

NIKITA PARMENTER

*Revenge*

FINDING MY HOME SERIES

BOOK SIX

Revenge (Finding My Home)  
Book 6

Nikita Parmenter

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# Chapter One

## *Ever*

I groan as I finally fully regain consciousness. I've been fading in and out for the past two days. At least, I think I've been here for two days. It's hard to tell the time in this tiny cell they have me in. Blake has visited me twice in my brief moments of consciousness, always talking about all the great things we're going to do together. When I've awoken previously, I've been unable to move much at all, my mind groggy, and I quickly lose any grip I have on it before fading back into oblivion. I think it might be my mind's way of trying to protect me, along with the leftover drug they pumped into me.

As my mind tries to pull me back under, I fight it this time. I need to know what's going on and where I am if I have any hope of trying to escape. Thankfully, my body agrees with me, and I slowly pull myself up off the cold hard floor, my joints aching and sore, and to think I was moaning about sleeping on the ground in the forest not so long ago. I'd take that over this any day. As I move, the clank of a chain sounds through the tiny room I've been put in. I glance down and sneer at the manacle around my ankle. It's thick and attached to the wall; judging from the length of it, I won't even be able to reach the door.

They've chained me like a fucking dog.

The anger at being chained serves to burn away the last vestiges of tiredness still taunting me. Once I've got my stiff body into a sitting position propped up against the wall, I slowly and methodically take in the rest of the room. I can't see much, the only light coming from under the door, but it's enough to make out vague shapes, my eyes getting used to the dark quickly. As I suspected, the room is small, concrete and has no window. So there's no hope of escaping out of that; from what I can make out of the door, it's metal and looks

thick, with a small viewing window in the top portion. There's a dark shape in the corner that I'm assuming is where I'm supposed to do my business. I'm in a prison cell, worse than a prison cell; actually, they get more amenities.

With my inspection of the room over with, I take stock of my body instead. I'm going to need to be as strong as possible to escape from here.

If you can escape from here, now he's got you, he's not going to let you go easily. A dark voice mutters in my mind, and I push it away, even though I know it's right.

I'm sore from being on the concrete floor for so long, and my injuries from the fight, although they don't seem as painful as they should be, they are causing me more of an ache than anything else. Which makes me think I've been here longer than the two days I initially thought.

Fuck.

Okay, think positive, Ever. Yes, it's bad that you've been here that long, but it means you are stronger and more able to fight if you're mostly healed.

That's great, and all, but I'm also weak from lack of food, my head dizzy even though I'm only sitting, and hunger pains that I hoped I'd never feel again are gnawing at my stomach. They must be planning to feed me at some point, Blake needs me for something, and he won't just let me starve. Which also means that I can trust whatever food they do give to me. He won't poison it for the same reason.

So, I find out as much information about where I am and, more importantly, what he wants from me, and I play the game until I can make my escape or the guys can get to me.

At the thought of the guy's, pain pierces my heart as the images of Rage, Atlas and Riot all sprawled on the floor, covered in blood and not moving, flash through my mind.

"No, no, no," I mutter out loud, aware that it makes me sound crazy and not giving a flying fuck. "They're okay. They have to be. I'd know if they weren't."

“That’s where you’re wrong,” the chilling voice of Blake announces as he lets himself into the room, flooding it with light and making my eyes water painfully at the onslaught. I can just make out his widening grin, “Three of your men are dead.”

Cold dark fear floods my veins at his words as tears start to make tracks down my face, I can’t stop them, and I won’t. I scream in pain as memories flash through my mind one after another, sobs wracking my form.

I barely hear Blake’s joyful voice through my anger, “I will leave you for now, but I suggest you get over it quickly. I have something we need to do tonight.”

The door slams shut behind him, and my grief turns to all-consuming rage. I scream, yell, and pound my fists until they’re a bloody mess. I will make him pay for taking them from me; slowly and agonisingly, I will destroy him from the inside out and make him wish he had never met me. With that final thought, my switch gets flipped, my emotions get buried under the rage, and I numb myself to everything apart from my need for revenge.

## *Riot*

“She’s been gone for eight fucking days!” I roar, punching the wall, “he could be doing god knows fucking what to her right now!”

“You need to calm the fuck down, all of you do,” Peter comes storming into the kitchen at the house on Dom’s compound. His clothes are rumpled and stained, and his hair is sticking in all directions; he’s not fairing much better than the rest of us.

We came here almost without consciously deciding to. Blind with rage and fear, we drove straight back to Dom’s compound; we’re going to need all the backup we can fucking get on this one; as soon as we find his fucking location, they’re all going to fucking die.



“Ever is missing,” Atlas growls as he jumps to his feet and winces slightly when it pulls at the stitches holding the wound in his stomach together.

“Yes, I am fully fucking aware that my best friend is fucking missing, but none of us is helping her by sitting around and getting fucking angry about it. Save your fucking anger, let it build and then unleash it on the fuckers that took her, not each other!” he finishes with a yell, “Ever would kill me if I let you destroy each other, and I will not fucking allow it.”

I look around at the others as we sink lower in our seats, feeling properly chastised.

“He’s right. We’ve been falling apart and taking it out on each other. We need to stop. We need to do what we do best and fucking end the cunt that took her and anyone else who he’s associated with.” Rage says into the tense silence.

Trick runs a hand through his hair that desperately needs a wash, but then I can’t talk; we’ve all been too busy scouring any information that we can find and barely getting any sleep in our mission to do so. Whenever we sleep, we have nightmares. I know I’m not the only one; I’ve heard the others call out in their sleep often, and Rafe has been curled in my arms, tears slowly dripping down his face multiple times. We all feel like we’ve failed her, and we have. Blake should’ve never gotten close enough to her to be able to grab her.

We promised to keep her safe, and we fucking failed.

I glance around at everyone. We’re broken; there’s no mistaking that. My eyes catch on Trick, and I watch as he takes a deep breath and pulls himself together.

“Everyone, go and shower and put clean clothes on. Dom wants a meeting with us, but Peter

is right. We can’t carry on like this. We are no use to Ever like this.” Trick’s order is firm, and without argument, we all get up to do as he said.

As I walk past Peter, I pull him in for a hug, and he grips me tightly, “Good job, man. Ever would be proud of you for

kicking our asses back into gear.”

He pulls back, his eyes watery, as he sniffs, “She’s going to be okay, right?”

My heart clenches, and bile rises in my throat, but I have to answer him honestly. We all know what a sadistic fucker Blake is. “I don’t know. But I do promise you that we will bring her home again.”

He nods as he swallows quickly, and his eyes start to water. We silently make our way upstairs, I fucking hate this, but I need to keep my head in this situation. Even when we find Blake’s base of operations, we need to try and remain objective. If we rush in, in a murderous rage, then we could make mistakes, we could alert them we’re there, and they could move her or, god fucking forbid, kill her to stop us getting to her.

No, we need to do this as tactically as possible, using all of our skill sets, and we have enough. We can do this smartly and still brutally torture Blake and any other fucker who is in the building because I can guarantee he’s not fucking alone.

Once I’m in the shower, I have to wash my hair twice, it’s absolutely disgusting, and I can’t believe we’ve been walking around like this. By the time I get back downstairs, everyone is starting to gather, ready to get to Dom’s and see what he wants. Even Jensen looks better; darkness is completely consuming his eyes, but he’s present, and he looks ready actually to get our shit together and do this right. Everyone does, and I’m really fucking proud of Peter for sorting us out and standing up to us despite the fact that it could’ve gone very wrong, and it would’ve if anyone other than Peter had tried, they would’ve been dead, and we wouldn’t have cared.

“Everyone ready?” Trick asks, bags under his eyes that match the rest of us.

“Yep,” Cash replies for all of us. “Where are we meeting him, his place or the clubhouse?”

“His house,” Trick replies, pulling open the door. He pauses and turns to look at us all, “from now on, we do this

strategically and intelligently. This is Ever, and we cannot afford to fuck this up.”

“Agreed,” Luc growls.

One by one, all of us agree, and I watch as their features harden, we are going to bring her home to us, where she belongs, and she won't be out of our sight ever again.

Trick nods as he sees the change in everyone but adds, “That doesn't mean that I expect anyone to be unfeeling, not at all, I know none of us can be, we love her, and she's our world, but I do expect you all to support each other a hell of a lot better than we have been the last few days.”

Everyone nods again. Yeah, shit got out of hand a few times as emotions ran high, especially when we couldn't immediately find her, but we are focused again now, and we're brothers. We've got this.

“Good, let's go.” Trick orders.

We take the bikes to Dom's home, probably driving far faster than we should but regardless of everything, we're all still on edge, and we will be until she's home and she's safe.

“We're here!” Trick calls as we walk into the house, and we are immediately assaulted with the smell of food. My stomach isn't the only one that growls, and I try to think when I last ate, when any of us last ate and when I can't remember; I know that we need to do better.

“You lot are looking more focused and less homeless,” Elena says in replacement of a greeting and then points in the direction of the dining room, “now sit your asses down and eat. You can have the meeting while I feed you. I've had enough. From now on, you will be here for at least lunch and dinner.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Rafe answers as the rest of us nod.

Elena is pretty fucking scary when she wants to be, it's no wonder Ever, and her get on so well. We all traipse into the room where she's laid out enough pasta and garlic bread to feed an army. Dom, Blade, Inferno and Noel are already here, and Dom nods as he can clearly see the change in us.

“Eat.” He orders, “we can discuss everything once we’re sure you’re actually eating. You will be no good to her half starved.”

Without replying, we all load our plates and start eating, although Atlas stabs his food like it’s personally offended him.

“I want to bring my team in to help,” Noel starts, and Trick stops eating and raises his eyebrow at him, so Noel continues, “this is not a small rescue mission. This is infiltrating one of the most dangerous criminal bases we know of in this country. You will not be able to do it by yourselves. I know you’ve got Dom and the guys, but I really think you need more people. My team are extremely good at what they do. We wouldn’t be working for D if we weren’t, and I know they’d want to help. Regardless of the fact that you saved me from that fucker they’d still want to help.”

Trick observes him closely, and it’s easy to see how strongly he feels about this.

“He’s right,” Rafe mutters.

“It’s never a good idea to turn down help.” Rage adds.

“Are you sure?” Trick asks, “you wanted to leave it longer before bringing your team here, so there was no chance that Blake would know you’re alive and try to get to your team.”

Noel nods firmly, with no sign of hesitation, “It’s Ever, of course, I’m sure.”

Trick nods, “Then thank you, get them here as soon as possible. She’s already been gone for eight days, and that’s eight too many.”

I’m not the only one that notices the crack in his voice, but none of us mentions it. We’re all feeling the same.

“Before we go any further, I want to clarify something that I’m fairly sure I know the answer to,” Blade starts, “we aren’t taking Blake in for questioning, are we?”

“We kill the fucker.” Jensen growls.

“We do it by causing as much pain as he’s caused Ever, and then we fucking triple it,” Luc vows.

“Thought so.” Blade replies, a gleam in his eye. He knew that was going to be our answer.

“The next thing we need to do is to call D and see if he’s got any updates for us,” Trick says, and he looks to Atlas, who pulls out his phone, dials, puts it on speaker and then sets it on the table.

“I haven’t heard anything from Alaric yet, but I know he’s working from his side to try and locate Blake’s base of operations,” he explains while it rings.

“He knows that we’re killing him, right?” Inferno asks, double checking because otherwise, this gets a bit complicated.

“Yeah, he knows, and he agrees. Ever is family to him.” Atlas replies.

“Hello, boys,” D’s voice comes over the phone, and everyone quiets down again, “I’m not going to bother asking if you’re all okay because I know you aren’t.”

“No, we’re not, but we’ve lost our shit, and now we just need to bring her fucking home.” Cash replies for everyone.

“Of course, I’ll get on with my update then. I’ve got multiple teams on the lookout for any sign of Blake’s base of operations. We’re almost certain that’s where he’s keeping her since all of his most valued possessions are kept there,” several of the guys growl at the statement, but none of us can argue that he’s wrong, we just hate it. He ignores us as he continues, “I filled Jynx in when she called to give me her update on their current job, and she is trying to get back so that they can help. She said she’s giving it two days to find a solution, and if not, she’s going to slaughter them all. So either way, you will have her and the guys to help you out.”

The way he so casually talks about Jynx murdering a whole bunch of people would make you assume that it’s because he doesn’t take her threat seriously, but in fact, it’s quite the

opposite, and now I know her better; I know that she means what she says.

Everyone stays silent, so D continues, “I’ve spoken to Alaric, and he’s agreed that they should be called in and that he’ll keep the authorities away for as long as possible. Her team are of high interest to them, and they want them to work for them, which just isn’t possible, not with their families. He’s also on his way to you now, I’ll let him explain more when he gets there, but he’s managed to swing it with his boss. If I can get away, I will, I owe Ever a life debt, but I’m currently trying to weed out the fucking rat who is responsible for Noel being kidnapped and several other teams’ problems. It’s also highly likely that they had something to do with Ever. I can’t risk anyone else being compromised. Along that same note though, has Noel spoken to you about bringing his team in?”

“Yes, he has. So long as he’s comfortable letting them know his location this soon, then we’re happy to have their help.” Atlas replies, his voice is cold. I haven’t heard any warmth in it since we had to tell him when he first became conscious again that Ever was taken. I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone shut down that fast before.

“Good, they’re one of my best teams. They’re highly skilled and have no problem with getting bloody. Especially where Blake’s concerned, they have revenge on their minds as well, don’t worry, they know Blake is yours.”

“They should be here in the next two days,” Noel tells us and Trick nods.

“Keep me updated, and I’ll let you know if I find anything,” D says and then hangs up.

## Chapter Two

### *Ever*

The door to my cell opens up, and I remain still, staring straight ahead despite the harsh glare of the light. I know what's coming, they're stupidly predictable, but I haven't worked out a way to use it against them yet. I think it's been three days since I first woke up, and like clockwork, every day since one of Blake's lackeys pays me a visit, they ask me all sorts of questions about the guys. For what reason, I don't know, but I stay silent, and I'm starting to think that's the whole point of the game. I stay quiet; they beat me and keep me weak for the fights.

As I'm pulled up by my hair, the first blow hitting me in the stomach, I let my mind drift. I'm aware of the pain; of course I am, but I can compartmentalise it so I can think of something else. It's not like I can fight back, my hands and legs are bound, and it just makes it last longer if I do. My mind automatically wants to drift to the guys, but sudden and overwhelming pain quickly follows as soon as I picture Atlas, Riot and Rage. I see them lying on the floor, surrounded in blood and never to open their eyes again; bile quickly rises in my throat, and it burns my throat as it comes up. I'm vindictively glad that I managed to get some on the fucker enjoying beat the shit out of me. It makes him angrier, so avoiding thoughts of the guys, my mind travels back to the day I first woke up and what Blake showed me in the evening.

He led me out of my tiny cell and through what appeared to me to be a complex of concrete buildings. When we finally arrived at this massive warehouse-like space, I was instantly assaulted by the noise. It didn't take me long to realise that this was an underground fight club, but this one was a fight to the death, and not all the fighters wanted to be there. Some just owed Blake debts and couldn't pay, and some were trying to save members of their family or their friends. It was

disgusting, and he made me watch three rounds as he clapped and giggled like the madman he was.

Finally, he led me back to the cell and informed me that he'd start my training by having me fight for him. He said if I wasn't strong enough to survive, then I wouldn't be any good for his purposes and deserved to die. I refused, of course, I expected him to be angry, but he just chuckled this dark laugh and said, 'I've already killed three of your men. It would be incredibly easy to get to the others, especially while they're grieving. If you don't make yourself useful in the way I have asked of you, then you will become the means of release for my men, whether that's as a punching bag or sexually. I don't give a fuck, Toy. You're a weapon, that's it.'

That shut me up, I'm not going to risk the guys, and I'm not being used like he was suggesting. My emotions and my moral compass shut down. If I want to survive this, I'm going to have to do things I promised myself I'd never do again. I will survive this, even if it's only long enough to feel Blake's blood drip through my fingers as he screams in pain and terror until finally, the light leaves his eyes and the world is finally free of this monster. That is what is keeping me going; that's what is stopping me from sinking into the pain of my grief and letting it consume me.

That was two days ago, and since then, he sends someone to beat me while I'm bound and then comes to pick me up himself. He tries to get me to talk, but since he told me what happened to Riot, Atlas and Rage, I haven't uttered a word, and I won't. He then takes me to the arena, and I fight for my life. I make sure I listen to their names, hear what their supposed crimes are and remember their faces. I could tune it all out, they could become just a blur to me, but they don't deserve that; I am the one taking their lives. If I weren't such a coward, if I weren't so selfish that I want to survive just so that I get revenge on Blake for what he did to my men, then I'd refuse to do as he wants, but I am selfish, and I will kill him.

My mind drifts back to the present when I'm plunged back into darkness again. It's become my comfort.



I'm pretty sure these fuckers are under orders from Blake not to hurt me too badly because, despite the barrage of hits, I never find myself incapacitated enough that I wouldn't be able to fight properly. Of course, Blake could just be underestimating me, or the fuckers are pretty weak fighters themselves.

I pull myself up off the floor and test my body, twisting and throwing a couple of punches to check that the hit to my stomach didn't damage anything that would restrict my movement. When I only find a twinge of pain, I move on to inspect my face. I'm fairly certain one of my eyes will be swollen shut by the time Blake comes to retrieve me, but I can manage with that. It's nothing I haven't done before. My lip is split again, but that's not likely to affect the fight, so I should be good to go.

I know I have a short time before Blake arrives, so I take the opportunity to relieve myself on the bucket they've provided, but they don't seem to want to empty any time soon. Once done, I sit down and wait. I need to get out of here, but in order to do so, I need more information. Blake thinks he's broken me, and, in a way, he has, just not in the way he wants me to be broken. Every time I step foot out of this cell, I gain more information about where I am, about the level of security, about the guards, and it may take me some time, but I will get out of here. I will get my revenge on Blake, and I will find my way back to my men. Whether they still want me after they find out what I've done to survive is another question entirely.

Before my thoughts can take a dark turn, as they do almost constantly now, the door starts to open and in walks a grinning Blake. The fucker only stops smiling when he's screaming at someone, and even then, it usually ends with a smile as their blood is spilt. The man that followed him in, bends down in front of me and undoes my chain, unbinding my feet at the same time but leaving my arms bound. He grips hold of my arm, adding to the bruises already there. I comply as I'm brought to Blake's side, and we start the walk through the long hallway and take several turns in order to get to the giant warehouse where Blake holds his fights. I'm reasonably

confident that the buildings are connected, and there are enough offshoots off the main passageway that I can easily conclude that there are more buildings as well.

“I do hope you’re enjoying your stay with me so far,” Blake goads; I stay silent, “still no words for me?”

Again, I don’t say anything, and I don’t even bother to look in his direction, knowing that it’s going to piss him off more. I am currently in a position where I can’t do anything else, not until I have more information. I haven’t got to the point yet that I’m willing to take Blake out regardless of what happens to me. I may be shut down, but my men have lost three of their brothers too, and I won’t make them go through losing me as well, not unless I have no choice.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t need you to talk to me to do what I have planned for you. You just need to follow my orders, and I think we both know you won’t risk what’s left of your men..” His smile is broad, and he knows he has me right where he wants me, and he’s right.

For now, anyway.

His smile slips as I don’t react in any way. I just carry on walking beside him like the good little toy he so loves to call me. Inside I’m a bubbling cauldron of hate and anger, but I learned a long time ago to hide my emotions. He doesn’t try to talk to me again as he has done the last two times I’ve walked this way, it instantly makes me suspicious, but I can’t be any more aware of my surroundings than I am right now, so I just wait for the other penny to drop.

Before we get to the set of double doors that lead into the warehouse, I can already hear the crowd, bloodthirsty for the upcoming fights and the ones they’ve already witnessed. Blake only brings me out for my fights. The people involved in these fights are people that Blake feels have wronged him in some way, so of course, he maximises their torment by having his business partners and people who work for him witness their bloody deaths. It’s actually reasonably ingenious as not only does he charge, so he’s making more money, but it also serves

as a warning to those who witness the murderous fight that this is what happens when you step out of line.

As far as I can gather, they very rarely come out on top and get to win their freedom. If I'm honest, I highly doubt that the few who do win actually get to keep their lives.

The crowd quiets to a murmur as I'm brought in and led directly into the large cage that surrounds the ring where the fights take place. The purpose of the cage is simply to stop the participants from escaping into the crowd. I move to the far corner and hold my hands up, waiting to be unlocked. Unlike the last two times I've been in here, though, he takes the key off the accompanying henchman but doesn't immediately unlock me; instead, he takes a step closer and raises his voice so that everyone in the room quiets.

"Treyton informed me that you are wearing a very unique looking necklace," Blake sneers, his eyes flashing with insanity.

A trickle of real emotion pushes its way forward as I automatically lift my hand to grab Atlas's ring that's threaded on my chain.

Blake grins triumphantly as he reaches out and forces my fingers to open, I know I don't have much choice, so I forcibly push away that trickle of fear and stare straight ahead as he grips the ring.

"We can't have you catching this in the fight now, can we?" he questions, "besides, it's not like you need it now he's dead."

It's through sheer force of will that I keep the pain from that statement from outwardly showing. Thankfully anger quickly follows the pain as he lifts the chain over my head and rips it free. It doesn't break, but I watch as he puts it over his own head and grins down at it. Seething anger like fire scorches my veins, my vision starts to turn red with the sheer force of it, and I desperately consider ending him now. Fuck the consequences.

Just in time, my logical brain kicks in as my emotional one takes a back seat. While he's been talking to me, several more of his men have entered the cage as if they're predicting me to react badly. Blake needs me, which means he won't allow them to end me, but he will allow them to hurt me enough that the following planned fight will be more challenging, and now that I'm thinking logically, it's not worth my life. I can almost hear Atlas yelling at me, telling me not to fucking dare attempt to get it back, it's just physical proof of the meaning, and he could never take away the meaning behind it. The pieces of my broken heart turn to dust as I imagine his words. I'll never get to hear him yell at me again.

My heart hardens as I push all thoughts of them away. Right now, emotions are a weakness. If I ever escape this place, I can deal with the incapacitating grief then, but right now I can't afford to. It's thanks to my capability to become unfeeling that I can do this.

I will get my ring back; when Blake's blood drips through my fingers, I will rip it from his dying body, but for now, I keep my fists clenched and my body still staring ahead as my blank mask becomes more permanent and runs deeper than just a mask. I'm not sure I can come back from this.

He nods like he's pleased with my reaction and then hands the key back to the man who followed us in here before turning and striding out of the cage door, the rest of his men following behind him. The guy left behind quickly unlocks my cuffs and then backs up rapidly like he's expecting me to lash out at him, I grin at him viciously as I take a step in his direction, and he practically runs out of the door. They've all seen me fight; by this point, they've seen how easily I've ended two lives already. They're right to be wary of me. If I get the opportunity, I will end them too.

The sound of the crowd picks up again as a wiry-looking man is led into the cage. Apparently, he doesn't need the cuffs I do. At first glance, you'd be made to think that this man is far from dangerous and couldn't hurt a fly. However, when he looks up at me, I can see the pure glee as he looks me over and realises his fight is against a woman. He licks his lips, his eyes

predatory, and I'm pretty fucking sure I can guess what disgusting things he's thinking right now. Regardless of what crimes he's committed against Blake, I'm going to enjoy taking this one out.

"Mark here is accused of damaging some of my stock," Blake starts, and I try not to gag. By stock, he means people, "several of the women are now utterly useless for resale and have had to be put down. He's not only sampled something that is not his but cost me money, and for that, he gets to go up against my Toy. If he survives, he will be granted his freedom. Fight!"

I stay still as Mark approaches me, he's a predator, and he sees me as weaker than he is. I'm sure he's heard the stories about me, everyone is starting to now, but because I'm a woman and a short and dainty looking one at that, so, therefore, he can't possibly fathom that the stories about me are true. I'm going to really enjoy proving this fucker incredibly wrong.

I let him circle me. Whereas I've ended the fights as quickly as possible before, this time, I want to make the fucker pay for the countless number of his victims. As he comes up on my left, he reaches out, his hand going straight for my boob. I snatch his hand out of the air with a speed that shocks him. Without hesitation, I snap his wrist, and he bellows in pain. He stumbles back, away from me, and I tut in disappointment, watching as the anger in his eyes grows. He lets loose, what can only be described as a war cry and charges me. He's got pretty non-existent fighting skills which is probably why he prayed on women in the first place.

When he's within reaching distance of me, I strike, smashing my fist into his face, the spray of his broken nose covering me and adding to my already blood-stained clothes. He's much weaker than I thought because he immediately falls to the floor, clutching his nose and moaning. I let him, I can't end his life while he's being so pathetic, but I do have to end it, for those women and because of Blake and to protect my men. For that reason, I wait. Finally, he gets up, and predictably, his anger is renewed, he swings for me again, and

I let him land the hit because it brings me close enough to do what I need to do. I strike out in quick succession three hard blows to his throat, cutting off his air with one final hit. I watch as he falls to the floor, gripping his throat in panic before the lack of oxygen makes him pass out.

The guards casually walk into the ring as the crowd goes wild, and one comes straight to me, locking up hands again as the others check on Mark. When one of them looks up at Blake and nods, I know the guy is dead, and I simply stand stoically as I wait for Blake to grab me. He takes me back through the passages.

“You did really well; that was so quick.” Blake gushes like he’s fucking complimenting me, and I want to murder him, although I want to make him bleed every second of every day, so I’m not sure that really has anything to do with it.

“Sir,” one of Blake’s guys rushes up to him, “you said you wanted a report. Well, Liam still hasn’t been found.”

Blake waits until I’m secured with the manacle around my ankle but doesn’t leave the room as he replies, almost as if he wants me to know.

“I’m not surprised. He knows the second he surfaces he’s dead, and that bitch wife of his, Amelia too.” He turns to smile at me as he walks out the door like he thought that statement would affect me. When I don’t react, he rolls his eyes and slams the door. Yelling, “See you tomorrow, Toy.”

# Chapter Three

## *Jensen*

We're all gathered around the kitchen, refusing to sit at the table since it reminds us of our Ever. She always insists that we eat together at the table, and we can't bring ourselves to use it, so we have our morning coffee and catch up on information in the kitchen and have been since Peter kicked our asses into gear three days ago. I can't fucking believe that she's now been gone for well over a week, closer to two, and all we're hitting is dead fucking ends when it comes to his base of operations.

The most infuriating thing though, is that even when we do have the information, it could still take a few days to do recon, prepare and make sure all the various teams know what their part in the plan is. I know that we can't go into this alone, and I know we need lots of help in order to pull it off in the best way possible. Still, I don't particularly appreciate that organising all of that help is going to mean it takes us longer to get to her. We don't know what Blake wants her for, but we do know that he wants her for something, so in that way, at least, I am reassured that she's still alive. If he wanted her dead, he would've killed her in front of us as soon as she was grabbed, it would've had the most significant impact on us, and that would've been what he wanted.

I am in a constant fight with the darker side of me; I want to fight, I want to hurt, and I want to get revenge on Blake and any other fucker who has been involved with Ever's kidnapping.

“What's the plan for today?” Rage asks.

He really should still be resting, but then again, so should Riot and Atlas. They all had bad enough wounds that they needed stitches and bled a lot. Fortunately, the amount of blood made it look worse than it was, but they should still be

taking it easy. I, however, do not have a death wish, and I'm not going to tell them shit. They'll rest when Ever's safe, and she will be fucking safe, make no mistake about that.

As Trick opens his mouth to reply, Atlas's phone buzzes; he glances down at it and then looks up at the rest of us, "Alaric is arriving today."

Trick nods, "Noel's team is arriving today too. We need to fill them in on the situation and work out the best place for them to fit. If Alaric is arriving today, I'm hoping he's managed to find some information out."

"Well, he was supposed to arrive yesterday, and he wouldn't want to tell us over the phone since he knows how volatile we are, so it wouldn't surprise me if he did," Cash guesses.

"Might be wishful thinking," I mutter and receive a look from him, and I feel bad, I'm losing my hope. "Sorry, man."

He nods and claps me on the shoulder. I know they're all worried about my mental well-being, but it's not like they can talk. We're all fucked up right now.

"We'll just have to play it by ear and remain objective. We need to do this right, or we risk Ever, and none of us wants that."

He likes to remind us of that almost hourly, and I think he needs to hear it as much as we do. I want Ever back, and I want her back now. If we know the location and can't immediately go to her, it's going to be incredibly difficult for us all. I have to continually remind myself that we won't be able to go to her straight away since we will only know the location and nothing else, and that's not enough information for an operation of this scale.

"When are Noel's team arriving?" Luc asks.

"They should be here in around an hour or so. Dom wants us at the clubhouse to greet them and to go over everything. The club have been told to steer clear." Atlas replies, having gone over the plan with Trick.

"We're bringing a lot of teams in, and I agree we need the help, so what about Lyric's team?" Peter asks.



“I need them to stay in the town if possible. We risk it being compromised if they leave, especially since they hold prominent positions there. I will put them on standby though, we don’t know if Jynx is going to be able to get here, and I’d rather not have D send a team that we haven’t met before. We don’t need to be dealing with that on top of everything else,” Atlas replies.

“Okay, yeah, that makes sense.” Peter nods, “As soon as we have a location, I can look at all the necessary satellites to get clear pictures of the area and building. I might be able to hack into any cameras that are around, and I should be able to find as much information as I can to help.”

“Thanks man, I know you can do it, and I know you can do it as quickly as possible,” Trick replies, and Peter nods, with a determined look on his face.

Before anyone can say anything else, the front door slams open, and we have our weapons drawn in seconds.

“Getting quicker, boys,” Jynx says casually, striding into the kitchen with no concern for all the weapons pointing at her and her men following behind her shaking their heads.

“Hey, Jynx,” Atlas greets, nodding at the guys.

Once we’ve got all of our greetings out of the way, Jynx goes around to each of us and insists on giving us a huge hug, and I have to admit I need it and judging from the slight mist in everyone’s eyes, the others did as well.

“Right, now that’s out of the way; tell me the plan to get my bestie back.” Jynx orders.

“We’re about to go over to the clubhouse, Noel’s team are arriving soon, and we’ve got to fill them in, so it would be better if we can do it all at the same time,” Trick says, and Jynx nods in agreement.

“Noel Fredyiuck?” Rome asks curiously.

“I have no idea what his last name is,” I reply for everyone and then feel a smile tug at the corner of my lips, “fucker doesn’t stop talking and uses it to his advantage.”

My description of him makes Jynx and her team chuckle.

“Yeah, that’s him. They’re a good team, definitely up for this,” Mason replies.

“That’s good. We need the extra help for this one,” Rafe replies.

“Let’s get to the clubhouse then. No point wasting time.” Ace replies, eager to get going.

“Sure, we can explain what we know when we get there,” I tell him before asking, “where are you guys staying?”

“We’re hoping Dom will have a place for us to crash. We didn’t exactly let anyone know we were actually on the way.” Malachi shrugs.

“Fair enough. If not, you can crash here.” Trick offers.

Rome nods, “Thanks, come on, let’s go. I want to know what’s going on so we can help.”

We don’t need telling twice, and we get to the clubhouse quickly.

“Hey guys,” Blade greets, and then his grin widens as his eyes land on Jynx and her team, “Jynx, I take it you had a bloody end to your job?”

“Don’t I always,” she chuckles.

“True.” He turns to the rest of us, “Dom’s told the club to steer clear for a while so we can have our meeting.”

Following him into the large meeting room that has the bar in it, I immediately make my way over to it and help myself to a drink. It’s great having Jynx and the guys here and meeting Noel’s team. Usually, I’d be psyched to meet another team that understand our way of life, but I just can’t get excited. I want Ever. It’s absolute torture not knowing if she’s okay, not knowing how to get to her or even where she is. I’m living in a constant state of fear and anger, and I know I’m not the only one.

I don’t think I’ve slept properly since she was stolen from us. Any time I close my eyes, I see her in the back of that

fucking van, pure fear in her eyes. My mind has taken to taunting me with all the things that could be happening to her, and I have never felt so helpless as I do now.

I hear Dom, Noel and Inferno greet everyone else, and I repress the urge to scream. The love of my life is fucking missing, and we're just standing around talking? I know it's illogical. I know there's nothing else that we can do right now, but the inaction is making everything worse. I can't say I blame Dom for telling all the club members to steer clear, one it gives us the privacy we need, but it also prevents fights; some of his members don't understand why we're so affected by it, and that didn't end well the last time one of them claimed she was just a piece of ass that we needed to get over and move on. Haven't seen the fucker since.

"Do you need to fight it out?" Ace leans on the bar next to me, his own drink in his hand.

I turn my head to look at him; there's a level of understanding in his eyes that speaks volumes. He knows what I'm feeling right now. He knows first-hand the need I have riding me to break and bleed, anything I can get my fucking hands on.

"Thanks, man. I don't think that would be a good idea, though." I reply honestly.

He nods, "I've gotten to that point. Make sure you take the edge off on a punching bag or something, though; otherwise you're going to explode at someone who doesn't deserve it."

"Every night, man, every night I've been down in the club gym, taking it out on the bag."

Ace nods.

"They've just messaged. They're here. I'll just go and grab them, and then we can fill everyone in," Noel announces to the room before striding back out of the door.

As he walks back in, I study the four team members that follow behind him, and my eyebrows hit my hairline.

"Oh shit," I mutter.

“What?” Ace asks, confused.

“Elijah!” Peter exclaims.

“That’s what we better get closer in case we need to intervene,” I reply. What the fuck are the chances!

## *Peter*

Surely I’m not seeing this right. Elijah just followed Noel into the room, which means that he is on Noel’s team, which means he’s a part of this world, and instead of explaining and making any sense of this, he’s just standing and staring at me as his expression flits through an array of emotions, shock, happiness, confusion, they’re all there on a loop.

“What the fuck!” I exclaim, aware that my voice has gone slightly squeaky with my shock and that his team, Jynx, Dom, and the guys, are all staring at us in confusion. I just don’t give a fuck right now. I need to try and work out what the fuck is going on.

“You work for D?” Elijah asks, moving closer to me, and I couldn’t make my legs move if I fucking wanted to.

“No, not technically, but you fucking do. Start talking, Eli,” I order, my voice a hell of a lot firmer than it was.

I watch as he runs his fingers through his black hair and have to clench my own hands to stop myself from reaching for him. After all this time and everything that has happened, I still fucking love him.

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” Eli says, my presence here throwing him off.

“I’ll start then. This is my team. We work with the feds for several different reasons. Ever is my best friend and the love of their lives; she’s been taken by Blake, who is Atlas’s brother. We’re going to rescue her and kill every last fucker that had anything to do with it,” I start, and get a murmur of agreement at the killing statement, “Jynx, who is D’s niece, and Ever’s other best friend, is here with her team to help and

so is the rest of Noel's team which apparently includes you. Your turn," I finish, my eyes narrowed, I turn to Trick, I know we need to get on with the meeting, but I need to know how he's here and if this is why he ended it with me. He nods, his eyebrows raised, and I've never been so grateful that they're my family.

"Wow, okay. It's a long story. I basically got noticed for my skills in the ring and a couple of other things I'd been up to. Long story, but I got brought in to work for D. The kind of work that I was doing was increasingly getting more dangerous, and I couldn't risk you. I wanted to keep you as far away from this world as possible, so I ended it, not that it mattered since you're here." He frowns.

Jensen steps up to my left and hands me his drink, which I immediately take a massive gulp of, "Actually, you didn't end it. You ghosted him and hurt him worse than if you had just ended it. That was a dick move, and you fucking know it."

He's right, and he squeezes my shoulder in support.

"I know it was. I couldn't bring myself to officially end it for selfish reasons entirely, and I apologise for that. I will spend the rest of my life making up for that."

My heart starts to beat in my chest like crazy, and I try not to let it show how much his words have affected me. That was quite a fucking statement, and there's absolutely no question that I love him, and he's it for me, but I need more information, and he's going to have to fucking grovel after what he put me through.

"If that's all true, then why did you start messaging me?" I ask.

He looks around at everyone who is so obviously listening to our conversation, any sort of declaration of feelings in front of other people has always made him feel awkward so I'm expecting him to ask to speak to me privately, which means it's a shock when he straightens his shoulders and answers me.

“When I saw you at the ball, I knew I couldn’t do it anymore. We’d lost Noel, and it just reaffirmed to me that life is too short to have regrets and losing you is my biggest regret. So I decided to try and find a way to make it work if I could convince you to give us another try.”

I’m not really sure what to say to that. Of course, I want to give us another try, I’ve never felt about anyone the way I feel about Eli, but it hurts that he didn’t keep me in the loop. We could’ve made it work. Having said that, I used to keep my hacking from him as well. He knew I was good with a computer but not what I was using my skills for, and maybe if I had been more upfront with him about it, he wouldn’t have decided to keep all of this from me in the first place.

“Why were you at the ball with a team member?” Rafe asks, saving me from answering him straight away.

Eli reluctantly moves his eyes away from me, his demeanour changing to the more controlled and sterner persona he uses for everyone else.

“We’d gotten word from a fairly trustworthy source that one of Blake’s men was going to be at the ball. I couldn’t work out why he’d be there, but we figured there were a lot of high-profile people there, so he was going after one of them. Now, we know that he was after Ever. We had planned to detain and question him on Noel’s whereabouts, but we lost track of him before we could do that.”

“That must’ve been the guy Ever killed in her room,” Trick mutters, and I watch as Eli’s team all appear shocked.

“It has to be. Alright, I know you guys have a lot to talk about,” Atlas starts looking between Eli and me, “but we need to talk about what’s happening with Ever and the plan to save her.”

“Of course,” Eli answers. He points to each member of his team, one of them I recognise from being with him at the ball, “this is Marty and Callan and of course you know Noel.”

“Nice to meet you guys.” Rage offers.

“We appreciate that you have come to help,” Luc adds.

“It’s the least we can do, you saved Noel from him, and even if that weren’t the case, we’d still be here. Blake needs to be taken out.” Callan replies, he’s tall, really tall, and built like a swimmer, his red hair shaved close to his head.

“Why don’t we take a seat, and we can catch everyone up,” Dom suggests, and we all move toward the tables.

Before we can get started with filling them in though, one of Dom’s guys, one I recognise from showing the ropes in the surveillance room, walks in.

“Sorry, Pres, I don’t mean to interrupt, but there’s someone at the gate in a black van.”

Before he’s even finished speaking, I’m bringing the surveillance up on my phone. “I’m just checking who it is,” I tell Dom. The face in the driver’s seat is one that I’d recognise even with a bad angle, “it’s alright, it’s Alaric. I’ve opened the gates for him.”

“Thanks, Peter,” the guy replies.

“No worries,” I smile and then turn to Dom, “if you compile a list of names of people that have clearance, I get it set up on the system, so they don’t have to double check with you.”

“Great, thanks, man. Inferno, could you do that when we’re finished here?”

Inferno just nods, a man of few words.

“Thank fuck, Alaric is here. Hopefully, it means that he’s bringing some good news for us.” Cash suggests.

“There’s no point in starting the meeting until he’s here. He needs to be caught up too,” Trick points out, not replying to Cash because that would be too much to hope for right now.

# Chapter Four

## *Trick*

“Hey guys,” Alaric greets, striding into the room and looking determined. He heads straight for Atlas and pulls him into a hug. When he steps back, he meets each of our eyes, “We are going to get her back, and we’re going to end this once and for all.”

“There’s no doubt about that. No one takes my soul sister and lives to fucking speak about it,” Jynx interrupts, her eyes flashing with deadly intent as her men look at her lovingly.

My heart clenches, their relationship is much like ours with Ever, and I never thought I could miss her more than when she disappeared the first time. But I do. My feelings for her have grown substantially since the first time she left, and it’s killing me slowly. You’d think that knowing that the others are feeling the same way and can understand would ease it slightly, but it makes it worse. I hate them being in pain.

“Jynx, guys, I’m not surprised to see you here. We’re going to need your unique set of skills.” Alaric greets them.

As introductions are once again made, I can feel my agitation rise, and I know I need to keep a hold of it; introductions are necessary, and we’ll get to Ever in a few short minutes.

*Yes, but minutes could make all the difference,* a taunting voice says into my mind, and I feel my expression darken.

“I have a location,” Alaric announces as soon as the introductions are over.

“What the fuck, you don’t think you could’ve fucking lead with that!” Jensen practically explodes.

“I need the coordinates now,” Peter immediately demands, pulling out his laptop that he always has on him.



Alaric quickly reels off the coordinates, and my anger calms slightly now I know he's on it. I know he'll find something that we can use; he always does. I don't miss the surprised look that Elijah gives Peter. I hope they can work it out; it's evident that they love each other, but Pete has to work through a lot of hurt before they can get to the point where everything is truly forgiven.

"While that's being done, why don't we fill everyone in?" Dom suggests looking at me. He's trying to stop the rest of us from exploding at Alaric, and it's a good call. Ever is our everything, and he should have told us immediately that he found the location of Blake's base of operations.

I take a calming breath and then launch into the explanation. I don't leave anything out, making sure everyone has all the details and knows how long she's been gone for. When I get to that point, Rafe interrupts me.

"She's been gone for ten days, four hours, and twenty-seven minutes." Rafe's voice cracks and Peter briefly stops typing as Jensen, Riot, and Atlas all drop their heads taking deep breaths and trying to keep their emotions under control.

Everyone is silent as they absorb the amount of time she's been gone and what that fucking cunt could be doing to her. As much as it pains me to say it, I know I need to make sure everyone is prepared for the worst-case scenario.

"She's been gone for long enough that we aren't expecting her to be unharmed, and I need everyone to be aware of that," I say as gently as I can.

My team's heads snap up to me, some with anger in their eyes and some with bleak acceptance.

"I have brought everything I can think of that could help with her extraction and taking down the fuckers there," Alaric announces as a way of reassurance as he watches us all closely.

I know that if we were a typical team, one that works for the feds and he is in charge of overseeing that, he'd be telling us that we're too close to this and to take a step back. Fortunately

for him and us, he isn't restricted by those rules. That wouldn't end well for anyone.

"How did you manage to convince the big boss to be here without any Fed intervention?" Rage asks a suspicious note to his voice.

Alaric shifts slightly at the question, and I narrow my eyes, "Officially, I'm on vacation, but unofficially, he is on standby with a few teams for when I give him the go-ahead."

He's hiding something from us, but at this point, unless it directly affects rescuing Ever, I don't give a shit. We can work it out later after she's home.

"As soon as we've got the plans from Peter, we can work out the entrance points for each team." I start, and everyone leans forward to listen. I am not unaware that the guys are all fidgeting and barely managing to hold themselves back from leaving right this second. We all know that logically we need to go in with a plan. But logic and feelings rarely go hand in hand, "My team and I will head straight for where we think Ever will be. It will be guesswork, but we can assume that she's shut somewhere, so we'll take it from there. Our sole focus will be to get to Ever. Of course, we'll take as many people as we can out on our way to her. Everyone else needs to clear the buildings; whoever finds Blake first is to detain him but don't kill him."

"He's ours," Riot growls and everyone nods in understanding.

"Simple, straightforward and easy to accomplish, I like it." Rome nods in agreement.

"Does it work for your team?" I ask Elijah, who appears to be their leader.

"Yes, we can manage that easily enough."

"Alright, I've got an aerial photograph of the coordinates, and I have the schematics for the buildings too. Alaric, could you just confirm that this is the right place?" Peter asks, turning the laptop to Alaric, who nods and looks impressed at the speed that he's found it.

“Any surveillance video?” Jensen asks.

“No, but this should be enough. It’s going to have to be.” Peter answers him and then moves the laptop so that everyone can see.

“You can hook it up to the projector. It’ll be easier to explain.” Blade offers, pointing behind the bar where the projector hook-up must be.

“Thanks, that’ll make it a hell of a lot easier.”

It takes him only a couple of minutes to hook everything up, and then he starts to explain. “Okay, so, the coordinates put the base at around a ten-hour drive away,” he winces at how far away it is, knowing that we’re going to want to go now.

Jynx leans forward and looks at the screen more closely before typing something quickly into her phone and then looking up at us.

“We can take my plane. We flew in on it, so it’s at the airport the town over. It’s big enough for all of us, and we won’t need pilots. Mason and Malachi are certified. We can get there in three hours and an hour or so drive to the location.” She interrupts, and I feel the tension in the room lessen slightly. We can get to her today.

“Thanks, Jynx,” I say gratefully, and she just nods, waving to Peter to continue.

“Great. So, on the schematics, it looks like these three entrances would be the best to go through. It will cover all exits on the buildings as there are none on the south side. We do need to be aware of people escaping to the other buildings though since there are tunnels that seem to connect all of them together. Unfortunately, all of the buildings have levels where you could keep a person or several people prisoner.”

“Great, thank you, Peter,” I start and then look at everyone waiting for me to make the decisions. I’m not quite sure how I’ve been put in charge of this whole thing, but I don’t think that I could’ve handled it if I weren’t. “Noel and your team will take this entrance, Jynx and your team will take the one on the north side, and Alaric and my team will take the one on

the east side. Dom, will you and your guys be okay with catching any stragglers outside the building in case someone calls for backup?”

“Yeah, wherever you need us, we’re there,” Dom replies.

“I have earpieces in the van that we can use to stay in contact at all times. After we’ve rescued Ever and the situation is under control, you all need to head back here, and I’ll stay behind to deal with that side of things.”

“Sounds good.” I agree, and so does everyone else.

“I see no reason to wait. As soon as you’ve sorted the plane and we’ve got the go-ahead to take off, we can leave.” Alaric says.

“I’ve already contacted them; while we were talking, the plane is ready when we are,” Malachi replies, and I could hug him. Everyone is working hard to get us there as quickly as possible.

“Great, everyone get geared up and meet at the van. I’ll give out the earpieces, and the weapons I’ve got are packed already, so easy to transport. I’m assuming we’ll have no problem getting them on the plane?” Alaric asks Jynx, who just grins and shakes her head.

“Let’s get this done then,” I order, standing up and prompting everyone to do the same.

Before everyone can leave, Jynx stops us, “I just want to warn everyone about the likely state of Ever’s mind, Trick’s team especially. As Trick said, she’s going to be hurt, most likely triggered, and she will have definitely flipped her switch off. Like me, she is able to turn her emotions off effectively; it’s like going into survival mode. The longer you have it off, the harder it is to switch it back on, and because she will have had her emotions buried for so long when they do resurface, she’s going to feel everything that she’s repressed all at once. This needs to be handled extremely delicately.”

I look at the guys. All of their hands are clenched as the possibilities run through our minds.

“We understand,” I answer for all of them, and she nods, before turning on her heel to go and get ready.

Soon the only people left in the room are my team and Elijah’s. Elijah is staring at Peter, and considering we’re all fully armed, we all stay put in case Peter needs our backup. Elijah clearly doesn’t know who Peter is now, and I think he’s struggling with it.

“You’re staying here, right?” he asks Peter.

“Fuck no,” he exclaims.

“It’s too dangerous, Pete,” Elijah tries again.

A small smile stretches my lips as I watch Peter roll his eyes and take a deep breath preparing for a tirade, “One, I am perfectly aware how dangerous it is, and I’m still going. You get no fucking say in that. Two, you have no idea what I’m capable of. You don’t know me anymore.”

Elijah winces at the last sentence, and I feel for him, but Peter’s right. He’s more than capable of coming with us, and he cares about Ever as well. I’d never stop him from coming with us.

“Fine, if you insist on coming with us, then I want you with my team,” Elijah looks at me.

I shrug, “That is entirely up to him.”

“Look, I get why you are worried, but we would never put Peter in danger. If we didn’t think that he could handle it, then he’d be in the van doing surveillance, but we know he can. He’s proven himself many times.” Cash points out.

“I’m sticking with my team,” Peter says firmly, and Eli runs his hand through his hair and then storms out.

“He’s just worried, he’s spent all this time trying to keep you out of this world and you’re in it, and he doesn’t know how to handle that,” Callan says to Peter.

Peter deflates slightly, “I know that, but I also know where I’m needed, and that’s with my team. I’ll talk to him properly but not until Ever is back safely. She’s more than just my best friend. She’s family; all of these guys are.”

Callen nods, and we follow them out to the van to see everyone gathered and ready to get going.

“Here, you all know how these work by now, and yes, Jynx, you have to wear one,” Alaric interrupts Jynx as she opens her mouth and then promptly pouts when he tells her she has to wear one.

We take the earpieces, not bothering to put them in yet since we’ll be going on the plane, and there’s no point having them in there.

Everyone moves towards all of their vehicles, but I pause along with Atlas as Elijah pulls Peter off to the side. They’re far enough away that I can see the hand gestures but not really hear anything. Finally, Elijah gets frustrated enough that he raises his voice.

“I fucking love you. You cannot get hurt! You don’t even know how to fight!”

Peter stills, and I know he’s about to explode. All of our emotions are running high right now, Peter’s included.

“I’ve got this,” Atlas says, striding towards them.

“Peter,” I call out, already clicking on to what Atlas is planning, “prove him wrong.”

I move to Elijah’s side and clamp my hand on his shoulder, knowing that he’s going to want to intervene. As Peter and Atlas go at it, Peter using all of the skills that Atlas has been teaching him, Elijah tries to shrug me off.

“Just watch, forget what you thought you knew about him and fucking watch. Not only is he holding his own, but he’s holding his own against Atlas Farlow, Liam Farlow’s son, and I’m sure you’ve heard those stories.” I order.

His body deflates. I’m hoping, partly thanks to my words and the realisation that Peter is far more capable than he thinks, but I know it’s mainly because Peter and Atlas have both stopped fighting and are now grinning and shaking hands. They clearly both needed that release.

Peter doesn't even look at Elijah as he strides past him to get into the van that we're taking to the airport.

"If you stop underestimating and start getting to know who he is now, you're going to have a much better chance of getting back in his good books." I offer him advice as we walk toward the van and before he splits off from us to go with his own team.

"And grovel, man, you're going to need to do a lot of grovelling," Atlas adds with a grin that is far too happy.

"Thanks man," Elijah replies sarcastically but with no heat, and Atlas chuckles.

"Enough talk. Let's go and get my future wife." Atlas's demeanour instantly becomes serious again.

"Our wife, brother," I add, and he grins with a nod.

We all load up and follow Jynx as we finally exit the compound and are on our way to get to our Ever back. I think it's safe to say that now we actually have a plan, and we're able to act on it. All of us are feeling cautiously optimistic, we're so close to getting her back. I hate that it's taken us this long, but we couldn't do anything if we didn't know where Blake's base of operations was. Peter tried to trace the van, but none of us got a good enough look at it, and the cabin was in such a secluded place that there weren't any cameras around for us to be able to follow it.

The drive to the airport goes reasonably quickly, and I'm pleased when everyone seems to have their work personas on, meaning that they're all focused on the task at hand, and we get the plane loaded up with gear in no time.

I want to say that the plane was nice, but honestly, I haven't noticed it. My mind is going a mile a fucking minute trying to come up with every eventuality and possibility. It lists everything that could go wrong and possible ways to fix it. There's only one scenario that my mind shies away from and one that I know that I won't be able to deal with. I don't think any of us will.

Along that thought process, though, my gaze searches for Cash, who's sitting across the aisle from me, "Have you got your medical kit?"

"Yes, and I've got all the supplies from Alaric's van, too; he had a lot. We're covered for most eventualities." He replies, his voice somewhat monotone.

He knows why I'm asking him, and although it's likely that some of us are going to get hurt, the only person I'm genuinely concerned about is Ever. It infuriates me that I don't know why Blake wanted her, and therefore I don't know what condition she's going to be in when we get to her. What if she can't walk? What if she can't be moved without making her condition worse?

I run my hands through my tangled hair as my thoughts spiral, a loud bang on the table in front of me jolts me from them, and my eyes snap up to meet Rafe's.

"Stop it, stop letting it control you," he orders gruffly, his voice harsh, "if there is one thing I know about Ever, it's that she's strong. Really strong, she will survive this in every way, and we will be there by her side to support her in whatever way we can while she heals physically and mentally."

"He's right, she's strong enough for this, and she's got us for when she's not feeling so strong," Riot agrees, sitting to the left of Rafe.

"And if she needs more help than I can give her," Cash starts, "then we get her more help. We have multiple resources at our disposal. She will be fine."

"She has to be," Jensen stares out of his window as he mutters.

I share a worried look with the others. He is right at the edge of what he can handle right now, and someone is going to have to be on Jensen watch if Ever is unconscious; his brain won't compute that very well at all. Atlas and Rage both nod that they've cottoned on to the same thing, and they've got it. It has to be one of us. Anyone else could get killed if he's triggered.



With that settled, the rest of us fall silent, and I listen to the conversations going on around us. We're coming, Sweetheart, not long.

# Chapter Five

## *Ever*

I have completely lost track of how long I've been here. It feels like months, but I know that can't be right. I haven't given up my hope of escape, but I have come to the conclusion that it's going to take me longer than I initially thought. My whole body hurts, and I'm exhausted, which I'm sure is strategic. I'm trying to push the pain away and bury it as much as I can, and I'm only really managing to block it out completely when I'm fighting. Blake has upped my fights, so instead of one fight a night, I'm now doing up to four, and he doesn't grant me any breaks in between the fights, which means by the last one, I have to work hard to stay upright, not only from exhaustion but also from any hits they've managed to get through my defences add in the daily beatings from Blake's men, and I'm already at a disadvantage. I haven't lost a fight, and I have memorised the names of every person whose life I've taken. They swirl around my head on repeat. Over and over again.

I think my whole body is purple by this point and mottled with cuts and abrasions. By the time the fights are done, I'm exhausted. I manage to stuff the stale bread and water, which they give me once a day, into my mouth, and then I pass out exhausted on the hard floor. I almost groan as the door to my cell opens, and I know it's time for my fights. Blake's man has already been in to 'warm me up' for the battle, as they call it, and I wish they'd unleash me long enough that I can end them, that I'd do happily.

"Hello, Toy," Blake greets me happily from the door, as the man he's brought with him goes through the usual process of unbinding my legs and leading me toward Blake.

He's stopped trying to get me to reply, having realised that no matter how much he goads me, no sound will come from my lips. I won't give him the satisfaction, and this is the only

thing I actually have control over. I don't bother paying attention to the journey this time; there's no point I could walk this route in my sleep. As always, the crowd roars when I'm brought in and placed in the cage, and I ignore the noise as I wait patiently for them to undo my cuffs. It seems to be taking longer than usual to bring my first opponent out, so as I wait, I study the crowd. I've started doing this if I get a chance, always hoping that I'll catch sight of a familiar face and know that I'm about to be freed from this living nightmare. I know it's unlikely, anyone I recognise, Blake will too, and there'd be no chance of them getting in here, but I like to keep that tiny bit of hope alive. It's starting to feel like the only thing about me that isn't a killing monster right now.

I see nothing but a sea of bloodthirsty faces, none that I recognise. That small flame of hope splutters and dies. I'm going to have to play the long game to get out of here, and I know that.

Commotion by the door to the cage grabs my attention, and I watch as the latest fighter, which is relatively big, is being dragged by several of Blake's men toward the cage and is also fighting pretty damn hard. Usually, the people brought here for me to fight are as complacent as I am; there is no escape, so what's the point of fighting? Of course, they could be biding their time like I am, but I'll never know, and they won't ever be able to tell me. There's not exactly a lot of time for talk while we're fighting for our lives. Blake waits by the door to the ring, a deadly look on his face. The crowd quiets as they wait to see what's going to happen.

"I'm not getting in the ring with that monster!" the guy yells.

I don't even flinch. I just stare stoically in his general direction. His words mean nothing to me, and besides, he's not wrong. I am a monster.

Blake sneers at him, "You're wasting my time. You can either get in the ring with Toy and have a possibility of surviving, or Thomas here can shoot you now."

The sound of a gun being cocked echoes around the silent warehouse as Thomas lifts the gun to point at the guy's head, holding it directly between his eyes.

The guy straightens and repeats, "I'm not getting in the ring with that monster."

"Fine." Blake shrugs.

The bang of the gun going off is deafening, and I watch unflinchingly as blood blooms on his forehead, and he drops to the floor. Blake glances over at me, and when he sees me seemingly completely unaffected, he grins.

I should care. I know I should, but I'm numb to everything. I no longer feel anything apart from anger that burns through my veins like liquid fire, and I'm consumed with my thoughts of revenge.

Blake's smile is gloating as he approaches me, ignoring his men getting rid of the body and going back to get the next participant.

"You know, I think you're finally ready for what I have planned for you. I think you're broken enough now that I can remould you into the perfect weapon."

I stay silent. As soon as he gives me enough freedom, he's dead, but for now I play my part of a good, silent little soldier.

"Boss, the next one is refusing to fight, too," Thomas announces, and Blake sighs like he's dealing with unruly children who won't do as they're told.

"Bring him out here." He orders.

The next fighter is given the same ultimatum and, like the previous fighter, chooses to be shot rather than step in the ring with me. This happens one more time before we run out of fights for the night, and Blake puts an end to the evening. He follows his man, who has the chains for my wrists, into the ring, and as he chains me back up, once again reminding me of being a rabid animal, he starts to goad me.

"Did you see that Toy?" he asks, not expecting me to reply as he continues, "all of those men would have rather been shot

at point blank range than take their chances in the ring with you. You're a monster, and you're formidable."

The last line, he says like it's a compliment, as I'm led from the cage and back to my much smaller one.

He continues talking as he watches me closely, "You don't care, do you?"

"She's a cold hearted bitch, that's for sure." The man pulling me along adds.

"You're right about that. I bet she never really had any true feelings, certainly not for those men of hers."

My anger starts to bubble, and I push it down with as much strength as I can muster. I may be numb right now, but I know without a doubt that I love my men. I know what he's trying to do, and I have to exert tight control over my anger so that I don't do what he wants me to do and go for him. He's testing me, trying to see just how broken I really am, and if I fail, then I'm right back to where I was before with no hope of escaping this fucking torture.

"No comment on that, Toy?" he asks as we turn into the corridor that my cell is in. "That's intriguing. You really are heartless. I can't say I blame you for not caring about them. I mean, they were pretty fucking useless. Three of them were even stupid enough to get themselves killed." His laugh is booming and filled with utter, twisted joy.

I keep my breathing even as I force my mind to be silent, and I plead with my hands to stay hanging loosely at my sides, so I don't give away the turmoil that's festering inside me, thanks to his words and the reminder that three of the men I love are dead.

The man leading me opens the door to my cell and leads me inside; when he bends to put the manacles back around my ankles, Blake stops him.

"I think she's proved herself well enough so far today that she can have her feet left unchained." The man steps back, and Blake turns to me, his eyes dead; I don't think I've ever seen a genuine emotion in them. He plays the parts well, even anger,

but I don't think he really feels it. He's a psychopath, pure and simple. "Don't disappoint me, Toy. We haven't started the torture portion of our friendship yet, but I have no problem with bringing that forward," his smile is sadistic as he continues, "oh, and now I've ruined the surprise. Oh well, something for you to look forward to, I guess."

With that chilling statement, he fishes out Atlas's ring from underneath the collar of his shirt and slides it along the chain as he stares at me. When I don't react, he turns around and starts whistling as the man who brought me in here closes the door behind them. I stay standing, remaining still in case someone decides to pay me a visit now I'm back in my cell. When no one arrives after a while, I let myself sink to the floor and wrap my arms around my legs as I let a single tear fall down my cheek in reaction to his words. I won't let myself shed any more because I'm certain that if I do, I won't be able to stop, and Blake needs to think that he's broken me enough that I've become an unfeeling robot, one that will do whatever he tells me to.

For the first time, they've left my feet unchained, and I know I need to take this chance to at least try to escape, even if I'm caught and put through the torture Blake is promising. The jokes on him though, I've been tortured, and I am an expert torturer; if I were going up against myself, I'd be worried, but morbidly enough no one is as good as I am. I know I can withstand whatever they try to throw at me. I will never allow him to break me fully.

It's time to start to plan.

## *Cash*

We've finally landed, and I am feeling antsy as hell. We're so close to getting her back, and I can't help but feel like we're going to be too late, or she's not even being held at Blake's base of operations. All of our intel suggests that Ever should be being held there, but if I were Blake, that would be the last place that I kept her since it would be expected.

I can't voice any of my concerns to the others; I can see the renewed hope in their faces and actions. I can't take that away from them, we're already on the very edge of oblivion, and I fear what it could do to us if we arrive and she's not there. Even my less volatile brothers will be in no position to help the others.

"Jynx and her team managed to hire us a couple of vans," Trick starts, and I force myself to pay attention. "We'll load up our vans, and then everyone is to drive to their designated entry points, park far enough away that none of Blake's men will take notice of the vehicles, and then we'll travel the rest of the way on foot. As soon as you are in the vans, put your comms in and do a comms check to make sure everything is working properly. We'll enter at the same time, so wait until you get my order to breach the building. We go in hot, and no one gets spared. Watch each other's backs. I am not losing anyone today."

He speaks like a true leader, and I am really proud of how far he's come and how well he's holding the rest of us together after Peter gave us a kick up the ass. He not only has the presence of a leader, but he also has the respect of one, which is proven when everyone simply nods and gets on with the tasks he's given them. It doesn't take us long at all to load everything into the vans, and we're soon setting off. Everyone has their own locations to get to, and everyone begins to check in on their comms to ensure we can hear them all as we start the journey.

Thankfully the airport where we landed is a small, privately owned one whose owner owed one of Jynx's guys a favour. It's also only an hour or so away from where Blake's base of operations is. Our van is silent as we all prepare ourselves for what we're about to do. I miss Ever. She would've had us laughing by now, taking away some of the tension that is always present when we do something like this.

In the silence, a phone rings; Alaric pulls out his phone and frowns when he looks down at the screen before answering it.

"Boss," he greets. It's silent for a while before he clips out a reply, "I am aware, Sir. Yes, I'll see what I can do."

He hangs up abruptly and tilts his head back, so it's leaning against the side of the van.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He looks around at us, all of us watching him and sighs, "Yes. He's pushing for a meeting with you all, but I can hold him off for a bit longer."

"Why's he suddenly so interested in having a meeting with us now?" Rage asks.

"After the way you handled the thing with Luc's sister, he's become increasingly curious." He suddenly sits up straight, "Shit, please tell me you're all eighteen? It won't help much if he's decided to go against you, but it will help a small amount at least."

"All of us, apart from Ever, are over eighteen." Trick replies.

"It's her birthday in four days," Jensen adds quietly, staring straight ahead.

"Fuck," Atlas curses, banging his head back against the side of his van hard.

"We're going to have her back by then," Riot adds firmly, staring around at the rest of us and daring us to argue with him. None of us will; we all hold the same hope that she will be back by then. I do feel like I have to play devil's advocate in this situation though because having them be prepared is better than it being a shock for them.

"Remember what Jynx said," I start and instantly have their attention, "if she is back with us."

"When," Rafe interrupts.

I correct myself, "When Ever is back with us, we don't know what condition she's going to be in physically, but from what Jynx said, we do know that she won't be okay mentally. Which is obvious after what she's gone through."

"We still celebrate her birthday," Rafe starts, "I don't want her to think we've forgotten. We'll just play it by ear."



“A quiet thing just us, Rafe’s cooking. She loves that.” Luc starts listing, and I nod. I’ve warned them there’s not much else that I can do.

My attention is on Jensen. After his words, he slipped back into silence, playing with one of his knives. Every now and then, the blade knicks his fingers, drawing blood, and yet he doesn’t seem to feel it and continues just staring ahead. I catch Trick’s eye and shift my head in Jensen’s direction. He nods that he’s noticed and then starts signing.

“There’s no point in stopping him now, but we do need to keep a close eye on him after we’ve got Ever back.”

I nod my agreement. The others are so wrapped up in their own thoughts that they don’t even notice our exchange. Jensen isn’t the only one I’m worried about; the rest of them aren’t exactly handling this situation well either, not that I can say I’m faring much better.

Alaric clears his throat, gaining our attention again, and I frown at the nervous look on his face, “I feel like I have to ask, are you all prepared for the worst?”

“Shit!” Atlas yells, as he immediately reaches for Jensen as he launches himself at Alaric.

Anger burns through my veins as all rational thought leaves my mind the second that the meaning behind his words penetrates my mind. I feel my face blank as I move to get to Alaric, only to find myself pinned to the seat by Riot and Rafe. My breath is coming in ragged pants as I strain against them. How fucking dare he suggest that!

“Cash, fucking hell, man, calm down a minute!” Riot yells at me, the words piercing the fog of anger in my mind as I slowly start to relax enough that I’m not going to kill Alaric.

“I’m good,” I growl out through clenched teeth.

Riot and Rafe share a look but slowly let me go, hovering close to me just in case I decide to go for him again. Jensen and I weren’t the only ones that had a similar reaction to Alaric’s statement. Rage is being held by Luc and Trick, fire in his eyes.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Peter says into the tense van, not bothering to look around from where he’s driving. He decided the rest of us were too volatile to drive, and since none of us argued like we usually would, he was proven right. His words are enough of a shock that Rage and Jensen stop fighting, “how the fuck did you think that was going to go? If they didn’t know their brothers so well, you’d be dead right now, and it would be your own fucking fault. They aren’t stupid. Their minds have been going over all the possible outcomes for the past ten days, and there was absolutely no fucking need to point that out to them. You aren’t dealing with kids, and you aren’t dealing with amateurs.”

We all stare at him in shock, it’s very rare that Peter comes out with something so forceful, but when he does, it makes us listen. His stare is cold and unflinching as he watches Alaric, who looks away and nods his head.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. That wasn’t necessary. It’s something that I have to remind my other teams when we do rescue missions. You are not a regular team, and I should know better.”

No one answers him, but none of us are trying to kill him anymore, which is a good sign. However, if Jensen truly wanted to end him, that knife he was playing with would’ve been embedded in his head before the rest of us could do anything.

Into the silence, Trick says, “We’d know if she was dead. She’s a part of us; we’d know.”

“We’re here. Let’s get this done.” Peter announces as he parks up in our designated location.

Before we unload, Trick checks that everyone has arrived at their own locations and once that’s confirmed, we get out, double checking that we’ve got everything we need on us. I glance around at our surroundings. We’re in a warehouse district parked down one of the side roads, out of the way, and we easily blend in with everything else. Our outfits would stand out, mainly because we’re very obviously armed.

Fortunately, it's taken us long enough to get here that night has fallen, and we'll be able to use the darkness as our cover.

"Everyone move into position and wait for my command." Trick orders as we set off.

"We're coming for you, Ever. Just hold on a little bit longer." I whisper into the darkness of the night.

# Chapter Six

## *Ever*

Surprisingly, I was left alone for the rest of the evening. Normally I would've been visited by one of Blake's men by now. Either they've been warned that my feet are unchained now, which means I can move around freely, and they don't want to risk me getting revenge for all the times they've previously visited, or Blake has decided to give me a reprieve, which is worrying.

I should probably try to get some sleep, but that seems to elude me these days, not that I like it anyway since whenever I close my eyes, my memories and emotions come roaring back. I hate it.

As I'm contemplating risking it, I start to hear shouts outside my door. Well, that's new. Getting up off the floor, I make my way closer to it and lean my ear against it. I can't work out what anyone is saying, but I can hear heavy boot falls running up and down the hallways mixing with the urgent sounding shouts. Something is going on.

For the first time in a long time, that tiny spark of hope starts to glow a bit brighter. This is my chance to escape. The stupid fuckers, not only didn't chain me, but they also left the long length of chain in here and still attached to the wall. I pick the chain up off the floor and back up towards the wall where I usually stand. With any luck, someone will be along to move me to a more secure location soon, depending on what's happening. Either way, I will be ready. As I silently wait, I start to hear the unmistakable sound of gunfire.

Unfortunately, because of my handcuffs, I can't hold the chain behind my back to conceal it from view if anyone comes to get me; this means I'm going to have to work quickly. One thing that does work in my favour though is that the handcuffs they've used for me have a length of chain connecting them

long enough that if I had someone on the floor, I could kneel on their back and use it to strangle them, although it wouldn't wrap all the way around so it would be more difficult than usual. I'm grateful that I'm not feeling the fresher wounds of fighting today like I have been the last few days.

The sounds outside my door continue until, finally, my door opens. The guard rushes in and, in his haste to get me out, most likely under Blake's orders, doesn't pay enough attention. You should always enter cautiously when going into a monster's den.

The fact that Blake only sent one man to get me either means that he truly thinks he's broken me enough that even in this situation, I would be compliant, or he can only spare one man to get me. It does briefly occur to me that this could be a setup to test my loyalty, but I can't pass up this opportunity.

As soon as Blake's man is within striking distance, I swing the chain around, and it's heavy enough that when it strikes him in the face, it immediately knocks him out. I work quickly, grabbing his two guns and a wickedly sharp looking knife. I don't want to take the risk and become suddenly swarmed by Blake's men, so I don't shoot him like I want to. I edge my way toward the door, peeking around the corner and find the hallway suspiciously silent. It's too late to turn back now, and I'm not going to pass up this opportunity because of fear.

Once I'm in the hallway, I decide against going through the tunnels. I'm assuming that this is an attack from outside forces, and if I'm right, Blake's men will use the tunnels to escape. I'm not risking being trapped in a small area with multiple men who want me dead. With this in mind, I head in the opposite direction, hoping that I can find my way out since I have never travelled this way before. I'm assuming there's an above-ground exit. Hoping that the luck of the silent hallway stays with me, I cautiously make my way forward, ignoring the pain in my body and the fact that my sight is slightly compromised in one of my eyes thanks to the hit I got in the beating before the fight earlier. It's always the same fucking

eye that fucker goes for, and if I spot him, I'm going gouge his eye out and see how much he fucking likes it.

Finally, after taking a false turn that led to a dead end, I find a set of steps that lead up. As I get to the door at the top, I suddenly become aware of the noise just beyond it, shouts and gunfire, which I'm hoping will adequately mask my appearance. I push through the door and find that my easy escape has officially come to an end. There are only two of Blake's men stationed outside of the door though, and I unload the guns into each of them, done with trying to stay quiet.

Once they fall, I discard the guns I was using and take theirs; it's a testament to how panicked Blake is when I'm not immediately swarmed. Thanks to the near-constant darkness I've been kept in, my eyes aren't struggling as much as they usually would be with the low light out here now that night has fallen. However, I am still somewhat restricted, and I can only just make out shapes fighting and the flash of a gun. I can't make anything else out though, so I have no idea if this is one of Blake's rivals or the cops.

It could be ... I cut that thought off immediately. There is no chance I'm losing myself in thoughts of them right now.

Hidden in the dark, just off to the edge of the action, I try to force my feet away. This is my chance to escape. I can't seem to make myself move my feet in the direction of escape though. No, this is also my only chance of getting my revenge on Blake and ending him once and for all. He's already taken three parts of my heart and soul from me, and so long as he's alive, he has the potential to take out the rest. I will not allow that to fucking happen.

No, I'm going to end him, and I'm going to do it now.

For Atlas, Riot and Rage.

I haven't let myself think of their names for a while now because every time I do, the pain that follows is almost consuming. I will grieve for them properly as soon as Blake is dead, and I have the freedom to do so, a luxury I don't have right now.

Blake's office of sorts is in the building where most of the fighting is concentrated, so of course, that's where I head. Blake's men wouldn't be fighting so diligently if he wasn't in there. Sticking as much to the shadows as possible, I run toward the door that will give me entrance to the building. As I pass people fighting, I don't bother to stop and look at the intruders to see if I can identify them as Blake's rivals or cops. If they're Blake's rivals, they'll be after me as well, he has made it no secret how much he covets his Toy, and if it's the cops, they'll try to stop me or rescue me, and I definitely don't want that.

"The Toy!" someone yells, and I curse viciously, "get the bosses Toy! Harm, don't kill!"

Ah, well now, that I can use to my advantage. Increasing my speed, so I don't find myself surrounded and waste precious time, I get to the door leading into Blake's building; just as two of Blake's men step in front of it, they raise their weapons no doubt to incapacitate me and not kill me, but I'm singularly focused on this burning need to end Blake, and I'm quicker than they are before they can properly raise them I've fired off two shots, a gun in each hand and they drop to the floor, dead. I sprint past them, pushing my way through the door and immediately seeking cover so I can assess the situation. The fight is raging on in here, and there are so many people that I don't bother to focus on the many faces, simply searching the fight for a group of men that should give me an idea of where Blake is in the fray. He'd be surrounded by his men.

My eyes snag on someone who I think is familiar, but when I don't immediately recall who it is, I reject it as my mind playing tricks on me, and I go back to searching for the next group of men, sure enough on the other side of the vast room, and slightly off to the left is a group of Blake's men who are being picked off one by one, making my job easier. I'm willing to bet that's where Blake is. I'm going to have to do this quickly and carefully, bullets are flying, and I can't risk being hit, not until I can get to Blake. I step out from my cover, planning my route in a blink of an eye and set off dodging bullets and grasping hands. My focus is purely on getting to Blake. One of his men manages to strike me in the

side, and I whip my gun around, shooting him in the chest as I carry on moving.

The men surrounding Blake are being dropped rapidly, so much so that I now have a clear sight of him. His eyes widen as he spots me; that's right, you cunt, I'm coming for you.

## *Rafe*

We're outside of the main building, where all the activity seems to be; Jynx and her team have already breached the building and are fighting inside, while Noel's team is rapidly clearing the buildings to the right and is now moving onto the buildings to the left. While I'm fighting, I'm trying to keep a lookout for any sign of Ever, despite how unlikely it may be to find her out here. A sudden yell gains my attention, unlike the shouts we've heard so far.

"The Toy!" someone yells, and I curse viciously, "get the bosses Toy! Harm, don't kill!"

The words fan the flames of my fury as my eyes dart to where the fucker is pointing. I see a darkened shape that I could swear is Ever. I can only see the back of her, but she's covered in blood, dried and fresh, wounded, absolutely filthy, and moving through the fighting crowd with ease. My hesitation about it being her is immediately gone when she gets to the door, and two men lift their weapons to shoot her, fear strangles me, but she shoots them with no hesitation in the next second as she rushes forward and through the door. Moving toward the fight instead of fucking away from it like she should be doing.

"Fucking hell, did you see that!" I yell as I shoot another fucker.

"That was her, wasn't it? Going into the building?" Cash asks as if to make sure that he saw what he thinks he did and wasn't imagining it.

Before I can confirm, the rest of my team have doubled their efforts, pushing forward and getting to the door as



quickly as possible when you're being shot at. We leave Dom and the club outside, finishing off the fuckers out there. They'll enter behind us when they're done. When we enter the building, it's pure chaos, and there's no way to find my tiny Ever within this mess. The best way to find her is to kill all these fuckers that are a threat to her. We spread out, ducking and weaving and taking down anyone we can. We, along with Jynx's team, are making a considerable dent in their numbers, and it's not long until Noel's team, and the bikers from outside join the fight. Their appearance signalling that their areas are clear.

Only a few enemies are still standing when I finally spot her, heading straight toward fucking Blake.

"Ever!" Jensen roars, and she turns her head slightly, looking in his direction as she carries on moving forward. When her eyes land on him though, they stay blank. She shakes her head and carries on, moving forward.

Fuck.

That's not a good sign.

Her face is battered, bruised and bleeding, and she doesn't seem to be aware of that either. Jynx was right, Ever is in deep survival mode right now.

We follow her, and there are so few people left alive now that I trust the other teams to dispatch them quickly.

She's only a few feet away from Blake, with us not far behind her, when suddenly Blake roars and charges toward her. She stops dead, and we stay back; as Blake charges, I'm about to yell out a warning when she moves quicker than I have ever seen her move before and disarms him easily. Making Blake look like he's incredibly inexperienced when we all know he's not. She's silent, her back still to us, as she turns the gun on him.

Movement out of the corner of my eye tells me of the approach of all the other teams, and I turn to them, putting my finger to my lips and also holding my hand up, warning them not to approach any closer, Ever is in a highly triggered state

that is clear to see. The only team as close to her as us is Jynx's, and I think that's a smart move. She's not as familiar with the others, and I don't know what will happen if they make her jump and she thinks they're a threat.

Blake's chilling laugh fills the now silent room, littered with his dead men. His eyes drift over her shoulder, landing on us, as a manic light fills them, "You know killing me won't bring back your men.. It won't change that I killed Riot, Rage, and Atlas. I would've left them alone if it wasn't for you, Toy. You know that."

My heart freezes, and my stomach churns as my head snaps towards the others. All colour has drained from their faces. Ever thinks they are dead. Fucking hell, he's told her they're dead and that it's her fault. I expect Ever to rage and scream to deny what he's saying, but she stays silent, doesn't flinch, doesn't tense. She does nothing.

"Ever," Atlas calls out to her hesitantly, and I watch as she tenses and then shakes her head as Blake grins triumphantly at us.

She had to have heard him, but this fucker has messed with her head enough over the time that she's been here that she believes that they're dead, truly believes it. Even when faced with Atlas's voice, she still doesn't think it's real. My heart breaks for her. Blake has done what Atlas warned us he would do and has mentally tortured her. She's spent this whole time thinking they were dead. She probably wouldn't have believed him, but the last thing she must've seen had to have been all three of them laid passed out on the floor and covered in blood.

If you only got a quick glance at them, you would've assumed that it was all their blood, but it wasn't. Riot was lying in a pool of someone else's blood and only mildly injured; Atlas and Rage were injured enough to bleed a fair amount, but it was nothing life-threatening, and they were covered in others' blood as well.

"Puddin'?" Rage asks cautiously, using her nickname.

I hope, like hell, it jogs her memory enough that she at least looks at them. If she sees them, she'll believe they're alive, right?

This time she has no visible reaction, and I can practically feel the pain coming off my team. We weren't prepared for this, and I have a gut-wrenching fear that this is just the tip of the iceberg. She's been with him for too long; he's thoroughly fucked with her head.

Riot's hand threads through mine, squeezing it tightly, and I glance over at him, watching a tear making a slow track down his face. Before I turn my attention back to Ever, I see Peter wrapped in Elijah's arms, watching with floods of tears streaming down his own cheeks.

## *Riot*

That cunt.

I can't fathom how much of a psychopath you need to be to convince someone that people they love are dead. It's obvious how much he's enjoying this though because while Ever has a gun pointed at him, she's made no move to actually shoot him, and he's smiling a genuinely euphoric grin as this all plays out. He was sure enough in his psychological torture that he even said we were dead while looking directly at us.

I know that Rage and Atlas have already tried to get through to her, but I have to try. I just have to.

"Ever," I start, and when there's no clear reaction, I add, "Sunshine?"

There's still nothing, no reaction at all and still absolute silence. This is not good, it's more than not good, it's not something that I don't know how to handle, and I don't know how to help her, and that's killing me. Right now though, we need to focus on this situation. I don't know what she's planning to do, and I don't know how long Blake is going to be amused enough by the situation not to try to take her out again. He's surrounded, and he won't get far, but with Ever in

this state, I have no idea how she's going to react if loads of people start moving toward her.

Trick takes a step forward, but before he can take another one, Jynx clears her throat and shakes her head, halting his process. We have to trust her judgement in this; she knew Ever when she was in the thick of her father's business, and she's similar enough to Ever that I'm hoping she knows how she's going to react.

# Chapter Seven

## *Ever*

I swear I can hear them, Atlas, Rage, and Riot, but they're dead. That's impossible. I know Jynx and her men are here. I can see them out of the corner of my eye, but I don't dare take my eyes off Blake to check who else is here as well.

I think my mind has finally broken. I thought I heard them calling out to me using their nicknames for me, sounding almost as broken as I feel inside. I thought I saw them, too; as I made my way over here, I thought I heard Jensen call to me. I mean, it is entirely possible that he's here if Jynx is here, but I also thought I saw Rage, Atlas, and Riot fighting alongside him, and that can't be true. My mind is playing tricks on me, and Blake's succeeded in breaking it. I watch him, my face emotionless, as he looks over my shoulder again. If the remains of my guys are standing behind me, then he's taunting them, and I will not have that, not when they've already lost so much.

I'm aching to turn around and see them for myself, but with my emotions on lockdown, I'm not entirely sure how that's going to go. Besides, I need to deal with the threat Blake poses first.

Without warning, I raise my gun and shoot out his knees. Making that infuriating smile fall off his face as he bellows in pain. I grin dangerously; as I approach, I put the gun in the back of my pants, just in case I need it. Ignoring the shuffling happening around me, I know where every single person is, and I know that those surrounding me are not enemies purely because I know Jynx wouldn't allow that.

Blake starts to try and move himself across the floor, trying to get away from me, and I let the anger that I've kept on a tight leash free. He sees the change in me, and his eyes fill with the first real emotion that I've seen thus far, fear. His fear

most likely has something to do with the knife I'm twirling in my hand, one of the main reasons that he wanted me was because of my skill with knives. He knows better than most how skilled I am with them. Moving with speed, I dart forward and slice under his armpit, making him crash to the floor as I move to do the other one, using his shock to my advantage and making his arms useless. I'm careful not to slice the artery under his left arm, as I don't want this to end too quickly.

He starts to splutter incoherently as I run the knife down the front of his shirt until I reach the soft dip of his stomach. His legs are useless, as are his arms, and I pause, building his terror before I plunge the knife into his stomach, up to the hilt, and using two hands, drag it down right until I feel the blade reach the top of his belt, blood spurts from the wound as his screams increase and I tune it out, as I stand up, and watch. He'll bleed out; I've hit enough vital organs that he will bleed death in an excruciatingly painful way.

Blood rapidly pools around him in the way I intended it to, just like I remember Atlas, Riot and Rage being surrounded by their own blood as the van doors slammed shut and I lost consciousness. I think it's fitting that he dies in a similar way to the way that he killed them. Before the light completely fades from his eyes, I lean over him, fishing out Atlas's blood-encrusted necklace from beneath Blake's shirt and viciously yanking it free. The chain is strong enough that it lifts his torso up off the floor, making him howl as the movement aggravates his eviscerated stomach. My smile is cold as he falls back to the floor, his eyes open and staring into the abyss as all the twitching he was doing stops.

Still, I stare, waiting, watching his chest to see if it rises again. Everything is still and silent around me, no one daring to move or say something that could make me turn on them. That's understandable. I am, after all, a monster. It's because of this that I see the movement to the left of me, behind one of the people I don't recognise. He's stood with Noel, and Elijah is somehow here wrapped around Peter, the guy behind him raising the gun is not with them though; I recognise him as one of Blake's.

“Watch out.” I hear Ace yell.

A bang echoes throughout the room, and everyone flinches, staring with shocked faces between the very dead man on the floor and me. I’m still facing forward, standing over Blake. I was confident enough with my aim that I didn’t need to entirely turn toward the threat when I took the shot and therefore didn’t have to risk seeing who was behind me. I refuse to look behind me; I don’t know why. All I’ve wanted over the past, however the fuck long I’ve been here, is to see them, but now I’m faced with the actual possibility that they’re behind me. I can’t turn around. It’s like it’s too good to be true, and yet it’s not at the same time. To see them all standing there but missing three essential people might be too much for me to handle.

I stare down at Atlas’s ring clutched in my still handcuffed hands before lifting the bloody and gore-covered chain and placing it around my neck. It’s mine, and only I get to wear it.

“Ever?”

My head slowly moves towards Jynx, and I force my eyes to stay focused on her and not drift away. I don’t want to see just how badly I’m hallucinating. I think I’d rather live in denial for a bit longer.

“Ever?” there’s Atlas’s voice again as if trying to cement my earlier thoughts that I’m losing my mind.

I can’t hold in my flinch this time. My eyes are still locked on Jynx, and understanding lights her features.

“No one speak for a minute.” She orders as she slowly starts to approach me, and I tilt my head, watching her cautiously despite the fact that I know she will never hurt me.

“Some of your best work,” she compliments with a proud smile when she’s within reaching distance of me as she nods over my shoulder toward Blake’s dead body. I nod, aware that my features are still expressionless. Her face becomes serious again, “Blake lied to you, Ever. They aren’t dead. I promise you they are alive. You know I wouldn’t lie to you. All you’ve got to do is look at them. You can hear them, right?”

I shake my head rapidly back and forth, and since no words will come out of my mouth, I start signing.

“What’s she saying?” Jynx asks someone over my shoulder, looking confused.

Rafe’s voice is choked with emotion when he replies, “Not real, over and over again.”

“Fuck,” I hear Jensen curse.

I know the others are here, I know they’re real, but I still can’t look because I also know that what Jynx is telling me can’t be true.

“They are Ever,” Jynx tries again. “I promise he lied. Guys, come here.”

My men suddenly surround me, and I blink as Atlas, Riot, and Rage fill my vision. They look heartbroken. Still not believing that this is real and they’re really here, my hand shakes as I reach out to stroke the stubble on Atlas’s cheek. His eyes close as his breaths become shaky. Rage and Riot gently reach their hands out almost at the same time and place them on my cheeks.

Holy fuck, I can feel them, and if I can feel them, they’re real. They aren’t dead.

“We’re here, Ever,” Atlas confirms.

“We’re okay, I promise.” Rage adds, grabbing my hand that’s not on Atlas’s face and putting it over his heart, so I can feel it beating.

Silent tears make wet tracks down my face as it truly hits me that they’re alive, and not only that, but judging from all the other hands I can feel touching my back, arms and anywhere they can, my other guys are surrounding me too.

Riot opens his arms, and I go to fling myself at him, but I’m suddenly brought up short when my arms won’t widen enough, thanks to the damn cuffs.

Riot’s eyes flash with anger, “Someone get those fucking things off her!” he barks out the order, several of them growl



when they realise what he's referring to, and Jensen steps forward, lock picking set in hand.

"I've got it, Angel, I'll have these off you in seconds," he tries to speak gently, but the darkness that burns white hot in his eyes speaks of the depth of his anger at the chains around my wrists, as he works he notices the bloody marks underneath them from where I've tried to shimmy wrists free, and they've continued to rub. His movements become jerky, but even so, he has the chains off me far quicker than I thought possible. He grabs them before they hit the floor and forcefully throws them as far away from us as possible.

Turning back to me, he searches my eyes as he gently places his giant palm on my cheek, and then in a move contradicting the violence in his eyes, gently kisses my forehead before stepping back and being replaced by Riot, who immediately picks me up. I bury my head in his neck as he holds me tightly. I'm lost in a sea of strong arms and whispered words as I'm passed around my guys, and although my tears are flowing freely, I'm still not making a sound. Eventually, I'm put back down, and Peter barges through the others with an exuberance that almost has my lips tilting up into a genuine smile and not the sharp ones I have been using lately. He pulls me into a gentle hug.

"I'm so glad we've got you. We almost lost them as well." He mutters, stepping back and not seeming to mind that I didn't quite get my arms up in time to hug him back.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, guys, but I really need to get this sorted, and you guys need to get back to Dom's compound." Alaric interrupts, and I look over to where he's standing, just slightly away from everyone else. Relief flashes through his eyes. He says somewhat gruffly, "I'm glad we've found you."

Again, my words won't come, and I just nod.

"Come on, let's get out of this place." Trick orders. He starts to reach for one of my hands and then pauses when he sees the cuts, bruises, and swelling that adorns them. I suddenly want to hide them, aware of how dirty and damaged they are. "How

badly are you hurt, Ever?" he asks me gently, and the guy's forward momentum pauses as they look back at me.

I simply stare, not really sure how to answer that question since everything hurts, and I'm switched off enough that I can't tell him how bad my injuries are, just that I know they aren't life-threatening.

"It might be a good idea to use yes or no questions for a minute," Jynx suggests, and then turns to me, "can you walk back to the van?"

I nod. I know I can do that. I don't miss the frowns on everyone's faces, but I really can't force the words out. It's been a long time since I spoke, and more than that, I'm worried that if I do, I might break the spell, and all this will disappear, that I'll wake up in my cell again, just about to go for another fight. If this is a dream, I'm sure as hell making the most of it, so I reach for Trick's hand, threading my fingers with his and then turn to my other side, reaching for the closest one of my guys who just so happens to be Cash. He looks down at my hand and winces slightly as we all step over bodies to get out of this place that I am more than ready to leave.

"I don't want to hurt you, il Mio Cuore," he mutters, and my eyes close as a fresh wave of emotion consumes me at the sound of my familiar nickname.

I squeeze his fingers tightly, silently begging him not to let go.

"She's probably not feeling pain right now, not to the extent she should be anyway," Jynx guesses correctly as we finally make it outside.

"It's fucking terrifying when Jynx gets like that," Rip mutters.

"Let's just get back to the van, and we can check if there's anything that needs dealing with when we get there," Atlas suggests, and I marvel once again that he's actually here.

"We're going to go and grab our van. We'll meet you at the airport. Just remember she's very firmly in survival mode."

Jynx warns the guys, and I'm incredibly grateful for her. She's right; I am, and she knows because she's been there herself in my current state though I have no idea how to explain it.

"I'm going to go back with Eli and his team. I think you guys need some time," Peter explains, and I know I should have questions about why Elijah is even here, but my mind is still stuck on the fact that Atlas, Riot and Rage are alive and that I'm finally free.

Blake's dead.

"Are you sure?" Jensen asks, his movements slightly jerky. I'm not buried enough in my own mind that I can't see that he's struggling, so I let go of Cash and Trick, moving to him and wrapping my arm around his side, his arm drapes over my shoulder gently, and I feel his body relax. My own doing the same as it recognises that I'm finally safe.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Peter replies, giving me a watery smile.

I want to reassure him that I'm okay, but I can't. The truth of it is I'm so far from being okay. I've buried so much that I don't know how to swim back out, and it's scaring me.

My men are all tense as we finally get to the van. I don't think I'll truly feel like I'm free until we're driving away from this place. They all start to unload their weapons into the back of the van, and I stand there watching them, relishing in the sight of them all after what feels like a lifetime to me. Cash grabs a bag out of the back of the van, and Trick stops him.

"Let's get her out of here and onto the plane before we do anything else." He suggests, and I watch as Cash struggles with the suggestion, he knows I'm hurt, and he wants to fix me now. All I can feel is muted pain, but I know that I'm covered in blood, and some of it is mine, and my eye is still partly swollen shut, so I know my face can't look great.

"Is that okay with you, Ever?" Cash asks me, and I nod. All I really care about right now is getting as far away from this place as possible.

"Let's go," Atlas orders, as he climbs in the driving seat, and the guys reach to help me get in the van.

I end up sitting with Riot and Luc, pressed up close against the both of them. I couldn't tell you about the journey to the airport or how long it takes; I spend the whole time studying the faces of all of my men, committing them to memory and trying to convince myself that they are really here. When we get onto the plane, that must be Jynx's since it has her family name printed on the outside of it. I'm led to the back of it as everyone else fills the seats near the front and gives us a semblance of privacy. As soon as the plane is safely at altitude, Cash appears in front of me again, his medical bag in hand.

Luc places a water bottle in front of me, and before Cash can get a word out, I chug the entire thing, finding it quickly replaced by another one that I sip much more slowly.

"Where are you hurt?" Cash asks gently.

I shrug and start to sign, glad that even though my voice doesn't seem to be working right now, my illogical fear of speaking aloud and breaking this spell doesn't seem to extend to signing, "I don't know."

His brow furrows with worry before he clears his expression. "Okay, how about we clean up the wounds on your face and hands and then we'll have a look at your torso and back? You walked with no limp, so I'm assuming that your legs are okay, but if anything hurts, tell me to stop, okay?"

I nod. They're all watching me closely, but as I do my check that they're really here, I realise that I can't see Atlas and my breaths start to come in short gasps, and I twist in my seat, trying to find him.

"Ever, what's wrong?" Trick barks out, the order clear in his tone and firm enough that it pauses my panic momentarily.

With shaky hands, I sign, "Atlas."

"Shit," Luc mutters. "Atlas, get in her fucking eye-line. She's still not completely convinced you're real. She needs to see you, man," he orders, somehow understanding why I'm panicking.

Atlas barrels forward from where he was standing just far enough away and obscured behind the chair so I couldn't see

him. He crouches down in front of me, and immediately my heart starts to calm as his hands land on my legs, and I can feel him.

Well fuck, that's a not-so-fun development to have from this. Now I'm calmer. I know that was an overreaction but does my anxiety and trauma care? Does it fuck. I can't have them within eyesight at all times; that's not possible, and it wouldn't be fair to them. I can only hope that reaction calms down really fucking quickly.

"Better?" Atlas asks gently, and I nod, feeling like an idiot, but at least I'm feeling something.

# Chapter Eight

## *Atlas*

She had a panic attack simply because she couldn't see me. I keep my hands on her legs, watching her closely for any sign of pain as Cash gently starts to clean the grime and blood off her face. Even when he gets to the open cuts, she still doesn't flinch or make any sign of pain, and I know that hurts.

My gaze drifts to her hands. Most of her knuckles are split and swollen, a couple of her nails are ripped off, and they're almost completely covered in blood. It's more than evident to me that she's been fighting, and brutally at that. I'm not going to ask; she's in far too fragile of a state right now.

She thought we were dead, and I can't even begin to fathom the amount of pain that caused her. I'm willing to bet that out of everything that happened while she was there, the emotional torture that Blake put her through is what will have left the most significant trauma and has left behind triggers. We've already seen one. That's what that fucking cunt was best at though, the psychological torture. I should know he used to practice it on me, and it was bad enough when we were kids. He's had years to hone his skills now, and I can only imagine how formidable he is now or was. I knew that he loved to play fucked up mind games but what he made Ever believe was truly psychotic.

If she hadn't murdered him, I would've taken great pleasure in murdering him myself. She did though, and fucking hell was she violently beautiful. It may be a strange thing to be proud of, but I really am. There was no hesitation in her strikes as she faced down the man that had put her through god knows what. Instead of freeing herself and then running away as any other person would, she ran towards the person who did this to her.

I have always loved how truly bloodthirsty she is.

When I realised that the fucker had my ring around his neck, I had to be held back from going for him myself; I didn't need to though she had it handled, and I glance to where it sits on top of her shirt covered in drying blood.

“Ever, can I clean my ring?” I ask her gently, and she reaches up the hand that isn't being cleaned by Cash and grips the ring for a second before she nods slightly and lifts it over her head, handing it to me. I try to keep my reaction off my face when I see that Cash has moved on to cleaning the wounds on her wrist that are left over from the shackles. I noticed them when Jensen freed her from them, and they're bad enough that they are going to scar her. I hate him for giving her a constant reminder of her time there.

I grab a few antiseptic wipes that Luc hands me from Cash's kit and begin meticulously cleaning the ring and chain—making sure that there's no trace of him on it and glad that I have something to do. I feel a bit useless; I don't know how I can help her. I know that it's stupidly soon, but I feel like she's trapped herself inside her own body and mind. I don't know how to help her pull herself out of it other than just being there for her, and she is the one that needs to pull herself out; no one else will be able to do that for her. We can help, but until she decides that she's safe enough to venture out of the cocoon of safety she's created, there's not much else that we can do for her. I understand that much, at least from my own experiences.

I'm nearly done with the ring, my mind having drifted, when Cash interrupts my thoughts, “Ever if it's okay with you, I'm going to get you to stand up so I can see if you have anything that needs dealing with on your stomach and back?”

Ever nods and starts to stand. Whereas she appeared to be moving fluidly, especially when she was dodging through the fighting crowd and ending people, she now seems to be incredibly stiff, and although she's not showing outward signs, I have to imagine that now her mind is starting to realise that she's safe the survival mode that she's in is beginning to diminish ever so slightly and letting the pain back in.

“Luc, Atlas, could you help her stand, please,” Cash orders, “the rest of you, could you block the aisle to the rest of the plane? I’m going to have to look with her in the aisle. Is that okay?”

She simply nods, and I stand up, moving further back into the aisle and offering her my hand as Luc does the same, she takes them, and we both slowly lift her to her feet. She’s definitely a hell of a lot stiffer and even winces as she stands up straight. We gently hold onto her arms in case she wobbles as she reaches down and tugs up her top, which I can’t help, but notice is crunchy, most likely from the drying blood.

As soon as her stomach is exposed, her chest still covered, vicious curses explode from all of us as I stare in horror at her stomach. It’s black and purple—one giant bruise interspersed with cuts and slices and dried blood.

“Mother fucker!” Luc hisses, and I glance over to see him looking at her back.

Sure, enough, it’s in the same condition, but the slices are more extensive. How the fuck was she walking around like this, let alone fucking fighting. I can’t stare at the obvious signs of her pain anymore, and I glance around at the others, ensuring that none of them have been triggered. They’re all just spitting fucking mad, and I imagine that as soon as we get the chance, we’ll be fighting out some of this anger that’s riding us fucking hard right now.

Cash swallows hard as his hands hover, not sure where to touch; he takes a deep breath and then leans closer to inspect some of the slices. I imagine that there isn’t much he can do about the bruising.

“Okay, so anything that would have needed stitches is too far into the healing process. So I can’t stitch them and reduce the scarring. I’m sorry, Ever.” Cash tells her.

She shrugs, not looking as bothered as I think she should be.

“Alright, let’s sit you back down. You’ve got to be hurting, and I can check your legs when we get back to Dom’s.” He



frowns, clearly as happy with her reaction as I am. I don't want her to be upset. Of course I don't, but I would like to see an expected emotion from her; it's worrying.

She nods and manages the slightest twitch of her lips in the semblance of a smile. When she sits back down, Cash hands her some painkillers, which she immediately takes and then she stares out of the window. Of course, I'm watching her like a hawk, so I notice that every five minutes or so, she looks up and seems to check that we're all here. After the fourth time of her doing it, I drag my eyes away from her to see if the others have noticed. I'm guessing from the frowns on their faces they have. To be honest, though it's not all that surprising, she's been in what I'm sure was hell for nearly two weeks, thinking that three of us were dead and most likely lost hope that we were coming for her.

"Ever?" Luc tries to gain her attention, and she turns her head toward him, tilting it questioningly, "did Blake do something to your voice? Is that why you aren't talking?"

I hadn't even thought of that, and I should've. I'm not sure why I thought she wasn't talking, but it didn't occur to me that something might be wrong with her voice, that the fucker had damaged it to the point that she couldn't talk, and that was why she wasn't.

Her eyes become sad, and she shakes her head hesitantly. She starts signing, "I haven't spoken since he told me Atlas, Riot, and Rage were dead. My voice wouldn't work after my reaction to finding it out, and then I realised how annoyed it made him when I didn't reply. It was the only thing that I had control over, and now every time I try, I just can't."

Rafe's voice is soft, "That might be a trauma response to what happened. You try to talk, but it feels like something is blocking you, does that sound familiar?"

She nods, almost looking relieved.

"That's what it was like for me. It should get easier in time. I'll help you where I can. Although, it might be a good idea to let Cash have a look at your throat just in case you did some damage?"

She signs, “Thank you, Big Guy.”

She turns to look at Cash expectantly, so she misses the way that Rafe’s breath stutters and relief consumes his eyes at her calling him the familiar nickname.

Cash grabs a light, and one of those stick things out of his bag and then leans across the table as she opens her mouth and sticks her tongue out.

“There’s no obvious damage. When you’re ready, there is no medical reason that I can see, which would mean you wouldn’t be able to talk. However, having said that, you haven’t used your voice for ten days at least, so it’ll probably be rougher than usual, and you’ll have to rest it when you do start talking. I also have no idea if you damaged your vocal cords when Blake lied to you, so we need to be aware of that too.” He explains.

She nods and thanks him before leaning back in her chair and seeming to retreat back inside herself again. It’s going to take a lot of time for her to heal, and I plan to be here every step of the way. I go back to cleaning the ring and getting it perfect. By the time the plane has landed, it’s finally finished, and I loop the chain back over Ever’s head. She grips it tightly and then leans forward, kissing my cheek. It’s such a simple gesture, but it makes my heart skip.

She’s really here, finally back with us where she belongs.

## *Ever*

As we disembark the plane, I find myself surrounded on all sides by my men. I can feel the edge of my emotions right there, and a few have managed to force themselves forward, but I’m absolutely terrified to drop the barrier and feel everything at once. So I’m only letting trickles of feelings through, apart from my love for my men, that’s in full force still and has always been too profound to put behind that barrier. Usually, I’d find it mildly amusing that I’m being walked through a private airport surrounded on all sides, but

right now, I feel like I need it. They make me feel safe and protected.

Something I haven't felt since I was taken from them.

Through the bodies of Trick and Luc, who are leading us, I can just make out a line of vehicles that we seem to be heading toward, and I'm assuming they're ours since there is a number of motorbikes parked with them.

"Ever, can I talk to you for a second?" Jynx asks from somewhere outside of my circle of protection. The guys hesitate to move, so Jynx puts them in their place, "I know you guys are feeling super protective now and rightly so, but one, Ever is even more lethal in this state than she is normally, and two, like fuck would I let anything happen to her, you can stand watching us talk just out of earshot. Go stand with Rome," she orders, and they chuckle, although they still reluctantly move away, making Jynx's men laugh.

Once they're out of earshot, Jynx turns back to me, and I raise my eyebrow in question, I know there's no point in signing to her since she doesn't understand it, and Rafe or one of the others would have to be over here translating, and she seems to want to talk to me by herself so that would defeat the point of her sending them away.

"I'm coming back to the compound, but I feel like the guys are going to keep you to themselves for a while, so I wanted to tell you this while I have a chance," she starts, and I nod, "you've been through hell, and the wounds left behind are going to take time to heal. You'll probably find you have some new triggers, but you are incredibly strong, and you can heal from this. Just don't push yourself too hard, and don't expect everything to be normal straight away. I wish someone had given me that advice. One day at a time, little soul sis, one day at a time. You've got your men, and they would literally do anything for you. You've got this."

Her words hit home, I know everything's not going to go back to normal despite my hope that it will, I can't fucking talk for one thing, which is partly because of this block thing like Rafe explained, but I'm reasonably sure it stems from my

fear that if I talk they'll all disappear again and I'll wake up. I can feel snippets of emotions, and then I feel myself slipping straight back into the unfeeling robot I became when I was with Blake. It's already exhausting. It's also somewhat of a relief to have her recognise what I'm feeling and voice it. It makes me feel less broken and more capable of healing from this.

"I'm going to hug you now," she grins, "but don't worry, I don't expect you to hug me back."

Her response is so Jynx and on the nose that it has me smiling, even if it's just for the briefest moment, and when she hugs me, I do manage to hug her back somewhat loosely. When it comes to the guys, I have absolutely no problem, but anyone else, even Peter, it seems to shock me when someone hugs me. However, Peter is the only one who has embraced me without warning so far, and that was directly after I'd realised my men were alive. So, there is a chance that my reaction then was circumstantial.

Who the fuck knows.

"Alright, boys, you can come back now," Jynx yells, and my heart jumps as they all practically run over to me.

Jensen scoops me up, lifting me from under my butt, and I'm guessing that's because of the bruising on my stomach and back that I had honestly forgotten was there. My arms quickly wrap around his neck, my hands immediately going into his hair. He doesn't say anything, just holds me closely as he walks toward the van that I recognise as one of Alaric's. Once he's impressively manoeuvred me inside without causing damage to either of us, which is made doubly impressive since it's Jensen, he places me on the bench next to him. I almost immediately find myself being gently lifted and placed on Luc's lap. His arms wrap around my waist loosely, and I place my hand over the top of them as Jensen's hand lands on my leg, and Rage threads his fingers through mine. With them touching me like this and the others all within easy view, I can feel my flight or fight instinct pull back a bit more.

I'm glad that it's not becoming a permanent feature like I was worried it was going to be, but it does mean that it's not masking my pain level as much as I'd like it to. Fuck.

To distract myself from the pain that's starting to make itself known, I study the inside of the van. It's different from the other one of Alaric's that I've been in; for one, it's tripped out with all the gadgets that I'd be playing with under any other circumstances and most likely breaking since I'd want to press everything. The other thing that's different is that although from the outside it looks like a typical van, with no windows in the back and completely solid, it's actually not, and it means that I can see where we're going. It's not long before I start to recognise my surroundings. When we pull up to the gates that lead into the compound, I'd love to say that I relax even more and feel safe, but that's not entirely the case.

I do relax a bit more being in familiar surroundings, but I am still on edge. It's because there are a lot of people here that I only vaguely know, so I'm feeling the need to stay on guard, just in case something happens. I don't feel as safe as I should, even though I most likely am. Thankfully, Trick drives the van straight to the little house that we stay at before, and none of the other vehicles follow us, all going in different directions. I tense slightly when I see Elena waiting outside, a response that I'm not entirely sure why I have, but it could be that I'm just peopled out after everything that's happened in a very short amount of time. I slowly pull my pain-riddled body out of the van, aware that I look like something out of a horror show.

I desperately want to shower.

Elena looks me over, and her eyes are understanding as she keeps her distance from me, "Just to clarify, if I thought that you wanted a hug right now, I would be over there in a heartbeat, but I recognise that look, and I'm staying right here."

The relief I feel is almost overwhelming, and I realise that I'm touched out, apart from my guys, not only because my body is starting to let its pain known but also because any touch has come with pain recently, and I just can't right now. The guys I have to touch, so I know they're real, and their

touch gives me extreme comfort, and Jynx I can handle because she's Jynx, and she gave me prewarning, but I'm out now, I'm done.

"I just wanted to see with my own eyes that you were here," Elena explains. She then turns to the guys, "Is he taken care of?"

"Oh yeah, Ever dealt with him and made him pay for all the pain he caused countless people." Riot replies, his proud grin is soothing some of the sharp edges of my psyche.

"Good. I've got food cooking at home, and I'll bring it over in an hour or so. No arguments." She firmly says before walking back toward her car.

## Chapter Nine

“Alright, let’s get inside,” Trick says, opening the door and stepping through. I follow him and start heading straight toward the stairs. My need for a shower is almost becoming desperate now. I have ten days of grime and blood to scrub off.

“Your bag is on the bed of the room you used last time, Sunshine,” Riot calls after me.

As irrational as it sounds, I don’t want to shower alone. I feel like as soon as they’re out of my sight, everything that has happened is going to come crashing down on me, and I may end up having a panic attack. I almost had one when I couldn’t see Atlas on the plane, for fuck sake. That might be one of those things that I work on slowly, but I sure as hell hope that it sorts itself quickly because I am not okay living like that.

It doesn’t change the fact that I can’t handle it right now though, so I turn around on the stairs to see them already all at the bottom, still watching me. I pause; I’m not entirely sure how to ask them to come with me without making myself sound like the crazy person I clearly am.

“Do you want a couple of us to come with you? We can either wait in your bedroom or be in the bathroom, whatever you need, Princess?” Atlas asks me, and I could fucking kiss him right now for finding the right words and taking the pressure off me.

I nod, and without discussion, Luc, Atlas, Riot and Cash all step forward and start following me up the stairs. It’s what I wanted, but I still pause, feeling utterly ridiculous and hating how weak and vulnerable I feel right now.

Trick watches me closely before he opens his mouth, “Jensen, Rafe, Rage and I will all go and have a shower too, and then we can meet down here, okay?”

I nod again, offering him a relieved smile as I turn around and start up the stairs again so I can shower. The others all follow me into my room.

“Okay, Sunshine, do you want us to stay out here or come in the bathroom? We can all sit on the counter or floor while you shower,” Riot asks me.

I bring up my hands, “Come in, if that’s okay?”

“Of course it is,” Cash replies.

I smile slightly, glad that they’re all taking this in their stride and not looking at me like the crazy person that I feel. Seeing my bag on my bed, I rummage through it to find the comfiest clothes I own. Settling on a pair of black joggers and an oversized grey hoodie, grabbing underwear, I make my way to the bathroom.

“I’m going to leave the door open. We’re right here, and you can see us, but I think it will be easier for you to get changed without us in there, or one of us might end up with an elbow in our guts,” Luc teases, and I nod.

The bathroom is barely big enough to fit them all in if they sit down, so I definitely won’t be able to get changed with them in there. I hurry into the room, turning the shower on as hot as I can stand and then quickly strip, throwing my soiled clothes into the corner. I never want to see them again, not that they’re salvageable anyway, but that’s not the point. Once I’m in the shower, I open my mouth to call them in to let them know that I’m ready, but the only sound that comes out is a tiny squeak that they definitely won’t be able to hear over the sound of the shower. I refuse to let myself panic again though, so instead, I bang a couple of times on the shower door.

“Shit, Ever are you okay?” Atty asks as they all rush in, and I cringe. I didn’t think that through.

I stick my head around the around the shower door and then realise the whole reason I’m in this mess is that I can’t fucking talk, so even though it exposes my boobs which they’ve all seen anyway, I move so they can see my hands and start signing, their eyes only dip to see what I’m saying.



“I couldn’t call for you, so I banged. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Instantly they relax, the tension draining out of them.

“I think you can expect us all to be a bit jumpy for the foreseeable future,” Riot mutters.

“He’s right, and if you hadn’t asked for us to come in here with you, I’m fairly sure the majority of us would’ve followed you anyway,” Luc admits, and the others all nod along, in agreement.

Relief fills me, and I become calmer knowing that they’re finding this as hard as I am. I dip back into the shower and start scrubbing, watching the rusty brown water go down the drain.

Gross.

I wash my hair at least four times; it’s that disgusting, and by the time I finally feel like it’s clean enough, my scalp hurts from trying to get all the tangles out. I then move on to scrubbing the rest of me; I want to get rid of any remnants of that fucking place. I can hear the murmurs of the guys on the other side of the misted glass shower door, and I can just about make out their shapes through it, but I’m too focused on scrubbing to really listen to what they’re saying; I’m just taking comfort in the familiar sound of their voices blending together.

As I wash, I keep catching the sponge on the scabbed over cuts and reopening them in my harsh treatment of my skin. I don’t care; they could probably do with cleaning properly anyway.

“Ever,” Cash calls, “you need to ease up the scrubbing. You’re going to make yourself sore.”

I don’t bother replying since that would mean them having to see my hands, and my body is very quickly giving up on me. The familiar routine of the shower is adding to my sense of safety, and my whole body is aching. To appease them though, I do ease up on the scrubbing, mostly satisfied that I’m clean enough anyway. Now I’m not covered in mud, blood,

and fuck knows what else; I take stock of my body, the dark purple bruises covering most of my torso are expected, thanks to the daily beatings. I vaguely remember getting a few of the slices, but it must have been when I allowed my mind to wander, so my memory is hazy where they're concerned.

My legs aren't as damaged as the rest of me, but I do have wide, angry-looking red and weeping welts around each of my ankles from where they had me chained to the wall, and I tried to get free. They're going to leave massive scars. I'm not too keen on looking at my face since I'm reasonably certain that it's just a swollen mass of bruises.

"Leave the shower on when you're done. We're going to take it in turns after you. Someone will always be with you," Luc calls, gaining my attention again.

Finishing up, I pull the door back slightly, and before I even have to ask, a giant fluffy towel is thrust into my hand. I take it gratefully and wrap it around me, stepping out of the shower.

The guys are all smiles as their eyes travel over me, that is, until they get to my ankles, and then dark clouds of anger change their expressions.

Cash steps forward, and before he can ask, I start signing, "My ankles were chained too."

He swallows thickly as Atlas and Riot clench their hands, and Luc and Cash's eyes flash dangerously.

"Get dressed, and I'll have a look at them in the bedroom. From the glance I've just gotten, I think they're going to need ointment and wrapping." He says stiffly as he walks back into the bedroom.

Luc and Atlas follow him out as Riot steps forward and wraps me in his arms, my own quickly wrapping around him with absolutely no hesitation. He holds me as tightly as he can without hurting me, and his warmth permeates the ice that's surrounding me. His cheek presses into the top of my head as he tucks me in close.

"I'm so sorry for everything that's happened, Sunshine. I know things are going to be different for a while, and we're

going to have to figure some stuff out, but we're together, and we're all more than willing to help you through this." Stroking my back gently as he murmurs into my hair.

I squeeze him tightly, letting him know that I've heard, and he steps back slightly. I tilt my head up, it's been far too fucking long since I've felt his lips against mine, and now that I'm clean again, that's pretty much all I can think about at this moment. His smile is soft as he brings his calloused hand up to my cheek and gently cups it before his lips slant over mine in a gentle kiss. Everything else fades away as his tongue languidly slides against mine, and by the time he pulls away, I'm feeling more relaxed than I have been for a long time.

He gives me one final kiss, his eyes full of love for me and then steps back, "Get dressed, Ever, there's plenty of time for more of that, and I desperately need a shower."

My smile, although small, is genuine, and I make a point of not looking away from him as he starts to undress and get into the shower, making him chuckle as he finally gets under the spray. My body may not be anywhere near up to anything more physical than kisses, but I can still enjoy the view.

"Get dressed," I hear his desire-roughened voice from beyond the sound of the spray, and my smile widens.

I want to retort yes sir snappily, but since my voice still won't fucking do what I want it to, I raise my hand in a salute and hear his chuckle as I vaguely make out him shaking his head.

I'm starting to waver, having been on my feet for longer than my battered body would like, so I quickly drop the towel and carefully pull on my clothes. Now that I'm clean and in fresh clothes, the exhaustion is starting to hit me hard, and I shuffle into the bedroom, my feet barely lifting off the floor, that's just too much effort right now, but hey, at least the wood floors up here are getting a clean thanks to my fluffy socked feet.

Now I know I'm getting tired; that was a completely random thought to have.

“How’re you feeling?” Luc asks me as I sit heavily on the bed.

I open my mouth, and that embarrassing as fuck tiny little squeak comes out, making all three of them frown; I sigh heavily and sign instead, “Fucking voice. I feel better, still on edge though.”

“That’s understandable, and I imagine it’s going to be a while before you find that you can fully relax.” Atty reaches for me, pulling me onto his lap as he speaks.

“Let’s have a look at your ankles,” Cash brings over his bag, which he must have grabbed while I was still in the bathroom with Riot.

As Cash works at putting ointment and wrapping my ankles, Riot comes out of the bathroom, and Luc goes in, kissing me on the top of my head on the way past.

“I’m just going to grab some clothes from my room; I’ll be right back,” Riot tells me, and I nod.

Now that we’re here and I’m feeling further away from the shit that occurred, it seems that I’m less panicky about having them all within my sight. I think it would still be a problem if I’m completely left on my own, but hopefully, that will improve with time. Jynx was right; I need to ensure that I don’t push things, this is just the way it’s going to be for a while, and so long as the guys don’t start to mind, then I’m just going to have to accept it as one of those things.

“I’m all done. Do you want to go back downstairs with Riot and Luc while Atlas and I shower?” Cash asks, and I nod.

I don’t have to worry about how my stiff body is going to get up from Atlas’s lap as he stands with me in his arms and gently lowers me to the floor. He holds me steady as I get my balance and then dips his face, his lips brushing mine in the softest kiss.

By the time I’ve walked back down the stairs and plopped my ass on the sofa, I’m done, and unless I desperately need to pee, I’m not moving for the rest of the day. Hell, I’m actually not sure what time it is, I know it was dark when I first exited

the buildings, and then we travelled for a while, and it's light outside now; Elena offered to make food, so I'm guessing we're somewhere in the afternoon.

Fucking hell, a lot has happened since I last got that brief moment of sleep.

"Food is nearly ready, Angel," Jensen says, as he comes into the living room and just stares at me like he's worried I'm going to disappear any second. It would be weird, except I'm looking at him the same way.

I lift my arms up, "Carry? My legs don't want to work, and I think I'm seconds away from falling asleep."

He grins and is in front of me in two strides; he leans down, placing his hands on either side of my hips, and my tired arms automatically lift so I can cradle his face in my hands. He sighs heavily, his eyes closing as he moves to rest his forehead against mine.

"I'm so fucking glad you're back home with us, where you belong," whispering softly; he doesn't open his eyes, "my darkness, as you like to call it, has never been that hard to control, and the only reason I didn't lose my shit completely was because I knew we'd get you back."

Tears leak from my eyes, and I pull his face down to mine. His kiss is full of all the emotions that he's been struggling with, and I feel his tears mix with mine. I kiss him back with as much feeling as I possibly can, and when he pulls back, his eyes look brighter, and he clears his throat as he wipes his wet cheeks.

"Come on, let's get you sat up. The guys are probably finished setting the table by now." He moves to the side of me so he can scoop me up bridal style, and he does it so carefully that I only get mild pain from my battered body.

When he carries me into the dining room and gently sets me down on a chair, my eyes start to leak again. I watch as they all take their usual seats, passing dishes around and loading my plate up when I don't immediately do so myself. Rafe has

one of his hands on my leg, and Trick has one of his hands on my other leg.

It's all just so normal.

"Ever, what's wrong?" Rage asks from the table as he reaches across, and I meet him halfway, threading my fingers through his.

His words, of course, bring all the attention to me. I reluctantly pull my hand away from Rage's and start signing.

"I never thought I'd have this again, not with all of you," I tell them honestly.

Sympathy shines bright in all of their expressions, and I don't think anyone really knows what to say; I try to smile, and the conversation eventually starts flowing around me again. Atlas leans around Trick to get my attention.

"Little bites Princess, I'm assuming you aren't used to proper meals or food, so take it easy, okay?"

I nod, having already figured out that I was going to have a problem since I've only eaten a quarter of the food on my plate, and my stomach has started cramping painfully. I force myself to take a few more bites because, goddamn it, I love my fucking food. My stomach pangs painfully again, so I reluctantly put my fork down. I receive concerned glances from most of the guys, but none of them says anything.

When everyone is finished, I try to help them tidy up, and I'm immediately told to go and sit back down in the front room. I'd argue, but I really am feeling worn out and tired, so I simply do as I'm told. Although I can hear them all in the kitchen, and I keep catching glimpses of them, it's too quiet, so I curl up on the couch, leaving a space on either side of me for the guys, and grab the remote, putting something light-hearted on.

Soon, I have Rage on one side, my head on his chest and listening to his heartbeat, irrefutable proof that he's here and alive. Atlas has his head resting on my curled-up legs, and I have my hand under the neck of his shirt and resting over his heart, again reassuring myself that he's here. Jensen and Riot

are sat in front of me on the floor, despite there being enough room for everyone, and I feel incredibly safe surrounded by them, so safe that my eyes drift closed.

## *Luc*

Ever finally drifted off to sleep twenty minutes ago, and the rest of us have fully given up with the pretence of watching tv like we were doing. Instead, our eyes are on her, marvelling that after what felt like an eternity, she's back with us.

As I watch and hope she does wake up and catch us all staring like the creeps we definitely are, her brow furrows, and she starts whimpering. Other than the squeak she made earlier when she tried to talk, this is the only sound I've heard her make, and I fucking hate it. Atlas starts gently rubbing his hands down her leg, and Rage's fingers are running through her hair. She starts to calm down again, sighing in her sleep and snuggling ridiculously closer to Rage. Who I have to admit I'm slightly envious of right now.

"So what now?" leaning back in the armchair and running his hand through his hair, Rafe asks.

# Chapter Ten

## *Luc*

“Well, at some point, I assume we’re going to get an update from Alaric, but I don’t imagine that will be for at least a few days because of the amount of processing and shit they’re going to have to do.” Atlas starts, talking quietly so as not to wake Ever.

“But he’s dead. The main threat to us is gone, so where do we go from here?” Cash asks.

“I guess, one step at a time, and I think we can all be in agreement that Ever comes first,” I add.

“I assume that our arrangement with the Headmaster of Blackbreak will still stand?” Jensen asks.

“I guess that’s something else that Alaric will fill us in on.” Riot concludes with a shrug. All we really care about is Ever right now, “Has anyone heard from Peter? I’m surprised he didn’t show up.”

“Yeah, he sent me a message when you guys were upstairs. He said he was going to stay with Elijah. He wants to give us space and can easily see how fragile Ever is.” Trick explains.

“He’s an amazing friend.” I point out, and everyone agrees.

It’s silent for a moment before Trick speaks again, “I know she’s barely been back at all, but I’m wondering if it was really a good idea to bring her back here, where she’s surrounded by so many unknown people.”

“Well, we couldn’t take her back to the academy. There’s no way she could handle that right now.” Rage points out.

“No, you’re right, but we could have taken her to the cabin. She loves it up there,” he points out.

“Why don’t we just see how it goes? She’s still healing, and sitting in the car for the journey up to the cabin may be asking



too much of her.” Cash points out, and I agree with him.

“Alright, so we’ll stay here unless we notice that she’s started struggling and then we can take her up to the cabin. I think maybe we should plan for that when she feels a bit better anyway. It’s a hell of a lot more peaceful up there, no people to worry about, and she can concentrate on healing properly.” Trick suggests and gets absolutely no complaints or disagreement from us.

I don’t know if the others feel as strongly as I do, but the cabin feels like home to me, like the first true home I’ve ever had. Living in that mausoleum of a house that my parents called a home had never felt like being at the cabin does. I’m not even sure where my mother is, and quite frankly, I don’t care. My father is where he belongs, which is behind bars, and my sister, who is the only member of my family that I actually give two shits about, is safe here, surrounded by her men and her friends that have become like family to her. It may not be traditional, but she’s safe, happy and extremely loved, and that’s all I want for her.

Besides, I look around at my chosen family, all of us positioned around Ever like she’s our gravitational pull; who am I to question whether something is traditional or not?

“We’re going to have to be aware that she could have some new triggers,” Rafe mutters into the silence, and I’m not the only one who winces.

“We will be. She’s got all of us, and we’re not going to let her drown,” Atlas’s voice is full of conviction.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself, man,” Jensen agrees.

He must have spoken to Ever while we were all laying the table and trying to make the kitchen look less like a family of angry racoons had taken up residence in it. Cleaning was not on our priority list since she was taken, and it definitely showed. But Jensen looks happier, less like he could murder the next fucker that looks at him wrong and more settled, more himself, and that’s how I know he’s held Ever; she’s always been able to do that for him. For all of us, really, but the effect on Jensen is more pronounced.

He gets up and drapes a blanket over Ever, making sure she's warm and then settles back down, staring at the TV. The rest of us all do the same, completely exhausted and yet unwilling to move away from her. I think it's safe to say that we're all going to be sleeping in here.

## *Ever*

I startle awake, my heart racing and my palms sweaty, bolting upright and dislodging something heavy off my legs; it takes me a second to realise where I am and what woke me. My heartbeat calms slightly as I recognise the front room and the guys all spread out around me, all of them asleep, except for Atlas, who I dislodged when I woke up.

“Ever, are you okay?” he asks me gently.

I don't bother replying, too focused on the noise that woke me and trying to work out if we're under threat or not. That's when I hear it again, the sound of male voices outside. They aren't particularly aggressive, but they are loud, and it's reminiscent of when Blake's men used to walk the halls outside of my cell and taunt me. As is relatively common with trauma, while I was in the situation, I could deal with it, but now I'm out, my hands are starting to shake, and I'm waiting for one of them to stop and decide it's time for my beating.

“Hey, Ever, it's okay. You aren't there anymore. It's just Dom's men. They won't hurt you,” Atlas appears in front of me, carefully standing over the top of Jensen and Riot.

Rafe suddenly appears over his shoulder, making me jump, and they both frown.

“Just breathe with us Baby, Come on, you can do it, in and out,” Rafe coaches me, and I hadn't even realised that I wasn't breathing properly.

It takes some time, but I finally get my breathing under control and sink back into the couch's cushions. I thought I was doing better, but thanks to that wake-up, I can feel the progress that I made yesterday retreat. I sink into the familiar

feeling of numbness; it gives me a sense of safety that I desperately need right now.

“Are you okay now?” Atty asks me, and I nod, unable to give him much more.

When he shares a worried look with Rafe, I try to give them a smile to reassure them, but as the frown lines deepen between their eyes, I know that I didn’t manage to pull it off.

“I’m going to go and start breakfast,” Rafe mutters, moving back.

I’m aware of the rest of the guys getting up around me and offering me smiles that I try to return authentically, but I’m pretty sure I fail. Eventually, I give up, staring blankly at the TV, not really seeing what’s happening. They all go into the kitchen to help Rafe set up breakfast, and I can hear them talking about me and worrying, but I’m too deep in the numbness to really bother listening to what they’re saying.

There’s a part of me that’s screaming at me to snap out of it; I don’t like causing them more worry, but the more significant part of me has decided it’s safer to stay wrapped in this numbness, and for now, I’m not going to force it, I feel too raw and too vulnerable being here. It might be better if I wasn’t in pain and stiff; at least then I’d know that if I need to, I would be able to put up a damn good fight, but as it stands, I’d be easy to take down. I don’t fucking like it, I don’t feel safe here, and until I heal enough, I’m not sure I’m going to be able to pull myself out of this numbness.

## *Trick*

“What happened?” I demand as quietly as possible as we help lay the table.

It doesn’t take all of us to do this job, but after seeing Ever and getting worried looks from Atlas and Rafe, we’re using this as the reason so we can talk. Rafe is clearly worried since, technically, it’s past lunchtime and not breakfast, even though we’ve only just woken up. I don’t think any of us are going to

complain about breakfast for lunch, especially since this is the first time since Ever was kidnapped that he's been back in the kitchen.

"She was fast asleep, and then she suddenly shot up and slipped immediately into a panic attack. I don't think it was something she was dreaming about." Atlas starts to explain. "It seemed to be connected to the noise outside. A few of Dom's men were walking past the cabin and being pretty loud about it."

"She was ready to fight," Rafe adds, as he stirs a pan of eggs, "when she finally started breathing properly again, she just seemed to retreat back into herself, like when we first found her."

"So she's protecting herself," Riot mutters.

"We can't stay here if it's keeping her so on edge. There's no chance of her finding her voice or properly healing while she doesn't feel safe." Rage sits down heavily in his chair. His relationship with her is still relatively new, but there is absolutely no denying that he cares about her as much as the rest of us. None of us has ever questioned that.

"Like Cash said yesterday though, it might not be a good idea to move her either," Luc points out.

I sigh heavily, running my hand through my hair, and distractedly noticing that it's getting long enough to need a cut. My attention drifts to where Ever's sitting in the front room. She hasn't moved since we came in here. Her body is tense, despite how much pain that must be causing her, and she's staring unseeingly at the TV. We can't keep her here. She clearly doesn't feel safe if the sound of Dom's men has triggered her, and it will happen again; there's always noise around here, and it's boisterous and loud. I can't let her be in a constant state of being triggered. That's no way to start the healing process. But Luc is correct as well, and I have no idea if moving her up to the cabin so soon after us getting here will be counterproductive; I need a second opinion.

"Why don't we call Jynx and see what she thinks?" I suggest, "she's had some pretty good insight where Ever is

concerned, and from what we know, she's dealt with some heavy trauma as well. She might be able to suggest something to help that we haven't thought of yet."

"Good idea, a different perspective might help." Cash replies.

"I'll call her now," pulling out his phone, Atlas pauses before dialling, "do we want Ever to hear this conversation?"

"She's not listening, we haven't been quiet so far, and her facial expression hasn't changed at all. She can hear us; she's just too deep in her mind to truly hear what we're saying." Jensen answers him.

"I think you're right," Rafe mutters, placing the eggs on the table and returning to make something else.

"Alright," Atlas agrees, dialling Jynx and putting the phone on the table so we can all hear.

I really hope she has some sort of solution to help Ever because I don't know what to do, and I just want to do what's best for her.

"Hey guys, how're things going?" Jynx asks, worry heavy in her voice, which is a complete contrast from her usual carefree or violent vibe, and it speaks volumes about how much she cares for Ever.

"Ever got triggered by noises outside this morning, and now she's retreated back to how she was when we first found her. She had started communicating more with us by signing, and we even got a few real smiles." Riot explains quickly.

"Now all she's giving us is fake smiles that almost look painful," Rage adds. "We were thinking of taking her up to the cabin, but we aren't sure if moving her again is going to cause her to spiral more, so we're wondering what you think?"

"She clearly doesn't feel safe here, and because of that, is still clinging to her survival instincts. I think you guys definitely have the right idea of taking her up to the cabin if that's where she feels the safest. You guys know that though, trust your instincts." She immediately replies.

I wish I had more information and knew how to help her properly. That's what is making me second guess what I really know will help. I am going to be scouring the internet for ways to help as soon as I get the fucking chance. We need to get her where she feels safe first.

"You don't think that it could make her retreat even more?" Jensen asks, chewing his bottom lip with worry.

"Ask her. She's there; she's just not responding how she would normally. She'll tell you if she doesn't want to go." Jynx explains.

"Okay, we'll let you know how it goes. Are you popping by at some point?" Atlas asks.

"Yeah, I'll be over later. Don't worry; I know better than to barge in." Jynx replies warily.

"Okay, see you then," I reply as Atlas hangs up.

"Why don't we take breakfast into the front room? We might have a better chance of her eating something that way." Rafe suggests, already grabbing his and Ever's plates and moving into the room.

I watch as he places it on her lap, and she gives him a fake smile. Watching her try to be normal for us is painful, but I don't know if us pointing it out and telling her she doesn't need to pretend for us will help. The lack of information is genuinely fucking frustrating me now, and I feel my fingers start to twitch with the need to draw. I may have been able to draw Ever's bike designs for her without drawing something disturbing, but after everything that's happened recently, I'm reasonably confident that my fears will transfer onto the paper, and I don't want to see them embodied and brought to life, they're bad enough in my mind.

I try to watch her without being too obvious about it and breathe a sigh of relief as she picks up her cutlery and starts eating. At least we don't need to worry about that. Her appetite has, understandably, diminished thanks to the lack of food that she had, but she is eating, and regular small meals will help to get her back where she was. I wait until she's finished eating

before I put my own plate down and go to kneel in front of her.

The conversation pauses around me as the others all wait to hear her reply, and I think they're all keen to get to the cabin as well. There's no mistaking that they all feel more at home there than anywhere else; I can see the difference in them whenever we're up there.

"Ever?" I ask, gaining her attention. Her eyes are full of pain while her expression remains blank, "we were wondering if you wanted to go up to the cabin?"

Her eyes spark with life, the first sign of anything real I've seen in her expression since we woke up this morning, and she rapidly nods her head.

I smile, "Do you want to wait a few days or ..." I don't bother finishing my sentence as she shakes her head no, "okay, it shouldn't take us long to get packed up and then we can head off. Does that sound okay?"

She nods again, a small amount of tension draining out of her.

I lean back and look around at the guys, double-checking that they're all okay with leaving so soon. No one makes a single sign of protest.

"What about Peter?" Luc asks.

"Call him and see what he wants to do. Better yet, ask him to come over," I suggest and look back to Ever, who seems more present as she nods.

"Ask him to bring Elijah too. You may as well get everyone on board with the plan." Cash suggests, and I nod in agreement.

Rafe dials his number and puts it on the speaker; he greets, "Hey, man."

"Hey, is Ever okay?" he asks immediately, and Ever's lips twitch slightly at his concern.

"Yeah, she's doing as well as can be expected. Do you and Elijah want to come over? We have something we need to talk

to you about?”

“Yeah, can do. Give me twenty minutes, and then we’ll be over.” He replies and then hangs up.

“You may as well ask Jynx to come over too, she wasn’t going to come over until later, but we might be gone by the time she makes it over.” Riot suggests and then adds, “I’ll text Dom to let him know we’re going and that we’ll message when we’re leaving and meet at the clubhouse so we can say goodbye. Is that okay?” he asks Ever; who is actually listening to the conversation.

She nods her agreement. I have to say I’m feeling pretty damn hopeful about taking her up to the cabin since just the mention of us taking her up there has already pulled her out of her self-imposed shell. Maybe we should’ve taken her up there straight away. But in all honesty, we hadn’t adequately considered anything past rescuing her. In all of our planning, we completely forgot what we’d be doing after we got her back, and that meant that when Alaric told us all to get back here, that’s what we did.

It was an oversight on my part, and I’m usually much better at finding all the solutions to any possible problem we could encounter: the worry and utter panic of having her missing overshadowed everything else. I move back to my seat as I watch my family, all of them are staying as close to Ever as they possibly can without overwhelming her, and even if they are having their own conversations, their eyes are never off her for long.

I always knew she was our forever, but seeing them now, it would be obvious to even the most sceptical of people. She’s our heart, our home, and I will do everything to protect her.



# Chapter Eleven

## *Rage*

There's a quiet knock on the door and Ever tenses slightly. I hate that everything is making her so jumpy, and I hope that being back at the cabin will help her. Even I could see the difference in her when Trick mentioned going up there, and there was absolutely no mistaking that she wanted to go. It's the most animated I've seen her yet. I have to admit that I'm looking forward to going back up there. I've only been once before when we were there before when we went after Luc's father, but there's just this feel about it that immediately makes me relax.

It probably sounds ridiculous, but it feels like home, or what I assume a proper home would feel like, and the fact that it has more than enough space for all of us to have our own areas and not be under each other's feet all the time is a bonus too.

"I'll get it," I offer, standing up and striding toward the door. I open it to let in a worried-looking Peter and a much more relaxed Elijah, "hey guys, are you alright?"

Peter doesn't bother replying as he rushes past me to get to Ever; Riot messaged him after he hung up to let him know to take it easy with her and so I'm not surprised when instead of hugging her as I know he wants to he merely sits next to her, and she leans into him slightly, getting comfort from her best friend. I turn back to Elijah.

"I'm okay," he replies and then rubs his hand over his face and raises his voice slightly so that everyone can hear him, "I've apologised to Peter for the way I behaved when I first arrived, but I feel like I owe you guys an apology too, I acted like a dick, and I'm sorry."

I clap him on the back as we walk further into the room, "Don't worry about it, man, emotions were running high."

“Yeah, and you’d just realised that the person you sacrificed your own happiness for in order to keep safe was deeply involved in the thing you were trying to keep him safe from,” Jensen sums up, “I think I’d act like a dick too.”

Elijah chuckles quietly. “Yeah, that’s a good way to sum it up. When I actually took a step back, as you told me to Trick, I realised that it wasn’t just words, you guys really do consider Peter family, and I knew then that you wouldn’t let anything happen to him and that he was more capable than I gave him credit for. I’ve got a lot of making up to do.”

“Yes, you do,” Peter sniffs prudishly.

My grin is wide; oh yeah, Peter’s going to make him work for it. There’s no mistaking that. We all take our seats again, and I watch curiously as Peter holds his hand out to Ever, resting it facing upwards on her leg and just waiting, letting her choose, almost immediately she threads her fingers through his, and he squeezes them gently, being careful of her bruised knuckles.

“So, why are we here?” Peter asks in the silent room.

“We’re going to take Ever up to the cabin. There are no other people there, and it’s somewhere we know that she feels safe.” Trick starts to explain, “We wanted to know what you want to do?”

Peter shares a look with Elijah before he answers, “Well, I don’t think staying up at the cabin with you would be the best idea right now. I think you guys all need to spend some time together, just you guys. I’m not saying that I won’t be around every chance that I can get, but I think she needs her men surrounding her.”

I frown, “I get that, and honestly, it makes sense, but she’s going to want you close by. Just look at the way she’s holding you right now. Not to mention as soon as she’s not feeling so triggered, she’s going to want to know all the dirt on what’s happening between you and Elijah.”

I feel immensely proud when Ever’s lips tilt up briefly at the corners before falling again, it wasn’t much, but I’ll take it.

“Rage is right,” Trick agrees.

“What about if you stayed in one of the houses in town?” Atlas suddenly suggests, and I could smack myself. Of course, that would make more sense.

“One of Lyric’s men is the main realtor in town,” I explain to the others since they all look incredibly confused.

“Remember how I said that I had her team infiltrate all of the main jobs in the town so effectively we control everything? Well, Jonah owns and runs the only realtor office in town. He’ll definitely have a place for you, Elijah and his team to stay.” Atlas explains further, and when Peter raises his eyebrow at the mention of Elijah coming with, Atlas chuckles, “Come on, you don’t think Elijah is going to let the man he loves leave without him, do you?” he ignores Peter’s pinkening cheeks and then turns to Elijah who looks like he’s enjoying this whole thing immensely, “Besides we could do with extra eyes in town if you’re up to it?”

“Definitely. We could use something that’s a bit more laid back after the last few months, and I want to make sure that Noel is as okay as he’s making out. It’ll be good to get a change of scenery too. Just let us know what you want us to help out with in town.” Elijah replies.

“Will D be okay with that?”

“Yeah, I don’t see why not. I’ll message him and let him know. He won’t answer at the moment because he’s still trying to weed out the fucking mole. If he needs us somewhere else at some point, he’ll let us know.” He replies.

“Great, in that case, you better go and fill your team in. If you leave tomorrow, that should give me enough time to talk to Jonah and get you a place set up.” Atlas replies, and Elijah nods, standing up.

“Thanks, man.” He turns to Peter, “Are you coming with me now?”

“No, I think I’ll stick around for a bit. I’ll meet you back at the house. I need to pack my shit which is here anyway.” Peter replies.

Elijah leans forward and kisses him softly before striding out of the room. I watch as Jensen's smile becomes full of mischief as he waggles his eyebrows at a flustered-looking Peter.

"Shut up," Peter mutters.

"I didn't say anything," Jensen chuckles.

"You were thinking it," Peter retorts, and I can't help my laughter.

"Jynx should be here soon, but why don't we start packing?" Rafe suggests.

"Good idea. Peter, can you stay with Ever?" Riot asks, trying to convey to him with his eyes that it's important. She didn't seem to panic when no one was in the room with her this morning, but that doesn't mean she won't now.

"Yeah, of course," Peter replies without missing a beat.

As we all leave the room, I glance back and notice that he's not trying to engage her in conversation. He's just sitting next to her watching the tv and holding her hand, and even from here, I can see the familiarity of it is helping her to relax.

I think we're all fucking lucky that Peter is a part of this ragtag family. If it wasn't for him pulling us out of our mood when we were looking for Ever, I fear we could've destroyed ourselves before we finally sorted our shit out and actually let the people who wanted to help us help.

I don't bother folding my shit as I stuff it into my bag. Most of it needs washing anyway, and to be honest, I can't be bothered to fold it; I want to get back to Ever. I do take a moment to call the stable hand back at Blackbreak quickly. I need to know that the horses are being looked after properly and will continue to be so while Ever and I aren't there to do it ourselves.

Once I've hung up, I feel much better and reassured that they're absolutely fine and there haven't been any issues, even with Tank. I offered him a bit more money to carry on for as long as it takes since I have no idea when we will be back there.

When I get back downstairs, it's no surprise that everyone is already packed, and Ever's bag is in the pile with everyone else waiting by the door.

"I'm going to start loading the SUV," I say, grabbing as many bags as I can.

"That's a point. How are we going to get Ever's bike up to the cabin? She definitely can't ride it, and we can't leave it here," Luc asks.

"I already sorted it. Dom is lending us a trailer to put it on. I'll just have to be extra careful about getting it up the track to the cabin. The holes in the road were pretty bad last time we went up there, and with everything that's happened, I haven't been able to get anyone up there to fix them," Trick explains.

"That's understandable. Once everything has settled down a bit, then we can look into getting some people up to fix it or do it ourselves." Riot suggests.

"I'll help you take those out," Rafe adds, grabbing his own armful of bags and then opening the front door. "Hey, Jynx."

Atlas chuckles. He teases, "I know you aren't used to not barging into places, but you are supposed to knock to let someone know that you're there."

"Haha, you cheeky fucker, I literally just arrived." She replies, pushing past us all and heading straight for Ever.

Just like Peter, she simply sits down next to her, but unlike Peter, she grabs Ever's hand instead of waiting for her.

"Hey, how're you doing?" she asks, and when Ever just shrugs, she smiles sadly, "that good, huh? At least you're going home today. It's easier in a place you feel truly safe."

Leaving them to it, I follow Rafe out the door and start loading everything into Trick's SUV.

As we walk back inside, Rafe turns to me, "I'm going to make some sandwiches for Ever and coffee. It's probably best that she eats little and often."

"Yeah, man. That's a good idea. Her stomach won't be able to handle proper meals right now but eating little and often

will soon get her back to where she was.” I reply, clapping him on the shoulder and knowing that this is the way that he feels he can help her.

We’re all at a bit of a loss, and I don’t think even she knows what is going to help right now. I really hope that moving to the cabin is going to help her fully come out of her fight-or-flight mode. I think at some point there’s going to be a turning point where she entirely comes out from the numbness, but it’s like Jynx said before, she’s had her emotions buried for so long that when the floodgates break, she’s going to be overwhelmed by everything that she’s repressed and all we can do is hold her together and weather the storm with her.

“I’m sure Jonah could find you guys a place as well if you wanted to come to town?” I hear Atlas offer Jynx as we walk back into the front room.

“Thanks, but I need to deal with the fallout from the bloody mess I left behind from the last job. I left my people to deal with it, but they’ve run into a few issues.” She grins, not seeming to be worried at all.

It’s times like these when I forget just how far she’s come from the traumatised and deadly teenager she was. She’s been through so much shit, and yet she’s become the strong, confident, deadly and powerful woman she is today. It gives me hope. I’m so fucking proud of her.

“Fair enough. Make sure you check in regularly. I know you work for D, but I’m not asking you in a boss way. I’m asking as a friend.” Atlas orders. He’s feeling on edge and feeling the need to keep all of his now very large extended family close.

“Don’t worry; I will. I need to check on Ever anyway.” Jynx says. She squeezes Ever’s hand and gets up, walking to the front door, “If you guys need anything, let me know.”

“Will do, thanks, Jynx. See you later!” I call after her.

“Dom has said he’ll bring the trailer up here to save us having to pick it up from the clubhouse and then drive all the way back and load the bike up. I think he’s bringing Elena to say goodbye, too, so as soon as they’ve been, we can set off.

Sound good?” Trick asks, looking specifically at Ever, who nods and gives him a small smile. This just proves to me that going to the cabin is the right thing to do.

I think we should consider replacing the front door with a revolving one at this rate. The more people that arrive, even though they’re friends and in some cases, family, the more I see Ever start to tense and retreat. I’m guessing that Peter picks up on the same thing because not long after Jynx goes, he does, too, promising to call everyone.

Dom arrives with the trailer and Elena, who thankfully quickly picks up on the delicate state Ever’s in and doesn’t stay for too long before they make us promise to keep in touch.

As soon as the door shuts behind them, Ever starts signing, “Can we go home now?”

Jensen immediately starts to help her off the couch, “Of course we can, Angel.”

There’s a quick check to make sure we’ve all got everything that we need, and then we waste no time following Jensen and Ever out to the SUV. When we get out there, Ever’s already in the front seat, turned to the side with her arms wrapped around Jensen’s waist as he talks to her quietly, and she nods along with whatever he’s saying. When he sees us, he steps back, gives her a gentle kiss and then grins.

“Let’s go home.” He announces to all of us.

## *Ever*

Home.

That sounds perfect right now. I know, without a doubt, that’s where I want to be. As soon as Trick suggested it, I felt some of the numbness recede and the sense of rightness flow through me. If that happens just from the thought of it, then I’m hopeful that I’ll be able to become more myself when we finally get there.

If I'm being honest, despite the fact that I haven't been able to help my reactions today, I feel pathetic. I have never been the type of person who enjoys wallowing, and that includes now. Not that you can really call it wallowing, it's more trauma, but you know, potato potahto.

"Jensen, gave you one of his knives?" Trick asks as we start the journey, and I nod, twirling the blade through my fingers.

"Smart man," he praises, before asking, "is it helping?"

This time I open my mouth to try to reply out loud and only manage to produce a weird sound as I chicken out at the last minute. Trick looks at me to check I'm okay; I sigh heavily and nod. Predictably the rest of the journey up to the cabin is quiet, and I can't really sign to talk to him since he has to keep his eyes on the road. By the time we're carefully picking up the track that leads up to the cabin, my body is stiff from staying seated for so long, but I'm almost buzzing with anticipation.

When we pull in, the bikes pulling in behind us, I don't wait for someone to help me out; too excited to be back here. I hop out of the SUV and move to stare up at home. It takes me a minute to realise that no one has walked past me, and I turn back to see them all watching me cautiously. I feel so bad that I'm making them worry, but I already feel so much better here.

I smile, a real one that I genuinely feel and see the relief in their answering smiles. I clear my throat; they will not disappear if I talk, they won't, and I am in control of everything. I can do this. I am safe, I am home, and I'm surrounded by men who love me.

"Thank you," my words are scratchy, my voice straining since I haven't used it for so long, but I did it, and they're still here.

I suddenly find myself surrounded by my men; as I'm pulled into one of their arms, the rest of them all touching me somehow. When I'm finally put back down, my smile is still on my face, and theirs seem a bit wobbly. I meet Trick's eyes.



“I should’ve brought you here in the first place,” he mutters, his tone apologetic.

I frown and then pull him towards me, shocking him enough that I can quickly kiss him. He shudders and draws me closer.

I pull back, “You couldn’t have known.”

That’s all I manage to get out before the strain on my voice starts to hurt, so I step back slightly and start signing instead, “I didn’t know I would react this way. It makes sense. I have always felt safe here, and nothing bad has ever happened when we’re here.”

He nods as if in agreement, but I can tell that he’s still being hard on himself for not bringing me here in the first place as he starts to lead me up the wide porch steps and to the front door. I knew I’d feel so much better here, but I didn’t think it would be so quickly.

# Chapter Twelve

## *Ever*

Obviously, I don't suddenly feel exactly how I did before the kidnapping, and I don't think I'll ever be the same person I was before, but that's okay. I promise myself, as I watch the guys bustle around our home and set things up, that I will come out the other side of this stronger than ever before. I feel trapped inside my own mind, a trap that I've made myself. Speaking and proving to myself that the guys were still going to be here if I did was one step that has massively helped. However, I still feel like I'm wrapped in cotton wool, like I'm seeing everything through a gauze. It isn't very easy to explain, which is why I haven't tried to explain it to the guys; I can't work out how to word it so that they understand.

My body is healing and using a lot of energy to do so, and it's no surprise when my eyes start to feel heavy as I listen to the guys joking and arguing with each other about doing a grocery run. Apparently, Atlas is refusing to go with only a grocery list from Rafe again because half of the things Rafe had on his list Atlas didn't know what they were.

My eyes drift closed, my blinks getting longer as I revel in being surrounded by them, their voices pulling me to sleep. However, as I reach the point of sleep where I couldn't wake myself if I tried, I know that I let my guard down too much. As the face of the first man I was forced to kill flashes through my mind and screams of what they called me start to chant in my ears, "Monster, monster, monster!"

As the memories and chants echo around my memories, I desperately struggle to wake back up again. I don't want to remember; I don't want to go back there. Please don't make me go back there; I don't want to relive it.

Fuck.

## *Jensen*

She's been asleep for about thirty minutes, and we've deliberately not quieted down. We attempted to when we first realised that she had fallen asleep, but she became really restless, so Rage suggested that we carry on as we were, and she settled again. It seems that hearing us makes it easier for her to relax. It's understandable; she spent a long time thinking three of us were dead, so listening to all of us messing about and talking must be reassuring. Being here has already helped her, and I hope that we can get back to a point where she's at least talking regularly. I miss hearing her voice. Her speaking when we first arrived was clearly a positive thing though, and it makes me hopeful. As soon as I've finished that thought, she screams.

I've moved before I've consciously made the decision to do so, and we all surround her as she screams and thrashes. Cash reaches out toward her but finds his arm held back by Atlas.

"Don't wake her. It could make it worse," he explains when Cash looks like he's about to hit him.

He's right, but I'm not too fond of it. We watch helplessly as she continues to scream and thrash. Suddenly her eyes flash open, and she launches herself over the back of the couch and lands in a fighting stance. I stare dumbfounded. She shouldn't be able to move like that, not with her body in the condition that it is.

"Ever, you're home. We're here," Atlas says gently, and she blinks, thankfully coming out of the nightmare quickly and looking around at each of us before she finally relaxes her stance.

What comes out of her mouth next rocks me to the core and fills me with horror, my poor angel. What he made her do, I can't even imagine.

"I killed them. Fifteen of them, I killed them. Three of them refused to get in the ring with the monster, and he shot them.

Their blood is on my hands too,” she looks up at us desperately, “I didn’t want to. He said he’d kill the rest of you, said I’d become the outlet for his men’s frustrations. I couldn’t let him kill any more of you. He’s already taken so much.” Her voice is starting to strain, but she still talks, and none of us stops her. This is too important. She needs to get this out, “Some of them deserved it. A couple of them just wanted to free their family out of Blake’s clutches. He wanted to break me so he could remould me into his perfect unfeeling weapon. If I didn’t end them, they would’ve killed me.”

The whole time she’s been talking, we slowly approach, so when her legs collapse beneath her, and she starts to sob uncontrollably, I’m there to catch her. I pull her onto my lap as I sit on the floor with her. The others all surround us, laying their hands on her wherever they can.

“Ever,” I start, and she gazes up at me, tears streaming down her face and breaking my heart. I resist the urge to freak out myself, she needs me, and these tears are a way of letting it all go. That’s important. “You did what you had to do, to protect us and to protect yourself. You said that some of them didn’t deserve it, but they would’ve killed you if they had the chance. You aren’t the monster, Ever. Blake is for putting you through that. He’s the monster, and you defeated him. You made it so that he can never spread his evil to anyone else again, and he can’t hurt anyone else because of you.”

Her sobs slow as she listens to me, but tears keep streaming down her face, and I rub her back slowly, offering her as much comfort as possible.

“Let it all out, Sweetheart. Feel everything you were supposed to feel. You’re safe here. We’ve got you.” Trick adds, and Ever’s eyes close.

The tears don’t seem to be ending and come in waves of intensity. She will be almost silent, and then bone-shaking sobs will overtake her again, and we’re all riding the emotional rollercoaster with her. None of our eyes are dry. I’m crying for everything that she’s been put through, I’m crying for all the pain my brothers, and I have felt. I’m not embarrassed to be crying in front of them. Why would I be?

They were there, they went through the hell alongside me, and they've listened to Ever talk about part of the torment she went through, and no one should've gone through what she did. It would affect us if we'd learned it happened to a stranger, but the fact it happened to Ever is heartbreaking.

Eventually, her tears turn silent and don't turn back into sobs, and I look around at my family, my brothers, with their red-rimmed eyes, all staring at her.

"Is she asleep?" I ask quietly. The last thing I want to do is to disturb her.

"Yeah, I think so." Rage replies, gently moving some hair that's sticking to her forehead.

"Do you want some help to get up? We can take her up to her room. She'll be more comfortable." Rafe suggests.

"Good idea, why don't we all grab blankets and shit and set up in there. I know none of us wants to be away from her right now." Trick suggests.

Rafe and Atlas help me get off the floor and adjust Ever so that I can carry her more comfortably, and then I head off towards the stairs and her room. The other's all disperse to change and grab blankets as Luc helps me to pull back the covers and lay Ever in the middle of the bed. When I start to pull back so I can get changed myself, her hands tighten in my shirt.

"Guess I'm not going anywhere," I chuckle quietly, I awkwardly try to toe off my shoes without moving too far away so she can still hold my shirt and then climb in beside her, and she instantly snuggles down onto my chest.

"I don't think you're complaining," Luc mutters with a smile as he starts to strip down to his boxers and then climbs in on the other side.

He finds the remote on her bedside table and turns the tv on quietly, just so that any noise we make talking doesn't disturb her, not that it's likely to, but if we go quiet, at least there's some noise in the background for her. It's not long at all until

everyone is back and setting up their beds. Trick was right; none of us wants to leave her after what she's just revealed.

"Being here already seemed to be really helping her," Rage starts, "do you think this will undo all that progress she's made in such a short time?"

It's something that I worried about as well, but I think if anything, it's likely to be the opposite before I can give my opinion though Atlas answers.

"It could go that way, but I hope that it's going to go the other way instead, and she's released a good chunk of her repressed emotions, and now she can focus on healing. We aren't really going to know how she's going to react to it until she's awake." Atlas finishes, watching her closely for any signs of distress.

"I hope you're right," Luc mutters.

After that, everyone settles down, Rafe and Riot sharing a single space on the floor and taking comfort in each other as we all watch the Tv. I should get some sleep, it was already late by the time that Ever finally fell asleep, so I should be feeling exhausted. The problem is I don't want to go to sleep and risk missing hearing if Ever needs me. With that in mind, I settle in for the long haul tonight. I'm reasonably certain that the guys are thinking the same because we spend most of the night talking quietly or just staring at the tv, constantly checking on Ever to make sure she's okay. One by one, we all slowly drift to sleep, exhausted from the journey here and the emotional toil of the day.

By the time I finally stop fighting my closing eyes, I've already tried to reassure myself a dozen times that I'll know if she needs me because she's lying on my chest, and if she moves, I'll wake up. I'm worried enough about her having another nightmare that I know I'll wake up.

*Ever*

When I wake up in the morning, I feel weirdly calm. I can't explain it. Last night, I felt like I was falling apart, and I would never be able to put any of my crumbling pieces back together again. They were all there though, surrounding me, comforting me, despite the horrific things I told them I did, and that calmed the raging storm of emotions inside me. I feel more like myself today, with no numbness clouding my emotions. Instead, I just feel raw and delicate.

I'm lying on Luc's chest, Jensen pressed up close behind me, and as soon as I move, Jensen starts nuzzling my neck, and Luc's fingers tighten around mine where they're resting on his chest. I really want to stay in the safety of this cuddle, but my bladder is screaming at me, and I can't ignore it for much longer, no matter how much I want to.

"I really need to pee," I announce, and my full bladder massively overshadows my relief at my voice still working.

Jensen and Luc chuckle, but Luc quickly scoots out from underneath me and gets out of the bed, turning to help me stand. Which I'm grateful for since my body does not want to cooperate with me right now.

"Slowly, Firecracker. You're healing." Luc warns me.

"Nope, need to pee more than I need to take it easy," I joke, smiling up at him as he helps me to the edge of the bed and then grabs my hands, slowly pulling me to stand.

Luc's eyes fill with emotions at my smile, "I've missed that smile."

I don't bother with words as I simply tap him on the chest and then shuffle walk to the bedroom, trying to avoid the rest of the guys that are spread out all over the floor. Thankfully, my body isn't as stiff now that I've got it moving, although I won't say no to painkillers if anyone offers me some. Once I'm done in the bathroom, I quickly make my way back out to the bedroom, and it's only once I'm out there, with all the guys staring at me somewhat cautiously, that I realise I didn't panic; maybe it was because I needed to pee, but I'd like to think that

because of my breakdown last night, I'm going to be able to handle things slightly better now.

"What?" I ask when the guys just stare at me, and then, wanting to relieve the tension in the room, I add, "did I forget my pants again?"

The laughter that consumes the room is slightly hysterical, filled with relief and an overreaction to my bad joke. Just like my crying stint last night was a release for me, I think this may be one for them.

"Come here," Cash mutters, gently pulling me towards him and settling me on his lap. I snuggle into him as he wraps his blanket around me.

"How're you feeling?" Rage asks me.

I consider his question, wanting to answer him honestly, "My body is sore and stiff, although the stiffness lessened slightly the more I moved. The rest of me just feels delicate and exposed, like all that cotton wool that was dampening my emotions, and my reactions to everything have been ripped away, and now I feel overly sensitive. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, it does, and I think it's understandable." Trick replies.

"What about your voice? You're speaking more now. How're you finding it?" Cash asks.

"It doesn't necessarily hurt, but it feels like I'm straining by the end of a sentence," I explain, my voice becoming raspy by the end of it and proving my point.

"That's to be expected. It might be a good idea to start carrying around a bottle of water. I think it will help to soothe the scratchiness." Cash suggests, and I nod. It can't hurt. I should probably drink more water than I do, anyway.

"Shit," Atlas suddenly exclaims, and we all turn to look at him. He's already getting his phone out and striding toward the door, "I forgot to call Jonah and get him to arrange a house for Peter and the others to stay in; I'm going to call him now and get dressed."



He's gone before anyone can reply to him.

"Right, I'm going to get breakfast started. I think we still have quite a bit left here that should be good, and I put a lot of it in the freezer. We will need to do a shop at some point today though," Rafe gets up as he talks.

He comes over to where I'm sitting in Cash's lap still and crouches down in front of me, kissing me softly and making my toes curl. I sigh dreamily, not even embarrassed that he has that effect on me. It's not like he's the only one that can do that to me so easily.

"I'm going to get changed too," I say and try to get off Cash. When it doesn't happen as smoothly as I'd like, he stands up with me and places me on the floor.

One by one, the others all go to get dressed until I'm left with just Trick. He wraps me in his arms, "I brought some clothes in here last night, so I can get changed here while you do. Is that okay?"

"Yeah," I reply, because why the hell wouldn't it be and then add, "I think I'm doing better, and I don't have to see you all the time, but I'm not sure how I would react if I were totally left on my own," my hands clench in his shirt, "sorry."

His fingers move under my chin as he gently tilts it up so his eyes can meet mine, "Don't ever apologise for something you need, Sweetheart. None of us wants you out of our sight either, and I don't think that's going to change any time soon."

I smile up at him, his words reassuring me. "Thank you."

"Anytime, now go get dressed," he orders, and I turn around to find something to wear, glad that I left some of my things here before we went to deal with Luc's dad. Before I can make two steps though, he gently smacks my butt.

I spin as quickly as my body will allow me and raise my eyebrow, my lips twisting into a teasing grin, "Don't smack it unless you're going to follow through on the promise."

He growls, reaching for me again and searing me with a spine-tingling kiss that leaves me begging for more by the

time he finally pulls back.

“As much as I want to have you underneath me, Sweetheart, I don’t think you’re up for that right now.”

I sigh heavily and pout, and reply, “I know you’re right; I just don’t like that you’re right.”

He chuckles, kisses my nose and then spins me around, gently nudging me toward my closet. I do as I’m told and quickly choose another comfy outfit because, like hell, am I wearing jeans. I pull on some super soft black leggings and an oversized maroon hoody and call it good. By the time I’m done, I can just start to hear the sounds of the guys making their way downstairs, and I follow Trick out of my door, noticing that he’s dressed comfy like I am.

My body seems to be coping with the whole moving thing slightly better today, and I don’t immediately need to sit down when we get downstairs. Which I’m thankful for since I’m never good at resting; I get bored and antsy too quickly. Not all of the guys are down here yet; Jensen, Rage and Atlas seem to be missing, most likely still getting ready. The rest of them are all doing their own thing in the front room, apart from Rafe, who is in the kitchen. I move up onto my tiptoes and kiss Trick on the cheek.

“I’m going to go and see if Rafe wants any help.”

“Good idea, he’ll like that.” Trick replies, holding me closer for a second before he lets me go again. I really fucking missed his calm and in-control presence.

I quietly make my way into the kitchen and then lean against the wall as I watch Rafe bustle around near the stove, getting everything ready. It looks like we’re about to have a feast. It’s one of my favourite things to do, to watch him when he’s so absorbed in doing something that he loves.

His smile is broad when he finally does spot me, and he immediately stops what he’s doing to come over and pick me up. My arms wrap around his neck as my legs do the same around his waist. I kiss him softly, running my hands through his hair; when I pull back, his eyes are bright.

“Hey, Big Guy, do you want some help?”

## Chapter Thirteen

His response is not what I was expecting as a single tear slips down his stubbled cheek. I reach out and gently rub it away, leaving my hand on his face.

“What’s wrong? I’m not that bad a cook,” I add, trying to lighten the mood and make him feel better.

It seems to work, as no more tears follow the first one.

“They’re happy tears, Baby.” Smiling softly, he adds, “I wasn’t sure if you’d ever ask me that again, and it’s one of my favourite things to do with you.”

“It’s one of mine too,” I agree, and then wriggle to get down, making him groan, “come on then, put me to work.”

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” he double-checks.

“If I need to sit down, I will,” I reassure him.

He watches me warily but finally agrees, “Do you want to make the pancakes?”

“Absolutely.”

As we work, we settle into the familiar routine, and although we very rarely speak, each of us too focused on our own tasks, the familiarity of it is a great comfort to me, and as my body starts to tire, I refuse to stop and break the moment, even though I probably should.

Turning to take the plate of pancakes over to the table, I spot Jensen leaning against the counter and watching us both. He was so quiet coming in here that I’m not even sure how long he’s been watching us, and I start to smile before realising that he’s gotten lost in his mind. I don’t think he’s even aware that I’ve spotted him. I know him well enough to know that he hasn’t been triggered, and he’s not in a panic attack. He’s just lost in his thoughts and staring into space.

I place the plate of pancakes down onto the side that I've just picked them up from, and then will my body to comply with my plan.

"Jensen, catch me!" I try to yell, but it comes out more of a rasp than anything. It does manage to get his attention though, and his eyes widen as I come hurtling toward him.

Okay, hurtling might be too strong of a word, I shuffle run, but I'm going to pretend that I'm hurtling toward him.

My jump is pretty pathetic, but he still catches me with ease and hoists me up. Before he can even get me properly situated, I've slammed my lips on his, biting his bottom lip and then soothing the sting with my tongue. My hands dive into his hair and tug sharply as he holds me as tight as he can without aggravating the bruises. Stupid bruises.

The rumble of a groan starts in his chest, and goosebumps prick my skin at the sound of it. The sound just does something to me that I can't explain other than the fact it turns me the fuck on. His hand wraps around the back of my neck, holding me to him with just the right amount of pressure. He deepens the kiss, his tongue moving with mine and making me moan as I try to get as close to him as possible. I can feel his smile against my lips, and the kiss slows from desperately needy to full of love.

"What was that for?" Jensen rests his head against mine as his voice comes out husky.

I shrug, "You looked like you needed a kiss."

"Always," he replies before kissing me once more and letting me back down on the floor. "Let's eat."

I'm surprised when I look at the table and see not only that all the food is laid out but also that the guys are sitting down and smirking at me. I was so absorbed in Jensen that I was utterly oblivious to everything else.

Whoops.

Sitting down between Cash and Riot, Cash hands me some painkillers while Riot pushes the glass of orange juice closer to me; I take both gratefully.

“Johan has managed to find a house for them in town. He keeps some readily available in case we have to call in any outside help anyway, so they’re going to be using one of them.” Atlas informs us as we eat.

“Peter just messaged me telling me they’re leaving. Will it be ready in time?” Trick asks.

“Yeah, it’s all good to go. I’ll message him the directions to Jonah’s office and his number so they can let him know when they’ll be arriving.” Atlas replies.

I pause with my fork halfway to my mouth as something occurs to me, “Hang on, Elijah’s with Peter, right?”

I know he is. I saw him, but selfishly I wasn’t thinking about anything else but being numb and my guys whenever he was around.

“Yeah, but I think we’ll let him explain that one.” Trick grins.

I pout, but I know that Peter is going to want to tell me all about it himself, “Fine. I bet it’s one hell of a story, and he’ll tell it better anyway.”

I finish my sentence by sticking my tongue out at Trick, which makes his lips tick up in a smirk.

“What’s the plan for today, then?” Luc asks.

“I need to go down into town to grab some more stuff. The things we’ve got won’t last us for very long.” Rafe replies.

“It might be a good idea to pick some stuff up for Peter and the others too and drop it down at the house,” Trick suggests.

“I’ll message Jonah and get him to give me the address.” Already tapping away on his phone, Atlas replies. “He said he’ll be at the bar at lunch, so we can see him if we stop by there.”

“I’ll come with you guys too, if that’s alright?” Luc asks.

Rafe shrugs, “Yeah, of course. Does anyone else want to come?”

“Sure, I will,” Jensen adds, stuffing his face with more eggs.

“What about you, Ever? What would you like to do today?” Riot asks me.

“Honestly, I would love some of Rafe’s hot chocolate and to just veg out in front of the TV today. I’m not quite ready to go down into town, I think that might put me too much on edge, and I don’t think my body will let me do much else just yet, although it’s feeling much better.”

“That sounds perfect to me. I can’t be bothered to get dressed properly and deal with people today,” Rage agrees.

“I can make hot chocolates before we go,” Rafe offers.

“Thank you,” I reply happily.

## *Atlas*

After Rafe makes Ever and the guys who are staying their hot chocolates, Luc, Jensen and I all follow him out to the SUV, it’ll be easier to get down the track in it, and we need plenty of space for groceries. Even when we do small shops that will only last us a few days, I’m quickly learning that there’s still a huge amount of food thanks to the number of people we’ve got to feed and that a fair few of us like to snack continuously as well. Looking over the list Rafe hands me as we drive down to the town, this doesn’t look like a small shop at all, and I start to question how wise it was to come with him.

I could’ve just taken my bike and picked the key up from Jonah and then met the others there.

“Don’t even think about escaping,” Jensen says from behind me, amusement in his voice as he correctly guesses what I was thinking.

“How the fuck did you know that?” turning in my seat to face him, I ask.

“You had that look,” Jensen shrugs.

“Dude, he was facing forward.” Luc points out.

Jensen just shrugs, not willing to go into more detail at all.

“I’m going to need all of you. We’re going to need at least two carts. Not only do I want to get enough food for a few weeks, but we need stuff like laundry detergent and cleaning shit.” Rafe adds.

“I hadn’t even thought about shit like that,” Luc admits.

“If we ever end up staying here permanently,” Rafe starts, and I interrupt him.

“I’m fairly certain that’s what Trick is hoping will happen, that we can make this our home base.”

“Yeah, I thought so too.” Luc adds, looking excited by the idea, “I love it here. I wouldn’t mind at all.”

“It’s extremely safe as well since Atlas owns most of the town.” Jensen points out.

“Agreed,” Rafe then continues, “as I was saying though if that does happen, we’re going to have to make a few adjustments to the house. It’s great for the short term, but I’m going to need a proper pantry with extra freezers, and the utility is going to need to be bigger, or we’re never going to keep up on the washing. There’s nine of us.”

“That should be easy enough. There’s a contractor in town that I trust. I’ve used him before. We’d have to talk to everyone about the design and things like that. Also, we’ll need to know if anyone else has any suggestions on how to make it work as a permanent home.” I reply.

“Does anyone else hope it becomes our home sooner rather than later?” Jensen asks.

“Fuck yes,” Luc replies. “We’ve been through so much shit, and I don’t know about you guys, but this is where I feel like I’m home.”

“Same,” Rafe replies as he parks the car. “We’re here. Grab a couple of carts. We need to get this done as quickly as



possible, so we can get to the bar in time to meet Jonah. It'll take Peter a few hours to get here anyway."

There's no point in trying to start a conversation when Rafe is in this mood. He's solely focused on feeding us all and making sure we have everything that we could ever need; he's a mother hen, and I love the fucker for it. He doesn't just make sure that we, as a collective, have things that we need but also individually too. He remembers it all, and my point is proven when he walks down the feminine hygiene aisle and picks up the products we all know that Ever likes to use. He then grabs the individual body washes and shampoos that we all prefer to use.

"We're lucky to have you, man," I mutter, slapping him on the shoulder, he looks at me confused, so I explain, "if we were all left to do our own shopping, we'd forget half the stuff we need. I just wanted you to know that I appreciate what you do for us."

His cheeks tinge slightly pink as he looks away in embarrassment and gruffly replies, "Thanks."

I chuckle but don't push it any further since I see Luc and Jensen turn down the aisle, their cart loaded up with snacks, "Point made."

He bursts out laughing, "Yeah, they've proved your point."

"I want to get Ever a water bottle, so she can always have it on her," Luc says, not bothering to ask what we're laughing about.

"Good idea. I think they're down this way," Rafe replies, leading us to a different section of the store.

The shopping trip takes a lot longer than I thought it would, and we have to put the back two seats down in order to fit everything in the trunk.

"We're going to have to be quick getting the key from Jonah and getting this to Peter's place, or some of this stuff is going to spoil," Rafe mutters as we climb back in, and he starts the short drive to the bar. "I should've thought about that, and we should've gone to the bar first."

“We’ll be quick,” I reassure him.

When we get to the bar, we all climb out and make our way through the lot to the door.

“Hey guys,” Dom greets, “how’re you?”

“We’re all good,” I reply and then turn to greet the others, who are also here, “Guys, this is Jonah, Lucien, Creed, Ezra and, of course, you know Dom and Lyric.”

“Nice to meet you all officially. Any chance we can call you Dominic? It’s getting confusing in conversations, what with Elena’s partner, who is also called Dom.” Jensen asks bluntly.

Dom chuckles, “Sure. If only this were a TV show or a book, right? Then no one would have the same name, as unrealistic as that is.”

I chuckle, “So, any updates?”

“Nah, man, everything is good here. I assume that you’ve got Ever back?” Jonah asks.

“Yeah, she went through hell,” Luc replies.

“Blake’s a sadistic fucker. I’m not surprised.” Dominic replies.

“Was,” I add.

“What?” Creed asks.

“He was sadistic, Ever killed him.” Jensen grins proudly.

“Fuck yes.” Lyric grins, as she bounces excitedly in her seat.

“What does that mean for you now? Are you still taking over the business now your father and brother are out of the picture?” Lucien asks.

“I don’t know. We’re not going to know anything until I get an update from Alaric about what he’s uncovered at Blake’s base of operations,” I reply.

“Fair enough,” Creed replies nonchalantly. He knows that I’ll fill them in when I have any information.

“Here’s the key to Peter’s place.” Jonah hands me the key and then adds, “it’s the farmhouse, right at the bottom of your track and down the road on the left. I’ve kept it empty since we took over since it’s just a bit too close to your place. I figured you wouldn’t mind having Peter and the others there, though.”

“Thanks man, that’s perfect. Does it need sorting out before they get here?” Rafe asks.

“Nah, I’ve had people in once a month, the same guy that looks after yours. It should be good to go.” Jonah replies.

“Great, thanks guys. We’re going to head off; we’ve got groceries in the car, and things are going to spoil soon. As soon as Ever is up to it, we’ll have to get together.” I offer.

“Sounds good, but there’s no rush. We’ve all been through shit that takes some time to heal from; We’re not going anywhere.” Lyric replies, this time and for once serious.

If any of them are going to understand the kind of shit that Ever has been through, it would be her. She hasn’t had an easy life.

Saying a final goodbye, we all load back up into the SUV and head to the farmhouse that I only vaguely remember seeing once before. The road leading to it is literally only a few metres away from the road leading up to our place and is relatively overgrown, thanks to how often it gets used. When we get to the farmhouse, it’s evident that it’s been taken care of in the years that it hasn’t actually been lived in; it’s large enough for the whole team, with wood siding and surrounded by a large expanse of grass that has been cut recently.

“This is nice,” Jensen comments, as we get out and move to the back of the SUV to grab the bags that are for Peter and the others.

“Yeah, I looked at buying this one too, but it’s not big enough for all of us,” I reply.

“Let’s get this shit put away and then get back home. I’m worried that things are going to spoil.” Rafe orders, striding up

the porch steps and then pausing by the door when he realises that I have the key.

I grin as I open the door, and we walk down the hallway with the stairs on our right and straight into the kitchen at the back of the house. Although the house is big enough for Peter and Elijah's team, the downstairs isn't as open plan as our place. It's also a bit too close to the rest of the town for my liking. Peter will probably love the convenience of it, but I know the guys, and I prefer a bit more space and privacy.

"How did I have no idea that this was here in all the years that we've been coming to the cabin?" Jensen asks.

"I didn't know either," Luc tries to comfort him as he puts some of the food into the fridge.

"That's the beauty of the place. If you don't know it's here, you won't find it." I shrug.

"Can we get here from our property without using the road?" Rafe asks curiously.

"I don't know, an elderly couple was living here when we first brought the cabin, and by the time they died, I'd already gotten Jonah into the realtor's office, and he's kept it empty ever since," I reply with a frown, I really should know these things.

"Maybe that's something we can check out when Ever is up to it?" Luc suggests.

"Yeah, that's a good idea. We can take the four-wheelers out and explore down this way. I think we've only ever explored up the mountain, not down this way." Jensen agrees, an excited gleam in his eye.

"Sounds good to me. Do we own this whole property?" Rafe asks, "I can never remember how much of the land around the cabin is actually ours."

Jensen deals with things like investments, and he helped with the sale of the house, so he answers, "We've got about one hundred and fifty hectares, so a huge amount of land, from what I can remember though it doesn't stretch this far down."

“So if staying here permanently becomes a real option. We could buy this place too and own everything on this side of the mountain?” Rafe asks.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Jensen replies.

“That’s definitely something that we should bring up when that conversation happens. I think it’s pretty much a foregone conclusion that we’ll be living here. It’s just when. We’ve still got school and shit.” I reply.

“Urgh, I don’t want to go back there. I just can’t be bothered.” Jensen groans, putting the last thing away and pulling out his phone, “I’ve told Peter we’ll hide the key under the mat and give him directions.”

“Good idea. Is that everything out of the SUV?” Rafe checks.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure it is. But if we’ve missed something, we can always bring it back down. It’s not like it’s far.” I point out, striding to the door and ready to get back to Ever. The others all follow, and I lock up behind me, looking forward to snuggling on the couch and chilling out for the rest of the day; after the groceries have been put away, of course, I know there’s no way I’m getting out of that one.

# Chapter Fourteen

## *Ever*

For the last two days, we've done nothing but chill out and enjoy each other's company which has been great, but I'm getting antsy now. My body is a lot better than it was and healing nicely, which means I'm fed up with being stuck inside.

"Can we go out?" I ask, suddenly interrupting the conversation the others were having and making them stare at me.

"To town?" Jensen asks carefully.

"No, just outside. I feel like we've been inside for weeks." I reply dramatically. "Peter's had time to settle in now. Can we go and see him? I want to see this farmhouse you guys told me about too."

Jensen's eyes suddenly light up with excitement, "Oh, I know. Why don't we take the four-wheelers and see if we can find a track or path leading toward the farmhouse?"

"Do you think you'd be up for that?" Trick asks me, and I nod.

"Definitely, that sounds awesome. I just want to get out of the house for a bit."

"Promise to take it easy then, and if you start hurting, you tell us, and we can turn back and go and see Peter in the SUV," Rage asks me, raising his eyebrow.

"Yep, I can do that." I'm practically bouncing in my seat at the prospect of getting out of the house. "Can we go now?"

Amused smiles meet my question.

"Sure, let me just ring Pete and let him know what we're planning," Rafe replies for everybody and pulls his phone out, dialling.

I get up, much easier than I was moving even just a few days ago, and look down at my outfit, black leggings again and a dark grey hoody that's big enough that I think it might be one of the guys. No one has mentioned that I'm wearing their hoody and asked for it back, so I'm wearing it. Peter won't give a shit what I'm wearing anyway.

I hear a weird noise coming from the other side of the room, immediately chuckling when I look over to see Rafe holding the phone away from his ear and wiggling his finger in it while he winces.

"Peter is just a tiny bit excited that you're feeling up to coming down to see him and was planning to invade today anyway because, in his words, he needs his bestie time," Rafe explains, and then puts the phone on speaker so we can all hear Peter still squealing excitedly.

My heart soars. I really have missed him. It's been amazing to spend time with just the guys, but Peter has a point. I need my bestie, plus I still don't know what the hell is going on with the whole Elijah thing.

Finally, Peter calms down enough to say, "I'll make sure everyone else is occupied and stays out of the way."

"You don't have to do that," I reply.

"Are you kidding? I want to talk to my best friend. I don't want them listening in," he replies without missing a beat.

"Alright, Pete, hopefully, we'll see you in a bit," Rafe replies and then hangs up.

"Everyone, go and get ready and meet in the garage." Trick orders.

It's still cold enough that I'm going to need a coat if I'm riding on the four-wheelers, so I grab that and pull my boots on at the same time before making my way to the garage.

"Are you feeling well enough to drive one by yourself?" Trick asks me seriously, and I nod.

Not only are the painkillers kicking in, but I think I would've been able to handle it without them anyway. I'm

feeling so much better, thank fuck. Also, since this is an exploratory mission, we aren't exactly going to be going super fast anyway, so I should be fine.

It's not long before we're all ready to go, and Atlas takes the lead, heading in the opposite direction to the one I'm used to going when we head out. We head straight into the woods that surround the property, picking our way carefully through the undergrowth. I don't think anyone really has a plan of where we're going, just the vague direction of going down to Peter's place.

We've been travelling for long enough now that I'm starting to think that we're absolutely going to get lost if we're not already when Rage calls out over the sound of the engines.

"What's that?" He stands up in his seat so he can see better.

We all slow down so that we can see what he's pointing at, and I frown when I can't see anything since I'm in the middle of them and too short to see anything, even if I do stand up.

"It could be a track. It hasn't been used in a long time, but it does slope down and zig-zag, so the incline is not too steep," Rafe says, having gotten off his vehicle to go and have a closer look.

"Well, we haven't got anything left to lose. Let's check it out," Jensen grins, already heading down it and forcing us to follow or lose him.

"For fuck sake, Jensen!" Luc yells after him, "wait for the rest of us!"

To be fair to him, he does slow down but not by much, and we all take off after him. I honestly couldn't wipe the smile off my face if I wanted to. I feel so free and light; it's incredible. The contrast between now and when I had the crying meltdown is enormous, and I honestly think that it's because of being here, at the place I consider home, surrounded by my men and knowing that I am incredibly safe here.

The track that we've found is so overgrown that even Jensen has to slow down or risk a low-hanging branch to the face. It's bumpy as hell, and we have to dodge branches and



all sorts of shit. I'm about to suggest that we turn back, especially since we don't actually know whether this is the right path when the track starts to level out, and I see what could be considered as an exit up ahead. Jensen obviously thinks the same and heads straight for it with no caution at all.

When I follow the guys through to the other side, I find myself in a large field, and the grass is so long that I can only just see over the top of it when I'm sitting down. As I stand up to have a better look at the surroundings, I spot a large rundown barn at the far edge of the field, and I make a note to ask the guys if we can explore it on the way back. I love exploring old, abandoned places, or at least I like watching videos of people doing it, and I'd love to explore one myself.

"I think that's Peter's place across the field," Cash says as he points in the opposite direction to the barn.

I can about make out a tiny dot in the distance, and since I haven't ever seen Peter's place before, I can't confirm whether it is his house or not. I want to catch up with Peter more than I want to explore a dodgy-looking barn.

Progress is slow across the field; we can't see through the overgrown grass well enough to ensure that we aren't going to hit rocks or abandoned machinery. Finally, we get to the edge of what must be the farmhouse property. It's a hell of a lot better looked after than the rest of the land, and we open the gate to let ourselves into what is essentially a vast backyard. The farmhouse itself is cute, and there's a massive wrap-around porch on the back, with a painted white railing and Peter sitting on the steps.

He jumps up when we approach, his grin huge and his outfit so completely him that it makes me smile. He's teamed forest green skinny jeans with a dark purple button-up shirt and matching accessories; he somehow makes it work.

"Hey guys," Peter greets, "the others are inside, and yes, I'm telling you so that I can get rid of you and have Ever all to myself."

His bluntness causes a shocked laugh to bubble out of me, and Peter's eyes become watery. I can only imagine how

different I seem to him since the last time that he saw me, and I chastise myself for not doing this sooner.

“Alright Pete, we won’t interrupt,” Jensen chuckles and then adds with a mischievous grin, “I need to interrogate Elijah anyway.”

“I seriously hope you mean in the boyfriend way and not in your preferred method of interrogation,” Rage asks with a raised eyebrow as Peter stares at them with wide eyes as if he’s confused about what the hell is happening.

Jensen shrugs, his smile broad as he starts to make his way up the steps, “I guess that depends on what his answers are.”

“Don’t pretend we’re not all going to be trying to figure him out,” Trick says to Rage.

“He has a point we’ve got to make sure he’s good enough for Pete and knows that he’s got a lot of making up to do after what he did the first time,” Cash adds.

“Or he’s going to be dealing with us,” Atlas’s smile is sharp.

“I would not like to be him right now,” Riot comments as he follows the others inside.

“Nope, me neither. I’m kind of looking forward to it though,” Rafe teases, winking at Peter.

“Me too. That’s a surefire way to see how serious he is about Peter, having him go through all of us to get to him,” Luc adds, the last of the guys to enter the back of the house, and the door slams closed behind him.

Peter’s wide eyes meet mine, a thread of panic making his brow furrow, “Do I need to be concerned about that?”

I can’t hold back my smile any longer as I climb up the steps and take a seat patting the space next to me for Peter; he hesitates as he looks back toward the door as if wondering whether he should go in and rescue Elijah before he finally sits.

“They’re just looking out for you because you’re family. They won’t do anything unless he deserves it,” I reply,

answering his previous question.

He nods and relaxes as he stops staring at the door, “That’s kind of sweet actually, that they’re looking out for me like that. So how’re you doing, really?”

“Of course they are; you’re family. Better, a lot better. I haven’t got the numbness that I was hiding behind, so things still feel really raw sometimes and like they’re too much. The nightmares are pretty horrific too, but I’m doing okay, better than I thought I would be, although that could be because I haven’t left the house. I have no idea how I’m going to react surrounded by the general public, And I can’t hide from that forever and just become a shut-in. Eventually, I’m going to have to bite the bullet and face it. Having said that, people suck, so it wouldn’t be that bad,” I stop talking as Peter’s hand lands on my arm.

“Sweet, you’re rambling.” He comments gently, his eyes full of sympathy that I’d hate if it came from anyone else.

“Sorry, I guess the short of it is, I’m doing good, but that in itself is making me worry because I have no idea how I’m going to handle anything out of this little bubble of safety.”

“That makes sense, and to be honest, you’re doing so fucking well. Give yourself credit. If you struggle when you are out in the big wide world, that’s okay; I can guarantee you won’t be out there alone. At least one of the guys will be with you. I know for a fact that Jynx told you not to expect too much, and it’s still early days, one day at a time, Ever. That’s all you’ve got to do, and when you start to feel like you’re ready to try to be around people, strangers, then you start small, don’t do what you usually do and jump in head first.” His voice is full of conviction and is already making me feel better.

“Like how?” I ask.

“Well, you know that this town is stupidly fucking safe thanks to Atlas, so you go with the guys to get coffee or something. Some of them wait in the car with you while the others go in to grab the order. If you’re feeling up to it, you go in too. It’s all about little steps.”

I eye him suspiciously, “That actually sounds pretty manageable, but how did you become an expert on dealing with trauma?”

He blushes slightly and looks away from my probing gaze, “I may have looked up the best ways to help someone with trauma, and I ordered a few books too.”

I gently bump my shoulder against his, “Thank you, that’s really sweet.”

“Anything for my bestie.” He smiles, the pink in his cheeks fading.

“So, enough about me. What the hell is Elijah doing here and with Noel’s team, and just what the fuck?” I ask, the questions exploding out of me.

“Yeah, you can imagine my shock when he showed up with Noel’s team. Apparently, that’s why he ended it with me because he wanted to keep me out of this dangerous life that he found himself in,” Peter stares out over the land as he talks.

“Okay, so a kind of noble reason then, except he didn’t end it with you, he just ghosted you, and that’s fucking shitty.”

“That’s my problem. It would’ve been so easy for him just to tell me that he was finding the long-distance thing too difficult, and he thought we should end it, but he didn’t,” Peter mutters.

“What’s his excuse for why he didn’t end it?” I ask.

“That he couldn’t bring himself to do it.”

“Well, that’s a fucking shitty excuse.” My frown is unmistakable, and Peter just nods in reply. I can tell that this is really bothering him, that he doesn’t know how to handle it, and everyone knows that he still loves him. “Has he apologised?”

“Repeatedly,” Peter confirms, turning to look at me.

“The way I see it, that was a good few years ago. He was dealing with what felt like an impossible situation, he didn’t want to lose you but didn’t want you in danger either, and he’s

apologised for how he did handle it. I know you love him, so why don't you start fresh and see how it goes?"

He contemplates my words for a bit before nodding, "Yeah, I think I might do that. You can't go forward if you're always looking back."

After that, the conversation turns to lighter topics where we catch up, and he tells me all about Noel's team. I let him do most of the talking as I take sips from the new water bottle the guys brought me when they went into town. I talked enough at the beginning of the conversation that my voice turned raspy. When he mentions Blackbreak, I frown as something occurs to me.

"Hang on, how are we not at school right now? We only had a day or so to get back after we were done with Luc's dad?" Peter stares at me incredulously, and I shrug, "What? That's hardly been on the top of my list of concerns."

"Fair enough. You know Alaric knows the Principal?" I nod, "well, apparently he knows him well enough that he called in a favour and explained what was going on. He excused us all."

"Oh, okay, that makes sense. Do you have any idea when we have to go back? What about Noel and the team? They're similar ages to us, right?"

"They work for D, so they did everything online and have already got their GED, and I don't know when we have to go back. Why don't we go and ask the guys and see if they know?"

I nod, and we make our way inside. Everyone is sitting around in the lounge and talking, seeming to get on great, which is a relief. It occurs to me that although this is the first time I'm properly meeting them without the numbness clouding my mind, the guys already know these guys quite well, especially since they've fought alongside each other. I immediately make my way over to Luc and plop myself on his lap; he wraps his arms around my waist and holds me close as Peter makes the introductions between me and the others. When he's done, he reiterates my question to the guys.

“We’re not actually sure at the moment. We’re waiting for the update from Alaric,” Trick answers.

“We were there for my protection though, right? So do we even still have to attend?”

“Well, we do if we want to graduate, but I think it’ll be a choice. You’re safe from Blake now, and Liam’s not a threat to you,” Atlas replies.

“Technically, we could go back to our high school if you wanted,” Rafe adds.

I don’t really know how I feel about that. The thought of going back to school to be surrounded by kids that are entirely carefree and unaware of how dark the world really is isn’t something I want to do.

“What happened with Liam?” I ask, “did he contact you while I was gone?”

“No, we didn’t hear anything from him. We haven’t since he contacted us at Peter’s masked ball. So we’re assuming he’s still in hiding with Amelia and most likely won’t remerge or contact us if he wants to stay hidden. Blake may be gone, but there are still people who are loyal to him that will take Liam out. Not only that, but he made a lot of enemies.” Rage replies.

“Blake was looking for him,” I add, my mind trying to reject the memories. “There’s every chance that he already found them both. He had a lot of people at his disposal.”

Trick watches me cautiously, “How do you feel about that if it’s true? She was your mother.”

I pause, aware that there’s another team in here that I don’t know that well. Peter trusts them though, and that’s enough for me.

“Do you want us to go?” the guy that Peter introduced as Callan asks, and I shake my head.

“No, it’s alright.” I reply, “in all honesty, I should probably care more, but she abandoned me with an abusive psychopath, and I don’t really know her. I’d rather hold onto the memories

of the good mom I had when I was a kid than tarnish it with anything else.”

The guys nod, watching me closely for any signs that I’m masking how I really feel.

“I can understand that,” Cedric interjects, and I turn to face him, surprised that someone would be able to relate, “my mom did the same sort of thing, took off and left me with an abusive fucker. So I understand the desire not to have anything to do with your mother.”

I nod and offer him an understanding smile.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Right, it’s been great to catch up, guys, but it’s starting to look like it’s going to rain, and I don’t want to get caught out in it,” Trick says, standing up and effectively changing the subject.

“I’ll walk you guys out,” Peter says, getting up from where he’s sitting next to Elijah.

Elijah has periodically watched him the entire time we’ve been talking, and as soon as he sat down, he grabbed his hand and held on tight. The love he feels for Peter is as evident as the love Peter feels for him, and because of that alone, I think that they’re going to be able to make it work.

“Bye, guys,” I say as I follow everyone else out of the room.

When we get to the back porch and our four-wheelers, I pause while Peter says goodbye to the guys. When they move to get back on them, I turn to Pete.

“Do you want to come up for a bit?”

“No, it’s okay. I can see that you’re starting to tire, and I think that you just need to enjoy your guys. Besides, I’ve got some catching up to do,” he winks, with a decidedly suggestive smile, before he becomes serious again and starts to look a little insecure, “just promise me you guys won’t kick me out of the team?”

My mouth pops open in shock, “Never. What the hell made you even consider that?”

“I’m spending a lot of time with Elijah and the guys,” he replies like that’s an adequate reason to doubt his place among us.

“You fucking doughnut,” I reply, and his eyes snap to me, looking vaguely amused. “You don’t have to spend every second with us to be in the team, we’ll always need you, and



regardless of whether you decide to move in permanently with Elijah one day, it will not change anything, and let's be honest, I don't think you really want to live with me and the guys on a permanent basis anyway," he shakes his head rapidly. I grin, "well, there you go. Are you thinking of switching teams?"

He stares at me silently for a second before my words sink in, and we both burst out laughing. "That came out wrong."

"I'm definitely not switching teams. I love dick too much," he wiggles his eyebrows suggestively, "seriously though, working with you guys is not just a job. You're my family, and I'm never giving that up. Plus, I couldn't work with Elijah; we'd drive each other fucking insane."

"Well, at least I know it's not just me that gets insecure over things that aren't even issues to begin with," I reply, raising my eyebrow and making him chuckle.

"Yeah, it seems a bit ridiculous now that I've actually said it all out loud."

"It's not ridiculous. Sometimes it's nice to get that little bit of reassurance. I get it." I shrug.

"And that is why you're my bestie," he pulls me in for a gentle hug and then turns me toward the steps. "Go home before it rains. I am not being blamed for you catching a cold on top of everything else."

I salute him and make my way down the steps getting back on my four-wheeler.

"Everything okay?" Riot asks.

"Yeah, he just had an insecure moment," I reply. "I know we want to get back quickly, but can we please check out the barn on the way past?"

"I'm definitely up for that!" Rage replies.

"Just quickly though, and if it looks like it's going to collapse, we aren't going in, Jensen." Trick replies, eyes on Jensen, who just grins sheepishly.

"Fine," he replies, rolling his eyes like it's so inconvenient that Trick wants to keep him safe.

Finally, after picking our way slowly across the field, we arrive at the barn. Its paint is faded, and a few boards are missing near the base, but other than that, it seems to be in reasonably good condition. When we approach the doors, there's no lock or chain on them, so it's relatively easy to open, although the sound the doors make signifies it hasn't been opened for a while.

"This is pretty cool," Luc says as we enter. "I wonder if any of this old equipment works?"

"I doubt it. It must have all been left here after the elderly couple died, and the family members didn't bother to clear it out." Atlas replies.

"I reckon I could get some of this stuff working again," Rage says, inspecting an old rust-red tractor.

"Why?" Jensen asks.

"Mainly curiosity to see if I can," Rage replies with a grin.

"I'd be interested in helping," Cash replies, walking over to Rage to inspect the old thing that looks like it will never run again.

The inside of the barn is vast, with a lot of old equipment, tools, feed bags and all the usual things you'd expect to find on a farm. It also has another level that I'm assuming is store hay and stuff like that. As much as I want to explore it, the ladder looks like it will collapse if you look at it wrong, so I quickly change my mind.

However, Luc's curiosity seems to have gotten the best of him, and he starts to make his way up, not using the ladder but instead the much sturdier-looking walls. I have no idea how he manages it, using handholds that don't seem to exist from my point of view down here, but it's not long until he's up on the second level and disappears from view as he checks it out.

"How're you feeling?" Riot asks as he wraps his arm around my shoulder, and I lean on him heavily.

"I'm starting to get tired now, and I think the painkillers are wearing off," I reply honestly.

Before he can comment, I feel something brush against my leg, and I freeze, trying my best not to freak out and imagining giant spiders and all sorts of things. Riot senses me tense and looks down at me with concern as I force myself to look at my legs, where something is still rubbing up against them.

“Aww,” all the fear immediately drains from my body as I plop my ass on the floor and start stroking the adorable scruffy black cat that scared the shit out of me.

“Where’d she come from?” Riot asks, crouching down next to me.

I gently scratch behind her ears and grin at her purr, which sounds like it could be coming from one of the old vehicles in the barn; it’s that loud. She’s super friendly and even hops up on my lap, rubbing herself all over me and nudging my hand for more pets.

“She’s a girl?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure,” Riot replies.

“She must be living in here. She’s quite skinny; bless her.” I reply, “you’re so pretty though. Look at those beautiful big blue eyes.”

“She doesn’t look very old,” Atlas says, coming over and stroking her.

“There might be more in here,” Trick comments, smiling down at me and then turning around to look at the loft area, “Luc!”

Luc’s head appears over the side of the platform, “Yeah?”

“Are there any more cats up there?”

“More?”

Trick moves out of the way and tips his head in my direction, where I’ve now got the cat curled up against my chest as she purrs and gives me cat smiles.

“Ohhh. No, there’s nothing up here but straw and junk.”

“I’ve checked around the rest of the barn quite, and I haven’t seen any,” Rafe adds, “but then again, I didn’t see her.

I'll have another check."

"We can't leave her here," I say.

"You want to take her back home?" Jensen asks, wandering over and crouching in front of me so that he can look into my eyes.

I nod. I don't want her to get hurt out here; it's a miracle she's lasted this long, and she's skinny and clearly needs a good meal in her, not to mention that she needs love.

"Okay, let's take her home, then," Jensen replies, as easy as that.

"Jensen, I don't think," Trick starts, and he shoots him a warning look.

"She's coming home with us. We can't abandon her. We don't do that," Jensen replies firmly, and Trick's eyes flash with understanding.

"Okay, you're right. We can't leave her, but what about when we go back to school?" Trick asks, thinking practically.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," I reply. Maybe, Lyric's team will look after her or something.

"How're you going to get her back up to the house on the four-wheeler?" Rage asks curiously, having finally wandered over from looking at the tractor. I'd be willing to bet that he's going to be back down here fixing it up as soon as he can.

"Erm," I eloquently reply, because actually, I hadn't gotten that far into my thought process.

"Maybe there's something in here that we can use to take her back up safely?" Rafe suggests, gazing around at the piles of junk. "I didn't find any more cats; she's the only one that's been living in here."

"Or we could just bring the car back down and get her that way?" Luc suggests having made his way down from the loft.

While they're talking and I'm trying to figure out how to get to the house safely with her and mentally make a list of everything we're going to need for her, she climbs up onto my

shoulder and starts sniffing around, nudging the hood on my sweater. I reach back with my hands and open it up for her so she can see. She immediately climbs inside and settles down the entire time, purring like the tractor. She's so tiny that the hood completely covers her, and I can barely feel her weight. It's got strings, so you can pull them tight, and I tighten them enough that she won't be able to fall out but can get out if she wants to. The last thing I need is to have a cat freaking out on my back.

"Well, she looks pretty safe where she is now," Rage mutters, his eyes soft as they watch me.

"Huh? Where'd she go?" Jensen asks. I slowly get up off the floor and then turn around, showing him my hood. He grins as he walks over to me and peeks inside; I'm guessing he's stroking her because her purr just got impossibly louder.

"Do you think she'd be okay in there?" Trick asks me.

I shrug, "We'll be going pretty slow anyway, and she's fast asleep, I think. I can feel her purring."

"Alright then, let's get back. Not only am I hungry, but it still looks like it's going to rain out there, and the winds picked up. I don't know much about cats, but I do know they aren't that fond of rain." Atty suggests.

It's a unanimous decision to leave, and I step outside of the barn cautiously since the wind has really picked up now, and I'm worried it's going to freak the cat out. I shouldn't have worried; she doesn't even stir. The ride up to the house is done extremely cautiously on my part despite the fact that the cat hasn't done anything but purr the entire way back home.

As soon as we park the vehicles back in the garage, thunder booms, lightning flashes and the rain that was merely threatening a few seconds ago starts to fall in sheets. Still, the cat stays purring in my hood.

"I'm making hot chocolates and sandwiches for a late lunch, and I'm making stew for dinner," Rafe announces as he looks out of the garage doors before they shut and shivers.

"Do you want some help?" I ask.

“No, it’s okay. You need to rest. I noticed you wincing and moving a bit more carefully. It’s all fairly simple to do anyway. Plus, you’ve got to get your cat settled.”

“I’d argue, but you’re right,” I reply, wrapping my arm around his waist as we walk back down the long hallway to the main part of the house.

“I’ll help, man,” Rage offers, and Rafe nods gratefully.

While they head off to the kitchen, I head straight for the couch, sitting down and loosening the strings on the hood. Surprisingly the cat slowly crawls out and down onto my lap. She looks around at everything before curling up in a ball on my legs and promptly falling back to sleep.

“She has to be the most unbothered cat I have ever come across,” Atlas observes, shaking his head as he lights the fire. “What are you going to call her?”

“Runa,” I reply. I always loved that name and said that if I ever got a pet one day, that’s what I’d call it.

“Nice. As soon as the weather clears up a bit, I’ll go down and get her some stuff.” Luc offers, sitting down next to me.

“I’m cooking her some chicken now in case we can’t get down there today,” Rafe calls from the kitchen.

“I have a feeling she’s going to be one incredibly spoiled cat.” Trick’s smile is indulgent as he watches me stroke her.

As I open my mouth to reply that, of course, she is going to be spoiled, Atlas’s phone starts to ring, and he cuts me off, “Guys, Alaric’s calling. I’m guessing it’s an update.”

He answers the phone and puts it on speaker as everyone else comes in and takes seats around the room so that they can hear.

“Hey guys, how’re you all doing? How’s Ever?” Alaric asks.

“I’m good, thank you,” I reply, “how’s everything going back there?”

“That’s why I’m calling. Atlas, I know the plan was for you to take over Liam’s business, which Blake actually took over, but not only did your raid on Blake’s base of operations take out a lot of the major players, forcing the rest to scatter, but he kept everything there. He was so confident in the safety of it that all the information on his business, employees, everything, was there..”

“You’re fucking kidding me, seriously?” Rage asks incredulously.

“Yeah, once again, his ego has become his downfall. Well, the downfall of his empire. But as I was saying, because of all of this, we don’t need you to take it down from the inside out. Having said that, thanks to you and your team’s proven success; you are probably going to get called on to go after the stragglers at some point. The big boss is aware of what happened, and you will have time to rest and time for Ever to heal before you are given another job.”

His voice becomes tense when he mentions the big boss, and I can’t help but feel like there is something that he’s not telling us. I frown.

“That’s actually a relief,” Atlas replies, “working fully in that world would be more dangerous than just doing the jobs, and I don’t want to risk my family.”

“I had a feeling you would feel that way,” Alaric replies, completely unsurprised. “Ever, I’ve gotten confirmation that you can just write your statement for everything to do with your father and his business dealings. We’ve now got confirmation that it was never them that were a threat to you. It was Blake the whole time. He took an interest in you when he followed Liam on one of his check-ins. It was just a bonus that taking you affected Atlas. He had always planned to have you working for him.”

“Well fuck.” I reply, my mind reeling at the implications of my father hadn’t died when he did, and I hadn’t come back home to the guys. I could’ve ended up in Blake’s clutches with no backup. “But also, thank you, I really didn’t fancy sitting in

a courtroom. It's easier to write everything down anyway. When do you need it by?"

"As soon as you can, so we can get that over and done with."

"Okay."

"So what does all this mean then? Are our parents still being protected, and what about Blackbreak?" Cash asks, leaning forward in his chair.

"I'm keeping the surveillance on your parents for the moment, just in case those of Blake's men that have escaped decide to go after them. It's incredibly unlikely though just a precaution on my part. Luc, your mom, has fled the country. She's somewhere in the Caribbean."

I look to Luc to see if he's okay, but he just shrugs, threading his fingers through mine and mutters I'm fine, and he really does seem to mean that, which instantly makes me relax and listen to Alaric again.

"What about Blackbreak? When do we have to go back?" Jensen asks.

Alaric pauses, and when he speaks, it's in that same tone that makes me think he knows something that we don't. I'm not the only one that has picked up on it since I share a look with the others. At the end of the day, I trust Alaric, and if he's not telling us, I have to believe that it's for a reason, and he'll share it when he can.

"Alaric?" Atlas asks when he still doesn't reply.

He clears his throat, "For now, I think it would be best for you guys to stay where you are. I've spoken to the Principal, and he's agreed. He will send your schoolwork to your school emails, and you can just complete it when you're ready. I think it's important that you all rest while you can."

Again I share a look with the others.

"Okay, that sounds good to me." Trick replies.

"Good, Atlas, keep your phone on. I might need to get in contact with you in the next few days." After Atlas confirms



that he will, Alaric hangs up.

“Well, that was weird. He’s hiding something, right?” Jensen asks the room as a whole.

“Absolutely, but I’ve got no idea what,” Atlas replies, staring down at his phone thoughtfully.

“Well, at least we don’t have to worry about school for a while,” I add.

“True, alright; there’s nothing we can do until he decides to tell us what the fuck is going on, so I’m going to finish lunch,” Rafe says, getting up and heading to the kitchen, Rage following behind him.

“The rain doesn’t look like it’s going to let up any time soon, so Runa is going to have to wait until tomorrow to get some proper cat food,” Trick says, settling down and picking up a book that he had next to the chair.

“I don’t think she’ll mind eating chicken.” I chuckle as Cash and Luc hand out controllers, and they all start playing the multiplayer game.

I’m happy to just stroke my cat and watch.

## Chapter Sixteen

The next day I find myself in the house with only Cash and Rage. Everyone else decided to go into town to get stuff for Runa, who has decided that she wants to explore the house today. I'm not sure why they all needed to go for that, but I'm not complaining about spending some quality time with Cash and Rage. My body has healed enough that instead of my need being a steady burn in the background as I'm surrounded by all these gorgeous men that like to give me toe-curling kisses and then walk away like my panties haven't just melted off, it's become a roaring inferno.

I'm done with waiting today though. I'm also finding that I can be left alone for short periods of time without freaking out so long as I can still hear at least a couple of them. With this in mind, I quickly get changed into a two-piece swimsuit that I left here and then grab a towel. In my mind, this idea was a hell of a lot sexier, but when I was planning it, I seemed to have forgotten that not only am I still covered in bruises, but the bruises are now yellowing and not sexy at all. However, I am committed to this now, and the hot tub does sound like a freaking awesome idea; even if it doesn't lead to what I want it to, it will still be nice to spend some time with just the two of them.

I make my way downstairs and through the living room, where they're both sitting watching something on the TV; when they see me walk past, they turn, and their eyes widen.

"I'm going in the hot tub," I announce unnecessarily, since why else would I be walking around in a two-piece?

They don't say anything but share a look, and then both scramble to get up and follow me, making my smile widen as I walk through the back doors and toward the hot tub. Rage grabs his shirt and pulls it over his head, and I almost freeze in my tracks since I somehow managed to forget not only how delicious his muscles are but also that he is heavily inked.

Yum.

Before I get completely distracted, I switch on the bubbles and climb in; grateful someone turned it on and the waters warm because I really didn't think this through at all and only had one thing on my mind. I think by this point, I'm so frustrated that we're lucky I didn't just yell I need sex and dance around naked, although that would've been amusing. Once I'm settled, I turn and watch as the guys undress, making absolutely no move to hide that I'm checking them out. Their heated eyes blaze as they watch me watching them, and they quickly catch on to my intentions. It's not like I'm not making it blatantly obvious what I want right now.

Fortunately, it doesn't look like I'm going to have to be any more blatantly obvious with them, as they both completely strip and get into the hot tub. Rage wastes absolutely no time in pulling me onto his lap, his hard dick, only separated from where I want him by the thin material of my bikini bottoms, and I really wish that I was as naked as he is. Maybe I should've just danced around naked. His hands weave into my hair, pulling my face down to meet his as his lips devour mine. I feel another set of hands run up my back as Cash starts to kiss along the back of my shoulder; Rage must notice him there because he moves his hand from my hair, giving Cash better access to my neck.

My nails dig into Rage's shoulders as he starts to move his hips underneath me, somehow managing to rub against my clit with his dick, despite the fabric between us and driving me mad with need. Cash's fingers deftly tug on the strings of my bikini top, and I feel a tug as it's thrown away from us, and I gasp as my taut nipples rub against Rage's hard chest. Rage's hand slips down my back and grips my ass, guiding my movements as I grind against him.

Cash nips my shoulder, and I moan against Rage's mouth, my hips speeding up. I'm so fucking close already. I rise up as Cash's fingers move around the front of my stomach and dip into my bikini bottoms; he circles my clit a few times, making me pant with need. I feel his head lift from my neck, and I'm assuming some sort of communication just went on with Rage

because his hands grip my ass as Cash moves my bikini bottoms to the side and Rage lines his dick up with my entrance.

Cash slowly plays with my clit as Rage teases; he lets out a deep growl as he thrusts his dick inside me, moving only an inch or two and then stopping and pulling back out. It's driving me fucking wild, my moans having become an incoherent mess. I'm pretty sure I'm begging at this point, but I'm so delirious with fucking need and sensations I couldn't even tell you my own fucking name.

I make a whimper of protest as Cash's fingers move away from my clit, and then call out with pleasure as one of his hand's grips my throat pulling me back slightly and giving him a better angle for my boobs. He rolls my nipple between his fingers, pinching lightly and making my back arch. At the same time as Cash's grip tightens on my throat, Rage finally gives up his teasing, loosening his grip on my hips so I can slam down onto him. My thrust has us both groaning with pleasure as I start to rock my hips, Rage meeting me thrust for thrust and hitting at just the right angle. I reach my hand back and grasp Cash's dick. The angle is odd, and I can't play as much as I'd like to, but he doesn't seem to mind.

I start to move quicker, grinding pussy on Rage's dick while Cash tugs and teases my nipples, and I try to continue playing with Cash as my orgasm builds. My back arches as I reach the precipice, so fucking close, Rage increases his thrusts and then dives forward, his mouth closing around the nipple that Cash isn't playing with, flicking his tongue over it before he sucks at the same time that Cash squeezes my throat and pinches my nipple. All the sensations have me careening over the edge and into euphoric oblivion as I ride it out, Rage's thrusts increasing until he's bellowing out his own release.

I kiss him softly, my body still buzzing. His eyes are bright and full of emotions and love. He meets Cash's eyes over my shoulder, and his smile turns wicked as I'm lifted off of Rage's lap; my body is extremely pliant thanks to my orgasm, but as the guys shift me so that I'm bent over, my hands on the side of the hot tub, my boobs directly over Rage's mouth as Cash

lines up at my entrance and wastes no time, in plunging into my oversensitive pussy, I moan loudly in pure pleasure as my orgasm starts to build again.

Rage's large hands palm my boobs as he shifts so he can tweak one of my nipples with his fingers and sucks the other one, alternating between flicking his tongue around it and nipping them almost to the point of pain. Cash's thrusts are hard and fast, one of his hands gripping my hip as he pounds into me, as the other one moves around to my stomach and his fingers delve through my folds. Impossibly my climax builds just as quickly and combined with Rage's mouth on my boobs and the relentless pace that Cash has set, I'm soon screaming out my release as Cash tenses and groans out his own behind me.

We all collapse into an exhausted and satisfied heap, Cash somehow managing to sit back on the bench as I sprawl across the both of them, all of us still breathing hard as my pussy still pulses with the aftershocks of both of my orgasms.

I swear I could sleep for a fucking week, and I'm hungry.

I hear them both chuckle and shift my head off Cash's chest enough to get them both in my eyesight, "What?"

"You said you wanted food out loud." Rage answers, moving forward and kissing my nose.

"Whoops, well, it's true." I shrug.

"Do you want to go and raid the snacks?" Cash asks me, looking amused.

"Yes," I reply, simply too exhausted to bother with any more words.

They both grin and help me stand on wobbly legs before we all get out. My skin immediately pebbles as the cold air hits it, and I start to shiver. Rage hands me the towel I brought down and then rubs my arms, trying to get me warm.

"Go and get dressed, il Mio Cuore; we'll get some snacks and meet you in the front room." Cash suggests, and I nod.

My body is deliciously sore, and I throw on one of the guy's shirts that they've left in my room, it reaches mid-thigh, and we aren't going anywhere today or having anyone over, so I don't bother with pants because that just seems like far too much effort. When I get back downstairs, the guys have pulled the coffee table closer to the couch and have absolutely loaded it with snacks. They've left a space between them for me, and I plop my ass down. My legs are thrown over Cash's lap, and the rest of me is leaning on Rage, who has an arm around my shoulders.

Cash hands me a bag of chocolate-covered pretzels, and I dive in while we cuddle and watch something. It's not long before the others all get back from their shopping trip. Jensen wiggles his eyebrows suggestively at me as soon as he sees us, and I wink at him, looking very pleased with myself.

"Where's Runa?" Trick asks, putting a couple of bags down and then coming to kiss me. Once I've been thoroughly kissed by him, he lowers his voice and asks, "did Cash and Rage take good care of you?"

"Fuck yes," I immediately reply.

"Good. Where's Runa?" he asks again since he distracted me the first time.

"I'm not actually sure. She spent most of the night sleeping on my pillow, and then this morning, she went off to explore," I say.

"I know, I kept getting cat tail in my face." Riot chuckles.

A sudden wailing meow comes from the kitchen, and I get up to follow the sound, worried that she's gotten herself stuck somewhere.

"She's quite dramatic, isn't she?" Jensen chuckles as we see what Runa is making all the fuss about.

She's staring down at the dish that we fed her the chicken in yesterday, smacking it with her paw and then yowling like she's heartbroken.

"I'm guessing she's hungry," I reply with a giggle.

“Here, I think this is the bag that has her bowls and food in,” Rafe says, handing me the bag.

As soon as she’s got food in her dish, she’s back to purring happily, and I roll my eyes. Jensen called it; she’s definitely dramatic.

“Come on. I want to show you what else we got her,” Jensen’s smile is broad as he grabs my hand and tows me back to the front room where the rest of the bags are.

“Where’s everyone else gone?” I ask curiously; the front room is empty, and they’ve all suddenly disappeared.

“I don’t know,” he shrugs and then quickly changes the subject. “Come on. I got all sorts of stuff for her. I always wanted a cat. I also asked the pet store about local vets, and they gave me a business card. I figure it would be a good idea to get her checked out and all that stuff.”

“Thanks, that’s great. I’ll call in a bit and see if I can get her set up with an appointment.” I reply.

He insists on taking everything out of the bags individually and showing me. It’s so cute, made even cuter, when Runa comes sauntering out of the kitchen and jumps up onto the coffee table, and he starts showing her everything that he’s brought her instead.

He’s brought her several beds because, and I quote, this is a big house, and she should have options. Several different collars in case she fancies a change and so many toys we’re going to need a basket just for them.

“Wow, that’s a lot of stuff for one cat. Thank you,” kissing him on the cheek to show my thanks; he grins at me.

“I also got one of those cat doors that we can put in the back door. She might not want to go out now, but considering she’s lived her life outside so far, I don’t want to force her to stay in all the time either.” He adds.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” I reply, stroking Runa as she jumps onto my lap and starts kneading it to make it comfy. I try not to wince at her tiny claws digging into my bare legs. She finally settles down, and I breathe a breath of relief.

“I got her a scratching post too, but it’s still in the SUV. It’s surprisingly heavy.”

“I take it Runa approves of all her new stuff?” Luc asks, as the guys and he all come back into the room. I frown. What were they doing?

“Yep, she loves it.” I reply, “thank you, guys. What’s that?”

Atlas was the last to come into the room, and he’s carrying a big wicker basket thing.

“We ran into Lyric in town, and she dragged us all the way back to the bar so she could give us this. It’s for you,” Atlas explains, looking at the basket suspiciously like he’s expecting something to jump out of it or for it to explode.

“Oh, that’s cool. What is it?” I ask as he puts it on the floor in front of me since the coffee table is still covered with snacks. I push it away slightly and move to sit on the floor, my back against the couch.

“When Lyric is involved in the gift giving, it really could be anything.” Atlas winces.

That sentence should worry me, but honestly, I’m just super intrigued. The more I learn about Lyric, the more I like her, and it really is sweet that she’s thought to send me a gift basket anyway, actually, hang on.

“Why has she sent me one?”

“Oh well, they were on standby in case we needed them to come and help us get you out. She knows that you were taken, and everyone knows Blake’s reputation, so I’m guessing she’s assuming that you need whatever is in the basket.” Trick explains.

“Lyric is a little different. From all outward appearances, she’s quirky and sweet, and she is. But she’s also dangerous as hell. I wouldn’t want to go up against her.” Atlas explains.

“She sounds like my sort of person,” I reply, meaning the words.

The basket itself is lovely and has these black leather buckles that hold it closed. I undo them and flip the lid open,



and promptly burst into laughter.

“Oh yeah, Lyric is absolutely my kind of person,” I grin, pulling out two huge machetes.

“Whoa,” Cash says as they all back up slightly.

“That’s fucking awesome. What else did she send you?” Jensen asks, moving closer to get a better look.

I start pulling things out, laying them on the floor next to me and telling them what it is as I go, “Okay, so there’s some more knives, a really tiny gun,” I take aim with the gun aiming at the thick wooden surround around the fireplace, the gun, though tiny is reasonably powerful and I’m pretty fucking impressed.

“Holy shit, Ever, Puddin’, warn us before you start shooting inside the house,” Rage chastises.

“Whoops, sorry,” I apologise, “to be fair, the bullets are so tiny you can’t even see the hole.”

“I’ll give you that one,” Rafe mutters, inspecting the tiny hole in the massive wood surround.

“Alright, what else did you get?” Riot asks.

“Erm, a massive bottle of Jack and tequila. Chocolate, of course, some bright pink knee-high fluffy socks, a whoopee cushion, and a whole load of fireworks,” I giggle. This woman certainly has an eccentric personality; I can tell that just from what she’s sent me. I pull out a note and start reading it out loud, “Ever, trauma is a fucking bitch. I always find that blowing shit up helps when I’m sad, and even more so when it’s pretty, hence the fireworks. I hope this helps. Love ya, Lyric.”

Everyone looks amused, as Rage says, “I’m not entirely sure that Ever and Lyric getting to know each other is going to be anything less than explosive.”

“Nuh-uh, there’s no way you’re keeping us apart. It would be rude for me not to thank her in person.” I am fully aware that my smile is not exactly innocent. So I change the subject, “Can we set some off now?”

“Might be better to wait until it’s dark,” Cash teases, and I turn around so I can stick my tongue out at him.

“Actually, there was something that we wanted to talk to you about,” Trick starts leaning forward. When I look at him quizzically, he continues, “it’s your birthday tomorrow, and we wanted to know if you want to do anything for it.”

“Wait, what?” I ask, frowning, “it’s tomorrow?”

“Yes, Angel.” Jensen replies gently, “Do you want to do anything?”

“We could just have a quiet one here, or we could invite Peter and the guys up?” Luc suggests.

“And Lyric and her team, she’s clearly dying to meet you, and I want to introduce everyone to each other anyway,” Atlas suggests.

“It’s whatever you’re comfortable with,” Rafe adds, pulling me up from the floor and wrapping me in his arms.

I take a second to answer them, mostly because I’m so shocked that I didn’t realise that it was my birthday tomorrow. To be completely honest, I couldn’t tell you what day of the fucking week it is, so it’s hardly surprising. I guess although I’m doing better in some aspects, in others, I’m still living in a bubble.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Erm, can we sort of do a mixture of both?” I ask, and they all nod before I can even explain, “so tomorrow, we’ll just spend the day just us; I don’t really care what we do, just that we’re all together. Then the next day, invite everyone over for a lowkey party? I’m not sure I can handle something too over the top.”

“That’s okay, Princess, we’ll do whatever you want,” Atlas replies for all of them, “do you want Lyric and her guys to come or would you just like it to be Peter and the guys?”

“Definitely Lyric and her guys,” I grin. “I still want to light some fireworks tonight, though and see if Pete wants to bring Elijah up so I can get to know him better.”

“Yeah, that sounds good to me. I’ll message him,” Luc says, pulling out his phone.

Just like that, the wheels are in motion, Pete and Elijah are invited, Lyric and her team are invited to the party the day after tomorrow, and Atlas spends an amusing amount of time fielding all sorts of questions from her. Rafe starts planning food for the meal tonight and the party.

“Do you want some help making dinner?” I ask Rafe; he put me on Jensen’s lap a while ago so he could start scribbling recipes he wants to do in a notebook.

“Nope, you need your rest. The next couple of days are going to be busy. You can come and keep me company though?”

“Oh, come on, you can at least set me up at the table, and I’ll peel and chop stuff,” I point out.

“I’m fairly sure I can do that without burning anything?” Trick offers somewhat questioningly as if he’s not entirely sure that’s true.

I giggle, “The worrying thing about that statement was the think part. You’ll be nowhere near heat, and yet you still only think that you won’t burn anything.”

“It’s a gift,” he teases.

“Alright, fine. I’ve got a lot of prep for tomorrow that I can do now.” Rafe mutters.

As the others go off to do their own things, the four of us go into the kitchen and set up at the table. Rafe brings over lots of veg to help prepare as he sits down with us and starts peeling and chopping.

“What are we having for dinner tonight?” Trick asks curiously.

“I thought I’d do stuffed burgers. Something we can eat while we watch the fireworks.”

“Oh, that sounds awesome,” I comment. “What are all these vegetables for though?”

“That’s for the food tomorrow. I’m going to get a few more ingredients for the party though since we’re feeding more people.”

“That’s okay. We can grab it in the morning, people won’t be coming around until later, and I’d really like to do some baking as well.” I suggest, feeling brave and a trip to the grocery store I should easily be able to handle.

“Okay, Baby, we can do that. If you change your mind, just let me know, and I can grab everything you need,” Rafe offers.

“Thank you, Big Guy.”

“I just had a thought,” Atlas announces as he walks into the room, “we don’t want to gain any attention by setting fireworks up off here, do we?”

“Well, you said that the town is mostly controlled by you. People know someone lives up here; they’ll either assume it’s coming from the farm where Pete is staying or just that whoever is up here is having a party or something. It’s not like

this place is a complete secret, and no one knows it exists,” Trick points out.

Atlas considers Trick’s answer for a moment, runs his hand through his hair and then nods, “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. I’m just worrying, that’s all.”

“I think we’re all a bit more cautious at the moment,” Jensen replies.

“Yeah, I know you’re right,” he replies. “The rest of us thought that it might be a good idea to set the fireworks up now. The last thing we want to do is do it in the dark; that’s just a recipe for disaster.”

“Sounds good,” Rafe replies.

## *Atlas*

Lyric didn’t just send some shop-bought small and pathetic fireworks, she’s actually made these, and I doubt that Ever realises that. I usually would never even entertain the idea of setting off someone’s homemade fireworks; however, Lyric is an absolute genius when it comes to explosives, and I’ve seen her fireworks displays before; they’re stunning. Of course, she doesn’t just use her gifts with explosives for fireworks, but it is the prettiest use she has for it.

Her guys regularly have to talk her down from wanting to blow shit up; it’s her go-to coping mechanism. Enemies surround you? Blow them up. Can’t work out how to infiltrate a target? Just blow it up and walk straight in. Sink blocked? Blow it up.

Thankfully she’s skilled enough that when she blew up the sink, it was pretty localised. It scared the living shit out of her men though, which she thought was hilarious. Yeah, Lyric is definitely one of a kind.

“Are we good to go?” Rage asks, an armful of fireworks.

“Yeah, we’re good. The backyard is big enough that we can set them up out there,” I reply, and then add, “I don’t suppose

she sent instructions?”

“Nope, she always forgets that we don’t instinctively know how to set this shit up.” Rage replies.

“What?” Cash asks, looking confused.

“Lyric makes her own fireworks,” I thoroughly enjoy the looks of shock on their faces.

“Don’t worry, she’s a fucking genius with explosives,” Rage adds when I don’t elaborate.

“That is so fucking cool,” Luc comments, looking impressed.

I grin and then motion for them to follow me out to the backyard.

“I texted Lyric, and she sent us a picture of the way to set it up that will look best when they’re set off, but said we could do it any way we wanted, and it would still look good. She then sent practically an essay saying how excited she is to come up in a couple of days, and she’s working on something new.” By the end of his sentence, Rage is frowning with concern.

“Why are you frowning?” Riot asks.

“Because if she’s working on something new, it could either work really well or blow up in a way that it’s not supposed to,” I explain, looking over at Rage’s phone so I can see which fireworks are supposed to go where.

“She sounds like a mad scientist,” Cash chuckles.

“She is,” Rage shrugs and then passes the phone around. “Come on, let’s get this done. Pete and Elijah will be here soon.”

As we get further into the garden and away from the house, I bring something up, that’s been bothering me.

“She really had no idea that it was her birthday tomorrow,” I mutter, gaining the attention of the others.

“It’s not that surprising we’ve effectively wrapped ourselves in our own little world up here, and the only place she’s gone

is to Peter's place." Luc points out.

"That's true. I mean, I probably wouldn't realise what day it was if I weren't keeping an eye on them because it's her birthday soon," I admit.

"Do you think that we may have gone a bit over the top with decorations and things for tomorrow?" Cash asks, having gone to look over all the bags that we left in the garage from our shopping trip to get supplies for Runa, who is watching us set things up from the porch.

"Nah, I think she's going to love it. Besides, Peter is coming up soon. We can show him, and he can let us know if we've gone too far." Luc replies, full of confidence.

After that, the fireworks are set up pretty quickly, and we all go and get changed, ready for when Peter arrives. By the time I come back downstairs, the smell of Rafe's cooking has invaded everywhere, and my mouth waters. I fucking love his cooking.

## *Ever*

"**E**ver!" Trick calls up the stairs, "Pete and Elijah are here!"

"Coming!" I yell back, grabbing a hoody since it's going to get cold outside later. I don't know why I'm nervous; I've already met Elijah. Trying to shrug it off, I rush down the stairs and practically jump on Peter to give him a hug.

"Hey guys, how're you?" I ask.

"All good, thanks. Where did you get the fireworks from?" Elijah asks. He looks like he's pretty easy going and seems to really care for Pete, so that's a good start.

I motion for them to follow me as I take them into the kitchen and offer a drink. Peter opts for a whiskey and coke like me, whereas Elijah ends up with a beer. Once we've got our drinks, I explain, "Lyric sent them over to me in a gift basket."

“She made them,” Trick adds, and I stare.

“What?” Peter asks.

“According to Atlas and Rage, she’s a genius with explosives, and she loves making her own fireworks.”

“Wow, that is so fucking cool.” My voice is awed. I wonder how difficult it is and whether she’d be able to teach me. On second thoughts, I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to learn how to do that. I’d do far too much fucking damage.

“Angel, where’s Runa? You should probably put her in the saferoom. It’s soundproof, and she won’t get spooked by the fireworks.” Jensen suggests.

My eyes widen, “Well fuck, I hadn’t even thought about that.”

“Who the fuck is Runa?” Peter asks.

“My cat, I found her in the barn near the farmhouse. She’s absolutely adorable, and now you’ve been tasked with helping me to find her.” I grin.

Elijah surprises me when he follows Peter and me, getting involved with making the noises to call her to us. I finally find her curled up under one of the chairs in the front room, where I swear I already looked for her, and she wasn’t there. I pick her up, her purring instantly starting up and making me smile as I turn to show Peter and Elijah.

“Oh, she’s just the sweetest,” Pete gushes, giving her scratches which she absolutely loves.

Elijah just grins as he strokes her.

“Pete, can you grab the bed on the window seat, and we’ll set her up in the saferoom, not that she’ll use it? She’ll probably end up curled up somewhere else anyway.”

It doesn’t take us long at all to get her set up, and she doesn’t even bat an eye as she settles back down to sleep. I shake my head at her when she chooses to lie in a cardboard box rather than in the nice soft bed. We find all the guys out in the back, with the fire pit roaring and chairs set up all around it, and I plop my ass on Rafe’s lap as Peter and Elijah take the



two chairs to his left. This is so cool, and I am genuinely excited to see what Lyric's fireworks are like. I have a feeling that they're a hell of a lot better than the ones that you can get from the stores. It also makes me incredibly curious about the kind of person she is, and I can't wait to get to know her better.

I push thoughts of Lyric out of my mind, she's coming up in a couple of days, and then I can get to know her. Right now, my focus is on getting to know Elijah better, and so far he's not throwing up any red flags.

I grin mischievously and ignore Peter's warning look, "So then, Elijah, what are your intentions with my best friend, who you've already hurt once?"

Peter facepalms, as Rafe chuckles quietly behind me. I've got to give it to Elijah though; he doesn't get flustered or defensive and just sips his beer and smiles.

"I plan to spend the rest of my life making up for that mistake, and I plan to get down on one knee and make him mine as much as I am his. I plan to get to know his family better because he loves them so much, and I'd like to be a part of what you all have here, too," Elijah says with such conviction that he's got the attention of all of the guys too. "and I finally plan to make sure that he never ever questions how much I love him ever again."

Peter is staring at him in absolute shock until he suddenly pounces on him and kisses him fiercely, making my smile broaden.

When they pull apart, Eli looks back at me, my response to his words clearly important to him.

"Well said, man," I say, raising my glass, "you can definitely stick around, and I think I can speak for all of us when I say that we would love to get to you better." His smile is relieved until I lean forward, my expression becoming deadly. Everyone falls silent as the guys share a look, "however, if you ever intentionally hurt him, I'm not talking arguments or drifting apart or anything like that; I'm talking cheating on him or deliberately doing something that you

know will cause him pain, you will be dealing with my alter ego Shadow, and she has a lot of damage to work out.”

My threat lands as Elijah’s eyes widen in shock as he recognises the name. I can’t help my smirk as several of my men growl, and Rafe nips my neck. It still fascinates me that me being bloodthirsty turns the lot of them on, dirty fuckers. I adore them for it.

Elijah clears his throat, “I understand completely, and I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“Good,” I smile, this time a soft one. I don’t want to scare him away, but he also needs to know what will happen if he hurts Peter again.

After that, we start to talk about lighter topics, and Elijah starts loosening up a bit. I can see why Peter likes him; he’s hilarious.

## *Atlas*

I must have taken longer than I thought to get ready because not only are Peter and Elijah here, but the others have set up the fire pit in the back garden, and chairs are far enough away from where the fireworks are. Although the weather during the day is starting to warm up now, we still have frigid nights, and as I step outside, I’m incredibly grateful that I decided to put on one of my fleece-lined flannels. Ever is looking cute as hell, all wrapped up and sitting on Rafe’s lap, talking animatedly to Peter and Elijah. It seems like Elijah has managed to get the Ever seal of approval.

“Hey!” Pete yells, excited as always, as he spots me and Ever turns and gives me one of those smiles that light up my insides and make me feel like a million fucking bucks. Oh, I don’t know how she does it, but I will never take it for granted.

“Can we light the fireworks now?” Ever asks, bouncing in Rafe’s lap and making me chuckle when she doesn’t realise

what it's doing to him. "The guys told me that Lyric made them, and I think that is so fucking cool."

"That one's on you and Rage since you guys know Lyric and already trust in her abilities," Trick points out, sipping his beer.

I share a look with Rage and then shrug. Fair enough. The fireworks are absolutely stunning, and watching Ever's face light up each time one goes off makes me want to hug Lyric for bringing her this joy. I was slightly concerned that the loud bangs would cause Ever to be triggered, but she shot that tiny gun earlier with no problems and now just seems to be enjoying the show. This leaves me feeling relieved, we may not be working currently, but we will be soon. I have no doubt about that, and we're going to be sent after some of Blake's associates. I'm reasonably confident that our teams ended everyone that was at the base of operations, and Dom and his club wouldn't have let anyone escape. It wouldn't necessarily be a big issue if she was triggered by bangs and weapons now, but it would mean that she wouldn't be able to go on jobs with us, and I know that she would hate that. So I'm glad that it doesn't seem to be a problem for her.

Thoughts of the job have my thoughts turning to Alaric; he is hiding something, that much is obvious. I have no idea what it could be, but I do trust him, so I'm not overly worried about whatever it is. I am feeling slightly at a loss right now though. For the past few years, my whole goal has been to get rid of Liam, which then turned out to be Blake because he controls pretty much all of my father's businesses, and now, they have found enough information that I don't have to do that. Don't get me wrong; I am incredibly glad that I don't have to pretend to run it, especially since it would put Ever and the guys in far too much danger, but that's been the plan for so long that now I'm not really sure what the future holds.

I enjoy doing the jobs for Alaric, and I'm hopeful that we can carry on doing it, but I have a feeling that it's going to be more complicated than we thought. Alaric already said that the big boss is starting to push for a meeting with all of us, and who the fuck knows what the outcome of that will be.

“Here, man. You look like you need this,” Rafe says, handing me a beer.

The fireworks have all been set off, and now we’re gathered around the fire pit eating and shooting the shit. The burgers are absolutely delicious; he’s stuffed them with mozzarella cheese, and I know I’m going to be asking for these as regularly as Jensen asks for those brownies. It’s not long until Ever starts yawning and finally gives up the fight in trying to keep her eyes open.

# Chapter Eighteen

## *Atlas*

“Come on, Angel, let’s get you to bed,” Jensen chuckles, helping her off Luc’s lap.

“Yeah, good idea. Night guys,” she says sleepily.

Everyone gets goodnight kisses, and when she gets to me, I say, “I’ll be up in a bit, okay?”

She nods with a sleepy grin and then threads her fingers through Jensen’s as they make their way inside. I’m reasonably sure she’s going to be out before her head hits the pillow.

After we’re confident that she’s gone and can no longer hear us Trick sits forward, excitement in his eyes, “Right, let’s get this done then, shall we?”

“What done?” Elijah asks, looking confused.

Peter starts bouncing in his seat, the excitement practically overflowing as he asks, “Ooo, what are we doing? I get to help, right?”

“Of course you do, and as you know, it’s Ever’s birthday tomorrow,” Riot starts and gets interrupted.

“Yep, and the day after, we’re having a party, and I finally get to meet the infamous Lyric,” Peter grins.

“Yeah, right, well, we’ve brought loads of decorations for the house, and Rafe got all the ingredients to make these epic cupcakes, and we want to set it all up before she wakes up in the morning. Plus, we have to wrap our gifts.” Luc explains.

“Oh my fucking god, that’s so damn cute. I’d love to help you guys.” Peter replies, hopping up and heading inside even though he’s got no idea where we’ve put everything.

“I can help you with the cupcakes,” Elijah offers Rafe somewhat nervously. “I’m not great at baking them, but I’m pretty good at decorating them.”

“Yes, please man,” Rafe replies, looking relieved, “I’ve got the baking down to an art, but the decorating always looks like I’ve dropped it on the floor.”

Elijah chuckles, “Yeah, I can definitely help with that. You guys had better find Peter before he starts decorating with shit that you don’t want him to.”

“Ah fuck,” I mutter, jogging after Peter, the others following me as we find him in the garage, already sorting through the bags of stuff.

“Guys, you got some awesome stuff. She’s going to fucking love it!” he exclaims, easing my fears that maybe we’ve gone over the top.

“How in the fuck did you know where we put everything?” Luc asks.

“It wasn’t that hard to figure out, you’re guys, and this is the most convenient place to put everything, where Ever isn’t likely to go.” He shrugs, “Let’s get this all into the front room, and then we can lay everything out in room order and split up. We’ll get it done quicker that way. Did you guys get helium?”

He’s completely taken over organising it, and I know I’m not the only one that is incredibly relieved. We may have had the idea but executing it to the level that we wanted was always going to be a bit hit-and-miss.

“I am so freaking happy that you’re here, man,” Trick mutters, and Peter beams back. “And yes, we did. It’s still in the SUV.”

“Alright, well, go and grab it, and let’s get this stuff in the front room.”

Doing as we’re told, we grab all the bags and traipse after him into the living room. Peter pulls things out of the bags, and then we tell him where we want to put them; I feel weirdly proud when he agrees to our choices.

“Alright, Trick and Luc, you do the kitchen and take a canister of helium. It will be easier to blow the balloons up in there than try to move them. Everyone else, you’re with me, and we’ll do in here and down the stairs. I know you didn’t have that in your plan, but there’s more than enough stuff here to do it, and I think it will make it even more special.” Peter explains.

“Shall I turn the fairy lights back on here?” Luc asks as he starts toward the kitchen with Trick, “I never took them down at Christmas since it took so fucking long to get them up in the first place.”

“Oh, definitely!” Peter grins.

For the next few hours, he orders us to put things where they look best, and he clearly has a vision for what he wants the place to look like when he’s finished. The balloons, banners and streamers are all strategically placed, and it looks classy instead of trashy, which was something I was worried about; I have honestly never put this much thought into something like this before.

I just want her to be happy; I want her to come downstairs in the morning and feel special and loved. We want to make her happy in any way we can, in all the ways we can. There is a slight chance that we went over the top, but I don’t think she’ll mind. At least, I hope not. The smell of the cupcakes drifting from the kitchen is divine, and I’m wondering whether it’s worth my life to pinch one. Probably not; Rafe’s been known to smack people with wooden spoons when they help themselves; apart from Ever, of course, she just gets a look.

With the lights in the rafters of the front room, it looks like some kind of birthday grotto, and I am immensely pleased with how it’s turning out. None of us had any idea what to do with the stairs, so Peter took over completely; he somehow made a balloon arch that she’ll have to walk through right at the top and then wrapped some fairy lights around the bannister, adding a few strategically placed balloons and then he’s spread these multi-coloured petals that Jensen insisted on buying a fuckload of all down the stairs and leading to the front room.

We each got her a bouquet of flowers, Cash and Rage sending us pictures of the kinds they wanted to get her. Peter, Riot and Trick are busy arranging them around the front room; thank fuck we thought to get vases too.

“What can I do now?” I ask.

“Start wrapping the presents and set them up on the coffee table,” Peter orders and then spins to face me, “Wait, do you wrap like a blind t-rex? I’ve seen the pictures of Ever’s wrapping.”

I burst out laughing, “Nope.”

“Thank fuck, okay, you do that.”

Finally, everything is ready, and Peter and Elijah have gone home, making us promise to take pictures of her reaction tomorrow. I’m fucking exhausted, and I’m beyond ready to sleep as I quietly make my way into Ever’s room to see her and Jensen curled up together, with Runa lying on her pillow.

Lucky fucker got to play distraction as we decorated.

I quickly strip down to my boxers and climb into bed, looking forward to snuggling my woman.

## *Ever*

Like clockwork, one of Blake’s men lets himself into my cell again, and I force myself to stand on tired legs as I try not to groan when I realise that it’s the fucker that always goes for the same eye and leaves with a hard on the disgusting fucker. I have no idea how long I’ve been here now, but I want my men.

Pain stabs my heart as the faces of Riot, Atlas and Rage flash through my mind.

“Aww, don’t wince, darling.” The fucker teases, wrongly assuming that my reaction was to him. “I love our time together. It would make me mad if you didn’t enjoy it, too, and I’ve taken it easy on you so far.”



A brittle laugh escapes me; this is easy?

Sick fuck.

He clearly doesn't like me laughing at him though, as a brutal hit to my stomach abruptly cuts it off. My rage simmers in my veins, and I clench my fists as I wheeze. I've been here long enough to realise that if I fight back, the beating lasts for longer, and I end up struggling in my fights, I can't afford to struggle in my fights, or I'll end up dead.

He swings for my eye, and I can't help my natural reaction to duck. His sinister grin widens with dark joy, and I inwardly curse my stupidity. I force myself to stay still as he aims again, spitting vitriol at me the whole time; I've tuned it out. My head snaps to the side, and yet I refuse to show any sign of pain. He likes that too much.

His strikes come in quick succession, one after another, and I hold my ground until I simply can't anymore. If he hits me one more time in the head, my upcoming fight will be impossible to win. I allow my body to crumple to the floor, shielding my head with my arms as he continues to rain blows down on me. Suddenly a picture of me in my bed at the cabin with Jensen wrapped around me flashes through my mind's eye, and confusion fills me for a brief second before I shake it off and let a fantasy fill my mind, if I were at home in the cabin, my knives would be under my pillow, and I'd be able to use them to pry the eyes out of this fucker. A heavy weight appears in both of my hands, and I uncover my face briefly to see my knives in them; I frown. That's not right. That's not how this goes.

Does it really matter? I jump to my feet, suddenly unchained as I knock the fucker down, pounce on top of him and hold my knives to his throat, enjoying the look of fear on his face.

*Atlas*

My plan for snuggles doesn't happen, as Ever lets out a grunt, and I suddenly find myself underneath her, a knife to my neck. I knew she started to sleep with them under her pillow again, but this was not quite what I pictured happening. I stay dead still; I obviously spooked her when I got into the bed, and she's clearly not awake yet.

Making sure not to move and startle her further, I dart my eyes over to Jensen, who thankfully woke up at the same time she moved. His eyes are not only slightly shocked at the turn of events but heated as well because, of course, this is turning the fucker on.

I can't really say much because I'm not exactly not turned on right now, so long as she doesn't actually slit my throat, that would be a slight mood killer.

"Whoa," Jensen starts, sitting up slowly, "Ever, Angel, it's okay. You're at home, and you're safe. That's Atlas's throat that you have a knife against."

"It's me, Princess," I add, hoping it convinces her and she doesn't press the knife any harder against my throat.

She blinks rapidly for a second and then looks down at me in confusion before she realises that she has a knife to my throat and a look of horror crosses her face. She removes the knife and launches it toward the wall without looking, and it, of course, lands perfectly. My hands land on her hips as her hands land on my chest.

"Shit, Atlas, I'm so sorry." She apologises, her gaze switching between Jensen and me.

One of my hands cups her face, "Ever, did you know that I fell in love with you the second night we met? The night that you held a knife to my neck. I didn't think it was possible to love you any more than I did at that moment, and yet, here we are."

She moves until her lips are barely a breath away from mine and then whispers, "I love you, Atlas."

Her lips meet mine in a deep kiss as her pussy grinds down on my dick.

Fuck.

My hands start to skim up her bare back, and I realise that somehow, in all the excitement of nearly having my throat slit, I'd completely missed that she was only in a tiny pair of underwear.

Suddenly she moves her head away from mine, and I follow her gaze to where Jensen is getting out of the bed.

"Where do you think you're going?" she asks, her voice husky with desire.

"Absolutely fucking nowhere," he grins, checking with me before he replies.

I have absolutely no problem sharing Ever with Jensen.

I flip her so she's on her back, making her squeal in surprise; as I kiss down her body, Jensen takes one of her nipples into his mouth. Her hips thrust, and I quickly discard her underwear and then delve my tongue between her folds, swirling around her entrance before I move up and lightly flick my tongue over her clit. One of her hands grips my hair tightly as she bucks her hips, grinding against my face. Obliging her silent plea, I alternate between sucking her clit and swirling my tongue as my fingers find her entrance and pump inside her, I curl them up at the same time as I suck her clit into my mouth, and she detonates, falling apart in our arms as I lap up her juices.

When she stills, I lift her up, motioning to Jensen that I have an idea. I move to the edge of the bed and turn her around, so her back is to my chest, and she's stood over my legs, my dick straining to be inside her. Curiosity and excitement dance in her eyes as she lets me move her.

My dick nudges her entrance as she lowers down, and I thread my hand through her hair and pull her head back, "You're going to ride me while you take Jensen in your mouth, alright, Princess?"

She moans as she nods and then slams down onto me, making my hand tense in her hair as a groan leaves my throat. She reaches for Jensen, who is already standing in front of her, his dick in his hand as he watches us. She wraps a hand around his dick, pumping twice as I remove my hand from her hair and grab hold of her hips, helping to guide her movements on my dick.

She licks the tip of Jensen's dick before taking him into her mouth, gripping her hand around his base as she moves it in time with her mouth. Jensen throws his head back, a deep groan leaving him, and I speed up my thrusts as one of my hands strokes up her back and grips the back of her neck. Making her moan around Jensen's dick as his hands thread through her hair as he groans at the vibrations her moan causes.

We find our rhythm as I thrust into her, and her walls clench around me, driving me to the point of insanity. Our movements start to become erratic until Jensen groans out his release, Ever swallowing it down, before her pussy spasms around my dick, and she moans loudly with her release. I speed up, her spasming pussy triggering my own release.

We all fall haphazardly onto the bed in an exhausted and sweaty heap. She turns her head to Jensen, kissing him languidly before moving to do the same to me and basking in the afterglow; I'm consumed with love for Ever and our family. I can't believe that I got lucky enough that this is our life. After cleaning up quickly, we all fall back into bed, wrapped around each other and falling into a deep sleep.

## *Ever*

“Happy birthday!” Luc's excited voice wakes me up.

“Don't worry, we brought coffee and bacon,” Trick adds, and I open my eyes a slit to make sure it's not a trick when I see Rafe holding a tray loaded with food and, more importantly, right now coffee, I start to sit up, nudging Atlas and Jensen so I can pull the covers up with me.

“Here,” Rage hands me a shirt off the floor that must have been from one of the guys from last night, and I pull it on.

“Happy Birthday, Sweetheart,” Trick smiles softly, leaning over Jensen so he can give me a kiss. I know there’s no point in saying that I have morning breath because he simply won’t care.

Once everyone has given me morning kisses and Atlas and Jensen have finally sat up, Rafe puts the tray on my lap as the others go to get theirs.

“We didn’t quite think it through,” Rafe mutters, “we wanted to do the whole birthday breakfast in bed thing, but then we thought it would be weird to be eating alone, but there are so many of us we can’t all eat in bed, and so we settled on everyone just eating in your room.”

“Thank you, this is perfect,” I reply, stopping his rambling.

Breakfast is loud, and the guys seem unusually excited, considering it’s still reasonably early. As soon as I’ve finished my breakfast, it’s taken off me, and I’m pulled out of bed.

“Come on!” Jensen grins excitedly, grasping my hand and pulling me toward the door.

“Hang on. I need underwear!” I exclaim, and everyone freezes.

“Oh shit yeah,” Jensen replies.

Rage strides over to my drawers and takes his time choosing a pair before he decides and brings them over to me, I grin and pull them on, but before I can get out a comment about Rage’s choice in bright pink booty short-style underwear, Rafe and Trick have grasped my hands and are leading me out the door and down the hallway to the stairs.

“Oh my goodness, guys!” I exclaim as I see the black, teal and purple balloon archway, streamers and fairy lights decorating the stairs.

“Peter helped,” Atty grins, before moving past where I’m frozen at the top of the stairs, “there’s more.”

Excitement thrums through me as I follow the guys down the stairs and into the front room. This is so fucking cool. The decorations and colours extend through here and into the kitchen, and I can't believe that they've done all this for me.

"Thank you so much, guys. This is amazing!" I compliment, spinning in circles so that I can see everything. "I can't believe you got all this done after I went to bed."

"You're welcome," several of them reply, all looking proud as fuck, and so they should.

"Jensen was the distraction," Rafe chuckles.

"I took my job very seriously," he says primly with a wicked gleam in his eye.

I blush, thinking of all the ways he worshipped me last night, and that was before Atlas came in, and I nearly slit his throat.

"Presents?" Riot asks.

"Show her the cupcakes you and Elijah did first; they're awesome." Cash suggests.

Before he's even finished the sentence, I'm rushing to the kitchen; the cupcakes look amazing and are decorated in an ombre rainbow effect that's stunning.

"Erm, it looks like Runa likes them," I mutter, motioning to the one that she's clearly knocked off the counter and is munching on the floor.

"Aww shit," he exclaims, rushing to check the others, "I think that's the only one she got. I'm going to have to remember not to leave anything out from now on. I would normally cover it anyway, but I was so tired last night I clearly forgot."

I would answer him and reassure him or something, but my mouth is already full of an absolutely delicious cupcake. He turns back to face the rest of us and promptly bursts out laughing at my bulging cheeks stuffed with cake after presents, which were thoughtful as well as funny. I'm told to

go upstairs and get dressed in something warm that I don't mind getting ruined.

Infinitely intrigued, I quickly do as I'm told and then meet the guys in the garage.

Bouncing on my toes with anticipation, I immediately ask, "So what's the plan? What are we doing?"

All of their smiles are broad, and Jensen and Luc are bouncing just as excitedly as I am.

"We thought that maybe you'd like to take the crossbows out?" Trick asks, "We set some targets up near the waterfall a few summers ago."

"I have no idea if they are still there, but there are plenty of trees if not," Atlas adds.

"And it's nice enough that I've made a picnic." Rafe finishes.

My smile is huge. It sounds like the perfect day.

"That sounds great," I reply, "I want to see what the waterfall looks like now it's warmer and shooting things is always a winner."

I practically race toward the four-wheeler that I usually use and then impatiently wait as they all get themselves organised. I kind of remember where the waterfall is but my sense of direction isn't that fabulous, so I'm not going to risk it and end up getting lost and spending my birthday trying to find the guys again.

I still can't believe that I forgot it was my birthday.

"Rage, can I borrow your phone to text Peter please?" I ask. I had mine in my pocket when I got kidnapped, and I haven't replaced it yet.

"Of course," he replies, handing his phone over and telling me the code to get in; he then adds, "we need to get you a new one."

## Chapter Nineteen

He's not wrong, I definitely do need a new phone, but so far, this is the only time I have needed it since I got back. I'm not missing not having my phone that much, but I know I will be as soon as we return to the academy and everyday life.

I am struggling with the thought of going back to the academy; not only did so much happen there, but also, so much has happened since we left to come after Elena's ex, and I guess I'm just not ready to go back to normal life and pretend as if nothing happened. To pretend that I care about all the little high school problems happening there and all the networking shit we had decided was probably a good idea. I am curious to see how Matty, the kid that I saved from his abusive father by using shadow's skills, is getting on now.

I thought I'd start shying away from the Shadow side of me even more after what happened with Blake, but it's actually the opposite. Shadow is not separate from me; she's a part of me and ingrained in who I am; I separated myself from that side of me because of the things that Shadow is capable of, but without it, I wouldn't be here; I wouldn't be as strong as I am. I am more than aware that I have some serious shit to work out about my time there, but I don't hate myself for what I was forced to do. I know that D has some therapists on his payroll who also work in other capacities with him; Jynx mentioned them before when he made her talk to one, and she said it actually really helped her. So I have been thinking about asking him if he could put me in contact with one. I want to work through this in the healthiest way I can; I don't want to suppress it and then have it cause problems in the future.

My future is with my men, and I don't want anything to jeopardise that, not even me. I'm not quite ready yet, it's still a bit raw, but soon I promise myself that I will make the call.

Thinking about the school reminds me of Tank, and I feel like the shittiest person ever to grace this planet. How the fuck could I forget about my horse! I know I didn't have him for



long, and he's most likely being looked after, but I haven't even asked about him. What the fuck is wrong with me!

"Rage!" I yell, probably a bit too shrilly since he's only a couple of metres away from me.

He rushes over to me, scanning me from head to toe for injuries, which doesn't make that much sense since I've been sitting here the whole time and how the fuck could I injure myself. I've also gained the attention of all the others with my yell; once Rage is satisfied that I'm not hurt, he frowns.

"What's wrong?"

"Is Tank okay? I never asked; I'm a shitty owner," I practically wail, knowing that I'm being slightly dramatic but absolutely appalled with myself.

His smile is understanding as he takes my hands in his, "I've called and checked on Tank and my horses a couple of times. They are all okay. I promise. You aren't a bad owner, one, you had him for very little time; two, you know that he's at the school and being taken care of. It's not like you left him in a field somewhere to fend for himself."

"Rage is right. Cut yourself some slack," Trick adds.

"Are you sure they're okay?" I double-check.

"Yes, Ever. They're fine." Rage reassures me again, and my stress slowly leaves. I still feel like a shitty person, but I'm totally going to make it up to him.

Rage leans forward and captures my lips with his kissing me slowly until any remaining tension is gone.

"Better?" he asks when he pulls back.

I nod.

"Good, let's go shoot some shit," Jensen hollers, starting his engine and racing out the door leaving the rest of us in his dust.

I quickly jump on mine and follow him out, the rest of the guys cursing and following us as quickly as they can. I floor it so I can catch up with him, and we spend the rest of the

journey vying for first place, not that I actually know where I'm going now I'm out here, but there's only one trail, so I'm hoping it's this way. It doesn't really matter because I only manage to overtake him once in a broader part of the track.

When we arrive in the clearing surrounding the pool at the base of the waterfall, I barely manage to stop my vehicle before I'm pulled from it and up into the arms of Jensen, who kisses me like I'm his air.

"What was that for?" I ask, panting from the aftereffects of the searing hot kiss he's just given me.

"I just love you; I love that you challenge me and play with me and that you don't want me to be serious all the time."

I melt, "Of course not. You wouldn't be you if you were serious all the time, and I love you just the way you are."

This time he kisses me slower until we hear the sounds of the other four-wheelers and pull apart. I had no idea how far ahead we had gotten from them with our impromptu competition.

They all seem highly amused when they arrive, although Trick shakes his head in a 'what am I going to do with you two' kind of way. I wink at him; I could suggest several things, his gaze heats.

"We'll go on foot from here on out, the terrains not great for the four-wheelers," Atlas interrupts Trick, and I'm staring contest.

"Wait," I say suddenly, "are they big enough for horses?"

"I doubt it," Atty replies. "I suppose they could be if we cleared them a bit. Why?"

"Is it like a trail through the woods?" I ask instead of answering.

"No, there's a smaller clearing down that pathway," Cash answers, "we set them up down there. Why?"

"Could we set up a trail of targets through the woods?" I again ask without answering.

“Yes, Ever, but why!?” Jensen asks, clearly having had enough.

Rafe grins, “You want to do it like Merida, don’t you?”

“I love that you know that,” I exclaim, running and jumping so I can kiss him properly.

“Guys, fill the rest of us in, please?” Riot practically begs.

I giggle, “Okay, in one of my favourite Disney films, there’s this scene where she rides her horse and shoots targets as she goes, and ever since I saw it, I’ve always wanted to do it.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense,” Riot replies sounding relieved that he knows what the fuck I’m talking about.

“I know the scene you mean.” Rage says, “I’d have to get a better look at the trail and stuff, but I’m pretty fucking certain that we could pull it off.”

“Yes!” I grin.

“Come on then, let’s show you the clearing,” Trick smiles indulgently.

As we walk down the pathway, Rage and Rafe are studying the surroundings.

“We’d need to make the paths a bit wider, and extend the trail as well, loop it right round,” Rage says.

“We can all help, it sounds pretty fun, and those of us who don’t want to ride it can use any one of the vehicles we have,” Atlas suggests.

“I’m definitely up for building some targets.” Luc agrees, the others all joining in the conversation.

“I might be better off helping to clear the pathways,” Jensen announces excitedly before he promptly trips over a very obvious tree root and barely manages to keep himself upright.

“You can help paint the targets,” Trick suggests, and we all burst out laughing.

“There’s one thing you guys are forgetting,” Cash points out, and we all look at him.

“You guys don’t have your horses here, and the old stables haven’t been touched since we bought the place,” he replies.

“Wait, there are stables here?” I ask, never having heard about or seen them before.

“Yeah, and a paddock. You actually have to go through the backyard and the trees for a short while before you can get to it. I think there used to be a small track leading there on the left side of the house, but it was overgrown when we moved in and hasn’t been touched since.” Trick explains.

“Oh, that’s cool,” I reply, wondering what else is hidden on this vast property.

“It would take us a while to sort the trail out anyway, and we’d have to sort the stables out. Maybe it’s something we can think about doing during the summer break. We could bring the horses up then.” Atlas suggests.

“Yeah, that would work. We can see if Peter and the guys want to help as well.” Rage replies.

We finally get into the small clearing where the guys have set up several targets at varying heights all throughout it. After refamiliarising myself with the crossbow since I haven’t used one for a very long time, I chose a target and aim—my arrow flies off into the bushes. Yeah, I am definitely out of practice and far more comfortable with a longbow, anyway.

I will not let it defeat me though, and I become so focused that I don’t pay attention to any of the guys until I finally hit the middle of the target. By this point, I’m fucking sweating. I’ve been relentlessly trying to hit the bullseye for so fucking long.

“Well done, Ever!” Luc calls, a broad smile on his face.

Since I’ve thoroughly exhausted myself and my arm is threatening to cramp instead of taking aim again, I watch the guys. You can tell how often they came out here in the summer since they’re all repeatedly hitting the target. A sharp gasp leaves me as Jensen turns his head because Cash just asked him something and then promptly trips, shooting the arrow as he falls.

“How in the fuck did you manage that?” I ask indignantly, staring at the arrow in the bullseye. “I’ve been trying for fucking ages to get it to hit the bullseye, and you trip and fucking manage it.”

Jensen’s smile is gloating as he looks up at the target, mud and grass smeared across his face; the others just shake their heads in disbelief and then go back to their own games.

“I’m just that good, I guess,” he teases.

“You’re just that lucky,” Rage teases back, pulling him up off the ground.

Jensen merely shrugs in response. “Fancy a competition?”

“Absolutely,” Rage replies.

“I’m in,” I add. I’m going to lose horribly, but at least I’ll have fun doing it.

Rafe interrupts us, “Are you guys hungry?”

“Yes!” I practically yell, and I’m met by raised eyebrows and a snort from Jensen.

“New plan, food first and then the competition.” Rage amends, and I agree wholeheartedly.

Rafe has already set out a couple of picnic blankets, and I help him lay out the food, one because I’m insanely curious to see what he’s packed and two because I’ll be able to eat sooner if I help him set it up. He’s made sandwiches to everybody’s liking as well as a couple of pasta salads, strawberries, a selection of cheeses, drinks for everyone and, of course, more cupcakes along with several other things he’s handmade.

It’s all absolutely delicious, and I eat far too much; I have to stay sitting on the blanket for a bit while the others get back to shooting as I try to get my food baby to settle so I can move. They have all taken our idea and are having their own competitions with each other. When I can finally stand, Jensen is already hopping around excitedly, and Rage snatches his crossbow out of his hand.

“Dude, for the love of fucking everything, do not jump around while holding the crossbow. You’ve already

accidentally shot it once.”

Jensen freezes and then points at Rage, “You make a good point.”

I burst out laughing; he’s honestly so wired today; he’s in top form, and it’s highly entertaining.

Finally, Jensen calms down enough that Rage agrees to give him back his crossbow, and I finally stop laughing at their arguments long enough that we can start our competition; well, the boys can. I’m going to place third which, considering there are only three of us, isn’t exactly great.

I have fun though, and eventually, the guys stop competing so that they can give me pointers, and my aim actually starts to improve. I still don’t bother competing with them when they suggest another competition and instead alternate cheering for both of them and then go and cheer for the others, too, making up as many ridiculous rhymes for each of them as I can.

“Ever, you’ve got to stop,” Cash pleads through his laughter when it’s his turn to shoot.

“What? I’m helping,” I shrug, my smile playful.

“You are not. The rhymes are too much, and none of us can concentrate,” he replies, still laughing along with everyone who is in earshot.

“What’s wrong with Cash, Cash give it a bash; if you win, you can smack my ass?” I ask, trying to contain my own laughter as I repeat my rhyme. I’m ridiculously proud of it, no matter how bad it is.

When the laughter finally dies down, and I get stared at instead, I sigh dramatically, “Fine. You don’t get to appreciate any more of my outstanding rhymes today.”

Instead of yelling my rhymes, I mouth them enthusiastically and add in some dance moves too, which has an even better effect on them than when I was shouting them. After getting bored winding them up, I try out my newfound skills on a slightly higher target pinned further up the tree and hit the outer ring, which I’m pretty proud of. If we do manage to get the trail set up and the horses up here, I’m definitely going to

have to get a longbow, it's what I'm used to and what I will be able to do the trail best with. I'm going to have to do some training with Tank too actually, because he's going to have to take most of his cues from my knees, and I don't want him to be spooked by the bow.

I'm looking forward to it, and I hope we can make it happen.

A shiver works its way through me, and I realise that the sun is starting to dip below the horizon. We've been out here all day, and I'm surprised. The temperature is beginning to drop with the sun as well though, and I definitely didn't bring enough layers up here with me to keep me warm for when it really does set.

"Ever, do you want to head home?" Trick asks as I practically burrow myself into his jacket, and his arms wrap around me, regardless of the fact that it's his turn to shoot.

"Yep," I reply simply.

"Thought so," he teases, "we should head back before it gets dark anyway."

I help everyone pack up, and then we take the path back to the waterfall and our four-wheelers. I'm kind of dreading the journey home because if I'm this cold now, I can only imagine how cold I'm going to be with the wind whipping past me.

When the house finally comes into view, I breathe a sigh of relief, my breath misting in the air in front of me. I come to a screeching stop in the garage before getting off the vehicle and walking into the warm house; I seriously wish I'd worn more layers to go outside. My nose is so cold that I'm not even sure it's there anymore, and I can't feel my freaking fingers. After trying to toe my boots off to no avail since they seem to be fused to my freaking feet, I plop my ass down on the floor and use both hands to try and tug them off. When my feet are finally free, I dump my boots by the door leading from the garage and into the house and then make my way to the kitchen to the coffee and to pinch another cupcake.

By the time all the guys wander in, I have everyone's drinks made, and they all sip them happily. Warming their hands on the mugs, it really did get cold in that last half an hour. Runa loudly makes her presence known as she wanders into the kitchen and hops onto Rage's lap; he doesn't even blink, just strokes her.

"What do you want for dinner, Baby?" Rafe asks me.

"I'm not sure, I am starving, but I fancy something super comforting since I'm still cold from the ride back," I look out the back doors, "and now it's raining. The ultimate comfort food weather."

He thinks for a minute, and no one else is trying to give him any sort of help since he probably already has an idea of what he wants to make anyway.

"Okay, how about soup?" he asks, "I can do a couple of different flavours, and there's enough time to make some bread as well."

"That sounds perfect. Do you want some help?" I ask.

"No, it's your birthday. I've got this, and Riot can help." He grins.

"Oh, I can, can I?" Riot asks, and Rafe simply kisses him in answer, leaving Riot panting when he finally pulls away. I can't help but giggle when Riot says, "yep, I'm totally going to help."

"Thought so," Rafe's smile is satisfied before he turns to the rest of us and adds, "alright, out of my kitchen, you lot."

I salute him as I get up, earning a kiss of my own. Before I follow the others into the front room, admiring my decorations for the millionth time today. I head straight toward my pile of presents.



## Chapter Twenty

I search through them until I find a pair of black and white striped fluffy socks that one of the guys got me. I instantly pull them on over my cold feet and then set about making a fire. I really am that freaking cold, plus I love an open fire; it will go with the whole comforting and cosy thing we've got going on right now.

“What do you want to watch?” Luc asks me.

“I don't mind. Oh, actually can we play that racing game,” I ask.

“Yeah, sure, let me just load it up.” He replies and then hands out controllers to everyone who wants to play.

They play a game while I get the fire going and then sit back to watch, enjoying the coffee and slowly starting to warm up.

We're halfway through my game, and I'm in second place when Trick comes down from upstairs, his phone to his ear.

“We missed a call from our parents while we were out. Listen to this,” he chuckles as Luc pauses the Tv.

Trick calls in Rafe and Riot and then presses the speaker button on his phone, and out comes the voices of Jenny and Kat, “You listen to me, Trick, it's our baby girl's birthday, and if you do not answer, your phone I will drive up to that damn school and purposely embarrass you in front of everyone!”

“Cash, you better ring me back if I don't get to talk to me Tesoro on her birthday heads are going to fucking roll,” Kat's voice threatens, and the reason she didn't speak in Italian becomes apparent when she adds, “that threat extends to all of you!”

“Wow, okay. I guess your moms want to talk to me?” I say sarcastically.

“Shit, you better ring them back before they call again. You’ll be in more trouble if they think you didn’t call back as soon as you got their message!” Rafe points out.

“We can’t put them up on the big screen because they’ve seen the front room at Blackbreak, and they’ll know we aren’t there, and they’ll probably recognise the cabin too.” Atlas points out.

“I do not want to have to explain that whole situation right now,” Luc replies.

“Or ever,” Jensen adds with a wince.

“I’m assuming that they don’t know I went missing, then?” I ask.

“Nope, in all honesty, we were too focused on you to contact them, and it probably wouldn’t have been a good idea anyway,” Rafe replies, and I nod in agreement, they probably would’ve wanted to get the authorities involved and go through the proper channels, and that wouldn’t have helped my situation at all, and it could’ve made it worse.

“Alright, so we just all try to cram in on the phone screen and hope that they don’t recognise the background.” Cash suggests.

“Why don’t we go in the office, there’s a couch in there, and they’ve never seen it,” Jensen suggests.

“Good idea. Come on.” Trick replies.

We all make our way to the office, which I only remember seeing once when I first got a tour of this place. I’ve just not had a reason to go in there. We’re all rushing, mainly because we know how mad they’re going to get if they think we’ve been ignoring them.

“Everyone ready?” Trick asks, looking at us all crammed on and around the couch.

He dials a video call and then holds up the phone.

Jenny answers on the first ring, “Kat, they called back!” she yells back into the house and then chastises Trick, “it’s about damn time. We tried to ring Ever, but it didn’t go through.”

“Yeah, I dropped my phone, and it’s completely dead,” I reply, moving so they can see me and waving.

“Ever!” They greet at the same time while Rich, Rob and Marc gather around them so they can see.

“Hello, boys, Ever,” Rich grins.

“How’re you all?” Marc asks.

“Happy Birthday!” Kat and Jenny interrupt together.

“Thank you,” I grin. I’ve really missed them.

We make the usual small talk, asking how we are, insisting on having individual conversations with each of us, even Rage, and I’m not quite sure how he feels about that, but I love that they’ve so readily accepted him as one of us. When they start to ask questions about school, it gets a little bit dicey, and we have to be careful how we answer because they will definitely know if we don’t tell the truth.

“The threat to Ever has been taken care of,” Trick tells them, and they fall silent.

“You don’t think that should’ve been the first thing you told us?” Rob asks, his eyebrow arched.

“Does this mean you can come home?” Jenny asks hopefully, and I wince before quickly ducking my head, so they don’t see.

“I don’t think so, mom. We’ll finish up school at Blackbreak.” Trick replies as gently as he can.

“Yeah, I suppose that makes sense, but we can see you now?” Kat asks.

“Soon, there are a few things they’ve still got to take care of to make absolutely certain that she’s safe. That’s why you’ll notice that your security won’t have gone anywhere.” Cash replies this time.

“Okay, I guess that’s better than it possibly being never,” Jenny replies.

The conversation then turns back to them making sure we’re eating properly and Jenny and Kat telling us about all the new

pranks that they've pulled on their security guards, and that one or two are now even beginning to play them back.

"How's Rylie? Are she and her dad still hanging out with you guys?" I ask.

I still miss her, we clicked immediately, and I don't make friends easily, which means it still hurts that she walked away. I understand why she did, I always have, but it doesn't make it any easier.

I'm watching the screen closely enough that it's easy to see when they tense and all look at each other.

"What?" I ask.

Rob's hands land on Jenny's shoulders as he starts to talk, "They were coming along to every one of our family dinners, but they started to come less and less, and wouldn't answer any of our calls, avoid us if they saw us when we were out, and then we heard that Rylie had dropped out of school. A week later, the garage was sold, and they'd moved. No word or anything; they were there one day and then just gone."

I share a worried look with the guys.

"Okay, well, thanks for trying," I reply.

"We better get going. It's nearly dinner." Rafe says, and after a small protest, they all say goodbye.

As soon as the phone call ends, I start talking, "I really hope she's okay. I mean, just because they moved doesn't have to mean that something is wrong. Maybe they decided that there were too many memories and needed a change of scenery."

"When she ended your friendship, she said she couldn't be involved in this, that it was too dangerous, well technically, our parents are still involved, there are people watching them to make sure they're safe, and there were people watching Rylie and her dad, there's every possibility that they just decided that it was still too close. She'd obviously been through some shit, and being kidnapped by Liam didn't exactly help." Rafe points out.

“I’ve been thinking about that actually,” Atlas starts, “it’s been bugging me why Liam would kidnap and torture Rylie when he knew exactly who you were and in his own fucked up way cared about you.”

“Yeah, that’s been driving me mad as well,” Riot adds, “I just don’t understand his motivation.”

“That’s the thing; I don’t think that it was Liam. I think it was Blake, and Liam caught wind of what he was doing. At that point, he wouldn’t have wanted me to know just how out of control Blake was and how much his own control over his businesses and his men had slipped. So he took credit.”

“You know, I think you’re right. That would make far more sense.” Trick thoughtfully replies.

“He never bragged about it,” I add, “I mean, he took great joy in rubbing in what he did to Rage, Atlas and Riot, but he never brought up Rylie.”

“He wouldn’t. She was inconsequential to him. He doesn’t feel things like normal people, so he wouldn’t have thought that you still cared since it wasn’t immediately happening.” Atlas points out.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I just hope she’s okay.” I reply.

“I’m sure she is, but if you wanted to, we could get Peter to check on her?” Luc asks.

I genuinely consider it for a second but dismiss it almost immediately, “No, she specifically asked me to leave her alone. I’m not going to do that to her even if she won’t realise I have done it. If we ever reconnect one day, I don’t want to have to start it by saying I looked into you when you asked me not to.”

“I think that’s probably for the best. I am sure she’s okay. She didn’t really have friends at school, did she, until you started?” Jensen asked with a frown.

“Not that I know of. She used to say hello to everyone, but when I started hanging out with her, there wasn’t anyone else wanting to eat lunch with her or anything like that.”

“Maybe that’s why she moved?” he replies.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I reply. “I just hope that she knows I meant what I said and that if she needs help with anything, she can contact me.”

“I’m sure she does. We do need to get you a new phone and see if we can get you the same number though,” Cash reminds me.

“Yeah, shit, I hadn’t thought of that.” I bite my lip with worry.

“We can grab one tomorrow when we go to the store for ingredients, and I’m sure Peter can work his magic so you can keep your number,” Rafe adds, reassuring me.

“Yeah. That makes me feel better. Thanks.”

“No worries, now come on, dinner should be ready. I’ve just got to plate up.”

“We’ll help lay the table.” Rage says, pushing up off the couch and then turning to pull me off of Luc’s lap.

Dinner was stunning as usual and exactly what I was craving. Hearing them sing happy birthday to me was equal parts amazing and horrifying; they all gave it their best, but not all of them could sing, so it was a weird mix of expertly sung and sounding like a dying cat. Poor Runa couldn’t handle it and immediately ran off; I haven’t seen her since.

As we all clear the table, although the guys grumble because I insist on helping, Atlas’s phone rings, and he answers it as a facetime call, his smile turns into a disapproving look, and because we’re all nosy, we quieten down and start paying attention.

I hear the sound of pained yells coming through the phone and begin to get concerned until I hear Jynx’s voice and get excited; I know full well she’s not in trouble.

Atlas’s voice comes out sharp as I bound my way across the kitchen to get to the phone, “Jynx, I really don’t think that it’s a good idea that you talk to Ever looking like that and with that going on in the background.”

By this point, I've already reached him, and I grasp the phone, turning it toward me. Atlas tenses watching me closely; I can see why he might be concerned. Jynx is covered in blood splatter, and this close to the phone, the sounds of torture are even louder in the background.

I check in with myself just to make sure, but it's really not having the effect that I thought it might.

"Shit, Ever, I'm so sorry I didn't even think. I was just so excited about wishing you a happy birthday that I ..."

I interrupt her, "Seriously, don't worry about it, it's not triggering me at all."

She slowly smiles, "Really, that's great! And Happy Birthday!"

We all burst out laughing as she starts hollering the happy birthday song at the top of her lungs and her guys join in, despite the fact that they're obviously still trying to get information out of someone in the background.

"Thanks, guys!" I giggle when they finally stop.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there, but we'll catch up as soon as I've sorted this shit show out. I've got to get back to it." Jynx apologises.

"Of course, don't worry about it!" I reply, and we hang up.

When I pass the phone back to Atlas, they're all looking at me cautiously.

"Are you sure you are, okay?" Riot asks.

"Yeah, I really am. I think my triggers are more to do with losing any of you. My life has always been dark and filled with death, so to a certain extent, I'm used to that. But losing you or thinking that I had, and the emotional torture Blake put me through in relation to that, I think that's where my triggers are coming from."

"I guess that makes sense," Rage mutters.

"I still want you to be cautious in other situations though," Trick adds seriously, and I nod in agreement. I'm not taking

any risks, but this makes more sense to me.

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The next morning I meet Rafe and Riot in the kitchen. No one else is up yet, but we not only needed to get an early start for baking since everyone is arriving at four, and I want to make a variety of different things, but it was also decided we'd start this early because we need to go to the store to pick up some more ingredients and there are likely to be fewer people there at this time in the morning.

I may be feeling brave enough to actually re-enter society, but I'm not sure I want to make my first test trip at the peak of shopping hours.

"Morning, Sunshine," Riot greets me, far too happy for this time in the morning.

I narrow my eyes at him and then point accusingly, "You've had coffee!"

He immediately thrusts a travel mug at me, and I take a long sip, just the way I like it.

"Damn, I forgot how scary you were before coffee and this early in the morning." Rafe chuckles.

I ignore him completely, sipping my coffee until I feel it warm my veins. "You guys ready to go?"

"She's had enough now. We can talk safely, I think," Riot whispers out the side of his mouth to Rafe, who is trying and not succeeding in suppressing his smile.

My lips twitch and using my free hand, I tap him on the arm.

"Never mind, false alarm, she's violent," he jokes, pulling me toward him and kissing the shit out of me.

"We better get going." Rafe grins, looking at us both fondly.

Once we're in the SUV, Riot grabs my hand across the back seat, "I've messaged Peter to say that we'd be dropping your



new phone in on the way back so he can do his tech thing and get your number back.”

“Thank you,” leaning forward; I kiss him gently, his lips moulding to mine.

It takes no time at all to pull up to the store, and I’m reasonably pleased that other than a slight quickening of my heartbeat, I seem to be okay. Of course, I haven’t gotten out of the car yet.

“Ever, if at any point it gets too much, then you say something, and we’ll get you back home, okay?” Rafe asks, turning around in his seat so he can look back at me.

I nod.

I will tell them, of course I will, but I am also not going to let this defeat me. I will not let Blake take away my freedom by making me too scared to go out. That’s ridiculous, and I won’t allow it.

Opening my door, I hop out of the car, feeling prepared. It’s such a small thing, going to the grocery store, and yet it feels monumental to me. I grab a cart, liking that I have a barrier between me and everything else.

“So what do we need?” Riot asks, “I’m pretty much just here, so I can spend time with you both.”

His words are so sweet that I can’t help my reaction, “Aww.”

Riot winks at me and blows me a kiss as Rafe starts listing everything that we need and explaining that because there are quite a few of us, we’re going to have to double the recipes. We’re halfway through the shop, and the longer we’ve been here, the more relaxed I’ve become.

“Hey, Rafe,” someone calls, and we all turn around to see a tall, mocha-skinned man with bright blue eyes striding toward us.

“Hey, Creed, right?” Rafe asks, holding his hand out for Creed to shake and then nods to us, “This is Riot and Ever.”

“Hey, man, nice to meet you,” Riot greets, holding his own hand out, and I do the same.

“Guys, this is Creed, one of Lyric’s team members.” Rafe introduces.

“We’re hers,” he grins, and I easily understand his simple statement.

“Just like they’re all mine,” I grin.

“Lyric is so excited to come up later. We’ve had to distract her by getting her to make some things that explode, just to stop her from coming up earlier.” He chuckles. “You guys are in for a treat later. If you think that the fireworks she gave you before were good, you’re going to love the ones that only she can set off.”

“They were amazing,” I grin. “She was right. Blowing stuff up really does make everything better.”

Creed rubs a hand over his face, “She wrote that in the note, didn’t she?”

I nod. “Yep, the best advice I’ve gotten in a while.”

He lets out a surprised laugh, “We told her not to write anything like that, to let you get to know her before she let out her crazy.”

“Why on earth would you do that?” I frown, “I haven’t met her, but I think she’s awesome.”

“It’s not what you think. We adore her for exactly who she is, but she doesn’t have many friends and people struggle to understand her. She wanted to make a good impression on you and asked us to help.”

“Oh, okay, I guess I don’t have to smack you then.” I grin, “and she just hasn’t met the right people yet.”

“I hope you’re right. I’m fed up with watching her try to change who she is to fit someone else’s mould when she’s perfect, exactly how she is. She can be a bit much for some people, has absolutely no filter, whatever she’s thinking comes out of her mouth, add in her violent tendencies, it makes people uncomfortable. But I think she’s perfect.”

My heart melts at his words, and then I chuckle, “Sounds like she’s going to fit right in with us.”

“We better get on. Ever wanted to bake some stuff for tonight, and I needed to grab extra ingredients,” Rafe explains.

“Yeah, of course.” Creed says and then reaches into his back pocket, “I was going to give this to you tonight, but I’ll probably forget. Atlas mentioned that you found a cat and you’re keeping it. Well, my friend works at the vet’s here in town, and he’s lovely. He’ll look after her.” He hands me a business card.

“Thank you,” I reply, as I look down at the card, noting that it’s the same name that was on the card that Jensen brought home from the pet store. “I’ve been meaning to get her booked in since I found her a few days ago, but I just haven’t managed it.”

“You’re welcome. He’s pretty flexible with his appointments, and since the town is so small, he’s rarely booked up.”

“Great, I’ll give him a call when I get home,” I reply.

He nods with a charming smile and then walks off in the opposite direction.

“He seems nice,” Riot comments as we carry on shopping.

“Yeah, they all seem to be, and they clearly love Lyric,” Rafe replies.

“I can’t wait to meet her; she sounds awesome and like she could do with a friend.”

The rest of the trip passes quickly, and we even manage to get me a phone. Ever since I said last night that I hoped Rylie would call if she needed me, I’ve been panicking that she did and because I was otherwise engaged, okay kidnapped, I didn’t get it. I don’t think I’m going to get rid of this panicky feeling until I know for sure if she called me or not. We pull into Peter’s driveway, and I briefly consider how quickly I’ve started to think of this temporary accommodation as his house.

I feel like we're all putting down more permanent roots, and I know that it's going to make it infinitely harder for all of us when we have to go back to the academy. I don't want to go. If I had my way, we'd stay here, but I know that's not logical or possible.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“Hey Sugar, are you okay?” Peter asks as he answers the door. “Come on in.”

“Hey Pete, it’s only a quick stop in,” I explain before looking into the sitting room and greeting the rest of his team. I follow him into a room that he’s clearly claimed as his office and looks more lived in than anywhere else.

“Wow, you’ve made your mark in here,” I mutter.

“Yeah, I honestly love this house and would love to put my mark on it properly. Since I can’t, I did as much as I could in here.”

“Yeah, I kind of feel like that about the cabin. I love it as it is, but I’d have a few more homely touches around if I could.”

“Well, that place does belong to you, so there’s no reason why you can’t. You should bring it up with the guys. You know I’d love to help.” He wiggles his eyebrows, and I giggle.

“Yeah, maybe I will. The guys texted you earlier, but since you didn’t reply, I wasn’t sure if you got it, so I’m here because I lost my phone in the whole kidnapping thing, and I have absolutely no idea where it is. I think I vaguely remember Blake ordering someone to smash it when I was in the back of the van, and then it being in bits. Do you remember my friend Rylie?” he nods, so I continue, “well, I told her that if she ever needed me to call me and ...”

He interrupts me, “And you want me to get your new phone set up with your old number, right?”

“Well, yes please, if it’s possible,” I reply hopefully.

“Yeah, I can do that. It should be done by the time we come up tonight, and I’ll bring it with me.”

I jump up and squeeze him as tightly as I can, making him chuckle before something else occurs to me, and I step back,

“We ran into Creed, one of Lyric’s men, and well, from what he was saying, she could do with some friends, people who she can really be herself around, sounds like she’s a little quirky.”

“Sounds like our kind of person. Consider operation new bestie a go.” He grins like a dork, and I burst out laughing.

“Great, I’d better go. I’ve got baking to do,” I get up and make my way to the door.

“Oh, I love your baking.” Peter mutters, “see you later.”

“Bye, guys!” I yell to the others and get a host of goodbyes back.

I jog back to the car and hop in.

“Everything okay?” Rafe asks as he starts the car and heads out of the farm driveway and up the road to our place.

“Yeah, he said he could do it. I should have my phone back by the time they come up later.”

“You know, I think I’d be more shocked if he didn’t know how to do something,” Riot announces, and I mutter my agreement.

I help Rafe and Riot carry the bags from the car into the kitchen. After saying hello to all the guys, they all decide to give us some space to bake since they know how into Rafe and I get. Cash and Luc decide to go and spar in the gym. Trick decides to go and see Peter and check in with Noel.

“We’re going to go and check out the trail for the targets and make a plan for getting it widened and stuff so that we can ride it,” Rage says, motioning to Atlas and Jensen as he gives me a sweet kiss before they all head to the garage.

“And then there were three,” Riot teases, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively and making me smile.

“Alright, let’s get the first batch in,” Rafe orders clapping his hands, “we’ll make the cake and cupcakes first since they’ll need time to cool before we can ice them and then we’ll do the brownies and quadruple chocolate chip cookies.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I agree, and start to gather the ingredients to start the batch of chocolate cupcakes while Riot grabs the ingredients for the raspberry ripple ones, and Rafe starts the main cake.

We work in comfortable silence, music playing in the background, and I regularly get distracted as Rafe and Riot move to the music as they move around the kitchen. Holy hell, can those boys move their hips. I keep having to remind myself to concentrate on what I’m doing, or I’m going to end up messing up the batter.

As soon as the cakes are put into the oven, and we have nothing to do but wait, the guys turn to me, and I think fuck it, as I pull off my shirt, enjoying their heated looks, my smile is full of suggestion, “Well, what shall we do while we wait?”

Rafe glances at the timer, “We’re going to have to be quick.”

Riot strides toward me, hoisting me up as his lips crash against mine. He carries on walking until he lowers me onto the kitchen table, which is at just the right height. Impatient, I undo my bra and fling it off to the side as Riot moves to kiss me, his fingers rolling my nipples in his fingers as Rafe undoes my jeans and tugs both them and my underwear down my legs until I’m bare before them.

As Rafe’s hands move up my legs and Riot’s lips move down my neck, I manage to get some words out, “Now, this is hardly fair, I’m naked, and you’re both fully clothed.”

They look up from my body and share a look with each other, a wicked gleam in their eyes. I push up onto my elbows as they step away from me and turn to each other, sharing a kiss that is so fucking hot as they start to undress each other, their hands running all over their bodies as their tongues tangle. My hand moves down my body, finding my clit and using my fingers to circle it, my eyes never leaving the show that Rafe and Riot are putting on as their hands travel down taut abs to grasp each other’s dicks; they both groan as they start to pump their hands and my own moan joins theirs. Riot drops to his knees, his hand wrapping around Rafe’s dick as he

takes him in his mouth. Rafe's hands grip his hair forcibly as his gaze dips as he watches Riot.

Their attention moves to me, their eyes flaring with feral hunger as they see my hand between my legs. Riot releases Rafe with a pop; as he gets up and stalks towards me, he drops, his tongue licking from my entrance and then circling my clit as my back arches; I whimper in protest as he pulls away, causing him to chuckle, he slams into my dripping pussy, his tongue tangling with mine before he pulls away and looks over his shoulder. I see Rafe lining up behind him, and he smacks Riot's ass, the jolt going through him to me and making both of us moan in pleasure. Riot's thrusts slow, his fingers plucking at my nipples as he kisses down my neck; my eyes never leave Rafe and the look of pure ecstasy on his face as he pushes torturously slowly into Riot's puckered ass. Riot growls into my neck, clearly fed up with the tease Rafe's giving him as he slams his ass back, I thrust up at the same time as he pushes back, and I moan as they both growl when we join as one.

I'm so fucking close, it takes a second, but we find our rhythm pretty fucking quickly, Rafe thrusting into Riot as Riot's dick pounds into me, my pussy clenching around him as I lift my hips to meet his. Their thrusts become faster, and Riot's tongue is tangling with mine as somewhere in the background, I'm aware of the timer for the oven going off. I cry out as an orgasm slams through me; my back arches as Riot slams in one more time before stilling, Rafe following quickly after.

We all collapse, breathing heavily, and Rafe moves from behind Riot, so he can bend and kiss me. Riot takes the opportunity to smack his ass, making me giggle.

"Shit, the oven went off," I exclaim suddenly, and Riot and I both turn to watch Rafe's ass as he rushes to turn the oven off and disposes of the condom on the way.

When he turns back around, he draws his lip between his teeth as he nibbles it, looking like he's genuinely considering coming back over here and going for round two. I mean, I wouldn't be saying no, not ever.



“Don’t look at us like that,” Riot’s smiling is knowing, “one of us clearly has to show some restraint. We still have to make the brownies and cookies, and we have to ice the cakes, and we haven’t got that long until everyone shows up.”

“Fine,” I grumble teasingly, “let me get up so I can get dressed.”

Riot kisses me once more before getting up, and I take a moment to enjoy the view as he walks over to the trash can to dispose of his condom, and when they both start pulling their clothes back on, I figure I should do the same. Once we’re dressed and the cakes are cooling so that we can decorate them, we start on the other things.

Rafe decides to make blondies too, so I make the quadruple chocolate chip cookies, and Riot makes the regular brownies.

“I really want a bigger oven,” Rafe mutters, “doing big meals or lots of baking in here would be so much easier if we had more than one.”

“Yeah, it does its job, but if we were to stay here permanently, then a bigger one or even a couple of built-in ones would make more sense,” I reply, checking the temperature of the cake and finding it still slightly too warm to decorate.

“I think Trick is making a list of improvements and things that we’d need to make if we made this our permanent home,” Riot tells us, “I’ll get him to add it.”

“Oh, so it’s a possibility?” I ask, excitement thrumming through me, I love it here, and I’ve made it no secret that I want it to be our home.

“Well yeah, it makes sense. It probably won’t be until we’ve finished school and possibly college, depending on if any of us want to go.” Riot replies.

“It’s protected up here, and after a few tweaks to the living space, it will work great for us full-time. There are even stables for Tank and Rage’s horses.” Rafe adds.

“Is it bad that I wish we were done with school already? I mean, technically, this would be our last year if we were at a

normal school, and I don't want to leave here. I feel like it's going to be so much harder to go this time."

"I know what you mean," Riot replies.

"I don't even know what I'm going to do with Runa," I mutter.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Baby," Rafe kisses me on the top of the head. "Why don't you call that vet that Creed gave you the number for and get her booked in?"

"Oh, good idea. Can I borrow someone's phone?" I ask, pulling the business card out of my pocket. Rafe hands me his phone, "thanks."

I dial the number, and the receptionist seems really lovely, especially when I mention that I found her in a barn. I tell her that other than appearing a bit skinny, she looks in good health, but I want to get her checked over and get all the necessary things done so that I know she's healthy.

When I'm done, I walk back into the kitchen, "She's got an appointment in two days."

"Good. Are you going to be okay taking her down? One of us will be with you," Rafe asks.

"Yeah, I should be fine. It makes me nervous, but I refuse to let it control me. I think it might be one of those things that the more I do, the better it gets."

"Good, I'm glad," Riot replies, smiling softly as he checks to see if the cake and cupcakes are still too hot, "I think we should be able to frost these now."

"Hey, guys!" I hear Peter call out as he, Elijah and Trick all walk through the front room heading in our direction.

"Hey guys, you're early?" Riot replies.

"Yeah, Ever's phone didn't take as long as I thought it would, and I figured I may as well drop it off and come and see if you guys needed any help setting up."

He hands me my phone, and I thank him before tuning everything else out as I check to see if I've received anything

from Rylie. When there's absolutely nothing, I'm relieved because it means that she's okay. Well, it means she's not in deep enough that she needs our help, although that's assuming that she would ask us if she did. I'm also disappointed because I don't know for sure if she's okay but also because I miss her like crazy.

I do have a text from Elena though,

Elena: Hey, I'm just checking to see how you're doing and to send you this. The girls found their voices!

Me: oh, that's adorable! Clever girls, I miss them! I'm doing loads better; it helps to be at home. Thank you for looking after the guys for me.

Elena: Good, I'm so glad! I couldn't look after them until Peter kicked them back into gear.

Me: Well, thank you anyway, I'll give you a call soon, and we can catch up properly.

"Anything?" Trick asks.

"Nope, just some messages from Elena. Could you remind me to call her soon? There's nothing from Rylie though, which I hope means that she's safe," I reply, putting my phone back into my pocket.

"I'm sure it does. Remember, if you change your mind at any point, I'm happy to try to find her for you." Peter offers.

"Thank you, but I'm not comfortable with that."

Trick and Peter nod, I'm not sure they understand my reasoning entirely, but they'll respect my need to respect Rylie's wishes.

"Elijah, you're just in time. We were just about to decorate the cakes," Rafe grins, and then turns to me, "he decorated your cupcakes."

"Wow, really, they were awesome. Thank you!" I compliment him, and he turns pink, which has Peter gazing at him lovingly.

“You’re welcome,” he replies, slightly awkwardly. His attention moves to Riot and Rafe, “so what’s the plan?”

“Well, we kind of don’t have one,” Riot shrugs.

“Wait, what?” I ask. “We brought all of that decorating stuff that I have no idea how to use, and you guys didn’t have a plan?”

Rafe rubs his hand over the back of his neck and looks a bit sheepish, “I kind of figured I’d either wing it or look up ideas and try.”

I chuckle.

“It’s a good job. I showed up then. Show me what you’ve got, and I’ll see what I can do.” Elijah suggests a gleam in his eye that gives away just how much he enjoys this sort of thing.

“Okay, I’m ready to learn something new,” Riot says, following Elijah over to the counter where we’ve laid out all the supplies.

“Do you guys want a coffee?” I ask.

“Yeah, sure. Do you not want to help them decorate?” Trick asks.

I grab some cups and start pouring coffee, making it how they like it, “No, I think it might be a case of too many cooks.”

“Good point,” Peter replies, taking the cup off me as we sit down at the table.

“Oh, Riot said that you were making a list of changes we’d need to do to the cabin if it was going to become a permanent place?” I ask, and Trick nods, “Rafe would like a bigger stove or some of those built-in ones. Baking a lot and cooking big meals is not that easy in this one.”

Trick pulls out his phone and types something in, “Got it.”

“So, is there anything I can do?” Peter asks.

“I’m not sure. We ran into Creed in the store earlier, and he said that Lyric had something big planned. So, we probably

need to get the outside set up and start the fire pit.” I suggest.

“Sounds good. Do you have any lights left over from Christmas? We could do something similar to what we did in Elena’s backyard for Jensen’s birthday?”

“Yeah, I think we have some. I’ll go and grab them if you guys want to head out?” Trick asks.

As soon as we’re out of earshot of the guys, Peter turns to me and gently pulls at a thread of my hair, “Did you have fun in the kitchen with Riot and Rafe?”

My eyes widen as I reach up to feel my once-centred bun is now on the side, “Oh my fuck, do I have sex hair?”

He grins, thoroughly enjoying me blushing, “Yep.”

I burst out laughing, “I did have great fun.”

He wiggles his eyebrows as he smirks, “I bet you fucking did.”

“Come on, you dirty fucker, let’s light the pit and make sure we’ve got enough chairs for everyone. I have no idea what Lyric has planned, but I think it’s something firework based.”

“I can’t wait to meet her; she sounds awesome.”

We get to work, and when Trick comes out with an armful of fairy lights, we start to wrap them around the back porch and wherever else we can get them to reach. Finally, the yard looks as ready as it’s going to get, and we go back inside to see how the guys are getting on.

My jaw drops when I see the cupcakes; they’re done in a gothic way that I absolutely adore, with red and black swirled frosting, pearl-like sprinkles and tiny skulls. They look absolutely amazing.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“Wow,” I mutter. “You’ve got a real gift.”

Elijah grins, still leaning over the cupcakes, piping bag in hand, as he finishes the last two, “Thank you.”

“How come you two aren’t helping?” Trick asks Rafe and Riot.

“We quickly realised we were outclassed, and Rafe needed to start the pizzas anyway.” Riot replies.

“Is that what we’re having?” Peter asks excitedly.

“Yeah, homemade pizzas, loads of different toppings,” Rafe replies, kneading some dough. The brownies and cookies are out, but the oven is still on, so I’m assuming that there are pizza’s already in there.

“I’m going to go and get ready.” I say, “Lyric and the others are going to be here soon. Elijah, the guys are still coming up, right?”

“Yeah, they’re looking forward to it.” He mutters, his tongue out in concentration as he starts on the bigger cake.

Trick and Peter sit down at the table, fresh coffee in their hands, and I make my way out of the room to go and get changed. My pants are filthy from climbing around outside and trying to string up the lights.

Once I’m up in my room, I pull on some light blue jeans with a low cut white long-sleeved top and dab on a bit of makeup. I was going to leave my hair natural and just take it out of my usual messy bun, but thanks to the amazing sex in the kitchen with Rafe and Riot, it needs a brush, and if I brush it, it’s going to go poof. I will quite literally look like I’ve stuck my fingers in a plug socket. Checking the time on my phone, I figure that I should have just enough time to straighten it, so I plug my flatiron in and, while it heats up, divide my hair into more manageable sections. It’s so damn

long now that when it's straight, I'm most likely going to end up sitting on it, which is not going to be fun.

Getting up, I head toward the door of my room and yell, "Does anyone know how to cut hair?"

I get several no's, and then Rage appears, coming up from downstairs.

"Hey! You're back," I grin, flinging myself at him and kissing him deeply. "Did you get what you needed?"

"Yeah, I'll show you later. We drew up a plan, it'll be quite a lot of work, but it's going to look so good." His eyes drift up to my hair, that's sticking in all directions. "You want your hair cut?"

"Yes, can you do it?"

"I can. I used to have to trim my mother's when she couldn't be bothered to go to the salon and wanted an excuse to yell at me."

"Oh, Rage, that's fucked up. You don't have to. I don't want to bring back any bad memories or anything like that."

He smiles, pulling me closer, "It's okay, Puddin'. I actually like doing it. How much do you want off?"

"Thank you!" My excitement is obvious. I hate sitting on my hair, and I like wearing it down, which I will be able to do more if I know I'm not going to yank my own head back every time I sit. "I only want enough off so that I don't sit on it."

"Okay, I can do that." He looks at his watch, "we should have enough time. I think Atlas said that they were running a bit late anyway."

He grabs some scissors, muttering about how they're not perfect, but they are sharp, so they should work.

"I haven't got any proper scissors, so it's up to you, I can either use these and then order some proper ones in case it needs neatening up slightly, or we can wait?"

"I want to wear my hair down tonight and not sit on it, I trust you, and if it goes wrong, I'll just put my hair up. I wear

it up most of the time anyway, so I can just do that until the proper scissors come,” I shrug.

He nods and then gets to work. It’s been a long time since I’ve had my hair cut, but I’ve never felt this relaxed while having it done. He does it surprisingly quickly and even straightens my hair for me when he’s done. He picks out several imperfections with the cut, but I can’t see any and just hum along with him as I reassure him that I love it and I think it looks great.

I hear the front door open, quickly followed by several voices that I don’t recognise, and excitement mixes with nerves. I really hope she likes me. If everything goes to plan, then eventually, we will be living here permanently, and it would make things super difficult if we didn’t all get on, especially since they’re a big part of how things are run in this town and Atlas relies on them a lot.

“Stop worrying, come on.” Rage mutters, grabbing my hand and pulling me out of the door and down the stairs; how he knew I was worrying, I don’t know.

“Hey, you must be Ever,” a tiny blonde with hair down to her waist and bright blue eyes greets me. She’s dressed similarly to me, but her t-shirt says I almost pulled a muscle trying to give a fuck. It instantly makes me smile, and my nerves relax.

She looks sweet and innocent, but there’s a sharpness in her gaze that tells me never to underestimate her.

Rage moves past me to greet the guys standing behind her, they all look like they’re in their late twenties, and they’re all good-looking. There’s an eclectic mix, with one of them being in a full suit and the others dressed in button-downs and jeans or plaid shirts and jeans. They all have an aura of danger about them, but the guy with black hair in a man bun and bright, sharp blue eyes is practically bouncing on his toes, looking equal parts ready to attack and super excited; he and Jensen will get on great, add Ace into the mix and there’d be a whole lot of trouble in one room. As different as they all seem, they currently have one thing in common, they all look nervous as



they subtly watch Lyric and me. I'm guessing it has something to do with what Creed said earlier.

"Yeah, that's me," I grin.

She shocks me when she pulls me into a tight hug, and she's only an inch or so shorter than I am. Fortunately, I'm not nearly as jumpy when it comes to touch, nothing like I was when I first got back, so it only takes me a second to wrap my arms around her too.

Her smile is contagious as she steps back, her hands still on my arms as she looks me up and down.

"Lyric," the guy introduced as Ezra warns, and I don't have to wonder why for very long.

Lyric ignores him entirely as she goes, "Fuck me, you've got fantastic boobs."

"Lyric!" her men all groan at the same time.

Her smile turns sheepish as she turns to face her men and mutters, "Too much?"

I burst out laughing, shocking her men and her as she spins so fast back to me that I have to catch her so she doesn't fall.

"Thank you, I think they're pretty great too," I smile and then add, "and your ass is fucking fantastic, like seriously damn."

The hallway falls silent as both she and my guys all stare at us wide-eyed as we grin at each other.

"I will never understand women," Jensen mutters, breaking the silence.

Lyric grabs my hand and turns to her men, pointing accusingly at them, "See, I told you she'd get me!"

She then pulls me toward the kitchen leaving the guys to get to know each other or whatever guys do. Before we get there, the door opens again, and Elijah's team walks in.

"Hey, guys!" I yell.

Lyric echoes me even though she has no idea who they are, “Hey guys!”

I giggle again, and her lips tilt up in a smirk. When we get to the kitchen, Peter’s already sitting at the table with three drinks in front of him as he smiles, amused.

“That was one hell of an entrance. To be fair though, she does have good boobs,” Peter’s response has both of us chuckling as Lyric curtseys. “I’m Peter. I love your shirt.”

“Thanks,” Lyric replies and as soon as we’ve taken our seats turns to me, looking worried, “I didn’t offend you, did I? I’m not great at keeping my inside thoughts from becoming outside thoughts.”

“Don’t be silly. Of course you didn’t. Just be yourself; you’re good,” Peter answers for me, and I nod in agreement.

Her whole body seems to relax, “Thank fuck for that.”

“I think you’re going to find out pretty fucking quickly that we aren’t normal, not even by a long shot,” I reassure her, and hold my glass up, clinking it with them both, “to new friendships.”

Lyric’s eyes brighten at my words, and I suddenly want to kill every fucker that has made her think that her true self isn’t fucking good enough. I know she’s most likely capable of doing it herself, but still. I haven’t known her for very long, and I can already tell that she’s an absolutely amazing person.

“Those fireworks that you made were absolutely stunning. I’ve never seen anything like them before.” Peter gushes excitedly as he sips his drink.

“Yeah, honestly, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to go back to using store-bought ones again. They’ll just be boring.” I add.

Lyric starts wiggling in her seat, her excitement palpable, “Do you want to learn how to do something cool? I can’t teach you how to do the fireworks here since I don’t have all the stuff, but I can teach you how to make flash bangs?” her excitement suddenly drops, and she frowns, “sorry that was a really weird thing to ask, of course, you don’t.”

“Whoa, hold up,” I stop her self-deprecating tirade, “I would love to. I actually said to the guys that I wanted to ask you if you could teach me, but they vetoed it because I’m a hazard.”

Her eyes fill with wonder, “Seriously? You don’t think it’s weird that I’ve got science shit in my bag. Everyone normally does.”

“Honey, you’ve been hanging around with the wrong people,” Peter points out, downing the rest of his drink and pouring us fresh ones, “but don’t worry, we’ve got you now.”

“He’s right. Now, what are we making?” I ask excitedly. Lyric is seriously cool and just a bundle of contradictions. Most of it, I’m guessing, comes from past trauma, well, that we have in common.

“They’re called flash bangs, and they admit a blinding bright light, and mine make a really loud bang. They’re great for causing a distraction on jobs, and if you actually hit someone with them, it hurts a lot. I threw one at this guy on a job, and he lost his eye. It was awesome but don’t worry; he deserved it.” She explains happily.

“That’s awesome. I cut off a guy’s hand a few weeks ago and the thumb off his other hand,” I reply as soon as I see doubt flash across her features.

She leans forward, her eyes flashing dangerously, “What did he do?”

“He liked to force himself on young children.” I hiss.

“He got what he deserved, although you should’ve castrated him,” she shrugs.

My smile is sharp and dark, “I’d already done that the first time I caught him. I can’t take what’s not there anymore.”

Peter chokes on his drink, “Fucking hell, I had no idea that you’d done that. He’s dead now, by the way. Dom did what you suggested and left the kid’s families in a room with him.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Lyric grins, lifting her drink and taking a sip. “Now, back to the flash-bangs. Do you want to learn how

to make them?”

“Fuck yes!”

Peter holds up his hand, “Wait, you need to put Runa in the safe room, or she’s going to get spooked.”

“Oh shit yeah, hang on a minute,” I tell Lyric, picking Runa up from where she’s curled up on Peter’s lap and taking her to the safe room.

## *Cash*

Ever walks through the front room smiling like a mad woman, with Runa in her arms and heading in the direction of the safe room, and I frown. Why is she putting Runa away? Unless Lyric told her what the surprise was and it’s loud. Deciding to leave her to it, I turn back to the guys.

Lyric’s men are pretty cool, and I don’t see any issues in us getting on, which is a damn good thing. We’ve all decided to stay in the front room for the time being to let the girls and Peter get to know each other a bit better. After the fourth time of catching one of her men looking at the kitchen worriedly, I can’t keep my mouth shut anymore.

“Okay, why do you guys all look so worried? Should we be worried?” I ask.

Lucien shares a look with the others and shrugs, “I know it probably looks like we’re being overprotective assholes or worse, guys who think their woman needs to change, but it’s not that at all. She’s been hurt so many times, thinking that she’s got genuine friends when she doesn’t and when that happens, we end up losing an outbuilding because she blows it up in frustration. Don’t get me wrong; she’s strong as fuck.”

“And deadly,” Ezra grins, clearly liking that as much as we love the fact that Ever is deadly. His expression sobers, “But she was so nervous about meeting Ever that she wanted us to

tell her what she shouldn't do, and I fucking hated it. There's nothing wrong with who she is."

"I don't think you guys have anything to worry about. You saw how well the introduction went, and there's very little she could do to shock Ever." Trick points out.

"Yeah, if anything, you should be more worried about the trouble that they can cause together," Jensen adds helpfully, and I shoot him a warning look. He shrugs, "what it's true, Ever loves blowing shit up."

"Oh yeah, that might be an issue." Dominic chuckles.

"I'm sure it'll be fine, right?" I ask slightly hesitantly.

"I guess we're going to find out," Rage mutters, a twinkle in his eye that says he's looking forward to seeing what trouble they're going to cause together.

"Peter will stop them from doing anything too extreme, right?" Noel asks.

"Dude, no," Elijah replies, shaking his head, "he'll be cheering them on and throwing his own ideas into the mix."

We all chuckle at the very accurate description of Peter and Ever's friendship.

"Jonah, I actually wanted to talk to you about something," Trick starts as conversations start to flow around us, and I move closer, nosy as fuck and for a change, not knowing what he's planning.

He looks at me amused when I stand next to him but doesn't call me out on it.

"Sure, what's up?" Jonah asks, sipping his beer.

"We plan to make this our permanent home eventually. So I was wondering if it would be possible to buy the farmhouse and surrounding land that Elijah's team is currently staying in. I don't want to risk someone moving in there and becoming curious."

"Huh, that's a pretty good idea. How come we didn't buy it when we bought this place?" I ask, interrupting Jonah's reply.

“Because it didn’t matter then, the farmhouse is miles down the road, and we weren’t as aware of security as we are now.” Trick points out, and I nod.

Yeah, our lives have gotten a hell of a lot more dangerous since Ever came back into our lives, and that’s saying something because they weren’t exactly safe before. I wouldn’t change it for the world though.

“Yeah, we can do that easily. I actually own it. The kids of the couple that died were struggling to sell it, and by the time I took over the real-estate office, I was already aware of Atlas’s plan.”

“That’s great. There’ll be less of a paper trail which, of course, we don’t want,” I reply.

“I can actually do it, so the only piece of paperwork is a paper copy kept in my office, nothing online.”

“That would be perfect. Jensen is in charge of all the money since he’s got a gift for it and understands it way better than the rest of us. So I’ll get him to transfer it to you as off the grid as he possibly can.” Trick replies, sipping his beer.

“Great, I’ll get the paperwork written up and drop it by soon.”

“Actually, why don’t you guys come down to ours for dinner?” Lucien offers, joining the conversation. “It’s been a while since we entertained, and you can sign the paperwork then.”

“Yeah, that sounds great. When do you want to do it?” I ask.

“Tomorrow evening, drop by around six?”

“Definitely, we’ll see you there.”

There’s suddenly a massive bang from the kitchen, and the girls start laughing maniacally.

We sit there in shocked silence until Lucien smacks Ezra on the back of the head, “I thought you checked her bag when we left!”

“What the fuck was that?” Atlas asks, as we all get up to investigate.

He’s ignored as Ezra answers Lucien, “I did! You know what she’s like. She’s fucking sneaky.”

Walking into the kitchen, it looks like there’s a mini lab set out on the kitchen table and Peter, Ever, and Lyric all turn to us, their smiles broad and excitement dancing in their eyes. Ever immediately comes over to me and grabs my hand pulling me closer to the table.

“Look what Lyric taught me how to make,” she exclaims excitedly and lifts up a small glass vial that has a stopper in the top.

“Ah shit,” Dominic mutters, “cover your eyes!”

He says it just in time as Ever throws it on the floor, and there’s a massive bang. I can see a bright light from behind my closed eyelids, and when I open them again, there are two matching scorch marks on the floor. Fortunately, it’s flagstones, so at least we don’t have to worry about it catching fire; I have no idea if we can get the marks off the floor though.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### *Cash*

“That is so fucking cool!” Jensen exclaims, pushing through everyone else, “I want a go!”

Lyric grins and hands him a vial with no hesitation whatsoever.

“Wait!” Atlas yells, and Jensen freezes with his arm in the air. “There are already two scorch marks on the kitchen floor; please, if you have to do it again, go and do it outside and not on the deck!”

Ever looks at the marks on the floor and winces, “Oh yeah, whoops.”

“To the yard!” Peter yells, threading his arm through Jensen’s and dragging him out the doors.

Turning to Lyric’s men to tell them we told you they only had to worry about Lyric and Ever conspiring together; I find them all looking after a bouncing Lyric and Ever with soft looks on their faces.

I clap my hand on Creed’s shoulder, squeezing once, “I told you guys you didn’t need to worry about Ever accepting her.”

“Nope, but I do think we should follow them out because now that Jensen is involved as well, it could get really bad really fucking quickly,” Luc reminds us, and we’re suddenly all rushing to get outside.

Thankfully, they’re being relatively smart, and I’m not the only one that breathes out a sigh of relief.

“The kitchen smells awesome, by the way,” Ezra comments as we settle around the firepit and watch Jensen, Ever, Lyric and Peter joke around.

“Rafe is making homemade pizzas for dinner,” Riot replies, smiling proudly.



“Sweet,” Marty grins wistfully, “I haven’t had homemade pizza for years.”

Marty rarely speaks, so this is the first time that I’ve listened enough and not been distracted by Ever being gone that I’ve recognised the ever so slight accent to his voice.

Hoping that I’m right and not about to make an absolute ass out of myself, I switch to Italian, “Do you speak Italian?”

His eyes light up as he sits forward. It’s a good job; I grew up speaking it, and I’m used to my mom’s habit of talking quickly because he barely takes a breath as he replies in Italian, “Yes, I do. Do you speak Italian? I don’t get to do it much at all; none of the others can, although a couple of them have been trying to learn, things like jobs and other projects keep popping up, and then it gets put to the side.”

I grin, “No, I don’t get to speak it much either unless my mom calls.”

“It’s nice to talk to someone who speaks it. I feel like I’m not being completely true to who I am if I speak English all the time. Even my accent has diminished over the years.”

We converse in Italian for a while, and he’s right; it’s really lovely to talk to someone, although I can tell it means more to him than it does to me. I make a note to make sure that I speak with him more often in Italian.

When Ever comes over to sit on my lap, I switch back to English and Marty gets distracted talking to Callan. I feel like we don’t know the guys on Elijah’s team nearly well enough considering we’ve fought alongside them. I’ll make sure we fix that.

Noel leans over from his chair next to mine and lowers his voice, “Thank you for doing that for him. I’ve been trying to learn, but I’m dyslexic, so it’s not that easy for me, and it’s going slow.”

“Why in secret?” Ever asks.

Noel shrugs and looks over at Marty. When his gaze softens my eyebrows raise slightly, I honestly had no idea that he felt like that. I know I don’t know him that well, but his look right

now is making it hugely obvious that he likes him, and even though I was distracted by Ever being gone but I never once picked up on anything between them; he hides it well.

“Oh, got you,” Ever replies knowingly.

Noel’s gaze snaps back to Ever, “What, I, no.”

“Dude, chill out. It’s okay.” I add, not liking the way he’s panicking.

“He’s straight.”

I’m instantly reminded of the Riot and Rafe situation and how Riot thought Rafe was straight. I share a look with Ever, and I get the feeling I’m going to be roped into some kind of recon mission to see if Marty feels the same about Noel.

“That sucks, man I’m sorry,” I reply to him, my response clearly shocking him, although I don’t know why. His leader is gay and with one of my best friends, for fuck sake.

“I’m not doing it because I want him to like me like that. I just know that he struggles with it, so I wanted to do something to help.”

“Well, I’m sure he would help you learn,” I point out, sipping my beer.

Noel looks away, rolling his own beer bottle between his hands, “I don’t want him to get fed up with me or think I’m stupid. I’m not the easiest to teach.”

“Stop that right fucking now,” Ever growls, and Noel’s eyes widen, “dude, he’s your friend. Just ask him, and if for whatever he can’t teach you or refuses, then one, you tell me so I can smack him for being an idiot and two, you ask Cash instead. I’m sure he’d help you.”

Noel bursts out laughing, and my curiosity is peaked when Marty immediately finds him and starts smiling simply at the sound of his laugh. For fuck sake, it’s another two that are completely unaware of each other’s feelings.

“You may have a point,” Noel concedes, “I’ll try. Could you teach me something now?”

“Sure, what do you know?” I ask.

“The simple things like, hello, goodbye, yes, no. Things like that.”

“Okay, do you know how to say how are you?” I ask, and he shakes his head, so I continue, “So repeat after me, come stai oggi?”

He repeats it after me almost perfectly, and I’m reasonably certain that he’s going to pick it up quite quickly. I continue to teach him a couple of things, not understanding what he meant about him being hard to teach since he’s doing really well so far.

“Hey, what are you guys doing?” Marty asks, trying to sound nonchalant and failing miserably.

## *Ever*

I try to hide my smile.

Noel is entirely oblivious to the real reason why Marty is over here, and I have a sneaking suspicion that it’s more down to jealousy than curiosity.

He seems nervous as he rubs his palms on his thighs and looks up at Marty. “Cash is helping me to learn some Italian.”

Marty’s eyes light up as he takes a step forward toward Noel and then stops himself, “You want to learn Italian?”

Cash and I share a look as we watch this unfold. I think this might be the first step in the right direction, but I do think it’s going to take them longer to admit that they are into each other. They both seem overly cautious.

“Well yeah, I know that you miss being able to speak it, but I’m finding it pretty slow going. You know I struggle enough with English, so Italian is even harder.”

Marty’s whole demeanour seems to soften at his words, “Has it been easier for you to get the hang of it with Cash teaching you verbally instead of having to read things?”

“Yeah, definitely,” he admits.

“Well, if you’d like, I’d love to teach you?”

Noel sits forward in his seat, getting excited, “Really? That would be great!”

Marty relaxes at his words. He was clearly nervous about Noel’s reply. Noel gets up and follows Marty, and I turn to Cash with a huge grin on my face.

“I know that wasn’t the intention of teaching him, but I think it worked out quite well,” I praise.

“Yeah, a bit of jealousy never did anyone any harm,” he chuckles.

Peter comes over to join us, his eyes on the retreating figures of Noel and Marty, “Please tell me that you two just gave them a push in the right direction. I could see the attraction between them from the second that I spent any decent time with them all. Elijah thinks I’m seeing things, but he’s just gotten used to their dynamic and doesn’t see it for what it is anymore. It probably doesn’t help that Marty is a bit of a player. Well, they both are, but Marty only talks about his female conquests. I’m fairly certain that he’s got some trauma clinging to him.”

“You know, that actually makes sense. I think it might take a while, but Marty is now teaching Noel Italian, so hopefully, they realise sooner rather than later.” I reply.

“It was obvious enough to us.” Cash adds.

Our conversation gets interrupted as Lyric comes bouncing over to us.

“Come and dance with me!” She demands and grabs both Cash’s and my hands and pulls us up.

She’s already gotten several of the others up and dancing, and my hips sway to the beat as I’m spun between all of my men. Cash quietly sings the words to the songs in my ear, and I never thought I was the swooning type, but seriously I challenge anyone not to swoon if he sang in their ear. Jensen and I have a dad dance off, and I am in fits of laughter,

especially when Noel and Lucien join in with their own moves. Noel, I'm not too surprised about, but Lucien arrived in a suit, and I definitely didn't expect it of him.

When I start to get tired, I excuse myself to grab a drink and look around at all these people that have come into our lives. Not only are they awesome as hell, but they all understand the way that we live and the thrill we feel when using our unique skill set. It's rare to find people that truly understand you, and yet we've somehow managed to surround ourselves with them. New friends and old, and I really hope that someday soon we can all be in the same place. I have a feeling that it would be one hell of a party, and I really want Jynx to meet Lyric. She'd fucking love her.

"Are you guys hungry yet?" Rafe yells over the sound of the music and everyone's conversations.

"Hell yeah!" Ezra yells back, making everyone laugh and echo his sentiment.

Rafe chuckles, "Okay, give me ten minutes, and I'll load everything on the table so you guys can come and grab what you want."

I get up and make my way into the house, "Hey, Big Guy, do you want some help?"

"Yes, please," Rafe replies, pulling me into his arms and kissing me.

"What do you need me to do?" I ask.

"If you can put the chips, dip and all that sort of stuff on the table. I'll start cutting up and plating the pizzas. There aren't enough seats in here for everyone, so we'll get them all to grab a plate and take it outside."

"Sounds good," I reply. I can't wait to try the pizzas; they smell absolutely divine.

We're set up quickly enough, and once everyone has grabbed their food and taken seats around the firepit again, the compliments start flowing, and Rafe's ears start to turn pink.

“Where did you get these pizzas from?” Jonah asks, “They’re awesome.”

Rafe clears his throat, “I er, I made them.”

“No fucking way,” Noel exclaims.

“Rafe’s an amazing cook.” I praise, proudly, and then go back to my food as the conversation picks up around us, everyone asking Rafe about how he made them and some of them even placing orders for him to make them some.

Trick comes to sit next to me, holding his hand out so I can thread my fingers through his. I balance my plate on my lap so that I can still eat and take his hand.

“Are you okay, Sweetheart?”

My yawn takes over my face before I can answer, and I smile sheepishly, “Yeah, I’m having a great time, Lyric and the guys are awesome, but I’m getting tired now.”

“I think everyone is,” he replies, nodding over to Lyric, who is sitting in Creed’s lap and yawning.

She makes her way over to us, “I’m shattered. I’m going to set up the surprise I made for you guys, and then if it’s okay, we’ll head home after that. The guys told me that you’re coming to ours for dinner tomorrow?”

“We are?” I ask, turning to Trick, and he nods, “awesome.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. I think everyone is ready for bed,” Trick agrees.

“Awesome. Creed, I need your help to set it up!” She yells over her shoulder.

I watch as she completely changes, her confidence increases, and she takes charge, ordering Creed and telling him exactly where to put what I’m guessing are fireworks. She’s placing them with such precision that I know there’s more to this than just awesome and really pretty fireworks. The rest of us stay seated as we watch her work and fall silent as she continues telling Creed what to do.

“They need to be set off exactly forty-five seconds after the last one, or it won’t work. I’ll light the ones on this side, and I’ll signal when you need to start the ones on your side.”

“Got it,” Creed replies.

Lyric starts tapping on her watch and then chucks Creed, one of those long lighters, “Remember, step at least five paces back. I’ve made these safer than generic fireworks, but I’m not risking you.”

Creed nods and strides over to her, pulling her tightly against him and kissing her like she’s the best goddamned thing that ever happened to him. When he finally puts her down, she’s got this goofy as hell look that I’m sure I get when one of my guys kisses me like that.

She shakes her head as if trying to get it back into the game and then strides over to the first one in the set as Creed moves toward the second group that they’ve set up.

She lights the first one, steps back, waits a few seconds and then lights the next one. She seems to light them in random order and waits different amounts of time between each one, sometimes waiting and sometimes doing it straight away. The colours are amazing, and I’m reasonably sure that she’s made the pops, bangs and fizzles louder somehow. About halfway through, I start to realise that she’s making them into a picture.

“Holy fuck, it’s a skull!” I yell excitedly.

“Whoa, that’s insane,” Jensen’s hushed voice is full of awe.

It’s crazy clever, and I have absolutely no idea how she’s done it. The guys weren’t being dramatic when they said that she’s a genius. She really is. She nods to Creed, who starts setting his own exactly forty-five seconds apart, just as Lyric told him to, and a huge and brightly coloured rainbow appears in the sky.

“Wow, that was amazing,” I tell her when it’s over, everyone else doing the same thing and complimenting her while her guys look really proud.

She smiles proudly. “Thanks, guys.”

We all get up and take the plates and stuff inside, Peter loading the dishwasher as much as he can and setting it going. As we're saying goodbye, Lyric turns to Peter.

"Are you coming to dinner tomorrow as well?"

"If it's okay, I'd love to."

"Yeah, of course!"

We all say goodbye, hugging and promising Lyric that we'll see her tomorrow. Considering they have a relationship like ours, I'm really interested to see how they live. They've obviously been together for a while, and they have that level of comfortability with each other that tells of knowing each other really well.

I watch them all leave, waving from the front porch and trying not to cheer when Noel and Marty bend their heads together, still talking and with barely any space between them as they walk to their car.

"I can't wait to get into bed," I yawn.

My statement is echoed as we close the front door behind us, and I start to make my way upstairs as some of them follow, and some of them check the house to make sure that everything is locked up. I get halfway up the stairs before I remember Runa and spin around, going back down to get her. When I open the door, she comes straight to me, meowing her little head off and clearly telling me off for leaving her for so long.

Picking her up, I mutter, "I'm sorry, baby, but you really wouldn't have liked the fireworks and the noise out there."

She starts up her purr engine as I take her into the kitchen and feed her waiting for her to be done before I open the window for her to see if she wants to go out. She looks at me like I'm crazy and sits down, refusing to go outside.

"Alright, fine, I'm going to leave this open slightly like normal in case you want to go out in the night, got it?" I ask her like she's actually going to reply.



When she chirps in reply, I grin. I love how vocal she is. I make my way upstairs, Runa following me and jumping on the bed, where Trick and Luc are already settled down, they both give her scratches as she settles on my pillow, and I leave the door open a crack so she can get out.

“I’m just going to have a quick shower,” I tell them, grabbing some clean underwear and heading toward the bathroom.

My shower is quick, mainly because I can’t stop yawning, and I’m so tired that my eyes feel like sandpaper.

When I finally climb into the bed, Trick and Luc are very nearly asleep and kiss me softly, muttering goodnight before they wrap around me. My last thought before I succumb to sleep is that this must be the longest that we have ever gone without some huge drama happening. We’re just getting to enjoy each other and spending time with our friends. It’s been incredible and definitely something that we’ve needed for a long time. Not just because of the whole kidnapping thing but because of everything else that’s happened in the last few months, we haven’t really gotten to just rest.

I have this feeling that it’s not going to last for long though, Alaric is hiding something, and I can’t help but think that whatever he’s hiding is going to bring a whole lot of drama back into our lives.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

When I wake up the next morning, I'm surprised that I didn't have my usual nightmare. I've had one every night since I got back, although some are worse than others. Since I've had no nightmares, I feel refreshed, and my mood is better than it usually is in the morning. My legs are tangled up with the guys, but I push up on my elbows so I can look over at Luc and Trick. I can't help but pepper their chest in kisses, and they both reach for me at the same time. Luc pulls me into his chest and presses his lips against mine as I swing my leg over him, pushing the quilt away at the same time.

I move my hips against his dick, my underwear already damp and my movements causing his hard dick to rub against my clit. I'm suddenly lifted off Luc, my lips crashing against Trick's as Luc pulls off my underwear and his own. Instead of keeping on top of him as I expected, his eyes spark with heat as he hands me back to Luc, who lines up at my entrance. I lower down onto him as tortuously and as slowly as I can, and I moan when he is finally fully sheathed inside me.

My attention moves to Trick, who is watching us, his hand around his dick as he pumps it. The sight somehow manages to turn me on even more, and I can't pull my eyes away from him as I start to rock my hips against Luc and his dick hits just the right spot.

"Do you think you could take us both?" Trick asks, reaching behind him and pulling a tube of lube out of the drawer in the bedside table.

My thighs clench around Luc, and my eyes practically roll back in my head. Yes fucking, please.

"She likes the sound of that," Luc growls, reaching up and plucking my nipple between his fingers, making me throw my head back in pleasure.

"I need to hear her tell me," Trick replies, squirting some lube into his hand and using it to coat his dick.

“Yes sir, I want you both,” I reply with a wicked smile as I lean forward and spread my legs as Luc moves his further apart so that Trick can settle behind me.

Trick’s smile is full of dirty promises, and he leans forward, his chest is pressed against my back as his dick slips between my ass cheeks and he pushes his finger against my lips; I suck it in, swirling my tongue around the tip and then release it with a pop. Luc slows his movements as Trick kisses down my back, the finger I just sucked swirling around my asshole before he pushes it in torturously slowly. He pumps a few times as Luc slides in and out of me, and my moans of pleasure get louder.

“More,” I hiss, desperate for his dick to replace his finger.

“More what? Use your words, Sweetheart. Do you want my dick where my finger is?” Trick growls, his other hand coming down on my ass and shocking a yelp out of me as my pussy clenches around Luc’s dick, my nails digging into his shoulders as I bite his neck. Luc’s hips thrust up hard, and he lets out a low groan.

“Yes, Sir,” I practically beg and finally feel the pressure of his dick against my ass.

My mouth seeks Luc’s, and he nibbles on my bottom lip as Trick torturously slowly slides inside me. Once he’s situated, they both start to move, and the feeling of having them both inside me has my orgasm building rapidly. I pull my lips from Luc’s as I scream my release into his neck, and they both speed up, prolonging it as wave after wave rocks through me. With one final thrust, Trick stills, grunting out his release as his hands clench on my hips, no doubt leaving bruises. A second orgasm threatens to overwhelm me as Luc palms my boob in his hand, still thrusting and making both Trick and I groan; he pinches my nipple and throws me into another mind-blowing orgasm as he calls out my name as his orgasm rips through him.

We detangle ourselves and fall into a sweaty and exhausted heap, my head on Luc’s chest and Trick pressed against my

back. I'm so exhausted and satiated that I know there's absolutely no way that I'm going to stay awake.

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"Ever," Trick mutters, sweeping some hair off my forehead, and I grumble incoherently in reply.

"Ever, we need to get up," Luc adds, amusement in his tone as I snuggle deeper into the bed.

"No." I groan.

"Peter's downstairs, and he has something to tell us." Trick adds.

I peek one of my eyes open, the other one refusing to budge and wanting to stay closed.

"Come on. I'll get you the biggest cup of coffee we have," Luc tempts me, and I groan, sitting up.

"Fine," I mutter. The promise of coffee is the only thing that's making me want to get up right now. "Can you hand me some clothes please?"

"Sure," Trick replies, going to my closet and rummaging around.

He comes back with underwear, grey-cuffed joggers, and a tight white tank. I pull it all on and then reach for Luc's hand.

When we get downstairs, what Trick said registers in my mind, Peter has something to talk to us about. Well, shit, what are the chances that it's actually a good thing and not something that we have to worry about.

"Is everything okay?" I ask him as we walk into the kitchen.

Luc goes further into the kitchen as I walk around the table to give kisses to Jensen and Atlas, who are sitting on either side of Peter and then quickly go around the table to give everyone kisses before I take my seat opposite Peter.

Peter frowns, which is not a good sign, "I think so. Have your coffee first, and then I'll explain."

He knows me well. Coffee always comes first, especially if we don't know whether the news is good or bad. Luc places a truly giant mug in front of me, and I have to grip it with two hands as I lift it to my mouth and take a huge gulp.

"Are you ready now?" Peter asks cheekily, and I stick my tongue out at him before nodding. "Right, so you know Alaric said that the Principal was going to send us some work to cover the time we will be away? Well, I thought the amount that he sent would be a good indicator of how long we've got left before we have to go back."

I really hope he's not about to tell me that we're going back next week because I'm not ready and I don't want to go back. However, I don't think I'm ever going to want to get back, so maybe ripping the bandaid off and getting it over and done with would be better in the long run.

"Yeah, that makes sense," Trick replies, "so how long do we have?"

"Well, that's the thing, he's sent enough work to cover the rest of the year, and he's used our last test scores in combat and weapons training to graduate us from those classes," Peter explains, looking perplexed.

"That's great, isn't it? It means we don't have to go back this year," Jensen excitedly shifts in his chair.

"Yes, but why?" I ask, frowning.

Don't get me wrong; I am extremely happy that we won't have to go back this year, but as far as I can tell, there's actually no feasible reason that we shouldn't go back.

"So, what does this mean?" Luc asks.

"I think we all agreed from our last phone call with Alaric that he knew something and wasn't telling us." Rage interjects.

"And I'd bet that the something he knows is the reason why we're out for the rest of the year," Rafe adds, twirling his coffee cup in his hands.

"It could be a job?" Peter suggests.

“But if it were a job, then surely, he would’ve told us by now, especially if it’s something that’s going to take us that long?” Riot asks.

“I’m not sure. There’s only one way to find out, I suppose, Atlas; why don’t you call him and ask him what’s going on,” Trick suggests.

Atlas pulls out his phone and dials; when Alaric doesn’t pick up, he tries again. “Either he’s busy with the Blake shit, or he’s ignoring us, knowing that the Principal has sent us through the work and that we’ve got questions.”

“I’m betting that it’s a bit of both,” Peter points out.

I down the rest of my coffee and push up from my seat, “I’m going to go and spar. Clearly, shit is about to hit the fan again, and I need to know that I can fight without having flashbacks or panic attacks. I need one of you to spar against me, please?”

They share a wary look. I understand their hesitation completely. If this goes wrong, then they’re going to have to deal with a triggered me, and they won’t like that even though they aren’t the reason behind it, they still triggered it. I wait though, because I know that they understand that I need to do this. It’s better to find out if I can’t cope or not while I’m at home and safe rather than if we’re out in the field and get attacked.

“Okay, Angel, I’ll do it,” Jensen says resolutely as he stands up, “it’s important that we find out now.”

“I’ll come too,” Atlas agrees. “We need to know if size plays a role in if you’re triggered or not.”

“It might be a good idea to get one of the guys from Elijah’s team up,” Peter suggests, “you instinctively know that your men won’t hurt you, but you don’t know Elijah’s team that well so it will be closer to a real world scenario.”

Trick frowns, crossing his arms over his chest, “I don’t think ...”

I interrupt him, “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Get Callan to come up if he’s willing. I know him the least.”

“Ever, are you sure that’s a good idea?” Cash asks.

I shrug, “I need to know and Peter’s right. I’m not feeling nervous or twitchy about sparring. In fact, I’m looking forward to it like I normally do. But I do want to spar with you guys first before we bring Callan up. If I can minimise the amount of people that see me have a panic attack, that would be best.”

The guy’s nod, not looking overly pleased with the turn of events but also knowing that I need to do this before I become a liability in a situation that could have real and dangerous consequences.

“Thanks, guys. I’ll meet you in the gym. I’m just going to put a bra on.” I grin as all of their eyes, apart from Peter’s, dip to my boobs.

“I’ll call Callan and see if he can come up. I’m sure it won’t be a problem.” Peter says, pulling his phone out.

“Hang on, could you wait until I’ve sparred with a couple of the guys?”

“Yeah, sure, just let me know, and I’ll message him. I’m fairly sure they aren’t doing much today.”

“Thanks.”

After I’ve changed into a sports bra, I make my way down to the gym and check in on how I’m feeling, and I’m relieved when there’s no anxiety or fear at the prospect of fighting, just the usual anticipation and excitement.

Hopefully, it stays that way because sparring is one of my favourite things to do, and I will be mad as hell if I can’t do it anymore.

“Hey Sweetheart,” Trick greets me, “are you ready?”

I nod and head toward the mats where Jensen is bouncing around, trying to let out some of his nervous energy.

“If at any point you start even to feel slightly uneasy, you call it, got it, Angel?” Jensen demands seriously.

“I promise,” I reply and then kiss him because it’s hot when he gets all serious with me.

Everyone is here, and I know it's because they're worried about me. I don't bother speaking, and neither does Jensen as we square up. We've sparred so many times by this point that it's familiar.

"First one to the mat," Trick calls, unable to hide the apprehension in his voice.

We both nod and then start to circle each other. I strike out first, which isn't how I used to fight. I used to wait for my opponent to make the first move; however, when I was with Blake, I couldn't do that. The move surprises Jensen, but he takes it in his stride and blocks the hit. Moving to strike me back, which I dodge easily. We go at it for a while, neither of us really landing any significant hits, which surprises me, since he used to be able to land at least a few.

Eventually, Jensen calls it, a massive grin on his face as he wraps his sweaty arms around me, "You've gotten better."

I grin, "I guess something good came out of those fights."

The guys freeze, but they don't comment as Atlas steps forward.

"Alright, my turn. Are you okay to fight again so soon?" Atty asks me, and I nod.

The whole point of this exercise is that he's taller than Jensen and to ensure that I don't get triggered by bigger opponents. I don't think I will be. I was put up against a variety of different-sized people. What Jensen said about them not being good people if they were involved with Blake has helped me to separate it in my mind. My survival instincts are strong, but I won't let myself be pulled back under and turned into the emotionless robot I was.

Atlas and I's fight lasts a bit longer than my fight with Jensen, and he lands as many hits as I do. When I finally take him to the floor, I have to remind myself that this isn't a fight to the death, and I need to hold back.

"Are you okay?" Trick asks, as we both guzzle some water.

"Yeah, the only issue I've had is reminding myself it's not a fight to the death, but it hasn't been hard to remind myself of



that, and I haven't lost control, so it's just a reminder kind of thing." I try to explain it as best as I can.

"Well, that's good, you're in control, and you haven't been triggered." Cash smiles encouragingly.

"Do you still want me to get Callan up here?" Peter asks, phone in hand.

"Yeah, I could go another round, and I want to make sure that fighting against a relative stranger isn't going to be a problem since we're unlikely to be fighting against people we know."

Peter nods and makes the call, "He said he'd be up in about ten minutes. I hope you don't mind, but I filled him in a little bit so that he won't get blindsided if something doesn't go to plan."

"Yeah, of course, we don't need someone else freaking out alongside me." I agree, drinking more water and looking around at the guys. Atlas checks his phone again, "Anything?"

"Nope, not even a message to say he's busy at the moment," Atlas replies, frowning.

"So there's definitely something going on, and he's not ready to tell us yet," Luc summarises.

"That sounds about right." Trick replies, "He needs to tell us soon though, because I'm not being blindsided."

"I agree," Riot replies.

"Oh shit. What time is it? When do we have to be down at Lyric's for dinner?" I ask, inadvertently changing the subject.

"We're okay. We'll have to rush to get ready, but it shouldn't be too close." Peter replies.

"Thank god. There's no way I want to let Lyric down. I have a feeling that's happened a lot with people who she thought were friends in the past."

Peter nods in agreement just as Callan lets himself into the gym, "Hey guys, sorry for barging in; Peter said it was fine."

“Don’t worry about it, man,” Trick grins, shaking his hand. “He explained why we’ve asked you to fight?”

Callan nods, his understanding gaze switching to me, “Yeah, I get it. I also wanted you to know I’ve been there. D found me in an underground fight ring. I was their top fighter, and I liked it at first, but when I wanted to leave, I found I wasn’t able to, and suddenly I wasn’t fighting in the ring against people who wanted to fight as much as I did, but I was being used as muscle. They used me to put fear into people who didn’t pay the debts that they had to have in order to keep their homes and businesses, the fucker was the worst kind of loan shark you can imagine, and by that point, I was in too deep to find my way out until D found me. After that, I refused to fight. I’d hurt innocent people. D introduced me to Elijah, and he helped me get past the block, it took a while, but I managed it.” He scrubs a hand over the back of his neck, “I guess what I’m trying to say is that if you need someone to help pull you through it, I’m here.”

“Wow, I had no idea,” Peter mutters.

Callan’s smile is slightly twisted, “It’s not something I like to advertise. But you guys are not only friends now, but you and Elijah are clearly in it for the long haul also; I saw what Cash and Ever did for Noel and Marty last night; they’ve been dancing around that for years. I’m happy to help.”

I share a grin with Cash and Peter as the others look confused and then step forward, “Thank you, I really appreciate it. I’ve been okay so far, but the fights I was forced to do were to the death, and I’ve had to remind myself of that. I’m not sure how it’s going to go with someone who I don’t know that well.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five

“That’s okay, you’ve got your men, and so long as I have your permission, I have a couple of tricks that can temporarily knock you out without doing any damage, just in case you get lost in the memory and find that you can’t stop.”

The guys shift around uneasily, clearly not liking the idea of him making me fall unconscious, but his suggestion floods me with a considerable amount of relief.

Callan smiles as my relief is clearly evident to him.

“Yes, please, even if you can’t do any tricks, if I lose myself being triggered, knock me the fuck out. I will never forgive myself if I seriously hurt any of you.”

He nods as sounds of protests surround me, “You got it, Ever.”

Despite the conversation that we’ve just had, I am feeling a hell of a lot more relaxed. Callan is clearly a very accomplished fighter, and he’s willing to protect me from myself, and by doing that, it means he’s protecting everyone else as well. It would be nice to talk to someone who has been through something similar to what I have and has come out the other side.

The guys fall silent as they all step away from the mats and back up against the wall, Luc leaves the room, and I won’t hold it against him. He gets triggered by women being hurt, and I think he can cope when I fight normally because he knows what a skilled fighter I am. He can manage when I fight against the guys because he knows that they would never seriously hurt me, but with Callan, he’s an unknown, and there’s a more significant possibility that it could trigger me. If it triggers me, then I’m either going to go into fight-to-the-death mode or become a sobbing, screaming mess.

Luc couldn’t handle that. I’m actually surprised at how well he dealt with what I looked like when they first found me. Of

course, he'd just ended the fuckers that did it to me, so I'm sure that helped.

As Callan and I start to circle, I'm pleased that my emotions remain calm. There's not even a thread of panic that would mean that I'm pushing toward a panic attack. Callan is a fucking good fighter; his skills are extremely good, and it's not hard to believe that he was once a professional fighter. He's so good that I have to almost constantly remind myself that it is not a fight to the death. Even so, I'm still in control, and there's no impending panic attack. It's more about getting myself out of a particular way of thinking, almost like a habit.

I hold my own, which I'm damn pleased with, but Callan manages to take me to the mat easily. He watches me closely as he slams me to the floor, waiting to see if it's triggered me, I have to take a deep breath, but I nod, confirming that I'm fine and earning a grin. He reaches out his hand, and I take it as he helps to pull me up.

I guess, although I was worried about it, I'm not at all that surprised that the fighting hasn't triggered me and that the only thing I have to remind myself is it's not a death match. That should get better fairly quickly. I've spent my whole life fighting and in life-threatening situations, too. It's a part of who I am, and I'm not going to lie to myself and say that I don't like the thrill of the fight because I really do.

"All good?" he asks me.

"Yeah, no panicking. I did have to remind myself more often that it wasn't a fight to the death, but I was still in control, so I don't think that's anything to worry too much about."

He nods like it's not a big deal that I had to stop myself from killing him but then again, he's such an incredible fighter that I'm not sure who would win between us. It would be damn close, that's for fucking sure.

"Dude, you were fucking awesome!" Jensen bounds over as he exclaims excitedly. "You have to spar with me sometime?"

Callan's smile is as broad as Jensen's, "Yeah, I'd be up for that. Just let me know when. It's been a while since I've been able to spar with someone that can hold their own as well as Ever can, so if you guys are as good as her, then it'll be a good challenge."

"He's better," I praise, "he normally has to fight against at least two of the others to give him a good workout."

Callan's eyebrows rise as he looks back to Jensen, seeing him in a new light, "Well, in that case, hell yes."

"You're on," Jensen grins.

"Thank you for helping. I know it was a pretty strange request," I tell him.

"No problem, it was fun, and I'm glad I could help. I've got to get going though. We're helping Ezra to update the security around town. It was Peter's idea. Since Ezra is the sheriff, he's the easiest one to work with without raising anyone's suspicions."

"Oh shit yeah, I forgot we were doing that today. I need to come with you." Peter replies, gathering his stuff. He turns to me, "That didn't last as long as I thought it would, so you've got more time to get to Lyric and the guy's place."

"Thank fuck for that. I need a long shower," I grimace as I pull my top away from my sweaty skin.

"Whoa, hang on, are we just going to breeze past the fact that Ezra, fun-loving, goofy, Ezra is the sheriff?" Cash exclaims.

Callan chuckles, "Yeah, I was surprised too, but he tones it down while he's working, although not by much. I think he's most likely got the most loyal officers working underneath him. It's impossible not to like the fucker."

"Huh, I never would've guessed," Riot mutters.

"Right, I'm going to go and shower," I announce, making my way out of the gym; a couple of guys stay behind to get their own quick workouts in since they were too busy watching and worrying about me to do it earlier. When we get

to the front door, I say goodbye to Callan and tell Peter that we'll pick him up on the way to Lyric's later.

Before I go to get changed, I need to go and find Luc to make sure that he's okay. The last thing I want is for him to be struggling. I walk past my door and down to Luc's, knocking on it before he yells for me to come in.

"Hey, Firecracker, are you okay?" he asks, immediately putting his book down on his bed and making his way over to me, his arms outstretched.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. I'm sweaty as hell and most likely stink." I warn him.

He shrugs, pulling me into his arms regardless and holding me close. He takes a deep inhale of my neck and then steps back, pulling a face with a twinkle in his eyes, "Oh yeah, you definitely stink."

I smack him on the chest as a smile pulls up the corner of my lips, and I'm glad that he's okay, "It went fine, by the way, Callan is a wicked fighter."

"Good, I'm glad. I hope you don't mind that I had to leave?" he asks, swiping some sweaty hair off my cheek and tucking it behind my ear.

"Not at all. I'm glad that you know your limits and didn't force yourself to stay. I would've been mad as hell if you'd done that."

"That's one of the many reasons I love you, you understand."

I go up onto my tiptoes and kiss him, "I love you too. Now I really need to shower. We're going to Lyric's soon."

"You can use my shower, and I'll wait for you out here since we don't have enough time to play," he raises his eyebrows suggestively, "also, that way, you won't be completely alone."

"Thank you. It's not nearly as bad as it was, but I don't want to test my limits anymore today. I hadn't even thought about it."

He kisses me, his tongue tangling with mine and making me rethink whether we have enough time or not.

“Go on,” he chuckles when he pulls back, and I try to follow him.

I pout, which makes him laugh harder, but I do as I’m told and go into his bathroom. Once I’m finished in the shower, I realise that I didn’t bring any clothes with me since I hadn’t planned to shower in here. So I wrap the towel around me and go back out into Luc’s bedroom.

Luc groans when I step out of the bathroom, his heated eyes travelling over my bare legs.

“I’m just going to go and grab some clothes,” I tell him unnecessarily.

He nods, still staring, “I’m going to stay right where I am, or that towel is going to be on the floor in seconds, and your legs will be wrapped around my head.”

“That was mean,” I groan as I make my way to the door and down to my bedroom, his chuckles following me.

I chose something comfy but nice to wear, and now I’ve met Lyric; I know that she’s not going to expect me to get dressed up to the nines for dinner, and I’m glad because that’s really not me.

When I get back downstairs, everyone is already ready, and I check my phone. We still have a little while left until we have to go, which explains why they have the games console on, playing some kind of shooting game. I start to make my way toward Rafe and Riot but spot Rage staring down at his phone in confusion, and I change direction heading toward him instead.

“Are you okay?” I ask, sitting next to him, and he automatically wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer while he still looks at his phone.

“Yeah, I have a missed call from my dad.”

“Oh?” I ask, “are you going to call him back?”

“Yeah, I’m nervous.”

“That’s understandable,” I reply. In the last phone call he had with his dad, they both learnt things about each other that they had no idea about, thanks to the lies his mother told. She’s screwed them both over in many ways and could have very probably permanently damaged their relationship. If it weren’t for Rage finally telling his dad what his mother put him through, they could’ve gone their whole lives thinking the other didn’t want to have anything to do with them.

She’s a raging bitch, and if his dad hasn’t dealt with it, then I’m going to be more than happy to do so, and I know that the others would come with me. I hate the hold she has over him, and I hate what she’s put him through.

“Do you want us to leave?” Trick asks.

My attention drifts to the rest of the room, and it’s clear they’ve all been listening, the nosy fuckers.

Rage smiles warily, “No, it’s okay, I’d probably just tell you guys anyway, and it’s easier for you to hear first-hand than have to explain if it’s not good news. My mother is a real piece of work, and it wouldn’t surprise me if she somehow managed to fuck up whatever plan he had.”

“We’ll deal with it if she has,” Atty tells him firmly, the others all nodding in agreement.

Rage nods and presses a few buttons on his phone as the guys turn the TV off.

“Rage?” his father, Kian’s voice sounds relieved that he’s called him back.

“Hey, is everything okay?” he replies, trying to sound unaffected, but I can hear the nerves in his voice.

“Yes, actually, that’s why I’m calling. Your mother will no longer be a problem for either of us. I’ve come out publicly, which went a lot better than I thought. It turns out that having as much money and control as I do, no one wants to admit they have a problem with me openly, so I haven’t even lost any business, which I was prepared for.”

“That’s great. I’m really glad she can’t hold that over you anymore,” Rage replies, sounding genuinely pleased for him.



“Thank you. She has been served with divorce papers, and I had the lawyer draw up an extra stipulation; she is not to contact or come anywhere near you. That has also been sent to her hag sisters. I was going to get her parental rights revoked, but you’re nearly nineteen, so she has no control over that side anyway.”

Rage’s eyes fill with hope before it fizzles out almost as quickly, “Why would she sign that though? She loves the control she has over me, those bitch aunts of mine too. There’s no way that she would willingly sign it.”

“She has no choice. It turns out that the staff have been filming the abuse that she and her sister put you through for years. They couldn’t hand it over to the local police since she holds too much power in that town, and they all have families to support. You know first-hand how vicious she can be. They also couldn’t give it to me since I hadn’t been to the house for years, and they had no way of contacting me. Apparently, they tried a couple of times, but my secretary assumed they were prank calls and didn’t put them through.”

“There are tapes?” Rage asks, going pale.

“Yes, I’m so sorry. I want to tell you that I’ll destroy them, but they are the only thing that is keeping your mother in line. I’ve told her that if she doesn’t sign the agreement that bans her from contacting you, I will take it to the police, and she will be going to prison. Of course, it’s entirely up to you. If you want to follow that through now, I will hire you the best lawyers, and we will get you the justice that you deserve.

The only reason why I told her that I’d do it this way first is because of how high profile the case would be. The media would be involved heavily, not just because of me but because of her career as an actress. I wasn’t sure you’d want that, and I wanted to get you out of her clutches as quickly as possible. I hope that’s okay? We can do it any way that you want.” By the end, he sounds nervous.

It’s silent for a moment as Rage thinks, “Thank you. You’re right. I don’t want any media involvement at all, but I won’t

hesitate to press charges if she even attempts to make contact with me. I'm done with it all."

"Well said. I have the only copy of the tapes, and there are no more in existence. I thoroughly checked and considering the staff cared enough about you to try to get these to me in the first place; I'm sure there aren't any more copies. I have had them all sign ironclad non-disclosure agreements though, just to make sure that you are as protected as possible. I can have them delivered to you if you wish?"

"I don't ever want to see those things. If it's okay, could you keep them safe for me just in case we need them?"

"Of course I can. I have the best safe in the world, as my home safe. I'll put them in there and in a second smaller safe in the unlikely event that the first one gets broken into."

"Thank you, dad. For everything, I can't believe I'm finally free."

Kian takes a deep breath, his voice heavy with emotion when he finally speaks, "I'm so sorry that I didn't do anything sooner. If I had known, I would've taken you with me when I left; please believe that."

"I do. I know how evil she can be, and I know how after hearing something over and over again that you finally start to believe it and think that she's right."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"The house is in your name. It always has been. She hated that. I'll continue to pay for the staff and the upkeep until you decide what you'd like to do with it. I completely understand if you'd like to sell it, and I can do that for you."

"I never want to step foot on that property again, but I have my other horses there, and until I have a place to move them to, they're going to have to stay there."

"When you've got the time around school, you could look for houses so you can be rid of the place sooner. The house

and grounds should sell for around twenty-two million, so you've got plenty of money to play with."

My jaw isn't the only one that drops open, I mean, we all have a lot of money by usual standards thanks to Jensen's savvy investing and various other things, but twenty-two million is fucking crazy.

"Holy fuck, twenty-two?" Rage chokes; I'm glad he's shocked as well.

Kian chuckles, "Yeah, I'm not sure why that shocks you though. You got your inheritance when you turned eighteen."

"No, I didn't."

"What?" Kian barks out angrily. "Demetri, trace Rage's inheritance now. If that bitch has it, we're taking her down for fraud at the very fucking least."

"Dad?"

"I'll sort it and get it returned to you. I should've fucking known that she'd try something like this. It looks like the bitch may be going to prison regardless."

"Good. Erm, out of curiosity, how much was in there?"

"A little over two-hundred and fifty million," he replies, his deep voice already amused, anticipating Rage's reaction.

"Fuck," Rage hisses as everyone else lets out their own exclams.

"I'm going to leave you to digest that. I have to take care of this now anyway. I'd love to meet up soon?"

"Yeah, I'd like that, you can meet my girlfriend and the guys. They're my family," Rage's smile is broad.

"I'd love to, speak soon. Bye."

"Bye, dad," Rage replies, hanging up.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“Are you okay?” I ask.

He scrubs his spare hand through his hair, “Erm, yeah, I think I’m in shock for many reasons, actually.”

“Yeah man, I know I would be.” Cash replies.

“I’m free,” Rage mutters, a relieved grin lighting up his features.

“Congratulations,” Luc offers.

“Thanks,” Rage pauses and then frowns, his head snapping to look at Jensen, “holy fuck, that’s a lot of money. Dude, you have to help me invest it. I have no idea what to do with that much money.”

Jensen smiles reassuringly, “Of course. Don’t worry; I’ve got you.”

Rage lets out a heavy breath. “Thank you.”

“Shit, we need to go,” Rafe curses, getting up and then turning to face Rage, “are you okay to go or do you want to cancel?”

“Are you kidding? I’m in the mood to celebrate.” Rage chuckles.

“Fair enough, come on. Let’s go. Atlas, can you text Dominic and let him know we might be a few minutes late?” Trick asks as we make our way to the garage.

“Already done,” Atty replies, threading his fingers through mine.

We all pile in the SUV since the bikes aren’t really safe going down the track as it is, and we haven’t gotten it fixed yet.

“If we really are staying here for the rest of the school year at least, we need to see if we can get our cars here. Having

only one is a bit ridiculous, especially since we have to squeeze in,” Cash suggests.

“Yeah, that’s a good point. I’ll see what I can do,” Luc replies.

“Don’t forget we have to pick up Peter,” I remind Trick, and he nods.

We pull into Peter’s drive, and he’s already waiting outside, so I’m guessing that one of the guys must’ve texted him to let him know that we were on the way.

“Hey, everyone okay?” he asks as he gets into the front seat.

Everyone answers that they are, and then Rage fills him in on the phone call with his dad and the tapes that he’s understandably worried about. Peter picks up on his apprehension and turns around in the front seat so that he can look at Rage.

“If you want me to, I can set up a search using your photograph, and I can have it running continuously so that if anything, video or picture shows up on the internet, I’ll be notified immediately and be able to remove them as soon as I get the hit. I should also be able to trace the source, so we know who uploaded it.” Peter’s eyes are full of understanding as he offers Rage a way to help and settle his anxiety.

“Yes, please, man, that would make me feel so much better about it. I trust my father not to do anything with them without letting me know, but I don’t trust anyone else not to want to make some easy money or bring down my mother, regardless of the effect it has on me. She’s pissed off a lot of people.”

“I can understand that. I’ll get started as soon as we get back from Lyric’s. It might take me a day or two to get it done, but it’ll start searching immediately and like I said, I can have the programme running continuously.”

“Thank you.” Rage replies, the relief almost palpable.

“How far away are we?” I ask as we drive through the town and out to the other side.

“It should be up the next turning.” Trick replies, glancing at Atlas in the rear-view mirror for confirmation; he nods.

“Like us, they live fairly isolated, for privacy and because of Lyric’s penchant for blowing shit up when her experiments go wrong or when she’s extremely emotional,” Atlas explains with a fond grin.

We pull up the road and travel for a mile or two before we come to a sprawling set of wrought iron gates; as we approach, they swing open, and once we’re through, they automatically close behind us, which is really impressive and means that they have some pretty tight security here. Something that we should maybe think about doing for the cabin since we’re staying there for an extended period of time now.

I am so happy that we get to stay; it feels right, even if there is a reason behind it that we don’t understand yet. I don’t think I would’ve coped very well going back to school, although I understand why it’s important, obviously; it just seems inconsequential after everything that’s happened.

As we pull up the long driveway, vast fields on either side, I can see a few storage buildings dotted around, including two burned-down ones, which I’m assuming Lyric got her hands on. The house is vast and modern, which surprises me. It’s all glass, steel and straight lines. It’s impressive, and I can see why they’ve opted to have the huge windows. The views must be amazing. The garage set off to the side of the building is just as modern as the house and massive, but then I guess it needs to be since there are so many people living here.

Before the car has even come to a complete stop, Lyric is pulling open my door and grabbing my hand, and I giggle as I’m pulled from Jensen’s lap, and he reluctantly lets me go.

“I’m so happy you guys are here,” Lyric says excitedly, grabbing Peter’s hand, too and pulling us toward the huge front door.

“Whoa, it opens automatically?” Peter sounds awed as we walk through the door that definitely just opened by itself.

“Oh yeah,” Lyric replies, rolling her eyes, “Lucien and Jonah love their gadgets. The entire house is tripped out with them. Which is great, but what’s wrong with opening the curtains using your hands instead of a remote?”

Lucien comes around the corner just in time to hear the end of Lyric’s mini-rant, “There’s nothing wrong with opening them with your hands, but where’s the fun in that?”

Lyric just rolls her eyes as she ignores them and carries on, pulling us further into the house while I try and absorb as much as I can. It’s open plan, and although super modern, it’s surprisingly warm and cosy. You can tell that they’ve lived here for a while, there are a lot of photographs and trinkets everywhere, and the place looks well lived in, and it makes me want to make the cabin more homely even more. We need more personalised touches, and I want to decorate, so long as the guys are okay with that, of course. I imagine that because there are a lot of us, we’d have to go for something relatively neutral in the shared areas, and then in our own bedrooms, we can decorate in our own style.

I mentally make a note to talk to the guys about it, even though I know I’m most likely going to forget.

“Where are you taking us?” I ask Lyric.

She walks straight past the busy kitchen, where the smells make my stomach grumble, past the beautifully set table that is big enough to seat all of us, and I make another note to ask where she got it since we need a bigger table ourselves. She doesn’t bother answering as she heads down a wide hallway through a utility room that’s big enough to fit all of the guys in with space and has two washers and two dryers. I’m just going to keep making notes because there are several things here that I want for the cabin.

“Lyric, where are you going? Food will be ready in a minute.” Dominic calls after her.

“We’ll be back in time, Nic, I just want to show them my lab, and I may have left something on,” she winces.

“Explosion or just a mess?” Dominic asks, like this is a common occurrence and not that big of a deal.

“Just a mess,” she lets go of Peter and I’s hands and then struts toward Dominic, kissing him fiercely enough that I feel weird witnessing it and look away.

“You know that’s not fair when you do shit like that,” Dominic calls, sounding strained, after Lyric, who suddenly appears next to us again.

“You’ll be fine, Nicky. I’ll make it up to you,” her smile is full of mischief, and I can’t help but giggle.

“What have I told you about calling me Nicky,” Dominic grumbles, “It’s nothing like my actual name.”

Lyric pulls us forward again as she yells over her shoulder, “No, but it is like my nickname for you, Nicky.”

She darts through the door pulling us with her as Dominic growls playfully behind us; her laughter is full of joy.

“I’m so going to pay for that later, and I can’t wait,” she winks at me, and I burst out laughing as Peter shakes his head, looking amused.

“You two are far more similar than I thought,” he mutters, and we share a smile.

Lyric leads us a reasonable distance from the main house, which makes sense if she’s known for blowing things up.

“So, did you train to be a scientist?” I ask, not really knowing what she specialises in.

“God no, me and school never got on very well,” she replies as she types in a code, and the door to a sizable single-story building opens. “I’ve always loved chemistry, though, and I guess I just have a gift for it. I learned most of what I know from books, and I’ve done a few remote college courses, now I’m older and don’t have to deal with other people. Obviously, I can’t do the practical side of the courses; well, I can’t let them know that I can do the practical side of the courses since that involves actually going in, and I just don’t do well in those situations.”



“Yeah, I’m not too fond of school, but it was my way out, so I did as much as I could,” I reply.

“Oh shit yeah, I forgot you guys are still in school,” Lyric replies. “It’s been five years since I was supposed to go. I don’t miss it at all.”

“This place is amazing,” Peter interrupts, changing the conversation.

“Thanks, I’ve managed to keep this one the longest, and I’ve become attached to it, so any potentially explosive or dangerous experiments I do in one of the other outbuildings, I think I’d actually be sad if this one went up in flames.”

The space is large, bright white and obviously sterile. There are several machines that I have no idea what they do, a laptop set up next to a large screen on the wall. There are Bunsen burners and vials and petri dishes, locked cupboards with warning signs on them and massive workbenches. I watch as she walks over to a complicated looking set-up, vials at different angles and liquid going from one vial to the others. She adjusts a couple of things and turns the flame down slightly.

“There, that should do it for now, and I can come and check on it after dinner.” She says.

“I have no idea what you just did, but it looked really cool,” I mutter as we follow her back out of the room and she giggles.

“Yeah, that’s the go-to line for the guys as well, Creed has some basic understanding, and I’ve taught him a bit, so he becomes my assistant when I can’t do something by myself and need an extra set of hands,” she explains as the door automatically locks behind her.

“Did you have fun?” Trick asks as we get back into the kitchen, and I happily go into his arms.

They’re all either leaning in the kitchen or sitting up at the table. The space is so vast that everyone is still able to have their own individual conversations without it being overwhelming.

“We were just going to get you guys,” Jonah says, Lyric tucked under his arm, “the food is ready.”

We all take our seats as Lyric, and her guys put all of the food on the table and tell us to help ourselves. I’m not sure what cuisine they’re serving, but it’s absolutely delicious.

I catch Rafe’s eye from where he’s sitting opposite me, “You want to try and recreate this, don’t you?”

His smile widens. “Yep.”

“I’m happy to give you the recipe if you’d like?” Lucien offers.

“Thanks, man, but part of the fun is trying to recreate it,” Rafe replies.

Lucien’s smile is broad as he replies, “Yeah, I get that.”

“Did you guys get the contract and everything sorted for the farmhouse?” I ask, changing the subject.

Trick told us all about the plan earlier, and it makes sense.

“Yeah, it’s all sorted, and the only copy is in our home safe, so no paper trail.” Jonah answers.

“That’s great,” I reply.

The conversation flows, and I can see us doing this more often, having them up to ours and being down here, probably with Elijah and the guys too. We need a bigger table. Throughout the whole meal, I notice Atlas checking his phone, and I’m assuming that he’s checking for word from Alaric. It’s strange that he hasn’t called back yet; he’s usually quite good at replying if it’s just a message to say that he can’t talk right now.

“Who is ready for dessert?” Ezra grins, jumping up and starting to clear the plates, and we all get up to help; they try to protest but eventually concede.

“Guys, I’m going to have to go back to the bar,” Dominic says, frowning as he wanders back into the room; I didn’t even notice him leave.

“Why?” Lyric asks, her mouth already full of the chocolate cake that we’ve only just put on the table.

“A few out-of-towners have stopped in at the bar on their way through town and are causing trouble. They’re picking fights, hitting on women and not taking it very well when they turn them down. There’s about eight of them.” Dominic explains with a frown.

“What’s the plan?” Jensen asks, his excitement is evident.

I decide to follow Lyric’s lead and help myself to some cake, she grins as I sit down next to her, and we listen to what the guys are saying.

“We’ll ask them to leave with a bit more muscle behind the question, and if we don’t, then we get to have some fun,” Dominic grins.

“I’m in,” Jensen replies, immediately standing up.

“Me too,” Atlas and Rage say at the same time.

Cash gets up and nods as well.

“Great, Ezra, are you coming?” Dominic asks.

“Yeah, not in uniform though. It’s more fun that way,” his tone suggests that by fun, he means less legal.

“Ever, Lyric, do you want in?” Atty asks.

“Nah, I’m good. This cake is far too delicious to abandon right now.” I reply, around the bite of cake I’ve just taken.

“What she said,” Lyric adds, “besides out of towners are usually boring frat kids that pee their pants when you and the guys turn up or when I throw knives at them; it’s not worth it.”

I burst out laughing, “I’m definitely not coming then.”

“Well fuck, they’re just as bad as each other. It might be a good thing that they’re staying here. I can’t be bothered to deal with the hassle of calling in cleaners.” Lucien mutters.

“What about the rest of you?” Dominic asks.

No one else agrees to go; everyone wanting to stay here and eat.

“We’ll meet you back at the cabin?” he asks.

“Yeah, that should work, this shouldn’t take long, but it’s getting late,” Atlas replies.

“I’ve got to check on that experiment anyway.” Lyric adds.

As soon as they’ve gone, Peter’s expression turns conspiring, “More cake for us.”

## *Cash*

When Dominic suggested that there was trouble at the bar, I almost had to stop myself from jumping and yelling I’ll come with you. Thankfully Jensen practically did it for me, and all I had to do was agree to go ever since we realised that something was going on; thanks to the Principal sending enough work to last the year, I’ve been feeling on edge.

We’re about to have another curve ball thrown at us, and after the shit we’ve just been through, I hope like hell that we can handle it, that Ever can handle it. I will not put her at risk or have anyone else put her at risk, and that includes physically, mentally and emotionally.

I’m feeling tense as fuck, hence my willingness to go with Dom to the bar even if it turns out to be nothing.

“You alright, man?” Ezra asks, “you seem a bit off. Not that I know you that well, so just tell me to shut up if I’m overstepping anything.”

“We’re all a bit tense, we can’t get hold of Alaric, and because of a couple of other things, we’re all fairly certain that shit is about to hit the fan.” Atlas answers for me.

“Do you need us?” Dominic asks from the front seat as we near the bar.

“Not yet, but be prepared. Alaric wouldn’t keep me in the dark for no reason, and I have a feeling that it’s something

big.”

“You got it, man. I’ll make sure the others know to be on standby.”

“Has he still not replied?” Jensen asks, leaning forward.

“Nope, and I’ve sent him texts now as well. I’m still hoping that he replies sooner rather than later.”

The conversation finishes as we pull up and see a couple of Dom’s guys blocking the doors, as eight guys outside start ranting and raving at them. I have to hand it to them; the bouncers don’t even blink when one of them throws a bottle at the wall near him, although I can see the relief in their eyes as they recognise Dominic’s truck.

“Hey, boss,” they yell, and the guys turn around.

“So you’re the boss,” one of them yells angrily, and I stand there and observe. I’m basically here as silent backup, but I need a fight, a real one, not a sparring match, so I’m practically begging them to throw the first punch. For now though, I settle for looking bored as hell. I know that a fight isn’t really the most favourable outcome in this situation, but I don’t think any of us would complain.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## *Cash*

We follow Dominic as he pushes through the group and stands in front of the door.

“Thanks, guys. You can go back in. we’ll take it from here,” Dominic tells his guys, and they nod as they head back inside. He turns to the group, who are now watching us slightly warily since the numbers are now more even than they were, “I believe you were asked to leave.”

“And since you didn’t leave amicably when you were asked the first time, you now need to leave the town tonight as well.” Ezra’s voice is low, and there’s no mistaking the threat in it.

I let my lips pull up into the cold smile that freaks even the guys out. Three of them look over us and back up a step, smart men. The others though, they’ve clearly had too much liquid courage and laugh boisterously.

“You can’t make us do that,” one of them scoffs.

Jensen is bouncing on his toes, eager for a fight, “That’s where you’re wrong.”

Atlas sighs heavily, like this whole conversation is boring him, “Look, you can either leave of your own accord, or you can be escorted to the town lines. I have to warn you though, if you choose option two, we’re going to have a bit of fun first.”

That has them faltering slightly.

“We’ll call the police. You can’t threaten us like this,” another yells, clearly no volume control on that one.

“Go ahead,” Dominic replies, crossing his arms over his chest.

They hesitate before one of them nods, and as they make the call, their confidence increases.

“They’re sending the sheriff. You’re fucked now,” he goads.

I barely hold in my laugh as Ezra’s phone starts to ring, and he answers it, putting it on speaker so the fuckers can hear the whole conversation.

“Sheriff?”

The guys become still, looking confused.

“Hey Billy, how’re you, man?” Ezra replies, anticipation in his tone.

“All good. Sorry to interrupt your day off, but some fuckwits from out of town just called in, reporting an issue at Dominic’s bar?”

“I’m handling it, don’t worry,” Ezra replies reassuringly.

“I’m guessing you don’t need backup?” Billy asks knowingly, and my eyebrows hit my hairline.

I have a feeling that the people in this town are more filled in than I and the others thought they were.

“Nope, I’ve got back up.”

“Good, good. Have fun,” Billy replies and then hangs up.

“The Sheriff is here, boys,” Ezra’s smile is sharp, his gaze cutting, and several of the group visibly swallow.

“So, what’s your decision?” Dominic asks.

Aw man, they’re going to go peacefully. I know I shouldn’t be disappointed but damn it.

They all start to back up and head to their cars.

“Good choice. We’ll follow you out to make sure you don’t get any ideas,” Rage warns them.

“I’ll have officers on the lookout for you. I wouldn’t suggest coming back to town again. We won’t be inclined to be so hospitable next time.” Ezra threatens.

As they head back to their cars, one of them pauses, and I tense; I just know the fucker is about to try something. I step forward just as he turns and barrels toward us, yelling out a

battle cry and raising his fist to strike. He heads straight toward me since I'm the closest one to him, and I pull back my own fist and strike him straight in the nose, it crunches beneath my hand as blood spurts, and he falls, knocked out from my hit.

"Impressive," Ezra mutters, coming to stand up behind me, "that smile is creepy as fuck though."

I chuckle as I allow my creepy smile, as he called it, to fall, "Yeah, none of the guys like it when I smile like that, but it has the desired effect on whoever I'm using it on."

Dominic slowly and deliberately approaches the guys who have all stopped by their cars and are looking between their knocked-out friend and me.

"Get your friend and leave now. This is your final warning."

They nod like bobbleheads making me chuckle, which in turn makes them watch me even more cautiously; I am so tempted to shout boo but manage to restrain myself.

We get into the truck and wait until they're all in their cars before we follow them out, Dominic drives close enough to their bumper that we can see the heated argument going on inside, and I'm guessing that if they had planned to stay the night tonight, the argument might be because they need to get their bags.

"If they go to the B&B, are we going to let them get their stuff?" Jensen asks curiously.

"Yeah, but if they just drive to the town lines, then we'll leave it," Atlas replies.

"Ezra, don't forget to get the plates of the cars; in case we need them later. I doubt they'll come back; I think they were adequately scared," Dominic grins as he reminds Ezra.

"Already done. I'll have my guys at the station keeping a lookout for them just in case any of them get brave." Ezra replies, his foot up on the dashboard as he types away on his phone.



As the cars in front approach the town sign that signals that they're leaving the town limits, they slow down to a crawl. Dominic pulls the car to a stop and then pushes his door open; we all do the same and stand in front of the truck, the headlights casting our shadows across the asphalt. Jensen's quiet chuckle has me glancing in his direction only to see him with a shit-eating grin on his face as he finger waves at them.

"You're a fucking wind up," shaking my head and highly amused, I tell him.

"At least you can never say I'm boring," he retorts as we watch the car's speed up. We stay until we can no longer see them anymore and then turn back around to get in the truck.

"I don't think anyone would accuse you of that, dude," Rage adds.

"I'm just going to ring Ever and see if she's gone home yet," Jensen mutters, his phone already to his ear. When he hangs up, he asks Dominic, "they've all gone back home. Would it be okay to drop us off up there?"

"Yeah, of course. Thanks for helping tonight, guys," he replies.

"Anytime. We're going to be staying for a while, so if you need any more help, let me know. Eventually, we'll start working on schedules and getting Elijah's team and ours into important positions in the town. For now, we're enjoying the much needed break," Atlas tells them.

"That sounds great," Dominic replies. "It'll be nice to have you around a bit more."

"I think there's a couple of positions at the precinct going if anyone is interested. You'd have to get Peter to forge your papers and prove to me that you've read the shit about laws and protocols. But I should be able to make it work." Ezra suggests.

"Okay, cool I'll speak to the guys and see if any of them are interested."

As we pull up the track that leads to the cabin, I start to think about what kind of job I'd like in this town if we were to

stay even more permanently than just for the rest of the year. Most likely something to do with the medical field, which isn't something that we could forge, but hopefully, I could get work experience somewhere in town. I know we don't have a hospital, the town being too small, but I'm assuming there's a doctor's office.

We haven't really discussed the implications of us staying here for the rest of the school year, but it's clearly a conversation that we need to have. There are too many of us for things to just fall into place; we need a plan.

"There, you go, guys," Dom says, as he pulls to a stop in front of the cabin.

We thank him as we get out, and I take a second to just look up at the house. Unlike some of the others, I had a really good home, and my parents are amazing, but coming here and seeing it all lit up warmly, knowing the Ever is inside, feels more like home than anywhere else.

As we walk up the porch steps to the front door, Atlas's phone starts ringing, and Jensen, Rage and I share a look. We need that to be Alaric.

As Atlas opens the door, he yells, "Guy's Alaric is calling everyone meet me in the front room!" before he presses the answer button.

Almost everyone is already in the front room anyway, and Rafe joins us from the kitchen. Ever looks cute as fuck in her PJs and tucked up under a blanket. I immediately go to her and kiss her softly before settling on the floor in front of her legs.

## *Ever*

"Hey, guys," Alaric's voice sounds throughout the room, Atlas having already put him on speaker. "Is everyone there?"

"We're all here. What's going on?" Trick asks, getting straight to the point.

Alaric sighs heavily, and my nerves start to skyrocket. I just want to know what the fuck is going on now so that we can begin planning how we're going to deal with it.

"The guys know, but Ever I don't know if they've managed to fill you in since you've all had a lot going on. I told them when we were on the way to get to you that my boss was getting pushy in wanting to meet you all. I've pushed him off for as long as possible, but he's demanding to see you now, or he's going to get some agents to try and locate you. Obviously, it will be better that you come in of your own accord. I'm sorry, guys."

Silence reigns in the room as we all come to terms with the implications of what he's saying.

"How soon?" Trick asks, his voice is serious.

"The day after tomorrow," Alaric replies.

"Do you have any idea how this is going to go for us?" Atlas asks.

"I'm honestly not sure. He's not having you brought in under arrest, and he's also having you meet him in his office and not in a cell, so that's a good thing. I think if you didn't go through with the meeting though, that could change very quickly; he's very keen to talk to you all."

"So if we have any hope of this reaching a favourable outcome for us, we have to attend?" Rage asks.

"Yes, that's the bottom line. Ever are you eighteen now?"

"Yes, only just, but we're all eighteen now."

"Well, at least there's that." He mutters, "I need to get some shit sorted before you get here. I'll send you the location, and you'll need to bring Peter too. He knows that I recently added someone with a tech background to the team."

"Fuck, I was hoping to keep him out of this. Elijah is going to throw a shit fit," Rafe mutters, running a hand through his hair as he frowns.

"I'm sorry this has happened so soon, guys. I really am. I tried to put it off for as long as I could. Give me a call when

you're on your way, and we can meet before I take you over, so we can go over a couple of things. Atlas, I'll message you the town that you need to go to."

"Okay, thanks, man. We know you tried." Atlas replies.

"Is this why we're not going back to the academy this year, isn't it?" Luc asks.

"Yes. I'll talk to you in a couple of days."

He hangs up, and Trick immediately stands and starts pacing.

"Jensen and Luc, how close are we to sorting plan B?" he suddenly asks.

"The one where we disappear and go completely off the grid?" Riot asks to clarify, and Trick nods.

"There are still a few things to work out. We need Pete, really, to make the IDs and passports and to make sure that they live up to harsh scrutiny. Between the three of us, we should be able to pull it off in a few hours tomorrow." Luc replies.

"We also need to ask Peter and Elijah what they want to do if we do implement plan B and the meeting with Alaric's boss doesn't go well." Cash adds, making a good point.

"Fuck, yeah. That's going to get complicated," Rage frowns.

Trick, still pacing finally stops and turns to face the rest of us, "It's getting late now. We can't call Peter. We'll do it first thing in the morning and get him and Elijah to come up so we can explain what's going on. Then, Jensen and Luc, you guys help him get everything ready for plan b. I want everyone to have a go bag packed with essentials and also pack anything else that you might want. We can't take it all with us; that would be too suspicious. No one knows about this place though, and we should have a small window to grab everything before we have to leave. I seriously hope that we're being overly cautious, and all of this is for no reason, but I'd rather be over-prepared than caught off guard."

“I’ll fill Dominic and the guys in on what’s going on and get Ezra to get his guys to keep an eye out for any newcomers while we’re not here, just in case they do know this place exists,” Atlas suggests.

“That’s a great idea. Do that as soon as you can.” Trick replies. “I want everyone armed; when we go obviously and subtly, hopefully, they’ll pick up on the obvious ones and miss the hidden ones. Atlas, has he messaged yet? How long is the drive?”

“Four hours, and our meeting is at three. We need to leave early morning and then meet with Alaric so he can fill us in and escort us to the meeting.”

“Okay, we can do this. No matter what the outcome of that meeting is, we will make it out not only together but also on top.” Rage fiercely announces.

“I’ve got Runa’s vet appointment tomorrow. Should I cancel it?” I ask, having only just remembered.

“No, there’s no need to cancel, but just to be safe, instead of just one of us coming with you, we’ll send two. I’m not taking any risks with anyone’s safety.” Trick replies. “Is everyone happy with the plan?”

We all nod; I can’t think of anything that we haven’t covered. This wasn’t the curve ball that I was expecting, and it could go very wrong very quickly. After all, we’re only young and have had a hand in bringing down some pretty high-profile criminals that normal law enforcement couldn’t. The thing that I’m holding onto, so I don’t completely panic and suggest we go for plan B anyway, is that, as Alaric said, he’s not bringing us there in cuffs. We’re not being arrested, and meeting us in his office suggests a business meeting more than an interrogation.

I do wish we didn’t have to involve Peter, although knowing him, he’d insisted on being involved anyway, and there’d be nothing that we could do to stop him.

“Ezra’s just replied and said that they’re on it. They’re also all on standby in case we need them.” Atlas announces to the

room as he taps away on his phone.

“Alright, we’ve got a busy day tomorrow, and it’s already late, so let’s get some sleep.” Trick orders, and I get up, heading toward the stairs.

“Ever?” Jensen asks as my feet hit the top step, and I turn to look at him, “are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, it’s like I said after I spoke to Jynx on my birthday. I think my triggers are more to do with losing one of you. I’d rather stay here than have to deal with whatever shit is about to happen, but it’s not triggering me.”

“Good.” He eyes me warily as we continue to my room, and we both start to get ready for bed.

“What? Just say it?” I ask as he hesitates.

“How are you going to handle it if the boss suggests splitting us up or locking us away and us all being separated?”

I inhale sharply as anger starts to rise, “Not well. I have a feeling that a lot of people will come out of the situation very badly.”

He watches me cautiously, “Got it. I’ll mention it to the guys, and we’ll have a plan to get us out quickly if that’s suggested, so you don’t go terminator on everyone.”

My anger disappears quickly at his words, and I climb into bed, snuggling up on his chest. “Thanks, Jensen.”

He kisses my forehead, and I close my eyes, the feeling of being loved washing over me and dispersing the last vestiges of anger that were still lingering at the suggestion of us being split up.

My eyes suddenly pop open as my sleepy mind reminds me of something, “Shit, how am I going to get Runa down to the vet tomorrow?”

“What?” Jensen asks, his voice sleepy and cute as hell.

“I don’t have a cat carrier for Runa,” I say again.

“Oh, yeah, you do; we brought one. I think we left it in the garage somewhere. We can find it tomorrow.” Jensen replies

and then pats my hip.

“Thank you,” I reply, my eyes already drifting closed again.

Tomorrow we’ve got one hell of a busy day; we’ve got to fill Peter and Elijah in and convince Elijah that Peter is going to be safe with us. Pack a go bag and everything we may want from here just in case the worst happens. Luc, Jensen and Peter have to sort plan B out so that it’s ironclad and ready to go by the time we leave the following day, and I’ve got to take Runa down to the vet.

Well fuck.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

The next morning we're up and dressed early. There's so much to do. Before I can even think about packing though, I need coffee, lots and lots of coffee. What else is new?

The breakfast table is tense, all of us lost in our own worlds and thinking about the millions of things that we have to get done before we have to leave. I'm trying to stay positive because I don't want to have to leave this cabin permanently. I want this meeting to go well; whatever that means, I don't care, just so long as it means that we don't have to implement plan B. I don't want to do that; I don't want to lose my home.

But no matter what I may be telling myself, the fact is that when we leave tomorrow morning, we have no idea if we'll be coming back to stay, coming back to grab our stuff or even if it will be safe enough to come back at all and that's making this whole thing even harder. However, I am confident that no matter what happens, we will remain together, whether that's because I've lost my shit and things have gotten bloody or not is a whole other thing that I'm going to say is a problem for future Ever.

"What's going on?" Peter asks as he and Elijah come into the kitchen, looking as tense as we are.

Trick gets them to sit down, and then we explain everything that Alaric told us on the phone last night, what our plan is and what we need Peter to help with today.

Once done, Atlas takes over the conversation and addresses Elijah, "I promise you that we will keep Peter safe, he can look after himself, but he has all of us as backup. You know that we think of him as family."

Elijah is still frowning, but he answers honestly, "I know. I do not doubt that you won't let anything happen to each other. I will have the guys on standby just in case you need backup at some point."



We all share a look that was a lot more simple than we thought it would be.

“That was easier than I thought it would be.” Rafe mutters and then adds, “that brings us to the second point before we can get on with everything we need to do today. What do you guys want to do if we have to implement plan B?”

Peter and Elijah share a look before Elijah answers, “Do you mind if we think about it, and Peter can let you know in the morning?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“I’ll set up the paperwork and stuff regardless of whether the decision is to stay where we are,” Peter adds.

Trick nods, “Alright, let’s clear the table, you three can set up in here then, and everyone else can go pack.”

“I’m going to get back to the guys and fill them in. Make sure we’re ready just in case,” Elijah says as he gets up from the table and then turns back to face Peter, “I’ll see you at home later.”

“Yeah, it might be a while. We’ve got a lot to get through.” Peter tells him.

“No problem. Call me if you want a lift home later.” He replies, leaning forward and giving him a kiss before he says goodbye to the rest of us and makes his way out of the house.

“You guys are cute together,” I mutter to Peter, and he smiles.

“Thanks, we’re getting there. We still have a couple of things to work out, but he’s mine, and I don’t plan on us being apart again.”

“Good, I love seeing you happy,” I reply before getting up to help clear the table.

Once the table is cleared, I leave the three of them to get to work and head upstairs to pack. I don’t really have any idea what it involves, but I trust that they can get it sorted and that we’ll have a safe plan that we can follow through on if we have to. When I get to my room, I take a second just to let

myself feel. No one has come with me this time, and I leave my door open, so I can hear them moving around. I'm okay; I don't know how long it will last, but at least it's a lot better than it was not so long ago.

As I pull my duffle bag and a giant suitcase out from under my bed, I start to feel sad. I know it's only a possibility that we might have to abandon this place, but I hate the idea. The thing is, I'm not just sad. I'm frustrated and mad as hell too. We've only just stopped hiding and having to be careful, thanks to Blake, and now we might be heading straight back into another situation where we have to be careful, except this time we're hiding from a branch of the government, the chances of us pulling it off are slim, and I don't want to go back into fucking hiding but more extreme.

No, I'm not going to let it happen. I refuse to give up the life we have here, and I'm going to find a solution that means that we can stay here. I don't know how other than just hoping that whatever the big boss wants to talk about is not something that means we have to disappear.

I try to make sure that I have everything that I need for now and all my important stuff in the suitcase and then sling the bag over my shoulder and grab the handle of my suitcase, glad that it's on wheels since I've packed as much as I can possibly fit in it and it's heavy as fuck. I shake my head at the difference in the amount of stuff I've got now to how much I brought with me when I first arrived at Trick's house. I had a single rucksack and now look at me. Sometimes it's hard to believe how much my life has changed in such a short amount of time.

I start to wrestle the suitcase down the stairs, bumping it down each step and then trying to catch it as it tilts to the side and threatens to fall. By the fourth step, I'm huffing and panting like I've run a damn marathon.

I hear an amused chuckle behind me, "Do you want some help, Firecracker?"

I turn to Luc and grimace, "I may have packed too much in it."

His amused smile kicks up a notch as he walks down to the step I'm on carrying his own suitcase and then picks up mine as if it weighs nothing. I'm not ashamed to admit that I check out his arms as he takes them both down the rest of the staircase. Holy fuck are they hot.

"Okay, now bring them back up and take your shirt off and then do it again," I suggest with a teasing grin.

His eyebrows raise, and he chuckles, "Not sure we have time for that, and you're now blocking the stairs for everyone else."

I pout as I look over my shoulder and see Trick and Atlas watching me with matching amusement lightening their features, "Fine."

When I get to the bottom of the stairs, I dump my duffle bag next to Luc's and then launch myself at him, making him stumble slightly as he catches me. I tug on his shirt to bring his mouth down to mine and kiss him thoroughly. When I pull back, his teasing smile has turned soft.

"Ever, you need to get going if you want to get down to the vet on time," Trick reminds me as he comes down the stairs.

"Riot and I are going to come with you," Atlas tells me, dumping his bag next to ours.

"Okay, I just need to find the cat carrier and Runa," I reply, starting off toward the garage.

"Are you armed?" Trick calls after me.

"Always," I reply, still walking.

I'm not likely to leave the house without an assortment of weapons on me for a very long time.

I find the carrier quickly enough and then go on a search for Runa, calling her name; as I walk through the house, it's not until I recheck the snug that I see her curled up on one of the armchairs.

"Dude, I've been calling you for ages, and I know you know your name," I chastise her, giving her a stroke and making her purr. The sassy little thing just meows at me and gives me that

look, like I should have known she was going to make me come to her. Which to be fair, I should've.

Getting her into the carrier is as hard as I assumed it would be and requires bribery in the form of some leftover chicken, much to the guy's amusement. Once I've actually got her in it, she meows continuously and keeps sticking her paws out of the sides and batting at anything that comes close.

"Well, it's going to be fun to get her back in when you leave the vet," Jensen points out from the table, laptop in front of him as he sits next to Luc and Peter.

"Oh god, I forgot I was going to have to do that again." I groan.

Atlas grabs the keys to the SUV and then turns to us, "Come on, we've got to get going. We're pushing it now since she took so long to get in."

"Here, I'll carry her," Riot offers, picking the carrier up as she continues to yowl.

"Thanks. See you guys later!" I call out as I follow Atlas and Riot to the garage.

## *Rafe*

"How are you guys getting on?" I ask, sitting down at the table opposite Peter, Luc and Jensen.

"Yeah, good, I think. It's gotten a little bit more complicated because we've got more people to cover and the size of the house we'd need," Luc starts.

"Don't forget the fact that it will be a branch of the American government that would be looking for us as well. Which means we can't stay in this country. At least it wouldn't be as safe to. Travelling anywhere via plane is an issue in itself, and so the safest bet is Canada, but it's getting over the border without being flagged." Jensen adds, typing away as he moves money around to make it untraceable, I have no idea what he's doing, but I do know it's complicated as hell.

“That’s where I come in,” Peter adds, not looking up from his screen, “I’ve not only found a way in that is rarely patrolled anymore, but if it is, I have all our documents with fake names and all that shit ready to go. I’m just making sure that it goes back far enough that it can withstand even the most in-depth search.”

“Are we going to have to change our appearances?” Luc asks curiously.

“Most likely, but the pictures on the documents and IDs are easy enough to change, so we don’t need to worry about it right now,” Peter replies. “And I can wipe the cameras at the security checkpoint if we do get stopped.”

“What about the house?” I ask.

“I’ve found one, in the middle of nowhere, that’s being sold privately, and they’ve accepted the offer. Fortunately, they don’t want any attention brought to them either, so we’ve managed to keep it as private as possible, and Peter’s going through and scrubbing any trace of it from the internet. At the same time, Jensen makes sure the money that we’ve transferred won’t lead back to us.” Luc explains as he turns his laptop to face the rest of us.

The house is enormous, similar to Lyric’s with all the glass, but instead of glass and steel, its big oak beams. I prefer it, and it’s a beautiful place surrounded by three hundred and seventy acres of land, a lot of it forest. It looks like it’s big enough for all of us too, which is a bonus. We definitely won’t be living in squalor if we have to leave this place and go on the run.

That makes it slightly better, I suppose, but this will always be home. I spoke to my parents this morning, and I know that Trick, Cash and Jensen have talked to their parents as well. Riot has only just gotten off the phone with his aunt. We’re all aware that if this goes badly, it’s not only this place that we lose but also our families. We haven’t seen them for far too long already, and we were so close to being able to see them again, just waiting until we got the okay from Alaric, and now we might not get that chance and who the fuck knows when we’ll be able to see them again.

I'm also worried about how this is all going to affect Ever. There's no mistaking that she is so much better since we came back to the cabin, but she's not entirely okay. She still has nightmares although she doesn't talk about them; we've all woken up to her whimpering in her sleep. She's also a hell of a lot more protective, and Jensen told us about the reaction she had to the what-if scenario he gave her. I blow out a harsh breath; I'm just hoping with everything that I am that we're going to be surprised, and it's not going to be bad news.

"I'm going to go and load the SUV with the bags for tomorrow," Cash says, getting up from the table.

I lay my hand on his arm, and he blinks down at me, his mind clearly a million miles away, "You can't Ever, and the guys aren't back from the vet yet."

"Oh shit yeah." He replies, running a hand through his hair and sitting back down heavily, "I just feel like I need to do something."

"There's not much left to do," Trick replies, looking as on edge as Cash does.

"I'm going to make a simple dinner. They should be back soon, and we missed lunch. Does anyone want to help?" I ask.

"Sure," Cash replies, getting up and looking relieved that he's actually got something to do.

Trick surprises me when he offers to help as well, and I wrack my brain trying to think of something that he can do. He's not the best in the kitchen.

"Alright, Trick, you butter the bread and start to assemble the sandwiches. Cash, if you could peel some potatoes and cut them really thin for me, please, that would be great. I'm going to make some chips, and I'll start the salad too."

They both nod and go to do their jobs.

We work in silence until we hear the front door open, and the others walk in.

"How did it go?" Jensen asks, looking up from the laptop to smile at Ever.

“Erm, well, I’ll be surprised if they let us back. As soon as I opened the door to the carrier, she shot out and then raced around the room, deliberately knocking shit over. The vet got her to calm down with some treats, and she let him look over her and give her the shots with no problem. That was until I tried to put her back into the carrier, and then all hell broke loose again.” Ever explains, sounding amused and exasperated.

“He had to get the nurse to come in to try to help,” Atlas grins.

“Fortunately, he seemed to find it more amusing than anything else, and Runa’s in great condition, so that’s good.” Riot adds.

“Well, at least you won’t have to take her for a while.” Trick chuckles.

“You’re just in time. Dinner is nearly done.” I tell them as I start to bring the food over to the table.

“How’re you guys getting on?” Ever asks, looking at three on their laptops.

“I’m done,” Peter says, shutting his laptop.

“Me too,” Luc says as he stretches and pushes his laptop away.

“I’m just trying to secure as much of our funds as possible. I should be able to press one button and have it all moved within seconds if I need to. I’m just checking that it’s going to be untraceable,” Jensen explains and then looks to Peter, “could you double-check it for me?”

“Yeah, of course. Give it here, and I’ll look over it.” He takes a moment to look over Jensen’s work.

Jensen tries not to look nervous as Peter goes over it but is failing miserably, so much so that Ever picks up on it and moves to go and sit on his lap, effectively distracting him.

Peter looks up from Jensen’s laptop and looks at him, surprised.

Jensen starts to squirm as he frowns, “What? It’s bad, isn’t it? Did I mess it up?”

“No, not at all. This is some brilliant work. I wouldn’t be able to trace it with all the protections you’ve got in place and the amount of times it will move before it gets to the new accounts.”

Jensen’s cheeks tinge pink slightly, “Thanks, man.”

Deciding to save him, since he’s so obviously feeling awkward, I announce, “Foods ready.”

The conversation at dinner is deliberately kept light, as we focus on being together and not that this might be the last meal we eat at this table. I know it seems like I’m solely focusing on the negative, but I’d rather prepare myself for the worst and expect it rather than feel completely thrown if I thought everything was going to be okay, and it’s not.

When we’re done, and the table is cleared, Peter gets up. “Elijah should be here in a minute to take me home. What time are you going to come and get me tomorrow?”

“We’ll pick you up at eight. That will give us enough time to get there, meet Alaric and get to the meeting.” Trick answers.

“Great, see you guys then,” Peter says, giving Ever a hug as he leaves.



# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## *Ever*

I can't help but gnaw on my lip with nerves as we drive down to pick Peter up. I have no idea how it's going to go today; none of us do, and the unknown is messing with me. Trying to settle my nerves a bit, I start counting my weapons; I did what Trick suggested when we first learned that we'd be meeting the big boss, and I have some of my weapons on show and some hidden. I'm most likely over-armed, but I'd rather have too many weapons than too few.

"Do you think we should've taken two cars?" Rafe asks as we pull into Peter's road.

"Yeah, it's way too cramped in here with all the bags as well, and the last thing we need is to get pulled over because we have too many people in the car," Atlas replies.

"We can ask Elijah if we can borrow theirs," Trick suggests.

"Good idea, I'll ask," Riot answers as he hops out of the car and goes to knock on the door for Peter.

"I'll drive the other car," Atlas says, unfolding himself from the cramped seat and getting out.

"Okay, just stick close and stay in contact. Especially on the way back, we need to keep an eye out in case we get followed home." Trick orders and Atlas nods.

"I'll come with you guys, too," Rage says, giving me a quick kiss and then climbing out.

Jensen reaches out across the seat and, using his thumb, pulls my lip free from my teeth, "It's going to be okay, Angel."

"You don't know that," I point out, and Trick turns in the front seat to look at me, Cash doing the same in the passenger

seat, as Rafe's palm lands on the back of my neck from the very back and I turn to look at Luc who looks as worried as I do.

"It may not go favourably for us, but we're meeting with Alaric before we see the big boss to work out a plan in case it doesn't go our way." Trick tries to reassure me.

"We also have the contingency plan in place in case something goes wrong. So we're covered from the point," Luc adds.

"We won't be split up, Ever. None of us will let that happen." Rafe adds, getting the crux of why I'm so nervous.

"I know all that," I reply. "I'm still worried. I know we can handle everything, but I don't think I can handle it if we end up getting split up."

"I know, Sweetheart, but we aren't going to let that happen. Hang on," Trick says, dialling and Atlas's voice comes through the phone from the other car that they've only just all got into.

"You guys ready to go?" Atty asks.

"Yeah, but don't hang up yet. We need to talk about something." Trick says as he starts pulling out of Peter's drive and back onto the road.

"Okay," Atlas replies, simply following us.

"Hey, Ever!" Peter yells, sounding more excited than he should be. He adds, "Before I forget, Elijah and I talked about it last night, and we want to be involved in plan B if it comes down to that."

"That's great. I'm glad you'll be coming with us if everything goes tits up, but why don't you sound more worried?" I ask.

"What's the point in worrying about something that may not happen? I know we have to be prepared in case something bad does happen, but it's not happened yet, and life's too short to be worrying about ifs."

"Huh, you actually make a really good point," I reply.

“Alright, man, what did you want to talk about?” Atlas asks, now that we’re out on the road leading out of town.

“I want to make a plan for what happens if we have to split up when we leave the meeting if something goes wrong.”

Jensen reaches out and threads his fingers through mine, and squeezes them tightly.

“I actually have a meeting point set up; in case that happens, I’ll tell you when we get to wherever we’re meeting Alaric. I don’t want to risk sending it to you or saying it over the phone,” Peter interrupts.

“That’s great. Thanks, man.” Trick replies.

“We’ve got two vehicles, so we’ll most likely have to split up if we get followed, depending on how many cars are following us; if it’s only one, then it might be better to box them in and then take them out. But even if we do have to split up, we can stay in contact the whole time,” Riot adds.

“Great, we have a plan. Is that better?” Luc asks me.

“Yeah, I just need you guys to stay in contact if we have to split up,” I reply.

“We’ll actually have to throw our phones. They’ll be able to trace them far too easily,” Peter explains, “but before anyone freaks out, I have two burner phones with me, we can use those, but we can’t turn them on until we’re at least a mile away from the building.”

“Okay, thanks, man I hadn’t thought of burners.” Trick replies.

“No problem.”

I’m still worried, but knowing that we have a plan for every eventuality is helping, as well as what Peter said a minute ago. We’ve got this, and we’re going to be fine and, most importantly, remain together.

“Atlas, do you want to call Alaric and get directions to where we’re actually meeting him?” Trick asks.

“Yeah, I’ll send the location to your phone.” He says and then hangs up.

The drive to the city is relatively dull, if I’m honest, but I refuse to let myself get stuck in my head and start worrying. There’s fuck all we can do about it now, and we’re as prepared as we’re going to be. I thought that the city that they were based in would be one of the major ones, so I’m slightly surprised when we arrive, and it could be considered a small city, if that. I guess it kind of makes sense. As far as I can gather, they aren’t a significant branch of the government but more so one of the secret parts of it, so the more privacy they have, the better.

The motel that we pull up in front of is generic and nothing special, but this is where Alaric wanted to meet. We park up outside of number twelve, and I’m not the only one who scans the surrounding area as we get out. We’ve all been highly aware since we entered the city, and I doubt we’ll fully relax until we’re on the way back home.

The good news is that apart from the nerves about the situation, I’m okay. I’m not panicking, which is a damn good job because we can’t afford to be dealing with that too.

“Hey guys,” Alaric greets us, as he pulls open the door to his room and motions us inside.

“Hey, sorry we’re a bit late. We got stuck in traffic,” Atlas replies.

“No worries, this shouldn’t take long. Everyone take a seat wherever you can.”

Once we’re seated, Trick asks, “So, what do we need to know?”

“First, I just want to check that you’re all okay?” he asks, looking at me.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I reply, slightly bending the truth.

The guys all nod in agreement as well, and Alaric perches on the table in front of us all. He looks worried but not panicky, so I guess that’s something.

“I don’t know what’s about to happen. He hasn’t filled me in at all. Because of that, I’ve had D lend me some of his men, and they will be hidden in plain sight throughout the building to aid in your escape and to create a distraction if need be. Several of them know to head straight for the gates if they get the signal so that you waste no time trying to get through them. I promise you that I will get you out of there if something goes wrong.” He says the last bit fiercely.

“We know, man, thank you.” Rage replies for us all.

Alaric nods and then continues, “I assume that you all have a plan B in place and ready to implement? You won’t be able to stay at the cabin, he doesn’t know that it exists, but you’ve been there long enough that you have a presence in town, and people recognise you and will easily be able to point them in the right direction which would put Lyric’s team and Elijah’s at risk too.”

Trick nods, “Yes.”

“Good, don’t tell me. The less I know, the better.”

“Understood,” Atlas answers him.

“Is there anything that we should know about him?” Peter asks.

“He’s a fair man, a good boss, I like working for him, and he has my respect. But he is known for being harsh when it’s needed, and he’s got the balance right so long as you stay on his good side. When we enter the building, we’ll go through the lobby and to the elevators. If we bypass the detectors, then it means he’s letting you all stay armed, which means he has a level of trust and respect for you, which is a good sign.”

“And if he makes us go through them?” Riot asks, his arms folded over his broad chest and a frown darkening his features.

“Then you need to be prepared, it could still go your way, but there’s more of a chance that it won’t. Having said that, either way, I want you to be on guard like you always are. He knows what your skill sets are, and he has all the reports from the previous jobs you’ve done, apart from the ones from the

last job rescuing Ever. He'll still be expecting you to do them, but he hasn't pushed for them yet."

"You know him well, and he clearly likes you because he gives you a lot of free reign, especially with us. So what do you think? How is this going to go?" Rafe asks.

Alaric takes a deep breath as he thinks about his answer, "He's been more tight-lipped recently and closed off, not sharing as much as he normally would with me, but I don't think it's going to end in you guys needing to use your plan B, I've gotten really good at reading him over the years, and I'm not getting that vibe, there's none of the usual warning signs."

Rafe nods, "Okay, well, at least that's something."

"I promised that I would protect you guys if this ever happened, and I will." He adds firmly, with no sign of deception in his body language.

After talking to Alaric, I'm feeling better about the plan and our chances of coming out of this okay. I'll feel even better if we get through the lobby without being checked for weapons. The boss isn't a stupid man, and he wouldn't be where he is now if he were. He knows we're going to be armed, so if he lets us through anyway, that's a gesture of faith and a good sign.

"What's the boss's name?" Trick suddenly asks, and it occurs to me that I've never even bothered to ask since we all just call him the big boss.

"Mr Rising," Alaric replies. "I think I've told you all I can. Do you guys have any questions?"

"No, I don't think there's anything else." Trick replies looking around at everyone else to check and receiving nods of agreement.

"I just want this over with now," I mutter.

"Come on then. Let's do this. If you follow me in your cars, I'll take you there."

Loading back up in the cars, the atmosphere is tense; I feel like our whole future rests on what happens in the next hour or

so, and I guess it does. I haven't thought enough about the good side of what could happen in there, but it could very well change our lives too. I'm not sure he would've been so insistent on having us meet him if it was a simple nice to see you thing.

We aren't driving for long before we pull onto a road; I'm slightly curious about where we're heading since we're actually just outside the city limits, and I was sure the headquarters would be in some high-rise right in the middle of the city. We turn off the road and approach a set of monumental gates, security cameras on top, barbed wire stretches along the top of the fence on either side, and there's a guard booth just outside the gates with two guards stationed inside. I'm willing to bet that there is more patrolling the perimeter of the property. They see Alaric's car and nod, letting us through without us even having to stop. We drive further up the tree-lined road and then get to another set of gates with yet another security gate with a security fence stretching off into the distance on either side.

I share a look with Jensen, "Well, this will make things more complicated if we have to leave in a hurry. One gate we could've probably gotten away with, but two heavily guarded security gates are pushing it."

"I can see why Alaric mentioned having a few D's teams heading straight toward the gates when they get the signal. We're going to need it." Trick mutters.

I relax slightly, "I'd forgotten he'd said that. If anyone can make sure the gates are open for our escape, it'll be the people that work for D."

Alaric pulls straight through this set of gates as well. I study the guards as we drive past; they're both heavily armed with stoic faces, so pretty damn typical for these types of people. What isn't typical for this sort of place is the building, one it's highly guarded and far enough from the road that no one can see the actual building, it's not in the middle of the city, and as we pull up and park outside, it's not a high-rise. Nope, it's a huge mansion, five stories, perfect gardens and at least forty cars parked outside. It's a contradiction.

“Stay alert,” Trick orders sternly as he gets out of the car, and we all follow, meeting up with the others before we approach the doors.

I walk between Trick and Alaric, the others fanning out behind us, and I’m glad that they aren’t trying to block me in like usual. I need to see what’s going on around me, and we need to present an equal and united front. The inside of the mansion is a shock; although they’ve kept a few original features, it’s primarily modern, and it’s been completely remodelled. They’ve taken as many of the internal ground floor walls out as they can, and columns appear throughout the vast place holding up the first floor.

The floor is marble, and there are people everywhere. There’s even a coffee shop off to the left. It’s almost surreal what a contrast it is to the outside. In the middle of the space is a substantial circular desk with several receptionists sitting behind it, taking calls and tapping away on computers. To the right of it are the detectors and security guards waiting for whoever needs to be checked and right at the back of the room is a sprawling staircase and an elevator with ornate mahogany doors.

The people are a mix of being dressed casually and in workout clothes and being dressed in suits. It makes me wonder if maybe they train here as well. Alaric leads up to the desk.

The receptionist looks over us all curiously before turning her bright smile on Alaric, “Hey, Alaric. You can head straight on in, and I’ll let him know that you’ve all arrived.”

“Thank you.” He smiles charmingly and then leads us to the elevator.

No weapons check. That’s a good thing.

We’re silent as we get in the elevator, and I expect him to press the button for the fifth floor since bosses are usually on the highest floor, so they can lord it over the underlings that they’re better than the people they employ. So it surprises me when instead, he presses the button for the level minus six, which means going down. This place is a hell of a lot bigger



than I thought, and I kind of want to explore it to see what else it's hiding. You know, after we've dealt with any shit that's about to be thrown our way.

I share a look with the others; we don't talk because in a place like this, we can't risk being overheard. I can guarantee that there are bugs and cameras in here. Peter clears his throat, and we look at him. He has his phone out, and I watch him curiously.

"Are you okay?" Alaric asks, an almost knowing glint in his eye.

Peter shrugs, "Yeah, I'm just impressed. There's a camera in each corner, one in the middle of the ceiling, and behind each mirror, all of them are equipped with high-grade microphones."

Alaric's eyebrows rise as his grin widens, "Impressive."

"You missed the nozzles in the bottom back corners," I add, pointing to them, "I'm guessing they are there to gas any unwanted visitors."

The guy's tense but Alaric holds up his hands, "Don't worry. It would've already happened if it was an option. Good eye Ever."

"That's not as reassuring as you think," Atlas points out as the elevator dings, and we all step out.

As we walk down a short corridor, Alaric subtly hands something back to Trick, who takes it and puts it in his pocket without even looking at it since that would make it obvious. When we push through the doors at the end of the corridor, we arrive at yet another vast open space. This one is filled with a couple of rows of desks and then a set of double doors at the end; I'm willing to bet that's the big boss's office.

The people in here are all dressed in black combat pants and matching shirts, boards are set up every now and then with maps and suspect pictures on, and I think this is actually some of the high-profile teams. They greet Alaric warmly as we walk through and look at us with a mixture of shock and respect.

Seeing our confusion Alaric mutters, “They are all high up enough to know that I was bringing in my team that’s been responsible for taking down not only Blake but also all of your other jobs. They’ve all seen the aftermath of them, and I imagine that they’re all shocked at how young you all look.”

Ah, okay, that makes sense.

“Come in,” a deep voice booms when Alaric knocks on the double doors.

## Chapter Thirty

Alaric pushes open the door and gestures for us to go inside. There's a huge desk at one end of the room but sitting in front of it is a conference table big enough to seat all of us. The room is decorated in the style I'd expect, with a drinks decanter on the sideboard, a wall of books no doubt hiding a safe behind the desk, a vast tv most likely used for conference calls, as well as a wall filled with some pretty awesome weapons. Alright, so maybe that last one isn't quite what you'd expect.

A middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair stands up from behind the desk, he's in really good shape, and I wouldn't be surprised if he still went out into the field when he can. He seems like a hands-on boss. He's also dressed a lot more casually than I expected. I thought he'd be wearing a suit, but he's dressed like the people outside the doors and is armed as well.

He doesn't smile as he looks over us, and although he seems slightly surprised, his eyes seem kind, and I'm going to hold onto that.

"Take a seat." He offers as he moves to the head of the table, and Alaric shuts the door. We all take seats, and I notice that everyone is keeping their expressions blank and their postures relaxed.

It's silent as he studies us before focusing on Alaric. "So, this is the team responsible for all of those jobs?"

"Yes, sir," Alaric replies. Surprisingly he smiles proudly.

"Well, I have to say you're all a hell of a lot younger than I thought you were going to be," Mr Rising starts, "but I've read the reports, and I've seen the write-ups of the scenes after you've finished jobs not mention I've visited a couple myself. You can't argue with the results. Are you all over the age of eighteen?"

“Yes, Sir,” Trick answers, for all of us.

He doesn't say anything for a while, just contemplating us. I wish I could say that I picked up on some sort of cues from his body language about how he's feeling, but the man has got his facial expressions and body language on lockdown. It's pretty impressive. He obviously knows that we haven't all been over eighteen for the entire time that we've been doing jobs with Alaric. I mean, the guys could probably get away with claiming they are a few years older than eighteen, but I can't. He doesn't mention it though; he just observes us. I resist the urge to squirm and keep my expression blank as I sit relaxed in the chair, the guys all around me. I briefly dart my eyes to check on Peter, and he's holding up as well as the rest of us.

Finally, he starts talking again, “Do you know what we do here?”

This time Atlas is the one who replies, “You go after the biggest known criminals and the people that normal law enforcement can't touch mostly because they are well connected, and there's too much red tape and protocols that normal law enforcement has to follow.”

Mr Rising nods, “Yes, you're right, and yet we still can't do what you've managed to do. Your team has become somewhat of a legend around here for your success rate and because you're who we call in when we can't do something. It's damn impressive, more so when you consider your ages.” We stay silent as he steeples his hands under his chin and contemplates us all, “I'd like to offer you all a job.”

“A job, Sir?” Trick asks, his eyebrows dipping slightly in confusion, “do you mean a singular job?”

“No, I mean, I'd like you all to work for me officially.”

We all share a look, and Trick sits up a bit straighter, “We'd need a bit more information, Sir?”

He nods, “Understandable. So you'd be operating as you are now. Alaric would be your liaison, and he would still give you the cases we need you to work on. I'd expect you to check in after every job for a debrief; for the large ones, I'd need you to

come in, but the smaller ones can be handled over the phone unless I request otherwise. You will have free reign to do what you do, just like now. The difference is not only will you all get paid, but you wouldn't have to immediately leave the scene when you've done your jobs. I will need you to go through some training on how to process crime scenes and things like that."

"We'd be able to work how we do now, do it our way?" Rage clarifies.

"Yes, that's the idea. You'd still be handling the jobs that even we can't do, so you'll still be doing the more dangerous and complicated ones, but you will have all the vast resources we have here at your disposal. It's also safer in many aspects. I understand that you have a tech guy, and he's incredibly good at his job?"

"That would be me," Peter replies.

"I would like to ask that if our tech guys can't do something, we send it over to you to see if you can make any sense of it?"

"If we all agree to do this, I don't see why that would be a problem," Peter replies incredibly diplomatically.

Mr Rising smiles at his answer, "You'll also have the highest clearance, so you can officially get into the databases that you've been hacking into up until now. Along that same vein, do you think it would be possible for you to strengthen the security around some of our databases so that no one else can gain access?"

Peter's smile is proud, "I doubt anyone else could, but as I said before if it's something that we all agree to, then I don't see why that would be a problem."

"We'd remain a team? You're not going to try and split us up to spread our skills to other teams?" I ask, speaking for the first time since we arrived in the room.

His eyes connect with mine as understanding flits across his features, "I'm going to be honest with you because I think that's the only way that this is going to work from now on. I

did consider splitting you up for the reason that you mentioned, but I feel like that would be counterproductive not only because I feel like the reason that you get your jobs done so efficiently is because of how well you work together as a team but also because I want you to work for me, and I know that if splitting you up was an option then you wouldn't even consider it."

"That's a fair assumption," Rafe replies bluntly.

My whole body relaxes for the first time since we found out that this meeting was happening, he doesn't want to split us up, and he was honest that he considered it, and I can respect that.

"I am aware that you have worked with other people who work in a similar way to the way that you do," Mr Rising starts.

I glance at Alaric accusingly, and he holds up his hands, "I haven't said anything."

"He hasn't; I wouldn't be the boss if I didn't have a set of my own skills." Mr Rising confirms. "Don't worry; they're safe. I'm not going to bring them in or anything like that. If you decide to accept my offer, they will be protected too and work with you as they have been, but in a more official way, they would also be getting paid, and you would be responsible for them. As I said before, I'll send the jobs through Alaric to you, and then it will be up to you to choose the best people to handle it. Whether that's your team or one of the teams you're in charge of is up to you. You would also need to teach them how to write up the reports, we require them from everybody."

Trick leans forward slightly in his chair, his face stern and his eyes calculating, "And what happens if we agree to work for you, but they don't want to?"

I hadn't even thought about that, but I'm very glad that Trick did. I don't want to put Lyric and the guys or Elijah's team at risk.

“Then that’s their choice, we still won’t touch them, but they can’t ever be found at a place of interest or a crime scene.”

“Understood.” Trick nods in response.

Well, he didn’t exactly say that we couldn’t use them, just that they couldn’t get caught helping us, and that would put them more at risk than having them involved officially. Having said that, the decision needs to be theirs, and we can’t make it for them. We can only give them all the information that they need to make their own decision. I just really hope that they decide to join us. Wow, okay, apparently, I’m considering doing this. It seems like a good move to me; we’d be safer, we don’t have to leave the cabin, and we’d be doing what we love to do in our way and get paid for it. The anxiety of what might happen if we get caught in a place we aren’t supposed to be would be gone as far as legal people are concerned, but we need to discuss it properly and look at it from every angle.

“What about school?” Riot asks, “We’re in our last year.”

Mr Rising’s eyes move to Alaric, “I believe that’s already been taken care of?”

“Yes, they’ve been sent the work for the rest of the year,” Alaric replies.

Did he know that this was going to happen? He didn’t say anything, and he was more focused on what could go wrong than what could go right, so it would surprise me if he did. I imagine it’s more likely that he was asked to sort it without reason as to why.

“Good, so the way I see it, you could either test for your GED now, or you could carry on studying around cases.”

“Could we take some time to discuss it?” Trick asks.

“Yes, of course. I will need the answer in the next couple of days though,” Mr Rising replies.

“What happens if we decide it’s not right for us?” Cash asks, scrutinising him closely and no doubt looking for any tells.

“You won’t be arrested, that I can promise you, but you would be very strongly discouraged to carry on doing the things that you do.” He replies honestly.

It seems like he knows that even if we didn’t have Alaric giving us the jobs, we would still be doing what we do best, mainly because it’s who we are, and if someone needs help, we’re going to help them. It just so happens that most people we come in contact with have problems that require an active approach rather than mediation.

Trick nods in understanding. It doesn’t really give us a great alternative option and makes me lean even more toward the job offer, it’s secure, and we won’t have to worry so much.

Mr Rising then pulls open a hidden drawer in the top of the table and pulls out a stack of files; he splits the pile and then hands one set to Atlas and the other to Jensen, motioning for them to take one and pass it along. None of us opens the file, not wanting to see what it contains just yet. I have a feeling that it’s something we need to look over in private.

“That file has all of the information in and your contracts for you to read over. Should you decide to take me up on my offer, I’ll have them sent digitally to you to sign. Peter, I assume that you are the best person to send them to?”

“Yes, my laptop is the most secure,” Peter confirms.

“Good. If your other teams agree to work under you, then I’ll have contracts sent over for them as well. They protect them as much as they do us. They will also need to come in for the crime scene training. Once everything is signed, you’ll need to come back to get your IDs and clearance added to the system. Your other teams will also need to come here and get their IDs and clearance. Their clearance level won’t be as high as yours will be. I think that’s all for now; I will let you leave to discuss it. I will also need the reports for when you took down Blake at some point soon as well.” Mr Rising says as he stands up, and we do the same. “Also, Ever, if you could get me that statement about your father’s business dealings and all the people involved as quickly as possible, we can put that to



bed as well. I assume that Alaric told you that we no longer require you to testify in person?”

“Yes, he did, Sir, thank you. I’ll get that to you as soon as I can. I’ve actually already got it written up and ready to go. Peter just needs to send it.”

“Perfect.”

“Thank you, sir. We will have an answer for you by tomorrow morning.” Trick tells him, shaking his hand firmly.

“I look forward to it. Alaric, please escort them from the building.”

“Just one last thing,” Atlas says, and we all pause in leaving the room. “Do you know where we live?”

“No,” Mr Rising says curiously.

“I want it to stay that way. It’s the only way that I can properly guarantee that we are all safe.” Atlas adds.

He looks over us all, “Okay, I can agree to that. We have a couple of teams that feel the same as you. Their homes are unknown, and we don’t look for them. It also protects them if our systems are compromised since no one will be able to find our agents.”

Atlas nods, “Good.”

We all turn to leave, I feel optimistic and relieved, but I keep my face blank. There are people on the other side of the doors that we need to keep our guard around, at least until we know them all better. It’s not until we get to the Elevator and the doors shut behind us that Rage speaks, looking at Alaric.

“Did you know that was going to happen?”

“No, I didn’t. I had hoped that it was going to be something like that.” He replies honestly and then adds, “Make sure you check your cars for trackers before we leave, there are a few people here that are incredibly curious about you, and I wouldn’t put it past them. It’ll calm down now, and Mr Rising meant what he said. They won’t try to find where you live.”

“So why the tracker, then?” I ask.

“A test to see if you’re as good as you seem to be. They all know you are thorough.”

Trick shrugs, seemingly not to be too concerned. In all honesty, we were probably going to check anyway.

“Can we meet you back at the motel? I’d like your opinion on this offer, and this probably isn’t the best place to have that conversation.” Trick asks.

“Yes, of course,” Alaric replies as the elevator doors open, and we fall silent again.

When we get back to the cars, Peter pulls out his phone and checks the vehicles for any bugs or trackers, as the rest of us manually check them in the unlikely case that Peter’s software misses something.

“It’s all clear. Did you guys find anything?” Luc says, getting up from underneath the SUV.

“Nope,” Peter confirms, “it’s all good. We can go.”

We waste no time in getting back into the cars and making our way back out through the sets of gates, still following Alaric. I guess that went a hell of a lot better than we thought it would, but there’s a lot to think about, not only because it affects us and our lives but also because it affects the others too. Either way, things are going to change, and although this change would be huge, I can’t help but feel like accepting his offer would be the right move to make, and I hope that the guys will feel the same way.

The drive back to the motel is quiet, we’re all lost in our own thoughts, and Luc and Jensen are holding my hands as they sit on either side of me, leaving Rafe in the back and Trick and Cash up front.

All of them are showing their tells now that we’re away from scrutiny, clearly showing that they’re seriously taking into consideration everything that we’ve just been told. The file that Mr Rising gave me is sitting in my lap, and I’m beyond curious to read through it all and get a better idea of how this could work, but I’m also not willing to let go of the

guy's hands, and I want to get Alaric's opinion on this before I do look at anything else.

I value his opinion and trust that he will give us his honest one, whether we want to hear it or not. Despite the fact that I think it's a good idea, Alaric has known his boss for a long time, and he might've picked up on something that we didn't. There's a genuine chance that he's about to tell us to put plan B into motion and get out of there.

I'm suddenly a hell of a lot more nervous than I was a couple of seconds ago, and with no one else talking or giving their opinion right now, I've got nothing to distract myself with. I have officially talked myself into a state of worry, and it should be classed as a talent how easily I can make myself panic over things that haven't and might not even happen.

Thankfully before I can spiral any further into my self-imposed panic, we pull up outside of Alaric's motel room. Before I can scoot across the seat to follow Luc out the door, Jensen pulls me over onto his lap and then sears his lips to mine in a fast and passionate kiss that has me reeling and feeling a thousand times better than I did a few seconds ago.

## Chapter Thirty-One

“What was that for?” I pant when he finally pulls back.

“I could see you overthinking. It’s all going to be okay, Angel, don’t worry.” He replies, kissing me softly once more and then opening his door to let me out so we can catch up with the others.

“Thank you,” I reply, threading my fingers through his as we walk through the door.

“Okay, we have a lot to discuss, but before we go home and have that conversation, I want to know what your honest opinion is?” Trick asks Alaric, and we all take the same seats that we did last time.

“I think it’s a good idea.” He starts, “you get to do what you’re all good at and help people, but with the law behind you. You won’t have to worry about getting caught or finding information by yourselves, and I know you don’t need it, but you’re also going to get paid for it. It’s not a once you’re in; that’s it thing. If you decided later on that it’s not for you, then you could pursue other careers like Rafe and his cooking if that’s something he wanted to do. I can’t make the decision for you though, I can only give my opinion, and personally, if I were in your position, I would be taking the offer.”

Trick nods thoughtfully.

“What about Lyric and Elijah’s teams? Will they really be safe if we don’t take the job, or if they don’t want to be involved?” Riot asks.

Alaric nods and then replies honestly, “Mr Rising is a man of his word, but I think you all know that they would be safer, just like you would be if you accepted the offer, and they did too.”

“What about Jynx? She’s so vehemently against working for the feds even though you are one, and D works with them occasionally.” I ask.

“That’s different,” Atlas surprisingly answers. “She’s got stuff going on that would make it impossible for her to have any law involvement. Plus, you know she’s never done very well with the law.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” I reply. I don’t know the extent of why she can’t have the feds involved other than the fact she just doesn’t like it. She’s only vaguely mentioned it once. It’s just if we’re going to do this, I want to protect as many of my people as possible, and obviously, she’s on that list; she’s my soul sister.

“Okay, I guess we’re going to get going then. I need to call Elijah, and we need to talk about this properly,” Trick replies, “Thanks, man.”

“No problem, I’ve got to get back to work anyway. We’re still going through all the stuff we found at Blake’s place. I tell you what, if you guys do take the offer, that will be the bit that you find tedious,” he grins.

“I don’t know, it sounds interesting to me, going through everything and trying to make the connections and find the evidence.” Trick replies.

“And that right there is one of the reasons why you’re the leader you are and why I have every faith that you will strive to be better,” Alaric says.

“Thanks, man,” Trick replies.

We say goodbye, and as we’re walking toward the car, I remember the piece of paper that Alaric handed to Trick when we were at the base, and I ask curiously, “What was on the note that Alaric handed you?”

“He handed you a note?” Cash asks.

“Yeah, hang on,” Trick replies, fishing it out of his pocket and opening it, and then adds, surprised, “it’s the codes to override a lockdown so we could still get out of the building.”

“Wow, he could’ve gotten in a hell of a lot of trouble for that. They would’ve known it was him that gave us the codes.” Rage adds, sounding just as shocked as Trick.

“We need to burn that,” I point out. “There can’t be any evidence that we’ve had that, and we don’t want him to get in trouble.”

“Good point,” Atlas mutters. “We can burn it when we get home unless anyone has a lighter on them?”

Everyone says they don’t.

“Alright, come on, let’s get going; we’re not going to get back until around eight as it is, and we’ve got a lot to sort out.” Trick orders, and we all separate into the cars.

Once we’ve set off, Trick gets Cash to dial Atlas’s number.

“Hey, long time no speak,” Atlas jokes, and I grin.

“Haha,” Trick replies sarcastically, “I just wanted to see what everyone’s initial thoughts are on the job offer. I know we’ve got a lot to discuss, but we also need to fill in Elijah and Lyric, so I want to know how to approach that. There’s no point in us filling them in if we don’t want to do it.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” Atlas replies, “well, I think we should do it.”

“I agree,” Jensen adds.

“Me too,” Riot and Rage say at the same time.

“I think it’s a good idea, and it gives us a chance to do what we like doing,” Luc replies.

Rafe, Cash and I all agree that our initial thoughts are that we want to do it.

“It’s unanimous then. We still need to figure some stuff out and make sure it’s the right decision, but we can do that when we get home. Peter, call Elijah and fill him in, get him to tell the others and ask them to think about what they would like to do if we do agree to it.” Trick suggests.

“It might be a good idea to get him to get in contact with D as well. They’re his team, so he needs to be informed of what’s happening.” Atlas adds.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Trick replies. “Tell him we’ll pick him up on the way past, he needs to be a part of the

conversation, and he can tell us what they've decided at the same time."

"I'm on it, and I'll do it now," Peter replies.

"Thanks, man. Could someone also get in contact with Lyric and get them to meet us at their place? We need to fill them in properly and see what they think. We've only got until tomorrow morning to give Mr Rising an answer. It'll be easier in person." Trick adds.

"Sure, I can do that," Rage replies.

"Great, I think that's everything for now?" Trick asks.

"We have an issue," Atlas says, suddenly serious and I sit up straight.

"What?" Trick barks in reply, sensing the tone change.

"We're being followed," he replies, "black SUV two cars back."

Jensen frowns as he turns in his seat to check, but all we can see is Atlas's vehicle, "Are you sure?"

"Not completely, but there's one way we can find out," Atlas replies.

"If we take the next right, we should be able to make a loop back out onto this road, and there would be absolutely no reason why they would need to go that way unless they were following us." Peter adds, "I can direct you."

"Alright, stay close and stay alert." Trick says, all business now, as he adds, "Peter, could you also find a reasonably secluded place that we can lead them to if they do follow us?"

"Yeah, I'm on it. There's actually a warehouse district that we'll drive through before we get back out onto the main road. If they've followed us that far then we can just pull over there. There doesn't seem to be any security cameras in the area either."

"Perfect tell us when we need to pull over, and Atlas, you'll need to get behind them at some point so we can block them

in.” Trick adds as we take the turn Peter tells us we need to take.

“Got it,” he confirms.

I have no idea how he plans to get behind the vehicle that’s following us, but I trust that he can. I have to admit that a thrill of excitement goes through me, which is quickly followed by relief. I was worried that I might not have the same reaction to danger that I used to, and that could complicate things. I don’t think I could do what we do if I didn’t get that feeling anymore.

It’s evident that they are following us, so I pull out one of my guns and check it over. The others all do the same.

“What’s the plan for after we’ve boxed them in and made them pull over?” Peter asks; from the other car, Atlas never hung up the phone.

“We’ll surround them with our weapons drawn. They haven’t started shooting yet, and they aren’t being particularly aggressive, but we will still wait in the cars just in case they start shooting when they realise they’re blocked in.” Atlas replies.

“Agreed,” Trick replies, the rest of us doing the same.

“The place we can pull over is about ten minutes away,” Peter says.

Atlas waits until the last few minutes before he slams his brakes on, causing the other car to swerve around them; as soon as they’re in front, he drives as close as possible, and Trick slows down, not giving them any space to get around us. The fact that they don’t try anyway and ram us out of the way I take as a good sign. They still aren’t shooting either; however, they were definitely following us. As we pull off to the side of the thankfully deserted road, they move easily enough with no resistance to being herded.

Doing as Trick suggested, we wait in the cars for a minute or so before he gives the signal and we all get out and head toward the car, with the windows already rolling down as we approach and our guns drawn as we surround the vehicle.



The woman driving the car must be in her early to mid-twenties and has a massive grin on her face, her curly hair in complete disarray as she squirms in her seat like she's trying to stay where she is. She doesn't look threatening; more like she's excited, which is odd. I study the rest of the occupants in the car. The guy in the front seat is shaking his head in exasperation, his brown hair moving into his eyes. Another guy is sitting directly behind him and grinning like this is the best thing ever, and it gives me serious golden retriever puppy vibes.

"I'm so so sorry, this wasn't my idea, and I warned her." The guy in the middle wearing a superman t-shirt stretched over a muscled chest apologises profusely, making my eyebrows rise.

I don't know what I thought was going to happen, but it wasn't this.

I turn to look at the last guy, and he holds up his hands, "I'm just along for the ride and to keep them out of trouble."

"How's that working out for you?" I ask, my smile sharp.

"Obviously not that great," he replies with just as much snark, and my smile widens.

We still have our guns pointed at them, and we aren't taking any chances, but it's clear that they aren't a threat to us, I'm not sure what's going on, but I don't think they mean to cause us any harm.

"Why were you following us?" Trick asks.

It's the guy in the middle, the one who was apologising profusely, that answers, wisely staying as still as possible, "We used to be the youngest team. We heard all the stories about you guys. Everyone has, but we thought you'd be a lot older and up yourselves, so we didn't try to make sure that we were down in the office like all the others did. Zemi has absolutely no impulse control," he stares at the side of the still grinning and bouncing woman, who I'm assuming is Zemi, and her smile widens impossibly further, "when she realised that you

were younger than even us, she got excited and wanted to talk to you.”

The guy that matched my sarcasm interrupts, “And then, as usual, it kind of got away from us, and she kept following you, and the plan to introduce ourselves in a normal way completely fell apart.”

I burst out laughing, lowering my weapon and prompting the others to do the same, “Well, that was one hell of an introduction.”

The woman’s smile turns slightly sheepish as everyone relaxes, “Yeah, I’m sorry about that. I just wanted to say hi.”

I chuckle again, “Maybe next time don’t follow someone if you want to say hi. I’m Ever, by the way. Who are you guys?”

She starts bouncing in her seat again, “I’m Zemi, and this is my team.”

“My team,” the guy in the seat next to her interrupts half-heartedly, and I get the impression that they’ve had this conversation a lot.

Zemi waves her hand in the air dismissively, “Semantics. So Mr grumpy over there is Raiden,” she points at the guy next to her, “and then in the back, we have Saint, Wilder and Zepher.”

“Zep,” the guy with the sarcasm corrects.

“Right,” Zemi replies, rolling her eyes and entirely unperturbed.

“Nice to meet you guys,” Jensen grins, clearly finding this whole thing amusing. He then goes on to introduce everyone else, “I’m Jensen; this is Trick, Rafe, Riot, Peter, Rage, Atlas, Cash and Luc.”

“So, which one are you with?” Zemi asks, causing all the men in the car to groan.

“Zemira, we’ve only just met them and not under the best circumstances. You can’t ask that,” Raiden points out, shooting us an apologetic look.

My smile is amused, “Don’t worry about it, and I’m with all of them except Peter.”

“Yep, I’m just her bestie, and I like dick.” Peter chimes in, causing a shocked laugh from the team in the car.

“All of them?” Zemi asks.

I don’t miss the confused and slightly intrigued look the three guys in the back of the car share.

“Yep, they’re all mine, and I’m theirs.”

“Holy shit, that’s awesome. You’re not only swimming in fucking dicks, but you get to pick and choose,” she sighs wistfully, ignoring her team’s dropped mouths and my loud laughter. Damn, I like this girl.

“It’s pretty fucking awesome,” I reply.

“I bet.” She adds.

Trick clears his throat, “So, what’s it like working there then?”

Raiden answers this time, “It’s good, the pay is great, and the jobs are interesting. The older teams weren’t too fond of us, they’re all pretty stuck in their own ways, and some of them didn’t think we were up for the job when we first arrived.”

Zep scoffs, “Dude; they still give us shit. There’s no point sugar-coating it, and they’re going to find out for themselves soon enough.”

“We get to shoot stuff though, and they’ve got some fucking awesome toys,” Saint adds.

“He means weapons. He always refers to them as toys,” Wilder answers, rolling his eyes.

“Not just weapons, gadgets too.” Saint retorts.

Cash leans on the side of the car, “Well, shit from people who think we aren’t qualified is nothing new. We can handle that.”

“And give as good as we get,” Jensen adds.

Saint points at him, “Dude, this one guy was a right fuck, kept claiming we were just children, so I figured I’d act like one. I put hair removal cream in his shampoo and then left a trail of evidence to one of the other teams that they had high tensions with anyway; they’ve been fighting ever since.”

Jensen’s face lights up, “Fucking genius, man, I’ve got some other things we can do!”

“Jensen!”

“Saint!”

Trick and Raiden say at the same time, and then they both share an understanding look. Especially when Jensen and Saint both shrug at the same time. They’re definitely going to cause some shit together.

Peter suddenly interrupts their conversation, “Hang on; you said gadgets. What kind of gadgets?”

“New weapons and some tech stuff I don’t understand,” Saint replies.

Peter sees Wilder roll his eyes and instantly zeros in on him, starting a conversation with him about all the tech they’ve got going on at the headquarters. I don’t understand half of it, but judging from Peter’s excitement, it’s pretty amazing stuff.

As they talk, I turn to Zemi, “So, what’s it like being a woman there? I feel like I have to ask because traditionally, it’s a very male-dominated area.”

“We’re pushed harder than everyone else,” she replies honestly, her eyes flashing dangerously, “the same guys that don’t like that we’re a young team are also the same ones that have a problem with women being on the teams, especially an all male team.”

“I figured it might be something like that,” I reply.

“I’m not trying to put you guys off from working there, there are some amazing perks, like the pay and the safety and all that shit, but I also don’t want you guys going in with rose-tinted glasses on like we did.” She adds.

“Thanks, I appreciate that. Why don’t you give me your number, and then you can fill us in more?”

“Really?” she asks like she can’t believe I want her number, “even after I got carried away and ended up following you guys?”

I chuckle, “Of course, as I said, it was one hell of a memorable way to introduce yourself.”

“At least I know you guys will never forget me,” she returns my smile and then reels off her number.

“Thanks, I’ll text you,” I add. “Guys, we better get going. We’ve got a lot to do.”

They all say goodbye to each other, seeming to get along pretty well before Jensen grins dangerously and pulls out one of his knives, “Sorry guys, you seem great and all, but I can’t risk you guys following us again.”

They all stare at him in shock as he bends over and stabs one of the tires, making it go flat in seconds before the team in the car bursts out laughing.

“Fair enough.” Raiden nods.

I wave goodbye as we all get back in our cars and pull away.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

“I like them,” I mutter as we pull back onto the main road and finally head home.

“Yeah, me too,” Trick mutters thoughtfully.

“It would be nice to have someone on our side there. From what they were saying, not everyone is going to take a liking to us.” Jensen adds.

“Did you really need to stab the tire?” I ask him teasingly.

“Yes, I wasn’t going to risk them following us home because Zemi’s curiosity got the best of her again. Besides, they didn’t seem too bothered.”

“Probably because they know that’s what she was going to do,” I joke, and then pull out my phone when it buzzes in my pocket. “Guy’s D’s calling.”

“Hang on, and I’ll get Atlas up on the other phone. We need a big car for when we all want to travel together. This is a pain in the ass,” Trick mutters.

I press accept on my phone while Trick gets Atlas up and explains that D’s calling so they can listen in. “Hey D, what’s up?”

“Ever,” he greets warmly, “I’m just calling to clarify a couple of things.”

“Okay, shoot,” I reply. I had a feeling he might get in contact with us after Elijah called him.

“Elijah called me and let me know what was going on. You’ve been offered a job with Alaric’s boss, yes?”

“Yeah, that’s right, and if we accept it, then the teams that we’ve worked closely with before, so Elijah’s team, now that he’s tied to Peter and Lyric’s team, will be working under us and gain the same level of security and have contracts and all that.” Trick answers this time.

“And you would be in charge under Alaric?” he confirms.

“Yes, we still have a lot to discuss before we can say for certain, but we wanted everyone else’s opinions first.”

“Okay, Elijah’s spoken to me briefly, and they’re in the same mindset as you and still discussing everything. However, if they decide to follow you, then that’s absolutely fine with me, they’re a good team, and they’ll work well with what you have going on.”

“Brilliant. Thanks, D.”

“No worries, I’ve got to get back. Let me know if you need a hand with anything,” he offers.

“Definitely,” I reply, before saying goodbye and hanging up.

“Well, that’s good. At least we know we aren’t going to have any issues with D if we do this, and Elijah and the guys want to be a part of it,” Rage says into the silence.

“Yeah. Did Lyric message back?” Trick asks.

“Yep, they’re all waiting at the house.” Rage replies.

“Good, let’s get this done so we can talk properly and decide what we want to do.”

I spend the drive to Lyric’s place mostly in my mind, imagining what our lives could be like if we don’t take this job; although we won’t be persecuted, we will be watched very closely. I have no doubt about that, which would mean that we can’t help people like we’re used to doing. I’m not sure I can live an ordinary and mundane life; I don’t even know what kind of job I’d do. This sort of thing has been my life for as long as I can remember, so long in fact that the only thing I remember wanting to do when I grew up was to become a knight, and technically they save people using violence too, so maybe I’ve always been destined for something a little bit bloody.

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“Ever, we’re here,” Jensen says softly as he brushes the hair off my face.

“Ah, shit, did I fall asleep? I’m sorry.” I grumble as I stretch out my back.

“Don’t worry about it, Sweetheart. We’ve had a long day, and it’s not ending anytime soon.” Trick replies, opening his door and then moving to open mine and help me get out.

We walk hand in hand, following the others up to Lyric’s colossal front door. It opens before we get there, and Lyric rushes out, giving me a huge hug, and then Peter. Before she steps back and turns to face all of us, her arms crossed over her chest and an unimpressed look on her face.

“I’m mad at you all,” she announces.

“What, why?” I reply, slightly confused.

“You should’ve stopped off here before you went to your meeting. I could’ve given you several things that would’ve made escaping from the place if you were trapped there a hell of a lot easier. You probably could’ve just walked out leisurely.” She huffs indignantly like we’ve genuinely offended her.

Trick chuckles, “We’ll remember that for next time. Thankfully we didn’t need to blow a hole in the place; that’s actually what we’re here to talk to you guys about.”

“You’d better.” She replies, before stepping to the side so we can all go through the door.

“Hey guys,” Dominic greets us.

“Sit and eat. I know for a fact that you’ve had too much on your mind today to remember to eat, and I also know that you’ve got a lot to sort out tonight and probably won’t have time.” Lucien orders us all as he gestures to the table that’s filled with buffet-style foods that we can load our plates up with.

“We can talk while we eat,” Ezra adds, already sitting down and eating.

“Dude, I told you to wait!” Lucien chastises, and Ezra just shrugs, smiling around a mouth full of food like a kid that’s been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.



“Thanks, man, we really appreciate it,” Atlas says gratefully, clapping him on the shoulder as he walks past to take a seat.

Once everyone has their plates loaded, Dominic asks, “Okay, so what’s going on?”

“I take it the meeting went well, or you guys wouldn’t be here?” Creed asks.

“Yeah. He offered us a job. We still have some things to talk about, but we wanted to fill you guys in, in person, since our decision will affect you guys as well, and we don’t want to agree to anything without getting your opinion on it.” Rage explains.

They all tense and share a wary look before Lucien says, “Okay, so shoot.”

“If we were to take the job, then there’s an option for you to also be employed with them. You’d work under our team. We’d get the jobs through Alaric since he’s our handler, and then Trick would decide which jobs are suited to which team best. You’d get the same level of protection as us, and you’d get paid for it as well.” Trick starts to explain.

“You’d also have to join us at the headquarters to go through crime scene training and a couple of other things, so we all know how to process our jobs properly, and you’d be expected to write up reports,” Atlas adds.

“And if we don’t want to?” Jonah asks.

“Then we can’t use you for any of our jobs in the future. At least we can’t get caught using you for any jobs, or they will go after you. I personally don’t want to risk you guys, so we wouldn’t be using your help. Mr Rising did say that you would be safe if you decide not to join us if we decide to accept the job.” Trick answers him honestly.

“Will Elijah and his team be joining you?” Ezra asks.

“Possibly, Elijah is talking to him now,” Peter replies.

“What happens if you guys decide not to take him up on his offer to work for them?” Creed asks.

Trick sighs heavily, “We’d remain safe, but we would be strongly discouraged from doing anything like we have been. In other words, we will be closely watched and have to be normal.”

Lyric laughs, “I’m sorry it’s not funny, but even I know you guys will go stir crazy if you can’t help people, and I haven’t known many of you for very long.”

“She has a point,” Dominic agrees.

“You’re right, and we’re leaning toward saying yes. We just need to work out a few things as a family first.” Cash replies.

“And we need to know how you guys all feel about it,” Luc tells them. It’s a big part of our decision; we want to make sure that everyone else is comfortable with whatever we decide and how their involvement will change because of it as well.

“If you guys agree, then you’ll have contracts just like us, and we’d all have to go to get our security clearance stuff and IDs, that sort of thing.” Trick adds.

Creed’s eyes snap to Trick, “Do not sign anything without letting me look over it first. Even if we don’t agree to work with them. I want to check the fine print and make sure that you aren’t signing your lives away or something else equally ridiculous. The government are well known for putting in clauses that effectively take away one of your rights or mean you’re fucked if you try to walk away.”

I’d completely forgotten that he was a lawyer, but it’s fucking handy that we can have him look over everything with a trained eye and tell us if it’s all above board. It had crossed my mind that they might try to pull something. As nice and honest as Mr Rising seemed to be, it could all be a very cleverly construed smoke screen to throw us off his real agenda. Give us just enough honesty to start to trust him, so we don’t look any deeper.

“Thanks, man. I was going to ask you to do that anyway.”

“Would we have to move?” Ezra asks with a frown, and I think it’s because he clearly loves his job here.

“No, we’d make this our home base, as it were,” Trick replies.

“Okay,” he nods, looking relieved and stuffing more food in his mouth.

Lyric starts bouncing excitedly in her chair, kind of reminding me of Zemi; I think they’d get on really well. Although with Lyric’s lack of filter and Zemi’s apparent lack of impulse control, I can imagine them getting into a whole load of trouble if they ever do meet.

“Of course, we’re in. Sounds good to me.” Lyric says excitedly, making me smile.

Her men all turn to her, looking exasperated and utterly unsurprised at her outburst.

“Lyric, Sweetness, we really should talk about this as a family before we just agree,” Dominic points out.

“We’d need to work out several things and make sure it’s what’s best for all of us,” Lucien adds.

“And that it’s the most logical thing,” Creed mutters.

“I think we should do it,” Ezra grins.

“Of course you do. You’re just as impulsive as Lyric is.” Dominic replies, making both of them pout at him.

I try to hide my grin as best I can, but it’s just too damn amusing.

Finally, Lyric sighs heavily and nods, “Fine, I guess you’re right.” She then turns to Peter and me, hiding her mouth with her hand as she stage whispers, “don’t worry guys, we’re with you either way.”

Peter and I burst out laughing.

“For fuck sake, Lyric,” Creed mutters but can’t hide his fond smile.

She throws her hands up in the air dramatically, “What?”

“I think that’s our cue to leave.” Trick grins as he gets up from the table, prompting the rest of us to do the same.

“Thanks for the food, guys,” I say gratefully, Lucien was right, and I hadn’t quite realised how hungry I was until the food was in front of me.

“No problem.” He replies.

“When do you guys need a decision by?” Dominic asks.

Trick winces slightly, “We need to know by tomorrow morning at the latest. I told him that we’d have a decision for him as soon as possible.”

“Okay, we can do that. We’ll let you know by the end of the night. Clearly, Lyric has already made a decision, but like you we need to work out a few things first.”

“Understandable. We’ll talk to you later then.” Atlas replies as we say goodbye and make our way back to the cars.

Before we can get in them, Trick stops, “We may as well all stop in at Elijah’s and see if they’ve decided what to do yet. They’ve had over four hours to talk about it thanks to the following incident.”

“Yeah, good point. We’ve got to drop the car off and bring Elijah up to the house anyway.” Riot replies.

With that, we all get into the cars and make the short journey to the farmhouse.

“Hey guys,” Elijah greets as he opens the door to let us in and immediately pulls Peter into his arms. “I was worried about you.”

## *Rage*

We all file into the front room of the farmhouse, leaving Peter and Elijah to say a proper hello. I can understand why he was so worried, but I think he handled it a hell of a lot better than I would have if I had to let Ever go into a dangerous situation, even if it were necessary at the time.

“Are you alright, guys?” I ask the room as a whole.

“Yeah, we’re good. Just trying to work everything out,” Callan replies.

They all look tired, but they don’t look tense, so I’m hoping that whatever discussion they had was pretty amicable. I’m grateful that the others and I all seem to be on the same page about taking the job. It would be difficult to come to an agreement about what to do if several of us were dead against it.

The main reason why I’m okay with it is because of the security it offers. Doing things as we do now isn’t as safe as it would be if we had the government and extra resources behind us.

It would also be a hell of a lot less stressful than it typically is.

“Sorry to get straight to the point, guys, but we were wondering if you guys had made a decision yet?” Trick asks as soon as Elijah is back in the room.

Elijah looks around at his team, double-checking that no one has had any second thoughts and still agrees; when they all nod, he turns to us, “Yes, and we’re behind you whatever you decide to do. I assume D contacted you after we spoke to him?”

“Yeah, he did. Are you sure?” Atlas asks.

“Absolutely,” Noel answers.

“And you’re all in agreement?” Trick checks.

“Yes, it was a pretty easy decision to make,” Marty replies as the others nod their own agreement.

“Great, thanks, guys. We’ll let you know what we’ve decided soon. We’ve just got to discuss a couple of things before we do. Elijah, do you want to come up to the house with us? This concerns you as well now,” Trick asks as he looks pointedly toward Peter.

“Yeah, of course. I’ll take my car up, so you guys don’t have to squeeze in the one car, and then I can drive Peter and me back later.”

“Sounds good. Alright, let’s go,” Atlas orders before turning to the others, “sorry for the flying visit.”

“No problem, now that’s all sorted. I need a beer.” Callan mutters, getting up and heading straight for the kitchen.

“Fair enough. See you later, man.” Luc chuckles.

As we make our way up to the cabin, I start to think about everything that needs to be done to the cabin to make it work for us long term, and more importantly, how much the others will all let me get away with paying for. I know they’re all considerably wealthy themselves, but I’d really like to help make this our permanent home. I want to get the stables redone as quickly as possible because we’re going to need to bring the horses up soon.

When we get back, Atlas pulls me to one side as the others head toward the house, “I just wanted to check in with you, man. You found out your mom was no longer a problem but had been hiding millions from you and may end up going to prison for it, and now we’re dealing with this. Before it all gets mad again, I just wanted to make sure you were dealing okay.”

That right there is why he will always be my best friend and always has been.

I clap him on the shoulder as I smile gratefully, “Thanks, man. I’m really okay though. That woman deserves to be behind bars, but so long as she’s as far away from me as humanly possible, I couldn’t really give two fucks what happens to her. As for the money side of it, I was just thinking about how I can spend it on the house if we take the job.”

Atlas chuckles at my raised eyebrow as we start to walk toward the house, “Of course, we’re taking the job, but you know what Trick’s like. He has to go through everything with a fine tooth comb before he’s happy, and to be honest, there are a couple of things I want to double-check as well.”

“Yeah, I get that. Besides, it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“Exactly, and we have a big family to look out for now, man. Can you believe how far we’ve come?”

“No.” I reply honestly, “I thought it was going to be you and me against everyone forever. Occasionally having Jynx thrown in there as well. We’ve even gotten closer to Lyric and her team, and we’ve known them for years.”

“I know. I’m surprised they stuck with us for this long, if I’m honest. I know I didn’t really make it easy for them. I went through the motions of friendship with them, but I didn’t actually open up to them.”

“Hey, that’s not all on you. I was just as bad, and I can’t even recall just how many times they asked me to stick around and have a drink with them before I headed back to Blackbreak after I’d come to check on this place for you. Well, the town, you didn’t even let me up to the cabin.”

“I think we owe them an apology,” Atlas replies with a frown.

“We can take them out for drinks after we’ve sorted this out and buy Lyric some explosive shit. She’ll be happy with that.” I reply, liking the idea more and more.

“Deal, come on, let’s get this done.”

# Chapter Thirty-Three

## *Ever*

“I’m going to go and make some drinks. Everything is easier to talk about if you have a good coffee,” I mutter, heading straight for the kitchen.

“I’ll help.” Riot replies following after me.

The others follow, too, all sitting down at the table.

We quickly have all the drinks made, although I have to ask Elijah what he wants since I’ve never made him coffee before. I realise that my mind is talking itself around in circles as I make the drinks. It’s suddenly become incredibly important to me that we take this job. As much as I’ve enjoyed helping people our way, I’m tired. I want to be able to take time off, and I want not to be directly involved with the people we’re helping.

I know that sounds callous, but I have had enough of it being one of us that needs the help or one of us that’s in danger. Never again.

As soon as I sit my ass down on a chair, Runa appears as if from nowhere and hops up onto my lap, purring and instantly settling my nerves. If we do take this job, I won’t have to worry about leaving her either, yet another tick in the pro column.

“Alright,” Trick, as usual, starts as Riot and I hand out drinks, “Elijah, I just want to make sure that you guys are in no matter what we decide?”

“Yes, if you guys want to work for them, we want in; it sounds like a pretty good deal and offers a bit more freedom than working for D does in the sense that we don’t have to worry about getting caught by the authorities. Having said that though, we will still be with you if you decide not to take and we have to become even sneakier about the jobs we do.” Atlas



raises his eyebrow at him, so he adds, “Oh come on, we all know you well enough to know that there is no chance that you guys will just stop and live a normal life. I was wondering how it would affect Dom and the motorcycle club, though, since they were involved in a couple of jobs?”

Luc frowns, “I don’t think this involves them at all since they were only brought in for those jobs, and they’ve got their own things going on. They were temporary, whereas your team and Lyric’s are more permanent. Elena and her men have gone back to just being family instead of work associates too.”

“Yeah, I think that’s a good way to put it. It would be far too complicated to get them to legitimise things and would take too long as well.” Riot adds.

Trick nods, “I agree. They need to stay out of this and just be family. If we really need their help in the future, we’ll have to consider it extremely carefully. What about the rest of you? Are you still leaning toward taking the job?”

“I am, even more so than I was,” I reply honestly.

“Me too,” Jensen agrees.

Before anyone else can agree, although they’re all nodding, my phone rings. I frown as I pull it out and then answer the video call. “Hey Jynx, everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything is fine, hey guys!” she greets, looking a lot less bloody this time.

The guys all reply, and I ask, “Why did you call?”

“I just got off the phone with D, and he told me that you guys got offered a job,” she replies, “so I’m being nosy and seeing if you’re taking it.”

I chuckle, “We’re actually just talking about it now, but I think it’s likely that we will.”

“Good. I was hoping you were going to say that and was going to try to convince you if you didn’t,” she replies with a smile.

“Oh? I thought you’d be against it?” Atlas adds, and I turn the phone to face him.

“So did I. You’ve made it no secret how much you dislike the Feds.” Rage adds.

Jynx sighs, “I know, and it wouldn’t be right for us. We’re too deep into the criminal world. It just wouldn’t be feasible. But I think it’s a good idea for you guys. You’ll still get to help people, and it’ll all be above board.”

“You know it means that we can’t involve you in any jobs?” Atlas adds.

“No, it just means that we can’t get caught being involved in any of your jobs. Between Peter’s skills with all things tech and our various skills and connections, it shouldn’t be that hard to pull off.” Rome adds from somewhere in the room with Jynx.

I’ve got to say that I’m quite relieved, I love working with Jynx, and more than that, she knows me so well that I don’t have to hold back on the deadlier side of me if it’s required.

“That’s good to know, although we won’t risk you guys unnecessarily,” Trick replies firmly, and Jynx nods.

“Yeah, I get that. But I just wanted you guys to know that we’re here if you need us, don’t hesitate to call us in. we can deal with the fallout if it happens.” Jynx replies.

“What she said!” Ace yells from the background and then starts cursing about a cat.

“Thank you, guys,” I reply. “Also, I want you guys to know that if you need our help on any jobs, just let us know. It goes both ways.”

“Got it,” she replies and adds, “I’m going to let you guys get back to talking about it. Call me later, and we’ll catch up properly soon!”

“Definitely, bye,” I reply, hanging up the phone.

It’s silent for a minute as we all try to gather our thoughts.

“So no one wants to implement plan B?” Trick asks, and nerves start to flutter in my belly. I don’t want to go on the run again. “It’s still an option if anyone is not comfortable with us taking the job, it’s a massive change, and although it offers us more security than we’ve got now, we will still be doing really dangerous jobs.”

“I think the pros outweigh the cons,” Riot starts, “I don’t want to go on the run. We’d never be safe again.”

“I agree. At least with this job offer, we can stay in one place. We will always have a home to come back to.” Rage adds.

There are sounds of unanimous agreement around the table, and I relax.

Jensen suddenly perks up, “I guess that safe house in Canada has just become a holiday home.”

Everyone chuckles, as Atlas points out, “It might be a good idea to save it in case we need it in the future.”

Jensen pouts, so Rafe adds, “But there’s no reason why we can’t buy another holiday home.”

Jensen’s pout turns into a smile, “Good point.”

Trick nods, looking relieved himself, “That’s something we can discuss later. We’d be able to stay here. We’ll be able to make this our home properly. It would mean that all of those changes we were going to make in the future to make this place more liveable for all of us on a permanent basis will have to happen sooner.”

“Yes, but it’s easily done, and I have a contractor in town that I’ve used before, and so has Lyric and the guys for various things. They’re good at what they do and trustworthy.” Atlas adds.

“Okay, so that’s one thing we can cross off the list,” Rage adds, “but I’d also need to get the stables and paddock sorted as quickly as possible since if we take this job, we won’t be going back to Blackbreak again. I’m sure there won’t be too much of a rush since Alaric knows the Principal and can pull some strings, but I’ll feel better once they’re here.”

“As soon as everything is settled with Mr Rising, I can get the ball rolling the works,” Atlas replies.

“We’ll need to get any stuff left at the houses at Blackbreak,” Peter adds thoughtfully, “but I can get a very discreet packing service to do that, and we can get it shipped down to the farmhouse, so this place remains known by as few people as possible.”

“Good idea. I had completely forgotten that there was stuff there.” I reply I don’t even remember what I left.

“Speaking of Blackbreak though, does anyone feel ready to take the GED now?” Rafe asks.

“No, I think a couple of months in, and I could probably get away with it,” I reply honestly.

“I could now,” Jensen says, Riot, Rage and Peter all agreeing with him.

“Okay, so those of us who feel like they’re able can take it as soon as possible, and everyone else can take it when they feel ready. I will let Mr Rising know that some of us are still studying for our GEDs and that the caseload needs to be adapted so that we can still do that.” Trick replies as he scribbles notes onto a piece of paper, no doubt trying to make sure that we remember everything.

“What about the kids at Blackbreak?” I ask. “There were still some issues when we left for break.”

“We’ve got that footballer, kid. What’s his name?” Luc asks.

“Matty,” I reply.

“Yeah, him, he seemed to be pretty on it. We can get him to keep an eye on shit in case the Phoenix society decides to pop up again, I really don’t think that would be a good idea, and we’d need to disband it immediately or send someone in to take care of it. That organisation has proven to be extremely dangerous even without my family’s involvement.” Atlas replies firmly.

“Yeah, I think that’s probably the best way to go about it,” Cash adds in agreement and then turns to Peter and Elijah, “what about you guys? How would this work with you?”

They share a look, and Elijah starts, “If it’s okay with you guys, we’d like to stay in the farmhouse. Peter loves it and has already started decorating it and making it his own.”

“But the guys are getting a bit fed up. It’s too small for all of us, really, so we’d need to get Jonah to find them homes in town or land that they can build on.” Peter adds.

“We’re a close team, but we don’t really do well living together for long periods of time.” Elijah chuckles.

Trick scribbles on his notepad, “That’s easily sorted. Just to clarify, we’d need homes for Callan, Noel and Marty, yes? You’ll be staying at the farmhouse with Peter?”

Elijah blushes slightly, turning to look at Peter, “Well, I hadn’t officially discussed it with him, but yes, that’s what I’d like to do.”

“Shit, sorry, my tact goes out the window when I’m trying to organise shit,” Trick winces as he apologises.

“No worries, man,” Elijah replies, still looking at Peter.

Peter’s smile is full of love as he replies, “I think we’ve spent long enough apart. I’d love to live with you.”

Elijah kisses him thoroughly but startles when Peter suddenly pulls back, “What?”

Peter seems to be over-excited as he says, “Oh my god, we can get a dog!”

“Erm, we’re still going to be travelling and working,” Elijah points out.

Peter deflates, and I can’t help but add, “True, but there will always be someone still around, either from your team, ours or Lyric’s, that could look after it while Peter’s away.”

Peter perks up immediately and points at me, “This is why you’re my bestie.”

Elijah chuckles, “Maybe we can talk about this later?”

“Oh shit yeah, important talk happening right now,” Peter replies, miming zipping his lips closed.

I don’t think I’ll ever get fed up with his theatrics.

“We’ll be able to see our families again if we do this,” Trick adds. “There’s absolutely no reason why we can’t, as we keep saying this job offers more protection, and none of the people we go after will have an affiliation with us, making it safer.”

“We can have the perks and safety of a normal life while still chasing the thrill of helping people in our own bloody and dangerous way,” Jensen adds with an excited smile full of anticipation.

“How do you think they’ll take it, us living here?” I ask, biting my lip. They’ve been pretty chill so far with our relationship and everything else that’s been thrown at them, but we are all only eighteen, a couple of us nineteen, that’s still really young. Even though I feel a hell of a lot older because of all the shit we’ve been through in our lives.

“I think it will take them some time to get used to,” Trick replies, and then adds, rolling his eyes, “but from my mom’s point of view, it’ll be more that her baby is growing up.”

“We can tell them by visiting them, they’ll be so excited we’re there, they won’t focus on us all living together straight away,” Jensen grins.

“Genius, I like it,” I reply teasingly.

“What about you, Trick?” Cash asks and gets a confused look in response.

“What about me?”

“Well, you’ve asked everyone else how they feel about this situation, but you’re going to have even more responsibility. If Lyric’s team agree to this as well, then you will be in charge of three teams. All the jobs will get passed from Alaric to you, and you’re going to have to choose the right people, plan the jobs and coordinate it all. Are you going to be able to handle that?”

“He has a point that’s a hell of a lot of responsibility on your shoulders,” Atlas adds.

“Obviously, we will all help out where we can, but the brunt of it is going to be down to you,” Rafe replies.

“We can do weekly meetings and catch-ups, and we can always have one of the other teams on standby just in case the team out in the field needs backup.” I suggest and then add, “Actually, I just thought that’s something else that Lyric’s team need to be made aware of. As far as I understand it, they stay in the town, making sure it’s safe and all that. So do they want to go on jobs, or would their main focus be here still?”

Atlas stares at me for a second, “Shit, I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll call them, but I want to hear Trick’s answer first.”

Trick looks around at us all, and there’s an unmistakable gleam of pride and excitement in his eyes. “Yes, I think I’m going to really enjoy the challenge of it, if I’m honest. I know there might be a few hiccups at first, but individually we’re all solid teams; together, we can only be stronger, especially since we all consider each other friends or family. I can do this.”

“I never doubted that man,” Cash replies, “I just wanted to make sure that you felt you were up to it.”

Trick nods in understanding and then gestures to Atlas, “You better call them, it’s getting late anyway, and we need an answer too.”

Atlas already has his phone out and lays it on the table after putting it on speaker so that we can all hear.

“Hey guys,” Dominic greets, “we were just about to call you with our answer. We’re in. Whatever you guys decide, we’re behind you.”

“See, I told you!” Lyric yells from the background, and Peter and I share an amused look.

“Thank you, guys, we really appreciate that, but we wanted to check something,” Trick replies.

“Okay, shoot,” Dominic says.

“Can everyone hear us?” Trick asks.

“Yeah.”

“Good, so we know that you spend all your time in the town and protecting it. Is that something that you want to continue doing, or do you want to go out on jobs too?”

“This was one of the things we spoke about,” Jonah answers this time.

“We’d like to do the occasional job, but obviously, due to our work commitments and then town, we wouldn’t be able to do it that often,” Ezra explains.

“Will that be a problem?” Lyric asks.

“No, not at all. It’s just something that I needed to know since I’ll be handing the jobs out,” Trick explains.

“So you’re doing it then? You’re taking the job?” Lucien asks.

Trick looks around at us all, and I can’t help but match his smile with one of my own. The others nod, Elijah and Peter too; we’re all in agreement.

“Yeah, we’re doing it. I’ll let you know when I’ve got all the contracts through, we had paper copies, but I think I’d rather wait for the ones that we’ve actually got to sign, just in case they assume we won’t read both, and they’re different. Once we’ve got them, we can go through them all together and work out any kinks.” Trick replies.

“Sounds good. I think it’s probably smart to wait,” Creed agrees since he’s going to be the one that has to go through the contracts for each team to make sure that they’re all legitimate and we don’t get fucked over. “It wouldn’t hurt to read the paper ones, too, at some point so that you know if they were going to try and pull anything.”

“Alright, thanks man, we’ll do that tomorrow. Talk soon.” Trick replies, hanging up and looking around at us all. “Peter, if you could send the email to Mr Rising, telling him that we agree and I’ll have two teams underneath me, that would be great.”



“Yes, of course, I actually left my laptop at the house for the first time ever, so I’ll do it when we head back.”

“Great, thank you. Message me when it’s done?”

“Of course.”

“We’re really doing this?” Rage asks with a smile.

“Yep, shall we put it to a vote?” Trick asks, obviously wanting to make certain that everyone is really on board, one last time. “All those in favour of taking the job, raise your hand.”

Everyone raises their hands.

“It’s unanimous,” Trick grins.

Peter gets up with a yawn, prompting Elijah to do the same, “We’re going to get going then, guys. Not only am I exhausted, but I need to get this email sent as soon as possible. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

I stand up, pulling him into a hug as everyone says goodbye, and we watch them leave.

When I sit back down, I lean my head on Rafe’s shoulder as he wraps his arm around me and kisses my forehead, as I look around at the others, all looking a mixture of nervous and excited. This feels like the right decision for all of us. Like them, I’m nervous, but it’s because it’s something entirely new for us, and I’m also ridiculously excited about all the opportunities this gives us. It also opens doors for the future that were previously closed because it wasn’t safe enough.

I never could’ve imagined that my life would reach this point; I’m doing something I’m good at with my gorgeous men by my side. I’ve gone from being almost completely isolated to surrounding myself with friends who feel like family. I couldn’t have wished for anything better.

One thing is for certain; this is not the end. It’s just the beginning of a brand new adventure.

# Books by this Author

## *Finding My Home*

Home

Secrets Worth Keeping

Twisted Complications

Warped Revelations

Repercussions

Revenge

Book Seven (Coming Soon)

## *The Lost Ones*

### **Part One**

Imprinted Tattoos

Uncovered Truths

Dangerous Discoveries

### *Part Two*

Hidden Monster (Coming Soon)

## *Broken Kings*

Bow down

Kneel (Coming soon)

# *Black Onyx Academy*

Black Onyx  
Book Two (Coming Soon)

## *Boxsets*

The Lost Ones 1-3  
Finding My Home 1-3  
Finding My Home 4-6  
Finding My Home 1-6

## *Audiobooks*

Imprinted Tattoos (The Lost Ones) Book 1  
Uncovered Truths (The Lost Ones) Book 2  
Home (Finding My Home) Book 1

# About The Author

## **Nikita Parmenter**

Nikita Parmenter lives in England, with her four children and two puppies. Coffee and cinnamon buns are what keep her going. Her characters all have a special place in her heart and quite often enjoy throwing her curve balls that send the plot line in a completely different direction than she had originally planned. She loves it! Not as crazy as it sounds, she promises. She writes Paranormal Reverse Harem, Contemporary Reverse Harem, and has a Reverse Harem Bully Romance in the works too. She loves writing strong, take no sh\*t female characters, that have become that way through fighting tooth and nail to survive. She also loves writing damaged alpha males with hearts of gold buried underneath all their jagged edges. Connect with Nikita via her Facebook page Nikita Parmenter - Author or Instagram nikitaparmenterauthor. There will be competitions, giveaways, POV's from some of our favourite guys, Bonus scenes and updates on when the next book's will be out! Please leave a review if you get the chance, it would mean the world to her!

Thank you so much for reading!