

JL AVERY

*She will
conquer the
man who
holds her in
a cage.*

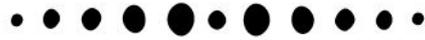
Scarlett Bay

UNTETHERED

Legacy

BOOK ONE

Untethered Legacy
A Scartlett Bay Novel - Book One



JL Avery

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Cover design by: Eryn Lee with Red Door Book Covers

Edited by Norma Gambini with Normas Nook Proof Reading

To my other half - While I know my never-ending discussions of plot holes and editing wasn't something you were used to, you took my new goal and reminded me I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. I appreciate all your encouragement. I love you.

To my sister - You are my best friend. My alpha reader. Biggest fan and quite frankly the best person to keep me motivated. The belief you have in me continues to push me to write. This book never would have gotten written if it wasn't for you.

To my new author friends Kathleen Cole, DJ Minshall, Aleena Rhea James, Stacy Warren and my Hype Girls – You have offered me so much guidance, suggestions, and unconditional support. Your experience and eagerness to help has been so valuable. Nothing short of inspiring. Thank you for being you and helping this story become what it is now.

Content and Trigger Warning

This novel contains graphic depictions of sexual assault, domestic violence (DV), kidnapping, and death. This novel uses strong language. This novel also has explicit sexual content. This novel contains sensitive material relating to child abuse, trauma, anxiety, terminal illness, pregnancy, loss of pregnancy, violence, and more. Please remember to practice self-care before, during, and after reading.

Chapter One

Ivy

The room's shadows keep me hidden; the only source of light comes from the parking lot, and it filters through the floral drapes. The aroma of floor cleaner and day-old pizza cling to the air. Could be worse, I guess. At least the constant buzz of the air conditioning unit almost drowns out the grunts from the man on top of me.

“You like that?” Mr. No-Name asks.

“Uh-huh,” is all I reply. Of course, *I do not* “like that.” I am not sure why I accepted the offer to go back to his room. The need for connection? The relief from the silence that comes from being alone? To forget what today is? Or perhaps to have an orgasm brought on by more than my right hand and a hot romance novel. Regardless of my subconscious choice, it seems he will meet none of my expectations tonight.

I close my eyes and tighten my core, attempting to speed up the inevitable. The jack hammer above me continues slamming into me as if it's an Olympic sport and the most pumps per second wins the gold medal. *News flash buddy, it's*

not working. Firm hands grip my waist as he continues his efforts, and sweat drips from the tip of his nose onto the side of my neck. *Gross.*

“Fuck, you’re so tight. I’m going to come,” he grunts, closing his eyes and throwing his head back in a dramatic roar. His eyes are pinched tightly shut as he tenses. And finally, after what seems like an eternity, he stills.

Thank God that’s over.

He pulls out, and his absence leaves me no excuses. *Time to go.* He’s panting beside me, clearly showing his exertion from the last two minutes.

“Uh, thanks. That was ... Well, have a good night.” I shimmy off the bed and pull my skirt down as I stand, hoping to avoid any further touching, and collect my shoes. We didn’t make it far into the room before he shoved my panties to the side as he laid me on the bed, fully clothed. I thank my lucky stars, grateful I won’t have to deal with the awkwardness of searching for my clothes.

“Wait, you’re leaving already?” Shock tightens his voice. I turn to him, and he’s lying on his side, head resting on his hand. He makes no move to pull his pants back up. He hasn’t even taken the time to remove the condom from his soft dick.

Already? What is he thinking? I wasn’t planning on staying the night or for a repeat of whatever the hell that was.

“I’ve got an early morning.” Looking at each other awkwardly, I speak again. “Bye.” I divert my eyes to the floor,

and with a slight wave, I take the final steps to the door. *Shit, my purse.* I spin around and see it on the floor by the dresser. I do my best to keep my confidence as I walk in front of this stranger again. Grabbing my bag, I head out into the night. Relief is my only feeling now. No-Name doesn't try to stop me or say anything. I assume he's as happy to be rid of me as I'm to leave.

As I wander down the cement balcony with its wrought-iron railing, a breathy giggle comes from behind me. Curiosity piqued, I turn to see who it belongs to. Instantly, my eyes catch the sight of the sexiest man I've ever seen. His deep brown eyes meet mine as his fingers flex firmly against the ass of the blonde plastered to his front. Too bad I didn't leave the bar with that guy. The woman's arms are draped around his neck, forehead rolling on his shoulder, giving him access to her neck.

Cold hard metal braces my back as I reach for the railing to steady myself, my eyes glued to the man as his tongue peeks through the valley of his lips and licks the woman from shoulder to ear. Heat pools to my lower belly as my fist grips tighter on the railing, the only thing holding me up at this point. A smirk plays on his face, and a zing as intense as an electrical pulse shoots through me as I realize I haven't looked away. A haze falls over his eyes, which tells me he's intoxicated. I could get lost in his deep brown gaze. With a confidence I didn't know I had, I rake up and down his body, well... at least the parts I can see around the blonde, as he watches me ogle him.

Licking my lips, I mouth, “Have fun,” and offer him a slight wink. The heat in his gaze darkens, causing anticipation to vibrate through me. Of what, I’m not sure. I’m not the girl cradled in his strong arms. Disappointment replaces the buzz, and it’s my cue to turn and walk away before I give this man the wrong idea and offer myself up for a threesome. I may be feeling bold tonight, but not that bold.

I finish my walk down the steps of the motel, seeing the bar across the street still buzzing with life. I pause to take in the world around me. The bulk of Scarlett Bay exists on Main Street. Bake Away Bakery sits at the edge, making it easy to stop in every time I pass. Across the road is Rex’s, a small convenience store that sells all the necessities. A few boutiques and a hardware store sit between the Bake Away and Darth’s Bar. Then directly across the bar is Step Back Inn. An unfortunate and confusing name, if you ask me. Scarlett Bay’s only stoplight sits at the end of Main Street. Then the area becomes residential with a gas station and high school. The elementary and middle schools are a few blocks over. You could spin in a circle in the middle of it all and not miss a thing. It’s no wonder everyone knows everyone’s business around here. I’ve already spotted at least four people swaying to the music in the bay window of Darth’s Bar. Focusing on the thud of my heels against the concrete, I return to my journey home. The addition of soft murmurs of people smoking cigarettes outside the bar and muted music are the only sounds that fill the night. It’s peaceful in a way, to have so much quiet you can pinpoint every sound and where it’s

coming from. As I get farther from town, I'm left alone to my thoughts in the quiet of the night.

My mind brings me back to the man on the balcony. The town is filled to the brim with tourists. He'll be gone at the end of the weekend, most likely. I'm a little surprised I didn't see him at the bar. There's only one. As the darkness of the night surrounds me and the city lights become nothing but a speckle in the distance, my thoughts turn to my loss. Will this feeling ever go away? The heaviness in the chest of something that could have been, but never was? How can you feel so incomplete with a loss of someone who never even existed?



I put myself through college while working as many hours as I could at a local diner not far from campus in New York City. I kept to myself, waiting to find a place I could stay for a while. I overheard a conversation from a regular at the diner, about this teaching job. From what heard she is from the Scarlett Bay, and still traveled to back during the summers. She was chatting on the phone explaining how hard it is to get teachers to relocate to such a small town. The school can't compete with the larger cities. It was the perfect fit. Far away, a small town, and I got to teach. It was a new beginning.

Sitting in my new classroom, I wait nervously. I rest against the back of the wooden rolling chair, the armrests slightly too low, creating an awkward angle and nowhere to relax my arms without slouching. I scan the time, waiting for the bell to ring.

There is about two minutes before class begins. Nerves float around inside my belly. This is my first day, and even though I'm ready, they are still there. I taught here as a sub last year, but this year it's different. It's all mine, my room, my students, my choice on curriculum. It's what I've been working so hard for.

This career is a far cry from where I thought I would be five years ago. I used to be the student that would sit in a corner of the class observing all my classmates, paying close regard to the murmurs and jokes. Hiding in plain sight can be simple when you've learned to mask yourself to be like everyone else. My career goals were not only small, they were nonexistent. I was living to be the happy daughter and one day a happy wife.

“Women are meant to stay home, raise families,” my father would say. Despite my intelligence, I continued to listen to him—right up until the day I left.

I welcome the chance to examine each student as they shuffle past the door. There are a few smiles, some heads hanging low, and the groups who strut in with the tenacity of lions, like their shit doesn't stink.

It has been a little over five years since roles were reversed and I was the student convincing myself that life would be so perfect after graduation. My world could be my own, where I could form my own opinions and opportunities. Smiles spread across the faces of students as they see familiar faces walking into the room.

“Hey, Maddie!” I hear from across the room, ignoring it, assuming it’s one kid calling out to another.

It’s insane to me how comfortable it is for the kids to laugh, to socialize, to genuinely be themselves, oblivious to the evils of the world.

My attention is pulled from the students, as I turn my chair to face Jordyn, as she whisper-shouts—barely a whisper, more of a shout, “Earth to Maddie!! I’ve been struggling to catch your attention for twenty minutes!” *Shit*. I’m generally good about remembering my new name. I’ve used it for the last five years, but sometimes I slip into a consciousness where it escapes me.

That’s my name now: Madeline, or Maddie as most have shortened it. It was my great grandmother’s name. It was an easy choice, really. I remembered going through old photo albums when I was a young girl, resting on my mom’s lap, giggling at how clothes looked in the “olden times.” If I had the power of time travel and could go back to the fifties, where my grandmother was twenty-two, we could be twins.

Rolling my eyes at Jordyn, I smile. “Oh, really? Twenty minutes? Bit of an exaggeration, don’t you think?” I’m trying to keep my tone from sounding annoyed. I like Jordyn, but having barely slept last night and running late after missing the shuttle, my patience is thin. I internally scold myself for being less than eager to talk to her. Jordyn has been so nice to me since I started working here. Putting a smile on my face, I push my irritableness aside and turn to her.

“What’s up with you, Mad? You seem distracted or upset,” Jordyn asks, clearly seeing right through my forced smile.

But, Mad ... ? Because saying Maddie is so hard.

Be nice, I reiterate to myself. Jordyn and I are hall mates, as she calls it since her science class is across the hall from mine.

“Nothing’s wrong. It’s a Monday and the first day of classes. Zoning before the be—” *Ringggg*. Jordyn’s look of annoyance is clear; she wasn’t ready to be done with our talk.

“Come see me after first period. I’ve got details on the new algebra teacher,” she says, wiggling her eyebrows as she walks away.

Why would I care about a new teacher? I swear that girl can make gossip out of a mayonnaise label. The start of my first class offers me a bit of reprieve from Jordyn’s excitement, and I’m grateful for it. Turning my attention to the kids, I stand and start writing my name on the board behind me, wishing it were a blackboard and chalk so I didn’t have to hear the screech of markers against plastic.

“Good morning, class! I’m Ms. Brighton. Welcome to drama, or as I like to call it, Elements of Theater. Before we begin, why don’t we start with introductions around the room?” A wave of disappointed grunts echo behind me.

Ha, kids are always assuming they’ll take an easy elective to get out of something and not have to do any work. I turn toward them, waving my hand in front of me. “As I was saying, before we begin, heed this warning. This class will

challenge you, it will break you out of social norms and comfort zones, and it will help you explore your own creativity. If you took this class thinking you'd get an easy grade, I would suggest reaching out to your enrollment advisor and discussing other classes that may fit your needs. Now to begin, I want to learn your name and what brought you to my class." I point to the football player giving the student next to him all his attention.

"Uh, I'm Trent and ... I expected it would be an easy grade." Half the room snickers and the other scowls at his remark. I'd say those looks are a good indication of the serious theatergoers.

"Well, Trent, I appreciate your honesty. It's a refreshing quality. I hope that if you choose to stay, you will give us your full potential." We continue around the room with a variety of answers. The kids want to direct, act, and others, produce. They have high aspirations; I will give them that. My heart warms to see them eager to learn. My theater teacher in high school was my favorite person. She saved my life by giving me a means to escape the hell I lived in. I could never repay her.

After introductions, I hand out the first assignment and break the class into groups to get to know each other. There are six groups. Each will create something different. One - scene location, two - main characters, three - a conflict, four - a weakness, five - a strength, and six - a resolution. The best things I've ever seen created came from collaboration. We'll see tomorrow how it'll play out for them. As I walk around the

room, I listen closely. *“That’s a good idea!” “We have to be more epic; it’s got to be original.”* My cheeks start to burn before I realize I’ve been smiling the whole time, watching them work together. I’m about to call time, but the bell ends class, interrupting my mind for a second time today. This time, I’m disappointed. It came faster than I expected it to.

“Okay, class, please drop off your assignments at my desk on your way out. Nice to meet you all. See you tomorrow.” I collect the assignments on my desk, placing this period in its coordinated folder to be sure not to mix it with my second. The one downfall of theater is the class isn’t enough to fill a schedule. So, I have two study halls, lunch, and then my other theater class. I can’t complain. I get to do what I love.

“Okay, so I’m not sure what kind of speed my kids are on, but damn, it’d be nice if they shared.” Jordyn’s voice carries over the slamming of lockers and excited laughter of students. I recognize she’s going to word vomit all she can in the next five minutes before the next bell rings, so I lean forward, plant my elbow on my desk and my chin in hand, and give her the attention she is so eager to receive.

“Okay, got to do this fast. Algebra teacher. He is so handsome. You should see the line of students outside his door requesting tutoring. I mean, it’s sick. They’re babies, for Pete’s sake! He fits the stereotype, though.” Jordyn looks off into the space above my head at nothing before her cheeks pink and her head shakes from side to side, as if to wipe whatever image she has in her head away. As if she can erase the thoughts like an Etch A Sketch.

“So anyway, his name’s Brett or Breck. Regardless, he’s moved here from out of state. He taught science before, but he minored in mathematics, so he’s stuck with Algebra. He isn’t stealing my class. But again ... with those looks, I’d offer him my class if I could get a view of that ass up close. Ha. Oh, wait, it’s Brad! Yes, that sounds like it.”

I give her a pointed look, raising my brows to my forehead. How does she do that in one breath? She is a whole species of her own. Nonetheless, she keeps going.

“So, I’m going down there once my kids settle. I can ask for Expo markers or something, then get a real close-up look.” Her hands rub together in front of her, showing her eagerness as she confirms her plan.

“Dude, did you have a momentary lapse and forget you’re married? What’s wrong with you?” Poking her arm, I laugh, knowing darn well she won’t follow through. Can one man honestly cause this much obsession? I mean, I know it’s a small town, but come on.

“Well, of course I didn’t forget! But a woman can still appreciate the male form!” Jordyn pushes off my desk and starts to back away toward the door. “Take a peek, Mads, you’ll understand.” Her smirk and wink have me rolling my eyes. “Okay, got to go back to my room now.” She pouts, as if her career is the bane of her existence. We both know she loves what she does. She’s gone before I can offer a reply. I smile, shaking my head at her antics.

I don't have to do much but work on last class's scenes, so that's nice. The bell rings, signaling the start of the next period, as the students wander in for study hall. I get to work and let the kids do what they want. I don't know what they do, and I don't care as long as no one is being obnoxious. I'm happy that I came in early and took the time to make it my own. The added items bring a lot of pattern and colors to the stale room. I have drapes around the windows. I circled the desks and planted a nice plush rug in the center of the room. Theater terms and vocabulary fill the walls. Famous quotes are secured to each desk. It's not a lot—on my salary—but it's enough.

My eyes float across the room, landing on a girl in the closest seat to the window. She is thin, almost sickly, with long dirty-blonde hair and tattered jeans. She reminds me of myself at that age. Her head down, she's writing into her notebook. I wonder what her story is, or if anyone has ever bothered to ask. No one ever asked me. They saw the reality they wanted. That's the problem with the maskers. They don't create chaos or break things; they don't swear and scream, begging for someone to notice them. Most of the time, no one is even aware they are hurting, burning alive in a hell created by the ones meant to protect them. So, because they consider themselves to be invisible, that's what they become.

Not anymore. When I left home, I left the pain in the hollow house that was filled with people and things. It disguised itself as a happy home, at least to the rest of the world. I knew what it was: a place where people lived and souls died, the ghosts

breathing as easily as the living. I left the damage and promised myself I would never be a victim again. Sometimes it takes one moment, one circumstance to wake you.

Chapter Two

Ivy

After study hall, I slink out of my room before Jordyn can begin again. Snagging my keys, I head to the faculty bathrooms. Atlantic High School reminds me of a castle. It has a stone exterior with arched doorways, large oak doors, with common rooms and classrooms surrounded by windows. It's why I was so eager to work here when I heard of the opening. When I walked into this building for the first time, I couldn't relate it to anything from reality. It was so close to a building you'd find in a fairy tale.

Scarlett Bay is a small town in Maine that sits so close to the ocean, you can smell it when you step outside. It's so tiny, you could throw a bucket of paint on a map and still not land on your mark. Tranquility at its finest. With a population of two thousand people, the town is quiet most of the year, but being a tourist town, it's always swarming with people during the summer months. I suppose that comes with its perks, too. I could meet new people without worrying about exposure.

The hustle of students crowds the halls. The sound of sneakers screeching and loud conversations as lockers slam open and close fills the space between the stone walls with unorganized chaos as students rush around before the next bell.

I hold tight to the wall as I make my way down the corridor to the staff bathroom. There is a parade of young girls giggling, as if their pitch alone will grant them whatever they wish. *Ah, the universal sound of a teenage girl.* Murmurs surround me, gossip about who is dating who or who scored tickets to what. The days where the “real world” is encased within the concrete walls surround them.

As I advance to the restroom, my eyes catch on the magnet attracting every female on campus. He is towering over all the students, maybe six feet tall with broad shoulders. The man is facing away from me, so I can't make out his face. He has longer brown hair on the top of his head, which fades to a shorter cut down the sides. His stature is enough to drop any woman to her knees. It's solid and hard like a statue, still not too stocky, and at least he can put his arms to his sides. I can understand what Jordyn was hinting at. This man may as well hold up a warning sign.

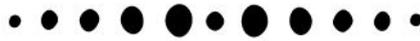
Is everyone in this school really going to swoon? Rolling my eyes, I get back to business, unlocking the door to the restroom. As I enter, more gossip fills the room, only this time it isn't from the students.

“Did you meet him? My gosh, I would unwrap him like a present on Christmas morning.”

Gag. I’m not sure who’s talking, but it’s ridiculous. Are people not even allowed to pee in peace? I take a breath and clear my throat before rounding the corner, so they get a hint to stop talking. They do—mum’s the word as they scatter out the door.

The bathroom is modest, with three stalls and a vanity. I appreciate that the administration locks this away from students. Nothing marks the surfaces or smells like stale cigarettes the students smuggle in. After emptying my bladder of the extra-large coffee I had this morning, I exit the stall and wash my hands. When I glance up at my reflection, I realize I look as tired as I feel, hair in a messy bun, bags under my eyes. I dressed in a rush too, in a T-shirt with faded jeans and flats. I could pass for a student if it weren’t for my ID badge hanging around my collar. My face is average, if you ask me. My blue eyes are dull, with a light brush of mascara to appear a tad presentable. I have a light complexion and like to wear little makeup, a far cry from the full-faced teen I once was. I suppose appearances don’t mean as much to me as they used to. Fitting into the normal beauty standard, shoved down the throats of young girls from the moment they start playing with barbies, wasn’t a priority to me anymore .

Giving myself a once over, I turn and head to the exit. When I peek out and see the hallway is clear, I let out a heavy sigh. I’m relieved the walk back to my room will be in peace without the mass of cackling schoolgirls.



Lunch is my favorite part of the day. It consists of me sneaking past the teacher's lounge to avoid the other teachers and meet Mr. Gregory. I've been sitting with Mr. G. every day during lunch since I started last fall. He is invisible. I want to remain invisible. We became instant friends, enjoying the company of someone else in solitude.

Gregory is seventy-two and well beyond retirement age, but his wife was diagnosed with dementia and was admitted to a nursing facility two years ago. Mr. G had to return to work soon after her admission to cover the cost of her medical care.

His selflessness immediately gave me a soft spot for him. When he first told me about his wife, I had assumed he admitted her to a home and that was that. Not Mr. G. Even with his wife not knowing who he is, he still does all he can to care for her. The love he has for her is eternal, living beyond the memories she may have lost.

I try to make life easier for him where I can. Wednesdays are for home-cooked meals. I make enough for lunch and dinner that he can take some home. It's better than the ham sandwiches he makes himself every other day or the TV dinners he swears he loves.

When the bell rings, I take no time to open my drawer and pull out my lunch bag. As I walk out of my classroom, my face collides with a rock-hard wall. *What in the world?* Before I can get my clumsy appendages to react, my ass hits the

ground, hard. The contents of my lunch bag spill out, two wrapped burritos with a side of chips and salsa rolling away from me. Thank goodness for my ability to pack. At least it's all secure in its wrappings. I'm too frustrated to even look up. I draw my fists to my hair. "Great." I sigh to myself.

"Whoa, are you all, right? Sorry, I wasn't looking—" a deep voice above me begins to say.

"I'm fine," I interrupt. Sitting up and collecting my bag and its contents, I ignore the presence looming over me.

"No, really, I was lost looking for the auditorium and wasn't paying attention. Let me help you." His feet shuffle a tad toward me.

"No. I got it. Just—" My words are interrupted as a dark boot covers my napkins and utensils. With an attempt to keep my annoyance at bay, I quietly start again, "Can you please move your foot?"

I don't look up as I attempt to grab the napkins, but the foot fails to budge. *Is this guy deaf?* I ready myself to shove his foot out of the way, and as my hand grazes the toe of his boot, my eyes rise and meet his.

My words seize in my throat. Those eyes. Deep brown with golden flecks around the center. He's inspecting my face, almost as if he can see into my soul, dissecting me piece by piece.

For a moment, I can't think. I can't breathe. My skin prickles all the way up the back of my neck. All those scenes

you see in movies where the girls are rendered speechless at the beauty of something, it's happening. Right here. Right now. I'm expecting something profound to happen, the catalyst to reveal itself. Then it does. It's him. Brown-eyes from the hotel. The same man I've been touching myself to for the better part of a week. I assumed I would never look at him again, yet here he is, standing in front of me, not imaginary, not a visitor—a new colleague.

His lips tip up into a sly grin, as if the realization slams into him at the same time it does me. Damn, if I didn't feel that in my gut. Giggles coming from behind Mr. Brown-eyes pull me from my stupor. I strain to see around him and find not one, but four girls lining up, waiting for me to skedaddle. I scoop up all the contents of my lunch and throw it back into my bag.

He extends his hands to help me up, but I ignore them as I scramble to my feet, running my free hand down my thigh to give my hand something to do.

"I'm good, thanks," I say once I'm fully standing. As I try to slide past him, I bump into him. "I'm going to be late." A rush of air accompanies my words as I make my way down the hall. I can't explain why I feel the need to speed walk like a grandma at the mall at six in the morning. Hand me wrist weights and call me a mall walker. Lord knows I'm too embarrassed to run. I need to get the hell out of dodge. Am I overreacting? Yes. Do I care? Hell no.

"Hey wait up!" I hear from behind me. Oh, gosh no. This can't be happening. *Go faster*, I sing to myself. *Do not slip and*

fall in these cheap ass flats. The pleasantries of excuse me and pardon me he's offering the people behind me as he tries to reach me are refreshing. It's genuine too. It's obvious his mom raised him to be a gentleman. A crowd of girls stops right in front of me, impeding my path. You would guess the newest teen heartthrob was standing at the other end of the hallway with all these crazed admirers.

Hilarious, considering I was practically drooling on my knees two seconds ago. Okay, so I'm a hypocrite. I'm not used to reacting so strongly to someone. I mean, I'm not a prude. My sexual experiences are more so of lazy men. Not saying a couple weren't good, but the majority are too busy chasing their own release to invest in the effort to get a woman off. I don't require a guy like Brown-eyes to tear me apart. A decent glass of wine, romantic novels, and my little pink rabbit will do the trick.

I glance to my left, then my right, when I find the supply closet. My escape. I move quickly, ducking into it and exhaling in relief. The room is quiet, less of a closet, more of a break room. There is a sink, a narrow bench, and a counter with a microwave. They lined the wall with all the janitor's tools and shelved supplies. At least I won't get too claustrophobic in here. Hearing a door open and close, relief floods me. It was the perfect time for Mr. G to steal me away from my wandering thoughts.

"Sorry, Mr. G, I'll get out of your way, unless you want to eat in here today? Away from the chaos of the youths?" I snort at myself, turning around.

My self-amusement breaks instantly. *Seriously?!* Brown-eyes is settling in front of the exit, muscular arms crossed against his rib cage, fighting against the fabric holding them at bay. Victory laces his eyes. Did he follow me here? What is he, five?

Stepping forward to walk around him, he moves into my path, stopping my progress. Side stepping, I'm blocked again. My skin is heating as I struggle, trying to maneuver around him one more time. It's a dance he seems to be enjoying, based on the chuckle I hear above me.

"Excuse me," I squeak. I don't even recognize my voice. What is with me today? I don't even know this person. My verbal capacity in the last ten minutes has decreased to that of a toddler. Scolding myself, I grumble at my loss of authority.

"I don't mean to interrupt whatever dialog you've got going on up here." He taps my temple with his finger. "But this fell out of your stuff and seemed necessary, so I needed to catch up with you." Holding out his palm, my apartment key rests in the center. My eyes practically bug out of my head. With lightning speed, I grasp for my key, right as his hand sweeps away, pulling it out of reach, his arm raised above both our heads.

"Uh-uh. Nope. Not so fast. Info for the key. What's your name?"

My brows draw up as I study him. "Are you normally in the business of bartering stolen property for information?" My stance distinctly shows I'm in no mood to joke around. My

arms are crossed, hip jutted out. It's the women's universal signal of do not fuck with me. I won't take my eyes off him, not if I want him to have any confidence that I can stand my ground.

“You can't claim lost property is stolen. I'm the good Samaritan that brought it back. We'll consider your name the reward. Although, laying eyes on you should be repayment enough. I can't help but require more.” I don't miss the flirtation in his voice, the way the words drip from his lips in a deep gravelly tone. It's clear he remembers me, just as I recognize him. His brow arches in challenge, waiting for my reaction, a small smirk forming on his face in anticipation. He is probably used to positive responses to his charms. I'm sure girls bat their eyes and flirt right back, not scowl and demand he go away. Either way, I'm not giving him what he wants.

I watch as his eyes migrate to my mouth. My own are fixed on his lips, and the compulsion to like them is almost too strong to resist. But I won't. This isn't one of my smutty romance novels. I will not be that girl swooning over a big, dark-haired, bearded stranger. I couldn't indulge in thinking about the way his beard would feel between my legs — *Jesus, get it together!*

In an instant, his eyes are back on mine. “Tell me your name.” This time, it isn't a request. A sternness in his voice pulls a shallow gasp from me, but the playfulness that appears on his face is a complete contrast to the demand he gave me. I know he's leaving no room for discussion. Unexplained urgency hits me. A pull to answer. I could offer him what he

so desperately wants, but I don't. While the heat pools in my belly, rebellion hardens my heart. I won't let another man demand anything from me, even if he *is* sexy as hell—an incubus sent to test my resolve.

I don't move, diverting my eyes for a moment, cataloging his features. He's wearing a dark button-up shirt, rolled at the sleeves. Tattoos peek out from the bottom. I wring my hands in front of me, giving myself something else to focus on as I wonder how much more is under his shirt. I clear my throat at the thought. Why is my mouth so dry? *Focus*. I take a minute to build up my courage and force my eyes up to his again.

With his body occupying the path to my escape, I know I need to be quicker or stronger to get past him. Clearly, neither of those is true. I'm five foot six and one hundred and fifty pounds. So, a diversion is the only alternative for me to avoid this interaction. I survey the room, taking a catalog of what I could use as a distraction. I plot my next move, but then his large frame moves closer. *No sir, not today*. I mirror a step backward. He instantly responds with another step forward. So, our dance continues as I take a larger step backward. His eyes haven't moved from mine. What does he want from me?

"I told you I want your name," he says, voice softer now as he winks at me.

"Shit, I said that out loud?" I already know the answer. He nods at me, answering my question anyway. It was rhetorical, jackass.

Forget the key and go! The thought is screaming at me. But I can't take off without my key. I need it to get into my apartment. If I leave without it, I will be sleeping on the porch. I'm not in the best circumstances to doze under the stars. I already struggled to sleep.

As all my thoughts collect, I realize the predicament I'm in. Then, as if a force field slams into me, I'm spiraling. I sense my body growing hot, turning molten. Head pounding, my eyesight blurs. *Calm down, breathe.* I try to soothe myself, but it's not working. Dark shadows creep around my peripheral vision. I'm closed in, pinching my eyes shut. My lunch slides back to the floor. I drag my hands to my eyes. *No. No. No ... Please, not now.* I haven't had a panic attack in years.

Swaying, I lean against the shelving behind me, feeling a firm grip clutch my bicep. It causes me to flinch, and with my lack of escape, shelving cold and hard against my back, my eyes launch open.

"Whoa, hey, it's okay. I won't hurt you. Are you alright? Just breathe," he suggests. His tone is soothing, like this isn't the first time he's talked someone from out of the darkness. His attempts to reassure me are making it worse, though. Reminding me that I can't lose control in the presence of someone else. Showing vulnerability is a weakness.

I open and shut my eyes a few times and grasp for my key. But when I lean forward, my vertigo takes over and I'm falling toward him. Lightning-fast hands collide with my shoulders in the attempt to hold me upright. I'm too weak to drag myself

away. Grappling to uncoil from him and to stand on my own, my limbs and vision in competition with each other on which will take orders, I begin to slump toward the floor.

I'm certain he'll see the attempt and haul me upright, but he does the contrary, and I'm pulled into him. But only for a moment. He secures me against his body—I'm stiff as a board against his chest, his scent invading my senses, strong and woodsy. I hear the scraping noise of a metal chair across the floor. His warm hand rubs the middle of my back in small circles as he gently guides me onto the seat. Gentle whispers of encouragement sound in my ear. I sandwich my arms against my legs as he instructs me to lean over my knees.

His tall frame kneels in front of me, and he urges me to take slow steady breaths. "That's it. You're alright." His powerful hands spread over mine, and he threads his fingers through mine as his thumb grazes over the tops of my fists. He is so close, yet still not so close to where he is invading my space.

He smells so perfect. What is that, cedar? If I were a Yankee Candle creator, I would declare his scent "fresh fall day." Inhaling him, concentrating on how his skin feels on mine, the way his presence drapes around me, I focus on coming out of the attack. My muscles loosen. My breathing slows, pulse no longer pumping in my ears. I lift my head slowly, afraid of the pity that will show in his eyes. I'm surprised, as the gaze staring back at me shows understanding. Recognition. I'm puzzled by his reaction. How can he not have any judgment toward a complete stranger breaking down in front of him?

Someone clearing their throat grabs my attention. It's then that the reality of the predicament I'm in, being embraced by a stranger in the middle of the maintenance room, sinks in. I shove Brown-eyes away from me and sit up straight, pushing my hair behind my ear. The embarrassment rushes to my cheeks. Gregory is standing in the door frame, struggling to bring his mop bucket back to its resting place by the sink. Brown-eyes and I are blocking his path.

“Pardon me, Maddie. I gotta put this in the closet, then I can punch out for lunch. Are we still going to eat together today? We can skip it if you're ... busy.” He speaks to me, but his scrutiny never leaves Brown-eyes.

“Oh no, we're still on for lunch. I've got to warm it up. I'll find you at our spot.” I stand and step away from Brown-eyes, putting more space between us, as I grab the mop and pail from Mr. G, moving it where it belongs.

His concerned look now pointed at me, he offers a slight smile and nods as he passes off the equipment to me and leaves the room. There is a heavy silence now that Mr. G is gone. An awkward thickness is in the air as I try to understand how I could be drawn to Brown-eyes the way I am, so aware of him. The feel of his gaze on me, intensity sparking in those chocolatey depths, makes me pause to steel my nerves before I turn back to the man behind me. Brown-eyes had been intently observing the interaction between Mr. G and me. I seize the moment to snag my key, now on the bench, while he is distracted. He must have dropped it there when I panicked.

“Gotcha!” Kissing the key and snatching my lunch off the floor, I grin at him in victory.

An easy laugh rumbles from his chest. “I wouldn’t claim it as a win. Catch you around, Maddie.” A huge grin coats his face as he reveals the fact that he now knows my name. I watch his back as he steps through the doorway, noting how the muscles bunch and flex as he strides away. I can’t avoid thinking about how hard I spiraled and how easily he delivered calmness.

Chapter Three

Bennett

I've never chased a woman before. I don't mean I've never pursued a woman. I mean, quite literally physically chased her. What is going on in that brain of hers? Did I give off a creeper vibe? Typically, I have the opposite effect on most women. I'm not trying to be conceited, but I take care of myself. I'm an attractive guy. Add in being an educator and women usually swoon. The stereotype of the female teachers being hot and the male educators being ancient and wearing sweater vests is outdated.

I couldn't tell you how often I've heard, "You are a good-looking man, intelligent, and love working with kids. Why are you still single?" Because I want to be? Because I haven't found anyone worth settling down for? A partner to work on life with? I've met plenty of women who would have settled down if I'd made the offer. But when things lean on the side of serious, I tell them all the same. I don't want that. I'm not looking for anything serious. Before the white picket fence, I needed to experience life. To see the world and have no ties

aside from my sister and Cooper, who I haven't spoken to in months. I should call him. I refused to tie myself down to someone else's dreams, and be a miserable husband a decade later, all because I lied to myself and accepted someone else's life plan. Sometimes I think the pressures of all the world's expectations push most people into marrying and settling down before they are ready. Probably the reason why I know so many couples who divorced before thirty-five.

Now? Now I'm open to someone challenging me. Call it cliché, but I want more than someone finding me attractive and smart. I feel like I'm stuck in a rut, my life too routine, not enough fun. I find temporary pleasure at night, only to go back to the same old scenario the next day. Rinse and repeat. I knew I couldn't continue with that pattern when I got back to Scarlett Bay. Though I had a close encounter with a bubbly blonde when I first got back, it did nothing for me. I hadn't even been that horny. That was until I saw Maddie staring back at me with such interest. My dick stood at attention at the sight of her.

"Well, hello there," a soft voice calls out from behind me. Here we go again. The woman's tone is flirty. I turn my head to offer back a "hello," but I don't slow my pace, continuing toward my classroom. A charming expression fills her face as she smiles at me, chasing me down the hall.

"My name is Jordyn, Mrs. Prichard. I teach the science class down the hall. I wanted to introduce myself and let you know that if you need anything while settling in, don't be afraid to reach out." I stop walking, her body nearly colliding with

mine. I catch her eyes moving up and down my body, but she makes no attempt to reach out and stop me. Clearly, she hadn't been paying attention or wasn't expecting me to stop. "Thank you. I appreciate it." At least someone is married around here. One less woman to worry about. *Here you go, sounding like a tool again, Bennett.* To be fair, most of the women here have been helpful and professional. Only a handful have given me a double take. It's common for the masses to go after the fresh meat in a small town like this—both men and women alike.

"There is something you can help me with. I was looking for the auditorium. There are bean bags in there for students to sit on, but no one is using them. I'd like them. Kids who are comfortable pay more attention," I explain as I realize we are stopped right outside Maddie's classroom.

She smirks. "Oh, I'd ask Ms. Brighton. She's the theater teacher. Though, be prepared ... She can become *territorial* over her stuff." Giggling, she points to the theater room door.

"Thanks, I appreciate that. I'll reach out to her." Nodding my goodbye, I head to my classroom. With her being married, and my interest suddenly pulled in another direction, there's no reason for me to stick around and make small talk. I distract myself with thoughts of Maddie, the way her lush lips trembled as she fought for control during her panic attack. So, she is a drama instructor, huh? It seems oddly fitting. Even though I know nothing about her, she seems to withhold herself from the rest of the world. The woman I saw at the hotel is not the same woman I held a few moments ago. She had courage, spunk, and didn't seem to be afraid of anything

in that moment, at least until the panic attack had forced itself on her.

A few years ago, I would have chalked Maddie Brighton up as too much work. But the way her body fit against mine when her eyes went vacant, as she disappeared into a different plane of reality, had felt oddly right. I didn't enjoy seeing her hurt, but the way she freely, for a moment, let herself lean into me ... I can't get it out of my head. There was something behind the resilience in her eyes; a bit of fear shielded behind them. She concealed it carefully.

The flirtation Maddie gave me the night at the hotel was clearly gone. Maybe she doesn't remember me. Although, the wide-eyed look of shock that covered her face when we smacked into each other gave me the impression she knew exactly who I was.

"So, where are you from?" Mrs. Prichard continues to dig as she remains trailing behind me down the hallway. I forgot she was there, her strides barely keeping up with mine.

"I'm from Maine, grew up in a town thirty minutes north of here. Went to the local college, then left the States about five years ago to teach English in Cambodia." My tone is relaxed. Something tells me she will share this information with others. Well, at least I won't have to repeat myself a million times.

"Wow! That's incredible. I have a few teacher acquaintances that teach English as a second language. None that traveled out of the country. I'm sure that was an interesting adventure. What drove you to do that?"

“Well, honestly, I wanted to get out of Maine.” I laugh. It’s not a lie. I felt stuck. Same friends, same bars, same cycle of chicks. I craved more than the city I grew up in could provide. It’s tough to be someone else when you decide you’ve grown out of all the bullshit. I’ve stayed connected with a few college buddies. Cooper more so, but our contact is sporadic lately. He’s always been the type to drop off the face of the planet and resurface every couple months. It was hard to keep in touch with all of us advancing in various directions.

“So, do you have family here?” She returns to her interrogation. At this point, we’ve reached my room, and I’m waiting for the opportunity to slip inside.

“Yes, I have a sister. She’s the one who swayed me to come back. She missed me too much.” I shrug.

“I’m sure she did. I know I would.” She reads me up and down. And here I thought we were having a good conversation without innuendo. Almost made it, Mrs. Prichard.

“I put in an application when the posting came up for this job. I came back this summer. I majored in sciences, but I like algebra fine. Don’t want to go stealing anybody’s job.” I wink, offering her the playfulness back. She could be an asset on campus, especially if I choose to get to know Maddie. I may need her in my back pocket.

The pink on her cheeks shows she isn’t immune to my tricks. “You’d have your job cut out for you. I’m excellent at what I do. I’ve expanded the female students by sixty percent in the S.T.E.M. program since last year. My intention is to

develop innovators of tomorrow. Then again, isn't that why we are all here?" She twists her side braid in her hand, thinking about what she said.

"Women in power, as it should be," I offer in agreement. With that, she steps backward toward her classroom.

"You got that right, fella. Enjoy the rest of the afternoon." Her back turns to face me as she heads to her room, waving at the students as they enter.



My class has been in session for a total of ten minutes, and I'm trying to get the girls back on course from their chatter and keep the guys from glaring at me. My mind can no longer be on the sea-blue eyes that have filled my thoughts most of the morning. The disappointment that overwhelms my chest is not lost on me. What is going on with me?

"Okay, class, I'm Mr. Harrison. Welcome to algebra. Time to get on track now that most of you seem settled. No intros needed. I'm sure you all recognize each other. Just tell me your name before you ask your question or answer mine. Let's get started."

A student raises his hand instantly. "Um, Mr. Harrison, is it true you were a combat soldier and got back from overseas? That's why you have all those tribal tattoos and that scar above your eye?" His tone is shy but assertive. Before I can answer him, the rest of the class breaks into a chatter of questions. Holding up my hand, I instruct them to hold any further

inquiries. So many rumors have already spread, and I'm shocked. I don't quite follow it, actually. I haven't even been here an entire day.

"Before I answer your unique question today, what's your name?" I ask.

"Tyler," he replies, inching forward in his seat, anticipating my answer. Clearing my throat, I answer, "I hate to disappoint you, but there's nothing heroic behind anything you see. My grandparents were members of the Penobscot tribe here in Maine. I never lived on the reservation. They moved out to care for me when I was young. However, when I got older, I wanted to get something to honor them ... to remember them by. At twenty-three, the only logical tribute was tattoos." If my grandfather had a say, he would have told me it needed to be bigger, whereas my grandmother would have told me to put them where no one would see them, fearing ridicule. "Nothing to know about the scar, either. It was an accident when I was a kid, only a few years younger than you." Sighs of disappointment are clear; they were all expecting some juicy story to share with their friends. Sorry to disappoint, kids.

"With that out of the way, questions? Maybe that's more aligned with why we are all here?" To my surprise, a hand raises, and I nod to her.

"Are we ever going to use algebra? I think algebra's a waste of time," the girl says from the very back of the room.

"Well, If I handed you some money today, and you took that and spent half the amount buying a frozen iced coffee on your

way home, then when you got home, you made another eight dollars washing your dad's car, what would be the amount I gave you if you ended the day with sixteen dollars?" She scrunches her nose as if protesting the question. After a bit, a gleam fills her face. Suddenly the light bulb illuminates as the answer comes to her.

"That's easy. You'd have given me sixteen dollars," she says with confidence. Clapping once, I extend her a point. "Exactly. Budgeting is where most notice the purpose. Or you may need to work out how long it takes to get someplace. We use math every day even when we don't realize it."

I see multiple nods around the room and turn to begin my lesson. Each student pays attention and offers me quips and jokes as class progresses. I can't help but smile and pat myself on the back. Battling with social media and texting for their attention is going to be my hardest challenge, but I accomplished it today.

Class advances with involvement from most of the students, time passing by quickly. This group of students may be my favorite. They are engrossed in the material and appreciate my more relaxed teaching style. My skepticism in returning to the States might have been unreasonable. So far, moving to Scarlett Bay has proven to be a wonderful thing.

When I was teaching abroad, I visited so many places and learned to acknowledge the culture in diverse communities. We take a lot for granted here in the US. As a teenager, I was not the kindest person to be around, usually fighting and

rebellious against anyone pressing authority over me. Growing up in the foster care system wasn't easy. I lost my family young, going into my first placement at twelve. That was where I met Bec. Since then, Bec has been the only family I've consistently had.

When CPS separated us, I refused to accept it. I wound up in juvie a few times, till one day Bec really got pissed. She really was the sole person who was able to keep me in line. So, as I aged and learned where I could safely exercise the control I desired, I concentrated on education and, well ... women, screwing anyone that would spread their legs for me. I appreciated them, showed them how in control I could be while still bringing them to the verge of explosion.

Word spread fast in college, and next thing I knew, girls wanted me to record my tricks in a book for their boyfriends. Pleasuring a woman doesn't come with a rule book or a list of instructions. Each one is unique. Make them talk, and listen to the words spoken and unspoken. Their bodies plead loudly. The way their skin flushes, their moans, a whimper here or there, or a grasp of the sheets, even their claws in my back, all of it reveals exactly what I need to know.

It's been a hot minute since I've slept with someone, with the exclusion of my failed one-night stand my first night back. Blondie and I made out for a while. Shortly after seeing Maddie in the hall, the poor girl dozed off in my arms, too drunk to stand on her own.

My intoxication had distracted me from her condition, but I was also picturing the gutsy chick from the balcony. So, after the two realizations, I decided it was time to call it a night. I wouldn't take advantage of her.

Seeing Maddie's face again, her gaze meeting mine when she was seated in front of me, both excited me and surprised me. Her scent enveloped me when she fell against me. She smelled of lilacs, and something else I can't put my finger on. Whatever it is, it's now my new favorite scent. I felt her reaction to me in the maintenance room, even if she fought it. I won't lie and say the challenge of pursuing her doesn't thrill me. Who doesn't like a good challenge?

My rumbling gut distracts me from my obsession. Bec's famous Rueben sandwich comes to view as I open my desk drawer. She has been showing her sisterly love, fawning over me ever since I got back, mothering me to the point of exhaustion. I'm older than her by four years, yet she has always been the levelheaded one. Maybe it's true what they say about women maturing faster than men. At twenty-five years old, I still have a lot of growing up to do.

After I finished college, Bec could sense I needed more out of life. She could tell even before I could that I was searching for the person I was supposed to be. She was running a cupcake business out of her apartment, and one of her customers told her about teaching English in another country, to which she casually mentioned over dinner.

I never suspected anything, even as she was implying I should do it. Turns out, it fulfilled me for quite a few years. That my sister had known it would was surprising. Then again, she's always known me better than I know myself. I'd thought it over for a few days. I'd like to say my intentions were pure of heart, that I was doing it because I wanted to give back. But my move was selfish, fueled by a need for change. I had no money to travel, so accepting a job that would allow me to do that made perfect sense. They covered residence and food in my contract. I could explore on my own outside of work.

Being out of the country changed my life for the better. The kids were eager, which truly made me love teaching, something I wasn't sold on for a career. I planned to go into a lab setting of some sort. I thought about extending my contract, but Bec is all I have and vice versa. We had it tough for years. The only constant was each other. It was time to come home. Bec may not be blood, but blood isn't everything, and I missed my sister.

When Bec had called me two years ago to tell me her business was booming and she'd be moving to a commercial building, I couldn't have been more stoked for her. Instantly, I realized once my contract was up, I would go home.

One thing I will have to adjust to is the stale air conditioning and boys' AXE body spray. Jesus, those idiots smell like they bathe in it. Speaking of idiots, I still haven't gotten my badge from the front office. Last thing I need is to get locked out of the building in the middle of the day. I need

to get to the central office and see if they set up my mailbox. My ID should be in there.

After taking a giant bite of my sandwich, I toss it back into my bag. According to the clock, I have twenty minutes left before my next class. There isn't enough time to eat and get my badge. The halls are quiet. This building's architecture is amazing, something to be admired. Turning the corner to the central office, I see teachers relaxing in their lounge. I reach the library, seeing students relaxing in oversized chairs, reading. Others are sitting together quietly talking at the table.

Seeing them reminds me of my own high school experience. I wasn't the best student back in the day. I was lucky if I even made it to class. I never went to the prom or enjoyed sports. Graduation was my only focus, but I wanted out more than anything. Correction, graduation was Bec's focus. I could have dropped out for all I cared. She insisted I get the diploma, and I went along with it. I'm glad now that I did.

My memory was the only asset that served me. It only took me reading material once to retain it. The skill made it hard for educators to fail me in class. One tried, claiming attendance was mandatory, until they saw my GPA. Dropping me to a failing grade would cause more issues for the school's scholar standing than me not attending classes. Education is important, but there are kids more concerned about survival.

The sound of typing and a loud ticking clock fill the small front office, an old secretary sign sitting on the edge of the

counter. I walk toward it and lean over to see a woman finger poking her keyboard, smacking her gum.

“Good afternoon ...” I look at her name plate. “... Ms. Kelly. I’m here to find my mailbox and ID. I was hired right before school started, so I didn’t have time to get stuff taken care of before the first day of classes.”

Her eyes pull from her computer, and she nearly chokes on her gum. “Oh!” She clears her throat after the word came out as more of a squeak. The action causes her gum to shoot from her mouth onto her desk. Her uncoordinated hands try to pull it from the keyboard, leaving a stringing mess as she fumbles with it.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry. I must’ve been so entranced in what I was doing I didn’t hear you come in.”

“No worries. Do you know if they are ready yet?” Offering her a smile as she finally gets the gum into the trash, I watch as she turns to the filing cabinet.

“Yes, right here.” She frantically looks for her file. “Yes, here it is! It looks like we never got a copy of your insurance card, however. It’s policy that you have current vehicle insurance to have a parking pass. Do you have that with you?”

“Oh sure, it’s in my truck. I’ll grab that and be back in a minute.” I elbow the hand sanitizer slightly as I turn to walk away. Hopefully the trip to my truck will give her a chance to settle down a bit. I don’t want to spend the next few minutes watching her fumble around while I can’t do anything to help.

It's already been a hectic day, and something tells me the rest will be as well.

Chapter Four

Ivy

I squat down next to Mr. G at our spot, unpacking our meal for the day. Grass brushes against my ankles slightly as I sit.

“Care to explain the man you were embracing in the closet?”

I don’t miss the insinuation in his tone, as if he is in on some best-kept secret. “We weren’t embracing, Mr. G,” I reply, rolling my eyes. “I just—I felt unwell and he eased me into the chair right as you walked in.”

And making me question my previous decision to walk away from him at the hotel. Stop it, brain!

His shoulders bounce in a silent chuckle. “Oh, I see. You fell, and he caught you?” He knows. I know he knows. But I’ll keep up my dumb game for as long as I can.

“Yep.” I won’t say anything else. The more I say, the more I’ll end up shoving my foot in my mouth. He knows what he saw, and he’ll draw a conclusion no matter what I tell him, but

it was innocent. Right? Yes, it was. At least, that's what I'll continue to tell myself.

“You know you don't have to eat with an old man like me every day. You can make friends. Eat with people your own age. Maybe meet some new people?” he questions, his eyes bouncing between his lunch and me.

“I enjoy eating with you. It's nice. Plus, *you* are my friend,” I mumble with a mouth full of burrito.

“I have a lot more years behind me than I do ahead of me, kid. One word of advice: keep people close. Find your people and build a life with them. Fill your life with memories of joy and love.” I feel his hand squeeze my knee with a small reassuring shake.

“I have a good life, Mr. G. I'm happy with how things are. I don't need anyone. I'm good solo.” The gentle encouragement he offers almost brings tears to my eyes. His advice reminds me of something a grandpa would say, not that I would know from experience.

“Don't misjudge my advice as an insinuation. You are nothing less than a strong, independent woman. I see you. You are so much like my Rose. Stubborn.” He eyes me with a small chuckle and shake of his head. “Took me quite a while to get into her good graces. She used to tell me I was misusing my time pursuing her.”

Dunking my chip into the salsa, I ask, “What made her choose to give into you, then? To let you in?” Watching him talk about his wife is one of my favorite things. The worry on

his face smooths out as he transports back in time to when his life was whole.

He sits there a moment, as if he has to ask himself that same question and doesn't know the answer. Then he smirks. "Well, I suppose I proved to her, repeatedly, that no matter what, I'd still be around. One time she even slashed my bicycle tires to make sure I didn't walk her home after a shift at the grocery store." The sparkle he has in his eyes as he relives this story is amazing to see. He sounds happy, and it's so different from the misery usually surrounding him as he's had to watch her float farther and farther away from him.

"Well, I take it that didn't stop you?" I pressed, savoring the sight of his pride.

"It didn't. I carried that bike the full way back to her house. Later, I went to the store from there to get new rubbers put on. She challenged me in a way that I can't explain. The harder she pushed, the more I had to prove she was it for me." His voice is softer now, as he continues to replay his past in his head.

Not wanting to interrupt his thoughts, I look out to the courtyard as the high schoolers mingle and hang with friends. I think about what Mr. G said. What would it feel like to have a person who always proves how good they are? Someone who you couldn't imagine your life without. A person who never gives up on you, no matter the baggage you carry with you or a past that seems to linger.

“You see, one thing I know to be true, is when we tell ourselves we’re okay alone, it comes from a place of pain. A place of darkness. We end up punishing ourselves over and over. It’s when we let people in that we undoubtedly find true peace.” When my eyes meet his, there is understanding there, his gray eyes blinking at me as if saying things will be okay.

In an instant, my walls go up, anger pushing my appetite away thanks to his judgment. Punishing myself? I’m a strong woman. I’ve survived a lot. I made myself who I am today, no thanks to my past or the so-called family I have left. Preferring to be alone is good for some people.

“Who says I’m punishing myself? I’m being good to myself by not relying on others to bring me happiness. I don’t think there is anything wrong with that.” When he lightly flinches, I realize my tone is harsher than I planned. But I can’t help it.

“I wasn’t trying to offend you, Madeline. Perhaps I overstepped.” My eyes follow his shrug as he reaches next to him and pulls up a hostess cake and splits it, giving me half. My shoulders drop in shame as I take it as his peace offering.

I’m too ashamed to speak, knowing my harshness may be the last contact he has for the day. With lunch nearing its end, kids are packing up their things, which means Mr. G is going to have to head out to collect the miscellaneous waste left behind before he can head home for the day.

A warm hand squeezes my shoulder, his signal he’s leaving. I look up at him and offer him a small smile. “Have a good day, Madeline.”

I nod. “You too.” Turning back, I look out into the courtyard. It’s empty now. Gregory’s quiet words boomerang in my mind. I’m not punishing myself, am I?

Before I give myself too much time to think on that, I shake my head to clear the intrusive accusation. The warmth of the sun is heating my skin, small beads of sweat forming on my neck under my hairline. I have a sweater over my top, since the air conditioning seems to be on full blast today, but with the midday sun, I’m gradually growing overheated. Standing and brushing the dirt off my pants, I raise my arms over my head, taking my sweater with them. It’s my latest thrift store find, but whoever bought it liked to show cleavage, so I safety-pinned it closed. With my arms raised above my head, I feel a tug at my scalp. Pulling at a slight angle again, I feel the same resistance.

Shit! You’ve got to be kidding me. Pulling air into my lungs, I attempt to calm myself while I think of my choices. I can rip it off and tear my hair out or pull it down with the same result. With my arms currently suspended over my head, sweater half on and half off, I need to make the decision quick. Warmth from the sun hits the small patch of skin between my waistband and lifted shirt. Grumbling, I take a deep breath and ready myself to tug it off.

A hand brushes over my lower back, causing me to nearly jump out of my skin. The faint touch of someone I didn’t know was there turns my heart into a block of ice in my chest. It brings back those unwanted memories from a time when I was so scared and helpless, vulnerable. And the new woman

I've painstakingly created, carved out of the empty husk I used to be, gets angry. How dare someone force those emotions back on me? "What the hell? Don't touch me!" I scream at my unknown assailant. I step away frantically and trip over my bag that's sitting on the ground next to me. Before I know what's happening, I'm tumbling backward right onto my ass—for the second time today. The only positive note is the sweater rips away from my head as I brace myself for the fall. Pain radiates from my scalp, where I'm sure a clump of hair is missing. I aggressively pull the sleeves off my arms and brush my crazed hair, now sticking to my face. I stand, ready to face off whoever thinks it's okay to lay their hands on someone without consent. My sharp stare clashes with the one and only Brown-eyes. My head spirals at the sight of him, again.

"You should be more careful," he tells me with a small chuckle.

Oh no. This will not go this way, not today. My blood heats in my veins as his smirk widens at my flustered state.

My filter now gone, I shout at him, "I should be more careful? As if all circumstances and situations that happen to me are, for some reason, my fault?" I shriek. Collecting myself, I offer him a bow and, with the sweetest voice I can muster, say, "Oh, thank you, kind sir. How will I ever repay you?" Batting my eyes at him to drive home the sarcastic tone of my voice, I let my scowl cover my face once more. Without another word, I push past him and bend over to grab my things. I stomp off and yet again feel a sturdy grip of his hand on my elbow. Yanking my arm away, I stumble back as it's

met with his halted movements. With a firm pull, he has my back forcefully smashing into his rock-hard front, nearly knocking the wind out of me. Not because it hurt but because ... *What is he made of?*

A muscular tattooed arm links around my waist and I'm held immobile. The warmth of his breath moves down the side of my face and neck. My eyes pinch tight as I fight the urge to lean into him. *This is a problem.* I should not be this attracted to him, especially since he thinks he can manhandle me. It doesn't even occur to me, while I'm caught up in his hold, that the fear from earlier is only a little spark in the back of my mind. It's there, it never leaves, but it's not a persistent voice screaming in my mind to run.

My emotions are at war. My breathing is coming in brief spurts, while my heart works a mile a minute. What is this feeling in my chest if not fear? A heart attack? Is this what people call butterflies? Also, I may vomit. Swallowing my nerves, I realize the few seconds that have passed feel like hours. I should shout, protest, or something. *Get the hell outta here, Ivy!*

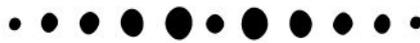
"I can feel your heart beating so fast. I didn't mean to scare you." He pauses as though assessing the situation. "In fact, I'm not sure I did. Are you scared, Maddie? Or do you feel this spark between us? I know I can't be the only one feeling it." His deep voice drowns out all sound from around us. It's as though it's only him and me here in our own little world. His tone is confident and maybe a little cocky.

The fear that's bubbling up inside of me at his unwanted touches melts away, and something else takes its place, a heat that I can't place. Something whispers to me to trust him. But that's wrong. I can't trust anyone. Only myself. I see red. As if the devil conjured himself, flashbacks start rushing into my subconscious, and I'm being held down, wailing for help with no one responding to my pleas. My body acts as if on instinct, flinging my head back into his face. A sharp pain shoots through where the back of my head connects with him, and I feel his teeth sink in, piercing through my skin. Stomping with all my strength on his right foot causes him to release me. I turn lightning fast and knee him right between the legs.

My need for control finally wins out over the strange feelings he is causing inside of me. I'm not going to give in that easily. I've been the victim. Men constantly take what they want as if I don't have a say. I refuse to be that girl again. I watch him as he drops to the ground heavy, one hand on his face, the other gripping between his legs. I would applaud myself for the takedown if I didn't fear what may happen next. His burly, tall, tattooed frame collapses like a row of dominoes, but I know it won't last forever. I need to go. Get away before he gets his wits about him. The men that think they own you are dangerous. Give those men a "reason" to want to break you, and they become lethal.

Who is this fucking Neanderthal, anyway? Why is he so interested in me? Glancing down, I see him rolling to his side. Whelp, if that didn't get the message across, he really isn't as smart as he is pretty. Stepping over him, I rush toward the

building. I speed closer to the courtyard entry holding my head high, pretending not to feel the burning in my legs from the run while they simultaneously feel like gelatin. The adrenaline spike is causing my senses to go haywire. I can't catch my breath. My lungs try to inflate faster and faster as my head pounds like it may explode. I want to look back, see if he is still on the ground. My fear and anxiety won't let me. I keep moving forward, straight ahead. No peeking. A prickling sensation races up my spine, an eerie sense something isn't right. I close my eyes, checking myself out, disbelieving what happened. Calming my nerves, I tell myself I got away this time. He got the message. I'm stronger than I look. *Then why do I feel so guilty?*



My last class seems to be taking an eternity to end, mainly because I keep rehashing the courtyard incident in my head. When the last bell sounds, signaling the end of my day, relief rushes over me. My mind is no longer occupied with how he felt pressed against me. I'm exhausted from the shift of emotions from intrigue to pure terror. When the fresh air hits me as I exit the building, I laugh slightly because of how hard I actually hit him.

I climb into the minivan established as the town shuttle. I question what Brown-eyes will do now. Is he going to report me? Technically, I assaulted him. God, I'm so stupid. I could lose this job. I *can't* lose this job.

He isn't wrong to assume I'm attracted to him. Anyone with eyes can see how gorgeous he is, though his arrogance snapped me out of the trance faster than an oiled pig on a Slip 'N Slide. The need to get home, take a hot shower, lie down, and watch crap TV is all I can focus on now. Stale cigarettes and musty leather consume the space around me. Cid, the driver, smokes in here when he has no passengers. He shouldn't be smoking at all, but he thinks if no one is on the shuttle, no one will notice. *We notice, Cid.*

I'm the only one on the shuttle most days when it's off season. Sometimes the local, widowed neighborhood-designated grandma, Shirley, will get on to strike up conversation. She's been alone now for a few years, even though she has family nearby, and it sounds like she doesn't get many visitors. So, I entertain her conversations and listen to her rave about her children and grandchildren. But today it's only me. Maybe I should look online for potential jobs. I've been at this school for a year already, so the experience should count for something. *Quit spiraling!*

The shuttle stops at my location, and I collect my things, offering a, "Thanks," and handing Cid a tip. He nods his dirty ball cap-covered head at me with a grunt of appreciation. I step down, out through the sliding door, and begin my walk to my apartment at a higher speed than normal. Thank God this day is over.

My living arrangement is less than conventional. I didn't have the money to live in the townhouses closer to the school when I first arrived. So, I started staying at a cabin here within

the campground. The owners, Tom & Susan Fritz, took interest and offered me a place if I worked check-ins on the weekend. I knew a good deal when I heard one, wasting no time and saying yes to the arrangement. I live in an upstairs unit off a garage, which is storage for all the maintenance equipment, with no one living below me. My eyes scan the area and latch on to a figure lurking behind the trash can sitting at the base of the deck leading to my apartment. More shit to deal with when all I want to do is lock myself inside my home. Can't I catch a break?

“I see you. Who's there!” Handling my pepper spray in my purse, I wait for a response. As if to give me my second heart attack today, Tripp, the campground's dog, comes leaping out toward me, ready to pounce. His paws immediately land on my shoulders, while he leaves slimy kisses against my cheeks.

“Hey, boy. How are you today? You scared me!” Fluffy, soft fur wraps around my fingers as I scratch the top of his head. Jesus, I'm so jumpy today. It's not that odd for Tripp to be around the garage. Shaking off the anxiety, I start up the steps to the deck leading to my apartment.

Sliding the key into the lock, I twist the handle and push my door open. I close the door behind me after stepping inside, and I kick my shoes off on the welcome mat. My toes wiggle at the relief from being confined in my tight cheap flats all day, as I drop my keys on the small entry table next to the door. I lock the bolt, chain, and handle on the doorknob. A rumble deep in my belly reminds me of the lunch I never finished. Needing something to make up for the nauseous

feeling I can't seem to expel, I walk into the kitchen and grab the loaf of bread and peanut butter from the cupboard.

Comfort food. Peanut butter toast is probably the only thing I could eat every day, especially on a lazy night with no energy to cook a meal.

The slight buzz of the toaster starts after I push the lever down, bringing my bread into the machine. It will take a minute to brown, so I decide to get out of my jeans. Walking across the room to grab a pair of yoga pants from my dresser, I pull them on. I'd be lying if Mr. G's words didn't get to me. My small space is feeling so big after the day I've had. The room is drowning me inside its paper-lined walls and silence. I have enough space for a full bed. I use a curtain to give separation from the makeshift living room. My love seat and small end table with a lamp sit against the false wall. The TV is on a navy-blue antique dresser I refurbished. When my eyes landed on the pitiful thing on the curb, a piece of trash in need of a new life, I couldn't help myself. I dragged it almost a mile back to my place. A plush rug lies on the floor as an accent. There is a bay window, which is my favorite part. My things are all secondhand and have seen hard use, but they've helped me create a home out of this apartment. They give me my own space to claim as my own, and that's thrilling for me.

My view is high enough to see above the dirty campground and stare at the night sky. My kitchen is small but efficient, equipped with a shallow sink and shaker cabinets. I've painted those too—yellow, bright, and cheery—and lined the inside with contact paper in a vintage floral design. That's my hobby:

bringing dull, dead, disposable items noone likes back to life. Symbolic? Maybe. After all, I brought myself back from the dead, too.

The popping of the toaster has me slightly tripping as I put on my socks, and I stumble into the kitchen, making sure its piping hot to melt the peanut butter on contact. *Yum*. The smell hits me instantly, making my mouth water. Then, without permission, my mind wanders to the handsome man who held me twice today. The way his strong, firm hand felt on my stomach. How he skimmed below my belly button, causing butterflies to riot beneath my skin. I still feel him behind me, towering over my frame. Feeling tiny isn't normal for a girl my height.

Warmth spreads across my cheeks as I remember how much my body reacted to him. What would he have done if I had let him? Would he have lowered his face from my ear, trailing his lips to the base of my neck? Would I feel his hand lower into the top of my pants? Only the pinky at first to test my willingness, then the ring finger ... My breath hitches as I imagine his other hand moving up to my breast, kneading it outside my shirt, his lips brushing right below my ear. My hands move to grip the counter to steady myself, knuckles white as the intrusion of lust overtakes the anger that had built up around the situation. I want to be mad at him, but now that I've had time to cool down, my body isn't cooperating. I'm startled from the fog as the butter knife slips from my hand and clanks onto the plate, then hits the floor. Reality slaps me in the face. What a bitch she is.

My body and mind are both betraying me. I swore I'd never allow someone to touch me with such primal possession again. I'm in control... . A book I read explained that sometimes the mind can replace the threat with fundamental need once the person is not around, creating a fantasy only you are in control of. Maybe that's what my mind is doing with Brown-eyes? Yes, that has to be it. I crave something more than control, though. I need *him*. *Stop it. You can't have him*. Grabbing my toast, I walk to my love seat, propping open my laptop and clicking on the next episode of Grey's anatomy.

Chapter Five

Bennett

If you would have told me I would be sitting at my kitchen counter after my first day of school with a busted lip, I probably would have believed you. If you had told me it was because of a woman, I still probably would have been likely to believe it. But if you told me that a woman would have kicked my ass in the span of ten seconds without so much as a second glance? Nope. Not a chance would I believe I was beat up by a girl. *Okay, okay, a woman. A sexy as sin woman who can kick some ass.* The burn from the ice on my lip has me wincing as I bring it back to my mouth. Avoiding the attention from both students and teachers for the rest of the day had been difficult. First day on the job, an array of rumors already circling, and I get a fat lip over lunch. I can't wait to hear the slew of gossip tomorrow. What the hell was that? She went total Laura Croft on my ass. No woman has ever brought me to my knees like that. I'm not sure if I'm pissed or royally impressed. I think I'll go with the latter.

“Whoa, first day and you’re already getting into fights. What happened to ‘I’m a changed man,’ and ‘I don’t do stupid things’? What, did you hit on someone’s wife?” Bec quirks an eyebrow at me.

Peering at her, I roll my eyes. “It wasn’t my fault. Okay, well, it kind of was.” She says nothing, but she lifts her brow and crosses her arms, nodding at me to continue.

“I met someone today and ...” Before I can finish, her hand slams down on the countertop across from me.

“See, I knew it was about some chick. Come on, Bennett, you honestly can’t be this dumb,” she says, throwing her hands up as if I’m a lost cause.

Okay, ouch. Clearing my throat, I continue, “As I was saying, I met a lot of people today, but one of them was another teacher.”

“And she’s married,” she finishes, her tone exasperated. She’s pacing the floor in front of me.

“No, she’s not married, actually.” Her suspicions should bother me, but she doesn’t know me anymore. She knows the Bennett from college. Not the Bennett now. I’ll keep having to remind Bec that him and I, we’re not the same.

“She’s got a partner,” she guesses again, her finger pointing at me.

“I don’t have any idea if she has a partner or not.” I wait for her to jump in, knowing she won’t wait for me to tell her the whole story without interruption.

“Well, if she doesn’t have a partner and she’s not married, what’s with the fat lip?” she asks, eyes shooting daggers at me.

“You know what? I’m not telling you now. You’re being so judgmental and don’t deserve to know how I got this. But I can tell you it was and was not my fault.” I hiss again as I bring the ice back to my lip. It’s been so long since I’ve had to do this. I almost forgot how much it sucks ... almost.

“Oh, come on! You can’t not tell me! I’m your sister! I promise I won’t interrupt again.” She mimes twisting her fingers in front of her lips and metaphorically throwing away the key. Her eyes bat at me as she attempts to play cute to charm the answers from me. That may have worked in the past, but not today. Serves her right. I’ll make her wait for a while longer. Plus, maybe I’m not ready to share Maddie, yet.

“Nope. You spoiled your own daily tea. Looks like you’ll have to suffer now. Moving on, how was your day?” Shifting in my seat, I’m reminded of my sore balls, too. Maddie’s ability to nail a man squarely in the nuts is both impressive and a little frightening.

She pouts a little at being denied my story, but then gives in. “Oh, you know, the usual, busier in the morning and at lunch. I’m thinking about working some later hours soon. That way I can come up with some yummy fall desserts. I *can’t* handle all these pumpkin spice addicts. It’s like the world can’t imagine anything other than what’s trending.” She sweeps her hair off her shoulders and clips it on top of her head.

“Well, you know I’ll love anything you make.”

“Yea, I know. Can you figure out dinner tonight? I’m beat,” she says, leaning against the hallway wall leading upstairs.

“Sure. Pizza?” I suggest without thinking.

“You could seriously eat pizza for every meal, couldn’t you?” she asks, groaning and heading toward the bathroom to take a shower so she can relax after a long day on her feet.

“You bet! It never disappoints,” I call out after her.

Bec has worked hard on her dream. I’m hoping that by coming home and staying with her, I can relieve some stress. Between running her business and keeping up with bills, she has put a lot of pressure on herself. My hope is that she can hire a few more employees and focus more on creating desserts, versus running the entire joint on her own. Bec gave me what I needed when she pushed me to work abroad. I’m eager to support her and not let her do it alone anymore, even if that means stepping in and helping wherever I can.

Picking up my phone, I dial the local pizza joint to put in our order. While the phone is ringing, I walk to the fridge, grabbing a beer and cracking it open. Bringing it to my mouth, I feel the burn instantly. Because I don’t have a problem trying not to think of her already. No, I have to have a physical reminder.

She moves so fast on her feet. It makes me question how much of a feisty kitten she could be in the sack. How playful would she be? Would she give in right away or make me chase her around the bedroom, like a lion after its prey. I have a feeling a night with her would be more satisfying than what

I've experienced before. Women had opened for me without a second thought. There wasn't ever any challenge. Maddie is a mystery, all wrapped up in a sexy package.

I wonder if she's used to being in charge, or if she would let me slow her down. I can imagine her anticipation pulsating through her as I put my hands on her, telling her not to move. How she would beg me with her eyes, eager to touch me back. I would worship her from head to toe. The night would creep by as I took the time to understand her body, drowning in how she smells and tastes. I want to discover all the areas on her body that would make her beg, especially the ones she never knew she had.

My cock strains against my pants as I think about all the ways I'd take her. Fuck. I haven't been this hard since college, at least not from my imagination alone. At thirty-two years old, I never would have expected I'd be standing in my kitchen with an unruly hard-on, all from a fantasy of a woman who had handed me my own ass.

As if she'd slapped me again, shame bulldozes into me, remembering her fear, her body forcing itself away from me. At that moment, I hadn't realized she was actually afraid of me. Not until she started fighting back. Remembering the self-preservation of her movements and the fearful way she'd run from me, my lust cools. Glancing down, I mutter, "Cool off. Maybe if I have a chance to talk to her about what happened, she won't be so scared of me." I'm not sure exactly why Maddie seemed so terrified. I've never had a woman react like that to me before, and it's left me baffled.

After ordering the pizza, I convince myself the smartest way to get her off my mind is to get laid. Scrolling through my contacts for a quick fuck, I sigh when no one stands out to me. If I don't do something, I'll find myself crazed with images of Maddie all hours of the day and night. But everyone in my contact list is being judged against the beauty that occupies my thoughts, and they're all lacking.

I'm so fucked. Surprised and confused, I toss my phone on the counter before taking another pull from my beer. Maybe it's a fluke, and I need to talk to Maddie more, reintroduce myself. Hopefully that will ease her mind, and maybe then we could start to get to know each other.

Then again, Maddie made it clear today she wants nothing to do with me. She walked away from me. Twice. I'm not sure if she realizes it, but it's making me want her more. The predatory reaction is not something I'm used to. I've never wanted to chase—and possibly keep—a woman prior to her.

I'm used to watching people, analyzing their body language. I did it when Bec and I were kids. Being in the system makes you hyper vigilant to behaviors. When I moved to the foster home with Bec, I knew right away we were in trouble. The man of the house was a piece of shit. Our foster mother was sweet, caring, and nurturing, all the qualities you would want in a parent. She insisted we call her Mother. Her husband, on the other hand, demanded we call him sir. To this day, I don't know their real names, and I don't want to.

I was fourteen when our foster mother died. The whirlwind of the final day together stands out in my mind. The screams, cries, and furniture scraping across the floor echo around me. I remember pushing Bec out of the way as our foster father charged her like a bull when she stepped between him and his battered wife.

When our foster father lost his temper, there was no way to escape. Mother gave us headphones in our rooms most nights. She wanted us to drown out the yelling and the beatings. I still remember the sounds of shattering glass and then next the loud scream from Bec. I've never run so fast in my life, trying to get to her. We'd grown close over the year we were together. Neither one of us entered the system because no one cared for us. We became orphans. Nobody wanted to adopt older kids. As a result, we ended up in the only home that didn't care that we weren't babies.

It was nice to have someone who could understand the profound emptiness of losing their family. Someone who understood our loved ones hadn't betrayed us. They died. Though it *had* felt like a betrayal from God or whoever was up there pulling the strings. Our families were there one day, and then they weren't.

I won't lie. Before Bec, I was angry. The word "missing" wasn't enough for me. I didn't only miss my family, I was floating in an emptiness. Hollow. I hated that they couldn't care for me anymore. I had wished to be older so I could have taken care of them. My grandparents were the best things I had in life. Once they'd gone, I'd been left alone.

Bec never talks about that night, when we watched our foster mother die at the hands of her husband. We both heard it: the struggling breath that escaped her as she clawed at his hands. I tried to get him off her. Seeing the blood race down his hands from the claw marks of her attempted escape had snapped something inside of me, and I'd had to help.

Once I knew Bec was safe, out of the way, I turned back to them. I was ready to charge him and save the only other woman, besides my grandmother, to show me compassion. Her eyes met mine, and I knew. She was ready. I read the plea in her eyes. She wanted me to stay put and let it finally happen. She didn't want me to save her. Her fight was over. I swear I saw her mouth, "I'm sorry." Sorry. What did she have to apologize for? Maybe bringing us to her home? For leaving us in the hands of her abuser? Or simply that I had to watch as her life left her body, the day changing me forever?

My sole focus, from that point on, was Bec. Where she went, I went, making sure she was safe. Social Services placed us towns away from each other. I fought hard with my social worker to be placed with her. I explained over and over we were siblings. Siblings should stay together, but we weren't "technically" related so with a look of pity, they said what they always did, "Nothing can be done."

I was happy that the second social worker seemed to understand our deep connection. She gave us each twelve pre-stamped envelopes so we could write to each other. They intended the letters to be mailed once a month. They were kidding themselves if they thought we would stop there. When

I got my first reply from Bec, I rode my bike for two hours, until I was outside the address on the return label. I needed to make sure her school was safe. That her home was safe.

I would have dropped out of school to keep her out of harm's way. My constant absences and rebellion against the rules got me kicked out of four foster homes in three years. When they had nowhere else to put me, I wound up in a group home. They tolerated my absence if I didn't cause issues and didn't show back up with the cops. They wanted a paycheck. They gave no fucks if I was around or not. Looking back, I was affected by the absence of care as much as the abuse. I felt like I was emotionally taken hostage. I had no one to turn to when life's tornado sucked me into its vortex, refusing to spit me back out.

Ding dong. Setting my beer down, I head to the door and open it. A young kid stands outside on the porch, offering the pizza box to me. After exchanging cash, and nearly dropping the pizza as the scalding hot box slides into my hand from the insulator, I head back inside, kicking the door shut on my way.

Bec is already back, dressed in her pajamas, towel wrapped around her hair. She grabs two more beers from the fridge while I set the pizza box on the counter and reach over to grab two plates from the dish rack.

"I don't wanna fuck anyone," I offer. Bec continues taking a slice of pizza and places it on her plate, as if my statement was as normal as talking about the weather.

The pizza smells delicious, Italian sausage and pepperoni covering the top. My mouth waters as I bring the slice to my mouth and take a bite. God, this is good. Humming in appreciation, I take another. How do people not want to eat this for every meal? Looking to the left of me, I see Bec staring at me. “What?” I question.

“So, you like her,” she sings with a smile, telling me she heard, after all.

“I don’t know her,” I quip back.

“But you still like her. I mean, what other explanation is there?” She presses a napkin to her mouth after cheese slides off her slice and hits her chin.

“I ... She caught my attention, that’s for sure. ” It’s weak. I know it, but I don’t have another explanation as to why I’m so interested in Maddie.

“When was the last time you actually turned your attention away from the many ho-bags in your phone?” she persists. “And don’t start with the ‘well, technically a long time since I was out of the country’ crap. I know you had side pieces there, too.” There isn’t judgment in her tone this time.

“I know. It’s terrible, right? Like maybe I’m coming down with something.” I dramatically touch my cheeks, pretending to check for fever.

“Oh, shut up! This is a good thing! You know we’ve both been terrible at commitment. Well, aside from each other.” She winks then continues, “So, what’s her name?” Bec has been

known to interrogate my love interests. Maddie would be spooked in an instant.

I grunt then respond, “ I’m not sure I want to tell you that information yet. I need to find out more about her. See where this could go.” Silence meets the statement. I take a swig of my beer and peer over at her. She appears to be in shock. Confused, I ask “What’s your problem?” Shaking her head, she opens her mouth as if she wants to say something, then shuts it again.

“What the hell, Bec.” I teasingly nudge her. “What’s your deal?”

Opening her mouth again, she starts, “It’s just ... This is so weird. You never keep anything from me. You also never know the real names of girls you pursue. It’s always nicknames. Blondie, Bunny, Tankini ...”

“Alright, I get it. I’ve been a douchebag and prefer nicknames. Your point?” Wow, I really was a fucking bag of dicks.

“The point is, you haven’t nicknamed her. You want to keep it to yourself, and you don’t want to bang anyone on your phone. She must be *some* girl, that’s all. I hope that if she’s made this kind of impression on you, you treat her well. Most girls who don’t bow down at the sight of you are the good ones, B. Just remember, if she’s not chasing you, she’s likely not looking for you. Don’t wreck her.” She clears her plate and offers me a quick squeeze before exiting the kitchen.

Don't wreck her. Is that what I'm in danger of doing? I know I've avoided intimate connections with women, but it was never a secret. I'm up front about it from the beginning. I wanted to avoid hurting anyone, knowing I had no plans for anything serious. That wrecks them? I never played games, always making it clear what I wanted. No one complained. Honestly, *they* fucking sought *me* out more often than not. I won't wreck her. I want to know her, protect her, if she'll let me. Her walls may be even larger than those I've built up. That intrigues me. Who knows? Maddie may end up destroying me rather than the other way around.

Chapter Six

Ivy

I'm stuck, immobile. Somehow my body is unable to move. I try to open my eyes, but I can't. Pitch black covers my vision. Pure, thick panic sets in. My heart seizes as I try to catch my breath. A scream builds in my throat as I thrash my head from side to side, feeling something rubbing against my cheeks. A blindfold? Where am I? Feeling around, I touch the softness of sheets below me. This is my bed. I must've fallen asleep waiting for Arty.

Laughter and whispers have me fighting to identify who could be here. "Someone shut her up!" His voice is familiar, but I can't pinpoint who it belongs to. I feel coolness on my face as the piece of fabric is lifted from my eyes, and I blink rapidly to clear my vision. I still can't see clearly when the fabric is then shoved into my mouth. My mind must be playing tricks on me. I squeeze my eyes shut, then open them wide, seeing Arty and his friends, Chris, Scott, Ross and Alex, smirking from all around me. All eyes were on me, bloodshot and glazed over. The sinister gleam in them sends a spike of

fear through my body. The smell of whiskey and beer pours off each of them, filling the room, and a sourness turns my stomach. The strength of my fear and the churning in my stomach make bile rise in my throat. I swallow it back. I refuse to throw up in front of them. To give them the satisfaction of seeing my fear.

What are they doing? Arty is by my feet with Ross, each holding a leg, spreading them wide. Chris to my left, pinning down my arm, Scott on the other side. Alex stands in between my legs, stroking my inner thighs, my robe opening and falling against the bed. My stomach drops, filling with dread as the situation unfolds before me. Evil is the only word I can use to describe the glint in Alex's eyes. I look to Arty for help and kick my legs, my eyes pleading with him to stop whatever this is. Arty diverts his gaze away from me. His true colors show him as the coward he is as his friends snicker and make crude remarks about my body. He's always talked down to me. Occasionally, he would show his irritation and anger with physical aggression, but I could handle that. I expected it ... but he never came after me in bed. My luck seems to have run out.

"Hold her still, you pussies!" Alex yells to Arty and Ross.

*Arty returns his eyes to me and attempts to soothe me.
"Come on, baby, this is going to be so good for you. I always tell you how pretty you are and how hot you make me. My friends are always so jealous."*

I'm not sure who he's trying to convince, him or me. His face blurs as I feel a rush of tears race down my cheeks. I attempt to scream, but no sound gets past the fabric in my mouth.

Scott leans down to my ear and whispers, "You won't go back to Arty once you have a minute with me."

Trepidation consumes me. I'm no virgin, but Arty was my first, vowed to be my only. How can he say he loves me and stand here and allow this? Take part in this violation. Thrashing my head, I collide with Scott's jaw. My forehead takes the brunt of the blow, then my head snaps back as a sharp blow lands against my cheek. More shock comes as I see Scott's hand pulling away from my face. He hit me, and all because I'm trying to defend myself. Everything feels like it's happening all at once yet taking an eternity. I see and feel everything. I want to feel nothing.

A scraping noise hits my ears. The sound is deafening, drowning out all other noises in the room. Nothing else exists. Tooth by tooth, I hear the pop of a zipper as it catches each groove. Time suspends until I hear the clank of a belt hit the floor. I feel a breeze against my legs as the fabric of my robe pulls open and jerks away from my body, putting me on full display. I rarely sleep like this. It was a long day after dance rehearsal. I took a soak in the tub and fell asleep in my robe. I scramble with a place to set my attention, to check out and wake up from this nightmare. They surround me, all around me, with no escape. I shut my eyes as tight as I can, wishing with all my might this isn't real. This is just a nightmare.

Callused, harsh fingers forcefully slide against my core, opening the most private part of me to all of them. The murmurs of appreciation around the room makes me want to vomit. Inhaling as much air as I can, I bellow a scream louder than I ever have. The blow to my face comes from Chris this time. Ringing fills my ears from the force. I consider screaming again, praying the next assault will knock me unconscious.

“Hold her head up,” Alex directs. They push my face to my chest, but my eyes remain shut tight. “Open your eyes, Ivy, or I’ll make this drag on all fucking night.” A loud sob wrenches through me, “Now!” he screams, saliva hitting my thighs as his fingers bruise into my skin. I’ll do whatever I need to do to get this over with. This has to end. I slowly open my eyes, barely seeing past the haze of my fear. Alex grips his cock and pumps it a few times, lining himself up at my entrance. My entire body tenses against the hold the monsters have on me. He’s really going to do this. All of them are. I pick a spot behind his head and focus my eyes there. I feel harsh fingers dig into my hips. “Round one,” Alex shouts, right before he buries himself inside my body in one forceful thrust.

A scream wakes me from my nightmare. Taking a moment to focus on where I am, the invasion has me clasp my mouth to keep vomit from spewing on the floor. I race to the toilet. Hair clings to my face, sweat drenching my back. Why is this happening? I haven’t had a nightmare in years. First a panic attack, now this. I raise my face up to the ceiling and pray to whoever is listening. *Please take this away.* I don’t

need good or happy dreams. I'll take emptiness with a smile, a solace in the darkness where I can be alone.

Flushing the toilet, I stand to wipe my face, throwing my hair in a top bun. That's when I notice blood on my hairline at the base of my neck. What the hell? I reach behind and feel the crusted blood. Panic sets in as I look around my apartment, and that is when I remember. Brown-eyes teeth crashed into my skull. I totally forgot my tussle with Brown-eyes. Great. I undress and jump in the shower, gently massaging my shampoo into my hair. The citrus and lilac scent wafts in the surrounding steam. The sting from my scalp brings me to reality, and I'm grateful for it. I'm no longer back in my room being assaulted by my boyfriend and his friends. I'm alone. I'm okay. The tense muscles in my neck and back start to relax. I lean against the shower wall, letting time pass as the water runs from hot to cold. Turning the water off and opening the shower door, I reach for the towel and dry off, forcing myself to say the mantra I've repeated since I left. That is not me. I'm not her. I'm not what they did to me. They will not break me. I will be better, do better, and inspire others. My plush purple robe feels like heaven against my skin, allowing the warmth to wrap me into a hug. Looking at the clock, I see that it's four in the morning. I will have my morning coffee and head to the shop to see if I can do anything down there. Lord knows my time for sleep has officially expired.



I've finished completing all receipts and balancing for the current week's check-ins when I hear the chime of the bell of the front door. "I thought I saw a light on. Maddie, it's seven AM. How long have you been here?" Mrs. Fritz asks.

"Oh, just a few hours. Couldn't sleep. The books are all caught up. I can come back later if you want me to?" I say, yawning.

"Oh no. The agreement was on weekends for check-ins so we could spend more time as a family." She gives me a stern look. She and her husband have been married for ten years. They have two brilliant kids, Landon, who is ten, and Austin is eight.

"Seriously, you restock, do our books, book reservations, and keep this joint running with loads of activities for kids. Your themed craft night was a great addition, by the way." She smiles.

"Ha, ha thanks. I love kids. I'm happy to help. You offered me a place to stay, and I want you to know how much I appreciate it." Grabbing my coffee and taking a sip, I occupy myself with anything so I can brush off her compliments. I feel a tad guilty for not being honest with them. They've been so good to me.

"We know you do, Maddie," she says, looking down at her watch. "You better get outta here before you miss the shuttle and end up walking."

"Oh, I think I may walk this morning. I could use the exercise. Plus, I love that delicious bakery on the way. See you

later, Mrs. Fritz.” With a small wave, I push open the door. The sound of the chimes follows me as I leave.

“For the hundredth time, it’s Susan! Have a good day, Maddie!” she shouts after me.

The Fritzes are nice people. They don’t know me. Starting completely over is one of the best things that I could’ve done for myself. I know I’ve grown. I know I’ve become someone so different from the girl I used to be. But as you leave and run away, it makes you wonder if you ever truly know anyone. I think about the process most people go through when they’re first getting to know someone. Do they notice the difference between genuine emotions and learned behaviors?

Do they realize that some people are exhibiting habits and not real genuine connections? That a slight twitch of the mouth and a wave isn’t a reflection of who someone is? It’s a gesture that’s encouraging you to believe, “Hey, I’m friendly and approachable!” As if any villain couldn’t placate you. Warp your reality and perception of who they are. My father was the king of deception. That’s why I keep my head down and go through the motions. I stay quiet and move with the changes.

Being unable to shake my nightmare has me feeling helpless, something I haven’t felt in a long time. I’ve grown from being the victim, haven’t I? I don’t mask my actions all the time. I’ve let some people in. Jordyn has weaseled herself into my bubble, and I enjoy talking to Rebecca at Bake Away.

Sure, we don't hang out like close friends do, but we chat and laugh when we see each other. It's safe.

Uneven gravel from the unpaved parking lot shifts under my feet as I make my way to the main road. The only one leading to town. Mainly dirt and stone kicks back behind the cars traveling in either direction. It holds little to no traffic, and always seems ten degrees colder. A flutter in the cattails lining the road makes them sway. My steps halt as I watch for what might have caused them to dance back and forth. Every movement makes me hyperaware. As if at any moment, a threat will jump out and reveal itself. I'm not paranoid, usually. I haven't feared my past for quite some time, but for the last couple weeks, I can't help but feel vulnerable. Then again, over time, when weird things happen, I can't stop my brain from thinking the worst. Isolation, I suppose, can make you a bit wary of the shadows that fade from the light into the darkness.

Even if something does happen, I know I'm stronger than I was back then. I know who I am now and what I will allow into my life. My ex-boyfriend, Arty, I'm not so worried about. He's an idiot. He has the brain capacity of a gnat. He's a man who can't lead, will always take orders. My father, though, he'd go to the ends of the earth to preserve his image to the world: portrait perfect, high-ranking family. No baggage to be uncovered. He must be going out of his mind with my absence. It's too bad his worry isn't because he truly wants me home.

I've gotten comfortable here, in this small town, away from the constant noise of the city. Chicago's lights and constant buzz never allowed me to see the stars like I can now. When I was a little girl, my mom and I used to lay on my bedroom floor and stare up at the ceiling where she had the constellations painted. She promised she would take me somewhere we'd be able to see the real thing. Only she never did. My mom passed, I was eight, and my father never mentioned her again. No photos, no kept bottles of perfume, no clothes. He even had the forethought to remove all her paintings from around the house. It solidified my assumption that the only thing he valued was her beauty and the money she came with. My mother had been stunning. Tall, five foot eight, she had red-auburn hair that was so long it had fallen to her lower back. It was beautiful. Her eyes were shiny emeralds that would sparkle when she smiled. I suppose I got my blonde hair and blue eyes from my father. Mirroring her image and coloring my hair to look like her has almost made me feel more connected to her on some level. An ache squeezes my chest so strongly that my hand moves reflexively to rub it away. I miss her. She always knew how to soothe me when I was upset. The way she'd run her fingers through my hair at night and hum ridiculous show tunes all day were only a couple of the ways she'd shown she loved me. She had truly been the beacon of light in our home.

In those last days, when she was still conscious, I remember her telling me to always get out in the world. Follow my dreams. She'd tell me tales of girls growing up to rule worlds.

Her oil paintings were always of women, beautiful, holding the attention of anyone viewing them. The women she painted were strong; none of them posed with a man. Each one of them was mighty and brave all on their own. All different shapes, sizes, and colors, all diverse. Yet, despite all the differences, they all screamed of power. A true heroine. I wish there were a way to find out what happened to all of them. There would be no hesitation to display them all over my home. Well, when I had a house of my own that I could display them. My thumb rubs the smooth surface of the moonstone charm that rests against my chest. It's the only thing I have left of her: a small charm clasped to a silver chain. When she died, the house was cleared of her existence. I saw it on the nightstand, remembering it was the only thing she'd never take off. So, I took it and have been wearing it ever since.

I doubt my father even knows about all the old photos of her family she used to show me. He worked so hard to isolate us from anyone other than himself. In the end, it was a world of our own, him the victor of a throne, and me the jester. A puppet on strings as he orchestrated my every move. If he showed up here, what would he tell others? I don't think anyone would believe his lies, but then again, I'm not really being honest with anyone here. I need to banish the thoughts from my head, but that isn't going to happen. I was careful. I'm still a stranger to everyone here. The night I left, I could've sworn I had an out-of-body experience and watched myself escaping. It was as if a part of my soul stayed behind in

that house, haunting it along with the other ghosts long forgotten.

The next day, Ivy Eloise Hanson became Madeline Miriam Brighton. My mother used to have a picture of me, tight in her arms, on her dresser. Behind her was the welcome sign of the town where she was raised: Brighton, New York. As far as I know, that was the first and last time we ever traveled to see her grandmother who was still living in the same home. My father isolated her from anyone that didn't align with his *values*. Really, he wanted her to be lonely. Lonely enough to not risk anything for the future he wanted for himself. I'm still in shock at the fact that my parents even ended up together. With the memory I have of her, she was nothing like my father. She was kind, generous, empathetic, and truly cared for others.

My trip down memory lane fades as a vibration in my pocket pulls me from my thoughts. I dig into my bag, pulling my cellphone into view. *Unknown Number* illuminates the screen, and I ignore it since only a few people have this number, and those who do are in my contacts. As my phone starts to slip into my bag, the vibration begins again. *Ignore*. When the vibration begins a third time, my patience is gone. "Learn to take a hint!" I grumble into the receiver. When I'm not met with a response, just heavy breathing on the other end, I hang up. Creep. It wouldn't shock me if it were Austin or Landon pranking me. Last weekend, they had fun ding-dong-ditching me. They were a bit shocked when I filled balloons with shaving cream and pelted them as they ran. I hadn't

laughed that hard in ages. Whoever it is, they can leave a message if they try again.

Even though it's a chilly morning, my walk is a lot more pleasant as I think about Mom. It's about to get even better, the sweet scent of the bakery hitting my nose as I approach the start of town. My mouth is watering as my feet unintentionally move faster, eager to get me to my destination.

Chapter Seven

Bennett

There has to be a jackhammer inside my head. No matter the amount of Tylenol, it isn't getting the eviction notice. Waking up this morning was difficult. I found myself drinking more beers than I had planned to last night. I couldn't stop thinking about Maddie. One dirty thought after the other consumed me. Next thing I know, it's time to get up for the day. Now all I can think about is Bec's comment, insinuating that I would wreck Maddie. Would I?

Water from the rain showerhead covers my shoulders as I slump forward, allowing the stream to flow down my back. The freezing cold water wakes me instantly. We need to invest in a new water heater. If Bec showers before me, it's a freezing tundra for me next. Normally, the imaginary icicles forming in my beard would piss me off, but after lying in bed entirely too long nursing my hangover, it's a quick one.

After getting dressed, I head to Bake Away. I walk in and see Bec is busy in the kitchen, so I grab myself breakfast from the case and take a seat. I can tell a few people have come and

gone this morning based on the empty cups left on bistro tables, ready to be cleared. As I think to do it, Ashley, the counter girl, comes over, rag in hand. Ashley is young, maybe seventeen, but she comes in three days a week before school and runs the register. She's been helping Bec for a few summers now, after confessing a hundred times how she is an aspiring baker.

Sighing, I take a big bite of my doughnut. Fuck, these things are the tits.

"Um, is that your third doughnut this morning?" Bec interrupts my thoughts.

"Fourth, actually." I laugh.

"Save some for the paying customers, you pig. What's up with you? You look like crap." A playful smile tugs at her lips as she refills the display case with more desserts.

"Gee, thanks, sis. I love your insults in the morning. Nothing is wrong with me. I didn't sleep well last night," I tell her, taking a sip of coffee that magically appeared a moment ago. *Thanks, Ashley.*

"Well, maybe if you didn't drink almost a case of beer by yourself on a school night, you wouldn't feel this way. Though, not gonna lie, I'm impressed you don't feel worse." She closes the display and places the empty baking tray on the counter behind her.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, Mom, thanks for the advice. Do you need help with anything before I head to the school?" I grab

my plate and mug, walking it to the dish bin at the very end of the register counter.

“Ugh, I hate that I can’t have you to myself longer! I miss the summer, when we would spend the days together in here brainstorming.” When she says brainstorming, she means she bakes, and I eat entirely too much. She begins to stomp her foot like a toddler to bring the point home. Bec has always been a bit of an exaggerated whiner.

“Come on, Bec. We both know we wouldn’t be able to do it forever. I’d constantly be in your way, especially when I weigh five hundred pounds after eating all your fucking ‘test’ treats,” I joke. But in all seriousness, it would be my reality.

The smile that spreads across her face says it all. That’s what she needed, a little reassurance that she’s doing amazing. My sister has spent the last few years doing this alone. I never even noticed the level of dedication and discipline she needed to make her business successful.

“Thanks, B, can you please run and grab the case of eggs and milk that got delivered and put them in the walk-in fridge for me? That would be great. Ashley has to leave for school any minute, too.” She refills the wax paper next to the donut case.

“You got it. Be back in a few minutes.” Walking away from her, I open the front door to Bake Away and step outside, inhaling the fresh air. I could’ve walked through the dining area and into the kitchen, but I want to be outside. The brisk morning air hits and helps clear my head even more than the

food did. I walk around the front of the building, turning right to enter the alley where the delivery driver stands with his clipboard. He leans against his truck, waiting for someone to sign for the delivery.

Scarlett Bay is smaller than where we grew up, a few hours north of here. People seem to look out for each other, which is nice, especially after all the guilt I felt for leaving Bec behind. I sound like such a chick. I do like it here though. The fresh air and open spaces are exactly what I need. After signing for the delivery, I bend forward to grab the case of eggs off the concrete step right in front of the service door. But before I can grab it, my phone chimes. I pull it from my pocket, glancing at my home screen. Rolling my eyes, I groaned internally. *Sarah*. Sarah also landed herself in small town Scarlett Bay after college. Her and I used to have a good time back in the day, but it's been a long time since that's been a thing.

Sarah: Hey, QT, lil birdy told me u r in town. 4 good this time. I'd luv to c u & catch up.

If I could pick any pet peeve, the damn short texts and misspelled words would be at the top of my list. She texts like a fifteen-year-old. Her message is out of the blue, but then again, I'm surprised she took this long. Do I want to see her? I mean, she could serve as an easy distraction from Maddie. My stomach turns at the thought, and it leaves as quickly as it entered my mind. I don't need to deal with this right now, I decide, and push the phone into my back pocket.

The first case is heavy, the cartons tightly secured on the pallet as I carry it through the service door and into the walk-in cooler. *Ding*. Grabbing my phone again, I read the next message.

Sarah: I saw u read my txt. Dnt leave me on read. 😊

Rolling my eyes, I begin to type.

Bennett: In the middle of something right now. Yes, I'm back. But getting settled in. Not sure if I have time right now. Appreciate the check-in though. Hope you're well.

My thumb hovers over the send button while I contemplate a different response. Should I meet up with her? What could it hurt? As I leave the walk-in cooler, I hear the bell to the front door chime. I happen to look up as Bec walks through the swinging doors to the dining room. My eyes land on the woman standing there, as if the universe screamed at me to look up. *Maddie*. Hitting send has never been easier. I couldn't have asked for a bigger sign.

Needing to get a better look at her, where she won't notice me, I sneak back out the side entrance and walk through the main door. Opening it slowly, I keep the chimes as quiet as possible so as not to draw attention to myself. The groan itching to escape my throat may give me away, though. A pair of leggings paint her legs. She's matched them with a maroon tunic sweater, hitting her mid thigh, and the color brings out the red tones in her hair.

I'm not one to typically notice women's clothing, but the slouchy sweater is so baggy on her it makes me want to peel it

off and see what's waiting for me underneath. It takes all my effort to shut the urge down as she bends forward, peering into the display case. How can she make something so simple, so fucking irresistible? As her sweater lifts a few inches up the back of her legs, almost showing her curvy assets, I have to divert my eyes before she can feel them searing into her. God damn, she's beautiful. The weird thing is, I don't think she knows it. If she does, she surely isn't overly confident. A small "mmm" spills from her mouth, and all the oxygen in the room disappears. My lungs tighten, and I hold my breath, as if the slightest exhale will give me away.

She seems to be completely oblivious to her humming between her murmurs of excitement. The tune sounds familiar, but I can't seem to make out what the song is. Her hips start to sway with her internal stereo, and fresh air finally fills my lungs after what feels like an eternity. Wherever she is in her head, it's a happy place. Her walls are down and she's less guarded. I revel in the opportunity to get a glimpse of who she really is.

I would sell my soul for the chance to bend her over a table in this room. Adjusting myself in my jeans, I quietly growl at the discomfort. I want to feel her, hear her, taste her. Relish in her as if she were the only sustenance needed to live. Then my mind shifts, and I realize I want more than the purely physical from her. I need to know her, listen to her, and understand what makes her uniquely her. Shutting my eyes briefly, I know I should say something, make myself known.

When I open my eyes and look up, they clash with Bec's glare of pure annoyance. My brows pull down in confusion, and I shake my head in a question. I mouth the word, "*What?*"

Her eyes trace the space from Maddie to me. Then she gives me a pointed look as she mouths, "*Off limits.*"

My heart instantly begins to race. Off limits? Bec has never once told me I can't see someone I want. She's scoffed, sure. Disapproved, you bet. She's even laughed at me probably about a hundred times. But to tell me in strict words, "*Off limits*"? **Never.** Anger wells up within me and my hands clench at my sides. I don't usually get irritated with Bec, but her getting in between Maddie and me pisses me off. A muscle flexes in my jaw as I clench my teeth. *Oh. Hell. No. She's gonna explain this one.* Bec can't tell me who I can or can't pursue. My sister's reaction to the way I'm watching Maddie adds fuel to the already blazing lust I feel for the woman I just met. The challenge has been set. I'm determined now. It's time I take a step forward and make my presence known.

Chapter Eight

Ivy

I drag my knitted sleeve across my mouth, knowing it wouldn't be out of character to be drooling over the masterpieces resting behind the glass. Darn thing is shielding the possibility of me reaching in and devouring the sugar-coated pastries until I've had my fill.

“Are you going to drool over the goods all day or pick something?” a deep baritone voice asks from behind me. My body straightens immediately, on alert at his close proximity.

“Hey, don't pick on my favorite customer. She can drool all day if she wants.” Rebecca winks at me, but I can hear the strained tone she offers to the person behind me. It seems like she is bothered but attempting to hide it. Not sure what that's about, but I trust she's handling whatever it is. Rebecca seems like good people, and she has a gentleness about her that I respond to.

I move slightly to the left, to let the man behind me ahead in the line. Instantly, my nostrils flare at the familiar smell. The cologne that hasn't faded from my memory since our collision

yesterday. *Oh, come on! Can't I catch a break? Not my favorite bakery, too.* I can't seem to get away from this guy.

“You better not take one step in front of that girl, Bennett. You've already had four donuts. Quit being an ass and leave her be.” Rebecca folds her arms over her chest as she glowers at him. The crease in her forehead deepens as they give each other mock glares. So, Brown-eyes finally has a name.

Bennett. I attempt to stifle a giggle, remembering my conversation with Jordyn. Pretty sure Jordyn hit every name but Bennett. She didn't even guess Ben. Rebecca's stern, yet playful tone puts that man in his place. I wonder how well they know each other. Does he live nearby? An unfamiliar feeling flutters in my belly as something else occurs to me. Could they be dating?

“Oh, come on, Bec. I was only trying to light a fire under her. She'd be here all day blocking all the customers from the looks of it.”

I didn't absorb anything he said except the cute nick name. Maybe they *are* dating. Wait a minute, there couldn't be a more perfect opportunity than this one.

Whipping around to face him, I plant my hands on my hips. “Is that supposed to be some sort of fat joke?” I'm not that sensitive; I can tell he's trying to tease me. The look of shock on his face, though, makes me smile. *Ha, ha, got you, buddy.* I try to hold back a playful smile, but when he clears his throat, starting to apologize, I can't resist anymore.

His face morphs from shame back to flirty when he sees my resolve break. “No,” he says as he lets his eyes travel down my body and back up, not attempting to hide his perusal. He wants me to see him checking me out. He’s looking at me like I could be one of the delicious pastries inside the display case behind me. My ears and face grow warm with my blush, it painting me as red as a tomato. He is forward, abrasive, and not shy in the slightest. I don’t think I’m ugly. For the most part, I’m ordinary. Never has anyone looked me over so closely and deliberately, attempting to log all my features into the back of his memory for later.

“You’re far from ordinary. You also have a habit of thinking out loud, don’t you?”

I’d like to slap his smug grin right off that face of his. That beautiful, perfectly bearded face.

“Shit,” I whisper as his grin turns into a full-toothed smile. As if he couldn’t be any more good-looking.

His brow arches in a look of surprise. *What? Never heard a lady say shit before?* Smirking at him, I turn around to escape his gaze. I guess that’s what solitude gets you, talking to yourself, literally. He makes it easy to forget everything and everyone around me. A quick glance over at the expression on Rebecca’s face tells me she saw me gawking at the man who might be her boyfriend.

“I’ll be leaving now,” I direct at Rebecca as I spin fast on my heel and move toward the door.

“Wait! I didn’t mean to be a jerk. Let me buy you breakfast,” Bennett offers as he steps into my path and blocks the door. My body freezes. I get it. We had a fun exchange a moment ago, but that’s all it was: banter. I don’t want anything from him. When someone offers to give you something for free, there is usually some kind of fine print, hidden obligations telling you that you owe them something. At least that’s always been my experience. Is it cynical? Sure, but whatever.

“Screw that, breakfast is on the house. It’s the least I can do after Mr. Cocky had to interfere with your decision making. Whatever you want, Maddie,” Rebecca tells me as she reaches for the wax paper, already anticipating my choice.

Did I also mention that Rebecca is observant? I’ve never known a person who could read the room like she does. As if she could read my mind, she knew I wouldn’t take Bennett’s offer. My body tensed slightly as he stepped closer to me. She saw it and intervened. I mask it well, but there are tells only a woman can see. I nod and walk back to the counter, careful not to fall on my face. I feel Bennett’s eyes lingering on me, but he doesn’t take another step closer, which I am thankful for.

“Thanks, Rebecca. I’ll take a chocolate glaze. Just not the one with—”

“Coconut! I know. I got you, girl. No EpiPen needed here.” The doughnut slips into the bag, then Rebecca holds out her hand, waiting for something. *Of course, a tip!* I feel sweat start to form across my hairline as I reach into my purse for my

wallet. I feel ashamed of myself for making her have to ask for it. I was a server at one point. I know how this works.

Before I have my wallet fully open, my hands shaking, Rebecca waves her finger at me. She gestures to my arm. I drag my eyes to where she is pointing.

“No, silly, your thermos. Give me that. I’ll fill it with the good stuff and not that crap you call coffee.”

Glad I wasn’t a complete jerk, I giggle as I hand her my thermos and watch her dump it out into the sink. I can still feel Bennett’s eyes on me. Keeping my internal monologue to a minimum, I focus on steadying my breaths. I watch Rebecca as she aggressively cleans my thermos. I’m almost insulted at the amount of scrubbing she’s doing to that thing. It’s not that bad. I cleaned it last night.

“Maddie, this thing smells like burnt asphalt. How do you drink this crap?”

My nose crinkles as I try not to laugh. “It’s not so bad. It only burns a little,” I reply playfully. Don’t get me wrong, I *love* Rebecca’s coffee, but even hers is too weak sometimes. If it doesn’t resemble motor oil, is it really coffee? I go to grab my thermos from her, and she pulls it away from me toward her chest, so I have no choice but to move with her.

Her lip twitches slightly, as I move closer to her while she prepares what she wants to say. “Sorry about Bennett,” she finally whispers, glancing toward him. “He just moved back to town. Doesn’t really know many people. He seems to like you, though. I hope he stays out of trouble. I can tell he got into a

fight already, but he won't tell me what happened." Her eyes shift to the floor.

I glance back toward him and look over his face, and that's when I realize what she is talking about. How did I not see it before? Nearly choking at the realization, I cough to clear my throat, biding my time before I have to reply. Now that I am studying his face, I see where his upper lip is split. My concern shifts, and I rein in my laughter as I turn back to Rebecca while internally fist pumping myself for a job well done. He got what was coming to him. He may be a great guy, but he isn't totally innocent. Okay, maybe I overreacted, but this is all new to me. I've put up enough walls over the years. Most people get the vibe and leave me alone.

"He looks like he can handle his own. I'm sure he'll be fine," I say.

Her eyes zone out, as if she is transported somewhere else for a moment. "He's been through a lot in life, Maddie. Do you think you could maybe hang out with him? Show him around the school? I know it's an odd request. He tends to get in his own way, he could use a friend. Plus, I have seen the way he looks at you. If you make the first move, the thrill of the chase will be gone and you two can be friends." she asks, eyes training back on me. Her expression is solemn, serious.

Friends. The word hits me hard in the chest. My legs feel so heavy, as if I can feel my feet turning to roots and forever cementing me in place. I try to swallow the thickness in my throat as panic starts to creep over me. If I open myself up to

them like that, it'll only give them the opportunity to ask questions. Questions I can't answer. The desperation building inside me makes me pause. Can I be friends with this man? Can I try? I can set my boundaries. I don't need to be his wingman. We can be passing ships of small talk in the halls.

Cautiously, I look over her face once more and immediately feel a connection between them. Losing focus on my insecurities, I hone in on the fact that there is a relationship there. This is kind of awkward. Is this a spy on my boyfriend situation? Cause no thanks. But ... if I don't agree, well then, I may as well find a new place to get my sweet tooth fix. No. My decision is made. I will say yes. I'll maintain a healthy distance and keep my favorite coffee joint.

“Listen, Rebecca. I'm busy and usually do lesson planning during my free time or working my second job. So, I won't promise to be his best friend. But I can show him around and be there if he needs anything.”

“Eek! Yes! Thank you. Thank you!” Her hands clap fast in front of me, and with the speed of light, she leaps forward, her arms pulling me into a hug. Once her arms are around me, my instinct to draw in oxygen escapes me. The bag holding my donut hits the floor with a thud. My vision blurs, and as if watching a stranger in my place, I watch my hands shove Rebecca off me. With the weight of her gone, my feet stumble back, catching on the stool behind me. I fall fast to the floor, smacking against a second chair at the table behind me, ass slamming hard against the linoleum beneath me. The back of my head meets the bottom of the metal barstool.

Rebecca's gasp brings me back from the chaos unfolding in my head. As she steadies herself back to standing, she gives me an all-familiar look: *pity*. But let's not forget its best friends: sadness and questions. They cross her face just as fast. The three coexist together and are served on a platter of condolences. They give me no purpose aside from alienating me more. When I feel a hand on my shoulder, the room fills with the screech of my shoes on the linoleum and my heart beating in my ears. Once I am on my feet, I race out of Bake Away before I can make any more of a fool of myself.

If a black hole would open and swallow me whole, I'd be okay. I'm at war with myself. Guilt, anger, and sadness jolt through my system. What is wrong with me? I can't live like this forever. It's not normal to be thrown in the deepest of my nightmares at any normal human interaction. Rebecca did nothing wrong, and guilt consumes me as I think about the look on her face. Then again, what was wrong with her? She didn't need to hug me. The burn in my lungs becomes too much, so I slow. The rough, cold concrete feels good against my forehead as I rest my head against the building. I suck in gulps of air as I hold my palms flat against its coarse surface, steadying myself. Maybe my distance from others is subconscious, to avoid interactions like this.

It's as if that one night has been making its home within my brain since it happened. They didn't only take from me then. They've been taking from me every day for the past five years. A sob forces its way from my chest, and my head shakes as I attempt to swallow it down. I turn my face to the sun, the

warmth settling in my skin. Cars drive by, businesses still run, and bicyclists continue to speed past. The world keeps on moving while I am stuck in this purgatory.

“I have your coffee and donut.”

I heard the footfalls before she spoke. I’d hoped it was someone waking by. But as I lower my face from the sky and turn, Rebecca stands there with the bag and coffee in her outstretched hands.

“I’m sorry, Maddie. I got over excited. I’m a hugger. I don’t always think before the lunge. Are you okay?” The softness in her voice turns my stomach. She has nothing to be sorry for. This is me.

“I’m fine. I was startled. I’m sorry I pushed you.” I can’t keep standing here with her looking at me like this. Like some sort of weirdo. “Um, I need to go. I’m sure you’ve got to get back, too. You didn’t have to bring me this,” I say as I grab my breakfast from her reluctantly. “I’ll pay you back. And if I broke anything ...”

“Oh no! I want you to have this. You didn’t break a thing. A few things tipped over, but it’s no big deal. I made Bennett stay behind and clean it up. He can do that for me. He’s sleeping on my futon, after all.” She laughs, trying to make this moment less awkward than it is. If that’s even possible.

Nodding, I divert my eyes in the direction of the school. “Okay. Thanks. I’ll see ya.” Before she has the chance to say anything else, I turn and start my brisk walk to work. I’ve

probably freaked her out. Now I will for sure need to find a new place to stop in the mornings.

As if she could hear my thoughts, she yells after me, “Please come back and see me. Don’t be a stranger!”

We are strangers. If we weren’t, she’d know she shouldn’t rush at me the way she did. The closer I get to campus, the heavier my head feels. A sharp ache pierces from below the top of my skull. All the adrenaline must’ve kept me from noticing how hard I’d hit it. When I reach behind and feel wetness on my fingers, I know already I’ll see blood. *Of course I will, because I perpetuate bad luck.* Remembering my collision with Bennett’s teeth yesterday, I realized my wound must have reopened. I should be happy; with my lack of coordination, it could’ve been worse.

“What in the ever-loving fluffernutter is happening?” I shout as I pass by some students standing at the entrance of the school. Awkwardly, I smile as I make my way past them, and they stare at me with weird looks. I made it five years without anything crazy happening, a year peacefully in this town. I want low-key normal! Walking through the main hallway, I detour to the teachers’ lounge. Loud bickering pours out of the lounge when I open the door, all over who should get the projector for their class. I don’t have the patience to listen to them bitch over something as trivial as a projector. I’m almost jealous that’s their biggest issue today.

“Why don’t you combine your classes and both use it in the auditorium? Aren’t you both teaching ninth year English?” I

offer them a resolution as I walk past them, grabbing the first aid kit from the wall. As I place the kit on the counter, the room goes quiet. They must've taken my advice because the bickering stopped. The door closes behind them as they leave.

“What are you doing?” a deep voice asks.

I nearly jump out of my skin and fumble with the faucet, attempting to wash my hands. Bennett's presence is now filling the room. He must've snuck in as the other teachers left. Rotating my head, I shoot him a pointed look. “Playing soccer,” I sarcastically reply. As I turn back to my task, a grunt of disapproval echoes around the room.

“No, I mean why do you need a first aid kit? Are you hurt?” His voice is quiet, soft, yet he asks the question with a firm tone. He's clearly not open to any bullshit I may spew at him. Ignoring him, I continue to sift through the kit, finally finding what I need. Pulling out the antiseptic wipes and gauze, I close the kit and put it back on the wall against the cabinets.

“Why aren't you answering me? What's wrong?” His voice is closer now. I tense my shoulders, preparing for him to play hero.

“I don't know you. It's not your concern. Why do you keep showing up in places where I am? It's becoming creepy,” I hiss. I'm being a bitch. I know it. But I can't afford for this to keep happening. I open the antiseptic wipe, the smell sterile and potent.

“We've met twice now. So, we kind of know each other. And because you fell hard back there, I want to make sure

you're alright." His tone is soft, but then he adds, "I also don't want you suing my sister for injuries sustained while inside her place of business." The words sound sour as they leave his mouth, like he didn't want to say them.

I should focus on his tone, his proximity, but instead my psycho brain focuses on one word: *sister*. Rebecca is his sister. Why do I feel so ... relieved? Relief is replaced with searing pain as I place the wipe against my head. Gritting my teeth, I finally blow out an answer. "I'm fine. I'd never do that to Rebecca. This isn't from anything at her store anyways. It's old," I bite out.

Bennett opens his mouth like he is about to refute my claim, then he shuts it. His eyes widen in realization as his tongue sweeps across his top teeth. A pained look replaces his otherwise calm features. His hand travels to his bruised and busted upper lip. "I did this to you. I'm so sorry. Let me at least help." His eager movements spread supplies on the counter as he digs through the pile I've made in front of us. "This is shit," he declares, firmly closing the lid. "I've got a better kit in my truck. Come with me. I'll fix this." I don't need him to play savior. I can handle this on my own. As I shake my head no, he continues, "Come with me." His hand reaches forward toward mine.

"Don't." I raise my hand in front of me to stop him from coming closer. He moves around me anyway, stepping closer to where my other hand holds my head, trying to see what we are working with.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” His hands raise, and he shows me his palms in surrender. “Can I please see?” Our eyes meet for a moment, and I can see the plea. His gentleness contradicts his firm tone only moments ago. “Please?” He slowly approaches, as if afraid I’ll bolt again. I lower my hand from my head, pulling the wipe forward to fold and throw away. I give him a slight nod and feel him behind me as he takes my hair down.

He brushes it over my shoulder as his gentle fingers part through my hair. “Jesus Christ. How did you go all night without getting stitches?” His tone is harsh and possessive, as if he has a right to be either. We don’t know each other, and he doesn’t get to dictate what I do or scold me for not taking care of myself.

“I’m sure it’s fine. It’ll heal on its own. I figured it would be scabbed over by morning. I think I hit my head at the bakery and it reopened slightly. It’s fine. I’ll put gauze on it and be on my way.” My body sways in confusion, wanting to walk away, but also leaning a little closer to him.

“No, you won’t. This isn’t something you can slap a bandage over. This is deep.” His hands fall away from my hair, and his warmth disappears.

“I’m fine. Thanks for your concern.” I cover my face behind my hair that’s fallen.

I’m not sure if he’s insightful or if it’s my charming personality that makes him pause, but he appears to notice my walls going back up and steps back. “You don’t have to come

with me if you don't want to. But will you please come to my truck and let me fix your head? I have liquid stitches and it'll help. It's waterproof so when you shower, you don't have to stress about shampoo getting into the cut and burning. If you make me say please again, it'll be the most I've said please in my entire life." His rough laugh brings a small smirk to my face.



I wait for him, sitting on the tailgate of his truck, listening to him shuffle through his backseat. Bennett's demeanor is strong and confident. He smiles at all those who walk by, sharing a wave or a nod. His energy is so magnetic, it's as if people could feel the pull to him from miles away. His truck is old. Dirt covers the tailgate and wheel wells of the blue Chevy. Closing my eyes, I imagine a cool breeze of night on my face, lying in the bed of this truck, and gazing at the stars.

The truck dips as his large frame settles on the tailgate next to me, pulling me from my daydreams. Any other man this size, I would find intimidating, but not him. He makes every move with purpose and caution as he works through his first aid bag. He glances at me every few moments, as if my presence will vanish within a second of his eyes leaving me. There is something intimate about his concern for me. A small smile crosses his face when he sees me watching him. I feel a tug at my center, as if there is a string linked to the corner of his mouth, directly attached to my core. The ache deepens as

he smiles wider. The moment makes me want to crawl into him and explore every crevice.

“Can you stand in front of me so I can get a better look at your head?” His hand points to the space between his spread legs. I leap off the tailgate, cursing at my wobbly legs to not give out on me now. *Don't seem so scared now, do ya'?* I move to the space between his legs without a word, afraid my voice will give away how vulnerable he makes me feel.

“I can't reach you with you standing so far away. Can you move closer to me? I'm too tall to stand and do this.” His hand is warm, gently tugging at my elbow to guide me backwards, toward him.

A small squeak leaves my mouth, and I pray he doesn't hear me. I follow the tug and let my feet step back. When I feel his knees collide with my back, I stifle a shudder. His knees open and rest on the outside of my hips. Faltering for a moment, I catch my breath while his strong legs cling to me. I flinch as his hand glides from my elbow to my wrist and then places something hard and cold in my palm.

“I'm not going to hurt you.” When his hand moves away from mine, I can see the object placed in the palm of my trembling hand: a pocket knife. The heaviness of the metal surprises me as I fumble with it, turning it over to inspect it closely. I glide my thumb along the clasp and flip it open and shut. Should I be insulted or more infatuated with him? He's offering me a sense of control. His keen awareness makes me wonder how he'd know this would make me feel better. Even

if my mind is allowing me to trust him the more he's around, he doesn't know that. My left hand clasps his jean-covered knee and grips firmly to steady myself against the assault of emotions brewing again.

"I'm sorry this happened. If I'd known I hurt you, I would've done this sooner." His hands gently work against my head, which at the moment feels more lightheaded than anything.

"Honestly, it was an accident. My body seems to respond before I can think straight. Sorry about your lip, though you did kinda deserve it." Still flipping the knife over in my palm, I inspect it closer. A wooden plate is fastened the length of it, an engraving of initials barely legible. I can tell it's been used, worn down after years of service.

"Yea, I guess I did, didn't I?" he intended it to be a question, but it sounds more like a confession. The wind is cold against my scalp, a total contrast to the warmth of his legs caging me.

In situations like this, the normal instinct is fight, freeze, or flee. The feeling in my chest doesn't match any of those. My brain is faltering at my options, so I suck in a breath quickly when the sting returns as he works behind me. Then warmth replaces the burn as he blows against what I would assume is drying glue. Warm hands move to my upper arms as he gently rubs up and down my biceps. Calmness follows every stroke of his hand.

There is a struggle between my brain and my heart. My brain is urging me to leave now, to protect myself. Then my

heart beats fast, telling me to let him in, let someone in. I clear my throat and feel the tingling in my fingers as I finally release the death grip from his knees. I know with his astute observation toward me so far, he must've sensed my uncertainty, but he had the courtesy of not mentioning it.

“Thank you.” I distract my raging emotions and collect my hair in my clammy palms and put it back up in a messy bun. The right side of his mouth quirks into a lopsided grin. I have to intentionally stop myself from swooning. *Hypocrite, you were so annoyed yesterday at all the others in this place obsessing over him.* Tires squealing a few spaces over grabs both of our attention. We both turn to see as a red sports car skids from the lot, leaving behind the smell of exhaust and burnt rubber. This is the wake-up call I need to walk away from him. This will be our quality time together Rebecca requested, two birds one stone. With no words left to say, I take the opportunity to turn and walk away.

“Whoa, wait up.” His truck doors slam. “Who was the asshole in the red Camaro?” He rushes up behind me.

“I don't know. I don't know many people around here, but I didn't see him. I've got to get to my class.” His footsteps continue behind me as I pick up my pace, trying to put much needed distance between us.

“What do you mean you don't know? He looked straight at you. He certainly knew you. He looked pissed. He your boyfriend or something?” The accusation in his tone has my previous thought squashed. How dare he seem offended. I

didn't ask for his help. Once again, his reaction proves kindness usually is always accompanied with an obligation.

“Are you sure they were looking at *me*? You sure have made a splash since you got here. Perhaps his girlfriend has an infatuation. But not only that, even if he was my boyfriend, it wouldn't be your business. Thanks for your help. I'm good now. I'm sure you've got better things to do.” While his accusation bothers me, I can't help but feel a sense of dread. Was the person really looking at me? How could he tell in the short amount of time the car was in front of us? Prickling with awareness, the hair on the back of my neck rises as I look toward the exit of the parking lot, scanning for the car that's long gone now. *You are being paranoid.*

“Why do you look so scared?” He stands in front of me, his hands deep in his pockets.

My eyes snap back to him, but I don't know what to say. I *am* scared. I'm always scared. It could be nothing, but it could be something. Or someone.

“You were fine just a minute ago. You let me help you. Now you're spooked and running off again. Look at your hands, Maddie,” he says, his hands still in his pockets, but his eyes are trained on my hands. “You're gripping onto that pocketknife as if it's your life source.” He shifts on his feet.

Looking down, I see my hand is gripping the knife so hard my knuckles are completely white. *Holy shit, he's right.* I release it instantly, watching the knife fall to the concrete with a thud. Running my hands through my hair, I pull my hair

down to cover my face. I feel the tears welling in my eyes as I raise them to meet Bennett's. His gaze pierces through mine, and he uses every ounce of himself to figure me out, his brows drawn together. He looks like he wants to take a step toward me, his left foot lifting slightly off the concrete, then he thinks better of it.

“I'm late for class. I need to go.” I back up a few steps to test him and watch him throw all his concentration in not making a move forward. Right when I think his resolve may break, he slowly bends down to grab his knife. I don't know what he does after that, because I take advantage of the split second his eyes move from me.

Chapter Nine

Bennett

Jesus, I'm such an idiot. *You look scared.* Yeah, cause saying that's going to fucking help matters. Classes seem to go by fast today. Though maybe it's the fact that I keep replaying this morning's events in my head all day. How did I not realize I hurt her yesterday? It makes sense that I could have; her head hit me hard. I feel so shitty being so oblivious to what was right in front of me. Plus, what about Bec? The sound of Bec's back hitting the display case almost brought out a reflex to defend her. I don't know how I restrained myself. Maybe it was the look of shock that soon morphed into understanding on Bec's face. Or it was the look of pain on Maddie's. She's a pro, wiping it away almost as fast as it appears.

The bell rings, finishing up the period, and students offer their goodbyes as they exit the room. Today, they focused in groups on a practice quiz I gave. I want to check their level of understanding before I start really following a syllabus. How can any teacher start without knowing the bones of each student?

My hyper focused need to know Maddie is growing by the hour. It's my free period, so I think I will take Jordyn up on her offer of talking. As I walk down to her classroom, the halls are thinning from students. Maddie's classroom is dark, so she must be having her lunch with the janitor. I knock on the door to Jordyn's room.

"Come in." Her eyes still on the paperwork on her desk

"Hey, it's Bennett. I wanted to come by and say hi. I appreciated you coming by to see me when I first got here, so I wanted to check in, too." *Liar, you want intel on her friend.* Looking around the room, I see that its layout is standard. Photos of animals and the periodic table line the walls. Einstein is plastered on the door. She has reptiles and a hamster on the shelf against the back wall of the classroom. I'm happy to see there are animals here. Animal behavior was a favorite topic of mine. Jordyn's head pops up, and she gives me a wide smile. "Oh hey, Bennett, that's nice of you. I'm doing well. How are you adjusting?"

"Oh good, good. The small-town life is interesting. The village I taught in was small, but not one of them spoke English, so if they were talking about me, I was clueless." I chuckle. "So, any inside scoop you want to share to get me in the know of the other teachers on this side of the building? I feel kinda outnumbered, since everyone knows so much about me." Her eyes sparkle as if it is her greatest honor. My assumptions of her being the school gossip are spot-on.

“Sure! You’ve come to the right place. Take a seat.” At least she admits she knows all the gossip. “Let’s see, Mr. Robinson is the social studies teacher. He’s been here for fifteen years. Looks like it, too. You can get on his good side by always making sure you mention the globe on his desk. The man is obsessed. Then there’s Ms. True and Mrs. Clarence. They both teach English. I’m not sure why we need two English teachers, but the board decided to introduce an advanced class. If you ask me, they both teach the same material. It’s the appearance of looking like we have exceptionally gifted children, I suppose. Not that our kids aren’t smart. You already know me. Mr. Agnes is the art teacher. He smells like dirt, but that man can sculpt anything from recycled trash. The kids love him. Janitor Gregory is the sweetest old man, and he seems to hold a soft spot for Maddie. She eats lunch with him every day” She finally takes a breather, and before she could continue, I interject.

“How about Ms. Brighton?” I ask, hoping my voice didn’t sound too eager.

“Oh, Maddie’s the sweetest. She’d do anything for her kids. They all love her. She started working here last fall. Honestly, I’m not sure where she came from. She doesn’t have an accent, but I know she doesn’t have family here.”

“Do you two hang out a lot?” I ask.

She tilts her head in thought for a moment. “You know ... Now that you ask, I guess no, we never have. At least not

outside of work-related stuff. I know she's mentioned a second job before, so I think that takes up most of her time."

"Oh, that's nice. Do you know where?" *Busted.*

She gives me a knowing look. "Why? Do you want to show up and say hello? I'm all for a work romance, Mr. Harrison, but you have to put more work in than asking the best friend for info." Her tone is pitched high as she flips her hair over her shoulder.

Best friend? Girls are weird. How can she claim to be a best friend and know nothing about her? "You caught me. I think she's beautiful and would love to get to know her more. I guess I thought with you being so close I could get some pointers." I wink at her.

She takes the bait. "Hmm I don't know too much, honestly. I don't think she's ever mentioned a boyfriend or husband at all. I know she lives close by because I see her walking or taking the town shuttle to school. She is a sucker for sweet treats and hates when you invade her personal space. Trust me, I once went into her desk to see if she had any Sharpies and she scolded me about asking for permission before you help yourself. I thought it was odd, but that's Maddie."

So, she has issues with people invading her personal space, no surprise after the last couple of run-ins we've had. Which means someone has violated her boundaries before, or she has something to hide. Thinking back to the first time I saw her having a panic attack in the janitor's closet, I realize it should've clicked then. Her running away from me, then kung

fuing my ass to the ground when I touched her outside, and the way she freaked on Bec all makes sense now. There is more than meets the eye.

Seeing Maddie in pain has my mind taking a darker turn where she is stuck in the same kind of hell my foster mother was in. Tormented by someone enough to fear something as gentle as a hug. Someone caused her to build the walls she's successfully kept for a year in this town. My rage comes to the surface, and I can feel my hands clenching at my sides. I barely know this girl, but the protectiveness I feel toward her is coursing through my veins. Why would anyone harm her? Why doesn't she have a family? Being a child in the system, I get having boundaries. I hated every part of jumping from foster home to foster home, but it brought me to Bec. Thinking about the things we've seen makes me want to puke.

Jordyn's hand reaches forward and pats mine. "Are you okay? You look like you could flip this desk at any moment."

Shaking the thoughts from my mind, I offer her a smile. "Yea, I'm good. Sorry about that. Not sure what happened there. Thanks for chatting with me. I gotta get back to my room and finish up. Have a good rest of your day." I leave the room, trying to get my wits about me.

"See you later, Mr. Harrison!" Jordyn yells as I step out of the room. It's odd that the only teacher she calls by first name is Maddie. She must really think they're best friends.



The last two days have been uneventful. Filled with entirely too many desserts and working my second job shuttling drunk college kids back to campus. Bec has become concerned with my lack of enthusiasm, but something feels off. The normal hustle and bustle of the days seem to go by, but for some reason, I can't pull myself from the fog. Something is missing, but I can't figure out what. That's why when I lean back in my office chair and see Maddie walk past my door, posting flyers in the hall, I decide it's time to confront her. Her hair is beautiful, swept over her shoulder, keeping the right side of her neck exposed. I'm not sure if she's been avoiding me. She may be living her normal life, but I can't help but take it personal. Especially after the last time we were together. She's hiding something. It's been a few days since I've seen her at school, no accidental run-ins, which is kinda of odd considering the proximity of our classrooms. Bec has started to notice her absence from the coffee shop in the morning, too. Apparently, it wasn't unusual for her to stop in every day before school. As she lifts her next poster to the wall with one hand, ripping the tape from the roll with the other, I step through my doorway.

“Need some help?” I ask, leaning against a locker on the opposite side of the hall from her. Classes ended about an hour ago, leaving the halls vacant and quiet. I can hear her intake of breath, as if she isn't expecting me to still be here. Maybe she isn't, since I usually leave right after school ends, but I had some grading to catch up on.

“I’m good, thanks.” She doesn’t turn around to answer me. I push off the locker and step into her path. When she turns to face me, I can’t help but focus on her mouth. Her lips purse together in annoyance as she steps around me. I tried to tell myself the last two days that this wasn’t about me. She clearly has something she’s working on. So, I have to be patient. I can do that, but it doesn’t mean I won’t play dirty. I know she feels this connection between us, too, so I test my luck and move closer.

“Don’t you have something better to do? Something other than following me down the hallway, Mr. Harrison?” She’s traded her tape for a stapler as she aggressively staples the next filer into the bulletin board. Someone’s testy today.

“Do you want me to be honest? Or do you want me to tell you what you want to hear?” When she doesn’t answer, I think maybe she’s ignoring me. I’m preparing myself to apologize and wave my white flag when she surprises me.

“Both. I’d like to see you try to read my thoughts, oh wise one. And please enlighten me with your honesty.” Her hand clasps over her heart in exaggeration, and she turns back to her task. I am starting to think this woman wouldn’t be normal if she didn’t have spunk in her. I do the only thing I know, accept the challenge.

“What you want to hear ...” Walking toward her, I come up close behind her, leaning into her space. I reach my arm above her head, palming the wall in front of her. When I hear her breathing change, I know what I need to do. “Actually, I do

have some other things I could do. Hope you have a good rest of the day, Maddie.” I push off the wall, backing away from her slowly. She may not want to admit there’s something brewing between us, but I don’t need her to. Her reaction is enough to tell me this isn’t one sided.

“Hmm ... not quite.” She turns to face me. “It was too ... I don’t know ... wordy. I’d be fine with, ‘*Yup, see you around.*’ The smile that flashes across her is memorizing. I like the way she looks so carefree, acting oblivious to the tension brewing between us.

“What if I told you—” I step back closer to her. “—that I can’t stop thinking about you? That I wish you would tell me you feel the same so we can stop the cat and mouse game and see where this could go?”

She turns her back to me before I can fully reach her, not surprised, as she tries to conceal the primal need I know we both feel.

Deny it all you want, beautiful.

Her back is to me and her head turns to the right as she looks over the shoulder at me. Her eyes meet mine, and for a millisecond, I see her wanting to let herself agree. She blinks, nerves apparent in her features, and turns around.

“Such a big confession, Mr. Harrison. Does that normally work for you?” She speaks away from me.

I can practically hear her walls going back up as she slides away from the small space between me and the wall, stepping

away from me.

“I’d say yes, but you make me forget about anyone else before I knew you.” I don’t think she notices that her hand has been smoothing out the same poster since I started talking.

Her mouth parts slightly, exhaling in small spurts. She smooths her hand on the same poster again and again. Her eyes are trained in front of her. I am almost flush with the right side of her body. My hand slides in front of her, brushing my thumb against her lower lip, pulling it from between her teeth. A small puff of air grazes my hand, and in this moment, I could consume all the air she breathes.

I pull my hand away, much to my own protest, and grab a poster off the pile in her hands. My chest brushes against her shoulder, and her hand right is in line with my hard shaft. I don’t dare touch her more. I am already pushing my luck. Leaning closer, my mouth a millimeter away from her ear, I say. “I’ll post one in my room. See you around, Ms. Brighton.” A harsh chill replaces the heat of where her body was. Taking my time with her will be the death of me.

I close my classroom door behind me to collect myself. That woman can make me hard at the sight of her. Adjusting myself, cursing for getting so close to her, I pull out my phone. Three messages from Sarah wait for me, begging for me to meet up. I swipe all the notifications clear, pulling up my social media page and searching for Maddie. If she plans to keep her distance, maybe I can peek into her life through her page. No results found. Hmm, that’s odd. What person doesn’t

have any social media accounts? Pulling up a web search, I enter her name. Maybe I can find something, anything. But there is nothing, a dead end. I guess I will have to keep working hard the old-fashioned way. Who am I kidding? If it were easy, it wouldn't be Maddie.

Chapter Ten

Ivy

Once again, I make it through another day of classes. I spend the rest of the day successfully dodging Bennett. His thumb pulling at my mouth has filled me with more fantasies than I would like to admit. To say it took all my willpower not to bite the tip of his finger is an understatement. I'm so sexually confused and frustrated, I've barely paid attention to what is going on in classes. Thankfully, my lessons are more interactive, letting the students really direct their speed. I need to get my crap together. I can't live this way, daydreaming about his strong hands lifting me onto my desk and taking me right here in my room. Crossing my legs to relieve the ache in my core, I try to focus on anything else. I need to take a break from him. Quit this obsession before it becomes too big of a problem.

Jordyn stopped me in the hallway right after lunch and asked me to a party in a few weeks, which I honestly find a bit odd. She's never invited me to anything before. But her husband closed a big account at work, and they want to

celebrate with close friends and his colleagues. I guess I fit the close friends criteria. I may go. Growing and moving on, right?

I've been sitting outside the school, waiting for the shuttle for fifteen minutes. Sometimes if there isn't enough foot traffic, the shuttle won't offer rides since it's intended for tourists. I open my phone, scrolling through to find the rideshare app. Maybe there will be one in the area. After submitting the request, I stretch out my legs, pulling my latest read from my bag. After a few minutes of reading, squeaky brakes come to a stop in front of me. I'm not paying attention as I gather my things and stand, walking toward the vehicle, but when I look up, I see an all too familiar blue Chevy—with a very happy Bennett.

“Seriously. Can't you take a hint?” *I am desperately trying to avoid you.*

He looks down at his lap, laughing with a smug look on his face, as my phone chimes in my hand. Looking down, I read, **Your ride has arrived.**

“I'm your ride. You can cancel, but I'm the only ride in a sixty-minute window. Cid can't do the shuttle today, something about a bad batch of lobster for lunch.” He taps his thumb against the steering wheel, waiting for me to make a decision.

“Never mind, I'll walk.” I begin to cancel my route, aggravated by the universe's joke.

“To the campground? Really? Listen, it’s going to storm, and it’s a thirty-minute walk. Just get in,” he says, leaning over the bench seat to open the door for me.

Of course, that means he has my address now. Here I am, trying to distance myself from him, and I hand him where I live on a silver platter. Okay, universe, not necessary! He’s right. It’ll take me forever to walk, and I’d rather not do so in the rain, but being stuck in a truck with Bennett seems like a bad idea. When I think I’ve made my choice, a storm cloud floats over my head, casting a shadow over us. *Damn it.* Climbing into the truck, I inhale, and his scent pulls me into his orbit for a moment. A soft radio plays, and a photo of an older couple is clipped to his visor. The interior of his truck has dark-blue seats with a black carpet covering the floor, offering a glimpse at his taste. I slide onto the bench seat, noticing the lack of barrier between the driver and passenger. For a moment, my mind wanders with thoughts of Bennett sprawled out above me as I’m laid out on the bench, and the things we could do here. My hands run along the seat, feeling the cool smooth leather underneath.

The truck hasn’t moved since I got in. I look over to him, and his dark brows arch as he points past me.

“Seat belt,” he instructs. Two words. Two words spinning me further into this rabbit hole of emotions.

“Oh, right.” I stare at my hand, willing it to stop shaking long enough to grab the buckle, and as the metal clicks into place, the truck shifts from park.

The first few minutes are silent. You'd think it would be weird or awkward, but the quiet between us seems comfortable, strangely calming. I feel relaxed. The radio's volume increases, and my favorite song comes on. I close my eyes and listen, losing myself to the music.

“Are you looking, looking for something like me,

Knowing nothing comes with a guarantee?

Where are you?

I don't know you, but I love you and hate you all the same,

Willing my life to burst aflame.

Where are you?

Isn't it funny how fate works out?

Crossing paths and mixing realms, pushing us both into doubt?

I'm here. Standing, pacing for a sign its true,

Freeing my demons to be ready for you.

Where are you? Where are you?”

I release a sigh as the last few notes leave my mouth. Opening my eyes, I notice the stillness of the trees out my window. The truck has stopped moving, and the radio is silenced. When I pull my attention back to Bennett, his fingers are still on the volume control, eyes glued on me.

“Your voice ... Your voice is ...” He has trouble finding his words, stumbling over each one.

“I know. I know. Leave it for the professionals. I suck. I didn’t even realize I was singing. I’m sorry. I love that song.” I am so annoyed with myself, instantly regretting my carelessness.

“Yes, it was—” His words halt mid-sentence, like he wants to say more but isn’t sure how to continue.

I can’t bring myself to keep eye contact, so I turn my face slightly and stare out the front windshield, begging silently for the truck to start and for us to continue the short drive to the campground.

“Wait, what? You think that sounded bad?” he asks as if I’ve said the most absurd thing he’s ever heard.

“Of course it did. My father used to put in headphones so he didn’t have to listen to me. He would always scream ‘leave it to the professionals.’” I chuckle softly to lighten the mood.

“I ... He ... I don’t.” His stuttering makes me regret even opening my mouth. *Okay, it’s bad, I get it.*

“Your voice is beautiful. I could listen to it all day. I don’t understand how anyone can tell you otherwise.”

Did he say I sound good? My cheeks warm as I turn back to explore his face for dishonesty. His eyes are on me, and he’s giving me a slight smirk, his body turned to face me completely to give me his full attention. He means it.

“Why did you pull over? I didn’t even notice the car stopped.”

“You had my attention the second you started to sing. I was thinking of the safety of others.” The sly smile that appears on his face sucks the air completely out of the truck. It’s the kind that makes fairy tale princesses swoon and mothers tear up. The kind that could turn the heads of a stranger walking on the street. If I weren’t me, but a woman living in a world filled with happy endings and true love, I would let myself be sucked into his orbit. I would act on my attraction to him.

The thought alone has my body zoning into the temperature rising in the truck. It’s blazing in here. I swipe my hands down my thighs, my hands clammy, searching for a way to relieve the uncomfortable feeling brewing between us.

My eyes meet his again, and I feel at ease as he explores my face. How does he do that? Look at me like I am worth everything in the world, peeling me apart with one single glance. It’s so overwhelming. I can feel his soul forcing to meet mine, calling mine to join his. Here we are on the side of the highway in the silence, simply staring at one another. No distractions, nothing but us. My nipples pebble under my sweater, my top so tight, he’d easily be able to see them if he looked. I shift in my seat, rubbing my legs together to get relief from the ache between them. I’ve never responded to a man like this.

He seems to note the shift in energy, war battling in his eyes. He wants me, no question. He said it out loud on the day he collided into my life. It looks like it physically pains him to keep his distance. His attention drifts to the road briefly, then his eyes return to mine with a look I can’t quite decipher.

Sadness? Sympathy? It feels like he can see all my scars, all my anxieties. I wet my lips, raking my bottom lip between my teeth, and his eyes immediately dart to them. I turn my face away from him, closing my eyes to escape the need in his, exhaling and bringing my palms to my face. This isn't right. I need to get out of this truck. I was kidding myself thinking I could be in such close proximity to him. My resolve is wavering. I feel a shift in the truck as his body moves closer to mine, and he puts a gentle yet firm hand around my wrist and pulls it from my face.

“Why don't you want to be near me, Maddie?” His tender tone makes me question why I am fighting this so bad. But of course, I am fighting this. I can never be real with him. Doesn't he deserve at least that?

I drop my other hand to my thighs. “I ... I just ... I don't want to be.” I shift to face him. I'm making the decision now. When I get home, I'm requesting a new classroom, maybe even a new job. I can't risk it.

“Why don't you want to be? Why can't you stand being near me?” His body moves even closer, leaving only a few inches between us.

I could tell him I don't know. I could lie. Instead, I say nothing, adding to the stagnant pause in our own personal confinement. Rain drops begin to pelt the windshield and the roof of the truck, getting louder and faster, drowning out the world around us. The only sound aside from our quiet breathing. The world around us is no longer visible at this

point. That's a Maine storm for you. In twenty minutes, it could be gorgeous again. My hair starts to move as I see his fingers wrapping around a piece that fell out of my bun. It's such a small movement, but somehow it feels insanely intimate.

"Maddie." His voice is deeper, dripping with anticipation.

God, I wish he could say my real name. This is the first time Maddie has really sounded wrong. I worked so hard to accept the name as mine, but to hear him say my real name, to see it on his lips, would be earth-shattering. I don't say a word. I manage to swallow as his eyes follow my throat bob down and back up again.

He stares at me in challenge, as if already waiting for my words to contradict my body.

"I'm not interested," I affirm. My body betrays me instantly, leaning further into him.

His lips meet the shell of my ear, the warmth of his breath wrapping around my face and rolling down my neck.

"Liar." As the word leaves his mouth, his hand weaves into my hair at the base of my neck.

That one word has a shiver running down my spine. My brain is in a fog, blinding me from reality.

"Maddie ... I need to kiss you," he says as if he's starving and I'm the only fix to satiate his hunger. My brain short-circuits. His word choice isn't lost on me. *Need*. He needs to kiss me.

“I ... You ...” Letting out a shaking breath, I try again. “Me ... I ... can’t.” *Wow, that was painful.* Needing space from him, I move away, grabbing the door handle. I push the door open and slam it so forcefully, it could’ve come right off its hinges. I jump from the truck and start running to the guardrail a few feet ahead. I can’t do this. Feel this. He can’t show up in my life like a bulldozer and make me feel these things. I’m focusing on myself. On my career. I’m fine being alone. I want to be alone. I don’t need anyone!

My shaky hands grip the cool metal of the guardrail as the sound of a door slams behind me, and in an instant, I’m panicked. I prepare myself to hear tires speed off as Bennett gets back on the roadway, leaving me behind. I feel relief for one second before I remember my purse is still in his truck. “Shit!” I shout as I spin around and come face-to-face Bennett. I blink a few times to be sure he isn’t a figment of my imagination.

“You didn’t leave me behind,” I say, surprise coating my tone. The heat in my body returns, and the cold sting of the rain on my face does nothing to cool me off, drenching the both of us.

“Of course I didn’t. Did you really think I’d leave you here on the side of the road in the pouring rain?” he asks me with such disbelief, like he couldn’t imagine it.

Well, buddy, it isn’t the worst thing someone could do.

My clothes are soaked, my shirt clinging to me, hair matted to my head. I can feel the sting of my mascara running into my

eyes and down my face. I'm the picture of the mess of a woman on the inside and out. How poetic.

He, on the other hand, looks like a walking billboard. He could walk around like this all day, and no one would mind the trail of water and dirt left in his path.

He ignores the fact that I didn't answer. Stepping closer to me, hands in his pockets, he lifts his brow in challenge. "Tell me you don't want me to kiss you," he says as he takes one more step closer, eliminating almost all the space between us now.

My silence has him raising his hand to rub his thumb along my chin, lifting my face to look at him. I can't answer him. I give my head the briefest shake no.

"*Tell* me you don't want me to kiss you." His eyes drop from mine to my neck as I swallow the thickness down. There's nowhere for me to go. I can't possibly push myself anymore into the guardrail behind me without folding myself into it.

"Tell. Me. You. Don't. Want. Me. To. Kiss. You." His punctuation on each word makes sure I hear every one of them.

Our breathing syncs up, pushing our chests together, the smallest of connection with each inhale.

I can't do this. *Say it, Ivy. Say no.* The words fight to escape, but no matter how hard I try to push, they won't budge.

If I'm being honest, I do want him to kiss me. I'm not sure how I do it, but as the words clog my throat, I force my feet to move and push past him. The loss of his body heat sends shivers down my spine. When I get to his truck, I keep my back to him so he can't search for the lie on my face. "I'm soaked, and I am freezing. I wanna go." It is not a total lie, but I'm far from cold. The opposite of chilly. I am an electrical fire, burning despite the pouring rain.

Without warning, I'm spun around, my back flat against the passenger door of his truck. Bennett's right arm wraps around my waist, while the other hovers above my head on the truck. His large frame towers over me. I feel so small in his arms.

"Say it." How can he be so dominant and still so gentle? He waits for me to answer.

"I can't," I pant.

"Why not? It's simple. Just say the words." He leans forward, and I feel the warmth of his mouth close to my lips. If I darted my tongue out, I could taste him. Less than an inch and my mouth would be on his. With each inhale, I feel my body betraying me, swaying closer to his.

"No." The word barely escapes my lips in a weak whisper.

Bennett's hand rises to my face, and his rough fingers push a fallen strand of hair behind my ear. "No, what? No, you won't say it?" His body leans closer, and he rubs the tip of his nose against the ridge of mine. His hand travels to the back of my neck and my head tilts. He is so close, I can almost feel the warmth escape his mouth against mine, such a contrast from

the cold air surrounding us. He's waiting for me to give him an answer. An answer I know I'm ready for.

"Please," he begs.

The plea breaks me. Simple, one word tears through my defenses. I'm instantly ready to expose myself to him. I can take one kiss, and I'll store it away in a box in my memory.

"I want ..." Before I can finish, his lips crash into mine, controlling my mouth with his. The kiss is deep and eager, consuming my every thought. His left hand wraps in my hair at the base of my neck, pulling me closer to him. He has a tight grip, though not enough to hurt me, as if he needs to hold me in place to ground him. Just enough. *God, yes.* It's enough to keep me where he wants me. His right arm pulls my body into his, impossibly closer, as a growl leaves his chest, and my body responds. I no longer have a say over my body's reaction, proving me a liar as every minute passes. I want everything he's willing to give me.

This is more than the movies, more than the girl crushes in teen magazines. This is irrevocably, irresistibly a creation of another world. One I will escape too over and over again. My hands move to his neck as I feast just as hard on his lips. The only taste I ever want again will be him. His tongue slips into my mouth as he takes control and explores me. I can't explain this kiss. A whimper leaves my throat, and he pushes his knee between my legs, rubbing me through my jeans. My hips move on instinct, and I buck my hips, grinding against him. His right hand lowers, palming my ass, and he's now in

control, rocking my hips and pushing me firmly against his leg.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful.” He pulls from the kiss and trails kisses from my mouth to the spot below my ear, tilting my head with his other hand to gain easier access. His strong hands rock my hips harder, his repetition becoming quicker. I can feel the well-known pressure building.

“Bennett,” I say, gasping for air.

“Bennett, I can’t!” I cry as my toes curl and my fist grips tighter in his hair, as if it’s the only lifeline tethering me to him. I feel the building sensations so close to peaking, sitting on the ledge, waiting to fall. Can I do this? Come like this? I’ve only ever made myself come. I’ve tried with men; they are too self-involved. Too selfish, seeking their own release. I never feel connected enough. The ache pulsing through me is borderline painful as my body begs for release. I refuse to ask him for it. A bolt of energy surges through me as he reads my body, angling his leg higher. The move sends a spike of adrenaline through me. He releases my hair and moves his arm across my chest, pinning me to the truck. His hand slips into my top and fists my breast. The other hand releases my weight on his legs while his hand moves to my front and his fingers flatten against my core from outside my leggings. His skilled hand is right where I need him. The perfect circles. Perfect pressure.

“Oh my God!” The cry escapes me without permission. He rolls my nipple between his fingers, and my head falls back

onto the truck.

“Yes, beautiful. Come on, Maddie, let go. Let go for me. I want to see you come.” With that command, I squeeze my eyes shut, my legs stiffen, back arching, and a silent scream gets thrown into the universe. Bright white flashes behind my lids, my body shaking with release. He slows his fingers as I ride out my orgasm. His lips meet mine again, only this time much slower, more tender, a complete contrast to our kiss from before. His heavy pants are harsh against my mouth.

“Fuck, you are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” Bennett pulls his hand from my top and places it on my cheek as his forehead rests on mine. Minutes go by before our breathing has leveled. My eyes open before his, and I look at him. I try to memorize him while I can, before he notices: the scar on his left eyelid and brow, the fullness of his lips swollen from our contact, long lashes over his cheeks. He’s smiling, breathing heavily. He looks so ... happy. Awareness slams into me with so much force, I feel my relaxed body turn to stone. What did I do? How did I let this happen?

He straightens and pulls me off the door. My legs are shaky, unsteady. The passenger door opens, and he waits for me to get in.

“Let’s get you to your destination.” He offers a genuine smile as I pull myself up into the truck.

He hasn’t said anything to me since we got back inside. I can’t believe I orgasmed on his leg, dry humping in the middle of a public road, like a couple of teenagers. All reason out the

window. I wonder what he's thinking right now. Does he think that he'll be getting some later? That I owe him? That he'll be on his way to my bed next? That's simply not going to happen. That back there, that was a mistake. A hot, earth-shattering mistake. I don't think I've ever felt that connected to someone in my life. I could become addicted to him if I allowed myself to.

“Okay, so what are we doing here?” He drums his fingers on the steering wheel.

Looking up, I see we're at the entrance of the campground. I didn't even realize we'd arrived. Now I need to think of a way to ditch him. Should be easy, right?

“I'm grabbing a paycheck,” I quickly reply. A lie that holds some truth is easier to tell. I ran away from home, living under a fake name ... It works.

“Okay, want me to wait while you get your check? Then I can bring you home?” His hand reaches out, and he laces his fingers in mine.

“No!” I shout and pull my hand away. Realizing I'd overreacted, I clear my throat and bring my voice back to normal level. “Um, thanks for the ride. I'm good. I'll uh ...” I look past him while I think about what else to say. “... see you around, maybe.”

I reach for the door handle, and the sound of the truck locks has my attention returning to Bennett. My body turns lightning fast to face him. “What are you doing?! Listen, I'm sorry for that back there. It's not like me, and I'm not in the business of

returning favors. I need to go. Let me out.” *Great job, Ivy.*
Right to the point.

Shaking his head, he sighs. “Returning favors? Really? I’m not even going to try to unpack that comment. Why are you here, Maddie? I know you aren’t being honest. I can tell.” His pointed look has my defenses coming back.

What’s he care why I am here? It’s not his business.

“Well, you don’t know me, so even if I was lying, it’s not really your business,” I mumble, not meeting his eyes. He stays silent, which grates at my nerves. He really isn’t going to let me out if I don’t tell him? Fine.

“Ugh, I live here, okay? Now can you unlock the doors?” Remembering I can flip the lock myself, I reach for it.

“You live here,” he says. It’s a statement, not a question.

“That is what I said, isn’t it?” Pushing the unlock button, I open the door and let myself out. I turn to face him, getting my bag off the seat floor. “I think you may be hard of hearing. Yes, I live here.”

He laughs and surges forward across the seat, swooping low and covering my mouth with his. Both hands capture my face. His chuckle breaks the kiss. “Your stubbornness is what I find most attractive about you.” He winks like the cocky fucker he is.

I feel the sting on my hand before I even know what I am doing, as my palm meets the side of his face. Is it rational? No. My brain is going haywire. It was a reaction to make him snap

away from me as fast as possible. Racing from the truck, I make it halfway down the driveway before I'm falling forward, stumbling. My foot loops through the strap of my bag, tripping me. Thankfully after two half hops, I correct my fight against gravity. Great, this is totally the time for my clumsiness to kick in. Pulling the strap from around my foot, I continue up the path at a quickened pace.

“What the hell was that for?” His body is racing in front of mine, and he's confronting me with a confused look.

What was that for? I don't know. I need to get the hell away from him before something else happens. Before I slip and tell him everything. Or before he confirms my assumptions that everyone is the same. That he will sweep me off my feet and toss me when he's done, be another user. Pretender. Forcing niceties to get something in return. If he thinks one moment of weakness on my behalf entitles him to more, it doesn't.

“I don't have time for this. I need to go. Please, just leave.” Pushing past him, I don't get very far before he is in front of me again, walking backwards.

“Maddie, what did I do? What did I say that made you want to slap me?”

“You! Looking for something I can't give you! You think I owe you something now, right? I didn't ask for that back there!” Digging through my bag, I find cash and throw it in his face. Turning my back to him, I walk in the complete opposite direction of where I need to go. Whatever I need to do to put

space between us. *Take the rideshare fee and walk away already.*

“Why the fuck would I take your money?” I don’t stop to answer him. “Seriously? I know we don’t know each other, but it’s not like I haven’t tried every chance I get,” he continues, clearly frustrated.

Spinning around, I look him dead in the eyes. “Then take the hint. Leave me alone.” We stand here staring at each other for a beat, neither of us saying anything. Well, this is a spectrum of events. I’ve been an embarrassing freak since I met him, then he gives me a mind-blowing orgasm, just for me to slap him in the face. Seems about right. He probably thinks I am a nutcase. Good. More incentive to stay clear of me.

He speaks first. “So where are you going?”

“Home,” I say, taking a step back.

“Then why aren’t you walking to the house?” he asks, pointing at the seasonal home to the left of us. Of course. The garage doesn’t look like an apartment. This could work in my favor.

“I have to grab a few things from the garage. Thanks for the ride. You can go now.”

He extends his hand, offering my cash back. “I can’t take this. Keep it. It was a pleasure riding with you.”

“Yea, it was a pleasure riding on you, too.” *Shit.* “With you! It was a pleasure riding with you, too!” My chest is warm, and

I feel the flush of embarrassment creeping up my neck. *Get moving, Ivy. That's enough embarrassment for today.*

He shakes his head while a light chuckle leaves him. I watch his back as he makes it to the driver's side of his truck, his hand raising with a slight wave. "See you around, Maddie."

No, you won't, Bennett. I'm about to avoid you like the plague.

Chapter Eleven

Bennett

I wait in the parking lot of the campground in a battle of wills, soaking wet, for almost a half hour. I want to ask her more. Spend more time with her. It's clear she doesn't want that. So, I sit here replaying today over and over. One minute she's unraveling on my knee, the next she's slapping me. Her emotional whiplash confuses me at every turn, but I can see the only time she lashes out is when she feels out of control. Fuck, she makes *me* feel out of control. Feeling her turn into putty in my arms is hands down the best feeling I've ever experienced. Driving now, I can't stop thinking of the way she smells, like rain and lavender. Her mouth is so fucking sweet, I'd bottle it if given the chance.

When she begged me, said my name like I was the only thing keeping her here on the ground, I had to watch her come undone. I read her body and spoke the language. It took everything I had not to push my hand into her leggings and feel her warm pussy pulsing against my fingers. But I know I need to take this slow—for her. She needs me to remain in

control. But I hadn't been willing to give up the opportunity to make her come. Seeing her eyes shut and all her muscles tighten nearly made me blow a load in my pants. Shit, it was the hottest thing I've seen.

I've made a lot of women come, but nothing compares to what Maddie brought forward. It almost makes me wonder if women before her ever truly let go or teetered on the edge, thinking it was the peak. What I would give to taste her cream on my tongue. I need more. I need to break down those walls she is hell bent on keeping in place. She was going to run, make excuse after excuse if I let her. I watched her planning, her search for words as she made it back to my truck soaking wet, each choice strategically checked off.

A knock on my window brings me back to reality. I didn't even realize I was back at Bake Away already. I drove on autopilot the whole way back. Bec stands outside my window, hands on her hips, offering me a questioning look. I open my door as she steps back.

"Hey, stranger, whatcha' doing in there?" The concern on her face isn't hidden, but her tone is neutral, knowing I don't need her to question everything I do.

"Sorry, I was in my head. How was business today?" I ask, climbing out of my truck. Thankfully, the ride from the campground was enough to partially deflate the friend in my pants. Do not want to have to explain that one.

"Oh, it was good. I met someone today" she says, wiggling her brows. Bec is a magnet for hot chicks; it's honestly the

reason I thought she called Maddie off limits.

“How the hell do you keep finding available women in this small-ass town?” I ask as we walk through the front door of Bake Away. I hold the door open for her as she turns and walks backwards into the dining area.

“It’s easy really. Women take one look at me and instantly question their sexuality.” The humor in her voice isn’t only truthful, it’s confident. Bec is beautiful, dark features and large eyes. All of her friends describe her to be sexy in a dominant way, yet her feminine side and sweet side will put you under her trance. I’ve seen it happen time and time again. She is often mistaken for Ashley Graham when traveling.

“So, tell me about your day,” she demands. “I can tell by your face something is going on, so spill.”

“It was good. Day flew by. Drove Maddie home. Hey, did you know she lives at the campground?”

“No, I didn’t know that. Wonder why. Maybe it’s temporary till the season’s over in October and local housing is free of tourists.” Bec shrugs as she locks the front door and turns off the open sign. I step ahead of her and start to put the bar stools on the bistro tables, so the floors can be cleaned tomorrow morning.

“I thought it was odd, too. How much do you know about Maddie?” I try to keep my voice calm, but if anyone can tell I am being anything but, it’s Bec.

She gives me a suspicious look. “Why, Bennett? You can’t make her your next quick lay. She’s a sweet girl. She comes in almost every day. Well, she did until recently.” She looks at me accusingly. “Maddie is always sweet, tips us well. I do not want to lose a good customer, especially if she’s not looking for a drive thru happy meal special.”

“Okay, you did not call my sexual encounters fast, easy, and kid-sized.” ‘Cause that couldn’t be further from the truth. I take my time and use my God-given talents to make a woman happy. So, I’ll take the happy part from that rude ass comment as a win. “I like her, Bec. I really like her. She intrigues me, but I get there is something she’s hiding. I’m trying to figure her out.”

“Yeah ... I know what you mean. She doesn’t ever really share anything personal, well, except for her coconut allergy.” She rests her chin in her hand, leaning against the dessert case like she’s thinking. “Her response the other morning was a bit odd, too. I think she had something happen to her, but we both know the past is the past. Unless she wants to share with us, we are not going to get it out of her. Look at all the people we’ve pushed away over the years.” She straightens back up, turning off the rest of the lights.

“I know, Bec, but I am telling you, she’s different. I feel something when I’m near her. I don’t want to push her away or scare her, but the thought of not seeing her feels wrong. I know it sounds so fucking cheesy. I can’t really explain it. I ... I want to know her. Even if she never wants me back, I’ve got this urge to know her.” I grab her purse off the counter and

hand it to her as she hangs her apron on the hook by the back door.

“Bennett James Harrison! That’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard you say! If I wasn’t your sister, I’d be swooning like half the town! Speaking of that, this isn’t a challenge for you, right? Thrill of the chase? She really is the first person of the female species who hasn’t fallen victim to the charm.” Batting her eyes to bring the point home, she grins at me.

“We had a moment in the truck. I know she’s attracted to me. It’s not about that. I need to know her. Keep her close. Safe.” As the words leave my mouth, I know they are nothing but the truth.

“Okay, whelp, then operation Maddie is a go!” she exclaims as the door closes behind us and she sets the alarm code.

“Operation Maddie? Really?” Shaking my head, I wait for her to step in front of me to the path that leads to our house behind the bakery.

“What? It’s always more fun when you give it a name.” She shakes her head when I remain silent. “Okay, Operation Stranger No More?” I offer her nothing, staring at her blankly. This is the strangest thing ever. “Come on, Bennett, help me out here,” she shoots at me, exhausted from my lack of enthusiasm.

“Operation She’s Already Home.” I sigh, giving into Bec. It fits. She keeps talking about leaving, moving, or pulling away. I guess I should say whispers, not realizing she’s talking out

loud. I want her to know she's safe here, and she's already home. There are people who care about her here.

“Well, you suck. How'd you pull that out of your butt, your turd muffin,” she says, punching my arm.

I give her an offended look, gasping and holding my chest. “Really, name calling? I did what you wanted!”

“Yeah, but you're annoying 'cause you're so good at it. Okay, so I have a good idea. Since we now know someone at the campground, we can introduce a product share of sorts. It's a small tourist town. They'd benefit if we can display their brochures, postcards, and magnets here. We'll offer some pre-wrapped sweets and brochures to them. It's a win-win. We exchange info with another local business while keeping an eye on our favorite girl.” She says it with such excitement as we walk up the front steps of the house.

“And you call me a genius!” I kiss her cheek as she opens the front door, and I scoot in front of her to get to the shower first.

“Um, to be clear, I never once called you a genius!” she shouts after me, chuckling. Walking through the kitchen to the hall leading to our bedrooms, I bound the stairs two at a time. Maddie will come around. One day.

Chapter Twelve

Ivy

Bennett has been in the parking lot for almost a half hour. I wonder what he's thinking? Why does he feel the need to wait outside the building? Does he have more to say? Is he hoping I'll leave so he can follow me? I'm being paranoid. He probably needs a break from the chaotic whiplash of emotions.

My phone rings. It's the same restricted number that's been calling me for the last week. This needs to stop. I answer but don't say a word, waiting to see if the person will hang up or an auto recording will play something about my car's extended warranty.

"It's me." A deep voice speaks over the line. I don't need it spelled out for me. His voice is clear in my nightmares. The last person I expect it to be is on the other line: Arty. My high school sweetheart turned into a demon in disguise. He knows exactly how Daddy trained me, and he played me well. I accepted all the lies and false promises. I thought we had it all. Thought I'd marry him one day. I was delusional, stuck in a false reality, not knowing any better. It was all a lie. He wanted

me for his own needs, not to grow a life with me. Arty and my father shaped me into the perfect daughter and wife. I was a pawn in their game.

“You can’t call me. How’d you get this number?” I look around the store as if he is here. “Arty, you need to leave me alone. I’m not kidding. I’ll call the police. The restraining order I took out against you should’ve been a clue. I don’t want to speak to you . You can’t contact me,” I whisper-shout, though I’m not sure why. No one can hear me.

“I know,” he says in defeat. “I know I’m not supposed to contact you. But I want to see you. I got your phone number from your dad. He called the phone company and they said you changed your number. He gave it to me. I’m worried about you.”

He’s lying. I took an old phone. I’m not on Dad’s plan anymore. I even used a different phone company. Arty has had a way to contact me this whole time. Fear seeps into my veins at the realization. The restraining order ran out last week. It’s no longer enforceable. I had hoped he’d be too dumb to realize it. Looks like Daddy Dearest waited for the perfect timing.
Asshole.

And Arty’s worried about me? Right. He was never worried about me. *Ivy, you need to be sure you come to school looking like a queen. It’s our reputation. You can’t eat this. Come on, Ivy, you can’t do that. All the girls let their boyfriends do this to them, Ivy. It’s normal.* I never saw the abuse before. A therapist I saw a few years back told me you never truly know

the dysfunction till you get out. It's almost like introducing a rehabbed animal to the wild: caged and abused, not really knowing how to thrive in freedom. Well, I figured it out. I swipe my hand over my face in frustration. "Leave me alone," was the only response I gave him.

I'm about to end the call when he shouts, "WAIT!" I don't know why I grant his request. Maybe it's habit or curiosity—to find out how much he knows. Or maybe I have this delusion he could be different. That all of it would be different.

"I also have to ask a favor." Clearing his throat, he continues, "I'm starting a new job and they do background checks. I really need you to write a statement that it was a misunderstanding of dumb teens being stupid. It's the only record I have, and I need this job, baby. It could launch my career."

Bile scorches my throat, but I swallow it back. I am not his *baby*. There is more to this. I know it. "Leave me alone," I repeat.

Then, as quick as his tender voice filled the phone, his facade drops. "No." Venom spews through the phone. It appears the monster can only be contained in small increments.

"Why do you have to be such a fucking bitch? Do you want to ruin my life? All because of a misunderstanding? I would never do this to you!"

His fury has changed the air around me. The danger lurking. I press the panic down. He doesn't know where I am. If he did,

he would be confronting me in person. Without another word, I disconnect the call. *Fuck this phone*. If they can figure out the number, I'm sure they can trace the call. I step out of the shop and chuck the phone at a large rock, watching it crack and shatter in half

My anxiety is at an all-time high. I can't seem to shake this feeling I am being watched, but I return to the check-in counter at the shop. It's slow tonight, as expected in the off-season. Only a few seasonal campers are here, and unless they forgot to pack something, they don't really need to shop. I should be able to close in a few hours. Looking up from the counter, I can see the beach and people playing. A small window opens to the sidewalk for those who don't need to come into the shop. Windows also look out to the parking lot so I can see people pulling in. This is the reason I enjoy being here. Nothing can take me by surprise. I have a view of every entry and exit. Nothing is unexpected; all is visual. I'm grateful for this. Because when I don't feel safe, I offer to work more hours so I can have a sense of security. I know that I can take care of myself. I just prefer to be prepared.

"Hey, it's slow. Why don't you head home for the night?" I jump in surprise, zoned out and not noticing Mr. Fritz standing in front of the counter. So much for being aware of everything. "I can close. Our cells are posted on the door if anyone needs anything, which they won't," he finishes. I can't really argue with him. Technically, he is the boss. I nod and grab my bag to head home to my apartment.

Exiting the back door, I see a familiar truck pulling into the campground. Looking quickly to the left, then the right, I leap behind the bushes separating the sidewalk and parking lot. Why is he here? I really don't understand how many more times I need to explain there is nothing else I want but to be far, far away from him. Peering around the shrubs, I see a small frame exiting the vehicle. Rebecca pulls a bag out of the truck with her. Whelp, this is awkward. I could either continue to hide or walk out. She will see, clear as day, that I was trying to fit behind this shrubbery like a coward. So, my mind convinces me that staying is the best option. I sit and wait, turning to face the water now. I will relax here for a few and see if she's left.

"It's quite odd to watch someone dive bomb into shrubs half her size, you know that?" An amused Rebecca stands above me. Busted. Looking up at her, we both burst into hysterical laughter. Tears rush down my face as she takes a seat next to me. We don't talk for a few minutes, laughing and staring out at the water. Once we have a moment to compose ourselves, I speak first. "Sorry, I thought you were someone else."

"Doesn't take a rocket scientist to know who you mean, Maddie. He told me he drove you home. I almost didn't believe him till he talked about this place. We've been in this town for a while and never contacted the owners. He's impressed with how nice it is. We thought we could exchange cards and fliers, maybe some merchandise, and start promoting each other." That is a really good idea: exposure for them both. This place is so tucked back, on the outskirts of

town, it's hard to remember there are other sites to see just a dirt road away. They both deserve the business.

“Yea, that is actually a good idea. I am sure the Fritzes will be all for it. They are always looking for small businesses to promote. Want me to walk you over to talk to them?”

“No, that's okay. I'll make my way over there in a sec.” She reaches into her bag and hands me a full bag of coffee. I smirk. Goodbye burnt tar, as she calls it. Shaking my head, I take the bag from her and nod. “Thank you. What do I owe you?” This is too nice.

“Shut up, would you? If I wanted to charge you, I would've waited till you stopped in again and offered it to you like I do all my customers. I'd like to be friends. Friends do nice things for each other.” There's the F word again. So, I play dumb.

“Aren't we already friends?” I ask.

She turns her head to me, sighing. “Not quick acquaintance, friends, Maddie. Authentic, close, and true friends.”

I don't know how to really do that. Authenticity isn't something that comes naturally. She deserves someone who can be honest with her, who can create a friendship based on truth. She doesn't even know my real name. We can't be friends. I don't know her well, but I know she deserves more than I can give her.

“I'm moving,” is all I can say back. I'm still facing forward, not wanting to make eye contact with her as the lie slips out.

Though, with the recent phone call, disappearing again doesn't seem like such a bad idea.

“You know, I tend to read people pretty easily. But I can't seem to figure you out. You have this look in your eyes like you're running and looking for permanency at the same time. How can you look so secure and so confused and lost with one glance? What do you want, Maddie?” Her question brings even more heartache. She pays attention. Isn't that the million-dollar question. *What do I want?* I know I want stability. I know I want safety. I know I want a life that belongs solely to me. No hiding. Where people know my name. Where they know that I hate sports and will only show up for the food. Where they know I hate clutter but will leave clothes in every room of my house. I know what I want. I know I can't have it. Not while I wonder if Daddy Dearest will show his face. I learned to listen through silence. He's still in control; he'd always been in control. How could my eyes be wide and unopened? Shifting uncomfortably, I say, “Sometimes the things we want aren't the things we can have. I've let go of my need for perfection. For life to be aligned with my expectations. Sometimes accepting reality is all we will ever have control over.” I choose not to peek in her direction.

Rebecca turns and looks me right in the eye, pursing her lips. “You act as if you have no free will. Listen, Maddie. When we think we are safe, settled, that's when change finds us.”

That hits me like a punch in the gut. Settled? I hadn't settled for anything. This is what life handed to me. I did what I

needed to. I could've settled and endured the torture back in Chicago. I could've settled and married Arty. I left, changed. She had no idea the lengths I've gone to get myself out from their power. "How dare you even attempt to judge me; you know nothing about me. I am not settling. I am living my life with what I've been given, okay? Your assumptions can be placed elsewhere. Probably not the most tasteful to ask someone to be a friend and then turn around and insult them." My heart hurts. Literally hurts in my chest.

"I am not trying to insult you. I'm trying to get to know you." She stands and turns to head to the shop, pausing in front of me. "At some point, you are going to have to let someone in." With that, she leaves me on the sidewalk. Wrapping my arms around my legs, I rest my chin on my knees, watching the ocean. Wishing I could pretend to be somewhere else. In a place I can let those around me know who I am.

I sit for a while, trying not to obsess over my loneliness. The air around me is getting colder with the sun almost fully gone. The water is so peaceful. You can barely see where the water ends and the sky begins. It is as still as glass, as if I could step and walk right across it to the sunset in the distance. Twisting my back, I prepare to stand and notice the coffee bag Bec left sitting next to me. Grabbing it, I head to my loft, feeling like I lost two people I never really had to begin with.



It's been a little over two weeks since I've been at Bake Away or seen Bennett. I've been holding my classes in the auditorium to avoid him. I know it's childish, but I need time to think. To process. It's Friday, and I am looking forward to the weekend. I woke up this morning with determination, ready to execute my plan. After my conversation with Rebecca, I feel like such crap. She's right. I do need to let someone in. While I can't give her all my secrets, I can still be a friend. Maybe if I have that, I won't always be preparing to leave. I'll feel like I have support. But if Bec knows there will always be a chance I'll disappear, then it won't be such a shock, right? I need to get a new phone first. I've been putting it off, and when the school tried calling me last week to remind me about updating my licensing paperwork, they weren't pleased they couldn't reach me. Of course, that morning I got a visit from Principal Joyce, scolding me for not having a reliable form of communication.

When I step out of my apartment in my knee-length summer dress, the sun feels warm against my skin. This dress is one of my favorites, navy with white flowers. The Fritz boys are playing fetch with Tripp. Their giggling becomes louder when Tripp sees me and bounds in my direction. Ready to leap, I leap to the left before he can reach me. We dodge each other back and forth before I give in and let him speed around my legs with his tail wagging wildly. I laugh as he leaps up, trying to lick my face, but I push him down. Out of breath, I wave to the boys and keep walking.

When I enter the store, Mrs. Fritz is behind the counter, looking at a gossip magazine that looks to be ten years old.

“Good morning, Mrs. Fritz,” I greet as I approach the counter. “Random question, do we have any minute phones left? I know Mr. Fritz wanted to clear the inventory since no one buys them anymore, but my phone broke last night.” I pull at the old tape attaching the bait menu to the counter and reach for the new tape next to the register to secure it.

“Hmm, let me check. And stop it, you aren’t on the clock,” she scolds, swatting my hand away. “Silly to say, never thought a young girl like you wouldn’t want a smartphone. How will you survive without checking your social media?” she jokes as she enters the back storage room.

“Yeah, I’m not a fan of social media. I prefer real life,” I half joke. I hated social media even before I had a reason to hide. Being able to hide behind a screen perpetuates hate. There is rustling and drawers opening and closing in the back, then she reappears with a package in hand.

“Here you go, dear. Also, can you take these brochures to your friend Rebecca for me? She was here a while ago now, but we weren’t sure where the overflow was. Found it while I was back there.”

“Oh yes, I was actually going to head there shortly. I can take them.” Grabbing the box from Mrs. Fritz, I wave goodbye and start on my walk to the coffee shop. Popping my headphones in, I que up my showtune playlist. Listening to my

mom's favorite songs brings me closer to her. She always gave me courage and strength. I could use that today.

Approaching Bake Away about half an hour later, I take a breath before walking in. Do I play this all business-like or apologize? Before I have a chance to solve my internal debate, a car catches my attention. The red car. This is a small town, but I've been here for almost a year, and I've never seen that car. The first time was the day Bennett was helping me with my head in the parking lot. I wonder who it belongs to? Paranoia starts to get the best of me, but it could be a college student. I shake it off the uneasy feeling in my gut and walk through Bake Away's entrance.

My stomach instantly grumbles as the smell of rich chocolate and sugar envelopes me. Gosh, I miss this smell. Jordyn is perched on a bistro table, absentmindedly stirring her coffee. When she hears the chime of the door, she sees me enter and almost seems disappointed. With a small wave, I walk over. "Are you okay, Jordyn?"

"Oh yea, I'm expecting someone. He said he'd meet me here, and he's ten minutes late. He probably got lost or something," she replies. It's unlikely. This town has one traffic light. If he's late, he's either got a terrible excuse or he isn't coming.

"Alright, well, I am sure there is a good reason," I say reassuringly. I don't need to bog her down with my cynical world view. I wonder who she's meeting. Maybe her husband?

Why wouldn't she say that? Instead, she said meeting *someone*. *Not everyone is as sinister as you think, Ivy.*

Rebecca must be in the back because I don't see her. I approach Ashely at the counter and ask if Rebecca is busy, and Ashley disappears for a moment. As fast as Ashely is gone, Rebecca comes through the swinging kitchen door. If she is upset with me from the last time we talked, she doesn't show it. Her smile is as warm as it is every other morning.

"Hey, Maddie! What's up?" Bec greets me.

Feeling awkward, I shift back and forth on my feet. "The Fritzes wanted me to bring these. They said they didn't have them ready last time when you stopped in." I hand over the box. "And ... I wanted to say sorry for the last time we saw each other. It was *a* day, and I shouldn't have bitten your head off."

She smiles. "Water under the bridge, hun. We all have our days."

My nerves center, and my anxiety melts right off me. My chest loosens, and I let out a breath, grateful that she isn't upset.

"Bennett is in the back about to head to Atlantic. Want a ride? I'm sure he won't mind," she asks.

It's as if her question is as simple as asking if I want sugar in my coffee. My shoulders tense, anxiousness returning. "No, I'm good. I could use the exercise," I reply. It's a lie. I hate exercise, and I already walked all the way here, but I can't get

in the car with him. I can only handle one step at a time, one person at a time. I look around, fearing Bennett will pop out and insist on a ride. I order my coffee and two donuts to go, saying my goodbyes to Rebecca and Jordyn.

Chapter Thirteen

Bennett

Watching Maddie from afar has proven to be a tad difficult. She's avoiding me, spending the last couple weeks teaching in the auditorium. Not that I blame her. As the weeks have gone by, I've noticed small things about her. In the brief moments I catch her in the hall, her attention is always on high alert. She'll peek through any doorway before walking through it. She watches people before approaching, as if she is building the courage to have a conversation. She appears to remind herself to smile, wave, or simply say good morning. To anyone else, she would be a sweet, funny, friendly person, which, of course, she is. But there is more to her. She leaves Gregory dinner to take home. I've seen her pick up garbage as she walks. If she hears a conversation of bullying, she intervenes with kindness. This morning, I watched her approach two tenth graders arguing over something trivial. She asked them both to close their eyes and walk her through their conflict. Dissect each of their viewpoints to each other. At the end of the conversation, both girls were smiling and hugging each other. She has a way of getting into your mind and making you

believe all will be okay. How can she be so caring to everyone else, yet keep herself in isolation from that same human connection?

Every sixth period this week, I've sat quietly in the back of her class, watching her teach and lead her students. You can tell they respect her. She speaks to them with humility and kindness. There is no power struggle, no superiority, only pure compassion. Today, she wears her hair down, and it falls to her mid-back in soft waves. She rarely has her hair down, so it's the first time I've seen how long it is. She has her hair swept over her left shoulder and a face of light makeup.

Her laugh reverberates through the auditorium like music to my ears. I've been hoping she would sing in class one day. Though, after her reaction in my truck, I'm sure she's too shy. Directing the students to act out a scene, she steps stage left to watch. One of the students stutters and chokes on his lines, and the class begins to laugh. Instantly, they quiet with the raise of her hand, and she walks to center stage. No yelling, no scolding. All she had to do was hold up her hand. Maddie walks up to him, telling him to play into his mistake. "It adds character," she says, making all the students laugh. She tells them all to own the mistake, that the only people who will know it happened are the people in the cast. The audience won't know, so keep going, use it as power within the role. It will make the character more relatable, closer to the real world, pulling the watchers deeper into the story. She's not wrong. She steps off stage again as he begins his lines a second time. He starts to stumble over the words again, but

this time, instead of a red-faced embarrassed boy, he straightens his shoulders and turns his mistake into a laughable moment for everyone. Remarkable.

“She’s one amazing educator, isn’t she?” A presence lurks over me as a man takes the seat next to me. I don’t recognize him, but he smirks and offers me an extended hand.

“Sorry, Bertram, I’m here to evaluate the school for funding. I work for the board. I’ve observed Ms. Brighton for a couple of weeks. She’s great with the kids.” His voice seems to be a tad irritated, though I am not sure why. His tone completely contradicts what he’s saying.

“Oh yes, she absolutely is. I’m Bennett. Bennett Harrison, algebra teacher. I haven’t seen you before. Will you be observing my class as well?” I eye him cautiously. Something seems off about this guy.

“Yes, sometime this week, I will likely sit in.” He offers a look I can’t quite decipher. He turns back and watches Maddie. Something about him gives me a bad feeling, but I’ve been irrationally crazy about this woman I barely know. So honestly, maybe I’m the creep.

“Do you know Ms. Brighton personally?” he questions without looking at me.

“Not really, our classrooms are in the same hallway, so we see each other from time to time. I recently moved to town, so I’m still settling in,” I reply, keeping it brief.

“Hmm, well keep in mind there are unwritten rules against teachers fraternizing with each other. I’d steer clear from her if I were you,” he sternly remarks. The vein in his neck starts to pulse quickly, as if the idea of Maddie and me would set him clear into rage. Who the fuck is this guy?

“Well, I don’t know Ms. Brighton all that well, but I can honestly tell you even if I were interested, there would be nothing to come of it if the feeling isn’t mutual. She is a strong independent woman and won’t give anyone the time of day if she doesn’t want to.” This got his attention. His eyes meet mine in a challenge, as if he disagrees with every word I say. “I’m sorry, Mr. Bertram, did I say something you disagree with?” I’m not sorry. Not one bit. He doesn’t know me, or Maddie.

“Nope. I want to make sure teachers know their roles. Focus on your students Mr. Harrison. I’ll see you next week.” Without another word, he stands and leaves the auditorium, but not without one more look back at the stage. I should go, too, before my cover is blown. I can’t seem to take my eyes off her though. When the final bell rings and the students begin to pack up their stuff, I hear Maddie start to address them, “Alright, everyone have a great rest of the day and remember—” Before she can finish, the students intervene. “—challenge yourself to be better, do better, and inspire others so they can too.” She smiles and waves goodbye, and just like that, auditorium is empty. It’s me and my thoughts now, repeating her final words in my head.

“Challenge yourself to be better, do better, and inspire others so they can too.”

After the lights go out, I leave the auditorium and head out to the parking lot and my truck. The hallways are empty, the final rush of students speed walking to their bus or cars can be heard ahead of me, and I follow them. The days seem long without talking to Maddie, but she needs to come to me when she is ready.

Thankfully with the week over, I can put my attention to helping Bec with the bakery. She’s decided to remodel the back wall, so it’s going to be a long weekend. Turning out of the parking lot, I see Maddie walking to the shuttle stop. To keep myself from spinning my steering wheel in her direction, I pull my eyes from her. When I look forward, I see the red Camaro parked on the street, the same one from a few weeks ago. It appears like they are sitting there waiting. The side windows are tinted, stopping me from making out the person inside.

My drive home is short. I stop to grab some items I need from the hardware store for this weekend project. As I round the truck, red catches my eye, the same red Camaro. Is this person stalking me? What the fuck? I turn and face the road and look head-on at the car. They continue past me, the driver wearing sunglasses and a hat, concealing their identity. A chill runs up my spine as I watch the car turn at the end of the block. Shaking my head, I walk inside. This is a small-ass town; everyone knows everyone. Yet, this car randomly shows up and no one knows who they are?

My brain works overtime as I try to think who I can ask, maybe Jordyn? When I enter the dining area, Bec senses my unease.

“Hey, B, what’s up? You look constipated with your face scrunched like that,” she jokes, trying to pull me from my mood. She’s draping plastic over a few feet in the back to cover the rest of the dining area from getting destroyed by the demo.

Looking up, I shake my head. “I am not sure. I keep seeing this red Camaro around town. I don’t remember seeing it before a couple of weeks ago. I’m not sure who owns it, but they’ve been at the school before too.”

“Oh. Well, who knows. Could be anyone, new student, parent, or boyfriend from a town over or something. I wouldn’t read too much into it. So, did you see her today?” She bounces her eyebrows at me. It doesn’t take a genius to know who she’s talking about.

“I see her every day, Bec. I work at the same school.” I put the bags of supplies and paint down to help her pull the plastic across the length of the room.

An exaggerated exhale leaves her mouth. “I know, Bennett, but did you talk? I don’t understand why you can’t approach her. Tell her you want to be friends. I told her plenty of times that’s all you are looking for.” I never told Bec about our heated interactions. It’s not her business, plus with how easily Maddie spooked, I don’t want more reason for her to run. Can

I be friends with her? I am not sure. I can try, though, if it's what Maddie wants.

“No, I haven't. I think that she's made it clear she's not interested in a friendship with me. I can be civil, though, Bec. I won't push her. If she wants to come over to hang with you, I can make myself scarce. If she wants friendship, well then, I'll let her make the first move.”

“I wish one of you would at least break the ice. She's a good person and deserves to have a support system. No one should be forgotten and alone all the time.” Bec's right, and the idea of Maddie isolating herself all the time makes me so angry when there are people right here willing to be involved in her life.

“She's got you.” I smile. “She's starting to open up. I think that's great.” Even if every time she talks about Maddie, I want to strangle her with my jealousy. Okay, not strangle her, inconvenience her maybe ... like hiding her favorite mixer for a day.

“Yeah, she's showing more interest than morning coffee. She is staying longer, talking more. Which is nice,” Bec agrees.

“I'm going to head to the house and throw in that frozen lasagna. Sound good?” I finish securing the end of the plastic and lock the front door. We're closing a bit early the next few days to get the back wall done. She still hasn't decided what she wants. Hopefully that doesn't take all weekend.

“Delicious. I’ll be done by the time it’s ready. See you in a bit.” With that, I walk through the back of the bakery and head home, ready to relax for the night.

Chapter Fourteen

Ivy

TGIF . I've been so exhausted these last couple weeks from the literal mind game that is avoiding Bennett. Do you know how hard it is to stay clear of a person who works not only in the same building as you but the same hallway? I'm not sure how I did it. Today was my last day in the auditorium. Next week, I'll go back to my classroom and face my reality. Before I left for the day, I stopped by to see Mr. G. He hasn't been in since last week. I miss him. I made my famous chicken alfredo for him to take home for dinner, which, of course, I'll be eating for the next few days. I never mastered cooking for one, or two for that matter.

Mr. G smiles when he sees me, looking more exhausted than ever. "How's your wife doing, Mr. G?" His shoulders slump, he grabs his food from me, and takes a seat.

"She's not doing so well. She doesn't remember me anymore. The last few days I had to watch her get dressed in the staff's uniforms. It's the only thing that makes her feel safe. I don't know much about life, Maddie, but I do know that

it goes by fast. I've had more yesterdays than I do tomorrows. I've lived a full and happy life. Many times, I took it for granted. I took my Rosie for granted. When you find your love, you latch on and pay attention, every single detail, because one day they may forget. Or you'll have to live each day trying to paint the picture for your best friend."

A tear leaks from my eyes, and I wipe it before he can see. It's not fair to unload all my emotions on him while he's struggling with the loss of his wife. My mom's faculties were always with her, but she wasn't the same person she once was.

She was so sick, she was bedridden for the final year of her life. It was like losing her twice. I was ten. I hated that she couldn't get up and do my hair or play with me. I hated that she couldn't come to school like the other moms. I spent so much of my time mourning the mother she once was, that I didn't give her the time of day to be the mother she could be in her final days. Then when she was gone, and I had to lose her again.

I still remember the rush of the staff when her heart stopped. The screams and the beeping as the head nurse went quiet, hushing the rest of the room. I knew she was dead. I felt it. Like a part of my soul left with hers. I was left behind, in a world I didn't understand, without someone to shield me from it. I had to change and let her version of me go with her to survive. My father's cold response to my tears made that clear. *"Get it together and wipe your tears. Everyone dies. She's been dead to this family the moment she became a burden to us. It's about time she relieved us of having to care for her. I*

bet she stuck around to spite me.” My face stoned, and I closed it up. Ever since, he would tell me what he expected, and I complied.

“A young man was asking about you this morning. He seemed eager to see you.” Why wouldn’t he say Bennett or Mr. Harrison? Is this one of those who shall not be named moments?

“Did he say what he wanted?” I sound more uninterested than I actually am.

“Not really. He asked how long you’ve worked at Atlantic and if I knew your schedule. I didn’t answer him though. The boys got to work harder than that to get a girl like you. Put some effort into it.” He winks.

“Good looking out, Mr. G. I appreciate it.” I giggle. Why would he be asking Mr. G? It doesn’t make sense.

The sound of sneakers screeching and students screaming at each other pulls us from our talk. Classes are done for the day, and practice for the football team is starting shortly. I hug Mr. G. Not for me, but for him. He looks a little shocked but squeezes back. It’s new for me, but maybe I need it too.

I grab my stuff and make it to the shuttle. I try to ignore the blue Chevy pulling out of the parking lot. I look away and spot Jordyn getting into the passenger side of the red Camaro on the street. She laughs, throwing her head back, clearly comfortable with the driver. The car pulls in front of me, heading in the direction of Bake Away. The driver has a baseball cap and sunglasses on, but for a moment, I freeze. All

the blood in my head is pumping loudly in my ears. I'm seeing a ghost from my past. It can't be. The man driving looks so much like Arty, but it can't be him. He wouldn't be this close to me and let me live in peace.

Convincing myself I am overreacting, I head to the shuttle. The ride home is quick. I walk the driveway to my loft and see a note stuck to my door. Looking around, I don't see anyone.

The handwritten note reads:

I'm sorry I missed you at school. I didn't see you at the bakery either. Let's talk. Please call or text me. 715-555-6542

It's not signed, the scribbles barely legible. Pushing my key into the lock, I walk into my loft. Bennett doesn't know when to let up. I kick off my shoes and grab a ginger ale from the fridge. My body sinks into the sofa, and my attention lands on the note I threw onto the coffee table, the number begging me to use it. I know I shouldn't text him, but curiosity gets the best of me.

IVY: You can't take no for an answer, can you?

BENNETT: Nope. Never could. I know what I want.

IVY: Well, we can't always get what we want.

BENNETT: Says who? I always end up getting what I want. What are you doing?

IVY: You have a lot of confidence for someone who's been turned down on multiple occasions. What if I'm not that into you?

BENNETT: You didn't answer me.

IVY: I'm watching TV. I flip open my laptop and start a rerun of *Friends*.

BENNETT: I can't stop thinking about kissing you.

IVY: Well, that's unfortunate cause it's not gonna happen again. My heart starts to race at his bold reply.

BENNETT: I bet you think about it, too. You just don't want to admit it.

He's not wrong. I do think of it often, but I sure as hell am not admitting it to him. I am not sure how to reply hovering my fingers over the buttons on the screen.

BENNETT: How hot my breath felt on your neck. How your body melted into mine when our lips finally touched. How you felt against my truck, my body over you.

Butterflies are at war in my stomach. I feel giddy and flirty and can help but picture him standing right in front of me.

BENNETT: My hands traveling from your neck, over your back, and grabbing a handful of your beautifully sculpted ass.

I still haven't responded, and as he continues with his torture, I stare at the screen in disbelief. His words cause my brain to fog with lust.

BENNETT: But we don't need to talk about what already happened. What if we talked about what could happen? Can you imagine my hand rounding to the front

and lifting your dress? Sliding my hand up your thighs and in between your legs. You'd be wet for me, wouldn't you? Cream dripping down your legs. By the time my hand connects with your panties, you'd be begging me for it.

My cheeks flush, and my legs clench firmly together as I nearly drop my phone. He saw me today. How else would he know I'm wearing a dress? Anticipation and fear battle with each other.

IVY: When did you see me today?

BENNETT: You were beautiful. If I were with you, I would slide the strap of the dress down to expose your shoulder and the top of your breast, kissing along the way.

Swallowing hard, I shut my eyes and imagine it, feeling his lips ghost along my neck. How good he would feel pressed against me, his movements slow and calculated. The harshness of his beard against my breasts, or the way his skilled fingers would feel against my center. I startle as my phone starts ringing in my hands, instead of the previous chime of a text. My breathing halts as his number glows on the screen. I can't answer the phone like this. He'll know he's had an effect on me.

IVY: Enjoy your night.

I type fast, tossing my phone to the coffee table. I can't say anything else, not without asking him to keep going. I need to relieve the ache between my legs, again. I know I can't have him, no matter how bad I want him. Even if I've been touching myself at the thought of him for weeks.

Lying back on the love seat, I bend my legs and open them wide, imagining Bennett's broad frame fitting between them. One hand skirts the hem of my panties, the other up my dress into my bra, and I'm fully exposed. My hand slips inside and finds my nub already peeking out of its hood, ready and waiting. I start slow circles at first, putting more pressure over my clit with every rotation. My left hand pinches my nipple, and my hips jut out. My pussy is weeping to be filled by Bennett. Lowering my left hand, I insert two fingers easily into my slick center, continuing my rotation on my clit. I curve my fingers up and find the spot I am looking for, riding my own hand, trying to get an ounce of what I could get if it were his cock inside me. My right hand moves faster, pressing harder, as my hips rotate and grind on my hand as I finger fuck myself. The image of Bennett above me, his dirty mouth, and his dark smirk pushes me over the edge. I'm spiraling out of control, legs pin straight, head thrown back as a silent scream lodges in my throat. A gasp releases at the end of my scream as I suck air into my lungs. Blood rushes to my face as the pressure of my orgasm takes over.

I lie there staring at the ceiling, and a laugh escapes me. Bennett has made me come more times than I can count, and he's only touched me once. *I'm in deep shit.*



Waking up today, I feel more refreshed than I have in a long time. You can credit my mood to my new friendship with Rebecca. Or the mind-blowing orgasms from imaginary

Bennett. Either way, I am quite chipper today. Per usual, I started my morning in the shop. When I get there, Susan tells me to take the day off and enjoy myself. So, I'm spending the better part of the morning soaking up the sun at the beach. After a couple of weeks of not seeing Bennett, I almost miss him. His texts haven't returned, which is okay. I think I would rather hear his voice anyway. Rebecca has been so patient with me and is proving to be the friend I've needed for a long time. It's time to open up more, allow her to see more than the closed off version of myself.

I still have my reservations about Bennett. I am not sure I can give him what he wants. Rebecca reassures me he wants to be friends, but I'm guessing he hasn't filled her in on the heated moments between us, either. I need to make more of an effort to be a better friend. So this morning, I decided I'm going to cook them dinner tonight. I borrowed Landon's bike and rode it to the store for a few items. I know they live in a house behind the bakery. So, if I cook it and walk with it insulated, it should still be fine by the time I get there.

I'm making a spoon roast with roasted green beans and red potatoes. I sear the beef on all sides in my cast iron before popping it into the oven. It's six PM, so I should be done and packed up by seven. Bec told me they are closing early this weekend, so I know this will be a nice break for them. While waiting for dinner to cook, I find myself being more finicky about my appearance. I left my hair down and waved the pieces around my face, applied light eye shadow and a pale pink lip. It's not much, but it's more than my usual efforts of

mascara and messy bun. I put on a pair of denim shorts and an off-the-shoulder, black vintage Beatles T-shirt. Before I can nitpick one more thing about myself, the timer for the roast goes off. I race through the motions of packing up dinner and giving myself one more look. I can do this. It's just dinner. I don't recognize the woman looking back at me. I look different, but it's not the makeup or the hair color or the fact that I had sun all day. I look almost ... happy. I haven't seen this lightness in myself in years, if ever.

After I get outside and lock up, I start my walk to Bake Away. The air outside is muggy, and I find myself hoping my hair doesn't frizz out like I stuck my finger in a light socket. Life can take a funny spin sometimes. I wouldn't have thought I'd even care, haven't in a long time.

The small breeze blows the long grass along the side of the road. The first twenty minutes of my walk are uneventful. The sky turns gray as the sun sets in the distance. Headlights shine from behind me as I start to see the streetlights from town in the distance. I move over closer to the grass line, expecting the car to pass. It slows down, and I turn my head to see what they are doing. I have to raise my forearm to block the brightness of the lights shining right at me. I'm not that far from town, maybe a quarter of a mile till I make it to Bake Away which sits right on the edge. The car shines its high beams and then dims them back to normal. What the fuck, car? Just go.

I wave the car on, thinking maybe they think I am in distress. It's not pitch black out, but with the contrast of the lights and the decreased sunlight, I can't make out the vehicle.

I wave them on, motioning them to go around me, taking another step to the side of the road. There is plenty of space for them to pass. There are no sidewalks, but I'm not walking in the center of the street. The car remains stopped. *Fine*. I roll my eyes and turn back around. I keep on walking, ignoring the bastard. Rocks slowly begin to crunch under the tires as the car slowly follows behind me. I pick up my pace slightly, nervous now that this weirdo won't pass me. It's then that I realize this person is following me. Unfiltered fear shoots through me, and I do the only thing I can think of: drop the dinner and sprint.

I am putting everything I have into this run. I hear the car bog down on the gas before it spits stones behind it, hitting its underbelly. I don't look back; that is the first mistake anyone can make. If horror movies teach you anything, the slight turn of the head slows you down. I push on, taking large strides. I can see the dimly lit Bake Away canvas sign from here. I'm almost there. The car begins to lay on its horn, sending the sound yards ahead of me. Whoever it is wants me afraid. The message is clear.

I prepare myself to scream with all my might, to get the attention of anyone who will listen. I'm barely catching my breath as it is, so I pray I can suck in enough to bellow out for anyone that may be in ear shot. Before I can let out a peep, the front door to Bake Away slams open, and Bennett is peeking out to see what the commotion is.

I can tell the moment he sees the pure agonizing fear on my face, and there is no hesitation before he races for me. Within

what feels like seconds, he reaches me, his arms wrapping around me so tight after I slam into him, unable to stop my feet. The instant protection I feel in his arms and the adrenaline has me scream out a sob. I barely recognize my own voice as I try to shout about the car, nothing intelligible coming out. I can't control it. It's as if the last five years of fear, anger, pain, and heartbreak choose right now to pour out of every ounce of my body. Every limb in my body becomes Jell-O as my body becomes weightless, and I feel myself being lifted into Bennett's arms. My arms instinctively wrap around his neck as I bury my face in his chest.

“Oh my God! What is going on? Why is she crying? What was that honking?” Bec shouts as she peeps out the window. I turn my face back toward the end of the street. The car turns at the stop sign at the edge of town, lit up by the streetlight, disappearing. Leaving the street quiet and empty, like there was never any chaos at all. More fear sinks lower in my stomach as my grip closes harder against Bennett's shirt. *The Camaro.*

“Maddie, who was that? Were they trying to run you over? Are you okay?” Her questions come out all in one breath. I wouldn't be able to answer them even if I wanted to.

Silence consumes me, fear taking over my every thought. The tears have stopped but the spike in adrenaline has me mute. I stare ahead as Bennett continues to hold me tight against him.

“I think she’s in shock, Bec. She looked so helpless and so scared. She wasn’t even screaming for help; she was running so fast. Who knows how long she was running if she came from the campground?” Bennett whispers gently as he sits on a barstool, his hand running small strokes along my arm, trying to soothe me. Last night I was secretly touching myself to his confident flirtatious self, and today he’s back to being afraid and unsure on how to react around me.

I know it’s not right. I know I promised myself I could do better and make true friends, but I need to leave. It can’t be a coincidence that I get a phone call from Arty, then think I see him in the Camaro, only for that same car to almost run me down. They do not need to be roped into my mess. My shaky legs straighten in front of me, and I pull my arms from around his neck. When I am finally standing, I wipe my face with my palms in an attempt to rid myself of the mess I must look like. Both pairs of eyes watch me, waiting for some sort of explanation. This is a small town; I doubt it’s common for pedestrians to be chased by cars.

“I made dinner for you guys.” They both look at each other, perplexed, then back at me, both confused that it’s the first and only thing I say after what happened. What else can I say? So, I continue, “I made dinner for you guys as a thank you for being so nice. I was on my way here to bring it. I am not sure who that was. They followed me for a while before I realized it. Once I started to run, they went faster. I thought I was going to ... I thought they were ...” My throat catches another sob from escaping, and I clear it before I lose it again. “I don’t

know what I thought. I'm sorry for ruining your night and your dinner. I'll go back and get it." I move toward the door.

"Stop! Maddie, you aren't going back out there. We don't know if that person is still around. The car looked red to me; did you get a good look at it?" Bec shouts.

"No, I was too busy running. It's okay. I'm fine. Plus, I don't want it to go to waste. I'll be a few minutes." I grab the handle and begin to pull the door back open when it slams shut.

"You are not going out there. Tell me where you dropped it and I'll get it." Bennett's stern voice sounds above me, not allowing any room for protest.

"Um, I am not sure, quarter to half mile down the road? It's in an insulated blue bag." He nods, and without saying anything else, he leaves. With a sense of relief that I don't have to go back out there, I fall to the bench by the window and take it in.

Chapter Fifteen

Bennett

There have been few times in my life when I've seen the look of fear on someone's face. But I've never seen it at the exact moment I felt it slam into me with an ache that knocks the wind straight out of my lungs. Terror shadowed Maddie's face at the same instant I felt the blow. It's as if it shot out of her and collided with my chest, nearly causing me to lose my breath. I'd be a happy man if I never have to see that look on her face again.

Who the fuck would do that? I need to blow off some steam before going back in there. She doesn't need to see my anger right now. Slowing my pace slightly to take some time to cool off, I notice movement out of the corner of my eye.

"Bennett!" Sarah calls sweetly from across the street just outside Darths, jogging over to me the best she can in her too-high wedges, she tosses her cigarette into the road. The smell of tobacco is so strong coming off her, I smell it before she reaches me.

“Hey, Sarah. How are you?” I continue to walk away from her, no patience to stand around and deal with her relentless flirting.

“Oh, you know, good ... How are you? I’ve missed you.” She loops her arm through mine while her other hand rubs against my chest. I try to breathe from my mouth to avoid the sour smell of cheap vodka that is heavy on her breath. She sways slightly as pulls her hands off me. *It’s only eight PM. Is she drunk already?*

“That’s nice of you to say. I need to grab something down the road. I don’t want to drag you away from your night,” I say as I continue walking, looking for Maddie’s bag. I hear her pout as she grasps for my arm again and clears her throat.

“Oh, don’t be silly! I want to see you, handsome. I can walk with you. We can catch up. Tell me, what’s kept you away? You know we always have a good time.” Her words are slurred.

“I’m not looking for the same things anymore. Nothing against you, Sarah. I’m wanting something different.”

“I can give you something different. We can be good together, Bennett,” she says, frowning.

I eye her. “We can be friends.” I am not leaving this up for debate.

She pulls her arm from mine so fast and stumbles. Reaching my arm out, I grab her shoulder to keep her from falling back. Once she stabilizes, I notice the blue thermal bag behind her. I

must've missed it when I turned to face her. I maneuver her slightly to the left and bend down to grab it, hoping I can head back. "I'm all set now. I'm going to head home. I have dinner plans with Bec and a friend."

"Can I walk back with you? I don't want to be out here in the dark all alone," she pleads, defeat covering her face.

"That's fine." Not saying anything else, I hope we can finish this conversation quickly so I can get back to Maddie.

I use my arm to keep her upright and straight on the road as we walk the rest of the way.

When we approach the bakery, she steps in front of me so she can face me. "I wasn't waiting around pining over you. I've been seeing other people," she confesses. Her outburst surprises me; we've never been exclusive.

"I'm happy for you. I didn't think you'd be pining over me. I know you're a catch. Any man would be lucky to have you," I say, stepping back from her to give us some space.

Her shoulders slump. "Just not you." Tears pool in her eyes as she looks down at the ground. I feel like a dick, but this isn't a conversation for right now. Hell, I didn't even know we would need to have a conversation at all. But my patience is wearing thin.

Offering her a small smile, I say, "I met someone. She's got my full attention." I hope it's soft enough to keep her from throwing a fit here in the street. She nods in understanding. Then quicker than I would expect from someone as drunk as

she is, she leans in close, grabbing my face and bringing her mouth to mine. The kiss is sloppy, wet, and uncoordinated. The taste of vodka and cigarettes seep from her mouth. The alcohol is clearly driving her actions.

I don't push her away immediately. Her pride is already broken, and I don't have the energy for another crisis tonight, not when this is so insignificant. I offer her a meek return kiss and let her get the closure she seems so desperate to have. After a few seconds that feel like an eternity, she finally pulls away.

“Goodbye, handsome.” With a small smile, she turns from me, melancholy evident in her stride, and she heads back across the street.

I'm not surprised Sarah kissed me, and I am grateful it's over. That is until my eyes look past the glass window of the bakery and land on Maddie's clear blues staring at me with a look of pain evident on her face. She had a front row seat to my kiss with Sarah. My heart is pounding a mile a minute as I contemplate what she must think. I pause to read her face, and she takes the opportunity to spin around and disappear. Multiple emotions were evident, but I can't pinpoint them all. Hurt? Jealousy?

I'm stunned for a moment, but when I shake off the surprise, I see Bec staring at me from inside the bakery. She stands with her hands on her hips, shaking her head in disgust. “*Really?*” she mouths as she rolls her eyes and follows Maddie farther into the bakery.

This is going to be a fun evening.

Bec and Maddie are closing, leaving out the back of the bakery, as I lock up the front. I follow close behind in silence. Once we get into the house, I walk into the kitchen and open the bag packed with the dinner Maddie prepared. My mouth instantly waters at the aroma spilling from the bag. She's clearly skilled in the kitchen. Everything smells and looks to have been cooked to perfection. Without permission, my mind shifts, imagining eating Thanksgiving together with Maddie in charge of the meal and Bec the desserts. Bec comes into the kitchen, quickly grabbing plates and silverware without a word, slamming each drawer. She's annoyed with me, not that I blame her. She doesn't know what happened between Sarah and me. It's safe to assume she believes my old ways are coming back. She doesn't want me to hurt Maddie. What she doesn't understand is that I will do anything to keep Maddie from pain.

How am I going to explain this to Maddie? The woman has been avoiding me for weeks. Before I sit down at the dinner-laden table, I race upstairs to clean my bedroom. Maddie can't go back to her place tonight, not after someone tried to run her down. I'll offer to let her stay in my room. I'll sleep on the sofa in the living room. Even if I would rather be by her side, I doubt she'll let me, especially after seeing my dumbass lip-lock with Sarah.

Picking up my clothes and throwing them into the hamper in my closet, I notice my pocket knife in my jeans. My grandfather gave me the knife before I was sent into foster

care. Maddie seemed to find as much comfort in it as I have over the years. I pull it out of my pocket and set it on the nightstand. If she's going to stay here, she can feel the security of knowing she can protect herself.

Chapter Sixteen

Ivy

Rebecca and Bennett have a beautiful home. We've all been sitting at the table, poking at our food, none of us really saying anything. My heart pounds in my chest as I replay Bennett's kiss with that woman. Why am I so disappointed? We aren't dating. Hell, I've barely spoken to him. I have no right to be upset. Yet, I am.

"Bec, are you positive that the car was red?" Bennett questions.

"Yes, I mean it was dark, but I want to say yes," she replies.

"Did you see anything at all? Do you know anyone who drives a red car?" he asks, turning his attention to me for the first time since we sat down.

"No. I didn't see the driver or the car. They didn't even shout or speak out the window. It's probably some idiots playing pranks. Kids get stupid with their hazing," I reply. I saw the car turn as it left main street. If it's the same Camaro, like I suspect, it has to be Arty. I can't let them know that I

have a suspicion. I can't get them involved or have them digging into my past. If Arty is here, I will figure something out.

"I saw the Camaro again today, same dude. He always has sunglasses on, and a hat." He eyes me suspiciously, waiting for a reaction from me. Little does he know, I've been trained to mask my face.

"Yeah, I saw Jordyn get into his car a while ago. She must know him. I'll ask her Monday." He looks even more confused, but he doesn't push me further. I could tell him I am used to this thrill of the unexpected, never getting comfortable, but I bite my tongue. We finish eating in relative silence.

Bennett starts to collect my plate before he says, matter of fact, "You're staying here tonight." My defenses rise. He will not tell me what to do. Before I can even respond, he corrects himself and steps directly in my line of sight, waiting for me to look him in the eye. "I think it would make everyone feel better if you stayed here tonight. You can have my room; I'll take the sofa. Will you please stay tonight?" I want to protest at first, but I am still spooked and having others close by does offer me some level of comfort. At least for tonight.

"Sure, thanks." I don't need to say more than that.

Rebecca shows me to his room and offers me a change of clothes. I get situated and comfortable in Rebecca's plum silk pajamas as I lie in the unfamiliar room. The futon is comfortable. I take a deep breath and close my eyes as I inhale

Bennett's cologne, still fresh on his sheets. Feeling my body relax into his bed, I envision him wrapped around me.

My phone chimes on the nightstand, and I grab it to see a text from Bennett.

BENNETT: You looked so scared.

He hasn't texted me since a few weeks ago. He never mentioned the texts either, not even in the few opportunities tonight where Rebecca wasn't around. Maybe he wants to keep this our secret. Something we have only to ourselves.

IVY: I was surprised. I don't get chased down by unknown cars on the regular.

BENNETT: Would you have been less afraid if you knew who was chasing you?

I contemplate my answer for a moment. Would that have made me feel better? Less afraid? It all depends on who the driver was. So, that's how I answer.

IVY: I guess it would depend on who the driver was.

BENNETT: It won't be a secret for long.

Bennett replies with such confidence, I don't think I need to respond. So, I place my phone back on the nightstand, when I spot the same knife he handed me a few weeks ago. Not sure how I didn't notice it before. I can't help but smile at his forethought. Bennett knew I would be uneasy. He did this for me; he wants me to feel safe. Bennett doesn't want to only save me or be territorial. He wants me to feel safe. Giving me the knife lets me take ownership of my own sense of safety.

No one has cared for me like that before. Then my mind drifts to the monsters of my story. Mitchell Hanson and Arty Carmichael may have found me.

I find myself questioning what it would be like to go back, not because I want to, but to see if my absence changed them. If me setting boundaries woke them up. I know the truth though. I've seen it before. What they say about the victim complex is true. The victim is made to believe it's all their fault. That the abuser didn't do anything. I fight with myself all the time to remind myself why I left. While my father wasn't kind all the time, he did have kind moments. It almost hurts more to know that me being gone gave him nothing but ammunition to use for his victim complex. So, I remind myself of that, of my truth. All I can do is be happy with where I am, be the best version of myself. Being alone beats any feeling I get being in their presence.

My eyes are growing heavier by the moment, so I close them reluctantly and drift asleep.

"I'm pregnant," I blurt out, sitting on my bed as Arty walks into my room.

"What do you mean you're fucking pregnant?" His reaction is immediate, exactly how I thought it would be. "We are juniors in high school, Ivy. You can't be fucking pregnant!" he bellows.

My anger immediately starts to match his. "Well, you know how! You didn't exactly wear a condom the last time we ..." I choke on my words, squeezing my eyes shut. We pretend that

didn't happen. Every day I get up, put on a smile, and go to school. I'm a good student, perfect girlfriend, and bright intelligent daughter. Each one of them acts like they didn't take a piece of me that night. I go through the motions, a shell of the person I used to be ... until those two pink lines appeared. It took away my ability to live in a nightmare, because it was no longer only about me.

"The last time!?! How the fuck are we supposed to even know who the father is?! You're a goddamn dirty slut. We don't even know who it could be! Have fun explaining to the world you have five guys to choose from, you whore!" His words slap me into utter shock. It takes me a minute to retort back, but I can't continue to take this. Not anymore. Not when I have a baby to protect.

"Me?!? I didn't ask for this." I laugh sarcastically. "I said no! I begged! You did this. All of you. This is your responsibility! If you don't step up, I'll go to my father. I'll go to the cops!" Holding my tears back, I square my shoulders. This is the first time that night has been spoken about out loud.

"Who do you think let us up to your room that night, hmm, Ivy? You're smarter than this. Do you really think that any of the staff would let five drunk teenage boys up to the teenage daughter's bedroom at midnight? You know who gave us the go-ahead. You're getting an abortion. End of discussion." A sinister smile crosses his face, as if he's proud.

"What? No! No, I am not. I have thought long and hard about this. I've known for a few weeks. I won't do that. I won't

kill my baby. Regardless of how this happened, it happened.” His right hook comes in fast, colliding with my stomach. Dropping to my knees, I fell to the floor, closing myself into a tight ball, blocking him from getting any more blows.

“You’re not keeping this baby.” He kicks me one more time, colliding with my forearms blocking my stomach, then slams my door. I am not sure how much time passed as I lay on my bedroom floor crying. How can anyone do this to another person? Act so loving and caring and nurturing one minute, only to be cold and calculating the next? The sun has faded past the blinds, darkening the room around me. The only light is filtering through the crease of my bedroom door from the hallway light. I’ve been up here alone for hours.

I jump as the bedroom door slams against the wall, opening to my father standing in the doorway. “Time for dinner.” He never fetches me from my room, weird. I stand up and wipe my tears from my cheeks, dragging my hand through my hair to make it presentable, and do what I always do. I collect myself and head to dinner.

Entering the dining room, I see Arty is already sitting next to my father, who’s posed at the head of the table. I take the other seat beside him, sitting across from Arty. When I look at him, I see his smug smirk, which makes me want to punch him. I am about to ask him what he is smiling at, but my father speaks first.

“You live in a fantasy world if you think I will allow you to bring shame to this family. You will not be keeping this baby.

This is the first and last time it will be discussed. Now eat.”

“I’m not aborting my baby. I won’t do it,” I meekly reply.

His eyes meet mine and he repeats. “Eat.” As per usual, I do as I am told. The second the chowder hits my mouth, I realize how hungry I am. With my appetite strong, and my eagerness to leave the table, I finish faster than usual, drinking my milk and excusing myself.

I’ve been lying here for a few hours, staring at the ceiling then the clock. Rinse and repeat. There is a long crack in the ceiling I never noticed until that night. I now stare at every night, wondering why I hadn’t noticed it before.

Trying to leave that headspace, I roll over to my side, feeling a strong pinch in my stomach. What the hell? It’s followed by major pressure and painful cramps in my uterus. I read online that cramping is normal in early pregnancy, but this doesn’t feel right. My stomach has been upset since after dinner, but creamy soup will do that sometimes. I sit up to go grab a heat pack from my bathroom, and when I move the covers, I see it. Blood. There’s so much blood covering my sheets and pants. I let out a scream so loud, the house vibrates with its strength. I turn to the door and see my father there with Arty. How long have they been there? Why are they staring at me? Why aren’t they helping me? Panic sets in. “Help me! Daddy, my baby. Something is wrong! I need to go to the hospital!”

“The issue is being resolved as I said it would be,” he says to no one in particular. I flash back to dinner, to the look on

Arty's face. The pressure my father put on me to eat stew in the middle of summer. The odd taste I couldn't place. He is taking my baby from me.

Time stops, yet an eternity passes. I feel it all. The foreign feeling deep in my womb firmly grips my heart as it tries to leave my body. I fall into a trance. Into a millennium of disbelief. The same place I escaped to not all that long ago. I stare at the same ceiling. The shadows in the doorway disappear. I am left alone again until small, wrinkled hands grab mine. Our maid sits beside my bed, sorrow and shame in her eyes. I know instantly she was ordered to poison my food. I don't say anything. There is nothing left to say. What's done is done. After a while, she leaves me alone. I lie still, mute as my purpose expels from my body and I become alone again.

The warmth of the blood pooled around my legs has me moving to the carpet off the bed that's caused me so much pain. I lie there as the crack in the ceiling stretches longer across it now. Symbolic, really. To see the crack as multiple men tore me apart, to then see it finish its way while life is torn from me, again. I wish my mom were here. As I watch the final inch of the crack reach the other wall, a curdling scream escapes me, and I can't stop. Scream after scream echoes between the walls of my bedroom.

“No! No!” I can't breathe. It feels like I'm underwater, choking with every deep intake of breath I try to steal. My screams wake me from my nightmare as, gasping for oxygen, my arms curl into my chest, trying to pound at my heart to will it to start beating again. The bedroom door slams open, but I

don't care. My sole focus is on survival, the tightness in my chest growing deeper as my vision grows darker.

“Shh, Maddie, Maddie, it's okay. You're safe. Shh, it's me. I'm climbing into bed with you, okay?” Bennett's hands attempt to clasp around my tight fists at my chest, but I don't budge.

“No, Bennett, don't. Let me. Move over, I don't think she can handle that right now.” The bed dips slightly, not enough to be Bennett's weight, so I know he listened to her. I feel soft hands moving the hair from my face, combing through it gently, with slow strokes. The sobs wrenching from me start to slow, but I still can't catch my breath. My body shakes with each sob. “Maddie, try to breathe, okay? You're safe here; no one will hurt you. You're okay” Her words pull harsher sobs from me, the comfort not mending the pain that feels so real, rooted so deep.

“Bennett, I need you to go to my room to get me a change of clothes. Hers are soaked through. I think she was having a night terror or panic attack.” Rebecca's hands continue to comb my hair as my sobs slow, and my body begins to relax on instinct. My mind is catching up to reality.

Silent tears fall now, and I move closer to her, laying my hand on her lap and soaking in this moment of restfulness. A peaceful wave comes over me. My eyes drift closed again as the sweetness of Rebecca's day in the bakery reminds me what timeline I am in.

“Maddie, let’s get changed, okay? You’ll be more comfortable.” Opening my eyes, jean-clad legs standing at the edge of the bed enter my view. When my eyes travel up Bennett’s body, his brows are furrowed with worry. I suppose he doesn’t know what to do, what to say. Honestly, neither do I. I’ve never done this before, relied on anyone to help me. In the past when I lost myself to the darkness, I was alone.

I’m here. I’m safe. Reliving the memory is just as a painful as the day my baby was taken from me. Once I woke from the haze of loss that night, I packed as much as I could into a backpack and said goodbye to my prison. I needed to run. I filed a police report in the town over, completed a physical exam, and supplied corroborating text messages to support my claims. The police immediately granted the restraining order.

I’ve spent the last five years thinking I was living, that I had gotten past it. Reality is, I am coexisting with the grief, the pain, the fear.

“I’ll go make some tea.” His voice so soft, I barely hear it.

“Coffee!” I shout louder than intended. Their heads snap in my direction. “Tea is nasty. It shouldn’t even be a beverage,” I mumble shyly.

“Coffee, then,” Bennett affirms as he exits the room with a small shake of his head, chuckling. Rebecca gets up and hands me her clothes before exiting the room.

Even though I am standing here alone, I have a feeling that my self-isolation is finally over. They keep trying, keep

showing me over and over again how reliable they will be. Is this what it feels like to have people?

Making my way into the kitchen, I expect to see both Rebecca and Bennett at the counter, but Bennett stands there alone. When his gaze raises from the mug in his hand, he says “Bec has an early morning. She said she was going to go back to bed. She said get her, though, if you need her.” I cross my arms across my belly, suddenly feeling more exposed in this moment. Did my nightmare freak him out? Maybe he doesn’t want to be around me.

“You don’t have to stay up. I’ll take my coffee to the bedroom,” I say, not even really acknowledging his mention of Rebecca.

“I don’t mind. I don’t sleep that much at night anyways. I normally do ride shares for the drunk idiots at the college not too far from here. It’s the reason I had the app on my phone the day I picked you up. I’ll only have to head that way in a couple of hours anyway.”

“Okay.” I walk to the coffee pot and pour myself a cup. Could this man be any more amazing?

“Do you want to talk about it? What happened tonight?” My shaky hands put the coffee pot back on the hotplate, and I prepare myself for this weird song and dance. Does he want to talk about the car chase again? Or my dream?

“Not really, no.” I’ve never told anyone about my past, aside from the police, of course. He seems to understand, because when I sit next to him, he doesn’t push, lifting his

coffee to his lips and staring straight ahead. Right when I become comfortable in the silence, he decides he isn't done with his line of questions.

“Why did you tell Rebecca you are leaving when you talked to her a while back?” His back straightens as he turns his body to face me.

Rubbing the tension from my forehead, I take a moment to think about it. I am always ready to leave, always have been. Well, at least that was before I met them.

“Because I thought I was.” I gulp, waiting for what he will ask next.

“Where were you going?”

“I am not sure.” It's not a lie. I have no idea where I would go next.

“But you aren't moving now?” he probes.

“I don't know.” I shrug because I am always halfway in and out the door. Wanting him doesn't change that.

“So, you tell people you are leaving to avoid building any ties or trusting anyone, is that it?” He sounds a bit angry now, his mug firmly returning to the counter.

“Bennett, what do you want from me?” I sniffle as my tears return. I'm too tired to banter with him.

“I want you. I want the truth about who nearly ran you down with their car. I want to know why you wake up screaming bloody murder from your dreams. I want to know

why every attempt I make to get to know you, you shut down. I want to know you, Maddie. That's what I want from you. Just you." His hands run through his hair as he pushes out of his stool and begins pacing the space behind me.

Standing, turning away from him, I walk toward the opening to the living room and lean against the threshold. I need to get some space from him. "You want answers to things I can't give you. You keep saying you want me. You want answers; you want me to open up. How do you not see you're asking for the impossible? There is no way I can offer you what you are looking for," I stammer, my voice shaky. I take a deep breath and keep going. "I had that, you know ... someone that wanted so much from me ... The moment I gave them a little piece, they always wanted more. They kept taking and taking from me. They clawed and fought for every piece of me until there was nothing left. I have nothing to offer you, because I refuse to give myself to anyone like that again. I won't lose myself." *And there it is, Ivy, your biggest fear: being so consumed in someone else you'll never have anything for yourself.* I gave myself away to someone out of expectation, to please my father. Not because I loved him. How could I remain myself and not live for Bennett if I fell harder? I can't let myself feel anything for him.

The heat that covers my back from Bennett is instant, his chest resting against my shoulders. I keep my back to him when his forehead drops to the top of my head, and he inhales. I rejoice in the feeling of him against me, and a shiver covers my entire body.

I don't know why I do it, my self-control losing the battle of needing to keep my distance. I lean back into him, my head rolling to the crease between his shoulder and neck, and I rotate my face into his neck. His body freezes, then with slow calculating movements, his hand directs my chin up. My lips are perfectly in line with his.

“You are stronger than you think you are. Why can't you be as kind to yourself as you are to everyone else?” The heat of his mouth throws me into ecstasy, and I barely hear the words he said.

My hand reaches behind his neck, pulling him closer to me. Our lips connect firm and fast, and I feast on his mouth like it's my last meal. He makes me feel things I never imagined I could. Butterflies flutter in my lower belly as wetness pools between my legs. I push up on my toes, trying to get as close to him as I can, when he spins me. My breasts harshly slam against his hard chest. I whine softly as our mouths separate, until his mouth returns to mine, controlling the kiss. His tongue licks my lips, begging for entrance, and I give it to him. He moans into my mouth, and I'm pushing my hands into the front of his shirt, exploring the valley of his abs and chest. My God, he is an aphrodisiac. His hand reaches into my hair, tugging lightly. I moan in appreciation as my whole body vibrates with anticipation. Our energy surges together, forming a force field around us, completely impenetrable.

“Let me in.” He grunts into my mouth as he pulls my waist closer to him. I don't say anything, keeping myself cemented

to him, living in the false reality that this could be something real.

“Please. Let me in.” He growls, pulling his mouth from mine and kissing along my neck, his tongue licking before each open-mouthed kiss. I keep my eyes closed. If I could crawl into his safety, I would stay.

“Maddie, tell me what you want.” He bites my shoulder, and it shoots a bolt right to my core.

But at the same time, just like that, like a bucket of ice water was poured on me, I’m pulled back to reality. *Maddie*. I can’t be with Bennett, not if I’m not fully honest with him. To Bennett, I am Maddie. He is falling for a girl that isn’t real. Reading my body well, he stops his assault on my neck. Our heaving breathes are the only sound filling the room. His eyes are hungry. My eyes stare into his brown ones, as he gives me all his confusion. *Don’t worry, buddy. You’re not the only one mind fucked right now.* I’m starving for him. He feels like the only thing that can feed the hunger deep inside of me.

I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep doing this to *him*. Needing space from him to contemplate what I will do next, I push against his hard chest and back away. Could I come clean about everything after all this time? Will they trust me again? He steps back toward me, and a tiny gasp of excitement escapes me. Then he leans forwards slowly, keeping his eyes trained on mine, and gives me one soft kiss on my forehead before disappearing from the room.

It takes me a few moments to calm my sporadic heart.
Watching his back get farther from me doesn't feel as freeing
as it used to. Now I want him to stay.

Chapter Seventeen

Bennett

FUCK! I scream to no one as I throw boxes from the back shelf in the bakery's kitchen. I can't explain why I am so angry. Angry that she pulled away from me, again. Angry that someone hurt her so badly she's having night terrors. She was chased by a fucking car tonight. Who is this girl? Why does it feel like danger looms over her, and why does she refuse to let anyone in?

I've been replaying the night in my mind, and the look of acceptance on her face scared me the most. Right before she saw me charge for her, she looked like she had already accepted this could be it for her. Then when I heard her bellow that blood-curdling scream, I panicked. My feet couldn't move faster to my bedroom. I thought maybe the fuck in the car followed us, found her room, and we left her there to be his prey. I tripped twice up the steps trying to get to her as fast as I could move. When I crashed through the door, my eyes frantically traced the room. When I saw her alone, I felt relief,

which was quickly replaced with hopelessness. I can protect her from a lot of things, but not the demons in her head.

Bec ran in shortly after, and her look matched mine. We both know the monsters in our minds are worse, harder to run from.

When Bec told me to step away, I was about to tell her off. Then I saw the unwavering fear and pain in Maddie's eyes. Like she couldn't really see me. Flashbacks of our interactions crashed into me. I moved back and watched Bec console the woman I am falling hard for, wishing I could be the solace she needs, the power she draws from to recharge.

There are so many similarities between Maddie and our foster mother. How often her fear would cover her features the second our foster dad walked through the door. She would flinch at the smallest noises or fast movements, always hyperaware. I remember she'd set a timer to ensure she had time to tidy up before he returned from work. Us kids had free rein of the house all day, allowing us to be kids and have fun, but when that timer went off ... she'd be like a tornado. I never understood why she didn't leave. I even asked her once. She knelt down on my level and said, "*Sometimes you take the good with the bad, and I get so much good being your mother. I can deal with the bad.*"

The day she died, I watched the life drain from her body. To be honest, I may have seen peace in her eyes right before she was nothing but a vessel. A vessel for abuse at the hands of her husband. I pushed Bec out of the room and told her to run.

But she saw it too, standing in the doorway, refusing to leave me. I know she loved our foster mother as much as I did.

The loss brought Bec and me closer, and we promised to always be there for each other. I don't think Maddie has ever had anyone to walk through life with. No one to lean on or to confide in. "*I have nothing to give you.*" How can she believe that? She has so much to give if she'd let herself. Let us in. Let *me* in. I don't have to save her; she's saved herself. I want to be her comfort, her support, and her everything. Prove to her that not everyone will take from her. I will make it my mission to show her she has a home here in Scarlett Bay. She doesn't need to run anymore.

"Hey." A soft voice comes from the door. Bec looks around the room at the destruction.

"Sorry, I'll clean this up before you open tomorrow." I grab one of the boxes and toss it toward the service door.

"Don't worry about it. You okay? That was kind of a lot back there. I couldn't sleep. Thought I'd come bake something. I see we both had an idea of getting out, huh?" She hasn't moved from the doorway, gaging my mood.

"I am falling for her," I confess, turning to face her.

"I know." She walks to my side and places a gentle hand on my arm.

"I want to help her." I drop my head, realizing my exhaustion for the first time tonight.

"I know and you are." She squeezes my arm gently.

“I don’t feel like I am. I feel like every time I get close, she pushes me further away.”

“She’s hurting, B. We don’t know what she’s been through, but she appears to have been alone for a long time,” Bec says in a sad tone.

“She isn’t alone anymore. She has us,” I encourage. It’s a fact. She has us. She needs to stop being so stubborn.

“She does, and when we care about someone, we let them heal on their own time. We support them and allow them to move or stay. Whatever they need.”

I know what she’s getting at. How she supported me when I needed to leave, needed to find myself. Even though it’s not even remotely the same thing, I know she’s right. We have to let Maddie lead us the way she wants to go. Be here when she needs it, waiting for her to be ready to accept we aren’t leaving her.

“You’re right. I’ll try and be patient.” I am not sure I believe myself as I say it.

“She likes you, too, you know. I see her watching you when your back is turned. Give her time.”

I am hopeful Bec is right.

“So, care to explain the heated kiss between you and the hobag Sasha?” Bec spits out, disgusted with the display she saw through the window.

“It’s Sarah, you know that, and it wasn’t heated. I think she needed to say goodbye.” Worry laces in my tone. I know she’s

going to rip me a new one.

“And she happened to become mute and incapable of using any other gesture known for the common interaction, like I don’t know, a wave? Maybe blow you a kiss? I mean, there are even many waves to choose from, the queen wave, the finger wave, the excited whole arm wave. The list goes on.” I can’t help but chuckle as she demonstrates each wave in her description. “Or if we want to get real formal there, the bow or the curtsy.” She continues her charade.

“Okay, okay, I get it. It was stupid. I was trying to avoid hurting her. That’s all. I wasn’t expecting Maddie to have a front-row seat.”

“Yeah, cause that’s the real problem.” Sarcasm drips from her statement. “You got caught. But yes, that was rough. She didn’t mention it, though I could tell she was bothered by it as we were headed inside. Then again, she was nearly chased down by a crazy person, so that could’ve dampened her mood, too.”

“Well, if she brings it up, which she won’t, I’ll explain it to her.” I bend down to pick up a few more boxes, sorting them away from Bec’s work area.

Bec eyes me for a second, then she lowers her voice as if to mock me. “Oh, that girl you saw me sucking face with, yeah, we used to fuck. She wasn’t ready to let me go so I wanted to give her a proper goodbye.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Great plan.” I don’t miss the sarcasm in her voice.

“Okay, I’ll have to think of a way to explain it a tad better than that.” I chuckle. This girl and her dramatics.

My phone chimes with the familiar sound of the rideshare app. *It’s bar closing time, already?* Seeing I am due for a pickup, I clean up the last bit of my mess and head toward the door.

“See you later today, not sure how long I’ll be out tonight,” I say, giving Bec a side hug.

“Sounds good. Be safe,” Bec replies as she preheats the oven.



As I am pulling up to the Darth’s, four businesses down, three girls stumble from the entrance, attempting to avoid eye contact with the man exiting with them. He seems quite a bit older, wearing a similar ball cap to the guy in the Camaro, hiding his features from me. I get out of the front seat to escort the girls safely to my truck.

“Are you ladies ready to head back to campus?” I ask, approaching them.

The stranger lifts his face, and the streetlights illuminate his features. I recognize him instantly. *Bertram*.

“Oh, look who it is! It’s good old Bennett.” He slurs his words as he steps up next to the girls. “These girls are fine. I’ll get them home. No need for you to be here.” His tone irritated, like I interrupted his latest conquest. *Nope, not today fucker*.

The girls sidestep away from him, all linking arms to stay together.

“Felisha, party of three? That you guys?” I say, stepping between them and Bertram.

One of the girls nods their head and opens the door to the back seat of my truck.

“Whelp, looks like you don’t need to get them home after all,” I shoot back at him. I get these girls are of age, but barely, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they got into this bar with fake IDs. Even if they weren’t barely legal, they were shit-faced. No fucking way in hell should this guy be following them out of the bar like he’s about to pounce on the first one to shut their eyes. *Fucking creep, and to think he works on the school board.*

“Fuck you. Ruining a good time,” he spat. Whatever, fucker. I get the girls in my truck and lock the door, walking to the bar in search of Phil, the owner. He is usually a good barkeep, but this sleaze ball passed by him. I find him at the bar, counting the till.

“Phil, there is a douchebag trying to take advantage of drunk girls leaving the bar. I got them into my car, but you may want to keep an eye on him. Looks like you’ve got a few more in here making their way out. I can come back if more need a ride, let me know.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me. Black ball cap and a button-up shirt?” Phil asks, irritated.

“Yep, that’s him,” I confirm.

“I kicked that fucker outta here around eleven. Someone thought they saw him slipping something in a drink.” I watch Phil reach under the bar and grab a bat. We walk out of the bar together and head to my truck. I see him still at my truck, knocking on the window, before I hear him say, “Don’t be a fucking tease and then bail on me.” “Get the fuck away from my car, you prick,” I shout at him. He spins and nearly loses his balance, falling back against my truck. Phil steps out from behind me, palming the bat with his hand. “Time for you to get out of here, man. We won’t be having any trouble.” Phil leaves no hesitation in his message.

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. Apparently, no one around her understands bros before hos.” Did that motherfucker really say that? Where the hell is this man from? I reach out and grab his arm in a firm grip, pulling him across the sidewalk and tossing him against the brick building. He is Phil’s issue now. My main goal is to get these ladies home. Safe.

“Let me know if you need any more rides out of here. Some of them in there may not even know where their phones are,” I shout over to Phil.

“Yeah, I already called Cid. He’s going to bring the shuttle. They are in the same dorm; the rest should fit with him,” he calls back to me as he stands guard at the door.

With that, I climb into the truck and hand each lady a water and garbage bag, praying none of them lose their night of partying in the back seat.

Chapter Eighteen

Ivy

This morning, I found a note on the counter from Rebecca. She was opening early today for the debut of her fall desserts. Bennett is likely in bed, since she noted he was out late with ride shares. I am guessing he took her room since I don't spot him on the couch. I thought I would be relieved, not seeing him this morning, giving me more time to think. To my surprise, I hate it. Sleep failed to come after the night's events, especially knowing he was in the same house, his hands previously all over me, and there I lay in his bed, alone. He's like an addiction. Every time I get a taste, I want more. When my body gave in to sleep, I dreamt of him.

Bennett's head is between my legs, and he's staring right up at me with a wolfish grin. A glint in his eyes is challenging me to protest or to ask for more, I am not sure which. His calloused hands are on the backs of my thighs, pushing them forward, giving him full access to me.

Before I let myself get lost in the fantasy again, I need a shower, then I will make my way back home. I could clean up

at home, but I saw the rainwater showerhead when I was in the bathroom last night, and it's too tempting. My efficiency shower holds no gold star.

Skipping steps two at a time, whipping my top over my head, I grab the hem of the sleep shorts and drop them over my hips, kicking them up and catching them midair. I unclasp my bra and shoulder the bathroom door open, only to slam into a dripping wet back. *Oof*. My breasts make contact first, nipples pebbling immediately. Fumbling back in surprise, I blurt out, "Oh my God, I'm so ..." My words stall. *Wow, he has a nice ass*. It's so delectable, I could bite into it. Shaking my head out of a stupor, I gulp as he turns, holding his towel in front of him. His eyes follow the flush of my neck down to my chest and stop on heavy peaks begging to be touched. I could cover up. I could turn and rush away, but for some reason, I stand there, frozen while his eyes feast on my bare chest.

He shuffles on his feet, unsure what to make of this moment. Clearly, he is not as into me as I am into him. I turn away, offering my back to him. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were in here. I thought you'd be asleep." The words are now finding themselves and rushing out as if they were one word.

"Uh, yeah, I couldn't sleep so I decided to take a shower." He starts to squeeze past me out the door, and I suck in and maneuver myself, flattening against the door frame. My forehead rests against the cold wood frame to give him space

to escape. He does everything not to touch me. *Of course, he doesn't want you. You're damaged goods.*

He stops instantly. "What did you say?" He presses into my body, his chest flush against my back, pinning me to the door jam.

Shit. "Hmm? Oh, I didn't say anything," I squeak.

He shimmies past me, but not before rubbing his entire body against me, his hand gently coasting across my ass. When I turn my head toward the hallway, he is fastening the towel securely around his waist, his bulge tenting the towel in my direction.

He steps closer to me and bows his head to my ear. My knuckles are white as I firmly grip the door frame, and I turn my face slightly away from him, his gaze too strong.

"Let's make one thing clear. I fucking want you, but I won't chase you, and not because I don't want to. Fuck, it kills me watching you walk away from me. I imagine taking you in every inch of this house. You'll come to me when you are ready. You'll be the one to make the decision because your choices matter. I promise, once you do, there is no going back. You'll be mine." He pecks me on the cheek and saunters away.

On that note, it's going to be a cold shower. A freezing cold shower.



How has this school week gone by so fast? I have another Friday night alone ahead of me. After I spent Sunday evening last week with Bec and Bennett, helping them repaint the back wall of the bakery, I finally convinced them to let me go home. I've fallen into a routine, going to the bakery every morning and letting Bennett give me a ride home after school. The tension between Bennett and me can't be described as anything less than an inferno, blazing with no sight of running out. But, in his annoying fashion, he's kept to his word and hasn't even attempted to come on to me. Playful banter is the only thing that helps me know he is still interested. Jordyn's party is tomorrow night, and I am thinking about inviting Bennett to come along, mainly so I don't have to go alone. Also, so we can have time to be near each other. I'm finding that I've been looking for any excuse to be close to him, often fantasizing about what life we could have together if I am honest with him.

Speaking of fantasies ... That's what brings me here. I lie on my bed for the fourth night in a row, rubbing my clit in circles, trying to find an ounce of release. The image of Bennett occupies every corner of my mind. His face keeps me from doing anything productive. I have papers to grade, lesson planning to do. I can't keep this up. I feel like a sex-crazed, lovesick woman. He told me he wanted me, that all I need to do is make the choice. Why is it so hard for me to make a move? I am lying to myself, more than I'd like to admit. I know exactly why. I'm not sure what these feelings are. Why my heart pounds when I hear his laugh in the hall, or why the

hair on the back of my neck stands up when he comes up behind me. How my body reacts to him the second I feel his hand brush against mine or his eyes set on me as I walk past him.

Three loud pounds on my door has me leaping out of bed like I was caught with my hand in the cookie jar. *Well, technically not untrue.* When I stumble my way to my front door, I bring my eye to the peephole. *No.*

Arty paces the small deck outside my door. My hands instantly move to my mouth, scared even the slightest exhale will give away I am home. I slowly step back from the door, my head shaking in disbelief. This can't be happening.

Knock. Knock. Knock. The sound fills the small space so loudly, I flinch at each one. "Ivy, I know you're fucking home. Let me in. We need to talk," he shouts.

I can't let him in here. I can't be alone with him. I could call the police, but I already know how that will go. These are small-town cops. They'll take an hour to get to this side of town.

I need something quicker. Who can I call? I pull out my phone and call Bennett.

Arty chuckles on the other side of the door, then I hear an echoed, "Hello." His voice passes through the receiver against my ear and sounds from the man standing on the other side of my door. *No.* I sway, nearly falling from shock as all the conversations we have had over text come back to me. It's been him the whole time. The flirting, the intimate

conversations, the concern. I thought it was coming from the man I've been falling for, and instead Arty's been playing with my head, texting me each night after Bennett drops me off, making me believe in the game of secret messages.

The rest kicks into place. He's been here for weeks, watching me, cataloging my every day. He was the man asking about me at the school; he's the one who nearly ran me off the road. He's been controlling what I thought was my reality, and I drop to my knees. Arty now knows all the people I care about. He talked about touching me, violating me all over again. I hang up the phone and I call the only number I've memorized. Dialing as fast as my fingers will let me, I hit send. *Rinngg. Please pick up, please pick up.*

"Bake Away, how may I—"

"Rebecca, it's Iv—ugh, it's Maddie! I'm in trouble. Is there any way you can get here as fast as you can, please? Please, I am begging you." More pounding on the door pulls my attention from the phone.

"OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR!" Arty continues screaming as cracks start to sound. He's kicking the door.

"Maddie, what's going on? What's that pounding? Who is shouting?!" Tears race from my eyes, now soaking my shirt. My worst nightmare is unfolding before my eyes.

"I don't have time for this!" I panic into the receiver. "I ... Please, I don't have anyone else to call. You're the closest to me." I am not sure if she can hear me through my sobs.

“Maddie, I am fifteen minutes away! Oh, wait one sec—” I hear clicking through the speaker. “Okay, I located Bennett, who is less than five minutes from you. I’m calling him now.” Then the phone goes dead.

Wood splinters spread across the floor as Arty forces his way through. He looks pissed, fists balled at his sides, fiery hate shooting from his eyes. His chaotic breach through the door has him looking around the small apartment, till his eyes land on me. I scream, launching myself to my knees and racing to the bathroom door, making my way inside. I push on the door as hard as I can to slam it, but his foot lodges in the crack as it’s inches from closing. Using all my body weight, I push the door, but my socks keep sliding on the tile, making it impossible to get any leverage. The bitter smell of whiskey oozes from the small crack of the door.

I see him lean back slightly, and with all his weight, his shoulder slams against the door, and I crash back into the wall. His hands go right to my head, grabbing my hair in a harsh grip, causing my head to snap back. Pain shoots to my hairline, the pull causing my entire head to burn.

“Two questions. One, did you really fucking think you could escape me, Ivy? Two, who the fuck is the guy that has his hands on you all the time? Does the cocksucker know you belong to me?!” His spit hits my face as he shouts in anger.

My smart ass responds, “That was three questions, though math was never your strong suit.” I know it was stupid, but I

won't beg. My tears are drying up, and I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry. I will get away from him, again.

His first strike is against my ribs, then he moves lower to my stomach, knowing it'll drop me to my knees. I collapse in front of the vanity, wheezing, unable to catch my breath. I know he will stop now, at least for a minute. He's the predator that likes to play with its prey.

"You know, I thought you were smarter. What happened to you, baby? We had it all. We would've been set right out of high school. We were the king and queen, ready to take our thrones, Senior year. We would've gotten engaged, then married. You would've been set for life instead of living in this hole," he says, tossing all my stuff off the pedestal sink in one swoop. He caresses my face and pulls me to stand in front of him.

"You happened." I spit in his face. Then I grab the closest thing I can reach and yank the mirror vanity cabinet. The door suction protests my pull, but then glass shatters everywhere from the collision with his face. In his surprise, Arty falls into the tub next to him. I take my advantage and step over his extended leg, but before I get far, he grabs my ankle, giving it a jarring pull. My leg pulls out from under me, and I am falling face-first toward the tiled floor. Glass scrapes my legs and hands as I brace myself for the fall. My voice is turning horse as the screams force their way out of my mouth. I kick my legs back and feel one connect with his jaw. Once his grip has loosened on my ankle, I push my body forward, grabbing

the base of the door and yanking it open, allowing myself to grip the door frame to pull myself forward.

When the door hits the wall with more force than I thought I was capable of, black boots stop an inch from my face. Before I can register what is happening, I am being yanked to my feet and set down outside the bathroom door. My head is pounding as I try to sit up against the wall. I hear shouting in the bathroom, though I can't make out the words. I curl myself into the smallest ball I can, hoping this whole thing is one of my nightmares. I shut my eyes tight as time stops. *Silence*. My heartbeat is the only sound occupying my mind. When I open my eyes, the room is still quiet, so I lean over the threshold of the door and peek into the bathroom. Bennett's back is facing me as his strong arm plasters Arty to the wall across his neck. Arty's face is white, turning a light shade of purple as Bennett leans more pressure into him.

When I blink, Arty is falling limp to the ground, and Bennett steps back from him, his shoulders rising and falling at a quickened pace. When he turns, his face is filled with pure anger, his hand running through his hair. He takes four large steps toward me.

"I'm sorry!" I shout, shutting my eyes as he approaches, not sure what he's going to do next. I barely recognize the man that stares back at me. My hands automatically go up, while I shuffle my feet against the wood floors, trying to get away. Bennett's arms circle around me, and his large hand holds my face against his chest. The sound of his heartbeat pumping so

hard I can feel it matches the speed of mine. His other hand is around my shoulders, his thumb gliding on my left bicep.

We stay like this for a while, swaying with each other. My arms come up around his center and clasp behind his back as I inhale him. My body instantly relaxes as seconds turn to minutes.

“We should get out of here before that douchebag wakes up.” He finally speaks into the silence. Nodding in agreement, I release him as I step away, looking at the mess around me.

I walk over to the small closet between the kitchen and bathroom, shifting the broom and cleaning supplies out of the way, pulling my duffel bag from the back. A bag I’ve had packed and ready for the last five years. I’ve never needed it. I hoped I never would. With a few sets of clothes, my passport, and some cash, it would take me a decent distance. I needed to play it safe, have a plan.

Pulling the strap over my shoulder, I turn to Bennett. He stands there with his hands in his pockets and an expression that I can’t decipher. Guilt filters through my mind as I realize this is what I was afraid of. They would find out I’ve been lying to them. He must hate me right now, realizing how little he knows about me. He gestures to me to walk ahead of him, following me down the steps to his truck.

Bennett grabs my duffel from me and throws it into the back seat. I’m reaching for the grab bar on the truck when I feel arms lifting me into the seat. “I’m not a fragile doll, Bennett. I can get in the truck by myself.” My defensive tone is in place.

I need to make this a clean break. Get out of here. Keep this far away from Bennet and Bec.

He doesn't respond to my words as he walks to the driver's side and gets in. Once the truck starts and it jolts forward in drive, I swallow my anxiety and make my plan.

"I can tell you are angry. I am sorry. I didn't know he was here in town. I didn't mean to get you in the middle of my mess. You can drop me at the bus station on Century and Everest. I don't want to cause you or Rebecca any trouble. I'm so sorry." I pick at the polish on my nails as we drive through the pitch-black parking lot, the only light coming from the stars and Bennett's headlights.

The way Bennett is gripping the steering wheel, I am scared it will pull right off the dashboard. He hasn't looked at me. Hasn't said anything since we left the apartment. Eyes straight ahead. Maybe he is in shock. It's not every day you have to step into the hell that is my life. The sign for the train station comes into view, and Bennett speeds right past it.

"Where are we going?" I ask

"You told me you lived in the house." His tone is stone cold.

"No, you assumed I lived in the house. I just didn't correct you," I say quietly.

"If I had known you were in that loft, I would've gotten to you sooner. You wouldn't be covered in gashes. How do you know him? Why were you fighting? And where are you going? You had a bag packed already. I can assume you

weren't packing to leave with that guy." He finally looks at me, his eyes swarming deep brown as he digests all the questions.

"I didn't know you, then. So, I wasn't going to tell you where I live. I'm fine. There are barely scratches. I don't know where to go, aside from away from him. He's my ex." I stare out the passenger window, avoiding any further questions that can be answered by the look on my face. I don't have the energy to mask my emotions anymore.

"I watched your body seep into mine as you unraveled, convulsed, and came all over my knee. I think we knew each other a little. Those are deep cuts. I'll ask you again, where are you planning to go? If your answer is I don't know, then I will answer the question for you. You're coming home with me." He doesn't leave space for me to say anything else. There is finality in his tone.

I don't say anything. What can I say? My thoughts are so jumbled by everything Arty did over the last few weeks. My stomach turns at the thought of touching myself to his messages, and the bile burns in the back of my throat.

"Pull over!" I yell.

"What? I am not pulling over. I am bringing you home," he insists.

"Bennett, pull over! I'm going to be sick!" I scream as my hand lifts to cover my mouth. I am jumping out of the truck before he's pulled to a complete stop, stumbling out, landing

on my hands and knees, throwing up the acid that's been fighting to escape. I heave more and more bile at the truth.

He steps up behind me, and I feel his hand on my back as he crouches down next to me.

"I want to come home with you," I confess as my eyes fill with tears, telling the truth for the first time since I have known him. I stand and wipe my sleeve over my mouth, slightly disgusted at the mess I've made of myself.

I know he has a lot of questions, and I will answer them. But I need to figure out what I am going to do first. How I am going to get Arty far away from here. We get back into the truck and finish the ten-torturous-minute drive to his house. When we pull in front of the bakery, Rebecca paces, wringing her hands in front of her, looking through the bay window into the street. Her body eases a bit when she sees the truck pull to a stop, then she races outside to the sidewalk to greet us.

Before I have time to move, she is pulling my door open, and her eyes look over me instantly as she slows her movements.

I step out of the truck slowly, and she opens her hands slightly then stops herself. "Sorry. I know you don't like unexpected hugs. I was so worried. Are you okay!? I've never been so scared in my life! I am shocked Bennett even understood me when I screamed at him over the phone. Gosh, with the rush and then the fall of adrenaline, I thought I may pass out. I mean, I didn't, so that's good, but I almost did. God, I am so happy you are here though. How are you?"

OMG!” she squeals, seeing the blood running down my legs. I guess it wasn’t as minor as I thought.

I wasn’t cataloging injuries. I was trying to get out of there. I don’t know what I should do so I give her the only thing I think will calm her down. As I pull her into a hug, she goes stiff as a board for a moment and then turns to goo, tightening her arms around me. Yep, she’s a hugger. “I’m okay. Thanks for calling Bennett to get me.” I sigh into her deathgrip.

“Of course, I called him! He was so close, and it sounded so bad.” She eyes me suspiciously. “Were you being robbed? I can’t imagine living there alone. Wait, did you live with someone?” Her rapid-fire questions has my head spinning from trying to keep up with her.

“Okay, Bec, I think we can quit the third degree, don’t you? Why don’t we talk this through later and get Maddie inside and cleaned up. I told her she can stay with us tonight.” Bennett interrupts her mile a minute word vomit. Gosh, that girl talks fast. How is her diction so impeccable?

“Oh, of course. Sorry, I speed talk under stress. Let’s get inside.” She ushers me toward the bakery, to head back to the house.

Chapter Nineteen

Bennett

I am waiting in the kitchen when Bec comes back after walking Maddie to the bathroom. It's not like she doesn't know where it is, but like me, Bec probably doesn't want to leave her alone.

“What the hell happened,” she asks, worrying her bottom lip.

“I am not sure. I pulled into the parking lot so fast, and I raced toward the main house, but as I got to the base of the steps, I heard what sounded like glass shatter and a scream. I turned around and saw a light on above the garage. So, I ran to it. When I got up there, he had her in the bathroom on the floor. Looks like he had gotten her pretty good. Glass was everywhere. Though it looked like she was fighting to get away from the bastard, his hands were around her legs, attempting to pull her back to him.” I rub my forehead in disbelief. If I had been a few minutes later ...

“Who is he? Why was he there? Did you leave him there?” She's pacing again, walking the length of the island, wearing

treads on the floor.

“She said her ex. But I’ve met this fucker. He was at the school, claiming to work for the school board. Oh, and remember that asshole from the bar a couple weeks back? That’s him. He had to have been stalking her. He has been around for weeks, all the places she’s been, yet she didn’t know it. She said she had no clue he was here. She had a go bag packed in the back of her pantry, Bec. A go bag! She was ready to run, who knows how long she’s been living this way. When we left, he was still there. There was no way in hell I was waiting around. I needed to get her out of there. I haven’t even called the police yet. I was too focused on her safety. Plus, you know how I am with cops.”

“Thank God you got there in time before it got worse.” I hear the double meaning in her voice. She means, good thing she’s not dead. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t cross my mind. We’ve seen domestic violence firsthand. While I want to be understanding, I am so furious Maddie didn’t tell us this could happen. We could’ve protected her. Helped her before it got to this point. We could’ve kept an eye out for this fucking asshole.

“Stop thinking like we could’ve done more, B. We don’t know enough about what’s going on to know we could’ve stopped it. I can feel your guilt pouring out of you. This is not your fault.” Her voice is stern as she grabs ice from the freezer, wrapping the baggie in a paper towel. “I know you hate cops, B, but you have to call them. This town isn’t like where we grew up, bogged down by overpopulation and

underpaid uniforms. I wouldn't be shocked if they already heard about it. It won't look good if she doesn't call them," Bec pushes gently.

I'm too angry to register half of what she said. "No, you're right. It's her fault. How could she not fucking say something? Tell us that she was being watched, followed, stalked. If she told us, we could've been more attentive! She wouldn't be up in our bathroom bleeding!" I sputter my last words, fuming at her carelessness, as cold liquid hits my face. I wipe it away with my hand and see Bec glaring at me.

"Now that I have your attention, you ass, I don't want to hear you ever come close to blaming Maddie for anything that's happened to her. How dare you after what we saw as kids. This is not her fault any more than our foster mother's! She has cuts all over her, Bennett! If that's how someone from her past greets her, how do you think she had it back then? She got away somehow. She found the strength. That makes her brave, strong, and badass. I know you care for her and feel helpless right now, but pull yourself together. This is not about how you feel. This is about how she's doing. This happened to her. Not you. Not me. *Maddie*." She finally breathes and starts again, poking at my chest. "And another thing ... Don't fuck this up. Don't go all cave man and push her away. We need to be careful or she'll bolt. We are her family now. I feel it, and so do you. We are all connected on a different plane than the rest of the world. If you chase my new family away, I swear to God, I'll kick your ass, Bennett James Harrison. My spatula will be shoved so far up your ass, I'll be able to flip my

flapjacks through your mouth!” Bec’s chest heaves as she catches her breath, and she moves her pointy finger off my chest to cover her palm over her heart. “Phew, okay, now I’m done.” She exhales, running the back of her hand across her head like she ran a marathon.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I ... You’re right. She left her bag in my truck. I’m going to go get it,” I reply. I need some space to think. I take the walk to my truck slow. As much as I want to race upstairs and be with Maddie, I also need to keep my cool. I get to my truck and remember to grab my first aid kit too. I’ve been paying so much attention to the lightness about her, I didn’t see she was in danger. I observed her kindness and empathy toward others like my life depended on it. I wish I could’ve seen the future, saving her from this pain. Kept her from living in a nightmare and set her free from the invisible chains she feels shackled by.

When I reach in and grab her purse and duffle bag from the back seat, a photo slips out of an unzipped pocket of the duffle bag. A photo of a woman and a little girl. The woman shares so many similarities to Maddie, though her eyes are green. Maddie’s are the blue, brightest I’ve ever seen. A little girl sits in the woman’s lap, her little arms wrapping around her neck, a gapped-tooth smile covering her face as her blonde hair blows in the wind. The little girl could be Maddie, but when I turn it around, it says *Ivy - age six*. Ivy? But she looks so much like Maddie. Does she have a sister? Putting the photo back in her bag, I zip it all the way shut, feeling guilty, as if I betrayed her in some way by glimpsing at it.

The chill of the night follows me on my walk back to the house, or maybe my chill is symbolic of the horrors that could've happened tonight. When I get to the base of the stairs outside the kitchen, I collect myself, building the courage to head up and knock on the door.

Chapter Twenty

Ivy

When I step out of the shower, I finally feel clean, the blood washed off most of the cuts on my hands and knees. But in my mind, I still feel so dirty, the water not washing away the thoughts in my head. Wrapping myself in the fluffy towel, I pull my hair back and squeeze it over the shower before twisting it and pulling it over my shoulder.

Fog covers the glass of the vanity mirror, and I don't want to wipe it away. I can already see the bags under my eyes. When I look down, I see I still have glass in both my hands and legs. I open the towel to see the bruise forming on my stomach. History becoming my present, I'm right back where I was five years ago: battered and beaten. My sight blurs when the tears I've held back all night finally make their escape. I croak back a sob and wipe the steam off the mirror to look myself in the eye. "You can't do this, Ivy. Not here. You can't lose it here. Get it together. Suck it up."

Knocking has me straightening up, wiping the few stray tears that fell even after my protests. The door opens a crack,

and a hand sneaks in, holding a first aid kit.

“It’s me. Can I come in?” Bennett whispers.

Wiping my eyes one more time for good measure, I suck in a breath. When I feel as collected as I will be, I open the door, waving my hand, gesturing him to enter. Bennett pulls out a pair of tweezers and grimaces when he sees my legs. I reach out and grab the tweezers from him. “I got it.”

I sit on the side of the tub, getting to work on the first piece of glass right under my knee. Hissing, I go for the next one in my calf, then two more at the ankle. Pausing briefly, I collect myself before moving to the next leg. When I shift, I look up and see Rebecca and Bennett watching me from the doorway. Both of them are staring at me like I am made of the same glass I am pulling from my flesh.

When Rebecca looks like she is tearing up, I have to look away. I wish they would give me the courtesy to do this alone. Their presence gives me more unease, as I’m worried what they may be thinking, waiting for them to ask me questions. To ask if I am scared. I am scared, but they don’t need to know that.

“I’ve got this. I can do it alone.” My voice cracks as my shaky hand lowers back down to my leg to get the last few pieces out. Thankfully, there’s no glass in my hand, only the cuts from my fall. Everything hurts, like I’ve been hit by a bus and dragged along the road under it. But the pain reminds me of what I walked away from. How I’ll never allow it again. Then again, I’ve said this to myself before. Trying to steady

my hand, I can't get it to be still enough to clasp around the shard. Small hands encircle mine, and my eyes shift to meet Rebecca's. She's kneeling in front of me, lowering herself to help me, no questions. No expectations.

She takes the tweezers from my hand and gets to work on the glass. It doesn't take her long, and when my eyes return back to the doorway, Bennett is gone.

“When I was eleven, my parents died in a car accident.” Rebecca's soft voice fills the room. I look at her and watch her as she applies bandages on the cuts large enough to need it, and she continues with her story, “I went into the system having no other family. My foster mom was nice. She always made sure we ate, had clean clothes, and she read to us at night. She even gave us each a handmade scarf for Christmas. We didn't have much, not with having four foster kids in the home.” She takes a breath, but I can tell she's not done. So, I don't interrupt her. “My foster dad used to get mad so easily. One thing out of place, and it would be World War 3. One night my foster mom had forgotten to clean up a pan she left soaking in the sink. He got home and threw her against the glass dining table. It shattered under her. I don't know when I reacted, but I raced to her side to help her up. My foster father struck me across the face. An instant after it happened, I heard a crash and saw Bennett on top of him, telling me to run. So, I did, but I couldn't leave Bennett. He was fourteen then. Our foster dad threw him off and grabbed his wife by the throat. I'll never forget the look in her eyes. She had been waiting for it. For the day he'd lose his control so much he'd kill her. It's

like all the fear left her body, and she accepted that she'd never have to deal with it again." A tear falls from her cheek onto my knee. "Bennett and I were separated after that, but he always made sure I was safe. He'd ride his bike for miles to my school to be sure I was doing okay. That day changed both of us. We haven't lost contact since." Her eyes meet mine. "I saw that same fear in you, in your eyes when I hugged you that day back in the bakery. It was like a haze went over you, like you anticipated an unkind hand. She used to flinch, too, when I would grab her hand in the supermarket or hug her unexpectedly. Fear like that doesn't come from a one-time experience. It comes from what feels like a lifetime of capture. I don't know what happened to you, but I am sorry. You are safe here for as long as you need."

The back of her hand cleans the tear off my cheek. I didn't even realize I was crying. I don't know who I am crying for: little Rebecca who lost her parents, her foster mom who lost her life at the hands of her abuser, or Bennett and Rebecca who had to see someone else they loved taken from them.

I don't think I can be in the same room as her and not lose it. It's not fair. So, I stand and watch her hand fall from my cheek. "I'm going to get dressed. Thank you for helping me and letting me stay here tonight." I grab her hand and give it a squeeze before walking away from her.

My shaky legs make it to the bedroom, even though after a few moments, I thought I would collapse right in the hallway, losing myself. Shutting the door behind me, I rest my back against it as I look to the ceiling. How is she so nice after all

the trauma she's had? She could be angry, distant, disconnected, but instead she's so warm and accepting. I wish I could turn off my agony, let people in. Offer them compassion. I don't know how to do that. My duffle bag sits on a chair by the window. Stepping forward, I pull out a sports bra. As I pull the bra over my head, my ribs scream in agony, begging for my arms to be brought down. Holding one hand to my side, right over my bruised rib, I slightly bend at the knee to snag a pair of underwear next. A gush of cold air surrounds me as the bedroom door swings open and shut. Whisking around, I see Bennett standing in the middle of the room.

“Why didn't you tell me you needed help?” His arms are across his chest. I cover my waist with my hands, and the pair of boy shorts is clenched in a tight grip. Right as I am about to rip him a new one, I see his eyes travel to my stomach. Fuck. I spin around and drop the underwear, grabbing a zip-up hoodie, pulling my arms through it, and zipping it up. It's longer so it falls just below my butt.

“Don't you knock!” I shout.

“Did he do that to you?” He is closer to me. *No, genius. I walked into a table.*

“Bennett, what do you want from me?” I bury my face in my hands.

“I want you to tell me if he did that to you.” He's stepped more into the room, sounding closer than before.

“I'm fine.” Keeping my back to him, I shut my eyes, willing him to get the picture and leave me alone.

“God damn it. I didn’t ask you if you were fine. Did he do that to you, Maddie?” he shouts. The volume in his voice alone is enough to make me flinch. Pulling my hands from my face, I drop my head. My shoulders slump as the tears start to rush forward. It’s silent, my cry. All the energy is exhausted from my body.

His hand lands on my shoulder in a slow steady movement. I want to lean in and let him hold me for a while, but it wouldn’t be fair to him. To take from him and not offer any explanation for tonight.

“You don’t need to run. We can help you,” he whispers.

I slowly turn around, looking him right in the eyes for the first time tonight. “You can’t help. No one can help me. You need to let me go.” I barely get the words out. Do I mean them? Do I believe them anymore? He steps closer to me, and I hope for a minute he’ll stop asking questions and be here. Hold me and let me escape for a little while. My heart and head battle against each thought.

His hand skims the hem of my sweatshirt. Sliding the back of his finger on my ribs, he pulls his eyes from mine and looks down. His face contorts into a painful look. I push his hand away slowly, walking to the window. I need time to think. I need to figure out what I am going to do. A plan. When I feared this happening, I never thought I would have anyone I cared so much about. Lowering myself to the chair beside the window, I ignore the pain as I pull my knees to my chest. It hurts, but the pain in my ribs doesn’t come close to being in

the same room with someone who feeds your soul, and you can't do anything but push him away.

“Tell me who that was, Maddie.” He's begging now, pleading with me for some type of clarification.

“He's someone I used to know, or at least I thought I did. My ex, I told you that.”

“Why is he here?” He pushes as he squats down low to get in my line of sight.

I shift my eyes from the floor to him. “I come from a world where people break you ... tame you like a wild horse. He got used to taking from me, till one day I ran. Have you ever run from a predator ready for the chase? You'll run for what feels like forever. They won't catch you when you slow because you're tired. You're still on alert. They'll catch you when you start to relax, when you think the chase is over. When you think that you're safe. That's when the monsters come.”

“You're safe here, Maddie.” He's making a promise he can't possibly understand. I won't let him get in the line of fire. They can't target Bennett or Rebecca.

“You shouldn't say things that you don't know to be true. You don't know them. You don't know me.” My heart is breaking at every word.

“I'll protect you, Maddie. Give me a chance.” His hand grabs mine as he lifts it to his mouth, pressing a tender kiss to my palm. I need him to stop. Every move he makes reminds

me how much he means to me. How I'd die if anything happened to him. In true Ivy fashion, I sabotage.

“Like you protected your foster mother?” I spit at him, pulling my hand away. I hate myself for it. My mouth is burning with the acid sitting on my tongue. When I look at him, his eyes grow wide, and I prepare for the fallout. He opens his mouth like he's going to speak but closes it. After a few seconds, he seems to know what he wants to say.

“I see you, The pain you wear each day. I thought I didn't, but everything is starting to make sense now. I won't let you push me away. I won't let you be alone anymore. You want to fight this feeling, this pull between us, fine. But I won't leave you. You have people now, Maddie, whether you let us in or not.” He stands and walks away from me, slamming the door behind him.

I want to let them in. I would be lying if I said I didn't love that he said they aren't walking away. We do agree on one thing; they are my people. I can't let them get mixed up in this. I can't let them in and be in the crossfire.

I wait in the room for about two hours before I change into black leggings and throw on my sneakers to make it easier to run, you know, just in case. I am hoping they are asleep, or at least back at the bakery letting off steam. It's where he went last time. I saw the lights from his bedroom window. I turn the handle on the bedroom door, and it squeaks in protest, the sound so loud, I may as well announce to the neighbors I am leaving. When I step into the hall, every creak in the hardwood

has me pausing, holding my breath as I listen for movement. No matter what I do, it may as well be a stampede of elephants trying to leave this place. After making it down the stairs, I feel relieved when I hit the bottom step. Now for my last obstacle, please don't let Bennett be lying on the couch.

Upon turning the corner, I peer around the half wall leading to the living room, letting out a breath when I don't see him, so I continue my steady escape toward the front door and slowly twist the bolt, till I hear a click.

"Where are you going?" I nearly jump out of my own skin, spinning toward the kitchen. My eyes find Bennett's staring back at me as he sits at the kitchen counter. *Damn it.* I was so focused on the sofa, I didn't think to check the kitchen.

"I can't let you and Rebecca get in the middle of this. I need to leave," I say catching my breath.

He stalks toward me, his steps so wide he reaches me in a blink. He tears the duffle bag off my shoulder.

"Hey! Give me my bag back!" I yell, attempting to grab it from his hand.

He walks away and tosses it on the counter, then proceeds to open every pocket. He pulls out over-the-counter medication, quick snacks, bottled water, pepper spray, a taser, two changes of clothes, cash, and my passport.

I'm attempting to wrestle his arm away as he continues to shake the bag upside down, but I am no match for his strength.

“This is a go bag. You had this hiding in the back of your pantry, Maddie. I get you’ve been running, but you don’t have to anymore. But I will tell you now, I changed my mind. You don’t get to hurt Bec. You can’t hurt her to push us away. That ploy upstairs with my foster mom, it’s not going to work. But it’s also not okay. Now, tell me the truth.” He spreads the contents of my bag all over the counter, making it impossible for me to leave with any of it.

He waits for me to answer, but when I don’t, he turns and grabs my passport. *Shit! He can’t find out this way.* “Stop!” I scream, lunging at him, but pain shoots through my torso, and I drop, folding myself in half, trying to stop the pain. I may have displaced some ribs tonight. I cry out in pain as Bennett drops the passport in less time than it takes me to cry out.

“Maddie, what’s wrong? Where does it hurt?” Concern ices his words, and it seems he no longer cares about his interrogation a few seconds ago.

Rebecca sprints into the room, hair all out of place, her face full of sleep. I have to come clean.

“Ivy. It’s Ivy.” It’s the only words that I get out while I try to swallow down the pain and anxiety.

Both look at me like I am speaking another language.

“Ivy? What? Who’s Ivy?” Rebecca asks.

Bringing all the strength I have to the surface, I stand up, leaning myself against the counter, and I tell them the truth. “I’m Ivy. My name is Ivy Hanson.” I slowly bend down to

pick up my passport off the ground and hand it to her. She doesn't hide her shock as her eyes bounce between the documents and my face.

“I've been hiding for five years, trying to escape my past. It caught up with me today. I'm sorry for dragging you into this.”

Neither of them says a word. Rebecca sits down on the stool at the counter. Bennett, while seeming to be shell-shocked, still has his arm around my waist, staring out into a space past me. I wait for them to soak it in, but it's clear neither of them knows what to say.

“I left home five years ago. Some stuff happened I am not ready to share. It broke me. I couldn't stay. I knew if I did, I'd die there, even if it was only my mind that checked out. I packed a bag and left. Madeline was my great grandmother's name, Brighton my mother's maiden name. I colored my hair and moved to NYC. I went to school and worked as a waitress. Mainly lived out of my car. I got a gym membership for the showers and Wi-Fi access. Once I made it through school, a regular at the restaurant told me about the opening at Atlantic. She summers here and knew someone who knew someone. It seemed like the perfect fit, so I applied. I was living in a campsite for a while, but the Fritzes noticed. They offered me a place to stay in exchange for working on the weekends. It was a win-win, really. And here we are.”

“Five years?” was all Rebecca could offer me. Bennett wasn't holding me anymore. He was leaning against the wall, watching me.

“Who’s the guy?” he asks.

Sighing, I continue, “Arty. My ex. Though I know my father is the one who found me. Arty is dumber than a box of rocks. He got my number somehow and called me a few weeks back, told me some crap about getting my new number from my father. In hindsight, it should’ve been a red flag. I destroyed the phone, and then he started texting me again. He was also the one who chased me in the car. I figured all this out tonight,” I explain.

“Wait, how did he get your number a second time?”

Rebecca interjects.

My face reddens, and I look to Bennett. “There was an unsigned note on my door, and they left a phone number.” I swallow hard “I thought it was Bennett.”

Bennett slumps to the floor and bends his knees, placing his arms across the top of them. “You were texting him thinking it was me? How did he do that?” His face is buried in his hands, so I could hardly hear him.

“Well, um, he, um, it wasn’t long after the rain situation, and the way he texted, I thought it was you,” I say weakly.

“He sexted you and you replied back, thinking it was me?!?” he shouts as he looks up at my face.

“I didn’t reply. He was the only one messaging. He also texted the night I brought you dinner. Again, I thought it was you and found it odd you were asking me again if I wanted to talk but thought maybe you wanted to keep our private

conversations private. When I was talking to him after that, I always thought it was you.” I shrug

“How did you find out it wasn’t my number?” he pushes.

“I called you tonight when I saw him pacing outside and pounding on my door. I dialed the number I thought to be yours and he answered, laughing that I didn’t catch on sooner.”

“Holy shit” Rebecca exclaims. Honestly, I forgot she was here.

“I need some air.” Bennett pushes off the tile floor and walks past me without a glance and out the front door.

My shoulders drop, and my eyes begin to water. I thought he said he’d never leave my side, but he did. I should’ve been honest sooner. I look at Rebecca with pleading eyes, and she doesn’t hesitate and pulls me into a hug. She says nothing. She doesn’t have to. This is my fault.

Chapter Twenty-One

Bennett

Going fifty miles an hour down a dirt road likely isn't the best of ideas, especially after the night we've had. I am exhausted and so angry I need to do something. I need to find this asshole. Bec's words repeat in my mind, and I feel stupid for letting my past with the police interfere with Maddie's— *No, Ivy's safety*. My whole body feels like it could explode. The sick bastard texted her, stalked her, made her believe *she* was messaging *me*. This whole time he not only stole from her, but he also stole from me. Stole moments I could've had with her.

Pulling in, I see red and blue lights fill the dark parking lot. My truck comes to a stop, and a deputy holds up his hand, motioning me to stop. I roll down my window, the deputy approaches, but directly behind him is a couple huddled together. The woman is crying into the man's shoulder. I assume it's the owners of the campground.

“Good evening, sir. This is a crime scene. We are going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Are you Mr. & Mrs. Fritz?” I shout past the man in uniform. They both nod and walk slightly forward. “Iv—” I choke on her name, correcting myself. “Maddie is safe.”

“Oh, thank God!” Mrs. Fritz sobs into her clasped hands.

“Thank you. We were so worried. We heard a car crash into something and speed off outside her apartment. When we went to check on her, the door was open, like it had been rammed into, and there was glass and blood. So much blood.” She continues to sob.

The deputy eyes me suspiciously. “My name is Deputy Clarence; I will oversee this investigation. Where did you say the victim is?”

“She is at my house. I know we should’ve called you before we left, or at least when we got in the truck, but my first priority was to get Maddie out of here.”

His head nods in understanding. “So, do you know the suspect in question?”

“I don’t know him personally, no. However, he seems to be someone from her past. I can’t speak for her, but I can bring her to the station tomorrow.” Looking at the clock on my dash, I see it is already three AM. “Well, later today, I guess.”

Deputy Clarence takes down my contact information and turns to finish talking to the Fritzes, so I know I am free to go. I pull out of the parking lot, back onto the dirt road leading to town, and slam my fists against the steering wheel. How the hell could I be so stupid? I curse myself for not tying him up,

or at least calling the cops right away. He could be in custody. All I can think of now is getting back to Ivy. I shouldn't have left her, but I couldn't let my anger be the focus. I feel guilty about how I raced out of the room after she finally let herself be vulnerable. After she finally told me, us, the truth. Who knows what she's thinking now?

Time moves in slow motion, the road disappearing in the darkness. I feel like I am stuck in an endless vortex, waiting to be spit out the other end. How am I going to explain the way I walked out on her? As my ignition turns off, Bec is rushing out the door in her robe.

“You better get your ass in there and make this right. Jesus Christ, this is why I prefer women. You men are so idiotic,” she scolds.

I can't blame her for her response. She isn't wrong. Head hanging low, I walk past Bec as she taps her foot, arms crossed. She's like some mom catching her teenager coming in past curfew. I make my way up the stairs, and before I even knock on the bedroom door, I hear Maddie's sobs. My hands clamp up and my stomach drops. I did this to her. In my need to take action, I added to her pain. Without knocking, I gently open the door, stepping into the darkness, closing the door behind me. The only light in the room are the red numbers on the alarm clock resting on the nightstand next to the futon. The light is barely enough to highlight her body facing the wall. She hasn't turned to face me, but her sobs have gone quiet. The only indication she's crying at all is the small quake of her

shoulders. I could speak, tell her I'm sorry. Would it be enough?

Following my gut, ignoring the urge to speak at all, I kneel on the floor at the edge of the futon, brushing my fingers across her cheek, moving the fallen hair out of her face. Her shoulders freeze as she snuffles quietly. I place my hand on her shoulder and apply light pressure to pull her toward me, so she is flat on her back. If she puts up any resistance, I'll stop, but she lets me pull her away. Her knees and head are still facing the wall, as her shoulders now lie flat against the bed. I do the same to her legs. She lets me manipulate her body easily. When my hand moves to her face, I leave it there for a moment, feeling tears against my palm. When she's completely facing me, her eyes closed, I shift closer to her.

"Open your eyes," I whisper. She doesn't give me what I want. Leaning forward, I kiss each eyelid, feeling her tears on my lips. Those belong to me. They are my fault. All because I needed to service my own need for justice, for revenge.

Her mouth slightly opens, and I can feel her tiny pants against my neck.

"I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry." I exhale as my forehead rests against hers. I want to hold her. I need to hold her. "Can I hold you? Please, let me hold you, Ivy." Her eyes fly open and meet mine, her chest heaving. I see relief in them as a tear falls. Maddie stares at me for a moment, as if she is contemplating her answer, then with a small nod, she lets me in. Grabbing the covers from the bottom of the bed, I pull

them up as I climb into bed with her, her body moving deeper into the bed to give me room. She burrows herself into me, her head into my neck. Her hands are resting at her chest, and I place my hand on her lower back, gently pulling her even closer into me. Lying there with my chin on her head, I feel whole. It doesn't take long for her breathing to slow, and her body relaxes. I feel the weight of her head on my arm. I know it will be a matter of minutes before my arms fall asleep, but I can't bring myself to care. I kiss her forehead one more time, begging it's enough to warn off any nightmares lingering on the surface after tonight. Feeling my eyes grow heavy, I let myself fall asleep as well. She's safe.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ivy

I'm not sure how long I've been awake, a few hours maybe. It took me a moment to realize where I was. The warm body encircling me had me thinking I was still dreaming. Bennett's arm, still firmly draped across my waist, keeps me anchored against him. I used to feel suffocated when anyone held me this way. Like my skin was desperately trying to detach from my body to slither and hide away. Not with Bennett. Bennett's body fits around mine perfectly. At some point, I must've flipped over in the night. Now his front is painted on my back, our feet intertwined. I wouldn't want to move even if his powerful arm wasn't holding me in place.

A bright stream of light lets me know it's early morning now. Rebecca is likely already at the bakery. It's Sunday, I'm supposed to be going to Jordyn's party today. Blinking wildly, I remember ... Jordyn. The Camaro. She knows Arty. How does she know Arty? Does she know who he is to me? Has he talked to her about me?

Before I can throw myself into the abyss of spiraling thoughts, a hand sprawls open across my stomach, pulling me closer to him. Bennett's pinky gently skims over the small space of bare skin between my shirt and shorts. My body unintentionally arches into him, and I feel his morning wood against my ass. His head moves from above mine, his lips brushing the side of my neck. His chest expands as he inhales. The sound resonating from his chest is nothing less than a beast seeking release. Tingles start at my belly in anticipation as his hand moves lower. I raise my hand above my head, scratching below his hairline. *Ahhh*. He feels so good against me. His body freezes as a moan leaves my mouth.

"Ivy, I'm so sorry. I, um ... I was asleep. Fuck, you smell so good." He leans in, inhaling me again.

Embarrassment has me pulling my face into the pillow. I reacted so easily to him. He wasn't even awake, and I was ready to hump him into the next dimension. *Damnit, hormones*. Before I can think better of it, my hand grips his arm as he starts to pull his body away from me. I don't have to say anything. His arm pulls me closer to him, and he laces my fingers in his.

I arch my back into him again as a hiss leaves his mouth in appreciation. He's as affected as I am. I feel his hand flex under mine as his thumb pushes my shirt up, bringing our joined hands to drag across my stomach. The intimacy behind his gentle caress causes wetness to pool at my core. This small touch is enough to make me soaking wet. I'm overloaded with sensation as his lips connect to my shoulder, and he lets go of

my hand and slides his into the top of my pants. My heart is beating so fast, it may burst right through my chest. His hand stalling at my panties throws me into a confidence I didn't know I had. I know what I want; I won't let his hesitancy stop me. I'm not as fragile as he thinks. His slow pace is generous and understandable, but I don't need him to take his time right now. I need him to take me. Having enough, I grab ahold of his hand, pushing him into my panties.

“Holy fuck. Shit, you're so wet.” His hand glides against my clit, and my legs spread, wanting him to have more room to move around. Before he moves lower to my entrance, his hand is gone, and I whine in protest.

His chuckle makes me want to strangle him. He shifts behind me, and his arm pushes against my shoulder, so I am flat on my back. He is still on his side, looking down at me like he's starved and I'm his next meal.

He smirks. “You know, I can handle you deciding a lot of things.” His hand moves to the waistband of my panties. “You decided how often I get to see you when you moved your class to the auditorium.” Sliding his hand below the seam, he hovers right above my center. “You decided you didn't want to talk to me, so I couldn't talk to you.” Thick fingers connect and circle my clit, and my hips jerk, grinding into his hand. *Oh, God.* My eyes shut. His hand stops its movement. “What you don't get to decide is how I make you come.” My eyes open to his brown gaze focused on my face. “Good girl, keep them open. Now, I'm only going to say this once. I lead here.” His finger

enters me without warning, pushing deep, filling me exactly where I want him.

“Shit,” is all I can muster. The smile that spreads across his face speaks of confidence as he puts a second finger into me and begins to pump faster. The sound of my wet heat trying to squeeze his fingers, keeping them from leaving me sounds around us. His thumb moves over my bud, and my head snaps back against the pillow. I bite my lip, attempting to hold back the scream trying to claw its way out of me.

“Mmm, there she is.” His lip meets mine fast and smooth, dominating and eager. His hand moves faster, and his mouth leaves mine. Shifting above me, his other hand pulls up my shirt with uncoordinated fast movements. I lift my arms, aiding him in his task, as my shirt flies off me. His eyes zone directly onto my breasts. He licks his lips and bends forward. His hand never slows as it pumps inside of me, persistent and powerful. His lips surround my nipple, and he sucks, *hard*.

“Oh! Please, don’t stop. Don’t stop.” I moan and thread my fingers in his hair, keeping his face against my chest. My words are airy and barely heard over the sounds of our breathing.

His teeth nibble on my pink peak as his fingers curve inside me, hitting that perfect spot of flesh. His thumb pushes harder against me.

“*Yes!*” I scream. My brain-short circuits, and I throw my head from side to side, losing myself in my orgasm. His mouth hovers over mine, taking my screams as his.

“Hell yes, you’re so fucking tight. You look so beautiful. Come all over my hand.” His dirty words would normally have me shying away, but his deep husky voice escalates my ecstasy, like a high I will ever come down from.

Mouth against mine, his tongue slowly caresses in an open-mouth kiss. As I’m coming down from my peak, his hand pulls away. His fingers move to his mouth, and he tastes me one digit at a time. He lets out a sound of approval. “Better than I ever could’ve imagined.” He smirks. I feel the redness in my cheeks grow darker by the minute at how exposed I am, while he lies hovered over me, completely clothed.

I feel his hand on my cheek, and his lips meet mine again, this time gentle and soft. “I’m going to go take a shower. You stay here. I’ll bring you some coffee when I’m done.” He stands from the bed, and all I can do is smile. The smile stays on my face as he exits the room. I feel giddy, pulling my pillow to my face, laughing in disbelief. It’s crazy I’ve found someone who can make me feel so protected and safe, but still dominate me in all the right ways.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bennett

If I had to describe the look of peace, I'd describe the look on Ivy's face as I walked out of my bedroom. Her smile was light, eyes sparkling, skin flushed, hair a complete shit show. I'd wake up to that every morning given the chance. It took all my willpower to not fuck her. If I weren't the man I want to be for her, I never would've shown such restraint.

When I woke up, I was sure my dream had started to play in real life. When she pushed my hand into her panties, I could've creamed right then and there. She was soaked. So wet my hand barely had any friction against her at all. I needed to take charge, take her far away and watch her fall back down to me. I've seen a million beautiful things traveling the world, but none compare to the moment she gave herself over to me. This is the second time, and it was even better than the first. It takes over her entire body, no hiding.

Cold water sprays across my back as I turn the shower on. I need to cool myself down. *Who am I kidding? I need to take care of this before I find myself losing control.* As I hang my

head under the showerhead, the water begins to warm. My left hand supporting my weight against the tiled wall, my right-hand wraps around my cock. Closing my eyes, I see her below me, her eyes fighting to stay open, her mouth in an “O” as her nails rake down my back. I tease at her entrance. The tip of my shaft pushes into my tight fist, imagining her sweet cunt begging me to ram into her. With a few pumps of the tip, I imagine her eyes meeting mine as one word passes between us. “*Please.*”

I shove my cock into my hand, grunting as I spurt against the white tile in front of me, my cum washing down the drain as fast as it left me. I half collapse on the wall, now holding myself up with my forearm and forehead, shaking my head at the ease of it all. *Fuck.* I’m in so deep. All the complexities of Ivy are creating an addiction. Her piercing blues attacked me first, but her smile ... Damn, she could pull the attention of every single person in a room with that smile.

I’ve never had to pretend about who I am. I was never ashamed of my story either. Ivy is doing what she needs to do to survive. I could never imagine spending five years in self isolation to keep myself safe, seems exhausting. What she doesn’t know is that I see her strength peeking through. She may have disguised her appearance and her name, but she can’t hide from me. Her tells are no longer invisible. She bites her left thumb nail when she’s showing nervousness, rakes her hands through her hair and averts her eyes somewhere on your face, to appear to be looking at you, but won’t look you in the eyes when telling you a lie. The second her lie has passed her

lips, her eyes are back on yours. She clears her throat and nods when she needs an extra moment to think before she responds. I see it. I see her. She's letting her walls down slowly, and I will be here waiting on the other side.

Shutting the water off, I step out of the shower and throw on my gym shorts, walking down to the kitchen with a noticeable bounce in my step. I've never come across a person who can both be so guarded and transparent before. The smell of coffee leads down the hall. Bec must've started it already. Bless her. I know I told Ivy I would make it, but spending one more minute away from her is pure torture. The coffee steams into the cup as I pour, and I reach into the fridge to grab the flavored creamer she loves. Not quite sure how she likes her coffee, I shove the creamer under my arm and head back up the stairs with our mugs.

When I approach the door, I begin to shoulder it open, realizing it must've latched when I left to shower. "Ivy, beautiful, can you open the door?" Stepping away, I wait for her to answer or to hear her getting out of bed, but I hear nothing. "Hey, Ivy, you fall asleep on me? Wake up, sleepy. Let me in." I knock on the door with my elbow. *Stupid, she's probably exhausted. Stop trying to wake her up.* Kneeling, I put the coffee on the floor outside the door and turn the knob slowly, not wanting to wake her. When I walk into the room, everything comes to a massive halt.

She's gone.

My eyes wander around the room. The bed's a mess; her bag is gone. Bec's borrowed pajamas are thrown haphazardly on the floor. There is no sign of her. A breeze from the window catches my attention. I walk over to it and see it was her means of escape. She clearly walked across the porch's roof and climbed down the rest of the way.

What the fuck! I scream, slamming my fist against the wall, nearly leaving a fist-sized hole behind. I don't understand. She seemed so happy this morning. Why would she run? Where the hell is she going? A million ideas run through my mind. Every pound of my foot against the hardwood shakes photos lining the walls in the hallway. Every stride becomes bigger as I make my way to the bakery, stampeding inside like some sort of animal. I can almost see the steam expelling from my ears.

I like to believe I am an understanding guy, mostly patient. I give people the benefit of the doubt. I am honest. I never lead anyone on with my intentions. I told her I wasn't going anywhere, and she bails. Again. The door to the bakery slams as I enter the kitchen, and I see Bec at the counter rolling dough.

"She fucking left." I clench my teeth, feeling them grinding to the point of pain.

"Okay ... Maybe she needed to step out. Did you try calling her?" She eyes me worriedly, like she doesn't understand why I would be so pissed.

"Whose side are you on? We fight to befriend her. Show her we care. We catch her in the lie and still offer her safety with

us, and she still runs away!”

Bec’s hands stop working the dough, and she walks toward me. “B, we can only do what she will let us. We can’t force her to stay. She said last night she’d stay the night. She did. We need to give her time to trust us. If there is anything we know better than anyone, it’s learning to let people into your corner. It’s been you and me against the world for almost two decades. We’ve both had a revolving door of lovers and friends. If it weren’t for each other, we would probably be in the same place as Ivy. Try to be patient. It’s Sunday. You’ll probably see her tomorrow at school. If you are worried, call her. I doubt she’s dumb enough to go back to her apartment. She’s been running and hiding for years. She knows how to take care of herself. Let her.”

“Nice speech. Now that it’s over, need I remind you, her abusive ass ex is on the loose? When I left last night, I went to her place to take care of him myself. When I got there, police were everywhere. The owners said they saw a red car race out of the lot.” Her face pales. “You got it; the asshole chased her in his car, terrorizing her. And he’s still out there, likely not being as careless about his disguise. Want to know what else I found out? There was this guy, some sort of “board” member at the school last week, watching her. It was him. He’s been stalking her, Bec. Who knows what this prick is capable of? And I’m pissed she’d even put herself in danger. She needs to realize she’s not only fighting for herself anymore.” I worry the floor, pacing back and forth, unable to focus on anything but where she may have gone.

“You are right, Bennett. I’m sorry. I’m worried too. It brings back so much from when we were kids. How our foster mom always used to say how she couldn’t leave. Excuse after excuse. How it was her home. What if Ivy goes home? What if she doesn’t want us involved? What if we can’t help her?” Tears come down her cheeks.

Walking over to Bec, I grab her shoulders. “She’s already home. I’m gonna go back to the house and get my phone.” I kiss her forehead and release her.

I know Bec still thinks about our foster mom. I know she wishes she had more pull, begged more, pushed harder, fought harder. I guess I didn’t even make the connection to Ivy. My paces have slowed a bit, me having calmed, though I’m still pissed. Ivy needs to let me in. I tried to be the slow patient guy, but after this move today, I refuse to do that anymore. My dominant traits are about to release full force, Mr. Patient out the fucking window. I’ve reined in the best for her, to keep her comfortable. That restraint is long gone now that she’s run away from me again. I know she’s fighting herself as much as she’s fighting me. Maybe she doesn’t need a nice, contained Bennett. Maybe what she needs is someone to show her how much they mean when they say they will keep her safe. No more talk. Time to show her.

Making it to my room, I walk over and grab my jeans off the floor to get my phone and call Ivy. The screen illuminates in my hand, and I see I have a new message. I don’t recognize the number. Opening the message, I read:

Thank you for last night. Well, and this morning. I can see now you and Rebecca really do care. I figured something out last night. Jordyn knows Arty. I am not sure how, why, or when they met. But I saw her get into that red Camaro in the school parking lot. I need to end this. End their chase for good. I don't know why Arty is here, but I'll make him leave.

She must've added her number to my phone and texted from it. Right above her message is an outgoing text of a heart emoji.

My fingers stumble over the touch screen as I reply to her,

Bennett: Stop. Don't do this alone. Come back. We can figure this out together. The message shows received almost immediately before I see three bubbles indicating she's typing back.

Ivy: Bennett, it's fine. I can handle Arty. I'll make sure I am not alone with him. He is too smart to try anything in public to ruin his image. I have a plan.

Bennett: The fuck you do. Ivy, I am not kidding. I have been patient with you. I have gone slow with you, and I have let you take your time to come to me. Time is up. I am not playing games. Come back.

Ivy: No.

Bennett: YES. My blood is boiling to the point of eruption.

Ivy: Not gonna happen.

Bennett: Ivy. Do not test me.

Ivy: I'll be fine.

Bennett: I didn't ask you if you would be. Come. Back. Now.

Ivy: I'll talk to you later. I gotta go.

I dial her number, and she declines my call, sending me to voicemail. Pacing in the center of my bedroom like a helpless fool, I dial again. *Denied.*

Bennett: Ivy, answer your damn phone. At least tell me where you are. I will come with you. The three bubbles illuminate, and I am afraid to blink, gripping both hands on the phone, willing her to send her location. The bubbles disappear, and she doesn't reply. She fucking ignored me. Flat out did not answer. This girl has to be the most infuriating person I've ever met. On one hand, I'm impressed, but on the other, I am ready to break something.

The only other option I have is to get into my truck and drive around looking for her, so that's exactly what I do. I trip into my shoes, not realizing I ran to the bakery barefoot. I throw on a baseball cap, swiping my keys off the nightstand. It's time to chase her. She's been running and chased by monsters for years. What she doesn't know is that my need is stronger, and my willingness to do whatever it takes to keep her safe will surpass her stubbornness to do it alone. *I'm coming for you.*

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ivy

I have a plan. Like hell I do, but I have been repeating the line to myself since I left Bennett's window, trying to convince myself I know what I'm going to do. I have no clue, but I do know I need to do something. When Bennett left me alone in bed this morning, I felt this pull to him. Like a string tethering me to him, the farther he went, the harder that force felt. Five years ago, I would have laughed at such a connection. Hell, six months ago, I would still have said this type of connection doesn't exist. People never give you all their cards, so how can you trust? I don't doubt Bennett's actions anymore. I know he's irate. I would be pissed, too. But I need to handle this so we can move on. *So I can finally move on.*

I made it to the school as the debate team loads on the bus for their meet a few hours away. I hurry and freshen up, throwing on a nice cocktail dress I had in the costumes for the drama department. Staring at myself in the dressing room mirror, I slide my hands down the sleek dress. It's tighter than my usual style, but I need to look presentable, and I can't

really go to my apartment for anything. So here I stand in a slate gray pencil dress, with its sweetheart neckline, looking like an imposter. The neckline dips dangerously low, exposing the cleavage I usually hide away, and I wear heels I found deep in a box, black with red soles. I fluff out my hair and apply a tad of powder under my eyes, giving myself one last glance to be sure no cuts are revealed under the hem of the dress.

My legs shake as I walk out of the dressing room and exit the building. Jordyn's house is, luckily, down the street from the school, so at least I don't have to walk too far in these damn heels. Anxiety starts to creep in as I think about what Jordyn might know. Looking at my hands, I see they aren't as easily covered as my legs. I will tell her they got scraped up from catching myself after tripping. Partial truth. Those are the easiest lies to tell, aren't they? The click-clacks of my heels seem to collide with my breaths, right, left, right, left. I focus on nothing but the pounding in my chest. I look up before crossing Main Street and see Bennett's truck is still there, about twenty yards away. Thankfully, he hasn't come looking for me. I crouch down and race across the street, as if it would make it any less obvious. I'm crossing the road with absolutely nothing to hide me from view. *Idiot.*

Before I know it, I'm standing outside Jordyn's home. Cars line the street, but there's no Camaro to be found. After walking up the porch stairs, I ring the bell, praying I can get through this. Straightening my posture, I flatten the front of my dress with my palms as the door opens. "Maddie, I'm so

happy you could make it! Come in.” Jordyn waves her arm frantically. She looks tired but well put together in a red cocktail dress. Her hair is pinned and swept over her shoulder. I offer a small smile and enter the house. Looking around, I see everyone is in suits and dresses. I’m happy I made the decision to change before stopping in my jeans and Harley tank top. Jordyn leads me into the kitchen, and she stops at the counter.

“What can I get you to drink? Wine, cocktail, beer?” She opens the fridge to show me the selection to choose from.

“I’m good, thanks. Hey, Jordyn, can we talk for a minute?”

She eyes me with a look of suspicion. “Okaayyy,” she finally says. “Come back to Charlie’s office; it should be quiet back there.” Following her down the hall, I catalog the family photos lining the walls, the cleanliness of her home, and the perfectly placed decor. She really is quite the perfectionist.

When we enter the office, the room is surrounded by oak bookshelves, smelling of cigars, and reminds me of an office of an old mafia boss from those Tarantino movies. A black leather chair sits behind a mahogany desk, with some sort of weapon hung up on the wall. Long red drapes cascade around the window. It’s the complete and utter opposite of the beautiful, open white floor plan of the house. She closes the door behind me and parks herself on the desk.

“Honestly, I’m happy you want to talk. My face feels like it’ll be permanently stuck in a damn fake smile if I’m out there another minute. I love my husband, but the schmoozing is a

lot. I hate that we can't celebrate without keeping up appearances. I mean, come on. We aren't like those yuppies out there. I'm a science teacher, for Pete's sake. I'm not a Stepford wife. Half the time I come home smelling like acid." She blows stray hair out of her face and crosses her legs. The house she keeps is a complete contrast to who she is.

"Anyways, you look smoking. Who knew ripped jeans and baggy T-shirts were hiding so many curves under there? Where is Mr. Harrington when you need him." She giggles as she raises her eyebrows up and down. My cheeks redden, and the look on her face tells me it doesn't go unnoticed.

"Ohhh, I see that blush, Ms. Brighton. You've got a thing for Mr. Math Hottie! I knew it! I knew when, on the second day, he came into my room asking all those questions about you, it would only be a matter of time before he sweet-talked you. So, are you going to go on a date?"

"What ... I ..." She almost got me there. Shaking my head to clear it, biting my thumb, I look at her. "I'm sorry. Bennett isn't who I wanted to talk about. I ..."

"Bennett!" She squeals. "We are on a first name basis? Oh. Em. Gee! Are we on a shirtless basis? Please, tell me you are. Tell me everything. No details left out. This is so exciting! I will have to live vicariously through you. Lord only knows the last time I've seen any action. Charlie has been married to work foreverrrrrr."

"Jordyn. Breathe ... Just shush, okay? First off, I have nothing to share on that front. I'm close with his sister. She

owns the bakery, so we um ... We see each other.” I’m not telling her I’m staying at their house until I figure out what Arty is doing here. I shuffle in place and rub my hands together nervously before I ask, “So, a while back, you were waiting at the bakery for someone. That person was driving a red Camaro. Can I ask who that was?”

“Red Camaro? I was meeting with a realtor. There is a house right on the water that was put up for sale. With the big promotion, I wanted to surprise Charlie. He always wanted to live on the water. So, I reached out to the buyer’s agent on the website. He was supposed to meet me but never did.”

Okay, that all sounds reasonable. She has always talked about moving somewhere with waterfront property. “Oh, okay, I guess I assumed it was the same person because I saw you get into a red Camaro at school.”

“Oh, that red Camaro. Yeah, that was Charlie. He surprised me at work and picked me up. He has been thinking about buying one but wanted to pick me up and see how I liked it. I think it belongs to a buddy of his because he didn’t get it from a dealer. Ivy, are you alright? You’ve never been this invested in my life before. Don’t tell me you’re that friend that shows interest once the money starts coming in,” she half jokes.

“You know me, queen of the luxuries,” I sarcastically reply. Well, her explanation makes sense. Which means she doesn’t know Arty. Could there be more than one red Camaro in this small-ass town? I find myself relaxing a bit, knowing what I know now.

I nod toward the door. “So, should we get you back out there so you can continue to play obedient housewife?” I poke her side, and Jordyn lets out a big sigh.

“Yeah, I guess. Ugh, I really don’t want to. They are all so stuffy. Half of them seem to have sticks up their asses. We should hide in here,” she says as she lifts a bottle of bourbon off Charlie’s desk, waving it at me.

We both jump as the office door opens. “There you are! What are you doing hanging in here? Come on, babe. I need you out there with me,” Charlie begs at the doorway to his office. Charlie is very handsome, wearing a navy-blue suit. When he finally notices me standing here, he extends his hand toward me. “I’m sorry. Charlie. I’m Jordyn’s husband.”

“Hello, I’m Iv ... Mad—” Pretending to cough, covering my mouth with a fist, I reach out my other. “Sorry, I’m Maddie.” That was close. I need to keep my shit in check. Coming clean to Rebecca and Bennett can’t have me getting loose at the mouth.

“Oh, Maddie! It’s so nice to finally meet you. Jordyn talks about you all the time. I’m happy to finally put a face to a name. Come join the party. I’m sure it will dwindle down before we know it.” He smiles.

“One could only hope,” Jordyn whisper-grumbles behind me. I stifle a laugh, looking over to Jordyn. “So, I heard there was wine?” I wink. She pushes off the desk, skipping and clapping her hands as she steps in front of me, stopping to

offer a peck on the cheek for Charlie. They are cute together. Yin and Yang, but they seem to balance each other.

Following close behind Jordyn, I make my way back to the kitchen, looking forward to a nice glass of wine. When we head down the long hallway, we step into the open floor plan of the kitchen. Placing both hands on the counter, I watch Jordyn move with ease as she opens drawers to find her bottle opener. Not sure why. There are like five bottles of wine open.

“I don’t know how these people drink that crap. We’re slumming it with the good stuff.” She winks, pulling out a cheap bottle of Moscato from her fridge.

I chuckle. “Must’ve been a while since you slumped then, because you don’t need a bottle opener for that. It’s a twist top.” I laugh a little harder.

I feel a hand on the small of my back, and I freeze. My brain is confused. I stay still as if my lack of movement will erase the body behind mine. The hand moves its way around my waist and firmly rests against my lower stomach. Hot breath hits my left ear. I feel as though my brain is misfiring.

“I’d recognize your laugh anywhere, baby,” a deep voice whispers. “Don’t make a scene. Tell her we have some catching up to do and you need to leave.” My eyes meet Jordyn’s, and her questioning look meets my gaze. I did this to myself.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Bennett

I've called Ivy five times since I left the apartment. I drove to the Fritzes' campground, and they said she hadn't stopped at home. I check on the school, which is a dead end. I take every back road imaginable. The radius of this town is maybe seven miles, so she's either left Scarlett Bay all together or I've missed her by a millisecond.

Where the fuck are you, Ivy? I pinch the bridge of my nose as I think of the next place to look. I should head back to the bakery; maybe she went back home. Making a U-turn at the school, I notice a line of cars parked along the curb. It looks like someone is having a party. Slamming on my breaks, I jolt out of my seat. Didn't she say Jordyn was having a party today?

She fucking wouldn't. There is no way Ivy would put herself in danger and go to Jordyn's party knowing Jordyn may know Arty. We stayed up talking about everything. I shared about the loss of my grandparents. She told me about her mother, and about the prison she lived in since she died. About all she

has been through. The hell that those two men put her through. The immense loss she's felt. I feel closer to her. Like her confession has cracked more of her armor and has given me the opportunity to see her unshielded. Ivy wouldn't go after them alone. No, she's smarter than that. Even though I want to believe it, I find myself slowing my truck. Pulling it up to the curb and putting it in park, I look up and down the street of cars, no Camaro.

My phone begins to vibrate in my pocket, and I shift to pull it out. I don't recognize the number, but I answer. "Hello?"

"Hi, I'm calling for Bennett. Bennett Harrison," the professional male voice on the other line asks.

"Yeah. This is Bennett."

"Yes, this is Deputy Clarence. We spoke last night at the Fritzes' campground. You agreed you would bring Ms. Hanson in for a statement. It's a little after noon now, sir. I need to check that Ms. Hanson is still coming in."

"Yes, I'm sorry. She stepped out this morning before I could speak to her about meeting you. I will get a hold of her and bring her in shortly. Thank you for your call." I disconnect before he can respond.

Opening my door to my truck, I hop out and approach the front door I assume is Jordyn's. I ring the bell, and thankfully, a familiar face meets mine. Her eyes are a bit surprised, but she smiles nonetheless. "Oh, hey, Mr. Harrison, how are you?"

"It's Bennett, please. I'm here to see if Maddie is here?"

Leaning into the door jamb, she smirks. “Well, she was. You just missed her.”

“Missed her? Where did she go?”

“You know, I’m not sure. She seemed to know one of my husband’s associates. He seemed pretty comfortable around her, if you ask me. He asked if they could go somewhere to talk. They left about twenty minutes ago. She seemed hesitant at first, but he must’ve charmed her.” She talks as if she is describing a fairy tale. Little does she know, it’s Ivy’s worst nightmare.

“Did you get his name?” I try to keep my tone neutral as my irritation skyrockets.

“Uh yeah, I’m sure he mentioned his name, but I can’t remember. Arnold, maybe?” she says as she scrunches her eyes shut, as if looking for the name floating around in her head.

I narrow my eyes at her, knowing what the answer to my next question will be. “You mean Arthur?”

“Yes! That’s it! Wait, how did you—”

“You have absolutely no clue where he took her?” I interrupt.

She shakes her head, clueless. “Nope. But I’m sure she’s fine. She’s a big girl. Good for her having two guys chasing her. About time that girl got out.” She laughs.

“Do you or your husband at least know where this guy is staying?” The pitch of my voice rises as I pinch the bridge of

my nose in annoyance.

“Hmm, considering we have one hotel in town, I’d assume there. But I don’t know.” She shrugs.

Without another word, I’m storming down her front steps, racing to get back to my truck.

“Bye to you too!” Jordyn shouts from behind me. I throw her a quick wave and get in. My tires squeal as I floor it, trying to get to the hotel as quickly as possible. I’ve been this angry one time, and it’s not lost on me that it was a situation all too similar to this one. This crippling anger I feel now comes pretty darn close to that when our foster father hit Bec. If that son of a bitch so much as lays a hand on her again, I will kill him myself. Consequences be damned.

It takes me two minutes to make it to Step Back Inn, down the road from Bake Away, and I park my truck in the diagonal parking across the street and head for the entrance. When I enter the hotel, there is no one at the front desk, only a small bell that says, “*Ring me.*”

I pick up the bell and shake it a few times before laying it back onto the counter. An old lady comes from the back room, gray hair braided down to her waist. She looks me up and down and scoffs. “Can I help you?”

“Actually, yes, ma’am, I’m here looking for a friend of mine?”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re all always looking for a friend of yours.” Her eyes roll as she starts to walk away.

“No, ma’am, I’m sorry. I have a friend staying here.” I stand with my hands in my pockets, hoping she will tell me what I want to hear.

“Well, there are no customers here. So, whoever she is, she isn’t here” She begins to hack out a heavy smoker’s cough.

“Is there another hotel nearby?” Worry laces my reply.

“Not on the island, but there are a few private rentals ... or the bed and breakfast off Casper.” She begins to give me directions, but I’m already on my way out the door, nearly swinging it off the hinges.

Getting back into my truck, I let out a scream, “Fuuuuuuuuck!” Gripping the steering wheel, I inhale deeply, shaking my entire truck with the amount of force I use. *Why is she doing this?* Last night, I got her away from this maniac. There’s no way she’d willingly leave with him. She has gashes all over her to remind her of her struggle. Turning the ignition, the truck revs up again, and I put it in reverse without looking and slam on the brakes as an old lady in a wooden wagon appears behind me out of nowhere. She honks at me to warn me of the collision. I’m no longer in my right mind. I forget everything around me. Nothing else exists except finding Ivy.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ivy

Arty is different than I remember, even colder than he used to be. Detached. He is taller, bulkier than the boy I left all those years ago. The change in his frame makes him seem more lethal than before. Arty never physically harmed me, not till the night in my room with his friends. He was more of an emotional manipulator. He'd keep me hostage in my own mind, making me feel like I was on a tightrope, waiting to fall. But now, as he walks me out of Jordyn's home with a death grip around my waist, I'm scared, battling with the instinct to scream and run as far away from him as I can.

Disconnecting from this moment, I focus on the sun. The day seems warmer now that it's peeking through the clouds. We make it on to the sidewalk after leaving Jordyn's house when Arty's smile falters for the first time.

"It's about time you fucking listened to me. I won't lie. The thrill of the chase has been more than enjoyable, but fucking five years, Ivy? You'll be lucky if I, even for a moment, let you leave my sight again." His arm releases my waist, and he

moves his grip to the back of my neck, squeezing so harshly, I bend to find relief. Without any hesitation, I react, my hands pushing into his chest, forcing distance between our bodies.

“You don’t need to touch me. What do you want, Arty?” I grit through my teeth.

“Arthur. I’ve told you time and time again, it’s Arthur. Not here. I’m taking you back to my place, and we will talk there.” He advances on me again, and I dodge his grasp. Rolling his eyes, he closes them as he pinches his nose. “You know, the defiance you had as a teenager was cute, but now it’s repulsive. Quit the games and get in the fucking car.” We are standing in front of a sleek gray sedan. I keep my stance in place, refusing to break eye contact first. I wave my hand in annoyance to insinuate he can move away from the car. He side-steps slightly, enough for me to grab the door handle. As my hand grips the handle, my face is slammed against the car, a quick force as pain spreads across my face. “Ow!” I scream. Before I can react, the harsh dig of his fingers pulls at both sides of my face as he scowls at me. “It’ll serve you well to mind your manners around me. Do as you’re told and we won’t have a problem. Be a bitch and there will be consequences.” Hatred lacing every word, he throws my face away from him.

The taste of blood fills my mouth, but I’m unaware of where it’s coming from as my whole face aches in pain. I’m not sure what’s worse, the sheer burn I feel over my face or the fact that I underestimated Arty.

Not wanting to cause any more trouble, knowing how stuck I am, I nod. He opens the car door for me, grabbing the top of my head and guiding me in with gentleness, as if he didn't bust my face on the car seconds earlier. The door slams next to me, and I take a moment to dig for my phone in my purse. With the windows of the car blacked out, I may be able to get away with it. Finding my small flip phone, I pull it out. I watch Arty closely, so as not to get caught, as he rounds the back of the car. He stops at his door and appears to be on the phone himself. With my trembling hands, I type a text to Rebecca as fast as I can, knowing she always has her phone in her pocket. "*Gray Challenger, tinted windows.*" That's all I manage before the driver door opens. I shove the phone into my bra, hoping to conceal the device.

"Give me your purse," he demands as he glides into the driver's seat. I must take too long to obey his request. His aggression is clear as he whips across me, grabbing my bag from the floor between my legs. His arm moves intentionally slowly as he smooths his hand across the inside of my thigh, keeping his eyes set on me as he pulls my bag to him. I refuse to look at him. I won't give him the idea that he can easily get a reaction from me. So, I remain forward, eyes trained on the tree in front of me on the curb. Its leaves are already changing colors. Arty's hand digs through my bag, no doubt looking for my phone. The bag gets thrown into the back seat, and his body turns to me.

His hand moves across the console and grips slightly above my knee. When I keep my attention on the tree, he squeezes a

bit harder. Not enough to cause me pain, but enough to say eyes on me. Here we are again, Arty expecting me to do what Daddy taught me, obey. So, out of pure rebellion and as a promise to myself, I do what I practiced since I left hell. I keep my eyes forward, shoulders back, and repeat to myself, *“Challenge yourself to be better. Do better.”* I won't let them break me again.

His patience has always been short. That's one thing that remains a constant for Arty. The grip on my knee grows brutal, but I school my face to hide the pain as his nails dig into my flesh. Arty has escalated from silent scars to visible ones. Gritting my teeth, I cave, moving my head in his direction and meeting his eyes.

“Mmhhh, that's more like it. Won't take us long to get back to normal, now will it?” His eyes are cold. Who pines over someone for half a decade? His comment makes me want to crawl out of my own skin. Did I cave? Am I a weak little girl living in a fantasy of freedom?

“Now, where is your phone?” he asks, not pulling his hand away.

The lie comes swiftly. “I left it in my apartment. I wanted to get out of there when you broke in. I haven't been back.” His eyebrow arches as he inspects my face for lies. I don't move; I don't breathe. A car door slamming behind us breaks the silence. My eyes flick to the side mirror as I see Bennett running up the front steps to Jordyn's house. My hand immediately reaches for the handle when Arty's hand laces

into my hair, his grip unyielding. “Don’t you fucking dare. Let go of the door, Ivy. Now.” My hand drops from the door as he continues to pull at my hair. Letting out a small whimper, I move my hand to try and release some of the tension off my head.

“Don’t make a fucking sound.” He shakes his head, bringing his face close to mine as he licks the side of my face. I revolt at his touch, but I can’t move.

My eyes are still focused on Bennett, and I’m mentally sending him signals, hoping he’ll sense me, feel how close we are. *Please, Bennett, look over here.* For a moment, time freezes as Bennett’s head turns in our direction, and he looks down the street. A sob wrenches through me, tears flowing steady. It’s as if his eyes land right on me, but it’s impossible. The front door opens, and he takes a slight step inside.

“Let’s get out of here before your boy toy comes back out.” An evil gleam is in his tone as he kisses my cheek and pulls away from me. My tears, mix with tinges of red, fall to my lap, covering my hands. My bloody face is long forgotten.

We pull away from the curb and begin our drive to who knows where. I take that moment to glance at Arty while he’s driving, fully anticipating his eyes to be on the road. Queasy, I swallow at the situation I put myself in, but when I see the smile, ear to ear, on his face when my eyes meet his, I all but vomit at my feet.

“There’s my girl. Beautiful and broken.” It’s like pouring acid on a wound. Swallowing down the thickness in my throat,

I allow myself to do what I have to, to survive. I offer him a small smirk and turn to look out the window. Never underestimate the power of a man to underestimate the power of a woman.



“Don’t make a scene. We’re going in to have a bite to eat and talk,” Arty orders as we pull up to a diner right outside of town. It’s small and run down. The car slows as gravel crunches under the tires, like that night he chased me.

Sucking in a breath, I retort, “You expect me not to make a scene yet want me to walk in there with my face looking like this?” I ask, pointing at my nose. I know there is blood on my face without even having to look. It covers my hands when I attempt to wipe proof of his assault away. He reaches to the center console between us, then to the back seat. The smell of his strong cologne burns my nose. He can’t possibly think it’s a pleasant smell. His hand returns with a bottle of water and tissues from the backseat, and he hands them to me.

As I lower the visor to look at myself for the first time, anger surges through me at the sight of my face. It takes all my control not to lash out at him. I have to be smart, formulate a plan. Dampening the towel, I bring it to my face to clean under my nose and above my top lip. Thankfully, my nose doesn’t seem to be broken, but bruising forms on the ridge. Once the tissue hits my face, it throbs in pain.

From what I can see, my lip and cheek took the brunt of the blow. Taking my time, my face now free of any crimson red, I give myself another look. There is a vacancy in my eyes, paleness on my skin, and bruises are forming.

Closing the visor, I turn to Arty. “What do you want from me? The bullshit about needing the restraining order redacted is crap. I know it won’t stop you from getting your job. What is this really about?”

He smirks at me, and it reminds me of the Cheshire cat. There’s something devious, dangerous behind it. A lot must’ve changed since I left Chicago. While Arty was a narcissist, he was nothing but a pawn for the devil himself. The man I see before me now is irrevocably evil.

“You’ll find out what I want soon enough,” he sings. Arty opens his door and slips out of the driver’s side. Rounding the front of the car, he opens my door and guides me into the restaurant with a solid grip on my elbow.

No one seems to pay us any mind. The smell of stale coffee and over concentrated bleach-cleaned booths completes this dingy space. Navigating our direction to the back of the restaurant, Arty guides me to a booth. Instructing me to sit, he follows in the seat across from me, with his back facing the door. The booths line the windows of the diner, and he pulls the blinds down, creating our own little cove in the back of the restaurant.

I feel sensory deprived. The only reprieve I have is the ability to see the restaurant’s entrance as people walk in. Or in

my case, the exit. How can one door have a dual meaning, depending on perspective? Weighing my chances, I look around to catch the attention of someone. If it gets bad enough, I can mouth, “*Help.*” I guess I will have to wait and see where this so-called conversation leads us.

“Why’d you leave all those years ago?” Arty pointedly asks.

“What do you mean, why did I leave? Did you honestly expect me to stick around after what happened? I talked about moving away long before then, but what happened ... how everything happened ... There was no way I was staying.” I try hard not to raise my voice, needing to bide my time before he puts his hands on me again.

“You were a brat used to getting her way. It wasn’t that bad. Trust me, it could’ve been worse,” he retorts.

“Well, I guess we will never know, will we? So, are you going to start explaining why you went through all this trouble to see me? Why do you feel the need to barge into my life after five years? I’m pretty sure disappearing and changing my name would’ve made a very distinct impression. I want nothing to do with you,” I spit. All thoughts of self-preservation are out the window. Who am I kidding? I’m not that meek, palpable little girl anymore. I’m stronger than this, and letting him believe otherwise isn’t going to keep him from what he wants.

“I believe I would be the best to answer that.” A shadow forms over me, and my whole body turns cold.

“Dad,” I whisper.

Mitchell Hanson stands before me, invading my space as I try to catch my breath. Mitchell is a heartless man. A man who, during his wife's suffering, turned his head and slept with as many women who would accept his invitation. A man who treated me like I was only there to look pretty and serve a purpose of appearances. The man who murdered my baby.

"Hello, dear Ivy. I've been working very hard and utilizing many resources to find you." His body bends, and his chest pushes against my shoulder, making me scoot in. Then, he slides in next to me.

"It's time I get what I deserve. So, tell me, Ivy, where is your mother's necklace?" His voice is menacing as he crowds me, pushing me farther in the corner of the booth.

My hand instantly reaches for the spot it normally rests on my chest. It's gone. Rubbing my chest to try and ease the ache I feel to not have it, I drop my hand to my lap. Where could it be?

"What would you want with my mother's necklace?" I question.

"Well, someone found their voice since being away from home." My father chuckles to no one in particular.

"You're right. She's been a real pain in the ass," Arty deadpans.

"Ivy, dearest, it's time to come home. You'll be happy to know, Arty has advanced in his father's company, as we planned. Merging our families will bring us to the top families

in the City of Chicago. It's time to fulfill your responsibility as my daughter." He sneers.

"I'm not coming back with you. I will not marry this monster across from me either," I snap, looking Arty in the eyes. *I would die before I have to link myself to him forever.*

Pain shoots through my knee as my father's hand clenches my leg, digging his fingers hard. Fighting a wince, placing my hand over his, I dig my nails into the top of his hand, feeling my nails break through my skin. I suppose he is human, after all. Though, the devil bleeds, doesn't he?

He hisses as he pulls his hand back quickly. "Well, I see you inherited your mother's stupidity." He elbows me hard in the ribs, blowing the wind out of me.

I'm confused, my mother's stupidity? What is that supposed to mean? Did she fight back against his aggression, too?

Instantly, I'm thrown back into the past as a six-year-old little girl.

Peeking into a cracked door, I hear my mother whispering into a phone. "He's on to me. I know it. I'm not sure how long I can keep this up. No. No. I'm not backing down. But Ivy is my number one priority. I can't leave her with him. He's a monster. I need to wrap this up and get us both out of here. How much more do you need? Okay. Yes, I hear you. I will sneak into his office tonight. Okay. Yes. I'll be safe. I love you too. Goodbye."

Who was she talking to back then? What was she looking for? She was collecting something, but what?

The waitress interrupts whatever conversation Arty and my father are having. My mind is absent from the room around me. The waitress eyes me warily, and I can see the knowing look in her eyes. *She knows.*

“Could I please have a glass of water?” I ask meekly.

She nods. “I’ll be right back with that, miss.” Her eyes move between my father and Arty for a moment before she slowly walks away.

“So, where is the necklace, Ivy?” my father urges. He looks no different than he did five years ago: sleazy car salesman with greased back hair, overgrown nose hairs, beer gut. Yet with all that, he still has the God complex. Real charmer.

“I don’t know where it is. Lost it.” I shrug with indifference, as if the necklace means nothing to me.

Where I lost it, I’m not entirely sure. I never take it off. Running through the last few days’ events, as if a movie scene is playing before me, I search for it. *My apartment.*

Last night, when Arty yanked me by my ankle, I fell to the ground. I remember feeling my necklace tug on something. It must’ve broken off sometime during the struggle. It’s a tad jumbled, it all happened so fast, but it has to be there.

“Bullshit, you bitch. I’ve been here for weeks watching you. You never take it off. Where is it?” Arty bellows.

“I said, I don’t know. If you’ve been watching me, when was the last time you saw it on me?” I quip. His jaw clenches. He’s clearly not liking my defiance.

“She’s got a point, son. When was the last time you saw it on her?” My father’s tone drips with disdain, only now he directs it at his minion. *Son. Gross.*

Arty adjusts in his seat, pulling out his phone and laying it on the table. My eyes focus on it, and I feel dizzy. Dozens of photos fill the screen as he scrolls: me walking to the coffee shop, at the school, in the auditorium, teaching my students, at the campground, stocking shelves. There are photos of Bec, Bennett, Mr. G, and Jordyn. All at home and various places around town. Arty has cataloged every aspect of my life. When I think I’ve had enough, my heart stops as I look closer at the phone. Arty spreads his fingers across the screen, zooming in on one photo in particular. There’s an image of me pushed up against Bennett’s truck while he hovers over me in the rain. He’d been peeping in on one of the most intimate moments of my life.

My hands cover my face as the tears start to well in my eyes. How could this be happening? Everyone I care about is in danger because of me. In pure desperation, I reach for his phone, as if erasing the photos will eliminate the threat. My hand is too slow, as my father reaches for it, gripping it hard. I watch my wrist snap before the pain starts. Like lightning before thunder. *Hmpf.* I bite my tongue to silence my scream, not wanting to give my father the satisfaction.

“You will learn to not touch what doesn’t belong to you, like your mother had to,” my father grits out as he releases my hand. My eyes close, and I pull my wrist close to my body, cradling it away. Arty looks at me, pleased, from across the table when I open my eyes.

“I’m going to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.” Arty leaves the table with a pep in his step, as if he laid down a winning hand.

The room goes hazy as Arty’s body steps away from the booth, all sound around me mutes, and then I’m staring at the eyes that have saved me time and time again.

Bennett.

When our eyes meet, he doesn’t change his expression. I swallow hard, trying to keep myself together. He looks tired, concerned. I want to race to him, but I know I can’t. He sits at a table alone. I’m not sure how long he’s been sitting there. How much he heard. My mouth quivers from knowing he shouldn’t be here, then I shake my head slightly. *No.*

I want to cry, scream, run, but I do none of it. I hold my breath and beg my body to stop shaking.

My heart breaks at the sight of him being so close yet so out of reach. Silently, one tear falls before what feels like hundreds race down my face. When I open my eyes, Bennett rises from his seat. He looks straight into my eyes before mouthing, “*It’s okay.*” My chest rises quickly as I try to collect myself. Bennett walks toward our booth with a confident stride.

“Hey, I was looking for you this morning. You left without saying goodbye.” His voice isn’t strained. If he knows something is wrong, he isn’t giving it away. But I know him. I can feel the tension in my bones. My father doesn’t even look up at him. His face is burrowed into his phone; I doubt he even heard him speak. My sadness suddenly turns to hate.

“Bennett.” Bennett extends his hand to my father, right in his line of sight, giving him no opportunity to ignore his introduction. There’s no sense of intimidation at all. The last thing he will ever be is vulnerable to him.

My father, not one to deny pleasantries, extends his hand toward Bennett, returning the gesture. *Appearances, remember?* Bennett’s eyes land on my father’s hand, and he sees the bloody nail marks covering the top of it. If I’m not mistaken, a ghost of a smirk crosses his face.

“Mitchell Hanson, Ivy’s Father.” He speaks flippantly. The gleam in his eyes and confidence in his tone proves he thinks he has a one up, that Bennett doesn’t know my real name.

“Nice to meet you, sir. Ivy, can I talk to you for a moment? Bec wanted me to ask you about selling baked goods at the fall play. She’ll kill me if I don’t tell her I saw you. She’s in the car. I was coming in to pick up a to-go order.” He lies so easily. The words flow from his mouth with no hitch.

“Sure.” I sit up, turning my body to leave the booth, waiting for my father to move.

“I’m sorry, Bennett, is it? It’s been a while since I’ve seen my daughter. We have a lot to catch up on. I’m sure you

understand.” His hand moves to my leg under the table, communicating I don’t move. My shoulders fall in defeat, as I know I’ve lost this round. I should’ve known it wouldn’t be easy.

“Oh, I understand fine, Mr. Hanson. I’m sure you missed your daughter. However, my sister is not as understanding as I am. If I go out there without Ivy, she will storm in here. Probably cause a scene. You know how women are.” Bennett winks. *He fucking winks.* If this were any other moment, I would punch him for that comment, but now? Now, I could kiss him. His shit grin is exactly what my father needs.

Father lets out a full belly laugh, as if hearing the best joke he has to date.

“Got that right, son. They wouldn’t know a proper way to conduct themselves if it weren’t for us.” My father laughs as he slaps Bennett on the shoulder. He rises and moves out of the booth to give me room to exit. I eagerly grab my bag, but my father’s hand grips my neck.

“Leave it. You’ll be right back.” The look he gives me is one of warning. I nod, leaving my purse where it is. As I step next to Bennett, he swings his arm over my shoulders, and he pulls me close.

“She’ll be back in no time,” he shoots over his shoulder as he guides me right out the side door of the restaurant.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bennett

“Get in the truck. We are getting you out of here,” I whisper against her ear as we open the back door to the diner.

When we get to the Chevy, Bec has already moved to the back seat. After I open the door, Ivy climbs in. Circling the truck, I climb into the front seat, reversing out of the parking spot as fast as I can. The side door to the restaurant busts open, and Arty steps out. *Fucker*. We can hear his screams as we reverse out of the parking space. I throw my middle finger up, watching his face turn purple, like his head may explode in anger.

“Take me to my loft.” Ivy doesn’t stutter. My head whips toward her, barely staying connected to my body at the speed of it.

“What the hell are you talking about? We’re going to the police!” I look at her with confusion. What the hell is she thinking? Her house is the first place they will go.

“No! Take me to my loft. I don’t need to go to the police right now.” Her voice is clipped. I try to rationalize what she could be thinking, but I’m hitting a wall. It makes no sense. My head shakes, and I open my mouth in shock. No words come out. I move my eyes back and forth from her to the road as I drive, waiting for her to say something. Anything.

Bec pushes her face over the bench seat and turns to Ivy. “Ivy ... Bennett went to your apartment last night. The Fritzes called the police after all the commotion. The police are already expecting you this afternoon. Bennett told them he’d bring you in,” she offers in a soothing tone, painting a clear picture for her, hoping to ease her into the plan. I didn’t have time to tell Ivy about the cops last night, not that I wanted to. I planned to tell her this morning, but she bailed before I got the chance.

“I don’t care! I didn’t ask for the sheriff to be called. I need to go to my loft. Let me out if you don’t want to take me.” She aggressively pulls at the handle, when we stop at the one and only light in town. *My luck*. I reach out and grab her hand to keep her from leaving the truck. She screams in anguish, trying to pull her hand from me, using her other hand against her forearm. I let go of her as if her touch burns me. When I look at her wrist, it looks to be doubled in size, purple circling it.

Did they break her fucking wrist? If she were not in this car, I would be turning around so they could fight someone their own size. When I first entered the diner, I saw the bruising on

her face, marks covering the left side. Taking a deep intake of air, I try to calm myself.

“Ivy, why do you want to go back to the loft? We want to get you to a safe place. We want to help you.” I keep my voice barely above a whisper. Not for her sake but for mine. If I say what I want to, it won’t be good for either of us.

“I don’t need your help! Let me out,” she screams. She won’t look me in the eye. It’s a stark contrast to the woman in the diner. The one whose face washed with relief when she saw me.

“I’m not letting you out till you tell me why we need to go back there.” From losing my patience, my tone comes off harsher than I intend.

“I need to go back there. I have something I need. That is all. Take me there,” Ivy rushes.

“Ivy, tell us what’s going on,” Bec adds.

“Why? So, you can look at me like you pity me? Like I’m some fragile broken girl?” Ivy pauses and takes a deep breath before steeling all her features. “You both remind me of that every time you look at me with your sad eyes. That I’m exactly what they made me. A weak, manipulated, broken little girl. I don’t want to be that person! I don’t want you to help me. I don’t need you to fix me! I can take care of myself. Go play savior with someone else. I don’t need it.” A sob almost escapes her at the end, as she pulls at a string on her skirt.

I look at Bec in the rear-view mirror and see her bloodshot eyes as she covers her mouth, attempting to cover her cries. It's a battle of wills—the fixer and the girl who sees the past as all she is.

Without another thought, I turn the truck around and head in the direction of Ivy's apartment. No other words are exchanged. If she wants to go to her place, fine, but she isn't doing it alone. She's trying to run again. Trying to get ahead of the pain before she gets washed away in it. When we pull into the gravel parking lot, she's out of the truck before I come to a complete stop.

I turn to Bec. "Stay here." I race after Ivy before Bec can so much as blink. *Again*. I feel like I'm always chasing her.

"Ivy." I huff at the top of the deck stairs, attempting to catch my breath.

"Bennett, you need to leave. I don't need to be another problem you solve. I made it this long without you." She doesn't close the door to her apartment once she steps inside.

"I know." I exhale, following behind her.

"So, leave," she mutters weakly, her voice losing the authority it held just moments ago.

"No." My tone is stern and final, leaving no room for her to think I will back off.

"What is wrong with you!" She screams and spins around, looking at me for the first time since we left the diner. Her eyes carry the pain of a thousand lifetimes.

“I don’t want to see you get hurt, Ivy.” I reach out to her.

“Why can you not see that you’re hurting me? You remind me of the things I lack! Of everything I could never give you. Of everything I could never have.” She chokes on the last word. Her confession surprises me. She admits she wants me. Why won’t she let herself have it?

“I’m right here. We are right here. Fighting for you. Fighting with you!” I step farther into the apartment, glass breaking under my shoe. Everything in the room is untouched after last night. I watch her as she walks into the bathroom and drags her foot against the glass on the ground, still in a dress and heels. There is no way she’s comfortable.

“What are you looking for?” I ask, watching her kick away a few more times.

“Nothing.” Her arms are crossed against her belly, while she cradles her bad hand close against her.

“If you tell me what you are looking for, I can help, and we can get outta here,” I offer, hoping she will tell me so we can do exactly that.

“A necklace. It’s a moonstone. It was my mother’s. It came off when Arty showed up here last night and ...” Her words trail off. Her head swivels around the apartment as she replays the events in her mind. Her eyes are haunted with the memory, the same way they were the night she had her nightmare.

“Okay, I will help you look. Why don’t you change into normal clothes? You will be more comfortable,” I say as I start

to move cushions from the sofa in case the necklace fell there. I'm happy when she doesn't protest. She nods and moves to her dresser. I'm not sure if she forgets she has no physical walls, or if she is so deep in thought she forgot I'm here, but I watch her unzip her dress and slide it down her body. Her movements are slow, uncoordinated, as she keeps her hurt arm bent in front of her.

I turn my head away, but not before I catch the bruises covering her ribs. When she tries to put on a pair of jeans, attempting to pull them up with one hand but failing, I move to her without hesitation. Ivy hangs her head, staring at the ground, letting me take the pants from her loose grip. She's clearly defeated and exhausted, so we share no words. I bend down in front of her, on my knees, praying she'll accept my help. She stands in front of me in her bra and panties, but my eyes are trained on her feet. I don't want to see her like this, any more than she wants to be seen. She leans her hand on my shoulder, and she lifts her foot off the ground, so I can slide her leg through her pants.

If this were another time, another place, I wouldn't only help her into her clothes. I would graze open-mouth kisses up her legs, hold her hips firmly as she sways in my arms. I would watch her from my knees, begging her to let me have her. But that isn't what this is. This isn't us exploring each other. We are stuck in this revolving door of pain and grief, unable to get out.

With both her legs in her jeans, I rise as I pull her pants up until they catch at the ridge of her ass. Rounding my hands

behind her, we make eye contact, both begging to be in another place. I wish we could be together. As my hands tug her pants to her hips, she looks away again. Her lip rests between her teeth as her chest lifts and falls with heavy breaths. Her emotions are fighting against themselves, like fire and ice. I finish buttoning her pants and pull a T-shirt over her head. She moves toward the bathroom again, this time at a slower pace, and slides on a pair of moccasins.

I watch the look on her blank face turn to surprise, and I tense, worried there is glass in her shoe. Her face lifts to the ceiling in a silent prayer.

“Please, please, please,” she whispers to herself.

Ivy pulls her foot out of her shoe, and when she bends over and puts her hand in, her face lights up. When her hand pulls out, there is a necklace hanging from her fingertips.

Tears fill her eyes as she pulls the charm to her chest. Shutting her eyes tight, she raises her face to the ceiling one more time, mouthing, “*Thank you.*”

I don’t want to interrupt her first moment of peace she’s had since this morning. It feels like a lifetime ago. I feel like I’m being thrown around in the center of a tornado, trying to figure out what she really wants. Does she want me? Will she leave? Am I wasting my time chasing a shadow that will never stay in one place?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ivy

Walking out of my loft feels so final. It hurts more than I thought it would. Bennett's warm hand rests on my lower back as we walk back to the truck. I know I said some terrible things to him and Rebecca. I could hear Rebecca's heart fracture at the words that I shot at them, breaking their trust in me with every word. I will never forgive myself for hurting her. But I want them safe. I want them to be far, far away from this. *From me*. Especially with how lethal my father and Arty have become. My palms begin to sweat at the thought of what else Arty could have on my friends, after what I saw today. Rolling my necklace between my fingers, I think of my mom. *What should I do, Mom?*

"We are going to the hospital, Ivy. You need that wrist looked at," Bennett says as we both return to the truck. I was already thinking it. I look at him, and he stares at me, warning me not to fight him, as if he's already so deep in my mind, carving himself a home there.

"I need to go to the school, first—"

“What do you mean, the school? No, we are going to the hospital; that is the end of it,” he interrupts before I can finish my sentence. I flinch at his words. He should know better than to force me to do anything. In my stubborn fashion, of course, I snap back, “The end of it?! Are you fucking kidding me? You don’t own me. I need to go to the school and get my bag. My passport is in it. Take me there. Hospitals don’t really take kindly to women with injuries like this and men hovering behind them,” I spit. The pain on his face is immediate, so is Rebecca’s gasp from the back seat. I regret it the minute the nasty words shoot from my mouth. This is what I want, though, right? To make them hate me. To become so revolting they want nothing else to do with me or my problems.

“Fine,” he snaps. He’s fuming, his left leg bouncing quickly, during the ride to the school.

I step out of the truck, expecting Bennett to stay seated where he is. Yet here he is again, following close behind me. Rebecca stays back, clearly getting that she should keep her distance. That or she can feel the wrath of Bennett in an orb around him.

Walking ahead of him, I keep my pace to avoid the hopelessness seeping out of him. I want to tell him I feel it too, this magnetic pull that wants to force our souls together, merging us as one. Expecting compassion from him at the end of this is like a murderer expecting to be granted a dismissed conviction.

Approaching the auditorium, I turn to face him. My words are stuck as I battle how I can apologize but still say nothing can change. I understand there are consequences to each of my choices. At any time, my quips and attempts to keep him at arm's length will push him away for good. Eventually, he will fall tired of the overwhelming game that is my brain.

There can be happiness after him, right? At least, I know I had happiness because of him, even if it was short-lived. Without saying anything, I turn away, shaking my head at the thought. The hallways are covered in darkness, so I run my hand along the wall to find the light switch. After a few minutes, I decide to say screw it and walk the hall based on memory. Halfway down, something catches my foot, launching me forward. Strong arms wrap around my waist before my face slams into the floor below me. In a rush, I'm back on my feet. Bennett releases me as if our skin-to-skin contact insults him.

A helpless feeling has me stepping away from him. I did this to us.

"I'm sorry," I mumble before the tears break free. I need to get away from him before I cry. I know him, he will try and console me, and I don't deserve his comfort. Not after everything. Rushing the rest of the way through the hall, I count each step, trying to focus on anything else. I slam the door behind me once I'm safe in the four walls of the small space. When I turn on the light, I get a full look at myself in the mirror. I watch myself break. No amount of pain growing up could've prepared me for this type of ache. It's an all-

consuming, reality-altering pain that spreads across my chest. The only motivation I have left to live is to keep them safe.

The sound of the door creaking open and then shutting has me burying my face deep into my hands, hiding from the only person that could see me even with his eyes closed. I guess in my utter panic, I forgot to lock the door. When I hear him step deeper into the room, my shoulders shake as my body wrenches with a full body cry.

“Ivy, turn around. Look at me,” he whispers. As I shaking my head back and forth slightly, my breath hitches, and I try to compose myself. My body is sweaty and cold as my emotions torpedo through me.

“Ivy, come here,” he says again. But I can’t. I can’t bring myself to turn around. In true Bennett fashion, a hand grips my elbow, and I’m spun into his chest. His hands encircle both my arms, avoiding my wrist the best he can, lifting them over his shoulders and around his neck. Warm lips touch my forehead. “You never have to hide from me. I want to see all of you. All your beautifuls.” He coaxes me into a steady breath. When he lifts my head to his, I see his grief, the concern, and the betrayal.

“I did that.” I point to his face, pulling away from him.

“You did what?” Confusion pulls his brows together.

“That!” I point again, this time circling around his face. “I put that look in your eyes. That pain there. I’m responsible for it. I’m not better than they are! I toyed with your emotions.

I'm exactly like them, born in fire, scorching anyone who gets too close," I shout at him.

He is on me in seconds. His body flips me around, pushing me against the cold wall behind me. His strong hands are on my face, and he tugs me to look at him.

"You may not listen to ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the things I say, Ivy, but hear this. Really hear it. You are nothing, *nothing*, like those monsters. I've watched you for weeks. Craved you for weeks. I've been ready to get on my knees and beg for you if I have to. I'll settle as the man on the sidelines who watches your life continue, if it means I'll be a part of it. You are so much more than what you think you are. Let me in. Let me show you the strong woman I see." Bennett leans farther into me, pushing his erection into my leg. Need. Pure primal unadulterated need lights up my body.

"You don't know me," I weakly protest.

"I know enough. I'm done letting you stand in my way. You're mine now. Say it." His hands are still holding my face captive, but I'm unable to look away, even if I want to. *I don't want to*. I let my eyes trace the sincerity across his face. "I ..."
I swallow hard. Can I do this?

"Yes. You can. Let me in. Let me give you what you need."
His thumb brushes over my lower lip as his eyes watch my mouth open slightly.

"I ..."
I exhale, losing all vocabulary.

“It’s easy, Ivy. Mine.” His foot spreads my legs, and he continues to push into me, grabbing my arms and draping them back around his neck.

“I’m yours.” I gulp, paralyzed with acceptance. His mouth crashes into mine, his hands leaving my face, lowering to my thighs. I’m lifted off the ground, and my legs wrap around his waist. I’m pinned to the wall, his cock grinding against me. His kiss is demanding, harsh, impatient. Teeth, tongues, and lips fight for dominance, throwing restraint out the window. Biting his lip, I suck on him, fisting into his hair with my good hand. When one of his hands finds my ass, his grip strong with bruising force, I rotate my hips against him.

“Mmmm,” I moan as I pull my mouth from him, throwing my head against the wall.

“*Uh*. Bennett, I need you.” The plea escapes my lips, and I don’t even recognize my own voice.

“I always need you. You are the air I need to breathe. God, you’re beautiful.” His tongue traces my throat, and I groan as I continue to grind against him.

“I want you.” A breathy plea.

“You have me, Ivy.” He brings his mouth back to mine.

“No, I want you. I need you. Please.” I lower my hand between his, flicking the button of his jeans. His body stills instantly, trance broken. My anxiety screams at me. He’s going to say no. What the hell, of course he’s going to say no. Earlier today, I was practically calling him a piece of shit. Sliding my

legs down his waist, I keep my eyes trained on the mirror behind him. God, we look so hot together. When my legs hit the ground, I start to step away from him. Fingers slip into the top of my jeans. Grabbing them in his fist, Bennett forces me back in front of him.

“Where do you think you’re going, beautiful?” His forehead rests on mine. His eyes are dark, hungry. Bennett’s other hand comes between us, and he releases the button of my jeans. Sliding the zipper down, his left hand slips in, bypassing my panties all together. His eyes haven’t left mine, so he can watch my reaction. When his middle finger dips between my folds, I hitch a breath. His deep growl releases from his chest, and my core clenches.

“Shit, you’re so wet. Are you sure this is what you want?” he asks. Words fail. So, I move my hand and grip his length from the outside of his jeans. Shock doesn’t quite describe the emotions I feel as my hand grips his girth. I’m no prude, but the size of him sends a thrill and fear through me.

As Bennett pulls away, my pussy weeps for him, and I whine in protest.

“Patience.” Bennett chuckles. He unbuckles his belt and unfastens the button, dropping his jeans to the ground. He strips me from my pants and underwear as I pull one leg through. I jump back into his arms, wrapping my thighs around him. Here I am with one pantleg hanging from one leg around the most amazing man I’ve ever met, about the fuck him for the first time. Crude? Maybe, but I love it. He angles

himself against my folds, as the heat of him rubs against my wet center. The head of his cock slides against my clit, making my legs grip him closer with my ankles in his lower back. *Nirvana*. This has to be the closest to heaven I will ever get. His cock rubs up and down against my ready heat. Our breathing syncs, and our eyes never leave the other.

“You feel so good.” I pant. His moans of approval tell me it’s feeling good for him too. He pulls back enough to angle his cock, ready to push into me. I hold my breath, wanting to feel him spread me apart.

“Yo, Bennett! Where are you? You two have been gone forever. You better not have killed each oth—” The door to the dressing room swings open, and we both stay frozen as Bec catches sight of us. “Holy shit! Oh crap! Okay, while I’m thrilled, I did not see this coming at all. At least not right now. Good for you guys!” Rebecca’s claps fill the room. I can’t bring myself to look at her, my face reddening in embarrassment.

“Bec! Can you get out! Jesus. Close the door!” Bennett scolds her.

“Right, sorry!!” The door closes. There is a moment of silence while we both stare at each other. Then we laugh, both of us losing it on our luck. Bennett bends his head into the crook of my neck. “Of course, this would fucking happen.” He helps me pull on my clothes, and I fix my hair in the mirror as he adjusts himself in his now fully-clothed body. *Such a shame*. I can’t believe we almost had sex. As much as I hate

that we were interrupted, Bec couldn't have better timing. I want nothing more than to be with Bennett, but there is a lot we need to talk about. A lot I have to say, apologize for.

I walk to the corner of the room on shaky legs, my body still buzzing.

“So, that was, um ... ,” I start.

“Awkward,” he says behind me, rubbing his hand behind his neck.

“Yes. We can pretend that never happened.” I nervously giggle. His head reels back with a look of shock on his face.

“No! No! No, not all of it. Only the part where we were interrupted by your sister,” I reassure.

“I wouldn't be able to forget about the rest, even if I tried.” I snort. *I didn't mean to say that last part out loud.* I can feel the warmth rush to my face at my slipup. That is the most honest thing I've ever said to him.

Bending down to grab my bag, my necklace falls forward in front of me, still around my neck. Something catches my eye, causing me to pause. Gripping the necklace, I feel an opening I hadn't ever noticed before. Is this why my father wants it? What is it? Rushing and trying to get it off with one hand, I scramble to Bennett, unsuccessful. “Get it off! My necklace, take it off!” I panic scream. He unfastens the clasp, and I spin to grab it from him. Sitting down at the counter to hold the necklace, I push my thumb nail into the opening, popping it open.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” His voice is laced with concern.

Stunned, I look at Bennett. “It’s a locket ...” Opening the necklace all the way, I see a small chip inside.

“How could I have missed this?” I say weakly.

Bennett takes the necklace from me, examining it. “Look.” He points to the inside of the necklace. “The hinges are inside the necklace; this must’ve been custom made,” he explains, looking over it some more. “This looks like a micro SD card,” Bennett says, pulling out a small chip hidden behind the stone that has hung around my neck for over a decade. Could this be what my father wants? Why would my mother keep an SD card in her necklace? *What were you hiding, Mom?*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Bennett

“What the hell!” I whisper-yell to Bec as we walk ahead of Ivy toward my truck.

“What, like I was supposed to guess you two were about to fuck? She was literally screaming at you to leave her alone not twenty minutes ago!” Bec replies quickly, throwing her hands up, clearly exhausted by it all. Who isn’t?

“Well, we were. Fuck, this has already been such a long fucking day.” I adjust myself for what feels like the hundredth time. I’m exhausted, my mind half fucked from all this tug of war.

“I can go to the hospital, but do one of you think I could borrow your phone?” Ivy asks behind us.

“Yeah, you can borrow mine when we get there,” Bec says. I’m glad she offered; I knew Bec likely saw through Ivy’s attempts to ostracize us.



We ride to the hospital in near silence. The only sound in the truck is the murmur of the radio and Ivy's finger tapping along the door frame. Ivy has been offering me small glances, but the only reason I notice is because I've barely taken my eyes off her since getting in the truck. She looks away the second our eyes meet, shying away from any unspoken feelings. The way her body sits closer to me in the truck makes me feel like I'm finally making progress with her. Finally starting to tear down those defenses she has had up for so long. Getting her into the hospital proved to be an easier task than I thought. When we walked up to the counter, the receptionist peers through her round eyeglasses.

"Name?" she asks. Her tone is borderline irritated, as if this is the last place on earth she'd rather be.

"Ivy Hanson," Ivy offers. The nurse looks up at her face for a brief moment, a look of recognition crossing her face, but Ivy doesn't seem to return it. Grabbing the clipboard, Ivy walks to the waiting area a few feet away. Bec's not not far behind, offering to take the clipboard from her to help her fill it out. Ivy hesitates but eventually hands the paperwork to Bec. I stand here, pretending not to listen to all the information flooding from Ivy. It feels impersonal to hear all of this in such a clinical setting. I want her to tell me all these things because she wants me to know them, not because I'm eavesdropping on her medical forms. Looking around the waiting area, I spot a coffee machine against the wall by the reception area. It's the perfect opportunity to excuse myself.

When I get to the machine, I begin to feed my dollar bill into the money slot and overhear the snooty receptionist on the phone.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure it’s her. She gave the same name; she doesn’t look as sinister as this police report makes it sound. Do we call it in now or after we treat her?” I see her nod out of the corner of my eye in understanding as she hangs up the phone. I instantly don’t feel good about what I’m hearing. Could she be talking about someone else? Sure. But it can’t be a coincidence that she’s making this phone call after we walk in. I grab the coffee and head back to Ivy and Bec. I need to think of a way to bring this up without causing Ivy to freak out any more than she is already. Before I have a chance, a nurse comes through the swinging office doors.

“Ivy? We are ready for you,” the nurse calls. Ivy stands and walks back with clipboard in hand. Maybe I’m being paranoid, but with everything that has happened, I have a right to be. Shaking the thoughts away, I take a seat next to Bec.

“So, what does she need my phone for?” Bec asks.

“She found a weird chip in her necklace. It looks like a SD card, the kind you can slide into a phone or camera. I’m not sure of the significance beyond that. The look on her face was pure fucking shock, though, so there has to be more to the story.”

“Yeah, that’s weird though,” Bec says, looking out the office window. “Her wrist looked bad. Although, apparently

not too bad, if you two had the time to get a little action.” She looks at me and winks.

“We didn’t really stop to think. Impulse took over. That’s what happens when I’m around her. Logical thought goes out the window, and I turn into this lovesick, horny, overprotective monster.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Be careful. I know you’re really falling hard for her, but we still don’t know much of her story. I care for her, too, but don’t get too attached. We don’t know what could happen with her psycho family back in town.” Bec bows her head as she says it, already ashamed that it came from her mouth. I know deep down she’s being protective of me, as this is the first time I’ve really opened myself to anyone that isn’t her.

“I know, but I can handle her and them. I was so ready to march back into that restaurant and beat that mother fucker’s ass for touching her, again.” I clench my fists, wishing I could hit them one time.

“What I want to know is why she went with them. It isn’t adding up.” Bec shakes her head.

“If the swelling on her face indicates anything, I don’t think she went willingly. I can tell she was hit somehow. I won’t let them get away with it,” I affirm.

“We need to convince Ivy to go to the police next,” she declares.

We sit waiting as patient after patient leaves the hospital, some coming and going in the time we've been sitting here. Time seems to stand still as I page through the same crap magazine for what feels like the hundredth time in the last hour.

"Does this seem like it's taking forever?" Bec questions next to me, legs resting on the seat across from her.

"Yeah, I'm guessing she needs X-rays. I'll go ask though." As I walk back to the counter, I see the same receptionist sitting and scrolling through her phone.

"Excuse me, we came in with our friend. The nurse took her back a little over an hour ago. Can you tell me how much longer it will be?" I question.

"Are you family?" she asks, her tone grating in irritation.

"Well, no, I said we are friends, but we came in with her," I answer, rolling my eyes. I look at the door, waiting for her to answer.

"Well, I can't give you information on her care if you aren't family," she retorts, returning her attention back to her phone.

"I am not looking for information on her care. I want to know if she's almost done. She's been back there for a while." I lean over the counter, trying to get her to look back up at me.

"I said I can't help you." She doesn't give me any attention, her answer final.

Fuming, I head back to Bec. What is wrong with that lady? She acts like this is the worst job in the world.

“I take it she wouldn’t tell you what you wanted to know?” Bec determines based on the look on my face. Grunting in frustration, I sit back down. The automatic doors for the emergency room open from the parking lot. Irritated, I look up, guessing it will be another set of patients who will come and go, yet again. Instantly, my stomach drops as two police deputies make their way to the reception desk.

“We got a call about a suspect here at the hospital?” one deputy says as they stand at the desk, one hand on his belt.

“Oh, yes, I called. We can’t let you back to the patient’s room, so you have to do your business after she’s received treatment, but the doctor has kept her back there and will bring her out in a moment. You can speak with her then.” The receptionist’s mood seems to change as she answers in a sweet tone, and the second deputy leans against the counter. The older deputy nods his head, and they move to the side of the reception desk, waiting for their intended party.

My heart seizes as Ivy is escorted out the doors marked do not enter. Both Bec and I leap to our feet to join her. Both men make eye contact with the receptionist, and she nods as they stride in Ivy’s direction.

“Ivy Hanson?” the younger deputy calls out as she walks toward us. She hasn’t noticed them, yet. When she looks to them and sees the uniformed men before her, she looks back to us. The look of betrayal crosses her face as she points her stare at me. I shake my head, letting her know this is not me, that I

didn't bring them here behind her back. When she sees I already know what she's thinking, her eyes turn to confusion.

"Yes? That's me," she says, turning to the uniforms.

"We are going to need you to come with us," the deputy states. His tone firm as he reaches for his handcuffs.

"I'm sorry. What is this about?" I interject, and both men turn to me. One is your typical cop you would assume spends half his day consuming donuts and sleeping in his squad car when he's supposed to be clocking speed on the highway. The other is young, clearly a rookie, and boy does he have a superiority complex seeping off him.

"You are?" the rookie questions.

"Her boyfriend." The words slip out of my mouth. I don't even care what Ivy thinks at this point. The only thing I care about now is keeping her safe. Fuck technicalities, she's mine.

"Well, sir, with all due respect, I'm going to ask you to take a step back." He shifts his body between Ivy and me and turns to her, his back facing me.

"So, Ivy, we are going to need you to come with us to the station. We have some questions for you," he repeats.

"I don't understand. Can you tell me what this is about?" she asks, shuffling back and forth on her feet.

"It appears there has been an allegation reported against you. We are going to have to ask you some more questions. It would be better to not do this here," the tubby deputy adds.

Her eyes grow wide, and I can see the panic in them instantly. She side-steps them, scooting toward me, and turns, pulling me into a hug. Her right arm is now sandwiched between us in a sling, and she whispers, “Take the necklace from my hand, Bennett. Do not let them see it. Do not let them take it.” I spin her away from them, feigning a hug goodbye. I grab the necklace, sliding it into my palm and cupping her face. My lips find hers just as quickly, sending my message with no words that it’s going to be okay. I pray she gets it. Her left hand scratches below my hairline as she mirrors my need with her mouth. She gets it; she hears me. She breaks the kiss, and with a shaky breath, she nods. I step back, turning around to the cops.

“Can we meet you there? We actually already have plans to meet with Deputy Clarence, due to an incident last night.” I offer the explanation in hopes the name dropping will have them agree.

“We are aware of the incident you are referring to. I’m afraid we will need to bring Ms. Hanson in ourselves,” he says, affirming my thoughts.

“Okay, we’ll follow you then,” I reply. I look to Bec, who is standing with her arms behind her back, appearing to hold herself back from a fight to defend her friend.

I watch Ivy swallow down her fear, and she is escorted out of the hospital.

Chapter Thirty

Ivy

Riding in the back of a cop car is not something I thought I would ever experience. Both the men talk amongst themselves with no regard to the fact I'm sitting in the back seat. Am I allowed to speak? What can I say? Isn't there something they say on TV? "Anything you do say can and will be used against you?" This whole thing seems fucked. Why would they need to bring me in over last night? Instead of opening my mouth and potentially making the situation worse, I remain silent the entire ride, all the way through the station, until I'm sitting in a damp, undecorated white room, alone.

My two buddies from our road trip here enter the room with a woman in tow. I assume she's a detective, since she is not in uniform like the others. That makes me feel a bit more comfortable, though she doesn't look happy to be here.

"Ivy Hanson, do you know why you are here?" Deputy Clarence asks, finally looking at the nameplate on his uniform. The young deputy scans the paperwork in front of him, almost insinuating he has no idea why I'm here.

“Um, honestly, no. Only that I’m wanted for questioning,” I answer weakly. I run my hands along the smooth metal surface of the table that my legs barely fit under, trying to keep myself as composed as possible. The older deputy adjusts himself in his chair and leans in closer to me. *Deputy Oscar*. He is likely trying to fit his gut under the table. “So, Ms. Hanson, you are here due to some legal action taken against you. These are charges of stolen property, false assault charges, defamation of character, and false identity,” Deputy Oscar says as he lays out papers in front of me with each allegation. “Can you explain why Arthur Carmichael would file these allegations?”

My mouth runs dry, and I’m unable to form words. Arty is pressing charges against me? I blink, sitting back in my seat. A dark cloud of confusion and worry hovers over my head. I know they are capable of a lot of things, but getting the police to arrest me shouldn’t be one of them. I should have filed the police report last night. I should have pressed charges five years ago, like the police suggested. I wanted the restraining order to be filed so I could disappear. I didn’t want to sit in a trial and live through all they had done to me. Not when there was enough evidence to warrant a restraining order, allowing me to disappear.

“I have no idea what this could be for,” I answer honestly, running my sweaty palm along my pants.

“Well, have you been impersonating a Madeline Brighton?” Deputy Gordan interjects sternly, not wavering in eye contact. Is he trying to be intimidating? Because he sounds like a dick.

“I don’t feel I have done anything illegal. I still have my license and passport in my full legal name. I have instructed the school human resources to list my name as an alias for my own safety. I have restraining order paperwork to approve that. I use my alias in other aspects, but I barter for a room, no money is exchanged, no lease signed. I don’t have a bank account in any false names, and my phone is a prepaid minute phone. So, the name I choose to be called is not any more illegal than your nickname, deputy. *Butch*, is it?” I remark, looking down at the tattoo on his forearm. His eyes travel to where I’m looking, and he leans back, crossing his arms to cover it. This intimidation tactic sparks something in me. I’m no fool. I won’t let Arty or my father make me out to be one.

“Well, we have no knowledge of a restraining order,” Deputy Gordan replies as he nervously sifts through the folder in front of him.

“It was taken in Illinois. It recently expired. The order was against my accuser, Arthur Carmichael.”

The woman sitting quietly next to me finally shows signs of life. “Did either of you substantiate any of these claims before dragging this woman in here?” Her irritated look is bouncing between both men.

“What about this: stolen property?” Deputy Oscar flips a photo around, and it’s one of my mother’s paintings. As I slide the photo closer, I remember this one. My memory brings me back to the day she painted it.

I'm sitting on her lap at her easel. "This woman is a prophet, Ivy. Many believe that there was no such thing as women prophets. That is untrue. Men lived for the purpose of shielding the real seers, camouflaging themselves as prophets to protect the divine. Though, their power ran rampant when men learned of the riches and power of being held in high regard. So, they replaced the purpose of protection and captured the women to relish in the power of which they stole."

My eyes widen as her brush strokes the canvas, creating long waves of raven hair. "She's beautiful, Mama."

"Yes, she is. And she's stronger than she knows. She will conquer the man who holds her in a cage, setting an example for her friends to do the same. We have to learn from her that no matter how harsh the world is, or when it feels stacked against us, we control our legacy. It does not belong to anyone but us, especially a man. We untether our purpose from the greed men show and refuse mistreatment."

"Ms. Hanson? Do you recognize it?" Deputy Gordan pushes, pulling me from my memories.

"Yes," I reply, clearing the lump forming in my throat. "It's my mothers. She was a painter. I have not seen her paintings since I was little, but I would recognize her work anywhere." I answer as I glide my hand over the photograph.

"No, ma'am, not the painting, the necklace. Do you recognize the necklace?" he urges as he pushes a zoomed in photo next to the one under my hand.

“Oh, um ... I’m sorry. I must have missed that. Uh ... Yes, I recognize it. It was my mother’s. When she passed, I took it. Wore it every day, until the other day when I misplaced it.”

“Arthur claims this property belongs to him and his family. Some sort of inheritance from your mother.”

Scoffing, I roll my eyes. “He is delusional. Let me ask you this, if this was some sort of prized possession of his that I stole, why not file charges five years ago when I left? Or heck, take it from me any of the years he saw me wearing it? Why now?” I ask, searching my brain for the answers myself. This has to do with the chip. It’s the only thing that would make sense. What could be on there that they could both want so badly?

“I’m not at liberty to speculate the motivation behind filed allegations, miss,” he replies. *Whatever, dude.*

“Ms. Hanson, let’s move on to the false assault charges,” the female pushes. “Also, I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself sooner. My name is Jenna Briar.” I meet her eyes, seeing she’s softened a bit since first walking in here.

“You mean the charges I intend to file against Arthur Carmichael today? Regarding the assault in my apartment last night where I have two eyewitnesses and bodily injury you can clearly see?” I reply, not removing my eyes from hers. I see her skim down my face, noticing the swelling and my arm in a sling. Jenna sadly nods and closes the file in front of her. Letting out a breath, I let my body rest against the back of my

chair, knowing she sees it: the manipulation, the attempt to get ahead of their poorly played games.

“This report says that you had falsely accused Mr. Carmichael of physical assault. You’re saying you have not even made a report yet?” Deputy Gordan asks, clearly embarrassed.

“No, sir. I fled the scene for my safety last night. I had planned to come in this afternoon to report the break in. Before I could make it here, I was forced to leave my friend’s home by your so-called victim and assaulted again. He slammed my face into his vehicle. My wrist was also fractured by a second party, Mitch Hanson, my father. The waitress that served our table can likely corroborate my story, as she asked me if I was alright before my friends showed up and successfully got me out of there before more could take place.” I exhale at the end of the events replayed.

“Why go through all this trouble to find you and attack you if you have been out of their lives for so long?” Deputy Oscar asks. I’m not sure how much information I should offer. The necklace could hold the information I need. I need to find answers before I hand it over to them.

“If I knew, I would surely do whatever they wanted. I want them out of my life.” All three nod.

“We’re sorry we didn’t gather more information before calling you here. It’s not often things like this happen in a small town. I suppose we weren’t as prepared as we thought. I have seen you around town and know the kids love you at the

high school. My niece is in the school play. We will get this figured out, Ms. Hanson ... or Ms. Brighton, as you prefer. Please let us know if anything comes to mind. I'm sorry, again, that I didn't introduce myself earlier. I'm a liaison here for the station—a social worker. The office doesn't have many female deputies. It's easier for women to open up when another woman is present, especially in cases of assault." She looks at me with newfound determination, like this case will not go the way Arty and my father intend. I nod my head and extend my left hand to her; she shakes it and rises, giving me a firm squeeze.

"You are free to go. Please, offer a good contact number for you, in case we have further questions," Deputy Gordan pipes in, clearly wanting the last word. Before I can reply, Jenna holds the door open for the men to leave.

"If you want to wait here, I would like to come back with the proper paperwork to get your statement for your assaults, then you can go," Jenna adds. I nod and remain seated while all three exit the room. Closing my eyes, I finally see this for what it really is: a race for the truth, for power. I took my power back, like my mom said all those years ago. I will be damned if I let them steal that from me again. As mother said, greed won't give them the strength to take what belongs to me. My legacy is mine.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ivy

All I care about is getting out of the station. I crave Bennett. His strength. His comfort. I'm done fighting him, fighting myself. I won't stand in my own way anymore. I'm not sure where this feeling is coming from, if it's the fear of getting arrested or the memory of what my mom said . And I need to tell him, but right now, I also need to figure out what my father wants and how to get rid of him for good. What could be on this chip?. I walk out of the police station with a newfound confidence, leaving with Bec and Bennett shielding either side of me.

“Did you put the chip in the phone?” I ask as we drive in the direction of the bakery. The cool breeze from Bennett's open window feels calming against my skin.

“No, we wanted to wait till you got out. We didn't think it was our place.” Rebecca's hand squeezes my shoulder in reassurance as she answers. Turning to her, I see the tenderness there. She's the woman who's been fighting to be my friend since I arrived here, and I couldn't see that we were

already kindred spirits. Two souls wandering around, waiting for someone to see them. I wouldn't blame them if they did look without me. I'd have a hard time resisting if I were in their place. It's clear their thoughts are only for my best interests. My heart tightens at that, at the amount of persistence they have shown since coming into my life. Wrapping my hand around her fingers, I offer her a gentle squeeze back. "Thanks," I whisper.

Bennett's hand gently grazes my knee, and a jolt of electricity shoots through me. One simple touch, and my mind is flashing back to the dressing room. My cheeks turn pink. By the smirk on Bennett's face, he clearly knows where my mind went. Shifting to face forward, I shake my head, trying to clear my brain before speaking again.

"So ..." I clear my throat. "Can I—"

I'm cut off as Bennett's phone slides into my palm. I look over to him, and he winks. Damn him. It should be impossible for him to read my thoughts as easily as he does. I steady my breath, pulling back the stopper that fits snugly where a small SD card should be slotted. I slide the SD card into the slot, turning the phone over, and close my eyes.

An attachment icon fills the screen, and I select it.

608-555-2152

A phone number? Why would she store a phone number? Who is it for? I have more questions than answers.

"What is it?" Bennett asks, breaking my line of questioning.

“It’s a phone number. I don’t recognize it, but it has a Chicago area code,” I say as I stare at the phone.

“Let’s call it?” Rebecca says, pulling herself closer to the front seat.

Reaching to the floor, she hands me my purse. I pull out my phone and dial the number. It rings three times.

“Thank you for calling the law office of Walter Hampton. How may I direct your call?” a sweet voice answers into the receiver.

Click. I panic. I had to hang up. A law office? I don’t understand. The more I find, the more questions I have. I want to get off this never-ending carnival ride.

“What is it, Ivy? Who was it?” Bennett asks, his voice filled with concern.

“A law office. Why would my mom have a law office number on a SD card? What was she doing?” I ask more to myself than anyone else.

“There is only one way to find out, babe. Call it back.” He’s right. I should call again, so I dial for a second time.

“Thank you for calling the law office of Walter Hampton. How may I direct your call?” The woman on the other line sounds less chipper this time, clearly recognizing the caller ID. I try to think about what to say next and stumble.

“Uh ... hi ... Yes, I don’t know why I’m calling. It’s kind of a strange situation ... This number ... My mother left it hidden —” I’m not sure how to describe this situation. *Um, hi, my*

dead mother hid this number embedded on a SD card in a necklace she wore everywhere. Why do you think that is? This entire situation is ridiculous. I shouldn't even be doing this. It's clearly a dead end, a number that only meant something to her.

"I'm sorry. This was a mistake. I'm sorry I wasted your time." I pull the phone away from my ear, ready to hit the end button.

"Wait! What did you say your name was?" she shouts through the line.

"Ivy. Ivy Hanson," I tell her, not sure why it would matter.

Silence. I look at my phone to make sure the call didn't disconnect. When the timer on the call continues going, I pull the phone back to my ear.

"Um. Hello?" I say, looking over to Bennett, who looks as confused as I am.

"I'm sorry. Iv—Ms. Hanson. It's ... I knew your mother. I didn't think we would hear from you after all this time." Her voice chokes. *She knew my mother. Didn't expect my call.* I can repeat her words, but I'm still not comprehending.

"My name is Tonya. I knew your mom. She was a kind woman, and strong. I'm sorry for your loss. Walt is out right now, but I know he will be eager to speak with you. Is there a good number he can reach you? It's Sunday, so we don't normally take calls, but I must have forgotten to take the call forwarding off my cell before leaving Friday."

When I shake myself out of my stupor, I realize we are back at the bakery. Both Bennett and Bec sit quietly, neither of them interrupting, yet neither leaving me alone. *Gosh, I love them.* My eyes grow wide at the realization. Bennett's face shows interest as he faces toward me, waiting for me to tell him what is going on. Bec looks concerned, maybe hearing parts of the conversation being so close to me. I start to overheat as a panic attack starts up. The car begins to feel so small. *Love.* What do I know about love? I can't love them. Can I? My hands shake, causing the receiver of the phone to pull from my ear ever so slightly so I miss what the woman on the other line is saying. Abandoning the call altogether, I drop the phone.

I need air. Racing out of the truck, I run to the cold brick lacing the bakery's exterior. I brace myself for the darkness to cover my eyes, taking my vision from me. Love seems so big. My heart feels like it is expanding right out of my chest. How can a feeling like this exist in my world that seems so small? Bennett's arms wrap around my waist, pulling me to him. He drops his forehead to the back of my head as my vision blurs with rushed tears.

"Shh, Ivy, beautiful, it's okay. Calm down. Try to breathe. Do you feel me wrapped around you? Follow my breathing, in and out. Come on, one ... two." I match my breaths to match his as I feel the rise and fall of his chest. I feel his lips on my hair and sag into him.

"That's right, Ivy, relax. I got you. I will always be here. You are not alone. You're safe," Bennett soothes against me, rocking me gently in his embrace. I choke on a silent sob at his

words. *I'm not alone.* I spent years surrounded by people, yet I was always alone. Always walking a life where people could walk right through me, as if I never even existed at all. Then I ran. I found comfort in being one in empty spaces. But now, hearing him say those words, it's like he has given one last kick to my defenses, and everything has crumbled. Bennett has dug his way under, climbed over, and bulldozed every obstacle I have thrown at him, fighting hard to get to my heart and making himself a home there. This is where I want to be, with him, feeling him, consumed by him. Closing my eyes, I let myself float on a wave of ease, letting his strength surround me with his energy, protecting me from my own demons.

I spin in his arms and wrap my arm around his torso, burying my face into his chest, not caring about my arm in its sling. Nothing could take me from this moment. "Thank you," I whisper.

Bennett moves his hand to my cheek, and his thumb traces my jaw. "Look at me," he demands as I bring my eyes to his, unable to ignore the raw emotion in his voice. When my eyes meet his dark brown ones, his tongue licks his lips, and I feel like my knees will buckle beneath me.

"Do not *ever* thank me again," he commands. His demand has my thighs pressing together instantly as I gulp at the sudden race of my heart. The speed is no longer from panic. *It's from need.* The corner of his mouth pulls into a smirk as he brushes a piece of hair from my face.

“Okay.” I bite my lip. It’s a simple word, but it’s all I can say. I blink against my need for him. He lowers his head down to mine, and our lips connect, slow and gentle, as they mold together. His rough beard brushes against my chin, and he angles my face to deepen the kiss. Then, without warning, a different person emerges from me. Like an animal let out of its cage, I pull him closer to me, gripping tight onto his shirt. Bennett’s hand moves from my jaw, pushing into my hair and holding me captive against his mouth. “*Mmm,*” I hum as he grunts, pushing my back into the hard brick wall behind me. Pelvis to pelvis, we’re fighting for control, fighting for relief. It’s fast and messy as his tongue licks my mouth and I bite his lip in appreciation. His chest rubs against me, putting pressure against my aching breasts. That action alone could make me come right here in public. *Public.* My eyes shoot open, and I push against Bennett’s chest, flattening a hand to my own, attempting to catch up with the moment.

“I hate to interrupt, but maybe you two should take this inside?” Rebecca giggles as she shakes her keys in our direction. The shiny keychain is the only thing keeping me between torture and Bennett’s bed. Bec passes Bake Away’s entrance and follows the alley next to the bakery, clearly heading home. “Oh, and I gave that nice lady your phone number so they can contact you,” she shouts over her shoulder.

I turn back to Bennett, still in a daze. His stare is heated, his hands reaching back toward me, as if he’s unable to restrain himself.

“I can’t take another minute of this, Ivy. Tell me you feel it too. Tell me you want me as bad as I want you,” he begs as his forehead rests on mine, his eyes tortured.

“Yes,” I reply shyly.

“Yes, what?” His eyes open and close, blazing with dark amber rings around his blown pupils.

“Yes, I want you too,” I croon, standing on my tiptoes to kiss him again, starving for him.

His strong hands grip my hips, and I’m lifted off the ground, forced to wrap my legs around his waist. His mouth is on mine in an instant as he starts to jog back to the house. It’s careless. I’m bouncing up with each step as he speeds through the alley. With every long stride, he slams into my core, assaulting me with a pressure I can barely stand. I take advantage and grind harder into him at every collision. *More. I need more.*

“Fuck. You’re so hot, beautiful. Shit, yes, grind on me. Get yourself ready for me.” His arm wrapped around my waist holds me so tight, to ensure I don’t slip out of his embrace.

His words only motivate me more. Hearing how a simple one move of my hips can make him lose all composure, I push my face to the side of his, running my tongue along the shell of his ear, down his neck, closing my mouth around the pulse of his vein, tasting the salt of his skin. I tease him with a small bite. I have never been so bold, so confident. He does this to me. I don’t know if I have ever felt the need to be as present in a moment as I do with him right now. With Bennett, I want to feel it all.

Bennett hums in appreciation as I run my good hand down his shoulder, over his pec. I catalog all his sounds and responses in the speed of the moment. There is a beating in my ears, and blood is rushing through my head, making it almost impossible to believe this is real life. I'm so distracted in a world of my own, I haven't even noticed we had made it to the house, up the stairs, and into his room.

I shift slightly as Bennett raises his foot and slams the door behind us. A cold hard surface spreads across my back as he leans me against the door. It's such a contrast to the warm body in front of me. The need is reflected in his eyes as he finally takes me in, and I return his gaze. His eyes are dark, almost black, his chest moving against mine at a quickened pace. Have you ever felt euphoria? Felt like you are so high, gravity could fail and you could float away? My mind races with all the thoughts of him, but he doesn't move. He stands frozen against me, as if I'm a mirage in front of him and if he blinks, I will disappear before his eyes.

I wiggle in his arms, trying to pull him back to the moment. To bring him back to me. His lips tilt up on a smirk. He knows exactly what I want. Still, he makes no move to give it to me. *"You'll come to me when you are ready."* Bennett's words echo in my mind, and I realize what he wants. He wants me to beg. His control is hanging by a thread, and he wants me to tell him what I want.

As if reading my mind, he says, "You know what you got to do, beautiful. Tell me what you want me to do to you." His voice is deep, urging me to open up.

My cheeks turn pink instantly. I've never been one to talk in the bedroom, never vocalized my needs before. There is something so sexy in a man forcing you to speak your deepest desires. Bennett knows what I want, but he won't move until I say it.

"I want you." I whimper.

"You have me." Still smirking, he rubs his nose against the tip of mine.

"You know what I mean, Bennett, please." Arching my back, I push my pelvis firmly against him.

"No, Ivy, I don't. Tell me what you want. What you need," he urges, his eyes staying glued on mine when his hand begins to glide from my knee at his waist. It slowly makes its way up my thigh, gripping where my thigh and waist crease at a bend. My eyes close, and I rest my head on the door behind me, trying to unscramble the words necessary.

"Mmm," I moan. *Jesus, brain, work!*

"Mmm, is right. You are so sexy. The way your thighs tighten around me, your nipples poking through the fabric of your shirt. I can't wait to wrap my mouth around them." He worships me with his words. I'm pretty sure he could make me come without even touching me.

"Yes!" I shout. This is torture.

"Yes? You want my lips on your tits, Ivy?"

"Please. Yes." I nod eagerly, so frantically it's almost unattractive.

Bennett pulls me off him and lifts my top over my head. With his large hand, he circles my breasts and pulls the cups of my bra down, instantly exposing them. He doesn't take his time. His face descends and his thick lips wrap around my pink nipple. The tip of his tongue circles around it, nearly making my knees buckle beneath me.

"Shit," I whisper as a zap of excitement shoots down to my toes. My hand grabs for the back of his shirt to pull it over his head. This hot and cold, fast and slow has me teeter-tottering right on the edge of breaking.

"Bennett, I need you inside me." *Well, hello, bold Ivy, welcome to the game.* The pooling between my legs solidifies my need for him.

"I have been waiting long enough to hear those words come out of your mouth." He lifts me back up and tosses me on the futon. I unbutton my pants in time for him to grab the waist of my jeans, pulling them off, underwear and all. Before I can reach for his pants, he lowers himself to me, placing an open-mouth kiss against my heat.

"Shit, Ivy, you're soaked. This is all for me?" His tongue runs along the seam of my center. My hips pump up to meet his face.

"Don't stop!" I shout as he begins to pull his face up from me.

"Tell me you want me," he repeats as he steps back and undoes his pants and lets them fall to the floor. My eyes immediately zone in on his cock. *So fucking beautiful.* I

always gagged at the thought of calling a penis beautiful, but not Bennett's. His is a work of art. Long and thick, the head perfectly shaped. A bead of pre-cum seeps from the tip. I'd take him in my mouth if I wasn't so impatient. My core clenches at the thought of tasting him. My thoughts long gone from his tongue pumping into me, I reach for him. "Bennett I'm going to scream if I don't have you inside me."

His lean body climbs over mine, his lips and teeth grazing my left nipple, giving it the same attention as its twin. I open my legs wider to accommodate him, and I feel the length of his cock against my stomach. At the slight rotation of his hips, his cock moves between my folds. My cream coats him as he glides himself back and forth over my clit. I bring my mouth up to his, kissing him slowly. Our mouths move away as both of our heads look down, and he aligns himself at my entrance. Everything around us disappears, our breaths still, all our energy focused in the moment as we watch him enter me. Our bodies join as he pushes deep and is fully nestled inside me. All my senses mute until he fills me completely. His thick member stretches me almost to the point of pain. We stay still for a moment, adjusting to each other.

He speaks first. "God, you feel amazing. Better than I imagined." Running his nose down my cheek, he peppers kisses along the way to my neck. This doesn't feel like our first time. It feels like we have been doing this for a lifetime, his body perfectly molded to mine. I could live here forever. Bennett shifts below me, giving me slow, steady thrusts. I lift my hips to meet his, and my clit rubs against him. "Oh, yes."

My hand claws against his back as I continue to move. Picking up speed, my legs fold around his waist, and we move in tandem, the rhythm smooth and easy. In no time, his hips pump harder as his teeth scrape my collarbone, sending a shock through my entire body. My heat clamps around him harder as I grab his face and bring his mouth back to mine, pushing my tongue inside. His taste is minty and musky. His lips are assertive, as his tongue savors mine. He pushes a rough hand between us, his thumb pressing firmly against my greedy bud. His circles are slow but deliberate, as my body sparks and flames at his touch. I'm chasing the high with each strum. "Bennett, you feel so good. Harder." He instantly pushes deeper into me, swiveling his hips, his cock hitting that spot inside me that has me seeing stars. He continues his momentum that has me close to coming, and I can feel the climb as his thrusts become harsher, faster.

"Ivy, you feel too fucking good. Are you close?"

"Make me." I grit against his neck, sucking the flesh into my mouth. I'm hungry, greedy. I need him to take me to the edge. All my nerves are on fire as he bows his head and sucks a nipple into his mouth. His teeth graze lightly, and my nipple rolls between his bite. *I'm a goner.* My core closes around his cock, trying to lock him inside me. My head falls back against the pillow, my eyes scrunched shut and hands gripping the sheets. I come undone. White flares shoot behind my lids, and my muscles go completely rigid as I milk him for as long as I can. Bennett shifts above me, trying to pull from me to pump harder, but my grip against his dick is too strong.

I open my eyes in time to see him throw his head back and grunt. “F-Fuck.” His strong hands hold me in place as he pushes so deep into me, I can feel him at the back of my channel. Watching Bennett climax has to be the most erotic thing I have ever seen. His face is flushed, tight jaw, stomach flexed. His body hardens like a statue as he fills me with his cum. His body is still so still, I worry he has stopped breathing all together. In a large gasp of breath, Bennett leans down over me and slowly pulls out, rolling to his side to face me. Both of us are panting and sweaty, trying to compose ourselves, coming down from our high. When I finally look over at him, he only says three words. Three words so clear, so stern and determined.

“You’re coming again.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Bennett

The shock in her eyes is enough to make me hard again. It ignites a drive to bring her over the edge as I hover so I can watch her unravel. I move my hand down her stomach and watch as her chest rises and falls in slow movements, matching the speed of my hand. When I reach her heat, her mouth opens, and my eyes are instantly drawn to the perfect “O” she makes.

Slow rotations around her clit gives me satisfaction as her hips rotate, mimicking my movements. I lower my hand to her folds and can feel myself spilling out of her.

“I can’t get enough of you.” I pull my hand away and scoot back and place my back against the frame of the futon, grabbing her by the arms. I yank her back against my front so her back meets my chest, careful not to harm her wrist.

“Ekkk! What are you doing?” she squeals.

“I told you. I’m going to make you come again.” This angle makes it possible to use both hands. I push my right hand into

her with no warning as her head lolls back onto my shoulder. My left hand grabs her breast and rolls her nipple between my thumb and pointer finger. With her head thrown back, I take advantage of kissing her cheek and then her neck, letting my tongue trace the base of her jaw. Ivy's hips begin to move in tangent with my hand, meeting each stroke with a thrust, showing me how thirsty she is, how bad she wants this. How sexy she is. That she's bold enough to take it.

“That's it, baby. I know you like it. You want to come?”

“Oh God,” she pants.

“Words, Ivy. Do you want to come?” I pinch her nipple between my fingers again as I feel her arch her back, wanting more. My greedy, beautiful woman.

“Yes!” is all she gets out.

Ivy rotates her face toward mine, and her mouth attacks with urgency, taking me by surprise. I smile into the kiss, relishing her need for control. I move my tongue with hers, as my left hand moves to her clit. I take in her moans, letting them fuel me, recharging my own arousal. This is not about me though. It is about Ivy letting go.

As I lightly pinch her clit, her moans grow louder. Her center clamps around my fingers like a vise, and I curl them to hit that perfect spot. It's fast. The noise of her sex is loud as she drenches my fingers, and mixed with the frantic gyrations of her hips, I know she is close. But for some reason, she's not peaking. Something's holding her back.

“Come for me, Ivy. Let go. I want all of you,” I whisper, my mouth tracing her ear.

As if she is waiting for permission, as soon as the words leave my mouth, she goes rigid above me. Legs stiff, her small fingers dig into my thighs. I don't stop. I continue pumping my fingers deep, curling to hit her soft spot, all while rubbing her clit firm and fast, allowing her to ride out her orgasm as long as possible.

A few minutes later, her body stills, her legs opening wide at her sides. Her breathing fights to steady. Ivy takes long, deep pulls of air, as if the strength of her orgasm knocked the wind right out of her. I remove my hand slowly from her entrance. I bring my hands to her thighs, massaging the tension away, moving my way up her stomach and to her breasts all while kissing her neck. Ivy's hand reaches to the back of my head, and she pulls my mouth to hers, kissing me softly. Such a contrast from the urgency only moments ago.

“That was incredible,” she says as she pulls slightly away from my mouth.

“You are incredible.” I pull her chin toward me, making sure she is looking into my eyes.

“I didn't expect that. I didn't expect you to ...” She hesitates, bouncing her eyes between mine then looking to the ceiling. Her cheeks flush pink in embarrassment.

“What? You didn't expect me to what?” I know what she is going to say. I would be lying if I say it doesn't send an

exhilarated excitement through me. I was the first to give her multiple orgasms.

“To keep going ... after you came. I mean, I know I came already, but I didn’t expect you to make me come again.” She exhales a shaky breath.

“I needed to see you unravel. It wasn’t enough the first time.” I wink at her. “So how are you feeling about today? I know it was a lot. First your dad and Arty, then jail, and now this attorney.” I run my fingers through her hair as she relaxes into me, her body blanketed over mine. I feel so content. Even with all the chaos around us, I wouldn’t want to change this moment for anything.

“You are right. It is a lot.” Her eyes drift closed as she answers.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. We don’t have to talk about it,” I say, worried I may have overstepped.

“No. No. It’s not that. I ... I’ve never felt like this. At least not for as long as I can remember”

“Felt like what, beautiful?”

“Content? Safe? Happy?” she asks more to herself.

“Home. You feel like home, Ivy.” I kiss her forehead, pulling her tighter to me. Ivy turns onto her knees in between my legs. She kneels, facing me, and smiles.

“Yeah ... Home.” She blushes.

My hand grabs the back of her neck and pulls her mouth to mine once more. I know we have a lot to talk about, a lot we are going to have to figure out and resolve, but the world could be on fire and nothing could pull me away from her. We take each other in, finally feeling safe enough to admit what the other means to us. I wasn't afraid. I was waiting on the sidelines for her to come to terms with it. I would have waited, or I would have walked if that was what she wanted, but I'm thrilled as hell she came to the same conclusion I did. We belong together.



I wake up to an empty bed, the bright red numbers on my clock reading one in the morning. I'm not sure when we fell asleep. I held her in my arms, talking about my travel out of the country, all the places she wants to go, and all my favorite spots. The room is quiet, no sign of Ivy. I run my hand along the sheets, and they lack her warmth. I throw on my clothes and head downstairs. Rounding the corner, I find Ivy in my T-shirt and sweats, sitting at the counter and talking to Bec. The room feels so relaxed, so happy with the two of them. Bec seems to be at ease, too, as if she's been waiting for Ivy as well.

“I think I'm ready to meet with that lawyer. Will you guys come with me?” Ivy turns in her chair, and her eyes plead with mine. I hadn't even realized she heard me come into the room. Guess that's what happens when you feel so connected with

someone. No different from when I woke when I no longer felt her beside me.

“Of course, we will be there with you. We will be here every step of the way. Are you going to call the attorney back?” Bec answers and questions.

“Yes, I will tomorrow.” Ivy’s hand moves to the button on her phone and illuminates the time. “Well, I guess today, technically.

“Yeah, we should all go to bed. It’s Monday, and those already suck without adding exhaustion into the mix.” Bec yawns.

“I feel like whatever we find out, we should share with Jenna Briar. She was very attentive at the station and really wants to help. I told her in my interrogation that I didn’t know why they wanted the necklace, which was not technically a lie. Maybe we’ll find out when we talk to the attorney.” Ivy stands from the counter, pouring her water in the sink before making her way to me.

“That is a good idea. We need the authorities to be informed, but we’ll wait till we have all the info. Do you want to take the day off? You’ve had a rough weekend,” I ask, rubbing her back.

“No. I want to see the kids. They are so dedicated to rehearsals for the fall play. I don’t want to disappoint them.” Her body relaxes against my chest. “That Tonya woman, she was shocked I called. I can’t believe she knew my mom. I haven’t talked to anyone who knew her in years. It’s almost as

if she never existed at all.” Ivy’s tone changes. Remembering her mom must be hard for her. I don’t know much about her, only that she passed away when Ivy was young.

“I don’t remember much of her, only how she deteriorated in front of me. I was not the best daughter to her. She was strong. Independent. She made me promise her that no matter what, when I chose my partner in life, I’d keep my independence. That I could be in love and keep true to myself. Be a team and still be an individual. I never really understood what she meant before. I do now. My father really did dull her, tried to remove her passions. She never let him. She fought even till the end.” When Ivy finishes, I realize where her strength comes from. Her mother really raised an amazing girl, even if it wasn’t long enough. Ivy keeps saying she doesn’t remember her mom, but she shines through in all Ivy does. In her very being.

“You’ll never have to choose between yourself and us, beautiful,” I tell her as Bec mumbles in agreement.

“I know,” she replies. I know she knows. The understanding in her tone is clear. She knows I will always encourage her to be exactly who she is.

“I’m gonna go back to bed. See you up there?” Ivy angles her face and kisses my chin.

“Yes. I’m right behind you. I’m gonna grab some water.” I squeeze her before letting her go.

Bec watches her leave the room, then her eyes inspect my face.

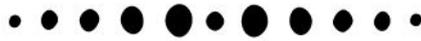
“She is the love of your life, right? Cause you are for sure hers. There is no way around it. As much as you two fight it or play this tug of war game, you’re meant for each other. The dream worthy kind of love, written in the stars kind of love, makes people sick kind of love. All the love that people want and dream of. You. Are. It.” Her finger points at me, matter of fact. Then she rushes to me. My body stiffens around her. I think ... *I love Ivy*. I know I care for her. Want to be near her all the time. But do I love her? I’m not sure I have ever been in love. How would I know if this is how it feels?

“Get out of your head, you idiot. Don’t you dare talk yourself out of this. If you wake up thinking of her, go to bed thinking of her, and miss her the second she is out of your line of sight, you love her. If you picture a future with her, you love her. If you have to even question if this feeling you have is what love is, it is because you love her.” Bec giggles into my chest.

“You’re right. I do love her.” A feeling spreads across my chest. Is it pride, happiness, surprise? None of those words fit. It feels like power. A power so strong, its urgency pushes me to protect and cherish Ivy with all that I am. Like our souls were destined from the beginning to be matched. My sole purpose was to find her and be her beacon, the light that illuminates all that she is. This is love.

“I know,” Bec says in certainty. “Night, B.” We hug tight, then she heads up the stairs.

I’m in love with Ivy Hanson.



Ivy called the attorney's office Monday evening like she said she would. Walter told her he had to prepare a few things before he could set up a meeting with us. I'm relieved to know she has some time to heal and try and decompress. It's been a few weeks since the arrest. We have settled into a routine. Ivy and I head to school after opening Bake Away with Bec. We share our lunch hour with Mr. G. then go home together. It's Wednesday, which means Ivy has no rehearsal. This frees us up for a video meeting with Walter tonight. We are all a little on edge. Bec closing the bakery early shows Ivy how dedicated we are to being there for her.

I can feel the anxiety roll off Ivy in waves. Jenna has been in contact with her, helping Ivy get a new restraining order against Mitch and Arty, and so far no one has word on where they are. Jenna has turned into an extension of us, checking in on us all the time. I'm not sure why she seems so close to this case, but Ivy feels better having her around, and I'm grateful for that.

The colors are changing on the trees, making it appear like Scarlett Bay should be in a home magazine now that fall is approaching. I get out of the truck at school, closing the door, and grab my bag as I hear Ivy *hopping?*

Turning around, I lean my back against the truck, crossing my legs in front of me, watching her. What the hell is she doing? *Hop. Giggle. Hop. Giggle.*

A full-toothed smile crosses her face as she peers back at me. “Don’t you love that?” she asks.

Shaking my head in confusion, I ask, “Love what?” *You?* I think to myself. I haven’t told her yet. There hasn’t been a moment that feels worthy enough.

“That sound!” *Hop*. That is when I notice she’s jumping on leaves, crunching them under her feet. One at a time, she hops then searches around for her next crunchy target, leaping toward the one that looks like it will be the loudest, savoring the sound.

“I guess I never paid attention to it before,” I answer honestly, stepping closer to her. When I get face-to-face with her, I let myself soak in her warmth against the chill of the fall day. I watch her face change from curious to heated, eyes darting around to see if anyone is watching. I smirk down at her, leaning my face impossibly close, feeling her warm breath against my mouth. Then, I leap to the left. My feet give the resounding crunch as they land on my target, and I let out a heavy laugh.

“Tease,” she mutters as she giggles, following behind me, crunching her own. Both of us are laughing, zigzagging around each other. Carefree.

“You two better get inside. The bell’s about to ring. Don’t want to be the late ones to class,” Mr. G calls from the entrance.

“Thanks, Mr. G!” Ivy runs up, squeezing his shoulder as she speeds to her classroom.

“See you later, handsome,” she whisper-shouts, walking into her class.

My attention pulls from her when Mr. G steps up to me. “Be good to her boy. She’s been caged up for a long time. One more fracture and I worry she’ll stay in her own cage for good.”

“I’d never hurt her,” I confess.

“Yes. Yes, you will. That is life. Love is pain sometimes. A reminder of how hard we have to keep working at it. But make sure the pain that comes from your love is never intentional, and when you do hurt her ... make sure you’re the one to heal her, too.”

I nod in understanding. “Thank you for being there for her. I know you mean a lot to her.”

“She reminds me of someone I once knew.” His eyes drift off into the distance as he remembers a past that seems to have been living parallel to his present for a while now. “Oh, I forgot to mention to Ms. Brighton, the gentleman from the school board was looking for her this morning. He said he will meet with her at her open period at eleven. Will you let her know?” Mr. G asks.

My entire body freezes as I process the words coming from his mouth. Arty is here, and no one here knows who he really is. I am sure everyone heard about the commotion at the campground, but the only person that would be able to recognize Arty is Jordyn. She has been gone since the end of

last week on a leave of absence to take care of her mother out of state.

“Mr. G., call the sheriff’s office. Now. That man can’t get within a foot of Ivy.” I growl. I leave my class to fend for themselves as I race to the main office. I plan to talk to Principal Joyce immediately. What I don’t expect to see is Arty standing in the office with a smug look on his face, as if he’s the winner of the game he’s been playing. I see nothing but his face behind my fist as I race into the office, tackling him to the ground. The table behind him snaps under our combined weight, and he grunts at the impact. He attempts to buck me off him, but his small body is no match for mine. Screams come from behind me. I don’t know who they belong to, and I don’t care. I want to see this fucker in pain. His nose cracks under my fist as it collides with his face again. Arty’s high-pitched scream pierces over the crowd behind us.

“Mr. Harrison! Get off of Mr. Bertram. What are you doing?” Principal Joyce shouts. I feel someone tugging at my arm, and I pull my hand back harshly, my eyes remaining trained on my target.

“Bennett!” Ivy yelps as she falls forward next to Arty. He is now a mess of blood and tears, not even attempting to fight back anymore.

My throat clogs when I see her on the ground. My rage is so strong, I didn’t even notice she was here trying to break this up. I immediately let go of my fist wrapped in Arty’s shirt and

roll off him. I pull Ivy to me as she wraps her arms around my neck.

“Fuck, I am so sorry, beautiful. I didn’t know it was you. I didn’t know it was you. I’d never hurt you,” I press, pleading with her to know that. I push her slightly away from me so I can inspect her, make sure I didn’t hurt her in any way. But more, I want to see her face. To look in her eyes and know she isn’t afraid of me.

“I know you’d never hurt me,” she whispers. She threads her fingers through mine, halting my hands from their exploration, and gives me a soft smile. I relax instantly, amazed at how incredibly strong she is, even after everything she has been through.

“Excuse us. Let us through,” Deputy Clarence shouts through the crowd. When he makes his way into the room, he immediately moves to Arty and grabs for his cuffs.

“Thanks for apprehending our suspect, Mr. Harrison, but did you have to rough him up so much? This is gonna be way more paperwork. I’ll need your statement.” Deputy Clarence grunts to me as he pulls Arty to his feet.

“What the fuck! Why are you arresting *me*? He assaulted me! I want him arrested,” Arty whines as his hands are brought behind his back.

Deputy Clarence steps in and begins to read Arty his Miranda Rights, but before he can finish, Arty screams more nonsense.

“Wait! I’ll tell you where her father is! He is the one who was behind all of this! I will tell you anything you want to know!” Arty yells, spit flying from his mouth.

Coward. Ivy was right. He is fucking useless.

“He’s outside, parked on the street along the football field, waiting for me!” Arty continues to scream as they walk him out of the room. I am about to follow them out and head to Mitchell when Ivy tugs on our joined hands.

“Please don’t. Let the sheriff’s office handle it. I don’t want you involved in this more than you have to be. *Please,*” Ivy begs as her eyes water with rushed tears.

“We will surround the car and get him, Bennett. He won’t get away,” Deputy Clarence assures us. I nod to him as he leaves, pulling Ivy against my chest. I never want to be the reason for her tears. Ivy wraps her arms around me as her body shakes. Her sobs are silent and heavy as the room clears. No one’s left but her and me holding on to each other, silently begging the other to never let go.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ivy

I'm sitting sandwiched between Bennett and Bec like a form of armor shielding me from what's to come. The impending meeting has us on edge. After Arty and my father were taken into custody, I felt so much relief I almost forgot about it. That was until I saw the closed sign on *Bake Away*, and my fear came racing back. I don't know what to expect. Why an attorney would hold on to anything my mother may have given him. I mean, she died in 2005—

The screen of Bec's laptop buffers as the video call connects, and a man comes into view. My chest tightens, and in the same moment, Bennett squeezes my hand, sensing my distress.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Hanson,” Walter starts. Sitting next to him is a woman who looks at me as if she has seen a ghost. It must be Tonya. Walter is dressed in a button-up shirt, his suit jacket open and casual. He wears glasses on the tip of his nose. “I'm Walter, as you may have guessed,” he continues. “It's been so many years since your mom's passing, but we had

note of your eighteenth birthday. When that came and went and we didn't hear from you, we assumed you weren't given the instruction to contact us. We did send certified mail to your last known address." Walter shuffles through some papers, pulling out an envelope with my name. The address is written to my father's house. "Here it is. It came back as returned, and we had no forwarding address for you."

My mother left instructions for me to be contacted. Of course, I had no forwarding address. I didn't want my father to know where I was. I have missed out on this for four years.

"I ... I left my father's house a little over five years ago. I didn't want to list a forwarding address." My throat begins to tighten. Walter holds his hand up to stop me from continuing.

"You do not need to explain, Ivy. We can assume why you didn't want contact upon moving." His eyes are soft. Tonya nods into the camera in understanding. He knew? They knew? How? I play with the hairband on my wrist and duck my head.

"So, can you explain why you even need to contact me?" I ask, trying to move the conversation forward.

"You look just like her," Tonya blurts out. Walter scolds her with a look.

"Sorry, it's just you're so beautiful. I'm happy you're okay." Tears fill her eyes as she sits back, knowing she has overstepped.

"Ivy, your mother left a safe deposit box here for you. We were supposed to deliver it upon your eighteenth birthday. I

have only watched one video, but there are several. The only one I have seen is the one we recorded upon her request.”

“There is a video? Of my mother?” Shocked, I snap my hair tie hard, trying anything to make sure this is real life. A soft hand encompasses my wrist, pulling me from my daze. Bec rubs her thumb over the small red mark. I look at her, and she gives me a reassuring smile, saying, *“I’m here. You are not alone.”* I take a deep breath and turn my attention back to the laptop.

“We have the video queued up and will leave the room for you to watch it. We will be back in about twenty minutes.” Walter gestures to Tonya to get up. The camera turns, now facing a screen against the back wall. The camera view jostles for a moment until the camera is zoomed to the projector filling the screen. The camera goes black as it adjusts to the darkness as the lights shut off before they leave the room. I hold tightly onto my anchors beside me.

“Hey, little sunshine.” My mother’s face appears on the screen. She is frail, pale, in a hospital bed. This must have been taken toward the end of her life. How did she pull this off without my father knowing?

“I know this is confusing. I hope you know how much I love you. How much I wish I could be there with you. Unfortunately, things didn’t work out that way. As you know, I got sick, and the cancer has taken over quickly. I’m sorry you have to watch this.” Her voice catches, and she begins to cough, unable to stop. A man steps out from behind the

camera, his back facing us. He hands her a tissue. It must be Walter, since he said he was there when the video was recorded. She grabs the tissue from him, muttering a thank you, but then my body stiffens as she brings a shaky hand to his cheek in a soft caress. He brings his forehead to hers, and in a barely audible whisper, he says, *“Anything for you.”* The man goes to pull away, but she holds his hand tight, pulling him into the camera view as she begins to talk again.

“Sunshine, I want you to meet someone. This is TJ, your biological father.” I barely hear the gasps next to me as my heart begins to beat out of my chest. *My bio what!* Shaking my head in disbelief, I push my chair away from the counter. *“I will give you a minute to process this, hunny,”* I hear behind me as I pace the kitchen. This can’t be real! That is not true.

“This can’t be true!” I scream. “How could she? How could she leave me with the monster of a father if I wasn’t really his?” Bennett’s steps behind me, placing his hand on my lower back. “No! Do not touch me. Don’t touch me. Back up!” I shout, pushing his hand away. I can’t do this. I need space. I need air. I need ... I need to run. Racing out the front door, I bolt. Fast. I push hard, moving my feet to go faster than I have ever before. My lungs are on fire, but I don’t care. The cold air offers a sting on my face, and I can’t bring myself to stop. Squeals of tires and loud honking pulls me back to reality as I turn to see a blue Accord slamming on their brakes in front of me. I didn’t even realize I had run into the middle of the street. *Oof.* My already empty lungs seize as a hard body collides

with mine, pushing me to the other side of the road. The car narrowly misses us.

Bennett says nothing as he holds me from behind. My knees buckle, and I collapse to the ground, the adrenaline dumping on me. A full sob of agony echoes in the air. It isn't until I see tears hitting the concrete under me that I realize the screams were coming from me. When I look up, I see people coming out of the stores, confused and nosey as to what's happened. Bennett scoops me up, placing me on my feet, and escorts us back to the house. Bec is on the phone as a figure enters the screen. She called the law office, asking them to stop the video. I say nothing, staring at my mother's face paused on the screen with a stranger whose eyes match mine. Why would she not tell me? Why would he not come for me? I was unwanted by both of them: the man who raised me and the one who created me.

Bennett guides me on the stool, clearly not wanting to push. Walter returns to the screen for a moment. "Ms. Hanson, I know this is a shock, that you are confused and looking for answers. Please, if you watch through this clip, it will all fall into place," he urges.

Bennett finally turns me to him and holds my face in both his hands. "If you don't want to do this, you don't have to. What do you want, Ivy?" he cautions. I'm not sure, but I have a lot of questions. A tissue is pushed between us as Bec enters our circle. I take it from her. I shake my head in agreement and turn back to my mother's face. I can do this. I'm not alone.

Wiping my face and nose, I ready myself for what else she has to say.

Walter must sense my agreement or see me somehow because the video begins again.

“I know this is a lot, sunshine. Let me start from the beginning. I was twenty-two when I found out I was pregnant with you. Unwed. It was a different time back then. TJ was, is, the love of my life. We met at the senior center where your great grandma stayed a few months after I graduated high school. He worked in their janitorial department. I saw him every Thursday I visited. One day he approached me, asked me for coffee. From then on, we were inseparable. Your grandfather didn’t like it. He wanted me to marry “up.” Our family had always been wealthy, and marrying a poor man was not something he approved of. My mother was a meek woman, rarely offering an opinion on anything other than the home’s décor. That’s how it was back then: men ruled. I suppose that’s why I was so stubborn to be independent. I moved out at eighteen into a one-bedroom apartment with TJ. My dad didn’t agree, but I was sure I would prove him wrong. I started painting then, selling some pieces locally. It worked for a few years; we got by. When we found out I was pregnant with you, we were so happy.” TJ looks down and smiles at her, squeezing her hand. *“Then one day, TJ came home. He had been let go from his job. Management received a complaint from an anonymous source claiming he had stolen from some of the residents. I knew it wasn’t true, but it was too late. I went to your grandfather, then. We needed help. He accepted*

us, inviting us to dinner to talk.” She begins to choke up. Seeing the anguish in her face causes a low sob from me. Bennett’s arm comes around my shoulders as Bec weaves her arm through mine, putting her head on my shoulder. Thankfully, I was able to take my sling off last week.

“My father had a new employee. He was also invited to dinner. Mitchell Hanson. Mitchell came from a wealthy family whom he approved of. I had met Mitchell in school. He was popular; often he’d asked me out, to which I respectfully declined. Yet, he was always persistent. Why, I wasn’t sure. At least, until much later. My father went on to explain that Mitchell told him about how TJ was fired because he stole. I was shocked. My suspicions about a liar were true, but I never would have thought that Mitchell, a person I had not spoken to in years, would be behind it. He had set TJ up then played the perfect role in manipulating my father’s mind. My father had looked to Mitchell to continue, bringing out a folder. Inside was a contract. It stated that Mitchell and I would be married. He would become a shareholder in my father’s company in exchange for marrying his daughter. My father made a clause that there could be no infidelity, or the shares would default to Mitchell, even in the result of divorce. I was allowed to divorce Mitchell at ten years. At that point, I would take what I came into the marriage with and fifty percent of any marital assets. Ten years seemed like an eternity to be away from your father. I hated the thought, but I knew then I couldn’t get on my father’s bad side. Not when I had you to think about.” She catches herself. *“I’m sorry, TJ.”* She weeps then continues,

“We went home that night and went over all our options. It was TJ in the end that told me we had to do it—for your sake. He didn’t want you to grow up like he did, never knowing where your next meal would come from.”

The video pauses again as Walter’s voice comes through the speakers. “Would you like to stop here? Or keep going?”

“Please keep going,” I answer, unable to take my eyes off my mother’s face, at the way she looks at TJ like she betrayed him.

“I signed the contract. I moved in with Mitchell, and he began his career as he wanted. We slept in separate rooms, despite his protests. When you turned six, I started to notice something off about Mitchell’s business dealings. He wasn’t a kind man, certainly not a good husband, but I wasn’t good to him either. I didn’t love him. I lived for you. I started to hear shady phone calls and saw weird wire transfer receipts. So, I began to pay closer attention. I didn’t have a way to record what I heard, so I bought a video camera. In the guise of home videos, I would recap the things I heard, saw, people who would come to and from the house. It wasn’t long before I realized he was laundering money, stealing from people in the community and using it to triple his wealth and giving them the sad news that their investment was lost. ‘That happens in stocks,’ he would say. He was intricate about it, not doing it too often. Never to the same person. Mitchell needed to create a ruse, and he is good at what he does. I told TJ what I found, and he warned me to stop, but I couldn’t. I needed proof of what he was doing. Not for just us, but for all the people he

scammed. I didn't have a way to get the videos to authorities without it putting you in harm's way. I want you to take them now. You are grown. You can take him down. There is a trust in your name. All the art I sold on commission, I put away, keeping small amounts so Mitchell didn't notice. I hope he's been good to you all these years, sunshine. I hope you've been happy. I hope you found happiness. I planned to be there for you. When my cancer diagnosis came, I wasn't sure I'd make it to the ten-year mark to divorce him. To be free from him. You can be now, Ivy. Be free from him. I love you." TJ walks to the camera, then the projector screen turns blue, signaling the end of the recording.

"So, I know this is a lot of information to soak up," Walter starts as the screen focuses back on him and Tonya.

"Did he know?" I ask, interrupting Walter.

"Did who know?" Bennett asks, seeing Walter's face scrunch in confusion.

"Did my dad ... Mitchell, did he know about this?" He must have known. Why else would he be looking for the necklace? Why would he care?

"Mitchell Hanson contacted us, claiming he was looking for a will his late wife left him. He contacted our office about three years ago. We did not offer him any information as his name was not listed on any of our legal documents, and by that time, you were no longer a minor. We were lucky he hadn't reached out sooner," Walter explains.

“How did he find out about the will?” I push, trying to put all the clues together.

“The letter was sent back to us. We assumed you may have moved. When Mitchell called the office a few days later, I knew he must have somehow read it. Yet, there was no way I could prove that. Not many wives keep a secret will from their husbands. If it weren’t for your mother’s request that the letter be mailed after you turned eighteen ... Well, let’s just say she was a smart woman.” He smiles slightly.

“That still doesn’t explain why he wants the necklace.” That’s all I can focus on now. No secret life, no paternity, no betrayal. Only questions about the necklace. Why does he want it so badly?

“Thank you. Can you send us the rest of the videos? This one too?” Bec jumps in.

“Yes, of course. I’ll need an address. Also, is there an account where I can wire the four million?”

“Did you ... Did you say four million?” I blanch.

Sensing my continued shock, Walter replies, “Uh, yes. It was three million, but it accrued interest as it sat. I will have Tonya contact you and gather your address and bank information. I’m sorry for your loss, Ivy.” *Click*. The video call ends, and the laptop screensaver of two cats tumbling over yarn comes back. They weave themselves through the tight threads, creating a web they can’t get out of. *Isn’t it ironic?*

Chapter Thirty-Four

Bennett

Ivy is still staring at the empty space where the laptop sat on the counter. Four million dollars, a secret father, and evidence to throw away her abuser. I cannot say I would respond any different. I'm thrilled for her with the information, but I can also understand the absolute mind fuck this must be.

"Psst," Bec calls me from the hallway, curling her finger, calling me over. "Holy shit!" She whistles as I approach her.

"I know. You think she'll be okay?" I look back at the unmoved Ivy. She needs to blink, breathe, eat. *Something*.

"Yeah, she'll be okay. We'll make sure of it," she says absolutely. "She's right, though. Why would her father want the necklace so bad? I mean, he had no idea about the will until she was eighteen. Something doesn't seem right about that." Bec sneers.

"Yeah, it's too much to dissect now. We need more info. The other videos will help," I agree.

Bec slips away and calls the attorney, getting them the information they requested. It's been a few hours since the call, and Jenna stops by randomly as she does, giving us the court date for Ivy's assault claims against Arty. Ivy was quiet throughout dinner. Jenna, not missing a beat, calls her out.

"Hey, what's up with you? You know this is an open-and-shut case, right?" Jenna asks Ivy in encouragement as she winds her chopsticks in her lo mein. She must have forgotten that today was the day we had the meeting with her attorney. All Jenna's attention is focused on making sure Arty and Mitchell get what they deserve.

"Hmm? What? No, I'm not hungry anymore," Ivy replies, proving she's still absent from the rest of us.

Bec and I give each other a look, not sure what we can say. We don't want to speak for our girl, but at the same time, Jenna is a good friend.

"Excuse me," I say, grabbing Ivy by the hand, pulling her out of the kitchen with me. We walk up the stairs, but she barely looks where she is going, moving on autopilot. When we reach the bedroom, out of instinct, Ivy reaches for the doorknob. I tug her cold hand, shaking my head at her. "No, beautiful, come on. Let's run a bath. You can warm up and relax. You've been freezing and tense all day. I'll pour the salts that you like." Her shoulders sag in response, and she lets me pull her into the bathroom with me.

I want her to feel all my love. My understanding. My commitment. Her eyes are vacant, as if she's replaying her life

over and over. The anguish shows on her face. Once the bubbles start to rise, filling the tub with smells of lavender and sea salts, I turn and help Ivy out of her clothes. I take the hair tie off her wrist slowly, pulling her hair behind her into a very messy bun, attempting to keep it out of the water. Ivy steps out of her pants and slides her underwear down, kicking them to the side. There isn't anything sexual about this moment. She is beautiful, pained, and mourning a woman she lost all those years ago. I grab her hand as she steps and eases herself into the tub. With a delicate kiss to her forehead, I step away. Her wet hand grips my leg. Red puffy eyes meet mine. "Thank you," she whispers.

"What did I tell you about that? You never have to thank me for taking care of you." I leave her in the bath to be alone for a while. I know she needs time with her thoughts.

I head to the bedroom, grabbing Ivy a set of sweats, and sit on the futon. My heart begins to race at the thought of losing Ivy. How her mother must've felt, how she was torn between her love of her life and the love for her unborn child. Rage tears through me as my fists collide with the pillows on the bed. How could anyone do that to someone? Then my memory flashes to Ivy running into the street, a car headed right for her. Her need to run, to escape, made her close her mind as she went into flight mode, forgetting the dangers in the world. Her lack of concern for herself pisses me off, too. I get she isn't in her right mind, but what the fuck? How can I be mad at her after all she's been through?

“So, is Bennett being hard on himself again already? Mr. I need to be the fixer of all things?” Bec calls from the doorway.

“Don’t start, Bec.” I groan, not at all wanting to have this conversation right now.

“Bennett, you couldn’t have done anything to change what’s happened. You’re doing everything you can to make it better. You know that, right?” She walks in and sits next to me.

“Yeah, I know. It’s ... a lot,” I grumble, tugging at my hair in frustration.

“Yeah, I filled Jenna in on the minimum. She is going to see if she can find anything in the statements about the necklace, since she has clearance for that kind of stuff.” Bec rubs her hand against my back, making me feel pathetic. I’m not the one whose life is in constant turmoil.

“Good,” I say in a frustrated exhale. “We should have done this at the end of the week. We both have classes tomorrow; we can’t play hooky. Thanksgiving break is soon, and we are preparing for exams.”

“I think routine and normalcy will be good for her, honestly. For you too. The attorney stuff will be here by the weekend, anyway, and it will be good to go over it then.

“I hear the tub draining. I’ll get outta here. Goodnight.” Bec disappears from the room before Ivy enters through the doorway.

Once Ivy has decompressed a tad from what happened, I decide to confront her. Her little jog with death has had me

tense all evening.

“What are you doing?” she yelps. With my whole body above hers, I pin her arms above her head.

“It’s been a long day. I know a lot of information has been thrown at you, but I think it’s about time I gave you a little punishment.” I kiss against her neck as she rotates her head, giving me better access.

“Punishment?” Her body shakes under me, both curiosity and excitement surrounding her in a bubble of anticipation.

“Yes, do you know why, Ivy?” I ask in a stern tone. My hand skirts down her side and up her inner thigh. I feel her pelvis lift, trying to meet my hand halfway. I can’t help but smirk at her eagerness.

“*Tsk, tsk.* I’ll give you what you want. Eventually.” I groan as my lips touch her neck right at her artery, and I feel it pump beneath my lips. Her chest rises and falls as she waits for a further explanation.

“I can deal with a lot, Ivy. Losing you is not something I will deal with.” I bite against her throat.

“What? I ...” My lips seal over hers before she can continue. She hums in appreciation, lunging her tongue forward to gain entrance.

“Mmm,” she moans when I match her tongue with mine, my hand connecting with her cloth-covered center.

“You ran out into the middle of the street, Ivy.” My middle finger moves the fabric of her boy shorts over slightly. I feel

how slick she is, and it takes all my power not to give in and feel her unravel underneath me. Maybe this is my punishment. Holding my composure, I move my mouth lower, soaking up her throaty rasps as I kiss every inch of her skin. Tasting her as I slowly run my tongue down her chest, enjoying her smooth skin. Next, I meet the stiff ridges of her nipple, closing my mouth around it. I suck. Hard. That seems to be the right move as Ivy arches her back, chasing after more pressure on her clit.

“I’m gonna take it super slow, Ivy. So slow. You won’t get release until you are begging me for it. I’ll hold you on the edge until you can’t take it anymore.” I grunt over her as she wraps a hand around my hard shaft under my sweats. *I didn’t see that coming.*

“I will beg you now. I want you” she mumbles. My hand leaves her shorts, grabbing her wrist in a firm grip. “No.” I look up from her chest, sliding my tongue over her nipple, staring straight into her eyes. Her tongue juts out too, licking her lips. Her skin is so delicate, so warm. I could see myself wrapped up in this woman, entangled in each other forever. Goosebumps spread over her skin as I continue to circle my tongue around her peak.

“Keep looking at me. Watch me,” I demand, my voice rough with need. I continue moving, kissing a path down her stomach. Ivy has been sleeping in underwear only, which works to my advantage, making it easy for me to roll her over and ravish her whenever I crave it. I always crave it.

“Keep your hands above your head. Got it?” She nods in response.

“Words, Ivy.” I smirk.

“Yes. Okay. I won’t move them.” She shutters.

I arch my eyebrow at her. She won’t last two minutes. I release her hands, bringing mine to the top of her underwear. Kissing her hip, I slide them down over her legs. She may not be moving her arms, but she opens for me like a flower in bloom, directing me exactly where she wants me. I’ll let her have that as my eyes leave hers and connect with her clit. It’s wet and swollen, waiting for me to devour it.

“Do you know how fucking beautiful you are?” I waste no time, leaning forward and swooping my tongue right over her waiting clit. The moans of approval shoot right to my cock.

“Do you know how good you taste?” I lower my tongue to her entrance, lapping at her juices, teasing her. Her hands grab my head, and my mouth stops. She realizes her mistake immediately, moving them back with rapid speed.

“I’m sorry, Bennett. I won’t do it—” she starts, but my mouth attacks with force, sucking hard on her clit.

“Oh my ... ,” she begins to scream, and my hand has to reach up and clamp over her mouth to keep them from reaching Bec’s room. Ivy’s legs tighten around my head as her hips grind against my face, her teeth biting into my hand covering her mouth. I thrust my tongue deep into her center

until I feel her warmth start to clench. I immediately stop, pulling out slowly and flattening my tongue against her clit.

“No,” Ivy mumbles in protest, her hands gripping the sheets above her head to keep herself from moving her hands.

“Does this make you angry, Ivy? Desperate? Imagine how desperate I felt chasing after you into the street. Not knowing if I’d reach you in time. Do you like this feeling? The need holding you on edge?” I place my middle finger against her throbbing heat, teasing her slowly while I wait for an answer.

“I won’t do it again. I promise. Please, Bennett. Please,” she begs.

“Can you accept it’s not just you anymore, Ivy? Your life isn’t disposable. You have a group of people who love you, who want to keep you around forever.” I strum my tongue against her clit as I push one digit inside her. “Yes!” she shouts. I feel the velvet of her pussy against my fingers as I pump inside her.

“I will never have enough of you.” I groan, curling my finger against that spot. Her climax hits her hard, her body nearly levitating off the bed. I take that moment to push down my sweats, my movements faltering with my need to be inside her. My cock throbs as I thrust into her mid orgasm, throwing her into another. Her body shakes in pleasure. I burrow my face into her neck, thrusting with deep, hard pumps, bringing my point home. Her legs are now pinned against her chest, with my hands gripping the back of her thighs. The vise she has around my cock brings me close to joining her.

“Come, fuck, please come with me, Bennett. God, please come. I’m coming again. I want to feel you,” Ivy begs. With her plea, my hips pull back and thrust one more time, nearly topping out against her, and I release my cum deep inside her with a low grunt.

“Fuccck. I love you,” I confess, mesmerized by her body vibrating beneath mine. She goes as stiff as a board as a silent scream leaves her open mouth. I collapse next to Ivy, thankful as the cool sheets hit my heated skin. Her body rolls toward mine, and I feel her lips against my chest. Her head nuzzles into me under my chin, tucking herself in.

“I love you,” her soft voice says as her breathing begins to level out. Then she’s asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Ivy

The girl looking back at me in the mirror is not me. Flushed cheeks, shaky legs, smile from ear to ear. The orgasms did not stop last night. One after the other, we only took breaks to nap in between. This is what happiness looks like. Bennett asked after our first time if I wanted him to get a box of condoms, the heat of the moment making us forget about being responsible. Thankfully, I have been on the implant since I left New York, so we can enjoy each other skin to skin with no barrier. I splash cold water on my face, running my fingers through my hair, feeling reborn. Happier than I ever remember being. Is this how Mom felt with my dad? I can't imagine giving this up, but she did. She gave it up for me. I clench my chest at the burn of realization. I would have done the same. I would have done anything to keep my baby, to see them grow up. It looks like we both lost the opportunity.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Bec peeks her head into the bathroom. It's early Friday morning, and I'm sure she wants to get in so she can open

Bake Away. I need to get ready to head to work.

“Hey, I gotta pee.” She laughs, but I see the concern in her eyes. She wanted to check in on me.

“Oh, sorry! I didn’t realize I was in here for so long.” I scoot past her, closing the door behind me. Time has slowed since the talk with the attorney. The package with the stuff from Mom’s deposit box should be coming today. Jenna is going to come over, too. She’s become such a close friend and fast. There is something about her that comforts me, as if she has felt betrayal and heartbreak so deep, she doesn’t even have to look at you to know you have too. Maybe she is one of those people that see auras, that can tell what a person is made of at first glance. Opposites can attract people who have been broken. We all end up gravitating together at some point, understanding the darkness that veils over our eyes in triggering moments.

Bec swings the bathroom door open, shouting to me down the hallway. “Want to get some drinks later? Ladies’ night? We can invite Jenna.”

“That sounds nice. See you later!” I shout.



Small towns leave no room for secrets. Everyone knows my name now. It wasn’t hard for me to talk to Mr. G. He offered no judgment. If I’m being honest with myself, I think he knew something all along. My exhaustion is compounding between theater rehearsals, school, and Bennett’s appetite for sex.

Okay, I may have a nonstop appetite myself. I'm ready for Thanksgiving break. Thankfully, tonight is the night, and the kids are beyond pumped. Then, next week will consist of tearing down sets and thinking of what show to do in the spring. I will plant some seeds with them before break, so maybe the kids will agree on something. I jot some ideas down to spark some creativity as fast as I can. My free period is moving fast toward its end.

"Hey, can we talk?" Jordyn sheepishly enters the room. I haven't seen her in a few weeks. She has been off work due to an emergency with her mom, who lives in Arizona.

"Jordyn, we do not need to make this a thing. You've called me at least a hundred times," I try to reassure her.

"I know, but I feel terrible for never truly knowing you, never trying. I don't want you to hate me," she chokes out.

"I don't hate you." I sigh, turning my chair toward the door. I wave my hand toward the chair next to my desk, hoping she will come sit.

"Listen. I get you feel bad, but I'm to blame, too. I haven't been entirely honest since I've been here. So, it's not like you knew how to get involved. Can we move on?" I say. I get why she feels guilty about Arty and the party. She had no way of knowing anything like that would happen.

"Really, you sure?" She moves to the chair and sits, steepling her fingers at her mouth.

“Yes, Jordyn. I’m sure you didn’t know. I’m not going to let Arty or my father ... Mitchell, take any more from me,” I say with confidence. I believe it now.

“Can I ask ...” Her need-to-know is surfacing. I have kept my life from enough people. I’m not ashamed anymore. I’m not afraid anymore.

“I didn’t have the best life back in Chicago. I left when I was seventeen and started over. I used an alias to make it more difficult for my father to find me, if he even tried. I always felt like he would, with his need for perfection and control. We are working out the reasons for all his motivations.”

“But you are safe now?” She snuffles.

“I’m safe now.” I smile. “So, what’s the newest gossip?” It’s my turn to put her in a good mood. I know that she’ll continue to beat herself up if I don’t change the topic.

Jordyn’s eyes light up like it’s Christmas morning. “For real, just like that?” Jordyn bites her lip, trying to hold it in.

“Just like that,” I reassure her, reaching into my desk drawer and handing her a box of peanut chocolate clusters I know she loves.

“Oh, how I’ve missed you!” Jordyn sings.

I’m not sure if she is talking to me or the chocolates.

“Ha,ha, okay, so the gym teacher’s, Ms. Quin’s, brother is a student here, right? Well, there has been rumors he’s been stealing her faculty keys to bang girls in the locker room. How sick is that? Also, I heard a rumor that Mr. Agnes was spotted

at the mall with, you'll never guess." She pauses for dramatic effect. "Bennett's ex Sarah. Like, there is a twenty-year age gap. Talk about change in preference," she bellows.

There she is. My gossip queen.

"I mean, it can't be for the money. We work here too. The money is shit, am I right? Anyways, Charlie and I are trying to spice things up. Ever since the whole party fiasco, he realizes how much time he's focused on his dreams and not his wife. We are passing ships in the night. I love him, but honestly, I can't remember the last time we connected. Being together for fifteen years, married for ten, it's time we reconnected. So, I'm making him take me on an all-expense trip to Ireland!"

"That is amazing! When do you leave?" I ask, excited for her.

"Oh, not till summer break. So, you're stuck with me till then." She winks.

"I'm sure it'll be exciting." I encourage her to continue.

"Yes, oh, and did you hear they are looking to expand the janitorial department? Principle Joyce said things are getting missed around here. Thankfully, she doesn't want to fire Mr. G, so she is expanding the budget so he can get some help."

"I did know that. Mr. G told me last week during one of our lunches. He wasn't too thrilled. Then when I told him he can make the new guy do all the heavy lifting and chump work, since he has seniority, he seemed alright with it."

"I think the new guy starts after break."

“Yeah.” *Ringgg*. The bell signals our time together is over.

“I’m ready for the break! Will you be at the play tonight? Bec, Jenna, Bennett, and I are going to Darth’s if you want to join. It was supposed to be a girls’ night, but this morning, Bennett turned it into a celebration for the show. Bring Charlie!”

“Oh yes, I wouldn’t miss it. I will totally come out after. I will see if Charlie is free. You know how he is. Workaholic.” She rolls her eyes. I know she hates it. She’s mentioned before how Charlie is always focused on work. Now that he signed this big account, I hope he will be able to be more present for her.



The lights flicker across the auditorium, indicating the show is about to start. Peering around the corner of the stage, I see all the seats filled. My heart swells with pride at knowing how important presence is to the kids. Turning, I address them. “Alright, everyone. You have put so much work into this. You are going to do amazing. Remember, mistakes are okay! Keep going, play the role. No one out there will know if you stumble. Break a leg everyone. Places!” I clap my hands, watching them scatter.

The opening scene is already set up, and my students find their marks. I leave the stage crew and manager to run the show, sneaking out to the audience to watch the performance with everyone else. My eyes adjust to the contrast from the

light of the hallway to the darkness in the auditorium. The only lights are a small strip along the steps and seats. Thankfully, Bennett saved me a seat right up front.

“I don’t know why I’m so nervous. It’s not like I’m up there performing,” I whisper to Bennett, taking my seat.

“Because you’ve worked so hard with them. You are excited,” he replies, squeezing my hand gently.

The curtains open, and the show begins. There is something remarkable about hearing a collective laugh of a crowd. The kids are feeding off it. The jitters before the show are long gone as the time passes.

“These kids are amazing,” Bennett whispers. I nod, incapable of moving my eyes from the stage in front of me. In a trance, the sound of applause pulls me to the present. Wiping my tears, I rise to my feet and clap loud and fast. Looking at Bennett, I excuse myself to run backstage before the bows.

Racing up the steps, careful not to trip, I push through the side stage doors and round the corner backstage. “Amazing!” I shout as twenty kids race to my side, nearly knocking me off my feet. There’s laughter and giggles as the kids pile on the circle around me.

“Okay, okay! That’s your queue. The music is playing. You guys, you need to go bow! Get out there, soak it in!” I laugh, shooing them away. They bound for the stage, five at a time, giving each other the spotlight.

Parents line the halls as the students exit the back hallway. Screams of praise and congratulations echo off the walls. *What a feeling.*

“Ivy!” Turning my head, I see Jenna, Bennett, and Bec along the back wall of the hallway, avoiding the stampede of parents.

“Hey!” I shout, grabbing Jenna and Bec in a group hug. They both gave me the courtesy of not being shocked. I’ve been working on the whole hug thing.

“Is Jordyn here?” I look around, searching for her.

“Girl, you know I was not going to miss it!” Jordyn shouts from my left. “I had to pee. That line was so long!” She gives herself a wipe of the brow, as if it is the most exhausting task.

A light tap on my shoulder has me turning to my right. Mr. G is there in scrubs, pushing someone in a wheelchair. *Rose.* Looking at the people around me, I feel fortunate to have found this life, like all the shit from my past led me to this moment.

“Ivy, this is Rose,” Mr. G introduces. I kneel down to her, see her frail face, and I offer her a warm smile.

“Hello, Rose. It’s so nice to meet you.” I gather her hands in mine for a gentle shake. A genuine smile spreads across her face.

“This was such a great performance. My husband used to bring me to shows all the time. It’s my favorite. All the lights, it’s like entering an alternate world,” she says in awe, her eyes

bouncing off all the costumed kids around her. My eyes swell as I look up to Mr. G, knowing this must be so difficult for him. He's living in a world where his true love is still right in front of him, but he is a stranger to her. Mr. G gestures to the entrance, indicating he is ready to go.

"I'm so happy you loved it. Thank you for coming." I squeeze her hand one more time. I sense Bennett behind me and turn my head. In his hands, he holds a small bouquet of flowers. I mouth to him, "*Can I have one?*" Eyeing the flowers, needing no other instruction, he pulls a rose from the bouquet and hands it to me. I turn back to Rose and offer it to her.

Her trembling hand reaches out to grab it. "My husband used to buy me roses, called me his beautiful Rose. It's not actually my name, you know. My name is Edith. He used to say—"

"Your name is yours, but I think your beauty exceeds it. Rose is what I'll call you. My beautiful Rose." Mr. G interrupts her, staring lovingly at his wife.

A gleam of recollection covers her face as her eyes leave mine and she turns her head to look at Mr. G. We are all silent, watching as she stares at him.

"Gregory?" A smile brighter than the sun covers her face and excitement covers his. I know it has been months since her last recall.

"Yes, my beautiful Rose. What do you say we get some supper?"

“Oh, I am hungry,” she replies, staring at him in amazement. “I’ve missed you,” she says as she grips his hand on her shoulder. They lock eyes, longing for this moment to last forever.

“You guys have a good night,” Bennett offers as he helps me to stand.

I wave goodbye, choking down the sob wanting to force its way out. I turn around to see all three girls are blubbing, staring after Mr. G and Rose. A tear slips from my eyes, as I’m unable to keep them contained now.

“Well, that was heavy.” Bec wipes her eyes.

“I’ll say. Rose! Her name isn’t even *Rose!*” Jenna blubbers in a no-shame ugly cry, digging in her purse, I would assume looking for a Kleenex, as Bec hands her one.

“Oh, everyone is going to hear about this. Mr. G is sly! What a romantic!” Typical Jordyn.

“Okay. I’m going to go check on the stage crew, make sure all is picked up, then we can head out. I’m starving!” I tell them, heading back to the stage room. My cheeks burn, my smile not leaving my face in weeks. How could I be so lucky to have finally found my people?

Chapter Thirty-Six

Bennett

Music pours into the streets when we open the front door to Darth's. It's been a while since I have gone out on a Friday night, and the bar is packed. We are all sitting in a booth toward the back, offering us a slice of privacy. Ivy's legs continue to scoot closer to mine as her drinks increase, responding to the pull of our magnetic force. I won't pull her to me in a full alpha form of PDA. I'm not that guy. At least, not yet. I place my hand on her knee to remind her I'm not going anywhere.

Appetizers flow and drinks come faster. Everyone is laughing and enjoying our time together. Jordyn said her husband couldn't make it, so here I am, surrounded by women, at their beck and call.

"So, I really didn't want to bring this up. However, I feel like if I don't, you would be more upset," Jenna confesses to Ivy, her body freezing in place.

"Okay ... what is it?" she asks hesitantly.

“Your dad’s stalking charges were dismissed,” she rushes out, defeated, leaning her arms forward onto the table. Ivy’s whole body flinches, like Jenna’s words were a literal punch to the gut.

“What! What do you mean? How? I ...” Ivy searches for her next words.

“I know. I’m so sorry, Ivy. There was not enough evidence for the permanent restraining order. So, after the temporary ends, there is not anything else that can be done. He didn’t receive any further jail time, and with no previous record or contact made from him aside from the diner, it’s ... lacking.”

“Wait, so what about Arty?” Bec interrupts

“His permanent restraining order will be discussed at his court date, which was also set today.” She eyes Ivy, ringing her hands together.

“Well! Spit it out!” Ivy shouts.

“It’s on Monday.” Jenna hiccupped.

“Wait, Monday! How can anyone prepare for something when it’s scheduled this soon!” I jump in, interrupting her.

“Isn’t there a rule about this?”

“Usually, yes. The typical policy is to schedule a hearing in a minimum of seven days from initial appearance and plea. He pleaded not guilty yesterday. I’m not used to this all happening so fast. Someone has connections. I don’t have any power at the courts, only access to information. I’m so sorry, Ivy,”

Jenna says, shame covering her face. She has to know this isn't her fault.

“Not gui-gui-guilty,” Ivy stutters. Her eyes are moving across the surface of the table, as if to find answers there. “Not guilty!” Ivy screams, her hands gripping the table like she may flip it over. I put my hand over one of hers in an attempt to calm her.

“Ivy, we have the Fritzes as witnesses for the apartment, the hospital records, the phone logs, and over half the town saw the red Camaro. He will for sure be issued the restraining order,” Jenna reassures.

“Okay, what about the fucker's assault charges?” Jordyn snarks.

“Well, that's something else. There were no witnesses, so it is his word against yours. Aside from his history with Ivy, he doesn't have other records of assault.”

“Hold up, you are telling me he may not get charged for the assault!” I bellow. I'm beyond pissed now. My knee bounces under the table, as I attempt to stay as composed as possible. I can't lose my shit here. Ivy is now sitting quietly next to me, tracing her finger over the knots in the wood of the tabletop.

Jenna's eyes meet mine, sympathy filling her features before she looks away. “Arty is claiming that she had the bruises prior to him meeting her. His attorney has submitted photos of you and Ivy. Your arm is across her chest, caging her against your truck.” Jenna is pulling at the label on her beer, refusing to make eye contact with me.

“What! But he wasn’t hurting me!” Ivy chokes.

“That,” Jenna continues, “mixed with Bennett’s criminal history and his incident with Arty at the school, the defense is suggesting your bruises were from Bennett. That doesn’t mean charges will be brought against him. Arty needs enough doubt to sway the judge enough to accept the not guilty plea.” As Jenna finishes, she takes a few chugs of her beer, finishing it.

Collectively, the table does the same, sitting in silence while the bar around us continues to party.

“Waiter! Five shots of tequila, please!” Bec shouts. “We will figure this out, Ivy,” Bec says, grabbing hold of Ivy’s hand across the table.

One step forward, two steps back. It always feels like something.



Ivy isn’t much of a drinker; that much is clear. After three shots, she was swaying on her feet. I’m currently grabbing toast, water, Advil, and grabbing a bucket just in case. Giggling leads down the hall from the bathroom as Bec sits with Ivy while she showers. Pushing my head in the cracked door, I see Ivy with a soap bubble mustache and beard peeking out from the curtain. At least she still has her sense of humor after tonight. Bec waves me into the room, poking my shoulder. “Tag, you’re it.” She laughs.

“You know, I expected a sad drunk, not a goofy one, especially with what was dumped on her tonight.”

I nod. “Yeah, me too. I’m sure it will hit her in the morning,” I guess while moving deeper into the bathroom.

“Peanut butter jelly time, peanut butter jelly time!” Ivy sings from the shower.

“Wow.” Bec’s eyebrows raise to her forehead, her hand slapping my chest as she squeezes past me.

“Have fun with that.” She yawns, heading toward her room.

I close the bathroom door and move to sit on the toilet.
“How are you doing in there, beautiful?”

The shower curtain pops open fast, and her face appears. “Well, well, well, fancy seeing you here!” She giggles. “Oh! Oh, I have to tell you something.” She opens the shower curtain the rest of the way, starting to step out of the shower. Water and soap cover her body, shampoo still sudsy in her hair. Her footsteps on the rug line the front of the tub. When she moves the other to step out, she kicks the edge of the tub, tumbling forward.

I leap up, catching her, soaking my shirt and jeans.

“Well, crap on a cringle. No. Poop on a popsicle stick. No ... shoots and shingles! I don’t think that’s it either,” she says, frustrated, into my chest.

I shake my head. “Beautiful, do you think you can tell me what you want to say while I help you get all this soap off?” Ivy looks around as if she doesn’t know who I’m speaking to.

“Me?” She blanches.

I nod my head, chuckling. “Yes, Ivy. You.”

“Okay.” Her eyes travel up and down my body. “But only if you come in, too.”

“I will if you promise to behave.” This is going to be torturous.

“Alright.” She winks.

Yup, she isn’t going to make this easy on me at all.

Stripping down, I climb into the shower behind her, thrilled there is hot water left. Spinning Ivy so her back faces the water, I run my fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp. Her head tips back with a low moan. “Oh, that feels good,” she muses.

“Good. Relax. We’re almost done.” Grabbing her conditioner, I squeeze some into my hand, repeating my movements. Her head tips forward, and she leans her forehead onto my shoulder. I drag my fingers down her neck, kneading gently as her shoulders relax. Her warm, slick body gradually molds into mine, moving closer and closer to sleep. I shut the water off. Guiding her out of the tub, I wrap a fluffy towel around her perfect body. Ivy shuffles her feet across the hall to the bedroom, throwing the towel to the ground as she slides on a pair of boy shorts. I use the towel to soak up water from her hair, and I pin it up with a clip left on the bedside table.

Ivy, now fully relaxed, tugs up the covers to her chin and burrows deep into the mattress, placing a small kiss on her

cheek. “I love you,” she whispers as a small smile pulls on her face.

“I love you, beautiful.” After changing into a pair of gym shorts and a T-shirt, I head down to the kitchen. My nerves are still buzzing from all the information tonight.

“I’m surprised you are still up,” I call out to Bec, seeing her resting her head in her hands at the kitchen counter.

“I know, right? I’m so tired. I can’t stop thinking about what Jenna said. Do you think that Arty can really blame you?” Her voice chokes.

Immediately, I realize this isn’t only about Ivy’s safety anymore. Bec is scared too. My stomach turns at the thought of either of them worrying about this. I would never let them go through life without me. There is no way I will let that fucker take me down with him. Not a chance in hell. I walk over to Bec, pulling her into a hug. “I don’t know, Bec, but we will figure this out,” I reassure her.

“We’ve been together forever. I can’t lose you.” Bec cries into my chest.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, holding her tighter against me.

“I hope you are right,” she whispers, sniffing as she pulls away from me. She wipes her eyes, removing all evidence of her vulnerability. She isn’t one to show this much.

“Let’s get to bed. I came down for some water. We can talk more tomorrow. We both need sleep.”

“Okay. Wait! Do you think Coop could help? Didn’t he go to law school?”

“Cooper? From college? I haven’t talked to him since I got back, but yeah, he did. I don’t think it’s criminal law, though.”

“Well, maybe you can give him a call. He may know someone. I know you asked Jenna, but she’s probably going to get you one of those crappy public defenders. You need someone good. At least call him tomorrow? For me?”

“Yeah, of course I will. It’s probably about time I reached out to him anyway.”

Her shoulders visibly relax as she lets out a sigh. “Thanks. I love you, B.”

“Love you too,” I call back. When she leaves the room, I release a breath, attempting to ignore the tightness in my chest. I won’t leave either of them behind at the hands of those assholes. Grabbing my water, I head back to the bedroom, each step creaking under my weight. Twisting the handle slowly, to not wake Ivy, I crawl into bed behind her, pulling her close, molding her body to mine perfectly. Sleep comes faster than I thought as my eyes become heavy, and the room disappears behind them.

Movement pulls me from sleep as the warmth of Ivy’s body is no longer next to mine. When I feel small chills on my chest, moving down my stomach, I open my eyes. Ivy’s bent in front of me, her warm mouth on my chest, giving me small open-mouth kisses. She runs her tongue slowly down my

chest, peppering more kisses along the way. My cock instantly twitches each time her mouth touches my skin.

“Hmm, what are you doing awake?” I ask, moving my hands to her gorgeous, sleepy face. Cupping her cheeks, I pull her close, locking our lips together.

“Mmm, mmm,” she moans, breaking our kiss. “I had a craving.” The twinkle in her eye tells me she is up to no good.

“Oh? What is it you want, beautiful?” I tug at her bottom lip with my thumb. Her tongue grazes along my digit, slowly mouthing the tip. She’s so hot, and watching her lips wrap around my finger has me itching to push my cock into her mouth.

A smile spreads across her face as she lowers her mouth back to mine, tracing her tongue along my lower lip before lightly nipping.

“You, I want you.” She moans, moving back to my chest. Soft lips brush against every part of my skin as she trails down my stomach. Her palms move to my thighs as my dick strains against the fabric of my shorts, begging for her touch.

“You want me ... huh? How do you want me?” I grit my teeth, attempting to stay calm, let her have control. I push her hair out of her face, blocking my view from her eyes.

“In my mouth. I want to taste you.” Her voice is so soft, hesitant, embarrassed to admit it.

“Fuck,” I growl without permission as her fingers trace the band of my boxers before pulling them down. Her words have

me spiraling for strength to let her do this, but my hands flex, wanting to take charge. Rock hard, my dick pops free, and her eyes move to it. My cock is in borderline pain anticipating her mouth. Her tongue glides along her lips as she stares, as if overwhelmed with what to do next. Ivy looks up at me, eyes saucers as she looks back down, moving closer to me, nestling herself comfortably between my legs torturously slowly.

Her soft hand wraps around the base of my cock, and a shock shoots through my whole body. Her mouth lowers to my tip. Her velvet tongue spins in small, slow circles across it before she takes me fully into her mouth. Ivy's mouth is warm. Slick and slow, she dips lower before gagging, and she pulls back slightly, getting used to what she can take. It feels like heaven.

“Oh shit, your mouth is perfect. You feel amazing,” I grit out, encouraging her to keep going.

She hums in acknowledgment, making my hips thrust gently. My body is out of control as she touches me. As she takes me deep into her mouth, her eyes shoot up to mine, and she takes me as far as she can and sucks. Hard. I close my eyes to remain in control. “Fuck. Just like that, baby. Keep moving,” I manage to say as her hands grip mine. I open my eyes as she guides my hands to the back of her head, adding slight pressure. She wants me in control. My independent, strong, beautiful woman wants me to dominate the moment. Show her what I like. She doesn't have to ask me twice. Taking her lead, I start to move her head up and down, and she bobs on my shaft. Adjusting my hips slightly, I begin to move

in tandem with her. One of her hands rests next to my thigh. When I look past her gorgeous face, her other hand is weaved between her legs, touching herself. I have never met a more perfect woman.

“Hell yes, beautiful. I wanna see you touch yourself. You like it when I guide you? Take control?” My grasp tightens in her hair as she attempts to nod her head in agreement.

The vibration of her moan on my cock has me so embarrassingly close to coming. My hips jut forward on instinct as I feel my tip hit the back of her throat. She gags slightly at the impact, her eyes watering. I slow my speed.

“I’m sorry, baby. I got—” Before I can explain, she uses her free hand to push my hand again. She wants me to fuck her mouth. When her hand returns to the mattress to brace herself, I thrust again. Another moan leaves her as her eyes squeeze shut. Sounds of appreciation fill the room. I can hear her hand on her cunt, wet and fast, as she pleasures herself, not afraid to give herself what she needs.

“F-Fuck! You want me to fuck your mouth, beautiful? You like that?” This time I don’t slow down. I keep a steady rhythm, pumping in and out of her warm mouth. Small whimpers are blocked by my cock as she bucks her hips against her hand. Her teeth drag across my shaft as she gets lost in her own roller coaster. The contrast throws me into a spiral of curses. “I’m coming, beautiful, lift up,” I grit between my teeth, throwing my head back, trying to fight the urge to push her face down, to make her swallow me. When I tug at

her hair to warn her one more time, thick spurts of my cum lace the back of her throat, and she swallows as much as she can. When my dick stops twitching, she lifts her mouth, licking my sensitive tip before sitting up. Her tongue slips out, sliding along her lips, not wasting a single drop. My spent member flinches again, fighting its exhaustion, needing more of her.

“That was fucking incredible.” I gasp, pushing up and dragging her face, pulling her closer. Her lips collide with mine in a bruising force. My hunger for her is insatiable. I need her to unravel. To feel her melt into a puddle of euphoria. After dominating her mouth, I pull her forward and lift her by her hips.

“Ah! Bennett, I’m gonna fall!” Ivy squeals. My tongue is on her center, silencing her. Her legs straddle both sides of my face as I yank her legs wider with a grunt, trying to get more of her. To bring her closer to my mouth so I can get my fill.

“I’m going to suffocate you!” She pants, lazily trying to wiggle away from my face.

“Then I will die a happy man. Stop fighting me and give me what I want. Sit.” I growl, pulling her firmly, one more time, down on my mouth. My request is granted as she sits and allows my tongue to enter her. I know she lets go when her pussy starts grinding against my face, her clit gliding along my nose. I move my face up to suck her clit, entering a thumb into her dripping wet cunt. I slap her ass gently as I moan into her, feeling her become wetter by the minute. Her reaction has my

dick at full attention once again as she becomes uncoordinated. Her hips are moving faster as her thighs squeeze my head. Ivy screams out her release as her pussy clamps onto my finger, and she sags into the wall at the head of the bed. I lost count of how many times she's come for me. Every time she begs me to stop, I prove she can take one more. I will always give her one more.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Ivy

“Ivy. Ivy, wake up,” Bec whispers from the doorway. Bennett is still behind me, unmoving. I slip his arm off me, climbing out of bed. A chill covers my skin outside of his cocoon. Sliding on his T-shirt, I tiptoe over to the door, looking back at Bennett to be sure I didn’t wake him. I join Bec in the hall, pulling the door shut behind me.

“Morning, sleepy head.” Bec snickers.

“Good morning.” I roll my eyes at her goofy grin.

“So, I didn’t want to wake you, but it’s two o’clock, and a delivery came for you.”

“From the attorney?” I ask. Bec nods, looking at me with concern. It’s a far cry from the snickering smile she gave me a second ago.

“Okay, Bennett will kill me if I don’t wake him. We’ll be down in a minute.” Walking back into the room, I close the door. “Hey, handsome.” I shake him slightly, placing soft kisses on his cheek. “Wake up.” I kiss him again.

“Grrr. No, come back to bed.” Bennett reaches for me blindly, refusing to open his eyes, nearly hitting me in the face.

“Bec woke me up. She said the package from the attorney came.” Bennett shoots out of bed, his hair half matted to the top of his head, eyes full of sleep.

“What did you say?” He turns his head to me, trying to decipher the words.

“The package ... ,” I start.

“Why are we still in bed! Do you want to go see what’s in it?” Throwing the covers off his naked body, he stands up.

“Well, that’s kind of why I was waking you up,” I reply with a giggle, trying hard to divert my eyes from the hard beast.

“Oh, right. I need coffee. It’s too early.” He stretches high, and his cock bounces right in front of me like a bat ready to swing. *Here batter, batter.*

“It’s two o’clock,” I mumble, still enjoying the view.

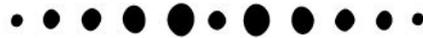
“I was up late. Don’t you remember? I made you come until the early hours of the morning. I’m pretty sure the sun was rising by the time you got your fill.” His fingers graze the bottom of my chin, lifting my eyes to his. *Busted.*

“I can’t help it if I can’t get enough,” I state matter-of-factly. His face lowers to mine, and he playfully peppers kisses all over.

“Okay! Okay! I’m sorry to wake you up. You know I could always make it up to you,” I say, winking at him and gliding

my hand along his cock.

“Hmmm, that’s not happening. Let’s get going. It’s time to take care of this. It’s important.” He lifts me off him and smacks my butt playfully as he follows me out the door.



I don’t know what I was expecting when I see the package from the attorney. The box sitting on the floor in the kitchen looks to be able to fit a microwave. When we open it, there is a typed letter on top underneath the bubbled packaging.

Ms. Hanson,

I want to reiterate our sincerest apologies for the loss of your mother. We have converted the tapes from your mother’s VHSes to DVDs. There is a total of forty. All are labeled with dates to be sure they are watched in order. There are also journals kept by your mother she included with further details. The information has not been seen before, so I cannot attest to what is there. I have also included your birth father’s contact information. Please let us know if you have any questions.

Regards,

Walter

I look back to Bennett and Rebecca. “There are forty tapes,” I explain, astonished, turning back and sifting through the contents. Each video is numbered with a DVD and wrapped around the original, thick tape.

Rebecca leans over my shoulder. “Do you want Bennett and I to watch with you?” she asks. *Ding dong.*

The doorbell makes me jump slightly. Bennett goes to the door while I continue to shuffle through the box, not paying any attention to anything else. An envelope labeled TJ rests at the bottom of the box. My nerves prickles down my back with unease. What would it be like to talk to him? Would he want to talk to me?

“Yes, that’s me,” Bennett offers the person at the door. Hearing his tone, I move to his tense stance in the doorway. Deputy Gordan and another deputy I don’t recognize stand there.

“Bennett, I’m afraid we need you to come with us,” the deputy says.

“What? Why does he need to come with you?” Fear claws at my skin. “I don’t understand. What is going on here?” I push past him, creating a wall so he can’t leave.

“Beautiful, it’s fine. I’m sure it’s about what Jenna told us last night.” He rubs my lower back. *That’s what I’m afraid of, you jackass.*

“Are you arresting him?” Rebecca appears behind Bennett, pulling the door open wide.

“No one is being arrested. We have a few questions for Bennett,” Deputy Gordan offers.

“I’m sorry, Deputy Clarence, but I decline any questions without a lawyer present. I do not need to come to the station

if I'm not under arrest. I'll contact an attorney and be in touch." Bennett shuts the door, sagging against it, clearly exhausted. My entire body leans into his, telling him I'm here, that I'm not going anywhere. This is exactly what I was afraid of: dragging them into my mess. Rebecca stands a few feet away, chewing on her nail as she stares at Bennett. I refuse to allow my father to take one more thing from me. He won't hurt my family.

"Do you think that was a good idea, B? Won't this make you look uncooperative?" Rebecca asks, worrying her bottom lip.

"I don't want you guys to watch those videos alone. I will text Jenna and ask if she has any contact for an attorney, and I'll call Coop tonight as a backup. In the meantime, let's watch the videos." He runs his hands through his hair, motioning with the other to head to the kitchen.

"Okay, well, I will get my laptop." Rebecca nods.

The first video starts, the view aimed at seven-year-old me. I'm running and zigzagging around the room, chasing a balloon, giggling and bopping the bottom to keep it off the floor.

"Keep it off the floor, Ivy! Ha, ha, you got it," my mother encourages behind the camera. The video jostles and spins trying to keep up with me running down a long hallway. The angle drops to the floor, the view unfocused.

"How much did they invest? Hm, okay. Send forty-five percent to the offshore account, put the rest on the shares in

imports. The value should increase next week, and they won't be the wiser. We will insist they broke even, after splitting their investments, to increase their capital, as we promised. If they don't lose money, they won't be the wiser." There is a brief pause, and Mitchell's voice returns. *"I don't pay you to question me. Do as I say. Don't forget I have you by the balls with your involvement. Don't fuck with me."* The slam of a phone hitting the receiver ends the conversation. Dark shoes fill the camera view. *"What the hell do you think you are doing, Eloise?"*

"I was waiting for you to get off the phone. I wanted to talk to you about Ivy," she replies calmly.

"So, you thought snooping in the doorway was appropriate? You know better." His voice is angry and short.

"Sorry, Mitchell. I want to take Ivy to get ice cream this afternoon. I know you don't like it when I take her alone." She's backing away from Mitchell, but with every step, he takes one toward her.

"Well, that's obedient of you, and out of character. What is it you really want? Don't waste my time."

My mother sighs. *"I got a call from an old friend. They are in town and want to meet."*

"By friend, do you mean TJ? The answer is no. Nice try, though." He steps back into his office, the sound of his footsteps getting louder on the hard floor.

“I don’t see why you care. I need to get out of this house.”
She steps forward, but not past the threshold of the door.

“I care because you are my wife. No one needs to see you gallivanting around town with another man like some whore. Now go.” The office door slams, and the camera goes black, then a fuzzy white line breaks across the screen.

“Clear the account and move all the assets to account ending in five-five-eight-two. That’s the account held under the nonprofit charity. Yes, contact Carmichael and tell him he needs to do the same.” Mitchell’s voice booms through the speakers.

After four hours of watching the videos, I conclude they are all the same. There are months upon months of conversations between him and an unknown source. Mitchell Hanson had been stealing money from people entrusting him to invest. Endless accounts, names, and banks are named in the videos, correlating with my mother’s meticulous journals. My mother collected an entire year of these conversations.

“Wow.” Bennett exhales, stretching his back. His hand has not left my leg since we started watching the videos. Rebecca mirrors him on my other side, holding my hand.

“I’m sure this is enough information to put your dad away for good, Ivy.” Bec turns to me, shocked as much as I am.

“It’s so old. How could it?” I say, shrugging. I don’t feel as confident about this as they do. If Arty can manipulate what he did to me now, blaming Bennett, who knows if this would hold any merit in court.

“If he was like this sixteen years ago and got away with it, I doubt he’s changed. If anything, he’s more ballsy. He’s bound to make mistakes. It’s how cocky bastards like that are,” Bennett retorts. He isn’t wrong. Maybe turning this in will spark an investigation.

“So, what do we do now?” I ask Bennett, needing him to say the words out loud. To put truth to them. Convince me that this is how to finally get peace. How I finally become free.

“We take the asshole down. For good.” He speaks with determination.

“Okay, let’s call Walter. He will know how to go about this. I’m thinking this is bigger than our small-town cops can handle,” Bec says as she gets up, pulling out a pizza from the freezer.

With the two of them distracted, I look down at the envelope lying flat next to the laptop. *TJ*. Do I contact him? There was only one appearance of him in the first video. Did he ever want to see me? Millions of thoughts rattle around my brain, causing a headache of emotions. The only way I will know the answer is if I ask him myself. I don’t know if I’m ready for that.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Bennett

“You have an extensive history of assault,” my attorney says, flipping over a file in front of him. Bec was right. Jenna has connections, but it’s an overworked, underpaid public defender. His stuffy, cluttered office, brown carpet, and once white walls are now beige from age, bringing me back to my teen years.

“I had a hard past, yes. However, my record shows no charges since I was nineteen.” I lean forward, putting my elbows against my knees.

“Yes, I see that. However, after college, you were out of the country for some time. Have you had any charges against you while you were out of the country?” he asks, not even looking at me. His corduroy jacket is wrinkled and worn at the elbows.

“No, sir,” I insist. I grip firmly against my knee, trying to keep it from bouncing. How many clients does he have? A pile of thick manilla folders on top of his desk and the file cabinet behind him indicates a lot.

Mr. Overworked hums as he listens to my response. His chubby hand runs along his chin, as if he's trying to solve a riddle. The room is so informal, coasting the line of hoarder. A degree is framed behind him. Dennis MacAvoy. The degree is thirty years old. Need I say more?

"I'm going to be honest. There is not enough information here to arrest you, let alone charge you. It is open-and-shut. Is there a reason you insisted on an attorney? You could have spoken to the police," says the guy who took the meeting.

"The people running this game seem to be very creative. I wasn't sure what I was up against." I shifting in my chair, itching to get the hell out of here.

"I see. Well, I will contact the police and schedule a meeting. I don't see the need to prolong it." Shutting the file, he opens his desk drawer, pulling out a brown paper bag.

"I appreciate that. Thank you," I say, standing as he takes a bite of his bologna sandwich, not giving me another glance.



Ice cold rain smacks me in the face as I leave the courthouse. When I make it to my truck, I pull out my phone, keeping my promise to Bec.

"Well, well, well ... Bennett Fucking Harrison. Long time no talk. How the heck are you?" Coop greets through the phone.

“Hey, Coop. I’m alright. How are you? I’m sorry it’s been a while. I moved back to the States and life kind of got busy.”
And I’m only calling you because I need something.

“Tell me about it. No worries. We exchange our routine emails and texts, though rarely do we talk on the phone. Not that I’m not thrilled to hear that sexy voice of yours.” He chuckles. Coop has always been a free spirit. The first one to try to make anyone uncomfortable. Honestly, we became fast friends because he gave no shits about what anyone thought of him.

“You got me, man. I do have something I want to run past you. Where are you living these days? Could we meet up?”

“I’m in New Hampshire now. But you know me, never staying anywhere too long. It’s about a three-hour drive from you. You know I’ll be there for you in a heartbeat. Whatcha got?” he offers.

“No, no. I can run it past you.”

After giving him the rundown, he is silent for a moment.

“Did you say you met someone and fell in love? Bennett? Is this really you?” He raises his voice to mimic a swoony cartoon character.

“Fuck off, man. That is not the only thing you heard in this whole conversation!” I chuckle into the phone. Of course, he would call me out.

I hear him howl on the other line. “Listen, based on all the facts you gave me, I’d have to agree with your attorney. I’m

not practicing law anymore, but if you ask him to email me the case file, I'll give it a second set of eyes.”

“You aren't practicing? What are you doing now? I guess we really do need to catch up.” I start my truck as I give him my ear.

“I decided to go after photography. Nature mostly. But I have done some houses and landscaping for some local magazines. I can travel and still work. It's working out well for me,” Coop admits. He sounds happy.

“Wow, man. That's great. I'm happy for you. And I know the last we talked, you were thinking about taking things to the next level with Aurora. How'd that go?”

“That, my friend, is a story for another time. Way too long for this call. Listen, I'm about to meet a realtor to take some sample photos for a showing. I will reach out once I get the file.” Voices come through the line as he asks them to wait for a moment.

“Oh, sure thing. Thanks again, Coop. I really appreciate it.” I disconnect the call.



Ivy is on the phone with Walter when I get back. “Yes, thank you. They did reach out already. The FBI took my statement and copies of all the data you sent us from my Mom's deposit box. They didn't say much, but when I called and provided Mitchell's name, there was no hesitation on coming to collect

what I have. How long does this kind of thing take?" Silence fills the room as she paces.

"Mhmm, that makes sense. Okay. Thank you, Walter. For everything." She stops moving and pinches the bridge of her nose. "Oh, um, yes. I didn't forget. I don't know what to do with all that money." I approach her then, rubbing my hand along her arm and up into her hair, pulling her head into my chest. "Yes, that's my account information. Bec, my friend, must have sent it."

There's another short pause, and she exhales. "Thank you." The phone drops from her ear.

"How is this even real life?" She chokes. "One minute, I'm trying to live a new life, and then it crashes all around me," she whines as she shakes her forehead in disbelief.

"Ivy, you will get through this," I encourage gently.

"How, Bennett? How can I do this? I tried. I tried to build a new life here. To start over. Then this. I brought this mess on all of you. You had to get a lawyer!" Her tears are heavy now, running so fast down her face I can barely see her eyes.

Smoothing my hands over her face, I wipe the tears, but the gesture is not enough. I pull her into me again as she shakes. I brush my fingers through her hair, kissing the crown of her head. How can I make this better when we are so deep in it, there is zero sign of the light at the end of the tunnel?

"I need you to understand something, Ivy. I'm going to be fine. The attorney told me that there is no case. He was already

in the process of scheduling a meeting with the police when I got a call on my way home. The police no longer need me for questioning. A few women around town have come forward with allegations of creepy behaviors from Arty. He can't excuse his aggression toward them. They don't find him to be credible."

A harder sob shakes her body as she absorbs the information. "Another thing, beautiful. You didn't just rebuild your life. You rebuilt yourself. You are way stronger than you give yourself credit for." I would walk through fire to take her pain away.

"And you helped us too," Bec offers, walking into the living room to join us. "We couldn't spend forever being the two of us. We'd kill each other." Bec giggles, and she wraps us both in a bear hug.

"I love you, both of you," Ivy says, pulling air into her lungs and releasing a long shaky breath. She pulls away and wipes her face with the back of her hands. "Phew, now that that's over. I need chocolate." Ivy winks at Bec.

"Hmm, that's weird. There is a box of your favorite donuts on the counter right now. Wonder how that happened." Bec raises both her hands, shrugging. "It's a conundrum." She laughs.

"Total mystery!" Ivy shouts over her shoulder, already beelining it to the kitchen.

"Easy to please." Bec shrugs.

“Did you hear there will be no charges?” I ask, throwing my arm over her shoulder.

“I heard, thank God. I can’t wait for all of this to be over. For all of us.” Leaning into me, she stares into the kitchen after Ivy.

“Yeah, same.”

We join Ivy in the kitchen. She’s got a coffee brewing as she bites into the donut. Sitting on the bar stool, I watch my two favorite people giggle over some shared inside joke.

“So, I talked to Coop. He’s looking over the case, not that we need him to anymore. It was good to talk.”

“Who is Coop?” Ivy asks, mumbling around her donut, spewing crumbs out onto the counter.

“Ew! Ivy, can you fit any more donuts into your mouth?” Bec quips. Ivy’s eyes sparkle, and she takes the challenge and thrusts her hand toward the plate. Bec grabs fast for the donuts. “Don’t you dare! You’re a monster! Here I thought Bennett had a sweet tooth,” she playfully scolds Ivy.

“Coop is a friend from college.” I squeeze in my answer between their playful banter.

There’s more cackling from Bec, and Ivy’s mouth is stuffed to the brim like a chipmunk.

“You sneak!!! Did you really have that hidden somewhere?!” Bec shrieks.

“You malays fonna hap a pockeh donuh.” Ivy’s inaudible reply has Bec looking to me for answers.

Shaking my head with a laugh, I translate. “You always gotta have a pocket donut.”

A mumble comes from Ivy as her hand shoots up, giving me one finger, instructing me to hold on. She finishes chewing at a fast speed, using her coffee to gulp down the rest of her donut. “That’s nice.” She smiles.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Ivy

If you had asked me a year ago if I would be sitting in a courtroom watching both my dad and ex-boyfriend stand trial on multiple counts of embezzlement, tax evasion, and wire fraud, I would have looked around the room for cameras because I must have been punk'd. After the FBI got involved, they pulled in the IRS. An agent was sent to our house about a month later. My father has been back in Chicago since his release. I received a few calls from him. At least, I assumed it was him, considering the zip code. I refused to answer. Arty remained incarcerated until his trial. With the new charges against him, they pushed his court date. They wanted time to consider the additional crimes. So, here I sit in back-to-back arraignments for both Arthur J Carmichael and Mitchell D Hanson.

Per the usual, since Rebecca and Bennett have become permanent fixtures in my life, they flank either side of me. Jenna and Jordyn sit behind me, occasionally offering shoulder squeezes throughout the trial. The room goes silent when

Mitchell and Arty are walked into court. They sit along a wall, waiting for their turn.

Arty gets called first. “Arthur Carmichael, you are brought here today with the following charges against you: two counts of repeated assault, two counts of fraud against property for embezzlement, and wire fraud. The prosecution has requested a total jail time of fifty years with a possibility of parole after twenty years served.

“After reviewing the case thoroughly, and with this being your first time here in court, I do not want to issue you too harsh a sentence.” The judge peers over his throne at Arty.

Bennett’s frame stiffens next to me. The oxygen leaves the room entirely. How can a judge make such a comment after everything Arty has done? Gasps collectively fill the room, going off like a bomb, and I look to see Arty smiling.

“What happened?” I whisper.

“The judge gave him fifteen years, offering the six months he’s been in as time served. There’s a potential for early release in eight years, based on good behavior,” Rebecca whispers back, squeezing my hand.

Tears fill my eyes at the injustice of this entire situation. I don’t even realize my father has now replaced him at the defendants. Even though I can’t clearly see him, I can smell his sharp cologne from here. A knocking noise is in my ears as my heart picks up pace. My eyes are trained on the judge’s moving mouth. I can’t tell what he’s saying. The whole room has blurred, and his mouth moves quickly, his mustache

bouncing with every syllable. Shifting in my seat, I bend forward, dropping my head in my hands. I try to regulate my breathing so I don't pass out. My anxiety needs to stay in check, at least until I can get the hell out of this place. I run through all the videos in my head. There is no way the judge will let him go. *No way.* I grasp at my necklace, holding my mom's presence close. *This is for you, Mom.*

"Forty years, with a possibility of early release in twenty." As if my mother heard me herself, my hearing focuses as the judge gives his sentence. His gavel slams, and he rises to leave.

"I'm going to be sick." I race out of the courtroom through the back door, searching for the restroom down the hall. I slam my sweaty body against the cold stall door. anything to cool myself off and slow my heart rate. I hear the creak of the restroom door open; it doesn't take a genius to know it's my girls. Three sets of shoes appear outside the stall.

"Ivy, I know it's not life, but he's an old crusty man. Forty years is a long time, even twenty. His life is over." Jordyn seethes.

"She's right, Ivy. Plus, his whole life is power and money. All his assets are frozen. He is broke. Even upon his release, he will have nothing," Bec adds. The bathroom door swings open again, and I assume it's Bennett walking through.

"Bennett, if you waltz yourself into a public women's bathroom, we are going to get kicked out of here!" I shout over the stall, not ready to face any of them yet.

“Um, excuse me. I was hoping to have a word with Ms. Ivy?” A small voice breaks, but she sounds familiar. Wiping my eyes the best I can, I take in a deep breath and slide the lock. The woman in front of me stands, wringing her hands, tears in her eyes.

“Oh my God, Ms. Jones?” I exhale in disbelief. She looks the same, only more fragile.

“Ms. Ivy, you are so grown up. I’ve missed you. I’m so happy to hear you are okay. I’ve always wondered about you.” Her eyes shift around the room, eyeing my friends with caution.

Fury replaces my surprise, as I next remember her compliance in my abuse. “What are you doing here after all you’ve done? You could have helped me! Protected me! You helped them!” I scream at her, louder than I ever have before. My fists are too tight, my fingernails digging into my palms.

Ms. Jones flinches at my words as she cries harder. “Ivy, dear, I tried to protect you. Your mother hired me to watch over you. I didn’t know anything happened to you or the baby until it was too late. I wasn’t on staff either night. I did my best to keep you safe. I could only do so much. I distracted them for four days after you left, hoping you’d have a good enough head start to throw them off your trail. When Mitchell’s searches came back with no sign of you, I knew you got away.” Ms. Jones bows her head. Her words are rushed, croaked, as she urgently gets them out before her tears follow. I avert my eyes with shame. She did care for me after I lost the

baby. Remembering back, I know she offered me comfort every time she saw me hurting, played my mother's favorite songs, always left snacks for me in my room, bought me new *Playbills* for shows on Broadway.

Jenna, being the gentle heart she is, goes to the woman I once knew, offering her a tissue. Jenna scoops her arm around Ms. Jones. The room is mute, the only sound being the low sobs of Ms. Jones and me.

“Ms. Ivy, I have loved you for your entire life. I came into your life when you were eight. Do you remember?”

Nodding my head, I urge her to continue.

“Your mom hired me a few months before she passed. She wanted me to keep an eye on you, protect you. I'm so sorry I failed you. Failed her. I loved your mother as if she were my own daughter. Well, she should have been. If I had known about any of this plan she had with my boy, I would have slapped them silly.” She waves her hand in the air, swatting away the idea.

My body falls back into the stall wall behind me. “What?” My whole body vibrating in realization of what she said. This isn't real. She's old. She doesn't know what she's talking about. Delusional. My hands cover my face as I back farther into the stall, needing isolation.

“TJ is my son. I'm your grandmother, Ivy. I'm so sorry. I couldn't tell you. Mitchell didn't know who I was. I ...” Ms. Jones grunts as I slam my body into hers a little too harshly. “You're ... You're ...” My words catch in my throat, and I

scramble for what to say. I turn my head and see my friends huddled together, tears matching mine. I have a family. A living, breathing family, and I knew her. I knew her and I thought I had no one, but I had her. This last year may have been the worst best year of my entire life.

“You still smell like molasses.” I inhale deeply, absorbing the memories.

“And you, my dear, are as beautiful as your mother.” She runs her hand over my cheek, pulling my face away from her shoulder. “I’m so proud of you. She would be too.” Her compliment causes another rush of tears to flood my face.

Bennett’s large frame storms into the bathroom like a man on a mission. Not able to stay away a minute longer, it was only a matter of time before he tore apart this building to get to me. He sees the bathroom full of crying women and a look of confusion covers his face.

“Are you okay?” he asks, zeroing in on my embrace with a stranger. Nodding, I release Ms. Jones and walk over to Bennett.

“Everyone is leaving. What do you say we all head to Darth’s? We could all use something to eat after this day,” Bennett offers, his eyes shifting over my blotchy red face.

“And a drink!” Jordyn shouts with a clap. Yes. A drink. That, I could use.

We all trail out of the bathroom into the main lobby of the courthouse, the floors shining our reflections back to us. I

watch us move in tangent, a group perfectly choreographed to be my family. A tug at my hand pulls my attention. Ms. Jones smiles gently as she starts to walk ahead of us. I follow her path. My eyes tunnel to the man at the end of the hall, shuffling back and forth on his feet, hands deep in his pockets. Everyone else continues to walk, but my steps falter, feet cemented to the floor, keeping me from moving forward.

Bennett steps back, noticing my hesitant steps. “Ivy, what’s wrong?” His eyes echo mine, moving to the man standing before us a few feet ahead. “Holy shit, is that ... ?”

“TJ,” I finish for him. I let go of Bennett’s hand and start my slow and steady stride toward the man my mother loved. He looks the same, minus the peppering in his hair, and thick-framed sit glasses on his face. He begins to step forward, too, matching my hesitation.

It takes forever, yet no time at all to meet in the middle. I could reach my hand out and touch him—make sure he is real and not a figment of my imagination—but I don’t. We stand silent, staring at each other for a while, cataloging each feature. His eyes are deep blue like mine, his nose bent slightly as if broken before. Sun spots cover his forehead and cheeks. He’s tall, six feet—explains my five-ten status. My mom was only five foot five, and Mitchell was five foot six on a good day.

“Hi,” he says first, extending his hand out in front of him, shaking and unsure.

“Hi.” My hand encircles his, mine clammy and loose. This is so informal and impersonal. I hold still for a moment, neither of us pulling our hands away.

“It’s nice to see you,” he says, turning my hand and sandwiching it between his.

“It’s nice to meet you.” A tear falls as I match his movement, both of us clasping hands together. I imagine all those cool father-daughter handshakes I missed out on.

Bennett’s arm wraps around my waist, offering me the same support he has since that day in the janitor’s closet.

“I don’t want to interrupt, but we should probably head out of here. I’m Bennett, Ivy’s boyfriend.” He nods, extending his hand to TJ.

“TJ.” He reluctantly pulls his hands from mine and firmly shakes Bennett’s.

“We’re headed to Darth’s. It’s a local watering hole. Why don’t you join us?” God, I love this man.

TJ offers me a look, questioning if it’s what I want.

“Please, join us. I’d really like that.” I smile at a man whose smile matches mine.



“I’m so mad at you!” I playfully pinch Bennett’s arm.

“Hey! That’s no way to treat the birthday boy!” He slaps my hand away playfully.

“Well, I asked you if you wanted to do anything, and then you go and plan your own party! What the poop is that!!” I tickle his side, trying to get back at him somehow without being a total nag on his birthday.

“Ohhh, poop. Careful, Ivy, you may hurt my feelings with that dirty mouth,” he replies, completely unaffected by my assault.

“Well, I asked you for a month what you wanted to do, and you said nothing. Now you are telling me we are going to have a small party at Bake Away! I haven’t even showered!” I jump from bed, tossing my pillow, smacking him right in the face. I laugh at his shock when he moves the pillow away from him and dodge it when he tosses it back.

“Well, hop to it, beautiful. I can’t be too late for my party.” He winks as he folds his arms behind his head, lying back down.

“Well, what if I had my own plans for you today?” I glide my hand up my torso, seductively pulling my shirt over my head and throwing it at him. I bring both hands up to my nipples and pinch them, throwing my head back, and then bring my eyes back to him. “What a shame we won’t have time now ...” Before I can finish my sentence, Bennett’s body strides across the room, picking me up from the waist, hauling me over his shoulder.

“Hey!” I yelp, slapping his ass.

“Don’t you tell me we don’t have time. I can get you to come at least three times before fucking you up against the

shower wall. They won't even notice we are late." His hand drags up my inner thigh, pushing into my shorts. "Fuck, always ready for me, beautiful." Bennett pulls his hand away. I groan in protest.

"Eek!" I shout as his hand makes a stinging connection with my ass.

"That's for the tease. It's my birthday. I get what I want." His evil chuckle has me laughing as he carries me through the hall. I'm ready for what this mastermind has planned.

Eight pairs of eyes stare us down as we enter Bake Away. Rebecca, Jordyn, Charlie, Jenna, Ms. Jones—well Grandma Sharon—Mr. G, his beautiful wife Rose, and TJ. All of them are waiting in a semicircle, and in the center is the most delicious chocolate cake I have ever seen.

"Hey, everybody! I've brought the birthday boy! But are we sure that this isn't a party for me!? That cake looks to die for!" Clapping my hands in front of me, I lick my lips hungrily. Rebecca offers me a smile and shakes her head. "Well, she has always been intuitive." Not sure what she means, I walk toward them, noticing their odd grins.

"What? Why are you all being weird? Well, if you aren't going to start singing "Happy Birthday," I will." I walk to the cake, starting the familiar tune as I reach my hand out to swipe the tiniest bit of frosting off the corner of the cake. "Happy birthday ..." When my finger swipes at the swirl of chocolate from the corner of the cake, I see the inscription.

“Be better, do better, and inspire others.” My mantra. What is happening? Turning around, I see Bennett is gone, only the back door in view. Then he clears his throat. My eyes look down at the love of my life on one knee.

“Ivy Eloise Hanson, you slammed into my life, quite literally. I wasn’t looking for you, for anything, really. But I knew you were something special. You have shown me strength, empathy, and courage. The world brought us together. I know you. This last year together has been the best of my life. You make me want to do better. Want to be better. And want to inspire others, like you’ve inspired me. Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?” His stance is stoic. Not a shaky hand or falter in his words. He knows what he wants, and he isn’t afraid to ask for it.

There is no way this is real life. The man I love is standing before me, asking me to spend the rest of my life with him.

Someone behind me whispers, “Pssst,” bringing me back to reality. “Um, babes, this is where you answer him.” Rebecca elbows me jokingly.

“Home.” The only word I can think of flies from my mouth. Bennett’s face relaxes, and he comes to stand with a smile on his face. He knows.

“You are my home. Of course, I will marry you. Yes. Yes. A thousand times, yes.” I squeak, turning into those teenage girls at the school, swooning over the latest heartthrob. *My heartthrob*. Bennett pulls me into his arms, spinning me around. The entire room fills with cheers and claps. When he

finally puts me down, I pull his face to mine, pressing my lips to him in a deep kiss, hoping to translate all I want to say that I can't verbalize. He pulls away, cradling my face in both his hands. "I know, beautiful. I love you so much."

"Oh, oh, I'm planning the bachelorette party!" Jordyn shouts, pulling us from our bubble of pure bliss. Bennett slides the ring on my finger. Looking down at the diamond, I see it's a cushion cut center, encircled with blue stones, and shanked with blue stone down the channel of the band. "I had your mom's moonstone added to the ring. I hope that's okay. They suggested breaking it into small pieces to flank the band, whatever that means."

"I love it." I interrupt him with another kiss. "It's perfect." What a sneak. I knew my necklace was taking way too long getting cleaned.

We spend the rest of Bennett's birthday celebrating him, us, our new life, our new family. I want to pinch myself, making sure this isn't a dream. The legacy I fought so hard for is finally mine. This is what the fairy tales always talk about.

Return to Sender

Jenna

Blotting my eyes for the hundredth time, I stare at my blotchy face in the mirror of the honeymoon suite bathroom. I was supposed to run up here to get Ivy's earrings she left behind. I volunteered, knowing I would need another moment to myself, using the duties of being a good bridesmaid as an excuse to indulge in another breakdown.

This is the happiest day of my best friend's life, and it's the worst day of mine. Well, technically, that was Thursday, but does it ever really stop there? Pain drowns you. When you suffer an injury, it doesn't disappear because a new day starts.

Why is a broken heart any different?

My phone rings in my bag. I scramble to my purse to catch it before it times out. Sucking in a breath in an attempt to compose myself, I answer, "Hey, Bec. Yes, I got them. I'm headed down now." Hitting the end call button, I touch up my makeup, blowing out a shaky breath, forcing the burning in my eyes to stop. *Just make it through the day, Jenna. You can cry about that later.* It's not like my heart's never been crushed before. The lump in my throat starts to return. *No, stop.*

I had this exact day planned for myself. I was supposed to be marrying my longtime boyfriend. I did everything right, together six years, growing together. We bought a house. We had been living on my mom's land, in a barely four hundred square foot trailer. It was a good plan. The last five years we were able to save money until the perfect house came along.

When we finally picked out our dream home, I gave him the money from our savings. I didn't have enough credit to my name to be on the loan, but thankfully, Trevor was approved for the mortgage without me. I'm positive our cash deposit helped. When Trevor asked to move in first, I didn't think anything of it. We had been cramped in our small space for years. I loved him, so why shouldn't I offer him space when he asks for it? It had been so long that he had any space to himself. I convinced myself he wanted to make it his own. Days turned to weeks. Weeks to months. My patience wearing thin, I couldn't help but start to take it personally.

Jordyn, Bec, and I carry Ivy's centerpieces to the back of my SUV. I offered to store everything at my new house. Maybe I should have talked to Trevor first, but I have plenty of room. With the new house only five minutes from the venue, it makes sense to store stuff in the garage for a few days. Trevor may have been living there, but it is my house, too. He can get over it.

I punch in the garage code, the date of our first date, but it doesn't work. After a few attempts, I walk to the front door and insert my key, only it doesn't turn. I call Trevor, but after repeatedly being sent to voicemail, I storm toward my SUV. I'm about to pull out of the driveway when headlights beam into my rear window. Trevor's Jeep pulls into the driveway and up next to me.

"It's about time!" I shout at him as I slam my door, making my way toward him. Then an ice-cold chill runs through my veins as a woman steps out, confusion all over her face.

“Um, can I help you?” she hesitantly asks, rolling her window down.

“Um, no thanks. I’m sorry. I thought you were someone else,” I answer, clutching my keys in a tight grip. What are the odds she has the same make and model of Trevor’s Jeep? Don’t jump to conclusions, Jenna.

The dark-haired woman steps out from the Jeep.

“I’m waiting for my fiancé to get ...” My words halt instantly. When she closes the door, I get a full view of her pregnant belly. I’m no expert, but she looks to be toward the end of her third trimester.

The stranger sees my eyes trained on her belly, and she giggles. “Ugh, I know. I’m a whale. Two more weeks to go till this baby gets here. I’m beyond ready.” She runs her hand in circles.

“Yeah ...” My brain is scrambling for an explanation. I must be at the wrong house. When my eyes move back to her face, I see the hurt in her tight smile. Shit. She thinks I called her a whale! Way to go, Jenna, insulting a pregnant woman.

“No! I mean, you aren’t a whale.” I scan the area for a giveaway that I’m at the wrong place at the wrong time. This is a new development; all the houses look alike. Searching the yard, I see the windows I remember loving during our walk through, the landscape rock I insisted was meant for me, since I kill any plant I encounter. I swear I can hear plants wince as I walk past them, as they pray their fate won’t end in my hands. The mailbox is the only one in the neighborhood that

*has a thick brick surround, which excited me. The rest of the properties have cheap deep-green, plastic boxes. It makes no sense to pay all this money for a home, to then have a tacky mailbox. It's like wearing crocs with a ball gown. This **is** my house.*

"I'm sorry. Are you at the right house?" I ask. The woman in front of me scrunches her eyebrows, scrutinizing me.

"Uh, yes. This is my house. My boyfriend owns it. I moved in about ten months ago."

I avoid her eyes as I start to backtrack toward my SUV. Rage. Confusion. Pain. My emotions are in battle for the frontline. Ten months? That's when the house was officially closed, and Trevor asked to move in without me. Into the house I helped pay for! All my money went into this house with a secret pregnant girlfriend!

I once again force myself to the present, rushing through the chapel doors, toward the bridal suite. Before I can turn the handle, I hear my name being called from the groom's side of the hall.

"Hey, Jenna, my friend Coop should be here any minute to start taking photos. We want the girls to go first. Can you keep an eye out?" Bennett calls to me, his head popping out for the groom's quarters.

"Yep, watch for the photographer, you got it." Flashing him a smile, I enter the bridal quarters. Bennett looks so handsome in his suit, but the happiness on his face takes the cake.

I walk into the bridal room and offer Bec the earrings she's been waiting on. Ivy seems way calmer than I thought she would be. She's absolutely stunning, still wearing her all white "I'm the bride" pajamas Jordyn insisted on. Looking at my watch, I see the ceremony starts in about forty minutes, and Ivy is walking around like it's the easiest thing in the world. Maybe it really is that simple when you find your true love.

I see a car pull up alongside of the building from the window in the back of the room. It's the only window that has a view into the parking lot. Everyone else is all accounted for: makeup, hair, officiant, attendants. So, this must be the photographer. I'm already in my bridesmaid's dress since I'm anal as hell and insisted on being ready. I need to be prepared for last-minute mishaps.

"Hey, I got to go get the photographer. I think Bennett said his name is Coop. I saw a car pull in. I'm going to go grab him." I announce it to the girls.

"Oh Cooper! I love him! He's great. Super nice! It's happening, Ivy! It's going to be real now, documented in time." Bec snaps pretend photos at her. "You may want to wipe the chocolate off your face before he starts snapping the real ones though," she playfully scolds.

I walk out to the front doors, pushing, preparing to prop them open, assuming he will need to bring in equipment. Sliding the door stopper under the frame, I hear a car door shut close by. "Hey, sorry. This door doesn't like to stay open. I'm going to wedge this in here and then show you straight to the bride!" I

explain as my heel fails to push the small sliver of wood
beneath the door.

Black men's dress shoes come into my line of sight, but he doesn't say anything. Rude. My grip falters on the door as it is opened wider. The stranger moves his foot and pushes the wedge under the door. Bringing myself to stand, I blow a curl out of my face. "Oh, thanks! My heel couldn't get traction on the stopper, I guess. Ha ha." I hear his voice before my gaze fully lifts to introduce myself. "Belle?" a deep voice rumbles in front of me. My spine locks straight up, and my entire world stops. Only one person has ever called me Belle—someone I haven't spoken to since the year after we graduated high school.

My eyes trail up deep gray slacks, to a solid frame barely hiding behind a vest and suit jacket. Then I meet his eyes. As if my life couldn't get any more complicated, standing before me is the man I loved. The man I hated. The man I hated to love.

"Bird," I whisper back as I stare into the deep green eyes I have spent years trying to forget.

About the Author

JL Avery lives in NE Wisconsin with her husband and two dogs. She splits her time between crafting, writing and spending time with loved ones. Her dream is to write full-time and enjoy traveling around the world. JL Avery loves to write steamy, angsty and suspenseful romances to set the reader on a journey with her characters.