



THE *Secret* OF *Raven*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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THE SECRET OF RAVEN

(A PACT BETWEEN THE FORGOTTEN,
BOOK 4)

JESSICA SORENSEN

The Secret of Raven

Jessica Sorensen

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ONE

RAVEN

I'm standing in a room, and so many people are looking at me —adult people with eyes that remind me of those that peer out from the darkness in cartoons. You know, the ones that are supposed to be scary. Well, these eyes remind me of those, and it's terrifying. I can see all of their faces since the lights are on in the room.

"Stand right there," a lady with a camera tells me. She's standing in front of me, and the camera is on some sort of stand.

Everyone is watching me, and I'm scared.

"Where's my dad?" I ask as I fiddle nervously with the hem of my dress.

When we came to this house, my dad had been with me. But soon after we entered the place, he took off with a bunch of guys. He told me to wait in this room that doesn't even have windows, and then all these people showed up and started whispering while they stared at me.

"Your dad's busy," the woman with the camera says. "Now, don't move. I'm going to take a photo of you."

Tears burn my eyes, and she sighs. "Estell." She snaps her fingers. "Bring in the other one. Perhaps that'll get her to be more cooperative. If not, we'll have to take more drastic measures, but I'd rather not dope her up if I don't have to."

I'm not fully certain what she's saying, but my stomach twists in knots. I'm about to try to run out of the room,

although I have this bad feeling that these people are bad and will chase me.

I stand still as a boy enters the room. I saw him when we arrived. He was getting into trouble. Or, well, he was getting yelled at for doing something.

He looks around my age, has short brown hair, and dark eyes. He looks scared but is trying to hide it as he walks straight toward me. He's wearing boots, and they squeak against the black and white checkered floor as he approaches. When he reaches me, he turns and stands beside me. He's slightly taller.

I look at him, wondering why he's here and why I am, too. He doesn't look at me, though, his gaze fixed on the camera.

"Don't look at me," he mutters under his breath. "Look at the camera and keep your expression blank. The sooner you do that, the sooner we can get the hell out of here."

I don't understand any of this. I want my dad, but asking for him didn't do any good. So, I decide to listen to the boy and face the camera.

The lady behind it lowers her eyes to the lens.

Flash.

Flash.

Flash—

My eyes snap open. A light flickers through my room. It confuses the crap out of me to the point where I bolt upright in bed. I seriously expect someone to be standing at the foot of the bed, taking a photo of me, but no one is there.

Another flash flickers through my room, and I realize it's coming from the window. A window I don't remember being in my bedroom.

Panic sets in as I peer around, trying to figure out where I am. A lamp is on, and I see blue walls surrounding me ...

Then it clicks.

I'm at Hunter, Jax, and Zay's house, not my aunt and uncle's. I left the lamp on because the dark scares the shit out of me. I was a little buzzed when I fell asleep not too long after we received a text that school was canceled due to the weather. Hunter had given me one of his shirts to sleep in, so the scent of his cologne is currently kissing my nostrils.

One thing that I don't know is why in the hell something is flashing outside. Did it start to lightning again?

I climb out of bed and walk over to the window. When I peer outside, shock whips through me at the sight. The snowfall has nearly tripled since I went to bed and is still fluttering down from the sky like big chunks of cotton candy. The flashing light is coming from a malfunctioning solar lamppost. Or, well, it just doesn't have enough light to continue working.

Releasing a breath that I didn't realize I was holding, I turn away from the window and rake my fingers through my hair. That dream ... memory—whatever the hell it was—is making me feel uneasy. I honestly am starting to feel like I'm losing my mind. I need to learn more about memory loss and what causes it, and maybe find a way to dig out all my buried memories. I would search for it online, except I don't have a phone, and my computer is at my aunt and uncle's house.

I need to get my stuff if I'm going to live here.

I head back to bed to get some sleep, but I'm wide awake now. And kind of thirsty. It's still dark outside. I check the time and frown.

Five thirty in the morning.

I'm not a morning person, and after drinking last night, I should be fast asleep, but I think the newness of where I'm sleeping and, really, just everything, has me wired.

I don't want to wake anyone up, but I need some water at least.

While the idea makes me super uncomfortable, I decide to go down to the kitchen to get some water.

The house is dark and quiet as I leave my room and descend the stairs. I assume everyone is asleep, so when I step into the kitchen and find someone standing there, I nearly pee my pants.

As I start to spin around to run, I hear Hunter say, “Shit, you scared me.”

I breathe in relief as I turn around and face him. “I scared *you*? I nearly just pissed my pants.”

He chuckles as he scoops up a scoopful of coffee grounds. He’s making coffee, and it’s so early.

“Are you like awake awake?” I ask, tugging at the hem of his shirt that I’m wearing.

He’s shirtless, and the scars he showed me a brief glimpse of earlier are visible, but knowing how he feels about them, I try not to stare. Still, he immediately notices where my attention is and turns around, dumping the grounds into the coffee machine.

“Sorry. I don’t usually sleep with a shirt on, and we usually don’t have guests over, so it’s not a big deal ... Not that you’re a guest. You’re totally one of us ...” He shakes his head. “I seriously just turned into a babbling idiot, didn’t I? You’ll have to forgive me.” He flashes me a smile from over his shoulder. “My brain doesn’t work until it gets its morning jolt of caffeine.”

“You’re fine. And I get it—being nervous about someone seeing your scars.” I tug on the hem of the shirt again. “But you know that already since you’ve seen mine.”

A drop of silence goes by, and then Hunter cracks a small smile. “We’re seriously like two peas in a pod.”

“Or like two weirdos in a kitchen way too early in the morning,” I quip with a smile.

He smiles back as he turns on the coffee machine. “I actually usually wake up this early.”

I pull a face. “Well, that’s just gross.”

His eyes crinkle around the corners as he smiles. “I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess my bestie isn’t a morning person.”

“Nope. Not at all. And it doesn’t help that I have a mild hangover.”

“You need some painkillers?”

“Maybe.”

He wets his lips with his tongue, considering something. “Let me cook you some breakfast first, and then you can take them. It’s not good to take them on an empty stomach.”

I promptly shake my head. “You don’t need to cook me breakfast. I can just eat like a granola bar or something.”

“No way.” He dismisses me with a flick of his wrist. “You need to eat something healthy.”

“Is that your way of saying I’m unhealthy?”

He grabs a carton of eggs, a gallon of milk, and the butter from the fridge. “No, that’s my way of saying that you need to eat better than I’m sure your aunt and uncle were feeding you.” He bumps the fridge shut and sets the ingredient onto the counter. Then he twists the knob on the oven. “You probably haven’t had a homecooked breakfast in a very long time.” He glances at me, as if waiting for me to answer.

Nodding my head is painful—the pain stemming from the truth. “It’s been a minute.”

He hesitates. “Can I ask how long?”

I rub my hand across my chest, the truth of the answer causing even more pain to swell through me. “I honestly can’t remember ever having one.” Not even when my parents were alive.

His expression turns sympathetic. “Aw, baby, that’s so sad.” He steps forward and lightly brushes his fingers along my cheek. “That’s going to change today, though, okay?”

I hesitate. “You’ve already done a lot for me. It feels weird that I’m just standing here and you’re making me breakfast.”

“I’ll make it for myself, too,” he insists. “But if it makes you feel better, how about you make the toast?”

I nod and smile. “That does make me feel better.”

He smiles, too, but his is more of amusement. “So damn cute,” he mumbles, shaking his head and turning back to the stove.

I’m glad he is since my cheeks are warm. At least he can’t see that I’m blushing.

“The bread is in the pantry, if you want to grab it.” He points over his shoulder at a door nearby.

“Okay.” I spin around and head over to it, the hardwood floor cold against my bare feet. But it’s nowhere near as cold as it was last night when the power went out. And, you know, when someone left a dead raven in the snow and used the blood to paint the words, “*Consider this the start of my retaliation,*” in the snow.

“When did the power come back on, anyway?” I wonder as I open the pantry door, and my eyes widen at the sight.

So much food and snacks are on the shelves. Seriously, if the world went into apocalyptic mode tomorrow, these guys would for sure survive.

“It was right after you went to bed, actually,” he tells me as I search around for the bread. “I’m glad. It would’ve sucked ass if it’d been off for too much longer. It’s way too cold for that.”

“Agreed.” I spot the bread. Or, well, loaves of bread. They have multiple choices, even some sort of cinnamon raisin, which sounds yummy. “Hey, Hunter?”

“Yeah, baby.”

My heart flutters in my chest. Why does he keep calling me that? It doesn’t sound like a nickname for a bestie but more of like a girlfriend term. Then again, what the hell do I know?

“Does it matter which kind of bread I use?” I ask.

“You can use whatever you want. This is your house, which means everything in it is yours, too. I don’t want you feeling like you have to ask for things, okay?”

“Okay,” I say, but I’m sure I will.

They may say this is my house, but it’s not. Not really. Once I start officially working for them, I’ll only be a renter, not a part-owner. I’m so grateful they’re letting me do that, though. I just don’t feel comfortable enough to use all of their things without asking first.

I’m also worried my aunt and uncle aren’t going to let me move out, and that all of this will be a brief moment in my life. But I can’t dwell on that right. Not when I have so much else going on.

Sucking in a breath, I grab the loaf of cinnamon raisin bread and exit the pantry. Hunter is cracking eggs into a bowl as I make my way over to him. The toaster is on the counter near the stove, and I set the bread down in front of it.

His gaze strays to the bread as he cracks an egg. “Good choice. That’s Jax’s favorite.”

“Are we cooking for them, too?” I ask as I untwist the twisty tie from the bread bag.

He nods as he opens a drawer and takes out a fork. “Blaise is an early riser, too. Jax probably won’t be up for a bit—he gets lazy after drinking. But I figure we can wake him up early since we have a lot of stuff to do.”

“Won’t he get mad if we do?”

“That’s what the breakfast is for—to smooth over his hangover and possible grumpy mood.” He starts whisking the eggs with the fork. “However, just to add some icing on the cake, I figured I could send you up to wake him.”

I stupidly point at myself. “You want me to wake him up?”

He nods, wisps of his blond hair falling into his baby blues. “Unless you don’t want to.”

“Well, I don’t want him to be bad at me for waking him up.” I set the twisty tie aside.

Hunter smiles, a beautiful, glittering, amused smile. “Trust me; Jax won’t get mad at you for waking him up. He might chew out my ass, but he’ll be all sweet for you.”

My mind wanders to when Jax kissed me last night and how Hunter saw. No one’s said anything about it, though, so I don’t dare bring it up.

“Maybe he won’t be if I wake him up,” I point out. “Perhaps he’ll be annoyed that I woke him up at the butt crack of dawn.”

He shakes his head with certainty. “Trust me; there’s no way Jax will get annoyed with you.” He stops whisking and adds a drop of milk to the egg mixture. “You’ve already got him wrapped around your pretty little finger.”

Again, that kiss flashes through my mind.

Hunter flicks a look at me—the implying one—like maybe he’s thinking about the same thing.

“That’s not true,” I insist, and when he merely rolls his eyes, I add, “Well, if it is true, I’m not doing it on purpose.”

“I know you’re not, but it doesn’t make it any less true.”

“Maybe I should do something to make it not be that way.”

He chuckles, his eyes crinkling around the corners, as he collects the bowl of egg mixture and moves over to the stove where a pan is heating. “Yeah, nothing you can do is going to change that. That’s the thing about Jax; he doesn’t connect with most people, but when he does, it’s for life.” He dumps the egg mixture into the pan, and it sizzles. “We’re all kind of like that, I guess.” He sets the bowl down.

“But I don’t have all of you wrapped around my finger,” I stress as I take out a few slices of bread from the bag.

He doesn’t say anything as he collects a spatula from the drawer, but I detect his brows rising in an implication.

My stomach drops. Like actually drops with nausea. I’m not even sure why I’m freaking out about this.

Okay, actually I do.

A few times when my uncle was splitting me open, he uttered similar words.

“You’re such a fucking slut,” he said to me once as he put the tip of the knife to my side, piercing the flesh. “And you know it.” The blade sank deeper, but I didn’t give him the satisfaction of flinching. “This is your fault, you know. You have me wrapped around your finger, making me feel this way, always being here, always fucking with my head.”

He’d been trashed that night and, honestly, I could barely sort through his rambles. Still, I remember the being-wrapped-around-my-finger part clearly because it didn’t make any sense. Still doesn’t.

As shame washes over me, I grow silent as I start putting the slices of bread into the toaster.

“Pretty Raven, where’s your head at?” Hunter asks, glancing at me.

“Just on making this toast.” I want to force a smile onto my face, but I can’t get my lips to cooperate, so I keep my gaze trained on the toaster.

“Hey.” Hunter moves beside me, so close that his shoulder touches mine. Then he cups my face with his hands and turns my head toward him so I have to look at him. “What’d I say that upset you?”

“Nothing. It’s just me ... I’m just being stupid.”

“You’re not stupid. Your feelings are yours, and you’re allowed to feel upset.” He skims a finger along my cheekbone. “But I really want to know what I said to you that caused that emotion to rise so I don’t accidentally do it again.”

“It’s nothing really,” I insist. “The comment about me having all of you wrapped around my finger just reminded me of something my uncle said to me a few times.”

Something flashes in his eyes that I think might be anger, yet when he speaks, his tone is even and calm, soothing. “Do you mind if I ask what it was?”

I lift a shoulder, that shame bearing down on me. I don't have to tell him—I know that—but Hunter already knows enough about me that I decide to.

“A few times when he was cutting me and he was drunk,” I start, swallowing hard, “he said I was a slut and that I was making him do that to me because I had him wrapped around my finger. Whatever the hell that means.” I sigh. “He was drunk and just rambling.”

Hunter remains quiet for a moment, the eggs hissing in the background.

“You know what he did to you is in no way, shape, or form your fault, right?”

I nod, but a small fragment of me has questioned, if perhaps I was normal—not so sassy and defiant and maybe even a murderer—that he'd have left me alone.

“It wasn't,” he repeats, carrying my gaze. “And what I said about you having us wrapped around your finger, I didn't mean it as a bad thing.”

I frown. “How? No one wants to be wrapped around someone else's finger.”

“That's not true at all. Can it be bad? For sure. Especially if the person running the show is a cruel person. But there's not a cruel bone in your body. And you don't have us wrapped around your finger because you're trying to make things that way.” His lips tug into a half-smile. “It's because we want to be.”

My heart is doing weird things in my chest. “Even if that's true ... why would you want to be?”

He drags the pad of his thumb across my lips, his gaze fleetingly falling to my lips. “Why wouldn't we want to be? You're sweet, adorable, feisty as hell, funny, and just so goddamn strong, despite everything.”

I think, by *everything*, he means all the shittiness that is my life. And his words? They ink my soul, even if not all of them are true.

“Even though not all of that is true, thank you for saying that.” I suck in a breath. “Thank you for being so nice to me.”

“You don’t need to thank me. I’m just speaking the truth.” With one final glance at my lips, he lowers his thumb. Then he stares at me.

I stare back, wondering what on earth is going on in his head.

And then the fire alarm starts squealing and startles the crap out of us.

“Shit. The eggs.” He rushes over to the oven, flips on the vent above it, and turns off the heat. When the alarms go quiet again, he crinkles his nose. “Dude, I’m going to have to make another batch.”

I look in the pan and, yep, the eggs are nearly black. “Ew.”

“Ew for sure.” He walks over to the opposing side of the kitchen and puts the pan in the sink. Then he bends over to grab a clean pan out of one of the lower cupboards.

While he does, Zay wanders into the kitchen. He’s wearing a hoodie with the hood pulled up over his head, fingerless gloves, a pair of sweatpants, and sneakers.

His gaze shifts from Hunter to me then sweeps up and down my body, reminding me that I’m just standing in Hunter’s shirt. Granted, it goes almost to the tops of my knees, but it might be a little weird that I’m just walking around in it.

Maybe I should go get dressed ...

Before I can decide, Zay moves further into the kitchen, toward the fridge. “Why did the fire alarms just go off?”

Hunter startles then stands up straight, turning toward Zay with a pan in his hand “Because I messed up the first batch of eggs.”

“Really? You’re usually a better cook than that.” He opens the fridge, casting a glance at me before looking back at Hunter. “Let me guess; you were distracted.”

Hunter shrugs. “Kind of, but it’s not a big deal. They went off for about five seconds and, since you came down here a minute later, I’m guessing you were awake.”

Zay shakes his head then begins rummaging around in the fridge, bottles clinking together.

Hunter wanders back over the stove, giving me a small smile, but uneasiness is floating in the air between them. I have no idea why, unless Zay really is simply annoyed that Hunter set off the fire alarms. It feels like there’s more to it than that, though.

“I’m going to go do a few miles on the treadmill,” Zay announces as he grabs a bottle of water from the fridge and bumps the door shut. “And then I’ll come back and eat.” He looks at me then. “I was thinking that I could spend a little bit of time this morning teaching you some self-defense moves. I’m not sure how many you know yet, so we’ll just start by you showing me then go from there.”

“Okay,” I start to say, but then something dawns on me. “I don’t have anything to wear except for my jean shorts, T-shirt, and boots. Are we going to be moving around a lot?”

Zay lowers his hood from his head and then rubs his hand across his short, cropped brown hair. Then he twists the cap off the water bottle, with a contemplative expression. “You’re definitely not going to want to wear that. Maybe we should figure out a way to get some of your clothes.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” I say. “However, I still don’t have anything to wear still ... Workout clothes aren’t my thing.”

He gives a short pause then flits a glance at Hunter, who’s cracking eggs again. “You think Low would have anything she could borrow?”

“She probably does. I’ll ask.” Hunter wipes his hands off on a towel then collects his phone from off the counter.

“Will she even be awake?” I wonder.

He nods, sweeping strands of his hair out of his face. “She’s an early riser, too.”

The way he says it makes me question if there's a reason behind why she gets up so early.

He sends her a quick text then places the phone on the counter and picks up the fork to whisk the eggs. Zay downs a mouthful of water before wandering off toward the doorway again, making me wonder where the treadmill is.

The toast pops then, scaring the hell out of me. I move over to the toaster but don't grab the toast.

"Where are your plates?" I ask Hunter.

He points to a cupboard beside my head then scoops up his phone as it pings with an incoming text. I grab a plate, pluck the toasts out of the toaster, and set them on it while Hunter reads the text.

"Low's going to bring you some clothes to workout in," he informs me as he sets down the phone. "We really need to develop a game plan to get your stuff, though."

"I have to get my aunt and uncle to agree to let me move out first before we do that," I remind him as I take out the last piece of toast. "Are we still planning on blackmailing my aunt with the knowledge that we know she's cheating?"

"Definitely." Hunter moves over to the stove with the bowl in his hand. "And I thought about that a lot while I was falling asleep last night." He dumps the eggs into the pan. "And I think that maybe we should all just go over there when your uncle's not there and just lay it out for her. We don't need to mention the cameras. We can say something like when you texted her last night, we were at the house and saw her."

"But, wouldn't I have said that to her last night if it were true?" I point out as I grab a plate.

"That doesn't really matter." He reaches for the spatula. "When it comes to blackmailing, all you need is a little bit of knowledge and a lot of confidence."

I recline against the counter. "You say that like you're a blackmailing expert."

He tosses me a smirk. "Maybe I am."

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you were,” I say, and he grins.

I smile, too. It’s really hard not to smile around him.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment.” He sticks the spatula in the stove and starts moving the eggs around. “Don’t worry; blackmailing your aunt will probably be the easiest part of the day.”

I take the toast out of the toaster. “What’s going to be the hardest?”

“Probably holding this stupid party. Not just because it’s going to be rushed, but because I’m sure some of the people Benton is inviting are sketchy as hell. Not that we’re all not sketchy as hell, but there’s various levels of it.” He adjusts the temperature on the stove. “Totally off the subject, but these eggs are about done, so do you want to go wake up Jax?”

I nod as I put the last piece of toast on the plate. “Sure.” I start toward the doorway, but then I pause, realizing ... “Wait. Which one is his room?”

“It’s the third door on the right,” he replies as he grabs the salt and pepper from a cupboard.

I walk off and head up the stairs, hoping Jax doesn’t think it’s weird when I wake him up. It seems sort of weird to me. I mean, I barely know him ...

I think, anyway.

Okay, the more time I spend with the guys, the more I question that, especially after the shit I remembered with the raven. I really do need to find a way to bring it up to them. I just don’t want to look totally crazy.

So, how does one tell someone else that they think perhaps they once knew each other but then somehow forgot ...

Yeah, that sounds crazy.

Crazy, crazy, Raven. I’ve been called that many times. Perhaps that’s why I’m so reluctant to tell them.

Le sigh. I really do need to grow some lady balls. Normally, I’m all about the badass, but this is different

because these guys are trying to be my friends, and I don't want to mess that up.

TWO

RAVEN

As I'm continuing the mental battle inside my head, I pass by the first room in the hallway and instantly slow to a halt. The door is wide open, the light is on, and inside is a treadmill along with a weight bench. In the far back corner is a sofa and, standing beside it, is Zay. He has his phone in his hand and is reading something on the screen. That's not what captures my attention, though. No, I stop walking and stare inside the room because Zay has his hoodie and shirt off, and his bare back is facing toward me, giving me a full view of a long, jagged scar that runs down his back, right along his spine.

I've seen scars before—have plenty of my own—but this one is long, thick, and so close to his spine. Whatever caused it had to be a painful experience—

He suddenly turns, and his gaze collides with mine. He freezes, the muscle in his jaw pulsating.

“What were you just doing?”

“Nothing,” I say quickly then turn to leave. But that's when it hits me, like a brick hitting me in the gut. Or the head.

“What do you mean, he fell down the stairs?” I ask the blond-haired boy. “That doesn't sound like him at all.”

“I know. I think it was a lie,” he tells me quietly. “That's probably why they're not taking him to a hospital.”

“What?” I say in horror. “But he broke his back; they have to fix it.”

“One of our dads’ special doctors is performing surgery on him now,” Hunter tells me.

I peer over my shoulder at the four-story house in the distance. “In the house?”

“Yeah ...” He sucks in a breath then lets it out. “This is bad. Like, really, really bad ... If they mess it up, he could maybe never walk again—”

“You want to ask me about it?” Zay asks, wrenching me from the memory.

“Ask what?” It may seem like I’m playing dumb, but I’m disoriented from the vivid ... memory?

Zay tosses his phone onto the sofa and steps toward me. I’m tall, but he’s taller, and I have to tip my chin up to meet his gaze.

“The scar on my back.” He crosses his arms and stares me down. “I know you saw it.”

I press my lips together, deliberating if I dare ask him. It’s not that I’m afraid of him; I feel uncomfortable asking him about his scars when I don’t even like people seeing mine. I want answers, though, and if I don’t ask, I’ll never get anywhere.

“What happened?” I dare ask.

His eyes search me, but I’m not certain what he’s looking for. I have a few guesses, like maybe he’s trying to see if I already know the answer. I’m not positive, but I’m starting to get the impression that maybe Zay is aware that we may have used to know each other.

“My father pushed me down the stairs,” he says calmly. “Broke my back, and I had to have surgery.” He turns around to end the conversation.

“Did you have it at a hospital?” I ask, not taking the hint, my need for answers way greater. “Because that scar is gnarly. No offense.”

He pauses, his muscles raveling into knots.

He gradually turns toward me, and I wait for him to say it.

He stares at me, his gaze exploring mine again so intensely, like he can reach inside me and extract the answer with a look.

“Why would you ask that?” he questions.

“I—” I almost tell him, but something stops me, silencing the words right off my lips. I’m not sure why that keeps happening, why I just won’t say the words aloud. It’s like my mouth has been programmed not to. Well, either that or the fear of being looked at like a lunatic is too great. “I don’t know. I just ...” I shrug.

His gaze is relentless, dissecting me from the outside in. “No, I didn’t go to the hospital.”

Silence trickles by, and he says nothing. The silence is making me squirmy to the point where I can’t take it anymore.

“Okay.” I turn to leave.

“Raven?” he calls out.

I pause, casting a glance over my shoulder. “Yeah?”

“You better hurry up. We have a lot of shit to do today.” With that, he kicks the door shut.

Asshole.

He’s an asshole. It’s that simple.

Well, I wish it was.

The truth is he isn’t always an asshole, like when he helped save me and when he didn’t let me take off after Hunter caught Jax and me kissing. I wonder why he’s so hot and cold. Was he always like this? I may have that answer locked away inside my mind. One day, I will have to find a way to talk to these guys about what I’m remembering; see if it’s for sure them in my surfacing memories.

It feels like it ... It feels like I know them ...

I reach Jax’s door then and knock. When no one answers, I assume he’s still sleeping, so I open the door and go inside. It

feels a little weird to walk into his room while he's asleep.

His room is similar to the rest of the house with framed photos on the walls that Hunter probably took, but he has tons of bookshelves lined with all sorts of books. He also has the curtains drawn shut, but he left the closet light on, like me, as if he's afraid of the dark.

When I near the bed, I can make him out, asleep on his back. The blankets are only pulled up to his waist. He's not wearing a shirt, and I try not to stare, but my eyes wander to his chest.

He's lean and toned, not overly muscular, and a few tattoos cover his flesh, including a willow tree that runs up his side. It's a pretty tattoo, detailed, with birds soaring above the branches. What I don't get is the vertical lines running underneath it. They don't seem to go with the tree, but maybe I'm not looking at it right.

I lean in and angle my head to my side. Then my heart clenches. Those lines look familiar, not because I've seen them before but because I have some on my wrists.

Jax cuts himself. I know the sign—I'm a cutter, too.

Poor Jax. Poor beautiful, soulful Jax. Hunter told me he was in pain over the girl that they lost. Is that why he cuts? Is it something else? A combination of things?

Poor, sweet Jax.

I reach out and brush my fingers along the side of his face. I'm not even sure why I do it. I just feel this urge to touch him, to take away his pain.

The moment my flesh kisses him, his eyelids flutter open, and his gaze finds mine. Confusion floods his pupils, along with sleepiness.

"Am I dreaming?" he whispers, blinking a few times.

I shake my head from side to side as I lower my hand from his cheek. "No ... I'm supposed to come up here and wake you up for breakfast."

He wets his lips with his tongue then reaches up and plays with a strand of my hair. “It kind of feels like I’m dreaming. Are you sure I’m not?”

I snort a laugh. “Yeah, I promise you’re not.”

“Oh.” He sighs then rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands. “What time is it?”

“Like close to five-thirty.”

When he lowers his hands from his face, he slowly sits up and stresses, “Shit, that’s early.”

“Sorry.” I tug on the hem of my shirt as his gaze drifts to my legs. “Hunter told me you weren’t a morning person, but you’d handle being woken up better if I were the one to do it.”

He meets my eyes, a small smile tugging at his lips. “He’s definitely right.” With his lips pressed together, he reaches up and tucks a strand of hair out of my eyes. “I hate early mornings, but if you ever feel like coming and waking me up again like this, feel free.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.” He hesitates. “As super weird as this is going to sound, can I hug you?”

“Really?”

“As long as it isn’t too weird, then yeah.” He sweeps his fingers through the dark strands of his hair, leaving them sticking up in all sorts of directions, but in the sexiest way ever. “It’s fine if you don’t want to. I was just having this dream about you, and I was about to give you a hug when I woke up.”

“You were dreaming about me?” Jax, mysterious, gorgeous Jax, who I’ve kissed, was dreaming about me?

He hesitantly nods, brushing strands of his inky black hair out of his face. “I think it was because you were on my mind last night when I fell asleep.”

I crinkle my nose. “Because of the whole raven thing?”

He wavers. “Partly.”

I wonder if that other part is because we kissed last night. I'm not about to ask, though. I'm not about to bring that up when no one else has.

Still, if he wants to hug me, then I'm not about to argue. It may be foreign to me, but I think I might like the hugging thing. At least with him and Hunter.

"You can hug me," I say, feeling nervous for some dumbass reason.

His brows rise slightly, but then he relaxes, scoots to the edge of the bed, lowers his feet to the floor, and reaches for me. His hands find my waist, and I expect him to stand up and hug me, so I'm surprised when he pulls me toward him until I'm nestled between his legs. If he hugs me now, his face will end up where my breasts are, which seems awkward. But he doesn't do that. No, he lifts me up and sets me in his lap so I'm straddling him. That'd be awkward enough, but I'm also wearing no pants, and he's sporting a pair of thin pajama bottoms, so we're touching. A lot. In some intimate places. Jax doesn't appear to notice as he slips his hand around my waist, moving his palms up my back.

He smiles at me in this goofy, happy sort of way, something I haven't seen him do since I met him, and I'm guessing he doesn't do that a lot.

"Hey," he says.

A smile touches my lips. "Hey."

He presses against my back, guiding me toward him and giving me the hug he sought. "We did this in my dream, you know," he says, his breath lightly kissing my ear. "Only we were sitting in the grass underneath a tree."

"That sounds kind of nice," I admit. "This is nice, too."

"It really is. I just wish I didn't have a headache so I could completely enjoy it."

"Are you hungover?"

"Yeah? You?"

“A little bit. Hunter’s making breakfast, though, and insists that’s going to help.”

“It will.” He traces his nose against the arch of my neck. “You smell so good.”

A shiver rolls through my entire body. And when I say through my entire body, I mean, my entire body. Like I can actually feel the shiver between my legs. It’s a strange sensation that makes me feel all squirmy.

“You okay?” His lips brush against my neck again.

“I’m fine.” My voice is soft, and my heart is beating swiftly enough that, with his lips so close to my pulse, he might notice.

“Your heart’s beating really fast.” He leans back and looks me in the eye. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I bob my head up and down. “Yep.” I’m not sure if I am, though.

I feel ... Well, I’m not sure. It’s definitely something I haven’t felt before.

He quietly sighs before slanting away to look me in the eye. “I like this.”

I angle my head to the side. “Like being woken up by me?”

A warm smile graces his face. “I do. Not that I’m a huge fan of getting up this early, but if I had to, this is definitely the way to go.” He loops his arms around my waist. “But I actually meant this. You living with us. You being able to come wake me up because you’re living with us.”

His words make my heart feel all gooey and warm.

“We’ll see if you’re still saying that after a few days,” I joke, because his niceness makes me uncomfortable.

Keeping one hand on my waist, he brushes strands of hair out of his eyes with the other. “Trust me; I’m one hundred percent certain my feelings aren’t going to change about this.”

We’ll see.

We'll see.

We'll see.

I keep the words trapped inside my mouth since he appears fairly adamant about this.

A yawn works its way up my throat, and Jax frowns.

“You’re still tired,” he says. “Did Hunter wake you up?”

I shake my head. “I woke up on my own, but I usually don’t wake up this early. I think it was just because of the storm.”

He sketches his fingers along my jawline, and wonderful goosebumps sprout across my skin. “Do you want to go back to bed?”

“Want to, for sure. But I think we need to get up.”

“Nah. We can spare like ten minutes.” He lays down before I can protest, bringing me with him so I end up lying flat against his chest.

His hands are on my lower back, and my head rests on his chest. So much of us is touching that it is nearly maddening. The sound of his heart is dancing against my eardrum, soft pitter-patters and whispered promises of dozing off into a potential dreamland.

“This is nice, right?” He trails his fingers up and down my spine.

It is.

It really is.

My eyelids are lowering as exhaustion tiptoes into my mind.

This ...

I could seriously get used to this ...

All the touching ...

The connection ...

He gradually rotates us to the side, moving slowly and lining us so we're face to face. Then he tucks an arm underneath my head and drapes an arm around on my waist. We're so close our foreheads are nearly touching.

He doesn't close his eyes, raveling a strand of my hair around his fingertip.

"I feel like we should fall asleep like this every night," he murmurs with his gaze locked on mine.

"Except it's not night," I remind him, fighting the urge to shut my eyes.

"It should be considered night ... the sun's not even up."

I crack a smile. "I guess we can pretend."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. For a few minutes, anyway."

He unravels the strand of my hair from around his finger then spreads his fingers across my cheek before lowering his forehead to mine. "Okay."

His breaths are feathering across my face as he remains that way, his head lightly touching mine. It's a peaceful moment, but I'm not sure if I can fall asleep or not. Not with him so close. Not with me just wearing my shirt and underwear. Not with the sound of the banging coming from one of the other rooms.

"What is that?" I whisper.

"Zay taking out his anger issues on a punching bag." He quietly sighs. "So much for falling asleep." He gives a short pause then slants back, his eyes lighting up. "Wait. I have an idea." He starts to move away from me but briefly stops. "Just stay like that, okay? Don't move."

He waits for me to nod before untangling his legs from mine and sitting up. Then he gets out of bed and walks over to one of the bookshelves that has a stereo on it. He powers it on, collects his phone from a charging dock, and scrolls through what I'm assuming is his music collection.

Moments later, “Cough Syrup” by Young the Giant clicks on, and it overpowers the sound of Zay punching the bag.

When Jax turns back toward the bed, I’m smiling. He smiles right back and starts toward me. I try not to stare at the scars on his chest, not wanting to ruin the moment, but my gaze drifts toward them a few times. He either doesn’t comment or doesn’t care as he climbs back into the bed. Then he stretches across the mattress, tangles his legs with mine, tucks his arm underneath my head, and lowers his forehead against mine so we’re lying just how we were before he got up.

A few lyrics pass by, and we just sort of stare at each other. I should probably close my eyes—that was this point, right? He said he was still tired. I’d yawned. He said we should sleep for like ten minutes. And I’d been close to dozing off. But now he’s here, lying in front of me, just staring at me with his pretty haunted eyes, playing with my hair.

He doesn’t look like he’s about to fall asleep. He just looks content. And the music, it’s flowing around us and whispering at my mind to listen instead of go to sleep.

Listen, Raven.

Listen to your heart.

Listen to his.

I can’t hear it anymore since my ear is resting against his arm, but if I place my hand against his chest, maybe I can. And I kind of want to, want to see if it’s racing like mine is.

Slowly, I lift my hand and place it against his chest, right above his heart. His fingers in my hair pause, his muscles stiffening. I almost pull back, but then he relaxes and begins playing with my hair again. His heart is pounding fiercely, despite how relaxed he looks. His skin is warm and soft. I’m not sure why that’s what I realize. It seems weird to note how warm and soft skin is. But it’s been a while since I’ve touched someone else—a long damn time.

I let my hand travel lower to the scars. They’re all around an inch or so long and run vertically. The texture is rougher

than the rest of his flesh, like they're telling me a story of the pain he endured.

"Raven." His voice catches.

I stop tracing his scars, worried I've crossed a line. I mean, what the hell did I think I was doing, just touching his scars like this? I wouldn't want anyone touching mine.

He fixes his finger under my chin and angles my head up toward him. Our gazes briefly weld together, and I can see the terror in his eyes. He's looked like this a handful of times, but I can't figure out why he's afraid this time.

"Are you okay?" I ask softly.

He nods unsteadily then gradually leans in and lightly brushes his lips against mine, in a soft kiss. My lips part in surprise, and my eyelids flutter close as I slip my hand across the top of his abs and grip his side.

After what happened last night, I didn't expect him to kiss me ever again. I didn't ever expect him to kiss me. And yet, here he is, with his lips resting softly against mine.

His muscles are taut under my palm, and his hand has frozen in my hair, like he's shocked the hell out of himself. But then the shock must dissolve because he's suddenly kissing me deeply, his lips parting mine.

I suck in a breath through my nose, my fingernails delving into his flesh. He groans, his hand now on my cheek as he presses his body closer. I clutch onto him as he angles me to the side until I'm rolled over onto my back beneath him. Our hips are aligned, his palm is still molded to my cheek, and our legs are tangled as his lips play with mine.

I wonder how I'm doing. If I'm kissing like a normal person, or is it totally evident that I have no clue what I'm doing. Jax knows that I don't. He was aware of it when he kissed me for the first time. That doesn't make it easier, though, feeling so out of my element.

Clueless Raven. Here she comes again.

This is the third time Jax has kissed me. The first was just a test, to see if I could do it. The second was a drunken kiss that was blurry and confusing, but not bad. This kiss, though. This is a kiss that I'm wide awake and completely coherent for. Jax seems to be aware of that too; every tongue sweep and lip brush seems to carry some sort of purpose, like he's touching, tasting, *feeling*.

Feeling.

Emotions.

Breaths.

Warmth.

Flesh.

Fingers.

Tasting.

Contact.

So much contact.

I can literally feel *everything* about him—the softness of his skin, the way his muscles have seemed to loosen yet some are wound tightly, the way our legs are tangled, a woven vine, and I can't figure out where his begin and mine end. Music is kissing my ears, but it sounds softer. Or maybe all of my senses are more alive so it's overpowering. I almost feel like I'm drowning in how our tongues tangle, with how his hands wander down my sides, his body heat that surrounds me. In fact, I'm pretty sure I've never felt this warm in my entire life.

Or felt this much.

It's like my brain can barely process it all—it's so much.

Then he's pulling back, opening his eyes.

“Are you okay?”

I nod my head, my breaths coming out in sharp intakes.

“Are you sure?” he double-checks, and I nod. “Do you want me to stop?” he asks, and I shake my head. He nods, too,

and then he leans in to kiss me again. His moves are deliberately slow, giving me time to back out.

I don't.

Instead, I lift my head and meet him halfway. It surprises us both and, for an instant, we both remain frozen. But we quickly snap out of it and start kissing again.

We stay that way for a while, giving each other lazy but purposefully kisses, our lips whispering secrets to each other, getting to know each other. Sometimes, he seeks answers, delving lower and kissing the side of my neck, softly sucking, subtly whispering that they crave more but never fully taking. It's not in books or movies, those crazy, wild, intense kisses where teeth are clanking together and we can barely breathe. It's a slow tune, a musical build-up, an acoustic guitar working its way to a chorus. Every brush of his fingers, every touch of his tongue, it's a beat, a rhythm, begging me to sing it.

To be honest, I probably could've done this all day, until the sun rose and set again, until my lips are swollen and bruised, until every muscle I have is so deliriously tired, I just drift off to sleep with the feel of him still on me.

Everywhere.

On my tongue.

On my lips.

On every inch of my flesh.

Even on my scars.

And that might be the most beautiful part of all. That these ugly words that stain brutal moments on my side, that silently weep pain on a daily basis, don't bleedingly ache right now.

I could've gone like this forever, but a loud bang on the wall shatters the moment. Jax and I both startle, and that poetry our lips were creating stops mid-verse.

"Jax, turn the damn music down!" Zay shouts through the wall. "I need to make a phone call!"

Jax and I trade a look, and then Jax rolls his eyes and blows out a sigh.

“He’s such a drama queen. The music’s not even that loud.”

I giggle, and a smile touches his lips.

“It really isn’t,” I agree. “Maybe he just isn’t into this song?” Or maybe he’s just grumpy.

“Yeah, maybe.” He’s propped up on one arm and stares down at me with a crease between his brows. “Personally, I love this song.” His voice drops to a whisper as if he’s telling me a fragile secret. “In fact, I think it might become my favorite.” He traces my hairline with his fingertips, brushing strands of hair out of my eyes.

My pulse is racing like a lunatic. I’m uncertain if it’s from the words he spoke, his touch, or the look in his eyes. Then he lowers his lips to mine again to kiss me, and I’m more than ready to go back to that quiet, peaceful, poetically lyrical moment. But his phone rings, and it quiets the music playing from the speaker.

Sighing heavily, Jax pushes off the bed and walks over to pick it up. Coldness instantly starts to creep through my flesh and bones. I want him to come back and breathe heat into my body again. But when he answers the phone, I can tell he’s talking to Hunter, and it reminds me that I was supposed to be coming up here to wake up Jax, not make out with him on his bed for who knows how long. It also reminds me of the last time Jax and I kissed, and Hunter caught us and was visibly upset. I’m still not sure why. I wonder if he’ll get upset again if he finds out what we were just doing.

“Yeah, I know,” Jax says to Hunter. He’s standing over by the speaker, doing that thing where he gnaws on his thumb ring.

The noise always drives me crazy, and it’s bad for his teeth, so I get up, tug the hem of my shirt down, and cross the room toward him.

He watches me curiously as I stop in front of him, reach up, and remove his ringed finger away from his mouth. Then I offer him a smile, which he returns. I move to step back, but he places a hand on my hip, holding me in place then drawing me closer.

The way his hand curves around my hip makes my heart sputter.

“I said I already know, man,” Jax says as he absentmindedly slips his arm around to my back, causing me to shift closer to him.

My hands drift to his chest again, right along the scars. It’s not an intentional move. It just happens, and his muscles constrict. But he doesn’t move me away. He holds me in place, holds me close to him.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he mumbles, shaking his head while lightly tracing his fingers back and forth along my lower back. “I know.”

I graze my finger along one of the scars. I can’t see them, but I can feel them, so much like my own.

Poor Jax. In so much pain.

Pain. Pain. Pain.

It’s a story of my own.

“All right.” Impatience laces his tone. “We’re heading down ... But I need to talk to you sometime this morning about some stuff ... Just something.”

I suspect he’s speaking in code, but I have no idea what the hidden message is.

“Okay.” He hangs up the phone, tosses it onto the shelf with a clang, and then fixes his gaze on me. “Hunter says we need to get downstairs ASAP because breakfast is getting cold.”

“Yeah ... I was supposed to make waking you up a quick thing, but ...” My cheeks radiate heat, which is the dumbest reaction, considering I just spent a lot of time making out with him and letting him feel my body. But I feel like I’m coming

down from a high. A kissing high. A Jax *high*. “But yeah, anyway.”

Jax’s cheeks flush, as if he’s coming down from some shared high, too. “Are you still okay with what happened?” he asks carefully. “I keep sort of kissing you without asking first.”

How can he be so sweet? He doesn’t look sweet. He looks sexy and dangerous. And that’s what Katie told me—that these guys I’m living with are full of darkness. I guess I can see it. I just haven’t seen it directed toward me yet.

“Technically, the second time we kissed, well, while we were on your bed, I kissed you,” I remind him, tracing one of his scars with the pad of my thumb.

“I know.” He utters the words with an awed glint in his eyes. Then he lifts his hand, tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, and leans in, kissing me delicately on the lips. “We should get downstairs before Hunter comes up here,” he murmurs, his lips brushing mine. “I don’t want to. I honestly just want to stay right here. But life is waiting for us.”

“You say that like this isn’t life?”

“I honestly don’t feel like it is. I feel like I’m dead, and this is my own personal heaven, created by things I’ve wanted for so many years but never thought I could have.” He sighs softly, his hand falling to his side. “I probably sound crazy, right?”

I shake my head. “I like the way you put things. You always sound so poetic. It makes me wonder about the poems you write.”

A ghost of a smile materializes on his lips. “One day, I’ll let you read some of them, but only if you let me read that one you wrote in class.”

“It’s not very good,” I assure him. “But if you want to read it, you can.”

Surprise flickers in his eyes. “Yeah?”

I shrug. “Sure. You’re the one that inspired me enough to write it.”

His smile broadens, and then he kisses me for like the umpteenth time. “I’m going to get dressed. I’ll see you downstairs.”

“Okay.” I turn to leave, my gaze falling on his scars one final time.

This time, I know he notices me staring at them, and fear flashes in his eyes.

Is that what you’re afraid of, Jax?

Of me seeing your scars?

Of me seeing what the scars have sewn together.

Of what’s bleeding beneath your flesh.

The secrets hidden in the darkest parts of your mind.

Like wilting rose petals dying in the shadows of the light.

I give him a small smile before turning away. Maybe one day, if we get close enough, I’ll ask him. But I can’t yet. Not when I’ve got my own secret-hiding scars.

Once I leave his bedroom, I head toward my own, figuring I can change my clothes while I’m here. As I’m passing the room that Zay is working out in, he happens to be walking out at that moment. He has his shirt off and is dripping sweat, his lean muscles on full display. Asshole or not, he’s hot. I can’t lie about that.

His hands are taped up, too, and a large welt is splattered across his cheek.

I step back from him when we nearly run into each other. “What happened to your cheek?”

He wipes the sweat from his brow. “The punching bag punched back.”

My brows knit. “How the hell does that happen?”

“I hit too hard, and someone’s music was distracting me just enough that I didn’t move out of the way when it swung

back,” he replies with a hint of annoyance.

So that explains why he was pissed off about the music. It wasn't about needing to make a phone call.

At least, I think so.

Then his gaze zeroes in on my neck. “And maybe I should be asking you the same thing.”

My confusion deepens. “I don't have a welt on my face, dude.”

“No, but you have one right there.” He quickly brushes his fingers along the side of my neck, startling me so badly that I jolt. “I'm pretty sure it's not a welt. And I'm pretty sure I was right about why Jax cranked up his music.” He lowers his hand from my neck. “I'd suggest covering your *welt* up before it ends up causing problems between Hunter and Jax.” With that, he walks away, heading for a room farther down the hallway.

And me? I'm bewildered.

What welt?

I hurry into my bedroom, heading straight for the mirror hanging on the closet door. When I lean in and examine my reflection, mortification washes over me. Because it's not a welt on the side of my neck, but a hickey. Right there on my flesh, branding the moment that happened between Jax and I. Zay's words sort of make sense now, about me covering up to avoid causing problems. He has to be referring to Hunter. But what does that mean? Why would this bother Hunter?

Worry stirs in my stomach. Jealousy is the obvious answer, but the idea that Hunter would like me like that is ridiculous, right? The big question is: how the hell am I going to cover up the hickey? I don't have any of my makeup, and even if I did, it wouldn't help since I don't have concealer.

I'll have to attempt to sweep my hair over it and be careful it doesn't fall away. Maybe while we're out doing all the tasks we have to do today, I can pick some up. I don't have money, though, and I'm not about to ask the guys. What I need is my

bag that I left at school. It has everything I need, including a joint. Yeah, that'd be nice right now.

I also need to get my stuff from the house. That is, if I'm allowed to move out. For all I know, my uncle will grab me and try to keep me locked up in the house. Hopefully, we can get it taken care of today, and he'll be out patrolling the streets and pretending he's a stand-up sheriff when really he's a dirty cop.

And a psychopath.

It makes me wonder why in the hell my parents left me with him and my aunt. Why give them guardianship? Did they not know who he is? Was it their only option? How did I get here?

These questions flood my brain as I strip off Hunter's shirt and reach for the T-shirt that I had on yesterday, the one I was wearing when I fell into the water. Then I put on my shorts, knee-highs, and boots, wishing I had warmer clothes. At least I have my leather jacket, which belonged to my mom.

I slip it on, preparing to go, when I notice a piece of paper by my feet. I'm not sure where it came from, but it almost seems like it fell out of my pocket. That makes no sense, since I fell into the water yesterday and any paper I had on me would've gotten ruined.

Confused, I pick it up and unfold it. The words written on it, in bright red ink, cause a chill to slither down my spine.

You may have escaped once, but I'm coming for you, little bird.

Little bird.

Just like the doctor used to call me.

THREE

JAX

After I get dressed in black jeans, a long-sleeve grey shirt, boots, and leather bands to hide my scars, I exit my room and hurry downstairs.

I'm chewing on my thumbnail. If Raven were by me, she'd probably make me stop doing it. And I probably should, but I'm nervous about talking to Hunter, about telling him what happened between Raven and me.

I didn't mean for it to happen, for my lips to brush against Raven's. Last night, though, I had a dream. Raven was in it, and we were lying underneath a tree with our fingers interlocked. We were staring up at the sky and everything had been so peaceful. Then she'd rolled onto her side and looked at me with the most beautiful smile on her face.

"What?" I'd asked, reaching up to play with her hair.

"It's nothing. I just like looking at you, Jaxon, because I see you. Like, really see you."

The way she said it had gotten under my skin. I felt like she could see everything—all my fear, pain, secrets, and scars. I felt so exposed and didn't care. No, I wanted her to see me. Just like I wanted to touch her.

So, I did. Leaning up, I pressed my lips to hers. And it was so easy, so ... *everything*.

When I woke and Raven was in my room, touching my cheek, her hair a mess of wild waves around her gorgeous face, I wanted my dream to come true so, so badly. I had acted without thinking, which can sometimes be normal for me. My

emotions, when they get the best of me, literally make me lose control of rationality, and I'm left dealing with the consequences. Sometimes, even Hunter and Zay have to deal with them.

And this time is no exception. What I did ... kissing Raven several times, especially after I told Hunter I wouldn't, will create some problems.

That kiss, though ... I ... I can't even form words, which is not normal for me. The words that live inside my head sometimes feel like the only living part of me. Sometimes they're even too alive. Right now, though, it's like they're lost in a maze filled with daydreams of kisses, and touches and her scent, and fuck, I almost turn around and go back to her. But I can't. Not until I talk to Hunter.

Last night, I mentioned something to him that I hadn't really put a lot of thought into, but when I said it, it didn't bother me, either.

That maybe we both date Raven.

Hunter was wary about it at best and didn't agree, and I told him I wouldn't be with her unless he was okay with it. We never reached an agreement, so me kissing Raven means I screwed over Hunter.

And now I have to fix things.

I wish he'd think about it. It's a complicated idea, and Hunter never agreed to it. I should've waited—I told him I would. But I got caught up in the moment, got caught up in her—Ravenlee.

In the end, I will have to put Hunter first if he can't be okay with this. Because I can't do that to him. He's one of my best friends and has been there for me through some really dark times. Zay has, too, and Willow used to. Then she was gone, but now she's here again.

I don't give a shit what Zay says about Raven maybe not being her. I can feel it in my damn soul. My broken, withered, silent soul that suddenly sings to life whenever I see Raven.

So, I guess that's the whole point of my ramblings. I want Raven, my soul does—every part of me does—but if it means crushing Hunter's soul, I'm going to have to just be friends with her. Friends is better than nothing.

I also worry about Raven, how she'll feel about all of this, if she wants us, or if she wants me. That worry plagues my mind like a damn virus as I enter the kitchen.

The air smells like bacon and eggs with a hint of something burnt, and the air is laced with traces of smoke. Hunter is sitting at the table with plates of eggs and bacon on it and is scrolling on his phone. Zay is over by the fridge, downing a sports drink.

“Did something burn?” I rearrange the leather bands on my wrist, ensuring my scars are hidden.

Hunter keeps his gaze on the phone. “Yeah, I fucked up the first batch of eggs. In my defense, Raven had me distracted.”

“Oh.” At the mention of her name, I suddenly feel like I have a mild case of heartburn.

Zay eyes me as he twists the cap back onto the sports drink. “That's weird. I think she had Jax distracted this morning, too.”

Shit. How does he know about that? Is that why he banged on the wall? Because he somehow knew?

Hunter sets the phone down on the table and fixes his attention on me. “She woke you up then?”

“Yeah.” I ignore Zay's hard stare as I pull out a seat at the table and sit down. My heart is pounding agonizingly in my chest.

Zay continues to stare at me as he strolls over to the table and plucks a piece of toast off one of the plates. He says nothing, but he doesn't have to. His thoughts are written all over his face.

Are you going to tell him?

If I don't, would he tell him? It's hard to say with Zay. Sometimes, he can be an asshole, but he usually has a purpose

for it.

“I kissed her,” I sputter like a dumbass. “Again.”

Hunter’s brows rise. “What?”

“I’m sorry.” I lower my head into my hands and sigh. “I was having this dream before she woke me up and ... I don’t know ... I just feel so connected to her ... I know that’s not an excuse. I do. I just ... I don’t know ...”

The room is silent, the sound of my uneven breaths filling up the space. I’m veering toward a panic attack and am starting to wish that I spent more time with the blade pressed against my flesh this morning.

“It’s fine,” Hunter finally says in a quiet tone.

When I look up at him, he’s staring at the table with a crease between his brows. Zay is standing beside him, his attention bouncing between the two of us.

“You don’t care that I kissed her?” I ask, fiddling with a leather band around my wrist. “Because last night you did.”

“No, last night, I said I wasn’t going to stop you from being with her.” He lifts his gaze to mine, and what I see makes me feel like I’ve been punched in the stomach. “You know, just like you said you weren’t going to be with her. But I get it. You like her, and she clearly likes you.”

“She likes you, too,” I insist, restlessly drumming my fingers against the table. “I can tell.”

“As a friend, sure, but you’re the one she’s kissing, so I’m going to remove myself from the situation.” He forces a smile that looks fucking miserable. “I’m sorry I’m making a big deal out of this. I shouldn’t be.” He pushes away from the table and stands up. “I’m sorry. I ...” Shaking his head, he rushes toward the doorway.

I hate that I’ve hurt him this way. I want to take it back—all the kisses—yet at the same time, I don’t. I’m conflicted between both worlds and don’t know how to balance them.

“Hey,” I call out to him. “I meant what I said yesterday ... I meant all of it. So, if you want to ... we still can.”

Zay arches a brow at me, like *what the hell are you talking about?*

Hunter halts for a second, but he doesn't turn around, and he only remains motionless for an instant before walking out of the room.

That burn in my chest intensifies.

"I fucked up," I say as I rub my aching chest.

"Yeah, you did," Zay agrees as he pulls out a chair, the legs scratching against the floor. He takes a seat and rests his arms on top of the table. "I was worried this was going to happen. It's why I didn't want her living here. And she's only lived here for a night. I don't even want to know what kind of fucking drama waits for us in the future if you two can't get your shit together."

"I'm trying." I fiddle with the leather band again.

I have my arm under the table, because if he sees me doing this, he'll know I cut this morning.

"I just ..." I blow out a breath. "I just can't stop thinking that she's Willow."

"Even if she was, why does it mean you can't just be friends with her? You don't know her, man. Not the Willow who's almost eighteen years old, who spent time in a psych ward, who acts like she has no clue that she's been to this town before."

"She could really not remember it. You know memory loss can exist, especially when it comes to traumatic events."

"I also know people lie. And if she is lying, there could be a reason. A dangerous fucking reason."

"Or she could just not remember."

He heaves a frustrated exhale. "Regardless, you still don't know the current version of her."

"Maybe not, but I didn't just kiss her because she's Willow. I kissed her because"—I swallow hard—"because she's always making sure I don't scrape my ring against my

teeth, and she makes me pinkie promises. She calls me Jaxon sometimes to tease me because I told her no one ever calls me that, and it's seriously the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen. I don't care if you think I'm a dumbass for saying that—it's true." I stare at the table, sorting through my thoughts and ensuring I get the next part right. "And I feel this connection to her, like she gets my pain, and I get hers. She even had a mild panic attack in the kitchen last night, and I was able to calm her down, which is crazy because I'm usually the one panicking. But it's like I knew exactly what to do with her and ..." I shrug. "It's more than that. Like I've said a ton of times, I don't work the same way as you do. I don't always have to have logic. I just have to know what I feel in my heart and soul. And it's been a long time since I've felt anything, so the fact that I feel anything when I'm around her means something to me, because it's been a long time since something wasn't nothing."

He remains quiet for a while, which is strange. He usually has to make his opinion on things quickly.

"What about Hunter?" he conclusively says. "Clearly, he's feeling something for her, too, for whatever reason," he says the word *feeling* with disgust, like he can't stand to have it on his tongue. "Are you going to just disregard that?"

I slump back in the chair. "No."

"Really?" he challenges. "Because it kind of seems like you are."

"I know I messed up this morning, but ... if this really does bother him, I'll stop it and just be friends with her." It physically pains me to say it, but when I put the words into the air, I know they carry truth.

Hunter is one of my best friends. No, he's like a brother to me. He's my family, really. So is Zay. And I can't do anything to jeopardize that. However ...

"I did give us another alternative," I add, reaching for a piece of bacon that's in the middle of the table.

He assesses me. "What?"

I shrug as I stuff the bacon into my mouth. “I’m not going to tell you.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Why the hell not?”

“Maybe I will if Hunter agrees to it. For now, I think it just needs to stay between us.”

“How about you just tell ...?” He trails off, his gaze drifting to the doorway.

I twist in the chair to see what he’s looking at, and my heart skips at the sight of Raven.

She’s so damn beautiful with these really long legs that look even sexier with the shorts, knee-high socks, and boots she has on right now. Her hair is so wild, and its shade reminds me of raven feathers. It’s a breathtaking shade that I swear I could write an entire poem about. My favorite part is her eyes, though. Her big, beautiful eyes. Her lips are amazing, too.

Lips that I’ve kissed ...

Lips that I want to kiss again ...

Her gaze wanders toward Zay, and she reaches up and sweeps her hair closer to her neck. When I look back at Zay, he’s staring at her with an unreadable expression.

“Hey,” I say to her. “You changed?”

“Yeah ... I didn’t really want to walk around in Hunter’s shirt until Low showed up with some workout clothes.” She promptly shakes her head. “But, anyway, I actually need to show you guys something.” She glances around the kitchen and furrows her brow. “Where’s Hunter?”

Zay looks at me with his brow elevated, like, *are you going to tell her the truth?*

I don’t want to lie to her, but I also don’t want to tell her about what’s going on until Hunter and I work it out amongst ourselves. She may not even know he likes her like that. I think she already gets that I do, though.

A thought occurs to me then.

What if, by some damn miracle, Hunter agrees to us both dating her? How the hell are we going to approach her with that? And what if she looks at us like we're insane?

Why am I even stressing about this? Hunter looked about as far away from agreeing as possible.

God, why does my head always have to be a clusterfuck of stress all the time?

"He went upstairs to do something." Not a total lie.

But not the truth, either.

I hate this.

"Oh." She worries her bottom lip between her teeth.

That's when I realize worry is also reflecting in her eyes.

I rise to my feet. "You said you need to show us something?"

She gives an unsteady nod then extends her hand toward me. "When I was getting dressed, that fell out of, I think, my jacket pocket."

In her hand is a piece of paper. I take it from her, unfold it, and read the words scribbled on it.

"You may have escaped once, but I'm coming for you, little bird." I look up at her. "Who is this from?"

She lifts a shoulder with a miserable look on her face. Beneath the miserableness, I detect the slightest hint of fear. "I have no idea. And I'm not sure how it got there because if it was my jacket pocket yesterday, it would've gotten ruined when I went into the river." She shivers at the memory.

My own heart shivers as images of her sinking underneath the waves sears into my brain.

I want to touch her, comfort her. So, while I know that what I'm about to do will annoy Zay, I do it anyway, stepping forward and slipping my hands around her waist.

Zay crosses his arms on top of the table, his gaze boring into me.

I ignore him.

“What happened yesterday, that’s never going to happen to you again, okay?” I assure her. “We’re going to keep an eye on you. We’re going to protect you.” *I’m going to protect you.*

She swallows hard then peers up at me through her eyelashes. “I appreciate everything you guys do for me, but this ... this note isn’t your problem. It’s mine because I’m pretty sure it has nothing to do with this game.”

Zay gaze dissects her. “What do you mean?”

Her chest rises and crashes as she heaves a sigh. Then she shifts her gaze to him. “The only person who’s ever called me *little bird* is the therapist I had while I was in the psychiatric ward.” Shame fills her eyes, and she looks away, staring down at her hands as she picks at the nail polish on her fingers. “But I don’t know how he would’ve been able to put that note into my pocket ... I haven’t even seen him since I was released.”

Zay rubs his jawline. “Can I see the note?” he asks.

Keeping one hand on Raven’s waist, I give him the note. He takes it from me and reads it, a crinkle forming between his brow.

“The note looks recently written,” he mutters, glancing at me.

“You think someone somehow put it in her pocket while she was in the house?” I ask, pulling Raven closer to me.

Her head snaps up, her eyes wide. “You think he—someone—came into the house and put it in my pocket? Like while I was sleeping or something?”

She’s trembling with fear, and it’s pissing me off. I’m not angry at her or anything like that. I’m fucking fuming at the person who is causing her this fear. Whoever this he is that she keeps mentioning.

“Not while you were sleeping,” Zay clarifies as he stands up. “The power was back on by then. But it was off for quite a while, and we were outside for a bit, which would’ve given

someone the perfect chance to sneak in and leave the note, if they were watching us.”

A shudder rolls through her body again, and I pull her closer.

“Raven, sweetheart, you said this guy called you this was your therapist?”

She nods then sucks in a breath through her nose, her gaze traveling to the wall.

Something’s wrong.

“He was more of a doctor than a therapist,” she adds as an afterthought.

I can sense it in her, something that exists in myself, Hunter, and Zay.

Cupping her face, I angle her head toward me until our gazes weld. “What did he do to you?” I ask hoarsely. Underneath the crackling of my voice, rage is piercing.

“Nothing,” she lies. I can tell she does. I’m not even sure how I know. I just feel it. See it. Recognize it. “I just ... didn’t like him.”

I skim my finger along her cheekbone, and her eyelashes flutter. The fear still remains in her beautiful but haunted eyes. It’s agonizing to know this, to realize that the pain continued to pierce her life when Willow—Raven—left us the first time. She already told us enough about her life that I’m aware that it wasn’t great and have seen a glimpse of the scars on her side. But this ... this is something deeper, darker, more sinister. It’s something that mirrors mine, Hunter’s, and Zay’s eyes, too.

And yes, I know that all of these thoughts only carry truth if she is Willow, but I don’t give a shit what Zay says anymore. Raven is Willow. I can feel it pulsating through my body as she peers up at me with those fucking eyes that I’ve looked at before, a long, long time ago.

“How are you gonna do it then, Jaxon?” she asks, peering up at me. Lightning is raging in the sky and reflecting in her eyes, and my body.

I want to rage, too, like the storm. Want to rip this house apart and tear up everything inside it.

“I’m not sure yet.”

Rain begins to shower down on us, but we stay put, too afraid to move as we hide in the trees from them—our fathers. Because, if they find us, they’ll hurt us. Again.

“But, one day, I’m gonna do it. I’m going to think of a plan and hurt them so they’ll never hurt us again. I promise.”

As she stares up at me with her big eyes, raindrops dripping down her face, she looks hopeful for a split second. But like the lightning above, it quickly fades as we hear a voice echoing from the distance—

“Jax.” Raven’s worried voice wrenches me from the memory. “You’re shaking ... What’s wrong?”

My vision has spotted over, and I have to blink a few times for her face to come into focus. Our gazes collide, and her worry deepens.

She molds her palm to my cheek. “Where’s your head at?”

I about come unglued from her touch, so many emotions pouring through me.

Pain.

Aching.

Fear.

Want.

And my head?

It’s in a razor-sharp place,

Filled with the biting of hands,

That have no right to be there,

No right to touch,

And yet, they do.

“I have to go,” I sputter, stumbling back from her. “I’ll be right back.”

I rush out of the room, my brain screaming at me to shut it off.

“Jax,” Zay calls out after me.

But I only quicken the pace, rushing up the stairs and into my room. The moment I get there, I head straight to my dresser.

Straight to where the silence is waiting for me.

FOUR

HUNTER

I'm unsure why I'm freaking out so badly over a girl I barely know. I don't even freak out when it comes to girls. Well, unless one of them is chasing me down, like Katie did in the parking lot the other day. And yet, here I am, sitting on the edge of my bed with a line laid out on my nightstand that whispers silent promises of peaceful bliss to me, of numbness, of turning this fucking feeling off inside me, the one that makes me feel like I'm about to crawl out of my skin.

Just do it.

No, don't.

Yes.

No.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

"God, make it stop," I mutter as my head throbs.

It's been a while since I've done a line. I was trying not to do it, to clear my head and stop letting drugs help me cope with things I don't want to feel. I shouldn't do it. I know I shouldn't.

Get up and walk away.

I rise to my feet to do just that when I hear her voice on the other side of the door.

"Jaxon, are you okay?" she says. I'm guessing he's in his room.

Something about hearing his name on her lips causes me to crumble.

I want her.

Badly.

I want to taste her more than I want to taste this fucking shit I'm about to snort up my nose. But, can I do it? Can I share her?

I'm not sure. And I'm not sure where that leaves me. Normally, this sort of shit doesn't bother me. I don't usually *feel* stuff for anyone. I honestly didn't think I could anymore. And yet, here I am, *feeling* like I'm about to crawl out of my skin.

FIVE

RAVEN

“Is he okay?” I ask, glancing at Zay.

“I’m not sure.” He scrubs his hand over his head. With a sigh, he lowers his hand and looks at me. “Maybe you should go check on him.”

I point at myself. “You think *I* should?”

“That’s what I said.” He rotates a sports drink that he’s holding in his hands. “Unless you don’t think you can handle it.”

Wariness floods me. “Handle what exactly?”

He drags his tongue along his top lip. “Jaxon’s intensity. Although, you have to like it a little if you’re making out with him all the damn time. Unless you’re just using him.”

My fingers fold inward, nails piercing flesh. “I’m not using him, you asshole. And I was only nervous about checking on him because I’m not very good at this sort of stuff. I don’t want to mess anything up.” Shaking my head, I turn to leave.

He lets me go, too, without saying a word. And I wouldn’t expect any more from him.

What I do wish is that he would’ve given me a heads-up on what I’m about to walk into.

After seeing Jax shirtless this morning, I’ve speculated that he might be a cutter. Is that what he’s doing in his room? How the hell am I supposed to help him when, just yesterday, I did the same thing?

I have no damn clue, but I'll have to figure it out 'cause even the idea of Jax hurting himself makes me sick.

I'm hurrying up the stairway when I feel the presence of someone behind me

“Raven,” Zay says from over my shoulder.

I keep moving, ignoring him, my boots thudding against the stairs.

He heaves a frustrated sigh. “Will you just put your temper aside for one damn minute and hear me out?”

Put my temper aside? Is he shitting me right now?

I skid to a stop and spin around, fuming mad. Of course, I do this without giving him zero time to respond, and he slams into me. While Zay doesn't have body builder type of muscular, he's toned, in shape, and tall, so when he crashes into me, it's like getting ran into by ... well, a six-foot-four dude who's in shape.

I have zero time to process it and immediately trip back, falling to the floor. He tries to grab me and regain our balance, but fails epically, and we both end up slamming to the floor. The edge of the stairs pokes me in the back, and I wince. Thankfully, Zay manages to get his hands out and brace himself against the floor so that he doesn't actually land on me. We bump heads, though, which is awesome, let me tell you.

“Ow.” I press the heel of my hand to my head.

Zay slants back, wincing in pain, too. But he hastily clears the look and narrows his eyes at me.

“Why the hell did you do that?” he demands, shifting his weight off me. He doesn't stand up, though, and his legs are pressing against mine.

“I didn't do anything.” I place my hands against his bare chest and move to shove him, but he barely budes.

His heart is also racing swiftly in his chest, too swiftly for the situation.

Was he that freaked out when we fell? That seems kind of strange to me.

“Get off me.” I push him again.

He glares at me with annoyance. “Will you chill out? I just need to talk to you for a minute.”

“Fine. But you can talk to me while we’re standing.” I place my palm on his chest again and put pressure against it, trying to push him off again, to no avail.

He remains motionless for a beat, his eyes searching mine. Then he slowly pushes away from me and stands up. When I sit up and start to push to my feet, he offers me his hand. I don’t take it, getting to my feet on my own.

His lips tug downward as he lowers his hand. “Look, I don’t want to fight,” he says, causing me to snort. He shakes his head, but continues, “I don’t. I just want to make sure that ...” He exhales loudly then rubs his hand across the top of his head, something I’m noticing he does when he seems uneasy. “That no one gets hurt. Jax and Hunter ... they’ve already been through enough. They don’t need some girl getting between them.”

“I’m not trying to get between them. I just ...” I trail off, chewing on my bottom lip. I’m not sure how to follow what I just said, how to deny what he just accused me of causing issues between Jax and Hunter. Still ... “I’m not trying to do anything on purpose.” My tone doesn’t carry much confidence and is laced with uncertainty, something I hate in general and absolutely loathe that Zay is hearing it. “But yeah, I can tell I’m obviously causing some sort of issues between them. I’m just not sure what.”

His stormy eyes meticulously dissect me. “You’re not sure why?”

I shake my head. “Not really ... I just ... I don’t ...” I huff at myself in frustration. I hate that I’m acting so uncertain in front of anyone, let alone him. “I already said I’ve had like zero friends in the past, so I’m not good at friendships and stuff.”

I expect him to mock me. This is Zay, after all. Instead, he wets his lips with his tongue.

“You’ve never had any friends?” he questions skeptically. “Ever?”

I give a half-shrug. “Not that I can remember.” Although these random memories that keep shattering in my mind every so often would suggest otherwise. Still, if they are true, that was a long time ago, and I’ve clearly forgotten the proper protocol for being friends.

He considers this for a moment. “Okay.”

Huh?

“Okay what?” I question.

“Okay, I’m going to help you,” he replies simply. “With this.”

Again, I’m not following him. “With what?”

“With making a bridge between you, Hunter, and Jax, so that the three of you can continue to be *friends*,” he says the word like it’s sarcastically amusing to him “Without drama happening.”

“Why would you do that?” I ask suspiciously. “You hate me.”

“I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it for them,” he replies with indifference then nods for me to get going. “Now come on before Jax ends up doing something stupid.”

He may still be being an asshole toward me, but I realize in that moment that Zay isn’t completely made up of darkness and turbulent anger. He cares for his friends and that makes it a bit harder to hate him.

I turn and hurry toward Jax’s room with Zay on my heels. When I near his room, I slow to a stop.

“The door’s shut,” I state the obvious. “Should I just knock?”

Zay stops behind me and rubs his jawline. “Try that first, but I might just have to pick the lock.”

Sucking in an inhale, I knock on the door. “Jaxon, are you okay?”

Nothing but silence.

So much soundless silence.

And in that moment, it clicks.

Because I’ve lived in that silence before.

Felt it through my flesh and bones.

“Jax is a cutter, isn’t he?” I ask softly, glancing at him.

His gaze sears into mine. “Why would you say that?”

His question is confirmation that I’m right, and that knowledge makes my heart ache with razor-sharp pain.

I swallow hard. “Because ... Because I saw his scars.”

His eyes relentlessly remain on me. “Yeah, but how do you know they’re self-inflicting?”

“I ...” I trail off, looking back at the door, unable to look at him anymore. “Because I just do.”

Silence.

So much silence that it’s making me want to run into the bathroom, lock the door, and let the sharp bite of metal pierce the pain right out of me. Then I feel fingers brush across the inside of my wrist, right beneath the band I always wear, the one that conceals the day I tried to dig too deep to get the pain out of me.

I startle, slightly jolting, my attention snapping to him. He’s looking at me with an unreadable expression, but in his eyes, I see that he *sees*.

Sees too much.

“Stop.” One word, and it’s brutally agonizing to get past my lips.

He pulls back immediately, his lips parting. And I brace myself for questions.

“I’m going to go get something to pick the lock. I’ll be right back.” He strides down the hallway and ducks into one of the other rooms.

I rotate back around to face the door, racking my mind for the right words to say.

“Tell him you just want to make sure he’s okay.” Hunter’s voice drifts from over my shoulder.

When I peer backward, he’s standing in the doorway to the room behind me. He’s changed his clothes and is now wearing a grey T-shirt, black jeans, and Converse sneakers. He’s leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed and a guarded expression on his face.

“Tell him that you’re worried and want to see if he’s okay so you can relax,” he continues. “If he thinks you’re upset enough, he’ll answer.” He steps forward. “He won’t want to make you suffer over worrying about him.”

“Are you okay?” I find myself asking, because he doesn’t seem that okay, either.

He nods, straightening his stance. “Yeah ... I think so.”

“Are you sure?”

He nods again, but I think he might be lying.

Still, I need to deal with Jax first, and then I’ll delve into trying to figure out what’s going on with Hunter.

With my lips pressed together, I turn back to Jax’s room and knock.

Again, nothing.

“Jax,” I say tentatively while chewing on my thumbnail. Nervousness is flooding through me. “I just want to make sure you’re okay ... I’m really worried about you.”

Again, nothing.

For a second, anyway. Eventually, the door opens.

Jax is standing on the other side. He looks okay, although his hair is a bit disheveled. I try to discreetly glance at his

arms, where I know cutters make marks, but he has a long-sleeved shirt on.

“I’m sorry,” he says before I can say anything. Then his gaze strays over my shoulder, at Hunter, I’m guessing. “I’m sorry.”

Why is he apologizing to Hunter?

“You’re fine.” Hunter’s voice sounds strained.

“No, I’m not,” Jax mutters with guilt lacing his tone and his head bowed in shame.

I don’t get it.

I really don’t.

But I want to.

I want to understand everything about these guys.

“Yeah, you are.” Hunter gives a short pause. “I want to ... I think I want to try.”

Jax lifts his head up, his eyes widening. “Seriously?”

I can’t see Hunter’s response, but I sense him since Jax bobs his head up and down.

I don’t want to ruin their moment since they both appear to be calming down, but ...

“Can I ask a question?” Then I stupidly raise my hand, you know, because I’m me.

A trace of a smile appears on Jax’s pretty lips. “You can always ask a question, sweetheart. You don’t have to ask if you can.”

“You also don’t have to raise your hand, even if it’s adorable,” Hunter says, his hand finding my waist.

Jax’s gaze drops to Hunter’s hand on my waist, and for a slamming heartbeat of a moment, his brows knit. But then he erases the look, and his expression is calm when he meets my gaze.

“What’s your question, sweetheart?” he asks as I lower my hand.

There he goes again with the *sweetheart* term. I used to think I'd never be the sort of girl who liked cute nicknames, but I'll admit that it's growing on me.

"I was just wondering what you two are talking about," I say, shifting my weight. "Because it kind of feels like you were having some sort of secret conversation."

Jax's gaze briefly flickers to Hunter, and I internally sigh.

"It's nothing really." Hunter is the one to respond, giving my side a gentle squeeze. "Honestly, I was just looking at Jax because he's so sexy."

Jax shakes his head while I snort a laugh.

"Funny," I tell Hunter.

"You think me thinking Jax is sexy is funny?" Hunter questions amusedly. "Man, baby, you're mean."

"That's not what I meant and you know it." I turn to look at him. He's so close that our lips almost brush, and I have to slant back. "Stop trying to cause drama."

His lips threaten to turn upward. "I never do that."

Now Jax is the one to snort a laugh. "You so do. All the time."

I grin at Jax. "He does, doesn't he? I've barely known him for a few days and have picked up on that."

Something unreadable flashes in Jax's eyes. He exchanges a look with Hunter and, boy oh boy, do I have a lot of questions about that.

Do they know the same thing I suspect Zay might already know?

That we may have known each other once upon a time?

My mother had once warned me to keep quiet about my past, like I knew anything about it. Now, I feel like my brain is screaming the opposite to me.

Tell them!

Ask them!

Who cares at this point if they think you're crazy!

They can just join the club.

The Raven-is-a-freak-club.

I almost ask, but Jax speaks first, and a small part of me is relieved by that.

“We should get started on our day,” he says, throwing me off a bit. “We have a lot to do.”

Right. Our big day of to-do stuff. Between the note and the drama, I'd almost forgotten.

I nod. “Yeah, we probably should.”

He offers me a smile then extends his hand toward me. I hesitate to take it, mostly because Hunter still has his hand on my waist. But, when I do, Jax starts to frown, so I hurriedly take it.

Hunter pulls away then. “I'm going to go work on some stuff for the party then look more into this note. Low should be here soon with some clothes.”

“I'm sure Zay is already working on checking out the house,” Jax tells him. “You know how he gets. He's probably already checked out all the cameras and ransacked the house.”

Hunter wavers. “True, but you know he won't check the basement, and the camera angles down there are shit.”

“Why won't he go into the basement?” Part of me secretly hopes they'll tell me Zay's afraid of basements. I know it probably makes me sick and twisted, but it makes me kind of happy.

Tension suddenly flows off their bodies.

“Something bad happened to him in one,” Hunter says softly, “when he was a kid.”

He doesn't specify, but I pick up on his vibe that whatever it was, was bad. Like terrifyingly bad.

And now I feel truly awful for secretly wishing Zay had a phobia of basements.

“But, anyway,” Hunter changes the subject, “we should get started with our day. Raven, baby, you should eat before you work out with Zay.”

“Right. I forgot I was doing that.” I must pull an amused face because he cracks a smile.

“Don’t worry. If he becomes a douchebag, you can text me to come save you.” He tugs on a strand of my hair. “We can use a code word.”

“But I don’t have a phone,” I point out, scratching my wrist, feeling twitchy about working out with Zay. Or just working out in general. I mean, sure, I can throw a wicked punch and a good knee to the balls, but if Zay’s going to try to make me run and do cardio ... my smoker lungs are going to have a shit fit.

“Jax is going to go pick that up for you while you eat breakfast,” he tells me. “And some coffee. Lots of coffee.”

Jax nods while dragging his teeth across his bottom lip. “Maybe I could do that later.”

Hunter quietly sighs. “You know it needs to be done now. It’s important that she has a phone.”

“I know that,” Jax mumbles, opening and flexing his fists.

I’m not certain what’s going on, but I can sense he’s struggling with leaving.

Hunter’s expression softens as he looks at me. “Baby, can you give us a minute?”

I’m a little bit hurt, but I probably shouldn’t be. It just makes me seem clingy.

“Yeah, sure.” I start to step past him to head downstairs to get something to eat. But as I’m passing him, he reaches out and lightly brushes his fingers across my cheekbone.

“Thank you.”

The touch sends butterflies kissing across my skin, and my eyelashes uncontrollably flutter. I want to kick my own ass for reacting this way to a guy’s touch, but a small part of me likes

it too much. Although, to be truthful, I've felt way off the last few days, unlike myself, less sassy and more ... I don't know ... fluttery?

"No problem," I tell Hunter in, thankfully, an even tone.

Then I start downstairs, casting one final glance back at them before I do. Jax has his head down and Hunter has a hand on his shoulder, saying something to him in a low tone. The conversation looks intense and has me worried that something is wrong. But they asked for privacy, so I resist the urge to check on them and go downstairs into the kitchen.

SIX

RAVEN

The food is sitting on the table and so are some plates.

I sit down in a chair, pick up a spatula, and start putting eggs onto my plate.

“You might want to put that in the microwave; it’s probably pretty cold at this point.” Zay’s voice travels across the kitchen.

I pull a face at the sound and don’t even bother turning around. “Thanks for the tip.” I drop a couple of pieces of bacon onto the plate then get up to go put it in the microwave.

I haven’t looked at him yet, but I can feel him watching me.

“You took care of everything with Jax?” he asks with his arms folded.

“Yep.” I open up the microwave. “You never did come back with something to pick the lock with.” I press the timer then *start* before turning around to face him.

He’s leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed, and he’s wearing an indifferent expression. “I did, but when I came back, it looked like you had it handled, so I backed off.”

“Really? I didn’t know you knew how to back off.”

He studies me in a way that makes my body want to squirm, but I refuse to let it. He says nothing, just standing there, staring at me. I could tell him to go away, but this is his house. So, I bite down on my lip and wait for the microwave to heat up my food. Eventually, he walks away but doesn’t go

far, merely going into the dining room. I watch him out of the corner of my eye as he opens a door that's near the pantry door. He stares inside wherever the door leads with a frown on his face and his muscles wound tightly, as if he's terrified of whatever is in there—

The microwave beeps, drawing my attention to it.

I tell myself to stop analyzing him as I grab the plate of food from the microwave. I take it over to the table, sit down, and take a bite of eggs.

Good God, I'm starving. I honestly feel like I've been starving for the last several years. The food tastes so good that I end up letting out this moan.

Zay glances in my direction with a funny look on his face.

“What?” I sound kind of defensive.

A beat goes before he says, “You're a noisy eater.” Then he returns to glaring at the room inside the door.

I mumble, “Asshole,” under my breath.

I almost say it louder just so he'll hear me. Then I remember that this is his house that he's letting me stay in and that I should probably be nice despite the fact that he's annoying.

I stuff another forkful of eggs into my mouth and try not to moan this time. Then I take a bite of bacon, then eggs. Back and forth, nearly devouring my food. I'm almost finished when I finally glance up from my food, only to find that Zay is still staring in that doorway like the boogeyman is about to jump out at him.

I should probably let him do his thing since we argue every time we speak. Plus, I don't know if I trust him. All the guys seem like they might have a secret—and so do I—but Zay is way more questionable than Jax and Hunter.

Just go back to eating your food, Raven.

Leave it alone.

But I guess I'm a glutton for punishment because I find myself stupidly getting up and wandering over to him.

"Are you okay?" I ask as I tentatively approach him.

He blinks, as if he was in some sort of trance. "Yeah, I'm fine," he says coldly without looking at me. "Go eat your breakfast."

"Stop bossing me around," I mumble.

He rolls his eyes. "Just leave me alone, okay?"

Well, at least he asked that time.

I start to turn away, figuring I've done my duty with at least trying to help, but mid-turn, I realize what's on the other side of the door.

A stairway that leads to a basement.

Jax and Hunter said he was terrified of the basement and never goes down into it. So, why is he standing here, staring at the stairway like it's the entrance to hell and he's about to enter it?

"That's the basement," I state the obvious.

"No, it's the attic," he replies curtly, his body tense, his jawline taut.

I don't know whether to laugh at him or be annoyed. "Was that your attempt at sarcasm?"

His chest rises and crashes as he inhales and exhales sharply. "Look, can you just give me a minute? I'm trying to ... do something."

"You're trying to go into the basement, but clearly don't want to."

I'm unsure if being blunt is the right way to handle this, and if it were anyone else, perhaps I'd be gentler about it. But Zay is rough and blunt and an asshole, so I figure I can skip the trying-to-be-nice thing.

He skates his gaze to mine. "Hunter and Jax told you I didn't like the basement, didn't they?" His lip twitches in

annoyance.

Maybe I should've kept that to myself. "Nah, I just got a vibe. Plus, you've been standing here for like ten minutes, staring at the stairway like it's the devil."

"I know you're lying. I know one of them said something." He looks back at the stairway and mumbles, "They have such big fucking mouths sometimes."

I bite down on my lip. Shit, I may have just unintentionally caused more drama between the guys.

I need to fix this.

Somehow.

"Okay, maybe they did," I admit. "But it's just because they're worried about you."

He just rolls his eyes. "Whatever. Leave me be. I need to go check to make sure everything's okay down there."

"You mean, you need to make sure no one's hiding in there? Like maybe the person who put the note into my pocket?" My stomach tightens at the thought.

Suddenly, I'm no longer hungry, thinking about the idea that the doctor could be in the basement. It seems implausible in a way, I guess. Yet, at the same time, who else would leave me that note?

But, why would he suddenly come after me?

"I doubt anyone is down there," he says. "But I need to go check." He still doesn't budge, though.

"Maybe you could have Jax or Hunter go?" I suggest. Then, just because I'm me and don't want to seem weak, I add, "Or I could."

He cuts his gaze to me. "You seriously want to go down there and see if some doctor you clearly hate is hiding somewhere?"

"I don't want to," I stress. "But I will."

I think, anyway.

I'm not scared.

I'm not.

But I am.

In fact, I'm terrified.

But I refuse to let him know that and start toward the stairs.

He sticks out his arm, stopping me. "No. I'm going to do it. I need to ... work on this." Then, with a deep breath, he takes a step onto the stair below him.

His foot is trembling and the stair squeaks. So does the breath he releases.

He mutters something under his breath then. It takes me a moment to realize that he's counting. He's scared. He may not be letting that on completely as he dares another step, but every single one of his movements is shaking, as if he's stepping toward the edge of a cliff and is about to fall.

I want to be clear here. I'm not a huge fan of Zay. He's hot and cold, and it makes me feel like I'm constantly getting whiplash. However, I get fear. I get having to face fears on a daily basis. And I understand that feeling he probably has right now. That one where your stomach twists with nausea because it thinks that fear is about to eat your entire body alive.

What I do next is solely based on that—and understanding.

I step down onto the stair behind him.

He senses this and turns around, his eyes narrowed. "What're you doing?"

I shrug, pretending to be calmer than I am. "I figured I'd go with you in case someone is down there and you need backup."

He cocks a brow at me. "And what're you going to do if there is?"

"Hey, like I said, I have a wicked right hook. I just didn't get the opportunity to use it when I jumped in the car. And

drugged,” I point out, and I swear he winces. Why, I have no idea. “And if that fails, I can run and get help.”

He considers this like a pain in the ass then finally turns around and grumbles, “Whatever.” He grips the railing and starts down the stairs again, painfully slow.

The stairs are so squeaky, so if someone is down there, they’re going to hear us. Thankfully, the light is on and the air is quiet. I’m hoping that’s a good sign that no one is down there.

I stay close, but not so close that I’m touching him. I can, however, hear him continue to count underneath his breath. When he reaches the bottom of the stairs, Zay lets go of the railing and shakes his hand out as he enters the space at the bottom of the stairs.

I trail behind him as we round the corner of a wall and step into a space filled with boxes, shelves, and dust.

“Wait here,” Zay instructs as he inches farther into the room.

I do as he instructs, even though part of me wants to smart off. But now’s not the time. I’m only down here because he seemed like he needed a buddy, which kind of makes me sound dumb.

I shake my head at myself and focus on looking around. The area doesn’t have a lot of spots for someone to be tucked away in. When I twist around, however, I find another section of the room. This one is much smaller, but a furnace is in the corner. Someone could be over there.

The doctor.

Little bird ...

I gulp as I stare at the furnace. He could just be back there. What if he is? I need to know. Know if it’s him. Know if he’s coming for me.

I inch toward the furnace, almost in a trance. Step by step, I get closer. And closer. And closer—

Fingers wrap around my arm, and I nearly jolt out of my skin.

“Don’t.” Zay’s breath brushes my ear. Then he maneuvers me to the side, out of his way, and walks back toward the furnace.

I hold my breath as he looks behind it.

“No one’s down here,” he says as he turns around, scrubbing his hand over his head.

I breathe in relief. “You checked the entire house?”

He nods. “And the security footage. I didn’t see anything, so whoever put the note in your pocket either snuck in while the power was off or did it another time.” He lowers his hand, studying me. “Unless you did it.”

I shake my head. Yeah, it’s time for me to go upstairs now. “Why would I do that?” I say as I head up the stairs.

“I don’t know, maybe for attention.” His tone carries a challenging taunt.

I should walk away. Just let it go. Not let him get underneath my skin. But I’ve never been very good at doing that, so I spin around. I’m already on the bottom step and end up stumbling slightly. I manage to catch myself by putting my hand on the wall. But I also manage to bump the light switch, and the lights go off.

Darkness briefly encompasses the space around me as I fumble to find the light switch in the dark. My heart is racing—I hate the dark. It makes me feel panicky and as if someone is lurking right in front of me. The doctor, maybe. Perhaps Zay didn’t check everywhere. What if that’s the case? What if he’s here? What if he gets me? What if I—

My fingers find the light switch, and I flick it back on, releasing a breath of relief.

“Thank God,” I say then brace myself for Zay to start giving me crap for my near panic attack.

But that never comes, and I discover why when my gaze finds him.

Because Zay is having a panic attack. Like a full-on, curled up in a ball, struggling to breathe evenly, panic attack.

He's sitting on the floor with his knees to his chest, and he's breathing ravenously as he rocks slightly from side to side.

I may have issues with Zay, but my heart breaks for him. I've been in this place before. It's part of the reason why I get high.

"Zay." I start cautiously toward him.

He doesn't even so much as look at me as I stop in front of him and crouch down.

"Zayden, can you hear me?" I ask softly, keeping an even voice because I know ...

I know that when I've gotten in this place, all I've wished for is for someone to come take my hand, talk to me softly, and tell me everything will be okay. That the crushing panic will pass. That the fear eating away at your brain will get full. That you will get better.

He keeps breathing loudly, his gaze locked on the floor. His head is probably filled with dark thoughts right now. He might even be locked inside a box of terrifying nightmares.

Sucking in an inhale, I gently place my hand on his cheek, hoping I'm not crossing a line and am about to make things worse.

His gaze snaps to me. His eyes are wide, and fear is radiating from the pupils. But he doesn't pull away, and that's all that matters at the moment.

"Just breathe through it," I tell him. "No matter what it is, you can breathe through it, Zay."

He actually listens, sucking in a breath through his nose then releasing it through his mouth. He does that several times and slowly his breathing starts to settle down. He looks like he's focusing more, and the tension is gradually unraveling from his body.

“Are you okay?” I ask him once I think he can hear and see past the anxiety.

He bobs his head up and down, his gaze glued to mine. “Y-yes.”

It’s strange to hear. He’s such a cold guy, steady and cold. And yet, deep in the pits of my mind, I swear I’ve been in this place before. A place where I’ve seen him fall into the dark waters of his own fear, and I’ve swam in and brought him back.

“You sure?” I double-check since his voice is still all wobbly.

He nods again and, this time when he speaks, he sounds a bit more like the Zay I know. “I’m fine.”

“Okay.” I withdraw my hand from his cheek and slowly stand up.

His gaze tracks my movements. I want to ask him what he’s thinking, what he was thinking about when he had the panic attack. Instead, I just offer him my hand.

He hesitates then takes it, his eyes remaining on me. I start to pull him up, but it’s fairly clear he’s standing up mostly on his own since I hardly feel any of his weight. I start to pull my hand away, but he tightens his grip. I tense, wondering if he’s going to be an asshole or something.

Then his lips part. “Thanks.”

I have a feeling he’s the sort of guy who rarely says *thanks*, if ever.

“You’re welcome.” It’s a bizarre moment.

One that’s shattered when we hear Hunter yell, “Where are you guys?”

Zay jerks back from me like my flesh is made of fire then turns and heads up the stairs. I let out a sigh and follow after him.

By the time we reach the top of the stairway, Hunter has figured out where we are.

As we exit the doorway, his eyes widen as his gaze locks on Zay. “Were you just in the basement?”

“Yep.” Zay doesn’t even bother stopping; he just storms through the kitchen. “I’m going out for a bit.”

Hunter’s brows dip. “Huh? I thought you were training ...” He trails off as Zay exits the room.

Moments later, the front door slams, hard enough that photos on the wall shake.

SEVEN

RAVEN

Hunter shakes his head from side to side, looking away from the doorway and to me. “What happened?”

I lift my shoulder. “I’m not sure.” It’s a lie.

But I feel weird telling Hunter about Zay’s panic attack. It’s a personal thing, and if Zay wants Hunter to know, he’ll tell him.

Although, I think Hunter might know since he says, “Is he okay? I mean, he went into the basement ...” He leaves the silent question hanging out there.

“He went to check it to make sure no one was hiding in there,” I explain. “I went with him because, I don’t know, just because. No one was there. But I guess that’s pretty obvious.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.” He eyes me over in a way that makes me squirm. “Are you okay?” he finally asks.

I nod, confused. “I’m good.”

He bobs his head up and down with his teeth sunk into his bottom lip. “Did Zay say anything about why he went into the basement? I mean, I know he was scoping things out, but usually, whenever we go down there, we have to go through this ritual to get him down the stairs, which takes a bit.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know why he went down there. I even suggested he don’t go, but he seemed pretty determined.”

“Weird.” The corners of his lips tug downward as he contemplates something. “I’m going to have to talk to him when he gets back and make sure he’s okay.”

“Where do you think he went?”

“Who knows?” He remains silent for a bit before he blows out a breath, shakes out his shoulders, and offers me his hand. “Enough with the intensity for a bit. You want to help me plan a party?”

I smile, but worry still stirs inside me.

Zay may piss me off a lot, but I’m still worried about him.

“Sure.” I take Hunter’s hand. “Did Jax leave already?”

He nods as his fingers lace through mine and guides me across the kitchen. “He went to get you a new phone. He’ll be back in a bit.”

“He’s okay, though, right? He seemed upset this morning.”

“He’ll be okay. He just has some things he needs to work through.”

I assume he means the cutting thing, but I don’t want to pry. He must not want me to, either, since he changes the topic.

“So, today, I get to teach you how to decorate for a party,” he says as we enter the living room.

We plop down on the sofa, still holding hands. It feels sort of weird holding his hand when I have a hickey on my neck, but Hunter knows about Jax and me kissing. And friends can hold hands, right?

“By decorating, I’m guessing you don’t mean balloons and streamers and shit like that,” I say as he opens his laptop.

A fire is crackling in the fireplace, and the air smells sugary, probably from a candle burning on the mantle.

He flashes me a devious grin then releases my hand. Then he types in the passcode on his computer and rubs his hands together. “You guessed right, baby.”

I don’t even bother pointing out that he called me baby again. It seems pointless at this point.

“So, what’re we gonna do?” I wonder, tucking my leg underneath me. “Set up spy cameras? Audio recorders? Wait—do you guys actually get to be spies?”

He shakes his head with a smile on his face. “God, you’re so fucking cute.”

I crinkle my nose. “Dude, I’m starting to think you might not know the definition of cute.”

He chuckles then light bumps my shoulder with his. “I’m starting to think you don’t.”

I’m unsure what he means by that, but I get distracted as his computer turns on. On the screen is what looks like coding.

“What the heck?” I lean over his shoulder to get a better look. “Did you get hacked?”

“Nah, it’d be tough for that to happen.” He types a few letters into the coding, and the computer screen goes to a normal home screen. “It’s added security protection.”

“Oh.” I can feel the corners of my lips starting to tug downward. “Okay, I’m starting to wonder how in the hell I’m supposed to help you guys with anything. I’m not computer stupid or anything like that, but this is clearly way over my head.” I gesture at the computer.

“I can teach you some stuff,” he replies as his fingers start moving along the keyboard. “But there are ways for you to help that aren’t even computer related.”

“Like what?”

“Making runs for us when we need ... after you learn to drive. I can teach you how to set up pretty easily.” He clicks the mouse. “You also can be a perfect distraction.”

“Distraction for what?”

“For if we need to sneak in somewhere to set up cameras and there are people around. It actually happens a lot.”

I arch a brow. “You want me to distract people? How?”

“Trust me; you’re very distracting just with your looks, but when you start talking, you could probably put someone in a

trance.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re delusional.”

He glances at me, his blue eyes glinting. “Do you know how distracted I was that day I met you in the front office? It started the second I walked in and saw you from behind. Then I saw you from in front, and I felt like my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth.”

“Liar. You were talking to me the entire time.” I’m trying to play it cool, but what he’s saying pushes me toward blushing.

“Yeah, so? It doesn’t mean I wasn’t struggling. And then, to top it off, you were so witty and sassy and, seriously, I was fucking mesmerized.”

I shake my head, ignoring the warmth spreading through my body. “You know what, bestie. I can see why so many girls at school like you.”

His smile falters, and it throws me completely off.

“I ...” Looking away from me, he focuses on the computer, growing quiet as he clicks keys on the keyboard.

I feel like I said something bad, but I’m not sure why it upset him so much. Low joked about it with him—being with a bunch of women. Zay and Jax have also given him crap. Still, I feel terrible that I upset him.

“Hey, Hunter, I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

His fingers stop moving on the keyboard. “No, you should’ve. It’s the truth.” He pushes a few more keys. “I just hate that it’s that way.”

“You don’t like that you’ve hooked up a lot?”

He releases a slow exhale. “Every time I decided to hook up, I was in an awful place. And I was in a really bad place for a long damn time, so I did it a lot, which means there’s a lot of hatred in me toward myself.” He quickly clears his throat. “But, anyway, that’s not your problem, and I’m sorry if I made

you feel that way.” He returns his attention back to the computer.

I hate that he feels this way, that he looks so sad right now. Hunter is the reason I’m not friendless right now, why I’m not stuck in my room during this snowstorm, with fresh new words carved into my flesh. He’s the reason I finally told someone about those scars.

Hunter, sweet Hunter, how can he hate himself?

Something inside me, something I didn’t know I had, begins to pump through me. I scoot toward him. It puts me super close, but I feel like maybe that’s okay for now.

“I wish you wouldn’t hate yourself,” I tell him. “You’re way too good of a person to hate yourself.”

“I’m not a good person,” he insists, continuing to type. “I’ve done a lot of stupid shit.”

“So has everyone else in the world and, trust me, not a lot of people acknowledge that.” I give myself a second to collect myself. “I mean, look at me. I’ve been accused of murdering my parents and, to be honest, I could have ...” I trail off as I admit the painful truth aloud.

He turns toward me, his eyes searching mine. But I look away, too ashamed to believe that.

“You really don’t believe that, do you?” he asks. “Please tell me you don’t.”

I lift a shoulder. “It wasn’t fully proven that I didn’t do it. There just wasn’t evidence that I did. And everyone has always thought I did, so ...” I release an unsteady breath.

“Trust me; not everyone else thinks you did it. Maybe people have said that to you, but I’m guessing that’s a result of your stupid bitch of a cousin. People are such damn followers. One person says something, and everyone else is like, ‘oh yeah, that has to be true,’ because god forbid they think for themselves. Then they’d actually have to discover who they are as a person, and they’d actually realize how much they suck. Well, either that or they can’t dig any deeper because

they don't have the emotional intelligence to think past the basic layer of first thought."

I angle my head to the side. "Where the heck did that come from?"

He lifts a shoulder. "Ms. Collinworth, one of my art teachers, was really into philosophy and psychology, and she was always talking about stuff like that in the hopes that we'd dig way deep into our psyche and be able to splatter our emotions all over a canvas."

"Did it work?"

"It did for a while, but her methods were a little too out there for a lot of parents, particularly religious ones, and the school ended up letting her go after a semester."

"That sounds like a small town thing."

"Oh it definitely is," he assures me. "Honeyton has a very poor education system. It's why I can't wait until I graduate and get the fuck out of here. I feel like college will be a lot more like "Ms. Collinworth's teaching style."

"It probably will if you go to a good college." I feel a little uncomfortable talking about this since I know I won't be going to college. Well, unless I can save up some money, like a lot of money. And since I have zero dollars to my name, it's looking pretty bleak. "Do you know where you want to go yet?"

"Not yet, but only because Jax, Zay, and I have to agree on the location," he says. When I give him a puzzled look, he adds, "We agreed to leave this shithole of a town together, so wherever we end up, we all have to be on board."

"Oh, yeah, that makes sense ... What're some of the choices?"

"New York, L.A., Seattle," he says. "We obviously want to live in a bigger city."

"That sounds cool. What's your first choice?"

"Oh, Seattle, for sure. New York's on the bottom of mine, but Jax wants to go there, so we left it on the list."

Interesting that Jax likes New York when he's mentioned a few times that he doesn't like being around a lot of people.

"What about Zay?"

"Zay's still up in the air about all of them."

I bob my head up and down like I understand, but I don't because I won't ever have the choice to move to a big city with endless possibilities.

"What about you?" he asks curiously.

My brows pull together. "What about me?"

He smiles, lightly tugging on a strand of my hair. "What're you planning to do after you graduate?"

"Oh ... I'm not sure yet. To be honest, I haven't really thought about it."

"Really?"

I give a half-shrug. "Honestly, I try not to, or else it kind of freaks me out."

He studies me in a way that makes me feel as if he's trying to dig into my mind. "Why's that?"

I shrug again. "I don't know ... I just haven't. I mean, I'm not bad at school, but I'm not getting any scholarships or anything like that. And my aunt and uncle couldn't give less of a shit about my future, so that just leaves me trying to figure it out. And, so far, I haven't figured out much." I fiddle with a loose thread hanging off my shorts. "To be honest, I try not to let myself think about it, because it freaks me out."

"Because you worry that you won't have enough money to leave them?" he asks, but I think he already knows the answer.

I waver. "Yeah, that's part of it."

"But you want to leave?" he checks.

"Of course. I've wanted to since the day I moved in with them. I even thought about taking off, but I'm unsure if living on the streets is any better. Who the hell knows?"

A beat of silence skips by.

“You would leave, though, if you could?” he says. “I mean, without having to live on the streets.”

I nod. “I’d be gone in a heartbeat if I could.”

He sucks on his lip ring in a way that makes my stomach do weird, fluttery things. “And, where would you go if you had to think about it?”

“I’m not sure ... I’ve never thought about it.”

He slips his arm around my shoulders and draws me back with him as he leans back in the sofa. “Well, picture it now, where you could see yourself happiest.”

Happy? Does such a thing exist? I think it does, but it’s been a while.

I rotate toward him. “I’m not sure.”

Our legs are close enough that they’re touching, and his arm is around me so our sides are pressed together. I feel safe, which is strange, considering what’s going on. But I like the feeling.

“Warm or cold?” he wonders. “I mean, do you like warm weather or cold?”

“Maybe both,” I say. “A place that has warm summers and snowy winters.”

“So LA is off the table for you,” he says with a nod. “How about Seattle or New York?”

I waver. “I don’t know ... I’ve never been a fan of how New York sounds—all hustle and business all the damn time. And I heard people are rude there, but I’m not sure if that’s true.”

“Oh, it’s true,” he assures me. “Not everyone, but there are some douchebags there.”

“You’ve been there before?”

“A few times. And I seriously don’t get why Jax likes it there. Personally, I don’t think the energy there matches his energy. But he has it in his head that artists and writers go there.”

Ah, so that's why he likes it there.

"Don't they go to Seattle, too?" I point out.

"That's what I told him." A grin spreads across his face. "I'm glad you're taking my side. It means we probably get to go to Seattle."

Now I'm beyond perplexed. "Why would that be the deciding fact in you guys' decision?"

"Because Jax likes you a ton. And while that might be outing one of my best friends, I think you already know that." His gaze flicks to the spot on my neck where the hickey is, and I get really squirrely.

"Maybe," I mutter. "But I doubt I will be able to convince him to move to a city he doesn't want to live in."

"He doesn't not want to move to Seattle," he clarifies. "He just prefers New York, but he'll definitely drop it if he knows Seattle's going to have you there."

"Yeah ... No, it won't." Although, I wish what he was saying was true.

God, how I wish it was true.

"Why not?" he wonders. "If it sounds like a place you want to live, then why not move there?"

"Um ... because I'm sure it's super expensive. There's no way I could afford living in any of those cities."

He brushes his fingers through my hair. "If you had roommates, you could."

"Yeah, maybe." I consider what he said.

Could that kind of future be possible?

His fingers comb through my hair again. "And just to clarify, by roommates, I mean Jax, Zay, and I."

I arch a brow at him. "You seriously want to put an offer on the table for me to move in with you eight months down the road?"

"Yeah," he says without missing a beat.

I gape at him. “Why? You barely know me. For all you know, in like a month, you’re going to be so damn tired of me that you’ll be pushing me off that bridge yourself.”

Something snaps in his expression. Breaks and comes alive at the same time. Maybe it’s called passion ... I don’t know.

“No one is ever going to do anything like that to you ever again.” His voice trembles a bit as he makes the intense vow.

Maybe it was the wrong thing to say.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I just ... I was just pointing out that we could make plans to move away together—all four of us—but there’s a chance that you’ll get tired of me, so maybe we should wait to figure out if we want to go to college together.”

“Nah.” He dismisses me, relaxing again. “Trust me; I have a feeling that’s not going to happen. Besides, Jax, Zay, and I get attached easily to certain things. Like how we did with each other. We bonded almost instantly. And with you? I had the same feeling with you, Ravenlee, from the moment I heard you talk about your beautiful name’s cursed meaning.”

I press my lips together, mostly so I can catch my breath. His words, though, and the way he’s saying them make breathing complicated. “You called me Ravenlee. I think that might be the first time you ever have.”

“I know, but I had to get my point across.”

“That it’s a beautiful name?”

He shakes his head. “That this isn’t some flirty game to me. Do I like calling you baby and teasing you? Oh, absolutely. But I also want to be more than that.” He reaches out and grazes his finger across the arch of my neck, right where my pulse is racing and right where Jax marked my neck. “If you’ll let me.”

Okay, so I hate to admit this, but I literally have no idea what he’s implying. Like, does he want to give me a hickey? Or is he just touching me because he wants to and accidentally touched the hickey?

Hello clueless Raven, you are becoming an annoying presence in my life lately.

Thankfully, for the sake of me continuing to stare at him like a clueless dumbass, the doorbell rings.

We both jolt at the sound. Then he slowly removes his fingers from my hickey, a small smile touching his lips.

“You good with that?” he asks me.

I just nod. I have no idea why, but I don’t want to ask him for fear of what it could mean.

It’s a weird fear, for sure, and truthfully, I don’t entirely understand it.

“Good.” He visibly relaxes then removes his arm from around me and stands. “I bet that’s Low.”

All I can do is nod and wonder what the hell just happened between us.

Wonder if I just agreed to let Hunter give me a hickey.

Nah, that can’t be it.

I get up and follow him to the front door, kind of glad when he opens it and I see that Low is standing on the other side.

I seriously could use a break from all this guy drama.

If it even is guy drama.

Maybe there’s a book I can read? Like *Ten Ways to Identify Guy Drama*?

“Hey, brother,” Low greets Hunter with a smile.

She has the same blonde hair as him, and it’s pulled up in a high ponytail. She’s also wearing black pants, a grey shirt, a leather jacket, and clunky boots. I like her style and am glad she’s the one I’m going to borrow clothes from.

She also has a suitcase behind her, the kind with wheels, which seems practical. However ...

“How did you get that up here?” I ask as I peer at the layer of snow covering the grass, sidewalk, and driveway behind

her.

“Levitated it, obviously.” She grins. “Haven’t you heard? I’m a witch.”

“Well, that’s convenient since I’m a magical faerie,” I retort.

“Aren’t all faeries magical?” she wonders, tapping her lip with her blue and purple painted fingernail.

I grin. “Good point.”

Hunter glances between the two of us then looks at his sister. “I love you, Low, but quit trying to steal my best friend.”

They both grin.

I realize that I could end up smiling the entire time by spending time with the two of them. They have that air about them, all lightness, smiles, and sunshine. And yet, if I look closely into their eyes, I can see shadows.

Hunter has told me a little about his past and the stuff he’s suffered through, and so has Low. I wonder how they do it. How they walk around, smiling for the world when so many clouds consume their mind.

“She’s not your best friend,” Low tells him as she steps into the house, dragging the suitcase with her. “I saw her first.”

“That’s not true at all,” Hunter replies as he shuts the door. “I saw her in the main office the first morning she attended school.”

Low looks at me for confirmation, and I nod.

“It’s true,” I say as Hunter walks over to me while Low stomps her boots off on a rug near the front door, snow going everywhere. “He’s like the first person I met in this town. Well, except for the secretary. She didn’t seem too impressed with me, though.”

Hunter’s eyes glint mischievously. “Probably because she knew you were high as hell.”

“You think she knew?” I question.

“Oh, for sure.” He brushes the pad of his thumb along my bottom lip. “It was pretty obvious.”

I pull a whoopsie face. “Crap. I hope that doesn’t come back to bite me in the ass.”

He wets his lips with his tongue, his lips parting. “I could bite—”

“Do not finish that sentence while I’m in the room,” Low interrupts him as she shucks off her jacket. Her gaze dances between us. “So, did you guys have sex or something? Because I’m getting a vibe. And if so, seriously?” She glares at her brother. “I finally make a friend and you sleep with her?”

Hunter gives her a tolerant look. “I didn’t sleep with her.”

She looks at me. “Is that true?”

I nod. “It’s completely true.” My skin is starting to warm, but I suck in a breath, calming myself down before I end up looking like a total spazz.

I can be okay with just being a partial one.

“All right, I believe you.” She moves farther into the foyer, bringing her suitcase with her, snow falling off it. “It’s weird he’s calling you baby, though.” She looks at her brother suspiciously. “Wanna explain *that*, big brother?”

He shrugs with his hands stuffed into the back pockets of his pants. “I gave her a nickname.”

She continues to stare at him as if she’s a detective, trying to crack his mind open. “Okay, but it’s something a boyfriend would call his girlfriend. Or a guy who wants to get laid.”

He makes a big show of rolling his eyes. “It doesn’t have to be either of those. I can call her baby because I like her, and I think the name lets her know that. At least, that’s how I look at it.” He looks at me, as if waiting for me to back him up.

I shrug. “It kind of got on my nerves at first, but it’s wearing on me.”

His lips threaten to turn upward into a smirk. “Wearing on you, huh? I think your pulse flutters when I say it.”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever, dude.”

He chuckles. “You’re so pretty when you pretend to be bad at me.”

“Okay, I’m done with watching you two flirt.” Low unexpectedly claps her hands, as if she really is a witch and is casting a spell to get us to shut up. It works, too, because Hunter and I both look at her. “So, my brother said you needed clothes,” she says to me. “So I brought a bunch. You’re a little bit taller than me, but not too much. What size are your feet?”

“A nine,” I tell her, figuring she won’t have the same size as my big feet.

“Hey, me, too.” She sticks her hand out for a fist bump. “Fist-bump for big feet.”

“True dat.” I tap knuckles with her, and we both laugh.

Hunter juts his lip out. “I’m feeling left out.”

I stick my fist in his direction. “Fist-bump for being”—*perfect* is what comes to mind, but I’m not about to say that aloud—“the most awesome friend ever.” I settle on that, figuring it’ll make him happy.

And it does. A smile touches his lips as he moves to give me a fist bump. But right as our knuckles are about to touch, he suddenly grabs my hand, lifts it to his lips, and kisses my hand.

His lips are so soft, is the first thing that flows through my mind. It’s followed by a, *He’s so nice to me.*

“If you want, I can kiss you,” the blond-haired boy tells me with a smile.

He’s always smiling. He’s cute. He kind of reminds me of an angel, if those exist. I don’t think they do, or else they would’ve saved me from this place already.

“Why would you do that?” I wonder as we sit on a fallen tree trunk in the forest, snowflakes dancing around us.

“You said you’ve never been kissed before.” His cheeks are bright red. I’d think maybe he was embarrassed, but he never gets that way, so I’m guessing he’s just cold. “I thought maybe ...” He shrugs, looking down at the snowy ground.

My heart is going crazy in my chest as I think about kissing him.

He’s so cute.

And sweet.

“Okay,” I say softly.

He glances up at me. “Yeah?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

His breath is clouded around his face as he lets out a breath. Then he leans in and our lips brush, so soft—

“Raven.” Hunter waves his hand in front of my face, causing me to blink from the images.

It takes me a second to focus on him, and when I do, I see that a worry line has formed between his brows.

“Huh?”

The worry line deepens. “You zoned off on me, baby.” He reaches out and gently traces a path along the side of my face, causing my eyelashes to flutter. “Everything okay?”

I nod, searching his eyes, wondering and wondering ...

Is he the angelic boy from the memory?

If so, why is no one speaking about it, that we know each other?

Why am I not?

Because I’m afraid, and because my mother once told me not to talk about the past. It’s ingrained in my mind, and I wish I could just let it go, but I can’t.

I’m terrified.

Of looking crazy again.

Of getting locked up in that padded room again with that perverted doctor.

“I’m fine.” I give him a reassuring smile that is totally fake.

His lips tug downward, but he doesn’t comment. I’m unsure if it’s because he knows I won’t tell him, worries I will, or if he’ll pry later when Low isn’t around.

“So, she needs some workout clothes.” Hunter looks at Low, changing the conversation and abruptly giving me whiplash.

Low looks about the same way, blinking her blue eyes at him in confusion. “What?”

“Raven needs some workout clothes,” Hunter specifies. “I told you this on the phone.”

“I know, but ...” She slides her gaze between us.

“And she’ll need something to wear to a party later tonight,” Hunter continues, glancing at a clock on the wall. “I’m running low on time, so I’ll let you guys figure out what to wear.” He turns to me. “You’re okay with that, right?”

“Yeah ... But wait. I’m going to the party?” I ask.

He nods. “Unless you’re not comfortable with that. But we kind of need to act like everything is normal so no one suspects we’re spying on it. Plus, it’s good to keep an eye on things, you know. If you don’t want to, that’s totally fine. One of us can take you somewhere and hang out.”

I shake my head. “No, it’s fine. It’s just ...” I pick at the chipped black nail polish on my thumb. “I haven’t really partied much.” Only once, actually. “And stuff has never gone well for me when I have gone to them, so I’m a little nervous.” Admitting that aloud is hard, and truthfully, I’m not a fan of doing so. Nor am I sure why I did it other than I think I’m letting my guard down in front of him.

I just hope I’m not making a mistake by doing so.

I wish I could say I fully trust him, but it’s difficult to trust anyone when you’ve spent your life feeling as though you’re

walking on a thin layer of ice that's slowly cracking.

Hunter's expression softens. "You really don't have to go if you don't want to."

"No, it's fine." I give a dismissive flick of my wrist. "I was just saying my thoughts aloud so I didn't look like a twitchy weirdo."

He studies me intently. "Benton's parties are fairly calm, and one of us will always be with you. Honestly, everyone will probably just be hanging out, drinking."

"Okay, but I promise I'm fine." I smile so he'll know I'm being serious.

"Wait—Benton is having a party at your house?" Low questions, rubbing a melted snowflake off of her arm.

Hunter glances at her. "He asked us to do it."

"Because you're bugging the party?" she guesses.

He puts a finger to his lips. "Yeah, but you need to pretend you know nothing about that. You know the rules."

She gives him a salute then lowers her arm to her side. "Too bad Dad has hired a tutor for me and he's coming over tonight, or I would come to the party." She says this more to me.

Hunter's eyes are the ones to widen. "You would've come to a party?"

She hesitates. "If I had a friend to hang out with, then yeah."

He stares at her like she's sprouted a unicorn in the middle of her forehead. "Really?"

"Yes, really." She narrows her eyes at him. "I know I've had shitty experiences with parties in the past, but that doesn't mean I wanted to stop going to them. It's hard when I'm a loser with no friends."

"Low," he starts to say with pity in his tone.

“Nah, I’m done talking about this.” She snags hold of my hand and yanks me with her as she spins toward the stairs. “I’m going to go play stylist.” She basically drags me toward the stairs with her suitcase.

I peer back at Hunter. Worry has consumed his expression, so I offer him a look that hopefully conveys, *I’ll try to cheer her up.*

He cracks a tiny but appreciative smile then turns and walks back into the living room.

When we reach the stairs, Low releases my hand so she can grab the suitcase. Then she starts lugging it up the stairs.

“You need any help?” I ask as I follow her.

She shakes her head. “Nah, I’m tougher than I look. You could probably say the same, I’m guessing.”

“I could.”

She smiles. So do I.

But her smile fades as we reach the stairs. I’m guessing it has to do with the party thing. Well, until she sets down the suitcase and says, “Okay, so how in the hell did you end up staying with my brother and his friends?”

Right. I guess Hunter never told her.

“It’s kind of a long story.” I fiddle with the leather band on my wrist.

“That’s cool. You can tell me why we dig through the clothes.” She faces the hallway. “So, which room are you staying in? I’d guess the guest room, but with how you and my brother were acting ...” She leaves the question hanging out there.

“We’re really just friends.” But, are we? I have no idea since Hunter touched me right before she came here and said he wanted to give me a hickey.

I think ...

Honestly, he could’ve been just saying he liked my neck. I’m that clueless about guys.

She inspects me so closely that I can visualize her holding a magnifying glass. “You sure about that?”

I nod. “Yep.”

I’m not sure if she’s buying it or not, but she lets it drop for now.

“So, the guest room, huh?” She starts down the hallway, pulling the suitcase with her.

I follow her. “Yeah, that’s where I’m going to be staying while I’m here.”

She stops in front of the guest room and reaches for the doorknob. “How long are you going to be staying here?”

“I’m not sure. It all kind of depends on if we can get my aunt and uncle to agree to let me move out.”

She opens the door and enters the room, the wheels briefly getting stuck on the threshold.. “That’d be awesome. I know you told me a little about them—your aunt and uncle, and they sound like assholes. And your cousin seems like a bitch. No offense.”

“None take.” I step into the room behind her. “I just hope we can get them to agree, but my uncle ... I can see him being a pain in the ass, even though he makes it known on a daily basis that he hates me living in the house. But he also won’t let me go anywhere. I think he likes the control.” And likes to torment me in the middle of the night like a sadist.

“He sounds like my father. He wants nothing to do with me, yet he won’t let me move out. And he has all these stupid rules ...” She sighs as she sinks down onto the bed. “Isn’t it going to be great when we turn eighteen?”

“Definitely.” I think back to the conversation that Hunter and I had about moving to Seattle. But that was just dreamers’ talk. There’s no way that’ll ever happen. No, more than likely, if I do get to move away from my uncle, aunt, and Dixie May, I’ll end up going to a community college. And that’s okay. It’s better than living with them.

“When do you turn eighteen?” she asks as she leans forward to unzip the suitcase.

“In a few weeks.” I sit down on the bed beside her. “What about you?”

“I have another year before I do. And, even then, I’ll still be in high school, so I know my father will try to make me continue to live under his roof. I’m going to do everything I can to get the hell out of here, though.”

“I want to leave, too. I just have no idea where.”

“You want to go to college?”

“I think so.”

“I don’t know if I do. I mean, I want to be an artist, and I haven’t decided yet if college will get me closer to that goal or not.” She pulls out a stack of clothes. “What about you? If you go, what will you major in?”

“Honestly, I have no idea.” I’m basic, and that makes it hard to pick a subject.

“None at all?” she asks as she holds up a shirt.

I shake my head. “I don’t have any talents, so that makes it harder to narrow it down.”

“Maybe you have a talent, and you just haven’t discovered it yet,” she suggests. “I think it might be harder to figure out what you’re good at if you don’t have anyone to encourage you to search for it. Hunter is the only reason I figured out I was good at drawing and painting.” She sets the shirt down and hesitates. “Did your parents—and you can totally just tell me I’m crossing a line if you don’t want to talk about this—but did your parents ever encourage you to explore your interests?”

I can’t help smiling a little. “My dad taught me how to fight.”

She raises her brows in surprise. “Really?”

I nod. “He used to fight in these tournaments and wanted to teach me his skills. I was young, so I never got very good at

it.” I have to wonder, though, now that these weird memories are surfacing, if perhaps him teaching me how to punch and kick and even do headlocks was for a different reason.

If it was so I could defend myself.

If only I had been more talented, then perhaps I could’ve stopped the doctor from touching me.

“Maybe you can have Zay teach you more about that.” She grabs a pair of pants. “Fighting is definitely his thing.”

“I figured as much.”

“You’re supposed to be doing stuff with him today?”

“I am, but I’m not sure if that’s still the plan, since he got mad and took off.”

She muses over something. “Oh, Zay. He always gets upset about everything.”

I arch a brow. “So, he’s not just like that with me?”

“Nope. He’s like that with everyone, so don’t take it personally.” She retrieves a pair of sneakers from the suitcase. “A little off the subject, but what happened that the guys offered to let you stay here? It’s not really their MO. Usually, they stick to themselves, but they seem to be all over you.”

I waver, unsure of how much I want to tell her. “Well, we’ve been hanging out, thanks to Hunter, but some shit happened, and I don’t know, I just ended up staying here last night.”

She looks at me with her brows furrowed. “What sort of shit?”

Again, I’m not sure how much I should tell her. Hunter seemed like he didn’t want her to know about it—the game, I mean.

“People were bullying me, and I think they felt bad or something.” It’s not a total lie, but it’s definitely walking the line where I feel bad.

“That’s still weird for them. Trust me; I’ve known them forever, and they’ve never had anyone else in their group.”

She gives a short pause as she takes out a dress. “Well, except for this one girl when they were little.”

Perhaps I shouldn’t pry. Perhaps it’s wrong to ask her about the guys’ secrets. But I feel like I need to know.

“A girl?” I say it casually, hoping she can’t read through my bullshit.

She nods as she sets the dress down on the bed on top of the pile of other clothes she brought. “I think her name was Willow. She used to come to our house for ... well, honestly, I’m not even sure. But I think maybe her dad worked for ours or knew them. But, anyway, he brought his daughter with him, and she would hang out with my brother, Jax, and Zay. They would follow her around like little puppies. It was cute. It was probably the only time when they were almost happy.” She sighs, like she’s getting sad thinking about it.

I swallow the lump welling in my throat. “What happened? To the girl, I mean? Did she just stop coming around?”

She shakes her head from side to side. “No, she fell into a river and drowned. At least, that’s what I was told. But I don’t know ... I honestly don’t buy into it.”

My interest is piqued. “Why not?”

She lifts a shoulder. “I’ve never told the guys this because they shut down at even the mention of her name, but I did tell my nanny at the time, and she told me never to speak of it again.”

I wait for her to continue, but she doesn’t.

I try not to get too intense, but I feel like I’m crawling out of my skin. “What was it?”

She exhales loudly as she stares at the pile of clothes. “You have to pinkie swear not to tell anyone if I tell you.” She holds up her hitched pinkie, and I reach for it, but she moves it back. “And just so you know, I take pinkie swears very seriously. If you break it, we can’t be friends anymore.”

“I take them seriously, too,” I assure her, reaching out and hitching my pinkie with hers.

We shake pinkies on it, and nervousness creeps into her expression. I get this feeling that maybe her nanny said more than not to just speak of it, like she scared her into keeping quiet.

She nervously glances around, as if checking to make sure no one else is here. “I thought I saw her—Willow—after she was supposed to be dead.”

My breath catches in my throat as my speculation—that I’m Willow—grows. “Where did you see her?”

“In a car. It was parked in our driveway, and she was looking out one of the windows, but they were tinted, so maybe I did see someone else like my nanny said. Or I saw a ghost.” She looks down at the pile of clothes with a haunted look on her face. Clearly, she’s been bothered by this for a while. “Does that make me sound crazy?”

I slowly shake my head. “Not at all.”

She looks up at me. “Well, I think you’re the only person—besides my brother and his friends—who doesn’t think I am.”

“But I thought no one else knew about the Willow thing?”

“They don’t. That’s not why everyone thinks I’m crazy.” She looks down at the clothes again. “There was an incident a couple of years ago at a party.”

I think about the first day I met her and how a guy was tormenting her in the hallway. “Can I ask what happened?”

She hesitates then shakes out her shoulders and smiles at me. “You know what? Let’s drop this heavy talk and focus on clothes, because this sort of stuff is supposed to be fun, right?”

I could say no and press her for more details, try to get her secrets out of her. But, since I have a ton of my own, I don’t want anyone to know about ...

“Yeah, let’s have some fun.”

The words are such a lie.

EIGHT

HUNTER

I'm currently working on getting the cameras set up by myself in the living room while Low and Raven are upstairs. Zay is off somewhere, probably beating the crap out of something or someone, and Jax is getting the phone but is probably veering toward a panic attack.

He didn't want to leave Raven.

He's getting too attached.

I mean, I'm glad he's finally been able to connect with someone, even if I want to connect with that someone, too, but he can get too intense sometimes. He was that way with Willow, though it never bothered her. It was like she knew how to handle him, as if she was made for him.

For us.

Watching Raven with Jax, I get the same vibe, and it's creeping me the hell out.

Not that I find her creepy. I just feel like I'm living in a déjà vu moment.

And living in a house of drama.

Thank God I convinced Jax to get the phone. It took some real talking and even bribing. My offer? Go, and then you can spend the rest of the day with her.

He was so worked up that he didn't even try to discuss the fact that I kind of agreed that I want us to both try to date her. And we need to talk about it before anything can happen. Then we need to talk to Raven, which is going to be weird as hell. I

just hope we don't scare the shit out of her and she takes off or something. The last thing we need is for her to leave, especially with the note thing, the raven thing, and her uncle thing ...

And the fact that I want to be around her all the time thing ...

As images of her wearing my shirt this morning flood my thoughts, I sink back into the chair and rake my fingers through my hair. Part of me wishes I'd done the line in my room, but part of me is relieved. I get crazy when I do coke, like wildly upbeat. I make mistakes. Well, more than I already do. And we don't need that right now.

I bounce my knee up and down as I drag my fingers across my face, restlessly waiting for the cameras to sync to the program. Since the party is in the house, I will have to lock the equipment up in my bedroom where no one can stumble onto it. It's a risk we're taking, setting up in our house when the party will be full of Benton's friends and colleagues of my father, Jax's, and Zay's. But the job pays a lot. Plus, I'm kind of curious to see what the cameras catch. Some of my father's secrets? Wouldn't that be nice? Because the more I know about what he's been up to, the more I feel like I have some control over my life. Right now, I feel like I'm losing some of it for several different reasons; one being this game we've been forced to play.

We all know we need to retaliate for the bird incident, but we're not sure what we want to do yet or who we even do it to. I also want to find out why my father is paying us to look into Raven's family. At first, I thought it was because her uncle is the sheriff. Now, with the question of her being Willow floating in the air, I can't help wondering if he has an ulterior motive.

He typically does.

And it's usually bad.

My computer beeps, announcing that the cameras are all synced. I lean forward to finish the setup when my phone rings, Zay's name flashing across the screen.

“What’s up?” I prop the phone between my ear and shoulder to finish working on the setup.

“I’m not going to be there until later to train Raven,” he replies. “Honestly, I think we should start training tomorrow morning because of everything going on today.”

“Why?” I wonder. “Where are you? And why the hell did you just take off when we have a ton of shit to do?”

“I needed some fresh air,” he replies in that annoying tone that implies he doesn’t owe me an explanation. “But then I stumbled across something I need to look into.”

I pause from typing, his tone catching my attention. “What is it? Because you sound slightly worried.”

“I’m not worried,” he insists. “I just ... Can you just let this go for now? I want to be sure before I throw this news on everyone.”

Worry stirs inside me. “News that bad?”

“I don’t know.” He sounds genuine—genuinely confused—which is weird for him. “Shit, I have to go. I’ll be back before the party.” He hangs up the phone, leaving me wondering what’s going on.

Part of me wants to track him down, but the other part knows I need to take care of this shit for the party. And I can’t leave Raven alone in the house.

That doesn’t mean I don’t track his phone to see where he is. And when I do, I’m perplexed, because he’s at Raven’s uncle and aunt’s house.

I stare at the location. “What the fuck are you up to, Zay?”

Just then, the front door opens. I look through the doorway and into the foyer. The snow apparently has started up again, along with the wind, because a gust of cold air and snowflakes sweep into the house.

“Shit, it’s cold,” Jax mutters as he hurries inside the foyer and shoves the door closed.

He dusts snow off his hair and jacket and stomps snow off his boots, a plastic bag in his hand.

“That was fast,” I say as he slips his boots off and sets them on the shelf beside the door. “Especially with how bad the roads are.”

“That’s what four-wheel drive is for. Plus, Del had the phone all ready to go, so I was there for like one minute, tops.” He looks around the room as he walks into the living room. “Where’s Raven?”

“Upstairs going through clothes with Low.” I elevate a brow at him. “Why do I get the feeling you drove recklessly to get back to her?”

He glances distractedly at the stairway. “I drove at a normal pace.”

“Liar.” I sigh heavily. “Dude, you’ve got to get it together and learn how to be away from her.”

“I’ve been away from her for over a decade, so if I don’t want to be away from her anymore, I shouldn’t have to.” He looks back at me. “Sorry, but it’s true.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know if she’s Willow.” Although, with each passing hour, it seems more like she is. She’s so similar to Willow that it’s crazy. I just wish I knew how it was possible, and if Raven knows. I doubt it, but I’m not positive. “And if you don’t chill out, you’ll probably scare her. And then maybe she’ll end up leaving on her own.” I’m not sure if it’s an empty threat, but it’s beside the point.

I’m just trying to get him to calm down.

Jax and his anxiety can get intense. Not that it’s his fault. He has a mental illness. We all have our own. But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to try to help him calm down.

“You think she would?” he asks, worriedly chewing on his lip.

“I don’t know.” I resist a sigh. “Let her have some time with Low. She’ll come down when she’s done, and then you can give her the phone and show her how to use it. But, right

now, I need to see if you have an answer to a mystery that's puzzling the hell out of me."

His brows pull together as he comes and takes a seat in the chair across from me. "What's up?"

I hurriedly tell him what happened with Zay, starting from catching him coming out of the basement to when I tracked him at Raven's aunt and uncle's house. By the time I'm finished, he looks about as perplexed as I feel.

"Why would he go there?" He leans forward and rests his arms on his knees. "Did you check the cameras at the house to see if any of them are picking up anything?"

"That's a good idea." I slant forward and open the cameras that show the view of Raven's aunt and uncle's house.

While I do, Jax comes over and sits down by me so he can get a view of the cameras.

I mark the box that will show all of the cameras' views at once. Once they're up, we start looking through them. When we get to the kitchen view, I realize why Zay is being weird about it. Although, I still don't know how he ended up there, or how he got there if Jax took the truck. It's a pretty far walk, and his car isn't made for snow. I guess he could've put chains on the tires.

"Who the heck is that?" Jax squints at the screen. "Wait ... Is that your dad sitting at the table with Raven's uncle?"

I slowly nod. "Yep." Anger burns underneath my skin. It's not that I know why he's there, but if he's there, it's not for anything good. And I don't like that some perverted fuck who gets off on hurting Raven is having what looks like some sort of secret meeting with my father. If he's involved with anything that has to do with Raven's uncle, that puts Raven that much closer to coming into contact with him.

And I don't want her to have to meet that piece of shit.

Ever.

"Is the audio picking anything up?" Jax asks then reaches for the keys without waiting.

“It might, but there’s a chance they’re too far away from the cameras for us to hear everything they’re saying.”

“We need better ones.”

“I know that.”

He sighs but opens the audio up, anyway. Static is the only noise we hear, but that’s not because their voices are out of range of the camera’s microphone. No, that means my father has an audio recording block or a white noise generator, which means ...

“He knows we set up cameras there.” I blow out a breath as I slump back into the sofa. “But I guess that’s not too weird since he paid us to look into the guy.”

“Yeah, but it’s weird he’s having a meeting with him in the kitchen,” Jax states as he assesses the cameras.

“Let’s just hope that Zay being there means he’s somehow spying on them.”

“And that he doesn’t get caught.”

“Oh, I know.” Worry pierces through me.

When Zay loses control, like he did this morning, he can do reckless shit that usually results in him either getting arrested or getting beat up. Although, the other person always gets their ass beat worse. Zay is a fucking badass fighter. But that doesn’t mean I don’t worry about him, especially when he’s spying on our fathers, who are powerful, dangerous, and evil.

I have the scars to prove all of that, both physical and mental ones.

“Do you think it’s too short?” Raven’s voice suddenly drifts down the stairs and is followed by footsteps.

I close the computer, not wanting Low to see.

Jax doesn’t ask questions because he knows where my head’s at. It’s something we’re all cautious of—telling Low enough about the families’ world that she’s safe, but not so much that she’s terrified.

“Nah, it’s perfect. You don’t have to wear it if you don’t want to, but I think you should,” Low says.

They appear on the stairway then, heading down to the bottom.

Raven trails her hand down the railing as they walk, her hair a wild mess of waves and those knee-highs she’s wearing ... fuck. I loved seeing her in just my shirt, but those knee-highs are almost as sexy.

Jax has his gaze glued to her. For a moment, he just sits there, as if he’s in some sort of trance. But then he gets up and hurries over toward the stairway. He’ll probably hug her or something, and then Low’s going to have even more questions about whatever is going on between all of us, which so far is nothing, but ...

“If I can get the lady balls to, I might,” Raven replies as they reach the bottom of the stairs.

Jax is already there, waiting for her, and when she sees him, a shy smile touches her face. It’s cute that she smiles differently at him. With me, she’s always teasingly grinning and playfully rolling her eyes, like she matches my personality, and yet she matches his, too. It’s kind of weird ...

But sort of nice.

I rise to my feet.

“Hey, you’re back,” she says to Jax, who’s smiling at her in the same way.

“Yeah, I got back a few minutes ago.” He’s opening and flexing his hands, I think to stop himself from latching on to her.

They stare at each other for a beat.

The silence draws Low’s attention, her gaze skating between the two of them, curiosity sparkling in her eyes.

“And he has your phone,” I announce as I approach them, trying to distract my sister.

“Oh yeah, I do.” Jax pauses then reaches out and takes Raven’s hand.

Okay, Low’s definitely going to ask questions now.

But before she can, Jax steers Raven into the living room where he left the bag with the phone. He picks it up and only lets go of her hand so he can take out the phone.

He’s gotten a case for it, black with a red rose engraved on the back, something we didn’t buy online when we ordered the phone, which means he took the time to purchase it at the store.

Didn’t drive recklessly, my ass.

Raven takes the phone from him, and her eyes widen. “What’s this?”

Jax’s forehead creases. “It’s the phone we got for you.”

“Well, I know that.” Raven turns the phone over, looking at it with a frown on her face. “I can’t take this. It’s way too expensive.”

“You’ll need that good of one,” I chime in, knowing she was going to protest. She always does when it comes to anything given to her. “For the programs we’re going to install on it.”

She continues to frown. “Okay, that makes sense, but I don’t need the case.” She starts to take it off. “You can take that back, right, and get your money back?”

Jax places a hand on hers, stopping her with fumbling to take off the case. “The case wasn’t that much,” he says. “And it reminded me of you—it’s why I got it.”

She peers up at him with this little pouty look that I doubt she’s aware that she’s even doing.

I also doubt she realizes what that look is doing to Jax. I do, though, I can see the shift in his eyes.

I want her to look at me that way ...

“I appreciate it, Jax, I really do, but I don’t want you guys spending money on me like this,” she says, still looking at him

in that sexy, pouty way.

“If you don’t like it, I can take it back,” he says, flexing his fingers. “I just ... I just thought you’d like it.”

“I do.” Her gaze lowers to the case. “It’s really pretty.”

“Then keep it.” Jax loses his restraint and reaches out to brush a strand of her hair out of her face. “I want you to have it.”

“Jesus,” Low mumbles, watching the scene with an astonished look on her face. “Dude, you’ve got Jaxon Capperellie whipped.”

Both of them blink, and then Raven glances at Low, giving her a pressing look, while Jaxon just stares at Raven like he can’t take his eyes off her.

“I do not,” Raven grits out, glowering at Low.

“Okay.” Low’s tone oozes sarcasm

Raven rolls her eyes. “Whatever.” She looks at Jaxon then, shifting her weight, and I can tell she’s embarrassed.

Before Low can add fuel to the fire, which I know she will since she shares the same twisted, sarcastic sense of humor as me, I say, “As fun as it is to watch you two squirm, we have a lot of shit to do. But later, if you want, I can embarrass both of you so you can go back to your squirming.”

Jax throws me an unimpressed look while Raven flips me the middle finger.

That gets me to grin, and Raven returns it, although I can tell she’s trying not to.

“I’m guessing that’s my cue to leave,” Low remarks as she glances at her phone. Then she grimaces. “Which I guess is okay since it’s tutoring time.” She wavers. “I guess it’s not totally bad since my tutor is hot.”

I shake my head. “Do not flirt with the tutor.”

She flashes me a mischievous grin. “I’ll try, but no promises.” With that, she wiggles her fingers at everyone. “See ya later.” She starts for the door, walking backward and

looking at Raven. “And Raven, call me if you want me to come back and help you get ready for the party.” She looks at me. “Or if you guys decide to invite me.” She grins playfully, but deep down, I think she might be hurt that I’m not inviting her.

But I’m not doing that for her own protection. Because the last thing I need is for my little sister to get caught up in this world more than my father is already forcing her to be. I wish I could do that for myself, too, but until I graduate and get the hell out of Honeyton, I’m stuck in it.

I just hope everything works out as planned, but I have this horrible feeling my future might be changing in a direction I’m not sure of.

And I don’t like it at all.

NINE

RAVEN

I don't want to accept the phone or the case, but Jax is looking at me in a way that makes it difficult to say no. So, *le sigh*, I'm going to take the phone and case for now, but one day, I will pay him back.

Jax is holding my hand. He seems a bit raveled, like he's stressed out. He was the last time I saw him, and I'm not positive why. I worry, though, that it has to do with him and Hunter. I think I may be causing problems, like Zay has implied several times. Maybe I should just go back to my aunt and uncle's house ...

Yeah, that thought kind of crumbles when Hunter informs us of something he discovered on the security cameras at their house.

"That's your dad?" I ask as I squint at the computer screen.

I'm sitting on the sofa between Jax and Hunter. Both of them are sitting close enough that their legs are pressed against mine. And like I said earlier, Jax is holding my hand. Their body heat and the scent of their cologne is wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

"It is." Hunter's voice is tight, conveying his disdain for the scene happening on the computer screen. "I'm not sure why he's there, and the audio isn't picking up."

"You said Zay's there, though." Jax leans forward, scratching his chin with his free hand. "Did you try to text him after you talked to him to see if you can get any more details?"

“I did, but he never replied.” Hunter restlessly bounces his knee up and down, the chain dangling from his beltloop jingling. “I’m not surprised. You know how he can get.”

“Or maybe he can’t reply.” The words just sort of leave my lips.

Hunter’s expression sinks. “Shit, I didn’t even think about that.” He looks at Jax. “Should one of us go check on him?”

“Do you know how risky that’d be?” Jax replies with his brow elevated. “Especially with your dad there.”

“True.” Hunter mulls this over with a frown. “We’ll give him a bit, and then if we haven’t heard anything, one of us should go check on him. We’ll just have to be careful.”

“I can go,” I offer. “It’s where I live, so it wouldn’t be too crazy if I just showed up.”

“No way,” Jax says at the same time Hunter shakes his head.

“Why not?” I’m a little annoyed over the fact that they’re telling me what I can and can’t do.

“Because it’s dangerous.” Panic flashes in his eyes, and he looks like he’s veering toward some sort of dangerous ledge.

Hunter remains a bit calmer. “I know we’re coming off intense, baby, but trust me; you don’t want to be near my father.” The muscle in his jaw ticks. “He always has some ulterior motive to everything he does, and that motive is bad.” He blinks at me. “So, it’s better to stay away from him and off his radar.”

“But aren’t I already on his radar?” I point out. “He has you guys looking into my family. That’s why you knew all that stuff about me, right?” *Or were they lying about that?*

The thought comes to me from out of nowhere and, while I want to dismiss it, I can’t.

What if they’re lying to me?

“Your family is on his radar,” Hunter stresses. “Not just you.”

I smash my lips together, so many questions filling up my mind. This is weird; Hunter's dad being with my aunt and uncle, sitting at the kitchen table and chatting. It makes me squirm, that connection between Hunter's family and mine. I don't like it, don't like that Hunter's corrupt father is with my perverted uncle and my bitchy aunt. It just ... feels off, especially when I've suspected that I've been to this town before and been with Hunter, Jax, and Zay. And after what Low told me ...

Something is definitely going on. I just wish I knew if Hunter, Jax, and Zay were in on ... well, whatever is going on. If not, I could just tell them what I think about my past. But my mom warned me never to talk about it.

What the hell am I supposed to do?

"We should set the cameras up," Hunter suggests as he rises to his feet. "We can leave the video feed playing on the computer, but it's just going to stress everyone the hell out if we sit here and stare at it without being able to hear anything."

Jax gives a bob of his head in agreement then stands up, too, pulling me up with him. "I'll show Raven how to do that."

Hunter's blue-eyed gaze briefly flicks to me before landing back on Jax. "Sounds good." He grabs a few cameras that are on the table and wanders off into the kitchen.

Jax collects some cameras, too, but only two since he won't let go of my hand.

"You know, you might be able to grab more cameras if you let go of my hand," I suggest with a teasing smile. "I mean, it's just a suggestion, but I feel like I might be on to something."

"Right." He doesn't release my hand immediately, but he eventually removes one finger at a time.

My hand feels strangely cold without his fingers tangled through mine.

He collects a few more cameras. Three are left, so I pick those up. Then we head upstairs. I'm actually pretty curious how they hide the cameras without anyone seeing them.

They're small, but still, unless they're tucked away, people will be able to see them.

"So," Jax says when we reach the top of the stairs. He sets all the cameras but one down on the floor at the start of the hallway. "We need to find a good place to put these where no one will spot them or accidentally find them. High places are good, but places with a lot of stuff piled in the area are great, too." He starts down the hallway, and I follow. "Bedrooms are going to be good for this particular." He stops in front of his bedroom door and pushes it open. "Because people will be distracted while they're in them." His cheeks tint a soft hue of pink as he enters his room.

I trail in behind him. "You're going to let people come up in your room and ...?" I can't even say the words aloud, but seriously, isn't that gross to him? People messing around and having sex on his bed?

"Mess around," he finishes for me as he peers around. "I'm not a fan of letting anyone up here, but rooms are where people will go to have private conversations."

"After they mess around?" I question.

He wavers, dragging his teeth along his bottom lip. "Maybe. Maybe not. But we need to put cameras in here just in case."

"But when you look at the camera footage, aren't you going to see ...?" Again, I can't get the words to leave my lips.

Fortunately, Jax seems to understand my rambling. "We fast-forward through that part. None of us watch or anything."

"That's good to know," I mutter uncomfortably.

"That we're not perverts?" Jax questions with a quirk of his brow.

"What? No, that's not what I meant. I just ... I don't know ... All of this—the cameras, the spying on people—it's a little weird to me." Great, I sound like a rambling dumbass.

His face changes to sympathetic. "I know. And I was just giving you a hard time. I don't really think that you think

we're perverts."

"That's good to know."

"It is, isn't it?" He's smiling now.

So am I.

His smile fades a little, but not entirely as he turns away from me and scans the room for a place to put the camera.

While he's looking around, I decide to ask him a question that's been bothering me.

"Everything's okay, right? With you and Hunter and ... well, just everything?"

He nods, but I detect the briefest stiffness in his shoulders. "Everything's fine. This morning and the drama ... we worked past that."

"Oh." I rub my lips together. "Cool."

He tosses a glance at me with his brow arched. "Cool?"

I shrug. "I honestly don't know what to say because what's going on is weird, at least according to Zay."

He gapes at me. "Zay's been telling you things about Hunter and me?"

"Um ..." I shrug again. "Kind of." I feel like I put my foot in my mouth, and it's annoying.

He faces me fully and fiddles with the camera in his hand. "What exactly did he say?"

I absentmindedly brush my fingers along the hickey on my neck. "That I'm causing problems, which I'm starting to think that I am."

He promptly shakes his head then hastily reduces the space between us. "You're not causing problems between us at all. In fact, you might be starting to heal some of those problems."

"Jax, you've known me for only a few days," I point out. "There's no way you can possibly know that yet."

"No, I do." His eyes burn fiercely as he stares at me, begging me to understand.

But I don't.

Maybe because I am clueless.

Or maybe because they aren't telling me things.

“Okay.” I take the camera from him. “So, how do we set this thing up, anyway?”

He studies me for a beat, and I feel like he might be disappointed in my response. But it's all I can give him for now.

Because I don't want to accept that yet, that perhaps they really are going to be my best friends, and I'll never have to be alone again. That's the thing about being alone for so long while being bullied—you start to doubt the good things and be more accepting of the bad. I don't like being that way, but it's all I can give for the moment.

A half-broken raven.

Kind of like the one we found in the snow last night.

TEN

RAVEN

“Do you think we have to worry about more stuff like the dead raven in the snow happening?” I ask as Hunter, Jax, and I sit at the table, eating some sandwiches.

We spent quite a while setting up the cameras and making sure all of them worked before we sat down to eat. It’s late enough that the sun is going down and the party will be starting in a few hours. We checked the cameras before we sat down, and no one is at my aunt and uncle’s house. Hunter received a text from Zay, too, although it was super vague.

I’m fine. That was all it said. But I guess that was enough to settle everyone’s nerves.

I still feel a bit uneasy, but I keep that to myself.

Hunter shakes his head then takes a bite of his sandwich. He’s sitting in a chair across from me, his foot pressed against mine. At first, I moved my foot, thinking it was in the way. But his foot chased mine, so I decided that’s how he wanted it.

Guys are so confusing. They’re always saying girls are, but they’re just as bad.

“All of our cameras are working,” Hunter assures me. “So, even if they did, we catch them before they get too far. Honestly, maybe it’s a good thing if they try it.”

I pick at the crust on my sandwich. “But what if they get into the party without anyone noticing?”

Hunter freezes. So does Jax. Apparently, that hasn’t crossed either of their minds.

They trade a look while I stuff a chunk of sandwich into my mouth.

“Just so you two know, I’m starting to catch on to your secret looks, so maybe you should just say what you’re thinking aloud.” I give a shrug when they both look at me. “It’s true, so I thought I’d just throw it out there instead of sitting here and pretending like I don’t know what’s happening.”

Hunter considers this. “Fair enough.” He cracks a smile then promptly erases it. “We were just thinking that we should probably be worried about that.”

I nod in agreement. “Maybe I should go hang out somewhere else?” I suggest, even though I don’t want to. I haven’t actually been to a party before except for one time where I ended up getting locked in a closet for hours because it was a setup by Dixie May. “Like maybe my aunt and uncle’s?” Those words leave a bitter taste in my mouth. “Or maybe I can just go hang out with Low?”

Hunter actually considers this then extends his hand across the table, takes mine, and starts playing with my fingers. My gaze immediately goes to Jax because, hello, we just made out this morning. But he just gives me this small smile.

WTF?

“Baby.” Hunter draws my attention back to him. “We don’t want to boss you around, but I think I really, *really* need to stress this.” He looks me straight in the eye. “You shouldn’t ever have to go back to that house, no matter what reason, okay? Your aunt, uncle, and cousin are abusive, and no one should ever have to deal with that shit. You turn eighteen in a few weeks, so all we have to do is keep dodging it until then, and then you’re good to go. We’ve got dirt on your aunt that I’m sure she won’t want your uncle to know about, so we’re good.”

I rub my lips together as his words sink in. “But, how do we know that blackmailing my aunt is going to work? We haven’t even tried it yet.”

“That’s because we haven’t had to yet,” Hunter tells me, tracing the folds of my fingers with his. “When we have to, we’ll use it and make it work.”

I waver, still unconvinced. “You didn’t seem so convinced last night.”

“I was pretty convinced,” he insists. “And now that I’ve seen my father having a meeting with your uncle, I’m one-hundred percent convinced it’ll work because I’m going to make it work.”

I open my mouth to tell him he can’t be one-hundred percent certain it’ll work, but the sound of the front door opening causes everyone to freeze.

“It’s me,” Zay hollers, and everyone visibly relaxes.

“We’re in the kitchen,” Hunter calls back to him.

I hear the stomping of boots and, a moment later, Zay wanders in, his face flushed from the snow, snowflakes dotting his hair. Even his lips look a bit blue.

“Dude, you look cold,” Hunter remarks, eyeing him over.

“I’m fine.” Zay shucks off his hoodie, drapes it on the back of a chair, then rubs his hands together, trying to warm them up. “I stood outside for a bit when I got back.”

“From Raven’s uncle’s house?” Hunter asks, and Zay nods, dropping into a chair. “How’d you even get there without the truck?”

“I drove my car,” he replies like it’s obvious. He fleetingly flicks his gaze to Hunter’s hand on mine. “I have chains.”

Hunter shakes his head with a heavy sigh, his hand leaving mine. “You know that’s not good to do unless under extreme circumstances.”

“I know that,” Zay replies with annoyance. “But Jax took the truck, and I needed to ...” He glances in my direction before looking back at Hunter. “I needed a break.”

Well, don’t I just feel great? I mean, I’m not surprised or anything, but seriously, could he at least try not to be so

obvious?

I'm about to open my mouth and say something snarky, but Hunter speaks first.

"Why the hell did you end up at Raven's uncle's house?" Hunter questions, crossing his arms on the table.

"I saw your father's car heading in that direction while I was driving," he explains, stealing half a sandwich from off Hunter's plate. "I figured I'd follow him and see what he was up to."

"And did you?" This from Jax, who's angled his body toward Zay and has his arms crossed.

Zay stuffs a huge bite of sandwich into his mouth. "I learned a little bit. I couldn't hear everything without getting into the house. And they had the doors locked. But I used a radio transfer to do audio in there, so I heard a little bit."

Both Jax and Hunter nod, like they understand what that is. I don't.

"What is that?" I decide to ask because, if I am going to be working for them, I should probably know these things.

I expect Jax or Hunter to explain since Zay always seems annoyed with me, but strangely, he's the one to answer.

"It's an old-school bugging system that works through the radio," he informs me as he takes another bite of his sandwich. "They don't work great, but because they're older, they can get by any block receivers, which is a device that can shut down any audio devices that might be bugging the area."

"My dad was using one of those?" Hunter asks, his body going rigid.

Zay nods as he wipes his hands off on a paper towel. "Yep. But I'm not surprised. He hired us to spy on her uncle and his family, so he knows we probably put cameras up in the house. What I don't get, though, is why he asked us to do that, but then he went over there and blocked us from hearing the conversation."

“Yeah, I don’t get it, either,” Hunter mumbles, slumping back in the chair. “What all did you overhear?”

“Well, apparently, your dad knows Raven’s uncle, at least enough that he’s met him a few times. I don’t know when, but enough was said that I could tell that much.” Zay’s gaze fleetingly strays in my direction, and then he looks back at Hunter. “But the main point of the meeting was that your dad wants to work with him to export goods.”

“What sort of goods?” Jax wonders as he picks at his sandwich. “Because we all know that, with him, that could mean anything from drugs to people.”

My eyes widen. “*People?*”

Jax turns to me so his knees are pressing against mine. “Yeah, unfortunately, there’s been speculation that Hunter’s father, mine, and also Zay’s—since they all work together—are part of an underground human trafficking ring. But we don’t have any actual proof. Just speculation because of”—he swallows down a shaky breath, his throat muscles bobbing—“certain things.”

The room grows quiet for a beat, and it’s a hauntingly unsettling sort of silence.

“Regardless of what he’s trying to export,” Zay finally says, “it means that the sheriff in town can be bought off, since her uncle agreed to do it.”

“I’m not surprised,” I mutter, my mind still half stuck on the human trafficking thing and the remark Jax made about it. *What did he mean by certain things? And why did it feel personal to him?* “He used to take all the drugs he confiscated on the job and would resell them. Well, the stuff I didn’t steal.”

“I’m not surprised by this, either,” Zay states. “Everything we’ve dug up on your uncle screams corrupt. Still, it makes me uneasy that your father”—he looks at Hunter—“is allegedly having us look into the family when he’s already making business deals with Raven’s uncle.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely weird,” Hunter agrees through a mumble.

They grow quiet again, and I detect them trading discreet looks. It makes me uneasy and kind of annoyed, but maybe I shouldn't be. Perhaps this is business stuff that I don't need to know.

"We should start getting ready," Hunter abruptly says. "We have about two hours until Benton will be here to set up everything."

"What else is there to set up?" I wonder as I stuff a small bite of sandwich into my mouth. "We already set up the cameras."

A trace of a smile touches his lips and, once again, he trades a look with Jax, who appears the slightest bit amused. Zay doesn't smile, but he looks at me with a bit less annoyance in his eyes than usual.

"It's for the actual party," Jax explains, threading his fingers through mine.

"Oh." I give a short pause. "You mean, like snacks and stuff?"

Hunter gives me that look that he does sometimes, the one where he thinks I'm being adorable, but it usually just means I'm being an idiot.

"Don't say it," I say before he can.

He bats his eyelashes at me innocently. "Say what?"

I narrow my eyes at him because he knows exactly what I mean. "That I'm adorable."

He presses back a smile. "Fair enough," he finally says, and then his smile breaks through. "You're cute."

Jax snorts a laugh, eliciting a dirty look from me.

"Sorry," he tells me, but he's still smiling. "You are cute, though."

I blow out an exhale, flitting my gaze to Zay, because I know he's not going to be looking at me the same way as those two, like they think I'm the most amusing girl in the world. And he's not. But he is looking at me in a curious way that

confuses me. However, as soon as our eyes lock, he looks away and stands up.

“I have a few things to take care of, and then I’ll help get ready.” He starts to walk away, but then he looks back at me. “If it works for you, I’ll start training you tomorrow, since it’s so late today.”

Is he actually asking me if I want to do something? Usually, he just tells me.

“Yeah, that works for me.” The confusion is evident in my tone.

He doesn’t comment on it; he just walks off, heading up the stairs.

“I feel like he’s keeping something from us,” Hunter mumbles as he stares at the stairway where Zay went. Then he shifts his gaze to Jax. “What do you think?”

“I think there’s a good chance you’re right.” Jax absentmindedly traces the folds of my fingers with his fingertip. “You know as well as I do that he’s not going to tell us until he wants to.”

“I know.” Hunter rakes his fingers through his hair. Then he stares at the table for a moment before lifting his gaze to me, the tension in his features visibly alleviating. “You wanna go get dressed then help us set up?” he asks. “We have to go get changed, too.”

I nod while chewing on my lip. I don’t want to ask again, but I want to know.

He must read my mind because he smiles and says, “When we say setting up, we mean music, moving the furniture for dancing, and setting up a beer pong table, and maybe a poker one—stuff like that.”

My lips form an *O*. Seriously, I didn’t realize people actually did that kind of stuff at parties. The one party I went to, where I got locked in the closet, consisted of music playing from a phone and people hanging out on a sofa, talking. It was lame, but I was even lamer, you know, when I got my dumbass locked in the closet.

My thoughts drift back to that memory as the three of us get up to change. While I trust these guys to an extent, there's still that mystery that surrounds the memories I keep having. And because of that, and the stuff that's happened to me in the past, I'm kind of nervous.

What if this is all just one big, elaborate prank?

What if I end up locked in a closet tonight?

Or worse.

ELEVEN

ZAY

I'm staring out the window, my eyes on the snow-covered street. Anyone walking into my bedroom would probably think I was dazed out or stoned. Getting high isn't really my thing, though. I like to be mentally present, especially when we're hosting a party for a bunch of guys working for Hunter's father. And mine. And Jax's.

Hunter's father is definitely the boss of the three, but all of them are scary motherfuckers. When we chose to leave that lifestyle, it was a huge deal. But we did it, and now we're just going to welcome that old world into our home. I hate it. It's money, though.

That's not the only reason we're doing it. It'll allow us to maybe learn what's going on in that world. And considering what I overheard today, I definitely want to know more, because what I told everyone I overheard isn't even close to the truth. And the truth is that it's not a coincidence Raven and her uncle, aunt, and cousin moved here. Hunter's father was behind it. I don't know why, but I need to find out. I'm just deciding if it's worth telling Jax and Hunter about it yet, or if I should wait until I find out more. Hunter might be able to handle it, but Jax will freak out and probably cling to Raven more than he already is. That makes me nervous, too.

If Raven is in on whatever our fathers have planned, the last thing I want is for Jax to completely fall the fuck apart when it's made known. He's getting attached already, and it's not a good thing. I should probably find a way to stop that, but

I'm not sure how. Emotional connection is not my specialty at all.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I turn away from the window and say, "What?"

The door opens and Hunter pokes his head in. "Just checking on you."

I raise a brow. "Since when do I need to be checked on?"

He gives me a look before slipping into the room and closing the door. "You had a panic attack today, man."

I shrug. "So? Jax has them all the time."

He leans against the door, studying me. "You don't. I've only seen you have a couple, and one of them was clear back when ..." He trails off, swallowing hard.

I know the exact moment he's referring to, when Raven—Willow—got swept away in that river and we never saw her again. At least, that's what part of me believes. The other part of me wonders if I have seen her for the last few days, if she's the girl who helped me through the panic attack that I had downstairs. I both loved and hated that moment. Loved because, for a flicker of a moment, I felt something else besides anger, something warm and foreign but not totally unfamiliar. But I also hated it because I'm not used to being comforted. What I'm used to is being tortured, on a ledge, constantly feeling like I'm going to fall. It's how I was raised.

"I know when it was," I finish for him as I head over to my closet to get some clothes so I can change for this party. "And so what if I had a panic attack? I was in the fucking basement. It makes sense." My tone is starting to shake, and I hate it.

"I know it does." He's moved into the closet doorway, leaning against the doorjamb with his arms crossed. "I just want to make sure you're okay, especially since you took off."

"I'm fine." I yank a shirt down, avoiding his gaze.

My heart is starting to race. I don't like the feeling at all. I like my heartbeat to be steady, consistent, and unmoving, just like how I want to appear on the outside.

“Zay,” he says hesitantly. “You took off ... You’re not just fine.” He shifts his weight, standing up straight. “I mean, I know you’re not one to sit around and talk about your problems, but you just ran off into a storm.” Another pause. “And I have this feeling that Raven has something to do with it. I mean ...” He huffs an exhale. “What happened between you two in the basement?”

My heart rate quickens even more. What happened in the basement was that she pulled me out of a panic attack, like she threw me a life vest in a sea of anxiety raging through me. No, fuck that. It’s like she jumped off the ledge with me as I fell into an abyss of terror, and then she sprouted fucking wings and flew us out of there.

She saved me from completely losing my shit, and while part of me is grateful, the other part of me is fucking terrified, because I don’t want anyone to have that sort of control over me. Ever. I’ve lived that damn life, the one where I can be manipulated and controlled. My father did it to me all the time.

“Nothing happened.” I turn with a shirt in my hand. “Are you going to step out so I can change or are you going to stand there and watch?”

He rolls his eyes but ultimately sighs and walks out of the room, shutting the door behind him and leaving me alone.

Which is what I want. Because when you’re alone, there’s nothing but space and emptiness instead of pain and aching.

TWELVE

RAVEN

I feel stupid. Like some dumbass girl playing dress-up. I hadn't paid much attention to the outfit that Low and I decided on, mainly because my head had been stuck on the remark she made about that girl being alive. Willow, I think her name. This girl that I'm starting to question if she's me, and yet I'm still not saying anything, almost like I've been brainwashed into keeping my mouth shut.

Well, that or I've just been scared into doing it.

That thought creeps into my mind as I stare at my reflection in the mirror. Like I said, I feel stupid and am pretty convinced I look stupid, too. But seriously, the velvet shirt and top I'm wearing is way nicer than anything I've ever worn. The shirt is an off-the-shoulder top that only goes to the bottom of my ribcage. But the skirt is high enough on my waist that the scars and wounds on my side are hidden. It's short enough, however, that if I bend over just right, I'll flash someone my ass. I also have on knee-high socks, platforms, and a black choker, and Low gave me this thigh holster thing that is supposed to carry my phone. It seems a bit weird—and even more so that she had something like this—but I strapped it around my thigh, anyway. I have my hair pulled up, and the ponytail is secured with a red ribbon because Low said I needed, “a pop of color.” I also stained my lips red and outlined my eyes with kohl eyeliner. The last finishing touch was lip gloss. I've never put this much effort into my looks before, and I'm not sure if I like it. Or maybe I'm just being self-conscious because I'm going to a party.

Sighing, I pick up my phone and dial Low's number, something Jax programmed into it already.

"Hey, bestie," she answers after three rings. "Let me guess, you're overanalyzing the outfit we picked out."

I fiddle with the hem of my skirt. "How the heck did you know that?"

"Because I'm on to you, best friend." She laughs wickedly, causing me to snort a laugh. "Seriously, though, I promise you look amazing So, stop thinking and own it."

"You sound like a positive quote of the day."

"That's what I'm aiming for."

We both laugh again.

Someone says something in the background, and she sighs. "That's my tutor. He's so annoying. Seriously. And I don't know why I have to sit here and study when school got canceled. I should be going to a party ... Not that I usually do, but you're there, and you're my best friend. I'm thinking maybe it might be fun."

I'm wary about where she's going with this. "It could be."

"Yeah, it could be," she agrees. "So, I'm thinking that maybe if you asked Hunter if I could come, he'd be more likely to say yes. You could bat your eyelashes at him. I bet it'd totally work."

I think about how Hunter mentioned the dangers at this party. "I don't know if I should."

The line grows quiet.

"Okay." She sounds hurt, and I feel bad.

Bad enough to run my dumbass mouth. "I'll ask, but I can't make any promises. He seemed weird about you coming for some reason."

"He's just being overly protective," she replies. "You should remind him of that."

I laugh softly. "I'll try to slip into the conversation."

“Good.” The hurt has alleviated from her tone. “Text me or call me if it’s a yes. I’ll keep my phone by me.”

“Okay.”

We say goodbye then hang up.

It takes me about five more minutes before I can work up the courage to go downstairs. What I really wish is that I was high. It’d make this a lot easier. But, unfortunately, I don’t have anything on me. So, totally sober, I trudge down the stairs.

When I reach the bottom, I spot Hunter and Jax standing in the living room, arguing over where to move the sofa.

They’ve both changed and, holy hell, they’re both ... hot. There’s really no other way to put it.

Jax has on a long-sleeved black shirt with the sleeves rolled up, dark jeans, and thick boots. His inky black hair hangs in his eyes, leather bands ornament his wrists, and his facial piercings glint in the lighting. Hunter has on all black—black jeans and a short-sleeved shirt that shows off a couple of his tattoos. His boots are similar to Jax’s, a chain dangling from his belt loop, and his blond hair is sort of messy, like he just dragged his fingers through it.

“We should just put it in the basement,” Jax is saying with his arms crossed. “It’ll be easier.”

Hunter gapes at him. “How the fuck do you figure that? We’d have to take it downstairs. If we put it into the garage, we can just walk in there.”

“But the car is in there,” Jax reminds him. “We’d have to pull it out.”

“Then go pull it out.” Hunter continues to stare at him like this is the most obnoxious conversation in the world.

“It’s snowing,” Jax says like *duh*.

Hunter looks at him the same way. “That’s the dumbest excuse ever. Seriously, bro ...” He trails off as his gaze drifts in my direction.

He does a double-take, and then his lips part. “Holy fucking hell. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

I scratch my wrist nervously as I make my way into the room.

Jax is looking at me, too, but he’s not saying anything. He swallows audibly and stares at me. I don’t speak guy code well, so I’m not sure what that means.

“Is it too much?” I self-consciously tug at the hem of my skirt then reach up and fiddle with the ribbon in my hair.

“Absolutely not,” Hunter says without removing his gaze from me.

Jax keeps his eyes on me, too, as he approaches. “You look beautiful.”

It takes me a moment to speak, because I know if I do, my voice will shake. “You think maybe I should at least take the ribbon out?”

He shakes his head then reaches up and lightly touches the ribbon with a half-smile on his face. “No way. It looks so good on you.” He moves his fingers and plays with one of the few strands of my hair that I left out of the ponytail and are framing my face. “God, you’re so damn gorgeous.” He offers me an apprehensive smile then, like he’s not sure if that was okay to say or not.

I’m not even sure if it is. Not because I’m taking what he said offensive. It just makes me feel a bit out of my element. Plus, it’s things like this that seem to upset Hunter.

Still, I manage to mumble a, “Thank you.”

Hunter steps up beside him then, appearing relaxed, which is a good sign. Then he rests his arm over Jax’s shoulders, another good sign.

“Please, please, let me take some photos of you,” he says, his gaze sweeping up and down my body. “Like pretty fucking please.”

I’m in no way, shape, or form used to this kind of attention. Plus ... “I really don’t like my photo being taken.”

“I get that, but I promise you’ll look beautiful in it.” He gives a short, calculating pause. “Plus, you can have a photo to look back on the first party you ever attended.”

“I’ve been to one before,” I remind him, shifting my weight self-consciously.

He frowns at that then hastily collects himself. “You’ll have fun at this one, I promise.”

I chew on my bottom lip. “I hope so. I’m kind of nervous. Not just because I’m going to be at a party, but a party that’s full of mafia offspring.”

Hunter points a finger at me, smiling. “Hey, we never use the term mafia.”

“Yeah, but I feel like that might be sort of a *Fight Club* thing,” I quip. “Like the first rule of being a mafia offspring is that you don’t talk about being a mafia offspring.”

He grins. So does Jax. Then Hunter’s smile fades into a contemplative look.

“I have an idea.” He glances at Jax, and Jax looks at him. They trade one of those indecipherable looks. “What do you think, man? Should we break the rules and risk pissing off big brother, or play it safe and risk being bored out of our minds?”

“Well, I don’t think we’d be bored out of our damn minds,” Jax clarifies. Then he pauses, tracing the tip of his tongue along his pierced lip, his gaze straying to me.

I can’t take it anymore. “Dude, what’re you guys talking about? Because I’m feeling really left out right now, and it’s not fun ... And who the hell is big brother?”

Jax cracks a smile. “Zay.”

“Oh.” More puzzlement webs through me. “What’re you thinking of doing that will piss him off?”

“What *we’re* going to do,” Hunter corrects, glancing from me to Jax. “You in or out?”

Jax considers this, but not for long. “In. But you better make it quick. He’ll be suspicious if he comes down here and

can't find us."

A Cheshire-like grin spreads across Hunter's face as he looks at me. "What do you say? Are you in, baby?"

I quirk a brow at him. "Why would I agree to that when I don't know what I'm agreeing to?"

A playful taunt dances in his eyes as he lowers his arm from Jax's shoulders and steps toward me. "That's a valid point, for sure," he says, reaching out and tracing his finger along my cheekbone. "However, I have this feeling that you're the kind of girl who might take the risk without knowing what it is." He waggles his eyebrows at me. "What do you say, little daredevil, you in or out?"

I know he's trying to bait me, but I can tell—or hope, anyway—that it's all for fun.

"FYI, I prefer daredevil Raven over pretty Raven," I say then grin. "But yeah, I'm all-in."

I take the bait, hoping I'm not making a mistake.

THIRTEEN

RAVEN

Once I agree to whatever the hell I just agreed to, Hunter slips his fingers through mine and tows me toward the stairs.

“Where are we going?” I wonder, trying not to stumble in my platform shoes.

“To have fun.” Hunter throws me a smile over his shoulder as we reach the bottom of the stairs.

“You’re acting sketchy,” I point out as Jax steps up behind me and tangles his fingers with mine.

It startles the crap out of me. Not the fact that he’s holding mine hand—he’s done that a lot of times—but both of them are holding my hand. I almost feel like I’m getting in the middle again, and if Zay saw, he’d freak out. But pulling away seems like an asshole sort of thing to do.

Plus, I kind of like holding their hands, but that’s something I’m going to keep to myself.

We make our way up the stairs like that with Hunter in front, holding my hand, and Jax trailing behind me, his fingers tangled through mine. When we reach the top of the stairs, I peer over my shoulder at Jax. He’s already looking at me, and our gazes lock.

A small smile touches his lips, and then he squeezes my hand.

That smile ... it’s kind of dazzling. So much so that when Hunter comes to a stop, I run into him.

“Shit,” I curse as I nearly trip and eat shit.

Luckily, mid-stumble, Jax manages to let go of my hand and loop his arms around my waist.

“You okay?” Jax asks at the same time Hunter turns around and gives me a funny look.

“It’s the shoes.” It’s only partially a lie. It’s the shoes and Jax’s smile making me a klutzy dumbass. “I’m not used to walking around in anything but boots or sneakers.”

Hunter’s gaze lowers to my feet, a smile touching his lips. “They do look killer hard to walk in, but you look sexy as hell.”

“Well, don’t get used to it,” I inform him. “I don’t really feel the need to look sexy all the time, and after this party, I’m going back to rocking my T-shirts, torn shorts and jeans, and old, worn-out boots.”

Hunter grins at me. “Well, that look is just as sexy.”

“If that’s true, then why in the hell do I have to wear this to the party?” I gesture at my outfit.

He shrugs as he pushes the nearest closed door open. “Ask Low. She picked it out for you.”

When I stare at him with an unimpressed look on my face, he chuckles. “If it makes you feel any better, while I love your normal look, you’d probably stand out at this party if you wore it. And it’s better if you blend in.”

“Like she’s going to blend in, anyway,” Jax mumbles from behind me.

My brows pull together as Hunter tows me into his bedroom. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

We’re all in the room then, and Hunter lets go of my hand to close the door. He and Jax trade yet another cryptic look.

“Dudes,” I groan. “Stop with the cryptic looks already. I’m starting to feel left out.”

Hunter laughs at that. “Sorry, baby, but sometimes when we do that, we’re sparing you the irritation we know you’re going to feel with what we’re thinking.”

“So, you’re thinking something bad?” I question, feeling sort of hurt.

Hunter shakes his head. “No, we’re thinking something good about you, but I’m noticing that you don’t do well with compliments.”

He’s right, and it’s weird that he has noticed this about me already.

But maybe it’s not an already thing ...

The little boy smiles at me. “You’re pretty.”

I squirm self-consciously. “No, I’m not.”

I glance between them, almost saying, *Do we know each other more than you’re letting on?*

But, like always, I hear my mom’s voice whisper, *Don’t say a word.*

“What are you thinking about me?” I ask instead. “I want to know.”

They exchange yet another look.

“We were thinking,” Hunter starts, heading toward a dresser. “That you’re going to stand out, anyway, because you’re beautiful, and it’s noticeable.”

“People will probably hit on you,” Jax adds with a heavy sigh. “It could get annoying.” He wavers, his gaze meeting mine. “Well, unless you don’t care.” He waits for my answer calmly, but I detect the slightest twitch of anxiety in the pulse of his fingertips.

“I don’t want anyone hitting on me,” I clarify, wiggling my hand from Jax’s grip so I can wrap my arms around myself. “Especially mafia offspring that won’t admit their mafia offspring.” I’m mainly referring to people like the ones who threw me off the bridge.

“Hey, we’re mafia offspring who don’t like to admit we’re mafia offspring,” Hunter reminds me as he removes a leather case from the dresser’s top drawer.

“True, but you guys aren’t assholes. You didn’t”—I swallow hard—“drug me and shove me off a bridge.” The words just sort of fall off my tongue. It’s weird because I thought I’d been okay about it, yet I sound angry and hurt, amongst other emotions.

Hunter stiffens, his gaze snapping to me while Jax’s hand stiffens in mine.

Then Jax moves in front of me and lowers his head to level his gaze with me.

“You know nothing like that will ever happen again, right?” He carries my gaze.

I nod, but a tiny part of me worries that it’s a lie. “I know. I’m just being stupid because I’m a little uneasy about the idea of being in a room with a bunch of mobsters that, according to you guys, are going to hit on me.” I shift my weight and sigh. “I just want to blend in for the night and not have to worry about stuff like that. And the note. And this game.”

He gives a nod. “I know. And right now, we’re going to help you be able to relax, and hopefully that feeling will stay for the rest of the night.”

I glance warily between them, wondering what they’re planning on doing. “How are you going to do that?”

Hunter parts his lips, but Jax speaks first.

“I also have a solution that might help keep people from hitting on you,” he says with a hint of nervousness in his eyes.

“Okay.” I briefly study him, wondering what’s got him so anxious. “What?”

He wets his lips with his tongue, then reaches out and takes my hand. “You can be Hunter’s date.”

At first, I think he said his date, but when I rewind, I realize he said Hunter. And that confuses the crap out of me.

He wants me to be Hunter’s date ... after Jax and I kissed?

What the shit?

I look at Hunter, wondering what he thinks of this. He's looking at Jax, and Jax is looking at him. Here they go again with their secret looks.

Le sigh. I wish I could take some sort of class that could help me figure out what on earth they're saying with their eyes.

Hunter finally looks at me, scratching the back of his neck. "You don't have to, if you don't want to, but I'd love to be your date tonight."

"Really?" My surprise is evident in my tone.

But, for reals, wasn't I just making out with Jax early, which seemed to upset Hunter?

"Yes, really." He appears genuine, but I don't know ... This situation is a bit weird. Then again, everything that's happened between us already is a bit weird.

I look at Jax, who offers me an encouraging smile.

I seriously don't get it, but I don't want to be a weirdo, either. Like, *oh, I can't be your date because Jax and I made out.* It's not like we're dating or anything like that. And I guess people just make out sometimes. It kind of hurts, though, that that's all it was to him—just kissing for fun.

"Yeah, okay." I smile, but it's a bit forced.

Hunter notices, too. "Are you sure? Like I said, you don't have to if you don't want to."

The hurt in his eyes makes me shove all my weirdness down about this.

"I'm sure," I assure him, sounding more confident this time. "As long as you are."

A smile touches his lips. "Of course I'm sure." He reaches out and plays with a strand of my hair. "It's a date then."

"Well, a job date," I joke then pull a face. "That kind of makes me sound like a prostitute, doesn't it?"

Hunter shakes his head. "Nah. It just sounds like we're two people working together and going on a date."

Date. Date. Date. It's such a foreign word.

"I guess." I'm not sure if I agree, though.

To be honest, it still does sound prostitute-y if you ask me.

Story of my damn life.

Not that the story of my life is that I'm a prostitute. I just feel like it makes sense, considering how my life has been so far, that it's work-related the first time I go on a date.

"Cheer up, pretty little daredevil," Hunter teases me as he opens the box he's holding.

"Okay, now you're just mixing all sorts of nicknames," I tease, wondering what on earth is in that box.

Jax moves up behind me, placing his hands on my hips, as Hunter pulls out a joint from the box.

Okay, so I don't want to seem like a freak or anything like that, but dude, he may have just stolen a tiny piece of my heart.

"You're smiling," he says as he takes a lighter and sets the box aside.

"Because I'm happy," I say shamelessly. "Right now, you're definitely my best friend."

He juts out his lip, pretending to pout. "I wasn't before?"

I hesitate, wanting to say no just to tease him. Honestly, he kind of is, which I know makes me sound pathetic, seeing as how I'm referring to him as my BFF when I barely know him. Allegedly, anyway. Not that having Hunter as my best friend is a bad thing. It seems like it could be a wonderful thing.

"Your silence says a lot," he teases, reaching out and lightly tracing his fingertips along my cheekbone. Then he removes his hand, but only so he can put the end of the joint between his lips and light up. He inhales, trapping the smoke in his lungs before releasing it.

Smoke laces the air as he hands me the joint. I'll admit, I'm totally excited to be getting stoned. After everything that's happened, it'll help clear my head.

Or, well, fog up my head, I guess is the better way of putting it.

I put the joint to my lips, inhale, and ... Oh my God, I'm in stoner bliss as the smoke saturates my lungs. I trap it in, letting it seep through every part of me before exhaling.

Smoke circles my face as my lips spread into a grin. "Thank you."

Hunter has an amused sort of look on his face before he slides his gaze to Jax. "Dude, she just thanked me for a hit."

"Yeah, I think we've already established she's adorable," Jax says with amusement in his tone.

I'm about to turn around and blast him with a dirty look because, seriously, he's starting in on this adorable thing, too? But as I turn, he leans forward, and we end up with our lips a sliver of an inch away from each other.

I blink. What is he doing?

With what can only be described as the most beautiful flirty smile I've ever seen curving across his lips, he keeps his eyes on me and reaches out, taking the joint from my hand. Then, still not breaking eye contact, he moves the end of the joint toward his lips to take a hit. I'm not even sure what it is—the way he doesn't look away from me or the intensity suddenly flowing off of him—but my heart is racing inside my chest, which is fucking weird considering I'm high as hell.

He takes a hit then moves the joint away from his lips. Then he leans even closer to me.

Confusion weaves through me for a moment. Then it dawns on me. I've seen people do this before, in movies. I've never done it, because I haven't gotten high with anyone before.

I hold perfectly still, my heart pounding in my chest as his lips connect with mine. I slightly open my mouth from the connection, and he exhales, the smoke funneling from his lips and past mine, slipping down my throat as I inhale.

I wait for him to move back so I can exhale, but he lingers close with his eyes shut, a soft sigh falling from his lips. Then he slants back, and I release the smoke. I can't stop the smile from pulling at my lips.

"That was weird," I say teasingly.

Weird but kind of sexy. I'm not about to say that aloud in front of them.

Hunter chuckles as Jax hands him the joint. "So damn adorable."

Jax studies me momentarily with his lips pressed together. "Weird in a bad way?"

"Nah, just weird different." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "I've never done anything like that before."

"I figured as much since you said you've never gotten high with anyone before." Jax is teasing me, or so says the smile on his face. He traces the pad of his finger along my bottom lip, studying me intently. "You're so gorgeous that I could write an entire poem about these lips."

Not what I was expecting him to say.

Hunter, though, starts laughing. "Just a warning, pretty Raven. When Jax gets stoned, his cheesy poet side comes out."

Jax glares at him, but Hunter keeps on grinning as he steps toward me. "Want one more hit before I put this up?"

"Yes, please." I reach for the joint, but he puts it between his lips instead.

He takes a hit, and I expect him to hand it to me. Instead, he leans in like Jax did.

Wait ...

Holy shit ... Is he going to shotgun with me, too?

I manage to get my lips parted as he exhales the smoke. He slides his hand around my waist, gripping slightly as he exhales. Jax still has his hand on my waist, too, and Hunter's hand ends up right above one of his. I'm pressed between the two of them and, holy shit, it's fucking weird.

But not necessarily bad.

“Jesus Christ,” Hunter breathes out with his eyes closed.

I’m unsure why he said that, and he doesn’t step back, so I angle my head to the side before exhaling.

“Are you okay?” I ask Hunter after I’ve cleared out my lungs. My brain, however, is a bit fuzzy.

He bobs his head up and down as he opens his eyes. “Yeah, I’m fucking fantastic.” His smile appears to be genuine.

“You look like you feel fantastic,” I say with a giggle.

His smile magnifies. “God, that smile.” He brushes his finger along my jawline before stepping back and lowering his hand from my waist.

I feel strangely cold, but that dissipates when Jax wraps his arms around my waist so that his chest is pressed against my back.

Hunter turns and puts the joint out against the inside of the box that he took it from. Then he puts the lighter and joint back inside and returns it to the dresser drawer. He removes something else from the drawer before shutting it—a camera case.

He turns to me as he unzips the case. “I know you said you hate being photographed, but I really, *really* want to take a photo of you.” He removes a camera from the bag, sets the bag down, then removes the lens cap. “I won’t do it without your permission, and no one will judge you if you don’t want to.” He steps toward me. “But you’re so beautiful, and with your permission, I’d like the honor to photograph that.”

Did I die on that bridge? I’m seriously starting to wonder because how can this be real? How can they be so damn nice? Well, Hunter and Jax are. Zay is a different story.

I’m not sure why I do what I do next. Maybe it’s because he’s so nice or maybe it’s just because I’m high as hell. Whatever brings me to do it, it doesn’t really matter. All that matters is that I nod.

Hunter offers me a smile. “Thank you.” Then he starts adjusting the camera lens. “If you want, Jax can be in it with you. It’s up to you.”

That sounds way better than me going solo and pretending I’m like a model or something. Even thinking about it makes me want to bust up laughing. I manage to keep that to myself, though, thank God, or else these guys are probably never going to want to get high with me again.

Normally, I’m not so giggly, but I’m a little off my game.

I turn to Jax. “If you don’t mind taking it with me, then I’d way rather you be in it.”

“I’d love to.” He brushes a strand of hair out of my face again, the metal of his ring kissing my skin.

He seems to like to do that—brush my hair out of my eyes. My heart seems to like it, too.

Once he’s done playing with my hair, he lowers his hand and steps back from me. He doesn’t go far, threading his fingers through mine and guiding me over to the bed where he sits down.

I start to sit down beside him, but he wraps his hands around my hips and pulls me down so I’m sitting on his leg with my body angled toward him.

“Are you okay with this?” he double-checks.

I nod, and he visibly relaxes before adjusting me so I’m basically sideways, sitting on his lap, my body angled toward him. I’m not really sure what to do with my hands, but he takes them and positions them on his shoulders. Again, those intense eyes of his burrow into mine.

He stares at me with a half-smile on his face. Confusion weaves through me, especially when he leans toward me, as if he’s about to kiss me.

Kiss me right there in front of Hunter.

But, at the very last second, he dips his head and brushes his lips against my cheek. So soft. So sweet. My eyelids unintentionally lower.

Can I just stay like this forever?

Flash.

My eyes snap right back open. Hunter is in front of me, holding the camera, a smile touching his lips.

“Not so bad, right?” he asks as he lowers the camera from his face.

“That’s it?” I question.

“That’s it.” He puts the cap of the lens back on the camera. “Was it as bad as you thought it would be?”

I shake my head, knowing it wasn’t so bad. Just a snap of a photo, and while Jax’s lips were on my cheek. But something about the camera’s noise, and the light, is causing goosebumps to sprout across my skin.

Snap.

Flash.

Snap.

“Smile for the camera, pretty little girl.”

“Raven?” Jax’s voice tugs me from the memory.

He’s looking at me in concern. “Are you okay? You’re shaking.” His gaze lowers to my arm. “You have goosebumps, too.”

I nod, telling myself to calm the hell down. “I’m fine.” It’s the only words I can get to leave my lips. The memory—whatever it is—sends this dark, heavy fear lashing through me.

He continues to look at me the same way. Honestly, he may even look more concerned.

Hunter is sporting a similar expression as he studies me, lips parting. “Baby—”

The doorbell rings, cutting him off.

His brows briefly knit. “Either we have an unexpected guest or someone is here early.”

“Hopefully, it’s the latter,” Jax says, shifting his weight.

They're worried, which makes me wonder who they think this unexpected guest could be.

Jax stands up, moving me with him and gripping my waist so I don't stumble. I give him a smile of gratitude.

Flash.

Snap.

"Smile for the camera, pretty girl."

I look away from Jax before he can see it and slowly exhale.

I don't want him to see the fear I'm feeling on the inside from the sound of the person's voice filling my head.

Deep, male, and unsettling.

And it's triggering an emotion so deep inside me—an overwhelming emotion.

Undiluted and pulsating fear.

FOURTEEN

HUNTER

She's distracted; I can tell. I'm not sure if it's because she's stoned or if it's something else. I feel like it might be something else, though, by the tension in her body. She shouldn't be tense. She should feel good—that was the point of us getting high. Maybe it's just that she's nervous about the people currently filling up my living room—too many people for this early of an hour.

Yeah, when that doorbell rang about an hour ago, it ended up being Benton and a couple of his friends; a guy named James, who is so chatty he makes me look quiet, and Ellis, Benton's right-hand man and who's done some questionable things. I'm not a huge fan that he's here, but I can't really fucking do anything about it at the moment.

What is kind of weird is that Benton never really explained why they arrived so early. He just complained about the weather and asked if it was cool if they were there. It wasn't like I was going to say no, not when he's paying us to throw this party. Still, showing up too early is just about as annoying as showing up way too late. We weren't even completely set up for the party. Luckily, the cameras were so that we didn't have to try to sneak around and do it, since Benton wants it to be a secret.

Zay is currently upstairs in the attic, where we put the computer that shows the cameras' views, and I'm guessing he's probably watching them to see if anything looks off. But with Zay, it's hard to tell for sure. For all I know, he could be still trying to dig up dirt on Raven.

And Jax is downstairs with me, standing just inside the living room, messing around with the stereo. He's all about the music and will probably try to play DJ all night.

And me? I'm in the kitchen with Raven.

She's barely said anything, but that might be due to Benton and his friends being around. She went from chatty to guarded the moment they walked in. It didn't help that one of Benton's friends, James, was eye-fucking her from the moment he stepped over the threshold. Not that Raven noticed—the girl is smart as hell when it comes to a lot of things, but not when it comes to how beautiful she is.

Like really, really damn beautiful.

I got one photo of her. Although I wanted to take more, I didn't want to push her. I haven't developed it yet, but I've taken enough photos to know when something will turn out soul-moving, and this one is for sure.

Ever since then, she acts like she's about to crawl out of her skin.

We're getting some plastic cups and plates. Or, well, I'm digging them out of the panty while she stares off into space just behind me. I flick a glance over my shoulder and frown at the sight of her standing there with her arms wrapped around herself, looking as if she's about to break apart.

I set the cups and plates down and face her. "Raven, baby."

She jolts, her gaze snapping toward me. Then she blinks, puzzlement crossing her features. "Huh?"

Something's wrong.

With a drop of hesitancy, I step toward her and cup her face between my hands. "What's up, baby?"

"Nothing," she says in an emotionless tone.

"No, I can tell something's up." I skim my finger along her cheekbone. Damn, her skin is so soft. "So, just tell me." I give her a small smile. "So I can make you feel better."

She swallows audibly. “It’s really nothing. I’m just nervous about the party.”

I can tell she’s lying by the flatness in her tone and the avoidance of my gaze. It’s not even just that. I can just tell she’s holding something in. Like my mind remembers her—Willow—and how she used to bottle stuff in. Jax and I would always have to dig the truth out of her. Zay was never good at that kind of stuff, but he was her protector. She was ours, though, too. It was such a beautiful thing—the four of us until *they* broke it.

Just like they break everything that is innocent and beautiful.

“That’s not it,” I say softly. “I can tell something’s bothering you, so please just tell me. I ... Holding it in never helps.”

I would know. I hide everything behind a mask of smiles and sex. That’s all I appear to be, and that’s all I’ve wanted anyone to see for a damn long time.

She stares up at me with her big, bloodshot eyes. She’s clearly stoned, and I can see confliction, either because she’s confused or is debating whether to tell me the truth. Part of me feels bad, because I know if she does confess whatever is worrying her, it might be due to her being high.

I’m about to tell her that she doesn’t need to tell me if she doesn’t want to when she says softly, “I think I’m losing my mind.”

“Why?” I keep my tone as even and calm as possible, trying not to spook her.

She presses her lips together, as if she’s attempting to trap words in her mouth. But, eventually, the words win. “I keep seeing these things ... about my past ... that I don’t remember, and yet I clearly do. Like, I forgot all these memories, but they’re coming back to me ... When you took that photo of me, I had this image in my head of some guy taking my photo and telling me to ‘smile for the camera, pretty girl.’” She shivers, looking away from me and staring at the wall.

I stare at her.

I can't take my eyes off of her.

It hits me like a rolling wave, painful and violent, and part of me wants to fight it. The other part wants to just let it carry me away.

Holy fucking shit.

Holy shit.

Holy fuck.

I can't hear anything else except the thudding of my heartbeat.

Not thudding.

Screaming.

My heart is screaming at me.

Screaming the truth at me.

I know the memory she's talking about because I was there, being forced to wait for her to get her photo taken so that they could take mine next. I don't remember a lot of the details; just that the man who took the photos worked for my father.

And that's when I know ...

Raven *is* Willow.

Willow *is* Raven.

Jax was fucking right.

Blood is pumping through my veins so forcefully that I feel like I'm about to pass out.

She's not dead.

Our fourth.

The one who made us whole.

I don't know how or why she's here, why we thought she died, or how she didn't. And I don't care about any of that right now.

I'm going to kiss her. I know I shouldn't. I know I—Jax and I—need to talk to her about our situation. It'll freak her out if I do, but I'm losing control.

Snapping.

Crumbling.

Breaking.

And I don't give a shit, about anything at the moment except her.

I turn her head toward me, and our eyes lock. She doesn't say anything, and neither do I. She's breathing heavily, her chest rising and crashing. Or maybe that's my breathing. Then I'm leaning in, knowing I'm about to mess everything up, yet I can't stop myself. And it's like she's on the same page, just staring at me, waiting, like maybe a tiny part of her wants me to kiss her—

Music suddenly blasts from the other room, so loudly that the walls vibrate.

Raven startles. So do I.

Raven blinks and, just like that, the moment fades. Not that I haven't forgotten about what she said or who she is, but the moment of me thinking about kissing her has drifted away. I want it back, but maybe this is for the better. Kissing her without talking to her first might make her freak out, especially since Jax already kissed her. It'll probably be confusing. And why would it not be? It's confusing to me, and I know what Jax and I discussed.

To be honest, despite what me and Jax may want from Raven, it might not mean anything if she doesn't want it back. And I worry that when we have to tell her the truth about our past, she may not want anything from us again.

It's so much worse now knowing that she's her.

That Willow is Raven.

And that, after I have to tell her the truth about her past, she might not want any of us.

This could break her.

I don't want to do that.

Don't want to force her to remember *everything*.

I swallow hard.

For now, I'm going to keep it to myself. Well, not myself because I feel like I'm about to explode. I need to talk to Jax in private. But, how the hell am I supposed to do that when we have a house full of mobsters?

Shit, I can't tell him yet. I'll have to wait until he leaves, or I risk someone finding out. And with this game going on, and with so many unknowns about why my father was at Raven's uncle's house, I need to be extremely careful who finds out Raven may be Willow. Because if I'm right—if she is—that means someone staged her death.

Was it my father and his men? Or was it someone else trying to protect Raven from my father and his men?

I have no idea, but I need to find out before someone else does first.

FIFTEEN

RAVEN

I think Hunter may have almost kissed me in the kitchen. Maybe I'm just being a dumbass, though. I'm not really sure. I'm not an expert on guys, but it kind of felt like he was thinking about it. Again, I could be totally wrong. In fact, I have to be, right? Because why would he kiss me when he knows Jax and I have been kissing? That's like breaking a code or something, right?

Perhaps I'm stoned.

Le sigh. I hate being so clueless about stuff and, lately, that seems like all I am.

Whatever did happen between Hunter and me, the moment has passed. Once the music interrupted us, Hunter and I left the kitchen to go into the living room where Benton and a few of his friends are, along with Jax.

I'm still thinking about the photo memory. It's dancing in my mind but is kind of fading, probably because I'm high. I worry how potent it'll come back to me once I sober up.

"Hey, man," Benton greets Hunter when we walk into the room.

A few other guys are in there, too, and everyone, including Hunter, is dressed in dark colors. Seriously, I feel like I'm at some goths-only party. Not that I care. It's just how I feel.

"What's up?" Hunter greets Benton as we walk toward where he's standing, besides Jax, who's messing around with the stereo, and another guy who I don't know but who has short, blond hair and a scar across his eye.

“Just waiting for people to start showing up,” Benton replies. Then he gives Hunter this strange look, similar to the sort of cryptic look Jax and Hunter sometimes give each other. “We’re all set, right?”

“Yep,” Hunter responds easily, but I can sense the tension flowing off his body.

While I’m not positive, I get the feeling that perhaps Benton is making sure the cameras are all set without having to say it aloud, which makes me wonder if scar guy isn’t in on it.

Speaking of scar guy ... He’s currently staring at me tensely. Well, either that or I’m having a high-induced paranoia attack, which has happened to me a few times. Plus, I’ve already been unsettled by this game going on. And that note ...

That stupid note that I still have no idea how it got in my pocket.

I know we searched the house, and the probability of the doctor being here is low, but I’m still unsettled. Because he either did track me down here somehow, or someone found out about my past and is tormenting me with it?

“So, I’m guessing you guys are coming to the party,” Benton says, sliding his gaze across Hunter and me. He gives me this smile. He did that a lot when I first met him, too, like he knew something I didn’t. Maybe he does. Who the hell knows? Perhaps he could even be in on the whole bridge incident. Or maybe he put the note in my pocket?

Oh my God, it suddenly dawns on me. I was wearing my jacket when we went to that bar/club. What if someone put it in my pocket then? It seems plausible. But I have no idea who it could be. I mean, I walked by a ton of people. It could have been a total stranger or maybe the guy who gave me that card? Or what if Benton did it somehow? I wasn’t super close to him, but I can’t eliminate him completely.

“Yeah, we figured we’d hang out and have fun since we have to host it.” Hunter shifts his weight, inching closer to me.

“School got canceled, anyway, because of the storm, so why not celebrate that, right?”

“For sure.” Benton keeps glancing at me, and it’s driving me crazy, especially since scar guy won’t stop staring at me, either.

“You look familiar,” scar guy finally says.

Jax, who’s been super distracted with shuffling through the music, suddenly turns and looks at us. He frowns, his gaze straying to Hunter.

“She just moved here,” Hunter replies then slides his arm around me, almost territorial-like.

Benton smirks, while scar guy’s gaze continues to burrow into me.

“What’s your last name?” scar guy asks me.

I briefly hesitate before saying, “Willowwynter.”

His face shows a flicker of emotion, but I can’t quite decipher it. “Your dad is the new sheriff?”

My chest clenches. “No.”

Hunter’s arm around me stiffens. “Benton, call your boy off.”

Benton glances at me before turning to scar guy. “Hey, Ellis, let off her, okay? She’s not a narc.”

So, he’s acting weird because he thinks, since I’m related to the sheriff, I’m going to tell on them? But, what does he think I’m going to tell him? And, why does it feel like there’s more to this than that?

Scar guy—aka Ellis—continues to stare at me. “Are you?” he questions.

“No.” I carry his gaze. Screw him and his intensity. It’s getting on my nerves. “The sheriff is my uncle, and I fucking hate him. So, no, I’m not going to narc on you. Plus, I’m high as hell, so I’d have to narc on myself, anyway.” My voice is trembling at the end.

And everyone is staring at me.

I'm not nearly stoned enough for this.

I want to bail so damn badly, but I doubt the guys will allow me. Thankfully, the doorbell rings and that distracts everyone. Hunter goes to open the door while Benton and scar guy starts talking in hushed voices to each other.

While they do, Jax moves toward me and whispers, “Are you okay?”

I nod and force a smile, not wanting to be a huge downer. “I’m fine.”

He doesn’t appear to buy it, but then Hunter returns to the room with a group of people, and the focus completely shifts off me.

Well, except for Ellis. I keep feeling him looking at me, staring at me, as if he’s searching for something. Well, that or he’s trying to plan my murder. With the look he’s giving me, it could be either way.

ABOUT TEN MINUTES LATER, the room is getting more and more crowded. I’ve been standing by Hunter mostly, but we’ve gotten separated, partly because I’ve been inching away on purpose. Now that I can’t see him at all, I take the opportunity to leave the room and duck into the kitchen.

I’m surprised I got away without him noticing, but I’m glad. I let out a huge breath. Apparently, stoned or not, I’m not a fan of parties. Too many people in one room makes me nervous.

I spend the next few moments hiding out in the kitchen, pretending I need to get a drink or something to eat when, really, I’m just being a scaredy cat.

Then my phone suddenly buzzes in my hand. I’ve been holding onto it for unknown reasons since almost all the

people I know are here. But the last time I was without a phone was when I was thrown off the bridge, so ...

I check the message and frown. "Shit."

It's from Low, asking if I've worked my magic over on Hunter and got him to agree to let her come to the party. The truth is I haven't even brought it up to him because I forgot to.

I am the worst friend ...

I'm standing by the counter where snacks and drinks—some alcoholic, some not—are scattered across the counter. I eye the open door that leads to the living room. Music is blasting from the stereo and chatter is flowing through the air. So many people are crammed into the living room. Even high, I can feel that familiar panic stirring inside me. I don't want to feel it again. However, if I want to be a good friend to Low, I need to woman up and go out there and talk to Hunter. I could just text him, but then he'd realize I've been hiding out in the kitchen.

Or maybe he already knows and is kind of relieved I'm not out there. After all, he was supposed to be pretending to be my date. Perhaps he really didn't want to do that and was just trying to be nice.

Loser, Raven. It's written on my side, right by all the other shit my uncle carved into me.

I rub my lips together as I stare at the doorway, trying to muster up the courage. I make it a few steps before someone walks through the doorway.

Dark hair, stormy eyes—it's Jax. And he looks worried. He peers around the kitchen, and a flicker of relief washes over his features when his eyes land on me.

"Thank fucking God." He strides across the kitchen toward me, his boots scuffing against the hardwood floor.

"Did something happen?" I ask, wondering why he's so worried.

When he reaches me, he loops his arms around my waist and pulls me against him, like actually hugging me.

“Jax,” I start to say, concerned about how worried he is.

But then he kisses me, intensely but briefly, his tongue briefly slipping into my mouth and tangling with mine.

I barely have time to gasp, and then he’s pulling back

He takes a few uneven breaths. “We didn’t know where you went.” He opens his eyes, and it looks like a storm is going on inside him.

“Oh ... Sorry.” I feel kind of bad now for sneaking out.

“It’s fine.” His fingers splay across the small of my back. “I mean, if you want to leave, it’s fine, but next time, please tell one of us so we can go with you. It’s not good for you to be down here alone.”

“Because of the game?”

“And because the people here are sketchy.”

“Right. Sorry. I think I might be a bit stoned and not thinking clearly or something. I just needed a break, so I walked out.”

He gives a hesitant pause. “Why did you need a break?”

I shrug. “There’s a lot of people in there, and it was making me feel uncomfortable.”

His expression softens. “You could’ve said something to me instead of just slipping out of the room.”

“I know, but you guys were busy talking to people.” I shrug again. “I promised myself I wouldn’t be a burden to you guys.” I sigh, looking away from him.

“Hey, look at me.” He cups my cheek and angles my head up so our gazes collide. “You’re not a burden, I promise. We love having you here.”

I don’t bother mentioning that Zay is probably excluded from the *we*.

“And I’m sorry we got distracted,” he adds. “It’s been a while since we’ve been around these people and, for some reason, they all want to find out what we’ve been up to. We’re

the guys who left the family. It's a big deal in this world, which is why we usually keep our distance from everyone. Well, that and about a hundred other reasons. But, unfortunately, money won this time." He skims his finger along my cheekbone. "It might be good that we're doing this, though. With this game starting up between the families, we could get some insight, like say if someone gets too drunk and starts spilling secrets accidentally."

"Good point." I give a short pause. "Jax ... you don't think that someone here slipped that note into my pocket, do you? Like maybe as part of the game?"

His brows knit. "Did you see something or something?"

"No ... I just ..." I dither, trying to decide if I want to bring up my thoughts on Benton. He is Zay's brother, after all, but still ... "It's probably nothing. It's just Benton keeps giving me these weird smiles and looks, like we're sharing a secret or something. And then this Ellis guy, who's with him, keeps staring at me."

Jax lets my words sink in, absentmindedly pulling me closer to him. "I really doubt Benton would be in on anything like that. Ellis, however, is iffy. I mean, the guy's pretty loyal to Benton, but you never know." He briefly pauses. "I'll text Zay and Hunter and have them keep an eye on them. And we have cameras everywhere." He brushes his fingers underneath my chin. "I swear to you that nothing will happen to you. However, can you stay by either Hunter or me? I know you're nervous about the party, but I don't like the idea of you being alone with everything going on. However, I won't pressure you to go out there," he vows, lifting my wrist to his lips and gently placing a kiss against my pounding pulse. It's right where one of my scars is, and I wonder if he can feel it. He doesn't seem to. "If you don't want to go out there, I'll stay in here with you."

He doesn't say it, but I know it'll be bad if he does, that he's supposed to be working.

I really don't want to go out there, but I also don't want to make him hang with him in the kitchen because I'm being a

scaredy cat.

“I do need to talk to Hunter about something,” I mutter. “So, I probably should go out there.”

He looks at me funnily. “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, Low just needs me to ask him a question.” I offer him a smile when he looks at me confusedly. “She wants me to see if I can convince him to let her come to the party.”

Jax makes an uneasy face. “I get that she’s your friend and everything, but I don’t think that’s a good idea. Hunter won’t agree to it, anyway. Trust me.”

I blow out an exhale. Jax knows Hunter better than I do, so he would know.

“What should I tell her?” I wonder, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth.

He rubs his hand across his scruffy jawline. “Why don’t you just tell her that you asked, but he said no?”

“You want me to lie to her?” Normally, a little lie wouldn’t bother me at all. But Low is like the first real friend I’ve ever had. Well, besides the guys ... if that’s what they are.

“You don’t have to,” Jax stresses. “But Hunter will say no, and it might be better if you don’t ask him in front of everyone because people might be pushy about letting her come, and that’s a bad thing.” He gives my hand a squeeze. “Trust me.”

He keeps saying that—*trust me*. Do I trust him? I think so ...

“Okay.” I text Low a quick message.

Me: I’m so sorry, but Hunter says it’s not a good idea for you to come.

She replies almost instantly.

Low: No worries. It’s not your fault. Thanks for trying.

I feel bad for lying to her, but then I get distracted as Jax takes my hand.

“You ready for this?” he asks.

No, not at all. But I'm trusting you. Please don't let anyone break me.

I keep those thoughts to myself and nod. “Yep, let’s do this.”

He smiles, but I swear I detect the slightest bit of concern in his eyes. Still, I hold on to his hand, and he starts toward the doorway. But right before we’re about to pull through it, he stops and turns to me. Then he leans in and brushes his lips across mine, causing my heart to flutter.

“I just wanted one more,” he whispers, either to himself or me—I’m not sure. Then he pulls back and looks at me. “You’re still okay with me kissing you, right?”

Am I?

Honestly, yeah. I just wish I knew what was going on between him and Hunter.

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip and nod.

He lets out a slow breath, like he’d been holding it. Then he leads me toward the living room.

The moment we reach the doorway, where everyone can see us, he lets go of my hand.

I give him a confused look, and he offers me an encouraging smile before leaning in and whispering, “Remember, you’re supposed to be Hunter’s date.”

Right. I forgot about that.

“He’s over there,” he tells me, pointing to the right.

The room is crowded, and I’m struggling to spot Hunter. Eventually, I do, over where Jax pointed, his blond hair standing out amongst the low lighting and sea of people that seem to be obsessed with dark clothing. Not that I have room to talk.

The music is loud, but I can still hear multiple conversations between sub-groups that have formed. Almost everyone has a drink in their hand, and a few people are dancing in the corner of the room.

I hesitate to move toward Hunter, the crowd making me feel uneasy. But Jax places a hand against the small of my back and urges me forward. I move slowly, turning my body to make my way toward Hunter with Jax right behind me.

A few people glance in my direction and creases form between their brows. They're probably wondering who I am. I try to avoid eye contact and do a pretty good job and, within a minute, I've reached Hunter.

Jax gives me a gentle push toward him, and I sort of stumble right into him. Hunter's muscles briefly wind tight, but then his arm is looped around my waist. Then he turns his head and brushes his lips against mine.

Freaking kissing me.

And it confuses the hell out of me.

My eyes widen, and he looks at me with a hint of shock, like he just surprised the hell out himself. Then he hastily erases the look and turns back to the guys he's been talking with—Benton and Ellis, who yes, is still staring at me.

Great. Here we go again with the creepy fucking staring.

Hunter goes right back into the conversation. "So, this new deal you were talking about ..."

Benton gives me another one of those knowing looks that annoy the hell out of me. Ellis, though, stares at me for a minute before directing his attention back to the conversation. Still, he keeps giving me these intense glances.

I'm not sure what the hell I'm supposed to do, so I end up standing there, pressed up against Hunter. He keeps his arm around me and traces his fingertips along the sliver of skin peeking out between the top of my skirt and the bottom of my shirt.

It makes me feel all fluttery and confused. And my confusion grows when I find Jax. For some reason, I thought he'd look upset, especially after Hunter kissed me. But he just smiles at me then changes the song on the stereo to an upbeat one.

What the heck is going on? And, why does it feel like I'm out of the loop on something.

Or maybe everything.

SIXTEEN

RAVEN

For about fifteen minutes or so, I stand beside Hunter while he chats business with Benton and his friends. Eventually, Benton suggests we play beer pong, and Hunter rubs his hands together with wicked delight.

“Sure,” he says. “You know I always love the chance to kick your ass at any game.”

The two talk shit to each other as we head in the direction of the doorway. It seems a bit strange that they go from talking business to playing a drunk game, but whatever. I’m just here for the ride, anyway. To be honest, I’ve been so quiet that I feel like I’ve gone invisible or something.

Which isn’t that bad, I guess.

The beer pong table ends up being in the garage, and Hunter leads the way, holding my hand and taking the lead. Jax has wandered off somewhere, and I haven’t seen Zay at all.

“You doing okay?” Hunter asks me softly as he opens the garage door and flips the light on.

I nod, glancing around the garage, where the guys put the living room sofas. A table has been set up with cups on it. I know what beer pong is, but I’ve never played it before, which is probably no surprise.

Since four guys are wandering in here, I figure they will play while I sit out. But Hunter pulls me to one side with him.

“Raven and me against you and Ellis?” Hunter says to Benton.

“Sure.” Benton smiles at me again.

Then winks.

Seriously, WTF?

He keeps doing that, like he knows a secret about me, and it’s making me kind of uneasy. He’s Zayden’s brother, so maybe he does know something about me.

“I’ve never played before, so maybe you should play with someone else?” I whisper to Hunter, my body turned in toward him

He lets out a shaky breath then slips his arm around me and pulls me so close to him that our chests touch. “Don’t worry. I’ll teach you how to play.”

We’re standing in such an intimate position, and it’s kind of weird but strangely familiar.

“Are you sure? You might lose,” I point out, resting my hands against his chest.

I can feel his heartbeat fiercely.

Why is it beating so fast?

He drags his teeth along his bottom lip. “I don’t care. I want to teach you.”

Okay, then. I guess I’m playing beer pong.

I’m about to tell him I don’t have a drink when a guy, whose name I still don’t know, enters the room with a few beers in his hand.

“Who’s drinkless?” he asks, looking around.

Hunter lifts up his hand, and smiling guy brings the beers over. He hands one to Hunter and then one to me. The bottle is cold and dewy.

The guy walks over to the other side of the table beside Benton and hands him a beer, too.

Hunter tips his head back to take a sip of his beer then sets it down on the edge of the table and turns to me. “Do you know the gist of the game?”

I nod, rotating the bottle around between my hands nervously. “Yeah. I’ve never played it before, so my aim will probably be bad.” I waver. “I guess I’m gonna be drunk really quickly.”

“If you don’t want to be, then just take really small sips.” He brushes a strand of his hair out of his eyes. “No one’s going to make you take any more than what you want.”

“I’m fine. I’ve drank before,” I remind him.

I’m not nervous about drinking. I am a bit nervous about losing the game.

Smiling, he brushes his thumb along my bottom lip. “Don’t be nervous, okay? This is supposed to be fun.”

“Yeah, I know.” I resist a sigh. I am way too sober for this right now. Because of that, I take a drink. And then another until most of the bottle is gone. “All right, what do I need to do?” I ask as the alcohol sweeps through my veins. “Or, well, I know how the game works, but who goes first?”

“I can, if you want me to,” he offers, his fingers lightly grazing my side.

“Sure.”

He winks at me and then turns toward the table with a ball in his hand. The other guys stand on the opposite side of the table. And, just like that, the game starts.

Hunter nails his first shot, and so does Benton. Now it’s my turn and, *gah*, I suck. Like so much so that the ball doesn’t even come close.

“Awesome,” I mumble, totally disappointed in myself.

“You’re fine,” Hunter reassures me. Then he takes a swig of his drink. So do I.

“I’ll help you next time, if you want,” Hunter offers as he sets his drink down on the floor beside his feet so he can crack

his knuckles.

“What’re you gonna do?” I question with a smirk. “Hold my hand and take the shot for me?”

“Maybe.” He’s on the verge of smiling.

“What?” I wonder why he’s smiling since we’re currently losing.

“It’s nothing.” He steps forward and playfully tugs on a strand of my hair. “It’s just good to see your smartass side coming out. It’s been kind of quiet tonight.”

“I guess so.” My mood sort of nosedives as I think of why I’ve been kind of off today.

Hungover.

Finding that note in my pocket.

Jax and Hunter getting into a little bit of a fight.

This party.

Being around people.

This game going on. Well, not beer pong but the families’ game.

That freaky as hell memory.

“Shit, don’t go there,” Hunter says, drawing me from my thoughts.

I blink. “What?”

He sighs. “Whatever I said that made your mood sink.”

“It wasn’t anything you said,” I assure him. When he continues to frown, I reach out and give his hand a squeeze. “I promise, bestie. I’m good. Although, I wouldn’t mind smoking a bit more when the game is over.”

His lips tug upward into a smile. “We can do that.”

“Awesome. You’re the bestest friend ever.” And I might be a bit more stoned than I thought.

I move to pull my hand away, but he tangles his fingers through mine, refusing to let go. I give him a funny look, and

he grins, tugging me toward him

“It’s your turn, best friend,” he tells me in this weird tone that makes me feel all sorts of out-of-control shaky inside. “And this is how I’m going to show you.”

Before I can react, he moves up behind me. Then he bends down to pick up the ball that’s on the floor. When he stands back up, he lines his chest against my back, the scent of his cologne engulfing me. I breathe it in, probably looking like a freak, but whatever. I’m too buzzed at the moment.

“You smell good,” I murmur.

He stiffens and I think, *Oh shit, should I have not said that aloud?*

But then he slides an arm around me and breathes in my ear, “Well, you feel good, baby.” Then his lips lightly brush the hell of my ear.

My heart slams against my chest, over and over again. How in the hell am I supposed to respond to that?

And then he lightly blows on my neck, and I shiver.

He chuckles in my ear, and my lips twitch. I turn my head and glare at him, but his smile only widens.

“What?” He feigns innocence.

“You know what,” I tell him with a scowl.

It’s not real, though. I’m not even upset at all.

He knows it, too, and just keeps on smiling as he rotates us back toward the table. Then he puts the ball in my hand but doesn’t let go.

“You’re seriously going to throw this with me?” I question, turning my head and arching my brow at him.

“Hey, that’s cheating,” Benton interrupts, uncapping another beer. “It’s cool, though. We’re still gonna win.”

They probably are, but that snarky little smartass that I’ve shoved down inside me decides to make a grand appearance.

I smirk at Benton. “In your dreams, asshole.” Then I throw the ball.

As it drifts through the air, two thoughts occur to me then. One, I just came off cocky and threw the ball myself, which means I will probably miss. And two, I just called a guy that’s part of the mafia an asshole.

Whoops.

No, double whoops.

But surprisingly, my ball makes it into the cup. So, I guess just whoops.

“Heck yeah.” I celebrate, hoping to God that Benton doesn’t take it offensively that I called him an asshole.

Benton laughs as he scoops up the ball from off the floor while Ellis simply stares at me. It’s weird. Benton is Zay’s brother, but he doesn’t act like him at all. Scar guy, on the other hand, has Zay’s brooding stare down to a T.

Hunter spins me around to face him with his fist stretched in my direction. “That was so damn awesome.”

I tap my knuckles against his, giggling.

A huge ass smile breaks across his face. “See? Partying isn’t so bad, right?”

“This one isn’t.” I press my lips together. “I do wish I was more stoned, though.”

He chews on his bottom lip. “You want to go get high with me right now?”

I perk up. “Can we?”

He slides his gaze to Benton then back to me.

“Unless you can’t,” I add, remembering that we’re technically supposed to be working, not getting high and drunk.

“No, I can.” A drop of hesitancy rings in his tone.

I’m about to ask him again, but he threads his fingers through mine and turns to Benton.

“We’ll be back in a bit,” he tells him, causing Benton to smirk again.

“Make sure to wrap it up,” Benton calls out.

Some asshole snorts a laugh and makes a rude ass remark that, if he wasn’t a mafia member, I’d kick his ass.

Hunter rolls his eyes at me. “Benton can be an ass sometimes,” he tells me apologetically.

The sounds of chatter and music assault my ears.

“Obviously. He’s Zay’s brother.” I inch toward Hunter as he tows me toward the stairs.

Hunter chuckles, but the noise is barely audible over the music.

“Who’s that guy with the scar?” I wonder as we weave around people glancing at us, but I try to ignore them. “His name is Ellis, right?”

“Yeah ... He’s Benton’s right-hand man.” He casts a glance over my shoulder. “Why?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. He just seemed scary and intense. And he stared a lot at me.” I want to tell him what I told Jax in the kitchen, about me being suspicious of him and Benton, but now doesn’t seem like a great time since people are everywhere.

Hunter offers me a smile. “Jax and I warned you that would happen, pretty girl.” When I narrow my eyes at him, he grins. But then his smile deflates a bit. “All jokes aside, I’m not a huge fan of how much Ellis was paying attention to you, either.”

We reach the stairs then.

“You noticed it, too, then?” I turn sideways to steer around a couple making out.

“Yeah.” A frown forms on his face, but he promptly gathers himself. “It’s fine. We don’t need to be around him for the rest of the night. In fact, let’s go get high and do something

else.” He starts up the stairs, saying with a mischievous glint in his eyes, “Something more fun.”

I’m not sure why, but butterflies dance inside my stomach.

I’m probably just being stupid. And I’m not even sure what I’m being stupid about.

Still, by the time we reach Hunter’s bedroom door, my heart is racing a million miles a minute. He doesn’t open the door right away, instead rummaging through his pocket, the chain on his beltloop jingling.

“What’re you doing?” I wonder.

“I locked my room,” he informs me as he takes out a key. “I didn’t want anyone coming in here.”

Now that I think about it, we didn’t put cameras in this room.

Once he gets the door unlocked, he pulls me inside the room with him. Then he shuts the door, locks it, and leans against it, studying me.

I think if it were anyone else, I’d probably freak out. I mean, we’re in his bedroom and he just locked the door. I feel safe, though. Probably more safe than I ever have.

That thought waves across me, and my legs shake so badly that I sit down on the bed.

“Are you okay?” Hunter asks, chewing on his bottom lip.

No, scratch that. He’s not chewing on his bottom lip. He’s sucking on his lip ring.

It’s ... sexy ... Oh my God, it is. And it’s making my stomach do funny things.

But I probably shouldn’t be thinking that ... right?

I blame it on being slightly tipsy and high.

I manage a nod. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just a bit buzzed.”

He frowns. “Maybe we shouldn’t get stoned then. I don’t want you to be completely incoherent.”

“Dude, I’m far from being completely incoherent. Trust me; I have a way higher tolerance than that. I’m just buzzed.”

He eyes me over while continuing to chew on his lip ring.

Internally sighing, I stand up so he’ll know I’m fine. Then I make my way over to him and put my hands on my hips.

“See? Totally fine.” I grin.

That gets him to grin, too. Then, shaking his head and smiling, he pushes away from the door. “So damn adorable,” he mumbles under his breath as he passes me.

I playfully poke him in the side. “Hey, stop calling me that.”

He freezes—tenses—and I realize I poked him, like on his side where his scars are.

I open my mouth to apologize, but the words fade when he turns to me with his brow cocked.

“You really want to start a tickling war with me, pretty Raven?” he questions with a smirk.

“Hey, I didn’t tickle you,” I protest, but he reaches for me and lightly tickles my side.

It’s high enough that he doesn’t touch my scars, and I sputter a laugh.

“Hey, dude,” I cry out through my laughter. “Stop that!”

“No way,” he tickles me again and again.

I start to do it back and, suddenly, I’m in a full-on tickling war. We’re both laughing, smiling, and squirming. Then I stumble and fall. He tries to catch me, but we end up falling onto the bed, thank God. He catches his weight with his arms before he ends up squishing me. Then he props up on his elbows and looks down at me, smiling.

“You know, I’m pretty sure I haven’t laughed like that since I was a kid,” he admits, sounding a little bit breathless.

“Me neither.”

We're both breathing rather loudly and, at first, we're both smiling, but then the mood shifts as he stares into my eyes.

"It's all you," he says, looking more serious than I've ever seen him.

I'm so perplexed. "What is?"

"This lightness I'm feeling for the first time in a long time." He wets his lips with his tongue as he leans in. His chest is pressed to mine, our legs tangled together, and I've never been so warm in my life. To be honest, I didn't realize how many days I felt cold until I met Jax and Hunter.

He's so warm ... and wonderful ... and sweet ...

My brain sort of dazes out as his lips inch nearer to mine. He has his eyes open, and they're searching mine. Searching for what, I'm not sure. And, for a moment, my mind remains blank, totally dazed by how pretty he is and how full his lips are.

But right before they brush mine, Jax's gorgeous but haunted eyes flash through my eyes.

"Hunter," I whisper as he shuts his eyes. "What ...? What about Jax?"

He pauses, his exhale feathering against my cheek. I expect him to push off of me, but he doesn't.

"He's ..." He opens his eyes. And then he just stares at me. And stares. So insistently that my stomach starts to weave with knots.

What the heck is going on?

And then he finally breaks the silence. "I ... Yeah, okay." Another pause, and then he pushes up from me. "Let's get stoned."

He's all grins, like nothing just transpired between us.

Me, though? I'm so damn flustered.

I sit up, my heart soaring in my chest like a damn lunatic. I'm pretty sure Hunter just tried to kiss me again.

Zay is right. I am going to cause trouble between them.

“Hold on,” Hunter suddenly says. Then he retrieves his phone from his pocket and frowns. “Jax needs me for something.” He rubs his lips together, glancing at me. “Will you be okay for a second?”

I roll my eyes. “Dude, I’m not incapable of taking care of myself.”

He steps forward and brushes his fingers along my jawline while offering me a smile. “I know, but I want you to feel safe.”

What he more than likely means, what he doesn’t say, is that he wants me to feel safe even with this game going on.

“I’m fine,” I assure him. “Go see what Jax needs.”

He nods, his gaze drifting to my lips for a moment. Then he looks away and heads out of the room, closing the door behind him as he says, “I’ll be right back.”

The door clicks behind him, and I rub my eyes with the heels of my hand then flop back onto the bed, lying down and staring up at the ceiling. Did I just mess up again? I’m not sure. Knowing me, though, I probably did.

Worry is consuming my mind, but then I see that Hunter has glow-in-the-dark stars dotting his ceiling. It makes a smile touch my lips. It’s cute. He’s so cute.

And I am way more drunk and high than I thought if I’m thinking things like that.

I’m rolling my eyes at myself when I hear the door open.

“That was fast,” I say as I sit up.

Then I tense because Hunter isn’t the one who slipped into the room.

It’s Ellis, aka scar guy.

“What are you doing in here?” My voice comes out a little shaky, and I cringe.

Calm the hell down, Raven. He can't do anything to you. Not with cameras everywhere. But then I remember that Hunter said there weren't any in here.

For an unnerving moment, Ellis stands there, assessing me with his cold eyes. I rack my brain for a way to escape, discreetly scanning Hunter's room for some sort of weapon, but I can't see anything anywhere.

"You didn't go to The Forgotten Club," he finally says, his voice deep, his eyes cold.

The Forgotten Club? You mean....

"That secret society... that guy who gave me that card..." I start to inch around the bed, moving farther away from him. "How do you know about that?"

He rolls his eyes and shifts his weight. I realize then that he's carrying something—a package. "Because I'm the one who sent you the card."

My lips part, but no words come out at first. I take a deep breath then try again. "Who the hell are you?"

"I think the better question is: who are you?" He steps forward and tosses the box onto the bed. "Next time, follow the instructions."

"There's a blizzard out there," I snap at him. "How the hell was I supposed to even get to this place ...?" I trail off as he exits the room, slamming the door behind him.

I open and flex my hands. "Asshole."

My attention is quickly distracted as I eye the package. What the hell is in it?

I want to find out, but on the other hand, Ellis has given me the creeps the entire night. What if this is a setup for something? I should probably just message the guys ...

I start to reach for the holster, where I tucked my phone, but something makes me pause. I'm not even sure what. Or maybe I do. It's the faintest of memories kissing my brain, ones that I swear contain the guys when they were younger.

Ellis had said, *I think the better question is: who are you?*

Perhaps this is all part of the game. Maybe something horrible will be inside this box that will hurt me. Maybe I'm stupid for opening it.

But my need to know outweighs all of that.

I walk over to the bed and open the box.

Inside are photos, papers, and a phone.

My heart is beating deafeningly, and blood roars in my eardrums as I start digging out the stuff. The photos are of a little girl with raven hair. In most of them, the girl is alone in a room, in a forest, in a chair ...

Flash.

Flash.

Flash.

"Smile for the camera, pretty girl."

I yank myself away from the memory, releasing an unsteady breath as I look over more of the photos. Photos where the girl isn't alone.

A blond-haired, blue-eyed boy, another with inky black hair and stormy eyes, and the last one has short hair and a scar.

The boys from my memories.

Jax, Hunter, and Zay. Somehow, I just know.

I sink down onto the bed as I stare at the photos. I may have suspected this already, but seeing the potential truth ... I set the photos inside and dig out the files. The breath gets knocked out of me as I read through them. They're records of purchases. But not any purchases. Purchases of what looks like people.

Vomit burns at the back of my throat, but I continue on, pulling out the phone. It doesn't have a password, and when I swipe upward, a video file is the first thing I come across. My fingers tremble as I push *play*.

The video starts with someone laughing. It's a view of the trees. And then a blond boy, the one from my memories, pops into view. "Hey everyone, it's Hunter again. And Jax." He moves the camera over to a sad-looking boy with dark hair—again one I've seen in my memories.

My heart sinks.

Oh my God ...

"He's a little sad today," Hunter informs the camera. *"But at least he's not grumpy like Zay."*

"Oh, shut it," someone says from nearby.

Hunter laughs, and then I hear a little girl.

"Quit picking on him, Hunter," she says.

I know that voice.

Have heard it a ton of times in my head.

"And that is our pretty little Willow," Hunter says then pans the camera over to a girl with raven hair.

The same one in the photos surrounding me.

The same girl I've seen in my head.

That's when I know for sure.

That I know the guys.

I just somehow forgot them.

But how?

What happened to me?

And, do the guys know who I am?

The video suddenly clicks to something else. A guy in a basement tied to a chair. And standing in front of him is Zay. The grownup version that I know now.

He has blood on his knuckles and sweat on his face. The guy in the chair looks familiar, but the angle is a little off, so I can't see his face.

“You think I’m the dipshit?” the guy in the chair says. “Well, here’s a little secret that’s going to blow your mind.” He leans forward. “That pretty little bird you’ve brought into your group isn’t who you think she is. Ravenlee Willowwynter, aka Willow Raven Lee. And she didn’t move here by coincidence. Her uncle was paid to move here so she could return to Honeyton.”

Zay tells him, *“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I am about to kick your ass again.”*

“You do know what I’m talking about, bro,” he says. “I’ve lived here my whole life, too, and I haven’t forgotten about that little friend you guys used to have.”

“Willow’s middle name wasn’t Raven,” Zay says with panic in his tone.

“Isn’t it?” the guy says.

I can see it on Zay’s face.

He knows.

He knows who I am.

Which more than likely means Jax and Hunter do, too.

Why didn’t they tell me?

Why?

Why?

Why?

I glance down at all the stuff surrounding me, but ultimately, I pick up the papers.

Lists of names of people and purchases, like they were being sold. But I can tell they’re code names. Still, one sticks out to me. Three words, but I feel them in my bones.

The Raven Four.

They were sold many times. But, to who? And, why?

And, what about my parents? Did they know? Did they do this to me and I killed them for it?

The answers my mind conjures up are enough to make me wish I were dead.

The pain ... it's aching inside me, begging to get out.

Memories are flashing through my mind, bright and toxic.

It's like now that I've seen pieces of the past, my mind is screaming the truth at me. It's bloody. It's ugly. It's so damn painful.

I should run.

Run the fuck away from here and never look back.

But I have nowhere to go. I'm alone in this world.

Alone.

Alone.

Alone.

Always.

Agonizing pain tears at my chest as I continue reading. Every piece of paper is worse than the other. But I keep going, seeking the truth. But ultimately I reach an end that breaks me. What I find, though, on the last piece of paper isn't what I expected it to be. It's not about the guys, my family, or whoever wrote the papers. No, it's about me. And what I find on it is horrifying, like straight out of a nightmare.

I start rummaging around for a razor blade, craving the bite of the metal over the pain. Part of me hopes I don't find one, though, because I'm too wound up and out of control, so I might cut too deeply. But the other part of me doesn't care, wants to find it more than anything.

And I do. I find one lying on the top of his dresser. Just there so easily.

I grab it, my hand shaking, and prepare myself to let it all out, no matter what it takes.

SEVENTEEN

ZAY

Parties fucking annoy me so badly. This one is worse because I don't trust a single person here. I want to leave, but I'm worried. Something has been off about this entire thing. I mean, the day we get a snow day is the same day Benton throws this party? And then Hunter's father has some secret meeting with Raven's uncle. Not to mention, it's a day after Porter told me about Raven and that she is Willow.

Plus, that stupid family game is going on.

I don't like this at all.

And I don't trust my brother.

I never have.

For many fucked up reasons. Reasons that not even Jax and Hunter know about.

“Aw ... Look at my baby bro, standing around and sulking.”

Speak of the devil.

My brother appears from the crowd and drapes an arm around my shoulders.

I have my arms crossed, my infamous broody mask on, and tension is flowing through my body. I'm sure he can feel it—how wound up I am.

“Fuck off,” I mumble, eyeing the crowd.

I'd been upstairs for a while, watching the cameras, but I knew I had to make an appearance. So, I came down here, part

of me secretly wanting to check on Raven, too.

When I was watching the cameras, she'd been in the garage with Hunter, playing beer pong. But by the time I got down there, they were gone. So, I wandered into the living room to see if they had gone there. The crowd is thick, though, and the lights have been dimmed, so it's hard to see anything. It's making me twitchy—not knowing where she is. And that in itself is making me even more twitchy.

I shouldn't care.

For all I know, she could be playing us.

Stop caring.

Just stop.

My brother chuckles. “Man, she's got you all wound up, doesn't she?”

His words send a jolt of tension through me, but I try to play calm.

“Who?” I ask, even though I'm fairly certain of the answer.

“Your pretty little raven,” he replies, his tone shifting into something cold, which reminds me a lot of how our father speaks to me.

I turn my head and look at him. He's grinning, but it's an emotionless grin—a taunting one.

“What the hell did you do?” I ask, because somehow I just know.

My brother, while not as cold as my father, has never been that great of a sibling to me. He used to torment the shit out of me when I was younger, beating me up, locking me in closets, letting his friends join in. It was brotherly fun, people used to say.

People fucking suck.

“Oh, you know, just breaking your little bird and basically handing myself the win in this game.” He gives my shoulder a rough squeeze. “You should've told her yourself.”

“Told her what?” But I think I already know the answer.

“Now, Zay, I lived with you for long enough to know when you’re full of shit,” he says over the music pulsating in the air. “I also know how you work, so I know that when your friends brought some stranger into your group, you were pissed and more than likely tried to dig up information on her. I’m also betting there was a familiarity about her, right?” His smile is cruel.

I hate him.

I hate him so much.

“You should’ve told her first,” he says in a taunting whisper. “But it’s good for me that you like to avoid issues that are difficult for you. It left me the perfect opening to break up your team and give mine the perfect opportunity to win.”

“We’re in the same damn family,” I snap, shoving him back and drawing attention.

He catches his balance quickly. “You don’t work for our father anymore. You guys are on your own in this. Outcasts who are being forced to play.”

“Why?” I ask, balling my hands into fists.

“Why not?” is all he says.

He’s totally playing me. He knows something I don’t, and I hate it.

What I hate more is that I have no idea where Raven is.

I need to find her.

I turn to walk away, and he laughs at me again.

“Such a goddamn pussy,” he says.

Something rises inside me like a wave, and before I even know what I’m doing, I twist around and sucker-punch him. People gasp as he trips into the wall, but I ignore them, getting in his face as he wipes blood from his nose.

“If you’ve done anything to her at all, I’ll fucking end you.” With that, I turn and storm away, with this disgusting

amount of fear pulsating through me.

Fear because I may have just opened Pandora's box by hitting my brother.

But most of my fear is stemming from the idea that he did something to Raven.

And the fact that that fear exists at all is more terrifying than anything else.

EIGHTEEN

HUNTER

I texted Jax earlier after I almost kissed Raven in the kitchen, saying I needed to talk to him when we got a chance. But it took him a while to reply, and of course, he finally did when I was about to get high with Raven.

I had a plan, too. While we were smoking, and after she was good and relaxed, I was going to tell her that Jax and I both want to date her. That way, I could finally kiss her. But then Jax had finally messaged me back, and I had to put a pause on my plan.

I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not. Because I'm not certain if Raven will want to date us both or not. Honestly, I'm still a little bit confused myself.

But I put that aside and meet Jax in his room where we agreed to meet so I can tell him what transpired between us in the kitchen. And I'm not just talking about the almost kiss. I'm referring to the fact that I'm almost positive she's Willow.

"Hey," he greets me when I walk in. He's been pacing the floor but stops as I enter. His gaze skims over my shoulder, and he frowns. "Where's Raven?"

"In my room." I close the door. "She's fine. We were about to get high when you texted me, so I need to make this quick."

"Make what quick?" he asks.

I take a deep breath then tell him what happened in the kitchen with Raven, what she said that made me realize ...

She's more than likely Willow.

“I can’t ... I can’t ...” Jax struggles for words as he paces the length of his room.

I knew he’d freak out, but he needs to know. So does Zay. He hasn’t responded to my text, though that’s typical for him.

“You need to calm down.” I watch Jax pace the room, worried he’s going to break.

He glares at me. “How the hell do you expect me to calm down after what you just told me?”

I lean against the dresser, mostly to hold myself up. The truth is, while I appear calm on the outside, on the inside, I’m freaking out.

Raven is Willow.

“Because this isn’t a bad thing,” I tell him. “This is good.”

He slams to a stop in the middle of the room. “Is it? Because someone clearly wanted us to think she’s dead. And what if they find out she’s here with us? What if they try to kill her all over again?”

He has a point ...

My stomach drops, but I’m distracted as my phone goes off. It’s Zay, so I answer it.

“Hey, we’re up—”

“Where the hell is Raven?” he snaps into the phone.

“In my room,” I reply. “Chill the hell out. She’s safe in there.”

“You sure about that?” Zay questions. I can hear the hammering of his footsteps, as if he’s running somewhere. “Because my asshole of a brother just informed me that they just won a round in the game because they did something to her.” He lets out a string of curses. “I knew throwing this party for him was a bad idea. It was a fucking setup so they could get close to Raven. I wouldn’t even put it past him to be the one behind the school closing.”

My heart is pounding so loudly in my chest that I can barely hear over it.

“What’s wrong?” Jax must notice the fear in my eyes.

I’m not surprised. We’ve been through a lot with each other, more than most people, and that kind of connection gives you the ability to read someone without them saying words. Zay is the same way, too.

And Raven.

I felt it from the moment I saw her.

Raven.

Raven.

Raven.

“Hunter?” Jax pulls me out of my trance.

“We need to find Raven,” I say, rushing for the door.

I just hope we’re not too late.

NINETEEN

JAX

There are so many painful moments in my life that the agony that constantly plagues my chest is a familiar thing. It's so frequently there that I barely acknowledge it. But when we walk into Hunter's room and I see Raven, that pain, it expands, swells, claws inside me and tries to rip me apart,

Part of me just wants to let it.

Because maybe it'd kill me, and death would be easier than what I'm seeing right now.

Raven is pressed up against the wall on the side of Hunter's bed, and her skin is so pale, as if she's sick. She also has a razor pressed to her wrist, and blood is trickling from a wound she's currently making.

As Hunter and I walk in and take in the scene, we both pause. Freeze. Maybe secretly hoping time will stand still so she won't have to feel any more pain.

She's looking down, but when she hears us, she looks up.

Tears drip from those eyes.

Those beautifully haunted eyes that I've already written poems about.

I swear I can feel her pain mixing with my own. I want to take hers away completely, cut my own wrist and bleed for her instead. But I can't move. Can't breathe. Can't think about anything but how broken she looks.

Hunter snaps out of his trance first. "Raven, baby," he starts to say cautiously. "Can you please put down the razor?"

She just stares at him.

He inches toward her.

“Stop,” she bites out in an uneven tone. “Stay the hell away from me.” Tears pool in her eyes again as she glares at him.

He does what she asks, stopping in his tracks. His gaze briefly flicks to the bed where I now notice papers, photos, and a phone.

My stomach ravel into even more knots.

Just what did Benton do to her?

Hunter looks back at her and holds up his hands in front of him. “I won’t come any closer until you give me permission.” He fleetingly pauses. “But can you please tell me what happened? *Please.*” When she doesn’t answer, he gives another pause. “Did ... did someone touch you or hurt you?”

She stares at him for a beat, her face shifting. “You guys did!” she cries. “You fucking knew, didn’t you? Knew who I was ... That we—I was ...” Her gaze flits to the mess on the bed, and then a heart-wrenching sob rips from her chest. “I want to forget again ... I don’t want to remember these ugly, violent things that are spinning in my head.”

I think it clicks then—what happened, what the papers on the bed probably are, what they unleashed in her.

Raven is Willow, and she had forgotten that she was—that much I already suspected.

But clearly, whatever is on those papers, photos, and phone released her memories. And now she knows ...

About us ...

About the pain ...

About how we were broken.

Hunter swallows audibly. “We didn’t know until today,” he whispers. “And we wanted to tell you ... We were just figuring out how ... Jax and I were just talking about it ...” He lowers his voice. “We didn’t want to hurt you.”

She stares at him with tears streaming down her face, and then something breaks. Caves Shatters.

Her face crumbles as she starts to cry uncontrollably.

“I want to die,” she says. “I don’t want to deal with this shit anymore. All the pain ... all the loneliness ...”

Her words rip my soul in two, and before I even know what I’m doing, I push past Hunter, heading toward her.

“Jax,” Hunter warns, but I ignore him, crouching down in front.

My legs are shaky, my hands are trembling, and my heart is an erratic mess. And yet, somehow, by some fucking miracle, my voice comes out even, like maybe my soul just knows that’s what she needs now.

“I know,” I say quietly. “I know how you’re feeling ... how much you want to bleed out that pain. But Raven, sweetheart, it’s not worth it. Trust me; I do know that.” I remove the leather band from my wrist and, with a trembling breath, stick out my arm and show her my own scars. “You’re not alone, and you’ll never be alone again.”

Her sobbing has quieted, but she’s still crying as she lifts her gaze to mine. I’m honestly kind of glad she’s crying while looking at me. I know it’s a strange thing to say, and I probably sound like a psychopath, but it’s how I feel. Because if she was trying to hide it, trying to bury her pain, then it means she doesn’t trust me at all. But letting me see her like this, she has to trust me a little. At least enough that she hopes I’ll try to save her from drowning in her own agony.

And I’m going to fucking try with everything I have in me.

So, even though I loathe my scars being touched, when she reaches out and lightly touches one of them, I hold perfectly still. And surprisingly, her touch is way less scalding than I expected it to be.

She stares at the scars for a while, tracing her finger back and forth across the lines. And it’s painfully torturous at first, but eventually, it morphs into something else, something that’s tortuously soothing.

“Why was this done to me?” she finally whispers, lifting her gaze to mine. “Why was all of that ...?” She swallows down a trembling breath as her gaze flicks to the papers then back to me. “Why was that done to us? And did my ... Did my parents know about it?”

I gather a steady breath before saying, “I honestly don’t know.” It’s a question that’s haunted my mind forever.

Why did this happen? Because my father wanted money? Is it that simple?

The truth is that nothing in this world we live in ever seems to be simple.

“We’re going to find out.” Hunter steps up beside me.

He was so quiet that I almost forgot he was here.

He pauses for a beat then sits down on the floor beside her. He looks at me for an instant, and I can see it in his eyes, a silent question. *Are you okay?*

I nod. It’s partly true.

I feel like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, about to fall off, but Raven has a hold of my arm and is stopping it from happening.

I don’t ever want her to let me go.

Raven looks up at Hunter as he brushes some of the hair from out of her eyes.

“We’ll get answers from you—I promise you that. And this”—he gestures at the bed—“nothing like this will ever happen again. We’re going to protect you.”

She looks at him, but I can’t read her at all.

“I wish you guys would’ve told me when you started suspecting.” Her voice is unnervingly hollow.

“I wish I would’ve, too,” he agrees. “We just didn’t want to have to tell you about ... all of it.” Pain flashes across his face. “Until we knew for sure. And even then, to be honest, a part of me just wanted to let you be so you wouldn’t have to feel what you’re feeling now.”

I worry his words might upset her, but she looks more calm than upset now. “I wish I didn’t have to feel it, either.” Her bottom lip quivers as she tries not to cry. “But now that I do, I want to know.” She looks from me to Hunter. “I want you guys to tell me everything.”

Everything.

My heart rate quickens at the idea of us sitting her down and telling her about all the darkness we’ve lived. About the monsters in disguise. About the brutality of it all.

Hunter gives a hesitant nod. I can’t tell if he’s lying. “If that’s what you need, then we’ll give it to you.”

She nods then starts crying again. The sound of her tears is agonizing, but the sound of metal hitting the floor as she drops the razor is like a splinter of light in a sea of darkness I currently feel like we’re drowning in.

I relax even more when Hunter pulls her against him, and she presses closer instead of pulling away. We let her cry then, me holding her hand and Hunter holding her.

I’m not sure how long this goes on, but I refuse to move until she’s done.

Hunter seems that way, too, but then something draws his attention to the doorway, and he straightens.

“Zay,” he starts to say.

I turn just in time to see his face.

The anger in his eyes.

The rage.

Mixed with it all is ache.

Ache for him and for her.

He used to be her protector, the one who watched over her, who made sure she never got hurt—well, as much as he could control that. The day we thought she died, something died in him, and all that was really left was this anger toward himself.

Right now, something has sparked inside him. Something that kind of terrifies the shit out of me.

And then he's turning and walking out of the room.

"Shit," Hunter mutters. He looks at me, his lips parting. But I already know what he's going to say.

"Go get him. I'll take care of her," I tell him as I wrap my arms around Raven.

He nods then rises to his feet and runs out of the room.

Raven leans into me, oddly quiet.

"What are you worried about?" she finally asks in a hoarse voice.

I don't know if I should tell her what I know, that I know the look on Zay's face. I've seen it before.

It's undiluted rage. And the last time he unleashed it, he almost killed someone.

TWENTY

RAVEN

I sometimes get these feelings of rage. It's so potent I feel like I'm drowning in it. I want to drown in it, let the anger take me away where I can't differentiate between it and reality. Right now, I want that rage I sometimes feel to surface, so I don't have to feel what I'm feeling in this moment.

Lost.

Drifting.

Agony.

I want it gone.

But I can't shake it.

Any of it.

The wound is burning on my wrist, blood is trickling from it, but I barely feel it.

"You should go check on Zay," I tell Jax, sounding robotic

He shakes his head. "No way. I'm staying here with you."

"You're worried about him." It's not a question. I can see the worry written all over his face.

He doesn't deny it, instead saying with emphasis, "I'm worried about you."

I'm worried about myself too. I keep that to myself, though, my lips parting to tell him to check on Zay. Part of me is just worried about what's going on downstairs, but a small

part of me wants Jax to leave me alone so I can see what I'll do. Hurt myself again? Be fine? Or maybe I'll just run—

A loud crash followed by shouting floats up from downstairs, interrupting my thoughts.

Jax stiffens. “What the fuck?” His gaze snaps to the door, his muscles twitching.

“Go see what it is,” I urge him.

His eyes lock on mine, his gaze piercing. “I’m not leaving you.” His gaze skims across my wound, silent words: *I’m not leaving you here to hurt yourself again.*

I’m sure blood is now coating his fingertip, but he doesn’t appear fazed by it.

I hate it. Hate this. This compassion when all I want to do is be angry. But I can’t quite get there, get past the fear, pain, and... Well, I can’t quite decipher the emotion twisting inside my chest. It’s foreign and connected to the way Jax keeps touching me and looking at me like he cares.

“Fuck.” I get to my feet, causing his hand to fall from my wrist.

He jumps to his feet, panic flashing across his face. “What is it?”

“It’s me caring too much,” I mumble. When his brows furrow, I sigh. “Let’s just go check on Zay. I’ll come with you.”

I step forward, but he snags my arm. I expect him to protest, but he looks at me momentarily before turning and hurrying toward Hunter’s dresser. He digs through one of the drawers and retrieves a shirt. Then he tears a strip off it.

“What’re you doing?” I ask as he returns to me.

He gently takes hold of my wrist and ties the section of the torn shirt around the wound. “To stop the bleeding,” he explains. “And so you don’t have to let people see it.”

And there’s that twisting sensation again, the one I want to despise but can’t seem to.

Once he gets the piece of fabric tied around my wrist, we hurry out of the room and jog down the stairs where the banging and shouting are coming from. When we finally arrive, I'm surprised to see a fight happening between Zay and Benton.

They're rolling around on the floor, people are surrounding them, and Hunter is trying to break it up by shouting at them, but a guy keeps shoving him away. They start yelling at each other, standing like an inch away, all red faced and rolling with fury. Jax curses underneath his breath and hurries into the room, towing me with him.

By the time we push our way through the crowd, Benton has Zay pinned down with his finger wrapped around Zay's throat. But it's clear by the massive welt and split lip that Benton has that Zay has gotten in a few swings. Benton laughs darkly as he cranes his arm back to punch Zay again.

I blame what I do next on some stupid connection I feel to the surfacing memories—the ones where the guys—including Zay—were my protectors. The connection is like a ghost inside me, faint and barely existing, but it's enough to drive me forward.

Jax is so engulfed in trying to assess the situation that my hand easily slips from his.

“Raven,” he starts to call out, but I ignore him, shoving my way to where Benton is about to punch Zay.

No one pays attention to me. Why would they? I'm just a girl, right?

A girl with a fucking hell of a killer right hook.

I don't even hesitate. I swing back and bash my fist into Benton's face so hard it hurts my goddamn hand. But it's enough force to knock him off of Zay.

The guy shoving Hunter back freezes as Benton topples over, groaning in pain. Hunter pauses, his eyes wide as he glances down at Benton and then at me.

I'm clutching my hand and trying to ignore the pain radiating in it. Honestly, I'm feeling a bit relieved to have a

different kind of pain to focus on right now.

A trace of a smile appears on Hunter's lips, but he hastily collects himself and slams his fists against the guy's chest that was holding him back, shoving him. Zay stumbles to his feet, his eyes flickering with a hint of shock. But he only looks at me briefly before storming over to his brother, boots thudding against the floor. Benton staggers to his feet, and clutches the side of his face where I sucker-punched him.

"Get the hell out of my house," Zay warns, getting into his face.

Benton continues to cradle the side of his face, a smile creeping up onto his lips, his mouth all bloody. "Why the hell would I do that, little brother?" He casts a glance around at the mob of people crowding us. "You're outnumbered."

My heart hammers inside my chest. He's right. We're outnumbered big time.

Zay inches closer to him. "Get the hell out of my house now, or I'm going to tell our father about that little extra you have hidden out in the hills."

Um... what?"

I feel a hand touch the small of my back, and I jolt, turning, about to clock whoever is touching me and bring more pain to my hand. But when my gaze collides with Jax's stormy eyes, the tension subsides from my body.

He doesn't appear stressed out, which I find odd. He gently takes hold of my hurt hand.

"You okay?" he asks, lightly skimming his fingertips along my knuckles.

I nod, baffled because aren't we supposed to be in the middle of a fight?

I sneak a glance back over at Benton. He's assessing Zay. Then he lets out a nervous laugh.

"Look at you, finally growing some balls." He wipes the blood from his mouth with his shirt sleeve and then steps back from Zay. "Don't think this is over, baby brother. You may

have won the fight, but you've officially been marked twice." With a manic grin, he continues to back away from Zay, his gaze landing on me. "And you? If you want to be on the winning side of this game, I'd suggest joining another group. One that has actually has ties to a family instead of just being the outcasts." He drags his tongue across his bottom lip. "In fact, I'm going to extend an invitation to you right now to join my group. I could do a lot with you." He says it like it's the most enticing offer.

Like I'll take it.

Like I didn't just hit him in the face because he was about to punch Zay.

Yeah, if that didn't declare my loyalty to these guys, I don't know what will.

Jax slips his arm territorially around me. Well, either that or he's worried I'm about to take Benton up on his offer and go with him."

I aim a bored look at Benton. "Hard pass."

He smirks. "Your loss, baby. But the offer remains open for as long as you survive this."

Those words send a chill down my spine, but I manage just to roll my eyes.

Benton's smirk widens then he turns around and strolls out of the house. A few people whisper to each other, and then everyone follows, squeezing out of the room like a herd of sheep.

Jax stands behind me with his arms looped around my waist. We stay that way until the room has cleared out, none of us moving as everyone leaves. Once the house is empty, Hunter leaves the room and goes over to the front door to lock it.

Then he returns to us.

For a moment, everyone sort of stands there in silent shock.

Finally, Hunter breaks the silence. “We should check the cameras to make sure no one is hiding somewhere. Or screwing in the guest room.”

Zay nods but doesn't make an effort to move as he rubs the back of his neck and stares at the floor. Hunter looks at Jax, and they trade yet another indecipherable look.

“I can't,” Jax strains out, his hold on me tightening.

Hunter continues to press him with a look. “She'll be with Zay.” Then he mouths, “*Give him a moment.*”

I'm beyond perplexed and I'm about to declare this, but then Jax sighs and releases me.

“I'll be right back. Don't leave Zay's side.” He rushes past me, giving me this look that I can tell means he doesn't want to go.

I don't want him to go either. Why do I have to stay here with Zay?

I frown as Hunter and Jax exit the room. Zay continues to stare at the floor in silence. Shaking my head in, I look down at my hand.

“Dammit,” I grimace because it's already swelling.

I hear the scuffing of footsteps, and when my gaze lifts, Zay is walking toward me. His cheek and eye are swollen, and he has a cut on his brow. He's not looking at me either but at my hand.

“You put too much force on your knuckles,” he mutters as he stops in front of me.

My lip twitches in annoyance. “You're welcome for saving your face from getting smashed.”

The corners of his lips twitch as if he's about to smile. It never happens, though, and I assume it's because I imagined it.

“I had it handled,” he says. “I didn't need you to step in. And you shouldn't have. My brother... he's an asshole when it comes to getting revenge.”

“He didn’t seem too revengeful considering he offered for me to join his team.”

“Are you regretting declining his offer?”

“Hell no. He’s an asshole.” I smirk. “Even more than you are.”

He drags his teeth along his bottom lip, assessing me. “Come on,” he says. “Let’s go put some ice on your hand.” He starts for the doorway.

Sighing, I follow. “You should probably put some on your face too.”

“I will,” he replies as we enter the kitchen.

He heads for the freezer and retrieves a couple of icepacks.

“Why do you have multiple icepacks?” I wonder, still cradling my hand. When he turns toward me, bumping the freezer door shut, I add, “Never mind. I bet you get in fights all the time.”

He tosses one of the icepacks down onto the counter and then crosses the kitchen toward me. “Like you don’t.”

“Fair enough.” I tense as he extends his hand toward mine. “What’re you doing?”

He gives me a tolerant look. “Putting ice on your hand.” He reaches out again, and this time, I allow him to take my hand. He examines momentarily before pressing the icepack against my knuckles.

Just above my hand is where Jax tied the piece of fabric to cover the wound, and I get the suspicion he’s staring at it. But ultimately, he moves away, letting me hold the icepack against my hand. The cold feels wonderful against my inflamed skin and I lean back against the counter, letting out a soft exhale of relief.

Zay moves over to where he tossed the other ice pack and picks it up, but he doesn’t press it to his face. Instead, he stands there, staring at something with his back to me, his muscles wound into tight knots.

“Raven,” he suddenly says.

I’m fairly certain that might be the first time he’s said my name. “Um, yeah?”

He quietly exhales. “Thanks for saving my face from getting smashed.”

“You’re welcome,” I say, a little thrown off. I give a short pause as I recall all the shit he gave me for not being able to defend myself that day on the bridge. “I told you I could fight. That what happened on the bridge only happened because I was caught off guard.”

He picks up the ice pack and faces me. He presses the icepack against his cheek.

“Maybe,” he says. Irritation pickles inside me, and I’m about to tell him off when he adds, “I’m glad you can. It means it won’t be such a pain in the ass to train you ... And I can just add to your skills instead of having to teach you them.”

I eye him over. “Is that your way of giving me a compliment?”

He rolls his eyes. “No.”

I roll my eyes too. “Whatever. I don’t really need your compliments anyway. I know I can fight like a badass.”

“I never said you couldn’t. I think you can fight, that you’re tough, and that you’re loyal.” He pushes away from the counter and steps toward me. “That was me giving you a compliment.”

Oh...

My heart’s doing weird things, but I refuse to react.

He reduces more space between us. His eye is almost swollen shut, his grey shirt is torn and stained with blood, and one of his boots has come unlaced. I can’t help thinking of the fact that Zay got into a fight with his brother after finding out Ellis gave me those files. I want to ask him why he did it. Because I was upset? Or because he was pissed off that they lost a round to... Well, whatever this messed up game is. I

think I already know the answer. Zay isn't the kind of guy to get into a fight because I was upset.

“Do you think getting into a fight with your brother was a good idea?” I wonder as he approaches me. “I mean, I get that it sucks you lost the round or whatever, but isn't this going to make it worse? And what did he mean by we've been marked twice? Is that like a game reference or something?”

He stops in front of me and stares for a moment. “How's your wrist?”

I blink and have to rewind over what he said. “Fine ...” My confusion is evident in my tone. “I didn't... cut very deep.” I hate talking about this aloud, especially with him.

He hesitates. “About that stuff in the files... You don't remember any of that... what happened in our pasts?”

That anxiety I felt when I started sifting through the files claws at my chest and throat again. So does the anger I felt when I saw Zay on the video that made it clear he knew all along who I was.

Between the fight and all of the other chaos, I'd momentarily forgotten about that.

I remember now, though. Vividly .

And that anger I sought earlier shoves its way to the surface.

“You knew, the entire time, who I was—I saw the video of you beating up Porter and him telling you.” I try to step back, but I'm already pushed against the edge of the counter. So I step forward instead and push him. “Fuck you. You should've said something to me.” I push him again, but he barely budes. “Or was that just the point? To mess with me?”

When he says nothing, my rage boils to that stupid pain that stems from countless years of being bullied. That's the shitty part about it. No matter how tough I can be, I can sometimes still revert to that scared girl who got locked in the closet at that party.

I start to sidestep around him, but he stops me by placing a hand on the edge of the counter and pinning me where I stand. He lowers the icepack from his face and inches toward me.

I'm about to knee him in the balls when he says, "I didn't say anything at first because it didn't seem possible—that you could be her—Willow. She—you were supposed to be dead." He's struggling to speak, and he seems frustrated with himself, too, something he announces with the sigh he blows out. "And when I realized you could be Willow, I was convinced you knew who we were all along and you were just playing us."

"I wasn't," I assure him. "I can barely remember much about my past... Well, until a few minutes ago when I saw all of that... stuff." I have so many questions, like if we were sold, why we were, and who did it.

And who the hell I am.

But he distracts me by touching my cheek with his hand.

Why the heck is he touching me like this when he loathes me?

"I know that now." His hand trembles. "I knew the moment I saw you in the bedroom surrounded by those files and with that razor in your hand..." He trails off, swallowing hard. "I know you didn't know." The pad of his thumb brushes across my bottom lip.

My breath catches in my throat, shock whipping through me.

What the shit is happening right now?

I'm not positive, but I swear he leans in like he's going to kiss me. And... Well, I honestly don't know what I'm going to do. I never find out since the sound of Jax's and Hunter's voices causes him to hurry and step back.

"I don't know either," Hunter says as he enters the room with Jax right behind him. "I think maybe it could be from..." He trails off as his gaze lands on Zay and then me. His brows knit, curiosity crossing his expression. "What were you two just doing?"

“What does it look like we’re doing?” Zay snaps. “Taking care of our battle wounds, something you two don’t have.”

“Don’t put the blame on us,” Jax mumbles, raking his fingers through his hair. “You’re the one that decided to go down and start a fight.”

“Someone had to retaliate,” Zay snaps, a vein in his neck bulging. “We’re getting our asses kicked in this game.”

“We don’t even know all of the rules,” Hunter stresses, leaning against the doorway with his arms crossed.

“Exactly.” Zay puts the icepack to his cheek again. “That’s how far behind we are.”

Silence skips by.

“What do you think your brother meant by we’ve been marked?” Jax breaks the silence in the softest whisper.

I should be paying attention. This is important. I know that.

But something else has captured my attention.

Through the frosted window above the sink, I can see the outline of a face. But I can’t make out any of their features. I feel eyes on me, though, and I stare right back. Staring and staring and staring until finally, I have to blink. Logically, I should be panicking. After all, I thought I just saw a figure outside, staring into the window.

But here’s the thing. While I was sifting through those papers that Ellis gave me, I came across one that made me question everything about myself. It’s a paper I tucked away in my pocket, where no one can find it unless I want them to.

Because what’s on the paper could ruin everything about my life.

Willow Lee: Age 5. Suffers from hallucinations. Sees people that aren’t there. Possible Dissociative Identity Disorder.

That’s what was listed at the top of the paper. Below it was some medical information that I couldn’t quite understand. But

I will once I get the chance to search it online. It's the thing that made me break completely, what pushed me to let that razor taste my flesh.

But what really pushed me over the edge is while I read the alleged diagnosis of me, I saw this image inside my mind, like a memory, of me writing a note and slipping it into my jacket pocket. Which wouldn't seem so weird, except I was in this house while I did it. I can't remember doing it, but as far as I know, only one note has been found in my pocket while I've been here.

The note that the doctor supposedly wrote.

I'm not sure if the memory of that is real or a hallucination.

But...

What if it is real?

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Ella & the Interrupted Road Trip

Ella & the Welcome Home

Breaking Nova Series:

Breaking Nova

Saving Quinton

Delilah: The Making of Red

Nova and Quinton: No Regrets

Tristan: Finding Hope

Wreck Me

Ruin me

Unbeautiful Series:

Unbeautiful

Untamed

Tangled Realms:

Untitled (coming soon)

Harlynn's Mystery Investigations:

Sugar Cookies & Zombie Secrets

Untitled (coming soon)

Mystic Willow Bay Vampires

The Secret Life of a Vampire

Untitled (coming soon)

Mystic Willow Bay Mysteries Series:

The Secret Life of a Witch

Broken Magic

Stolen Kisses

One Wild, Crazy, Zombie Night

Magical Whispers & the Undead (coming soon)

Enchanted Chaos Series:

Enchanted Chaos

Charmed Chaos

Entangled Chaos

Untitled (coming soon)

Capturing Magic:

The Thief of Wishes

The Thief of Magic

Untitled (coming soon)

My Cursed Superhero Life:

Cursed

Untitled (coming soon)

Guardian Academy Series:

Entranced

Entangled

Enchanted

Entice

Charmed

Untitled (coming soon)

Monster Academy for the Magical:

Monster Academy for the Magical

Monster Academy for the Magical: Hidden Magic

Monster Academy for the Magical: The Monster Clique (coming soon)

The Shattered Promises Series:

Shattered Promises

Fractured Souls

Unbroken

Broken Visions

Scattered Ashes

The Fallen Star Series:

The Fallen Star

The Underworld

The Vision

The Promise

The Lost Soul

The Evanescence

The Mist of Stars (untitled)

The Darkness Falls Series:

Darkness Falls

Darkness Breaks

Darkness Fades

The Death Collectors Series (NA and YA):

Ember X and Ember

Cinder X and Cinder

Spark X and Spark

Standalones:

The Forgotten Girl