



promise of
HELLFIRE

PROMISES BOOK THREE

CELESTE NIGHT

Promise of Hellfire

Promises Book Three

Celeste Night

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First Edition

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Some songs that inspired me while I was working on this book!

Love On The Brain – Rihanna

Give Me Back My Life – Papa Roach

Vermillion, Pt. 2 – Slipknot

I Get Off – Halestorm

Coming Undone – Korn

Do It For Me – Rosenfeld

Hot Demon Bitches Near U!!! – Corpse

Desire – Meg Myers

Darkside – Neoni

The Devil in I – Slipknot

Sweet but Psycho – Ava Max

*To M. It's the end of my first series and I can't believe it.
Thanks for reading every single draft, helping me proof,
buying me Powerade, and eating more french fries in the past
few months than is reasonable. One day, I will be more
organized in my chaos. Well, hopefully.*

Author's Note

If you are related to me, I caution you about reading this book. It might make family gatherings awkward. I know I said this for books one and two, but trust me.

Promise of Hellfire is the final book of a contemporary reverse harem/why choose romance series where the main character will have more than one love interest. I strongly recommend you read books one and two first.

This book is more emotional and darker than the first two. It contains dark themes, language, and explicit content that may not be for every reader. This book is for mature readers only. Please visit <https://celestenight.blogspot.com> for more details.

Character Guide

Welcome to the Streets of Strathmore

Rayne Woodward – Our Main Character

The Three Kings

Dominic Butler

Hunter Nicholson

Ethan Carter

The Men Who Run the City

Oliver Griffith

Paul Donohue

Aldo Renzetti

Other Notables:

Victoria Glenn-Rayne's best friend. Dating Rory Donohue

Rory Donohue-Paul's son

Ignacio Reyes-Ethan's friend. Strathmore PD

Wayne Ayers-Founder of Ayers Industries

Lennie Bennett-Works for Ayers.

~~Libby Sharp You'll see.~~

~~Trace Griffith Rayne's ex. Oliver's son~~

Lexi Burns-A dancer at Inferno. Rory's Ex

Chapter One

Rayne

“**T**he Ruby Rose,” I repeated, more to myself than to the man on the other end of the phone. Anxiety coiled tight in my stomach and I swallowed hard, trying to suppress the urge to vomit. I stopped believing in coincidences long ago, and the fact that the Rose was tied to both Ayers and Ethan’s father made my blood run cold.

The Ruby Rose was a second-rate strip club across town known for hiring women with addictions and not many choices. Very few had friends or family to support them. Rumors circulated around the city that employees there did more than dance and the VIP rooms were simply a front for illegal prostitution. Sometimes the dancers would turn up in back alleys or on the side of the highway, bodies mangled. No one else seemed to care, and police turned a blind eye to the discoveries. After all, who cared about missing dead girls from the wrong side of the tracks?

“Chandler, I need you to give me more details than that. How do you know?” Chandler Murray was one of the guys’

informants. I shuddered when I thought about the time Hunter threatened to torture him in an abandoned warehouse.

He lowered his voice. "I'd rather not say over the phone, but I can meet you somewhere when I get off work. Around eight."

"Fine. Where do you want to meet?" I asked, rubbing my hand over my eyes.

"Same place as last time," he replied quietly.

"Wait, you want to meet me at the warehouse where you were tortured?" I couldn't believe my ears. No sane person would request that. "Fine. At least it's private, and I know no one will overhear us. See you then."

I hung up the phone and glared at Hunter. "I know you're going through an existential crisis this afternoon, but I need you to sober up in the next," I glanced down at the time on the phone, "hour or so. Someone make him a coffee and maybe something to eat." I knew caffeine sobering someone up was a myth, and food wouldn't actually soak up alcohol, but at this moment I would try anything.

Hunter coming home inebriated was unexpected and, at this moment, incredibly inconvenient. Drunk Hunter wasn't something I knew how to deal with. My anger wasn't even directed at him. Not really. He'd had a pretty shitty afternoon and discovering that Wayne Ayers was his absentee father was quite a blow.

I handed him back his phone before picking up my own. “Don’t be like that, princess,” he grinned. “You should come sit with me.” He patted his lap. “The world will still be falling apart tomorrow.”

I sighed at him. Sitting on his lap was the last thing I needed to do right now. “Yeah, it will, but in the meantime we need to find out if Lexi really is at the Ruby Rose and what she is doing there. The only way to do that is by meeting Chandler Murray. When I get home tonight, I’ll sit with you all night long if you want.”

Lexi was one of the dancers that worked for Oliver at Inferno. Last summer, Oliver had given her two options: go to rehab and get clean or find another job. Typically, the dancers Oliver fired ended up at the Ruby Rose, at least temporarily. Lexi chose rehab. Even though she was still jealous of Victoria’s relationship with Rory, she no longer threatened the other employees and pretty much kept to herself. She had a tumultuous past but was busy turning her life around. When she went missing around Christmas, Oliver’s guys and I had looked for her everywhere, and even searched her apartment, but came up empty-handed.

Dominic sat on the couch beside Hunter and handed him a cup of coffee. “Drink this. Maybe it will make our demoness happier.” He gave me a quick wink, and I glared at him.

Ethan wrapped his arms around my waist from behind. “You’re pretty hot when you’re all aggravated and barking orders,” he whispered, setting his chin on my shoulder.

I pushed against his face with my hand and tried to hide my amusement. I knew what he was doing: trying to temper my mood. It may have worked. Only a little, though. “You would think that.”

“You know, we have thirty minutes before we need to leave. If you wanted, we could slip away and—”

I shook my head. “You’re done, you’re all done. You’re impossible. I’m going to call Paul and let him know we have a meeting this evening.”

I stepped away and dialed Paul, putting him on speakerphone while I made myself a cup of coffee. The temperature was cool and only fate knew how long we would be up tonight, especially since we didn’t know the extent of Chandler’s information about Lexi.

Paul Donohue was one of Oliver’s best friends and one of the three men that ran Strathmore’s criminal underground. People thought of them as boogeymen, but that wasn’t quite accurate. After Oliver was shot, I’d stepped up in his place temporarily. Paul, along with Aldo Renzetti, kept tabs on me.

I couldn’t really blame them. The first week as Olly’s proxy hadn’t gone particularly well.

The phone rang several times before Paul answered in an amused tone. “Rayne, I’m surprised to hear from you again so soon.”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t make any decisions without you. Yet.” Pulling the hazelnut creamer out of the refrigerator, I

leaned against the counter. “Just wanted to inform you I’ve got a meeting this evening. I might have some information you three need to be made aware of.”

“Hey, Paul, guess what?” Hunter called out, his words less slurred than earlier.

“Shit,” I muttered and instantly regretted putting him on speakerphone. Dominic placed his hand over Hunter’s mouth in an attempt to muffle him.

Paul chuckled. “It sounds like you’re having an interesting evening.”

I poured the creamer into my cup. “Oh, interesting is one way of putting it.”

“Just keep me informed.” I hung up the phone and picked up the coffee, allowing the heat to seep into my skin and willing it to give me the patience to get through the next several hours. “Hunter, I think you should stay here. I’ll take Dominic with me to meet Murray,” I told him from across the room.

Dominic nodded in agreement. “That’s probably for the best, considering the situation.”

“I’ll make him something to eat while you’re gone. Hopefully, he’ll sober up some soon,” Ethan mumbled, running his hands through his hair.

I pressed a quick kiss to Ethan’s cheek. “It’s fine. Don’t let him answer his phone like this.”

Dominic and I took the elevator down to the parking garage.
“Sorry about Hunter tonight.”

“It’s not your place to apologize for his actions, Dom. I can’t imagine what he’s thinking right now. He grew up without a father and then finding out who his sperm donor is? How many people can claim their father tried murdering their girlfriend?”

The ride to the warehouse was relatively silent, both of us lost in thought. I stared out the window, looking at the holiday lights still decorating the cityscape and thinking of how Christmas had been just a few days ago.

New Year’s Eve was two days away. I’d never been big on celebrating it before now because I usually had work, but this year was different. I didn’t have work, but I suspected it wouldn’t be safe to do anything other than hang out in the apartment. Just this afternoon, Ayers made a not-so-veiled threat to murder me. Add running Oliver’s business for him, and I also doubted I would have the time.

When we finally pulled up outside of our destination, I took a cursory glance around the neighborhood. Other than Murray, who waited in the black beater car next to us, no one was around. I didn’t have the key to go inside, so I rolled down my window and motioned for him to do the same. “Get in the back.”

Dominic placed one hand inside of his jacket pocket and raised an eyebrow. No doubt he had a gun placed there. Just in case. Murray’s gaze darted around before he finally nodded

and climbed out of his car. After he settled into the seat, he turned to me. “Where’s Hunter?”

I managed to suppress an eye roll. “Hunter is indisposed tonight. My offer still stands to call Tony or Joey, if you’d like. I’m sure they would love to talk to you.” It was unlikely he would want to deal with Oliver’s two most trusted “employees”, especially after the last run-in they’d had. A vision of Chandler tied to a chair with tears streaming down his face flitted through my brain, and I suppressed the urge to shiver.

“That’s okay,” he said, looking down at his feet. “Really.”

“What’s going on with the Ruby Rose, Chandler?” Dominic asked, hand still tucked in his pocket.

Chandler took a quick breath before words started spilling out. “This afternoon, Bennett and Ayers came in. Not unusual. They were laughing about something I couldn’t make out. A few new guys were sitting with them today. Ayers started talking about how there were fresh goods this month, including an ex-stripper from Inferno. Something about how bids were starting at \$10,000 and the girls are locked in the basement.”

Bids only meant one thing: an auction. This was worse than I imagined. I’d just assumed Ayers had kidnapped Lexi to get back at Oliver. Trace mentioned before his death that Ayers wanted to take down everyone in the old guard. Instead, he was going to sell Lexi and God knew who else to the highest bidder.

Bile rose in my throat and I swallowed roughly. “Did they say when? Or how many other girls are involved? What kind of condition are they in?”

Murray shook his head. “I couldn’t make everything out, but I managed to get a picture of who was sitting there when they weren’t looking.”

“Brave, but foolish. Are you certain that no one saw you taking it?” I asked, and Murray shrugged. If Ayers discovered the photograph, he was as good as dead. “I need you to send this to me. Maybe we can identify who else was there. Find someone that we can make talk.”

Murray pulled out his phone. “I don’t have your number.”

I took it from him. “That’s an easy problem to rectify, unlike the rest of this.” I programmed my number into his phone and handed it back. He pushed a few buttons, and a notification popped up. “You’ll text me if anything comes up or you discover something new, right?”

The man nodded before climbing out of the car and driving away. Dominic held his hand out. “Let me see the picture.” He zoomed in on the faces. “Shit. I know some of them.” He closed his eyes. “That’s Samuel Palmer, chief of Strathmore PD, sitting next to Ethan’s dad.”

I opened the car door and jumped out, hoping the fresh air would quell the nausea that struck me. I took several deep breaths in before staggering next to the building and doubling over, unable to stop myself. Dominic rubbed my back as I heaved until nothing was left in my stomach. Not that there

was much in it to begin with besides coffee. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve.

“We’ll find a way to stop this. The first thing you have to do is tell Ethan. You’ll need to contact Oliver and then we can make a plan.” He put his hand on my lower back and led me to the car. After I was settled, he passed me a bottle of water and I rinsed the acidic taste from my mouth.

“Lexi and I, we don’t exactly get along, but I would never wish this on anyone.” I just hoped that we weren’t too late.

When I walked back into the penthouse, Ethan and Hunter were sitting at the breakfast bar with plates of pasta in front of them. Hunter shoveled a large bite into his mouth as I filled a large glass with water. Looking between the two of them, the mood seemed grim, and they had no idea it was about to get worse.

Smudge lay on the couch curled into a ball, sleeping peacefully, completely ignoring my arrival. She had settled into her new life of luxury. I stepped beside her to stroke her soft fur, and she purred. Ethan looked over longingly. The two hadn’t quite made peace with each other yet. I was certain it was because he was too eager, and Smudge could sense his weakness.

“How are you feeling now?” I asked Hunter. He looked better than he did earlier, but that meant nothing.

“I’m fine,” he grumbled, never looking up.

“Good, because I don’t want to repeat myself later,” I stated, raising my eyebrows. “You know how you mentioned enormous sums of money coming into the Ruby Rose that you couldn’t explain? It’s because they are auctioning off women.”

Hunter dropped his fork and looked at me with wide eyes while Ethan simply clenched his jaw. “Like an escort service? Are the girls being held against their will? Or...” Hunter asked.

“I don’t have any proof yet either way, but Murray said they’re being kept in the basement, so my best bet is they aren’t there willingly.” I took a sip of my water. “It actually gets worse.”

Ethan cocked his head to the side. “For some reason, I already knew you were going to say that. What else is there?”

I leaned back against the wall. “Your father is involved. And so is the chief of police.”

“Fuck,” Ethan muttered as he stood up.

I placed my glass on the countertop. “We need to find out more information.”

Ethan balled his fists in his lap. “What’s the plan?”

“I don’t know, honestly. Usually, Hunter or Dominic come up with something. I guess I need to run everything by Oliver first.” I shook my head, and weariness washed over me. “Hunter, I need you to sober up so you can call Scott. We need information on Chief Palmer ASAP. I need some time to myself.”

I pulled a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator and wandered away, not bothering to glance over my shoulder.

Chapter Two

Rayne

Once I was on the roof, I opened my drink and took my phone out of my jacket, dialing Oliver's number and letting the December wind nip at the exposed skin of my face.

"Do you know what time it is?" he said on the other end of the line.

"It's not that late," I huffed, frustration seeping into my voice. "How in the fuck do you do this every day? My life has been nothing but chaos since November, and somehow," I took a quick pull of the beer, "it just got more complicated. Again. Remember when I wanted to be a teacher? Help kids who need someone to believe in them? Well, that feels like a lifetime ago."

Oliver sighed and his voice came out softly when he spoke. "Bad day today, firebug?"

"You could say that. Let's start small. I found out this afternoon that Hunter's father is Ayers—"

"Wait," Oliver started to speak, shock coloring his tone.

“Just listen. This will go a lot faster without interruptions,” I interjected, taking another pull off the beer in my hand. “He already spoke to his mom and from the state he was in when he stumbled into the apartment earlier, it’s been confirmed.”

“This is your idea of starting small?” Oliver chuckled, and I walked over to the edge of the roof.

“Yeah, because then I found out where Lexi is. Did you know the Ruby Rose is auctioning women off?” I let out a humorless laugh. “The icing on the cake is Ayers and Ethan’s dad are both involved. Oh, and the police chief. Let’s not forget him. How am I supposed to even deal with this mess, Olly?”

“One step at a time. I wouldn’t have left you in charge if you couldn’t handle it. What do you think you need to do?”

“Other than drinking and hiding in my room? Figure out a way to rescue Lexi before the next auction. I already have Hunter working on digging up information on the police chief. Well, whenever he sobers up.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll talk to Nia tonight and get her to sign off on letting me out of here. There’s nothing I’m doing at the hospital that I can’t do at home,” Oliver mumbled.

I looked over the twinkling lights of the city blankly. “Are you sure? Weren’t you just shot?” I asked.

He laughed at me and then wheezed. “It’s not so bad and I’ve lived through worse. It’s been about a week. I’m sure my

release will come with some restrictions, but the bullet didn't hit anything important."

I peeled the edge of the label from the half-empty bottle and frowned. "Four days doesn't equal a week."

"It's close enough, and this isn't up for discussion. I'll talk to you in the morning. I need some time to think."

Dominic stepped out of the shadows and stood beside me. "I'll take it the conversation went well?"

I twisted my lips into a wry smile. "Something like that."

"Did he have any ideas on how to handle all this?"

"Nothing that he told me." I walked from the edge and planted myself in a chair. "Who do you know that is involved with the operations of the Ruby Rose? A bouncer or one of the dancers? Hell, even a bartender."

"I don't know anyone personally. Sleazy clubs have never really been my scene," he mused aloud. "I'll see if Joey or Tony know more in the morning."

I looked up at the night sky and took a deep breath. "I think you're right. We need to find someone we can make talk. We have to find out when this next auction is and rescue Lexi before then."

"We do, but until then," he held his hand out to me, "come to bed."

I stared at him. "Right now?"

Dominic looked amused and placed his fingers on the small of my back. “We can have another drink first, but you need to get inside. It’s freezing.”

Somehow I knew this wasn’t a fight I was going to win. My nose and fingertips were numb from standing in the winter air, but the idea of fighting off shadows was unappealing. After everything the last few days, my demons were liable to show up again, and that made me dread the idea of drifting off. Ever since I killed my brother, nightmares plagued me.

I reached for his outstretched hand and hoisted myself to my feet, feeling heavy from everything bearing down on me. “Fine, but I’m taking you up on that drink first.”

We walked back down the stairs into the apartment, the warm air from the heat caressing my skin, and peeled off my jacket before sinking into the couch. Dominic stalked over to the kitchen to retrieve two bottles of beer.

“Where are the other guys?” I asked him, laying my head against the back of the couch.

“I put Hunter to bed. He needs to sleep off whatever happened this afternoon. As far as Ethan...” He handed me a bottle. “I have no idea. He said he needed to get out of here for a while and clear his head.”

“You don’t think he’s going to do anything rash, do you?” I asked, observing Dominic’s expression.

He shrugged at me. “I have no clue. I hope not, but knowing Ethan...”

Dominic sat beside me and I curled into the side of his body, basking in the heat emanating from his skin, while I thought about the other two men in my life. I couldn't imagine what they were going through.

Hunter discovered he had a wealthy father after living in poverty growing up. His mother had sacrificed everything to give him a stable childhood, while Ayers had sacrificed nothing. The man who contributed genetic material to him was corrupt, cruel, and willing to take out anyone who stood in his way.

Ethan's relationship with his father was fucked up, and tonight only brought further confirmation that he was a terrible human who cared only about money. I worried about what he was thinking or deciding to do. He'd left without saying a word to me.

“What do you need tonight, sweetheart?” Dominic asked as he brushed his fingertips over my collarbone lightly. “Sleep or a distraction?”

His words sent heat coursing through my veins, even though part of me felt guilty. I should be calling Ethan or making sure Hunter was okay. Dominic's fingers trailed up my neck, tilting my chin gently to look up at him. “It's okay to need something for yourself occasionally, Rayne. If you want to just sleep, I'll stay with you because of the nightmares. But if you need more...” His words trailed off, but the implication was there.

I swallowed, then licked my lips, his emerald eyes never leaving mine. “More,” I whispered.

Without a word, he lifted me into his arms and cradled me against his chest before carefully ascending the staircase. At this point, I knew better than to argue that I could walk. I simply laced my arms around his neck and waited to see what he had in mind. He walked into his room and gently placed me on top of the bed. His hands cupped my face, and he leaned in close to me, his lips less than an inch away. He ran his thumb along my jawline. “Tell me what you need tonight. Do you want me to make you feel secure and cherished, or do you need to be used?”

My face heated at his words, but I knew what I wanted. “Use me. I don’t want to think of anything else tonight.”

The corner of his lips lifted, and he stepped away from me. “Get undressed,” he commanded in a husky voice as he pulled open the drawer on his bedside table.

While he searched through the drawer, I pulled my dress over my head and unclasped my bra in anticipation, trying to watch his movements. The cool air of the room chilled my skin, causing my nipples to pebble. Dominic hummed to himself as he pocketed something and pulled out a coil of black rope. When he turned back towards me, he slowly drank in my appearance for a moment and licked his bottom lip before prowling toward me.

He spun me around, my back pressed to his chest, and brushed the hair off of my shoulders. I could feel the hard press of his cock against me and I pushed back, trying to tease him. He rolled his hips as he nipped at my ear. His breath

feathered against my ear as he whispered to me, “I think I’m going to have a lot of fun tonight.” He splayed his hand across my stomach. “I’ll make sure the only thing you can think of is how badly you want my cock inside of you.”

Teeth grazed against my exposed skin, and my breath hitched in my throat. His fingers hooked into the sides of my lace underwear. The sounds of the fabric ripping echoed in the room as he cast them to the side. He bit down hard and then soothed the sting with the pad of his tongue before pushing me towards the bed. “Kneel.”

I crawled across the bed to the middle and knelt for him, pressing my thighs together. He hadn’t really even touched me yet, and I’d already forgotten everything going on except the pulse between my legs.

Dominic knelt behind me, his fingers trailing across the curve of my breasts and down the length of my abdomen. He placed my arms behind my back and began carefully weaving rope around my flesh. His hands worked quickly, wrapping the length around my body and deftly tying knots. Kisses were pressed against my shoulders and gentle bites along my ribs as he checked everything, humming his approval.

The rope created a harness that wrapped around most of my torso and restrained my arms behind me. My legs were still free to move as I pleased. He palmed one of my breasts, his fingers tracing the rope surrounding it. “How does it feel, sweetheart?” he asked when he was finished.

Despite my inability to move my arms, it felt good. Secure. I nodded at him and his fingers moved from the rope to my nipple. He draped an arm around my midsection and pulled me flush against him. “Use your words tonight. Tell me how it feels.” He rolled my nipple between his fingers and it shot sparks through my body.

I threw my head back against his shoulder. “Good. Almost like I’m free,” I breathed out as one of his hands leisurely drifted down my body.

He pushed my upper body forward so that my cheek was pressed against the mattress. He inched my thighs further apart as his fingers danced along the sensitive skin, slowly teasing me. I rolled my hips back towards him and he chuckled darkly. One of his hands left my body and fabric rustled behind me, but from my angle, I couldn’t see what he was doing. A low buzzing sound filled the room, and he cupped my pussy, pressing a small vibrator directly against my clit. I gasped at the feeling and started grinding against his hand, thinking of nothing but the sensation.

Dominic pinched my nipples as I closed my eyes, lost to the heat pouring through my veins. The speed of the vibrations increased, and a whimper escaped my lips. It wouldn’t take long for me to come at this rate. Tension coiled between my legs and suddenly his hand was gone. I groaned out loud in frustration.

“You didn’t think it would be that easy tonight, did you? Remember, you said you don’t want to think of anything else.

You're going to have to beg for it," he taunted as he pressed a kiss between my shoulder blades. His lips brushed down my spine, alternating between gentle kisses and harsh bites.

He placed the vibrator against my clit again, once more at the lowest setting, and I rocked against it, hoping he wouldn't remove it this time. Nothing else mattered as I chased my orgasm with the toy between my legs and his lips on my skin. I heard his zipper lower, and the toy shut off again. Beads of sweat formed on my heated skin as I pushed my hips back towards Dominic, seeking any relief he would give me. He clicked his tongue as he dragged the tip of his cock through my wetness, teasing me. It rubbed against my sensitive clit and I closed my eyes, enjoying the feeling. "Not yet. I promise to make it worth your while."

Over and over Dominic teased me with his body and the vibrator until I was panting and writhing against the mattress. He wrapped an arm around my stomach, his chest against my back. "Are you ready to beg for it yet, sweetheart?" he whispered in my ear. His breath brushed against my skin and goosebumps formed at his words.

I swallowed roughly and nodded. Anything to relieve the frustration that had built up inside of me. My voice came out in a low whimper. "Please."

He nipped my ear. "Please what, Rayne? Tell me what you need."

I licked my lips. "Please let me come. I want to feel you inside of me."

With those magic words, he placed the vibrator between my legs again and lined himself up behind me. With one fluid motion, he increased the toy's speed and plunged inside. A deep, guttural cry left my lips, and I came so hard that the edges of my vision darkened.

His fingers dug into my hips as he moved inside of me, my walls clamping around him. "You're so fucking beautiful like this. My cock inside of you, completely lost," he gritted out. Wave after wave hit me as he pushed in and out with punishing strokes. He turned the vibrator up again. "I know you can come again for me," he said, each syllable emphasized by our skin slapping together.

With those words, I fell into oblivion again. "Good girl," he murmured, finally removing the toy from between my legs and flipping me onto my back. His body hovered above me for a moment as he tenderly wiped a thumb across my cheek and then pumped into me once more. I arched towards him, seeking the contact of his lips.

He licked at my lower lip before capturing it between his teeth while my hips moved with his, matching his rhythm. He grabbed the headboard and buried his head against my shoulder as he slammed into me several more times before collapsing on top of me. We were covered in a thin sheen of sweat and our ragged breaths mingled together.

My thoughts were fuzzy and I was certain my muscles were made of liquid. *So this is what bliss feels like.*

Dominic rolled over and removed the rope wound around my body, his fingers tracing the indentations left behind on my skin. His lips peppered kisses across the lines, and once he was done, he pulled me close. I laid my head on his chest and trailed my fingers along the planes of his body.

“Close your eyes, Rayne. You need some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be another long day,” he murmured into my hair, gently caressing my side.

And I did. I floated to sleep in the darkness that night and left the thoughts plaguing me behind.

Chapter Three

Ethan

After I left the penthouse, I sat on my motorcycle in the parking garage, wondering what the hell I was doing.

I always knew my father was a piece of shit. He was abusive and the tattoos on my back covered scars from my childhood. The fact that he was involved with selling women shouldn't surprise me, but it did. I removed my phone out of my pocket and dialed Ignacio's number.

"What's up, man? I'm surprised to be talking to you again so soon," he answered, yelling into the phone. The background was a low roar, and I heard a woman cheering.

"Not calling about business, though I suppose I should update you soon. Where are you right now?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. I had a suspicion about where he was. If I was right, it would be the perfect solution.

"One of those types of days?" he chuckled over the line. "The old factory on 22nd. I'll see you in a few."

I slid my phone back into my pocket and pulled on my helmet. The engine roared to life under me and I took off, hoping cops wouldn't bust the fight before I got there. The last thing I needed was to land myself in the city jail tonight. Rayne and Dominic both might murder me.

The wind whipped around me while I raced across town, biting at my exposed skin. My thoughts were consuming me and I barely felt the cold. I pulled up to the old cinder block building, paint peeling on the exterior, and parked on the side. I swung my leg over and strode inside, listening to my heart pound in my ears and the crunch of gravel under my boots. Tomorrow morning, I would show up at the apartment with bruises and cuts lining my face, but it was worth it. I didn't need a quick fight today. I needed the pain. The sting of someone's punch landing on my flesh.

I walked over to Maurice and leaned down. "Any spots still open for me, baby?" I asked and threw in a wink.

Maurice sighed at me. "I mean, the answer should be no. You're the most unreliable person I know, playboy. You just show up every few weeks and flirt your way onto the list."

"Don't be like that. I make you plenty of money when you let me fight." I lowered my voice. "Plus, I really need it. Please."

The older man shook his head in resignation and grabbed his pen. "How do you feel about going up against those two?" He jerked his head to the left toward two burly guys standing

in the corner. Both had shaved heads and long beards, wearing leather jackets with patches on them.

“I didn’t know you were letting the local chapter of Satan’s Sinners fight now, Maury.” I glanced over at them again. Both were tall and broad. Made like professional linebackers. I cracked my knuckles. “Yeah. I can take them.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You’re much too pretty to have a death wish. Fine, I’ll put you down.” He pointed his thumb in my opponent’s direction. “I’m betting against you tonight. Those guys are ruthless. Broke some guy’s arm last week.”

I grinned at him. “Perfect. You always know how to take care of me. Where’s Ignacio?”

“Usual spot. I don’t know why either of you still come to this. Y’all are getting too old. Doesn’t your body hurt the morning after having the shit beaten out of you?”

I tried not to, but I started laughing before I patted his shoulder. “That’s the whole point.”

I pushed my way through the thick crowd towards the metal fencing set up in the middle of the room. Women batted their eyelashes as I brushed past and adjusted their shirts while their dates grabbed their arms possessively. I ignored them. I wasn’t here looking for a piece of ass. There was only one woman I wanted. Someone who had clawed their way under my skin and into my heart. When I finished tonight, Rayne would be curled up in bed, waiting for me.

I approached Ignacio and stripped off my jacket, handing it to him. He frowned. “What’s going on, Ethan? Why are you here? I thought everything was good?”

Ignacio was one of my friends from college and worked for the Strathmore PD. We’d met at an illegal fight when we were younger and somehow stayed in touch over the years. He was always quick with a joke and had helped me through some crazy situations.

I stared at him for a moment, clenching my jaw, wondering how much to tell him. I pulled my pistol from my waistband and discretely placed it in his hand under my jacket. “A lot of shit happened this afternoon, but I need you to promise you won’t breathe a word to another soul.”

“Fuck,” he muttered. “You know me. We’re brothers, so whatever you tell me is between us. What’s bothering you tonight? Is it your dad?”

I pulled off my shirt and bounced on my heels a few times, looking around to see if anyone else was paying attention to us. I leaned close to him so that I could lower my voice. “He’s auctioning women off at the Rose. Him and Ayers. The police chief is involved, too.”

Ignacio’s eyes grew wide at my words and he stood there silently, running a hand through his hair. “Palmer? This isn’t good. Let me guess. The three of you and your girl are involved in this too?”

I nodded my head. “We still need more details, though.”

“Be careful. I’ll try to find out what I can for you, but I need you not to do anything stupid tonight.” He shifted on his feet. “Well, anything more stupid than usual. Who are you up against tonight?”

I lifted my chin in the direction of the men standing in the corner. “Them.” I wiped my hands on the front of my pants.

His mouth hung open in disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding me, Ethan. Are you just looking to get your ass kicked? Dominic is going to lose his shit on you.”

“Yeah, he is, but I’ll deal with it later.” I bit the inside of my cheek until I could taste copper on my tongue and leveled my gaze at him. “all I want to do tonight is fight, have a few drinks, and maybe fuck my girl when I get home.”

He sighed deeply and shook his head. “You were doing so good. I thought maybe Rayne had helped to cure some of your self-destructive behavior. Some nights I swear you are hellbent on getting killed.”

“She’s dealing with her own shit right now. Plus Hunter’s. She doesn’t have time to deal with mine, too.” I turned my back to him, watching the lanky guy in the ring getting absolutely demolished by a man with ruddy cheeks and a scar down his face. Blood covered his skin and dripped onto the concrete floor, but he wouldn’t stay down.

Honestly, the ref should have called it by now.

“Did you ask her?” Ignacio asked from behind me.

I turned my head to him. “Ask her what?”

He rolled his eyes at me. “If she had time to deal with your shit. I’ve met her and I doubt she would say she didn’t have time for you.”

He had a point, but I didn’t want to admit that to him. The ref finally called the fight, if you could claim that was what happened in the ring a few moments before. Two men escorted the thin man’s limp body from the space. I inhaled and handed Ignacio the shirt in my hand. “Just watch my stuff until I get back.”

I walked away from him towards the metal cage in the center of the room. “This conversation isn’t over,” he yelled. “Damn idiot.” I didn’t need to look at him to know he was muttering under his breath at me.

Glancing across the room, Maury nodded towards me and I opened the metal gate, trying to focus. Today had been a clusterfuck in every sense of the word. I slowly stretched my muscles, determined to let the two of them land at least a few punches.

“You sure about this?” the ref asked me when the two men from the corner entered the space, staring daggers in my direction.

I simply smirked and put on my mask, the one I wore around almost everyone except Rayne. “Yeah, piece of cake.” The older man lifted his eyebrows at me and raised his hands, backing away. Cold metallic adrenaline filled my throat as I bounced on my feet, trying to remember why I did this. Adrenaline helped to wash away all the unpleasant memories

from the past and the endorphins would make me feel good for a little while. The pain tomorrow would remind me I was still alive. My father hadn't won.

The two large men sauntered toward me in tandem. I eyed them warily. Both were tall and well-muscled, easily larger than me. *What is their weakness? Are they slow and overconfident? Are they going to use brute force, or will they fight smart?*

One of them circled me to my left while the other stayed to my right, and I tried to keep a close check on both. The one with red hair spit at me. "Hey Bones, pretty sure tonight is in the bag. Can't believe they would pit both of us against him." The man who was evidently Bones chuckled behind me and I darted to the side, trying to gain distance between me and the men.

"Yeah, I know, Key, but easy money is easy money, right?" I glared and moved lightly on my feet, allowing their words to roll off of me. Maybe they were hoping to distract me or piss me off, but it wasn't working. Bone barreled in my direction and slammed into my shoulder, knocking me off balance. I staggered briefly, trying to regain my footing before the next attack. In those mere seconds, Key was behind me and grabbed my hair.

"Should have cut this before coming here tonight," Key seethed. "You look like a bitch and fight like one, too." Bones' fist landed on my cheek, snapping my head to the side, and my skin stung from the blow. Key yanked my head back by my

hair as his friend's knee landed against the outside of my thigh. A few inches north and I would've been completely debilitated.

Maybe Ignacio was right. I hadn't really thought out what I was doing. I'd originally wanted to let both of them land a few blows, but there needed to be a deviation from my plan. I needed to get away from both of them before they slaughtered me. A few bruises I could explain to Dominic and Rayne. Broken ribs and a concussion, not so much.

I thrust my head backward towards Key, hoping to land a solid blow to his face. I guess he thought I was going to take their beating and not retaliate because the blow landed with a satisfying crunch. If I had to guess, it was his nose because his grip on my hair loosened enough that I could move out of his grasp, spitting at him on the floor.

"Who looks like a bitch now," I taunted, before balling up my fist and punching Bones, throwing my weight behind it. He staggered backward against the fencing. I kicked Key hard against the ribs before stalking toward Bones.

"What in the fuck?" He gritted out before raising his hand to hit me in the side of the face again. I inhaled through my nose before grabbing his shirt.

"Your friend said that I should have cut my hair before tonight, but I guess you should have remembered to take off your shirt." I jerked him forward before pushing him back against the fence again. His head hit the metal, and he grunted as I raised my leg and kneed him. My blow didn't land on his

outer thigh, and he crumbled to the ground, holding his groin. “You need better aim. This should have been easy for you.”

The man who I had left on the ground started trying to stand as I walked toward him. I clicked my tongue. “I don’t think so.” Kicking him again in the ribs, I watched with fascination as scarlet dripped down his face from his nose.

The surrounding crowd roared as Bones finally stood. An angry haze surrounded him as he approached me with a murderous expression. “It’s not over yet.”

Despite the volume of the crowd, the sound of police sirens echoed around the concrete walls from outside. “Sorry, we’ll have to pick this back up later, ladies,” I taunted, and walked backward to the gate, not wanting to remove my gaze from either of them. He came at me quickly and grabbed for me as I slipped out of the gate. People were shoving each other, trying to make their way to an exit.

I found Ignacio standing stock still, jaw clenched, staring at me. “We’ve gotta go. Like five minutes ago.”

I grabbed my shirt from his hands and shrugged it on as we started walking calmly. “Get out of here. I’ll text you later.” I pulled my jacket on and tucked my gun back into my waistband. “The stakes are higher if you get caught. They’re going to ask why you’re here. If I get arrested, maybe I can talk my way out of it.”

He shook his head. “Fine. Later, don’t claim I left you hanging, though.”

I patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry, I won’t.”

Ignacio disappeared into the crowd, and I said a silent prayer to whoever was listening that he could vanish before he was caught. Was what we were doing illegal? Sure, but on the grand scale of illegal things in Strathmore, this was pretty small.

As I navigated the crowd, bodies pushing against my back, a megaphone from outside sounded through the thick air, warning people to stop what they were doing. I glanced around at the sheer number of people still surrounding me and decided to take a chance. There was no way there were enough patrol cars or vans to escort everyone to jail, much less enough cells to hold all of us overnight. I just had to make it to my motorcycle. I picked up my pace, the exit within sight.

Suddenly, something jerked me backward against the body behind me. “I told you this wasn’t over yet,” Bones stated, his breath hot against my ear.

Chapter Four

Ethan

“Are you serious right now? We both need to get out of here. I’ll give you my number and we can continue this at a later time,” I said, trying to keep my tone even as a sharp object pierced the skin on my neck.

“You’re so arrogant. I should just leave you here, bleeding out on the concrete. See if the pigs get to you in time,” the man behind me seethed.

I watched as the crowd trickled out, everyone mostly gone from the building. “Doubtful at best. They’re not exactly competent and most of them are crooked. I would know,” I chuckled.

“Why the hell are you laughing? Are you crazy? I’m threatening to kill you,” he gritted out.

“Maybe I am crazy. It’s been a long day. I really need you to let me go. You still have time to make a run for it still.”

The knife, or what I assumed was a knife, pressed harder into my skin and something dripped down my neck.

“Drop the knife,” a familiar voice called out, “or I’ll shoot you.”

Ignacio. I thought I told him to leave and I could handle this myself.

“Who the hell are you?” the man behind me asked.

“Strathmore PD,” Ignacio answered. “Drop the knife now and put your hands up. All of you.”

I sighed and put my hands over my head. Earlier, I thought the night couldn’t get worse. Obviously, I was wrong. When I heard the metal clatter to the floor, I dropped to my knees. Hunter was right. I would complain too much about a bullet wound.

Unfamiliar uniformed officers swarmed us, pulling my arms behind my back roughly and cuffing me before patting me down. The large officer behind me drew the gun from my waistband and gave me a hard stare.

“Do you have a permit for this?” he asked.

I sighed again. “Yes, I have a permit for that. I thought you were supposed to ask me if I had any drugs or weapons before you searched me?” I raised one eyebrow.

“Detective Reyes, I need you to escort him to the station.” He shoved me hard in the shoulder and I stumbled forward.

Ignacio appeared beside me and wrapped a hand around my bicep, steadying me. “Let’s go,” he hissed, pursing his lips. “I’m going to try to get you out of trouble, but you need to make this look convincing. Given who your daddy is, I doubt

any charges would stick anyway,” he said under his breath where no one else could hear.

My feet started moving toward the exit. “Don’t bet on that. My father is part of why I’m here tonight,” I mumbled, keeping my voice down.

He raised his voice so that his co-workers would hear. “Trust me, I know exactly who your dad is. All of you rich boys, always crying about your parents and how badly treated you are. I doubt you’ve ever struggled a day in your life.”

He was trying to treat me like we were strangers to hide the fact he knew me, but tonight his words cut me. *You’d lose that bet. We all struggle. Some of us just in different ways.*

He opened the back door of his car and I slid in.

The precinct was probably only fifteen minutes away. I closed my eyes as Ignacio started the engine, dreading the next few hours. Ignacio’s phone rang from the front seat and he answered. “What’s up?” He listened silently, glancing at me occasionally from the mirror hanging over the dash. When he ended the call, he muttered, “Never a dull moment with you.”

“Hey, can you call Rayne for me? I need her to know I’m alright.” Ignacio nodded and dialed the number I gave him, putting it on speakerphone. It rang several times before it went to voicemail and my heart deflated.

It took only a split second to decide to leave her a voicemail. “I just needed to hear your voice, baby. Don’t worry about me; everything is alright and I’ll be home soon.” I

hesitated for a moment. “I had to tell you I love you, just in case.”

Ignacio cut the call and said nothing to me as we pulled up to the station. I waited for him as he opened my backdoor before escorting me into the building, walking past booking. “What’s going on?” I asked quietly, where no one else could hear.

The corner of his mouth lifted. “VIP treatment. Only the best for you.”

We entered a corridor and hung a sharp left. He opened a door and pushed me into a room with a two way mirror before uncuffing my hands from behind my back. I rubbed my wrists and sat in one of the seats, resting my heels on the side of the table. “What now?”

He tilted his head to the side. “You wait. I think someone wants to speak to you privately. Then you’ll be free to go, I assume. Two different people gave me specific instructions to make sure there was no record of this incident.” He looked over his shoulder towards the mirror before leaning in and whispering. “I’ll wait for you. My shift is almost over. In the meantime, I’m going to see what I can find out about the Rose for you.” He frowned before turning his back to me. “Good luck. You’re going to need it.”

I sat looking at the gray painted walls, staring at the lines the cinder blocks made for an eternity. Ignacio hadn’t ratted me out, and I wondered why he hadn’t left. I thought he

escaped... unless he discovered I'd been ambushed by the two jackasses behind me.

There wasn't a clock in the room, and an eerie silence filled the space. I tapped my fingers on my knee impatiently, thinking of how to explain this to Dominic. There went my plan of drinking and then falling into bed with my girl.

Finally, the door creaked open and inside walked a severe-looking man wearing a suit. I'd seen him dozens of times in my childhood. He glared at me as he closed the door and leaned against the wall farthest from me, watching me carefully. I sneered at him, waiting for him to say something.

"Mr. Carter, this isn't how I expected to spend my evening, especially so close to the new year."

My recklessness knew no bounds, and I decided to see if he would slip up and give me information. I wiped all expression from my face. "Chief, let me guess. You thought you would spend the evening down at the Ruby Rose, cuddled up to one of the new girls. Tell me, how does that work? The whole auction thing."

His eyes widened. "You don't know what you're talking about, son." He approached me quickly and sat in the seat next to me. "You need to learn to keep your mouth shut about things you know nothing about. And for fuck's sake, sit up like a normal person and take your feet off the table. You're the heir to a multi-millionaire and wealthy in your own right, not a common thug like the rest of them out there." His face grew

red when my posture didn't change, and I met his eyes in challenge.

“I promise I know more than you think, and I intend to find out every detail. You and my father have always been close. How long did the two of you think you could keep this under the radar?”

He grabbed the collar of my shirt and moved closer, his face inches from mine. “This is your final warning, Ethan. I know all about the sweet young woman you're keeping in your ivory tower. Did you think Ayers is the only one who wants her gone? Not by a long shot. Keep your mouth shut and your nose out of our business and maybe I can convince him to let her live. Maybe.” He straightened my shirt before pulling my gun from his jacket pocket and handing it to me. “Put this away and don't get any ideas. Even you can't get away with shooting me inside the police station.” He stood up and walked to the door while I stared at his back. “You're free to go now. Keep out of trouble for a few weeks, son.”

I waited until he disappeared before strolling out the door in complete disbelief. As I stepped out of the station, the frosty night air hit my face and I looked at the sky, trying to figure out how long I'd been trapped inside. The first rays of dawn were streaking the dark sky and suddenly I felt weary. My body ached from the hits I took and I wanted a nap.

Ignacio rounded the corner and broke the silence. “Sorry about earlier. We all have a part to play.”

We walked through the shadows to a dimly lit part of the lot on the side of the building, gravel crunching under our feet. “I know. It’s not a big deal.”

“How’s your face?” he asked me as we approached his sedan.

“I haven’t even thought about it.” It was a lie, but Ignacio said nothing. Honestly, it was throbbing. All I wanted was to jump into the shower or take a long soak in the tub.

We slid into the car, and Ignacio started the ignition, turning the radio down. He pulled out of the parking lot onto the main road. “I overheard what you said in the interrogation room to the chief. I won’t tell you that you’re playing a dangerous game, even though you are.” He blew out a long breath. “Hey, I did manage to scrounge up information about the auction, and I figured you’d want details.”

“And?”

“Here’s what I know. Once a month, they are selling girls off down there. Apparently, one guy was bragging about it a few weeks ago. The chief hand picks a few guys to stand guard on the night of the event. Gotta protect all the wealthy criminals. The highest bidder gets to do whatever he wants to the girl he wins. No limit.” He flipped on his turn signal and stopped at the red light. “Even if it’s murder. You know all of those bodies they keep finding of young women? The ones in alleyways and dumped on the roadside? The news keeps claiming they’re just prostitutes that met an unfortunate end, but I think it’s involving the Rose.”

I sat quietly for a moment as he turned into the parking garage of Jupiter Financial. “There’s no way to prove it, is there?”

Ignacio shook his head and turned to face me. “Pendejo, you know you’re my brother, but you need to be careful.” He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Are you going to take them down?”

I rubbed my hands down my face. “Pretty sure that’s the plan.”

He laid his head against the back of his seat. “I want in.”

“You should walk up and tell Rayne yourself. Do you know anyone on the inside? Someone who can tell us when the next auction is?”

“Let me see who I can find. Someone we can trust not to run their mouth.”

Chapter Five

Rayne

The next morning, I woke up, my alarm rudely blaring on the table beside me. Dominic was absent and the sheets on his side of the bed were cold. I rubbed my eyes and swiped the phone off of the table, trying to silence the noise. My eyebrows raised when I saw there was a voicemail. I missed the call last night while I was busy. Placing it on speakerphone, I stared at the ceiling as I listened. *“I just needed to hear your voice, baby. Don’t worry about me; everything is alright. I’ll be home soon. I had to tell you I love you, just in case.”*

Ethan. *Just in case?* My stomach sank at the words, but there was no use in worrying yet. Hopefully, he was home already and I could find out what his call was about.

I stumbled down the stairs to find two of the guys sitting around the breakfast bar talking in hushed tones. Dominic’s nostrils flared, and he sighed. He leaned in, listening carefully to whatever was being said, every once in a while working his jaw back and forth.

I shuffled to the coffeepot and the gentle ache between my legs reminded me of the night before. After I poured my coffee and added a healthy dose of creamer, I settled into a seat near them, tucking my legs under me. “How does everyone feel this morning?”

On the outside, Dominic looked fine. Neat, well dressed, free from the outward signs of distress from the past twenty-four hours. His tells gave him away. His jaw and posture. The excessive sighing. The events from yesterday coupled with his friends’ behavior got to him.

Hunter’s grimace didn’t exactly surprise me given the state he was in the night before. He kept his eyes cast down, head held in his hands, rubbing his temples.

When no one answered, I stood up, pulled a glass from the cabinet, and poured some water before setting it in front of Hunter with two pain relievers. “These might help.” His eyes briefly met mine before he looked away, picking up the pills and tossing them into his mouth.

“Has anyone heard from Ethan this morning?” I asked and was met with silence. They were broken, all three of them. Broken in different ways. I wished Hunter and Ethan spoke to me and told me exactly what they were thinking. The events from the previous day had shattered them further. “So, what have we been discussing?”

“Just wondering where he is. Probably locked up currently.” Dominic inhaled and flexed his fingers. “I suppose it’s been a while since he’s been this messed up.”

“It’s not like his relationship with his dad was great to begin with,” I interjected before sipping my coffee. “Now, let’s try this again. How are you feeling today?” I asked Hunter.

He kept his head down, not meeting my gaze when he replied. “Like garbage. And for more reasons than drinking too much. I shouldn’t have gotten wasted like that.” Pain flashed across his face so briefly I almost thought I imagined it. “Yesterday was a blow to me, but there’s too much going on to wallow and pity myself.” He finally glanced up and looked at me. “What if something had happened? I would have been completely useless.”

I shook my head at him and pursed my lips. “There’s no use having regrets now. What’s done is done,” I told him before clearing my throat.

The elevator door opened across the apartment and in strolled Ethan. Ignacio followed a few steps behind him, frowning.

Ethan’s appearance made me grimace as I tried not to linger too long on the injuries he had sustained the night before. He shrugged out of his jacket and winced as he laid it across the back of the couch. When he pulled his shirt off, I gasped. His perfect skin was marred by purple blooms across his ribs, his cheek was swollen, and a small cut decorated his throat.

“Where have you been?” Dominic asked. His mask of cool indifference was in place, but there was an edge to his words.

Ethan gave him a lazy grin and walked over to the couch slowly. He held out a cautious hand to Smudge, who was

sitting there. She sniffed his hand before turning her head and jumping off. It was progress, but Ethan frowned before walking to the coffeemaker. “Down at the station.”

“What the fuck, man?” Hunter groaned.

Ethan didn’t respond as he pulled out two cups from the cabinet. Ignacio cleared his throat before speaking. “Don’t worry about the arrest. It’s not on his record. I’d be more concerned about the fact that the police chief threatened him. Well honestly him and Rayne.”

Ethan handed him a cup of coffee and both men settled around the breakfast bar. “Plus, we have new information on what’s happening with the women at the Ruby Rose.”

Dominic’s anger deflated as we listened to Ethan and Ignacio take turns filling us in on what they thought were the important parts of last night. He didn’t mention the fight, even though everyone knew where he’d gotten his injuries. “What’s important now is that we figure out the next steps,” Ethan finally said.

“I’ll contact Scott and have him dig into the police chief’s background. Maybe there’s something there other than his association with Ayers and Ethan’s father,” Hunter stated, tapping his finger against the side of his coffee mug, thinking. “What are you going to do about him?” he asked, glancing in Ethan’s direction.

Ethan gave him a half-hearted smile. “I haven’t decided yet. He’s always been a piece of shit.” He scoffed and stood up, running a hand through his messy blond waves. Frustration

rolled off of him as he spoke. “What am I supposed to say? Dad, I have proof you’ve been holding girls against their will and selling them to the highest bidder. I’m sure that would go over well.”

Nothing he said was inaccurate. The one time I’d spoken to Michael Carter, he was cold, aloof, and dismissive.

“The first step is getting into the Rose. It’s a public strip club. Maybe in the next few days we could go and one of you could snoop around?” I suggested. “Obviously, we can’t make any moves yet, but we need more details. How much security is there? Is it lax? How many women are they keeping and where exactly do they have them hidden?”

Seeing Ethan standing there covered in his bruises and cuts, I frowned and sauntered over to him. His shoulders were tense as though he expected me to yell at him for his foolishness the night before, but I was relieved to see him in one piece. I laid my hands on his shoulders and planted my mouth against his. He lost himself in my kiss for a few moments and when I pulled back, I gave him a soft smile. “You and Ignacio need to find out anything you can about the setup. See if he can get any more information for us before this evening. Try to find out where they’re keeping the girls. That’s our priority right now.”

He nodded his head, his eyes hazy as I walked towards Hunter. Straddling Hunter’s lap, I cradled his face between my hands before kissing him, slowly coaxing him to relax into me. Our mouths tangled with one another for several moments

before I pulled back and watched him, slowly running my fingers through his dark hair. “Make sure you call Scott. Try to find anything that will be useful for us.” His lips touched mine softly, and he placed his hands on my hips. “Yesterday doesn’t define you,” I whispered to him before standing up straight.

Dominic pulled me against his chest and smirked. “Is it my turn?” he asked before weaving his fingers into my hair and pulling my head back, not waiting for my response. He crushed his mouth against mine and pressed us against the breakfast bar. Ethan let out a low whistle and chuckled while Hunter scoffed. I smiled against Dominic’s mouth, struggling not to laugh at the other two men. When he finally pulled away, his eyes were hooded and dark. “I’m going to call around and see if anyone has heard any rumors about the Rose that will help us. That is, unless there’s something you would rather I do instead?” he questioned.

I shook my head at him as he stepped back, giving me space to breathe. “I think that sounds good.”

“Do I get a turn too?” Ignacio laughed, clutching his coffee. Ethan’s mouth twisted in amusement while Hunter shot daggers his way.

I snickered at him. “Not if you value your life,” I joked. “When should we plan our field trip to the Rose?”

Hunter stared at me from his seat. He was hesitant to respond. “I don’t like the idea of you coming with us,” he mumbled.

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Well, I don’t like the idea of you going without me. When?” I grabbed my coffee on the counter and looked at Dominic. He set his lips into a thin line and looked at Hunter.

“I don’t really like this either, sweetheart,” he said.

I bit my tongue and tried staying silent. They were just trying to keep me safe after everything that had happened. First a kidnapping, then Trace attempted to rape and kill me, and Libby jumped out of thin air with a knife. I knew they were speaking out of concern, but it was driving me crazy. “I’m going. This isn’t a negotiation,” I finally said.

The room fell silent and all their eyes were on me. “What are you going to do today?” Ethan asked, trying to break the tension.

I took another sip of my coffee. I had no clue. “The first thing I need to do is call Oliver and check in. He told me Nia is letting him out of the hospital today. I’m really hoping she decided to keep him, but he’s stubborn.”

“You realize that even if he is released, you aren’t off the hook yet? He’s still going to need you, even if he doesn’t admit it.”

I gave him a sad smile. “Yeah, I know. Call it a gut feeling, but I doubt I’ll ever be off the hook.”

████████████████████

After a quick shower and another cup of coffee, I pulled my phone out, ready to see how Oliver was. He answered the call,

grumbling at someone in the background. *Probably a nurse or Nia*, I thought to myself. “Yeah?” he finally answered.

“Are you giving the nurses problems, Olly?” I teased.

He huffed on the other side of the line and muttered, “I want to let you know I am a model patient, Rayne. You can ask the good doctor yourself.”

I managed to stifle a laugh as I sat back on my bed. “I’m glad you seem to be in good spirits. Listen, I need some information if you have it. What do you know about the Ruby Rose? We found out a little more last night and the guys want to case the place tonight, see how security is. Maybe try to figure out where exactly they are keeping Lexi and the other girls.” I was secretly hoping we could smuggle the women out and leave unnoticed.

He was silent for a few moments. “I don’t know a lot about the place. They kept everything quiet. I mean, there were always rumors, firebug, but nothing I could prove.” I stood up and paced near the foot of the bed, listening carefully. “It’s the same thing we’ve all heard. The place was a front for prostitution and the employees weren’t taken care of. A lot of the girls are strung out. Things like that. The auctions must be fairly new and the clients tight-lipped, because I had no clue.”

I rubbed my face, a headache threatening behind my eyes as I took all the information in. “Have you ever been there? Do you know anything that might help us?”

“I wish I had information for you, but I don’t.” He paused for another moment. “Be careful when you go. Ayers already

has a target painted on your back. You'll raise suspicions. The Kings might get away with frequenting a sleazy strip club, but you won't exactly blend in." I doubted my guys would blend in either, given the area of town, but I held my tongue and stayed quiet.

"Fine, I'll be careful."

"Don't get any good ideas either. You need to be patient. We want all of those girls to make it out alive, and if you rush your plans, I'm worried about the consequences."

I swallowed hard, and the room swam around me. I hadn't considered what would happen if we weren't successful. Would they just move their base of operations somewhere else in the city or would they decide to "offload" their merchandise? The thought of both made me sick. "You're right," I replied quietly. "I'll update you later when we have more information."

I walked back into the kitchen after my call to refill my coffee cup and found Ignacio still sitting there talking with the guys. "I can't believe you're still with this guy. It has to be a new track record for him," he grinned.

I playfully punched his shoulder. "I can't believe you arrested him last night," I said under my breath. "It's your job, but was that really necessary?"

He shot me a look. "He didn't tell you the entire story. I had to. There were two guys who were trying to murder him."

I stared at Ethan in horror, and he gave me a sheepish smile while Ignacio laughed. “I found out what you needed. The girls, they’re hiding them in the basement. The door’s in the main hallway.”

My stomach churned at the thought as memories of being held against my will in a basement attempted to creep in. “What kind of basement? How many girls?” I asked before swallowing roughly, trying to keep the stomach acid rising in my throat at bay. “What kind of condition are they in?”

He shook his head at me. “No idea.”

Millions of questions ran through my mind, completely unrestrained. I paced back and forth in front of the couch, unable to sit still. The reality of everything was finally sinking in. Until now, everything had been happening too quickly. Yesterday I ran around putting out fires, but today I had time to think about it.

How could I watch Trace burn alive and Libby be shot in the head with zero emotion, but the idea of these women being kept against their will made me feel physically ill?

“When are we going?” I asked.

Dominic leveled a somber look in my direction. “Tomorrow night. With New Year’s Eve, we should be able to blend into the crowd and find some of the answers we’re looking for.”

Chapter Six

Hunter

Late that night, I lay in bed by myself, drowning in my emotions. Getting completely drunk seemed like the natural thing to do yesterday after I received the news that Ayers was my father, but it was foolish. I was disgusted with myself for my actions. Between Lexi being missing and Ethan disappearing, I should have been ready for anything to happen.

At least the pounding headache from this morning was gone.

Rayne tiptoed quietly into the room, blending into the shadows. She probably thought I was asleep by now. I'd given everyone an excuse hours ago that I was still tired from the night before and wanted to go to sleep early. Something about being ready for our trip to the Rose the next day. The excuse sounded thin even as it slipped past my lips.

I watched as she shrugged off her clothes and picked up a t-shirt from a pile on top of my dresser. She pulled the shirt over her head before sliding beneath the covers and scooted close to

me. The moonlight illuminated her face, hair cascading across her shoulders and down her back. She was tense, and a divot formed between her eyebrows. I rolled onto my side and ran my fingers through her hair, trying to calm whatever thoughts she was having.

Both Ethan and I were broken, and neither of us knew how to put the pieces back together again on our own. There was something about Rayne that seemed to ease the sharpness of those broken parts.

She shifted towards me and stared for several moments, darkness shrouding us. “I’m sorry,” I said, my voice thick with emotion. The shame crashed down on me as I lay beside her. “I shouldn’t have—”

She pressed her lips against mine firmly, but with a gentleness I wasn’t used to. “Shut up,” she whispered. “You don’t get to apologize. I just want you to tell me what’s going through your head right now. What were you thinking yesterday to set this off?”

Her fingers traced my lips as I let her words sink in, and I sighed before closing my eyes.

“I’m thinking about everything I’m doing now, and everything I’ve done to get here. My mother would hate it if she knew the truth. She sacrificed everything to keep me safe and away from this life, and I somehow still ended up here.” I placed my hand over hers, stilling her motions. “She told me she loved Ayers at one time. She pushed him away because of

his business associates. More specifically Aldo. Do you know what the fucked up thing is?"

Rayne shook her head at me and I cleared my throat, trying to will away the emotions coursing through me. "She's still friends with Aldo." I turned my face from her before I spoke again and my voice came out barely above a whisper. "She could have had everything, and instead, she chose nothing to keep me safe."

I felt her shift in the bed beside me. "Don't do this to yourself. You can't change the past and it wasn't your decision to make."

Turning my face back to her, I gave her a sad smile. "I can't change the past, but I can change the future. I want to be the type of man you deserve. You deserve more than this. More than any of us. All of us are monsters, and I'm sure you want more than this in your life."

"I'm pretty sure your mother would hate the fact that you're so caught up in all of this because it's a fucking mess and the body count keeps rising. I understand if you want to take a step back or maybe your conscience has gotten to you, but you don't get to tell me what kind of man I want." She clenched her jaw at me and pushed against my chest. "You don't get to tell me what I do or don't deserve, Hunter Nicholson. Especially not after your drunken confession," she hissed, sitting up straight. "You don't get to take back what you said. Do you even remember what you told Phillip?"

Shame and sorrow morphed into fury as she spoke and I narrowed my eyes at her. Did I remember what I said? Of fucking course I did. It was the thing I'd been thinking about for weeks. I shifted and pushed her onto her back, trapping her beneath me. "Of course, I remember and I meant every word." I grabbed her jaw, forcing her to look at my face. "I'm not taking anything back, even if I wanted to. God knows I tried staying away from you, Rayne, maybe even more than Dominic. In the beginning, Ethan followed you around like a lost puppy while Dominic froze you out."

I lowered my face close to her ear. "The whole time I knew if I spent any more time around you, I would lose myself to you completely. I also knew that once you were safe, you would disappear from our lives forever." I nipped at her earlobe, rolling my hips against her. "Tell me I'm wrong."

Despite knowing that she would leave and crush my heart into pieces, I couldn't stop myself from feeling the way I did. Everything about her was perfect. Her stubbornness. Her pride. Every scar and stretch mark. How she challenged me at every turn.

She dug her nails into my arms and glared at me as emotions washed across her features. She couldn't deny what I was saying to her, because it was the truth.

How did I know she would leave? Because we were the same. She wouldn't want to owe anyone anything and didn't want to feel like a burden. She worked too hard and had too many goals to allow something to stand in her way. Her tone

was that of a woman tightly controlling a temper she desperately wanted to release when she spoke. “That might have been true at one point, but you’re wrong about one thing. I’m not leaving. I wouldn’t be able to.” She turned her head away from me and burrowed against my shoulder trying to hide after her heated words.

My breath caught for a moment and my heart stopped. What was she saying? That she would stay here with us even after she was safe? Did she feel the same way about me that I felt about her? I trailed my lips along her shoulder. “What does that mean? I wouldn’t be able to?”

I pulled back from her and searched for any clue as to what she was thinking. She looked at me with wide eyes and bit her lip, lost in thought. I pressed my fingers against the pulse in her neck where it beat furiously.

And just like that, I knew. She was scared to admit how she felt. I wanted to reassure her and force her to say the words to me out loud. I brushed my lips against hers slowly, savoring the moment, licking at the seam and beckoning her to let me inside. She parted her lips, and I took my time exploring with my tongue, slowly delving inside.

This wasn’t like the other times we had been together alone. I wanted to show her everything inside me. All the tenderness and affection. All the shame and sorrow. My struggles. That she was the one for me.

She brushed her hands against my shoulders and wrapped her legs around me, removing any space between our skin. As

she rocked her hips against me, her fingers raked along my shoulders and back, scratching across the surface of my skin.

I could feel the control on my desire slipping and I rocked back against her, my cock strained against the lace covering her. “I need you to say it to me,” I murmured against her lips. “Tell me what it means.”

I kissed across her neck and hooked my fingers into the waistband of the underwear she was wearing. Her legs relaxed, and she lifted her hips as I tugged them down her thighs, leaving them around her ankles. I pushed her thighs apart and settled my body above hers. As I waited for a response, any response, to come from her, I was met with nothing except her nails biting into my skin. Brushing my lips across hers again before rolling my hips against her once more, I rubbed my cock through the slick heat. She arched her back towards me.

“Say it,” I commanded as I plunged inside and pulled out completely.

She groaned at my actions. “Why?” she whispered.

I thrust in again, this time harder. “Because I need to hear it.” I pulled out before thrusting into her again. “Because I want to know you aren’t leaving.” I alternated bites and kisses along her exposed neck. Every thrust became more demanding and her pants filled the room. I reached between us and teased her clit. Her muscles tightened in her legs, and she met my movements, getting lost in the motion of our bodies. I pulled my hand away from her and cradled her hip.

Her face fell as I slowed my strokes. “Why did you stop?”

I pulled her shirt up, exposing her breasts to the chilled air of the room. I nipped at one before I soothed it with my tongue. “You know,” I said before licking across the hardened nub. I lifted her legs and sat them on my shoulders. When I pushed in again she gasped. I rubbed her clit, and the headboard banged against the wall behind us. Emotions warred in my chest. I had bared my soul to her, and she was too afraid to admit how she felt. Or worse, she didn’t feel the same way.

Her voice broke me from the thoughts inside of my head. “It means that I’m yours,” her voice cracked. “I belong to all of you.”

Her words sank in as I buried my head in her shoulder and bit at her skin, completely losing myself inside of her. “Promise me. Promise that you’re ours and you won’t leave.”

Her heels dug into my shoulders, and her hands grabbed at the sheets beneath her. I watched her face, enraptured by how it contorted as she came beneath me. I memorized the way she looked, writhing under my body as whimpers escaped from her lips. Several thrusts later, I shuddered against her and kissed her forehead. Sweat clung to our torsos and our breaths were ragged.

“I promise.” It wasn’t an eloquent declaration of love and devotion. Our words and actions were clumsy, but I knew what they meant. They were enough for me. At least for now.

I rolled over, holding her against my chest as our breathing slowly evened out, eventually falling asleep.

When I woke up the next morning, Rayne was gone. I rubbed my fingers over the linen, wondering if I had imagined the entire night before.

Chapter Seven

Rayne

Early the next morning, I woke up and couldn't fall back asleep. Hunter slept soundly beside me, his chest slowly rising and falling. He looked almost peaceful with his dark hair fanning across the pillowcase. I couldn't fix the fact that Wayne Ayers was his father, but maybe our "discussion" last night would put him more at ease.

I promised not to leave. It was the first time that I had admitted out loud what I thought about our relationship. It was exciting but terrifying. Admitting, no matter how awkwardly it had come out, that I wanted him. I wanted all of them.

The sun wasn't up yet, but too many things weighed on my mind. I was restless as I carefully pulled back the covers and tiptoed from the room. Tonight we were going to the Ruby Rose and would have some answers to the questions that were weighing on me.

My vision was still blurry as I rubbed my eyes and tried to navigate the apartment. Dishes clattered in the kitchen as I staggered into the room. Ethan stood at the counter, mixing

batter for something before the sun came up. His shoulders and jaw were tense and he hadn't changed out of his clothes from yesterday. I wondered if he had been to sleep yet.

“Why did you leave the other night?” I mumbled, sleep still coating my tongue.

He stopped what he was doing and lifted his eyes to mine. “Don't worry about me. Everything is alright.”

Don't worry was the least reassuring phrase in the English language. I stood there stunned, unsure of what to say. “What's going on?” I stared at him, my thoughts racing. What was he thinking?

He wandered over to where I was standing and pressed a kiss against my forehead before cupping my cheek. “Let me finish up here before we talk about it. Are you ready for tonight?” he asked as he moved back across the space.

“Yes and no,” I answered, moving to the cabinets to search for a coffee cup.

He didn't push further and comfortable silence enveloped us. I made myself coffee, and he poured batter into muffin pans. He popped them into the oven and set a timer as I sat down on one of the stools.

“Are you okay?” I asked him, blowing across the hot liquid filling my cup.

He ran his fingers through his golden hair and shook his head. I waited patiently for him to say something, but he didn't. When the timer for the muffins went off, he pulled

them from the oven and offered me a small smile. “Do you like blueberry muffins?”

I inhaled and took a moment before I replied. I did like blueberries and they smelled heavenly, the light scent of cinnamon mixing with the fruit in the air, but he was avoiding my question. “Ethan...”

“Just eat a muffin with me and then we’ll talk,” he promised as he sat one in front of me. I tore a small piece off to help it cool and blew on it before shoving it in my mouth. I closed my eyes, savoring the taste. When I opened my eyes, I found him watching my expression carefully. “How are they?”

“Good,” I admitted, even though he was delaying our discussion. I was worried about him, especially after he had shown up at the apartment bruised.

I finished eating what he had placed in front of me, and he grabbed my wrist. “Come on,” he told me as he led me back upstairs to his bedroom. I sat on the bed while he stripped out of his shirt and his fingers made quick work of the button on his jeans, leaving all of his clothing in a pile on the floor. Ethan slid in beside me. He laid on his side and snaked a hand beneath the shirt I wore, resting it on my stomach.

I peered at him through the darkness. “What happened? What were you thinking?”

He closed his eyes, and I caught sight of the mark on his face. My throat felt thick with emotion as he began speaking. “I met Ignacio over at one of the old factories. There was a fight there, and I wanted it. I just wanted to feel something

other than rage.” His fingers made circles on my stomach as I traced his cheek. “I wanted the pain.”

“Why didn’t you come to me? Talk to me about what’s going on in your head?” I asked, curling close to his body.

He puffed up his cheeks and took a deep breath. His hand stilled on my skin. My gaze wandered over his body, looking at his injuries in the dim light, my hand drifting down his face. His bruises were still purple and red. In a few days, they would turn shades of greens and yellows.

His grip on me grew tighter, and he burrowed his face into my hair. “I’m fine now.”

I exhaled. This was the man who confessed his love to me over a voicemail apparently after being arrested. “I’m going to ask you again. Why didn’t you come to me instead of going out?”

His fingers brushed up my ribs. “You have enough to deal with. Then add Hunter to the equation. It seems we both have daddy issues.” He let out a low humorless laugh.

I pulled away as much as I could and grabbed his face. “This only works if we’re honest. If you need to lose yourself in something, lose yourself in me.”

He leaned his head forward and crushed his mouth against mine, bruising my lips with his urgency. This kiss wasn’t sweet or gentle like his usual kiss. He wasn’t taking his time to slowly explore my mouth. It was wild and frantic, with every ounce of emotion from his soul poured into it. He pushed me

onto my back, his tongue swirling with mine as his hand trailed beneath my shirt.

“Is that so?” he murmured against my lips. “I meant every word of what I said earlier, baby. Do you know how I figured out I was in love with you? You were the only one I wanted to see. The first person I wanted to tell what happened.” His mouth trailed kisses along my jaw as he spoke. “I will do whatever I have to keep you safe. Even if it means burning this fucking city down.”

I pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “You need to get some sleep.” He sighed at me and tucked me against his side before closing his eyes. Silence enveloped the room as his breathing slowly evened out. I watched his chest rise and fall as he fell asleep in the dim morning light, exhaustion from the past several days finally overtaking him.

I gently traced the tattoos covering his chest. My fingers brushed against the red and purple skin on his torso and I frowned. His hair was tousled and fell in waves framing his face. It struck me again that he looked like a fallen angel that heaven had cast out.

Maybe after this was over, the wounds under his skin would slowly heal. I wasn't sure what he planned to do about his father. Murdering him would be the most straightforward solution, but he was the last of Ethan's family.

My throat felt tight from the emotion welling in my chest. “Hey,” I whispered. “I feel the same way.”

The words felt right even though I knew Ethan hadn't heard them. As I lay there watching, I let my mind wander. It wasn't just Ethan I had fallen for. It was all of them, and if I were forced to choose, I would never be able to.

I eventually crawled out from underneath Ethan's embrace back to the kitchen, hoping to find something to eat before tonight. A single blueberry muffin wouldn't be enough to make it through the next twelve hours.

Hunter sat on the couch, scrolling on his phone while Dominic peered at his laptop frowning. Both were silent as I scrounged around the refrigerator, looking for something appetizing. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty," Hunter called out from where he was sitting. "I just wanted to let you know we've invited people over for tomorrow."

I closed the refrigerator door, unsure of what to eat. The mild queasiness over tonight wasn't exactly helping me decide. "Why? I know tomorrow is New Year's Day, but celebrating feels wrong."

Dominic looked up and frowned. "It is, but we need to speak to Rory. After tonight, I'll be able to come up with a better plan." He closed the laptop and rubbed his hand over his face. "And at some point, you need to see Oliver. I'm sure he'll appreciate the gesture. Well, I guess Marie will." I chuckled at the truth of Dominic's statement. Oliver's wife was probably ready to murder him by now. Olly didn't exactly strike me as a good patient.

Hunter stood up and stretched. “We’ll figure it out. First, you need to eat something. You can’t live off coffee today, princess.”

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes at him knowing that he was right, even if I hated it. Even if the last thing I wanted to do was eat because my stomach felt like I had swallowed a swarm of bees.

Hopefully, tonight we would be able to rescue Lexi and the other women being held at the Rose. It was a long shot, but I didn’t want to leave any of them there longer than was necessary. I didn’t know what kind of condition they were in, but my best guess was that they were living in hell.

Chapter Eight

Dominic

It was New Year's Eve. Instead of celebrating by sipping champagne, watching the ball drop, or getting our girl naked, we were all going to the Ruby Rose that evening. *What a long fucking week*, I thought to myself as I walked into the elevator. I pressed my cheek against the cool metal of the wall and closed my eyes.

Between Hunter discovering that Ayers was his father and Ethan losing his shit when he found out his dad was involved with this mess, yesterday was a lot. Plus, add in women being auctioned off at a seedy strip club across town and one of Oliver's dancers being held there. I rubbed my temples, willing the tension in my head to lessen.

Tonight, we were on a mission. We needed to step inside and see how tight security was. With a stroke of luck, we'd be able to see where the women were being kept and what condition they were in. I promised Rayne we would get them out tonight if it were at all possible, but I wasn't holding my breath. Nothing was ever that simple.

When I stepped out of the elevator into the dim light of the parking garage, the icy late December wind swirled around me. I inhaled sharply as I stepped towards the black SUV the five of us would use tonight. The others waited in the vehicle's interior and when I opened the driver's door. They said nothing, each otherwise preoccupied. Ethan looked at his phone, chewing on his bottom lip. Hunter stared down at his hands, lost to his thoughts, and Ignacio glanced out the window. I started driving, the heaviness of the silence weighing on me. Rayne sat in the passenger seat, eyes darting between the men sitting behind her.

The tension was palpable, and the air felt thick. I cracked the window and cleared my throat. "What's the plan?" I asked, my fingers clutching the steering wheel.

Hunter responded. "We're going to go in there and order a few drinks. Try to blend in. When it's clear, we can assess what security looks like. You, Ethan, and Rayne are going to search the rooms. Given that it's a holiday, I'm hoping no one will really notice us."

I peered into the mirror and Ignacio raised his eyebrows at me, his mouth set in a thin line. "Why Ethan?" he asked, tapping on the window.

Hunter gave him a once over. "Because he has the most experience out of all of us with picking locks, except maybe Rayne. That is unless there's something you want to tell us," he laughed, but all traces of humor were absent. Rayne gave me a half-smile that didn't quite meet her eyes.

Ignacio muttered under his breath and leaned further back into his seat. “You’re right. I just hate being sat on the sidelines.”

“You’re not,” I told him. “You’re going to cover our backs and make sure we don’t get caught.”

The city blurred by the window as we drove. New buildings fell away to older decaying structures. I pulled into the lot and removed the key from the ignition, sitting in silence for several moments and taking in the establishment before me. The three-story brick building was painted a dark pink, and the windows were blacked out, making it impossible to peek inside. A large, hot pink neon sign with a rose flickered over the door. A girl sat on a bench to the left of the building in white thigh-high leather boots and a red sequined bikini. The red ember on the end of a cigarette glowed in the darkness, smoke lingering in the night air. I pulled my jacket around me tighter, wondering how she could bear to sit there wearing practically nothing in the frigid air.

“Dom, you ready?” Ethan asked from the seat behind mine.

I gave him a stiff nod as I opened the vehicle’s door and stepped out into the night. After locking the doors, I shoved my keys into my pocket and slipped my usual mask of indifference back into place. Later, when I was alone, I would deal with whatever horrors I encountered. Right now it was important to keep myself together. We approached the door as a unit, moving together. The bouncer at the door ignored us as

we strolled in, too preoccupied with a girl leaning against the wall next to him topless.

The warm air inside the building felt almost stifling. The scent of stale tobacco, sweat, cheap beer, and even cheaper perfume was nearly cloying, forcing me to stifle a gag.

“Lovely establishment, isn’t it?” Ethan said where no one else could hear him. Over the sound system, someone announced that Vixen would take the stage next, and we made our way to a table across the room. Five steps away was a hallway, and that was the first place I wanted to search.

A woman who appeared to be in her thirties approached us when we sat down, swaying her hips in an exaggerated manner. Her pupils were the size of saucers and her lips were painted cherry red. “What can I get for you gentlemen?” she asked, rubbing her barely covered chest against Hunter’s arm. He politely sat back several inches, trying to position himself out of her reach.

“Five bottles of beer,” he said, giving her a tight smile.

She winked at him, pushing her lips out in what I am assuming was supposed to be a seductive manner. “Sure thing, honey,” she purred and internally I cringed.

When she was out of earshot, I stared at the three men surrounding me. “What the fuck?” I whispered. I’d been to strip clubs before, but nothing could have prepared me for this. The neon lights of the stage cast a glow around the room, only seeming to further illuminate the griminess of the place. Women stumbled around on tall heels, high or drunk. A few of

them were nothing more than skin and bones, and I watched as one exchanged a wad of cash for a dime-size baggy of some substance.

Rayne leaned toward me and lowered her voice. “You’re too used to how Oliver does business. It’s not like that on this side of town.” I grimaced at her knowing she was right. “Oliver has always made sure that all of his employees stay clean and keeps all of that shit out of his place.” She glanced towards where I had just watched the drug deal go down and frowned. “He does bad things sometimes, but really he’s a softie.” Ignacio nodded at her words, his eyes darting around the room.

She was right. Oliver made sure that everything was legitimate. The waitress from earlier sauntered back over to our table and gave me a smile. I tried to return it to her and attempted not to stare at the bruises lining her thin, pale arms.

“I need something stronger than this,” Ethan stated, gesturing to the unopened bottle in front of him.

Hunter sighed and patted him on the back. “Yeah me too, but the five of us can wait. I didn’t want to chance drinking something unopened from here. It was beer or bottles of water.”

I popped the cap off of the bottle and wiped the exterior with a napkin from my pocket, wrinkling my nose. The entire place seemed unsanitary, but hopefully, the nominal amount of alcohol would kill any germs left on the bottle’s exterior.

Hunter chuckled as he watched me before tilting his head back and taking a large gulp of the beer.

“How long do we have to sit here?” Ethan asked, leaning on the wall behind him.

Ignacio shook his head. “I know patience isn’t one of your strong suits, but I am going to strongly encourage you to chill out right now. We just need to sit here for a few dances, try to figure out who’s security, and then we make a move.”

The music got louder and a sultry number played over the speakers as the dancer called Vixen sashayed onto the stage. Vixen seemed to physically be in better shape than a lot of the other women scattered across the club’s interior. At least from where I sat, I couldn’t see all of her ribs or any track marks on her arms. Straight blond hair cascaded down her back as she danced around the stage, slowly moving her body to the beat.

I averted my gaze when the straps of her red glittery dress fell, bile rising in the back of my throat. Men whooped and yelled, cat-calling her from all over the room. Did they know about the things that went on here behind closed doors? The better question was would they care? I sat patiently, and we murmured amongst ourselves, careful not to draw any attention to our table.

The same waitress from earlier stumbled back to our table, and we ordered another round of beers. Before she left, Ignacio caught her elbow. “Hey, sweetie, where is the restroom?” he asked, giving her a sly look.

“Oh, if you go down that hallway, it’s the last door on the left,” she giggled.

He excused himself as she ran a hand across the top of her hair. I wasn’t foolish enough to think he was actually using the restroom. I knew he was trying to scope out the rest of the building and see where security was located. They wouldn’t leave the girls being auctioned off completely unattended.

Five minutes later, he sat back at the table and rubbed his eyes. He leaned towards me and lowered his voice. “I don’t think they have any major security up here at the front of the house except those three,” he said, tilting his head towards a dark corner across the room. “One of the bouncers seems preoccupied with the show and the girl clinging to his arm right now.” Ignacio peeled the label from the beer bottle in front of him. “Back hallway seems clear as well for the moment. I don’t know how many people they have in those rooms or on any of the other floors. There are four doors on the left side of the hallway. My bet is that one of them is the door you’re looking for. Be careful.”

The other floors. This floor masqueraded as nothing more than a strip club with the usual VIP rooms. The top floor was rumored to be used for prostitution. How stereotypical. No one knew what horrors we would find in the basement.

I sucked in a deep breath, steeling myself for my next move. Vixen sashayed off the stage, swinging her hips wearing nothing but a sequined G-string. Her ass jiggled as she walked off and the DJ announced the next girl.

All eyes were on her and I looked around making sure that no one was watching us before I stood up. I nodded to Ethan and Rayne and walked to the back hallway, waiting in the shadows for them to catch up to me.

Putting my ear against the first door on the left, I was met with nothing but silence. My palms were sweating as I tried the handle. It was unlocked, and I pushed it open a fraction of an inch, taking a quick peek around. No one was in this room. All it held was a desk with paperwork and a few filing cabinets.

I glanced over my shoulder. “This isn’t where they are being kept,” I mumbled to Rayne who was keeping guard.

“Should we look inside? Maybe we can find more information,” Ethan replied, gaze flitting down the dark hallway.

I slowly closed the door, and Rayne winced when it creaked. We definitely should have brought some WD-40. I shook my head and walked to the next door on the left. “We have enough information. At least enough to know what’s happening. We aren’t the feds. We aren’t trying to build a case against them. The financials and what we find tonight will be enough for Oliver.”

I wiggled the next door handle and frowned. Locked. “How quickly do you think you can pick this?”

Ethan shrugged his shoulders, giving me a cocky grin before pulling a small set of tools out of his pocket. I stepped to the side, keeping watch down the hallway. My palms were

sweating and my heart raced in my chest. At any moment someone could stumble on us and discover we weren't here for the entertainment on stage.

Ethan's brow lowered, and he was lost, deep in concentration. Voices echoed from a room further down the hallway and I rubbed my hands down my pants, the cracks in my usually cool façade showing.

"Quit thinking so hard," Ethan mumbled beside me. "I've almost got it." The door popped open, creaking on the hinges, and someone yelled from inside the room behind me.

"Let's go," I hissed, pushing them towards the open door. We stumbled into the dark and I closed the door behind us quickly, praying that no one heard us. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and turned on the flashlight, illuminating the area. The walls were gray cinder block and concrete steps sat in front of us.

Ethan swallowed, his eyes wide. "I guess we should go down." His fingers skated along the wall as we descended the steps quietly. Rayne stayed completely silent, her lips pressed into a thin line. Quiet sobs echoed from below.

I stopped at the foot of the stairs stunned. The smell of the room was overwhelming. Body odor and sickness clung to the air. I held my sleeve up to my nose, hoping to block some of the scents out. The back wall held wooden crates and a small bathtub was partially obscured by a dirty shower curtain liner. The other three were lined with cages of floor-to-ceiling metal bars.

I cautiously stepped forward and wrapped my hand around one of them, using it to steady myself. Each cage contained a bucket and a dirty mattress. The women that were being held here were emaciated, and I sucked in a deep breath, trying to quiet the emotions rising in me.

The girl inside the cage I was leaning on laid on her mattress, curled into a ball. Blood and dirt streaked across the skin visible from beneath the blanket. Her auburn hair was matted and bruises were visible on the hand clutching the blanket to her body. A low moan slipped from her mouth and she shuddered. Ethan stepped around me and peered into the cage next to her.

Chapter Nine

Rayne

The music pounded as I watched the dancer on stage and slowly peeled the label off the now lukewarm beer. I took a slow sip and glanced around the room, observing the patrons. Anxiety curled in my stomach knowing that somewhere in the building, women were being held against their will.

At Dominic's signal, I stood and walked towards the hallway. They talked quietly, trying doors and picking locks. My heart pounded in my ears and I wiped my hands against my clothes, hoping that we wouldn't get caught. I wasn't sure exactly how many people were security or working for Ayers, but I didn't want to have to fight my way out tonight or potentially endanger anyone.

When we found the stairwell that descended into the basement, I let out a sigh of relief. At least now we wouldn't be out in the open. When Dominic turned on the flashlight on his phone, shock washed over me. I stood unmoving for

several moments, disbelieving what I was seeing. At least a dozen women were being kept in literal cages.

“They’re all drugged,” Ethan whispered to me. “Look at her eyes.” I glanced in the direction he was looking at. A young woman who appeared to be maybe eighteen or nineteen laid still on top of a mattress. Barely out of high school, her skin seemed dull, and her pupils, even in the dim lighting, were dilated.

Glancing around the room, a lot of things became clear to me. I doubted any of them were being fed regularly. How long had some of them been held here? Did their families know they were missing? These women obviously weren’t allowed out of their prisons until right before a client or visitor, not even for basic hygiene. My stomach threatened to heave the contents of my dinner onto the concrete floor.

“What the fuck are we supposed to do?” Dominic asked, frustration seeping into his tone. The question was rhetorical. “Which one is Lexi?”

A cry sounded from behind the bars in the opposite corner and I slowly walked over, shining my light inside. The woman had bleach blond hair and blood streaked through it. Her bloodshot eyes were swollen and a rainbow of bruises lined her face. Lexi. At least she was alive. Her lips were cracked and an angry-looking wound sat on the corner. Someone had beat the hell out of her recently and I balled up my fists at my sides.

Despite the drugs and silent tears rolling down her cheeks, she bared her teeth at us. “Who the fuck are you?” she slurred. At least they hadn’t completely broken her spirit yet.

“Shh, it’s okay. We’re here to help,” Ethan murmured as he approached the front of the bars.

She scrambled further into the corner, pushing her back against her wall. “Fuck off. You’re just like the rest of the psychopaths in this place. Trying to take something from us.”

Ethan gave her a sad smile, and I walked in front of him so she could see me. “They’re with me, Lexi, and I promise he’s telling you the truth.”

Sobs erupted from her, and her body shook. “How do I know this isn’t a trick?”

“You don’t, not really,” I said cautiously, trying to swallow down the emotions threatening to drown me. “Olly’s been trying to find you, though. He’s had people asking around about you.” I reached through the bar and she grabbed my hand. Our fingers linked, and a tear escaped. “Listen, I need your help. Do you know when the auction is? We have to get all of you out of here before then.”

Her grip on my hand tightened. “They said the fourth, but I don’t know what day it is now.”

A quiet creak came from above and Ethan gave me a panicked look, his fist clutching my shirt.

“We’ve got to find somewhere to hide right now or be willing to fight our way out of here,” he hissed.

Lexi's eyes grew wide and she let go of my hand. "The shower. They never look in there."

Dominic shut off the light on his phone and we darted into the tub behind the curtain, trying to make as little noise as possible. Ethan hurried behind me and I prayed that whoever was coming down the stairs missed the rustle of the shower curtain opening.

"Our phones aren't on silent," Dominic said into my ear, panic lacing his voice. All I could do was swallow, knowing he was right. There was nothing I could do about that now. The glow from our phone screens would bring us unnecessary attention.

My heart hammered in my chest, and my hands shook. The cold taste of adrenaline coated my tongue. Everything was going so smoothly until right now. Heavy footfalls continued down the steps. From the sound of them, they were two large men, and the light flickered on from above us, blinding me momentarily.

"Gotta tell the guys to remember to lock up tighter. Can't believe one of them forgot," a deep voice stated. I closed my eyes, internally reprimanding myself. *How could I forget that detail?*

Ethan went stiff beside me, his jaw clenched when the other man spoke. "It's not like any of them can escape. Half of them don't even know where they are," the familiar voice laughed. Ethan's fingers dug into my shoulder as he listened. His father.

I laid my hand over his and squeezed gently, hoping I could convey what I was thinking. We would get the bastard. Between the hell known as Ethan's childhood and the women trapped down here, there was no way I would allow him to walk away unscathed. We locked gazes for a moment and his grip on me loosened.

"Which toy do you want to play with tonight?" the unknown voice asked, and an icy chill ran over my body.

"Choose one that isn't broken yet," Michael Carter said dismissively. "One that isn't too dirty."

"You know, there's a shower down here for a reason."

My pulse managed to skyrocket further. If they chose to bathe one of the girls, our hiding spot would be compromised. I was certain this was what a heart attack felt like, waiting on the next move from the men in the center of the room.

"No, I don't really have the time for that tonight. How about Oliver's girl? I like a girl with a little fight in her."

My heart fell and there was nothing I could do. Sure, we could fight the two men in the room, but what about everyone else in the building? There was no way we would be able to take the women from here without being noticed and if we failed, there was more on the line than just our lives. If they didn't kill the girls, they would just move them to a new location. If they let them live.

A cell phone rang and I waited, reminding myself to breathe. Ethan's father answered the phone. "This had better

be important.” I could hear the sneer in his voice from behind the thin fabric. “Fine.” What felt like a small eternity lapsed, but in reality, it was less than thirty seconds. “Well, girls, I guess it’s your lucky night. Business calls, but don’t worry, I’ll be back.” His tone was so cruel, and not for the first time, I wondered how Ethan had managed to survive his childhood under the thumb of the monster standing feet away from me.

“What a shame,” the unknown man replied. “I’ll have one of them ready for you next time. Are you sure you want the hellcat?”

Their footsteps receded up the stairs, and they shut off the lights.

When the door slammed shut behind them, I breathed a sigh of relief and stayed motionless for a moment, willing my heart to calm down.

“Promise me we’re going to save them,” Ethan murmured to me.

I squeezed his hand in reassurance. “I promise. And we’re taking down everyone responsible.”

I carefully climbed out from behind the shower curtain and walked back over to Lexi. “Listen to me. I know we’ve had our differences in the past, but I promise you I’ll be back. I can’t sneak you out of here tonight, and I hate leaving you.” My voice cracked against my wishes. I felt completely powerless at this moment. “Everyone involved in this is going to pay.”

She nodded at me as silent tears streamed down her cheeks.
“Try to hurry, okay?”

“I’ll talk to Oliver and come up with the best plan. I’ll get you out of here as fast as I can.”

As we snuck back up the stairs, my heart lay heavy in my chest and I reminded myself that it would only be a few more days.

Late that night, I snuck away from the guys, unwilling to talk about how I was feeling or what I was thinking. I needed time to process everything I’d seen.

The wind whipped around me in the darkness. I could understand the appeal of sitting on the rooftop by myself. It was silent, and the cold numbed the suffocating sensation that threatened to weigh me down. The moon shined brightly above me and I paused for just a moment before pulling my phone out of my pocket.

It was after midnight, but Oliver would be waiting for my call. I dialed the number, and he answered it in only one ring. “How bad was it?” he asked.

“I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but it was worse than I imagined. I don’t think the women have been fed. They’ve been drugging all of them,” I told him, trying to keep my emotions under control. “They’re literally in cages. How can another person be okay with treating humans like that? “

He cleared his throat and when he spoke, it came out softly. It seemed even Olly was having a hard time. “Did you find out

when they are auctioning them off?”

“Lexi said the fourth. How do you want me to handle this?”

“We’ll figure it out tomorrow. Try to get some sleep tonight,” he said quietly.

I ended the call and stared up at the night sky, knowing that the next week was going to be one of the longest of my life.

Chapter Ten

Rayne

New Year's Day. The time that most people decide to make resolutions and try to stick to them for less than a week before they're completely abandoned.

The only resolution I made this year was to ensure that, as soon as possible, Lexi and the other women were safe and out of the clutches of Ayers and Ethan's father.

Still, the guys decided to invite people over to celebrate the holiday. I knew there was an ulterior motive, and they were actually going to be planning with Oliver. It still felt like a farce to get dressed, eat food, and drink glasses of wine given the situation.

Dominic woke me up that morning with a soft kiss on the head. I grumbled and tried pulling the blankets over my head, not quite ready to face the day. "Come on," he laughed. "Get dressed. Victoria will be here soon and Hunter is already in the kitchen cooking." I scowled at him before finally sitting up.

Hunter would be making a traditional meal of black-eyed peas, greens, and cornbread. It was the same thing that I'd eaten every New Year's Day since I was small. According to superstition, eating this food would give you money and luck in the coming year.

I'd eat my weight in black-eyed peas if it meant that I would have enough luck to pull off rescuing the women at the Rose.

I dressed quickly in a pair of worn jeans, my sneakers, and a hoodie, not really caring how I looked. To me, everything felt surreal, and the last thing on my mind was my physical appearance.

When I walked into the kitchen, my stomach rumbled. The air was scented with onions, garlic, and butter. Numerous pots sat steaming on the stovetop. Hunter milled around, carefully stirring them, humming to himself as he worked.

I sat down with a cup of coffee, and Ethan silently passed me a pastry. "Don't try to sample anything he's cooking. He's in a bad mood today," he stage whispered.

I tried not to choke on the coffee I was swallowing when Hunter stared at him. "Everyone should be here in a little while. You can wait until then," he stated.

And sure enough, people began to slowly trickle in. The first to arrive were Victoria, Rory, and Kourtney. They set several bottles of wine and a peach cobbler on the countertop before giving me tight hugs. Both of them seemed to know exactly how the night before went, even though I hadn't texted them.

Perhaps my emotions were written all over my face. After all, Victoria was the one who played poker, not me. Maybe I needed her to give me some pointers if I was destined to take over Oliver's empire.

Rory gave me a tight nod of acknowledgment before heading into the kitchen to speak quietly with the guys. He already knew what they were going to ask him and what would be required of him. After all, this was what he'd been raised to do. His fate was to take over Paul's portion of the criminal enterprise, and he would do anything that might help get his father out of jail.

Victoria pulled wine glasses out of the cabinet before settling us around the sofa in the living room. She poured us wine while we talked about everything and nothing. The conversation stayed light-hearted and last night stayed unmentioned, even though it hung over our heads.

I noticed Smudge was absent, probably hiding because of the number of people and the noise. If I could get away with it, I would have hidden as well.

While Victoria discussed the puppy that Rory had given her for Christmas, Oliver and Marie walked in. He looked better than he did the last time I'd seen him. At least he was no longer hooked up to a million monitors. Still, he walked slower than usual and his face was lined with pain, wincing with every step. Marie helped Oliver settle on one of the stools near the breakfast bar before collapsing on the couch next to me.

“Please tell me there is enough wine for me to share,” Marie laughed. “Oliver has acted atrociously since he’s been home. He doesn’t know his own limitations. I swear to God every single day he pulls another stitch and I’m waiting to have to carry him back to Nia to be fixed up.” Victoria laughed lightly and motioned for Rory to hand her another wine glass.

I knew that at some point today the men would drive me into the discussion they were having, but at the moment I was enjoying the pleasant company.

Ignacio strolled in carrying a bottle of tequila and I grimaced, remembering the last time I’d drank tequila with the women sitting near me. I’d pass on that, stick to wine, and let everyone else deal with the hangover from hell.

Ignacio punched Ethan’s shoulder as he sat the bottle on the cabinet and sauntered over to the stove, opening the lids on the pots and peering in. “Man, Enzo and Paul had better hurry. I’m starving.”

Hunter glared at him. “Don’t touch the food yet. They’ll be here soon.”

“You should have made them ride with you,” I joked to Marie.

“Next time I will.” She winked at me and took a sip of her wine. “While we’re waiting for those two, Victoria can tell us about her wedding plans.” This was one of Victoria’s favorite topics to talk about other than Rory and the new puppy, Max, so the next several minutes were spent discussing potential flower arrangements and color palettes.

I poured myself more wine and settled back against the plush cushions behind me, only partially listening to the women gush over the ideas. Despite the circumstances of the past few weeks, I was content. After the women were freed and Ayers was taken care of permanently, this was what life could be like. I imagined lazy weekends and small parties surrounded by people who cared about me.

Aldo, Paul, and Ash walked in, shaking me from my thoughts. I hadn't expected to see Ash, but he was a welcome sight. A bottle of whiskey was tucked under Paul's arm as he strode towards me and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. "How are you doing with everything? I haven't heard of you murdering anyone else yet," he joked quietly.

I gave him a small laugh. "Yet is the key word. You know me, it's always an option." It was a joke, but lately, there was a grain of truth to my words.

Aldo glanced at the glasses of wine and empty bottles on the coffee table. "So... we're drinking before noon today. That can't be a good sign. How bad was it?"

I raised my eyebrows. "Oliver didn't tell you?"

He shifted on his feet and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I wanted to hear it from you since you were there."

Hunter cleared his throat. "No talking shop until after we eat." He turned and began pulling plates from the cabinet, muttering to himself about how this was the way the rest of the year would go.

He had a point. Growing up, there were certain superstitions you followed on New Year's. You didn't wash laundry or you would wash someone out of your life. If you swept, you would sweep out all of your luck. And finally, New Year's day set the tone for the remainder of the year.

Apparently, I would spend the next year discussing potentially committing felonies.

After we were given the all-clear, everyone milled about the kitchen area, ladling food onto plates. Ash came up behind me and gently checked me with his shoulder.

Ash was one of Oliver's oldest friends and the therapist that was "suggested" to me after I was kidnapped. As much as I wanted to fight seeing him initially, I actually enjoyed our sessions. He was a sounding board for everything hectic going on in my life and the chaos that sometimes filled my head.

"How are you doing?" he asked under his breath, the sound getting lost in the conversation surrounding us.

I gave him a weak smile as I grabbed a fork from the countertop. "Who knows?"

He nodded at me as he placed a piece of cornbread on his plate. "Understandable. Are you going to have time to come to our usual session tomorrow?"

I sighed and shrugged my shoulders at him as we moved toward the table. "With everything going on—"

He cut me off by placing a hand on my shoulder. "There's no need to explain. Just know that if you need me, I'm a phone

call away.”

I set my plate down at the table and glanced around, looking for wherever I laid my wine glass. “Don’t worry, I will.”

“Have you been writing like I suggested?”

I spotted my glass near the stove and refilled it before returning to his side. “Some, but I promise that I’ll try to make the time.” I respected Ash’s opinion that writing down the things bothering me might be therapeutic, but with everything going on, carving thirty minutes out of my evening felt daunting.

While we ate, everything felt normal, or at least as normal as a gathering of this type could be. People ate and laughed at the stories the older men told of their glory days. Normal seemed like such a strange term to describe lunch with crime bosses, arsonists, murderers, and whatever else. Victoria and Kourtney were the only ones here whose hands were clean.

After the table was cleared, the discussion turned to business. The events of the next few days needed to be executed with a degree of care and precision to ensure things went down without a hitch.

“Hunter, you’re taking care of the situation with Chief Palmer?” Oliver asked.

Dominic tipped his chin towards Olly. “Actually, I’ll be assisting with that.” They hadn’t filled me in on all the details yet, but I would gladly allow them to handle part of the specifics on their own.

“What’s the plan for the Rose?” Ignacio inquired, propping his head on his hands. “Are we just storming in there? How are we going to move the girls?”

Paul frowned. “Oliver and Marie are going to drive a van over and park nearby. On my signal, they’ll pull into the parking lot and wait there.”

Olly scowled at Paul’s words, and Ethan laughed. “Don’t tell me you thought you were going in with us. You were just shot in the chest.”

Oliver stared at Ethan. “Have you taken a good look in the mirror lately, playboy? You look like hell.”

Marie placed a hand over her mouth, trying to hide a smile. “Yes, but he didn’t spend nearly a week in the hospital.”

Rory looked at me and mouthed, “Or take a bullet to the chest.” The corner of my mouth lifted involuntarily. I should have known that Oliver wouldn’t be thrilled to take a supporting role.

Marie gave Rory a wink before she turned to Oliver. “I know I don’t usually get involved in these things, but you can’t drive right now. If Nia found out, she would have a fit. You’re already skating on thin ice with her.” Oliver scowled at her words but kept his mouth closed.

Paul cleared his throat and started speaking again, picking up where he’d left off. “Some of the women are going to require medical care. I think we should take them to one of our safe houses.”

“Wait, the two of you are going to be there?” Victoria asked with wide eyes.

Aldo, who had been sitting silently the entire time, simply raised his eyebrows. “Where did you think we’d be? Safe at home tucked into bed?”

Dominic rubbed the stubble along his jaw and closed his eyes. “As far as medical attention, I’ll contact Nia and have her on standby. Ash, you should be available as well.”

Ash stroked his beard and nodded his head in agreement. “Good idea.”

Kourtney ran her fingers through the ends of her hair, lost in thought. When she spoke, determination steeled her words. “Obviously, I have no experience with guns or anything, but I can gather clothes, toiletries, and other necessities. I’ll have them ready at the safe house.”

Victoria looked at Paul, her eyes shining with unshed tears, and cleared her throat. “I’ll stock the kitchen and make some meals for everyone there.”

“If either of you needs any money for this, let me know,” Hunter stated, standing from the table and striding across the room towards the bar.

“So, when exactly are we going to do this?” I asked, curious about the timeline.

Oliver took a sip of amber liquid from the tumbler sitting in front of him. “Early Wednesday morning before the sun rises.

I'm concerned that they'll beef up security the evening of the auction and I want as few complications as possible."

Ignacio shifted in his chair and looked at the older man. "I overheard one of the guys at the precinct say the Rose is closing early that night. They're using the excuse that a cleaning crew is coming in."

Aldo smiled, and a chill skated across my skin. "Perfect. We'll be ready to waltz in at four."

The conversation continued until late in the evening, all the details slowly being fleshed out over alcohol and cigars.

That night, after everyone went home, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling. The meeting had instilled a small glimmer of hope inside of me, but I was still filled with trepidation. I said a silent prayer to whatever gods were listening, searching for reassurance that we might manage to pull this off, and wondering if I had truly eaten enough black-eyed peas.

We would need all the luck we could get.

Chapter Eleven

Hunter

January 2. Only two more days were left until the auction and I needed to make sure that everything was in order so our plans would go off without a hitch. For that to happen, I needed to see Scott. He texted me last night to tell me he had the information I needed and insisted on meeting today.

Rayne paced back and forth in the kitchen, worry lining her features, staring down at her phone. I wrapped my arms around her, stilling her motions. “Hey, princess, slow down. It’s okay,” I told her, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips.

She leaned into me and sighed. “Are you sure you don’t want someone else going with you?”

I shook my head. “Scott is paranoid on the best of days, and I doubt today is the day the two of you should meet. He reiterated coming alone several times.” I squeezed her tightly, relishing the warmth of her body for several moments. “I’ll be back in a little while.”

During the drive over to the small park across town, I thought about how, when I was younger, my mother would take me here on Saturday mornings. She would bring bags of stale bread that she'd been saving and we would feed the ducks. Afterward, we'd stop by a local bakery to pick up freshly glazed donuts still hot from the oven.

My childhood was full of small moments like that. It was such a stark contrast to Ethan's. He'd had money and all the material things imaginable, but never love.

I parked the car in the gravel parking area and looked around. Scott sat on the park bench, looking over the pond, staring straight ahead.

As I approached, his features gave nothing away. His hand shifted underneath his jacket and he pulled out a brown padded envelope. He passed it to me wordlessly, and I tucked it beneath my hoodie.

"It's enough?" I asked him.

He shuddered. "Yeah, everything on that thumb drive is enough to convince him to do whatever." I passed him the bundle of cash from my pants pocket. "Remember, I wasn't a part of this."

I chuckled at his words and watched the ripples that floated on the water across from us. "That's always been the terms of the deal. No one will ever know where the information came from." I clapped my hand on his back and squeezed his shoulder. "I promise this is for a good cause, Scott."

He pushed his glasses up his nose and turned his face to me. “After this, I hope so.”

When I got back to the apartment, I plugged the thumb drive into my laptop, wondering what kind of dirt he managed to dig up on the police chief. Clicking on the first file, I wasn’t sure what to expect. My blood ran cold as I clicked through the documentation. Scott was right. This was exactly the information I needed to get rid of the chief. I tapped my fingers, wondering exactly how I wanted to approach the situation. Whatever we decided on, I had to meet with him today.

After a quick search, I realized Dominic wasn’t in the penthouse and Rayne was also missing. Fear jolted through me briefly as I pulled out my phone, dialing Dominic’s number.

I tried to remind myself to calm down. I knew I was overreacting. Dominic and Ethan would protect her with their lives. My brain didn’t seem to get the message, though, as I listened to the phone ring. The past month and a half had been filled with kidnappings, attacks, and its fair share of murders.

Finally, Dominic answered and I let out the breath I’d been holding. “Yes,” he answered, his tone almost lazy.

“Where are you? I have the information we need.” My words were laced with aggravation, and I bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself from saying more.

“Lose the attitude, Hunter. I get it. You could have checked my office. Despite everything going on, we still have a

business to run. The holidays are officially over, so we have to juggle handling both things right now.”

His tone reprimanded me as his words cooled my temper. I ran one of my hands through my hair. “Yeah, you’re right. I hadn’t considered that. I’ll be down in a few.”

The afternoon was spent with the four of us debating the best way to use the information we held. The general consensus was the police chief couldn’t be allowed to get away with the crimes he was committing. He deserved to pay and if Dominic’s plan panned out, we wouldn’t even have to get our hands dirty.

████████████████████

Every Monday, the chief stopped by the local diner for coffee, pie, and to flirt with the young waitresses, so I knew where to find him. Dominic accompanied me while Rayne stayed safely tucked away with Ethan guarding her at our place. She’d tried fighting me over the situation, but somehow we’d finally convinced her this was one conversation she could sit out. The truth was, I didn’t want her seeing tonight’s events unfold.

We strolled into the small diner, and the scent of bacon and hash browns filled the air. Dominic carried a small manilla envelope and scanned the restaurant before spotting the chief sitting by himself at a corner booth. I sunk into the seat across from him as Dominic slid in beside him, caging him in.

The older waitress manning the cash register locked eyes with me and I shook my head, telling her that we wouldn’t be

ordering anything today.

Strathmore police chief Samuel Palmer was one of Ethan's father's best friends. I shouldn't have been surprised that he was involved in this mess. For an older man, he wasn't unattractive. His short hair was beginning to gray, and he'd gained some weight around his midsection, probably from the pie he ate while trying to convince the waitresses to go home with him. I schooled my features, trying to keep the disgust I was feeling off my face.

Samuel raised his eyebrows at us. "Gentlemen, how can I help you?"

Dominic propped his head on one hand and gave him a bitter smile that made chills run across my body. "That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? I have something you need to see." He placed the envelope on the tabletop, tapped it with his index finger three times, and then slid it across to the chief.

Chief Palmer carefully took the envelope and opened it, pulling out a dozen photographs. His eyes widened and skin paled as he held the photos closer to his chest, angling them away from the rest of the diner.

In his hands was evidence of the crimes he'd been committing in Strathmore and outside of the country. Sex tourism was a lucrative industry, especially when it involved underage victims. It was doubtful he'd want information of this nature to spread across the city. And then there was the small matter of his wife and family, who would no doubt be horrified when they discovered the chief's proclivities.

He swallowed before speaking, placing the pictures back into the envelope before sliding them inside his jacket. “Where did you get these?” he hissed, looking between the two of us.

I tried to suppress the grin threatening to spread across my face but failed. “I have my ways, but you’re really not asking the right question.” Leaning across the table, I noticed beads of sweat gathering on his brow. “Also, I’d lower my voice if I were you. Wouldn’t want anyone to find out.”

He scowled at me and clutched the edge of the table, his knuckles turning as white as his face. “Fine, what do you little shits want?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Dominic’s smile grew wider. Watching him was unnerving. Whereas Ethan thrived in chaos, this was Dominic’s forte. He had the ability to turn all of his emotions off at the flip of a switch. “We need three favors from you. Two tonight, and one at a future date we specify.”

The chief seemed hesitant, but his shoulders relaxed and he sank back into his seat, mulling over what to say next. “And if I agree to this, you’ll hand over whatever incriminating information you have on me?”

That wasn’t exactly how this would play out, but he didn’t need to know that. I gave him a sharp nod and stuck my hand out towards him.

Palmer stared at my hand for several seconds before finally shaking it, sealing the deal. “What do you need from me right now?”

I adjusted my jacket and glanced at Dominic, who was tracing figure eights on the table in front of him, intentionally dragging the conversation out. He was like a predator toying with his prey.

“I want all the ‘evidence’ you have on Paul Donohue to disappear. We both know it was planted by your friend,” Dominic stated calmly. “Drop the charges against him in the next two days.” The chief’s mouth opened and closed several times, reminding me of a fish. Dominic placed one finger over the man’s lips. “Hold on now, we’re not quite done. Whatever happens in the next week, I want you to look the other way. Nothing will be traced back to us or Rayne. Building burns down? Several dead bodies happen to wash up from the river? None of it was us. Do we have an understanding?”

Dominic removed his hand from the chief’s mouth and sat up straighter, eyeing the man’s expression. “What are you three planning?”

I shook my head at him. “None of your concern.”

“I’m not sure this is worth the trouble.”

Dominic leaned in close to his ear and pressed something from his jacket into the police chief’s side. From the angle I was sitting, I wasn’t sure if it was a gun or a knife. The man stilled, his breath coming out in quick pants.

“And I’m not sure you have a lot of options. Unless you want Mrs. Palmer and the rest of the community to find out.” The chief winced when Dominic’s hand jabbed into his side harder. “And you’ll tell no one about this conversation.”

“Fine,” he muttered. I threw twenty dollars into the middle of the table and stood up. Dominic carefully smoothed the man’s jacket before standing and we walked out of the small diner.

No one had overheard the conversation, but even if they had, they knew better than to say anything.

“You’re a fucking psychopath,” I said as I opened my car door.

He raised his eyebrows. “Yeah, but I’m pretty sure Chief Palmer doesn’t realize that yet.”

If he didn’t, he would figure it out soon. After all, he owed us a third favor. There was no way we would allow him to get away with what he’d done or his part in what was going on at the Ruby Rose.

Chapter Twelve

Rayne

A cup of coffee sat on the table near me, steam wafting into the air as my pen scratched against the surface of the paper laying on my lap. When I woke up earlier that morning, the men I lived with were absent. Laying near the freshly made coffee was a note.

We'll be back later. Taking care of some things for tomorrow morning and didn't want to wake you. Made you some coffee. - Hunter

I was grateful for the coffee and extra sleep knowing that tomorrow morning, I would be up well before dawn. Plus, it gave me a chance to pour my soul onto the pages of the new notebook without interruption. I'd given Ash my word that I would at least try writing to see how it made me feel, and this was the perfect opportunity.

As I wrote, slowly sorting through the chaos of my thoughts, mixed emotions rolled through me. Grief over the knowledge that my path in life was already decided by fate. Anger over the women trapped at the Ruby Rose. Happiness

over my found family. Memories from my childhood were slowly transcribed into the notebook. All the events leading up to me burning Trace's sports car. How I initially became tangled up in the criminal empire I was destined to one day rule. The hurt and betrayal. Hunger and hopelessness.

Finally, my feelings about the three men surrounding me, standing by my side. Hunter making cinnamon rolls for Christmas and taking his time painting me on the rooftop. Dominic helping me pack my apartment. Riding behind Ethan on the motorcycle with the wind whipping around us. The leather bracelet still adorning my wrist. All of their words whispered in the dark and tender kisses pressed against my skin.

As I wrote, time evaporated and everything felt a little lighter. The bad memories were less suffocating as I realized they didn't own me or define who I was.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I missed the men who held my heart walking into the penthouse. Dominic gave me a soft kiss on the forehead and gently grasped my chin, lifting my face to look at him. He ran his thumbs over my cheeks, wiping away the dampness coating them. "I wish I could take away the hurt and change your past. Chase away all of your tears forever. Drive away your nightmares," he whispered, his lips hovering over mine. "Tell me what you need from me and I'll do whatever it takes."

A choked laugh escaped my lips. "I'm fine, I promise." And I was fine. I could only imagine what I looked like to them

with red eyes and splotchy skin from pouring all of my emotions out onto the pages.

He gazed at me for several moments, watching my face before pressing his lips gently to mine. When he pulled away, he asked me, “What do you need?”

Emotion caught in my throat and fresh tears threatened to spill over. Until recently, no one ever cared how I was feeling and no one had ever asked me what I needed. “I don’t know,” I murmured to him.

His fingertips caressed my cheek. “I have an idea. Do you trust me?” I nodded to him. I trusted all of them implicitly, even if I didn’t know what he had in mind. Without a word, he picked me up from my chair and cradled me against his chest. I gasped, still taken aback every time one of them lifted me with ease.

Ethan and Hunter followed us up the stairs into Dominic’s room where he carefully laid me on the bed. “Lay back on the pillows,” he told me softly, “and close your eyes.”

He stepped close to Hunter, speaking so quietly their words were lost to me. Hunter raised his eyebrows and disappeared from the room.

Ethan gave me a lazy smile as he reached into the bedside table, pulling out a length of dark fabric. He leaned close to my ear, his breath caressing my skin. “Remember what you told me? It works both ways, love.”

The words from New Year's Eve came rushing back to me. *If you need to lose yourself in something, lose yourself in me.* I swallowed the feelings threatening to pull me under and watched as he straightened the fabric.

Hunter entered the room holding a small square package and strode towards the bed, his gaze holding mine. When he sat beside me, he gently grasped my chin, turning my face to where I could see only him. "We haven't played any games in a while, princess, and the three of us have something in mind. What do you think? Do you want to play?" His lips brushed against mine gently. "The last time you played with Dominic, he said you felt like you were flying. Do you want to feel like that again?" he asked as his lips trailed across the skin beneath my ear.

Ethan's fingers lightly traced along the curves of my body until he reached the hem of my shirt. Their touches lit little fires under my skin, making me forget everything else. Desire pooled between my thighs and I clenched them together, seeking pressure to ease the ache.

My voice came out husky when I responded to Hunter. "I want to play."

Ethan's hands grabbed the edge of my shirt, tugging it over my head. "All you have to do is say the word if you want to stop," he told me as he kissed along my ribs, working his way up my body. His fingers unclasped my bra and dragged the straps slowly down my arms. Goosebumps formed along my

flesh and my heart raced faster, anticipating what their next move would be.

Hunter's mouth captured mine as he tangled his fingers into my hair, angling my head how he wanted. His tongue delved inside of my mouth, licking and exploring as a whimper left my mouth. He chuckled darkly and cupped my breast with a free hand, kneading it gently as Ethan tugged down my pants, exposing me to the cool air of the room. I lifted my hips to help him, wishing his hands would drift closer to where I wanted them.

Dominic cleared his throat, and both men pulled away, taking their warmth with them. He clicked his tongue in his mouth disapprovingly at Hunter and Ethan. "At the rate this is going, we won't be able to play any games at all. Ethan, the blindfold."

Ethan smirked at him before turning to me, securing the black fabric beside him across my eyes and binding it. Even at the bottom edge of the fabric no light shined through, leaving me completely in darkness. Ethan whispered in my ear, "No gag this time, so remember to use your words if you want to stop."

Shivers raced along my skin at his words. Something was placed in my ears, canceling out any noise in the room. Their voices were replaced by the steady beat of bass in the music. The weight on the bed shifted, leaving me by myself for what could have been seconds or minutes. My heart rate picked up, trying to guess what would happen next. Someone gripped my

wrists, tethering them together behind my back with something that felt rough on my skin. *Dominic*, I thought to myself.

Fingers traced the ties before someone shifted to sit behind me, pulling my back taut against their chest. Everything was heightened, my soft skin against the hard planes of the body behind me. Their lips found my shoulders as their fingertips brushed against my sides. I arched my body toward them, hoping that it would entice them to move their hands higher or lower. Instead, they wrapped an arm around my torso, tugging me closer, and nipped hard at my shoulder. His tongue brushed along the nip, soothing the skin with his mouth. *Hunter*. His need for control and obedience bled through in his body language.

Fingers trailed along my calves making small circles and drifted up to my thighs. The touches were almost reverent as they parted my legs wider. Soft lips touched my pussy and someone's tongue swept through my folds before settling on my clit. *Ethan*. Despite all of his cockiness and arrogance, his touches were almost worshipful.

The bass of the music playing in my ears and the darkness surrounding me heightened every touch as they teased me. Ethan's hair tickled the inside of my thighs and someone's mouth, hot and wet, surrounded my nipple, licking it. It felt like lightning shot through my veins and went straight to my clit. I tried to roll my hips against Ethan's mouth, begging him with my body to move his tongue faster, but firm hands held my hips in place as they slowly continued their assault.

Tension coiled tighter inside of me as Dominic's mouth moved to my other breast and Hunter nipped at the shell of my ear. Ethan sucked on my clit as someone pushed one finger inside of me and someone else rolled my other nipple between their fingers. As soon I felt myself getting close to the edge, Ethan and Dominic shifted away from me.

Even though I couldn't hear myself, I sighed at the loss of contact. Hunter cupped my breast and traced over my nipple, kissing along my neck. A gasp escaped when his teeth grazed my skin before sucking the sensitive flesh. He rolled his hips against me from behind, his hard cock digging into me, letting me know without words he wanted me.

He was as aroused by this as I was.

Suddenly, someone pulled me into their lap, adjusting my body exactly how they wanted. Their fingers dug into my hips, lifting me before thrusting inside. They pulled me tight against their chest, resting my head against their shoulder as Hunter's hands kneaded my ass. His hands parted my cheeks and fingers traced along the hole as cool, wetness dripped onto my skin.

Fingers delved inside, stretching me slowly. A low buzzing sensation pressed against my clit and the dull burning gave way to pleasure as I rocked back towards him. Hunter inserted another finger. Someone grasped my chin and tenderly pressed kisses against my lips as hands floated across my body.

The buzzing between my legs intensified as Hunter removed his fingers from me and nudged himself against the

tight entrance. I held my breath, knowing the intrusion would reignite the burn.

The person kissing me bit my lower lip, and I inhaled as Hunter pushed past the tight ring, inching in slowly. Someone's hands caressed my breasts, pinching and pulling gently at my nipples.

Once Hunter was fully seated, the men underneath me rocked my body between them. The motion started slowly, and I pulled at the restraints holding my wrists, wishing I could touch one of them. My skin felt flushed, a light film of sweat clinging to it.

Soft, velvety skin pressed against my lips and my tongue darted out, tasting the salty fluid beaded on it. I opened wider, allowing the hardened length into my mouth. I worked my tongue along the bottom side before hollowing my cheeks around it.

The buzzing sensation between my thighs increased at the same time the men inside me increased their tempo. The man whose cock had been inside of my mouth removed it and captured my mouth once more. I fell over the precipice into oblivion with him swallowing my cries, anchoring me to his body. Fireworks exploded behind the blindfold as my muscles jerked against the hard bodies surrounding me.

Every time I came down from the high I was on, the vibrations against my clit grew faster, sending me spiraling again.

At some point, I lost count of the number of orgasms, and my muscles felt shaky as they slowed. Warmth filled me as they finished, and the man in front cradled me to his chest.

Nimble fingers worked the knots covering my wrists, and the blindfold fell from my face. I flexed my hands and slowly pulled the earbuds out. As my eyes adjusted, I saw Dominic beneath me and Ethan sitting beside him, slowly stroking my arm.

Dominic's hands cupped my cheeks as he pressed gentle kisses to my forehead. "How are you feeling?" he asked as he shifted, pulling me closer.

I nuzzled my cheek against his chest and closed my eyes instead of answering. All the emotions from earlier were absent and in their stead, I felt completely content, endorphins racing through my body.

"Rest, princess," Hunter whispered in my ear from behind me. "Tomorrow will be a long day."

Chapter Thirteen

Rayne

Well before the sun came up, Hunter shook my shoulder, pulling me from the fitful sleep I'd fallen into hours before. "It's time," he murmured, setting a cup of coffee on the bedside table and kissing my forehead.

Any other morning, I would have grumbled about waking up so early, but as I unwound the sheets from around my legs, nervous energy settled under my skin. Despite my stomach doing somersaults, I grabbed the cup of liquid energy and greedily gulped half of it down before standing. It seemed counterintuitive to consume coffee before heading into battle, but I needed any help I could get. Perhaps a combination of adrenaline and caffeine would allow me to hyper-focus.

I walked into the bathroom and quickly washed my face, deciding to forego a shower. Between gunpowder and blood, I knew I would need one later in the day. I brushed my fingers through my hair, snagging on knots, before placing the tangled strands into a messy bun that could be hidden under a beanie.

Striding back into my bedroom, I noticed a pile of black clothes neatly folded and laying on the end of the bed. I was unsure of which man had taken it upon himself to pick out my clothes, but my best guess was Hunter. Black wasn't essential for a job like this. After all, we weren't exactly sneaking into the building, but it would help hide any potential unsavory stains incurred in the next several hours.

I shrugged the clothes on quickly, laced up a pair of worn black combat boots, and grabbed my coffee. Once I was downstairs, I refilled the cup in my hand, looking around the main living space of the penthouse. The Christmas tree still stood near the windows, a reminder of the things we'd put off doing. Maybe tomorrow, the guys could help me put the ornaments and lights up for next year.

That thought briefly stopped me in my tracks as I stared at the tree. When had I begun to think of my relationship with the three men as something long-term?

I glanced at the men who were busy getting ready themselves. Hunter loaded the gun in his hand and looked up, raising a single eyebrow at me. "Careful with the amount of coffee you're drinking," he said, placing the weapon in his jacket pocket.

I tilted my head to the side and glared at him. His words were out of genuine concern, but today I was choosing violence. Between the lack of sleep and anxiety flooding my veins, my current mood could best be described as turbulent. "Mind your business. I'm a big girl and know my limits."

Hunter lifted both hands in a sign of surrender, and Ethan tried to suppress a smirk. He stepped towards me and tugged a black beanie over my head. “Remember, love, that we aren’t your enemies,” he whispered in my ear before grabbing my hand and squeezing.

Inhaling through my nose, I took a deep breath and turned to Hunter. Despite hating apologies, I knew a small one was in order for being snippy with him. Today was not the day for my brattiness to shine through. “Thank you for your concern.”

He nodded at me in acknowledgment before turning away and glancing at his phone. “We need to leave in fifteen.”

Ethan dropped my hand as Dominic approached me holding a white box topped with a black bow. He cleared his throat before thrusting it at me. “Only the best for our girl.”

Curiosity got the best of me, and I opened the top of the box. An amused grin broke out on my face. “I guess you were listening when I was complaining the night Trace attacked me.”

That night felt like a lifetime ago. My exact words were, “*I am never wearing heels again to an event with you guys. The next present that I want is a thigh holster.*” Now I was the owner of two.

Hunter took the box from my hands and knelt in front of me. “We always listen,” he mumbled as he strapped the leather to my body, carefully checking the placement and buckles.

When he was finished, Dominic stepped behind me, his breath feathering across my exposed skin. Slipping a knife into the sheath on the right side and a gun on the left, he murmured in my ear, low enough where no one else could overhear what he was saying. “Do you like them?” His fingers slowly trailed up my thighs to my hips and I nodded.

“I don’t really want the gun,” I admitted quietly, “but I do like them.”

He pulled me back against his chest. “I know, but it’s for your safety.” He pressed a quick kiss to my cheek before releasing me. “Are you ready?”

I adjusted the beanie Ethan had haphazardly placed over my hair and walked over to Smudge. She was lying on a stool at the breakfast bar, watching the commotion going on around her. I scratched her behind the ears before responding. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Heavy silence enveloped us as Dominic grabbed my hand and pulled his car keys from his pockets. I tapped my free fingers against my thigh as we walked into the elevator, trying to center myself and push away the nervous energy. Ethan stood beside me and placed heavy objects inside my pocket. As much as I hated belts, I was grateful for the one I was wearing today. The weight of the metal pulled the fabric of my pants down. I reached inside and my fingers touched cold metal. Two extra magazines. I glanced at him and frowned.

“Just in case,” he mouthed at me. My mind flitted back to the day he carried me to the firing range at Aldo’s warehouse,

all of them insisting I needed to learn to use a gun. *“There are situations where you won’t be close enough to stab them.”* I shook my head, trying to free myself from the memories. That day, I’d finally been able to shoot the paper silhouettes. The shots had been messy, but the extra rounds would ensure that eventually I’d hit something, hopefully disabling the person I was aiming at. *As long as they didn’t hit me first,* I thought to myself.

Dominic’s fingers tightened around mine as the doors opened and we stepped out into the parking garage. The cold bit at my skin as we walked toward the black SUV and the anxiety that had been threatening to suffocate me all week was replaced by determination. No matter what we had to do or who we had to take out, the women trapped at the Rose would be free today.

I settled into the backseat next to Hunter and locked my seatbelt in place. Wordlessly, Dominic pulled out of the garage onto the city street. I stared out of the window into the darkness, watching as the lights and buildings blurred by. Hunter’s phone buzzed, and he glanced at the screen. “They’ll be there in ten minutes. Oliver’s already parked down the block at the old auto body place.”

“Good. We’ll be there around the same time,” Dominic said, focusing on the road. “Let’s hope everyone is ready at the safe house. Nia’s still on standby?”

“Yeah, everything is taken care of,” he replied. He rested his arm across my back and tugged me closer. I rested my head on

his shoulder, relishing the warmth of his body for a moment. “After this is over and Ayers is dead, we should go somewhere. A family vacation of sorts. Where would you want to go?”

I thought for several seconds before replying. “I don’t care, as long as it’s far away from here and the three of you go with me.”

“My vote is the beach,” Ethan chimed in. “We can swim or lay out in the sun. Drink lots of rum. Maybe go fishing.” I snorted at his response, and he gave me a curious look over his shoulder. “What?”

Of course, he would choose the beach. Ethan looked more like a surfer than a businessman with his wavy blond hair and blue eyes. I tried to straighten my facial expression. “It’s nothing. Where would you go, Dominic?” This was mindless small talk, but filling in the silence helped to keep my nerves at bay.

He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, a habit I noticed he did when he was thinking. “The beach would be fine. Or if you wanted, we could rent a cabin in the mountains. We could still fish, but it would be more secluded.”

“I like that idea,” Hunter whispered in my ear, his fingers trailing along my ribs. “It’s decided,” he said louder. “We should find a cabin. We can go in the spring when leaves start sprouting on the trees again.” I looked in the rearview mirror and saw the corner of Dominic’s lips lift.

“Oh, and we can stop by all the little mom-and-pop candy shops,” Ethan added.

Soon, the SUV pulled into the parking lot of the Ruby Rose, gravel crunching underneath the tires, and the visions of somewhere faraway were replaced with the reality of the present. The neon sign still flashed, casting the parking lot in a pink glow. There were a handful of cars scattered near the building, but thankfully, none of the dancers hung around outside like our last visit. I straightened up and unbuckled my seatbelt as Dominic parked behind the building, out of sight and away from any street lights.

Soon, a second black SUV pulled into the parking space beside us. I quietly opened the door and stepped out, stretching my legs. The shadows shrouded us as we stood there, waiting for everyone to pile out of the vehicles. “Maybe we should have parked farther away,” I mumbled. “What if they see us?”

The men around me pulled guns from their pockets and nodded at each other before slowly stalking toward the building. “Tonight, we aren’t worried about the element of surprise. Anyone left inside who works for Ayers, minus the dancers...”

He stopped speaking, and I could fill in the blanks. All the security still inside was collateral damage. They knew about the auctions and they would see our faces. They’d signed their own death warrants.

Chapter Fourteen

Dominic

The drive to the Ruby Rose was short, less than twenty minutes given the light traffic on the road this time of the day. I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel, lost in thought as I navigated the city, trying to keep track of what needed to be done today.

Hunter discussed where we would all go after everything was over, more than likely in an attempt to keep Rayne's mind off of what we were about to do. Sure, she'd done jobs for Oliver before, but this would probably turn into a bloodbath.

Part of me wished that Rayne had stayed behind at the safe house across town with Victoria and Kourtney. At least she would've been out of harm's way. Despite those thoughts, I knew that bringing it up was a terrible idea. As fiercely stubborn as Rayne was, the conversation would have been nothing more than an argument waiting to happen.

At least she knew how to use a gun now, thanks to Ethan. He'd never told us exactly how well she'd done that day, but I was confident she could figure it out. Add in the amount of

ammunition Ethan tucked into her pockets and the probability of her hitting a potential target increased exponentially.

I went down my mental checklist as I pulled into the parking lot, glancing around for the best space to park the SUV. The back corner seemed like a reasonable bet. There were fewer lights and windows in that area, though in just a few minutes, none of that would matter. The security inside would notice our presence quickly.

As I exited the car, Paul pulled into the spot beside me. He stepped out of the vehicle and walked toward me. “In and out as quickly as possible. We’ll burn all the evidence so that he can’t use this location again,” he said where only I could hear.

I nodded at him. “You know he’ll just move everything somewhere new.”

The older man sighed at me. “I know. It’s up to you three and your girl to take care of him. Not just for vengeance, but also to ensure this shit doesn’t happen again. I need y’all to live up to your nickname.”

The Three Kings. Before Rayne showed up, I’d assumed those days were over. I pulled the gun from the pocket of my jacket. “Don’t worry, I think we’ve got that handled. We’ve just got to make it through today.”

I glanced around me, making sure that everyone was here and we were all ready. Paul, Aldo, Rory, Ignacio, and the four of us. Eight against who knows how many people are inside. “When is Oliver pulling up?” I asked no one in particular.

Aldo shifted beside me. “In about ten minutes. It should be enough time to clear the first floor of the building. Marie’s driving and the last thing he needs right now is someone shooting at him or her.”

I couldn’t disagree with that sentiment. “Let’s do this then,” I told him as I started walking through the shadows of the parking lot towards the building. As we approached the back entrance, I gave Ethan a look and motioned toward the lock. Rayne stayed silent, watching as he pulled a small case out of his pocket and made quick work of the tumblers.

When he pulled open the door, the heavy sound of bass from the speakers inside filled the air, and I hoped it would help cover any noise we made. I peeked my head inside, glancing around the space and ensuring that no one was in the back hallway. “Split up,” I mumbled. “Rayne, you and Ethan head downstairs and start unlocking the cages. Try to keep everyone calm until I come and get you. Rory and Ignacio, clear the rooms at the end of the hall. We’ll clear the rest and meet up before we head to the front.”

“Remember, we need to do this as fast as possible,” Aldo reminded everyone.

I watched as Rayne and Ethan slipped inside the door leading to the basement and reminded myself to breathe. If anyone could take care of themselves in a high-stress situation, it would be her. Ethan was just icing on the cake. There was no way he would allow anything to happen to her.

Hunter and I stalked down the hallway, Paul and Aldo behind us, trying the doors on each side. Each time, we would open the door and peer inside, ensuring that the room was empty. When we reached the last door on the left, a single voice came from inside. I cracked it open, trying to see how many people occupied the space.

From my vantage point, a woman stood beside the desk, her body wracked with silent sobs. She was obviously one of the club's dancers, still dressed in nothing but a tiny, sheer dress that covered very little. "I warned you what would happen if you didn't bring in enough money this week, Hope," a deep voice rumbled.

I couldn't quite see the man from my vantage point, but his hand darted out, knocking the woman to the side. A whimper left her mouth and before she could respond, Hunter slammed open the door, gun leveled on the man sitting behind the desk. "Who the fuck are all of you? How'd you get in here?" he asked.

Before Hunter could speak, a shot rang through the air, and his body slumped in the chair. A perfect shot between the eyes. Blood trickled down his face, and I glimpsed over my shoulder to see Aldo lowering his gun. He shrugged at me. "Decided we should skip the predictable villain monologue. I've heard enough in my day." I didn't necessarily disagree with his logic, but made a quick note to myself not to piss him off in the future.

Tucking the gun in his waistband, Hunter carefully walked toward the woman who sat shocked on the carpet near the man's body. He offered her his hand, helping her up from the floor. "It's okay," he said, his voice soothing like he was speaking to a wounded animal. "Are the other dancers gone?" Her eyes were wide, and she turned pale, staring at the dead body. He gently shook her shoulder. "Listen to me. I can get you out of here, but I need to know that everyone else went home."

She turned her face to him and blinked several times. "I was the last one still here," she said, her voice cracking.

"I'm going to put you in the room next door so you aren't in here with him anymore. I want you to stay there quietly until one of us comes to get you. Do you understand?" He was patient but firm with the young woman and she nodded in response to his questions.

After the woman was tucked away safely and all the rooms in the hallway were cleared, it was time for part two of our plan. The front entry area where the bar and stage were located would be trickier to maneuver and the likelihood that someone might be injured increased. That was the second reason Nia was waiting at the safe house. Not only would many of the women need medical attention, but there was a possibility that we would as well. It was nothing we couldn't handle. Most of us had been shot or stabbed at least a few times.

Rory looked around the corner of the door frame, noting how many people were in the next room. He gave me a cocky

smile. “There are only ten of them I can see,” he stated quietly. “I don’t know why you paired Ethan with Rayne. Between the two of us—”

“That’s exactly why Ethan is paired with Rayne. The last time the two of you worked together on a job, we spent months cleaning it up,” Paul mumbled.

I worked to stifle a laugh at the older man. Rory and Ethan together were unstoppable, but last summer, the two had decided to leave a message, forcing us to lie low.

It was actually how Rayne had ended up involved with Ayers. I called in a favor from Oliver to burn down a building that supposedly held servers and the rest was history.

Rory rolled his eyes at his father. “All of them seem preoccupied. They don’t suspect anything.”

I glanced over Rory’s shoulder, taking in the scene before me. Ten men were scattered across the open space. Three sat at the bar nursing drinks, lost in conversation. Two stood in the corner, guns strapped to their hips. The other five played cards at a table in the middle of the room.

Placement and activity didn’t account for how quick of a draw any of them were, but there were six of us and we were prepared. The sooner they were disposed of, the sooner we could get back to Rayne and get the women trapped downstairs out.

“How good of a shot are you, son?” Aldo asked, staring at me.

“Good enough for only ten of them,” I reassured him.

He lifted his eyebrows at me. “Let’s hope you’re right.”

He tilted his chin up, giving us a silent signal, and we collectively paused, preparing ourselves for the next several minutes.

Then havoc ensued.

We turned the corner into the room and the smell of spent gunpowder and sulfur filled the air quickly as shots rang out over the heavy bass of the music playing.

I aimed for the three men at the bar, surprise lining their features as I steadied myself, firing several rounds at the small group. The first fell, his body hitting the floor with a thud while the man sitting beside him clutched his arm, crimson spreading down the sleeve of his shirt.

I didn’t have time to focus on the other men in the room and prayed that someone was covering me as I watched a person bleeding dart around the bar. My heart pounded in my chest and adrenaline coursed through my veins as I ducked behind a nearby table to get closer. I fired several shots when his head appeared several feet away above the dark wood. Bullets flew through the air and bottles shattered behind the bar from where I had missed my mark. Glass rained onto the floor, its sound adding to the chaos, but the bleeding man didn’t resurface.

One by one, the group of ten fell. Finally, the only sound filling the air was the heavy bass. “Can someone shut that shit off?” Paul asked as he surveyed the damage and ensured that

the men laying on the floor were no longer breathing. He pushed against one of the bodies lying on the floor with the toe of his shoe. He pointed at Hunter and Rory. “Go upstairs and make sure it’s clear. Dominic, go check on your girl. Help get everyone outside to the van.”

Ignacio messed with the sound system and everything fell silent. A muffled shriek pierced the air, and I stood in shock for half a second before racing to the basement stairs, worried about what I would find.

Chapter Fifteen

Rayne

After Dominic's orders, Ethan and I ghosted down the dark hallway, stopping in front of the door leading to the basement. Sweat beaded on my brow and I tapped my foot impatiently, trying to settle the anxiety threatening to overwhelm me again. In some ways, I wished Dominic would've given the task of picking locks to me. At least then I would have something to do with my hands and to preoccupy my thoughts. Instead, I stood there awkwardly, waiting for him to finish.

There were several factors that worked to our advantage. The first was the amount of organization that went into tonight's plans. The second was that the music coming from the sound system would help to muffle any noise we made unlocking the cages downstairs.

Ethan worked quietly, finally pushing the door open after the final tumbler fell into place. He pulled a small flashlight from his pocket and turned it on before placing his palm on the small of my back. "Ready to do this?" he asked quietly.

A pop came from down the hallway and I nodded my head. It seemed like things were already escalating and we needed to hurry. As we descended the steps, the music from upstairs slowly faded and the scent of mildew and sickness clung to my nose.

After tonight, they would be free, I reminded myself.

At the bottom of the stairs, I found the light switch and pushed it up. One woman gasped and another began crying as the room was illuminated. “Shh, it’s okay,” I said as loudly as I dared. “Don’t be scared, it’s just me.”

The woman’s cries got louder as Ethan approached the metal bars, attempting to unlock the mechanism in front of him. A divot formed between his eyebrows and he bit his lip, concentrating on the task at hand. “Stop being a dumb bitch,” Lexi hissed as she struggled to stand, staggering backward on her feet. “I know them. They’re here to get us out.” The woman pressed a hand over her mouth, trying to muffle her cries. Her body shook with silent sobs that I hoped were from relief instead of fear.

“Ethan, do you have another lock pick?” I asked, knowing if the two of us were both working, this would go faster. Standing here staring made me feel useless.

“One sec,” he mumbled as the lock finally popped open. The woman inside pushed her body further against the wall, tears streaming down her face. He lifted his chin in her direction and tossed me something from his pocket. “Before you start on locks, see if you can convince her to trust us.”

Lexi rolled her eyes at him even though her cheeks were also wet. “Rayne, let me out first. I’ll handle everyone else while you work,” she said, clutching the bars in front of her.

I approached where she stood, her face pressed against the metal. “Good idea. We both know that I’m not an overly charismatic person to begin with.”

She chuckled at my statement through her tears as I got to work. “I know we never really got along, but thank you for coming back for me,” she whispered as I worked with the thin metal pieces in my hand.

I shook my head at her, unwilling to meet her eyes. We hadn’t always gotten along. Last summer, Lexi made Victoria’s life miserable when she began dating Rory. Add in substance abuse issues and a stint in rehab hosted by Oliver and our past was dicey. Despite everything, I would never wish her current fate on anyone. What was happening in this basement made me sick to my stomach.

The lock finally clicked into place and I looked up at her. “None of that matters to me now.” I swallowed the hard lump forming in my throat. “All that matters is you convincing the others to let us help. Oliver and Marie are outside, but we have to wait on the signal to head out.”

Lexi gave me a half-hearted smile as she limped across to the opened cage. “I’ll see what I can do.”

The next several minutes were filled with Ethan and me working on the locks while Lexi comforted the women inside.

How she remained so composed considering the last several weeks, I wasn't sure.

There were two cages that still needed to be unlocked when I heard a loud shriek from one of the women huddled together in the corner near the stairs. My skin crawled at the sound and I looked up. What I saw caused my breath to hitch in my chest.

Bennett, Ayers' right-hand man, stood at the base of the stairs with a gun trained on Ethan. His gaze caught mine and his face split in two with a broad smile that didn't meet his eyes. "Well, well. What do we have here?" he asked as he cocked the weapon. "You surely didn't think that there weren't cameras protecting the merchandise?"

Lexi's eyes widened at his words, and the women surrounding her huddled closer together. Bennett's attention returned to Ethan. "I'm not sure what any of you are hoping to accomplish here. Everyone in this building is replaceable."

Fury flowed through me as I listened to his words. He obviously didn't realize he was among the people in this building that could be replaced. There was no doubt in my mind that Ayers would get rid of him without a second thought. My fingers inched towards my thigh incrementally, hoping not to draw his attention.

Time slowed to a crawl, and I watched in slow motion as Lexi jumped toward the blond-haired man. The pistol in his hand went off filling the air with gunpowder as I drew the gun

from the holster on my leg. The bullet struck Ethan's shoulder, slamming him back against the metal bars behind him.

A silent scream caught in my throat, and white, cold adrenaline floated through my veins. Scarlet stained Ethan's white shirt and he grunted in pain. I aimed my gun at Bennett as he jerked Lexi off his side and held her in front of him, using her as a shield.

"What are you going to do?" he sneered at me as his grip on Lexi tightened. His hand circled her throat and squeezed. "I doubt you even know how to use the gun you're holding."

I swallowed again, knowing that his words weren't far from hitting the mark, yet I also knew that inaction at this moment would be devastating. There was no way I could lose Ethan. Not after everything we'd been through. Fresh tears streamed down Lexi's cheeks and she gave me a silent nod even as her body shook from fear.

The last time I'd gone to the range to practice flashed before my eyes. The only thing keeping me grounded was the fact that even trying to make a body shot, I'd only been able to hit the paper target's thigh. At this moment, I wished I'd been able to ensure a headshot to free myself of the nightmare I was trapped in.

"Are you sure that I don't know how to use a gun?" I asked. It was a rhetorical question, but I was buying myself precious seconds, steeling myself for what I was about to do. My heart pounded in my ears, canceling every other noise in the room.

“Just do it!” Lexi screamed at me as I squeezed the trigger. The world tilted sideways and time sped up.

Several things happened at once. Lexi fell to the side, clutching her leg from where the bullet had grazed her skin. Bennett stumbled backward and dropped his weapon on the concrete floor as he fell into the metal bars behind him. Ethan lunged toward him, grabbing his throat between his hands, and I fell to my knees briefly.

“Don’t kill him,” I managed to choke out. “That’s for me.”

I stood up, my muscles shaking from the adrenaline coursing through my body, and spit in his direction. Fuck him for the part he played in destroying my life.

As I shoved my weapon back in the holster, I contemplated exactly what I wanted to do and how he should suffer in his last moments. He didn’t deserve a clean death, especially considering what the women huddled together near the stairs had endured.

“What do you want to do with him?” Ethan gritted out, squeezing his throat tighter. Bennett’s face grew redder and the vein on his forehead popped out as I thought.

I walked closer and put my hand on Ethan’s shoulder. “Stand him up.”

Ethan’s grip loosened, and he shoved him against the iron bars, holding him there while I emptied his pockets. Stashing the keyring, I looked at Ethan. “Throw him inside. We’ll come back to deal with him after we get them out.”

Heavy footsteps pounded down the stairs and Dominic appeared, weapon drawn and eyes wild. Taking in the room, relief slowly washed over his features and his shoulders relaxed slightly. “Well, it looks like you’ve got this handled.”

“We need to get them into the van before I take care of him. Is the rest of the building cleared?” I asked.

He tucked the gun away in his jacket and held out his hand to me. “Let’s get everyone upstairs, sweetheart.” He leaned close to me and lowered his voice. “I thought maybe you would want the honor of lighting this place up.”

A smile spread across my cheeks. The only thing that would make me happier might be Ayers completely vanishing off the face of the Earth. I nodded to Lexi. “Let’s get the fuck out of here. There’s food and clean clothes at the safe house.”

Ethan unlocked the final two cages and Lexi whispered to the women surrounding her, reassuring them that everything was going to be okay. And it would be eventually.

I was going to do everything in my power to ensure that Wayne Ayers could never harm another person again.

Chapter Sixteen

Rayne

Positioned near the door of the white cargo van, I peeked my head in, making sure that all the women were settled in. “Take care of them,” I told Oliver. Pesky emotions clogged my throat again, and I tried to ignore them. I still had things to do this morning. “Make sure that Nia looks at Lexi’s leg.”

Olly’s eyes shined in the early morning light and his voice sounded like gravel when he spoke. “You did good tonight, firebug. Really good.”

I looked over my shoulder at the group of men standing beside the Ruby Rose. “Ethan, go with them. Your shoulder—”

Ethan rolled his eyes and cut me off. “It’s fine for a few more minutes. We still have things to take care of.”

I took a deep breath in as Oliver chuckled. “He’ll be fine. We’ll get the girls settled in. By the time you get there, Nia will be ready to patch everyone up.”

I slid the door closed, ensuring it was secured, and strode towards the building. “Fine. Let’s go finish this.”

I pushed past the men standing at the back entrance and headed to the basement. The first thing on my list was guaranteeing that Bennett wouldn't walk out of here alive. It wasn't just for vengeance or retribution. We didn't need him running back to Ayers and informing him of the events of the morning. He would find out soon enough.

I walked down the stairs a final time and took a long look around the space, ignoring the threats coming from Bennett's mouth. Dominic and Hunter stood at the bottom of the stairs, watching me carefully.

Sound was muffled, almost as if I was swimming underwater and my body felt weightless. I wanted to burn the sights before me into my brain to fuel the coming week. This was no longer just about me. This was about justice for all the victims.

"How long had this been going on?" I asked the man standing behind me.

Hunter put his hand on my shoulder. "At least since last summer."

I held my shoulders back and looked at him. "How many victims do you think..."

He frowned at me and kissed my forehead before lowering his voice. "Don't do that right now. There's no way to know."

I walked closer to Bennett, my fingers brushing against the knife strapped to my thigh. "Estimate. You have the financial

records.” I trained my eyes on the man behind the bars, waiting for an answer.

Hunter cleared his throat, but Dominic was the one who answered as he leaned against the wall. “Lowest estimate is at least seventy. He’s made over a million dollars off of this venture alone.”

Hunter came close to me and folded his arms around my waist, pulling my back to his chest. His arms grounded me and his breath caressed my cheek as he whispered in my ear. “I need you to listen to me, princess. I know you want him to hurt, but he’s nothing. Just some guy blindly following orders who has an over-inflated sense of self. We need to hurry this up and be out of here soon. Everyone else is spreading accelerants around the building. Give him a clean death and we can get the fuck out.”

He pulled my fingers away from where they rested against my knife and pulled them to his lips, giving them a gentle kiss. Bennett didn’t deserve a clean death, but Hunter was right. We still had things to do today. “Do you want me to do this?” he asked.

I shook my head at him. Ethan had taken care of Libby, and all of them had a hand in taking care of Trace. I pulled my hand away and unholstered the gun on my thigh, leveling it on the man behind the metal bars. Bennett backed away from us, pressing his body against the back wall, trying to create the illusion of distance. My hands shook as I looked at him, knowing that he deserved it but my next actions I couldn’t take

back. Hunter's presence grounded me in the moment, and I squeezed the trigger.

The room filled with the smell of spent gunpowder as blood trickled from the wound in Bennett's chest, blooming on the front of his shirt. His chest heaved as he attempted to breathe and he cursed in pain. He wasn't dead yet, but between blood loss and smoke inhalation, he would be soon. I handed the gun to Hunter and pulled away, ready to finish what we started and get out of here. "Make sure everything down here is coated in gasoline," I told him as I walked away. "Where's Ethan?"

"He was patching himself up and then helping Rory," Dominic responded from behind me, placing his hand on the small of my back.

The smell of cheap liquor and gasoline filled my nose as I stepped onto the main floor. A look of unadulterated joy was plastered to Ethan's face as he splashed a bottle of vodka onto the walls. My eyes went to the red stain on his shirt that contrasted with the stark white of the cotton surrounding it. "How are you feeling?"

He shrugged at me as he flung the bottle against the wall, glass shattering onto the floor below. "I'm fine, I promise. Are you ready to get out of here?"

"Upstairs is clear?"

Rory appeared beside him, blood on the cuffs of his shirt. "Everything is taken care of, boss lady. The only thing left is to light this place up."

He wiped his brow with his sleeve, smearing the blood across his skin as Ethan stepped close and handed me a box of matches, closing my fingers around it. Everyone filed out the back door and waited for me.

This was finally it. Even prior to the auctions, the Ruby Rose was a place of nightmares. Women went missing weekly and were discarded like trash on the outskirts of the city. After it burned, someone should salt the ground. Nothing good ever came from this place.

I flicked the match head against the strip and dropped it into a trail of liquid on the floor. The flames quickly engulfed the room, darting out in all directions, and danced along every surface. The wood crackled and sparks flew into the air as someone grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward the exit.



The car ride to the safe house was silent, and exhaustion crept into my bones. My muscles shook from the adrenaline finally subsiding and I wanted nothing more than to curl up on the seat and sleep, but I couldn't. Not yet, at least.

Dominic turned the music streaming from the radio up, covering the heavy silence in the car, and I glanced in the rearview mirror. Ethan gave me a small smile when he caught me staring. He looked a little pale and a light sheen of sweat covered his skin.

“Are you sure you're okay?” I asked.

“Positive. The only thing that would make me feel better is if you were sitting in my lap.”

He gave me a quick wink, and Hunter chuckled beside me. “Of course, you would go straight to that. Get shot and immediately think of sex.”

I scoffed at both of them, exasperated. “We’ll talk about sex as soon as Nia looks at the bullet wound.”

“Promise?” Ethan teased, and I rolled my eyes, turning my attention to the buildings passing by.

Waking up early wasn’t exactly my forte. Add in shooting someone, Ethan and Lexi being wounded, and setting a building on fire. I would kill for a cup of coffee.

One more step of our plan was completed and for that, I could breathe a sigh of relief. I wasn’t sure what the timeline was for taking care of Ayers or the rest, but so far today was a success.

Dominic drove into the outskirts of Strathmore and the dilapidated industrial buildings fell away to a small suburban area filled with midsize homes. Lawns were neatly manicured and children played outside, riding the new bikes they received for the holidays despite the chill in the air. We turned onto a cul-de-sac and parked in front of a two-story white house. The black shutters and crimson door were a stark contrast to the paint. Hedges neatly lined the front. It fit in perfectly with the surrounding homes and seemed warm and inviting. From an outsider’s perspective, you’d have no clue

that this was a safe house for people involved in organized crime.

I trudged to the house and knocked before trying the knob. The door was unlocked and I stepped inside, shrugging off my jacket and hanging it on a hook in the entryway.

Joey, one of Oliver's men, peered around the corner and grinned. "I was wondering when you were going to show up. Long morning, killer?"

I gave him my best scowl as I passed by. "Please tell me there's coffee," I responded as I walked into the kitchen.

And just like that, everything from this morning was worth it. A few of the women from the Rose were seated around a large wooden table with cups and plates, whispering amongst themselves.

Victoria stood at the stove, making something that smelled faintly of cinnamon. "Of course there's coffee. I know how you are in the morning," she laughed as she continued working.

I searched through the cabinets of the spacious kitchen and found a mug as I listened to the quiet murmuring behind me.

Victoria pulled me in for a hug and kissed my cheek. "You did something good today," she whispered.

As I poured the dark liquid from the carafe, I raised my eyebrows. "I know. I just wish there had been a different way. How's Lexi?"

The corner of her lips lifted slightly. “Nia said it was just a scratch but she’s raising hell in one of the rooms right now.”

I took a sip of the hot beverage, momentarily not caring about sugar or cream. “Sounds about right.”

I clutched my cup to my chest as I wandered through the house, taking in the sights. Kourtney knelt in front of a large tote on the floor sorting through clothes and handing items to several of the women.

As I entered the hallway, I heard it. Lexi’s raised voice with panic lacing the edges. I couldn’t hear Oliver’s words, only the patient and calm tone he was using.

“You can’t expect me to stay here!” she yelled. “It’s just another cage.”

Ignacio rushed past me and I followed behind him, curious about what he would say. He pulled her into a tight embrace and crushed her against his chest. That wasn’t what I expected, and neither were the words that came next. “I’ve known you for a long time, and I know you can take care of yourself, but he’s right. You can’t go back to your apartment. Not yet.”

Lexi sobbed against him, and his grip tightened. “Where am I going to go?”

Emotion welled in my throat as I watched her battle her thoughts. “Come stay with me for a little while if you can’t stay here. At least then someone can keep an eye on you. We can swing by your place and grab some things. Then you can get some food and a nice long shower.”

Oliver nodded in approval, and Lexi's hold loosened.

After the two of them left the room, I tilted my head towards Olly. "So those two..."

He sighed as he leaned back against the wall. "No clue. Lexi's complicated on a good day. I'll say a prayer for Ethan's friend because he's going to need it." He rubbed his face with both hands. "Speaking of Ethan, how's his shoulder?"

I grimaced. "No idea yet. That's my next stop."

He pointed a thumb behind him. "Nia's in the room at the end."

When I pushed open the door, Ethan sat in front of Nia frowning. His shirt lay crumpled on the floor at his feet while she cleaned the wound on his shoulder, her fingers gently prodding his skin.

She looked up, and when she saw me she shook her head. "At least this time, it isn't you who's injured."

Chapter Seventeen

Ethan

I sauntered into the house after Rayne disappeared and searched for Nia. While everyone else was getting the women from the Rose settled, I had something else planned but first I needed my shoulder stitched up.

I couldn't tell anyone about my plans for the day. If I did, they would try to stop me or tell me to wait until I was healed. Fuck that. It had been long enough.

My shoulder ached from the wound and my skin was tacky from where blood had partially dried. I dreaded trying to remove the fabric from where it clung. I debated my options as I walked through the different rooms, assessing everything. Most of the women were slowly settling in while Victoria plied them with food and Kourtney helped them sort through clothes and toiletries. Most were quiet, and a few were still teary-eyed, but hopefully, with help from Ash and the others, they would be okay. Eventually.

Out of the people gathered this morning, it looked like I was the one who had the most physical damage. Rory had a cut

from glass shattering, Ignacio had a few scrapes, and Aldo's jaw was bruised somehow, but overall we were okay. That in itself was a miracle.

Joey looked me over and whistled.

"Fuck off," I told him with a grin. "It's not as bad as it looks."

He looked at me with amusement and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm sure, but just in case, the doc is in the bedroom at the end of the hall."

Okay, it was definitely as bad as it looked, but I didn't have time for this. I just needed some stitches, potentially some antibiotics, and possibly a tetanus booster. I needed to keep my whining to a minimum or Hunter would give me hell.

I opened the door leading into the bedroom and Nia sat on the end of the bed, pinching the bridge of her nose. She gave me a once over and sighed deeply, gesturing to the chair near the wall. "Shirt off so I can see," was all she said to me as she tugged on a pair of latex gloves.

Shrugging off the shirt, I closed my eyes and envisioned myself somewhere else as she poked at the oozing skin on my shoulder. *I've lived through worse than a bullet in my shoulder and stitches.* When the needle pierced my flesh, I clenched my jaw, refusing to show any discomfort. The doctor mumbled under her breath as she worked. Something about "no one is invincible," but my mind was focused on the hypothetical getaway we discussed with Rayne. After all of this is over, a break would be nice.

The door squeaked open and there stood the woman I was fantasizing about, wide-eyed and frowning, fists clenched at her side. Nia muttered something to her, but she didn't reply, all of her attention instead focused on me.

“Miss me that much?” I managed to grit out between my teeth. The needle pierced my skin one last time and the good doctor stared at me.

“You should probably take it easy for a few days. I don't want you pulling your stitches,” Nia told me as I gave her an easy smile and scooped my stained shirt off the floor.

“There's no rest for the wicked.”

“Ethan, she's serious,” Rayne said, exasperation lining her tone.

I bent down to press a gentle kiss to her forehead. “Don't be like that, baby.” Her frown deepened as she watched me toss the shirt into the garbage can and step toward the closet. I rifled through the clothes hanging there until I found a black button-up that would work as well as a hoodie. “I know she's serious, but I have something I need to handle,” I told her as I put the shirt and hoodie on, trying to ignore the pain.

“Does anyone else know what you're about to do?” Nia asked.

When I didn't answer, Rayne hid her face in her hands, done with the discussion. She knew I hadn't informed anyone of my plans for the day. I gave her one last kiss on her forehead

before whispering, “I’ll meet you back home tonight. Don’t be mad.”

I sauntered down the hallway, attempting to look as casual as possible while keeping my eyes peeled for Ignacio or Rory. This was the part of my plan that I hadn’t quite worked out yet. Both would take a bullet for me and both knew how to keep their mouths shut.

I finally spotted Rory sitting in the kitchen watching Victoria as she ladled something from a large pot into ceramic bowls for the women sitting around the table. When I motioned to him, he followed me out the back door, waiting for me to speak.

“I need your car keys,” I told him as I pulled a joint from my pocket. Leaning against the siding of the house I took a long pull and held it while I waited for his response.

He held his hand out, and I passed it to him. “Why? What are you about to do?” he asked as he took a drag.

I tried to sort out my response as I stared at the sky. Morning had finally broken and the last bits of pink and orange were fading. “I don’t think you want an honest answer,” I finally settled on. “Besides you owe me.”

He glared as he handed the joint back to me. “I’ll let you borrow my car, but we need to get something straight. I no longer owe you shit. We’re well past even for last summer. If it weren’t for our actions, you never would have met your girl.”

Fuck. He had a point there. “Just hand me your keys, man. I’ll get it back to you in one piece.”

He dug through his pockets before tossing me his keyring and I smirked at him as I took one last drag, stubbing it out on the wooden railing beside me as I tried to ignore the pain in my shoulder.



The drive to my father’s house wasn’t long. It was midmorning when I turned into the upper crust neighborhood filled with sculpted hedges and wrought iron fences. A few cars passed me as I drove down the street and I wondered what exactly would happen. How would he react when he realized I was no longer his punching bag? That he would finally be forced to face the sins of his past?

Prior to a week ago, I assumed my father was just another narcissistic asshole who abused his only child. Most of the scars of my adolescence I wore under my skin. He’d been allowed to get away with things for too long. My childhood after my mother died was bleak at best. Without her acting as a shield to his temper, his razor-sharp words and fists turned to me. Whenever he was done with me, bruises lined my face and blood splattered the floor.

Yet no one ever said a word. Whenever someone commented on a black eye at a sporting event, he would smile and use the phrase, “Boys will be boys.” People ignored the signs of what happened behind closed doors, choosing to focus on his success and wealth.

I'd bided my time, waiting to confront him about how he treated me for years, hoping in some ways that he would apologize. When I was younger, I longed for him to show me love and affection. Now I knew that was nothing but a pipe dream. The only thing he loved was himself and money.

And then I discovered he was involved with the auctions at the Ruby Rose. His disregard for anyone other than himself disgusted and infuriated me. He would stop at nothing to further line his pockets.

I parked Rory's car in the driveway of my childhood home and pulled the keys from the ignition, staring at the place that fueled my nightmares. The sprawling three-story brick home looked like it had sprung straight from the pages of a magazine with large white columns and a perfectly manicured lawn. No one would ever guess the true horrors of what happened inside the house.

I should have waited until it was dark to confront him and acted a bit more discreetly given my plans, but I wasn't overly worried. Hunter blackmailed the police chief and my father didn't believe in security systems. He felt he was untouchable. As long as I walked out of here casually, everything would be fine.

I glanced down at my phone to check the time. Somehow it was only eight. It felt like a lifetime had passed since I'd woken up this morning. Right now my father would be in his room lacing his shoes. No one else would even arrive at the house until ten, and the last thing I needed was witnesses.

Everything seemed to be in order for my hastily thrown-together plan.

Tugging the hood over my head, I headed to the front door. Lifting the doormat, I found the spare key he kept and silently slipped it into the lock, easing the door open. Stepping over the threshold, I closed it as quietly as possible, hoping not to alert the monster living within these walls.

Climbing the stairs, memories of the past attempted to assault me and I inhaled through my nose. Now wasn't the time to deal with that. I took a hard left down the hallway, walked toward my father's room, and pulled the gun from my waistband.

The metal was warm in my hand, heated from being pressed against my skin. I pushed open the door to his bedroom and a low creak alerted the man standing in front of the mirror to my presence.

His eyes met mine in the glass as he knotted the tie hanging around his neck. "Ethan, I wasn't expecting you. To what do I owe the pleasure?" He continued getting ready for work, acting as if this was just another morning despite glancing down at my hand.

I stepped closer and leaned my good shoulder against the wall, aiming the weapon at him. "Oh, I just thought we could have some quality father-son bonding time. We don't spend a lot of time just the two of us."

He scoffed at me, his face set in cold indifference. "I have a meeting in less than an hour, so whatever you want to say,

make it quick.”

A harsh laugh erupted from my throat. *You won't be making any meetings today or ever again for that fact.* When he finally turned to face me, I spoke again. “Do you know what I did this morning?” He narrowed his eyes at me and I grinned. “I was busy freeing all of your ‘merchandise’ from the Ruby Rose.”

His eyes widened, and his mouth opened before closing again. “What have you done?” That was all he said before I darted towards him and grabbed his collar, slamming him into the mirror behind him. The glass cracked on impact and I slammed him into it once more.

Sharp pain rolled through my shoulder and I gritted my teeth. *Almost done,* I reminded myself. “You’ve got it all wrong,’ he choked out.

I shook my head at him. “No, I don’t think I do. I heard everything I needed to the other night.”

As I pressed the smooth metal to his temple, his mask slipped back into place. “Ethan, I’m still your father. You can’t expect me to believe that you intend to kill me.”

My lips twitched at the idea. He had no clue. “That’s where you’re wrong. I could swallow the abuse I endured at your hands, but after the week I’ve had? You’re a monster and think you’re untouchable, Dad. What better person to take you down than me? Think of it as me seeking closure.”

I removed my hand from his shirt as I squeezed the trigger and watched as his body fell to the ground.

One last thing to do, I told myself, *and then this part of the nightmare is over*. Opening the walk-in closet doors, I tore things from their hangers, throwing them into the floor. I pulled several watches from their hiding places, shoving them in my pockets to dispose of later. In the parlor, I scattered documents across the floor and smashed crystal tumblers. All the way to the foyer I did things like that, hoping to make it look like a break-in gone wrong.

Chief Palmer would cover for me, he didn't really have a choice.

I left as quietly as I came, trying to ignore the emotions welling up inside of me. My vision was cloudy as I drove back to the penthouse.

Michael Carter was finally dead, and I hoped his soul was burning in hell.

Chapter Eighteen

Rayne

Sinking into the seat at the kitchen table, I held the steaming cup of coffee against my chest and vaguely listened to the women sitting around, allowing my mind to wander. Once everyone realized Ethan was gone, hell was sure to break loose. I should have argued with him, convinced him to stay here. Or maybe I should have alerted someone. There was a reason he didn't inform the guys of his plans: they would talk him out of them.

Dominic leaned down behind me and whispered in my ear, "Where is he, sweetheart?"

I shrugged, not turning to look at him. "He didn't tell me," I mumbled.

He cursed under his breath. "We're leaving in a few minutes. Everything here seems to be settled for the moment." He tapped the back of my chair with his fingers before straightening. "You should talk to Ash before we go. He was asking about how you were."

I closed my eyes for a moment and took a sip of the warm liquid before placing the mug on the table. At least I could tell Ash that I was taking his advice and writing in my notebook. I drifted through the house curious about what Ash wanted to discuss. When I finally found him, he was seated on the sofa next to Oliver in the small living room. Both were speaking so quietly I couldn't hear what was being said, but the deep frown carved into Olly's face worried me. I cleared my throat, letting them know I was standing there.

Oliver lifted his head, his piercing blue eyes staring a hole through me. "What did Ethan say before he left, firebug?"

I considered the best response before speaking. "All he said was don't be mad. Nia tried convincing him he needed rest but..."

Oliver's frown deepened, and Ash put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure it's fine. He's only been gone an hour. How much trouble could he have possibly caused?" Knowing Ethan I wasn't quite sure, but Ash was right. How much trouble could Ethan really get into?

Oliver's eyebrows lifted into his hairline. "You obviously don't know the three of them very well yet." He turned his attention back to me. "How are you doing after this morning?"

I gave him a tight smile. "I'm fine. The women seem to be getting settled. I saw Lexi head home with Ignacio."

He gave me a small nod. "Perhaps he can talk some sense into her. She's going to be seeing Ash soon."

I leaned my backside against the arm of the sofa. “Speaking of therapy, I wanted to tell you I started writing everything down like you suggested.”

Ash stroked his beard. “Does it help?”

How did I respond to that? It brought up such a confusing mixture of emotions. “It’s cathartic,” is what I finally settled on.

“Have you given any more thought to seeing your family and at least seeking closure?”

The answer to that question was no. I’d been so busy the past week with everything, it hadn’t really crossed my mind. “Soon,” I promised. “I think I’m going to head home and shower. Let me know if you need me.”

Oliver reached out and grabbed my hand, squeezing it gently. “And you do the same.”



Once we walked into the penthouse, I climbed the stairs to my room with only one thing on my mind: a shower so hot that it nearly scalded my skin. As I turned the knobs on the faucet and stripped out of my clothes, snippets of the conversation from the car ride home replayed in my mind.

Everyone was worried about Ethan disappearing and with good reason. The last time he vanished without telling someone where he was going, he got into a fight with two men, had a knife pulled on him, ended up in handcuffs, and was threatened by the chief of police.

I let the stream of water sting my skin as I scrubbed the scents of the day off of me. Gunpowder, sulfur, and blood were replaced with the familiar scent of strawberries and my muscles began to relax. By the time I stepped out of the shower, exhaustion clung heavily to my soul. Itoweled off and shrugged on a clean shirt before collapsing on the bed and falling into a restless sleep, wondering what Ethan was doing and when he would show back up.

A feeling of warmth washed over me and dragged me from my sleep sometime later. Rough hands tenderly brushed over the skin of my torso and soft lips pressed kisses to my cheek.

I blinked several times, trying to remove the haze of sleep that lingered.

Ethan laid beside me smelling of soap. His hair was still damp, and he reached out to brush some from his face. “Where did you go this morning?” I asked, the sound of my voice quiet even to my ears.

His hands stilled, and he frowned. I sat up and took a better look at him. Even in the dim light, his eyes were shiny and red. What had happened?

“I went to visit my father.” His voice cracked as he spoke and I wrapped my arms around his torso, holding him tight. He didn’t have to say the words for me to know what happened. Silently he shook against me, ducking his head into the crook between my neck and shoulder.

“Tell me what you need,” I whispered.

After several minutes, he managed to compose himself. His breathing slowed as I rubbed my hands down his back, soothing him. He wiped his face on his hands and then pressed his lips to mine, sealing it in a kiss.

“The only thing I need is you. I want to lose myself in you,” he murmured against my lips before tugging the hem of my shirt up and ducking his head to my breast. His tongue flicked against my nipple before his mouth latched on, swirling his tongue against the hardened peak. Moving across my chest to my other breast, he repeated the action. Lick. Bite. Suck.

If this was what he needed to feel better, if he needed to lose himself, then I would help him. I needed to know the details of what happened, but if he wanted to feel better for a few minutes, everything else could wait.

He pushed my thighs apart, settling his body over mine, grinding his hard length against the material of my underwear. “When you told me I should lose myself in you, it drove me crazy. You drive me crazy.”

He tugged against my bottom lip with his teeth. I rolled my hips against him, the only thing separating us was the thin piece of fabric that I wanted gone. The bare skin of his chest rubbed against my nipples as he moved, panting in my ear. His touches were desperate and needy, his fingers digging into my skin. “I can’t get enough of you.” His hips rocked against me and I wrapped my legs around his body, linking them at my ankles.

My hands brushed against his back, nails lightly scratching down his skin. “Then take what you need from me. Use me to feel good,” I whispered in his ear. He pulled away long enough to yank my shirt over my head, tossing it to the side. He ripped my underwear down my thighs, tearing the thin fabric, and hovered over my body again. As he rubbed the head of his cock through my wet folds, each pass hit my clit, and a moan escaped my lips.

He smirked before thrusting in. This wasn't Ethan's usual lovemaking where he reverently worshiped my body. This version of Ethan was unrestrained. Sweat beaded on his body, his muscles tense. Our skin slapped against one another as the headboard knocked against the wall. My nails dug into his shoulders, breaking the skin as he chased his demons away inside of me. He lifted my legs onto his shoulders, and my eyes closed as he hit a spot inside of me.

“Fuck. Just like that,” I cried out, biting down on my bottom lip. My skin was on fire as he reached between my thighs, his fingers making circles against my clit. I pushed my hips against him, meeting every stroke, and when he pinched the sensitive bundle of nerves between his fingers, the world around me faded. I cried out, clawing against the sheets beneath me as my body jerked.

He flipped us over, him lying on his back and me straddling his hips. “Look at me. Show me how you feel about me. Show me I'm not the only one who feels like this.” My hips began to move, slowly at first. My limbs were sluggish from my

orgasm as he brushed the hair away from my face. Soon the rhythm increased, my body moving against his faster.

He thrust beneath me, and his eyes closed. “Fuck, you feel so good. You’re like a drug and I can’t get enough.” His movements from beneath shook me and my breasts bounced from the impact as I leaned back, bracing my hands against his thighs. His fingers dug into me, his hands splayed against my hips, guiding me how he wanted me to move. He opened his eyes looking into mine. “When I told you I loved you, I meant it,” he rasped, his breath ragged. “I love every imperfection, every scar. I love your stretch marks and curves. You have no idea how fucking beautiful you are.”

His words were raw tonight, real. My eyes stung from the honeyed words that fell from his lips. This was a side to Ethan that was rarely seen. He usually masked all of his emotions behind arrogance and smug looks.

He pushed upward into me one last time, the muscles in his shoulders tense and his jaw clenched, before stilling inside of me. He rolled us onto our sides, our bodies tangled together and covered in sweat, and inhaled deeply before tenderly kissing me on my forehead. I hid behind my hair, my cheek against his chest. “I love you, too. Next time, tell me before you make a decision like that. Never leave me in the dark again,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

His grip on me tightened. “I won’t.”

Chapter Nineteen

Rayne

“**T**he two of you need to wake up. Now,” Hunter hissed in my ear, shaking my shoulder. “The police are downstairs and are requesting to speak to Ethan.”

The grogginess of sleep immediately fell away as I processed his words. As I jumped up searching for clothes, Ethan rolled onto his back and covered his face. “Shit, what time is it?” he groaned.

“Time for you to face whatever you’ve done,” Hunter responded. “They won’t talk to us.”

I quickly shrugged on the shirt lying on the floor and tugged on a pair of yoga pants. “Just breathe,” I told him quietly. “I bet they found your father.”

Hunter raised his eyebrows and left the room silently, anger radiating off his back. I had assumed he told them what had occurred earlier, but that was apparently incorrect.

I didn’t have all the details about what happened this morning, but I wasn’t overly worried. As long as Ethan played

it cool, everything would be fine. It was standard procedure to question family members when violent crimes occurred.

Finally, Ethan threw the covers off and sat up, rubbing his hands over his face. “Fuck,” he mumbled as he stumbled out of the room.

I walked down the stairs and headed straight to the coffee pot, sparing a quick glance at the display on the stove. It was after nine in the evening and here I was looking for a caffeine fix to lift the groggy haze blanketing me. As I pulled out the grounds and filled the carafe, my mind replayed the events of the morning. Where would Ethan claim he was today?

I stared into space, focusing on the darkness outside while I listened to the coffee drip, trying to keep my features neutral. In the window’s reflection, I could see two police officers. One was shorter with a shaved head. His shoulders seemed tense, and he crossed his arms over his chest, clearly unhappy about being left to wait. The second was tall, with short cropped blond hair. He leaned against the wall near the elevator staring at the phone in his hand. His arrogant demeanor reminded me of Ethan’s a bit and when his eyes met mine, I quickly looked away.

I poured two steaming cups of coffee, relishing the rich, earthy smell. When Ethan descended the stairs, I handed him one. He gave me a soft smile and tucked a stray hair behind my ear before he whispered, “Thanks.”

I watched as Ethan approached the uniformed officers, and my heart pounded in my chest. “Officers, how can I help you

this evening?" he asked before taking a sip of the steaming liquid he cradled.

The shorter of the two spoke first. "I'm Officer James and this is my partner Miller. Do you have somewhere a little more private we can speak?"

Ethan tipped his head in acknowledgment. "Whatever you have to tell me, you can say in front of everyone here. What is this about?"

Officer Miller finally stood up straight and his face turned serious. He puffed out his cheeks, trying to find the right words to say. "Have you spoken with your stepmother this afternoon?"

I watched Ethan carefully, trying to gauge his reaction. If he was nervous, it didn't show. He frowned as he scratched his cheek. "We don't exactly have a close relationship."

James nodded at him. "When was the last time you saw your father?"

Ethan's jaw went slack and his entire demeanor changed as he placed the cup of coffee on the coffee table next to him. My eyes darted to Dominic and Hunter who looked as tense as I felt. Ethan's words fumbled as they fell out of his mouth, voice cracking. "H-h-his annual Christmas party. We all attended. What's this about again?"

Tears shined in his eyes and the whole time all I could think was what the fuck. What was going on? James spoke up, his voice soft. "Someone broke into your father's house sometime

today. It looks like it was a robbery gone wrong. I regret to inform you..." The officer's voice trailed off as Ethan collapsed onto the sofa behind him. He let out a harsh breath as a tear trailed down his face. Hunter gritted his jaw, staring at Ethan's apparently bereft form.

Miller cleared his throat. "We just have one more question. None of the neighbors were home at the time and your father doesn't have a security system, so we have to cover all of our bases. I'm so sorry, but I have to ask. Where were you today?"

"Umm, I was here all day. I decided to take the day off and roped my girlfriend into staying home from work with me." I swallowed a sip of my coffee and schooled my expression. He could have at least warned me ahead of time that I was his alibi.

Dominic rolled his eyes. "I can confirm that the two of them were locked up in his room all day." He pointed his thumb in my direction. "She can get a bit loud at times."

My cheeks heated at his words and my jaw dropped. I was going to murder everyone after the cops left. James winked in my direction and I suppressed the urge to gag. "Well, we'll leave y'all to it. Thank you for your time, Mr. Carter. I'm sorry for your loss. Don't worry, we'll catch the son of a bitch that did this."

I waited for the cops to leave and seated myself on the end of the couch, close to Ethan. Several minutes later, Hunter was the first to break the silence. A roaring laugh rang through the

air and I glared at him. Ethan and Dominic joined in. Had I lost my mind? I pinched Ethan's arm. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Being a former theater kid pays off I guess," he replied, his body shaking.

Hunter smirked at him, wiping tears from his face. "What did you think about this time?"

The corner of Ethan's lips tilted upward. "Phineas dying in *A Separate Peace*."

Did he really make himself cry thinking about a fictional schoolboy who died from a broken bone? My eyes widened in disbelief as Hunter muttered, "I hate that book."

"You've got to be kidding me," I stated as I stood up and pointed my finger in Dominic's direction. "And you, was your comment really necessary? *She can get a bit loud at times*," I mocked.

Dominic closed the gap between us, grinning at me, and wrapped me in a tight embrace. "Sweetheart, it was absolutely necessary and your reaction made it all worth it."

I attempted to free my arms to punch him in the shoulder, but he squeezed tighter and chuckled. "You're all sociopaths," I grumbled.

Ethan stood up and pressed a quick kiss to my forehead, smiling. All signs of his earlier "distress" were absent. "Ah yes, but we're your sociopaths," he declared as he stalked back to the kitchen. "Celebratory drinks?"

“What are we celebrating?” I asked as Dominic’s face turned serious.

“I’ll have a drink, but we really need to talk, Ethan. Why in the hell didn’t you tell us what your plan was for the day?” he asked, releasing me from his hold.

Hunter shoved his hands in his pockets and sighed when Ethan didn’t respond. “No one is angry at you, and there won’t be any fallout from this. We have the police chief under wraps currently, but seriously, we could have helped you. Were you at least careful?”

Ethan poured amber liquid into four highball glasses and picked up two. He handed me one before he spoke. “Yeah, I was careful. I didn’t tell anyone because you would have stopped me. I know how you two are and Rayne would have convinced me to wait.” He sat back on the couch and the grip on his glass tightened. “I saw an opportunity and took it. He needed to be taken out for his part in everything.”

Dominic grabbed a tumbler off the countertop and leaned against it, taking a long sip. “Well, now we have to wait a few days before we can take care of Ayers and the police chief. Even with blackmail, we can’t have the deaths too close together. It would draw too much attention.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “Can we not make any more rash decisions without talking them through?”

Hunter nodded in agreement. “I absolutely agree with everything, especially after this morning.” He stepped closer to me and lifted a strand of my hair, rubbing it between his

fingers. “If we’re not committing felonies or making poor decisions, I guess we’ll have to find a way to keep ourselves preoccupied somehow.”

I pursed my lips to stop the laughter bubbling up inside of me, and Dominic coughed. “We’ll have plenty of time for that as well, but you seem to have forgotten we still work.”

Hunter dropped my hair and walked across the room, picking up the glass of amber liquid. “I didn’t forget, Dom, I just didn’t want to think about it yet. It’s not like we had an actual break for the holidays.” He tossed back the whiskey and poured himself several more ounces. “I’ll be up bright and early tomorrow to go into the office. Rayne, what are your plans for the morning?”

I took a small sip from the tumbler that Ethan had handed me, relishing the burn. “I guess I’m going to Inferno. Oliver still needs help. Plus, it will be good to hear what the word on the street is about the Rose.”

Dominic lifted his eyebrows and held my gaze. “That’s a great idea. Let me know what you find out.”

That night, I went to bed alone and attempted to sleep, but the events of the day weighed heavily on my mind. So much had occurred in the past twenty-four hours. The Ruby Rose was gone, the women were all safe, Ethan had killed his father, and we’d all lied to the police. Lexi was staying with Ignacio which surprised me and I wondered what their hidden past was.

Finally, Bennett was gone. It wouldn't take long for Ayers to discover his former right-hand man was murdered or that his business venture had gone up in literal flames. There was no doubt in my mind he would retaliate somehow. The only question really was when.

The next morning, I awoke from a restless sleep to being smothered by the two men laying on either side. Ethan's leg was thrown over mine while Hunter's arm clung tightly to my waist. Dominic was missing, but that didn't surprise me. He was probably already up, ready to start the day.

After managing to untangle myself from their sweating bodies, I snuck to the bathroom to wash my face. When I exited a few minutes later, both men were still sound asleep. Hunter had rolled towards Ethan and wrapped his arm around him in the time I was gone. They looked pretty adorable like that. I smiled to myself and debated taking a picture to show them later, but instead opted for coffee and a few quiet moments before the day started.

Dominic sat at the end of the breakfast bar, studying something on his phone. "How'd you sleep?" he asked, never looking up.

"Fine. I think I need a bigger bed," I mumbled more to myself than him as I milled around the kitchen.

He looked up from whatever he was reading and rested one hand on the counter, tapping it with his fingers. "So, you've decided you're staying?" He arched one eyebrow at me in question, waiting to see what my reply was.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Didn’t Hunter tell you?”

His movements stilled as he searched my face. “No. What are you talking about? Believe it or not, even though they are my best friends, we don’t discuss everything.”

“I’m not leaving.” I walked closer and placed a hand on his cheek. “And it’s hard to believe that the three of you don’t discuss everything. You share a business, a house... hell, even a girlfriend.”

Amusement twinkled in his eyes. “Fair enough. I’ll look into a larger bed.” He stood, shoving his phone into his pocket, and leaned close to me. “I’m glad you’re staying. It would be pretty lonely without you,” he whispered as he pressed his lips to mine.

Chapter Twenty

Hunter

I sat restlessly in the seat across from Oliver's desk, flipping through a stack of papers, watching Rayne from the corner of my eye. Dominic had requested I escort her to "work" today and told me he'd cover the office. I had no idea what Ethan was doing after yesterday's disaster. Since Olly still wasn't back on his feet from being shot last week, she was still filling in. I didn't mind and tried to keep myself occupied by casually perusing some files she handed me, knowing that soon the other shoe was going to drop. It wasn't like Ayers to wait for payback and I knew that sometime in the next forty-eight hours, we would find out exactly how he felt.

The shock of him being my father had worn off, while the guilt of the life I'd chosen lingered in the back of my mind. Only time would help to lessen that because there was no way in hell I would ever come clean to my mother after all of her sacrifices. She was proud of the business the guys and I had built and I wanted it to stay that way.

Rayne seemed to be slowly opening up to all of us, managing to trust us despite her initial reservations, and she'd agreed to stay. Soon Ayers would be taken care of, she would be safe, and we could all take a trip somewhere far away from Strathmore. She probably thought I was just saying that in the car last week, but the truth was we could all use a vacation, especially since she was eventually going to inherit Oliver's empire.

The low drone of the music from the front was driving me crazy, but Rayne seemed completely immersed in whatever she was doing, occasionally texting or making phone calls. Things were slower today. All of our energy, and Oliver's, had been directed towards shutting the Ruby Rose down for good. Now, it was back to business as usual, as long as you counted smuggling weapons as usual.

I tried to keep my focus on the numbers in front of me, but every time I looked up at Rayne, thoughts of her underneath me the other night flooded my head. I shifted in my seat, envisioning her seated on top of the desk, skirt pushed up around her waist and me kneeling in front of her with my face buried between her thighs.

Standing up from the chair, I stretched and stepped next to her. I allowed my breath to feather against her flesh, caressing her skin as I leaned close. "Hey, princess," I whispered, watching goosebumps dance across her skin. Her lips parted slightly, even as her eyes narrowed. When she finally looked up from the paper she was reading, I smirked. "Let's get out of here. We could go pick up some lunch." I tucked a strand of

hair behind her ear before tracing my fingertips down her neck slowly. “Or we could christen Oliver’s office.”

She bit her lip before groaning in frustration. “He’d be absolutely *thrilled* if he found out, and I’d rather not have that discussion. Let’s grab some lunch.”

She stood, grabbing the jacket from the back of her chair, and I pressed my body against her, pushing her against the desk. My hand splayed on her lower back and I kissed below her ear, placing my thigh between her legs. Her breath caught in her throat and she whimpered.

“Are you sure? He would never find out,” I murmured against her skin, placing leisurely kisses along the column of her neck. Her jacket fell from her hand as I nipped at her collarbone.

Her body melted into mine, but as my hands snaked beneath her blouse, she remembered where we were and pushed against my chest. Straightening her clothes, she cleared her throat. “Once this office is officially mine, I’ll let you bend me over the desk and do whatever you want.” She picked up her jacket off the floor. “Joey’s standing outside and all I can imagine is him hearing us.”

This was the same woman who shot Bennett without a second thought, stabbed her brother, and was the heir to a vast criminal empire, but she was worried about someone hearing her have sex. I pursed my lips together trying not to laugh, and when she saw, she grumbled, “I’ll have to look him in the eye every day when I’m here.” A grin spread across my face as she

continued speaking, mainly to herself. “And after what Dominic said last night, I have no doubts he’d hear me.”

A rumble of laughter escaped, and I pulled her to me, wrapping her in a tight embrace. “You know we love that, right? None of us would change anything about you. Besides, the look on your face when he said that was priceless.”

She grimaced at me before silently walking out of the club into the parking lot.

I drove to the small diner we’d eaten at weeks ago, my hand resting on her thigh. We didn’t speak as Rayne stared out her window, deep in thought. Her face was serious with her lips pressed into a thin line and jaw tense. It looked like she was debating something with herself. As I pulled into the restaurant’s parking lot, I reached for her hand and twined our fingers together. “What are you thinking about?”

“It’s nothing,” she replied as she squeezed my hand gently. Letting go, she reached for her door handle and slipped from the car. In thirty-two years, the one thing I’d learned was that whenever a woman said it was *nothing*, it was definitely something.

I waited until we were seated inside before approaching the topic again. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

Her face was buried in the menu, and she frowned. “I think this time I’m going to order a strawberry milkshake.” She looked at me for a moment before adding, “Last time we were here, someone wouldn’t share.”

I raised my eyebrows at her. “Last time we were here, you told me you could be allergic to strawberries.” The waitress came by to take our orders and after she disappeared, I smirked. “You were so bratty that day. Now stop avoiding the subject.”

She clasped her hands together in front of her on top of the table. “If you absolutely must know, I was just thinking about the future. A degree in education seems like a waste when I’m going to be laundering money and running a strip club.”

She had a point. All the classes she’d worked so hard in for the past several years weren’t exactly applicable to her inevitable future. “What do you want to do?” I asked gently.

She puffed out her cheeks in frustration and leaned further back into the booth. “I have no idea. Part of me wants to finish my last semester just to say I did it. The other half of me thinks it’s pointless.”

Her current demeanor was a far cry from the one she wore when we first met. She’d seemed so sure then, knowing exactly what she wanted. Now she looked so conflicted sitting across from me, allowing herself to be vulnerable. I wished I had answers for her and knew what to say. “I’ll pay for it if you want to finish.”

She scowled at me. “I don’t need someone to pay for it. I’ve saved most of the money I earned from my last job. You know, the one that landed us in this whole situation.”

I sighed. “It was just an offer, Rayne. You could take business classes online if you wanted.”

She placed her hands in her lap as the waitress approached, setting our milkshakes on the table. “I’d rather not,” she said before placing the straw in her mouth. “That sounds like hell. Besides, I have the three of you to help with the finances.”

“Oh, I see. You’re thinking long-term. Planning on keeping us around solely to help you with the books I see,” I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

Her face lit up with amusement. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. That’s just one perk.”

“Oh, that’s right. It has to be our sparkling personalities.”

She snorted at me and just like that, the cloud that had been hovering over her all day lifted. “Yeah, it’s definitely your personalities.”

I had so many other questions I wanted to ask her about the future. Did she have any other dreams or aspirations? Was she going to try to find closure with her remaining family? What was her favorite childhood memory? Did she want children of her own one day?

I held my tongue knowing that any of those topics could potentially be a landmine. There would be plenty of time to discuss the future after we dealt with Ayers. After she was finally safe.

Chapter Twenty-One

Rayne

So much was on my mind lately. I could almost see the light at the end of the tunnel, and I was both relieved and conflicted. Obviously, I was now destined to take over Oliver's empire, but who did I really want to be in the end? Should I finish my degree just to say I did it? Did it really matter? Hunter's discussion with me at lunchtime helped to ease some of the anxiety, but my fears stayed firmly planted in the back of my mind along with nagging thoughts of speaking to my parents and taking care of Ayers.

Ash felt like I needed closure from the childhood I'd escaped, but I thought it was fine. My way of dealing with things was ignoring them, and so far, it had worked out for me. Still, a small part of me wondered if he was right. The journal suggestion was therapeutic after all. What if I did need to visit my parents and see if things had changed since I left home?

When I walked into the penthouse late that evening, the dining room table was set with four place settings. Candles

littered the top, flames dancing on the wicks, and a small floral arrangement sat directly in the middle.

The smell of garlic wafted through the air as Dominic hummed to himself, stirring something over the stove. Ethan chopped vegetables next to him and both seemed oblivious to our presence.

I leaned close to Hunter and lowered my voice. “What is all of this?”

Hunter lifted one shoulder, and a shadow of amusement played on his lips. “Ethan did some more digging and found out your birthday is next week. He wanted to do something nice for you, but with everything happening, he was afraid we would be busy. Since he screwed up our original timeline when he decided to murder his father, we wanted to make it up to you.”

My eyes widened at what he said. “We don’t need to celebrate. I’m fine. Really.”

Typically, other than a few drinks with Victoria or Oliver after the club closed down, I didn’t celebrate. Like Christmas, birthdays had taken a back burner. Between poverty and addiction, the cost of a celebration seemed frivolous. The money spent on a cake would be better spent on groceries or rent, but looking back, it probably went to drugs.

Other than receiving gifts, gestures of kindness were hard for me to accept. After spending so many years just trying to make it and blending into the background, I wasn’t sure what

to say. Emotion welled in my throat. *Damn these men, always making me feel something.*

“We didn’t have to celebrate, but we wanted to. Besides, after dinner, we can always discuss our plans for Ayers. That always seems to put you at ease,” Hunter chuckled at me, pushing me toward the table. “The guest of honor has arrived,” he stated as he pulled a chair out for me. Dominic whispered something to Ethan and gestured toward a bottle of wine on the counter.

“You knew this entire time and didn’t tell me,” I mumbled to him under my breath, watching Ethan uncork the bottle.

He winked as I sat down. “It was a surprise.”

Ethan poured everyone a glass of wine and Dominic pulled whatever he was making off the stove. “I can’t cook like Hunter, but hopefully it’s at least edible,” Dominic said as he plated up the food.

When he set a plate in front of me, my stomach growled. Pasta in cream sauce, blackened chicken, and salad. “It looks perfect. Thank you for this, guys. I don’t really know what to say or how to thank you.”

Dominic frowned as he sat next to me. “You don’t need to thank us. We wanted to do something nice for you. Since we’ve known you, your life has been completely flipped upside down.” He picked up his fork and stared at me. “In fact, if it weren’t for the situation with Ayers, I would have insisted we go out.”

Ethan chimed in, “You know, we haven’t really been able to carry you out and spoil you the way we want to.”

My mind raced through all the things I’d done with each of them. Hunter painting me. Dominic taking me on a picnic. Riding with Ethan on the back of my motorcycle. I didn’t need a fancy dinner at a restaurant. Spending time with them was enough.

Initially, their protectiveness infuriated me. I didn’t want someone else to keep me safe; I’d been doing it on my own my whole life. Now, the fact that they insisted on keeping me close made me feel like I belonged. Not that I would admit that out loud.

“I don’t need you to spoil me,” I told them, “and you really didn’t have to do this.”

Dominic leaned closer and rested his hand on my thigh. “Rayne, we don’t do anything because we have to. We wanted to. Besides, isn’t this,” he gestured broadly at the table, “what people do to show their love? If this makes you uncomfortable, I regret to inform you it’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

What people do to show their love. My heart skipped a beat. Dominic was more aloof than Hunter and Ethan. He was careful with his words and his actions. He wasn’t one to throw around empty platitudes.

“What else do you have planned?” I asked, pretending to scowl.

“Presents of course,” Ethan piped in, smiling lazily.

They had just gotten me something for Christmas, and gifts were completely unnecessary. I was already living in their house for free. I started to open my mouth, but Hunter cut me off. “No arguments. It’s something you’re going to need soon.”

I swirled a bite of pasta onto the end of my fork, knowing that any resistance was futile. It was three versus one and I wouldn’t win against any of them. They were all just as stubborn as I was.

Placing the bite of food into my mouth, I nearly melted into my chair. Dominic claimed he didn’t cook as well as Hunter, but the taste was heavenly. “Good?” he asked, studying me with amusement.

“It’s fantastic,” I replied between bites. After I gorged myself on pasta and wine, Ethan passed around a tray of chocolate cupcakes and we settled into easy conversation. Dominic discussed several client meetings that were coming up in the next month and plans for Jupiter Financial. Hunter nodded along to what he was saying, occasionally interjecting an idea. Ethan shoved bites of cake into his mouth and rolled his eyes at the discussion happening around us. When he caught me staring, he winked.

“When is your father’s funeral?” Hunter asked and Ethan choked a little. Bits of cake flew from his mouth as he stood up and Hunter patted him on the back before handing him a glass of water.

After Ethan seemed to recover, and his color turned back to normal, Dominic pressed the question. “That wasn’t exactly an answer. When?”

Ethan sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “My stepmom called earlier. They’re doing a viewing tomorrow night and the funeral on Saturday afternoon.”

Hunter raised his eyebrows at him. “And you didn’t think we needed to know?”

I took a sip of wine, allowing the bitterness to coat my tongue as I watched them. I was honestly so full and content, I didn’t want to move, much less get in the middle of their argument.

Ethan shrugged at him. “I’m not going. There’s no love lost between my family and me. I’ve never cared for my stepmother, and honestly, it’s nothing more than a charade. All the elite gathered in one place, claiming that my father was a good man when it couldn’t be further from the truth.”

I tried biting my tongue, but I couldn’t stop myself. “It’s a charade you have to participate in. If you don’t show up, it will look suspicious.”

Dominic nodded in agreement and clasped his hands behind his head. “She has a good point and you know it.”

Ethan clenched his jaw and cursed under his breath. “I thought after dinner we were supposed to be talking about taking down Ayers, not whether to go to my sperm donor’s memorial.”

Dominic's nostrils flared at the bite in his voice. "We'll discuss that after the funeral. We just need to wait two more days. All you need to worry about is acting like the slightly distraught son."

Ethan's eyes narrowed, and he turned on his heel before heading to the elevator. "Fine, I'll go," he said over his shoulder. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. I'll do everything that I'm supposed to, but first I want to show Rayne what we got her."

I stood and walked over to him, lacing my fingers with his to comfort him. It was obvious the discussion of his father's funeral put a damper on his mood, and I just prayed he wouldn't disappear tonight. Hunter and Dominic followed us silently, piling into the elevator.

Once we reached the parking garage, Ethan headed to the back corner where something was covered with a white drop cloth and the world around me spun as my heart lurched in my chest. I already knew what was under there and it was too much. If a simple bracelet made me feel uncomfortable at Christmas, surely they realized a gift of this size would multiply that feeling by a hundred.

Dominic's hand found my shoulder, anchoring me to the moment. As I swayed on my feet, trying to remember to breathe, Ethan snagged the corner of the fabric and pulled, unveiling a sleek black Porsche. I shook my head at them and stared silently. Words refused to come out of my mouth and I swallowed hard, trying to figure out what to say.

When I could finally speak, my words came out quietly. “I have a car, guys.”

Dominic scoffed, and Hunter cleared his throat. “Listen, princess, I get it, but you needed a new one. Yours was—”

“A death trap,” Dominic grumbled. “I’m surprised the wheels hadn’t fallen off yet.”

Nothing he said was a lie, but the car he was so quick to cut down was mine. I’d paid for it in full using whatever tip money I had. It saved me from riding on the bus with strangers at all hours of the night or having to walk endless blocks down city streets to buy groceries.

Ethan stalked towards me and reached for my hand. He pressed the keys into my palm and curled my fingers around them. “You’ll need something reliable soon. We’re more than happy to drive you anywhere you need to go, but this gift is bigger than a car. It’s freedom, baby. Freedom is why you fought us so hard in the beginning,” he whispered to me, brushing his lips against my temple. “Tell me you don’t miss just going where you want, whenever you want to go. Soon you’ll be able to do that again.”

My throat tightened at his words. Even if they didn’t understand my apprehension about accepting a gift of this magnitude, they somehow understood me, even after so little time. Two months ago, I would never have imagined my life turning out like this.

“Ready for a test drive?” Hunter asked, and I gave him a weak smile. There was no way they would let me decline the

car, so I might as well make the best of it.

That evening, long after the sun had set, I drove the new car outside of the city limits. Rolling the windows down and turning the music up, I tested its limits. Letting the January wind bite at my skin, I contemplated the idea of freedom and how three men had managed to win my heart. God knows I hadn't made it easy so far, and it wasn't likely I would in the future.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rayne

Friday flew by in a blur at Inferno. Oliver had a new shipment of arms scheduled to be picked up later that weekend on top of ensuring that the club ran smoothly. Vendor orders for liquor, employee schedules, and Michael Carter's viewing helped to keep any other thoughts at bay throughout the day.

By the time that evening rolled around, I was exhausted, but knew there wasn't any time to rest yet. Sure, I could have allowed Ethan and the guys to attend tonight without me, but it made me feel like a crappy human being. If the roles were reversed and it was my parents that had been murdered, they would never allow me to attend any of the services by myself. Then again, Ethan was the one responsible for his dad's untimely demise.

I sighed as I looked in the mirror and touched up the small amount of makeup still clinging to my face, carefully applying lip gloss. The viewing and service would be held a few blocks away at St. Patrick's. I'd passed by the cathedral countless

times on my way to work or class in the past, often staring at the stained glass windows and ornate architecture, but never stepped foot inside.

Tonight, the very “private” event would be attended by most of the city’s wealthy, and the idea made my stomach roll with anxiety. Michael Carter was friends and business partners with Ayers. He’d be in attendance.

My greatest hope was that I could avoid any confrontation, spend the minimum amount of time there that was considered polite, and slip out mostly unnoticed. What would actually happen remained to be seen.

Between dinner last night, the discussion with Ethan about attending his father’s funeral, and their early birthday gift of a car, we didn’t discuss what their plans were for Ayers. I knew they had been working on something, but I didn’t press the subject. Even if we had to put it off for a few days for the purpose of timing, he’d be taken care of sooner rather than later and the guys would continue to ensure my safety.

When I reached the parking garage, I sought out Ethan. Hunter had given us explicit instructions to be ready at seven and my heels clicked against the concrete while I searched for him. He was crouched in front of Dominic’s SUV, sandwiched between it and the wall, hidden from sight. His eyebrows furrowed as he looked at his phone, his lip pulled between his teeth.

When he heard me approaching, his gaze never left whatever he was reading. Instead, his hand shot out,

beckoning me to grab it. I placed my palm in his and he tugged me down next to him. As I squatted beside him, he lifted my hand to his lips, brushing them over my knuckles.

“Are you hiding?” I whispered to him. “We’re supposed to leave in five minutes.”

“Just taking a second,” he responded, finally looking up. He shoved his phone into his pocket as his face twisted in disgust. “I don’t know why I torture myself, but I was just reading through all the news articles. They’re calling it all a tragedy and praising all the things he supposedly did for the community.”

I inhaled and squeezed his hand with mine. “No more news articles. You know the truth about what happened and who he was. He wasn’t a pillar of the community. He was an abusive father and a terrible human. You just need to make it through the next twenty-four hours.” He frowned and nodded at me before standing up. When I stood next to him, I straightened my clothing before adding, “Make it look like you’re a grieving son, but no over-the-top performances like the other night.”

He chuckled, his blue eyes shimmering with amusement. “Are you sure?”

I jabbed my elbow into his ribs and he grunted. “Positive.”

The ride to St. Patrick’s was short, and part of me felt driving was a waste. The weather was mild for January and it was only a few short blocks away. Walking would have saved the time spent searching for a parking spot, but I didn’t bother

voicing my opinion. Instead, I spent the time steeling myself for the next hour.

Before we walked inside, I straightened my shoulders and gave Ethan a reassuring smile. He grabbed my hand as we headed into the building. Cameras flashed in my peripheral and I tried to hide my grimace. I'd forgotten that other than a handful of outings, my relationship with each of the men was hidden from the public eye. I was dating three of the most eligible bachelors in Strathmore. By tomorrow morning, speculation regarding how I was associated with Ethan would be plastered in the gossip column of the city paper.

I fixed a bored look on my face as I hissed through my teeth. "Why didn't you remind me of the media?"

The corner of Ethan's lips lifted as we slowly meandered toward the front of the church where an oak coffin sat. "We have more important things to worry about right now."

I glimpsed around the space as people stopped Ethan, murmuring their condolences and patting him on the shoulder. Rich scarlet carpet covered the floors and dark pews sat in rows divided by the aisle we were standing in. Huge stained glass windows depicting angels and saints adorned the walls. I tried to imagine what it would look like in the midday sun, prisms of color cast across the neutral-toned paint. Golden candelabra dotted the dim space, flames dancing in the shadows.

Once we were finally standing in front of the casket, Hunter stood on his other side and Dominic stood at his back. Ethan

lowered his voice and ducked his head so that no one could see his face. “Coming today has been my own personal hell. Everyone that has spoken to me has mentioned what a good man he was and how unfortunate this is. Honestly, it’s a lot of bullshit. He was a monster at home and in the boardroom.”

Hunter frowned and placed his hand on Ethan’s shoulder. “Yeah, I’ve been listening. Just keep your cool man. When we get home, you can unwind.”

Ethan nodded and stood there for a few more moments, staring at where roses cascaded across the top of the casket. When a socially acceptable amount of time passed, he finally shuffled off to the right where his stepmother stood. Judging by her expression, she was also trying to portray a grieving family member. Her act wasn’t lost on me as she gently dabbed the corner of her eye while she exchanged words with her stepson.

Hunter and Dominic both shook the newly widowed woman’s hand, and quietly expressed their sympathy for her loss as I stood to the side. Someone sidled up next to me and before I could turn my head, they spoke. “How does it feel being the supposed queen?”

Chills skated across my skin when I realized who it was and my heart skipped a beat. *I guess trying to slip out of here unnoticed is no longer an option*, I thought to myself. “I have nothing to say to you.”

He chuckled quietly as he grabbed my hand between both of his and gave me a wink. “I don’t think that’s quite true. In fact,

we have lots to discuss.” His eyes shot to where the men were standing with Ethan’s stepmother. “You cost me a lot of money the other day, rescuing all of my merchandise. And then to top it off,” he squeezed my fingers roughly, “one of your men murdered my business partner.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I think you’re mistaken. They were all preoccupied that day. It’s in extremely poor taste to accuse someone of homicide.” I turned my head momentarily, catching Hunter’s eyes. He stepped toward us and Ayers let go of my hands.

“It’s good to see you, son.”

Hunter rolled his eyes as he tucked me under his arm. “I’m not your *son* and never will be. I don’t want you speaking to Rayne ever again.”

More flashes of light caught my attention from the edges of the room. Ayers leaned in close to me, his breath hot on my cheek. “I have a surprise for you, little girl. A gift if you will.” He pulled away and squeezed Hunter’s bicep. “I’ll be in touch soon.”

Ayers’ words floated in my brain, filling me with a sense of dread while we lingered in the church. I was tired of surprises from him and those closest to him. His idea of a present consisted of kidnappings or someone trying to kill me. Honestly, it was exhausting.

“Don’t worry about him,” Hunter said quietly, noticing my sour mood. “He’s trying to get under our skin.”

Several minutes later, Dominic and Ethan approached. Ethan noticed Hunter's arm draped over my shoulder and tilted his head. "The press is going to have a field day with this."

Dominic simply shrugged. "We'll handle it the same way we always do. Simply ignore it."

"Have I been here long enough?" Ethan asked, changing the subject. Dominic nodded at him and relief washed over me.

Once we were home that evening, Dominic poured tumblers of whiskey as Hunter started a fire on the roof. I made myself comfortable, tucking my legs under me on a chaise, and listened to their quiet conversation. Trying to push away the worry over Ayers' words, and the photographs that would circulate in the morning, I relished the sounds of their laughter as we drank. The alcohol slowly seeped into my veins, and paired with the comfort of their voices, I drifted off watching sparks from the firepit fly into the dark sky.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ethan

Around midnight, Rayne fell asleep curled up in front of the fire. Her lips were slightly parted and all I could think about was how peaceful she looked. Serene and completely at ease. I carefully lifted her and carried her downstairs, tucking her beneath the blankets of the bed. Now, her quiet breaths filled the room as I stared at her, early morning light trickling in. I wasn't ready to leave the warmth of the bed or face the day that awaited us.

Dominic laid on her opposite side, his fingers gently brushing down her arm. The blanket tucked around her body had fallen, exposing the faintest hint of cleavage. My fingers traced along the soft skin and her eyes fluttered open, hazy from sleep.

She stretched, sandwiched between us, and Dominic wrapped an arm around her waist. I stole a kiss from her. My lips pressed against hers softly and I ran my tongue along the seam of her mouth lazily.

For a few minutes, time suspended, and the day fell away as we leisurely explored her skin. This was all I wanted to do today, hide away in her room, wrapped around her body. Unfortunately, I knew that wasn't in the cards.

She groaned as I pulled away from her, feathering one last kiss on her temple. "You're nothing but a tease," she mumbled as she flopped back against the pillow.

"I'm giving you something to look forward to. Think of it as something to help get you through the day," I smirked as I pulled on a t-shirt and Dominic laid his arm over her waist, nuzzling against her neck.

Seeing the tender expression painted across his face gave me quiet joy. I never thought I would see him warm up to a woman, much less fall head over heels in love with one. Even if he hadn't expressed it yet, I could tell. Every smile he gave her, every murmured word, and every gentle touch betrayed him.

Dominic kissed her shoulder before pushing the covers back. "He's right. Between the funeral and seeing what the fallout from last night is, we don't have time. You need to get a shower." He walked to her doorway and paused. "I'll have a cup of fresh coffee waiting for you."

Rayne grumbled as she rolled out of the bed towards the bathroom and both of us went downstairs. I was desperate for caffeine, or really anything that would help me make it through the day. Today was the day they would lower my

father's body into the ground, but the only thing I felt was numbness.

I sank onto one of the bar stools as I watched Dominic make coffee and thought of my childhood. All the punches, kicks, screams, and insults were still clear. Time had done nothing to fade them, the details still vivid in my mind. My emotions were completely different during my mother's funeral. All I felt then was sorrow and a sense of deep loss. Attending my father's memorial felt like a farce.

Dominic slid me a cup across the countertop and I inhaled deeply, relishing the rich earthy scent. I'd prefer weed or alcohol to further numb myself, but Hunter and Dominic would lose their shit if I started this early in the morning.

Hunter patted my shoulder as he walked by, heading to the stove. As he started his morning ritual of cooking breakfast, he paused briefly. "What's the word about last night?"

I hadn't even bothered looking at the news this morning, knowing that articles praising my father's life would be plastered across the pages. I rolled my eyes at the thought as I took a sip of the coffee, waiting for Dominic's response. "Mmm," was all he said for a few moments, scrolling through his phone. Tapping my fingertips on the countertop, I stared at him.

"And?" Hunter asked, cracking eggs into the hot skillet in front of him. Rayne silently descended the stairs, her face completely blank, and Dominic finally looked up from the

article on his phone. He poured a mug of coffee and handed it to her.

“And it seems the media is rampant with wild speculation regarding the mystery woman who attended Michael Carter’s viewing. They’re also busy guessing who she’s with. It’s quite the scandal given the photos with both you and Hunter.”

Rayne let out a small groan at his words and rubbed her hand over her eyes. “I’m not worried about the supposed scandal. Ayers threatened me last night, so I’m much more concerned about what his next move will be.”

Hunter’s phone rang from his pocket and he answered it. “Hey, Mom. What’s happening?” A frown formed on his face and deepened with every passing second. “Slow down, I can explain... No, it isn’t what you think... Listen, why don’t you come over for dinner tomorrow?” He stared at the ceiling for several moments, pursing his lips. “Yep, around seven. I’ll see you then.” After he ended the call, he shoved the phone back in his pocket and leveled a look at Dominic. “Speaking of scandals, it looks like mom saw the pictures already. We may not usually handle gossip, but this time...” He trailed off as he shoved a bite of eggs into his mouth.

I didn’t envy Hunter or Dominic at that moment. My mother had been gone for years and my father could no longer berate my life choices. How would their parents feel when they discovered our non-conventional relationship?

“I didn’t exactly think of our parents when I saw the article,” Dominic confessed as he raked a hand through his

hair. “We knew they would discover it at some point, but I wish it wasn’t right now.” Dominic and his family had just recently begun mending their relationship and this could spell disaster.

“You should call them. Have them come over at the same time as Heidi. Just rip the bandaid off,” I mused as I pushed the stool back. “Besides, we’re adults. What are they going to do? Yell? Ground us?” I let out a small laugh. “I need to go get ready. Rayne’s right. I’m more concerned with Ayers than I am what people think right now.”

I quickly showered and put on the black suit hanging in my closet, ready to get today over with. Hair carefully styled, cufflinks in place, and a somber expression plastered in place, I sauntered downstairs, signaling that I was prepared to get this show over with.



By midday, I sat beside my stepmother, her hand carefully tucked into mine, as she dabbed at the corner of her eyes. Sunglasses covered her face, and I doubted the tears were real. She was immaculately put together as always, dressed in black with a single strand of pearls adorning her neck. The fingers from my free hand dug into my thigh painfully, helping to keep me grounded.

All the elites of Strathmore were in attendance, which meant Ayers was here somewhere as well. The media was also in attendance, keeping a thankfully respectful distance.

Rayne and the guys were here, seated a few rows back. I felt their eyes on me, offering silent support while I put myself on display for the public. I'd rather be anywhere else currently, but they were right. If I didn't show up today, it would seem suspicious. My father had been certain that whatever cracks had formed in our relationship over the years were hidden from the public eye.

The priest droned on as I stared forward, focusing on the edge of the coffin. As he said something about knowing that the deceased was currently in heaven, I stopped myself from laughing. *Hell was more like it*, I thought to myself. There was no way a monster like my father was headed to a peaceful afterlife.

The events at the Ruby Rose still haunted me when I closed my eyes. As much as I'd suffered at his hands over the years, it couldn't compare to the condition we'd found the women in. Malnourished, dirty, and caged like animals. He was far from the saint he was being portrayed as.

The priest asked if anyone had anything they would like to say. The people surrounding me looked at me expectantly but I kept my eyes focused straight ahead. I had agreed to attend his funeral, but there was no way in hell I'd agree to speak about the monster being buried today. My stepmother sniffled loudly and after a few moments, Wayne Ayers stood in front of the crowd dressed in a three-piece suit. Someone behind me gasped, and I bit my tongue until copper flooded my mouth. Of course, Ayers would be the one who wanted to speak.

I freed my hands and balled them into fists on my lap as Ayers cleared his throat. Icy rain drizzled down around us and all I could think was that the day couldn't be any more miserable.

“Many of you know that Michael Carter was one of my closest friends. We grew up together, went to the same college, and later in life started several business ventures. He'll be missed by everyone in Strathmore. He was a true philanthropist and believed in giving back to the community.”

I flexed my jaw and worked on keeping my emotions in check at the words spilling out of his mouth. They weren't lies, but half-truths. He gave money to the community. What better way to pay off officials and receive a tax write-off? They had business ventures together, but those included selling other humans. Sure, people would miss him, especially the clientele that frequented their auctions.

Ayers' parting words pulled me from my thoughts. “Carter left behind his only child, Ethan, who I'm sure is reeling from the loss. I reassure you,” his gaze met mine, “that the people responsible will pay.”

I tipped my head in acknowledgment, letting him know I understood his message. He knew exactly who was responsible for my father's murder.

Afterward, people slowly stopped by, pulling me from my thoughts to offer words of sympathy. I nodded, unsure of what to say. My stepmother, always the gracious hostess, discussed

how they were having a gathering at the house later that afternoon and invited whoever would listen.

The only thing I felt was relief as the coffin was lowered into the ground, dirt thrown haphazardly on top. There was no great, profound sense of loss over the man who raised me. I bobbed my head at my stepmother as I excused myself, telling her that unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to swing by later.

At some point, I'd have to see her one last time. His estate still would need to be settled and they would want to read his will, yet another thing I couldn't care less about. Step mommy dearest could have it all. I wanted nothing of his.

As I slowly shuffled towards where Dominic's SUV sat idling, awareness pricked at my skin and the hairs on the back of my neck stood. I hazarded a glance over my shoulder. Wayne Ayers stood at the edge of the graveyard, observing me. I quickly looked away and reminded myself to talk to Dominic later that evening.

Killing my father had messed with our original plans. That was the only thing I currently regretted. If I'd been more patient, we could have tied both of them up, thrown them in an abandoned building, and let Rayne set fire to the whole thing.

I opened the back door and slid inside next to Rayne, kissing the top of her head.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rayne

After the funeral, things Saturday evening were relatively peaceful. Once we got home, I changed clothes quickly into yoga pants, a hoodie, and fuzzy socks. I was choosing comfort over fashion after sitting in the rain and trodding through a graveyard, my heels sinking into the soft ground every step of the way. The icing on the cake was Ayers standing up to speak and everyone thinking he was a saint. The devil was a more apt description.

For a while, I was content to curl up on the sofa, warm and dry next to Smudge. She allowed Ethan to pet her briefly before turning her back to him. I stifled a laugh at his frown. *Progress*, I thought to myself. It was almost like Smudge could smell the desperation on him and knew how much he wanted the cat to love him. She eventually would. He'd wear her down in the same manner he had me. Her allowing him to touch her, even intermittently, was the first step.

After sunset, Ethan found two bottles of wine and ushered us up to the rooftop, claiming it was time to celebrate.

Dominic scowled at him before calling his parents to invite them to dinner the following night. As was expected, they had several questions about me and the nature of our relationship, especially since Christmas Eve he had introduced me as his girlfriend. Dominic reassured them in hushed tones I was his girlfriend and that everything would be clear at dinner as he paced the length of the rooftop.

Ethan poured us each a glass of wine before settling onto a chair and removing his tie. His fingers deftly undid several buttons and rolled up his sleeves, exposing the muscles of his forearms.

Hunter started the fire pit before slowly sipping his wine. The warmth from the wine and the flames helped to set me at ease, all of my concerns fading into the background. After setting up his easel, he pulled out a canvas. As he began to paint, I tried to peek at what he was working on. He shooed me away before dipping his brush in the paint on his palette. Soon, he lost himself in his project. His motions were smooth and fluid as he paid little attention to the conversation occurring around him. I took a large swallow of the wine I was holding, allowing the dryness to coat my tongue, and watched him furrow his brows in concentration.

Ethan sat near me silently, waiting for Dominic to finish his phone call. Suddenly he pulled me into his lap and gave me a mischievous grin. “We should inspire Hunter. Give him something more interesting to paint,” he whispered, his breath warm against my cheek. His fingers teased the skin at my waist as I swatted playfully at him.

“Dominic is on the phone with his parents,” I replied quietly.

Ethan leaned in, nuzzling against the column of my neck, and placed a gentle kiss against my collarbone. “That’s exactly why we should. We can distract him and hurry his conversation along.”

Any argument was silenced as his lips trailed softly up my neck to my mouth. He nibbled my bottom lip, and my eyes darted to the other men on the roof. Hunter watched with curiosity, giving me a small smirk. Dominic’s eyes widened as Ethan’s hand snaked beneath my clothes. He mouthed the word “stop” but Ethan shook his head. “Ignore them and focus on me,” he whispered. “Let’s give them a show.”

My cheeks heated at the idea as he captured my mouth, all other thoughts falling away. His lips were gentle at first, slowly stroking the fire building inside me as his hands explored my torso. A low groan sounded across from us, but I ignored it, focusing on the man underneath me. His fingers slowly drifted along my ribs as his tongue delved into my mouth.

“Mom, I’ve got to go,” Dominic grumbled, stepping closer to us. “Really, I promise to talk about this tomorrow.” The call ended and strong hands caressed my legs as he dropped down in front of me. “What are the two of you doing?” he asked as his hands parted my thighs.

Ethan released my lips as his hands drifted further up, palming my breasts. “I think that’s pretty obvious,” he

murmured against my skin, his thumbs grazing my nipples. “It looked like you needed to be saved from that conversation.”

Dominic gently grasped my chin, pulling my face towards him. “Is that so? Well, now that you’ve managed to get my attention, what are we going to do?” His thumb traced my lower lip as he watched me.

Ethan kissed along an exposed patch of skin and shivers raced down my spine, anticipating where this was headed. “If you’re trying for inspiration for my work, I think she needs less clothing,” Hunter said in a gravelly voice. In the darkness, his head tilted to the side.

Dominic’s eyes were dark and filled with lust as his hands hooked into the waistband of my pants. “He’s got a point, sweetheart.” I lifted my hips as he dragged them down my legs slowly and laid them carefully to the side. Cool air hit my skin but the fire and Ethan’s body heat kept me warm.

“Shirt too,” Hunter commanded, his eyes lifting from the canvas briefly to meet mine. Suddenly I realized despite his seemingly passive demeanor, he was exactly where he wanted to be right now—in control. Ethan tugged my hoodie over my head and tossed it to the side, leaving me completely bare before them.

Ethan caressed my breasts, teasing my hardened nipples, and leisurely nipped at my throat. I gasped at the sting on my skin and arched into his touch, desperate for more.

Dominic pushed my thighs apart, spreading them wide. He brushed his fingertips along my skin, slowly trailing them

from my calves upward. “I wonder how much you’re enjoying this. Sitting in Ethan’s lap with me on my knees, ready to worship you. Hunter watching us and giving me commands,” Dominic said, right before he slid a finger through my folds gently. “So wet for me already, sweetheart.”

Hunter’s gaze darted between us and the canvas as he painted. When Dominic plunged a finger inside as Ethan bit down on my shoulder, I moaned. “Taste her, Dominic,” Hunter said, his voice a low rumble. “I want to see her get off on your mouth.”

Dominic obliged, his head dipping between my thighs. His tongue assaulted my clit, licking it softly at first. As his pace picked up, I rocked my hips against him, my fingers tangled in his dark hair. One of Ethan’s arms wrapped around my waist, tethering me to him as I leaned back against his shoulder. His fingers still teased my breasts and ribs as he kissed my shoulders. I was aware of how quickly his chest rose and fell, and how hard he was beneath my body.

Tension coiled inside of me, letting me know soon I would tumble into oblivion and that was exactly what I wanted at this moment. Just the feel of their hands and mouths on my flesh, the sound of our breaths and groans echoing in my ears.

Dominic’s fingers slid inside me, curling upward, hitting a spot that made wildfire spread through my veins. “I’ve got you, baby,” Ethan murmured against my ear. “Let go and let Hunter see how beautiful you are.” Between Dominic’s mouth and Ethan’s sweet words, I came apart in front of them.

Ethan's hold tightened on me, as he continued whispering along my skin. My grip on Dominic's hair finally loosened, and he gave me a small smile before pressing his lips to the soft skin of my stomach.

Hunter laid his paintbrush down for a moment and wiped his hands on a rag. He stalked across the space towards us and dragged a chair a few feet away. My head was still hazy, but I was curious what he would ask us to do next. He sat down and crossed his legs before speaking. "Do you want Dominic inside of you, princess?"

I nodded at him, and he lifted a hand, gesturing to the man in front of me. My fingers found the front of his pants, fumbling with the button briefly before tugging them down. I reached for him but he grabbed my wrists and smirked, shaking his head. He held my hands against Ethan's shoulders as he stepped between my legs, parting my thighs further. His lips found mine as he thrust inside of me roughly, making me gasp against his lips. He pulled back, before plunging inside again.

The coarseness of the fabric of his shirt grazed against my nipples, and the force of his movements pushed me further against Ethan. His rhythm was slow, and I ached for him to speed up. I attempted to rock my hips against him, trying to urge him to go faster, but Ethan clicked his tongue, his grip on me tightening and restraining my movements. Ethan's other hand glided between Dominic and me, gently circling my clit.

Their motions were painfully slow, reigniting my desire as Hunter watched, his cock now free in his hand. I watched as his fist slid up and down his hardened length slowly. His eyes held mine as I watched him, his lower lip caught between his teeth.

This was exquisite torture, but I wanted more. “Please,” I whimpered to Dominic, begging him for whatever he was willing to give me. And with that word he slammed into me, his restraint fading. His tempo picked up and his grip on my wrists tightened.

Sweat beaded on his skin and heat radiated from his touch. “Is this what you wanted?”

Ethan’s fingers sped up as well, matching the pace of Dominic’s rhythm, sending me hurtling back into bliss. Small shudders racked my body, and a moan fell from my mouth. The sound of our skin slapping together filled the air, mingling with the crackling of the fire.

Dominic pulsed inside of me, his head falling onto my shoulder. His grip on my wrists loosened as he kissed my temple and Ethan tucked a strand of damp hair behind my ear. “So fucking beautiful,” he murmured in my ear.



Later that evening, Ethan laid beside me, his arm gently draped over my body. After the events on the rooftop, I’d snuck a quick peek at what Hunter had painted. It was me. My head lay on a man’s shoulder, eyes closed, and mouth parted.

My expression was one of complete pleasure, like I was lost to whatever was happening.

Hunter was insanely talented, and I reminded myself to talk to Dominic and Ethan. I needed their help to pull off something I'd been planning for weeks. Something special. His talent was wasted currently, paintings hidden in the back of his closet collecting dust. He should be proud of them, sharing their beauty with the world, but I learned that discussions about it were quickly shut down.

I was surrounded by three men who adored me and worshiped my body. I no longer had to worry about where my rent would come from or how I would pay for groceries. Sometimes I still worried that soon the bubble would burst and everything would disappear into thin air.

I relaxed against Ethan's body and pushed my thoughts aside as I closed my eyes. There was no point worrying about what-ifs right now. We had to make it through tomorrow and hope that everyone's parents would at least accept our relationship, even if they didn't like or understand it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rayne

The next morning was spent in a flurry. I jumped up from the bed, wrestling out of Ethan's hold, and raced downstairs, wondering where I should start. Nervous energy fluttered in my stomach as I thought about Hunter's mom and Dominic's parents coming over later that day. I gazed around the large living space and breathed a sigh of relief. Everything was tidy and in place. The floor sparkled and everything smelled like lemons. *Dominic. What time had he woken up?*

He sauntered down the stairs a few minutes later, towel drying his hair. I drank in his appearance. Low-slung denim and a white fitted t-shirt hugged his body, showcasing the muscle underneath. One corner of his mouth lifted as he tossed the towel at me and I laughed at him as it hit my face before I could catch it.

Dominic was being playful? Seeing him not being so damn serious made my chest feel warm, but was he not as nervous as I was about talking with everyone's parents? Our relationship was in the least unconventional and not the societal standard.

His expression fell as he observed me and he strode towards me, wrapping an arm around my waist. As he pulled me close, he tipped my chin up. “What’s wrong?”

I swallowed roughly and wiped my palms against my pants. Words tumbled out of my mouth, a testament to my anxiety. “Nothing, just thinking about tonight. What if everyone gets upset? What are we cooking? What am I wearing? The apartment looks nice. Seriously, what time did you wake up? I could have helped you.”

He pressed a kiss against my forehead and pulled me closer, stopping my rambling. “How are you somehow the same person who charged into the Ruby Rose and the woman who’s nervous about the reaction of our parents? Everything is going to be okay. To answer your questions, in the order you asked them, if they get upset, they’ll get over it, I promise. I was thinking of making pasta for dinner. Everyone loves pasta or at least tolerates it. You’re going to wear clothes.” He chuckled to himself and I pursed my lips. “Seriously, wear what you want. And finally, you know that I’m always up early. When have you ever washed dishes?”

When he finally released me, I felt slightly better, but couldn’t help the anxiety plaguing me. I genuinely liked their parents. Heidi ran a food bank in the neighborhood where Hunter grew up and Dominic was just reuniting with his parents. Their relationship was still fragile with everyone slowly working through the past.

I drank coffee and wasted time until later in the day when I finally decided to take a shower. I needed to do something and getting ready seemed like a good option. As I was toweling off, someone knocked on my bedroom door. Hunter walked in as I shimmied on my jeans.

He leaned against the wall, watching me with hooded eyes as I dressed. In his hand was a brown envelope. “What’s up?” I asked, buttoning the shirt I shrugged on.

“I was just thinking about how I can’t wait to take those clothes off of you.” I opened my mouth to respond, but he held up his hand. “Before you say it, I know. We don’t have time right now.” He handed me the envelope as a sense of dread consumed me. “A courier dropped this off for you. There’s no address on the outside, but it’s safe to assume we know who it came from.”

Everyone’s parents were due to show up in a few hours, but that wasn’t enough. Ayers had to throw me a curve ball today of all days. Before I ripped open the seal, I looked at Hunter. “How long before we can take care of him?”

He stood up straight and raked his fingers through his dark hair. “Princess...” He struggled to find the words to say and whatever dread I’d been feeling was suddenly replaced by white-hot anger. He was stalling and it pissed me off. I was sick of everyone else planning the next move. I was sick of being left in the dark. I was sick of always looking over my shoulder, wondering what would happen next.

Clenching my jaw, I looked down and tore the envelope open. I pulled out the two pieces of paper, a note and a newspaper clipping. I frowned reading the note.

You thought you were smart, burning down my business. Quite a flare for the dramatic, always resorting to fire. I've wondered often if you have a touch of pyromania. Perhaps you should ask your therapist about that at your next session?

I hope you enjoy the present I'm gifting you. Remember that if the Kings had taken my offer, none of this would have happened. They were foolish, siding with a woman over me. I'm curious how you seem to have such a hold over them. Young, wealthy, powerful men who fell for someone from the gutter.

You should think about talking to my son and having him reconsider the deal. It's still on the table. I'll even forgive Ethan for his misstep regarding his father.

XO

My hands shook with anger as I crumpled up the note and threw it on the floor. Hunter retrieved it, but I was focused on the article I was holding.

The Clearhaven Tribune. I hadn't been back to Clearhaven since I'd run away from home. I sat on the edge of my bed as Hunter glanced at the piece of paper in his hand.

Tragic Fire Kills Four

In a suspected gang-related incident, four people were found dead inside of a single-family home on 4th Court late

last night. Neighbors notified emergency services when they noticed the home had erupted in flames sometime that evening. All victims were dead on arrival. The cause of death was listed as a single gunshot wound to the head. Names of the victims are being withheld at this time while police search for next of kin. If you have any information regarding this crime, please contact Clearhaven police.

The breath I'd been holding rushed out of my lungs and my eyes burned. Ice filled my veins, but I didn't have confirmation of what I knew to be true. Not yet. I laid the newspaper clipping on the bed and grabbed my sneakers. Lacing them quickly, I rushed past Hunter who stood in the hallway.

"Ethan," I bellowed, praying he was dressed. I raced down the stairs, Hunter on my heels. I didn't want to answer his questions yet, not when I still had so many of my own. He reached for me and I jerked out of his grasp. "I need to check something and might be late for dinner. I promise to try to be on time. You and Dominic need to be here for your parents. It won't take long."

He gritted his teeth in frustration. "Just tell me what's going on."

"I'm not positive yet. I only have suspicions and I don't want to talk about it yet. Just give me two hours, Hunter," I managed to say. "If I'm right, I want him dead this week. No more waiting."

Ethan stepped out of the elevator, holding Dominic's keys and a grocery bag. "Why didn't you tell me he was gone?" I barked at Hunter who raised his eyebrows at me.

"Rayne, I need you to calm down and talk to us," Hunter stated calmly.

Dominic walked down the stairs holding the newspaper article and placed a hand on Hunter's shoulder. "Let her go with Ethan, man. We'll talk when they get back."

Ethan placed the grocery bags on the counter and watched as Hunter internally debated with himself. Finally, he nodded. "Be safe," he told me as he grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

Once we were in the parking garage, I slid into the driver's side of the new car they'd purchased me. "Are you sure you don't want me to drive?" Ethan asked as I buckled my seat belt. Worry lined his features and his mouth was pulled into a deep frown.

I gave him a hopefully reassuring smile. "You've chauffeured me around long enough." I pushed the key into the ignition. "Besides, you don't know where we're going."

The drive to Clearhaven was quiet, neither of us saying much. Ethan changed the radio station several times, struggling to find a song he enjoyed before finally I cracked my window allowing the breeze from outside to caress my face and let memories of the past engulf me. I was on autopilot as I thought of the small white house with black shutters. Of the boards on the porch that creaked and how more than a few needed to be replaced. Of how even though there had only

been three bedrooms, so many people lived in the house. Of the crib that my cousin once placed in the hallway.

My eyes stung at memories of my childhood and the abuse I'd endured and yet, it somehow wasn't all bad. Sure my mother had been a narcissist and addicted to prescription painkillers, but she still took in whoever needed a place to stay. My father sat by silently and never intervened, but he taught me how to change the oil on my car. My brother dealt drugs and fell in with the wrong crowd, but he saved every stray animal he found.

And then I broke. My eyes burned as tears trailed down my face, my emotions a jumbled mess I couldn't sort out. My family was complicated. When I left, I knew I had to. I needed away from them and the neighborhood I grew up in, but it didn't make it hurt any less. Ethan said nothing as he placed his hand on my leg, offering me comfort.

The tears had cleared by the time we pulled into the outskirts of Clearhaven and I wiped my face on the edge of my sleeve. The smells from the paper mill assaulted my senses, filling my nostrils with the familiar noxious odor. I rolled up my window knowing it wouldn't do any good. The smell permeated everything in this part of town.

I drove over the train tracks, signaling that I was almost there. Almost back to a place I once called home. I turned left and drove four houses before pulling up to the curb and stopping.

I didn't shut off the engine or step out of the car. I just stared at the lot littered with burned debris. One wall and several beams still stood covered in ash. *Should I go to the police station and leave my contact information?* The article mentioned trying to contact next of kin, but no one had my number. I was basically a ghost to everyone who'd known me.

Numbness crept over me as I looked at what remained. Ash had been right. I should have come back sooner and tried to reconcile my past. Now I would never have the opportunity to speak to anyone or see if things changed. This chapter of my life was closed, but I wasn't filled with any satisfaction.

Ethan squeezed my thigh, and when he spoke, his voice was soft. "Let me drive, baby." I nodded at him and we swapped places. "Your parents?" he asked as he adjusted the seats and mirror.

I swallowed the hard lump in my throat. "Yeah and two other people."

Ethan drove back over the train tracks. "Who were they?" I shrugged at him. I wasn't quite sure. "We'll take care of it."



Once we finally walked into the penthouse, I felt emotionally drained. If given the opportunity, I would've gone straight to bed, but Dominic's parents and Hunter's mother sat comfortably around the dining room table, chatting quietly. I'd known that there was a possibility I would be late. I also knew

I looked like a mess with red eyes, windswept hair, and splotchy cheeks.

Ethan placed his hand on my lower back and guided me toward the table. Dominic frowned as he poured me a glass of wine. “Did you find what you were looking for?” he asked gently.

I nodded as I took a sip. Dominic’s father, Kent, cleared his throat. “So, what’s the deal with this relationship?”

Heidi elbowed him in the ribs, not caring if we saw. “Now is not the time. Can’t you see that something is going on?” she hissed from between her teeth.

I managed to give her a small nod, even though I felt like I was suffocating. “No, he’s right. No more secrets. Let’s just rip off the bandage. I’m in a relationship with all three of them and have been for a while.”

It was quiet enough that you could hear a pin drop in the room. Kent paled and his mother, Melinda, raised her eyebrows before tossing the rest of her wine back. Suddenly, Heidi burst into laughter and hugged me tightly. She tried to gain her composure as her body shook against mine. When she finally let me go, she dabbed at her eyes. “I think that’s wonderful, dear. I really like you and doubt that anyone else could ever keep these three in line. Plus, you might give me a grandchild after all.”

Hunter hid his face in his hands and mumbled, “We’ll talk about a grand dog.”

At that Melinda started laughing as well. “I’m not sure how any of this works, and I’m too afraid to ask, but I’m happy as long as the four of you are happy.”

Kent sat further back in his chair and sipped his drink while the guys plated up pasta. “Well, I’m not too afraid to ask. How does it work? A relationship with all of you?”

Ethan shrugged. “We’re still working out the details, but so far no one has complained. When a man and a woman love each other very much—”

Dominic shoved his hand over Ethan’s mouth, his eyes twinkling in amusement. “Enough. There are sensitive ears here. I don’t think Heidi is old enough to hear the details.” He winked at her as he moved his hand. I was amused as Heidi’s cheeks turned red. He had simultaneously made a joke and flirted in the same sentence.

“Now, Dominic, you can’t speak to me like that. You’re spoken for now,” she playfully chided.

The rest of the evening was spent in quiet conversation and it seemed that given the circumstances, our relationship was accepted. The images of earlier still flitted through my mind as I drank my wine and picked at the food in front of me. After an appropriate amount of time, I excused myself from the table, ready to curl up in my bed.

Tomorrow, I would be ready to take on the world. Tonight, I just needed to be by myself.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Hunter

When Rayne left this afternoon, I'd been mad. Well, mad wasn't quite the right word. I wanted her to talk to me and tell me what was happening, but in typical Rayne fashion, she hadn't. After Dominic showed me the newspaper article, my heart sank into my stomach. Whatever she found in Clearhaven would devastate her.

Still, I managed to refrain from calling her or texting, hoping that she would finally talk once she got home. Then our parents showed up, and we pretended like nothing was wrong while we waited. The entire time, my eyes were glued to the door. My mother gently patted my shoulder and reassured me everything was fine, but she didn't know the truth. It was better that way.

Once Rayne walked through the door, it felt like the air had left my lungs. Her face was red, yet somehow she managed to plaster a semblance of politeness on it. I'd cringed when Dominic's father brought up our relationship. It wasn't the

right time, but Rayne shouldered his question with ease and not too long after, excused herself.

After everyone said good night, I turned to Ethan. “Spill.”

He sighed at me as he rubbed his face. “I’ve gotta call Ignacio tomorrow and hope he has a contact in Clearhaven. With the number of favors I’ve called in recently, I’ll never be done paying him back.”

“How bad was it?” Dominic asked, swirling the remaining wine in his glass.

Ethan grimaced at the question. “Which part? Where she grew up? The house? The look on her face? Or the fact she cried nearly the entire way there?” He dug into his pocket and pulled out a joint. “I don’t know what you want me to tell you. The whole thing was fucking bad. After this afternoon I completely agree with her. This has gone on long enough and Ayers needs to be dealt with.”

He stormed off to the rooftop, and I let him go. At that moment, I understood his rage and frustration at the situation. It was better for him to blow off steam here rather than elsewhere, and I didn’t have the mental capacity to worry about where he might escape to tonight.

The idea of Rayne crying broke my heart but knowing her family was gone devastated me. From what she’d said, and the way she acted, I knew her childhood rivaled Ethan’s, but that didn’t diminish her hurt.

I looked at Dominic and he nodded to me, an unspoken discussion occurring between us. We crept up the stairs quietly into her room and I crawled into bed next to her, wrapping my arms around her. Dominic did the same on the opposite side, brushing the hair from her face.

She wasn't asleep, the only thing giving her away was an occasional snuffle. Tonight, I would lie beside her and she could rest. Tomorrow, I would make her talk to us and we could decide the best way to get rid of Ayers. I typically preferred a clean kill. A bullet to the head felt appropriate in most situations. I doubted Dominic or Ethan would agree with that idea, though. Things would probably get messy knowing the two of them.

The next day I woke up to midmorning sunlight streaming through the window and Rayne's soft breath caressing my skin. Dominic's spot was empty already. *Probably busy cleaning up after last night.* I slipped from the bed, careful not to wake Rayne. She needed some sleep. Hell, we all probably did.

As I poured a cup of coffee, Ethan nudged me with his shoulder. "Talked to Ignacio this morning. Apparently, it was her parents, brother, and grandmother."

Shit. "So basically her whole family. What are we going to do?"

Dominic looked up from his laptop. "Well, obviously we'll cover the funeral costs and ensure a proper burial if she wants it."

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. *How is he always so rational and logical?* Most times it didn't bother me, but my patience was holding on by a thread.

"That's a given," I drawled. "I meant about my father. Has anyone called Oliver yet? Or even Paul? They won't let this slide."

Dominic shut his laptop and shifted in his seat. "I'll talk with Oliver and tell him we'll handle the situation. I need to borrow the warehouse anyway."

Ethan's eyes grew wide at those words, but he said nothing, choosing instead to focus on pouring a bowl of cereal. "Are you sure we need the warehouse? We could just dump him in the river?" I asked, knowing the argument was futile.

Dominic grinned coldly as he picked his phone up. "The river would be too nice of a grave for him. Besides, would we really let him get off that easily after everything that has happened? Our girl has been through literal hell and he deserves nothing less."

"When?" I asked, trying to feel out the situation.

Dominic stood and stretched before answering. "Tonight preferably, but I'm going to make sure that it's approved first." He stepped away as he made the phone call, leaving me with the sound of Ethan's chewing and my thoughts.

Rayne strolled into the kitchen not long after, hair damp, makeup on, and dressed for the day. She poured a cup of coffee and settled onto a stool across from me. She wasn't

upset like I expected her to be. No, instead her demeanor unnerved me and I couldn't quite read her body language.

Her shoulders were pushed back as she tipped her chin towards me, eyes narrowed. She took a quick sip of the coffee she was holding. "Where's Dominic?" she asked, ice lacing her tone.

This conversation was going to be pleasant. "He's talking to Oliver right now and discussing yesterday with him. Approving our plans."

She pursed her lips and a look of defiance flashed through her eyes. "I'm not looking for approval. Either you're with me or you're not, because I'm done running and hiding. It ends today, one way or another."

I held up my hands in front of me at her words. "Hey, we're with you. We just had to make sure the time—"

"Tonight," she snapped and Ethan struggled to hide the smile forming on his lips. Of course he would be amused by this.

"Tonight," he agreed as he carefully approached her like she was a dangerous animal. He leaned close, placing a careful kiss against her forehead. "That was the plan to begin with, baby. Just take a deep breath. I've got a surprise for you."

I watched him defuse the situation with curiosity. Rayne could be a hellcat when she wanted to be, but he somehow knew how to calm her volatility.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “And what would that be? If you mention anything about what’s in your pants, I swear to god.”

He smirked at her. “I mean, now that you mention it, that would be a great surprise, but that’s not it. I’ve been keeping tabs on Ayers for a while now and I have it on good authority he’ll be occupied at one of the seedy motels on 7th tonight. He has a standing date with one of the working girls.”

Leave it to Ethan to be the one to find Ayers’ exact schedule. It shouldn’t have surprised me. After all, he did decide to break into Rayne’s apartment to find out more about her instead of just talking to her. Not like she would’ve willingly given him any personal information.

Her muscles relaxed slightly, and she put her cup on the counter. “Did you take care of what we discussed?”

My eyebrows raised as he nodded. “What are you two planning?”

She shook her head. “Nothing you need to concern yourself with right now.”

I’d once told her that anything that concerned her was my business, but bit my tongue. With the mood she was in, I didn’t really want to provoke her temper, and instead focused my attention on our plans for the evening. “What time will Ayers be meeting his date?”

“Seven. Be sure to wear something black,” he told Rayne before stepping away. I struggled not to roll my eyes at him.

Rayne always wore black to jobs. Flashes of the night she burned down Ayers' building popped into my head. In the darkness, she looked like a shadow.

The rest of the day Rayne avoided us, primarily staying in her room, and I didn't press the matter. She needed time and space to process everything that had occurred, and I could give that to her until tonight.

Dominic finally re-emerged and told us that Oliver had agreed to tonight, especially when he heard about Rayne's family.

Thirty minutes before seven she appeared downstairs dressed in black. Her golden hair was pulled back into a bun, and her lips were pressed into a thin line. She grabbed a travel mug from the cabinet and poured more coffee into it. She hadn't eaten any actual food today, and I wasn't sure when the last time I saw her drink water was. After tonight, I would try to rectify that, even though she was going to fight me tooth and nail. "Ready?" she called out as she walked to the elevator.

Expedition Motel was only a twenty-minute drive from Jupiter Plaza, so I took my time grabbing the bag I'd packed earlier. It was in a rough area of town and the only place that charged by the hour, at least in that community. We loaded up in the car and drove, no one really chatting. We were all too focused on the task at hand: nab Ayers and end the nightmare the past two months had been.

When we arrived, I pulled into a parking spot behind the building and we waited as Ethan jogged into the lobby. When he returned, he knocked on my window. “Room 174. They’ve been here for about twenty minutes.”

I reached into the bag laying on the back seat and pulled out four ski masks, handing them out to everyone. We pulled them on and I opened my car door quietly. It was showtime.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rayne

For most of the day, I'd locked myself in my room. Not because I was despondent or in mourning. No, today I was angry. The emotion fueled my determination as I dressed carefully for the evening's events. Wearing black honestly wouldn't matter at this point, but it was a habit born from my past. A past that managed to haunt me at times despite every link being permanently severed.

The look on Hunter's face earlier when I told him I didn't care if I received Oliver's blessing was priceless. I doubted he realized his eyes got wider and his jaw dropped open. I wasn't lying when I said I was done. This had been going on long enough.

I sat in the back of Dominic's SUV waiting as patiently as I could for Ethan to return. Patience was never something I had a large supply of and it ran even thinner tonight. The need to end this situation consumed my thoughts.

My parents weren't saints; no one in my family was. They'd all put me through hell to different degrees. But none of them

were a part of the web I found myself entangled in. Ayers had finally pushed me too far.

I rubbed my hands along my thighs and took in the motel's exterior with passing interest, noting how the pale blue paint reflected the flickering neon vacancy sign. It could have used a fresh coat of paint and the red doors were scratched and dented with age. The breezeway and parking lot needed additional lighting, but that was more than likely intentional. The owners knew the clientele that frequented here wanted their identities hidden.

Ethan approached the vehicle, tapping on Dominic's window. His words were quiet when he disclosed the room number, but I didn't care if anyone overheard us. I tugged the ski mask over my face, concealing my face before I opened the car door.

How did I feel knowing I was going to murder Ayers or die trying? Fucking free.

I'd never been big on the idea of hiding and the only time I'd run away from anything, I was barely eighteen, which was a lifetime ago.

I flexed my fingers at my side as we silently strode towards the room he was staying in, a key card tucked in Ethan's palm. We walked to the motel room's door, moving like shadows in the moonlight. No one said a word as Ethan slid the key card into the lock. Even through the door, I could hear slaps and grunts. A woman cried out in pain and I took a deep breath, trying to keep my rage at bay.

The heavy red door opened with a creak, but the occupants of the room didn't seem to notice as we walked in, closing the door behind us. The space was dimly lit with yellowing walls bare of any decorations. Ancient stained brown carpet covered the floors, and I shivered trying not to think of what happened here previously.

I turned my attention to the bed where a strung-out woman lay sprawled with her legs parted. She was thin with glassy eyes and track marks covered her inner arms. A red handprint adorned her cheek, and I shook my head to myself. Her body was partially covered by Ayers, who was completely naked and propped up between her thighs.

Hysteria threatened to overtake me and I worked to stifle the laugh bubbling up in my chest as I watched him rut into the woman beneath him, oblivious to the fact we were standing here. His face was red and his muscles flexed as the sound of a gun cocking drew his attention, stilling his motions. The woman startled, grasping the sheets and scurrying towards the headboard in an attempt to cover herself.

Ethan leveled the gun on Ayers as he turned to face us. His pupils were as dilated as his companions when he sat up, reaching for a pair of pants. Dominic clicked his tongue. "No one told you to get dressed yet."

Ayers raised his eyebrows, amusement lining his features. "Why bother with the masks and theatrics? I know who you are."

He wasn't taking this seriously enough, and it pissed me off. I stepped towards him and grabbed a fistful of his hair, yanking it harshly and tilting his head up. "The masks aren't for you, they're for her."

The woman pressed against the headboard finally spoke, her voice shaking. "Who the fuck are you people?"

Ice laced Dominic's tone when he responded. "No one you need to concern yourself with. This has nothing to do with you."

Her eyes grew wide as I jerked him off the bed by his hair and slammed him into the wall. His body tensed and Hunter's voice rang through the room. "I wouldn't fight her if I were you, *father*." He gestured vaguely at Ethan. "He'll shoot you, but I promise you'll be leaving here alive tonight. A simple bullet would be too noble of a death, or so I've been told." He approached us slowly, pulling zip ties from his pocket. The woman watched us, her jaw clenched as he encircled Ayers wrists with the ties and pulled them taut, securing his hands behind him.

Dominic pulled a large wad of cash from his jacket and threw it on the bedside table. "Use that to get some food and stay somewhere safe tonight. You could check yourself into rehab and start over." He hesitated, mulling over his next move. "The next time you might not be so lucky. Not everyone would have left a witness alive."

Hunter dragged Ayers to the doorway. Ayers' cheeks burned crimson, and all traces of amusement vanished. His nostrils

flared at us. “You’ve got to be kidding me. At least let me put on some pants.”

Ethan pushed the gun into Ayers’ back. “Does this seem like a joke?”

The men opened the door and walked out into the darkness, Ayers in tow. I glanced over my shoulder one last time at the woman on the bed. I wasn’t certain how much Dominic had given her, but I had a feeling it was a substantial amount. Enough to make a difference. “He’s right,” I told her softly. “Take the money and start over. Get the hell out of this city. You have a chance to become someone new.” She nodded at me and said nothing as I closed the door behind me.

I walked across the parking lot to the idling SUV where Hunter and Ethan were shoving Ayers into the back. They pushed a rag into his mouth, ensuring his silence. Or relative silence given the fact he tried to speak despite the gag. “Please don’t make me shoot you,” Ethan stated before shutting the back hatch. “I really hate cleaning blood out of upholstery and Dominic is a bitch when his things are dirty.”

Ethan sat beside me on the back bench, weapon trained on our captive. “What do we do with him now?” I asked as I tore the mask from my face, relishing the cool air. I rubbed my face with the hoodie I was wearing, wiping away the beads of sweat that had formed.

The men did the same before starting the car. “It’s a surprise, sweetheart,” Dominic said as he pulled from the parking lot, focusing on the road. “This morning when I called

Olly, I wasn't asking for his blessing. I was asking to borrow one of his warehouses.”

I leaned my head back against the seat and stared out of the window. “The warehouse where we went to meet Chandler?”

Hunter glanced over his shoulder and gave me a look. I couldn't quite discern it in the darkness. Was it concern? Sympathy? Worry? “Same place,” he answered in a quiet voice. He muttered something quietly to Dominic and they turned up the radio, leaving me to my thoughts.

It didn't surprise me tonight impacted Hunter more than the other men. He'd been Oliver's muscle for hire in college, and out of all three of them, seemed to want to keep me away from the darker side of the business I would be taking over. He didn't realize yet that he couldn't protect me forever. This was the destiny that fate had forced me into.

I leaned forward and rested my head on his seat, grabbing his hand and lacing our fingers together. “It's okay,” I reassured him. And it was. After tonight, things would be different. He squeezed my hand in response and I squeezed back.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Rayne

We pulled up to the warehouse after a short drive. Most of Strathmore was eating dinner or watching television, completely oblivious to the fact that tomorrow when they woke up for work, Ayers would be dead. All of this senseless destruction and meaningless death started for what? One man's ego and wealth. Being one of the wealthiest men in the city wasn't enough for him. He had to run for mayor and take out anyone he thought stood in his way.

I hopped out of the car and waited as Hunter unloaded Ayers, dragging him through the gravel towards the steel door. "You could stand up and walk," he gritted out.

Ayers fell to his knees as we reached the door and Dominic rolled his eyes before grasping his legs. "He's just delaying the inevitable. Ethan, knock on the door for us. Joey's already here and will let us in."

Hunter and Dominic lifted Ayers with ease as Ethan knocked. When Joey saw us, he gave me a wide smile. "Killer! What have we here?" he asked, glancing at Ayers still

smiling. I sighed at him, knowing I would never live down the nickname after the past few months.

Dominic tipped his head up and grunted, still holding Ayers' lower body. "Room's ready?"

"Yeah, I'll leave you guys to it," Joey answered. "Let me know if you need anything."

Ayers' attempted to struggle between the men as they carried him toward the door a few feet away, his muffled cries echoing against the walls. Ethan narrowed his eyes and kicked him in the ribs before he opened the door. "Stop struggling. You've earned whatever happens tonight."

A metal chair was set in the middle of the room and cabinets of different shapes and sizes lined the back wall. Hunter settled Ayers into the seat before Dominic began tethering him to it. Ethan lowered the gun once Ayers was secure and ripped the gag from his mouth.

"You don't think you'll get away with this, do you?" Ayers bit out and Ethan backhanded him, his head bouncing to the side.

Dominic glared and walked behind him, leaning close to his ear. "Of course we're going to get away with this. Surely you didn't think you're the only one who can bribe and blackmail people? For instance, what about your good friend, the police chief? He was desperate not to let anyone else find out his dirty little secrets. Imagine his family's horror when they discover his role in the Ruby Rose and the fact he was a predator."

Ayers paled at his words but said nothing, instead swallowing harshly. Dominic sauntered towards the cabinets and pulled out a pair of pliers, inspecting them. “What do you want to start with, sweetheart?”

What did I want to start with? The pliers held no appeal to me. I didn’t want him to die quickly, but the idea of torturing him by prying his fingernails off wasn’t quite what I wanted to go for.

I shook my head at him. “No pliers. What else do you have?”

Hunter watched me with interest, curious about what my next move would be. “Hand her a knife. She’s already comfortable with it,” he said, his voice coming out gravelly. He stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Princess, you don’t have to do this. You could let one of us,” he whispered in my ear before kissing my cheek. “You have enough nightmares that plague you.”

I laid my head against his shoulder. “This is something I have to do. You can’t protect me forever,” I told him as Ethan fished a switchblade from his pocket. He pressed it into my palm and wrapped my fingers around it.

“Well, since you’re the most stubborn woman I know, and absolutely determined to do this, if you want to drag this out, make sure your cuts are shallow. If he loses too much blood too quickly, he’ll pass out,” Hunter replied where no one else could hear.

Ayers scoffed from where he was sitting and Dominic turned his gaze to him. “Something you’d like to say?”

“Just that I can’t believe this. My son is giving my murderer pointers. I still don’t understand why the three of you chose a woman, literal trash if I may add, over what could have been a lucrative business deal.”

Dominic’s fist slammed into Ayers’ face, bones crunching on impact. Blood trickled from his nose, which if I guessed was now broken. Dominic wiped his hand on a rag before shoving it into Ayers’ mouth. His jaw flexed as he stepped away. “We’ve warned you before about speaking poorly of Rayne, yet you continue to disrespect her in our presence.”

Hunter unwrapped his arms from my torso as he nudged me in Ayers’ direction. “I’m not your son and I never have been,” he mumbled to himself.

I flicked open the knife in my palm, examining it for a moment. The black handle was smooth and the blade’s edge serrated. From my experience serrated edges were more painful, the edges of the skin left jagged and torn. I lifted my head as I stepped near him, pressing the knife against his bicep. “I still don’t understand. Out of everyone in the city, why me? I was no one, just a random person caught in the crossfire,” I whispered to Ayers.

I applied more pressure on the blade and dragged it against the skin, ripping it open. A muffled sound left Ayers’ mouth, and I watched him clench his teeth and try to make as little

noise as possible. Scarlet streamed from the wound down his body as I moved the blade to the opposite side.

“You brought my family into this. First my junkie brother, then the rest,” I said, keeping my voice steady. Cut. Next, I placed the blade against his chest. “You brought in my ex-boyfriend, who tried to rape and kill me.” Cut. I positioned the knife against his abdomen, watching the blood pooling on his skin. “And you manipulated Libby.” Cut.

I knelt in front of him and his eyes widened when the blade touched between his legs. He struggled against his bindings and shook his head, sounds of terror coming from beneath his gag. “The worst part wasn’t even what you did to me.” I pressed the blade down harder, “I mean, it was pretty bad, don’t get me wrong. The worst part was discovering that you were selling off people like they were nothing more than cattle.” I slashed upward, the knife not sharp enough to cut anything off in one motion because of the serrations.

Ayers’ already pale face beaded with sweat and he slumped over. “Shit,” Dominic hissed as he rifled through the cabin. “He passed out from the pain. He hasn’t lost enough blood yet.”

Ethan leaned against the wall and grimaced. “I would have passed out if someone tried cutting my dick off. Baby, promise me no matter how mad you get at us...”

I raised my eyebrows at him and said nothing.

Dominic pulled out several square packages and ripped one open, waving it underneath Ayers’ nose. “Wake up, sunshine.

We're not done yet," he crooned as Ayers' eyes fluttered open.

"Smaller cuts, Rayne," Hunter stated. "Otherwise, he'll die from blood loss."

"We could always cauterize the wounds," Dominic mused as he took a step back and crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for me to continue.

Ethan wrinkled his nose at the suggestion. "Let's not. Burning flesh is in my top five least favorite smells. And burning hair. Oh, and burning nails."

I should have been concerned that they were discussing this so nonchalantly, like it wasn't a human being strapped to the chair. I wasn't though. I knew what they were weeks ago, after I'd been kidnapped. My own personal monsters.

I should have been concerned that I was capable of killing someone in such a ruthless manner, but I wasn't. My future would be full of instances like this. I had to ensure that no one would dare to cross me ever again.

Ayers continued to struggle as I placed smaller, more shallow cuts along his body. I tuned out the noises that filled the room, focusing instead on the rage that had been fueling me all day.

By the time I finished, blood coated my skin and pooled on the floor beneath the chair. Ayers' chest no longer moved and Dominic pressed two fingers to his neck, feeling for a pulse. He nodded at me. It was done. I glanced around the room,

surveying the faces of the men I loved, trying to feel out what they were thinking.

They somehow weren't looking at me any differently. Hunter still seemed concerned, the corners of his mouth drawn down, but he opened the door behind him and peered out. Dominic seemed bored as he motioned to the sink that sat against the wall. "Let's get you cleaned up," he murmured. "Wouldn't want any of that *trash's* blood on your skin."

The pipes whined as he turned on the hot water, and I placed my hands underneath. He grabbed a paper towel, wetting it before dabbing at my face. Ethan stood beside me and brushed the hair from my face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good," I told him. "It's over. No more looking over my shoulder."

Dominic placed a hand on my shoulder. "Not quite. We have one more thing to do, but it can wait for a few days. You have Thursday night to worry about first."

Hunter gave him a confused look. Dominic simply lifted one eyebrow.

Joey waltzed into the room and stood motionless for several moments before he began laughing. "Holy shit, killer," he managed to say before laughing again.

Yep. Never living it down.

"Can you get us a metal barrel? We have a fire to set," Hunter stated to him.

Joey laughed and his entire body shook. When he finally recovered, his face was red. “Yeah, give me a few minutes.”

When he returned, he had a rusted barrel tethered to a moving dolly. Hunter motioned to Ayers’ body. “Help me lift him.”

I took one last look at the dead man tied to the chair, trying to find even an inkling of remorse. *Absolutely nothing*. All I felt was relief.

After Ayers was placed inside, Hunter rolled the dolly from the room, humming to himself, and turned left, opening a heavy door that led outside. Piles of pallets and rusted metal parts were scattered across the small yard. Joey walked out with a canister of gasoline. Ethan took the gasoline and poured it inside of the barrel, coating Ayers body. “It ends as it began,” he told me as he handed me the book of matches.

I almost laughed at his words as I struck the match and dropped it, the accelerant catching quickly. It wasn’t exactly the end, but he had a point. Everything had started because of a single impulsive act. A blaze that took out a luxury sports car and left me indebted to Oliver Griffith.

It was the end. The end of me being caged in the penthouse. But really it was only the beginning, the start of a new life.

Flames leapt up, filling the air with rancid-smelling smoke. Ethan’s statement earlier about disliking the smell of burning bodies rang true. Even with all the fires I had started, this was only the second time I had smelled burning flesh. It was a smell that would forever be imprinted on my brain.

We watched for several seconds before Hunter placed his hand on my shoulder. “Joey, you’ve got this right?”

“Yeah, I’ll handle it. Go take care of the queen and make sure to burn her clothes.” He laughed to himself again. “Wait until I tell Oliver about this.”

Dominic grabbed my hand and squeezed. “Let me tell him in the morning.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Dominic

I helped Rayne into the passenger seat of the car and buckled her seatbelt. She handled tonight well, and I was proud of her. She wasn't squeamish and didn't shy away from the brutality of the evening. Instead, she leaned into that part of her. I wouldn't say anything about it, but seeing her acting with no remorse turned me on. The blood contrasting on her pale skin was beautiful, especially now as she sat at my side.

I knew from his reaction that Hunter was worried about how this would impact her, but I thought of it as potentially therapeutic. Ash might disagree, but what better way to seek closure than vengeance? If her nightmares reappeared from the events of tonight, I'd be there to catch her while she fell.

As I turned the key in the ignition and my mind trailed off, thinking of what needed to be done this week. First thing tomorrow I needed to get the car detailed. Between the blood, dirt, and mud, it was absolutely filthy. The shop across town was incredibly discrete and always did an excellent job. After that, my focus would be on helping Rayne set up her surprise

for Hunter. Perhaps I would send Hunter on an errand in the morning, buying myself more time.

Then we'd handle the police chief. And after that, we should take Hunter's advice and go on a vacation. I didn't know the last time any of us had stepped away from Strathmore or any of our duties at Jupiter Financial. Considering everything, I thought it was well deserved.

I pulled into the parking garage and glanced at Hunter. "Call Phillip and tell him to wipe the feed from tonight. Just in case." Even though we'd blackmailed the police chief, I didn't want to leave any potential loose ends or evidence tying us back to tonight.

I escorted Rayne upstairs and helped her into her bathroom, turning on the shower as hot as I could stand, how I knew she liked it. I helped her peel off the damp clothes, plastered to her skin by blood, and watched as she sank against the shower wall, allowing the water to spray her body. She closed her eyes, ignoring the swirl of red gathering at her feet and I pulled a soft towel from the closet before leaving the room.

Going through her closet, I found a few pieces I thought she'd find comfortable. A pair of black yoga pants, an oversized t-shirt, cotton underwear, and fuzzy socks. I sat them on the edge of the cabinet before stripping out of my clothes, leaving them in a pile on the bathroom floor, and stepping into the water with Rayne. After she fell asleep, I would burn them all, but right now I needed to shower and check on her.

She leaned into my body and opened her eyes when she realized I was standing there, peering up at me. “Hi,” she murmured.

“Hi.” I squirted some of her strawberry shampoo into my palm and lathered my hair, waiting to see if she said anything else.

This mirrored so many other nights in some ways, but it was very different in others. A few short weeks ago, she would have had tears trailing down her cheeks or her hands would have shaken from adrenaline. There were no traces of that woman tonight as she soaped up her body. All I could see was determination.

“I have to ask, but I think I know the answer. You’re okay, right?” I asked as I rinsed my hair, the scalding water washing suds down my body.

She sighed as her arms circled me. “I’m fine, I swear. Besides, what else were we going to do? Let him continue to terrorize us and lord the fact he was Hunter’s father over his head? Let him become mayor? He had enough power.” She planted a kiss on my chest. “The only thing I’m worried about is whether you’ll look at me differently now. That’s it.”

I lifted her chin to look into her stormy-colored eyes. “Doubtful sweetheart. Pretty sure we’re all smitten with you. If you ever tried to leave, we’d just drag you back. This is where you belong.”

She closed her eyes before whispering, “I gave the three of you my heart. Don’t make me regret it.”

I turned off the water and handed her the towel on the countertop. “I wouldn’t dare. For one, I’ve seen what you can do with a knife.” Her lips tilted up like she was trying to suppress her amusement. “Plus, I know I’m not great at saying things like this, but I’m madly in love with you. A little murder won’t stop that.”

I grabbed a second towel and helped her dry off her body before she pulled on the clothing I laid out. As she left the bathroom, she stopped and leaned close, planting a soft kiss on my cheek. “I love you too, Ice King.”

I swatted playfully at her butt as she raced from the room and laughed to myself before gathering everyone’s clothes from tonight.

A while later I watched the flames flicker on the rooftop and wondered what I had done to deserve her love or even Hunter’s and Ethan’s friendship. The three of them overlooked my incessant cleaning and aloof attitude. They were my family and the ones I’d be willing to die for.



The next morning after breakfast, I sent a grumbling Hunter off to run errands and have the car detailed. We couldn’t accomplish anything if he was hanging around the penthouse. If he got back early, I would send him into the office to do... something. I gave Rayne a quick look and motioned for her to follow me upstairs to Hunter’s room.

“I’m having second thoughts. What if he gets mad at me?” she asked, worry marring her features.

I ran my thumb between her eyebrows, smoothing the skin there. “Then he gets mad,” I shrugged. “I don’t think he will though. Besides, you’re right. He’s been hiding his talent for years and it’s time he shows it off.”

Ethan popped his head into the room as I opened his closet, frowning. “I just want to let you know I support this mission, but if he catches us in his closet...”

I waved my hand at him dismissively. “He won’t. Trust me.”

In the back corner of the closet sat a pile of canvases covered with a sheet. I turned on the light and pulled the cloth aside, ignoring the dust tickling my nose. Rayne reached out and began looking at each as Ethan stood by watching her reaction.

“You should use that one,” he said, tracing his finger over the painting’s surface.

I glanced over at the one he was looking at and had to agree. It was the one he’d done most recently, after Michael Carter’s funeral. A woman’s face was cast in shadows and reflected in flames, her head thrown back, lost in ecstasy. The piece was provocative, washed in purples, blues, and oranges.

We chose a dozen other paintings, most of them portraying Rayne. To the uninformed bystander, you wouldn’t be able to guess, but she was his muse. Canvas after canvas filled with a

curvy woman with full thighs and breasts, the occasional scar dotting her skin.

After putting everything back the way we'd found it, Ethan and I carried the canvases downstairs and loaded them into Rayne's car. She took a deep breath as I sat beside her. "I can do this," she said more to herself than anyone else.

Ethan stepped around to the driver's side door and gave her a quick kiss. "You can do this," he reassured her before walking back upstairs. We'd agreed when we were planning he would stay home, just in case Hunter showed back up.

Rayne clutched the steering wheel tightly until her knuckles turned white as she drove across town to the small arts district. "Calm down," I told her and placed my hand on her thigh, hoping to comfort her. "He's going to love this. He's spent his whole life trying to please everyone else. This might be the nicest thing anyone has ever done for him."

She pulled into a small parking spot on the cobblestone road near A Piece of Me, a small art gallery that agreed to help us. They were more than thrilled to help showcase Hunter's work despite never seeing it in person.

We pulled the paintings from the car and I surveyed the building as we walked. It was an older home that had been renovated and converted for the owners' purposes. It was clean with a brick exterior and white shutters framed the large windows. Small steps led to a wraparound porch complete with wooden swings. Charming was the best way to describe it.

An older woman swung open the front door in excitement and hurried towards Rayne. “I was wondering when you two would show up!” Despite her advanced age, I could tell she was a force to be reckoned with as she helped us inside. From her bright red hair to the violently purple dress she was wearing, she exuded a sense of chaos in the best way possible.

Once we were inside, I glanced around at everything as she looked through Hunter’s work. Glass vases and ceramic pieces sat on shelves, the sunlight hitting them and casting a rainbow kaleidoscope on the walls. Small sculptures of welded metal stood tucked in corners and canvases hung in every corner. In the middle, one lone wall was unadorned.

“These are fantastic. Do you know if he’ll want to sell any of them? I could find buyers for these,” the woman stated.

Rayne chewed on her bottom lip. “I don’t know.”

The woman beamed as she made notes on a piece of paper. “That’s fine. What about formal training? Did the artist attend art school or...”

Rayne raised her eyebrows and laughed. “No, he has a finance degree.”

The woman started laughing with Rayne, and they chatted easily for several minutes before we finally left. “Is it weird that we planned this today considering last night?” she asked as we strolled down the stairs to the car.

I brushed a kiss against her knuckles. “It’s only weird if you make it weird,” I responded. “And we didn’t start planning

this today. You've been planning it for weeks.”

We all deserved a little happiness at this point. Life would never be the same as it was last November, but it was time for a new normal.

Chapter Thirty

Rayne

Thursday evening I carefully applied my makeup and threw on a wrap dress hanging in the closet. Hunter still had no idea about tonight and butterflies careened in my stomach. My mind pictured tonight going one of two ways, even though I knew the possibilities of how he'd react were endless. The best-case scenario was he'd be absolutely thrilled. The worst-case scenario was he'd be angry, and feel like I'd violated his trust, similar to how I felt when I found out Ethan broke into my apartment after we first met. I dabbed at the sweat forming on my face.

Ethan peeked his head into my bedroom. "Ready?"

I shook my head at him as I pushed my feet into the stilettos I was wearing tonight and then grimaced, remembering I had a terrible track record wearing heels with the guys. "Not really. What if he hates it?"

Ethan grabbed my hand, leading me out of the room. "He won't. Even if he does, he'll have time to cool off. He won't say anything in front of his mom."

That was a fair point and helped to settle my nerves some. Ethan had invited everyone's parents, Oliver, Marie, Paul, Aldo, Rory, Victoria, Kourtney, Ignacio, and only the gods knew who else earlier this week. Hunter wouldn't cause a scene in front of them.

When we reached the bottom of the stairs, I noticed Hunter quietly sitting on the couch, watching a basketball game while he looked at his phone. Dominic pulled a black silk blindfold from his back pocket and stood behind him, wrapping it around his eyes.

Hunter chuckled. "Well, this is kind of kinky. What are the three of you planning to do with me?" he asked as Ethan grabbed his hand, encouraging him to stand up.

"Guess you'll find out soon, big boy," Ethan joked. "You can't see anything right? I don't want to ruin the surprise."

Dominic smirked at them. "Surely, you aren't doubting our amazing blindfolding skills. I have it on good authority..."

The easy banter continued well after we were in the car and I laughed at them, my nerves slowly dissipating while they talked and hummed along to the music. When we pulled up in front of the gallery, I was amazed at how the outside had been transformed. Hundreds of fairy lights were strung up on the exterior and in the bushes. Everything felt like magic when I heard the light music from inside the building.

Dominic grabbed the ends of the blindfold, allowing Hunter to see for the first time. He inhaled sharply when he saw where

we were, his eyes wide. “Guys, I know this isn’t what I think it is.”

Ethan patted his shoulder and opened the car door. “It’s exactly what you think it is and you’re going to love it.”

Waiting outside of the SUV for Hunter, my mind started racing. I thought he would be upset; I didn’t expect fear. Dominic stood beside me, tapping his fingers on his thighs, and when his patience finally ran out, he opened the door and unbuckled Hunter’s seatbelt. “Come on. Your mom’s inside and so is Oliver. We can’t leave them waiting.”

Hunter’s shoulders stiffened further as he grimaced. “I can’t believe you guys,” he mumbled as he finally stepped from the vehicle. He clutched my hand in his tightly. “We’ll talk later,” he told me as we walked to the building.

My stomach dropped at his words and I hoped Ethan was correct. He would have time to reassess the situation before we made it home.

Once we were inside, I couldn’t help but be happy. People milled around looking at the paintings and chattering quietly to themselves. On the wall that was originally blank hung Hunter’s paintings in all of their glory. My cheeks flushed as I realized they were all of me, even if no one else knew. I grabbed a flute of champagne sitting on a tray and took a sip, trying to find something to preoccupy myself with.

The woman with fluorescent red hair saw us and excused herself from the conversation she was in, smiling widely. “So

this is the artist,” she declared as she grabbed Hunter’s free hand.

He plastered a pleasant-looking expression on his face. “I don’t know if I would call myself an artist exactly. This is just something I do to relax,” he told her.

“Nonsense,” she replied. “And with no training. You should be proud of your work.”

Hunter blushed at the woman’s praise. *If he could only see what the rest of us saw.* “Thank you.”

Next, Heidi approached him, wrapping him in a tight hug. “They’re beautiful, Hunter,” she gushed. Her grasp didn’t loosen as she spoke. “Why have you never shown me any of these?”

He let out a nervous laugh. “Because you always wanted me to have a reliable career. Something I could depend on. I’ve seen you struggle my entire life and wanted to make you proud. This was just something I did to de-stress. If it weren’t for these three—”

Ethan cleared his throat. “You can thank Rayne, Ms. Nicholson. This was her idea.”

I elbowed Ethan in the ribs and he grunted as I gave Heidi a tight hug. “It was my idea. I wanted Hunter’s work to be seen and not shoved in the back of a closet.”

He leveled me with a look and Heidi laughed. “I can’t thank you enough. The pieces are gorgeous.”

A woman I didn't know in a long black dress eyed us curiously as we talked to the other people we knew. Kourtney and Victoria giggled over glasses of champagne and Rory shook his head at them, evidently the designated driver of the evening. Kourtney's girlfriend was still absent, as always, probably off on a business trip. Ignacio stood beside Lexi, a fairly sizable gap between them as they drank bottled water. I was still curious what their story was, but wouldn't pry. At least not tonight.

Oliver, Paul, and Aldo stood in the corner drinking tumblers of whiskey. "I've told you before that your talents were wasted in finance, but I had no idea," Oliver stated. "I would've hired you to paint murals at the community centers instead of shaking down people that owed me money," he added in a low voice.

Hunter grinned. "Well, that wouldn't have exactly prepared me for a future with your girl."

"I'm serious, Hunter. We've been discussing it, the three of us. Next week, I want to talk about it. Sit down with some drinks. Hell, you could do a few pieces for me. Marie's been on me to redecorate the club."

Finally, the woman who had been eyeing us found the courage to speak to Hunter. "Are you the artist?" she asked.

Hunter nodded and squeezed my hand that was still folded in his. "I am."

"This might be presumptuous of me, but I wanted to leave you a card. The gallery owner wasn't certain if you'd be

interested in selling them, but there are several pieces that I'm very interested in. That is if you're willing to part with your art."

He took the card from her hand. "Thank you for the offer, but they aren't worth anything."

"I'm willing to argue that point, Mr. Nicholson. I hope to hear from you soon." She turned on her heel and sauntered out of the building, holding her head high.

"Man, look who might be able to retire from finance and crime to pursue his dream of being an artist," Ethan smirked.

"Don't joke about that," Hunter glared.

"He's not," Dominic stated, throwing back the rest of his champagne. "There's no reason you couldn't. You might have to fill in some on the crime portion for Rayne, but why can't you focus on what you love? The office is handled. After tomorrow, the Ayers saga will be wrapped up. You've busted your ass long enough."

He spent the rest of the night engaged in conversation and exchanging pleasantries as we sipped on champagne and waited for the crowd to die down. When we finally made it back home, I eagerly kicked off my shoes. My feet ached, but at least nothing bad had happened. There was still time though. Ethan And Dominic were mysteriously absent, giving us space to argue if it came down to that.

Hunter stalked towards me and I stepped backward, unsure of what he was planning. My back hit the wall behind me as

he gently wrapped his hand around my throat and captured my lips. The kiss branded me from the inside out, his tongue warring with mine as he gripped my hip. When he finally came up for air, he leaned his forehead against mine and closed his eyes. “Thank you for tonight. For believing in me, even if I was scared. Even when it made me uncomfortable.”

His words melted my heart further. That night he wrapped his body around mine, proving all of the ways he loved me.

Chapter Thirty-One

Dominic

Friday night and I knew exactly where I would find the police chief. Samuel Palmer was a man who kept a tight schedule. I pulled the SUV into the parking spot beside his patrol car at the diner and cut the ignition. I'd convinced Rayne to stay at the penthouse with Ethan. She didn't need to see what I was willing to do to protect her. She already had written in her journal that she knew I was her monster, and I didn't need to confirm her suspicions.

Hunter looked at me and sighed. "What's the plan? I know you told him he owed you one last favor."

I stepped from the vehicle and brushed the wrinkles from my clothes. "Don't worry, you'll see." I walked into the diner, the bells on the door tinkling, as I found Palmer sitting in a booth at the back of the room. I slid in beside him and Hunter sat across from him, trapping him in.

"I wondered when you would show up again," he said as he sipped his coffee.

A waitress with short blond hair approached the table with a huge smile painted on her face. “What can I get you guys?” she asked, a light southern accent gracing her words.

Hunter dipped his head down as I spoke. “I think we’ll have a cup of coffee. Oh, and how about a piece of pie? Palmer, what’s your favorite?”

He swallowed, and I watched his Adam’s apple bob before he responded. “Cherry. They have the best ch-cherry pie,” he stuttered.

“Well,” I checked her name tag quickly, “Renee, I would love a piece of cherry pie.” I winked at her as she left and turned back to Palmer. “Tell me about your family. How’s your wife doing?” I asked, tapping my finger on the table.

“You’re a fucking psychopath,” he muttered. “I’m not telling you anything.”

I scowled at him. “Don’t be unkind. I’m giving you a chance to talk and eat pie before I tell you why I’m here. You’re acting extremely ungrateful.”

He cast his eyes downward as Renee brought us back three pieces of cherry pie. I wiped my fork off on the back of a napkin before taking a bite. Palmer wasn’t lying. The cherry pie was phenomenal here. It was a shame I wouldn’t be back.

“My wife is fine,” he finally said, pushing the pie around his plate.

I clicked my tongue in displeasure. “I wouldn’t waste the pie tonight. Not with where you’re going. This might be the

last time you have any, especially some this good. Eat up.”

Hunter looked at me with disapproval before he dipped his fork into the filling. He closed his eyes as he tasted it. “Good, right?” I stated before turning my attention back to Palmer. “What about your kids? How are they?”

“Good,” he grumbled at me. He wasn’t much of a conversationalist, which suited me fine, and I decided to drop it as he put a bite of the pastry in his mouth.

When he finally finished, I took one last sip of the coffee sitting in front of me. I dug a pen and a small notebook from my pocket and placed them on the table in front of them. “Here’s what’s going to happen. I need you to write a convincing goodbye letter to your wife, confessing all of your love for her. And then I want you to record all of your sins.”

His eyes widened at my words. “This is a joke right?” I wasn’t sure why everyone thought I was joking, but I needed to rectify that immediately. I cocked the gun in my jacket pocket and his mouth fell open. “You wouldn’t,” he hissed. “We had an agreement. If I helped, you wouldn’t say anything.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “That’s right. I wouldn’t say anything, but you didn’t ask me what my terms were. You knew better than to make a deal with the devil. It’s either you do things my way, or I will smear your name at every media outlet I have contact with. I’ll completely ruin your name and your family’s. Either way, you aren’t walking away alive, so what’s it going to be?”

“So fucking glad Rayne isn’t seeing this shit,” Hunter said under his breath as the chief picked up the pen with shaking hands.

He started writing in the notebook and I peered at what was on the page, laying my chin on his shoulder. “Oh, surely you can do better than that. How long have the two of you been married?”

His hands shook harder as he wrote and he gripped the pen so tightly, I was afraid it would break. Good thing I had a second one in my pocket, just in case.

I watched as he signed the letter after pouring out his soul on the page. His confession wasn’t quite honest enough for me, but little did he know I would be enclosing copies of some of the evidence we had, further cementing his damnation.

“What now?” he finally asked quietly. His face was covered with a thin sheen of sweat and he knew his time was up.

Hunter rolled his eyes. “Now we step outside and see what he has planned,” he told him as he threw money on the table.

“We’re going to take a ride,” I said evenly as I stood. “Hunter’s going to follow us.”

I waved to the waitress, and she gave me another bright smile as I walked us to his cruiser. “Don’t try anything stupid,” I warned him. He nodded as he got in and stared as I buckled my seatbelt. “What?”

“I just...” he managed to stammer.

I patted his cheek. “Safety first, always. Do you know where the old baseball field is on Waverly Place? Head there.”

The rest of the ride was spent in uncomfortable silence as I checked in the rearview mirror, ensuring that Hunter was following us. After tonight it was finished. Samuel Palmer was the final loose end we had to tie up that dealt with Ayers.

Palmer parked in the gravel parking lot and jerked his key from the ignition as Hunter pulled up behind us. “Showtime,” I stated as I pointed my gun at him. “Let’s go.” I wrenched my door open and waited as he slid from the vehicle.

We walked onto the overgrown baseball diamond and he watched me cautiously, his eyes shiny with unshed tears. “What’s next?”

I shrugged at him. “I’ve thought about this and the different scenarios a million times. How it might play out. I’ve only come to one conclusion. No matter what, it has to look like you’ve killed yourself due to guilt. I mean, we know that’s not true, but no one else will realize that. If you hung yourself, you’ll claw at your neck and people will assume you had second thoughts. If you tried to overdose, it may not be successful. Hell, even driving your car into a telephone pole or choosing to slit your wrists might be unsuccessful.”

I paused for dramatic effect, watching as his knees gave out underneath him. “The only reasonable solution I came up with was a gunshot wound to the head. The likelihood of survival is less than ten percent.”

“Please,” he pleaded with me, tears spilling down his cheeks.

“Why should I show you any mercy? Did you show any to the girls trapped in metal cages at the Rose? How about the underage victims from your travels?” The words were bitter flowing from my mouth. “You didn’t show them mercy. Everything you’ve done has been for profit or pleasure, and now it’s time to pay the piper.”

Sobs wracked his body as he continued to plead with me. “There has to be another way.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Hunter muttered beside me before turning away.

I rolled my eyes at him before giving Palmer a hard look. “It’s either this or I release the information to the media. It will ruin your wife’s life. Can you imagine what your children will think of you?”

I ignored the tears streaming down his face as he lifted the gun to his head with shaky hands. He knew what needed to happen. I shoved the other documents I’d copied into the envelope in my hand and sealed it, laying it beside him. When the shot rang out, I didn’t spare a glance behind me. I simply walked to the SUV and left.

Hunter pursed his lips as we drove back to the penthouse. “I know we had to take care of him, but did it have to be like that?”

“Absolutely not, but the blood was already on his hands. Why do more than we had to?”

That night after I got home, I kissed Rayne on the head. We would finally have the fresh start all of us deserved. Sure, she would never become a teacher, but she was safe, at least for the time being.

Under her rule, I was certain Strathmore would become something better. Somewhere people could thrive and worry less about monsters who wore masks pretending to be men.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Rayne

Three months later

I laid back on the bed, basking in the feel of the cotton sheets beneath my body. I shivered as Ethan licked across my nipple and Dominic's tongue flicked across my already sensitive clit. "Shit," I groaned.

Dominic thrust two fingers inside of me, curling them upward and hitting a spot that made my back arch off the bed. Ethan's fingers wove into my hair, pulling, as he bit my bottom lip. His mouth consumed my whimpers as Dominic continued to torture me slowly.

Fireworks exploded behind my eyes as my muscles contracted around Dominic's fingers. I was well and truly sated, ready to doze off when someone cleared their throat across the room. My lids fluttered open to see Hunter leaned against the wooden door frame of the cabin, arms crossed over his chest. He looked at us with hooded eyes, clearly enjoying his view of the three of us. "You claimed you wanted to get out and see some of the shops, but to do that you need clothes."

Ethan chuckled beside me and kissed my cheek before getting out of bed while Dominic rolled onto his side, watching me like a predator.

I did tell them last night that I wanted to visit the small town near the cabin we rented for the week. For the past three days, I'd spent the majority of the time with at least one of them curled up beside me, or inside of me. My muscles were sore and between my legs ached. I grimaced when I thought of the cleaning crew who would come in after we left.

As I showered, I thought of how drastically my life had changed in the past three months. I'd finally decided that I was finishing up my final semester this fall, even though I wouldn't be using it. Oliver was back at Inferno, running things for the moment, but I wasn't certain how long that would last. One day, sooner rather than later, I would take his place. In the meantime, he'd been slowly teaching me the ropes.

I no longer looked over my shoulder or peered into the shadows wondering what was hiding. I went for drinks with Victoria and Kourtney and helped them plan Victoria's upcoming wedding. The guys finally relented after several arguments and no longer had private security following me around.

I still went to weekly sessions with Ash and wrote in my journal. It wasn't perfect, and might never be, but things slowly faded into the background. My nightmares were less

frequent and less intense. A sense of contentment had washed over me.

I'd settled into a routine with the guys. Our relationship just felt right. I still questioned what exactly I brought to the table and how I ended up here sometimes. How did I get so lucky?

Dominic and I went hiking every other weekend. He plied me with pastries and coffee and put up with my grumbling when he woke me up before sunrise. He was slowly rebuilding a relationship with his parents, calling them and occasionally having dinner with them.

Hunter and I still butted heads, and he was still worried over my safety. When we argued, he brought me a strawberry milkshake. It was a reminder of the first time we went to the diner and I insisted I didn't want one. He was spending less time at Jupiter Financial and painting more, preparing for an upcoming art show. His mother still hinted about children, completely at ease with our relationship. Hunter still looked mortified every time she brought up the subject and offered a grand dog instead.

Ethan and I went on motorcycle rides whenever we could. Now that the weather was getting warmer, the rides were getting longer. Smudge had finally warmed up to him, laying in his lap purring. The first time it happened, the smile that stretched across his face lasted for hours. He hadn't taken part in any fights lately, instead opting to invite Ignacio over to play games of pool.

I dressed quickly and dried my hair, ready to get out of the house before one of the guys tempted me again. I pulled a light jacket out of my bag knowing that although it was April, the mountain air was still crisp in the evenings.

That afternoon, we walked down the town's streets and popped into the small shops that dotted it. Ethan insisted on buying homemade fudge and candy to take home. Dominic bought us each coffee from a local shop that we cradled as we took in the sights. Hunter held my hand, squeezing it occasionally, almost like he wanted to make sure I was still there.

At dusk, we wandered inside a small restaurant that served British food. It was tucked on a side street and the smell of fried fish made my stomach rumble. We seated ourselves at a booth in the corner and looked through the menu. I watched as a man no older than thirty walked around between the tables playing guitar and talking with patrons.

As the night wore on, the Irish coffees we'd ordered warmed my body and I leaned against Hunter's shoulder. "You've been hogging Rayne all day," Ethan teased as he grabbed my hand across the table. "And sharing is caring."

Dominic snorted, sputtering on his drink at Ethan's words. "I think there's been plenty of sharing lately," he said, amusement lining his face. We all laughed for several moments before his face grew serious. "Are you happy, sweetheart?"

I thought for several moments. The truth was, I wouldn't change a thing. Not setting Trace's car on fire, or taking my last job from Oliver. Not moving into their penthouse or leveling the Ruby Rose. All of those events made me who I was. Our story wasn't conventional, and it was marked by a history of violence and tragedy, but it was ours.

“Very.”

Epilogue

Twelve months later

I stood by the freshly painted building and took a deep breath, surveying my surroundings and thinking about how far I'd come. It was difficult to imagine that two years ago this is where I lived. The spring breeze was cool against my skin and I laughed as I watched small children climbing on the new playground equipment that was installed a few weeks ago.

Dominic leaned in close to me and wrapped an arm around my waist. "I'm really proud of you. I just thought you should know that." He gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and nuzzled his face into my hair.

"I didn't really do anything, Dom." I peered to the left. Hunter stood beside a brick wall behind the playground equipment covered in paint, trying to put the finishing touches on the mural he insisted it needed. Even from a distance, I could see that he was lost in concentration. Colorful splashes covered the wall. It was an ode to childhood with a collage of kites, balls, and figures playing double dutch and hopscotch. A

group of children sat patiently watching him, chattering amongst themselves and staring in awe as he painted.

Not so long ago, these apartments sat next to an abandoned lot. Now the lot had been transformed into a basketball court for the people that lived in the surrounding area. I glanced over and saw Ethan dribbling a basketball and laughing with a group of teens wearing jeans and t-shirts.

Victoria rushed around frantically, struggling to put the final touches on the tables of food she had prepared as Rory stood beside her with tired eyes, a baby strapped to his chest. I watched as he nuzzled the small child's head and whispered something to her that only he could hear. If you would have told me 2 years ago that Rory Donohue would be quite the doting father, I would have laughed. I walked toward Victoria and placed a hand against her upper arm. "Calm down. Everything looks amazing," I said, trying to reassure her.

Her eyes were wide with panic. "I don't have everything out yet!"

I stifled the laugh threatening to burst out and pursed my lips. "You still have a few minutes. It's not even supposed to start until noon."

Today was huge for two reasons. The first was that today was the official ribbon cutting for Strathmore Reimagined, a nonprofit set up to help the community. After everything happened and Ayers disappeared, the guys purchased the old apartment building I had lived in when we first met. They

wanted to surprise me by revitalizing the area so that there was safe, affordable housing.

The second was that Victoria's restaurant, Glenn's Cafe, was opening next month. The name was an ode to her father. It had been a dream of hers for as long as I could remember and today she was catering the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Pinwheel sandwiches, cookies, and slices of cake were arranged on the tables next to picnic sides.

Three older men wearing suits walked up, looking serious as always. When Oliver reached me, a gentle expression spread across his face. "Firebug, you look beautiful today." He wrapped me in a tight hug and whispered to me. "I'm really proud of you, you know? I knew I picked right when I chose you to replace me."

The older man's words caused emotion to well inside of me. After everything went down, Marie convinced him to step aside. "*It's time to let the younger generation fight wars for a little while,*" she told him. His brush with death gave him the nudge he needed to take her advice.

I never managed to escape from Strathmore's web, but right now I was content with that. For the moment, everyone was safe and mostly unscathed. Oliver still wore the scars from his gunshot wound under his shirt and Paul had his freedom. After all, the trumped-up weapons charges were dropped.

This was everything that I could have ever hoped for. When I started this journey, I wanted to dig myself out of poverty and find a way to impact the community positively. I never

imagined that I would fall in love along the way, much less with three men. I twisted the ring on my finger. Last Christmas the guys had given it to me. It wasn't a wedding band, none of us believed in anything quite so conventional. Four strands of precious metal coiled together as one. It was a promise that no matter what, we were family.

Ethan approached me drenched in sweat and grabbed my hand. "Did you ever think this is how your life would turn out?"

The grin that seemed to be plastered to my face today widened and emotions caught in my throat. "Not in a million years."

Sign-Up For My Newsletter

My whole life was planned out until he waltzed into my life one night. Rory Donohue. I had stolen glances at him even as a teenager. He was tall, gorgeous, wealthy, and charming, but he was also the only child of one of Strathmore's crime bosses. Destined to take over his father's criminal enterprise, I knew that I should keep my distance, even though the attraction was undeniable.

Queen of Clubs is a prequel novella to Promise of Embers. It explores the story of Rayne's best friend Victoria Glenn five months prior to the events of the main story and is intended to begin introducing you to the struggles of Strathmore.

Sign up for my newsletter to get it for free!

Not ready to leave Strathmore just yet? Want to know more about Nia Mason, our doctor on call? Do you like second-chance romances involving a hidden child, a crime lord's son, and mayhem? Ties That Bind is coming late 2022/early 2023!

Nia

Feeling like I had no other options, I made a deal with the devil. Family is the most important thing, right? Along the way, I met Enzo Renzetti and my heart knew I should stay away from him. He was gorgeous, dark, but most importantly dangerous. After one night of passion that would change my life forever, I ran, but fate has a funny way of coming full circle. I'm back in Strathmore and I know it's inevitable we'll cross paths again.

Enzo

My destiny was always to take over my father's criminal empire. I didn't have time for love, especially after being burned once. Nia Mason was everything that I wanted in a woman: gorgeous, determined, and quick-witted with a smart mouth, but after she vanished I swore off relationships. Years later, she's reappeared and I haven't decided if I want to destroy her or claim her for myself.

The release date is a placeholder and will be moved up.

Afterword

I wanted to thank everyone who has come along with me on this journey! Your support has meant the world to me. When I was young, I wanted to be a writer, but as time went on, I had given up on that dream.

This series started as a passion project for my best friend, Bee, and I never intended on publishing it. I had started reading again in earnest and would call her to tell her the plot of every book that I read. She casually asked me one day if there was a book series where a woman had multiple love interests and didn't have to choose between them. I, of course, had an answer, but felt *extremely* uncomfortable recommending the books I enjoyed reading. She was looking for something without a lot of bullying and that wasn't pitch black. So, one evening after Thanksgiving, I started writing. I would share each chapter with her and my husband in Google Docs, and both would consume the material, excited to see where the story went.

The story changed drastically over time. Originally, the first spicy scene was in chapter 10. Ethan's golden retriever energy was much higher, and my husband told me that his lack of boundaries was concerning. Dominic was a much colder character. So I worked and modified things, rewrote the first half of *Promise of Embers*, and became extremely concerned about the number of times I mentioned Rayne drinking coffee. At some point, they encouraged me to actually look into publishing it.

I've learned a lot since the beginning of this adventure. Everything from how to format ebooks to how long it would take a molotov cocktail to completely destroy a car. I've been happy, sad, and even angry with the words that I placed on the page and I've met some amazing people along the way. Some people deserve a special shout-out for their support.

M, thanks for reading this about a million times despite night shift and on-call. Thank you for telling me *absolutely not*. You listened to me rant more times than I care to admit when I was worried about where the plot was going and purchased me hummus.

Bee, I know that life is really busy, but you still took the time out to read for me. Hopefully, things will calm down soon! Thanks for always listening to my rambling ideas and letting me spitball with you, even though it's football season and life is hectic.

Amanda, thank you so much for being my alpha reader (that term sounds terrible and definitely needs to be

revamped.) You read everything I sent to you, gave me your honest opinion, reassured me when I was concerned about the number of murders, and sent me pictures of your projects. You rock!

Shavonne, thank you for beta reading for me, giving me critical feedback regarding word choice and plot development, and reassuring me about the quantity of spicy scenes in the first 15 chapters. Side note, the thirst traps were truly inspirational *wink*.

Roxie, thank you for beta reading for me. You are so busy and have so much going on, so for you to carve out time in your schedule meant a lot.

Chrishawn, thank you for being my critique partner. Also, all of the memes, videos, and book recs. Hopefully, by the time this is published, you are one step closer to publishing my boy Onyx.

To my street team and ARC readers: you guys are phenomenal! Your support has been overwhelming. Thank you for all of the dms, jokes, and memes!

And once again to you the reader! You guys are just amazing.

Other Works

By Celeste Night

Promises Series

Queen of Clubs (newsletter sign up)

Promise of Embers

Promise of Flames

Promise of Hellfire

Standalones

Ties That Bind

About Celeste Night

Celeste Night is a romance author living somewhere in the southeastern United States with her husband, two minions, two dogs, two cats, and a partridge in a pear tree. She loves morally gray men and memes. When she's not plotting imaginary murders or dreaming up her next favorite book boyfriend, she enjoys reading, playing video games, and craft projects.

Follow me on social media to stay up to date on my latest projects! [Beacons.ai/celestenight](https://beacons.ai/celestenight)