was supposed to be able to hurt her.

What if Alec has been here? Before Riot found the photos under Emmy's seat, Rebel would have wanted something to crucify the bastard with. Ivy was trying to get a confession for my twin. What if that bastard realized? What if she thought she could still help us? What if he came after her?

That last thought has me punching a hole in the glass and twisting the latch so I can get inside. Launching across the living room, I throw her bedroom door wide open. Apologies can be made once I'm certain she's safe. Right now I need eyes on her. "Ivy?"

The lamp on her bedside table should be on, but it isn't. I turn it on and my heart lurches. Her bed is a mess of twisted sheets and blankets, but it's empty.

I leave her room, swallowing around the lump growing in my throat.

"Ivy? Adira?" The faint hint of metal and oil and earth in the air catches me by surprise in the hallway now that the rush of adrenaline is over. It's familiar in a way that I can't wrap my head around. Pungent and raw.

The lack of response does nothing to stop the back of my neck prickling and instead has me racing to the bedroom-sized closet Ivy and Adira call Narnia.

The overhead lights come on under the weight of my finger on the switch. The thumping in my ears starts to slow. Everything looks normal.

My gaze catches on the picture of Ivy and Adira on the wall, always slightly crooked. On the display shelves full of special edition designer shoes, including the Lulu Blues with their periwinkle soles.

Black curtains sway with the wind. I move toward it because it's odd. I've been in this room so many times and never even noticed there was a window because normally the curtains hang like a thick velvet backdrop opposite tall, gilded mirrors.

The window is probably ajar because of the smell. It's stronger here. The aroma sinks into my sinuses with every

breath until I can practically taste metal. There's another scent underneath it. Like flowers or candy. It's probably the laundry detergent or fabric softener they've used on the costumes, but together the scents are sickly and overwhelming.

Every step makes the back of my throat ache more. Instinct draws me toward that window like a magnet.

Until I see Ivy lying on the floor.

The whole world slows down as I stagger to a stop. An ice-cold pit forms inside me. She's deathly pale and so very still. "Ivy?"

Her chest barely moves under the fabric of a T-shirt that is far too big for her and yet rides up at her hips. Her legs are crossed at an odd angle as though she didn't mean to lie down but toppled instead.

That scent I couldn't put my finger on... it's blood. So much blood. It stains her forearms and soaks the cream carpet to rust at her sides.

"Oh God." I drop to my knees at her hip as I frantically take in every inch of her. Glimpse the razor blade in the shag. Put two and two together in a formula that will never make sense to me. This can't be real. This can't be happening. Ivy wouldn't do this. She couldn't.

She was doing her best to get stronger. To be better. Braver.

Except... fuck... I hurt her. And Rebel hurt her. And so did that prick. Every time Alec tormented her, every time he made her fear him, or made her feel weak, he hurt her. That bastard

would have pushed her until he broke her, given the opportunity. And Rebel gave him that opportunity when he talked her into putting herself in his path for us. But this...

Her hand is cool in mine as I turn it over. Stare in horror at the line scored deep into the flesh of her wrist. It weeps crimson. Her other arm has an almost identical wound. Bile rises in my throat. "No, baby. No. No. No."

How long has she been lying here? How much blood has she lost? Please God, don't let me be too late.

"I need you to be strong for me, baby. I need you to hold on." I fumble my phone with bloody hands that shake so much it's all I can do to tap in the three numbers that connect me with emergency services. My heart is trying to race straight out of my chest. "Just stay with me. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere, so don't you leave me, Ivy. Stay with me, baby. Stay with me."

The voice on the other end of the line sounds like it's coming from the other end of a tunnel. "Can you tell me where you are?"

I rattle off the address and answer every question he asks with a calmness that doesn't match the turmoil inside me. I can't lose her. I won't survive without her. It's been two days and that was almost too much for me to bear. The rest of my life without Ivy... I will do whatever it takes to save her. Anything you want, God, just please don't take her away from me. I have nothing if I don't have her. Without her nothing will matter anyway.

“An ambulance has been dispatched. We have to control that bleeding in the meantime. You’re going to need to put pressure on both wounds. Is there anyone else there who can help you?”

“Adira?” I scream, but there’s only silence from the rest of the apartment. “No. It’s just me. What do I do?”

“Can you see anything close by that you could use to bandage her wrists?”

I glance around until my gaze lands on the console where all the accessories are kept. Scrambling to my feet, I run to it.

A loose piece of paper lies on top. It’s addressed to Adira.

I'm sorry

...

My vision blurs as I turn my attention to sifting through the drawers until I find what I'm seeking. Whatever the words on that piece of paper are... she can tell me herself when she wakes up. "Scarves."

"That will work," the guy on the line says in a voice that is impossibly calm as I pull out two lengths of silk. "I want you to wrap them around her wrists with as much pressure as you can."

Dropping to my knees, I turn the speaker on and toss my phone to the carpet beside me. I focus on applying the makeshift bandages the way the 911 operator instructs me to. My breath comes in clipped bursts that catch on the pained lump in the back of my throat. "They're coming, Ivy. They're on their way. Be strong for me, baby, and hold on."

The bandaging secure, I gather her into my arms and bury my face in her hair. Blackberries. The scent of her shampoo climbs into my chest and wraps itself around my heart. My eyes burn and I blink back the wetness that coats the back of my throat. "You are so strong, baby. And I know that you didn't mean to do this to yourself. You were just hurting... so much... like I was."

Because I threw her out when she opened up to me. If I hadn't been so wrapped up in my own insecurities, she would

have been with me tonight. Not here. Alone.

But she was all alone. She was fragile. She was in pain.

I told her once I would do anything to protect her from harm. But I didn't. What if I lose her? What if it's too late to take back these past two days? "Fight, baby. I need you to fight. You have to be stronger than you've ever been. Don't leave me, okay? You have to stay with me. You have to wake up for me."

"The ambulance should almost be there," the operator tells me.

"I can hear the sirens." Albeit vaguely, but they grow louder every second.

I climb to my feet with Ivy in my arms. She's like a ragdoll as I carry her through the apartment to the front door and out into the street to meet the EMTs. My heart pounds with each step I take.

Two men in uniform exit the back of the transport and rush toward me with the gurney.

"Fight for me, baby. Don't you dare let go now." I press a kiss to her forehead before I lower her onto the rolling bed.

They hustle around her as we move toward the ambulance. Blood is already seeping through the makeshift bandages as they climb inside the transport.

"She's lost a lot of blood... damage to the artery... heartbeat is faint..."

They converse rapidly and all I can do is watch and listen and pray. It's so fucking surreal.

“We're going to have to transfuse her. What's her blood type?”

“I-I don't know.” I should know. I should be able to tell them what they need to know to save her. I bury my face in my hands. “Why didn't I ask? I should have asked. I should have taken note.”

“It's okay.” He clamps a hand on my shoulder. “We can still treat her.”

“I'll start her on O neg,” the guy behind him calls out. “We need to go.”

“I'm riding with her,” I say when the first one jumps out.

I'm climbing in when the one in charge of Ivy shakes his head. “No, you're not.”

“The hell I'm not.” There's no way I'm letting her out of my sight. “I have to be there in case... I can't leave her.”

“Not in here,” he barks.

“He's right,” the other guy says as he shoves me back so he can exit the transport. He shuts the doors, blocking my view of Ivy. “He needs the space to look after her. You'd only be in the way. You can ride in front.”

I race around to the front and climb in opposite him as my phone starts to ring. My phone screen lights up with Rebel's name. The first responder must have hung up when he heard

the EMTs. The casing cracks in my fist as we peel away from the curb and head toward the hospital.

“Please don’t give up, baby.”

CHAPTER TWO

Rogue

The doctors are waiting when we arrive. I jog to keep up with them as we bypass the waiting area and move deeper into the hospital.

The head doctor barks orders to his attending as we race to get Ivy into an operating room. She's lost a lot of blood. They suspect damage to the artery with at least one of her wounds but they won't know the extent until they start working on her.

The tubing the EMT placed in her vein still runs red while a nurse holds the blood bag up high enough for gravity to do its job.

Ivy seems so small. So vulnerable. I don't take my eyes off her. I can't. "Hold on, baby. You're a survivor. You're going to get through this just fine."

"Keep him here," the doctor orders.

A nurse grabs my shoulder as they roll Ivy through a set of doors. "You can't go in there."

“I love you, Ivy,” I yell, so that she’ll hear me even though I can no longer see her. “I’ll be right here waiting for you.”

“She’s in the best hands now.” The nurse’s grip on my shoulder tightens enough to keep me from trying to follow.

She ushers me through the hospital with its bright lighting and vinyl floors to a waiting area. “You can wait in here.”

“Thanks.” I lift a hand to shove it through my hair and get a glimpse of the blood staining my palm. Shit. It’s all over my shirt too. I’m covered in it. “Uh, could you point me to a bathroom?”

“In there.” She indicates an entrance close by.

“Thanks.” I stride away from her. Enter the bathroom. My hands shake. They’ve been shaking the whole time. I can’t get them to stop. Ivy’s blood is caked on my palms, the grooves barely visible under the rust.

Water shoots into the basin when I press the button that turns on the taps. I pump the dispenser until a glop of pearly soap floats in my hand then set about scrubbing until the water runs clear.

Finally clean, I drag a hand through my hair. It’s the normalcy of the movement when there are blood stains spread across my white shirt that gets to me. I grip the countertop as my vision tunnels. My lungs are burning and I can’t fucking breathe. I can’t catch my breath. I can’t stop the shake in my hands from travelling up my arms and into my chest. I almost

lost her tonight. I might still lose her. And I have no clue how I'm supposed to keep going if it might be without her.

I stand there for long moments, struggling to breathe while my heart races like it wants to come out of my chest. For all the bad things that my brothers and I went through with mom when we were growing up, none of them made me feel like I do tonight. It feels like I'm having a heart attack.

I eventually find the strength to take off my jacket and rip my shirt over my head. I don't even try to save it; instead I discard it in the trash, put my jacket back on, and head out to the waiting room where there are cops waiting to talk to me.

I don't know exactly how long they question me about Ivy before they decide they have enough information.

I also have no clue how much time has passed since they wheeled Ivy through those big doors and out of my sight. But I am sick of these same white walls and the way the bottom of my shoes squeak on the rubbery floor. Every minute seems to last an hour.

I'm lost without Ivy. Restless. Adrenaline is still coursing through my veins as I pace a room that feels more like a prison than a waiting room.

It's the same waiting room that Ivy practically carried me into when we'd first met. She'd been dressed like a Disney princess, and I'd been shot in the ass. Idiot I was back then, I had no way of knowing that one shy girl could turn my world upside down and inside out.

That I'd be obsessed with the mystery of her. That I'd hunt her down no matter what I had to do to make that happen. That I'd fall so fast and so deeply in love with her that the idea of life without her feels like a life spent in purgatory.

Arms across my chest, I walk to the other end of the waiting room. I can't stand it. Everything that matters to me hangs in the balance and I can't breathe.

I can't stop thinking about the way I found her. How cool her skin was. How pale and broken she looked lying on the floor in Narnia. All that blood. The strong scent of rust hanging in the air. Not even the astringent sting of the hospital's antiseptic can drown out the memory.

My stomach heaves. Bile burns the back of my throat.

My phone rings. *Riot*. I ignore it as a doctor comes into the waiting area. He calls out a name. Not mine.

I swallow convulsively as pins and needles roll over my whole body. Does that mean she's going to be okay? Or that she isn't? God, let it be the former. Plastic creaks under my ass when my knees buckle and I drop into the nearest chair.

A young woman who had been holding a sleeping toddler on her lap stands and adjusts the boy's weight to her hip as she follows the doctor into an alcove.

I clasp my hands between knees that I can't keep from bouncing. Hang my head. No news is good news, right? "Come on, man. Keep it together."

I switch positions. Stretch out my legs, clasp my hands behind my head. There's no relief to be had. Not as long as Ivy is in surgery and I can't get to her. How long has it been now?

I glance at the gold watch on my wrist as I climb to my feet. It's been hours since I left that party in Malibu. Hours since I found her. How long will it take for them to finish working on her? How long until I can draw a breath through these too tight lungs?

Another doctor walks into the area and I'm on my feet and barreling toward him before he has a chance to get away. "Ivy Love? I need to know what's happening. Is she okay?"

He stares at me with compassion in his gaze.

I start to choke up. "Tell me."

"Mister...?"

"Maddox. Rogue. I'm her..." We broke up. I initiated it. Does that mean I'm nothing to her now? "I brought her in. Is she okay?"

"So you're not family?"

"She doesn't have any," I mutter. None that I'd let near her, at any rate. Except Adira. And where the hell is he anyway? All my calls have gone to voicemail.

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you anything." He turns his back on me.

"No, wait." I grab his shoulder to stop my only source of information from disappearing. "She's my wife."

His eyes widen. “Your wife?”

Oh wow, that was not the word I expected to pop out of my mouth. Fiancée. That’s a word that would have gotten me information. Probably. Okay, it doesn’t matter. Ivy will understand. We’ll set things straight later. Right now I just need to know, “How is my wife, doctor?”

“Uh...” He blinks and picks up the conversation so he must buy it. “I’m actually here for another patient. But if you’ll give me a few minutes I’ll try to get you an update.”

“Thanks.” I can barely keep the turmoil out of my voice. All I want is to demand he find out now. To hell with anyone else.

“Rogue.” Summer’s voice hits me from way over the other side of the room as the doctor talks to an older couple with matching desperation and worry on their faces.

By the time I turn around the pint-sized redhead is throwing her arms around my waist and clinging to me like I need to be held down.

If anything I feel like I’m carrying so much weight on my chest I could suffocate. I could sink into this pain and never come up. I grab onto her like she’s a life preserver. Collapse against her as my strength fades. My voice cracks while I answer the question she hasn’t even asked. “She’s in surgery. That’s all I know. They haven’t told me anything else. One of the doctors said he’d try to get me an update.”

She reaches up and takes my face between her hands. “She’s going to be okay, Rogue. I just know it.”

Rebel and Riot are right behind her. Rebel snarls at someone over the phone while Riot engulfs me. “How’s Love? What happened?”

“I don’t even...” How am I supposed to explain to them that Ivy hurt herself? That she was in so much pain that she couldn’t deal? I don’t even know what she was thinking. I can only make assumptions based on the girl that I know. And even then... “It doesn’t make sense to me.”

“You should have called,” Rebel growls as he hangs up. “Or answered your damn phone. We shouldn’t have had to hear about this from a fucking news site.”

“Jesus, it’s news already?” I turn steel-jawed at the thought that some immoral asshole figured he could get ahead by using Ivy’s pain. Of course they fucking would, under normal circumstances. I just didn’t think it would be this soon. “Those fuckers. What are they saying?”

“It’s a whole lot of conjecture at this point,” Summer says. “They know who she is. And that she was transferred here by ambulance. Then there’s the usual question of substance abuse. Other than that...”

“They’re saying you hurt her.” The lines on my twin’s forehead couldn’t be any deeper. “They’re saying you found out she was Hawthorne’s sister and decided to take it out on her. They’re saying you two got into a fight after that video with the girl, and it escalated.”

“I would never hurt her,” I say.

“I fucking know that,” Rebel snaps back.

“We know that.” Summer draws my attention back to her with a calm hand to my jaw. “We’re on your side. We’re on Ivy’s side. We’ll put out an official statement. But you need to tell me what you know.”

All three of them wait for me to say something.

“She... I don’t know... she hurt herself...” I choke on the words. I’ve never met anyone who has fought their fears and insecurities as hard as Ivy has. It doesn’t make sense that she would throw it all away like this. “And all I can come up with is that it would never have happened if I hadn’t broken up with her. Because I would have been there for her. She would have been with me. Instead of feeling like she needed to do... this.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” Summer says. “You had no way of knowing she might do this.”

That’s not true. She told me about her past. She was scared it would change things between us. She told me how lonely she had been after her dad’s death. How she’d been in so much pain that she didn’t think she could cope.

Did I push her back into that darkness? I rub at my chest. These past two days have hurt more than I thought was possible. How much worse must it have been for her?

“You didn’t cause this. She was fine when I saw...” Rebel’s eyes widen as he catches himself.

“You saw her?” Grabbing him by his jacket, I bare my teeth at him. I’m shaking again, but this time it’s with the edgy,

twitchy need to hurl my fist into his face. “Of course you did. Because you’re fucking T-Swift.”

His jaw bulges, but his mouth stays firmly shut. It’s almost funny that he can remain silent considering he’s the one who pushed her to keep secrets from me. The one who had no qualms about throwing her to the wolf that is her brother and keeping that information from me. He might not have held the blade but he played a part in how we ended up here tonight.

“What are you going to do, huh?” Rebel stares me down, though he at least has the decency to look guilt ridden. “You wanna punch me? You wanna take some of that anger out on me?”

Fuck yes. That’s exactly what I want to do. I want to whale on him until he is as bloody as Ivy was when I found her. My grasp on his collar tightens as I shake him. “You were the reason she was keeping secrets from me. She probably felt like she had no choice, because of you. She kept quiet and I broke up with her and now we’re here.”

“You think I wanted this to happen? Because I didn’t. I was protecting you.”

“You weren’t protecting me. You were thinking about taking Hawthorne down. Ivy is just collateral damage. Admit it.”

“Hey. Hey. Hang on.” Riot grabs me by the back of my jacket and tries to drag me back.

Summer inserts herself between me and my twin. Brave woman. Both hands pressed into my chest, she pushes at me.

“We’re not going to do this now. Emotions are running high. Ivy wouldn’t want you getting yourself kicked out of the freaking hospital. She’ll want you here when she wakes up. She’ll need you.”

I go slack. Ivy is my only priority.

“You good, bro?” Riot asks.

I shrug him off and snarl at Rebel. “We’re not done with this.”

“I know,” he says.

“If she isn’t okay, I will never forgive you.” It’s not a threat. It’s a promise that I plan to keep with every cell in my body.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep, pained breath. He’s aware I can hold a grudge. That I mean it. He’s subdued when he speaks. “I know.”

“Is there anything you need?” Summer says. “While we’re waiting?”

“Uh, yeah.” I’m exhausted. Running on adrenaline and fumes. “Caffeine would be good.”

“Mr. Maddox?”

“Yes.” I turn my back on my brother to talk to the approaching doctor. He’s the same doctor that had ordered me to stay out when they took Ivy into the operating room. His expression is unreadable. My world grows fuzzy around the edges. “Ivy? Is she okay?”

“Your wife is out of surgery. It went as well as we could have hoped for,” he says, and I almost stumble as the tension leaves my body.

“Wi—” Summer squeals, probably courtesy of Rebel finding an inventive way to stop her from asking the question that must be on all their minds.

Riot squeezes my shoulder. “Thank God.”

“So she’s going to be okay.” Rebel’s voice grows lighter.

“She’ll most likely have some nerve damage,” Doc adds. “Her physical recovery will take some time. And she’ll need physiotherapy to regain full use of her wrists and hands. As for the rest... we’ve taken blood, requested a toxicology report. We won’t get those results back for twenty-four hours.”

I nod intently, but none of it matters. So what if we’ll have work to do to get back to some version of normal. As long as she’s alive.

“I want to see her.” I won’t be truly relieved until I rest my eyes on her.

“That’s not how this works,” the doctor says. “As soon as she wakes up from surgery she’ll be assessed by a psychiatrist and admitted to psyche and then you’ll have to wait seventy-two hours.”

I clamp a hand on the man’s shoulder and lean in. “I want to see her before she goes to psyche. What do you need from me to make that happen?”

CHAPTER THREE

Ivy

That was the most intense sleep of my life. I blink a couple times as I open my eyes, getting used to the light in the room. I never sleep in the dark. I can't stand not being able to see where I am.

But I... I don't recognize this room. Or this bed that I'm lying in, with a sheet tucked up to my chin. It's not my bed. A machine beeps somewhere close by. Where am I? H-how did I get here?

"Thank God, you're awake."

I jump at the unexpected voice. My heart starts beating so fast it feels like it could fly straight out of my chest. The man sitting next to the bed... he is beautiful. I must be dreaming. "Oh my God, you're cute."

"It's okay now." He brushes my hair away from my face with careful hands and an uncertain smile. Both tremble with every move he makes. "You're okay. You're going to be fine. You'll see."

“I know I am. Have you seen your face? It’s, like, so pretty. Wow.”

“Ivy, baby, do you know where you are?”

“In heaven?” It has to be, doesn’t it? For him to be here? Wouldn’t have expected heaven to look quite so much like a set off *Grey’s Anatomy*.

He chuckles and it is like the sun breaking through clouds. “No, baby, it’s not heaven.”

“But...” I’m so confused. “You’re here and you are pretty enough to be an angel.”

“Manly,” he corrects me. “Not pretty.”

“You’re hot.” God, he’s gorgeous up close. With that five o’clock shadow and his chest and abs on display under a black suit jacket he’s paired with the lightest denim jeans. They fit so snug. “Can I be your underwear?”

“Uh...” His smile grows. “How about you just be my girl?”

I beam up at him. His face is so worn. Tired. His hair looks as though he’s been tugging at it. Is it wrong that I think he looks even sexier like this? Raw and unpolished. “Can I?”

“You can.” He presses his lips together. Utterly gorgeous and sensual lips that make me want to kiss him.

“Hey,” I whisper.

He laughs. “What is it?”

“Come here.” I beckon for him to come closer.

“Okay?” He says it like it’s a question, but he leans in.

I bite my lip. “I bet I could blow your mind.”

“I bet you could too,” he says.

I breach the distance between my mouth and his. Oh wow. The moment our lips touch there are fireworks. They burst in the room with all their pretty colors. Pink. Green. Red.

“See, I told you I could blow your mind.” I collapse back against the pillow with the biggest grin. He’s certainly making me trip. I can’t decide if this is a dream or Rogue Maddox is truly here.

“That you did.” He smiles and nods.

“I am such a good kisser,” I tell him. “The best kiss you’ve ever had.”

“Can’t deny that’s true.” He tucks the blankets around me.

“And guess what?” I grin.

“What?”

“You’re the only man who’s touched these lips.” I make a duck face at him.

“Okay, then.” He settles on the edge of the bed. “But now you need to rest. It’s been a long night.”

“Oh. Okay.” I close my eyes.

“Thank God you’re okay.” He exhales audibly as his thumb brushes back and forth over my fingers.

My hand is tucked inside his. Is he sure this isn’t heaven? I open my eyes again. Four white walls. A dim light that illuminates the bed that I’m lying in from somewhere behind

and above my head. Machines beeping. And him. “If this isn’t heaven, where am I?”

“You’re in the hospital.” His voice is so rough that it cracks as he speaks. His hands tighten around mine like he’s scared to let go.

“The hospital, huh?” That makes sense, based on my surroundings. The back of my skull aches and my wrists hurt. I try to lift my arm to see if there’s a bump. What happened to me?

“Don’t.” He captures my fingers with his own and gently presses them back onto the blankets. He’s gentle; I’m so tired and weak that I don’t fight him. So much pain filters through his expression. “Don’t move too much. You’ve been in surgery for hours. You need to rest.”

“Surgery?” The pain isn’t bad. Oh wow, there’s an IV port in the crook of each of my elbows. And my right forearm is in a cast. The left hosts a bandage. Why did I need surgery?

“Rest. We don’t need to talk about it now,” he says.

Everything is hazy. I can’t seem to put together how I ended up in this bed. Or why he’s here. Not that I’m complaining. Who complains about a gorgeous, spunky guy showing up in their hospital room? Not me. No siree. No way. Adira would just die if he were here. “Hey.”

Rogue Maddox glances down at me. “What?”

“Hey.” I crook my finger to encourage him to come closer.

“Are you going to try to kiss me again?”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Okay.” His hands on either side of my head on the pillow, he leans in.

“Did they send you?” They must have. I must be awfully sick.

“Who?”

“The Make-A-Wish Foundation.” I giggle. “It’s not every day the man of your dreams tells you you’re his girl.”

“Oh, she has lines.” He chuckles and the lines on his face aren’t so deep.

“So?” I persist.

“No, they didn’t send me.” He shakes his head. The roughness is back in his voice.

I don’t like it. It makes my chest ache. “Then how did we end up here?”

“I found you. I called for help. I had to do first aid on you.”

“F-first aid? On me?” Wow.

“Yes.” His cobalt gaze is a whirl of emotions. His thumb rubs back and forth over my knuckles. “You had me worried sick.”

My gorgeous boyfriend—he called me his girl so now he’s my boyfriend, right?—was worried about me. I stare at his hand holding mine. It’s intimate and it makes my heart all fluttery. His touch is so real but everything feels like it’s

happening to somebody else. If this is a dream I don't want to wake up. Ever. Ever. Ever.

"I thought I was going to lose you," he says. "I thought I was too late."

"Oh my gosh." It sounds like whatever happened is bad. Really bad. "Why? What happened?"

"Christ, Ivy." His glittering gaze catches mine. "I was so scared. Do you know how much you mean to me? I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost you."

"I—" Wow. This is definitely happening to me. He said my name. He knows my name. Rogue Maddox really is my boyfriend. And he says the sweetest things. Such a dreamboat.

A woman wearing scrubs enters the room. "Oh, you're awake."

"I'm so awake." I smile at the nurse. "Isn't he the sexiest thing you've seen in your life?"

The nurse smiles as she makes eye contact with my boyfriend. "Still recovering from the anesthesia?"

"Think so," he says.

"Look at those abs. Have you ever seen anything like it before?" I whisper at the woman as I reach out to trail my fingers up and down them.

"Uh-uh." He catches my hand and puts it back on my lap. "Be a good girl."

“So I can look, but I can’t touch?” I press my teeth into my bottom lip. The way he called me a good girl did something to make my thighs melt. “Such a tease.”

“How are you feeling, Ivy?” The nurse moves around the bed. Starts checking her tablet.

“Wonderful.” I grin at her. “I’m in love.”

“I bet.” She smiles softly as she checks out my hottie. I don’t blame her. He’s to die for. I love watching him too. She probably knows who he is as well and can’t believe that he’s here. With me. It doesn’t make sense. But I don’t care. It’s like I’ve won the lottery.

“She needs to rest,” she says pointedly.

His face clouds and his hand tightens on mine. “I’m not leaving.”

My stomach fills with butterflies. Best night of my life. Best dream of my life. Either way, I hope it never ends.

“Fine.” The nurse backs down. “But you’re not to exhaust her. Your wife needs her rest so she can heal. And you are going to step out while I check her over.”

Did she just...? His wife? Am I married to Rogue Maddox, the most gorgeous man on the planet? Holy wow!

Hottie husband grumbles as he stands, rubs a hand over his face like he’s trying to wake himself up. “I’m going to get a cup of coffee and let everyone know you’re okay. But I’ll be back in just a few minutes. I’m not leaving your side. I won’t leave you alone. I promise.”

My gaze follows his wide shoulders as he crosses the room and disappears from my sight. I've never seen any man as devastatingly handsome as he is. And he is all mine? I am so lucky.

"He's even better looking up close, isn't he?" my nurse muses when I turn to find her watching the empty doorway too.

"That butt is a work of art." I yawn into my hand.

"You are an incredibly lucky girl." She checks my temperature.

"Oh, I know." I lift my head up and whisper, "That's my husband."

"If he hadn't found you when he did." The nurse looks at me like I deserve all the sympathy in the world. "Can you wiggle your fingers for me?"

It takes every ounce of concentration to do what she asks. *If he hadn't found me then... what?*

"Any tingling or pins and needles?"

I shake my head, then say, "Maybe a little."

"Okay." She adds something to her notes. "Are you in pain?"

"No. I don't think so."

"I suspect it will be a little while before you feel it," she says. "The psychiatrist will be in to move you to the psyche

ward as soon as we're certain you're stable. You lost a lot of blood. But in the meantime, you should rest."

"Psychiatrist?" A lot of blood? What happened to me? What am I missing?

The nurse frowns as she glances at me again. "Do you know why you're here?"

"I..." My wrists are bandaged and I had surgery and—I check the doorway as though Rogue Maddox might re-appear there—and now the nurse is telling me I'll be seen by the psychiatrist. "My wrists...?"

"That's... correct," she says as I lay back down. "I'll let your hubby back in now for a few minutes if you'd like."

It's like a fantasy come true. Rogue Maddox and I... we're together? He's... "My hubby?"

"Rogue Maddox. He's so concerned about you," she gushes. "Between you and me, I think he might have bribed someone to get back here. You shouldn't actually have any visitors yet."

"Oh my God, are you serious? Rogue Maddox is truly coming back? Wow. I can't believe it."

"What?" She narrows her gaze at me.

"I thought I was dreaming." I giggle. "He's so cute."

"He's your husband."

"Seriously? That hottie is really my husband? Adira is going to die when I tell him."

She smiles. "The anesthesia should wear off soon."

CHAPTER FOUR

Rogue

I grip the back of my neck as I arc around and stalk back toward Ivy's room. She is so fucking adorable coming off the anesthetic. I've never seen anything quite as cute as this happy, outgoing version of Ivy.

I almost wish it could last forever so she wouldn't have to relive all of the pain and trauma that led to us ending up here. Or what the next three days will entail once they take her to psyche.

I stall in front of the door while I call Adira yet again. Idle there, boring holes into the barrier with my gaze while the hinge of my jaw throbs. I can't stand that I'm not in there with her. Not when I came so close to losing her.

My lungs burn and my eyes are gummy. Seeing her like that... on the floor of Narnia. Blood everywhere. It's going to stick with me for as long as I live. If I'd been with her it would never have happened. If I'd stopped to think for even one second when she told me about Alec, she wouldn't have been alone. I would have been there.

The call connects to voicemail. Still no answer from Ivy's best friend. Where is he? Why wasn't he with her tonight? He should be here.

"Call me as soon as you get this." Ivy needs him to be here. I need him to be here. I end the call and shove my phone in my jacket pocket.

A lifetime dealing with my mother and her mental health issues didn't prepare me for what it would be like to find Ivy the way I did. And all I keep thinking is if I'd lost her tonight I would have fucking followed her right over the edge.

"Fuck it." I can't bear another second apart from her. If the nurse isn't finished by now she'll have to deal with me hovering. I shove open the door and enter the room.

"There's my man," Ivy squeals as she throws her arms up toward me. "Hug me."

I don't hesitate to go to her. When she wraps her arms around me I swallow away the wetness in the back of my throat and bend lower to press a kiss to the top of her head. I can't believe how close I came to losing her, but she's going to be okay. We're going to be okay. I will never let her go again.

"Ivy Love? Where is she?" a feminine voice demands, a second before that voice is followed into the room by a beautiful woman. "There you are, Ivy."

Everything about the older woman is immaculate, from her pointed toe heels to the cosmetics on her face to her straight blonde hair. Nicole Hawthorne.

The resemblance is there... but not to Ivy. To Alec. Because this woman is his mother too.

“Mom?” Ivy trembles as she drops her arms from around my waist.

I catch her hand and hold onto it as her mom sashays toward us in a form fitting black pencil skirt and a designer blouse. There is no way I’m going to let this woman intimidate Ivy.

A man files into the room behind her.

I’ve seen him and his Tom Ford suit and his slicked back hair before. He was hanging around Ivy like a total creep at the alternative wedding expo. And prior to that on the college campus. That was weeks ago? Longer? It seems like a whole other lifetime.

I assumed the lawyer had gotten the message that Ivy wasn’t interested in dating him, but apparently I’m going to have to make it more clear.

The nurse hurries up to Nicole. “You can’t be—”

“Do you know who I am?”

“No, but that doesn’t—”

“I own this hospital wing. I’ll have you fired if you don’t get out of my way.” Nicole is addressing the nurse, but she glares at me like I’m the crap she stood on and now wants off the bottom of her shoe. “Now, go and get the doctor.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The nurse sounds peeved but hurries out of the room.

Nicole clutches at the double string of pearls around her neck while she assesses us all through eyes the same color as her son's.

When those shrewd, cold orbs settle on me again my hackles rise.

“Get your hands off my daughter,” she orders.

“I don't think so.” I lock gazes with her, letting her know that I won't back down or be intimidated. I let Ivy down once and I won't make that same mistake twice.

“No?” Her mouth twists cruelly and there's no doubt where that bastard got that habit from. “Nathaniel, give it to him.”

The lawyer removes an envelope from the interior pocket of his jacket.

“What is it?” I eyeball the envelope. Nothing good ever comes from someone handing over a sealed envelope.

“An emergency restraining order.” Nicole smiles. “Until we can make it permanent.”

Still holding onto Ivy's hand, I tuck mine into my elbows. “I'm not taking that.”

“It'll still be in effect,” Nathaniel says. “It's in your best interest to read it and follow it. Do you have a lawyer?”

“Jason Winthrop. I'll be giving him a call.” I take the package and rip through the white paper to get at the document inside. Sure enough, it's an order to stay away from Ivy for the next seven days.

“I was so worried about you, Ivy.” Nicole carries on like she’s dealt with me and I’m no longer an issue. “When you started hanging out with him I knew you were going to end up in the hospital. I knew he’d hurt you. Look how low he’s brought you. That you’d end up needing surgery. And the doctor says you have bruises.”

Bruises? When we argued I grabbed her arm. I was furious about Alec, but was it enough to leave bruises? If it was I will spend my lifetime making it up to her. “Whatever you’re trying to insinuate—”

“He wouldn’t hurt me.” Ivy scoffs. “He’s my husband. And he’s way too cute to be that mean.”

Nicole’s lashes flutter. “What?”

“She thinks I’m cute.” I smile as Nicole chokes on the idea that Ivy and I are married. As soon as the anesthesia wears off Ivy will realize that we’re not. I’m sure she’ll understand why I said it. Or at least why I meant to say we were engaged. One day we might even laugh about it. If there will ever be a time when we can look back on tonight and not just feel traumatized. “And she knows I would never lay a finger on her.”

“Nathaniel,” Nicole screeches, grabbing for his arm, looking like she might vomit. “She can’t do that, can she? She can’t have... married him. Can we get that annulled? You can do something.”

“You need to leave,” he tells me. “As per the document in your hand, you’re not allowed within five hundred feet of Ivy

Hawthorne.”

“Love,” I mutter, and then for good measure add, “Maddox.”

“I’m a Love-Maddox,” Ivy gasps. “That’s me. I’m Love. He loves me.”

Nicole’s eyes widen. “Is she high?”

Ivy holds her fingers up in front of her face and wiggles them. “Husband dearest, where is my wedding band?”

“At home.” I smile down at her, enjoying the discomfort it’s causing the woman who is trying to insert herself between us. “You should leave, Nicole, while she probably won’t remember you tried to pull this shit.”

“This is not a joke,” Nicole says. “Ivy is *my* daughter. And you are an intruder who has caused her and our family severe pain. She wouldn’t be in the hospital at all if it weren’t for you.”

“That’s not true.” I’m already berating myself for not being there when Ivy needed me. For turning my back on her because I was too stubborn and angry to realize that it doesn’t matter that she’s related to Alec Hawthorne. I’m fully aware that living without her is not an option. I will spend the rest of my life making it up to her, but I’m not about to admit the guilt I feel to this woman.

“I have no doubt you knew who she was and decided to make it your mission to hurt Alec by hurting his sister,” Nicole says.

I'm getting dangerously close to losing my cool. I bury my fists in my armpits. "You're a liar."

"You should leave before I have you arrested," Nicole says. "Since you are in violation of the restraining order."

"Are you fucking with me?" I growl as I try to tamp down on the very anger that is likely how Nicole's lawyer was able to convince a judge to give her that restraining order.

"Give them a chance to say goodbye," Nathaniel leans in to tell Nicole. "A minute. It's the last time they'll be in the same vicinity."

"Fine," she says bitterly. "But not a second longer."

"I'm not going anywhere." I widen my stance and glare at them both.

Nathaniel is smugly confident. "You don't have a choice."

"What's going on in here?" The doctor enters the room followed by the nurse. "Ivy is supposed to be resting."

"Call security," Nicole says. "Tell them to escort this man out. He's not allowed anywhere near my daughter."

"Isn't she his wife?" the doctor asks.

"Domestic abuse," Nathaniel says, buying into the idea that Ivy and I are indeed married. "It's not the first time."

"It's bullshit." My blood pressure is spiking and the tops of my ears are burning. "You're making shit up."

"I assure you her injuries are very real, Mr. Maddox." The doctor glances at Nicole as though looking for confirmation.

“Along with multiple bruises, she has a broken wrist.”

“What?” The cast that is so much bulkier than the bandage on her other wrist. I noticed it earlier but I assumed it was tied to the surgery. Certainly didn’t think she’d have broken it. “Why would she have a broken wrist? That’s bone...”

“She also has a crack in one of her ribs,” the doctor adds. “They’ll be in my report unless Ivy tells me the cause was not malicious.”

“She’s paying you to say that, isn’t she?” I glare at Nicole. It’s the only thing that makes sense. “Whatever she offered you I’ll double it.”

“There’s no money.” The doctor turns gray above the collar of his white coat. “I’m only reporting on what I see.”

“I didn’t cause those injuries,” I fire back. My sin is in not being there when she needed me. I would never... but there’s someone who would. “What about her brother? What about Alec? He’s violent. He’s dangerous.”

“Alec loves his sister,” Nicole says. “He would never hurt her.”

It’s all lies, and she knows it. “Then where is he? Why isn’t he here? Where was he last night, huh?”

“Alec is worried sick. I told him not to come. Both of my children have ended up in the hospital because of you and your brother.” She pulls a tissue from her bag and carefully dabs at her eyes as she addresses Ivy. “Just look at what this man has done to you. What his family has done to your brother.”

“I didn’t fucking do it,” I shout.

Ivy whimpers. “Oh no.”

Shit. I’ve scared her. I sink down to her level and reach for her gently. “Baby, I’m so sorry. You know I would never hurt you. Tell them.”

“I…” Ivy yawns.

“Doctor, security, please,” Nathaniel says.

The doctor takes out his cell phone. “It might be wise to consider leaving before security arrive.”

“Ivy hurt herself tonight, and you’re more concerned with removing me from the picture than you are worried about her?” I snarl at the lot of them. Possibly she was hurt by her brother too. Did she think her only chance to get away from him was to end it all? “If there should be a restraining order against anyone it should be you two. And Alec as well.”

“Don’t talk about my son.” Nicole clutches her pearls so tightly her knuckles turn white.

“He’s a goddamn psycho. Your own daughter is terrified of him,” I snap at her as I drop my gaze to the woman in the bed. “He’s abusive. He’s a criminal.”

Nicole’s gaze pops. “You’re lying.”

“Stop covering for him.” I stand, towering over her. “We have proof that he drugged Rochelle Kitt. We have proof that he assaulted her. We’re going to take it to the cops. Pretty soon everyone is going to know what a piece of shit he really is.”

The color drains from her face, and I almost smile. It should feel like a victory, but it doesn't. Not when this stupid restraining order means I can't protect Ivy from her own mother. When security shows up I am going to have to leave. I can only be thankful that Ivy will be safely tucked away for the next three days while I deal with this legal issue.

Ivy's voice is pained when she speaks. "My head hurts."

"I'm so sorry, baby." Turning my back on Nicole, I focus on the woman I adore. Ivy is all that matters. I brush her hair away from her face. Kiss her temple. "Rest now, okay?"

"I can't believe I'm married to you." She smiles widely as she starts to doze.

"Get him out of here," Nicole orders as two men in uniforms stride into the room. "Get him out of here right now. I don't want him upsetting her any more than he already has."

"Why don't you come with us?" One of the security duo lays a hand on my shoulder.

I straighten and crack my neck from side to side. "Doctor, I think it might be time that we let my wife rest, don't you?"

"You're correct," the doctor says. "It's time you all leave."

I shake off the security guard's hold and turn to Nicole. "After you."

Nicole's face grows pinched before she walks out of the room with her greasy lawyer. I follow with my entourage of security guards.

“You are going to rue the day you tried to take my daughter from me, you cocky little upstart,” Nicole snaps at me the moment the door to Ivy’s room is closed. She stands so close that there’s barely breathing room between us. “You stay away from her.”

“Five hundred feet,” Nathaniel reminds me. “Next time we will have you arrested.”

“You know this is bullshit,” I say. “So how come you’re going along with it? What’s in it for you?”

He swallows and his gaze hardens before he appraises me coolly. “Get him out of here.”

“All right, let’s go.” The first security guard starts to manhandle me toward the exit. The second man mirrors him on my other side.

“You can take your hands off me.” I try to shrug them off. “I’m going.”

Once we’re in the elevator they let me go.

“You’re Rogue Maddox,” one of them says as we descend.

“Uh-huh.” I stare straight ahead at the line in the doors. Surely they understand I’m not really in the mood to chat, considering my woman almost died tonight and now I have a restraining order to deal with. And there is still no sign of Adira. Where the hell is he?

“It’s just... my girlfriend is your biggest fan,” he says. “We’ve seen every one of your movies. And Rebel’s too.”

“Great. Thank you.” I force myself not to snap at the man. He was only doing his job when he escorted me off the ward Ivy’s on. My real problem is with Ivy’s mother.

When Adira finally shows his face, I’ll find a way to circumvent every hurdle this wretched woman tries to put between us. If she thinks I’ll just let her walk in here and take over and I won’t put up a fight, she has no clue who she’s dealing with and how far I’ll go for my girl.

“Yeah, sometimes she likes to pretend it’s you when we’re going at it.”

The first guy chokes on his own tongue and starts to cough into his fist. “Jesus, Pete.”

Despite how fucked up these past couple days have been, for a second my lips twitch. “It’s not the first time I’ve heard that.”

“I bet,” Pete says. “I can’t wait to tell her that you’re married.”

“If you could hold off on that.” It might be hard to walk back my little snafu about Ivy being my wife if the media get wind of it. “We were trying to keep it from the media so we could enjoy it for a little while. But after tonight...”

“Sure,” Pete says. “But it’ll cost you.”

“What will it cost me, Pete?” I clench my jaw.

“An autograph for my girlfriend. And a photo.”

I'm exhausted and couldn't crack a smile for anything less than Ivy tucked up in my bed. "I'm covered in blood."

Pete's eyes widen as he gives me the old up and down. "Oh, yeah. Just the signature then."

CHAPTER FIVE

Rogue

Rebel and Riot both stand as security escorts me past them.

Summer glances up from her phone and her eyes widen. “Oh shit.”

“What the fuck?” Rebel starts to roll his sleeves up past his elbows as he and Riot stride toward us. It’s as innate a move to him as it is to me. We’ve always had each other’s backs. Until he went and talked Ivy into helping him.

“Dude? What did you do?” Riot asks as he tugs a metal lighter from his pocket and starts flipping the lid open and closed like it’s a fidget toy.

“Nicole Hawthorne filed an emergency restraining order,” I say.

“Let him go.” Rebel’s face turns the kind of stormy that doesn’t bode well for anyone who gets in his way. *You all right, bro?*

What does it fucking look like? I mirror his expression.

“We will,” says the guard whose name I didn’t catch, as they usher me toward the exit. “Once you’re outside.”

Rebel raises an eyebrow and shoves one hand into the other. *I’ll take one. You take the other?*

“They’re harmless.” I slant my gaze away from him to the looming exit.

“Huh?” Pete asks.

“What on earth is going on?” Summer asks as she and my brothers follow behind.

“I, uh, I don’t know,” Rebel says.

“Come back here while that order is still in place and we’ll be forced to get the cops involved,” the first guard reminds me as they walk me through the sliding doors and into the early morning cold. “Got it?”

“Got it.” I roll my shoulders and straighten my jacket as they disappear back inside.

It’s not yet bright as my family flank me one by one.

“How’s your wife?” Riot asks me quietly as journalists and photographers spot us from where they’ve been corralled out of the way of the entrance. They want my version of the events that transpired last night. Events that still have me spinning out.

“I almost questioned it out loud,” Summer says as the paparazzi run to crowd us.

“They wouldn’t talk if I wasn’t family.” I shrug.

“You’re a real Sandra Bullock,” Summer says.

“What?”

“Like in that movie. With the guy with the eyebrows,” she adds.

“You and your rom-coms, kitten,” Rebel says in a tone that says he wants to roll his eyes so hard.

“These guys are keen.” Riot gives me a shake. “They must have been out here all night.”

“None of you say anything.” Summer takes the lead as we move through the crowd. She’s calm and collected while I’m three seconds from breaking down. She’s most likely been prepping for this the entire time they’ve been in the waiting room. Longer. Since they first heard that Ivy had been transported to the hospital. All I could think about... all I can think about is Ivy.

Riot is beside me, flick, flick, flicking that lighter top in such a nonchalant way. But I know better. He’s as wound up as the rest of us. Antsy like an electric current is passing through him and one spark will set him off like a powder keg.

Rebel is behind us. His gaze boring into the back of my head. Willing me to keep my mouth shut and my feet moving. Having my back like he always has.

Only I can’t pretend that everything is okay between him and I, because the one person I need right now... the one person who matters right now... I can’t be with. How do I find a way to be with her when her vile witch of a mother is

determined to keep me away? When the state of California is behind her.

I've never felt as broken as I do this morning. Cut open and gutted. My insides on display for these circling piranhas with their cameras and their microphones. Their questions surround us like a wall pushing in on us.

“What happened, Rogue?” A microphone is shoved in my face.

Eyes forward, I keep walking.

“Is Ivy Love okay?” another asks.

Riot grabs the microphone closest to my face and offers it to Summer.

“I'm sure you can all understand that it's been a very long night, and as a family we need some time. We'll put out a statement in a few hours. Until then we have no comment.”

For a moment it falls quiet, like they're considering Summer's point and might just leave us be, but then a loud voice at the back shouts, “Was it a drug overdose?”

“Again,” Summer attempts to draw their attention back to her. “We will have a statement for you later this morning. If you could wait until that time—”

“Can you tell us anything about her current state?”

“Did you know she was Alec's sister when you started dating? Is that why you were so hush-hush about who your mystery girlfriend was?”

“When did you find out she was Hawthorne’s sister?”

“Was there any conversation on burying the hatchet between you two? Was this an attempt at calling a truce in the Hawthorne-Maddox feud?”

“Did you break up with her because she’s his sister? Did things get rough between you? Is that why Ivy is in the hospital?”

Guilt rushes me like a wave, drags me under. If I had reacted differently when she told me about her brother she wouldn’t be in that hospital room. She’d be in my bed, her naked body pressed against mine. Her head on my chest. Relaxed and happy.

“Just keep moving,” Riot mutters in my ear as he grips my shoulder and pushes me onward.

We’d be waking up right now to make love in the early hours because we can’t get enough of each other. Or I’d be watching her sleep, her dark locks silk against my fingertips as I considered myself so fucking lucky.

Instead I reacted like an asshole. I jumped the gun even though if I’d thought about it for one second I would have realized she wasn’t trying to betray me for her brother. No, it was my own flesh and blood leading the charge. I hurt her. I sent her away. I almost lost everything.

Those early mornings together. That feeling of sunlight kissing my chest whenever I looked at Ivy and thought *that girl is mine*. It all could have been gone. And now? Everything

is up in the air. The only thing I can be sure of is Nicole will do anything she can to keep us apart.

“Did Ivy Love hurt herself?” someone asks.

“Fuck off,” my twin snarls over his shoulder.

“She has a history of mental health issues,” the guy says from under the brim of a black baseball cap tucked into the hood of his sweater. “It wouldn’t be the first time she caused herself harm.”

“What the fuck do you know about it?” I launch myself at him.

“More than you do obviously.” His lips turn up in the corners, which is all I can see under that cap. Coward.

“Rogue,” Summer calls.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I jostle him. My hand curls into his shirt. I want to pound that smirk off his face. I’m on a knife’s edge. All these emotions swirling inside me.

His smile grows bigger. Uglier and twisted. “You don’t know her very well at all do you?”

Something inside me snaps. Before I’ve even realized I’ve made a fist with the hand hanging at my side it’s connected with his jaw. Once. Twice.

His bottom lip splits under the contact and starts to bleed. If anything he breaks into an even bigger grin as the crowd around us grows hushed.

“Christ,” Riot says.

Summer gasps. “Oh no.”

Rebel’s hand wraps around mine halfway through my next swing. The reporter spits a wad of blood onto the gravel as Rebel steps into the space between us, forcing me to relinquish my hold on the guy.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Rebel orders him while staring me down.

That simple connection grounds me when everything else has me spinning out.

The guy disappears into the crowd.

I can barely breathe as the media fill the space around us again. I’m this close to breaking open for the whole world to see and the thread between me and my twin is the only thing keeping me tethered.

“The car.” Riot says, reminding us of our objective. “One foot at a time. One breath. Ignore them.”

“Ready?” Rebel asks as he lowers my fist until my arm goes slack and falls back to my side.

I don’t fucking know how I’m supposed to go through the motions right now. My lungs are so tight. My breath labored.

“Nicole Hawthorne is releasing a statement,” one of the journalists announces.

The whole crowd starts to move. Phones are pulled from pockets or shifted from camera mode as the journalist who announced it holds up her phone and presses play on the

statement that is going live right now from somewhere inside the hospital.

A moment later other people start listening to it too and I'm forced to hear Nicole Hawthorne's faked heartbreak in surround sound. See it on dozens of device screens. A solemn and disheveled Alec Hawthorne supports her with an arm around her. Somehow he still manages to wear a crisp suit to a pre-breakfast crisis.

Does that mean he was in the hospital the whole time? Was he waiting for me to leave to make his appearance?

"We've had a truly heartbreaking situation befall our family, but thanks to the doctors and nurses who worked tirelessly to save my daughter and Alec's sister, Ivy is still with us this morning." Nicole pauses to clear her throat and dab at her eyes. Alec bows his head as though he too is overwhelmed.

None of their emotion is for Ivy. It's all an act.

"I can't leave her with him here." I spin around only for my brothers to block my path. "Get out of my way."

"No," Rebel says. *Not now. You'll only make it worse.*

"We really need to get out of here," Riot says and the two of them all but carry me through the crowd.

We're almost at the white SUV Bianca drove to the party last night when Nicole starts speaking again. "I thank you, as does Alec, for your support during this time. We have a long and arduous road to recovery ahead of us and would appreciate it if our family could be afforded the privacy we

need to help Ivy get back to the strong and positive girl that she was before she became involved with Rogue Maddox. My daughter didn't deserve to be tangled up with an abusive monster like him. Even when she said no to him he wouldn't leave her alone... he stalked her until she gave into him."

The blood whooshing in my ears blocks out whatever she says next. My knuckles are still bloody from that creep pap and Nicole Hawthorne has just accused me of abusing her daughter in front of the entire world. Fuck.

"She didn't," Riot says like he can't fucking believe what he's hearing. Even though they heard the conjecture when they were driving in.

"She fucking did," Rebel growls.

Camera flashes go off at our backs, as the media who are keeping pace with us start to ask the questions they'll be speculating over for who knows how long after this.

Did I hurt Ivy? Am I abusive? Am I the monster in this story?

I shake my head as I look into my twin's eyes. He has to know. *I didn't hurt her. I swear.*

I know you didn't. Rebel squeezes my bones until they ache.

The pain Rebel is causing me is good. It grounds me when everything else has turned into a nightmare. *What am I going to do?*

"Get in the car," Rebel orders as Summer again tells the crowd we'll put out a statement later in the day. "Don't turn

around. Don't speak. Get in the fucking car."

I'm all but shoved into the back seat before Rebel slams the door on me. Riot climbs in on the other side as I bury my head in my hands. They're shaking again. Stained with blood again.

As we drive out of the hospital parking lot I rub the blood from my knuckles.

"Do you think that was orchestrated?" Riot asks, glancing back at the crowd. "Like they paid that asshole to rile you up out there."

"Fuck." And I fell for it like an idiot. Gave them more to use against me.

"If that guy comes forward we'll settle," Rebel says. "Get him to back off. If he did it for them it's about money, right? We'll give him more to back off."

"Let's wait and see what happens," Summer says.

"We're going to call Jason and get the restraining order dealt with. Then we'll sue the fuck out of that bitch for defamation," Rebel says as he swerves through traffic. "We're going to take the photos to the cops and have Alec charged. As soon as Ivy is free from the psyche evaluation she can make a statement that the whole thing is bullshit."

"No." The shaking in my hands travels to my shoulders. "She hurt herself, Rebel. Really bad."

"Or she was hurt." He voices my own doubts.

“Most likely both. Regardless, there is no way I’m going to put any of this on her shoulders after last night. I won’t put her in front of the media.”

“Well, maybe not right away.” Summer lays a hand on Rebel’s arm. “Let’s give her some time to recov—”

“No.” I bite out the word. Guilt eats me when Summer stiffens. I close my eyes and try to calm myself. Try to breathe despite how my lungs want to seize. *God, baby, how did we end up in such a mess?* “I won’t lose her. And I won’t hurt her any more than I already have.”

“You didn’t,” Riot starts.

“I mean it. She can make a statement to the police if Alec is involved like I think he is. But then all she’ll be doing is working on recovering.”

“But—”

“It’s not negotiable,” I snap.

We all fall silent after that. I’m not in the mood to rehash it over and over with them. It’s final. I won’t do anything to jeopardize Ivy again.

It isn’t until we pass through the gates to the house that Rebel says, “What about Adira? If anyone can help refute the restraining order it’s him, right? He could tell the judge that you didn’t hurt Ivy. And he knows Nicole. As a character witness, he’s on our side.”

“Already had that thought,” I say. Adira knows how shady that family is, and Ivy trusts him more than anyone else. “But

in case you didn't notice, he isn't here. Or answering his phone."

"He took off," Rebel says.

"You know where he is." I glare at the back of his head. He knows about everything else. Why wouldn't he know where Adira is as well?

"Not exactly." He makes eye contact through the rearview mirror.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Ivy was keeping secrets from him too," he admits.

"Because of you?"

"No. Maybe. It was about Alec." He makes a face like he would prefer to choke than tell me anything. "Adira left the city to get his head on straight."

"We have to find him." Summer reaches over and places her hand on Rebel's thigh like he needs the sympathy. But he should feel guilty. I want him to feel what I'm feeling because he kept shit from me that could have changed this entire outcome.

"We need to get him back here as soon as we can."

CHAPTER SIX

Rogue

Everyone is inside when we enter the house. They must have headed straight here from the party while my brothers and Summer came to the hospital.

Rochelle jumps to her feet the second she sees us. Her arms wrap around me while her bodyguard Tex watches from where he's posted himself near the window. "Are you okay? Ivy's out of danger?"

"Surgery was successful if that's what you mean." My skin is too tight and hot and my chest is aching to explode. I untangle myself gently from her grip, far calmer on the outside than I am inside. "It's been a rough night. I need a drink."

"I've got you covered." Bianca sashays away from the bar with a tumbler of amber liquid. Sympathy twists her mouth as she places it in my hand. "Anything you need. We've got you."

"Yeah, man." Ethan clasps my shoulder as Riot wraps an arm around Ro.

“Alec is there,” my twin says.

I glance over to find him holding on that little bit tighter to Summer and I hate him for it. I almost bare my teeth. He gets to hold onto her. I don't have that comfort right now. I've lost everything tonight. Everything that matters. Because of him.

We'll bring her home.

There is no other option I'll accept. Ivy might have made it through surgery, but she's not safe with Nicole and Alec.

“We all watched the press release,” Bianca murmurs.

“What can we do?” Lincoln asks.

I toss back the liquor in my glass. Hope it will burn the bitter taste in my mouth to ash. It doesn't. Of course it doesn't. Whether Alec hurt Ivy or not, she tried to end it tonight. There was a note on the damn dresser. I only managed a glimpse but it was the same writing that was in her school books... her handwriting.

Perhaps they hurt her and she decided it was all too much. I can't begin to guess... all I know is I wasn't there to stop it. I didn't have her back. I didn't protect her.

“We have to find Adira,” Rebel tells them. “We've been trying to contact him all night but he's not answering his phone.”

“I'll go to the Mojito Bar when it opens and talk to the queens,” Ethan says.

“I'll swing past the apartment again,” Linc offers.

“Restraining order and public viewpoint be damned, I should be there with her right now.” I march out of the room.

“Wait, Rogue.” Summer follows after me.

“Did you volunteer to come after me because you know if he tries to stop me I’ll hit him?” I grab the keys to one of the cars from the cabinet near the garage. “I won’t hurt you, Sum, but I’m not going to let a piece of paper keep me away from Ivy, and I’m certainly not going to let you get in my way either. I can’t wait around for that woman to sink her claws into her.”

“No.” She grips both of her elbows and squeezes. “I don’t expect you to. I don’t even want you to. But—”

“But, what?”

She drops her gaze to my jeans. “You’re covered in her blood.”

“Shit.” Somehow in all the shock and exhaustion and the media hoopla and the rushed drive home I forgot that I was covered in Ivy’s blood. I pass my hand over one of the rust colored marks and my palm comes away stained. I blink like it will make my hands clean again. But they aren’t.

I shove one of those dirty hands into my hair and grip it as exhaustion overwhelms me. I need a moment to catch my breath and find my bearings. I need to clean up and a change of clothes. I put the keys back next to the empty spot where Emmy’s key should be. I forgot about that too. “Emmy—”

“Linc picked up the car and drove her back.”

“Of course.” I head toward the room I use when I stay here. “I’m going to shower.”

“We’re going to fix this,” Summer calls after me. “I promise you, Rogue. We are going to find a way to fix everything.”

I shut the bedroom door and go into the ensuite bathroom. I have to believe her. The future without Ivy in it—no matter how immediate or short term—is not something that I am willing to imagine, let alone accept.

I turn the water to a scalding temperature and shed my ruined jacket on the tiles. The rest of my clothes follow. I sag against the counter. Can barely hold myself up as my emotions drag me under.

Hell, I tried to fool myself into thinking I could turn my back on our love, but I knew I was wrong as soon as she was gone. It was only fear and pride that kept me from going after her straight away. It was only stubbornness that kept my anger banked to a level where I couldn’t bring myself to hold onto her like nothing else matters.

I clear the wetness from the back of my throat and step under the spray. The steaming water sluices over my body as I lather up some body wash in my hands and start to get clean. If Ivy were here the whole room would smell like blackberries. If Ivy were here I wouldn’t need to rest my head against the tiles while I get all choked up over how close I came to losing her. And I wouldn’t swing back to wanting to punch my twin in his stupid fucking face while I climb out and towel off and get dressed.

If Ivy were here she would be in my arms and I'd be promising her I'll never let her go again. Because she and I... we're meant to be together.

Rebel is flipping hotcakes onto a stack on a plate when I walk through the kitchen. It's a thing he does whenever he wants to make someone happy or knows he's fucked up. The aroma makes my stomach growl, but doesn't slow me down.

"What do you think you're doing," he calls out to me.

"Going to the hospital," I say.

"She's been transferred. You won't get to see her," he warns me.

"You don't know that."

"Uh, I do. I called and pretended to be her husband."

"You... fuck." I stop in my tracks.

"Actually we need to talk about your relationship status," he says.

"I meant to say fiancée. It came out wrong. I wasn't exactly thinking—"

"We do need to talk about that," Summer says, walking in with our lawyer. "But Jason is here so it'll have to wait."

"What have you two got yourselves into this time?" Jason puts his briefcase down beside one of the stools at the counter and unlatches the button on his jacket before sitting down. "I thought after the last time I wouldn't have to bail either of you out of trouble for a while."

“There’s no bailing,” I say.

“No bail.” Rebel collects a mug and pours black coffee into it before sliding it in front of Jason. “A tiny restraining order.”

“Emergency restraining order,” I elaborate.

“Where is it?” Jason asks.

“In my jacket.” I palm my chest before I remember that I abandoned the blood stained garment before I showered. “In the bedroom. I’ll grab it.”

Collecting the paperwork, I bring it back and hand it over to him.

He unfolds the document and reads it. “Why is this petitioned by Nicole Hawthorne?”

“Nicole Hawthorne is Ivy’s mother,” I say. “Ivy is Alec Hawthorne’s sister. It’s all over the media this morning. You haven’t heard?”

“I’ve been heads down with another client.” Jason lifts his gaze to Rebel and then to me. “The girl you’ve been seeing is the sister? Is this some elaborate joke? Are you screwing with me?”

“No,” Rebel and I say at the same time.

“I thought I told you.” Jason sighs and rubs at the bridge of his nose like we’ve given him a migraine. “Don’t fuck where you fight. Preferably don’t fight at all. But since I can’t stop you, you could at least keep it separate from where you stick your dick.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Rebel says.

“I love her.” I fold my arms over my chest and glare at my brother. “And if it’s any consolation I wasn’t the one that knew I was falling for Alec’s sister.”

“Christ, Rebel. You knew?” Jason stands and starts to pace.

“I thought we could use it to our advantage,” Rebel says.

“You thought you could use her,” I snarl at him.

“Rogue, I didn’t mean for it to go like this.” He exhales like his guilt weighs so much it’s crushing him. “I was going to—”

“I don’t want to hear it.” I hope it is crushing him. I hope he realizes that it doesn’t matter what his plan was. Only that Ivy is hurt because of his stupid secrets. “I don’t care what you were going to do. It’s about what you should have done.”

“Okay. Okay.” Summer slides between us. She pushes her palms into my chest despite how futile the gesture is. “What’s done is done. We can only work from here. Isn’t that right, Jason?”

“Yes.” He picks up the coffee Rebel poured for him and takes a sip. Clears his throat. “The restraining order has been filed by someone who isn’t the party in question. Why is that?”

“She’s incapacitated,” Summer says. “She’s been placed on a seventy-two hour psychiatric hold.”

“And they’ve effectively blocked you for seven days.” Jason’s brow furrows as he muses to himself. “After which

time they'll probably take you to court for a permanent order."

"What does that mean?"

"If they are successful, it means you won't be allowed near her for three years. And up to five."

The world tunnels. Three years? I can't breathe through the knot in my throat. "That's not—"

"Can we fight it? Can we sue them?" Rebel is asking.

"We can do both of those things," Jason says. "We also have the fact that this order has been filed by someone other than Ivy. I can have this thrown out of court in a couple... Tuesday at the latest."

"Fuck." I smash my fist down on the counter. The plate of pancakes jumps from the force. That's still four days. I can't leave Ivy vulnerable when they finally release her from the hospital. "It's got to be Monday."

"I would suggest you keep your temper, appropriate or not, under control." Jason eyes my fist. "And follow the rules of the order. No doubt you're fighting an uphill battle with the media already. Acting like a violent asshole won't help your case. With the public or a judge."

"I know." I shove both hands in my pockets.

"Do you?" He picks up his briefcase. "Do you understand that I can't help you if you undermine what I'm doing because you can't keep your emotions in check?"

"Hey, it's been a rough night," Rebel backs me up.

I've got it," I say.

"Good." Jason angles his head and his gaze narrows. "Is there anything else you should tell me?"

I rub my thumb over my knuckles. "I might have punched a reporter."

"Of course you did." Jason's expression darkens. "When?"

"This morning. During Nicole's live statement. While they were calling Rogue an abusive stalker," Rebel says. "The guy had to be a plant."

"I can work the emotional distress angle if he becomes an issue." Jason turns to leave. "I'll let you know as soon as we have a hearing."

"We've got evidence Alec drugged Ro," Rebel tells Jason. "She's going to take it to the police and have him charged."

Jason stops. "Does he know?"

"Not that we are aware," Rebel says.

"Actually he most likely does by now." I puff up my cheeks because I'm about to look like an idiot. "I kind of lost my temper while I was arguing with Nicole."

"Oh, Rogue." Summer sighs. "You didn't."

"Rochelle should move on this now." Jason puts down his case and takes his phone out of his jacket pocket. "Today. It's going to be hard enough that she didn't come forward earlier. You don't want to give them time to build their defense. I know the cop you want on this. He'll come out to the house."

“I’ll call Marty. See if we can coordinate the news drop with Alec being charged.” Summer leaves the room, already tapping in the journalist’s number.

“And Ivy?” Because as much as I’ve wanted this for Ro, Ivy is my main concern now.

“Stay out of trouble for the next three days. That’s it. All you have to do.” He holds up a finger to silence me when I open my mouth to agree. “Hey, Ruiz. I have a client I’d like you to meet. Let me give you the address.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rogue

Sweat drips down my forehead and into my eyes as I take another swing at the punching bag hanging from the ceiling of my twin's home gym. The heavy leather bag sways on its chain, the thick metal squeaking under the impact.

It's been almost forty-eight hours since the last time I laid eyes on Ivy. One more day until they release her.

My lungs burn as I power my fist into the side of the bag. My shoulders are starting to ache and my pulse pounds in my ears. I feel powerless. Helpless. All this waiting is making me crazy.

The air rushes out of me as the white wraps I'm using to cover my busted knuckles start to turn ruby under the constant rhythm.

Rochelle talked to the detective Jason asked to come to the house. She laid it all out for him in detail. We showed him the pictures.

His expression had grown more and more stormy the longer he listened to her. Ro isn't the first girl who has come forward about Alec. But the other girls changed their minds about following through. Or they didn't have evidence to support their claims. And Alec Hawthorne doesn't come across as the bad guy. He comes from a good family. Nicole Hawthorne is an upstanding member of the social elite.

It takes planning to arrest someone of his caliber. A solid case. Even if he is a monster. So we're waiting... I'm waiting to see that fucker's face when they cuff him. My God, I hope they do it in front of a crowd. And I'm waiting for the moment time runs out on the restraining order. And I'm waiting for Ivy to be released, back in my arms. Where she should be.

I can't help feeling like I screwed up when I told Nicole we were going after Alec. And I screwed up when I hit that asshole reporter. And I failed fucking spectacularly by not being there when Ivy needed me.

The bag swings back and I take the body hit. My hands are numb and my vision is blurred with my perspiration. Blood drips where it has soaked through the wraps.

I tear at the taut cloth until it comes loose and unravels. Peeling them from my skin, I toss them aside and assess the damage.

The plink of a single drop of blood hitting the gym floor is like the boom of a drum. One drop turns into a puddle at my feet. There's so much blood. Too much for battered knuckles. My heart beats on my tongue and my hands shake as I flip

them palm up. They are the color of rust. Red runs over my wrists and all the way down my elbows. I choke on the sweet-metallic stench. Swallow against my stomach, which tries to revolt.

I was supposed to keep Ivy safe. Instead I let her go. And every moment since has been hell.

“Need to get something off your chest?”

“Huh?” I glance up from my hands and lock eyes with my twin. There’s concern written all over his face as he approaches. I glance back at my hands... sweaty and free from any traces of blood. I’ve scrubbed them so many times they’re cracked and raw. I drop my gaze to the floor again... it’s pristine.

I rub one hand over the other. It doesn’t seem to matter how clean I get them... I keep seeing her on that floor in Narnia. Her skin is almost as pale as the carpet. Her wrists are slashed brown and bright red.

When I close my eyes it only intensifies the memory. No matter how hard I try to block the scene out I keep recalling details I don’t remember noticing at the time. How she was wearing one of my T-shirts. How there were bruises on her wrist.

I grind the heel of my hand into my eye. I haven’t slept in days. Can’t eat. Can’t concentrate.

“You can’t get it out of your head,” Rebel says. It’s not a question. There’s recognition in his gaze, so identical to mine

as he joins me in the middle of the gym. “There’s something about that much blood.”

I grit my teeth hard enough to cause a headache. I got there in time... I know that. I saw her in recovery with my own eyes. Still, nothing stops me from finding her over and over on a loop in my head. Seeing her blood all over my hands. My heart stops now the same way it did then. My voice catches on the wetness at the back of my throat. “She almost died.”

“But she didn’t die.” He grabs my shoulders and forces my focus. “You got to her in time.”

“Did I?” Because it doesn’t feel like it. Not when she’s still not safe. Not when I’m blocked from even being in the same vicinity. “It feels like they’re going to find a way to keep her from me.”

“She is safe. You have to keep hold of that,” he says.

“It’s not enough.” I shrug off his grip. Turn my back on him. I thought if I loved her and kept her out of Alec’s way that I could protect her. But when she told me she’d been in his crosshairs all along I let her down. I told her to leave. I broke her heart. I broke my own too. “I should have been there from the get-go. I should never have been anywhere but there with her.”

It’s my fault. I can’t block out the little voice that has been growing louder and louder with every passing minute since I found her. Can’t quiet it. Can’t stop thinking that I could have changed all of this if I’d just been there. That I might as well

have held that blade myself. Now I'm fucking powerless.
“Fuck.”

He tosses me a towel. “We'll fix this.”

“How?” I can't leave the compound without the paparazzi chasing me and asking a million questions. And that jackass security guard didn't only tell his girlfriend that Ivy and I were married, he spilt the tea all over social media.

Our fake as fuck marriage, that Ivy probably doesn't remember because of the anesthetic, has taken on a life of its own.

Summer had to ad-lib the press release to include how thrilled the family was about the nuptials since walking it back would have made me look even worse. And given Nicole an edge in her attack on me.

Our marriage is damn well trending under #maddlove; a play on our last names that the public decided to run with.

And #playboywifed, like the idea that this player could settle down with anyone is of fairytale proportions. People are gushing about how romantic it is that the two of us could work past the war between our families and fall in love. They're posting images of what dress they think Ivy might have worn and what super-secret location we used to exchange vows.

Honestly those posts are the closest I get to feeling hope. There's something about the idea that allows me to imagine the future might not be so bleak as the present.

But then people are also posting their opinions on us with the hashtag #abusivehusband and that makes me want to punch a bag until my knuckles bleed.

I wipe the sweat from my brow. “It’s a clusterfuck. And we haven’t found Adira.”

It’s like he disappeared off the face of the planet. I can’t just stand around doing nothing, but my hands are trussed up behind my back. I can’t find Adira. Can’t take on Alec. Can only wait for Ivy to be released. I won’t breathe freely again until she is.

But news of Adira’s whereabouts in the meantime would be a great start.

“I promise you—”

“Don’t say crap you can’t back up,” I warn him.

“It’s going to be okay. Adira will show. You just have to be patient.”

I wish I could believe him. I fetch a bottle of water from the small fridge over next to the wall. Twisting the cap free, I take a long pull and try not to choke on all the shit I’m feeling.

Like how much I want a drink that isn’t H2O. I want to drink myself into oblivion. Drown this voice in my head that keeps telling me that I’ve lost Ivy and I could have done something about that.

I clench my jaw until it aches as I walk over to where I left my phone and the new packet of cigarettes Bianca had brought

with her this morning when she dropped by to check on me. Lifting one from the pack, I stick it between my lips.

“You need to stop doing that. Do you think Ivy will want to deal with your bad habits once we get this mess cleared up?”

I stop on my way out of the gym. My fingers ball up as the tension in my shoulder blades ratchets up. I hate that he thinks he’s the fucking king of shit. “It’s a cigarette, not fucking heroine. Don’t tell me what I should and shouldn’t do.”

“You’re angry.”

“You’re damn right, I’m angry.” I turn and face him. Face the man who looks so much like me. Whose blue eyes mirror mine.

Except they don’t this time. His gaze is wary. Regretful. Soft. “You’re not to blame.”

“No.” His words cut right to the heart of me. And I hate that he has that ability. To see inside me and know what I’m thinking and feeling. And then he uses it as an excuse for the way he treated Ivy like a commodity. The way he kept important details from me.

The unlit cigarette falls to the floor as I launch myself at him. “You are.”

He goes down under my fists like a sack of manure, copping a blow to his pretty boy face before he makes my teeth ache with a hit of his own.

I give him an identical bruise to his jaw. “You had no fucking right.”

He catches me in the throat with the heel of his palm. “Fuck. Get off me.”

But I’ve got the upper hand and enough fury in my veins that he can’t move me. “You had no place getting involved where Ivy was concerned.”

He brings his arms up to block me from punching him in the face again. “What was I supposed to do? You’re my little brother.”

“By one minute.” I slam my knuckles into his ribs over and over again. “We’re not a pack of fucking dogs. We’re a family. You’re supposed to share shit like this so we can protect the people we love.”

He grabs my head with both hands and squeezes until the pressure is almost too much. “I was protecting the people I love, you fucking asshole.”

“Oh yeah?” I land a blow to his jaw.

“Yeah.” He winces but doesn’t let go. He plants me under him on the mat. “You’re my brother. I love you. I will always protect you.”

The fury leaves me and my blows slow and lose their force. “I love her. I love Ivy. I don’t care that Alec Hawthorne is her brother. If you really wanted to protect me that’s something you should have told me as soon as you worked it out.”

“I know.”

“As soon as you two came up with your stupid plan to get a confession I should have been included. You should have

trusted that I could handle it.”

“I know.” He eases his grip on me.

I use it to get the upper hand. Draw him up by his collar. “You should have trusted me. Relied on me. Given me the choice. Asshole.”

He puts his hands up in surrender. “I fucked up. I know I did. Trust me, I wish I’d handled things differently.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t.” I let his head slam into the floor. “You. Betrayed. Me. I almost lost her, Rebel. She almost died in my arms. Do you have any idea what that feels like? Could you imagine if that was Summer? How could you betray me like that?”

“I...” His eyes shine as bright as my own, though the pain is different. “There’s no excuse, there’s nothing I can say—”

“We found Adira.” Riot comes running into the room and stumbles to a stop within a few feet of the door. “Oh damn. What did I miss?”

We both climb to our feet.

The white of one of Rebel’s eyes has turned pink. And the skin around it has grown shiny. He brushes himself down. “Nothing.”

“Are you good now?” Riot asks.

Rebel and I glance at each other.

Do I hate my twin for going behind my back? No. Am I still angry with him? “It’ll be a while.”

“Fine with me,” Rebel says.

“Summer is going to be pissed.” Riot lets out a low whistle then grins. “We better get you both some ice.”

I touch the place on my lip where it hurts. It’s already starting to swell and my fingertip comes away bloody. “We found Adira?”

“More like he found us,” Riot says. “He’s here.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rogue

“**Y**ou look as rough as I feel.” Adira glances between me and my twin as we make our way into the kitchen. He’s the most un-Adira I’ve ever seen him, with enough scruff to count as a full beard and dark circles under his eyes.

“It looks like you’re winning,” I say. “Where have you been?”

“I had a friend I needed to visit. Amends to make.” He wraps his hand around a small silver pendant dangling from his neck. “But it looks like I should have been here.”

“Didn’t you get my messages? See any of the news?” I grab his black tank in my fist. “It’s been two days.”

“Christian lives in the middle of nowhere. Doesn’t own a TV. Reception was practically non-existent.” He pries his shirt free. “As soon as I heard, I came home, but I can’t see her. You know that. Not for another twenty-four hours. They wouldn’t have let me see her—”

“She shouldn’t be in the hospital,” I roar. “You should have been with her.”

“Don’t.” His expression turns strained. “I know you’re probably feeling as guilty as I am right now so I don’t want to say anything I’ll regret. Perhaps you should consider doing the same.”

“Hey Adira.” Rebel smacks an ice pack into my shoulder. “He has a point. Put this on your face.”

“Stay the fuck out of my business,” I snarl at him as he presses his own ice pack to his eye.

He gives me the bird over his shoulder as he goes to join Summer.

I toss mine on the counter. I want the pain. The sting is the only thing breaking up how helpless I feel.

“I can’t believe you,” Summer says as Rebel puts an arm around her waist and tries to draw her close. “We talked about this.”

“He needed it,” he says.

“You needed it.” She smacks his chest and walks out.

Rebel follows. We lost Riot in the gym. I’m not the only one trying to keep a lid on their anger at the moment. Not the only one worried that the damage can’t be undone. That Ivy won’t be the same. That Alec will continue to get away with what he did to Ro. That we can’t go back to what we were before my twin screwed me over.

I extract a cigarette and shove the pack in my pocket. “Have you been home?”

Adira flinches. Grows ashen. “It was the first place I went when I got in.”

“So you’ve seen it then?” I pat my jeans, searching for a lighter. Come up empty. There’s one out on the deck though so I head outside and Adira follows. “Narnia? The letter?”

“I’ve seen it,” he says and hugs his arms across his chest. “The cops came and did a walk-through.”

“Did you read the note?” The threads of tobacco catch fire with the flame, and I inhale until my chest eases. These shitty little cancer sticks are the only thing getting me through the day. “I didn’t read it. Didn’t have time to read it. But I saw it. It was her handwriting.”

I don’t want to read it now. The very thought of it hurts like there’s an elephant sitting on my chest. I have no idea how we move forward from here when she comes home. I have no idea what I’ll say to her. What I’m supposed to say. What I’m supposed to do. If I’ll ever be able to trust her to be out of my sight again.

“I read it.” His gaze grows bright as he takes a seat in one of the wicker loungers. He concentrates on a point on the wood by his feet before he grows resolved. “But I don’t believe it. Can’t believe it. She was sad when I left, but she was doing okay.”

We fall into an uncomfortable silence that is still easier than talking.

“There’s something else.” He clears his throat. “You know how much she hates cameras.”

“I do.”

“I have cameras in Narnia because my collection is worth a fortune. The footage is why I went home first. I wanted to see if the cameras caught anything. There was nothing but static.”

“And blood,” I say.

“So much blood.” He shakes his head.

“She can’t go back there.” I sit opposite him. Tap the ash from my cigarette into the sand in the ashtray. “I don’t want her to have to face that.”

“She didn’t hurt herself.” He sticks his chin out. “There’s no way. The letter doesn’t make sense. Maybe a year ago it would have, but she was turning into this whole other person with you. Getting strong.”

“But she has hurt herself before.” She told me. She was scared that I wouldn’t want to be with her. That I’d see it as a weakness. I brushed it off like it didn’t matter. She survived and that was the past. But what if I was wrong? She was sad and alone because of me. “We can’t pretend that she couldn’t.”

“I always figured that was an accident,” he says. “A mistake.”

She as much as admitted it was. That's probably another reason why I didn't take it as seriously as I should have. Never again.

"There's something else." I take another drag from the cigarette. "She had bruises. On her arms. A broken wrist. And a cracked rib."

"Seriously?" Adira pales. "So Alec hurt her?"

"My guess is that he did. Though they're trying to blame it on me." I squash the butt into the sand in the ashtray. "Perhaps he was the final straw for her."

"Oh my God." Adira covers his mouth with his hand. His eyes are so wide the whites show. "What if he did this to her?"

"Did the cops find anything?"

"No, but..."

"They didn't have any reason to be suspicious." The fresh cigarette I pulled from my pack snaps in my fist. If he tried to kill her... "You think he would?"

"I don't know," Adira says. "Five days ago I would have said he wouldn't go so far as to kill his own sister, but that was before... Did she say anything? About what happened?"

"She was stoned on the anesthetic. Tired. Confused. She believed that she and I were married." It was absolutely adorable how thrilled she was. Made me want to make it real, preferably as soon as possible. "The cops wouldn't have been able to use it even if she had told them he hurt her."

“But it’s been days,” he says.

“Which is why, as much as I hate it, Ivy must have known to turn the camera off before she...” I bite back on a sob as I drop the broken cigarette in the tray. My hands are shaking again. “Surely by now they could use a statement if she made one. If she’d told anyone about what happened and he was involved... shouldn’t that knowledge have made it to the police by now? Wouldn’t they arrest him? So he can’t have...”

The door opens and Rebel stumbles out like he’s being chased by screaming fans. His hair is a mess and he struggles to latch his belt. “You have got to see this.”

“What?” Obviously he’s made up with Summer. As much as I would normally make jokes about joining them, that can’t be what he’s talking about.

“Alec is being arrested.” He tugs at his shirt as he turns and races back inside. “It’s about to be live news.”

I glance at Adira as we both stand. This arrest has been a long time coming. It’s about what Hawthorne did to Ro. It’s not about Ivy. And yet... “Do you really think he could kill his own flesh and blood?”

“I cannot believe for one second she would try to kill herself. Not when she was finally ready to face off with Alec,” Adira says as we enter the house. “So I don’t know what to believe.”

We gather around the TV in the living room as the reporter fills us in on how Alec Hawthorne is being arrested for what

he did to Ro. Behind her, a couple of officers are leading him out of his favorite eatery, his wrists in cuffs.

His face is a mask of shock, but there's tension in the way he carries himself. Anger darkens his gaze. He was aware this was coming. Probably practiced looking surprised and innocent a million times beforehand.

A crowd has formed around him as he's led across the pavement. They take photos and video and shout questions. Someone throws a drink and the milkshake explodes as it hits his shoulder. It splatters the black suit he's wearing. His top lip curls in an ugly way before he's yanked away by the cops and shoved into the back of a cruiser.

Riot has his arms wrapped around Ro the entire time we watch. Doe-eyed, she stares at the monster who hurt her.

Nicole is there too. In the background. Storming away as the on-scene journalist tries to ask her questions about the arrest. About Ivy. About how it feels to almost lose her daughter and then have her son arrested for his predatory behavior.

"No comment." Nathaniel puts his hand up to the camera as he advises Nicole not to say anything. When he removes his hand he takes off his jacket and uses it to protect her from the cameras while he escorts her into the back of a town car.

"Now that Alec has been arrested, we need to focus on Nicole," Adira tells me. "She has always considered Ivy to be an asset. And not in the good way. Nicole won't let go without a fight. She'll want Ivy under her thumb."

“That’s not going to happen,” I say.

“She’ll try to convince the entire world that only she has Ivy’s best interests at heart,” he says as the story on the screen changes and Ro crumples in Riot’s arms. “Especially if she thinks she can use Ivy to control Alec’s situation. Use her to control you.”

Ro throws her arms around my brother as she buries her face in his shirt. It must be some kind of relief to finally have the world see Alec as he truly is after living with it for so long, no matter the steps that must come before he’s punished and she can move on. If she can ever truly move on.

“You think she wants Ivy as a bargaining chip?” I crush the back of the couch with both hands. I thought Rebel and Riot and I had it bad with our mom and her issues, but at least she wanted to love us. At least she tried while she was able to. “It’s like there’s no love in that family.”

“Mmm.” Adira nods. “Richard was the loving parent. He adored Ivy. That’s where she gets her sweet nature from, I’m sure. God knows she didn’t get it from the evil hag.”

“Should we celebrate?” Rebel asks when Ro finally lifts her head from Riot’s shoulder. “Is that a thing we should do?”

Ro dabs under her eyes with her fingers. It’s been a long road to get to this point. It wasn’t that long ago she couldn’t even be in the same room as my twin. And that tore our family apart. Her smile slowly grows more sure of itself. “I want to celebrate.”

“I’ll get glasses. You get the champagne,” Summer says to my twin.

Rebel’s gaze is overly bright. His shoulders are higher than they’ve been in a long time. Although they drop again when we lock gazes as he follows Summer. So does the curve of his mouth. *I wish things were different. Ivy should be here.*

This is good. For Ro. But I can’t shake that sensation that the storm is still not over. “I need you to do something for me, Adira.”

“Of course.”

“I want you to acquire a marriage certificate.”

“Fake documents are kind of tricky.” His expression turns unreadable. “I don’t usually get involved with something that shady. You’re asking me to cross a line I’m not comfortable with.”

“What aren’t you comfortable with? I’m not trying to trick Ivy. She will know it’s fake. I’ll know it’s fake. Everyone here will. But you know those reporters out there will verify everything... and the last thing I want is Nicole to have anything she can use against me. A marriage license should be enough to get her to back off.”

“Okay.” His expression softens. He offers Summer a weak smile as she hands out glasses.

“Do it quickly,” I say when she moves on.

Rebel pops the cork from a bottle of Taittinger. The bubbles explode out of the neck and he barely manages to land them in

the flute Ro is holding. Riot says something about Rebel blowing his load too quick and then laughs.

And all I can think is I still have another day without Ivy. And that's if Jason manages to get the restraining order thrown out.

"Are you going to collect her when they discharge her?" Adira asks.

"I plan to." I wait until Rebel has filled our glasses. "I expect you'll come with me. If I can't, because of the restraining order, I want you to pick her up and take her to my apartment. The two of you will stay there until I can deal with it."

Adira nods as Ro rubs her fingers up and down the stem of her glass. She does that when she's nervous. "It might only be a start, and there are no guarantees that Alec will ever get what he deserves, but I want to celebrate that, at the least, I got to watch him feel even an ounce of the humiliation I've felt. I stood up for myself when I didn't think I'd ever be able to face what happened. I couldn't have done it without you boys. Summer. You helped me start to see my worth again. So I want to say that I appreciate you all. And say that no matter what happens I'm going to see this through to its end. He isn't going to get away with what he has done anymore."

We drink to Ro.

CHAPTER NINE

Ivy

I stare at the clothes on the hospital bed.

Soft to the touch black denim with rips in the knees. A man's hoody in navy blue and a matching tank top. And a bra and panty set in a brighter version of my favorite color that looks like it costs more than I have in my bank account.

The clothes came via courier this morning, according to the nurse who delivered them to me about half an hour ago. The box of strawberry Pop-Tarts is a nice touch.

The note in my hand reads;

Baby,

I don't have the right words to convey how truly sorry I am that I wasn't there when you needed me. If you'll forgive me I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you. I won't let you down again, Ivy. I promise. I'll be there when you're discharged to bring you home. I'll be there no matter what you need.

Rogue

I flip the rectangle over and stare at the back of the card. It's as blank as my memory from the last few months. The doctors say that it's a trauma response. I couldn't handle what I did to myself so I blocked it and the reasons for my actions out entirely.

It's weird because I have long-term memories. Everything up until the time I spent in Sunny is crystal clear. My dad's death still hits me hard when I think about him.

I have college homework that I know was due months ago, but I don't remember doing it. Or even going back to college after last summer.

And the weather turned cold. It's like I went to sleep in the summer and now it's almost Christmas.

The man who bought me panties? And signed the card? He's a wild anesthesia dream that I had post-surgery. Or, at best, a crush I have on someone so famous I could never be in his orbit, let alone talk to him. Let alone get naked enough around him that he knows my cup size.

I cover the bandage on one of my wrists with my other hand. The wound hurts a lot. It aches down to the bone. I get these pins and needles because I managed to cut into the nerves. The pain meds they have me on help, but they suck. I feel sick all the time. Sleepy. Confused.

I don't know why I did what I did. I don't know what I was thinking or feeling. I have no clue why I had so much sedative in my system at the time. Or where I got the prescription drugs from.

I don't understand why Rogue Maddox is sending me packages and apologizing. Or why he thinks that I am going anywhere with him.

The doctor steps into my room. She has auburn curls that bounce around her shoulders and her identification on a lanyard. We've talked a lot these last few days. She checks the tablet that she carries. "How's the memory this afternoon?"

"Still missing." I drop the card on top of the package.

"Do you have somewhere safe to stay? Somebody who can be with you?"

"I think so." I fidget with a strand of my hair. It's greasy because the shampoo they gave me to use isn't my regular brand and no one brought me anything from home. The box from Rogue is the first thing that I've received from outside the hospital.

Not that it matters that I didn't have any of my things. Showering is practically impossible with one wrist bandaged and the other in a cast; never mind scrubbing my scalp. Showering without a nurse doing most of the work will be a dream come true. Well, it will be once I have the cast off.

"Who sent the package?" the doctor asks.

"Rogue Maddox." I say his name like it might spark something for me. Of course it doesn't. I know who he is. I've seen all his movies. Followed his social media. He fascinates me like a bird in a cage fascinates a cat. We've never met. As far as I'm aware.

The nurses say differently. I hear them talking about me when they see me. Rumor is he came to the hospital. That he was the one who brought me in. That we're married. That he hurt me.

She frowns and picks at a thread on her pants. "Will you stay with him?"

Possibly. I can't imagine moving in with the famous playboy. A man that I don't know from Adam. A man who may have caused me physical harm. Not unless there's no other option. "Have you heard if my friend Adira has tried to contact me?"

"Adira? No, I don't think so."

"Liam?" I ask with my metaphorical fingers crossed. I don't expect that he would go by that name now, but it doesn't make sense that he hasn't at least tried to find out if I'm okay. We've been besties for so long. Through thick and thin.

"Let me check the notes." She runs her fingers over the screen while she purses her lips. "No, sorry. You did have a Dizzy Sunshine check up on you. Does that help?"

"Could be a queen." One I don't remember. I add it to my growing list of things that don't make sense.

She switches off the screen. "Listen, you're going to leave here and you're going to see your name mentioned a lot on social media. You might even hear things about yourself on the radio or the news that are disturbing."

“I know how it works.” I glance out the window. It wouldn’t surprise me if there are reporters waiting outside for me right now. With Rogue Maddox sending me gifts and all. But even without this added confusion I’ve spent my life evading the media hoopla as much as possible. Growing up in a socialite family meant I had two choices. Embrace the fame or get really good at hiding from it.

“You might hear things about your... about Rogue Maddox,” she says. “Things that might scare you.”

“Like what?”

“That he hurt you.”

I narrow my attention to the woman. “Do you think he hurt me?”

Her expression stays neutral. “If I believed that he was a danger to you I would advise you not to leave the hospital with him.”

“And are you advising me?” I run my finger over the denim that is almost satiny to the touch.

The nurse who has helped me shower the last couple of days hurries into the room. Her smile is genuine. Her attitude is always upbeat to the point that it rubs off. “Do you need any help to get dressed?”

“I’ll finish the paperwork,” the doctor says. “You have people waiting for you.”

“Rogue Maddox?” I ask before she can leave the room. Why does my heart pitter-patter at the idea? And nausea grow

in the pit of my stomach? Did he hurt me like I hear people say behind my back? Or were we in love? I can't tell one way or the other.

I'm in the hospital and about to be discharged from a seventy-two. If we were in love and happy, why am I here?

"Your mother," the doctor says.

My heart plummets. Of course my mother would be here. The doctor and I talked a lot about what I do remember prior to the events that landed me in here. There are whole months gone from my memory but my life before last summer is all there. It's like a video recording that cut out at a certain point, but everything prior to that moment is still playable. My mother has plans for me. Business management. An engagement to Nathaniel Croft.

The doctor shuts the door as she leaves and the nurse helps me out of my hospital gown. I've never been so happy to shed a garment in my life. Then she helps me with my clothes when I can't make my arms and hands work the way I want them too. There is no way I can manage a bra by myself and it takes some effort to latch the button on the jeans. The sweater is baggy though. It slips on over my bandages easily.

I'm tugging up the zipper when there's a commotion outside of my room. Multiple voices speaking at once. Then the door opens and Rogue Maddox enters.

He fills the space. And even though there are other people behind him, I'm trapped by those sea blue orbs. "Ivy. Baby."

I'm lost in the wide set of his shoulders and the way he prowls toward me. He's gorgeous in real life. Up close. The tension in my chest ratchets up another notch as his fingers touch my face.

He peers at me this way and that. Frowns. "You really don't remember me, do you?"

"I..." I blink and the spell is broken. I don't know where I stand with this man. I don't recall the details that led me to trying to take my own life. He was part of the life that I can't remember.

"He's not allowed in here." My mother swans into the room. Nathaniel is behind her. She points Rogue out to security. "You need to have him arrested. There is a restraining order."

"A restraining order?" I take a step back.

"It's nothing," he tells me and then turns to my mother. "Your attempt to control me was thrown out of court this morning. You can't have me arrested for being here anymore than you can stop me from taking Ivy home."

"She doesn't remember you," my mother screeches. "She clearly doesn't feel safe with you. Ivy will come home with me."

My shoulders climb toward my ears with each sentence my mother spits out. It's only Rogue Maddox's steel blues that ground me and keep the hummingbird heart in my chest from taking flight. Going home with my mother would be a nightmare.

“Over my dead body.” The man in front of me says as he squares his shoulders. His gaze tells me those words are a promise to me as much as they are a threat for my mother. One he plans on following to its conclusion as he turns his back to me.

He’s so tall. In gray cashmere that fits his wide shoulders and tapered torso like it was tailor made for him. I want to reach out and touch it to see if it’s as soft and warm as it looks. I catch a whiff of oatmeal and spice. His upper arms bulge as he crosses his forearms.

“You’re forgetting I can make your life hell,” Nicole tells him. “You hurt my daughter, and I won’t hesitate to destroy you and your whole family.”

“Nicole,” Nathaniel warns my mother. He’s probably considering the legal implications her threats could have.

“Don’t you mean your son?” Rogue snaps back. “This isn’t about Ivy and you know it.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Nicole grows more agitated with every word. “Everything I do is always about Ivy.”

I don’t want to hear any more. I don’t know what they’re arguing about. I don’t know the man who is acting like I belong with him. But I know a lie when my mother tells it. I reach out and touch the cashmere sweater. “Where is Adira?”

“He was supposed to be here,” Rogue tells me over his shoulder. “He had a last minute emergency. Though I can’t

imagine what could keep him from being here. Can you, Nicole?”

Is he suggesting that my mother has something to do with Adira not being here? I wouldn't put it past her to try. She has never been a fan of my cousin or the fact that we've grown close. “And where is my wedding band?”

Rogue's spine stiffens on a quick intake of breath.

“We're married, aren't we?” It's what everyone is saying. There's something about the way he reacts that makes the back of my neck prickle.

“Absolutely.” His response is eager. Too... sharp? Too... quick?

“So where is my ring?” I ask.

“At the jeweler's,” he says.

“You said it was in your apartment.” My mother sounds suspicious. “Three days ago, that's what you said.”

“Right,” he says. “It was, but I took it to the store to have it cleaned and checked while you weren't wearing it. I also had them make a chain for you to wear it from in case you couldn't wear it properly for a while with your injuries.”

“Okay.” So I trusted him at some point. Enough to marry him. But then what? His response doesn't instill me with confidence. There's something he isn't telling me.

“Ivy, he's not a good man,” this time my mother sounds genuinely concerned.

So maybe he did... hurt me? Or maybe she has something to be worried about?

“You broke up with him,” my mother says. “You left him. Don’t go back to him. He’ll only use you. He’ll only hurt you again.”

“That is not how it is between us, baby.” I’m engulfed by him facing me. His hand is huge and it wraps around one side of my neck with the slightest of pressure. Every time I find myself in the center of those blue as a summer day eyes I feel like I’m falling into them. “Please believe me.”

I can’t just take his word for it. “You’re a stranger.”

“You don’t know him at all,” my mother says. “Another reason not to put your life in his hands.”

The problem is while I don’t remember my relationship with Rogue, or what happened for me to end up in the hospital, Nicole Hawthorne is very much the devil I know. The one whose motives have always revolved around what she needs from me. And I remember leaving the Sunny Health facility. How I was certain that if I moved back under that roof I would never get out from under her thumb.

Sometimes it isn’t better to go with the devil you know. Sometimes the choice is in the unknown. At least until I can talk to Adira. “Rogue?”

“Yes, Ivy?”

“Take me home, please.”

CHAPTER TEN

Ivy

Home sweet home.

At least... it's meant to be my home.

I don't remember the thirty story elevator ride that opens up to a private floor and lets us out into a foyer that is three times larger than the hospital room I've spent the last few days in. Or the huge potted ficus to the left as soon as we close the door. Or the movie posters displayed on the walls.

I don't recall the camel colored furniture or the white glossy tiles that seem to brighten the place like it's lit from beneath. Rogue shows me around the kitchen and it's the first time I've ever been here.

"I don't remember any of this."

Taking two glasses from a cupboard above his head, he fills them from a spout in the fridge door. He hands me one and keeps the other for himself. "The doc said that you're having trouble remembering anything that happened after last summer?"

I wrap one arm around my waist and put the glass down on the counter. “Um, I remember waking up in a place like the hospital. Sunny Health Resort. I spent some time there, but it all gets kind of blank after that.”

“So you don’t remember how we met?” His chest pauses like he won’t be able to breathe until I answer him. “Or us dating? Or... any of us?”

“No.” I walk a few steps away to put some much needed distance between us. I feel so lost and alone in my own head. I should have the answers for his questions, but I don’t.

“What do you remember about me?” He leans against the counter, watching me the whole time with an air of readiness about him. Like he’s waiting for me to need him.

“Uh... you’re a celebrity.” One I happen to have had a long term crush on, because crushing on someone I would never meet seemed like a safe idea to a girl who was painfully shy. Apparently I was wrong about that. “You’re a twin. Both of your brothers are actors too. The youngest one is more of a rock star though.”

“So...” He reaches up and scratches the back of his neck while he fights to keep the tension out of his expression. “Basically only what you would read on the internet?”

“Yes.”

“And your brother?” He puts his glass down.

“Alec?” My muscles feel shaky. Probably from a combination of medication and my body trying to recover

from what I put it through. My vision tunnels on what I remember. “The last time I saw Alec was in the hospital before I went to Sunny. He’d pulled me out of the water and started CPR. He’d called the ambulance to come get me.”

It seems like yesterday, but it was so long ago.

“You should probably sit.” Rogue is beside me, hooking my chin with his knuckle and peering down at me. “You look—”

“I’m okay.” I have to be. Even if he’s probably correct that I should sit down, I’m too uncomfortable in this strange space to be still.

He huffs out a breath and the hand that was touching me falls against his thigh. “The doc said your memories should come back with rest and time.”

“She said they *could*. It’s not a guarantee.” I hold myself tighter as I move further into the open plan living area in the hopes that something about my environment will jump out at me. It doesn’t. “I could just as easily never recall what I’ve lost.”

Never know why I made the decisions I did. Or how I got hurt. Or what it was like to love this man. My husband.

There’s a huge glossy poster stretched out on cork board on the wall. “Is that the artwork for your latest movie?”

“Yeah.”

I study the image of a professor and his student. The background is remarkably similar to the campus I went to. “Did you film this at Cal State?”

“You remember?” He sounds so hopeful.

“I recognize the grounds. Nothing else about it is familiar.” I glance around the rest of the room. “Nothing about any of this is familiar.”

The lines around his eyes and mouth deepen. There’s a depth of pain in those blue orbs that might rock me if I knew the man. “Then you’ll get familiar with it like it’s the first time.”

“You mean you.” That’s where that sadness is coming from. “I’ll become familiar with you again.”

His chest caves. “If that’s what it takes. I can’t let you go again.”

“Did you let me go? What happened between us?” I could tell at the hospital that he was hiding something. He isn’t wearing a wedding band either. But we’re no longer in the presence of my mother. So what don’t I know that he would want to keep quiet?

He swallows and his Adam apple bounces. His gaze drifts to his feet.

“Did you hurt me?” It’s like I’m talking about someone else. Someone who isn’t me. This whole situation is an out of body experience. “Did we break up? Did you leave me for some reason? Did I leave you?”

We were swamped when we left the hospital. Reporters and paparazzi everywhere. They asked these questions as he tucked me into the passenger seat of his Jeep.

His mouth contorts and I guess he's trying to work out what to say, but I just want the truth. Something I can come to peace with. "Is that why neither of us are wearing wedding bands?"

"We had an argument." He exhales audibly. His brow draws in as he glances at his left hand.

"Why did we argue?" I latch onto one of the questions the reporters asked as we'd left the hospital. They'd asked about some woman he was caught with only days before I ended up in the hospital. "Did you cheat on me?"

"God, baby." He reaches for me but drops his hands to his sides when I take a step back. He shakes his head. "It's not that simple."

So he did? He must have if he can't be straight with me. "It's not a no."

"It's not a yes. There was a kiss."

"Why are you being so evasive?" It must have been bad if I moved out. I don't see me anywhere in this apartment. Except the Pop-Tarts that he dropped on the counter when we first entered the kitchen. They're still there... the carton on its side. "You kissed someone else while we were married. Why would you do that?"

"Because I made a dumb choice." There's a bitterness to his words that is like cold water to the face. "One I deeply regret."

"That doesn't explain anything." It only leaves me more confused. Did I leave him because of the kiss? Did he try to stop me? Is that why I have these bruises? Did it escalate from

there? Is my mother right about him? I move onto another wall with more artwork and more things I don't remember. But at least it gives me space. Would I have been better off not leaving the hospital with him?

“Your brother—”

“What does my brother have to do with you kissing another girl?” What does Alec have to do with any of it? He's not the important issue here. He's not... relevant. I wipe at my forehead as it grows clammy. I'm too cold to be sweating.

“You really should sit down.”

I need to sit down before I fall down. Instead I lift my chin. “Tell me what my brother has to do with us.”

He opens his mouth as though he's going to answer me, but changes his mind. He runs a hand through his hair and his fingers shake. “I think it would be better if we came back to this conversation later.”

“Fine.” I reach out to grab the back of a nearby leather chair before I sag. I need a chance to compose myself. There's so much I don't know that brought us to this moment. We're not even on the same page.

“I need a cigarette.” He moves to the door that leads out onto a balcony complete with an infinity pool.

“I want my phone.”

“I don't have it.” He stops on the threshold. “It must be at Adira's.”

“Then take me there,” I demand. I guess time isn’t the only thing that changed. I’m different too. It wasn’t that long ago I wouldn’t have been able to talk to him at all. Would have been too shy to say what I needed to say. I still feel timid, but somehow I manage to voice what I need to without stuttering.

“Not a fucking chance.” He growls the words like just the idea has his hackles up.

“Then I’ll take myself.” I turn on my heel and head for the elevator. I need to see Adira and I need answers. I need to know all the gory details. Even if they feel like they happened to somebody else.

“The hell you will.” He clasps my upper arm before I manage three steps.

I stop and glance up into determined blue orbs and a concrete jaw. His fingertips press into my flesh. “Let me go.”

His eyes flare and he eases his grip immediately. “You’re not leaving the apartment, Ivy. You’re definitely not going back there.”

“I don’t think you understand that I am only here because it was better than the alternative of dealing with my mother.” I try to hide the quake in my voice. “This isn’t permanent. Whatever we had between us is gone.”

I have had such beautiful fantasies about this man but the reality is very different. He’s not who I thought he was. He’s a stranger. He’s also the man who most likely broke my heart, even if I don’t remember it.

“If that’s the only reason.” He holds me against him for a moment before he lets me go. “Then it’s enough for now. You’re not leaving the apartment without me, Ivy. You can’t. I have security posted in the foyer. I’ve hired you a bodyguard.”

“You’re telling me I don’t have a choice?” The thought gives me goose bumps, and not the good kind. Did I exchange one person running my life for another? “I might as well still be on lockdown.”

“No.” There’s hurt in his voice. “Yes. Just for now. I need you to be protected, Ivy. I can’t do that if I let you leave.”

“Protected from what?” From myself? Because he’s scared of what I’m capable of? What I almost managed to do before he found me and got medical help? If the sadness in his gaze is anything to go by that’s exactly his reasoning. “Let me go to Adira’s, and I promise, I’ll be safe there too. He’s my best friend and he’s always had my back.”

He’s the only person I know I can trust. The only person in our family that I know that my dad trusted to be on my side. He’ll tell me what really happened between me and Rogue.

“I can’t let you go back to that apartment. I won’t,” he says. “I’m sorry, but you almost died—”

“Where’s my bedroom?” I ask.

“You need to understand—”

I cut him off. Yawn into my hand. “If I can’t go to Adira’s I want to take a nap.”

“Fine.” He presses his lips together as he leads the way to a huge room with a massive bed. “This is the room we share.”

“I don’t recognize it.” Of course I don’t. This isn’t my life. This is someone else’s life. Someone like me, only different. Someone who liked the man that she shared this space with.

Matching night stands host identical lamps. On one side is an alarm clock. A pack of cigarettes. A bottle with only a ring of amber liquid in the bottom. On the other are my reading glasses and several pieces of jewelry that I assume are mine.

I yawn again. It’s as real as it is fake. I’m exhausted from the painkillers and the meds that I’m on. My ribs hurt with the rise and fall of my chest. My wrists ache and itch and sting. But mostly I want to be alone.

“I’ll move into one of the other rooms for now.” He draws the covers off the bed for me. “I think it might be best to give you space to get comfortable again.”

“That may never happen.” Considering the forced nature of our cohabitation it’s more than probable.

He eyes the hoodie I’m wearing. “Do you need any help?”

My fingers pluck at the zipper. I would rather wear the hoodie to bed than have him help me. “I want to sleep.”

“All right.” He steps back, his face a mask of indifference. Except for the storminess in those blue orbs. “If you need anything...”

“I need you to let me go to Adira’s.”

“No.” He bunches his fists and tries to hide them in his arm pits.

“Then I need you to leave me alone.” I lie down and drag the sheet up over me. My eyes are gummy and hot and I close them to block him out and keep all my fears in.

“Ivy.” He says my name, but must decide better than to try and drag out this conversation. Instead his lips press to my temple. “Rest, baby. We’ll talk later. Things will get better, I promise.”

His footsteps are muffled by the carpet as he leaves and the door clicks when it shuts. The first tear rolls down my cheek.

What do I do now?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rogue

I take a swallow from the whisky in my tumbler as I stare out over the city. Smoke curls from the cigarette between my fingers. I was going to quit. I am going to quit.

I thought I'd go to the hospital today and bring Ivy home. And that would be as complicated it as it would get. I assumed she'd not only know why I didn't want her to go back to the apartment she shares with Adira, but she'd be okay with it. She'd understand why I hired her a bodyguard. And why not being in her vicinity at all times would make me crazy.

God, she almost died. How can I not be terrified to let her out of my sight?

But this... that she doesn't remember us at all... Oh, I was not prepared for this at all.

When the doctors told us that she'd lost a part of her memory due to the trauma I figured they were talking about anything directly tied to what happened that night. Not months

of our life together. Not every moment we shared... gone like it never existed.

I reacted badly. The way she shut down made that clear. But I'm out here in the middle of the ocean with no life jacket and no clue how to drag us back to shore. How do I protect her when she doesn't remember that I'm on her side? How do I convince her that going back to Adira's is a bad idea that might trigger her? It sure as hell triggers me.

"Hey." Adira steps out onto the cold balcony behind me.

"You didn't show." I butt out the half smoked cigarette. He'd come to the courthouse this morning to be a character witness. We'd walked out together with plans to go back to his apartment and pick up a few of Ivy's things before we went to the hospital, but he'd gotten a phone call and raced off.

"The cops raided my shop." He joins me at the railing. "Can you believe it? Someone tipped them off to the possibility that women were being held there. Obviously they scoped the shop out and figured it wasn't the truth, but still had to do due diligence."

"Nicole?"

"The one and only."

"You could use a drink." I turn away and move to the bar. "What'll it be?"

"French Martini," he says.

I grab a martini glass and start mixing vodka and Chambord. "So obviously no sex trade, but a loss of time."

“Which I’m sure was the point.” He unbuttons his coat and takes out an A4 envelope. “And then I went back to the courthouse to retrieve this.”

I open the envelope and pull out the document. Inside is a document with both Ivy’s and my signature on it. Or at least Adira’s version of our signatures. “It looks real.”

“That’s because it is.” His lips press together in a slight grimace. “Officially. You and Ivy applied for a license. You could take that in tomorrow and have them issue a legitimate marriage certificate.”

“Thank you.”

“I have a contact with a contact at the courthouse I now owe a favor.” He sighs. “This better not come back to bite me in the ass.”

I hand him the pink drink. “It won’t.”

“Hmm.” He takes a sip. Glances around me and through the huge windows. “Where is Ivy?”

“Sleeping.” I reseal the envelope. “We have another problem.”

“What is that?”

“She’s lost part of her memory.”

His eyes widen. “Are you talking about amnesia?”

“The doctor said it’s a trauma response. There’s no obvious damage to the brain. All the memories should still be there.

But the events she's been through were so traumatic that she's hidden them from herself so she doesn't have to deal with it."

"That's..." Adira reaches for the closest stool and drags it over so he can sit before his knees give out on him. "Wow."

"She doesn't remember me," I say. "Us. Any of it. I don't think she remembers seeing me when she was in the facility where my mom lives. She doesn't remember being together. Or how we broke up. She asked me if I cheated on her."

"You kind of did," he reminds me.

"It was a kiss. That Alec set up to cause trouble between me and Ivy." And dumbass that I am, I was inebriated enough that I handled it as badly as I could have. "I don't even remember it."

"Still kind of cheating in some books," he says.

"And I will regret getting drunk enough that I didn't know what I was doing for the rest of my life. But the point is that she didn't remember why we would fight about Alec."

"Seriously?"

"Ivy thinks we're married. For real."

His eyes widen. His lips curve.

"Don't laugh. It's not funny." I figured it would be before I found out about her memory. Expected her to laugh at the idea that we're married.

It might even have ended up as a joke we would tell our grandchildren one day, long after a real marriage took place.

But there is nothing funny about the fact she believes it's real. Or that I could see it in our future. Perhaps not straight away, but not too far off either. She already has a beautiful dress just waiting to be worn. The gown that she wore to the alternative wedding expo had made my heart somersault when I saw her in it.

Any future seems uncertain right now.

"It's a little funny." Adira pinches his fingers together. "Only because I can see on your face that you've thought about it and now you want it."

"Fuck you." I am not that easy to read. I can't be.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to twist your panties." He settles down. "So what does she remember?"

"You," I say. "And that she doesn't trust Nicole."

"Well, that's good at least."

"She doesn't trust me either." I rub at the ache in my chest. And why should she when I did a spectacular job of letting her down? When I couldn't even work out the best way to answer her questions without freaking her out entirely. She thinks that the apartment is just another form of lockdown. She thinks that I could hurt her. I saw it today. In the way she looked at me.

"Why don't you just tell her everything?" Adira suggests.

"I'm scared that it will cause her to spiral," I admit. "Or that she won't believe me about Alec. You should have seen her reaction when I brought him up. I swear she was going to faint."

“But she doesn’t remember him?”

“Only that he’s the one that saved her from drowning.”

“If he did.” Adira chews on the inside of his cheek. “What if it’s muscle memory? Can her body still have a trauma response if she doesn’t remember?”

“I’m not sure.” I grip the edge of the bar. If that’s the case it lends itself to the idea that she didn’t hurt herself and that he tried to kill her. Or at the very least that he scared her so much she thought she had no other option. “But I don’t want to push her harder than she can handle. What if bringing it up causes more damage? I can’t lose her, Adira. Maybe you can help her. She trusts you. If you tell her she’s safe with me she’ll believe you. It’ll buy us time... I can speak to the doctors. I can look into where Alec was that night.”

“I have a man who can help with that. Used to be a detective,” he says. “And I’ll talk to her. I’ll make sure she knows she’s safe with you.”

“There’s something else,” I say. “She wants her phone. It must still be at the apartment. Can you bring it for her?”

“It’s not there.” He frowns. “I brought a bag of her clothes with me. I packed her makeup and extra glasses and contacts. I cleaned up in Narnia as much as I could. Her phone isn’t there.”

“It has to be. She didn’t have it on her when we took her to the hospital.”

He hugs his shoulders to his ears. “I’ll check Narnia again.”

“Thanks.” I hold the door open for the queen to step inside.
“And one more thing.”

“What’s that?” he asks as we walk through the apartment.

“Don’t tell her that we’re not married.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You haven’t cleared that up?”

“When was I supposed to drop that bomb? Was it between Nicole’s threatening to destroy everything I hold dear and finding out Ivy doesn’t remember a damn thing?” My heart pounds like I’m having a heart attack and a fine sweat breaks out on my forehead as I grasp the handle to the bedroom door. I know what it feels like to not have her in my life. I will do anything to make sure that she stays long enough for me to turn us around. “What do you think will happen if I tell her that now? It’s the only thing I’ve got going for me. If you tell her she will leave me and go to Nicole.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.” As sure as I know that my middle name is something I will never admit out loud to anyone who isn’t my brothers or Ivy. “I know all it would take right now for Ivy to walk out that door is for her to find out that this whole marriage thing is a crock. I need time for her to trust me again.”

“You’re asking me to lie to my best friend. After everything we’ve just been through. All the secrets. You of all people should hate—”

“I do hate it.” The words snap between my teeth. But if I walk into that room now and tell her that I’m not her

husband... That we were never married...

It'll be over.

"I'm begging you to go along with it. For now. Only until she believes that I wouldn't hurt her. Then I'll tell her myself."

His cheeks hollow as he considers it. He shakes his head. "I don't like it."

"This isn't about me." My pulse starts to slow back to normal. "Do you really think what's best for her is going home to your aunt? Or walking into Narnia every morning to start her day while her blood is still staining the carpet?"

"As soon as she's comfortable with you." He narrows his gaze on me. "Not a minute more. And only because I agree that she needs protection. But that is all the time you're getting. Do you feel me?"

"You have my word," I promise. I drop my grip on the door handle. "When the time is right I'll tell her."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ivy

My heart is trying to race out of my chest as I wake to a dimly lit room. The lamp furthest from me was turned on while I was asleep and it pushes away the shadows, including the ones in my head.

There was something... I blink. Whatever it was... it's gone now. Just a dream as slippery as my memories seem to be. My bladder is far more insistent.

I stumble out from under sheets where the fragrance of oatmeal and spice and musk lingers. Sheets that smell like Rogue Maddox because this is our bedroom.

He said he would move into a spare room. Was he not prepared for me to not remember who he is? Did he think that we could go back to the way it was before... before this room became only his?

I step behind the wall that partitions matching walk-in closets. His side full. Mine with only a few pieces of clothing. The ones Adira brought with him when he came to see me

earlier. He'd unpacked them while he visited. While he told me that I can trust that Rogue Maddox is a good man. That Nicole is lying about Rogue hurting me. And that this apartment is the best place for me to recover.

But how can it be when it's clear I don't live here?

The bathroom is huge. It's polished luxury but it's warm and inviting. Unlike the cold perfection Nicole prefers.

This penthouse might not be my home, but with Rogue and Adira both agreeing that I can't go to Adira's, staying here is the only option when the other is going to my mother's.

I don't understand why I can't go to Adira's though. When I asked him, he didn't answer the question. I guess I was so tired while he was here I didn't realize.

I struggle with the button on my pants and wish they were sweatpants. Or leggings. I would kill for something with an elastic waist. But I manage to get them undone and down my legs so I can take care of business.

Once I'm done I move to the sink to wash my hands, which is much harder with the cast. I could use help. At least until I'm healed. I need to make the best of this situation.

I dry my hands on a small towel hung above the counter and check out my surroundings. There are two toothbrushes in a holder beside it. And the toothpaste I like. My sugar cookie perfume sits on the counter.

There's more of me in this room than anywhere else. Huge bottles of my favorite shampoo and conditioner are on the

floor in the shower. It's expensive so I normally only buy the small bottles and make it last as long as I can, but these are already half empty.

I sit on the tiles inside the double shower and crack the lid on the conditioner. Lifting it to my nose I inhale the fragrance. It's as familiar to me as Adira. Or my sugar cookie perfume. Everything else is foreign, including the man who is probably asleep elsewhere in the apartment.

As foreign as my best friend hiding things from me. I don't know what I'm missing but I know Adira, and when I asked him about my relationship with Rogue it took him longer to look me in the eye than it normally would.

I put the conditioner down and stand. I'm desperate for a proper shower with my favorite products and water so hot I can barely stand it. The doctor said that I could get my stitches wet as long as I dried them thoroughly afterward.

The water makes the *dush* noise when it comes out of the rain showerhead. I step out to undress. The hoodie comes off as easily as it went on. My pants aren't too difficult considering I didn't bother latching the button. The shirt is harder. And there's no way I can reach behind my back and unhook the clasp on my bra. I forgot about the cast too. I can't get it wet.

My eyes sting with my helplessness. So much for getting clean and feeling even remotely normal again. I'm alone with a stranger and a few security guards. I can't ask for help. Can't

trust anyone because everyone else is on a different page. As much as I want to I'm not even sure I can trust my best friend.

The door opens and beautiful blues lock with mine. His hair is disheveled from sleep or perhaps from not being able to sleep. His gaze lowers to my chest before he course corrects. "Are you okay?"

"No, I..." I don't know what I am. Who I am anymore. Am I the wife of the most famous playboy in America? Am I so depressed I would try to take my own life? Am I just the woman who can't have a freaking shower the way she wants to?

I blink back the wetness that continues to threaten as he moves into the room. Blink at the startling realization that we're alone. In the middle of the night. And I'm in my bra and panties.

"You want to take a shower," he says.

"It doesn't matter."

"It does. You should be able to do what you want." His brow pulls tight in the middle and he touches the thin blue strap at my shoulder.

We both know he doesn't mean that I should be allowed to leave. We're only talking about a shower. I push anyway. "If that were true I would be allowed to go home. To Adira's."

"You're having trouble with this, aren't you?" His fingers trail down the strap where it crosses my shoulder until it hits the band that runs around my torso. Goose bumps break out

everywhere that he touches. He tugs at the clasp and the material loosens as he steps back.

“Thank you.” I hold the cups in place with my hands.

He’s beautiful up close. The way he bites his lip when he’s focused... I can see why I was enticed by him. I’m attracted to him. I lose my breath being stuck in such tight confines. “You can go now.”

“I think I’ll stay right here.” He opens a cupboard and retrieves a couple of fresh towels which he places on the counter. Then he opens a drawer and takes out a comb.

“I d-don’t think—” And my shyness is back as he lifts his shirt from his torso. The muscles ripple with the movement. Flex. He has lines everywhere. Abdomen. Hips. Grooves at his ribs. I slam my eyes shut and try to breathe. I’ve seen them before. Probably up close and personal. But also in magazines. On the big screen. And the little screen. And my phone. And on billboards. We’re married so we must have gotten naked at some point, right? Oh my God, he’s seen all of me too.

“You need help.” He takes my chin in his hand and tilts my face. “So I’m going to help you. But you may as well open your eyes because it doesn’t hide you from me at all.”

They spring open at that. He sees me. Not just in the way I’m standing in front of him, but in the way I think.

“We need to change this.” He takes my hand and holds it between us. “Shall I take it off now and then put the new bandage on after your shower?”

I nod. It's all I can manage as his thumb brushes back and forth across the top of the bandage. My nerves are messed up and the sensation is prickly like electricity, but it feels like it means something. And the way he looks at me is full of emotion. Pain? Guilt? It's hard to tell but my chest aches with how real it is.

His teeth plant in his lip again as he slowly peels the wrapping from my skin to reveal a pink line and the stitches holding it together. He shuts his eyes when he sees it and takes a long, wobbly breath. His voice is raw. "Does it hurt?"

"Some," I manage as my throat grows wet. "The painkillers help."

"I am so sorry that I wasn't there." He gently releases my arm before he pulls a packet out of another drawer. It contains a clear sleeve that he uses to cover my cast. "I should have been."

"But you weren't. Is it because of my brother?" I extricate my arm carefully from his grasp. "Adira said Alec has been arrested for hurting Rochelle Kitt." Or perhaps I dreamed it. It doesn't seem real. Alec is loved by everyone. "He has." He unfolds a towel and holds it up between us. "You can take your panties off. I won't look."

I take a deep breath, but when he closes his eyes, I do as he says and then wrap the towel around myself. If anyone is aware of what Alec is capable of it's me. "My brother—"

"Is a monster." He helps tuck the towel in securely. His fingers graze my boob and my thighs grow wet from the jolt

that small touch sets off in my core. His jaw bulges and I can't tell if it's because he hates my brother or because he hates that this is the closest he'll come to touching me. "You told me about him. About the things that he used to do to you."

Those memories rise and there's nothing I can do to stop them. Alec used to lock me in the closet and leave me to scream for hours in the dark. He used to make me cry and then he'd laugh like my tears gave him joy. He'd hurt me for the thrill of it. Make me feel weak.

My lungs grow tight thinking about it now. So tight my head swims and I can't draw enough oxygen in. "He hurt Rochelle in the same way?"

"He raped her," he says. "Assaulted her."

My ribs ache as the pressure in my head increases. I thought I was weak. I thought I was the only one he hurt. But now I find out I was wrong? It's so much worse than I ever thought possible. My knees give out.

"I've got you." Rogue wraps an arm around my waist and I collapse against his chest.

My ribs spasm with the impact, but his warm, hard chest with its smooth bronze skin smells like heaven.

His hand cups the back of my head. "You don't have to deal with him. You don't need to think about him. We're not going to talk about him anymore tonight."

We need to talk about everything, but not Alec, not tonight. He can wait. Whatever happened between Rogue and me...

whatever Alec's part in it... it can wait for a little while.

Slowly my breathing evens out as it syncs with his strong inhales and relaxed exhales. Adira says I can trust this man. I want to believe my bestie. I want to believe that the sweet and gentle man helping me right now is the real deal. "Thank you."

"Let's get you in the shower." Rogue steps away from me and unties the strings on his sweats.

I eyeball that little string. I get that I've seen it all before. That we're married. But I don't remember. And right now, this feels like the first time. Everything about him is a first for me.

"Look at me, Ivy." There's amusement in his voice. He cracks a smile that brightens his eyes. "Your eyes are bugging out of your head, baby."

"I'm not ready to see you naked." It's a whisper. Barely audible. A girl can only imagine so much... unless she does a deep dive on the internet. But this is different. This is in your face reality.

"I'm wearing boxers." He shoves the sweats off his hips and down his legs. "I'm not getting naked. You're wearing a towel. This is only so I can help you with the shower."

Sure enough he's wearing silk boxers with his face on them. Or maybe it's his twin's face. His brother has a ring through his eyebrow that Rogue doesn't. The face on his underwear has that ring. "Lucky me, I get to shower with two handsome men tonight."

“All right. Keep it PG.” He guides me inside the box with his hand on the back of my neck.

His chest is so close to my back that I anticipate him closing the gap while the water rains down on us. He doesn't. But I can tell that he wants to.

It's this living breathing awareness that settles in the pit of my stomach and between my thighs. It prickles the back of my neck when I think about how easily he could put his mouth there. I've had so many fantasies. Possibly even realities. I wish I could remember.

Flipping the lid open on my shampoo, he pours a generous amount into his hand.

The entire bathroom fills with that blackberry scent. “You don't have to do this.”

“I'm here to look after you.” He presses his fingers into my tresses and massages my scalp with the cleansing lotion. “So don't argue about it.”

It feels amazing as the soap grows sudsy. “So good.”

He stiffens. His fingers temporarily forget their task. “You don't want to do that.”

“What?”

“You moaned.” He clears his throat. “And I don't want to scare you when you realize what that sound does to my body.”

“Oh.” He's affected by me. As much as I seem to be affected by him. Of course he is. We wouldn't be here...

married... if that wasn't the case.

“Yes, oh,” he murmurs as he guides me back under the water and works on rinsing the soap out of my hair.

How did my moan affect him? If I turn around would I be able to tell? Would I see the evidence? Is he hard?

Don't look. Don't peek. Oh, but I'm tempted to. Either that or run from the shower and hide from the man I am so not ready for. It's a toss-up.

He squeezes a glob of conditioner into my hair and runs it through with the comb. His breath is loud despite the water. “I'm not ready let you go to Adira's because that's where I found you.”

“What?” His confession breaks me from my one-track thoughts.

“In Narnia.” His voice is raw. “You were lying there... on the floor. You were so still. And there was blood... so much blood. You almost didn't make it.”

He stops moving. Stops talking.

“That's why you don't want me to go home?” I turn to face him. To find the pain in his gaze is almost unbearable. I feel like an awful person for not considering that he does remember everything that has happened since we met.

“I should have told you earlier. I reacted badly. You've lost your memories and I didn't know how to tell you what I was thinking.” He touches my hair. Holds one wet tress on his finger. “I can't stand the thought of you going there. You're

already traumatized. I'm worried about what taking you back there might do. So can we put it off for now? At least... until you're settled? I should have said that earlier. I should have been clearer."

"Thank you for telling me." I touch his abs. I can't help myself. They're beautiful. And the front of his boxers are tented. I pretend I don't notice that part. I'm not ready. I'm not sure. I'm only beginning to feel like it could be okay to believe Adira when he says Rogue is a good man. But my mouth waters anyway. "I don't remember any of the details. It's like the whole thing happened to someone else."

"It didn't though, Ivy. It happened to you." He turns me around and lathers up his hands with body wash before gliding them over every part of my body that isn't covered by the towel, until I smell like a sugar cookie. "Adira can come here. He can stay for a few days while you get your bearings. I'll make that happen if that's what you want."

"You'll do that for me?" I ask once the soap is washed away.

"I'll do anything for you, baby. Except let you out of my sight."

Eventually he'll have to. I've spent too much time in institutions and under my mother's control. I won't live like that again. But he's traumatized too. Because of me. And yet, he's willing to make concessions. It makes me feel like I'm not so much a prisoner to his whim, but someone he cares

about. I need to give us both a chance to find our way. We can tackle this one day at a time. “Okay.”

“Okay.” He presses his lips to the back of my neck.

My breath catches, but it’s so natural for him that he doesn’t even seem to realize as he shuts off the water and climbs out to grab towels. He wraps one around his hips and helps me exchange my drenched one for a dry sheet before leaving the bathroom.

He’s back in an instant with a change of clothes and an extra T-shirt. He helps me with the plastic sleeve and then helps me dress. Our gazes lock a lot. Shy glances from me because he’s not what I expected. Hooded glances from him because he doesn’t want me to see how much worry is in them.

My stomach growls as he drops into a crouch and helps get my panties up my legs. I take over when he hits mid-thigh.

“You’re hungry?” He peels the backing off a new bandage and positions it carefully on my arm.

“It’s late.” But yeah, I haven’t eaten since this morning.

“I could have something delivered.” He smooths out the edges of the bandage so it sits flat on my skin. “Pizza? Tacos? Sushi?”

That’s too much. Unnecessary. “I couldn’t possible decide.”

“You know what?” He grins. “Let’s get all three.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ivy

I'm nervous.

I think he's nervous too as he spreads out the pile of food on the kitchen counter. Pizza. Tacos. Sushi. Champagne worth more than my beat-up old car. He keeps glancing at me like I might disappear.

I wrap my arm around my waist. The cast is heavy and clunky and makes me feel awkward. The man on the other side of the kitchen gives me butterflies. Was this really how it was between us all of the time? This constant awareness of each other? This craving for his touch?

He takes out plates. Glasses. Cutlery. Changes his mind about the cutlery and puts it back. Laughs. Spears fingers through his still damp hair. "I can't believe how nervous I am."

"It looks great." I'm famished. My stomach hasn't stopped making noises since it first grumbled after the shower. There's a gnawing pit inside me that needs to be filled. I'm just not

sure that food is going to fill the need that I find myself in since he branded the back of my neck and sent wicked shivers racing through my body.

He smiles. “Come over here then.”

I go like it is normal for him to beckon and for me to follow. Perhaps it is. Perhaps I don’t mind that he’s bossy. Sometimes. If it’s within reason.

He finds my waist with both hands. Lifts me off my feet until my butt is planted on the countertop. Like I’m one of the dishes.

His blues turn bluer under those beautiful lashes and heavy hoods. He swallows convulsively. “We should eat.”

“Yes, we should.” I’m breathless again. My mind not on the food beside me but on the way his gaze drifts to the hem of the T-shirt I’m wearing. On the way my core clenches and my panties dampen. On his mouth. His beautiful sensual mouth.

“Pizza?”

I startle. “What?”

“What do you want to start with?”

“Oh.” I cross one knee over the other as my face heats. I’m not a virgin anymore, even if I don’t recall the details. Never been a prude, technically speaking. I couldn’t be; with as much time as I spend with Adira and the queens. Those girls can be trashy when they want to be. But Rogue Maddox makes me wanton in a way that feels sinful. “Pizza.”

He plates up slices of pepperoni and hands one to me. “I texted Adira. He’ll be here in the morning.”

“Thank you.” I bite the tip off my triangle. There is nothing better than melted cheese on a carb-loaded base. Except maybe sushi. I enjoy the bite sized morsel that he puts on my plate next.

“I want you to be comfortable.” He pours small amounts of champagne into both glasses and takes a sip.

What he probably means is he wants me to be comfortable with him. And if moving my best friend in will keep me here, he’s willing to make the concession.

I’m so curious about him... about us... that I’m willing to let that be enough. For now. “What was our first date like?”

His eyes widen. They crinkle at the edges as he recalls a memory I might never recall. “You were... a bunny.”

“Oh? That is not what I expected you to say.”

He grins.

God, he’s sexy like this. There’s something different between the smile the cameras catch and the one he levels at me. It’s so much... more.

“Nothing about the way we met is what you’d expect,” he tells me.

I smile back at him. I can’t help it. That grin is contagious. I bury my shyness in the rim of my glass. The bubbles are sweet and tickle my throat. “Do tell.”

“The first time we met you were dressed as a Disney princess. And I’d been shot.”

“What?” I almost spit my mouthful of champagne. Barely manage to cover my mouth and swallow, because it sounds ridiculous. “Which one? Where?”

“Elsa,” he says. “You were dressed as Elsa. And in the ass.”

“Really?” What happened that he took a bullet? “Show me.”

“You seriously want me to show you my war wounds?”

“Yes.” I practically shout it.

He considers it. “Okay.”

Turning around he pushes his sweats and boxers down a couple of inches until I can see the puckered scar where a bullet was lodged.

It must have hurt. “Is that the only one?”

“I was shot twice,” he says.

“And I can’t see the other? Why? Is it because it’s somewhere... lower?”

“I can’t believe you’re trying to get me naked.” He drags his pants back up and settles against the counter again. “On our date.”

“This is our first date.” At least it is for me.

“Our second first date,” he says. “Though there are no bunny ears and I’m not sleeping alone in the park this time. But this is the meal we shared that night too.”

He slept in the park? Why was I dressed as a rabbit? “What kind of relationship did we have?”

“Some would say it was a Disney movie in the making.” He winks at me.

“Tell me more.” I lean forward and touch his chest. The cotton that covers it is soft, but his muscles are hot and hard underneath it. Am I flirting with him like this is normal for me? My cheeks heat. “I’m all, er, human ears.”

“Only if you let me sign your cast.” He grins as he grabs a marker from on top of a stack of take-out menus and notepads.

“All right.” I stretch my arm out for him and he uses one hand to hold it while he draws on the plaster. His name and mine joined together in an infinity symbol. “Tell me everything.”

It’s late when he helps me down from my perch on the counter. We nibbled on tacos while he filled me in on how he came to be shot and how I happened to be there when he needed me, though I wouldn’t give him my name.

He tells me about how he went to Adira for help finding me, only to work out later that I was right under his nose the entire time.

We laugh about Adira pushing him into being a part of his show.

He walks me to the bedroom and we stand outside the door. One arm on the wall above my head, he leans in until we’re

face-to-face. Breath mingling. He reaches out and takes my hand.

It feels so right as he closes the gap to kiss me. And I could see in the memories he shared with me how it would be so easy to want him. Want us. It would be so easy to give in to the feel of his mouth brushing over mine.

But the truth is, he cheated on me. He admitted it only hours ago. And I moved out. I did. And then I... Maybe it's not a bad thing that I can't remember. I don't think I could handle recalling how I must have felt that night. "What was our marriage like?"

He blinks and his gaze shutters. The same way Adira's did when I asked him earlier. "Baby, it..."

I can feel the lie coming from a million miles away. Perhaps it's the disconnect that suddenly seems like a gaping chasm between us. Or maybe it's in the way his jaw bunches at the hinge and he can't look at me straight on despite opening his eyes wider. "Please just tell me the truth."

"You were my everything," he says on an exhale.

And that is not a lie. It's right there, written in his touch and his voice and the way he stares at me. I want to believe it. But it doesn't answer the question. It doesn't tell me what our marriage was like. Or where we stand now. Or if I can trust the way my body craves him. "Why did you cheat then?"

He wets his lips and swallows hard. A grimace flashes across his face as he stares at the panel above my head. He

blows out a breath. “I wish I’d never been so stupid. I wish I could take it back. You’re my everything.”

Again I believe him. I just don’t know if I feel the same.

I open the bedroom door. I wish I knew if I felt the same a week ago. “Goodnight, Rogue.”

He taps his thumb against the wall. Groans. “Ivy, please—”

I close the door in his face. I’m confused by him. Confused by the circumstances I find myself in and the way I react to him. It’s too much. Too soon. We only just met.

I hear him huff through the wooden panel. “Night, Ivy.”

His footsteps fade. And my heartbeat slows. I’m yawning all over again. Crawling back into bed, between sheets that smell like him. Reminiscing over the way his touch made me want to melt into it. Finding that my body pulses with need again. And there’s nothing I can do with a cast on one arm and my other wrist so tender I can barely wriggle my fingers.

I imagine that he’s awake somewhere in this apartment too.

Tossing and turning in a bed that isn’t ours. Reaching for that tiny string in his sweats because he’s as frustrated as I am. Untying the knot so he can stroke his cock to thoughts of me. Grunting while he grinds up into his fist for relief.

Damn it. I toss off the sheets and shake my legs. The tension is too much. The buildup has my clit throbbing. But I don’t have the strength in my wrist and I don’t have any toys. Because this isn’t my home.

It might have been at some point. But it isn't anymore. And he might have been the man that I loved but I'm not the girl who wore bunny ears to our first date anymore. That girl is lost. Maybe forever.

And if she isn't, I have to protect her. I have to keep in mind that this thing between him and I ended before she tried to end her life. It ended when he kissed someone else and more than likely broke her heart.

I have to remember that.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rogue

A dira and Ivy are hanging out on my couch while he draws some intricate design on her cast. They're talking and laughing like they haven't missed a beat. He's still her best friend. She's still his younger cousin who needs his protection and advice. The time she's lost... the memories... they don't affect them.

Not like it does us. The way we were... who we were to each other doesn't exist for her. She only knows what we've told her and what she's garnered from the people around her. I hurt her, but not in the way Nicole told her.

Still, I did cause her pain. If I could take back that fucked up night where I kissed that girl I would. The fact that Ivy forgave me the morning after. That she was angrier at the girl taking advantage of my inebriated state than my stupidity. It felt like she let me off too easily, like I deserve that she's uncertain of me now.

Strawberry Pop-Tarts scent the air as I pull them out of the toaster and put them on a plate.

Adira wasted no time moving in. He probably already had his bags packed, considering we weren't certain what would happen with the restraining order. Probably expected Ivy would want him near even after that issue was settled. By the time she stumbled out of bed forty minutes ago he was unpacked in the only spare room left.

They'd disappeared back into the bedroom shortly after I'd made them coffee and when they'd come out Ivy was dressed in sweats and another of my hoodies.

She still looks tired. I can only hope the lack of sleep was because of the sexual tension between us and not because she's uncomfortable in this apartment that is strange to her.

"I need to buy a new phone," Ivy says to Adira as I take the Pop-Tarts to her.

I lock gazes with Adira. Honestly, I'm relieved she still doesn't have it. Once she does she'll know about T-Swift. About Alec's blackmail. It will create more questions than I have answers. "Still haven't found it then?"

Adira gives a minute shake of his head and steals one of the pastries off Ivy's plate. He breaks it in half before biting into it. "I'm sure it'll turn up."

The missing phone bothers me more than I care to admit out loud. It could be as simple as she misplaced it, but the off feeling in my gut makes me believe she didn't simply lose it. That and not knowing for certain who she interacted with in those last couple of days before I found her worries me. "Yeah, of course it will."

“I probably lost it,” Ivy says.

There’s no evidence of foul play. We only have our suspicions.

I yawn into my hand. I told Ivy she couldn’t go anywhere without me, and Adira’s apartment was completely off-limits. Like the doctor said when I called her last night, Ivy has hidden these memories from herself for a reason. And in cases like Ivy’s, avoiding re-exposure can be the healthy option.

I don’t trust that Alec’s being in jail means Ivy is safe either. But I don’t want to crowd her so much that she starts to hate me. The least I can do is give her the space she needs. As much as I can stand to, anyway.

“Tired?” Adira eyes me as I move away from them.

“Didn’t sleep.” Haven’t slept more than a couple hours each night since I found Ivy in Narnia. I thought it would be easier with her here, but it isn’t. Between my fear for her safety and my frustration at having to give her space, I have a lot on my mind.

It had taken me forever to fall asleep last night. With all the tension that had coiled in my muscles every time I recalled the way Ivy looked at me like she wanted me, I’d struggled to get comfortable.

I’d ended up giving in to the frustration and come to the visual of getting my mouth on her pussy. Flicking that tight little bean with my tongue until she fell apart for me. I’d

woken up a few hours later with her blood all over my hands and clothes and her name tearing from my throat.

I'd tried to run from those memories on the treadmill for over an hour before the sun came up.

"I want to check out the new Lulu Blues," Adira says. "And we should buy you something with wide sleeves that isn't a man's hoodie. It's cute for around the house, but eventually you plan to venture out in public, right?"

"Do I?" Ivy raises a brow at me, questioning my resolve to keep her at home.

"I know it's scary out there." Adira holds her hands. "Your brother's arrest is all over the news. Your man's reputation is being vilified in real time by your hag of a mother. God knows what else that ruthless bitch is doing behind the scenes."

"Don't forget I don't know who I am," Ivy says, letting her fears roll off her tongue. "And my husband doesn't want me out of his sight."

"He what?" Adira's scorn burns into my back.

"I'll come too."

"What?" Ivy lifts her gaze to meet mine. She pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

I take a breath. So much for giving her space inside the confines of the apartment. "I'll take you shopping. Both of you shopping. On me."

"That's not... you don't have to."

“Doesn’t have to?” Adira arches his neck and gives her an incredulous look. “Are you serious, girl? Of course he has to.”

“Besides, I want to.” More than that I want Ivy to be happy. I want to give her everything she desires. I want her to realize that she can trust me. “Can you give me a couple of minutes to get ready? And then we’ll go.”

“Get ready, lover boy,” Adira croons as I walk away.

I have no doubt my wallet is in for a world of pain. But I don’t care if Adira thinks I’m going too far. He agreed with me. This is the best place for her right now. With me. With my security team. She’s safer this way.

“Rogue, wait.” Ivy races after me.

She hesitates. Still so uncertain of what we could be... if only she’d trust me again. I fucking love her. It hurts to know that with my entire being I want every day of her future, when she doesn’t remember more than one of our yesterdays. “What is it?”

“Thank you.” She curls her fingers in my shirt and lifts up on tiptoe to kiss me. It’s a quick peck on the mouth. Barely a brush of lips. And it steals the breath from my lungs as thoroughly as the many far dirtier kisses we’ve shared.

I go after her mouth like it’s cocaine. Squeezing the back of her neck with one hand, I press her into the wall as I taste that vanilla gloss on her lips and the strawberry sweet recesses of her soft mouth. God, I’ve missed this. Missed her.

She hooks her cast around my neck and her leg on my hip when I trace my hands down her sides. I've missed the way her leg rides my hip when we fall asleep together. I've missed the way her body is made to fit with mine. It arches now and she moans as I grab her ass and grind her against me.

Her tongue is in my mouth. It wars with mine. Begs for more. For me. For there to be no beginning or end between us. Her body is molten as I lift her up and balance us against the wall. I inhale her scent. Her perfume and her arousal. It drenches my senses. Destroys my sanity.

"Ouch." She moans into my mouth a second before she pulls back, pain in her eyes. Tears cling to her lashes.

They break my chest. I smooth her hair from her face as I search for her pain. "What hurts?"

"Ribs," she says as she closes her eyes and concentrates on slowing her breathing.

"Okay, baby. I've got you." I carry her back to our bedroom, her bedroom, the one I don't belong in yet. The one I will inch my way back into with every chance she gives me.

"Ivy? You okay?" Adira sashays in as I lay her down on the bed. He raises one eyebrow at the two of us.

"Should I get the doctor?" I ask.

Ivy covers her sore side with her hand as her cheeks turn crimson under Adira's all-seeing gaze. "I think I'm okay."

"No, we need the doctor." I need to know that she's okay. That I didn't hurt her. That I didn't somehow puncture a lung

with that cracked rib or something. Oh God, is that possible?

“Breathe.” She grabs my hand and forces me to sit on the bed. Squeezes, though there’s no strength in the movement. “You’re shaking.”

“Of course I’m shaking. You’re hurt.” I fumble my phone in my effort to speed dial the doctor.

“I’ll talk to the doctor.” Adira takes my phone before I can drop it and makes a beeline for the door. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do while I’m gone.”

“What if that... I just made everything worse?” I cover her hand with both of mine. I need her to be able to trust me. But how do I accomplish that, when I can’t trust myself not to get carried away?

“I’m fine.” She eases her hand from mine and tries to sit up. “Let’s just get ready to go shopping.”

I stand up and fluff her pillows. “You’re not to leave that bed until the doc says you can.”

“Rogue, that’s ridiculous.” Her mouth grows stubborn. “I’m fine now. She’ll probably just tell me to take a couple of Tylenol and be a bit more careful.”

“This isn’t a discussion.” I walk across the room.

“You’re being a jerk,” she tells me, and I turn in time to watch the pillow she tried to throw at me land on the floor beside the bed.

“And right now, you’re weak, baby. And you’re hurting. If I need to I can keep you right where you are. Don’t think I won’t hold you down if you try to leave that bed.”

“Yeah, well, I have Adira.” She pokes her tongue out at me. “He won’t let you treat me like this.”

I chuckle. Fuck, she’s cute. “I don’t think the queen who made the call to the doctor is going to disagree with me on this.”

“Bah. Fine,” she yells as I close the door on her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ivy

I brush my fingers along the toe of the thigh-high boot with the periwinkle sole. The navy suede is studded with Swarovski crystals. They're reminiscent of the night sky and absolutely beautiful.

I used to have a closet full of beautiful things that my mother bought me over the years. They were handed to me as "gifts," but the price on them was far too high. It wasn't only obedience my mother wanted. It was my silence when it came to Alec. It was my future. It was a marriage I could never be happy in.

I guess I showed her when I exchanged vows with Rogue Maddox.

"You would look amazing in them," Adira tells me.

"They are beautiful." I glance over my shoulder at the man currently sitting on a love seat by himself. He is doing something on his phone, but his gaze drifts to me every few

minutes. It's like he's frightened that I'll disappear if he eases up on the hovering.

It was worse before we left the apartment. My rib stopped hurting almost immediately, but Rogue had still looked like he was about to have a breakdown. And then he'd threatened to hold me down if I tried to get out of bed before the doctor arrived. Threatened to hold me down like the warning wouldn't conjure images of him doing just that. And after that kiss...

Lucky me. The doctor gave me the all clear to go shopping as long as I didn't overdo it. Suggested I pop a couple of Tylenol and rest if I needed to. I'd almost stuck my tongue out at Rogue again because I was right and he'd overreacted.

Now he's trying to be more covert about his mild-ish stalker tendencies.

"He would trip over his own jaw if he saw you in those," Adira tells me. "And I have the perfect outfit in mind to go with it. A little midnight blue number under a chunky cardigan that you'll wear in such a way as to tantalize the man with just a few inches of shoulder."

I'm not sure that's what I want to do. "I still don't know where we really stand."

"Of course you do, honey." Adira smiles at me fondly. "You're in love with him. Head over heels. Surely you can tell. It's written all over every glance... every move you make."

That kiss... It had been something else. Even now I can't help but imagine where something that had started off as such an innocent peck might have led if it weren't for my injuries getting in the way. Maybe it's a good thing that they did. We have this connection that can make it hard to think straight. I drop my hand to my side. "But I don't know him."

"I understand." Adira squeezes my shoulders. "It must be hard to be told what your thoughts and feelings were. What your life was like... but feel like you didn't get to live it."

"Exactly," I say. "It feels like I'm in someone else's life right now."

"So trust me." He takes both my hands and holds them up between us. "You and that man need some time to get reacquainted. That's all. I would never steer you wrong."

"I know." He wouldn't. I am certain of that. He helped me start to find my way out of my shell. Helped me make friends with the queens.

This is a little different. For one, Rogue is the strawberry cheesecake of men. Sinfully delicious and as likely to stick to my hips, given the chance. And two; I'm not as shy around him as I figured I would be.

"You should at least try the boots on," Adira encourages. "Make him sweat that price tag a little."

"It's excessive." It's *buy my love* excessive. "But they're perfect. I would die to own these."

“You almost did die, so at the very least you should try them on.”

“That’s a terrible excuse.” I roll my gaze at him. It’s the very opposite of a good reason to try on the gorgeous boots that remind me of long evenings staring at the stars. What I did... I’m the one who should be trying to make it up to everyone. I put them through so much.

Rogue is watching me again. Hovering on the edge of the sofa like he’s waiting for me to decide that I need the boots. Like he did when I tried on clothes at the last store. He’s constantly on edge because of me.

Our bodyguard stays stationed near the door. He’s so statuesque that I momentarily forgot he was here. I’m not sure I understand why he is our constant shadow... other than Rogue said something about the paparazzi and my mother and protecting me. It’s almost as though he’s worried that she’ll try to kidnap me. The idea is ludicrous... isn’t it? My mother would simply beckon and expect me to jump to her will.

Except, I don’t have my phone.

It’s more likely that I’d have a problem with cameras in my face if someone alerts them to our whereabouts. But it also wouldn’t be my first time avoiding them.

“The bodyguard is a little over the top. I’ve managed to stay low-key for years.”

“It’s a tumultuous time,” Adira says. “I don’t think it’s a bad thing that he has someone watching your back. Nicole might

try to stab you in it.”

“My mother might not be very maternal,” I agree, “but she’s not a murderer.”

“Perhaps not.” He arches his eyebrow like a villain. “But the truth is someone hurt you. And it wasn’t that sexy beefcake over there.”

“I don’t remember anything.” I wish I did. I wish I had a clue how I ended up with a cracked rib and a broken wrist. I wish I could say Rogue Maddox is not to blame and be a thousand percent certain. “He thinks it was Alec, doesn’t he?”

“You look a little peaked, sweetie. You okay?”

He’s changing the subject, but I actually do feel tired. I press the back of my hand to my forehead. It’s a little clammy. “I’m okay.”

“Perhaps we should sit.” Adira takes my arm.

“No.” Because Rogue is watching me like he’s ready to pounce at the slightest hint that I might need him. “I’m good. I promise.”

“Good,” Adira says. “Now, he wants to buy you something pretty, and you are going to let him.”

“But I don’t know what he thinks he’s buying.” Because it’s certainly not the joy of owning women’s boots. “Is he trying to buy me things because he feels guilty for what happened with us? Or does he think there is a shoe sized hole inside me that he needs to try to fill?”

“I don’t know, sweetie.” Adira scopes out my husband. “Perhaps it’s both. Or it could be that he adores you and he wants you to be happy.”

“Yeah.” It could be that.

“You certainly look like you could do with some happy in your panties.” Adira leans in. “If I have to be caught in the middle of one more of the high-tension gazes you two are sharing, I’ll positively combust.”

“Oh, shut up.” I put my hand to his face and push him away.

He laughs.

“Did you find something you liked?”

“Many things,” my bestie says with a wink as he walks toward the salesgirl. “I don’t feel bad at all about making him pay for his guilt by purchasing you shoes.”

Rogue straightens as soon as we’re finished. He stands behind me and places his hands on my hips while Adira flirts with the woman helping him.

“Are you buying something here?” Rogue’s breath caresses my ear. “Since you refused to buy anything at the last place.”

“I didn’t see anything I had to have.” Except for those boots and there’s no way I would ever let him buy them for me. “Adira did though.”

“I’m sure he did,” Rogue says. His chest is against my back and the nearness is making me hypersensitive. “And I think you did too. I think you know exactly what you want.”

“Are we still talking about shoes?” God, I’m a wreck. This isn’t me. Not the me I remember anyway. That girl couldn’t talk to a man, let alone have sex with one. But Rogue Maddox must do something to my chemistry because I am a live wire. One spark is all it would take.

“We’re talking about those boots that would look so sexy on you,” he says. “You can’t tell me that you’re not lusting over them. I saw the way you looked at them.”

“And how was that?”

“The same way I look at you.”

I glance over my shoulder and get caught in his gaze. It’s been quietly smoldering all day. Wanting, making me want. Adira was right. It’s combustible.

“I’m all done here,” Adira says, his hands full of shopping bags. He must have bought half a dozen shoes and Rogue didn’t blink an eye. “What’s next? Lingerie?”

My whole body is on fire as we walk out of the shoe store. I pray Rogue didn’t overhear him.

Our bodyguard walks ahead a few paces, checking our surrounds as we go.

“Oops. I accidentally left your card with the clerk,” Adira tells Rogue.

“Hang on. I’ll be right back.” Rogue races back into the store.

A couple of people pass by while we wait. They look me up and down from the far side of our bodyguard before one turns to her companion. “Is that her? Is that Ivy Love?”

“Poor girl,” the other says. “Did you see the video? He’s such an asshole.”

“And her brother is a total creep.”

“Hey.” Adira wraps his arm around my shoulders. “Don’t listen to those bitches. They only know what the media tells them.”

“At least they know something,” I say. “What video are they talking about?”

Rogue clears his throat behind me.

It makes me jump since I thought he was still in the store.

“We should go,” he says.

“To buy a phone?” I feel so cut off without one. And now there’s a video. Normally I don’t put stock in social media, but if it’s a video of Rogue kissing another girl I need to see it. It’s the closest I might ever get to my memories of what happened.

His jaw bulges as he takes my hand. “We’ll stop there last since getting a new phone takes forever. I have a store I want to take you to first.”

Apparently the heat between Rogue and I can become exponentially hotter in a lingerie store. He must have heard Adira’s teasing suggestion because we’re now browsing beautiful pieces of expensive fluff and silk and lace. I pick out

panties and matching camisoles. Stretchy light-weight selections that don't bind around my ribs and that I won't struggle to get on.

Adira checks out some more adventurous pieces. Harnesses made from leather. Studded collars. Suede floggers that feel deliciously soft on my fingertips. But that's not what I'm after. It's not what I need.

“What you need right now is a battery-operated-boyfriend.” Adira points out a display case full of vibrators. “A little something for the not so little issue that man is causing you. Quick, while he's not looking.”

He wanders off to check out something with feathers. Rogue is busy holding up a wall and staring at his phone instead of me for the first time since we entered the store. The bodyguard has blended almost seamlessly into the store display. I'm pretty sure the mannequin in the plum corset is hitting on him. I put my head down and aim for the display as discreetly as possible.

There are several options; I pick one that's curved and pink and has a bunny on it. Adding the box to the lingerie I'm carrying, I pretend I'm not trying to buy a vibrator in front of my husband. Who I can't remember having sex with, but find myself desperately wanting after only a day in his vicinity. I dump the pile on the counter in front of the salesclerk.

“Can you ring this up please.” I glance over my shoulder to make sure said husband hasn't moved from his spot...and my nose bumps into his chest.

“It’s on my card.” He hands over his Amex, and then to my absolute horror picks up the box with the picture of the vibrator on it while the woman rings up my items.

My whole body must be beetroot with how badly I want to disappear into the floor. Sure, we’re obviously attracted to each other. We were a couple. We’re married. But this feels intimate. And my God, I’ve only known the man for twenty-four hours. Is it slutty to want to bang your husband like a couple of pot lids when you don’t remember dating him?

He studies the image for a moment before dropping it back on the counter without a single word. But his lip twitches. Once. Twice. He catches it with his teeth and tries to hide the telltale tic. Then he leans against the counter and squeezes my hip like he’d tear my clothes off right here, while he whispers close to my ear, “I could help you with that if you like.”

“No. That won’t be necessary.” I hide behind my hands. “I don’t even know how that got in there. I should just put it back.”

“Don’t you dare leave that out,” he tells the assistant before he leads me away from the counter. “We were all over each other from the very beginning. We have this tension... this attraction between us that burns like damn wildfire. You don’t remember that and it feels crazy to you right now. You’ve been through so much. So if you need... relief... I am buying you that toy. Or...”

“Or what?”

“You could always use me,” he says.

A montage of our bodies moving together spins out in my head. I'm on top with my hands on his chest as I ride him. He has hold of my hips and he's rolling them to get the angle of my clit right. Our flesh is sweat soaked. Hot. Breaths mingling into an erotic soundtrack. It's so vivid it could be real. I can practically smell the sex in the air.

"I can be that for you. If that's what you want," he says. "I can be your toy."

"Ivy, check out how cute..." I glance up to in time to see Adira duck down another aisle. "Oh my God, are those sequins?"

"He heard me, hmm?" Rogue's eyes widen and he moves his hand over his mouth to hide a smirk.

"That seems like a yes."

He touches my jaw. "Think about it?"

As if there's any way I couldn't.

His phone starts to ring at the same time the sales assistant gestures that she's finished with my items.

"I've got to take this." He swipes across the screen and puts it to his ear as he walks out of the store.

"You two are sickening." Adira dumps his items on the counter. Including a thong with purple sequins that is so not his thing. He makes a face. "Let me be your sex toy. Blech. Sickening."

"I'm completely mortified."

“You’re considering it.” He smiles as the woman takes off the security devices and puts his goodies in a bag. “I would be if I were in your shoes.”

“Me too,” the woman says wistfully.

I can’t believe we’re having this conversation. “I’ll make do with the vibrator.”

“Sure you will,” Adira says as we walk away from the sales assistant. “I give it a week.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I pocket Rogue’s card until I can give it back to him.

“Is it?” Adira nudges my shoulder and waggles his eyebrows. “Is it really? You’re so into him. The two of you have been nothing but fire since you first met. Your memory hasn’t dulled that attraction, has it?”

“No. At least not physically.”

“I doubt you’ll be able to keep your hands off each other for long.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” I say. “There are strings. He’s emotionally involved, and I’m...”

“Not sure yet?”

“He has history, but before yesterday, he was a stranger to me.” Funny and charming and sweet to me... but still a stranger.”

“You’re not on the same page,” Adira says.

“No. We’re not.” I rub at a tender spot below my throat. “I don’t know if I’ll ever feel the same way I did when we were together.”

“It’s okay.” Adira wraps an arm around my shoulders. “It’s okay for you to be confused and to question everything. You’ve been through so much. And Rogue understands that. I promise you, that man is committed to putting you first. He’ll be as patient as you need him to be. But you don’t need to be afraid of your feelings either.”

“How can you be so certain when I don’t know if I’m supposed to be heartbroken because he cheated on me? Or if past me would have forgiven him?”

Adira’s mouth twitches like he wants to say something but needs to think each word choice through first. “It’s complicated.”

“That’s what he said too.”

“Hang on. Let me speak.” He stops on the pavement. “The reason no one wants to tell you about what happened is because it could cause a trauma response.”

“It must have been bad then.” Unforgivable. Heart-shattering. “Did it... break me?”

“I wasn’t there. I only heard about it later,” he says. “I know Rogue regrets what happened though. And I know that you forgave him for it. The two of you are endgame, Ivy.”

“There they are,” someone shouts.

More voices join the fray. It sounds like a stampede a moment before a group of shutterbugs surround us. They push their cameras into our faces, asking questions about drugs and my mental health. About my brother. About Rogue. Our marriage. About my injuries. About my shopping.

My pulse races as I twist about looking for an exit. I'm separated from Adira almost helplessly. Like I'm caught in a riptide.

"Ivy," he yells after me, but he's stuck on the outer edge.

I'm jostled by one after another as I try to avoid their lenses. I've been mobbed before at events with Nicole and my brother. But never like this. Never with me being the center of attention. Then Rogue's there... with me... in the thick of it. His strong arms wrap around me and draw me under his arm. Angle me into his body. He lifts his jacket to block the cameras from capturing any part of my face.

"Back off," he snaps at the crowd as our bodyguard cuts a path to the car.

"Can we get a picture of the newlyweds?" someone yells.

"What is it like being married to the famous playboy?"

"Hey, Ivy. Why do you stay with him when he hurts you?"

"What?" I glance around to see who asked the question. But I can't make out a single face. They all blend together in a blur.

"Give my wife some space. Can't you see you're scaring her?" Rogue growls as he helps me up into the back of the

Range Rover. Adira is already waiting in the front seat. Rogue climbs in behind me.

And still the crowd are screaming questions I don't have the answers to.

"Are you okay?" Rogue is in my face. Worry in his blue eyes.

"I wasn't ready." Not to be surrounded by paparazzi. Or bombarded with questions. I wasn't prepared to find myself married to Rogue freaking Maddox and in the middle of a scandal. "I wasn't prepared for any of this."

"If you're hurt." He starts checking me over.

"I'm not."

"But if you were..."

His worry touches my heart. I frame his jaw with my hand. "I'm not."

"You're not?" He's breathing hard as his gaze locks with mine.

I fall into it. I need to feel the connection between us. I need him. He claims my mouth in a scorching kiss. Sweeps his tongue over my teeth and owns every inch before he draws away.

It's over too soon. It's not enough. I want more. I kiss him back with everything I have to give. Our mouths cling and taste and drive the flames inside me higher.

His hand finds my knee and my thighs part on instinct.

“Fuck.” Rogue rips himself away from me. His mouth is glossy from our kiss and he looks deliciously ruffled. He thumps his fist against the roof of the Range Rover as he sits back against the seat.

We’re not alone. I forgot. It felt like we were the only two people in the world.

“I got carried away,” he says.

“Me too.” All it would take is for him to touch me again and I’d be lost to this attraction between us.

“Where to?” the bodyguard asks.

Rogue’s expression turns guilty as he takes my hand in his. “I didn’t want to throw you in the deep end, baby, but we need to go to Rebel’s.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ivy

He takes my hand as we exit the car and holds onto it as we enter the house. It's a palatial three stories of concrete and glass. It's stunning inside.

Nerves swarm in my tummy. I've been here before. Met his family. Met his friends. I'd asked him about it in the car. About the first time I came to the compound.

He'd smiled dirtily and squeezed my knee but when I asked him what had happened to earn that look he hadn't answered the question. He'd told me instead about his brothers and Rebel's girlfriend-slash-publicist. He told me that they were all so grateful I was okay and are anxious to see me. He told me there was no way in hell he would be sharing me with that pack of hyenas if it wasn't necessary and that he was sorry we couldn't go straight home.

But going straight home means he and I will be alone and I'm not sure that I'm ready for that. Adira had to go to the bar because he's performing tonight. The bodyguard isn't likely to protect me from throwing my panties at Rogue. Meeting his

family buys me more time to prepare for that inevitable moment.

He keeps me close to his side, and I stay half a step behind because my whole body is trying to take flight. “What are they like again?”

“Loud. Nosey. In your face.”

“They sound like good people.” Once you get to know them. Were we friends? Was I comfortable here? Part of me had hoped that coming here would spark something for me, but it doesn’t. Nothing is familiar.

“Mostly,” he mutters.

“Oh my gosh. You’re here.” A cute redhead climbs out of her chair as the others start to notice us. She must be Summer by the way Rogue described Rebel’s girlfriend.

She stops a few feet from us and tips her head to the side until her hair sways like a curtain over her shoulder. Her green eyes are as warm as her smile. “It’s so good to see you. I want to hug you so bad, but Rogue looks like he’ll Hulk out if I even try. I’m Summer.”

“Rebel’s better half.” Rogue’s hand grows tighter around mine as he glares at the man who looks identical to him.

Rebel rises but doesn’t come over. Perhaps because of the tension that Rogue is exhibiting. But he wiggles his fingers and introduces himself.

Riot follows suit. Rochelle Kitt. Bianca Del Ray. Then Ethan Stone. Lincoln Landry. The table is a who’s who of

famous faces. Did I really spend time with these people?

Another woman walks into the room and I recognize her face too. Marty Kendall. “What is a reporter doing here?”

Summer’s gaze fills with pity. She presses her palms together. “I don’t know how much Rogue has filled you in on your brother.”

“On the arrest?”

“Are you okay?” Summer asks. “It must be hard...”

“Alec is... we’re not close.”

“I know that. I just... with your memories...”

“We weren’t close before that.” I don’t need to talk about it. Don’t want to. Thinking about Alec hurts my head. I taste acid when I swallow.

“Are you okay, baby?” Rogue asks as he catches me by my upper arms.

“She doesn’t look well.” Riot has joined us. He peers down at me. “Might be time for a lie down, huh, Love?”

“I knew you weren’t up to doing so much,” Rogue says as he scoops me into his arms and carries me into a bedroom. He lays me down on the bed and presses his hand to my forehead. “That doctor was an idiot.”

“I’m okay,” I whisper. “Truly. Just a little headache.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure you worry too much,” I say. It’s like every little thing that goes slightly wrong sets him off into blind panic.

“I can’t help it.” He tugs the blanket over me and sits on the edge of the mattress. Hunches into himself as he takes my hand and draws an infinity symbol on my palm. “I came too close to losing you to know how to be any other way.”

My heart squeezes for him.

“I’m going to get you some water.” He leaves and when he comes back it’s with a tall glass of iced water. He puts it on the nightstand and kisses my forehead. “Rest. I’ll come get you once we’re done.”

I almost ask him to stay. I don’t want to be alone. But my head really does hurt and all the shopping we did this afternoon has tired me out. My eyes flutter shut before he manages to close the door behind him.

I must fall asleep because I wake with a start. With raw, aching wounds and blood in my lungs. I choke on it until I cough. Until I can breathe again. Until all the crimson recedes and fades away entirely. Until all that’s left of the nightmare is an earworm.

Even that dissipates as I leave the bedroom and wander through the house. The headache has gone as quickly as it came on. There’s a Christmas tree in the formal living room that catches my attention. It’s covered in lewd Oscar statues and mismatched ornaments and pictures of Rogue and his brothers in all their various growing up stages. It’s pretty and unique and feels genuine in a way that I’m not used to outside of my relationship with Adira.

My mother must be beside herself with how everything went down at the hospital. There's no way she's going to let it go. The fact she can't reach me might be the only bonus of not having a phone.

"You're back with us." Bianca Del Ray smiles as she pours herself a drink at the bar. Her eyes are glazed. "Do you want one?"

"Thank you for offering, but no." I scrub at the goose bumps on my arm as I look around for Rogue.

"He's with Marty." Bianca fingers the chunky gold spirals around her neck. "They went for a drive."

"Oh. Where?"

"I'm not sure. Somewhere they could talk in private," the party girl says. "I know we didn't have a chance to get close before... everything. I just want you to know if there's anything you need..."

"Actually, there's one thing," I say. "Can I borrow your phone?"

"Sure." She unlocks and hands over the device. "Who are you going to call?"

"Adira. Is it okay if I—"

"Privacy? Of course. Just bring it when you join us. We're all out on the deck." She sashays out of the room.

I pull up Google and type Rogue's name into the search bar. He's had me on a social media ban since the hospital, though

he hasn't come out and said that's what he's doing. But there's been no radio, no internet, no news on in the apartment. Or the car. And I never did get a new phone.

He and Adira both think they are protecting me by only feeding me snippets that they believe I need to know and am ready for, but it feels like they're trying to keep me in the dark. I have too many questions not to go searching.

There are barely any photos of us, but I didn't expect there to be. And the ones that are there, Rogue has my face hidden in his chest. He looks like a god and I'm his most precious possession. Until the video. The one the girls we crossed paths with this afternoon must have been talking about.

He's with a woman in the VIP section of some club and she is all over him. His hands are on her hips and his tongue is in her mouth. And if I had loved him like everyone says that I did, like the fact that we're married says I did, then this moment would have broken my heart.

Even though it feels like it happened to someone else, it still hurts my heart. I watch until the recording cuts off suddenly. And then I watch it again. And again.

When Bianca's phone rings, I take it to her, outside, on the deck, where everyone is congregated.

It's warm with the outdoor heaters and the fire pit. They're drinking and laughing but the mood is a little somber. Which suits me fine because my mood has soured.

I catch gazes with Rochelle Kitt. Her lips curve tentatively and drop almost immediately, but I feel this connection to her. Like we're empathetic to each other's situations. I glance away, not liking the heavy sensation. I don't want to think about my brother and the damage he's done.

Rogue finally comes back. He and Marty share a look as they step outside. It makes me prickly and hot all over.

"You're feeling better?" He crouches in front of me. Studies my face. "You look better."

Am I the problem? Because my memory is gone and he feels guilty? I surge to my feet and make a beeline back inside. He brought me here to his brother's house and he left me for her. I want to leave.

"Ivy." He grips my elbow before I make it through the foyer. "What the hell?"

"What were you doing with her?" I jerk free of his hold.

He glances over his shoulder to see if anyone has followed before he levels those blue eyes on me. "With Marty?"

"Is there something going on between you?"

"There is nothing between me and Marty." He lifts his palms like he's trying to placate me.

"I don't believe you."

"You don't believe me?" His eyes flare.

"This huge house and you need to leave it to be with her?"

"Marty? We're talking about Marty Kendall?"

“Is that why we’re not together? I wasn’t enough for you?”

“Ivy, stop.”

“I saw the video,” I snap in his face. I knew his reputation, I must have been so naïve to think he would be happy with me.

“I saw the kiss.”

“You watched it.” He pales.

“I needed to know why I left you. Why we weren’t together even though we’re married.” What would break me enough that I couldn’t deal with life.

“I hurt you and I am so sorry, baby.” There’s so much apology in his gaze. So much honest repentance.

But the man is an actor and I can’t fall for his act. He led me to believe we would be forever. It’s the only reason I can believe I would end up as his wife. “I want an explanation.”

He swallows hard. “I’ve already told you—”

“You regret it.” I push his hands away when he tries to touch me again. “Yes, I know. But I don’t know why you did it. I don’t understand why you can’t just explain it to me.”

“Because it hurts you,” he says. “Because every time we start to talk about why you start shutting down—”

I don’t need the excuses. If he doesn’t want to be real with me then we can’t have a future. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t care. Whatever I felt for you... it’s gone. It’s over.”

“You think we’re over?” His gaze darkens as it drops to my mouth.

“I know we are.”

The wall meets my back as my arms wrap around his neck.

“Then tell me not to kiss you.” His hands flex on my hips.

I can barely recall what we were arguing about as I wet my lips.

His mouth is on mine in the next instant. His body pressing me against the wall as I open to the thrust of his tongue. He owns me like I was made to be his. Like our connection is primal.

When my thighs part to his hand, this time he doesn't stop. His thumb glides over my clit before he pushes aside my panties and spears me with two fingers. He pumps them in and out slowly. “Do you feel that, baby? Feel my fingers inside you? Feel the way your pussy wants my touch?”

I nod and whimper. It feels so good there are no words... just possession and need and this desire to let him do what he wants with me. To let him carry me away.

“It's because your pussy knows it's mine.” He growls into my neck as he rolls his thumb against my clit. “You might not remember us, but your body does. It knows what it loves. It knows we're not over. That we'll never be over.”

“Oh God.” I come so quickly. Come so hard.

“I screwed up and that's a part of us,” he says as he eases his hand from my panties.

My legs are quaking underneath me. I use the wall to brace myself so I don't melt into a puddle of goo at his feet.

"I can't change it, though God knows I wish I could. But I am sorry. And I will do everything it takes to make us all right again."

"Except explain why."

"You need to trust me," he says. "Or don't trust me, but be patient with me and yourself. You've been through a massive trauma, baby. We can't fix everything in a day. Just don't say it's over when it's obvious that's not what you want."

"It is what I want." Breathing heavily, I slide from between him and the wall. My muscles shake from the intense orgasm.

"The fact that you're hurting says it's not."

"Are you calling me a liar?" I don't want to admit that he might have a point. I don't need my memories to see why I was so drawn to him then. I'm drawn to him now.

"Yeah, baby." He sounds almost sad. "I'm calling you a liar."

Well, I might be a liar, but he's the one sneaking around with another woman. "You still haven't told me what you were doing with Marty Kendall."

"Marty Kendall and I barely get along, Ivy. I've held a grudge with her for years. You do not have to worry about me and Marty. Ever." He chuckles but when he stops he winces like he's still hiding something. "I will never hurt you like that again, baby. I promise. You're it for me. There are no women

in the world as far as I'm concerned. I jeopardized us once and not having you in my life killed me. Marty means nothing to me."

His reassurances feel empty because it's obvious that he's holding something back. That's why my heart seems to shrink. "That's what I thought."

"Ivy—"

"I want to go home."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rogue

That fucker is out on bail.

Somebody somewhere doesn't believe Alec represents a big enough risk to keep him locked up until his trial. Nicole Hawthorne put up the money. Of course there's nothing she wouldn't do for that bastard. And then she hired an entire publicity team to help convince the world he's innocent while simultaneously making Ro look like she decided that she wanted to be treated like that.

That bastard is anything but innocent. When they lock him up for what he did to Ro they should throw away the key.

Sweat drips in my eyes as I power down the treadmill. Just a few miles to take the edge off my frustrations. Nothing overly strenuous.

I've been saving those workouts for the middle of the night since I can't sleep. I'm not sure I'll ever have another good night's sleep again. Not as long as Alec Hawthorne is on the

loose and hurting people I care about. Not as long as I dream about Narnia and see blood all over my hands.

The fact that he probably hurt Ivy too... With the way she reacts whenever his name is mentioned, it's hard to believe he isn't somehow involved in how Ivy ended up with a cracked rib and a broken wrist. It's not that much of a stretch to imagine he went even further and attempted to murder his own sister. Or organized someone to do it for him?

At least when he's in jail he won't have to worry about what I'll do to him. Because if I ever get confirmation on my theory I will want him to feel every ounce of pain he inflicted on my woman.

But without a smidge of evidence or Ivy's memory resurfacing all Adira and I have is conjecture. It's not enough to get the cops involved. And at the moment there's too much public interest on him to beat a confession out of him.

And too many people who would assume that Nicole was right to label me violent and abusive. There are still plenty of people out there who think I hurt Ivy. That I should be in prison because I'm the kind of man who beats on his wife. And that she would be safer with Nicole.

At some point will she start thinking that way? Her looking at me like I'm the enemy is killing me. It sucks giant donkey dick.

I'm torn between wanting Ivy to remember what happened to her that night, and not wanting her to have to suffer through

it again. She almost passed out when Summer brought him up two nights ago.

“You all right, lover boy?” Adira stands in the doorway to my workout room. He has his suitcase beside him and a package in his arms. “This came for you earlier. I forgot to tell you before the show.”

I take the thickly padded envelope and open it. Inside are two ring boxes. I ordered them days ago just in case I needed them to convince Nicole to stay out of our business. Or at least that’s what I told myself instead of the truth, which is that I hoped Ivy would ask for her make-believe wedding band so I could see what it would look like to have my ring on her finger.

Instead, for the past couple of days we’ve sidled past each other in the hallway. And we make coffee in silence because the only thing she has to say to me is that she wants to go back to Adira’s apartment.

Of course that’s a no go. And Adira agreed with me. He talked her around to staying that first night. And I’m sure several times since.

I hate that she hates being here. I want her to be comfortable. And I want to go back to flirting and bonding with her, but the words to fix things escapes me. I’ll be lucky if she doesn’t ask to end this pretend marriage.

“You should probably tell her the truth sooner rather than later.” Adira takes one of the red leather boxes from my hand

and pries the lid open. His mouth turns down a little more.
“She would love this.”

“I figured.” Outside of the apartment our marriage has taken on a life of its own. At home we couldn’t be more distant.

I shove the boxes back in the package and toss it on top of the shelving unit that holds gloves and wraps and other workout necessities.

I shouldn’t have shown him. Adira’s been Switzerland in the cold war between me and Ivy. But at some point he will choose to set her straight on what the status of our relationship actually is. All I can think is when he does, I’ll lose her for sure. “Where are you headed?”

“Visiting a friend.” He grips the handle of the suitcase.

“Now?”

“Late flight,” he says.

“Are you sure this is the best time for you to be leaving Ivy?” I’m surprised that he would, actually.

“Chris needs me more,” he says. “His caregiver lost his mother and they’re struggling to find a temporary replacement, so I volunteered.”

“I can’t say that I see you in that role,” I say.

“Me either.” His grin is flashy and doesn’t hide the darkness in his gaze. “But it’s the very least I can do and nowhere near what I should do.”

“Cryptic,” I say. “How long will you be gone?”

“For a week. Perhaps a little longer,” he says. “I think, when I get back, it’s time I move to my own place. Deal with Narnia. In case...”

“She’s not moving back there.” I grab a towel and scrub the sweat from my face.

“You might not have a choice.”

I thump my fist on the top of the lockers. “As long as we don’t know what role Alec played in what happened, and he’s free to go wherever he wants, she’ll be staying here. I don’t trust him any more than I trust Nicole. This is the best option for her.”

Adira raises a brow at my outburst. “I get it, but—”

“I can keep her safe,” I add as I focus on calming the fear that rears up inside me. “You know I can. It’s why she’s still here, isn’t it? You’ve tried to talk her out of leaving. Convinced her to hang in there a little bit longer each time she’s tried to walk these past couple of days.”

“I don’t know what else to do.” He sighs. “I’m worried if I take her home it could traumatize her worse than she already is. I can barely stomach walking past that room. I can’t even begin to imagine how hard it will be for her.”

“I hate that she’s going through this.” I would do anything to go back and do things differently. Make it so she stayed with me and never ended up alone in Narnia in the first place.

“Tell her that,” he says.

“Yeah.” I turn my back on him. “If I can get her to talk to me.”

“Just tell her about the kiss,” he says.

“I have,” I say.

“No.” He pauses. “Tell her everything about that night. What happened. What was on your mind.”

“But you’ve seen how she reacts.” The last thing I want to do is cause her more pain. “Every time we mention him...”

I want to punch a hole in the closest wall.

“She’s hurting anyway.” He wipes a finger under one eye. “She’s confused. And she knows there’s more that we’re keeping from her.”

“The shrink said it could be harmful.”

“This isn’t healthy either,” he says. “She’s desperate to know. She wants to be able to trust you. Keeping all of this from her isn’t helping her connect to the time she’s lost. That’s another reason why I’m leaving. You need time to reconnect. Me being here is just giving you both a middleman.”

“You don’t need to leave,” I say. “She needs you.”

“No, she wants me because I’m safe and she knows it,” he says. “She needs *you*. You’re the man that has helped her grow and thrive. The man that she’s head over kitten heels in love with, despite this drama. So pull your head out of your ass and find a way to help her now.”

I snort under my breath. “Okay.”

“Perhaps start off small. Only push as far as you can before the negative outweighs the benefits,” he says. “And for queen’s sake do tell her what you were doing with Marty.”

“It’s not that easy.” At least not when it comes to the discussion I had with Marty. She told me there are some things about Ivy’s background that don’t add up. Like how Richard Love and Nicole Hawthorne weren’t mentioned together anywhere—in any publication—until six months after Ivy was born. Even if Nicole wasn’t a big name, at the time Richard was a well-recognized philanthropist. And it was his second marriage. After his first wife disappeared.

She’s running on a hunch. Reporter’s instinct. And that nose of hers is telling her that this matters.

In the meantime I can’t even tell Adira about it because he’s Ivy’s cousin. We simply don’t have enough to know what we’re looking at. I’m certainly not going to blow Ivy’s world to pieces when she’s already been through so much. Not without something concrete.

“Nothing worthwhile ever is,” he says over his shoulder.

“What about her phone?” I went ahead and had Adira custom order Ivy a new one since her phone seems to be long gone. A pretty, special edition with all the bells and whistles.

It even has a tracker, not that I’ll use it. Adira vetoed any thought I might have had of keeping a digital eye on her. He did however agree that it could be handy in case of an emergency. And as long as Alec is a free man we’re both paranoid enough to be worried about her safety.

We might not be able to prove he hurt Ivy or caused her to hurt herself, but we sure as hell can be cautious.

“I arranged for it to be delivered here,” Adira says. “It’ll be a couple more days at the most.”

“That’s too long,” I call out.

“Flashy things take time, sweetie.” He disappears around the corner.

I grab my water bottle and the package and head for the bedroom I’ve been sleeping in since Ivy came home. I need a shower. I need a good night’s sleep and Ivy in my arms too, but that doesn’t seem likely. So I settle for a shower.

Tossing the package on the bed, I step into the bathroom and turn on the water. Steam fills the space as I strip out of my shirt and tug at the string on my sweatpants. The way Ivy looked at me the night I helped her shower comes roaring back to me.

Adira must have given her a hand since then, because she certainly hasn’t asked for my help. And any idea that she might have let me be her toy now feels unlikely.

Sweats on the floor, I step into the shower. While I soap up, I try not to think about how I’d let her use me, if she only said the word. And I totally succeed. For sixty seconds. But then images of us overwhelm my noble intentions.

She’d ride me, of course. My grasp on her hips helping as I lift her up and down on my cock. Angling her just right to hit all those places that need friction while making it as easy for

her as possible so her injuries don't hurt. I'd build the pressure slowly so that when she does orgasm the pleasure is so intense she doesn't ever want to come back down.

As the suds run down the drain I wrap my cock in my fist and tug. Nice and easy. Letting my thoughts build on each other while I stroke myself. Until I'm pressing a palm into the glass and groaning with the tension.

I stop before I come. Showering alone without her. Getting off to the fantasy because we're not speaking. It doesn't cut it. I don't want my hand. I don't just want to come. I want my girl. I want her screaming my name the way she used to when I'd bring her to climax with my fingers and tongue. God, I miss that. I miss her. And the way she felt wrapped around my cock.

Shutting off the shower, I grab a towel and dry off enough that I'm not trailing water through to the bedroom.

Something crashes elsewhere in the apartment and I freeze in place.

Ivy screams.

I break into a run.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ivy

Three steps to orgasm.

1. Buy a vibrator.
2. Unwrap the vibrator and introduce it to my pussy.
3. Angle it to hit the right spot while fantasizing about what the man down the hallway could do to me. Even though we're over, my body doesn't want to get the memo, and I've spent three days replaying that fight and how hard I came when he told me I belonged with him. Until I couldn't stand it anymore.

Well, that was how it was supposed to work.

Except I couldn't angle the damn thing to hit my clit. I could barely hold it inside me. Even with physical therapy it's going to be a while before I regain full strength in my wrists, which means right now the vibrator is useless.

Unless knocking the lamp into the wall with the toy counts. I stare at the shards of glass that litter the floor. The lamp practically exploded when it hit the wall. Somewhat like I want to now.

“Ivy?” Rogue bursts through the door like a wild man. His hair is damp and sticking up. His skin is pink from the shower. He scans the room like he thinks someone is in here with me. “You okay, baby? I heard you scream.”

“I...” My cheeks burn, but my gaze is caught on his broad chest. On his flat brown nipples and his bronzed skin. On the lines of his abs that make a girl want to lick him like an ice cream cone. “The lamp. It fell down.”

“Oh.” His gaze diverts to the mess on the floor. “Oh, thank fuck.”

There’s a bundle of white terry cloth bunched in his hand, but there is nothing around his hips. He’s beautiful. Lean and muscled in all the right places. And that cock...

“You scared me.” He comes straight toward me. Tree trunk swinging between his thighs.

And is it... at half-mast? Was he in the middle of something when he came running? My thighs clench. My mind conjures up visuals of him wrapping his fist around it and stroking. It’s a beautiful piece of equipment, and I want to know what it would feel like inside me. Except, I already do, don’t I? I just don’t remember. What a shame. “I bet I couldn’t walk for a week after the first time.”

“What?” He follows my wide-eyed stare. His skin grows a little pinker as he realizes that he’s completely nude. Unfurling the towel, he wraps it around his hips. “Shit. I didn’t mean... you screamed, and I thought something had happened. So I came as fast as I could.”

I bet I'd come fast with that thing too. Unlike with my vibrator that I cannot angle to save my life. Or climax with either. And oh God, is my vibrator still visible where I dropped it when I hit the lamp?

I glance in that direction.

He makes a noise in the back of his throat. It's like a growl and a choke at the same time. "You were..."

His gaze is liquid, and my temperature ratchets up another notch. "I was..."

"And the lamp?"

"Collateral damage. Of my frustration. I can't..." I lift my arms. "With these wrists."

"I can..." He plucks at the comforter over my lap. I'm wearing one of his T-shirts because it's easier with the cast. And nothing underneath. "...let me help."

"You should go. We're over so we should just be over." I don't buy the words that come out of my mouth. I don't want him to go. If I truly meant them I wouldn't be still here. In his apartment. In his bed. There's something between us that I need to understand. A connection that might be the only link I have to who I became in the months that I'm missing. A connection that turns me into a sex fiend every time he's close, but if that's the price I have to pay... "I'm fine."

"I'm not," he says.

"You're not?" I didn't expect him to say that.

“I’m not okay with you thinking that we’re over. Or seeing you this needy and not being able to do anything about it.” He reaches for the comforter, and I don’t stop him as he drags it down my bare legs. He licks his lips as he reaches for the hem of the T-shirt and inches it up to reveal my lack of panties and my wet thighs. “It’s killing me.”

It’s killing me too. My clit thumps as his gaze lingers between my legs.

“Do you want the vibrator?” His voice is scratchy, raw. Almost feral with heat.

I can imagine him sliding the pink vibrator inside me and pressing it to all the right spots to make my toes curl. But, no, that’s not what I want. I shake my head. “Uh-uh.”

“Me?” Possessiveness flares in his gaze as he smooths his hand from my knee to almost the inside of my thigh.

“You said you would be my toy.” My words come out drenched with need.

“That’s...” He clears his throat as the outline of his cock flexes under the towel. “I did say that.”

“So?” I eyeball the cloth.

He raises an eyebrow. “You want it gone?”

On my knees, I pluck the cloth loose until it falls aside. Then I straddle him.

“Wrap your arm around my neck, baby.” He nips my ear and smooths his palm over my spine.

I place my cast around his shoulders as he kisses his way along my jaw. By the time he nibbles my bottom lip and our tongue clash, I'm squirming with anticipation.

He thrusts into me like he can't wait another second. Balancing me carefully so that I can't hurt myself, he lifts me up and down on his cock.

Delicious pressure builds inside me as he hits all those places I couldn't get to by myself. All that frustration I've been holding onto explodes into a mind-numbing orgasm. It makes my calves spasm as it steals my breath.

"Fucking beautiful," he murmurs. He doesn't stop. He's hard as rock inside me. Nowhere near done.

When the second one hits it comes on nice and slow. Every part of my body grows warm and fuzzy before I turn boneless in his arms.

"I'm going to fill you, baby." He grunts. "Are you okay with that?"

The way he says it, it's not really a question, so we must have done this before. I'm on birth control. I saw the packet in my cosmetics case. Resumed taking them again days ago. "I want it."

I want him. Us. Everything we were. Even if it didn't last. Even if it can't last. I still want it all.

"God... Feel what you do to me." He spills inside me.

I feel the jerk as he does. The warmth. The hope in my chest. Even if I can't believe in us yet, I want to.

He lays me down in the bed we used to share. Settles on his side beside me and pulls the covers over our naked bodies. Covers my belly with the wide expanse of his hand. “You and me, baby. We’re going to get through this. You’ll see.”

I hope so. Because otherwise falling for him all over again will destroy me.

His lips press to my ear. “You gave me your heart once, and I’ll cherish it forever, baby. I’ll give you everything you need. Do anything to make you happy.”

“You cheated on me.” My eyes grow wet and I close them to keep the tears at bay. I don’t know why it hurts so much when I can’t even remember it.

“I kissed someone else.” His breath is warm against my ear when he exhales. “It’s not a secret. I never tried to hide it from you. It’s also not as simple as that.”

“Then explain it.” I turn to face him.

There’s pain in those baby blues. It darkens them to the color of rough waters. He runs his fingers through the hair on the top of my head, playing with it. “I went to visit my mom that day. She’s not well. She has paranoid schizophrenia. Sometimes she hallucinates.”

“I’m sorry.” I think I know this somehow. Like it was in a magazine. Or on the internet. A long time ago when he first became famous.

“Well, sometimes she’s here. In the real world. And those are good days. Other times she thinks that I ruin everything

that I touch. Some days she thinks I'm the devil and that I'm out to steal her soul."

"That must be so hard." Listening to him breaks my heart. My hand finds its way into his. I want to offer him comfort because it sounds like it hurts him a lot to talk about her.

"It has its moments." He gives me a half-smile and squeezes my fingers gently.

He always looks so happy, but it hides a profound sadness. How many people have seen this side of him? Or is it just me? Am I the only one he lets get this close? He was a player before me... was that his way of keeping everyone at a distance?

"The day of that video I went to see her. I got so drunk after that I don't remember any of it. The only reason I'm even aware that I kissed that girl is because of the video."

"It's not an excuse." It shouldn't be, and yet, if I had to admit it, my heart is already half-turned around. He's been nothing but loving and sweet to me since he brought me home. And I have no recollection of the event either way.

"No. It's not." He stares into my eyes. Pleads with me to give him a chance. "You forgave me. Your brother, he hated that you were with me. He tried to break us up."

I have this sudden overwhelming desire to run away. It's happened a few times—whenever anyone mentions my brother. "I can't imagine he would care one way or another about what I did or who I did it with."

But then I never thought he would hurt Rochelle Kitt. I assumed he'd only been mean to me because I was his sister.

“Well, unfortunately he does care.” The pressure of his fingers increases on mine as he searches my face.

“I don't understand.” There are so many things I don't know. I'm so fed up with everyone trying to coddle me. It's like they don't believe that I'm strong enough to handle whatever they're not telling me. I try to clench my fist, but I can't because of the cast. Maybe they're right if I'm not even strong enough to make a fist. “Why?”

“Before you and I met, Rebel put him in the hospital for what he did to Ro,” Rogue tells me. “Rebel did time, but I don't think that was enough for your brother. He wanted payback.”

“Alec did?” Black spots dance in my vision. The whole idea makes me dizzy and shaky.

“Ivy, you're not okay, are you?” Rogue shifts onto his elbow.

“I'm...” I feel like I'm hyperventilating. Like I could die if I don't get enough air. “Go on. Please.”

“He set up the girl and the video. You told me that the next day. You were certain of it. That's why you stayed. You knew we weren't over. You're the one I woke up beside the next morning. The one I made love to the next day. Ask Rebel. Or Riot. They'll tell you the truth.”

“I believe you.” My voice is a rasp and I’m on the precipice of tears. I’m not sure why. I’m aware that Alec isn’t a good person. It’s not that I’m shocked about my brother. But it leaves me chilled to think that he could go as far as to set up Rogue to emotionally wound me.

Rogue wraps his arms around me and draws me close. “I’m worried that he hurt you. With the way you react whenever his name is mentioned, it seems like a certainty. You’re shaking, baby.”

I don’t want to think about it. I let out a low moan. “I’m fine. Tell me about Marty.”

“Marty?” His gaze is full of concern. “She’s a reporter. And a family friend. She came to me with some concerns about Nicole’s attack on me. I told her my side of the story. That’s all.”

“Fact checking?”

“You could call it that.”

“Okay.” I turn onto my back again. I believe him. “Remind me what we were like together. How it was before...”

“Before you forgot,” he says it so I don’t have to.

I might never remember that time. No matter how much I want to. “Yeah.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ivy

I bolt upright. My forehead is covered in perspiration and my heart is racing. I was in Narnia and there was so much blood. It flowed from my arms and dripped in big thunderous splats on the plush carpet. Its ivory color turned crimson and the crimson spread ever wider.

My fingers fumble against the new lamp Rogue bought to replace the one I broke. For some reason it isn't on, but the minute I press the switch it lights up and pushes the shadows back.

After what Alec did to me when I was little—the way he used to lock me in the closet—I'm always going to be afraid of the dark and confined spaces. But I never thought I'd be scared of the costume closet until now.

I'm not in Narnia though. Not in a confined space. Or the dark.

My pulse slows and my breathing too. I'm sitting in bed. Where Rogue gave me orgasm after orgasm before we fell

asleep. Like he's done every night since he told me the truth about that kiss. And Alec. And Marty.

His side of the bed is empty. There's the sound of rhythmic thumping coming from his home gym. He does this in the wee hours of the morning. Every day since he brought me home from the hospital.

I figured it was a tension thing. I was ready to explode, so surely he was too. But we dealt with that problem. And he's still doing it.

Shoving back the blankets, I wander toward the room where the noise is coming from. Stop in the doorway when I catch sight of him.

He's a god. Shirtless. Glistening. Gray sweatpants hanging from his hips in that way that makes a girl lose her damn mind. They're patchy with sweat. He throws fist after fist at a large bag hanging from the ceiling. His shoulders flex and ripple with each swing.

I watch him from the doorway as he takes out whatever is bothering him on the bag. Over and over and over he lashes out. His face is a mask of fury and pain.

"Rogue?" He doesn't seem to notice me when I move into the room. He doesn't stop when I circle him. Maybe he has earbuds in and he can't hear me over his music.

I'm almost in front of him when he stops. The bag smashes against his shoulder without his fists to stop it. Palms up he stretches out his fingers as he rips off the wrapping. His breath

comes too quick and too shallow. His shoulders go up and down with it.

There's something wrong in the way he stares at his hands. I go to him. Clasp his face with my hands. "Rogue? What is it? What's wrong?"

His gaze is unfocused, but then he blinks and he's back with me. "Baby, what are you doing up? Did I wake you?"

"No." I force him to maintain eye contact. "You don't sleep?"

"Ah." He grabs the back of his neck as he walks away to toss the wraps in a basket. "Not so much anymore. No."

"Since you found me," I guess.

"It's hard to see the woman you love like that and not carry it with you." He comes back to me with a bottle of water. Opening it, he takes a swallow.

"I'm sorry." I wring my hands as I watch a drop escape down his jaw and throat. I hate that I'm the reason he's hurting, even if I don't quite understand how we got here.

"Don't you ever say sorry for what happened to you. Or that I made it there in time." He wraps his arm around me and lifts me up. "Hear me? I would rather have a thousand nightmares than one night without you in my bed."

"Okay." I curl my legs around his waist. Rest my head on his shoulder. I love that even after an intense workout he's so strong he can hold me with one arm.

“And why are you awake?” He nuzzles the side of my head until I turn for his kiss. “Do you need more orgasms? I still have some gas in the tank.”

I smile as my heart grows too big for my chest. It’s like my body doesn’t realize that my mind forgot him. It’s still caught up in the euphoria of my feelings. I can see exactly why I’m drawn to him. “Just a dream.”

“Oh yeah?” He raises a brow at me as he carries me out of the gym. “And what is my baby dreaming about?”

Remembering my dream sobers me. “Blood. So much blood.”

His arm tightens around me. “So a nightmare then.”

“I don’t know,” I whisper. It felt so real. My wrists still hurt and there is a pain in my chest that aches beyond words. What happened to me before Rogue found me that night? “I think I need to go to Narnia.”

“No.” His jaw turns to granite. “That’s not a good idea.”

“I don’t think I have a choice.” It happened in Narnia. I’m having nightmares about the costume closet. Maybe not nightmares... they could be memories. “I have to go back and see it with my own eyes. All of it. I have to face what happened, Rogue.”

He shakes his head compulsively as he lowers my feet to the floor in our bedroom. “You can barely stand to hear your brother’s name spoken. And I can’t... you don’t know what it’s like... seeing you like that.”

My eyes start to burn. “It’s not your decision. It’s mine.”

“Then I’m asking you not to make it.” He strokes his fingers over a lock of my hair as his voice turns low and soft. “Please, baby. You’re traumatized.”

“You don’t have to come with me.” I don’t want him to be hurt by this, but I still have to do it. “I can go alone.”

“No.” The set of his jaw says he’s made this decision. “What if you’re hurt again? Alec is out on bail. Nicole wants to separate us. What if something happens and I’m not there?”

“You can’t make this choice for me.” I try to make him understand. I don’t want him to be angry with me. I don’t want him to be hurt by my choice. I was happy enough not to go when I wasn’t dreaming about the place, but it was never because he kept me from going.

“It’s a bad idea,” he says. “And it’s not happening. You’re not ready—”

“I understand that you’re tormented.” I appreciate that it’s hard for him. I realize that what he saw in that room keeps him up at night. But this could be a good thing for me. It could help me remember. “But you’re being unreasonable.”

“This isn’t about me,” he says sternly. “I’m protecting you.”

“I don’t need you to.” I don’t need to be sheltered by him. Maybe at some point I did. I certainly believed I was weak when it came to Nicole and Alec. Even now, my stomach is a pit when I think about standing up to Nicole. I literally tremble and want to throw up when I think about Alec.

But I'm here, aren't I? With Rogue. Married to a man who could be the love of my life. The Ivy who ended up in Sunny could never have managed that. Something changed. I feel it.

He swallows hard as he presses his hands to his face. They tremble violently. "I don't sleep, Ivy. I haven't slept a full night since I found you. Of course I'm tormented by what I saw." He huffs. "But you can't even remember what happened. Your beautiful and intelligent brain has hidden it from you for a reason. Don't push yourself to recall things that you're not ready for. That could hinder your recovery. The doctor said—"

"I'm going to Narnia."

"I think you'll find that I can keep you from doing that." He tries to soften his voice to take the edge out of what he's telling me. Tries to wrap his arms around me. "Jackson knows not to let you leave the apartment without me. The security downstairs know not to let you leave the building."

"Are you serious?" That's ridiculous. I push him away. He'd told me as much but then we'd fallen into a comfortable place with each other. Even when we weren't talking I never thought he'd truly stop me if I tried to leave.

"Yeah, baby." He lets his arms fall and slap his thigh. "I'll take you anywhere else you want to go. I'll take you to watch the show at Mojito Bar. I'll take you to dinner and dancing. I'll take you to France for a croissant and the view from the Eifel Tower if that's what you want. But Narnia is not negotiable. It'll do more harm than good."

"You'd take me to France?"

“Anywhere.” He tips my chin and kisses my mouth.
“Except Narnia.”

“This isn’t protecting me,” I say. “You’re doing this for you.”

“You were seriously hurt, Ivy. You almost died. Someone hurt you, but you don’t remember, so there’s not a fucking thing we can do about it.” His voice grows louder. “Except make sure they don’t get another chance. If that makes me the asshole then so be it.”

The argument is over. It doesn’t matter to him how huffy I get. He won’t change his mind. He can’t because he’s convinced himself he’s protecting me.

“I want to sleep alone,” I whisper, my chest hurting because I get that it is hard for him, but I needed him to be on my side. I needed him to trust that I can handle it.

“I understand,” he says and closes the door behind him.

I sink down on the end of the bed. If he understood me at all he wouldn’t be trying to keep me from finding my feet. Even if that means letting me go to Narnia alone. It’s why I will never go back to Nicole’s. It’s why her threats to leave me homeless and penniless weren’t enough to keep me under her roof.

And the fact that Rogue doesn’t understand this means I can’t give him my heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ivy

There's a black box next to my coffee cup this morning.

It's a rectangular carton with an image of a phone on it. A special edition in a purple-blue holographic foil.

He bought me a phone? After a week of silently refusing to let me have one.

Sipping my caramel macchiato, I tug at the blue ribbon wrapped around the box until the bow comes loose. I lift the lid. The screen is large and shiny and fingerprint free as I take the device out of the box. The casing changes from a glossy pale purple all the way through to blue depending on the angle I hold it. Silver shimmers wink in the light.

It might be the most adorable device I have ever seen. Except that it's his way of telling me I can have anything I want as long as I agree not to go to Narnia.

I power it up to find it has a fully charged battery and it's already set up, though he only put his family members and Adira in the contacts. I still need to sign into my Google

calendar. There are probably a whole host of other apps I'll need to login to at some point too.

A picture of Rogue and I fills the home screen. From the background it looks like we might be at Rebel's. We're snuggled up under a blanket and we look so cute together. Intimate.

We were happy. I have no doubt about that. Even if it feels like it happened to someone else. For a few days there I believed it could still be our reality.

"You like it?" he asks as he comes into the room. He's wearing a button down and he's in the middle of rolling one sleeve up to his elbow. Then he starts on the other one, revealing sweet ink and muscle.

My mouth waters. He's sexy. There's no doubt about that. "Huh?"

"The phone?" Rogue watches me with the device that fits my hand just right. A knowing grin breaks across his face and makes his chest puff.

I like the phone. I just don't like the price tag. I don't like that he thinks he can change my mind with a pretty bauble. Or get me to do what he wants by bribing me with material things. If I'd wanted that kind of treatment I would have left the hospital with Nicole.

"I know you're unhappy with me." His expression turns forlorn. It's clear he hates that we're at odds again. Even if he

isn't willing to budge. "But I ordered this a week ago, and it finally arrived this morning."

"So you didn't just give it to me so I'd change my mind?" I like the phone and I appreciate that he bought it for me. But I'm not giving up on Narnia if that is what he's hoping will happen.

"The phone has nothing to do with Narnia." He crosses his arms over his chest and rests his ass against the edge of the cupboards. He spreads his legs in that big dick way only real men can manage. "You asked for it. I got you one. The timing sucks, that's all."

"I like this photo." I show him the screen although he would be the one who put it on there so he already knows what the image is. "Is it at Rebel and Summer's?"

"It was the night I took you to the tree house." He smiles like the memory is something precious to him.

I wish I could see the memory playing out in his head. Experience it through his eyes. "It must have been special."

"It was the first time I told you I loved you," he says.

"Oh." It hurts to realize I might never recall something that obviously meant so much to both of us.

"I didn't mean to say that." He wipes a hand on his pants before he turns around and busies himself with the coffee pot and a fresh cup. "Forget I mentioned it."

"Do you have any more photos?" I ask.

“A few.” He moves more slowly as he brings his cup and joins me at the counter. “I can send them to your phone.”

“Please,” I say.

My resolve to keep my guard up weakens as he scrolls through his gallery and sends me photos of us. Perhaps I could have picked a better time to talk to him about Narnia. Instead of accosting him when he told me he can’t sleep after the way he found me. He suffered too. And he is trying to protect me. He’s right that my brother triggers me—even more than normal.

Perhaps I need to give him and myself more time. I can’t just throw away our marriage.

“Are there any photos from our wedding?” I ask as I scroll through the images he sent me. “I don’t see any here.”

His shoulders stiffen. “Uh, not on my phone.”

“An album?”

“I think you took them with you when you moved out.” He concentrates on the photos he’s still scrolling through.

That makes sense I guess. We would have been preoccupied on the day. And I can’t even imagine that we wouldn’t have instituted some kind of social media ban. Possibly to the point that no-one had phones at all. “So they’d be at Adira’s?”

“I can ask him,” he says.

“No, I will.” I pull up Adira’s contact info and send my bestie a text. It might take a while for him to respond but since

I'm not going to Narnia any time soon it's not a big deal. "So you're happy with the phone? You don't want something different?"

"It's perfect. Thank you." I peck his cheek. Or, at least, it's meant to be his cheek. But then my lips are skirting his jaw.

"You're welcome." He growls low in his throat as he wraps his hand around my neck to kiss me on the mouth. His tongue parts my lips and thrusts inside.

We're fire every time. Even when I don't mean for us to be. It's all I can do to keep my legs under me. To not hike one over his hip and feel him press against me.

He smiles with his eyes when he pulls back. "What do you want to do today?"

My phone dings with a notification from my Google calendar. I pull up the app and frown at the screen. That's a number I'll need to add to my contacts. "According to my schedule I have therapy with Dr. Keller. Can you drive me to Sunny?"

"I can." He's more of a pussy cat than a bear. As long as I don't push his panic buttons.

I press on his chest when he tries to breach the distance and kiss me again. "You know you can't actually come to therapy with me, right?"

"I'll wait in the car," he says. "Or I'll visit my mom. Sunny is the facility she's in."

“Oh. But that’s not how we met?” He said he was shot. That I was a birthday party princess. But his mom and I both spent time in the same facility. If I saw her would I know who she was?

“No, it’s not.”

“I better get ready.” I notice the time. “Can you tell me about it on the way?”

“I’d love to.” His eyes crinkle in the corners. Anything that brings us closer together makes him happy. I need to find a way to use that to convince him to take me to Narnia.

Thirty minutes later we’re in Rogue’s Jeep, driving toward Sunny. He tells me that we crossed paths many times without him knowing. I even ran into a door, not once, but twice in my attempts to hide from him.

It sounds accurate based on the shy girl I’ve always been. It sounds like a nightmare to the girl trying to find her feet now. I’ve suffered two broken noses and four black eyes for this man. It makes me wonder if I didn’t give myself my current injuries after all.

He tells me that it took him a while to find out who I was because when we did meet I gave him my drag name. That makes me laugh. Of course I told him I was Uma Cookie.

I tell him about how my dad used to take me to Adira’s shows. And how he and the drag queens gave me my alter ego to help me overcome my shyness issue. It doesn’t surprise me

at all that I needed that barrier between us in the beginning. How long did it take me to drop my guard around him?

We part ways at the front desk. He wanders off to find his mom. I head to Dr. Keller's office for my session.

A girl with pink hair is reading a magazine in one of the seats against the window wall when I enter the waiting area. My high tops sink into the plush carpet as I stride across the room. A man stands in front of one of the paintings with his hands clasped behind his back. He doesn't look at all comfortable, whereas the girl seems at ease as she flips through the glossy sheets.

She glances up at my presence. Her gaze widens and follows me to the desk where Dr. Keller's secretary is working. "Ivy?"

"I have an appointment," I tell the woman at the desk while pretending not to hear the girl. It's not that I outright want to avoid responding to her, but I don't know who she is. Or how she knows my name. I feel tongue-tied and awkward enough without having to explain to her why I have no clue who she is.

"Ivy Love?" The girl calls my name again before she taps me on the shoulder. "It's me. Dizzy."

"I'm sorry." I turn around and study the girl who clearly knows me. She has bright and friendly blue eyes and her dress is so cute. But she isn't familiar in any way. "I don't know who you are."

“Dizzy Sunshine.” Her brows draw together. “You don’t remember?”

“I lost part of my memory,” I explain.

“Oh.” She reaches for my hands. “Oh, I didn’t realize. I heard that you were hurt. Then you weren’t answering your phone and I had no way of contacting you. I tried the hospital.”

“You’re Dizzy Sunshine?” I forgot all about the drag queen who had called the hospital while I was institutionalized for days. “You’re not a drag queen.”

“Um.” She plays with one of those pink tresses. “No. We’re friends actually.”

“I’m sorry.” The receptionist grabs my attention. “Dr. Keller is away and it doesn’t seem that your appointment was transferred over to either Doctors Truman or West.”

“Oh.”

“I can see in Dr. Keller’s notes that you’ve met Dr. West. Would you like me to schedule an appointment with him for later in the week?”

“That’s okay.” I don’t like the idea of dealing with a therapist that I don’t know. It took a long time to build a comfortable relationship with Dr. Keller and I have no recollection of ever meeting this other doctor. It would be weird starting from scratch. “Can you book me in for when Dr. Keller gets back?”

“Sure.” She finds me a timeslot in a few weeks and I ask her to send the reminder to my new number.

“Okay. I guess I better go,” I tell the girl with the drag name and bright hair. I should probably find Rogue and tell him that I don’t have therapy after all.

“Do you know what we should do?” Bouncing in her pink Keds, she grabs both of my hands. “Now that you have nothing to do for the next hour we should catch up. We can go to the cafeteria and get matcha or milkshakes or coffee. Doesn’t that sound like a brilliant idea?”

Perhaps she can fill me in on more of the things that I don’t know. Like how we became friends. And why Rogue hasn’t told me that we are. “Don’t you have a session?”

She laughs as she threads her arm through mine. “I came to talk to my brother. He’s one of the therapists. But hanging out with you sounds like much more fun.”

The cafeteria is quiet and it doesn’t take long to order our drinks. We take them to a table and sit down. The sun shines in through the big glass windows. It’s one of the things that I loved about the place. As much as we were confined it never felt like we were. Sunny is so airy and green. And that sky reminds me of Rogue’s baby blues. Have I always thought that? How many times have I drawn the same comparison?

“So your brother is a therapist?” I suck the chocolate milkshake up through the straw. “And we’re friends?”

“My adopted brother is an asshole and a therapist.” She smiles at me. “And you and I met via Ben, but I’m guessing you don’t remember him, do you?”

“No.”

“Hand over your phone.” She puts her hand out for it. “I’ll add his number and mine to your contacts. And I’ll send him a text to tell him what happened to you. He’s been worried.”

I unlock the screen and hand it to her. Her fingernails tap on the glass.

“Where did we meet?” I ask.

“You met Ben at college. You were in some of the same classes.” She purses her lips and frowns. “I met you at the wedding. I was Ben’s date. We’d just started seeing each other.”

I was close enough with these people that they were at my wedding? And the idea that I made friends at college. That I became confident enough to have friends... and now I can’t remember them... it feels awful. “So you’re dating?”

“Just friends.” She hands me back my phone. “He moved away to be with his dad who has cancer.”

“Wow. That sucks.”

“It’s okay. His dad is doing great. They caught it early and they’re treating it aggressively. But we decided we would be better as friends. Long distance is not my thing. Neither is exclusivity, actually. And Ben is a bit of a boy next door, if you know what I mean.” She makes a face and then laughs.

“Of course you don’t. You’re with that sex god, aren’t you? You’re the girl who totally took Rogue Maddox off the market. Lucky bitch. He is to die for.”

I stir my drink with my straw just for something to do with my hands. I almost did die and somehow it revolves around my husband. And I think that’s part of the reason he doesn’t want to take me to Narnia. He’s scared of what I could remember.

“Oh.” She covers her mouth with her hands. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s okay. It’s fine.” She seems sweet and well-meaning, if a little over-enthusiastic. “It’s just the more that I learn about the things that I’ve forgotten the less certain I am of what is true and real.”

“I don’t believe for a minute that he hurt you,” she says. “I don’t know if that helps. But he’s a sweet guy. I could tell he just absolutely adored you from the way he looked at you. Plus Maddox men have this loyalty streak like you would not believe. It’ll probably drive you up the wall.”

“You speak like you have experience.” Did she date one of them? Perhaps Riot?

“That’s not...” Her face turns the color of her hair. “I just mean that I imagine they would. From everything on the internet.”

“He’s been sweet to me,” I agree. Hasn’t hurt me. Only tried to protect me. But that hurts me in its own way. And there’s

still the matter of what happened between us after I forgave him for kissing that girl. “Do you know why we broke up?”

“Mmm.” She shakes her head. “I wish I could help. The last time I saw you was when Will and I dropped you and Rogue home. You were definitely still together then.”

“Will?” I can’t keep up.

“Ivy, what are you doing here? I was about to head over and collect you,” Rogue says as he treads heavily toward us. There’s a dark scowl on his face. He frowns at Dizzy and his lip does this thing like he’s not sure he likes her. “Dizzy?”

“It’s good to see you.” She jumps to her feet. “I should go see my brother. But if you need anything, you have my number.”

“I do.” Dizzy grins and bounces on the balls of her feet. “Next time I’m drawing on your cast.”

I stand as she runs off. “Not a good visit?”

“Huh?” He glances the way Dizzy disappeared.

“With your mom?”

“She’s going through a rough patch,” he says and engulfs my hand with his as we walk through Sunny.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“She didn’t recognize me.” There’s pain in his gaze. “She was scared of me.”

I wonder how hard it must have been to realize that I didn’t recognize him when he came to pick me up from the hospital.

He'd seemed so in control of his emotions, but I'm starting to see how mercurial he truly is. It must have been hard to feel like I was slipping away from him too. "I'm so sorry."

"Everything okay with you?" he asks, turning the conversation away from his mom as we walk to the car. "What happened to therapy?"

"Dr. Keller is away," I say. "But I ran into Dizzy. She says we're friends."

"I guess you could say that. She dated your friend Ben. You spent some time with her."

"Just another thing I've forgotten." One in what has become a long list.

"You'll be okay." He wraps his arm around my shoulders and kisses my forehead. "I promise."

"I know I will. I just wish I could remember." He holds the door open and I climb into the Jeep.

He jogs around to crawl in the driver's side. Covers my knee with his hand as he starts the engine. Bright blue sky is broken up by the shadows of the palm trees. Like the flickering of my nightmares on the edge of my consciousness.

"It's why I'm so desperate to go to Narnia." I don't want to fight. I just want him to understand why it's so important to me. "Even though it might trigger me."

"I'd say it's more of a guarantee that it will trigger you," he says.

“Fine,” I concede. “Even though it will probably, most definitely, trigger me I have to go to Narnia. If there’s even the slimmest chance that I will remember any of my lost memories, I need to go back.”

He opens his mouth and then closes it. Glances at me and then back to the road. Swallows hard. “Can I have some more time to think about it?”

“You mean it?” I didn’t expect him to consider it. I thought he’d put his foot down again. “You’ll think about it?”

“Yeah, I’ll think about it,” he says begrudgingly.

“Okay.” My chest lightens. It’s not just Narnia. It’s how much I want to believe that what we have is real. That the man I find myself falling for all over again isn’t going to cause me pain or stop me from becoming the me that I feel blossoming inside me. So yes, if he needs to deal with his worries, I can give him that opportunity.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Rogue

Ivy wanders past as I'm running on the treadmill while listening to a recording I made of the script for my next movie. There's something about listening to it on repeat that helps me pick up the words and cues until they're almost second nature.

At the moment I can't retain a damn thing. Except those memories of Ivy bleeding out on the floor of Narnia. And Nicole's threat to destroy my world and my family.

My hands shake and I blow out a breath. My lungs grow tighter and tighter. I dig into my reserves and push harder. So far all Nicole's managed is to turn some of my fans against me and increase the amount of gossip about me. So maybe she's realized her attempts to keep me and Ivy apart are futile.

My steps pound on the mat as Ivy walks past again. This time with a strand of her hair between her lips and her gaze locked on her phone.

My girl is bored. Lonely, without Adira. Waiting for me to agree to take her to Narnia.

I slap my palm on the stop button and the treadmill powers down and my steps slow until the matt stops rolling under my feet. I'm drenched in sweat and my shirt is soaked so I whip it off as soon as I hit the bedroom and toss it in the hamper in the bathroom.

It's been days since I told her I'd think about taking her there. I told her I'd do anything for her, and I meant it. I never figured I'd be the guy to fall in love, but I'm in so deep with her I don't think I could ever climb out of it even if I wanted to. Hell, even this foot-in-mouth marriage bullshit has me wanting to make it the real deal. I fucking fantasize about putting a ring on it. The ring I picked out... the one I bought that is supposed to be the fakest of the fake... I chose that beauty like it would spend a lifetime on her finger.

I turn on the tap and shut off my thoughts about marriage as I stand under the cold water and shiver until it warms up. There's no point in daydreaming about what could be when she can't even remember what was. And when she does... what if we can't come back from that? What if I ruined everything and I was too late to truly fix it?

She thinks Narnia will help with her memories. But the way she reacts every time I bring up her brother doesn't give me confidence that taking her back there is the right thing to do. I'm petrified that it will only make things worse.

I almost lost her. I could still lose her. It doesn't get any easier to swallow. I start soaping up in an attempt to break up the mental paralysis that wants to take over. Rinse off and scrub myself with a towel on autopilot. Surely at some point this blind panic has to ease up.

Wrapping the terry cloth around my hips, I leave the bathroom with no solution to the personal apocalypse that seems so inevitable it fills me with a fear akin to the buzzing of hundreds of angry bees.

It's been almost two weeks since I brought her home. She's here with me now. She's safe. Protected from Alec who can't do anything without it being big news now that he's on trial.

Safe from Nicole, as far as I can tell.

When does it stop feeling like I can't breathe? I exchange terry cloth for clean jeans and grab a T-shirt from a freshly pressed stack. When will I stop waiting for the other shoe to drop? It seems like there's always a storm on the horizon. And Nicole went to a lot of trouble to get between us. Too much for her to give up as easily as she seems to have. I almost wish time would speed up just so I can deal with whatever that bitch is planning.

Ivy is lying on her stomach on the bed and the moment my gaze lands on her the buzzing sensation quiets and the weight on my chest eases.

She glances over her shoulder at me and uses one hand to push her glasses up her nose. "Why are you smiling like that?"

“Because... you have no idea how sexy you are right now, do you?”

She’s wearing an off-the-shoulder top with the tiniest pleated, blue tartan skirt that gives me the best view of her legs and a hint of her ass cheeks. It teases me with how easily I could slide my hand under the material to palm those round globes and slide my fingers between her thighs to tease her pussy.

I shouldn’t smile because she’s cute and sexy and on my bed. I should feel like an asshole for not following through with what she needs from me. So maybe it’s time I took her there. Maybe I need to stop being a little bitch about taking her to Narnia and give her the chance to remember. Even if that means she might freak out.

Even if it means giving her the chance to realize that everything that has happened to her is partly my fault. Yeah, deep down in the dark part of my mind that little voice is telling me it’s only a matter of time before she realizes I’m the reason she almost died. If I’d only forgiven her the way she did me, she wouldn’t be dealing with broken bones and bruises that take forever to fade.

It’s only a matter of time before she realizes that I ruin things that I love.

“What are you doing?” I ask as I toss my shirt on the bed and crawl over her. “Other than making it very hard for me to concentrate on anything other than getting to see your panties.”

She taps her phone against her fingertips. “Summer called me.”

“She did, huh?” The way Ivy and Summer have been growing closer makes me happy. And she’s been texting with that girl Dizzy too. I wasn’t sure about the bubbly girl who was dating Ivy’s friend when she first showed up but in the past few days she’s proven to be a real friend. It’s good. Ivy needs someone to vent her frustrations too, especially when I know I’ve been a major factor in those frustrations recently.

“She’d like us to go over for dinner.”

Braced with one hand and my knees either side of her legs, I dig my hand under her skirt to grasp a handful of flesh. She’s wearing a tiny bit of silk and I trace it from her hip down the line of her ass. And when she parts her thighs a little I follow it there too. “But my dinner is right here.”

She rolls her gaze at me over her shoulder, but her pupils dilate and a delicious moan leaves her throat. “I think she meant it.”

“I know she did.” I spread her legs with one knee and when she complies I kneel between them. The silk darkens as my finger slides over her clit and pushes the material into her opening. “Because she left me a message. It was a total earbashing.”

“Oh... d-damn.” Her phone falls to the mattress and she lowers her head to her forearms and lifts her hips for more. “W-we should really go... we shouldn’t be... late...”

“Of course.” I hook one finger into that thin, wet string and yank it away from the meal I’m about to partake in. “But you’re so fucking slick, baby. So needy. Aren’t you?”

“I-I’m good.” She shakes her head, but this breathy, high-pitched sound comes out of her as I slide two fingers inside her. And when she pushes back on them I know she wants what I want.

I carefully reposition her onto her back. The last thing I want to do is hurt her while I feast. Her lips part to my kiss with an energy that matches mine. They’re glossy and plump when I rest back on my heels and spread her knees further. “I have been an ass to a beautiful woman for far too long and need to make it up to her.”

“What?” She watches me as I settle between her legs. Locks her dark gaze with mine as I slip her panties all the way down to her ankles and toss them aside.

“Summer can wait the small amount of time it will take me to get you off.” Dinner will at least give me time to come to peace with my decision about taking her to Narnia. I lower my mouth to her pussy and swipe my tongue all the way along her seam.

She gasps at that first long lick and her fingers thread into my hair. I love the way her grasp tightens as I focus on teasing her clit. The little whimpers she makes when I suck the bundle of nerves between my teeth. And the way her hips beg for more when I use my fingers to stretch open her lower lips and thrust my tongue inside to get every last drop of her wetness.

She tastes like my personal slice of heaven. Always does. Her sweetness coats my mouth and rolls down my throat while I take my time feasting on her. Edging her toward the orgasm she desperately needs. I keep the pressure from sending her over it every time her hips start to fuck my mouth, until I've had my fill.

And then I push a finger inside her and stroke that sensitive spot where she likes it most. I add a second and curve them just right. Pile on the pressure with my tongue on her clit.

“That’s... so... oh God.” She groans as her hips start to roll endlessly, bumping her clit against my mouth while she takes my fingers. Her gaze is hazed with lust, unfocused as she comes with a scream that makes me want to keep this moment going all night.

I don’t stop when her hands loosen their grip on my hair and her thighs shake. I only stop when she begs me in between hoarse breaths. “Why did you say you needed to make things up to me?”

“Because I was wrong.” I move her legs between mine so that I can pull her panties back up. Her arousal drips down my fingers and I suck them clean. Wipe my hand across my mouth. There’s more to say. I was scared and I still am. “Sometimes I act like an irrational jackass when it comes to you. When all I want to do is love you and protect you.”

“I understand.” She wraps her arms around my neck when I hover over her. Dents her lip with her teeth. “But—”

“But just because my greatest fear is losing you, that doesn’t mean the only way to protect you is to take your choices away from you.” I say what she’s more than likely thinking. “I shouldn’t have made you feel like that. If you think you can handle going to Narnia, then we go.”

“You’ll take me?”

“Tonight. Does that sound good to you?”

“Why...now?” She pushes her glasses firmly up. They showcase her bright, wondering eyes.

“I should have done it days ago.” Even though it might mean I have to face my nightmares head on. Face what losing her looks like. Tell her what we think happened with her brother because she was with me. Even if this is the last time I’ll ever get to taste her. Or see her smile the way she is now. Or have her look at me and not hate me because I couldn’t just forgive her the way she did me.

She’s the better of us and I am well aware of that fact. Without her I’m just a guy with some money and some fame. My real wealth lies in having her in my world.

She takes my face between her hands. Her gaze shines. Her lips meet mine despite her taste still coating them. “Thank you.”

“We should probably get ready now.” I crawl off the bed so she won’t feel the tension already running through me at the idea that this second chance I have with her could possibly end at some point. “Do you need a minute to change?”

“Are you telling me I need to?” She glances down at the cute skirt that has my cock still hard in my jeans.

“No. Not at all.” I like the way she looks in it a little too much. “I’m telling you I’ll probably struggle to keep my hands to myself because you look so damn edible.”

“Oh.” She touches her bottom lip as she considers it. “I might change. Since it’s your family.”

“Fair enough.” I pick up my shirt and tug it over my head. Either way suits me fine, but she’s still not as comfortable with them as she used to be. It’ll take time that we’re all happy to give her. That I would give her over and over because I’m aware of how fucking lucky I am that she’s even here at all.

She climbs off the bed and heads into her closet to pick something out while I pat my pockets for my phone. I left it in the workout room after I finished my run. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” She calls out to let me know that she heard me.

It only takes me a minute to collect my phone and head back to the bedroom. By the time I’ve done that I’ve scrolled through my notifications and spotted the one from Marty in response to my earlier query asking if she’d found anything. And the answer is “not yet.”

“Rogue?” Ivy’s voice is a barely there, trembling whisper that snatches my attention from my screen.

Changed into leggings and a sweatshirt she stole from my closet, she sits on the bed. In her hands she cradles a red

leather box like it's a fragile baby bird. The lid on the box is open, revealing its contents.

Shit. Whatever words I should be saying... they don't come to mind. Nothing comes to mind except asking her to marry me and sliding that ring on her finger for real.

"Is this really mine?" She doesn't remove her focus from the ring nestled in the slit in the velvet cushion. "This is... it's beautiful. But it's soooo... over the top."

I cup the back of my neck. What do I say? That I picked it out because I know her favorite color is the same blue as that round sapphire? Or that she is as dazzling to me as the diamonds nestled on both sides? Oh right, I'm supposed to say that it isn't her ring. That it doesn't belong to her because we aren't married.

One slip of the tongue and now the lie is almost too big to take back—especially because I don't want to take it back. I told Adira I would clean up the misunderstanding once Ivy was comfortable, but the thought of how she might react makes the organ in my chest contract painfully.

"Uh, I picked it out." True. I spent my time choosing something she'd like but to a level that she deserved. Which is probably why she's still staring at it like she half-expects it to bite.

I stride over to her. Perhaps I can put it back in my bedside drawer and leave this conversation to another day.

“N-no.” She moves the box from my attempted grasp and pulls the wedding band free. “I’m your wife. I should probably wear the ring.”

“You don’t need to.” The way she called herself my wife makes me feel ten feet tall as I take the slim band from between her pinched fingers. “I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“But your family must wonder.”

They will wonder more if she shows up tonight with these rocks on her finger. I know everyone is maintaining the illusion that we’re Mr. and Mrs. because it’s probably helping keep Nicole at bay, but this isn’t costume jewelry. “They can mind their own business.”

“Okay.” She looks down and her cheeks turn pink. “I’d like to wear it.”

That takes a minute to sink in and then my lips start to turn up in the corners. She wants to see what it looks like on her. Perhaps it’s only to see if it might jog a memory, but my chest swells with warmth. “You would?”

She nods. “Please.”

I don’t hesitate to sink to my knees despite the Ataris’ *The Boys of Summer* ring tone I have for Summer reminding me that we’re running late. This vantage point is always my favorite when it comes to Ivy. Clasp her hand gently I slide the ring upon her finger.

Maybe I'm not making the right choice...the sane decision right now. No, I'm definitely not. But I'm caught up in the emotion of the moment. In the way the ring fits snugly and the engagement ring nestles so perfectly next to it. In a fantasy that is so far from reality that I'll eventually have to spell it out. Just not tonight.

Her gaze is shiny as she drags it away from her left hand. "I can't believe this is my life." A single tear slides from the corner of her eye and I brush it away with my thumb. "I love you, Ivy. No matter what. No matter whether you have my ring on your finger or not. Whether you remember us or not."

She falls against me and sobs against my shoulder. "I can't ___"

"That's okay. You don't need to say it back." I used to think love was a two-way street, but these last couple of weeks have taught me that sometimes when all seems lost you have to be able to love enough for two people. And that is something I am more than prepared to do for as long as it takes for Ivy to find her home in me. Like I found mine in her.

When she finally pulls away she's composed herself. She wipes a shaky hand over her face to remove any traces of the tears that overwhelmed her.

I consider asking her for the rings back as I stand, but I don't want her to cry again so soon. Instead I pretend like everything is as it should be while I check my phone to see if Summer left a message when I missed her call. "We should go before Summer sends out a search party."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ivy

Narnia is not exactly how I remember it.

The walls are still filled with racks and racks of colorful costumes and gowns. Black studded leather flirts with pink feathers and green snakeskin. Boxes filled with hats and wigs and boots are stacked to the ceiling.

But the wig heads are all bare.

The Lulu Blues, JDV special editions, and Lolo Exxy boots are all missing from their shelves.

My fingers graze the glass top of the console. Costume jewelry is displayed underneath the smooth surface. Gaudy, glitzy pieces that weigh a ton when they're worn.

Across the room there's a hole in the wall, which used to be covered with a picture of Adira and me. The framed photograph has been removed and placed on the floor against the wall. "There was nothing on the surveillance video?"

"Static." Rogue stands by the door. He has his hands in his pockets and a deep-in-dark-thought expression. I suspect he

can't make himself come any further inside. What he sees here is too painful for him.

I can't say the same. I thought coming here would bring me clarity, but it doesn't. There's no light over head or gospel choir singing while I'm flooded with the truth of these past few months. There's no recreation of the nightmares I've been having. "Weird."

"Adira was certain that you wouldn't... in front of the camera."

"So I turned it off?" I could have. I know how to. It just seems like an awful lot of effort to go to when I can't imagine why I would pick this sacred space in the first place. Unless it was because I knew Adira would be the one to find me, but even then... Rogue said the cameras caught static?

"Or something else happened to cause them to act up." Rogue's eyes narrow, watching me closely.

He's waiting for a reaction from me, but I don't know what reaction he anticipates. Is he hoping that I'll remember or afraid that I will? I skirt around the console to the spot where my life was almost forfeited for reasons that I still can't fathom. "Perhaps I researched ways to make that occur?"

"Perhaps."

A little of my blood has dried a deep brown on the fuzzy pink ottoman. And the carpet is smeared yellow through to pink, probably from bleach. But there's no smell in the room. No aroma of chlorine or ammonia. No copper.

Too much time has passed. Too many memories have been lost for my mind to connect to what my eyes see. It's like something else happened here.

Or like what occurred happened to someone else. Somebody who isn't me. But isn't that the whole point of my not remembering? The doctors told me that my brain chose to hide my memories from me for a reason. Because whatever I've forgotten is so painful that I couldn't cope with the knowledge.

I turn my back on the stain. Curl my arms around my torso to ward off the chill that settles over me. "And the cameras overhead caught nothing, I suppose. It would have been a bad angle."

"What?" Rogue steps into the room to get a better view of the equipment overhead. "I don't believe they've worked in the time that I have known you."

I glance up at the cameras above. I recall seeing them on top of the console not that long ago. Well, it doesn't seem that long ago, but with the gaps in my memory I can't be certain when that was. "Hmm. I'm sure Adira had them fixed."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I was here when they took them down. But perhaps that was ages ago? Everything in my head is... unreliable." An open drawer in the console has exploded with scarves and ties. They hang in colorful roped loops. I should put them away and close the drawer, but the ragged edge of a piece of note paper with my handwriting on it catches my eye.

My heart starts pounding in my chest as I snatch it up and crumple it into a ball in my fist. Rogue may have read it already. No doubt Adira has. But this note... it feels personal. Like a clue to what I was truly thinking.

I'm not prepared to read it with Rogue present.

"I don't remember any of this." I purse my lips as I consider our environment from a different angle while my pulse returns to normal. Not that the tilt of my gaze makes a difference. I still don't see anything that will give me the answers I want. "It feels like forever since I've been here."

"Do you remember when that was?" Rogue edges closer.

"I-I couldn't say." There's only a memory from a life that feels like a whole other world ago. It makes me smile as I watch it play out in my head like it's playing out in front of me, covering the damage and mess that Narnia is currently in.

"What are you remembering?" Rogue's hands graze my upper arms. It's like he could tell that I needed his support and didn't let his own trauma get in the way.

I turn and rest my head against his chest. I can hear the strong and steady beat of his heart in my ear. It's clear that he cares deeply for me, and it would be a lie to say I don't like the way it feels to have his love. And that despite my earlier misgivings I find I'm starting to feel that way too. But I'm not ready to say it back to him and I'm grateful that he understood earlier when I couldn't. "It was before my dad died. He came to pick me up on his way home from the office."

He'd left his jacket and tie in the car and his sleeves were rolled up to the elbows. He'd leaned against the cabinet while Adira pranced around in his newest costume. I can still see Dad as clearly as if it were yesterday. My chest aches because I miss him, and fills with warmth as I recall how his smile lit up his brown eyes. How the age lines he wore with grace deepened with his pride for his nephew.

"Tell me about it?"

"We were talking about Adira's new show. Adira was showing us parts of the act while he tried on the costume I'd made for him. It was just a normal afternoon."

And they'd been joking around. Adira had done an impression of my mother and my dad had laughed and laughed. He had this... big belly rumble of a laugh. It never failed to make me laugh too.

I smile as my vision blurs. I guess it will always be painful, but pain is not my entire existence now.

No, the man currently trying not to look at our surrounds while he supports me in my need to find out more has become far more important to me than I would have expected was possible in such a short period of time.

But then we are married so I suppose it makes sense that I would find myself totally into him again. I can't deny our chemistry. Whether that's enough, only time will tell. "I think he was going to leave her."

He grows still. "Your dad was going to leave Nicole?"

“It was just something he said when he drove us home.” I push away from Rogue’s chest and tip my head back so that I can see his face. “How he was sorry that he had let me down for so long and that he was going to rectify it. It didn’t make sense to me at the time. My dad was everything to me, and I’d never once thought he let me down. He was always the one to make peace between me and my mother.”

He went out of his way to make sure that I knew that I was loved. He protected me with his presence, even if he wasn’t aware that the time he spent with me was time Alec couldn’t use to torture me. He helped me find friendship in places that could not be sullied by my mother. He had to know that he was my hero and the rock that I needed.

“I told him that.” I put some space between myself and the man who sees himself as my protector now. Who has literally faced off and fended off my mother despite her attempts to make that impossible. He makes me feel safer than I have in a long time, but there is still so much between us I don’t know.

“What did he say?” Rogue asks.

“Uh...” I replay the conversation over in my head. Smell the warmth of the leather interior mixed with the citrus air freshener that Dad preferred. Relive my confusion while he’d given all his attention to the road. He’d muttered something so low under his breath that I wasn’t certain I heard what I thought I did. “He said something like if he’d known or if he could go back. We didn’t really talk anymore after that.”

I find myself leaning on that same edge of the cabinet where I recalled last seeing him in this room. While sadness wells in my chest like it always does, it doesn't overwhelm me. It feels good in a way to have these treasured memories and someone to talk through them with me. "Less than a month later he was gone. He was in Phoenix for a business meeting and his rental car was struck by someone who ran a red light."

"Ivy..." Rogue rubs my back.

"I guess we've probably had this conversation before," I say.

"A little." He minimizes the fact that I've probably talked about it a lot.

I stare at the engagement and wedding rings on my finger. The crushed diamonds that surround the entire wedding band alone would probably sparkle on the moon. It still feels like way too much, even if they are beautiful. And all they bought was my love, right? My heart? All of me?

I caught weird looks from Summer all night. Almost as though she wasn't particularly pleased to see my finger adorned again. But she didn't say anything. At least not to me. And Rogue said he didn't even notice any oddness at all. So it has to be me, right? Just because I'm not the version of me that accepted his proposal and the rings that came with it. I wouldn't have said yes if I hadn't believed in our love with all my heart.

"There's something I want to tell you," Rogue says.

“Your family doesn’t really like me, do they?” I ask. “That’s what you want to tell me? They don’t like that you married Alec Hawthorne’s sister.”

I can’t believe how bitter I sound.

“No, that’s not it.” He holds me with my back to his chest. “They don’t care about that.”

“They must.” How can they not? My brother is a monster. He hurt Ro. He went after Rogue to hurt me. “They hate him and I don’t blame them. And my mother—”

“You’re nothing like them,” he says heatedly. “And my family knows that. They want us to be happy. They’re concern is with how fast we’re moving when you don’t remember what we were. It’s been two weeks and you’re wearing my ring, baby.”

“We’re married,” I say.

“We’re starting all over again,” he says. “We’re both aware of that.”

I want to believe that’s all it is. But my doubts are like a fire breathing dragon. I spin away from Rogue and my sadness and my dark thoughts about whether his family likes me. I don’t want to think about how these rings are beyond flashy and money never actually buys happiness. Only regret and pain and heartbreak. Especially when you’re a Hawthorne by blood. “Do you think my wedding dress is in here?”

“I’m not sure.” Rogue scratches his whiskers.

“I’m going to look.” I unzip the first garment bag, hanging at the end of the row, to reveal something in a dazzling purple. Then I move on to the next.

“I’ll help.” Rogue marches over to the other end of the row and starts opening bags.

“There are so many costumes here I don’t recognize.” Each bag is like a Kinder Surprise. With each zipper cracking the plastic covering I glimpse feathers or diamonds or crocodile or leather in all colors. “Did I... make all these?”

“Most of them. You worked with Adira at Hunt Luxuries and backstage at the Mojito Bar when we first started dating. Helping Adira was how you were making ends meet. That and the birthday party princess bit.”

“Right.” He’d told me about that. I lower the zipper on something in cream and my breath catches at the boned bodice with its delicate antique lace. “This is it, isn’t it?”

Rogue finishes zipping up his last bag and joins me as I take the garment bag down. He glances at the small amount he can see and it seems like he stops breathing as his gaze returns to mine. But then his chest moves with that familiar rhythmic movement. “You were so beautiful.”

I lay the bag out on the console. I can’t wait to see what it looks like. Perhaps I can’t recall the memories, but these details are real. I can run my fingers over the lace and the bumps where the boning is inserted into the material. I want to touch and smell and maybe even try on the dress that I wore to marry my playboy.

He stills my fingers on the zipper with a hand on my wrist. His brow is furrowed and pinched together as he stares at the stain on the floor. “Let’s not do this in here. Why don’t we take it with us? Let me take you home.”

“Okay.” I pull the zipper to the top of the bag and hug the gown to my chest. I’d forgotten all about the hell that had happened in this room. That’s how unreal it all is to me. Even now I have no new memories to fit into the jigsaw of what happened. “But maybe we can also find the photo album from the wedding, before we go.”

Rogue swallows as he turns to leave Narnia. “Where would you keep it?”

“Bookshelf in the living room.” I follow him, still clutching my dress to my chest. “Or the bedroom.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ivy

I smooth trembling and clammy hands over the front of a dress that is far too pretty to be on my person while I stare into the floor to ceiling mirror in my walk-in-closet. The bodice is more intricate than I noticed at first. The beading and feathering and lace detail is so delicate. Each stitch must have been done by hand. “I wore this?”

“You wore this.” Rogue doesn’t make eye contact with me while he works the ribbon at the back that tightens the stays in the bodice. It flows into a long skirt and train that pools around my feet. He hasn’t been able to meet my gaze since I asked him to help me put it on.

Or maybe he’s been off since I asked him to help me find the photo album before we left Adira’s.

We’d looked in the bookshelf and in the bedroom. I’d even checked under the bed. But wherever I put it we weren’t meant to find it tonight, and I still haven’t gotten a response from Adira about it even though we messaged back and forth for an

hour last night. But I'd forgotten about it too as he told me about his friend Christian.

I've never seen Adira so coy about a boy. It's cute. It makes me happy to see him that way. Even if I wish my bestie were here to help me navigate this situation with Rogue. It's still all so new and confusing. I understand why he decided to give us space though. We need it to find us.

One thing I've learned is that Rogue needs time to come to peace with how the things that he needs to tell me may hurt me. It's like he can't bear to see me sad. But that's not how life works. I am sad for all the things that I have lost. I will hurt because our story ended in tragedy.

But I am lucky too. I am still here. I am stronger than I used to be. And we have a second chance to get our love right.

I'm more hopeful than I have ever been. And that is despite the fact that Narnia answered none of my questions.

It was a fantasy to believe it would help me remember everything—all of the good and all of the bad—yet when that didn't happen it was still a letdown.

I try to shake off the disappointment that goes along with not recovering any of my memories. It's by no means the end. The doctors said it might be a matter of time. Or it might come down to one thing that jogs my memory in a specific way. That was my initial reason for wanting to try on my rings.

I must sigh, because Rogue stops fussing with the ribbon and says, "You were the most stunning woman I had ever seen

that day. You are still the most stunning woman I will ever lay eyes on.”

I can't be bitter when I'm wearing such a beautiful dress while such a gorgeous man looks at me the way Rogue is now looking at me. He walks around me and takes a handful of the skirt in his fist.

I scream when he yanks it and the strands of fabric tear from each other. The noise is horrific. “Oh m-my God. W-what did you do?”

“Close your eyes,” he orders.

I can't bear to. Don't dare to. If anything they get wider. “You're ruining it.”

“I'm not.” His smile is beautiful.

The joy he is getting out of ruining this incredible gown pains my heart. Especially when it should be a symbol of the love we shared. “You're a sick, sick man.”

“Just close your eyes.”

I slam them shut and try to still the rapid beating of my heart. It's so loud it's in my ears. So strong it's in my throat.

I can feel him moving around me but thankfully there's no more sound of things tearing. He stops in front of me. The heat of him radiates from mere inches away and then it encases my hand. “Okay. Open your eyes.”

I gasp at my reflection. At the bright hue of feathers and frills where the front of the cream skirt used to be. I swish my

hips this way and that. The extra material is buttoned up into a bustle and then becomes part of the train. “It’s incredible.”

“It’s by Danica Garfield. She created it just for that day.” He puts his hands on my hips and swallows hard while he gazes down at me.

Suddenly I can imagine him in a Karl Lagerfeld suit while some wedding officiant declares us husband and wife. He must have been so handsome in a jacket precision cut to fit his wide shoulders. Did he have the same bright-eyed look on his face? Was the emotion raw and honest in his eyes like it is now?

His lips quirk in the corners almost as if we’re both thinking the same thoughts. “Is it weird that I’m nervous right now?”

“I don’t think so.” My stomach is full of nerves and the tips of my fingers tingle in his grip.

“Good.” He smiles wider and it makes him appear more boyish than I’ve seen him in the time that I’ve been with him.

When it comes to an emotional connection, two weeks can feel like a lifetime, can’t it? Even if I can’t remember, it feels like I’ve known him in another life. Which makes sense. “It must have been perfect.”

“Uh.” He runs a hand through his hair as he steps back. “Maybe I should help you take off the dress now.”

“Adira was there with the rest of the queens, right?” I hold my hair out of the way as he starts to tug the ribbon loose. “Your family too.”

“They were.” He leans down and places a kiss on my shoulder that makes my belly flutter.

“Tell me about it. Please. Tell me like we’re there right now.”

“Well...” His fingers still momentarily but then begin moving again, loosening the bodice bit by bit. “That means we’re at the Heart ranch.”

“Summer’s family’s place?” She mentioned it earlier tonight over dinner when she was telling us that all six of her brothers would be visiting for Christmas since she hadn’t been able to make time to go see them. When I’d shown an interest she had opened up the photo gallery on her phone and shown me pictures of an idyllic horse and cattle ranch in Kansas.

Rogue nods. “It’s beautiful there. Secluded. Far from the media if we plan it just right.”

Which of course we did. There are no photos of our wedding anywhere public. “You’re wearing a suit.”

“Navy blue tuxedo by Karl Lagerfeld,” he murmurs as his baby blues catch my gaze in the mirror. “Because it’s your favorite color. My brothers stand with me too.”

“I can picture it.” It’s exactly what I envision when I think about him as my groom. Him standing at the end of the aisle with his brothers beside him. He tugs on his cufflinks as Adira sashays down the silk runner. “Adira is my bridesmaid. He’s wearing something elegant and understated.”

“Except for his jewelry.” Rogue chuckles.

He's so right. It's clear as day. Adira would wear fabulous and colorful jewelry. In my mind I step into the aisle behind him. A cascading bouquet in purples and blue in my hands as Rogue and I lock eyes for the first time that day. My heart flutters. "Then I'm next."

"L.A. Riot plays an instrumental piece they prepared just for this moment. Our moment. In front of our family and friends and all of the queens." His voice has grown raspy. "But the only person I can see is you. And when you get to me you pass your pretty flowers off to Adira and you take my hands..."

I blink back tears as he finishes with the ribbons and gravity puddles the dress at my feet. I wish I could remember it. Feel the way I felt as I stopped in front of him and handed my bouquet off to Adira so that Rogue could clasp my hands in his. "I must have been happy."

I must have felt like I had finally found the place I truly belonged. Where I was protected but independent. Otherwise I wouldn't have gone through with it. So maybe we had teething problems. Kinks to work out.

"We are happy, baby." Rogue swallows thickly as I turn to face him.

I think he's trying so hard to believe that. It's why he hates telling me anything that might hurt us. But I can't ignore the elephant in the room for one more night. If we're ever going to be okay I have to know... "Why did we break up?"

"Is this really what you want to talk about tonight?" He rubs the bridge of his nose. "Wasn't Narnia enough?"

“Why did I leave you?” It pains to ask. It’s like a chasm inside my chest that deepens every time he tells me to wait or changes the topic. Because when I don’t think about it... when I’m with him... I am happy. I am loved. I do have real feelings.

But this thing that we’re avoiding... it’s crushing me. How can I be all in when I don’t have all of the facts? “Please, just tell me.”

He takes a long time to answer. So long that I start to believe that he won’t. I’m getting ready to step over the dress and escape from the room when he finally clears his throat. “You left me because I told you to.”

“W-what?” Of all the responses... I’ve imagined this moment over and over and he has never uttered those words.

His mouth slackens and he drags his hand through his hair. A heavy breath caves his chest. “We were happy and then you told me about Alec. You forgave me for that kiss and then you told me that bastard is your brother.”

“I told you...?” My heart sinks. I hadn’t told him about Alec until after it was almost too late? Until after he kissed someone else. Until after we were... married?

I kept my connection to the man his whole family hates a secret? No wonder I was so willing to forgive, even though seeing him with another woman must have broken my heart.

“Ivy.” He tracks his hand through his hair again. “I am so sorry.”

I shake my head as I back up a step and almost trip over the gown at my feet. “No, you—”

He catches me before I fall. “I didn’t give you a chance to explain yourself. I didn’t think about everything we were to each other. All I saw was that you’d hidden your relationship to him from me for months, and I told you to leave.”

I kept him in the dark. I was the one who got it wrong. What was I trying to accomplish that would merit hiding the truth from the man I loved? My vision turns watery and my head swims. I press my fingers to my forehead. They’re shaking and my head has started to pound. My secret must have seemed like such a betrayal.

My knees buckle.

It’s only his grip on me that keeps the ground from rising to meet me too rapidly.

“Baby, I was so fucking wrong. I knew it the minute you were gone.” He falls on his knees in front of me. Pushing the hair back from my face, he clasps it with both hands. His forehead touches mine, watery gaze searching mine like he’s scared our connection will disappear. “But I was so angry that you didn’t tell me. Too proud to admit that I could love the sister of the man I hate. I couldn’t bring myself to come after you. And when I did... when I realized that your connection to him didn’t fucking matter, that it would never stop me loving you... it was almost too late. You were... I found you...”

“In Narnia?” My eyes brim with tears but I blink them back. I lost my memories of him. Our history. Our marriage. I

almost lost my life. Over a secret? Over my brother? I broke my own heart and his along with it... for what?

The pounding in my head is the only answer I have. Whatever my reasoning is lost to me.

“Please, baby. Please forgive me.” He begs me with his eyes. “Or don’t. Because I don’t deserve it. At least not yet. Just don’t shut me out. I’m here fighting for us, because I love you.”

“Please stop.” I blink back more tears.

“I won’t stop loving you. I can’t.” He uses his thumbs to wipe away my tears while he barely restrains his own. “I love you so much. And I know we can get through this. But we’ve got to do it as one, baby. We have to find our way together.”

“Rogue.” I push at his chest. Doesn’t he understand that I’m the one who should be begging for forgiveness? If I’d come clean from the start, perhaps we wouldn’t have fallen in love, but I wouldn’t have hurt him either. Or maybe we were destined to find each other no matter the cost.

“I’m no good without you. And I know that your mind hasn’t stopped your heart...” He covers the left side of my chest with his palm. My heart booms underneath it. “You still feel us... even if you don’t believe it yet. Even if you don’t want to trust it. Deep down you know that we belong together. We will always belong together.”

I surge forward and kiss him.

“Ivy?”

“I feel us.” I smile at him. “And I’m sorry that I kept such a big secret. I wish I hadn’t—”

He claims my mouth with a fierceness that leaves me breathless. Our lips cling then seek then bite. His tongue thrusts and demands and I surrender to the storm of emotion and lust with a whimper.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m right here, baby.” He kisses my cheeks. My jaw. My eyelids. “I will love you with every breath, every heartbeat, and action for the rest of my life.”

His lips collide with mine again. Fuse.

Our tongues tangle and slide as we tumble to the floor. Him on his back and me on top of him. I straddle his thighs as I help him out of his shirt. He makes short work of pulling the belt from the loops on his jeans and tossing the leather aside.

The button comes undone under my insistent fingers.

My bra is a little harder for him to remove due to the cast. It gets tangled on the plaster, but who cares when his tongue is flicking my nipple like that?

His teeth graze my sensitive flesh and send delightful shivers spiraling through me that cause me to rock over his magnificent erection. “There’s still too much clothing between us.”

“I can fix that.” He clasps the back of my head and draws me in for another kiss. The other arm around my back he turns us both over so that my back meets the carpet.

For the second time tonight material is ripped, but this time it's my flimsy panties that give to his strength.

"I guess there's no saving them." I smile up at him.

"I'll buy you more. A truckload." His eyes are hooded, his gaze full of heat as he makes quick work of taking off his pants. "A boatload."

"I think I'll let you," I say. It's the first time I've felt like his need to go over the top in buying me things doesn't come with much of a price tag. What's a pair of ripped panties every now and then?

His mouth cruises my skin, leaving sparks everywhere it travels. The man is a magician. And his magic makes me long for him to fill me.

I dig my fingers into his hair and lock our gazes. "I want you."

"You've got me." He settles over me, holding his body weight with one arm while he settles between my thighs.

There are no words for the sweetness of his caresses or the way he rocks into me.

There are only our synchronized breaths and the shared emotion in our locked gazes as we build to a languid crescendo. And when I shatter so sweetly around him he grips my hips and groans into my neck as he comes too.

Afterward, he rolls onto his side. He pulls my back to his chest and wraps me up in his arms. His legs curve to fit against mine.

“I can’t help but feel like we were always meant to be this perfect and beautiful thing,” I say, and then hold my breath. It must sound cheesy. “It’s like we were made two halves of one whole and no matter what happened in our last life or this life we were meant to find our way back to each other.”

“I will always find you, baby.” He cradles me a little tighter. “You’re my home now.”

I hope he’s mine too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Rogue

I slam my palm against the steering wheel as I drive through traffic with a couple of paps on the Jeep's tail. Yanking the wheel to the left, I thread my vehicle through the small gap between a Tesla and an Audi. I'm supposed to meet Marty in five minutes, but I can't risk going to the meeting spot we agreed to until I lose these media fucks. There's nothing they'd like more than the chance to conjecture that I'm a cheating asshole.

Okay, maybe that's not the only scenario they would jump to, but it's the one I'm most worried about when it comes to Ivy. Especially since I can't tell her why I'm really meeting Marty.

I slam my foot on the brake before I park the Jeep up the ass of a Range Rover. What the hell is it with traffic this morning? A motorcycle comes out of nowhere as I take a corner too fast and cuts off the car behind me. Thank you to the rider; I now have a real chance at losing my tails. A few more minutes and

a couple of turns later and I've lost them. Only a handful of blocks from where I'm meeting Marty too.

A few minutes later I park at the curb and hot foot my way to an old bookstore while pulling the brim of my cap down low over my shades. The collar of my jacket hides the shape of my jaw when I flip it up. It's real incognito spy type shit.

The store smells like dust and dead tree corpses. It's dim and crammed from floor to ceiling with shelves filled with books and periodicals. Hell, there are even stacks of old newspapers on a table and chairs. I nod at the short, old man at the counter. His bushy white eyebrows nod back.

"Hey," Marty says when I find her way in the back.

"What century have we time traveled to, Marty McFly?" I crack a tight smile as I stand shoulder to shoulder with her in front of a set of shelves. "Aren't actual newspapers obsolete in this day and age?"

"Funny," she says with a flick to her black braids that sends them over her shoulder. "You're late."

"Paps were a bitch. I had to lose them. Can't risk them seeing us together."

"Oh, you're married now." She laughs. "How's that going?"

"I can't believe you're laughing at me. I should be offended." Probably would be if it were anyone else, but she's known me so long that her reaction is the most normal part of this conversation.

It wasn't that long ago that the idea of commitment and marriage would have sent me running for the hills. Now, I'm dreaming about a perfect wedding like some little girl with a scrap book and a princess dress. This is me now? This is who I've become? Hell yeah it is.

So much so that when Ivy asked me to help her put on the dress I stepped up to the challenge without a single thought to telling her the truth.

"Sorry." She turns her attention to a particular book—an old hardback with a brown cover and gold lettering.

I clench my jaw and lift my gaze to the ceiling. "I was going to tell Ivy last night... tell her that we aren't married..." That I made it up to give me some wiggle room in the hospital and then the media ran with it and she didn't remember me and it seemed like the best idea was to keep the lie rolling, at least in the short term. "But then she found her wedding dress in Narnia."

"The girl has a wedding dress now?" Marty's eyes widen.

"It was from an expo," I grind out. There's no way I'll tell Marty that in my panic to make sure Nicole didn't get to Ivy I had a fraudulent marriage certificate made up. "She decided she had to try it on, and I just... got caught up for a minute."

Ivy asked me to imagine our day together, and, well, I justified that it wasn't a lie the way we were telling it as if we were in the moment. I dove right the hell into that fairytale scenario.

I don't regret it either. Maybe I'm supposed to. But not telling her left the door open for a conversation we desperately needed to have. Sure, she almost passed out on me while we talked about the break up. We couldn't get into the nitty-gritty of why she kept Alec a secret. But the weight I've been carrying around for the last few weeks is lighter now.

And the marriage thing. Well, I probably should have mentioned it last night, but I got distracted by our phenomenal chemistry when Ivy launched herself at me. The sex had been mind-blowing in a whole new way. The connection... I want it all. With every fiber of my being. I want Ivy as my wife for the rest of my life.

Marty raises one brow. "Aren't secrets what came between you in the first place?"

"Uh. That's not fair." We made a lot of progress last night, not that Hollywood Juice's top billing reporter needs to know everything. I'm trusting her to keep what we find about Ivy a secret as it is. "I think this is a little different, don't you? I'm just..."

"Protecting her?" She slots the book back into its space on the shelf and turns to me. "Like she was trying to protect you. And Rebel was trying to protect you. Just like you're doing now by not bringing her into this."

"You and I both agreed." I cross my arms against my chest.

"And I still believe it is for the best." Her tone turns gentle and quiet. "Until we find something there is no point in adding this to what she is already going through."

“So we still have nothing?” How can that be? It’s been weeks.

“No, not nothing.” She side-eyes me like I’m being dramatic. “It takes time to gather enough intel to put the truth together. And we’ve had little to go on other than a timeline discrepancy.”

“What about what I texted you last night? That her dad was probably planning to divorce that devious bitch.” If he’d had an ounce of sense in him that’s definitely what he was doing. I’d texted Adira to see if he could confirm, but haven’t heard back from him yet.

“I found a few images of them around that time where the body language was off,” she says. “But there’s nothing written about them that suggests they weren’t a happily married couple.”

“That can’t be—”

“I did, however, get my hands on the police report for the accident that killed him,” she announces over top of me. “You read as many of those as I have and you start to get a feeling about what is accidental and what has a stink to it. Now perhaps the guy was only running a red light, but he was driving in the same direction as Ivy’s dad, which means they both went through the light at almost the same time to collide so soon after. And the way they hit... the images show that the other car ran into the front on the driver’s side of Richard’s vehicle. So did Richard lose control? Or was he forced into a spin by the other car?”

“You think the guy was chasing him?” I lean in closer and lower my voice. “Why didn’t the cops pick up on this?”

“It could be nothing.” She shrugs. “The driver confessed. He had narcotics in his system. Maybe they didn’t feel the need to look any closer. It’s possible they were paid not to. Do you have any clue what Richard Love was worth when he died?”

“Can’t say I’ve thought about it.”

“Billions,” she whispers. “Put you and both of your brothers’ financial worth together and you don’t even have half of what this guy was worth. What he left to his family.”

“Let me guess, it’s all run through Nicole, correct? She has the money to buy a whole hospital wing and bribe the cops that were called out to the accident.”

“It seems that way,” Marty says.

“Fuck.” And Ivy doesn’t see any of her dad’s money unless she dances to Nicole’s tune. It’s why she was practically penniless when we met. No one would choose to drive that piece of crap she kept patching with duct tape. It’s why every time I go big with a gesture she wants to know what it will cost her in the long term. I saw her questioning the rings when she put them on. It was written all over her face. When all I want her to feel is that she is loved.

“So she could have afforded to hire a hit man to do the job.”

“Or pay somebody who is desperate enough to be willing to do the crime and take the time,” Marty says. “Like Bob

Wilson. That's the name of the guy who hit Ivy's dad. I'm going to go to Phoenix. I want to look into him. Speak to him, if I can."

"You truly think Ivy's dad was murdered?"

"Maybe. I can't be certain." She stares at the shelf in front of her for a long moment before turning to me. "Just another thing to keep from your wife I guess. Until we know more. Because if someone killed her father..."

"There's every chance they've already tried to kill her." Adira was sure that Ivy hadn't hurt herself and now this? I'm as certain as my next breath that Ivy was attacked. "Alec already tried."

"Do you have evidence?"

"No." I don't know if that means he had help. If he's behind what happened in Phoenix, he might not have attacked her himself. "The break-in at Ro's. The dead mouse on the pillow. The homeless guy they arrested. Alec has an MO."

Her gaze flits to the front of the store. To the old man at the counter. "We need to be careful. Ivy especially. He could try again if given the opportunity."

"I won't be giving him the opportunity." I clench and unclench my fists. "I'll do whatever it takes to protect her from that evil bastard, even if I have to take Ivy and hide her on the Heart Ranch or something until he's behind bars permanently. Either for what he did to Ro..."

“Or we find evidence that ties him to Richard or what happened to Ivy.” Marty nods.

“Hell, the way I see it we don’t stop until we get him on the whole trifecta,” I growl.

“It might be for the best that you haven’t told her the marriage isn’t real,” she says. “Or at least haven’t told the public yet. It could be what’s keeping her family at bay.”

“Yeah.” But for how long? At what point are they going to try to take Ivy from me despite the appearance that we’re husband and wife? At what point will it be too late for my sweet girl to forgive me one last time?

“I’ll keep you up to date.” Marty clasps my arm and then she strides to the front of the store and disappears into the street.

I wait a few minutes before I leave as well. Climbing into the Jeep I text Riot to see if he feels like hitting the motocross track with me. There’s an edgy twitchiness in me that I need to burn off before I go home to Ivy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Ivy

Good morning world, isn't it a beautiful day? I yawn, stretch off the languorous effects of sleep. Last night was amazing. I'm sore in places I don't think I knew could be sore. And if I did, go me... this girl is satisfied.

My husband is not in bed beside me. The sheets are crumpled and any lingering body heat has dispersed. I bite my lip and smile. Sex is one thing, but love... the connection... the sweetness... it's something else. It feels like my heart has known Rogue Maddox forever. Like it was inevitable that I would find myself falling for him all over again.

When he told me about our wedding I could see it so clearly. Felt like I was really there. Perhaps in a way I remember it? Is that possible? Or does it feel like that because it was so perfectly what I imagined?

I rub my thumb over the sapphire still on my finger as I climb out of bed. Rogue doesn't shy away from what he wants or who he is or how he likes to show his affection. It's going to

take me some time to get used to the fact that the only motive he has is his feelings.

Jackson is on duty when I enter the kitchen. Coffee duty that is. “Where’s Rogue?”

“He had an appointment.” Jackson hands me my caramel mocha. “He wasn’t sure how long he would be.”

So I’m alone? With a bodyguard, but alone? Because he finally feels confident that I can handle being on my own? Can this day get any better? I grab my phone and check my notifications. I don’t have many with this being a new number that I haven’t given out to many people. Only two texts. One from Dizzy asking if I’d like to hang out. And the other from Rogue that basically tells me had to go out and will be back as soon as he can and that he loves me.

Smiling, I respond with a good morning. And then I try my luck and ask if Dizzy can come to the apartment. Since Jackson is with me and security on the building is tight it shouldn’t be too much of an ask. I hope.

When he replies, it’s with a smiley face and hearts emoji followed by a yes. So apparently this day can get better after all. I quickly tap a text that I send to Dizzy. “We’re going to have someone over, Jackson.”

He raises one eyebrow on his otherwise expressionless face. “Is that so?”

“Uh-huh.” I show him the message from Rogue then take my coffee with me to the bedroom.

By the time I've showered and dressed and made myself presentable Dizzy has already arrived. She walks into the apartment with a bouquet of red roses that are so big I can't see more than her hands and her legs below the knee.

"These are for you," she tells me as she puts the flower arrangement down while Jackson closes the door.

"Wow. You really shouldn't have," I say. Not that I don't appreciate the gesture.

"I really didn't." She wipes her hands on her skirt. "If I had they would be pink."

"Oh." I eye the long stem roses. There must be close to a hundred buds.

"They were being delivered when I got here. I offered to bring them up," she says.

"Let me check them for you, Miss Love," Jackson says.

"They were checked by security already," Dizzy says.

"Rogue probably sent them." My heart skips a beat as I walk over. Perhaps after last night... the man loves to spoil me. "You can leave us, Jackson."

"Yes, ma'am." Jackson leaves the room only to take up his post near the door. Near enough that he can hear if I need him, but still give us privacy.

I reach out to touch one of the velvet petals. "They are beautiful."

“O.M.G.” Dizzy practically screams as she grabs my hand. “You are rocking those rocks, sister. Holy shit, they’re... divine.”

“Rogue gave my rings back to me last night. He’s been holding onto them while I healed.” She’s seen them before. At the wedding. Maybe she didn’t have a chance to see them up close though. I’m a little fuzzy on the timeline. How long before we broke up did we exchange vows? I suppose that’s something I should ask Rogue after I thank him for the roses.

I locate a card sized envelope in the bunch and pull it free from its pike. I don’t recognize the handwriting but that’s to be expected since no doubt the florist was the one to write the note Rogue dictated.

With a loopy smile on my face, I tug the gold edged card out of the envelope.

“You’re so lucky.” Dizzy clasps her hands together in front of her and makes heart eyes at the ceiling. “Rogue is such a sweetheart. He really adores you.”

Leave him. It’s for your own good. Do it before it’s too late.

The blood drains from my face and curdles in my belly. I cover my mouth as the acid rises in the back of my throat.

“Ivy, is everything okay?”

“Huh?”

Dizzy peers at me like I’m frightening her. She takes my elbow and steers me into the closest chair. “Are you okay? I thought you were going to faint dead away.”

“I-I’m fine.” I struggle to pull in a breath as the rushing sound in my ears fades. Who would send me this?

“You’re anything but fine.” Dizzy snatches the note out of my hand and glances over the text. “It’s not a very good threat if you ask me. There’s no... or else. No mention of repercussions.”

There’s a QR code taped to the back of the card. I try to keep my phone from shaking as I scan it.

“Perhaps it’s more of a warning.” Dizzy chews the inside of her cheek and twirls a loop of pink hair around her finger.

A video comes up on my screen. In it Rogue hits a man over and over. There’s a darkness in his eyes and the way he holds his jaw is full of anger as he lashes out. The video is on a loop. It takes me a while to realize that. At first it looks like he hit the man many more times than is actually in the short clip.

A clip I’ve already come across while I was obsessed with the video of Rogue kissing that girl. “My mother said he was dangerous.”

“No.” Dizzy’s voice grows louder. “I’m sure there’s an explanation.”

“She sent me the roses.” She found a way to get to me. It was only ever a matter of time. And this card might be worded as a warning, but I have no doubt it’s only the beginning. She waited... probably hoping that Rogue and I would implode on our own, but now that it’s clear that hasn’t happened...

“Your mother would do that?” Dizzy gapes at me.

“My mother...” I don’t know why I keep referring to her like the woman has a maternal bone in her body. “Nicole will always do what is in Nicole’s best interest.”

I have no idea why making me miserable is in her best interest. Unless it’s simply that she enjoys it.

“I am so sorry. That must be hard.” Dizzy sits next to me. “I guess I was lucky. My mom was the kind of mom who baked cookies, and read us bedtime stories, and as we got older gave good advice. There wasn’t a thing she wouldn’t do for us.”

“Was? Did you lose her?” Her mom sounds like everything I wish Nicole had been, but there’s a nostalgic tone to her words that make me wonder.

“I hate to think about it,” Dizzy says. “I usually tell people that she’s back in Phoenix. She is... just not the way they imagine.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine.” She glances away with a shrug and when she turns back the sadness is gone from her expression. “So are you going to tell Rogue about the card?”

“I have to.” I’m so done with allowing secrets to cause us pain.

“You’re a braver woman than I,” Dizzy says. “If it were me...if I showed that card to West, he wouldn’t hesitate to go after Nicole. He would be hell-bent on protecting me even if that meant putting her in the ground.”

“West? That’s your brother? The therapist?” I put the name with the info she gave me in the cafeteria at Sunny. I haven’t met him, but I can see that they share a strong connection. “That’s family, though.”

“Rogue is your family, right? He chose you to be his family,” she says. “I’m sure he would move heaven and earth to take Nicole down for trying to get between you.”

She might have a point. Rogue is always sweet to me and I don’t believe for a second that he would act violently toward me. But that video isn’t fabricated. He assaulted that reporter. Whatever the circumstances behind it were, it’s not a stretch to believe he might handle this warning poorly. Strike Nicole harder. Go further. And then what? She has him locked up? She wins anyway? I can’t let that happen. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“We could always take care of it ourselves,” Dizzy says. “We could put a bomb under her car. I’m sure I’d be great at explosives.”

“What?”

“Wishful thinking.” She grins from ear-to-ear as she stands. “How about I help you get rid of those tacky roses. And you can decide how you’re going to tell Rogue later?”

“That would be good.” I need some time to work out the best way to handle Nicole so that she understands there is nothing she can do to get between us. And to minimize how he’ll react when I tell him about it.

“What’s your bodyguard’s name?” Dizzy asks as she picks up the arrangement.

“Jackson.”

“Ooh, sexy. I like that.” She waggles her eyebrows. “Jackson, will you please help me dispose of these roses? Ivy is allergic.”

Jackson strides into the room and takes the flowers from her. He gives me the once over but says nothing about my lack of symptoms. “Everything okay, Miss Love?”

“Yes. I just need those roses gone. They’re giving me a headache.” Which they are. A Nicole sized headache. I rise to my feet, the card carefully folded in my hand. “I think I’ll go and lie down. Sorry to cut our visit brief, Dizzy.”

“It’s fine.” She waves me toward the bedroom. “Jackson is going to help me to the elevator. And I am going to message you later and see if you’re feeling better. Perhaps we can organize to catch up again then.”

“I’d like that,” I say before I turn and walk into the bedroom.

A moment later the front door shuts, leaving me temporarily alone. I lay back on the bed and I watch that video of Rogue punching the reporter a dozen more times. Flinching each time his fist connects with the man’s face.

“Don’t watch it,” I order myself. It doesn’t give me the full picture. It only shows me what Nicole wants me to see. Still I find myself unable to stop.

I want to believe that the man I've gotten to know is the real deal. I want to believe he had a very good reason for his loss of control. But I'd be lying to myself if I said the look in his eyes didn't frighten me. How far will he go if I tell him about the note?

I want to pretend that I can ignore Nicole's warning and that will be enough for her to go away and leave us in peace. And that I'll never have to see how Rogue reacts when I tell him.

We're happy now. Maybe I will never have my memories back, but I don't need them to fall for Rogue all over again. I already am.

This warning threatens every shred of happiness we have. How far will Nicole take it if I don't do what she wants? She filed a restraining order against Rogue. She slandered his name all over social media. I can only imagine what comes next.

My hands shake as I tear the cardboard into tiny pieces that I drop into the box my phone came in. The note that I saved from Narnia, but haven't been able to bring myself to read, is in there too. I put the box at the back of a shelf in my closet. Hide it behind a pile of sweats.

If I don't give it another thought maybe Nicole will realize she's lost her power over me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ivy

There is a box on the table in the foyer. It's wrapped in blue paper and tied up with silver ribbon. A card is attached to the carton under the ribbon.

"Jackson." My voice shakes as I clutch at my belly. My lungs tighten with every breath. It's been three days since the roses were delivered. Three of the best days.

Rogue isn't so guarded anymore. He isn't so over the top with his need to protect me, which means we're getting along better. Enjoying each other more.

We took a ride to the park where we had our first date so long ago and made a new memory. It was bittersweet because it used to be my special place with my dad. And now it means even more to me.

He took me and Dizzy to a prescreening of his new movie, where we met the cast and directors too. And he's given me space to be alone, as long as Jackson is with me. To spend time with Dizzy or just hang out in the apartment.

We're growing closer with each passing day. Well, I am to him. I suppose he was all in long before the first moment of us that I remember. He said that he hoped I would eventually feel like he's my home. Like I am for him. And the more time we spend together without all of the fear and half-truths and him being beyond overprotective, the more I do feel like that.

I've managed to put Nicole to the back of my mind until now. I almost convinced myself ignoring her would be enough to make her leave us alone.

"Yes, Miss Love?" Jackson puts his book down on the chaise and stands.

"Do you know where that came from?" I point to the box.

"It came in with the mail, ma'am."

"Does it say who it came from?" I wrap my hand around the base of my throat. "A return address? Anything?"

He strides over to the table and picks up the gift. "There's a card. Should I check it for you?"

"N-no," I practically shout at him, as I hurry to take the box before he can investigate. If this is from Nicole it's best I handle it.

"Are you sure?" His expression rarely gives away his thoughts, but he probably can tell my reaction isn't normal.

"Let me look at the card first." I hurry over and slide the white envelope from under the silver ribbon. My hands shake as I use my thumb to unseal the flap and tug the card free.

My heart starts beating again, and I let out a long held breath as I scan the contents of the card.

You love them, so I'm buying them for you. They don't have your size though, so I'm special ordering them. Hopefully, by the time they come in you'll have already forgiven me for not being able to take my eyes off you after everything that's happened.

Not that I need an excuse. I never could stop thinking about you. Looking for you. Staring at you. Not from the moment we met. Can't wait to see you in them.

Rogue xx

“It’s from Rogue,” I tell the bodyguard as a smile takes over my face. I carefully slide the card back inside the envelope and place it back on the box.

“Is there anything I should know?” Jackson narrows his gaze on me. He’s too perceptive. No doubt it comes with the job.

“Everything is fine.” I pluck at one end of the ribbon. “Great, actually.”

Jackson nods. “If there’s anything I can do…”

“About what?” I stifle the awkward laugh that threatens to bubble up my throat. He’d see it for what it truly is. “Seriously, I’m fine. And I’m going to text Rogue and tell him I received his gift.”

“Okay.” Jackson resumes his position on the chaise. He picks up a book from the cushion next to him. He spends a lot

of time reading while he's babysitting me.

This one is a romance novel. I can tell by the flowers on the cover. Does he actually read the books he picks? Or is it simply a matter of blending into the background to put me at ease?

I leave him to read—or stare at—his book as I take my present to the bedroom since I have no idea what Rogue bought me. The box is too thick and wide to be lingerie. The ribbon comes loose when I tug on one end, and I slip it free from the box before starting on the paper. When that's folded and moved to the side I run my fingers over the embossed LuLu Blue label on the shoebox.

I press my lips together and blink rapidly to clear my vision as I flip open the lid. It's the boots that I'd fallen in love with the day we went shopping with Adira. Thigh high in a navy suede and covered in crystals.

I didn't even try them on because I was so scared he was trying to buy me somehow, but he bought them anyway. Ordered them, probably with a little help from my bestie, who knows my size. Without a thought to whether they would come at a time where we were fighting or out-of-sorts. The card was written weeks ago with the confidence of a man who has no intention of ever giving up on us.

It's the first time in a long time that a gift hasn't immediately made me consider the cost for being cared for. Or maybe it isn't, but it's the first time that I remember not being afraid of the price I'd be expected to pay. Rogue cares about

me because he loves me. This gift is because he wants me to be happy.

I cover my mouth with my hand as that sinks in. He wants me to be happy. And I am when I'm with him.

Jumping from the bed, I shed my baggy sweats and pull on the boots. They feel soft and luxurious on my legs and they fit perfectly. I pick up my phone to call Rogue and tell him how much I love...the boots.

"Hot damn." Rogue whistles as he fills the doorway to our bedroom. He grabs at his chest over his heart.

"You're home." I throw myself into his arms. He had press interviews for his movie most of the day.

Even with the bad press my family has caused, he still has obligations to the studio. A week ago that would have been a relief. Now, spending time with him has become something I've come to crave.

He catches me in his strong embrace. Gives me that smile that's only for me. "I might have to spend more time working if you're going to greet me like this when I come home."

I wrap my legs around him and draw him in for a soul searing kiss. "I love y-er, them so much. I love them so much."

"You do, huh?" His smile grows stronger along with the warmth in his gaze. He nuzzles my shoulder and presses a hot kiss to my throat. He doesn't acknowledge my slip up.

Those three little words that I didn't even realize I was going to say until they were almost all out there.

“You don’t know how good it is to hear you say that.” There’s a raw vulnerability in his tone while he takes a seat on the edge of the bed. Almost as though he figured I might never find my way home to him and that I have is a miracle. “That you love the boots. I hoped you would.”

“I do. I would probably marry these boots if that was a legal thing to do.”

“Yeah, well, I guess you’ll have to settle for me.” He kisses me soft and slow and I kiss him back with everything I have. We get lost in the press of our lips while we cling to each other. Get swallowed up by emotion.

Until my phone starts to vibrate. And when that stops Rogue’s phone starts to ring.

“Want to bet that’s Adira?” He’s breathing hard when he pulls back. We both are.

“I know it is. He said he was coming home today.” I’m smiling as hard as he is. He makes me giddy. “Answer it.”

He accepts the call and then hits the volume button before holding his phone up between us. “Adira?”

“Hello, gorgeous man. What have you done with my bestie? She’s not answering her phone.”

“I’m right here.” I beam at Rogue as he rolls his gaze to the ceiling.

“Oh speaker phone.” Adira sounds outraged. “Next time, warn a girl before she says something that might get her into trouble.”

“Of course,” Rogue says. “What can we do for you, Adira?”

“Ahem.” I frown at Rogue, but it doesn’t stick. “What could you possibly say that I shouldn’t overhear?”

“Oh you know us boys,” Adira says like my husband and my best friend have their own boys club. “Sometimes we like to whip them out and compare just for shiggles.”

Rogue chuckles.

This time it’s my turn to roll my eyes.

“Come to the Mojito Bar, babes,” Adira says. “I’m home and I am dying to see you both. But I have to go to the bar because business does not take a vacation. Not even for a queen.”

I squeal and bounce on Rogue’s lap. I’ve missed my bestie. “I can’t wait to see you.”

Rogue groans as his cock hardens between my thighs. I rotate my hips for that extra sweet friction.

His gaze flares. “Hanging up now.”

“Be at the bar in an hour,” Adira orders as Rogue mashes the *end call* icon with his thumb and tosses his phone somewhere over his shoulder.

“You’re incorrigible.” His hand slips between us and inside my panties. Two fingers press at my entrance and I sink down on them greedily. His thumb swirls over my clit.

“You have magic fingers.” I whimper as he strokes my most sensitive places with the right amount of pressure to work an

orgasm out of me in mere minutes. I come riding his hand like the shameless woman I am when it comes to him. He owns me, body and soul.

“I love watching you come,” he says as I collapse against his chest. He steals his hand back. “If we didn’t have to get ready I’d keep you in bed and force orgasm after orgasm from your needy pussy.”

“Threats,” I tease, as I lean in to kiss him. But I have no doubt that he could do as he says. Possibly even has at some point.

He grips my hip and drags me along the steel length in his pants. “Promises.”

“We better get ready.” Before I start to pant, I slide off his lap.

“I need to take a quick shower.” He strides toward the bathroom. When I move to follow him he shakes his head and chuckles. “Alone. If you want to see Adira, that is.”

“Fine.” I huff and enter my closet instead. “I need to pick out an outfit to go with these boots anyway.”

I decide on a super simple black mini dress with long sleeves. Then I pair the outfit with green contacts, smokey cat eyes, and nude lips. And because we’re going to Mojito Bar I finish it off with a blue ombré wig. It will also come in handy as a disguise if we run into the press. Or maybe not now that everyone knows I’m Rogue Maddox’s wife. Armor might be a better word for the way I use makeup and costumes.

Rogue is staring at his phone with a fierceness that makes my heart skip a beat when I join him. I press at the uncomfortable sensation in my chest and hope it goes away. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course.” He shoves his phone in his pocket as he stands. A smile curves his lips as he runs his gaze over me. “I must have been a true saint in my past life, because you blow me away every time I see you.”

Perhaps the vague sense that something is very wrong is lingering from earlier, when I thought the boots were another message from Nicole, and I’m just reading into things. I take a deep breath and bask in the contentment. “The feeling is mutual.”

“Shall we?” He takes my hand.

“Unless you want to get in trouble with the queens.”

“Definitely not.” His hand covers the small of my back as he leans in. “Besides, with the way you look tonight I can’t wait to show you off.”

“Miss Love,” Jackson greets me when we step into the foyer. “I hope you’re feeling better.”

“Yes, very much,” I say as we leave the apartment.

“You weren’t feeling well? If you want we can call off this evening.” Rogue holds my hand in the crook of his arm while the elevator descends.

I squeeze his bicep and smile up at him even though the thought of Nicole makes my stomach tight and heavy. “No. It

was a small stomachache. I'm fine now. Besides, I can't wait to see Adira."

We enter the garage and walk across the concrete structure to the car. Rogue holds my door open and I climb in as his phone starts to ring.

He looks at the screen. "I need to take this."

The door closes and I settle into the backseat of the Range Rover while Jackson climbs into the driver's seat. He stays poised and alert. "Ma'am, you received another flower arrangement. I had it removed for you."

A chill rolls down my spine. "Was there a card?"

He pulls the white envelope out of his jacket pocket and hands it to me.

"Did you look at the card?" I consider opening it, but I probably don't have time. Rogue could finish his call any second.

"I will have to tell Mr. Maddox about this."

"Don't." I stow the envelope in my purse. "At least not tonight. Give me time to talk to him. It should come from me."

"Okay," Jackson says as Rogue hangs up.

A second later Rogue takes a seat beside me and we're on our way to Mojito Bar for a night of fun and frivolity. But the card in my clutch is a heavy weight on my chest.

Why couldn't Nicole just leave us alone?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Rogue

Mojito Bar is crowded and noisy as we make our way past the line and inside. The queen on the door sees Ivy and rushes forward to take her hands. “Girl, I can’t believe you’re back. It’s been forever since the last time we saw you. We were all so worried about you when we heard what happened.”

“I’m sorry I had you worried, Celeste.” Ivy beams at her friend.

It’s the first time she’s smiled since we left the apartment, although she’s still clutching her bag so tightly her fingertips have turned white.

Jackson stands a few feet away, his attention constantly on Ivy. Which is good. It’s what I want. Isn’t it? Even if he seems a tad more alert than usual. But I got the impression that I interrupted something when I entered the car, and that sensation has only grown stronger with Ivy’s actions since.

“Oh never mind that now.” The queen eyes me up and down. “Tell me this hunk-o-spunk is treating you like royalty.”

“He’s been nothing but patient with me.” Ivy smiles up at me. “It hasn’t been easy, considering I still don’t have my memories.”

“Everything with you is easy.” I draw her close and kiss her temple. So much easier than not having her in my life would be.

“I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before you’re back to your usual self.” Celeste holds her hand between both of his.

“Well, I hope by usual, you mean this more confident version of the girl that I remember being,” Ivy says.

“Are you telling me you were shy at one point?” Celeste chuckles. “Girl, you’ve grown these past months into a beautiful butterfly. You should show off your gorgeous self.”

“I’ll try.” Ivy glances over her shoulder. Then glances at Jackson.

It makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Have I missed something?

I’m probably on edge after the phone call with Marty earlier.

It looks more and more like Ivy’s father was murdered. Marty not only talked to the man who caused the accident that took Richard Love’s life, but to the man’s wife.

Both claimed not to know Nicole or Alec, beyond what they'd seen in the media. But where the man refused to answer any of Marty's questions, the wife was more than happy to chat about the miracle that saved her life a mere day after Richard's death.

Apparently she was on death's door prior to the accident and the couple was half-a-million in debt. Within twenty-four hours of her husband committing vehicular manslaughter, she was matched with a donor for a kidney transplant. By the time she was released from the hospital her medical bills and house were all paid in full. She didn't have a name or number for the person she called her guardian angel. Only praise.

Call me a cold-hearted skeptic, but I'm not buying the idea that the charity she received was actually charitable. And until I hear otherwise, I'm going to go right ahead and assume that Nicole paid to have Ivy's father killed and his murder covered up. We just don't have proof that Nicole was the one behind it.

On top of this unsettling news, I got a Google alert for a TV interview Alec did this morning. I almost threw my phone across the room when he stared down the camera and suggested the whole situation with Ro was miscommunication. The cocky bastard even went so far as to offer a supposedly heartfelt apology for any bad blood between them, like that would be enough to undo the pain and fear he caused her.

It's almost as if he expects to get away with what he did. Even with the photos we gave to the police and Ro's testimony. And with what Marty told me about Nicole's

financial situation it wouldn't surprise me if she bought a judge and a jury that will side with that prick.

"Are you okay?" Ivy asks me.

"Huh?" I card fingers through my hair. I don't want to concentrate on the what ifs tonight. Nicole and Alec will still be there in the morning. Tonight is about Ivy. I know she misses being around the queens. I know she's enjoying the freedom. She deserves to have a great night with her friends. Without my paranoia ruining it for her. "Yeah."

"Are you sure? We can go if—"

"No." Absolutely not. "It's nothing that can't wait. Tonight is for having fun."

"We are going to have such a great time now that you're back on your feet," Celeste says as we enter the main room with its curvaceous obsidian bar and muscular bartenders clad in nothing more than gold hot pants and glitzy bowties. "Can we expect a visit from Uma tonight?"

"Perhaps." Ivy presses her lips together, but there's a glint in her eye at the idea of bringing Uma out to play.

Gold chandeliers glitter over white linen tables and chairs shaped like shoes. Women in cigarette girl costumes carry brightly colored beverages in crystal glasses and jugs. Ostrich plumes vie with pearls and white roses in sumptuous arrangements that somehow don't detract from the queens prancing around the room to speak to their patrons.

I fall in line behind Ivy and the queen as we're led through to the VIQ area. The last time I sat at this table I was looking for Ivy, and Adira demanded I pay a toll for his help. I was dolled up for the stage and expected to entertain.

I can only imagine what the toll might eventually be for keeping the fact that Ivy and I aren't wed a secret from his best friend.

Celeste seats Ivy on a glass and pink feather seat that's shaped like a high heeled shoe. His eyes widen and so does his mouth as he holds Ivy's ring finger up. "Oh wow. Look at this rock. It's pure perfection."

Ivy frowns at the rings on her finger before she beams up at the queen. "It's quite heavy actually."

My pulse stutters. I never asked what Adira told the queens in regard to Ivy and I being married. If he asks questions it could blow everything, since I told Ivy they were all at the wedding.

"I bet it is." Celeste clutches at his chest. "I'm jealous, honey."

The queen sashays off to talk to someone else as one of the cigarette girls comes over to take our drink order; the first act kicks off.

I order champagne and they serve it in crystal flutes as the first act ends. Another queen takes the stage.

I move my chair closer to Ivy's and lean in. "Are you having a good time?"

“I’ve missed this.” She rests her back against my chest.

I love that she’s comfortable with me again. The nearness makes my skin buzz and my chest swell. I wrap an arm around her middle.

We stay that way through several acts before Adira ventures out to the table. Of course his friendly hug wins out against mine and she jumps up to receive it.

“You were gone so long,” she tells him with a disapproving tone.

“Christian needed me more than you did.” He tips her chin up with a one inch long scarlet fingernail. “Besides, you and your man seem to be back on the same page again. Now, I couldn’t credit myself with that if I’d stayed, could I?”

“Okay, Cupid.” Ivy laughs as she fakes shoving him away. “I suppose it wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that we were already in love and married before...”

“Oh my, I forgot how beautiful these are.” He smiles and titters as he takes Ivy’s left hand from his chest and holds it up, but none of the warmth he shows her is in the gaze he levels at me. He lifts her hand up and down. “And they weigh a ton.”

I stand and take his hand when he holds it out to me. Draw him closer so that I can say, “We need to talk.”

“You think?” he snaps in my ear.

But then he’s back to his charming queenly self. “Any chance you want to come and sing a duet with me, Love? Is your alter ego in the house? Or not tonight?”

“I’m not sure.” Ivy glances at the stage. At me. At Jackson.

Adira cups his hands around his mouth and pretends to yell in Ivy’s ear. “Uma, babe, you in there?”

“I...” She takes a deep breath and her expression changes. The nerves that were showing a moment ago become a brilliant smile as she puts on her Uma Cookie persona.

Even her posture changes when she becomes Uma. My gorgeous woman becomes a siren with the flip of a switch. She lured me to her and I was helpless to resist. Still am.

“I’ll be back,” she says as Adira tugs her toward the stage.

I can’t drag my eyes from the stage as the two of them take it over. I swear everyone in the audience can see the way my heart hovers outside of my chest while they re-create the same act I did with Adira. Of course their version a hundred times better.

I can’t stop grinning the entire time Ivy is on the stage. It’s hard to believe this is the first time that she’s taken part in the show. It wasn’t that long ago she wouldn’t have even attempted doing something like this in front of anyone but Adira.

But she’s learned to embrace her fears and conquer them. She made friends. She took part in the wedding expo act the queens put on even though she was terrified. And she stole my heart clean out of my chest along the way.

That quiet girl has become the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. That I want to propose to before the year

is out.

When Adira and Uma finish I stand and clap so hard my hands sting. The queens in the room join me. Soon the entire audience has risen to its feet to give Ivy and her alter ego the standing ovation that they deserve.

Adira and Ivy disappear backstage as the crowd settles and the next act starts. A few minutes later Adira comes to the table without Ivy. He sits in her seat and glares at me from under inch long lashes. Grabbing my shoulder, he forces me to lean in to keep our conversation as private as possible considering the public venue. “What the hell are you doing? I thought you’d have told her the truth by now, but I just heard about how beautiful your wedding day must have been and how sad she is she doesn’t remember it.”

“Look, I didn’t mean for it to get this out of hand.”

“I’m going to say this to you nicely, because I believe this all started from a place of love and sincerity.” He splays a bejeweled hand across the base of his throat. “Ivy has spent her life being a pawn. And the way you are treating her... moving her about the board without giving her a choice... or even telling her the truth... that’s going to backfire. And you aren’t the only one who will end up hurt.”

“I know that.” I’ve been there. It hurt like hell and I hate that I’m doing the same thing now. “I want to tell her. I want to ask her to marry me for real.”

“What?” Ivy gasps.

Adira and I spring apart. We have to look guilty as sin.

My throat thickens as I lift my gaze to the girl who is now wearing huge white bunny ears on top of her blue wig. “Ivy, what you heard... it’s—”

“What is the gossip? You two look cozy.”

“Well, we were just talking about...” Adira touches his neck as he glances at the stage. “Ivanna’s boobs are lopsided tonight, don’t you think? We should probably tell him.”

“Oh.” Ivy’s brow furrows as she stares at the queen on stage. “I don’t see it.”

“What’s with the bunny ears?” I rise to my feet so I can pull Ivy into my arms. My heart is still racing.

“You told me about our first date and the bunny ears,” she reminds me as she reaches up to rub one soft ear. “And about how I used the idea of wearing bunny ears to build my confidence when I talked to people.”

“You need to talk?” I find myself growing still.

“I need to tell you something.” She wrinkles her nose. “And you’re not going to like it.”

“O-kay.” A tingling sensation starts at the base of my skull and spreads.

She glances around until she spots Jackson. “I’m scared about how you’re going to react.”

“Ivy.” I knew something wasn’t right. Could damn well feel it like ants under my skin. If Jackson knows something... why

hasn't he informed me?

"Perhaps we should go backstage." Finally she looks to me as she slides her hand into mine. "Somewhere more... private."

"Ivy." I growl. And that's probably exactly what she doesn't want from me.

"Please?"

"Okay." I lead her through the crowded room until we can exit into the hallway to the dressing rooms. "Tell me."

She opens her clutch, which she grabbed before we left the table, and pulls out a small white envelope. Her lips tremble. "It's from Nicole."

"What? Did she threaten you?" My voice rises with the heat under my skin. It was going to happen eventually. It was only a matter of time before that woman made her next move. And after Marty's news this evening I'm not surprised that she already has. I snatch it out of Ivy's hand and rip through the envelope. Tugging the card free, I scan the words written on it. "Leave him before it's too late."

"It's not a b-big d-deal," Ivy says. "M-more of a warning."

The fact that she stutters over the words tells me everything I need to know.

Ivy's gaze locks on the back of the card. I flip it over to see what she's staring at. A QR code. I light up my phone screen and scan it. A second later a video of me hitting that reporter pops up.

“It’s the same as the last one,” she says.

“The last one? As in this isn’t the first one of these you’ve received?” My jaw starts to ache. I’m going to have to fire Jackson. “How many more have there been? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s the second.” Her eyebrows pull close together. “Why did you hit him?”

“I shouldn’t have.”

She twists the rings on her finger. “But you did.”

Is she afraid of me? The way Nicole wants her to be afraid of me. Where Alec is vicious, Nicole is cunning. While I was waiting for her to attack, she came at me sideways and I didn’t see it coming. Oh, but I should have.

I am done letting her have the upper hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ivy

“**W**hy the hell am I just hearing about this now?” Rogue turns on Jackson. “You should have brought this to me the moment Ivy received it.”

Jackson prepares to speak, but I beat him to it. “I asked him not to. I wanted to tell you myself.”

His eyes flare as they land on me. “This is why you were feeling sick earlier, isn’t it?”

I nod, though that’s not entirely accurate. I was sick because I thought she had when I saw Rogue’s gift.

“Christ.” He palms his forehead and drags his hand up through his hair. “I could tell something was off when we got here.”

“It doesn’t change anything.” I try to placate him. “It doesn’t affect the way I—”

“It ends now. I will not let her scare you like this.” He guides me to the side and stalks toward the far exit that will

take him straight outside without having to go back through the bar.

“Rogue, don’t... please.” The heels of my boots click on the concrete as I rush to catch up to his long strides. I reach for his arm. “Don’t confront her. It’s what she wants.”

He shakes me off before I can get a proper hold. “Jackson, if you want to keep your job, take her home and keep her safe.”

Jackson grasps my elbow and holds me in place. “Sorry, Miss Love.”

“Please, Rogue. Don’t do this.” I struggle against Jackson as Rogue reaches the exit.

His shoulders tighten as he pushes open the door. Then he’s gone and the door swings back into place.

“This is what she wants,” I say through a throat that grows watery. I’m not scared of Rogue Maddox. I didn’t trust him when I left the hospital with him, but I didn’t fear him. Even when I wasn’t sure of him, I didn’t think he would hurt me. That he believes I would be swayed by Nicole’s tricks... after everything we’ve become to each other...“He’s going to give Nicole what she wants. We can’t let that happen, Jackson.”

“Let me take you home, Miss Love.” Jackson ushers me back toward the bar.

“Did you not hear me?” I dig my feet in as we enter the crowded main room. “We can’t let him go after Nicole. We have to stop him.”

“I have my orders.” He pushes through the crowd, making a path toward the front of the building and dragging me along with him.

“Jackson, please—”

“Your safety is my priority,” he says. It’s like he’s a damn robot now that he has his mission.

“Fine,” I snap at him as I lock gazes with Adira.

Adira tips his head to the side and frowns. “Where is Rogue?”

“Uh...he...received a phone call. From...Rebel. It was something about a chess match with Riot. They needed a referee. I don’t understand that game.”

“Other than whoever takes the queen wins?” Adira asks.

“Exactly. What I truly don’t understand is who controls the pawns.” I hope Adira cottons on to my sly reference to Nicole as I mouth *help me*.

“Call me in the morning? We’ll catch up,” Adira says with a nod before he glides away.

“Let’s go.” Jackson tugs me in front of him. It’s probably easier for him to be able to keep an eye on me if I take the lead.

I smooth one clammy palm down the front of my dress as my heart starts to race. I grip my clutch tighter in the other. Any second now...

“Ooh, my lovelies. I’m feeling a little Whitney tonight,” Adira’s voice rings out across the room through the microphone he’s holding. “I wanna dance with somebody.”

We’re almost at the exit. Jackson’s grip on my arm is tight enough to keep me from escaping easily. He probably feels like he has no choice but to rectify what he considers his screw up earlier this evening.

I almost feel sorry for him.

But I can’t let Rogue confront Nicole. Nicole always gets her way. Always. She’ll have prepared for this.

“You,” Adira booms like the goddess he is.

Every head swivels in our direction. Several of the queens begin to merge on us.

It must have dawned on Jackson that he’s the center of attention, because he says, “What did you do?”

“Nothing.” I shrug as Celeste barrels up to us.

“Dreamboat, don’t be shy,” Adira says as the queens surround us.

In the confusion I manage to get free of his hold. Dropping to my knees, I crawl away from the group as they move him toward the stage.

“Miss Love,” he yells. “Stay right there.”

Poor Jackson. He has no idea that the queens and I have always had a backup plan for any time I want to avoid someone like... say, Nicole or Nathaniel or... my bodyguard.

Nicole would have hated being escorted to the stage too. That's probably why Adira loved this plan so much.

"Come up here and tell us your name, gorgeous." Adira beckons to the big brute as they get him to the edge of the stairs.

"Miss Love!" Jackson is still trying to get control of the situation.

I have no doubt he will. And then he's going to catch up to me fast if I don't hurry.

"Keys, Love?" Magnolia Clitterbean dangles the key to Adira's car in my face the minute I'm out of the main room.

I straighten and take them from him. "In his usual spot?"

"Always." He fluffs his violet curls.

I race across the foyer and yank open the door. "Tell Jackson when Adira is done with him that I promise I'll make sure that Rogue doesn't fire him."

I have no idea how I'll accomplish that just yet, but I'll make it work.

"I'd love to." He glances around the doors into the main room. "But you better move that behind or you won't escape the parking lot before he catches up to you."

The door bangs shut as I take off around the building to the parking lot. It's full of vehicles because of everyone at the show tonight, but I find Adira's Tesla easily because my bestie

has this almost superstitious need to park in the same spot for every show.

Rogue is nowhere to be seen as I climb in and start the engine. He didn't take the Range Rover, but it's been a good ten minutes since he marched out. He could have called a taxi. He could be anywhere.

Jackson is pounding through the parking lot as I reverse from the space. We make eye contact for a second. Him breathing hard. Me, silently apologetic. Not enough to stop though.

I put my foot on the accelerator and the Tesla lurches forward.

Jackson stops running and jumps out of the way as I drive past him. I wave. Again, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to kill my bodyguard. I just need to keep Rogue from going after Nicole, which has to be her intention with these showy rose displays.

I put several blocks between me and Mojito Bar before I guide the Tesla into an alleyway. As Jackson drives past my hiding spot I get on Instagram and search up Nicole Hawthorne. Rogue could be anywhere, but if I find Nicole I can put myself between them. Talk him down.

At least I hope I can.

It takes me all of two minutes to work out her location. A charity ball at an upscale hotel filled with people who worship Nicole and her so-called compassion. It's literally the perfect place for her to have Rogue confront her. Everyone who is in

attendance already believes Nicole is who she presents herself as. They won't think twice about supporting her campaign against my husband in a fight I still don't understand.

It takes me twenty minutes to get to my destination. Another five to convince the security in the lobby that I'm Nicole's daughter and they should let me in despite my bunny ears and blue wig and tiny dress. My heart pounds with each second that ticks by.

I don't see Rogue.

Where is he? Did he beat me here? Am I too late? Has the wicked witch that is my mother beheaded him yet? Okay, perhaps that's going too far... but I feel like I'm in a race against the clock to keep the man that I love from getting trapped in Nicole's web.

I dart into the elevator the moment security says I can go in. One of them swipes a keycard and presses a pin code into a small number pad before they depress the floor button. It seems to take forever to arrive, and I tap my fingers against my leg all the way up.

When the doors open, it's directly into the ballroom. It's filled with women in sleek gowns and men in tuxedos. They give me strange looks as I leave the elevator.

I wrap my arms tightly around my waist, self-conscious of how I must look to these people. Where Rogue sees the fun and sexy side of me, the people in this room judge me for my imperfections.

I reach up to touch one soft and fluffy bunny ear when one of the women sneers at them. Despite her, they give me the strength to move forward.

At least... I glance around to make sure... everything is dull as dishwater here. There's no scene. My husband isn't on his knees with my mother screaming "off with his head." He's not brawling with any of the tuxedo clad fat cats. He's not here.

I spin around again. One more time. I have to be certain. My pulse starts to slow. It's been tripping all over itself since I left Mojito Bar, but perhaps... Could I have been wrong about what Rogue's intentions were?

"Ivy, you look like a stripper." Nicole hisses in my ear like a snake. She walks around me like I'm a piece of art she's considering adding to her collection. Or not, if the disgust evident on her face is anything to go by. When she stops in her original position at my side she leans in. "And what is that on your head? Rabbit ears? How dare you come to my event looking like cheap trash."

I bow my head as her words wash over me like a familiar tide. The bright blue wig hides my hot cheeks. "I wasn't planning on coming here."

"Of course you weren't. Though why you would try to make your own decisions now... you've never been good at it." She lifts my chin and forces me to look at her. She smiles like a loving mother even as her words drip venom. "It was my intention that you be the guest of honor tonight."

"W-what?"

“Oh, my poor girl.” She yanks the bunny ears from on top of my head and drops them amongst a tray of empty glasses that a server carries past us. “Did you think I wanted Rogue Maddox to grace my event with his presence?”

“Well, I...” It seemed logical to me that Rogue would confront her when I told him about her messages. Wasn’t that what she was hoping for?

She smiles tightly. “We don’t allow riffraff. You know that.”

“You were manipulating me.” It takes every effort to keep my gaze locked on hers. She wanted me to react to her threats, because I have always reacted to them by being obedient.

“It would have been a lot easier if you’d made the right decision in the first place.” She brushes a lock of blue hair behind my ear, acting motherly for the people around us. Her friends and associates who believe that she is that version of a mother.

“This is because you felt slighted?” At the hospital when I woke up... when she tried to convince me to go home with her instead of Rogue... she was almost nice. But I knew what I was looking at was a pretense. I didn’t forget the way she’s always treated me, and I chose him over her.

“What kind of mother would I be if I let my daughter’s disrespectful attitude stand without a challenge?” She threads her arm through mine, forcing me to walk with her. “Your brother would never treat me like you do.”

“My brother...” What he did to Rochelle Kitt... the fact that he’s most likely going to get away with it if Nicole has anything to say about it. “Is a monster.”

“Your brother is misunderstood,” she whispers as she leads me toward a group of middle-aged men standing around like penguins. “And this court case Rochelle Kitt has foolishly demanded will prove that. Now, please try to be polite while we talk to these patrons. Their contributions will make a huge difference, and I won’t have you ruining it with your inability to socialize properly.”

“No.” I try to pull free of her.

“Your father would be so disappointed in you.” Her words cut the way she intends them to.

Maybe he would think I could try harder, because he was the peacekeeper. How many times did he plead with me to go along with what she wanted; to keep her happy? But I have to believe he wanted more for me than to be some pawn. “I’m not here for you to parade around. I’m not the wayward daughter trying to make peace this time.”

“You’re here for some other reason?” She stares down her nose. “Care to enlighten your mother?”

“Stop contacting me,” I say. “Stop threatening my husband. Leave us alone.”

“He’s not your husband,” Nicole snaps.

“Yes, he is.”

“You don’t really believe that.” Nicole gives me a pitying look. “Deep down you know that I’m right. Rogue Maddox tricked you into marriage in order to control you.”

“T-that’s n-not t-true.” There have been times when I feared that was the case. But he loves me, doesn’t he? I’m sure of it. He’s shown me how far he’ll go to make me happy.

“Oh, it isn’t?” Nicole taunts me even as she takes both my hands in hers and smiles at me like she’s proud of me. “T-then w-why are you st-stuttering? You always do that when you can’t make your own mind up. Ever since you were a little girl. I should know. I raised you.”

“It’s not true.” I find my voice and conviction. “I married him because I love him.”

“You love him?” Her smile turns sad.

“I do.” I truly do.

“Oh my girl.” Nicole pulls me in for a hug.

Perhaps it’s the fact that I’ve wanted my mother to care about who I am for so long that allows me to believe for a second that this hug means she’ll let us be this time. That she’ll put aside her own objectives and let me make my own choices. I hug her back like I used to when I was a child. “Thank you for understanding.”

“You’re welcome.” She ends the hug. “But it’s time for you to do the right thing and let Nathaniel annul this ridiculous marriage.”

“What?” I press my hands to that space between heart and stomach. I knew she couldn’t be trusted. It was foolish to hope that she could see a different path than her own.

“Nathaniel.” Nicole summons her lawyer from somewhere behind me. “Tell Ivy what you need from her in order to file the annulment.”

“I’m sorry, Ivy,” Nathaniel says as he hands me the flute of champagne he was carrying so that he can reach inside his jacket and pull out a folded piece of paper. His gaze is surprisingly sympathetic. I could almost believe that he means his apology as he unfolds the paper before handing it to me. “I hope you won’t think of me too unkindly over this.”

I stare at the papers he handed me. Paperwork to be filed in order to annul the marriage. I drain the champagne from the glass that I’m holding and then flip through the documents. There’s also a copy of our marriage license application.

“All I need is your signature,” Nathaniel tells me. “I’ve marked where.”

I stare at the date on the application. It’s the same date that was on my release papers from the hospital. And the signature... it’s mine, but it’s off... a touch. Not enough that Nathaniel or Nicole would be able to tell. But the date of issue?

“The application is dated the day you were released,” Nathaniel says as he takes the flute out of my hand. “That will help expediate the process. It appears that he forced you to

marry him while you were not mentally fit to make such a decision.”

Rogue lied to me about our marriage? I glance at my left hand even though the papers block my view of my rings. I have a freaking wedding dress in my closet. Is it all an elaborate lie?

I fold up the papers before I go to pieces in front of my Nicole. “I need time to think.”

“He played you for a fool,” Nicole tells me.

“I’m sure that’s not...” Only... we’ve spent weeks together. He told me about our wedding day. He made it sound perfect. And when I asked about photos from our wedding he told me that he didn’t know where they were. We’ve talked about all these things and he never told me that we weren’t actually married? No, he doubled down.

“Sign the papers, Ivy,” Nicole says. “The sooner you put Rogue Maddox behind you the sooner we can start planning your wedding to Nathaniel.”

“What?” I gape at him.

There was a time after my dad died when Nicole tried to push Nathaniel and I together, where I did consider the idea of an engagement. It was what Nicole wanted, and I was barely making it from one day to the next. “I thought I’d made it clear that would never happen by the time I ended up at Sunny.”

“Oh, silly.” Nicole laughs as one of the servers passes nearby. “You just don’t remember.”

“No. I do.” I stare up at man who is twice my age. I remember he was kind when my dad was around, and that at one point I used to think he was handsome. But Nathaniel wants me as part of some business arrangement he has with Nicole. That’s never going to be what I want. “I remember I said I could never marry you.”

“I promised your father I would look after you,” Nathaniel says, like he wants me to believe that’s why he’s going along with what Nicole wants.

I don’t believe him. “Then you know this wouldn’t be what he wanted.”

“Excuse me, Nathaniel. I need to walk my daughter out.” Nicole grips my elbow and hauls me toward the elevator.

Her grasp is so hard that I whimper. “Let go of me.”

“Listen, you brat.” Nicole pushes the button and as the metal doors close her expression turns cold. “You’re going to break up with Rogue Maddox and marry Nathaniel.”

“W-why would I do that?”

“Because it’s best for the family.” Her fingernails dig into my skin as the box descends. “Sign the papers for the annulment.”

“N-no, I don’t think I will.”

“If you don’t I’ll have your marriage investigated for coercion and have it invalidated that way.”

“You wouldn’t.” But of course she would. That’s the whole point. She doesn’t need me to be an obedient daughter. It’s a matter of reminding me that she will never let me be free.

“There is no happy ending for you and him. I promise you that,” she says as the elevator doors open into the lobby. She pushes me out and depresses the button that closes the doors as she says, “You have a week. Sign the papers, leave him publicly, or I will make sure that you wish you had.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Rogue

I pace the length of the windows that overlook the city. The lights are muted tonight, distorted by the rain that seemed to come out of nowhere a little while ago. My fingers itch to hold a cigarette between them even though I haven't had one since the day Ivy came home.

But tonight I'm in the perfect storm of anger and worry to crave that nicotine hit. It's been an hour since Jackson lost Ivy outside the Mojito Bar. Not that I was aware of that until ten minutes ago when I arrived home after speaking to Rebel and our lawyer.

Nicole seems to be gunning for a war and I'm not above giving her one. But I've learned to be levelheaded these last few weeks. Patient. Starting from scratch with Ivy—working to help her fall in love with me all over again—taught me that.

If we're going to take on the Hawthornes we're going to do it the right way. Our ammunition—Nicole's actions against me and Ivy along with the information Marty is gathering—will

be clean. It will be backed up with facts. And it will end her control over Ivy once and for all.

I'll finally be able to ask Ivy to marry me for real. After I explain about our fake nuptials of course. But first I need to find her. And it better be in one piece. "Where the hell is she?"

Neither of my companions answer.

I turn around to find Jackson and Adira in a silent glare-off. No doubt the bodyguard is furious with Ivy's bestie for helping her evade him.

I'm furious at him too. "What were you thinking, helping her?"

"She was worried about you," Adira starts from where he's pouting on my couch.

I put a hand up to stop him. I know I asked, but I don't want to hear it. "You of all people should have been as eager to protect her as I am. Not thwarting the man I hired to do that job. Especially when you had to have some notion that her plan wouldn't end with giving Jackson the slip. You gave her your damn car keys."

"I should have realized what they were up to," Jackson says.

"This is the second time today that you've failed me." I turn on him. I hired him because he was supposed to be better than good at this job. His references were stellar. "Alec Hawthorne is still out there, walking around like he owns the whole damn world. If he hurts her—"

"I'll find her," he says.

“You’re fired,” I snap as I pull out my phone. “I’ll find her myself.”

Adira gasps. “You promised—”

“You lost her,” I shout. That shuts him up. “You are the reason why we’re in this situation.”

I’d agreed not to use the tracking app on Ivy’s phone because she would see it as a violation of her privacy if I kept tabs on her that way. And with Jackson to keep her safe I didn’t see any need to do that. But this is different. I feel like I’m having a panic attack with not knowing where she is.

“Rogue, she’ll be okay.” Adira uncrosses and crosses his legs then clasps his knee with both hands. “Nicole won’t hurt her. At least... not physically.”

“You can’t be certain of that,” I say as I open the app. “Or that she’s even with Nicole. I’m not willing to leave her safety to chance.”

“You’re right,” he says as the icon that shows the location of Ivy’s phone appears on the map on my screen.

I black out my device and put it away as the front door to the penthouse is opened and shut. A second later Ivy appears in my view. She’s drenched from the rain. The blue strands of her wig cling to her cheeks. The hem of her dress drips water onto the floor.

“Oh, Love.” Adira rushes over and hugs her. He uses his thumbs to wipe away some of the mascara that has smudged

under her eyes. “I was so worried about you. Tell me you told the evil hag to go to hell.”

“I need a minute.” Her gaze locked with mine, Ivy frees herself from his embrace. “With my husband.”

My heart beats outside of my chest and I stop short of reaching her. The way she looks at me... it’s not like she looked at me earlier tonight when she accidentally told me she loved me. It’s the way she looked at me the first night she was home. Like she doesn’t want me to touch her. Like she doesn’t know me.

“I’m going to go,” Adira says. “I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Okay,” Ivy’s voice is barely audible, but her unwavering gaze speaks volumes. It says I could as easily be her enemy as I could be her lover. It’s full of pain and uncertainty.

It feels like loss. And I can’t quite breathe as easily as I should be able to now that she’s home.

“I’ll walk you out,” Jackson tells Adira.

Ivy puts her hand on his arm to stop him when he walks past her. “I’m sorry about earlier. Did he fire you?”

“He did.”

“He shouldn’t have,” she tells him but the words are equally for me. “I’m sorry for that too.”

“It’s okay, Miss Love,” he says.

She dips her chin and raises it again. Takes a key ring out of her clutch and hands it to him. “Adira’s car is in the parking garage.”

“I’m glad you’re home.” I reach out to touch her, but she sidesteps me so I let my arm fall uselessly to my side. “You had me worried sick.”

Standing in front of the sofa, she props a heeled foot on the cushion and pulls down the zipper on her boot. She takes out a piece of paper and waves it at me. “According to this we applied for our marriage license the day I was released into your care.”

“I wanted to tell you.” Why didn’t I? What was I thinking? That she wouldn’t work it out? Wouldn’t find out?

“Which is why you told me about how wonderful our wedding day was instead?” She sniffles as she drops the paper on the couch with her clutch. Reziping her boot, she puts her foot on the floor before she turns around. “And why there’s a gorgeous dress hanging in my closet? And why the photo album I kept asking about was impossible to find?”

“It wasn’t that I didn’t want to tell you.” In fact, it’s a relief that she knows. I didn’t mean to hurt her. “It just never seemed like the right time when we had so many other things to talk about.”

“You chose my future for me. You created a fantasy world for me to live in. With you. My God, you even managed to get my best friend to take part in it. And I’m not...” She wipes at

the corners of her eyes as she juts out her chin. “I’ve never been free. Do you understand that?”

“I know and that’s not—”

“I have never been allowed to make my own choices. Even now Nicole is trying to control me with this...”

“What?”

“She wants me to have the marriage annulled. She wants me to marry Nathaniel.”

“You can’t be serious.” Is she seriously considering it? “Giving into her is a bad—”

“I thought it was different. With you.” She rolls her eyes to the ceiling and fixates on something she sees there. A pained and watery smile affixes itself to her lips. “I married Rogue Maddox. My mother would have a fit, so I must have really meant it when I said yes to being your wife. To incur that kind of wrath. I was prepared for the humiliation and the pain of facing her.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” I wish I could spare her from what she’s been through tonight.

“But you humiliated me too. I wanted to believe you so bad. I wanted to believe everything you told me about our relationship.” She touches her heart. “Our love.”

“You can.” I grasp her arms.

“Can I?” She blinks at me. “How can I when I don’t remember us? When everything we have now is built on

this...lie.”

“We’re not a lie.” I pull her to my chest. “Our marriage is fake, yes. But I never meant for things to go this way when I told the doctor we were married. I just needed to know that you were going to be okay. And then Nicole slapped the restraining order on me. And the press found out that you were my so-called wife. And your memory was gone. Adira and I agreed that it was in your best interest—”

“That’s the problem,” she says, pushing me away. “You decided what was in my best interest. Just like her.”

“That was not what it was.” My voice rises along with my pulse.

“You could have told me,” she yells back.

“Tell me you wouldn’t have left if I’d told you.” I dredge a hand through my hair. “You were fighting me on everything. And I had to keep you safe.”

“You don’t even regret not telling me.” She throws her arms out.

“Not then. Not while it was so hard for you to trust me. Not when it was the difference between you staying here with me or being at Adira’s, which might have set your recovery back. Or worse, under Nicole’s roof where you’d have to deal with her and possibly Alec,” I admit. “Lately, I’m regretting it a lot, when I think about how much I want to ask you to marry me.”

“You...” She makes a choking sound. “W-what?”

“I would marry you in a heartbeat. If you’d have me. And none of it would be a lie. Because I love you. I think I have since the minute we met. And the fantasy is that you would say yes to me. You would allow me to be the man who gets to call you his wife. The fantasy is all mine, because you are incredible and perfect and everything that I want in the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. For so long I didn’t think that I would be the man who needed more. But I am. I want it all. You as my wife. Children. I want it all with you.”

Her chest heaves. “That’s...”

“A lot?” Right now, when she’s trying to wrap her head around the fact that we aren’t married. When she’s furious at me. Possibly considering whether she wants to fight for us.

She swallows. “It is.”

“It’s not a proposal. Not now. I don’t want this to feel like some emotional ambush. I’m not trying to force you.” I close my eyes and take a cleansing breath before opening them again. “That’s not what I want. It’s never been what I want. My entire world now revolves around making sure you are safe and happy. That’s it. That’s all that I care about.”

“I believe you,” she says. “Despite everything, I do believe you.”

“Because you feel it.” I trace her cheek bone with my thumb, gathering some of the wetness there. I want her to see that we are better together than we could ever be apart. “You feel that what we have is real. And nothing, not your family or

your missing memories or how angry you are at me in this moment will change that.”

“I need time to think.” She twists the bands on her ring finger up over the knuckle. Once they come free she holds them out to me. “I need you to give Jackson his job back so that he can protect me while I take that time. And I need you to leave.”

“I’ll move into the guest room,” I say.

“You have this way of making me forget that I need to be my own person. So you’ll go to Rebel’s,” she says. “Or I’ll leave.”

And go where? I’d rather she be here at the penthouse. As long as she’s here there’s hope, right? “For how long?”

“I don’t know.” She frowns. “I need time to decide where we go to from here.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Ivy

It's been a few days since Nicole threatened to destroy my world, and I found out there wasn't as much of a world for her to destroy as I'd been led to believe. The man I love lied about being my husband. And my best friend went along with it.

Of course they both text me every day. My mornings start with a message from Rogue that reminds me how much he loves me. The last thing I see before I fall asleep is his message about how he hopes I sleep well.

All I can tell him is that I'm not ready to have the conversation I know we need to have. I've barely had a chance to wrap my head around the fact that Rogue proposed to me the minute I found out we weren't really married. I came down with a stomach bug the next day. Most of our time apart I've spent in bed, punctuated with short trips to the bathroom where my stomach tries to exorcise itself from my body. I can't keep anything down.

At least today I was able to manage to shower, though it's still not easy with the cast. A few more weeks of it, unfortunately. And now I'm bundled up on the couch watching a horror movie starring Jenna Ortega.

"You want?" Dizzy holds the popcorn tub out in front of me.

"No thanks." I shake my head. I'm still a little green. Still a little woozy. And quite frankly I don't think the stabbing on the screen is helping, but Dizzy was excited about her movie choice and I don't want to make her feel bad by asking her to turn it off.

"What about you, Jackson?" She says his name like she wants to take him to bed, then waggles her eyebrows at me.

The bodyguard passes behind the couch and snags a couple of kernels before immediately going back to the chair he's camped out in the entire time she's been visiting. It's at the far end of the room; ensuring he isn't intruding and in our faces.

He doesn't let me out of his sight now, but am I surprised after my antics? Not one bit. He's doing his job and reporting everything I do back to Rogue. I pretend that I'm okay with it because otherwise Rogue would be here and any opportunity to think without him clouding my judgement would evaporate.

When he's near I want the fantasy too. I want everything he offered. Marriage. Family. Love. Nights where he makes love to me until I forget everything outside of the way we move as one. But that's the problem.

It would be easy to forget there is a price on everything in this world. And loving Rogue is going to cost me dearly. In the choices he'll try to make for me. Like our fake marriage. Oh, but it was fun while it lasted.

But also because of Nicole.

"You're thinking about him," Dizzy says knowingly.

I only told her we were taking some time and not that the marriage was a fraud. I'm not ready to announce that yet. "I can't help it."

"Maddox men get under your skin. They burrow in so deep that you can never scratch them out." She playfully scratches the inside of my arm with the tips of her pink nails. "No matter how hard you try, Rogue Maddox is always going to be the one that you can't get over. The one that you crave."

"How do you know that?" This isn't the first time she's claimed to have an inside scoop on the guys. When I questioned her she said it was something she'd read on the internet, but this feels too personal. "Did you have a thing with Rogue? Before..."

"Oh my God, no." She laughs awkwardly. "I'm so sorry if I gave off that impression. No, Rogue and I never did the deed. There was no filling of this hot dog bun. No sex of any kind. No flirtation. I hadn't even met him until Ben introduced us at the wedding."

"The wedding?" I glance at my bare finger. If Dizzy has noticed I'm not wearing my rings she hasn't said anything.

There was no wedding, so I don't understand why she would be talking like there was.

"Uh, the alternative wedding expo," she says. "You put on a performance with your friends. It was fantastic."

"I don't remember."

"No." She purses her lips. "I suppose you wouldn't. It's such a pity. You were so great."

"I wish I could." I study my nails. It would help me be certain about Rogue. About my feelings for him. About what I should do. "Did you have a fling with one of his brothers?"

"N-no." She tugs at her skirt as she uncrosses and recrosses her legs. "I haven't even met Rebel or Riot. Although I did once wave at Riot through a car window."

I'm reading too much between the lines. Wanting a friend who understands what I'm going through is making me see things that aren't there. "Was that with me too?"

"You were visiting Rochelle Kitt." She plucks a puffed up kernel out of the bowl and sticks it in her mouth.

We fall silent as we go back to watching the movie.

There are still so many things I don't know about what my relationship with Rogue truly was before I tried to kill myself. It hurts my heart to think about how devastated I must have been when he broke up with me. How lonely and lost I had to have felt without the carefully constructed walls I normally kept in place to keep my heart safe.

It doesn't exactly hurt less when I think about never seeing him again. Of following through on what Nicole wants from me. And why am I thinking about it? Because I want to protect him even if that means we can't be together. Just like he wanted to keep me safe by pretending we were married.

I don't really think that's it. I'm not blind to his flaws or my own. Or the way we're so fundamentally alike despite our differences. It's part of what makes us so good together. We understand each other in a way no one else does.

"Tell Rogue you love him. You truly do. You don't need your memories to know that. He might have been an asshole, but he's your asshole, you know? Like whatever stupid, overprotective bullshit he pulls, it's because of how much he loves you."

"I know he does." And the idea of not having him in my life is so unthinkable that I can only handle it as some semi-abstract notion that leaves me numb. It was foolish of me to believe that taking time was anything more than putting off the inevitable.

"They make us so angry sometimes, don't they?" She grabs my hand and holds onto it. "Like you could go and cut their brakes. Just let all that brake fluid leak out and hope they're on a hill when it does."

"That's dramatic." I laugh.

"Isn't it?" She grins and then releases my fingers. "Are you going to forgive him?"

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I say. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“More complicated? Like, you’re actually related to each other complicated?” She makes air quotes with her fingers. “Secretly.”

“Well, no.” How often can that possibly happen that it would be her first guess?

“He killed someone?”

“Um, I’m a little scared that this is the line you’re choosing to pursue.” I smile at how ridiculous her suggestions are. And I need something to smile about. “It’s nothing like that.”

“Then what could possibly be so bad that you’re willing to put that man on ice when you love him the way I see you do?”

“It’s Nicole,” I say. “Things have progressed.”

Her blue eyes harden. “What do you mean they’ve progressed? Have you gone to the police about her threats? Does Rogue know?”

My stomach lurches and I have to press the back of my hand to my lips and concentrate until the sensation passes. Then I haul myself up from the couch. “I’m sorry. I can’t talk about this right now. I think I should go and lie down.”

“Oh, I see. You’re the asshole, aren’t you?” she asks softly. The tub of popcorn she was holding tips on its side and spills puffed corn all over the couch as she stands. “You’re the one protecting him by taking space. You can’t help yourself.

You've been taught to do whatever it takes to make everyone else happy."

"What?" I'm shocked at the disappointment in her voice. And while she's not wrong about who I am at my core, she is wrong to think that this break was to protect him. He made me believe we were married. He made me fall in love with him all over again. For what? Nicole won't let us be happy. It can only end in heartbreak, and I'm scared I'm not strong enough to go through it again. I have scars on my wrists that are still a fresh reminder of what heartbreak feels like.

"If there were no consequences, what would you choose? Would you be with Rogue or not?"

"I would be with him." It's not a question. It never was. I love him. Always will.

"So why are you letting her get in your head?" Dizzy demands.

"Because she's made it clear she will never let us be together."

"No, she's been clear that she thinks you're still too weak to fight for your own happiness. And you're proving her correct." She grasps my arm and strokes my hair out of my face with her free hand. Her smile is bitter. "I thought that was changing."

"You thought...? Who are you to think that I should change?" I'm not too weak. Not anymore.

But I am afraid. Oh God, is it the same thing?

I try not to let my voice shake as I say, “I thought you were supposed to be my friend.”

Her lips turn down in the corner. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. I just want you to be as happy as I am.”

There’s a masculine throat clearing before Jackson speaks. “I’ll ask you to take your hands off Miss Love, please.”

“Oh shit.” I forgot he was in the room with us. Jackson has been here for the whole conversation. Watching it unfold so he could report back to Rogue. And there is no way we’re not going to fight about this.

Dizzy releases her grip on my arm. “I am your friend, Ivy. That’s why I’m being honest with you.”

“I think I need to take a nap,” I say. Perhaps I’m just overly sensitive because I’ve been so sick and miserable these last few days.

She picks up her bag and lifts the strap over her shoulder. “Call me later?”

“Sure.”

“Want to walk a girl out, Jackson?” Dizzy asks him.

“I think that’s a good idea,” he says before he escorts her away.

I sink onto the couch that is now littered with popcorn. The buttery aroma makes my stomach turn.

Dizzy is right about one thing. Being with Rogue is always going to be what I want. I didn’t need time to think about

whether our relationship was as much of a lie as that piece of paper was.

We might not have had a wedding, but our marriage was real. Emotionally.

He protected me and cared for me when I wasn't capable of doing so myself. He loved me without fear or holding back even though he couldn't be certain that I would ever love him the way I once did.

But I do. I love him so much and that is worth fighting for. This isn't the realization though. It's that I would walk the same path over and over again to have experienced what we have.

I would do it in a heartbeat every time. Even if the only ending we can ever have is grief.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Rogue

“You’ve reached Marty Kendall. Reporter at *Hollywood Juice*. Wait for the beep.”

The tires skid on the smooth concrete of the parking garage as I bring the Jeep to a stop next to Ivy’s Mercedes. I drag a hand through my unkempt hair. “Yeah, it’s me again. I haven’t heard from you in over a week. Figured you’d be back from Phoenix by now...”

Honestly I’m starting to worry. The last time I heard from Marty she said she was going to look into why Richard Love was in Phoenix. I’d told her Ivy said it was for a business meeting, but Marty had this feeling... like there had to be more detail to it.

“Just call me back.” I expel a lungful of tension as I hang up. Marty will keep. If she’s the same as she was back when we were friends the woman can keep herself out of trouble without my help.

Climbing out of the Jeep, I pocket my phone and keys and stride toward the elevator that will take me up to the penthouse.

The steel box rises smoothly. I tap my fingertips against my leg. It's been a long few days. Not quite as bad as the days Ivy spent in lockdown, but bad all the same. The only thing that kept me from losing it was the fact that she read every message I sent and that she never once told me we were over.

That and Jackson kept me informed of how she was doing on a daily basis. I might not know where we stand, but as long as she was safe I could handle her need for space.

Even if she's been in bed with a stomach bug for the majority of the time we've been apart. The number of times that I've almost turned around and ignored her desire for space just so I could hold her hair back while she was sick is borderline disturbing.

Summer had to talk me down several times as I was marching out to my truck to come here. Reminded me that my gung ho approach is what had her needing to take that space in the first place.

The problem is that I'm not sorry that I'm obsessed with Ivy. I'm not about to become less hotheaded or impulsive. That is who I have always been.

I take a deep breath as the elevator settles in its final position outside the penthouse. When she messaged me that it was time to talk I dropped everything to be here, but now that I am the nerves are kicking in.

The steel doors open and Jackson is waiting for me. He stands with his feet spread wide and his hands loosely clasped at his back as I step out.

“How is she?” I ask.

“Unwell,” he says.

“Still?” I raise a brow at that. These stomach bugs usually only last one or two days.

“She’s in her bathroom, Mr. Maddox. Can’t keep anything down.” He holds the door for me. “Told me to tell you that’s where you’ll find her.”

“Shit.” I scowl at a visual of Summer talking me into staying at the compound instead of racing back here to look after Ivy. I should have followed my damn instincts. I leave Jackson at the door as I make my way to the bathroom.

Ivy is on the floor in a ball. Her cheek is pressed to the tiles.

“Fuck. Baby.” I shouldn’t have let her push me away.

“Rogue?” Her voice is a rasp.

“Yeah, Ivy.” In three steps I have her scooped up in my arms. She looks wrecked. There are dark circles around her sunken eyes and her hair hangs in strings. “I’m here. I’ve got you.”

She lifts her hand but then covers her mouth with it. “Gonna puke.”

I put her down in front of the toilet again and when she sinks to her knees, I gather her hair up in my fist while she

wretches. “You’ve been like this the whole time?”

“Mmhm.” She nods, her cheeks pinched.

“I should have been here.” I help her to her feet and then lift her up onto the counter.

“I pushed you away.” She rests her head on my chest and takes a shaky breath. “I was scared. You scare me with your intensity.”

“I can’t change the way I am.” I stroke her hair back from her face and rest my chin on the top of her head.

“I know, and I don’t really want you to.”

“But I can try to be better about it.” I’ll do anything I can to make this work for us. “Because I love you.”

“I love you too.” Her hand splays over my left pectoral. “I let Nicole scare me more though. She’s always had this power over me... always made me feel like I can’t stand up to her. These past few days have given me time to come to the realization that not being with you is worse than anything that she could do to us.”

“You know I won’t let anything happen to you.” I wrap my arm around her shoulders and press my lips to the top of her head.

“It’s not me that I’m worried about,” she says.

“My lawyer is putting together a defamation case,” I tell her. “And I spoke to a detective about the threats she’s sent. We’re going to deal with her.”

“What if it’s not enough?” She wraps her hand around my forearm. Clings to me. She’s still scared. Still tortured by the way she’s been treated her entire life. It’s part of the fabric of who she is, and I can deal with that. As long as we’re together. “If it isn’t then we’ll go to the next step. Marty is looking into something that might help.”

“Marty?”

“I didn’t tell you because I don’t know what it is exactly that we have. It might be nothing.” Or it might be earth-shattering for Ivy, and I’d rather be certain before she is forced to deal with yet another life-altering discovery. “We can talk about it when you’re feeling better.”

“That sounds good,” she says.

I pick up her toothbrush and squeeze a line of toothpaste on it. “Brush. And then I’m putting you to bed.”

She takes a couple of minutes to brush her teeth and rinse out her mouth, and then I pluck her off the counter and carry her into the bedroom where I help out her out of her clothes, except her panties and camisole.

“You’re back now, right?” She grips onto my T-shirt when I sit on the edge of the mattress with her in my lap. “Are you staying? Was I clear that I love you and I pick us? I want you here. I need you with me.”

I lay down on the bed and she drapes over my chest. Drawing the covers up over us, I hold onto her tight. “You

couldn't get rid of me again if you tried. I'm not going anywhere."

Her breathing evens and she grows still. As sick as she's been she probably hasn't slept any more restfully than I have.

I carefully move us so that I'm on my side, with her in my arms. I press my lips to the side of her head. "There won't be one single night we spend apart from now on. Not even the night before I marry you for real, baby girl."

I must have fallen asleep too because the next thing I know I'm waking up to her wiggling her ass against my crotch. Fucking love the way she does that. Even if it makes me hard as rock. "You awake?"

"Mmhmm." She wriggles again and this time it's obvious that she's doing it on purpose.

I smile. "Feeling better?"

"I think so." She stretches in my arms.

"Hungry?" I press my hand to her belly and grind on her. "Want me to make you something?"

"Wet." She gasps. "You're making me wet."

"I was thinking more along the lines of ordering soup." I grin against her hair.

"I'd rather you make love to me." She takes my hand from her belly and pushes it between her thighs. "Then you can get me soup."

“Damn, I want to kiss you.” I slip two fingers through her folds and inside her.

“You’ll catch this crummy bug.” She moans and arches into my hand.

“Not if I don’t kiss you on the mouth.”

“Oh. Well...” She writhes as I stroke her torturously slowly. “What are you waiting for?”

“You’re a little bossy today.” I grin as I move between her thighs. “I like it.”

Using my fingers to haul her panties out of the way, I lick her from top to bottom.

“Oh God.” She knots her fingers in my hair as her back curves off the mattress.

I wrap my hands around her thighs and tug them further apart and over my shoulders so that I can eat her like the starving man I am. “A week without your taste on my tongue was too fucking long, baby.”

“I missed you.” She pants.

“Show me.” I pull her clit between my teeth. Alternate between sucking and biting just hard enough to bring her pleasure.

She pushes my head down on her pussy. “Rogue...”

I lift my head just long enough to tell her, “Good girl.” I know what it does for her to hear those words. How it makes

her pleasure spread into her mind. How it deepens the orgasm that follows swiftly when I put my mouth to work again.

By the time I ease up, her thighs are shaking around my head. I let them fall to the mattress and crawl up next to her.

“What about you?” she asks.

“When you show me you can keep food down, then I might believe that you have the energy to ride my cock, baby. Until then... that’s all you’re getting.”

“Mean.” She pretends to pout.

It makes me chuckle as I stand. “All I’m asking for is twenty minutes for me to order in some chicken noodle soup.”

“Okay.” She sits up in the bed. “But only if you help me wash my hair while we wait for it to arrive. It’s so difficult with this cast.”

“You think I’ll cave, don’t you?” My lips twitch. “If you’re naked. And I’m naked. I’ll wash your hair for you, but you won’t make me crack. I can be tough with you when I need to be.”

It takes me a couple minutes to locate the menu I want and order soup and a few other dishes I think she might like and be able to keep down.

She looks so much better than when I first came home. There’s color in her cheeks as she climbs out of our bed and walks over to wrap her arms around my waist. She rests her head on my chest. “I think we should get married right away.”

“Uh... what?” I hold her at arm’s length so that I can see her face. After our fight the other night, well, she could knock me down with a feather. “I’d think that’s the last thing you would want.”

“I said I needed time to think about where we go from here. I never said I was questioning whether I love you.” She touches my chest as she stares up at me unwaveringly. “At some point I am going to be your wife in more than just the public’s eyes. It might as well be now.”

“What about our perfect day?” I want to give her everything we imagined, from the romantic and secluded spot on the Heart Ranch, to the guest list filled with all of our friends and family, to the original song and the vows that I need weeks to agonize over. “I didn’t give us the chance to have that when I told the world we were married. I want to do it right when we do it for real.”

“I just want you to be my husband. Legally,” she says. “I don’t want to wait. It’ll only give Nicole more opportunity to try and come between us.”

“How long did she give you?”

“A week. To sign the annulment and break up with you publicly.” She clings even more tightly.

“Look at me, baby.” I lift her chin. “I won’t let anyone come between us again. Not her. And not your brother. There is nothing they can do that we can’t fight.”

“I still want to marry you. I don’t want to wait to be your wife when I already feel like I am. Like I have been this whole time. We could do it here. With your brothers and Summer and Adira. He’s an officiant. He could officiate.”

“This is what you really want?” All I want is to be able to call her my wife. It doesn’t much matter how that happens. As long as it’s for real this time.

She smiles up at me. “I want to be your wife more than anything.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Rogue

Thanks to the help of my family and Adira the living room furniture has been reorganized, leaving an aisle down the middle of the room. Petals have been strewn on either side of a blue silk runner. Dozens of pillar candles have been turned into a backdrop along the windows. Their flickering flames reflect off the panes, casting a glow over everything.

I adjust the cufflinks on my shirt and straighten my suit sleeves with a tug before clasping my hands in front of me.

“Nervous?” Rebel asks, the corners of his mouth twitching.

“Of course he is.” Riot claps a hand on my shoulder and smirks. “It’s not every day you hand over the key to your balls.”

I growl and push my arm into his chest as he tries to walk past me. “Say that again.”

“Easy, big man.” He laughs. “You know we’re happy for you. Love is a sweetheart.”

“She really is,” Rebel says, but his warm gaze is on Summer, his adoration and intentions clear on his face. Christmas should be fun—He showed me the ring he bought when I told him that I was marrying Ivy for real. The gorgeous red head is currently manning social media like it’s her job. Because it is. And the court case started today.

We were all there to support Ro. Except Ivy. She’s still dealing with the lingering effects of the stomach bug she came down with. Probably made worse by the stress of waiting for Nicole to retaliate, in addition to planning a wedding in just a few days. I didn’t want to make that worse by putting her in the same room as her bastard brother.

Slow and steady reintroduction to her trauma seems to be about what she can handle at this point, and as much as I’d like to see Alec punished for hurting her, I’m not willing to put her through the pain that would cause.

“Hey, assholes.” Riot stretches out the arm holding his phone and angles it until he has all three of us in the frame. “We look fine as hell. We should definitely take a picture for the fans.”

“Well, go on then,” Rebel says.

He glares at the screen, while I’m looking as nervous as I feel, and Riot is grinning like he doesn’t have a care in the world. The image freezes on the screen and Riot brings it closer so that he can tag it with #throwback and #bestmen. He captions it, “That time my brother got married, and we didn’t tell anyone...”

“That’s the only one today,” Rebel reminds us.

Summer was fairly strict about what we could post and when. Too many wedding related photos could make it obvious that the event isn’t a memory, but happening currently.

“Oh, this waiting is hard.” I give my leg a jiggle in an attempt to shake off some excess energy. Adira is currently helping Ivy finish getting ready. And even though I’ve seen her in her wedding dress twice... Ivy was adamant that I don’t see her prior to her walking up the aisle.

“Impatient fuck.” Rebel smirks.

“I can still cut you from the wedding party,” I clap back and then clap him on the shoulder. At some point I stopped being angry at him for his part in Ivy getting hurt. Stopped wanting to strangle him with my bare hands. Well, most of the time. It came from a good place. His heart. Even if what should be a normal sized organ seems more like a shriveled-up raisin most of the time. “You’re forgiven, by the way. As long as you don’t let me down again.”

His shoulders straighten and his gaze grows bright. He clears his throat.

Adira sweeps into the room in a floor-length black satin dress, long gloves, and a blonde wig. His hands are clasped around a leather folder as he glides up the aisle and takes his place behind us. “Sorry, we’re running a bit behind. She needed a quick pit stop in the bathroom.”

“Still sick?” I’m worried. It’s gone on too long. Tomorrow, I’ll call the doctor and demand she make a house call.

Adira nods. “Here we go.”

Ivy steps out of the shadows and into the light. She looks gorgeous. Always does. And it’s not because of the dress, which I’ve seen, although there seem to have been some minor edits and the train is now missing entirely, leaving only the very colorful and fluffy skirt which ends above her knees. It’s not the way her naturally brunette hair has been pinned and curled simply to one side.

It’s the emotion in her gaze that stays locked on mine. Until she’s standing before me and her hands are in mine.

She blinks to clear the sheen forming in her eyes as she smiles up at me.

I smile back. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

Adira opens the folder and clears his throat. “We’re gathered—”

A commotion from the front of the penthouse cuts through the moment. “We’re here for Rogue Maddox. We have a warrant.”

“What?” Ivy’s eyes grow round as cops march into the living room.

Jackson trails behind them, his jaw bulging with anger. “Sorry, Mr. Maddox.”

“That’s okay.” He can’t interfere in police business and I wouldn’t want him to.

“What the hell?” Rebel stalks toward the two officers.

“Are you Rogue Maddox?” one of them asks him.

Ivy tugs on my sleeve. “Nicole...”

“Do I look like Rogue Maddox ?” he snarls, but if the look of uncertainty on their faces is anything to go by, it will buy me a few precious seconds.

I clasp her face with one hand. It hurts my heart that our wedding is ruined. “It’s probably about the man in that video she’s been sending you. That’s all.”

“You never did tell me why you hit him.” She covers my hand with hers. There’s only love in her touch. She doesn’t fear me. She knows me too well.

“The morning I had to leave you in the hospital...this guy came up to me and started saying things about you that I was not prepared to deal with at the time and I lashed out. I shouldn’t have, but I did.”

“Was it bad?”

“I hit him a couple times.” It’s no secret. She saw the video evidence of me doing just that. “But he walked away.”

“Rogue Maddox, please put your hands up where we can see them and turn around.” One of the officers flashes his badge at me once they’ve used social media to visually confirm which twin is which.

“You were provoked,” she says. “Nicole set this up, didn’t she?”

“We think so.” I take a step back and raise my hands as I turn my back to the cops. “But it’s going to be okay. My lawyer will handle it.”

It was so stupid to lose my cool like that. My inability to be levelheaded when I’m emotional was why Rebel didn’t want me involved when he found out Ivy was Alec’s sister. He knew how I’d react. He knows what I’m capable of.

“This is it, baby. This is Nicole’s attempt to destroy what we have. But she’s failed because you know that’s what it is. You’re not scared of me. And we can fight this.”

We might even be able to pay the guy to go away. And then Nicole will have nothing left in her arsenal.

Ivy cries out as one of the cops forces me to my knees. “Don’t hurt him.”

Summer has a two-handed grip on my twin and Adira has clamped a hand on my baby brother’s shoulder, keeping him from trying to get involved. Riot’s fists are bunched so tight that his knuckles are white.

“It’s okay. They’re just doing their job,” I say to Ivy, but also in warning to my brothers.

My knees throb from the hard landing. We knew this could happen. It was only a matter of time. “Don’t get in the way. Don’t make it worse. And call Jason.”

Rebel pulls out his phone and starts talking into it rapid fire. No doubt filling Jason in on everything that is occurring.

The officer who showed me his badge slaps the metal bracelets on me. “You’re being arrested for assaulting Mark Anders.”

“I need you to be strong while I’m gone,” I tell Ivy while the other guy is patting me down. “I need you to have faith that we can fight this together much better than we can apart. Can you do that for me?”

For a second she looks uncertain. Then she swallows her fears. “Yes.”

“I’ll be home soon,” I promise.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” the badge tells me. “After the state you left Anders in you’ll be lucky if they ever let you come home.”

“What?” My whole body grows cold from the inside out. Everything seems to spin in slow motion.

“What are you saying?” Riot surges forward.

The other cop stops him. “He left Mark Anders fighting for his life. Your brother is fortunate the man is still alive.”

“That’s bullshit,” Riot snaps back. “There’s no way.”

“Shut your fucking mouth,” I growl at him before he accidentally says something they’ll take the wrong way.

Rebel comes back into the room. “What did I miss?”

“They’re saying Mark Anders nearly died,” Summer says in a strangled voice.

“The fuck?” Rebel grasps the hair on the top of his head and turns into a statue. Jason must say something to break him out of his trance because Rebel starts filling him in again.

“Oh my God.” Ivy has turned whiter than the bodice of her dress. She collapses into Adira’s embrace.

The first officer starts to tell me my rights.

It’s not the first time I’ve been cuffed. Not the first time a police officer overstated the trouble I was in. It is the first time I’ve been arrested and the guy might die though. Whatever calm I’ve managed to hold onto evaporates at the fear and confusion Ivy looks at me with.

I speak over the part where the cop warns me I probably shouldn’t say anything because it can be used against me. “It’s going to be okay.”

Ivy shakes her head wordlessly.

“Jackson will stay with you,” I tell her as the men help me to my feet. “Won’t you, Jackson?”

The bodyguard nods from where he stands outside the room. The cops coming to the apartment and my arrest are not something he can get involved in, but his job was never to protect me anyway. It was always about Ivy. Protecting her if Alec or Nicole came after her. Keeping her safe in case anything happened to me.

“I’ll be here,” he says. “I won’t leave her side.”

The officers march me toward the front of the apartment.

Ivy starts to follow.

One of the officers yells at her to stay back.

Her gaze grows watery and her pupils constrict as she stumbles to a stop. “Rogue?”

“I love you,” I tell her.

Her gaze stays locked on mine. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Rogue

Outside the police station the media circus is growing louder by the minute. They swarmed the station before I even arrived. Gave them the chance to get the perfect shot of me being hauled from the back of the cruiser.

Nicole probably had the information leaked for maximum impact. Payback is an uptight bitch in Prada and Pearls.

Her plan is going to fail though. Public scrutiny and a slap on the wrist won't be enough to keep Ivy and I apart. Even if I have to do time like Rebel... I can survive that as long as she's waiting for me.

"Sit," the officer orders, and then cuffs me to the table.

He exits the room and I do my best to get comfortable. This isn't the first time I've been in this windowless room or at least one similar. And I suspect they plan to let me stew for a while before they question me.

Mark Anders ended up in the hospital after I punched him. I roll my shoulders to ease the tension. Something about the

situation doesn't sit right. It's been four weeks. Shouldn't the cops have caught up with me before now? Asked questions?

The cuffs rattle as I try to lean back and stretch out my legs. My ass and the back of my thighs are going numb.

How long until Jason arrives? I glance at my wrist and wish I were wearing a watch. My phone is at the house because I'd left it on the bedside table when I was getting dressed and there's no clock on any wall in this interview room.

Even though it's probably only been a half hour, it feels much longer than that. The only thing cluing me into the fact that I haven't been here for hours is my missing lawyer.

The detective who arrested me enters the room and tosses a file on the desk. He flicks the sides of his leather jacket back as he sits across from me. "Rogue Maddox, huh? You're a pretty big celebrity, aren't you?"

"Sure." If he wants to play games, I'll play games. I know better than to talk without Jason present, but identifying myself is not going to give him anything he doesn't already have.

"Are you comfortable? Do you need anything? The coffee tastes like shit and the water is room temp."

"No thanks." I clasp my hands together on the table. "I want my lawyer. Any sign of him yet?"

"Can't imagine that he'll be far away." The cop begins to record our chat that will soon become an interrogation. "I'm Detective Brody Declan, but you can call me Brody."

“Great.” I run my thumb along the side of my nose as we stare off across the table.

He stretches out and cups his hands behind his neck like we’re best buds and he has all the time in the world to listen to my side of the story. Just waiting for me to start at my leisure.

When I don’t, he asks, “Want to tell me about your run in with Mark Anders?”

“Nope.” I study him the same way he does me. I suspect he’s waiting for me to give him something to pounce on. Sure, there’s no denying the video evidence of the altercation I had with the man, but the best defense is built on the things that I don’t say while I wait for Jason.

I think about Ivy. She must be freaking out. It makes my jaw clench because there is nothing I can do to comfort her. She needs me and I’m here with this guy looking at me like I’m the devil while she’s worrying about me. On top of that he and his partner totally ruined our ceremony.

I rub my thumb over the back of one wrist where the cuff has started to bite then swap to the other. Mostly it’s so I don’t tense up and show him how on edge I truly am.

So I think about the first time I got an inkling that I would fall in love with Ivy. That night in the park when she was wearing bunny ears and being so cute. I wanted to spend every moment with this amazing and mysterious woman. I wanted to learn everything about her.

Brody finally gets sick of observing and clasps his hands over the file on the table in front of him. “Do you think the fact that a man is lying in a hospital bed because of you is funny?”

“No.” The corners of my lips sink as Ivy melts into the background.

“We have witnesses,” the detective says, “that saw you assault Mr. Anders. Video that shows you two in an altercation. Would you like to tell me what that was about?”

I force myself not to clench my hands. “I’m not speaking until my lawyer arrives.”

Brody pulls several pictures out of the file and places them in front of me. “This is Mr. Anders.”

The man in the photos is unrecognizable. I certainly wouldn’t have placed him without the detective’s insistence that this is the same person.

He jabs at the bruised and battered face in the pictures. “This is what you did to him.”

“No, I...” I shake my head. Yes, I hit the guy. I hit him a couple times. I’ll own up to that when Jason gets here. I was prepared to plead guilty to my part. But these pictures... this guy... looks like roadkill. “I didn’t do that. That wasn’t me.”

“You were so angry after your altercation that you went back to finish the job. You beat Mark Anders so severely that he is unrecognizable, despite public interest in your earlier altercation plastering his face everywhere.”

“No.” This is... This is Nicole Hawthorne setting me up to prove her point to Ivy. The only reason Mark Anders is probably still alive is because Nicole still needs him as a bargaining chip. Cold-hearted and evil bitch.

“He spent three weeks in intensive care. As a John Doe. We couldn’t place him. Not until he was reported as a missing person.”

I can’t breathe. I plant my palms flat on the table while the whole room seems to swim. “I didn’t do that.”

How did I not see this coming? I should have. I knew it was a possibility. I was too confident. I thought I knew what I was doing. I thought I could protect Ivy. I wasn’t prepared for the cruel lengths Nicole Hawthorne would go to in her attempts to keep control of Ivy.

“We have evidence,” the detective says.

“You haven’t said anything, have you?” Jason barges into the room and takes the chair beside me. He pops his briefcase on the table. “Sorry I’m late.”

“I didn’t do it, Jason.” This is ludicrous. “They’re trying to —”

“Shut up,” Jason orders me. “What is my client charged with?”

Brody sneers at me. “Aggravated assault. Bodily harm. Possibly intent to murder.”

“Jesus.” Jason hisses between his teeth.

“I told you I didn’t—”

Jason cuts me off with one finger held up. “What evidence do you have?”

“Multiple video sources of the first altercation. Eyewitness accounts,” Brody says. “We have a witness that saw him fleeing the scene of the second altercation. They were certain it was Rogue Maddox. They described his tattoos.”

“Everyone knows what his tattoos look like,” Jason argues.

“We have his blood on the victim’s clothes, Brody says. “And a warrant for DNA testing.”

Jason opens the file and scans the contents like a man on a mission. His expression doesn’t change from the moment he flips the front cover until he closes it again. He doesn’t look at me. The corners of his mouth don’t twitch like they do when he knows he has his opponent over a barrel. “I want to talk to my client.”

“I’ll give you the room.” Brody stands and takes the file with him.

The door closes and Jason turns to me. “Tell me you didn’t do this.”

“We told you about him,” I say. “He got the better of me and I hit him. A couple of times. But those pictures...”

“That’s a lot more than a couple of fists.” Jason winces.

“Nicole Hawthorne is setting me up,” I say. “And the only reason the charge isn’t upgraded to murder is because Nicole

thinks Ivy will do anything she says if she dangles a little hope in front of her.”

“Any chance you have an alibi for the night before Ivy came home?”

“Security cameras in the lobby.” I’d spent the night at home by myself. I’d needed the space from my family and wanted to make sure everything would be as comfortable as possible for Ivy’s homecoming. I sink into my shoulders. “I did go for a long ass walk to clear my head though.”

“Did you see anyone who could verify where you went?” He starts taking notes. “Did you talk to anyone on the phone?”

“I was having a panic attack,” I snap. “I forgot my phone. I don’t even know where I went. But I know I didn’t try to kill anyone.”

The only blood on my conscious is Ivy’s.

“Someone got to him after you did,” he says.

“That’s what it looks like.” I slouch as much as I can. I can’t stop my leg from shaking. “Do you think he saw it coming? Did he know what he was getting himself into when he agreed to help Nicole and Alec?”

“You really believe he was paid to take this hit?”

Marty is in Phoenix trying to find concrete evidence that Nicole paid the man who is currently sitting in prison for the death of Ivy’s dad. “Yeah, I do.”

Jason eyes me critically. “Did you have any clue what you were getting yourself into when you decided it would be a good idea to get in bed with a Hawthorne?”

“She’s not a Hawthorne.” I slam my fist down on the table. If I’d known in the beginning who she was would I have gotten involved? I’d like to believe that I’d be smarter than that, but the truth is I was obsessed with her. It probably wouldn’t have made a damn bit of difference. “And I already told you I wasn’t aware Ivy was Alec’s sister.”

“Are you sure you’re not just blinded by your emotions?” he asks. “All of this could go away if you both just... moved on.”

I glare at the bastard. “If I hadn’t been arrested tonight we would have been exchanging vows. As far as I’m concerned that’s my wife you’re talking about.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” he says. “I’m just making sure you’re prepared for what might happen next.”

“It doesn’t matter what they try.” Ivy is my everything and I won’t let her slip through my fingers or give them the chance to marry her off to that creep. “She’s worth it.”

“This isn’t just some petty attempt to break you and that girl up. We’re talking up to twenty-five years of your life...” he clicks his fingers, “gone. If we can’t prove your innocence. Or at the very least Nicole’s guilt.”

The idea that I could spend that much time in prison... that Ivy might be separated from me anyway... It makes it

impossible to breathe. I tug at the collar of my T-shirt. “I need your phone.”

“Okay.” He unlocks the device and holds it out for me so that I can punch in the number then holds it to my ear since I can’t with the cuffs.

I don’t dare to breathe while I wait for her to pick up. She doesn’t know Jason’s number so she might not.

“Rogue?”

“It’s me, baby.”

“Riot told me this is your lawyer’s number. Are you okay?”

“It’s pretty bad. A lot worse than I was expecting.” I try to keep my voice calm. I can’t change what I have to say, but I don’t want to freak her out anymore than I have to. “The guy is in bad shape. Someone got to him after our altercation. I’m being set up.”

“Oh my God. I can’t believe she’s doing this.”

I wish I could get up and pace. Instead I shift about on the chair. “I need you to listen carefully.”

She sniffles.

I fucking die inside because she sounds so sad. “I need you to find Marty.”

“Marty?”

“Ask her about Phoenix,” I say as calmly as I can manage, when it’s tearing me up that I can’t hold her.

“I-I don’t know her number.”

“I’ve got it,” Riot says in the background. Then she must switch me to speaker because he comes through loud and clear. “We’ll call Marty now.”

“Good. She’ll explain everything.” And hopefully, if she hasn’t already found proof that Nicole Hawthorne is an ice-cold killer, she’s well on her way. “And Ivy... whatever happens until I come home... I want you to know that I won’t ever regret loving you.”

“Rogue.” She whimpers.

Jason is giving me the hurry along since we need to be working on our defense. No doubt the detective will be back any minute. “I’ve got to go.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Ivy

Breathe in. Breathe out.

My footsteps eat up the living room while I listen to Marty's recorded message.

"The police. They came and took him. Took Rogue." My emotions are all over the place. They're too big for my body. I can barely breathe and speak at the same time. "He told me to call you. He said to ask about Phoenix. Why aren't you picking up your phone?"

"What the hell is Phoenix?" Riot asks as he stands next to a tall cart, pouring whisky into three glasses.

"Is it a code word?" Adira asks, returning to the living room after taking a few minutes to change out of his gown and into something more comfortable. "One of those for me?"

"Yes." Riot hands him a tumbler.

"I have no clue what Phoenix is supposed to be." I hang up and sit down. How many messages have I left at this point?

Ten? Twenty? It's been over two hours since the police hauled Rogue away.

"Do you want?" Riot teases me with one of the tumblers.

"Mmm. No." I still don't feel good. Actually I feel worse. And the bodice of my wedding dress feels constricting even though it keeps slipping down. I need to remove some of the excess energy and emotion from my body before I scream.

At least the adrenaline coursing through my system is taking the edge off the almost constant nausea. I stand up again and pace the length of the blue runner still in the middle of the living room. My feet are bare. I kicked off my heels a little while ago. "There's the bird and the state."

"There's the guitar brand," Riot adds before he takes a drink. "They make pretty decent instruments."

"I'll try Marty again." I light up my screen. But I'm on three percent battery life. "Damn it. I need to charge my phone."

There's a power bar over here."

I hand Riot my device.

"Miss Love." Jackson brings me a mug of something hot from the kitchen. "Chamomile. It'll help with the shock."

"Thanks." I sip the warm drink as I go back to pacing while he returns to being a living statue at the edge of the room.

I knew that Nicole would try to hurt me for defying her. I knew she would go after what was most precious to me. I just

never thought she would be capable of... having someone beat almost to death in order to make it happen.

“Fuck,” Rebel bellows as he and Summer come barging back into the apartment.

“I take it that it didn’t go well.” Riot pours out two more measures of amber liquid. Then triples the amount in one of the glasses.

“You could say that.” Summer’s shoulders slump as she takes off her coat. “We couldn’t get anywhere near him. And there is media everywhere. It’s almost like someone tipped them off.”

“That’s because they did,” I say. “Rogue called me from Jason’s phone. He said Nicole is setting him up and that I need to get hold of Marty, but she isn’t answering her phone.”

“Yeah, Jason just called on the way up in the elevator and filled us in. He says they won’t let Rogue out on bail. They’re going to hold him.”

“At least the victim is still alive,” Riot says.

For now. But how long will that last? I slump into the closest chair. Bury my head in my hand. “This is because of me.”

“No. No.” Adira crouches in front of me. He takes both my hands. “Look at me, sweetie. This isn’t your fault. You can’t help that that woman is a villain. You don’t deserve to suffer for it. You didn’t do anything wrong. You just... fell in love.”

“What if the man dies?” I steal a hand back to wipe at my eyes. I know that what he is saying is true. But Nicole warned me and I chose to ignore it. What happens if I don’t heed her now?

“Hey. Hey.” Rebel lowers his voice, tries to smooth the roughness out of it. “Let’s not assume the absolute worst.”

“What do I do?” I stare into my best friend’s eyes. He’s always protected me, but this time he can’t. “My mother is behind this, and I don’t...” But, I do know what she wants. All I have to do is sacrifice everything I hold dear and marry Nathaniel like she wants me to. All I have to do is fall into this pit of despair that I can feel forming inside me at the very thought of breaking my promise to Rogue. But what good is a promise if he’ll be behind bars. “I can stop it. I can make it all go away.”

“No,” Rebel snaps. “I promised Rogue that I would keep you safe.”

“Are we really worried about my safety when Rogue’s the one they arrested?” My voice grows louder and higher. I’m not the one my mother wants behind bars. At least not those type of bars. She has a different, more gilded cage she’d rather see me in. That’s the reason she’s doing this.

“Do you really believe you hurt yourself, Love?” he asks me point blank.

The words, my breath, everything sticks in the back of my throat. Do I really think I hurt myself? “You want to talk about that now? I don’t know what it has to do—”

“Did you or did you not... hurt yourself?”

“I tried before...”

Even that feels like a question.

“Did you break your own wrist? Did you crack your own rib?” he clarifies.

“No.” I exhale the word. No. I don’t believe that I could do those things. “If I did, then how did I also manage to cut into my flesh with a broken wrist? And on sedatives. They make me so tired.”

“Then you aren’t safe. Do you get that? Someone hurt you.” He sighs. “And we’d put money on that someone being your brother.”

“Alec?”

“Your bones were literally broken... because you’re with us... Fuck, I thought Rogue would have explained more of this situation to you by now. He’s going to be furious.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I take off my glasses and pinch the bridge of my nose. Dots dance in front of my eyes. They make me feel woozy but I try to concentrate on what Rebel is telling me. “What has Alec got to do with it?”

“A lot.” He huffs out another frustrated breath. “You were helping me take him down when you got hurt.”

“What?” My stomach turns violently on itself.

“We were trying to get a confession,” Rebel says.

“Ease up there.” Adira charges across the room at Rebel with his hands up. “There’s a reason she doesn’t know everything. The doctor said that she might not be able to deal. That it could be too traumatic.”

Alec, he... oh my God, it feels like I’m suffocating. He broke my wrist? He was the one who left me with breaks and bruises? Rogue had said he thought Alec hurt me, but I didn’t think... it didn’t sink in this is what he meant. That Alec literally came after me because I was with Rogue.

“She needs to be aware,” Rebel tells Adira.

“It’s a work in progress,” Adira roars. “You’re pushing her too hard.”

“My brother is being framed for murder because of her family,” Rebel roars back. “And if she knows something—”

I bring a shaky hand up to my forehead. I can’t seem to keep my thoughts from spinning out. What kind of brother hurts his own flesh and blood like that? But then Nicole is obsessed with destroying my relationship with Rogue too. She would rather ruin my life than allow me to live it by my own rules. And Alec has always loved torturing me.

“How are you doing, Love?” Riot wraps his hand around my arm and lugs me out of the room while Rebel and Adira continue shouting at each other. “Come on, let’s go somewhere more quiet.”

He takes me into my bedroom and just manages to shut the door before I collapse into his brotherly embrace. Rogue’s

family is so tight knit. So accepting. It brings more tears to my eyes.

“We’ll get it sorted.” He doesn’t let go even though my mascara is running onto his shirt. “Got a few snot bubbles in you too? Want to blow them on my shirt?”

“That’s gross.” But the tears stop. I blink them back and wipe under my eyes with my fingers. “I probably look like a raccoon, huh?”

“Rogue once had a raccoon in his bed.” Riot squeezes my shoulders. “The damn thing found a pair of women’s panties tucked down the side of the mattress and scurried around the apartment, wearing them like a frilly pink pirate hat.”

I giggle a hiccup. I wouldn’t have thought anything could relieve the tension under these circumstances. Especially anything to do with Rogue’s bed-hopping ways.

But that was before me. Before we fell in love.

“Probably shouldn’t have told you that story, huh?” He leans in to whisper, “Just don’t tell him that I told you when he gets home. It’s bad enough dumb and dumber weren’t talking to each other for so long.”

“Thank you.” I drop onto the end of the bed. I’m emotionally and physically drained. Still reeling from what I’ve learned tonight.

“Do you think it was my brother?” I pick at the cuticles around my nails. “That he hurt me.”

Riot takes a lighter out of his pocket—the kind with a metal lid—and starts playing with it. “I think I’ve never known anyone to hate my family quite like yours does. And I know what he did to Rochelle.”

His gaze burns with hate.

“Right. I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.” The way he flicks the lighter lid open and closed is full of rage. Click, click. Click, click. Click... click. “You’re a good person, Ivy Love.”

A good person with a fucked up family.

Rogue’s family had every reason to wish that we weren’t together because of who my family is, but they accepted me anyway.

They’re here with me now, trying to work out how to fix what my family is determined to break. When the easiest answer would be for me to marry Nathaniel.

Their kindness brings tears to my eyes. I struggle to hold the waterworks back. This is how family is supposed to be. Not like mine. All my family ever does is hurt people.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Sure.” My trauma is banging on the door of my mind. The lies I’ve excused my family with for all these years are crumbling. And my husband-to-be is being set up. I wipe at my eyes, but they only grow wetter. “I think I need a minute. It’s the shock.”

“I’ll go make sure...” He curls his lip like his partial comment leaves a bad aftertaste. “I’ll check on you in a bit.”

The door closes behind him and I lie down. More tears come and I don’t try to stop them. I let them wash over me. Let my fear and sadness drown me.

I knew my brother was not a good man, but now I’ve learned he’s a monster. He raped Rochelle Kitt. He more than likely assaulted me. And I am seeing my life in a new light. Like those sedatives... did I really allow a doctor to prescribe them to me when I will never forget that I almost drowned the last time I took them? They make me so tired I can’t function...

Surely I would have asked for something else...

I get up and go into the bathroom where I pull out my cosmetic bags and check the contents of each one. No sedatives. Not anywhere. I check the drawers in the vanity in case they got swept up and not put back properly because sometimes I can be messy when I’m in a hurry. I come up empty.

I rest a hip against the counter as my heart starts to pound painfully in my chest. The world swims around me and I can’t swallow the bitter taste that races up my throat. I barely manage to lift the lid on the toilet before I empty the chamomile tea into the porcelain bowl.

My exhausted body can’t fight the stress and the stomach bug at the same time. I sink to the floor and rest my head on my cast.

Did Alec drug me?

Is the whole reason Rogue hasn't talked to me about my brother because every time he tries, my body throws up a trauma response like it is now? I think back over our conversations. My light-headedness and the way my body is wracked with trembles every time the topic came around to my brother. How Rogue didn't want me to go to Narnia. And wouldn't let me out of his sight. It makes so much sense in light of this new information.

"You all right, Love?" Riot struts into the bathroom. He wrinkles his nose. "Chamomile tea didn't sit right?"

I shake my head. A low moan escapes me. "Any news?"

"Not yet," he says. "Want a hand to get up?"

"I think I'm going to lie here for a little bit."

"I've been there," he says as he sits down across from me on the tiles and stretches out his long legs. "Normally after a bottle of Jack though."

"Where's Adira?" Riot has been kind to me tonight, and I like his company, but I'm surprised my cousin hasn't popped his head around the door to check on me.

"He left to clear his head." Riot rests his against the cupboard behind him. "So did Rebel. Separately. Summer is set up in the kitchen, doing social media triage."

We fall silent for a while. I don't know that I could drag my aching and weary body up if I tried. At some point I start to shiver and my teeth start to chatter.

“Got to get you up, Love.” Riot moves smoothly to his feet and then picks me up. “Can’t have you getting any sicker on my watch.”

“I wish I could remember,” I say once I’m on my feet again. I press my fingertips to my temples. I’m so tired and my thoughts are so muddled. “What if I know something that could help?”

Riot keeps an arm around my waist as he walks me to bed. “Your memory will come back if and when your brain can handle it. In the meantime, Rogue has the best lawyer on his case. And we know Marty will help once we find her.”

I collapse onto the mattress on my side and draw my legs up in front of me. Yawn. I’m at my breaking point. “How much further is Nicole willing to go to get me to obey?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Ivy

The cab stops in the middle of the empty street and I climb out. It's late, but I couldn't sleep. A couple of vehicles cross the intersection behind me, but otherwise it's quiet outside my brother's place.

His bachelor pad is a lot like Rogue's. High above the city and surrounded by security. They don't stop me as I enter the building and make my way to the elevator. None of them say anything. They're too focused on the cameras.

It's almost as if they don't see me. But then I've spent most of my life being invisible, so that's not truly surprising.

I've only been here once. I don't ever go out of my way to see him. Not at the house. Not here. It'll probably shock him that I would confront him now. But I can't stop thinking about how Rebel told me that Alec hurt me.

The elevator rises. I rub at the shiny pink scar on my wrist. It hurts like it's still fresh. What happened that was so bad that I'd block it out? What was so bad that I would try to end my

own life? More importantly, can I use it to my advantage? Can I make him believe that I'm coming for him now? Unless he helps me persuade Nicole from her current course of action. She'd do anything to make him happy.

I step out of the elevator and into the hallway. I can hear Alec's voice and I walk toward the sound of him arguing with someone.

The woman has a knife in her hand. As I watch, she lifts it to Alec's neck. He doesn't have the time to respond to the threat before she slices the blade through his flesh.

I muffle my scream as blood starts to weep from his throat. My heart pounds as the woman turns to face me.

I bolt up in the bed, my heart pounding in my ears. The woman who killed Alec... it was me.

On the nightstand my phone vibrates and the screen lights up.

Adira's tall frame is spread out beside me, his breathing even and deep. He most likely brought my phone in for me when he decided to crash here. Probably wanting to make sure I had someone close by if I woke up in a blind panic.

My phone vibrates again.

It could be Marty. I snatch it up to see Dizzy's name in my notifications. After the other day we've given each other some space but kept in touch via text. It's not her fault that I was on edge. And I'd get frustrated with me too when I think about

how many times I've broken my spine to make my mother happy.

There's still nothing from Marty. It's odd that she hasn't yet responded. I have this pit in my stomach; I'm probably worrying too much, but it's bothering me.

Dizzy: I saw on the news that Rogue has been arrested. Are you okay?

"No, not really," I mutter under my breath as I climb out from under the covers. I'm still in my wedding dress. My stomach burns with my jumbled thoughts. Is Rogue sleeping? Is he as scared as I am that Nicole will go even further to make sure we're not together? I text Dizzy back, letting her know how I'm feeling and what the real story is.

Dizzy: Would you like me to help you kill her?

I almost giggle out loud, but manage to stifle it. Oh my God. After this evening, Dizzy's brevity is a breath of fresh air in my imploding world.

Me: Will you be my alibi?

Dizzy: Of course. How would you do it?

I wish I could do something to force Nicole out of my life. But I'm not built like Alec and Nicole. They think that's my weakness. I hope it isn't.

Me: I don't think I could ever do it. Not really.

Dizzy: She'd deserve it.

More than anyone, but there has to be another way.

Me: Perhaps I could find some leverage instead.

Dizzy: Blackmail. I like it.

I snort quietly. The way her mind works is both refreshing and unnerving.

Me: I wish I could remember what happened to me. Everyone thinks Alec hurt me but I don't know how or why. Perhaps if I could remember what occurred I could use that to control Nicole.

Dizzy: I could possibly help you with that.

Me: What? How?

Dizzy: My brother could help. He sometimes takes on cases that are resistant to the usual methods.

Me: What do you mean? Are we talking extra therapy?

Dizzy: More like intense therapy. And it's a little more risky than just talking. But then we're talking about saving your man, so that's worth a little risk, right?

Yes, but...

Me: How risky?

Dizzy: Let's just say the medical board won't let him practice legally. But he also hasn't mentally incapacitated anyone either.

Me: That's a broad spectrum.

Dizzy: I promise you'd be in the best hands.

Am I crazy for considering this? Probably, but... I need my memories back. This may be the only way to save Rogue. To finally convince Nicole to stay out of my life.

Me: Okay.

Dizzy: Meet me downstairs in ten.

Me: Now? In the middle of the night?

Dizzy: You want to get Rogue home as soon as possible, don't you? Besides, I'm currently with West. He says he can help you, but he's leaving town for a conference in the morning.

Me: Fine. I'll be down in ten.

Dizzy: Whatever you do, don't bring Jackson.

Me: I thought you liked Jackson?

Dizzy: Trust me, it's not a good idea with West. He's overprotective with me the way Rogue is with you. What about bringing Adira?

I try to wake my bestie but he's dead to the world. It's probably for the best because I have a feeling that he would question this non-sanctioned method of therapy. He wouldn't like the idea of me putting myself through more trauma.

And neither would any of Rogue's family. They've all been given instructions to keep me safe. No, this is my decision. Something I need to do for me.

I change into black leggings and one of Rogue's big hoodies as quickly as I can. Then pick up my shoes and slip out of the

bedroom.

Riot is asleep on the couch in the living room. Rebel and Summer must be in one of the guest bedrooms. It's entirely quiet as I leave the apartment.

I expect to run into Jackson before I make it to the elevator, but I don't. But then again, it's three in the morning. He has to sleep sometime, and it's not like he would expect me to try to leave without him.

The elevator descends smoothly to the ground floor while I put my shoes on.

"Everything okay?" the security guard on the desk asks me as I make a beeline for the door.

"I need some air," I say. "Just a couple of minutes."

"I'll come with you." He stands.

"Literally two minutes." I hold up two fingers. "I promise. If I'm not back inside by then you can come and make sure I'm okay."

"Okay." He sits back down.

A limousine idles at the curb. As I move closer a door opens and Dizzy exits the long black car. "Does anyone know you're out here?"

"No." I glance over my shoulder, fully expecting Jackson to have realized I snuck out. But the street is empty except for a couple of cars that pass by.

“I’m so sorry.” Dizzy pulls me in for a hug. “We’re going to fix it.”

She climbs back into the vehicle. “Come on, there is someone I am dying for you to meet.”

I glance around the quiet street. Am I making the right decision? Do I have any other choice when my memories could be the only thing that can help Rogue? At this point, my only other option is giving Nicole what she wants. My life in exchange for his.

I promised him I would fight for us. I plan on promising him forever.

I take a deep breath and follow Dizzy.

In the limo I come face to face with a man. He takes up most of one seat, his arms stretched along the back. Dizzy takes a seat beside him and he moves one arm across her lap, almost like a seatbelt, while his cold blue eyes assess me.

I study him right back. I couldn’t look away if I tried. He looks like a model. The kind with tattoos peeking out the collar of his shirt. His hair is dark and cropped close at the sides, but longer on top.

“You look...” It blows me away how much he looks like Rogue and Rebel. “Have we met?”

“We have,” he says, tapping his fingers on the leather seat. “We had a therapy session.”

“We did?” I gape at him. Surely I should remember meeting a dangerously-handsome man who looks like he could be a

long lost Maddox.

“You didn’t tell me that.” Dizzy frowns at him.

“I wanted to see what made her tick. You’re important to me, and I don’t trust just anyone,” he tells her before turning to me. “Sunshine is captured with you, and I like to be aware of who she’s spending her time with. I had an opportunity to find out more about you, and I took it. I’m sure you can understand when I say that I still haven’t made up my mind about you.”

“Uh...” I don’t actually know how to respond to that.

“It’s not that you’re untrustworthy,” he says. “But you seem timid, and my girl here, is anything but. I find it hard to believe that the two of you can make a friendship work.”

“I told you my brother was an asshole.” She punches him in the chest.

He captures her hand and kisses her knuckles. “I wish you would stop calling me that in front of other people.”

“Asshole?”

“Brother,” he growls.

“But...” She laughs. “I like the way you hate it.”

My eyes are probably popping out of my head. “You’re not her brother?”

“I was adopted,” West tells me. “And Dizzy’s mom was already pregnant with her when she met our dad. We’re not... related.”

It doesn't feel like my place to ask questions about their relationship. Even if I have a lot of them. I'd rather focus on the real reason I'm here. "Dizzy thinks you can help me?"

"I've read your file," he says. "You're suffering from a trauma dissociation."

"You're going to help me with therapy?"

"Ideally." He pushes Dizzy off his lap so that he can lean closer. "But I think we're after immediate results, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"There are scientific experiments..." He starts talking about studies that have been done; about how memories are encoded. Experiments with mice. How recreating brain chemistry with the aid of different substances can help with recalling traumatic memories.

All I can do is try to keep up.

"It's a lot of information," West finishes. "Most of which you don't need to understand. But yes, I can most likely bring your memories back. I have to warn you, the recall will be brutal. There's a reason why your brain has hidden a chunk of your past from you. But we'll monitor you physically the entire time. And I'll be there to talk you through every step. What do you think? How far are you willing to go to get what you want?"

I lock gazes with Dizzy. She smiles encouragingly. "It's okay."

If I can finally be done with the Hawthorne name... bring Rogue home... "I'll do anything."

"Well then..." He smiles wolfishly as he squeezes Dizzy's knee. "Now we just need to talk about your payment."

"I-I don't have anything," I say. "I could get money. Maybe. I'd have to borrow from Adira."

"I don't want money." He waves at the spacious and luxurious interior of the vehicle. "I already have money."

"Then what?"

"A favor. And a promise that you'll fulfill that favor when I ask you to." He unbuttons his jacket and reaches into a pocket in the lining. Pulling out a folded piece of paper, he hands it to me. "What I'm about to do for you...It isn't exactly ethical. There would be ramifications for me if it ever comes to light. So this is my... safety net. A little document that says you voluntarily put yourself in this situation. And that you'll owe me much more than a favor if you tell anyone what happens here tonight."

"West." Dizzy grabs at his arm. "You said—"

"I am aware of what I said." He covers her hand with his own. "But I still need her silence."

I scan the contract to get the gist of it. I'm responsible for whatever occurs here tonight. If it doesn't work I can't back out of the promised payment. And I cannot under any circumstances talk about the deal I'm making with him.

A shiver wiggles its way up my spine and makes the hairs rise on my nape. Is this secret contract in the back of a limo in the middle of the night really happening? Or is this just another dream? I pinch my thigh to see if it hurts. Ow! Yep, it does. “And what’s the favor that I’ll owe you?”

“I bargained for you.” Dizzy beams proudly. “Because we’re friends.”

“An introduction. At a time of my choosing,” West says. “Are we in agreeance, Ivy Love?”

He’s asking for almost nothing and offering me a chance to help Rogue. “Yes.”

“Good.” He smiles. “Sunshine, would you like to do the honors?”

“Can I?” Her eyes light up.

“Yes, my love.”

Her gaze lands on mine as she moves across the cozy interior of the limo to sit next to me. “I promise you can trust my brother. We’ll get all the answers you need.”

Considering my own family has potentially put a man in the hospital in an attempt to control my life, this feels far less dangerous. “Do you have a pen?”

Dizzy hands one to me. “Just sign at the bottom.”

I think about Rogue while the tip of the ball point scratches across the paper to seal this clandestine deal. I think about how he looked at me as we stood in front of our family, ready to

commit to forever. With so much love. He is fiercely loyal and protective. He would turn the world upside down to find a way to free me if I were the one behind bars.

If I can remember what happened... if there's a chance that Alec did something to me that I can use against Nicole... to get her to back off and leave us in peace...I have to try.

Dizzy folds up the paper and hands it back to West.

He slides it into his pocket and then pours a glass of champagne. Handing it to me, he says, "Shall we find out what you've been missing, Ivy Love?"



Rogue and Ivy will be back soon! The epic ride will continue!
Pre order your copy.

If you need something to read in the meantime, and you like hilarity, everyday heroes, and no cliffs you should totally check out the Line Up starting with I Dare You.

Come join me in my A-List Rebel's group on Facebook to be the first to get sneak previews and extras! Bring your rebels dream cast, gray sweat pant memes, and anything else you want to share and join us here: [Misti Murphy's A-List Rebels | Facebook](#)

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THANK YOU!

I just wanted to take a beat to say thank you so much for sticking with me this past year. It's been a rough twelve months for me and at one point I honestly wasn't sure that I would actually be able to continue writing. My working memory got so bad that I would have forgotten by the end of a sentence like this what I was writing...so to have this book done and dusted, even if it isn't the end of the story, is a huge deal for me.

And that you waited for it... that you were excited for it after such a long time... It brings me to tears. Thank you for your support and encouragement and understanding. Thank you for being the reason I get to write stories and put them into the world. I appreciate you so much!

There are also a few people that I want to mention because without them this book would not have been finished on time, or even at all.

To Chasity Moody Oleson. Girl, you're the best! Thank you for all your help. From the brainstorming sessions to the late

night readings. I'm so glad you're a part of my team!

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xx Misti Murphy