

NIKITA PARMENTER

Twisted

COMPLICATIONS

FINDING MY HOME SERIES

BOOK THREE

Twisted Complications (Finding
My Home) Book 3

Nikita Parmenter

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This on is for my Secret helper, she knows who she is! i wouldnt have been able to do this without you. You're amazing! Love ya!

Also Hubby, i told you i'd put you in the dedication, you know what you did! Muhahahaha! I love you!

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Chapter One

“I’m sorry, what did you just say?” I ask, my eyes wide, there’s no way I heard him right, an all-boys school?

There’s nothing that can go wrong with that damn plan, I think sarcastically.

“You’re going to be the first girl to attend the all-boys academy.” The detective repeats and for the first time, I see uncertainty flash in his eyes as he looks over all of us.

Well, that’s hardly reassuring.

“How the fuck are we supposed to fly under the radar then!?” Jensen suddenly explodes, “You just told us that we need to keep our presence there as quiet and unassuming as possible. She’ll be the first fucking girl ever to attend a school filled with dick! Not just any girl either, but Ever! Have you seen her? They’re going to be all fucking over her and she’s going to knock at least one of them out for it, and that will be her showing restraint. Not to mention, what the rest of us would do.” He finishes abruptly as he glares at Trick who just pinched the side of his leg in warning.

Jensen very almost forgot that although this detective seems weird and more relaxed than most, he is a detective and admitting out loud that they would probably eviscerate someone if they hurt or touched me without my permission, is probably a bad idea.

I study the detective; his dark hair is messy, styled in a way that I haven’t seen any detective before have, normally its short back and sides and very neat. It seems to be the go-to for all the detectives I’ve met. His posture is more relaxed and on the casual side and as he moves the sleeves of his jacket rise showing dark lines of ink. Not unheard of for detectives to have ink but add that to his overall aura that isn’t quite fitting of a detective, and it makes me wonder who this guy really is.

“Thanks Jensen.” I grin, genuinely proud that he knows me so fucking well, that there’s no question that I’d take down anyone who tried anything with me.

“You’re welcome, Angel.” He winks.

“He has a point. Not only will Ever knock the first fucker that steps out of line out cold, but the rest of us won’t hesitate to step in either.” Cash says, making it sound like the usual guy protecting their girl stuff and not something darker like I know the guys are actually thinking and more than capable of.

“Is this really the safest place for her?” Trick asks, not including him and the guys in the question, “Considering that it’s a fucking boarding school, they’ve gone for god knows how long without seeing a fucking woman and the guys are fucking idiots?” He ends and I chuckle.

“Don’t get us wrong, we’re not exactly worried about Ever,” Riot adds in, “We’re more worried about what she’s going to do to idiots who don’t know their fucking place.” He grins and the detective shoots me an assessing look, clearly re-evaluating his first opinion of me. I grin savagely and his eyes widen with surprise before he chuckles quietly.

“That explains it.” He mutters as something clicks into place for him.

“Explains what?” Rafe asks, the question important enough to him that he decides to voice it rather than sign it. His eyes narrowing on the detective.

“Nothing, I have a feeling you’re going to work it out soon. In answer to your question, yes, it is definitely safer than what would await you all if you weren’t there.” He says, once again serious and his voice dark.

There is so much that this guy is not telling us, I can hear it in his voice. I get the weirdest feeling that it’s not entirely his choice though, almost as if he’s just following orders but not necessarily something he agrees with. At least, not all of it. As I watch him, I can’t help but feel that pang of familiarity again, like I’ve met or seen him somewhere before, but I can’t put my finger on why he looks so familiar. Under normal

circumstances, it would bother me, but my mind is preoccupied with thoughts of Atty.

I know we have the burner phone, but I'm still trying to repress my panic that he won't be able to get hold of us if he needs to. That flimsy wall that's holding back my emotions when it comes to Atlas wobbles and I take a deep breath trying to reinforce it. I can't show weakness now, especially not when I'm about to be the only girl in a rich ass academy filled with fucking dick.

I just know some idiots are going to get their asses handed to them by me, like I've said before, rich guys are a whole other breed of asshole. Fortunately, I have experience dealing with them, not so pretty anymore pretty boy's face flashes through my mind and I suppress a shudder, except him. He still terrifies me. I jump slightly when a hand squeezes my thigh and Riot looks at me with concern filling his gaze. I reach down and squeeze his hand, trying to reassure him that I'm alright.

He eyes me sceptically but threads our fingers together and holds on tightly. It instantly grounds me, and I honestly couldn't be more thankful.

“Well, like I said before, don't get caught. This school runs by its own set of rules unlike anything that you've heard of before. The kids are training to be the world's most influential and powerful people, and some of their parents already are. In this country and around the world. Having said that, be damn careful who you take on because they are richer than you could imagine.”

“And their wealth is a weapon, they can convince even the most down to earth person or even someone who you've known your whole life, to turn against you.” I finish for him my voice cold.

The guys turn to me, their eyes blazing with curiosity and anger as they assume correctly that I'm speaking from experience.

“Very true.” The detective says, his gaze sharpening on my face, “I don't feel like I can give you enough warnings.”

“We’re perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves and anyone else for that matter.”

“Oh, I’m more than aware of that.” He mutters.

“Excuse me?” Trick asks sharply, his voice cold and calculating, unlike anything that I’ve heard before.

“This is impossible.” The detective huffs, sounding thoroughly frustrated, “I have no doubt that it will all make sense to you soon.” He repeats, his tone signalling the end of the conversation. “As soon as you turn eighteen at this Academy, they move you into houses that are on the extensive grounds. All the houses are for multiple students and those students are all responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of it. Some are down small streets; houses lined either side and some are more isolated. The more money you and your roommates have collectively, the bigger and more isolated your house.” He starts to explain.

It honestly sounds more excessive than anything I’ve heard before. It’s almost the same concept as sorority houses and stuff, but not at the same time; they’ve taken the basic idea and made it more exclusive.

“I have managed to get you all into the same house, it’s called King Lodge. I have the key code here.” He says, giving everyone a piece of paper with a key code on it. “I highly suggest that you do not share that code with anyone. We aren’t too far from the academy now, you should know that although I have managed to make sure that you are all in a house together, you will have an eighth roommate. There wasn’t anywhere else that we could house you. Each door has a lock, your key code will open it but then you need to change the code on your room door so that it’s actually secure.”

“This is insane.” Rafe signs to us as we all share a look.

None of this is particularly making sense. It damn well better start to soon though, I get cranky as fuck when I don’t have all the information I fucking need. Which reminds me, I might need to warn the guys that something might trigger me while we’re here surrounded by rich idiots.

The detective stops talking, giving us as much information as he's willing to, which turns out to not be enough.

My attention switches to the houses outside of the limo, they're incredibly impressive and as we travel, get bigger and further apart until we end up on a long stretch of road, lined with rolling hills, tall trees, and large sprawling mansions dotted throughout the countryside. Eventually we turn off the main road and up a smaller one, trees line the road obscuring the view and I'm guessing adding another layer of privacy for the school.

The location is pretty damn isolated, we haven't seen any houses for miles and the last town that we passed through with all of the giant mansions was at least forty minutes ago. Finally, I see fencing up ahead, tall, thick, black metal fencing that rises high in the air and has spikes on top.

For a school? Seriously!?

The fencing expands as far as I can see and obviously surrounds the whole of the academy, which if the detective is to be believed is massive. As we pull up to the giant gates the prestige of the school starts to become obvious, the gates are just as strong as the connecting fencing, but they're covered in ornate shapes and inlaid with gold. It wouldn't surprise me if it was real gold, what does surprise me is the guard stations at either side of them.

One guard exits each of the stations and they both approach the car as we stop, I tense slightly as I easily pick up that they are both armed. Cash catches my eye and raises his eyebrow at me in question, the other guys picking up on our silent conversation easily. I tap my chest subtly, both hips and reach down to itch my ankle, then nod to the guys that have only just reached the car.

Jensen smirks, and nods as he grins proudly, the others looking equally impressed. It seems that some of my more unsavoury skills are going to come in handy here. I'm not sure whether to be excited or worried by that prospect.

We'll go with excited.

We watch cautiously from the back of the limo as the driver rolls down his window and the detective leans forward to speak.

“I’ve got Trick and the guys.” He says handing forward his ID and showing his badge.

I notice that he doesn’t mention my name and it makes me wonder if I’m a shock for everyone, that would not be great. Fun though.

Oh, I am definitely feeling twitchy. It’s hardly surprising considering everything that’s going on at the moment and the barrier that’s keeping all the emotional shit back. I’m going to snap; god help the fucker that causes me to.

“That’s all good sir, we just need to check out the luggage.” One of the guards says and we all turn to Jensen and I raise my eyebrows, remembering the negotiation that him and Trick went through in order let him bring his knives. He just smirks at me and winks, seemingly completely unconcerned and I find it stupidly hot.

I seriously hope like hell that they are only searching the luggage in the trunk because I have both of my normal knives on me, one in my jeans and one on my boot. I also have the beautiful knife set that Atlas gave me. I don’t really need my knives from home anymore, but they’ve saved me more times than I care to count, and I will always take them with me.

I know they won’t fail me. I know that Atty’s knives won’t either, but I’d rather have more weapons than less. That’s beside the point though, my point is that we are all armed. I imagine that the armed guards will not be happy to find out that information. I’m not sure that the detective would be too thrilled to find that out either.

Though I’m starting to suspect that he wouldn’t be surprised.

The longer that they are running these weird wand things over our luggage the more worried I become that they’re about to find the multitude of knives that Jensen’s packed. There’s no way that he only bought ten. His face said it all when Cash

said that they were like his babies. He's got no idea when we're going to be able to go back and get the others, so I'll be surprised if he didn't try to get away with bringing more than he and Trick agreed on.

They step back from the vehicle to wave us on through the giant gates and I breathe a sigh of relief, that would've been one hell of a first impression to make. Especially since I highly doubt Jensen would've allowed them to confiscate his knives.

The driveway is lined with manicured hedges and twists and turns making it impossible to see the actual school. Everything is extremely well taken care of and screams money. When the car finally pulls up to the school, I'm struck speechless, the building is ginormous and stunning, built in old stone with columns along the front leading to giant doors. There are tree sculptures outside the front doors and gargoyles perched on the roof. It creates an imposing and impressive visage. There are students wandering around and my guess would be that they've just come from dinner since it's too late for them to be still in classes. Thankfully, the weather up here has held and although it's cold and now dark, it's not raining or snowing and there are plenty of lights dotting the grounds that we can see pretty much everything.

There's a road leading around the side of the building and I watch several kids get into astronomically expensive cars, I'm sure I just saw a fucking Bugatti and follow it, I'm assuming that the houses for the over eighteen students are down that road.

"Remember that this is nothing like a normal school. I'd advise you to try and stay low, but I have a feeling that would be a fairly useless plea." The detective says before getting out.

"Eyes on your surroundings guys." Trick orders before he gets out, all of the others following.

As they get out of the limo, the surrounding students turn to watch smirking and laughing but giving off decidedly hostile vibes.

Oh, this is going to be so much damn fun.

I step out of the car behind them and the entire quad falls silent as they all turn to stare at me.

“Well, that’s reassuring.” I mutter, smirking.

It’s a damn good thing that I’m not easily intimidated.

The guys tense but they don’t close ranks. If they were to close ranks around me right now, that would give the staring jackasses reason to believe that I’m weaker than I am. We don’t want to start off by giving them the wrong impression.

“It’s about time someone bought a whore to this damn campus.” Someone yells and the crowd laughs as my guys tense.

Jensen steps forward his eyes blazing and I put a hand on his arm and shake my head. Not yet. I notice that now their shock has worn off several of the guys in the crowd are taking their phones out and tapping away. I have no doubt that in a matter of minutes everyone is going to know that we’re here or more specifically me.

“Your guide should be here any second.” The detective tells us, eyeing the guy that called out, “Ah, here he is.”

I can’t help my slight smile as a guy with neon pink hair that matches his neon pink braces that are over the top of a black shirt and paired with black checked cigarette trousers and black docs, comes strolling up. Damn, his make-up is fucking impeccable, I’m jealous.

“Sorry, sorry I’m late. I don’t do running unless it’s mandated and this,” He gestures to his outfit, “Takes time to perfect.”

“I’m well aware,” The detective says rolling his eyes, “Guys this is Peter, Peter this is, Rafe, Riot, Trick, Jensen.”

“Holy shit, you’re a girl!” Peter interrupts.

“Last time I checked.” I smirk and he grins.

“Oh girl, you’re going to cause a world of fucking trouble here. Just wait until Taylor finds out.” He replies, before clarifying. “My boyfriend.”

“As I was saying, this is Cash, Luc, and Ever.” The detective interrupts.

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. Come on chickies, let’s show you where you’re living. We’ll go in your limo since it’s quite a walk to the houses and its fucking cold.” Peter says as he turns towards the limo.

“We’ll be in touch when we have any news.” The detective says, clearly giving up on warning us.

“How are you going to get back?” Cash asks, a note of suspicion in his tone.

“I have to talk to the Headmaster; I’ll grab the limo when it comes back after dropping you off.” He explains.

Cash nods his response and one by one we get back in the car before I step in after Rafe, something occurs to me and I turn back to the Detective.

“If we were going to take the car to the house anyway, why did we get out?” I ask and Rafe looks at me impressed.

“Because it gives them time to get used to the idea of there being a girl here before classes tomorrow. Hopefully, that will have given them enough time to calm down.” He replies.

“Again, that’s hardly reassuring.” I comment before I get back into the car.

The door shuts behind me, and I expect some sort of awkward silence as we set off, but Peter has other ideas.

“I can’t believe they’ve let a girl in. The benefactors are going to be pissed.” He says grinning like he likes the idea of that.

“Why?” Riot asks.

“Because they’re misogynistic assholes and want this school to remain for boys only.” He says rolling his eyes.

“Well, that’s almost predictable for a place like this.” I reply rolling my eyes.

“I can’t say I disagree. They’re only just starting to accept that men can like men. Fucking idiots.” Peter practically

growls. “Anyway, what house are you in? The headmaster wouldn’t tell me anything. Just that I need to meet new students out the front. It’s rare that they let me meet new students, you know cause I’m gay and although the students are starting to be more accepting, their fucking fathers are not.” He pauses as he contemplates and we all share a look, I don’t think we’re going to be getting a word in, he’s a force to be reckoned with. “Sorry, sometimes my brain moves faster than mouth, and it all comes spilling out. I have to warn you that the houses are pretty small and basic, but they’re a whole lot better than living in the damn halls, trust me. What house are you guys in?”

“King Lodge.” Trick says shortly.

“No fucking way.” Peter exclaims, his eyes wide.

Chapter Two

“God damn it, what now?” Riot growls, it’s pretty damn clear that he’s had enough of this whole situation by now.

I listen to the conversation but in all honesty, I’m more interested in scoping the place out. We’re travelling down a street that looks like it’s a part of an upscale suburb. The houses are definitely not small, and are in fact, mini fucking mansions in all sorts of styles. The bigger houses have plots of land and even fucking gates to get in, and I’m damn glad that I’ve taken the time to study everything, although I am definitely going to have to do a walk through at some point to make sure I really know where the escape routes and shit are. I make a note of the other cars on the road, of course they’re all super expensive, and I even see a matt black Chevrolet Chevelle ss 454 that’s following behind us. I can’t make out the driver from where I’m sitting, but I do notice tattooed hands on the steering wheel, I dismiss it as just someone trying to get to their own house, but keep an eye on it just to be safe and go back to studying the surrounding houses and the street we’re travelling down.

I don’t like going anywhere, where I don’t know the basic layout. I made damn sure that I knew the layouts of each and every drop point when I was forced to work for my dad. Even if it was just scooping out fucking alleys, I did it because like fuck do I want to get trapped and backed into a fucking corner if things go south and let me tell you, my forward planning has saved me more times than I care to admit.

My hand twitches, wanting to play with one of my knives. Strangely enough, even though I haven’t used them, and we haven’t gone to battle together as it were, I still feel the need to pull out one of the knives that Atlas gave me rather than my old ones. I think it’s because it makes me feel closer to him and right now, we’re getting to the point in the evening where my wall keeping all my Atlas emotional shit back is practically non-existent. I noticed it happening last night, but

we were too focused on getting packed and trying to convince Jensen to leave his vast knife collection at home, that it didn't really hit me until everyone had gone to sleep.

Once we'd hung up the phone and Trick had fallen asleep, when everything in the house settled and it fell silent, that's when it fucking hit me like a ton of fucking bricks and I felt like I had a damn elephant sitting on my chest.

My mind has never really been a kind place for me, so it conjured up all sorts of twisted ass things that could be happening to Atlas, and I can feel them creeping up on me now. I desperately want to be behind closed fucking doors before that happens.

We know that he's going back into a dangerous as hell situation and he may be planning to bring us in at some point, but what the fuck happens between then and fucking now? We don't even know if he's okay, hell even if he's alive.

I viciously push the dark as fuck thoughts away before they consume me, I was hoping that last night's breakdown was a one-time thing but apparently, we're gearing up to have one tonight too.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

I've just got to hold it off for a little bit longer. It takes seconds for this to all swim through my mind and thankfully Peter replying helps me to hold the impending breakdown off for a bit longer.

"Nothing, I'm sure you'll find out soon enough." He says, being deliberately vague as we pull up to some wrought iron gates. "You need to put your code in." He instructs, looking a bit nervous all of a sudden and I have no idea why when he was so damn friendly before.

Trick opens his window and carefully types in the code, not bringing out his piece of paper to do so, already having memorised it. He angles his body so that none of us and especially not Peter, can see the code. The gates swing open and the car slowly swings up the sweeping driveway.

I glance behind us, out of the back window checking for that gorgeous car that was following us. It slows down as we go up the driveway before doing a quick U-turn and speeding off. Okay, so not just someone following us to get to their own house.

I get Rafe's attention and start signing before I forget because already, I want to stare at the beautiful house.

"A black Chevrolet Chevelle was following us. It did a U-turn as soon we started coming up the driveway and then sped off." I sign to him and he nods a small smirk tilting up his lips.

"Okay guys, this is where I leave you, I'd normally show you around, but there's no fucking way I'm stepping foot in his house. I've got no damn idea why they decided to fucking house you here. It's throwing you straight to the fucking wolves. He is fucking terrifying as shit." Peter rambles without a breath as we all get out of the car and he starts to walk back down the driveway, tapping away on his phone. "He's not here at the moment, thank fuck, so I'll meet you here in the morning to take you to classes. I assume your cars are going to be arriving soon. All of the information you need, maps and schedules will be in there. Breakfast is in your houses. See you in the morning." He yells back, already at the bottom of the driveway where a gunmetal grey Mercedes has just pulled up, he waves out the window and it races off, the gates closing behind him.

"Okay, that was fucking weird." Jensen says, "I mean I know we've dealt with a lot of fucking weird lately, but that was right fucking up there."

"I'm with you dude." Luc agrees, still staring down the driveway with a frown. "His entire mood switched. I wonder if we are getting our cars delivered though."

"My bike!" I exclaim. "I've missed her."

"It'll be nice enough weather soon that we'll be able to ride." Cash adds.

“As fascinating as the conversation is, I have two points to make, one, are we just going to ignore that he thinks we are sharing a house with a damn psycho? And more importantly, can we work out how to get in because I’m hungry.” Jensen grins.

“Of course, you are.” I smirk and he wraps his arm around me, pulling me into his side, and licking my cheek just because he can.

“There’s a keypad like at the gate, just put the code in.” Luc suggests pulling his hair back up into its bun.

“Excuse me, sirs and er ma’am.” The driver of the limo calls out.

Shit, I’d forgotten he was even here; I’m not used to having someone drive me.

“Would you like me to bring your bags up to the porch?” He continues.

“Nah, it’s alright man, we’ll grab them.” Riot replies, striding towards the boot of the car, the rest of us following.

We all grab our own bags and take them up to the porch.

“Do you think we have to manually shut the gate or something?” I ask as we watch the car drive away and back towards the main part of the campus.

I’m assuming he’s going back to get the detective.

Five minutes after the car has passed through the gate, it starts to close on its own and it makes me think that it’s probably on a timer.

“Well, that answered that question. Come on, let’s get this door unlocked.” Trick says as he types in the code.

The door to the huge house opens easily and if we hadn’t spent time in the cabin, the luxurious interior would have been overwhelming. As it is, it’s still a shock that they have these kinds of houses for eighteen-year olds. The wealth of these people is astronomical. Its decorated very much like a bachelor pad with greys and dark wood furniture. As we move

past the massive living room, I glance in taking in the huge TV, u-shaped sofa, and every conceivable game console that you could imagine.

The kitchen is pretty much stainless steel and looks like it has never been used, which doesn't give me much hope for the food choices that we might have. We all dump our bags and Jensen opens the fridge as the guys take a seat at the massive breakfast bar.

"There's nothing in here. Not a meal worth anyway." He mutters and his stomach chooses that moment to make a giant rumbling noise. He glances down at it and rubs it affectionately. "I know buddy, looks like we're going to starve." He adds dramatically and I chuckle.

"Let me see what I'm working with." I grin and go through all the cupboards, looking for something that I can make for all of us.

I start pulling out ingredients. The meal is by no means going to be five-star restaurant quality, but it'll be filling, and I've worked with less.

"What are you making Sweetheart?" Trick asks, coming up behind me and looking over the ingredients that I have placed on the counter.

"Pasta in tomato sauce with bacon. Because of course, one of the only things the mysterious roommate has in his fridge is bacon." I chuckle.

"That's pretty impressive. I looked and couldn't see any conceivable way to make a meal for all of us." Jensen says frowning.

"That's because one, you're not used to cooking things from scratch, and two I've had to make meals from a lot less, I've gotten a knack for it now." I reply as I put the pot of water onto boil and start the sauce.

"I hate that you've had to do that." Cash mutters, "Do you think it might be a good idea to get some groceries delivered?"

"Yeah probably. Since our new roommate is such a psycho." Luc replies, rolling his eyes and grinning in a way that he

shouldn't be, since most people would be worried.

I smirk and focus back on making the pasta sauce. The guy has a surprising amount of fresh ingredients considering it looks like nothing's been used.

Trick

“Aren't you guys worried about what Peter said?” Ever asks, I don't miss the tiny smirk playing around the edges of her lips as she turns back to stir the sauce that already smells absolutely amazing.

It baffles my mind completely that she's been able to create something that smells so freaking good with the minimal ingredients she has. I smirk as Rafe walks over Ever and without any prompting, she lifts up the spoon for him to taste. I still can't believe that he managed to keep the fact that he's such a damn good cook from us for so long.

“What do you think?” She asks.

He studies her for a second and I can't blame him. That sort of question would usually be a loaded one where the only right answer is, it's delicious. At least that's the experience that we've all had before, questions that aren't really questions and only have one right answer. Even from here, I can tell that there's only open curiosity and she is genuinely interested in his reply.

“It needs something ...” He answers slowly.

“That's what I thought, but I can't figure out what it is.”

Rafe searches through the ingredients she has out and then through the cupboards and adds a couple of things to the sauce, I have no idea what they are, my culinary skills are limited to toast. Finally, he dips a spoon into the sauce and blows on it. I can't help but almost crack up laughing at the image of this giant grizzly bear of a man blowing gently on a

spoon to cool the sauce down. The effect it has on Ever though, is pretty damn impressive as she practically melts.

“That’s perfect, I would never have thought to add that in, but it works surprisingly well.” She compliments and the big guy blushes.

“No, we aren’t worried about our new roommate.” Riot answers, watching them both fondly and answering the question I’d almost forgotten she had asked, too distracted by just watching her. I’ve got it so damn bad for her. “I am however, concerned about you.”

“Me?” She asks, sounding confused as she plates up the food, with Rafe’s help.

Jensen starts bouncing excitedly on the chair next to me and I roll my eyes.

“Yeah Sunshine, you. Peter says that this guy is a psycho, I know that you can take care of yourself, so well in fact, that it’s incredibly hot.” He starts walking up to her and backing her into the counter with a smirk. “But he was clearly scared of the guy, and the detective did warn us that this school was run differently than normal schools. It just has me a bit worried that’s all.”

“He makes a really good point, Angel.” Jensen adds, all the bouncing and excitement gone as he frowns.

“I know. You forget though, not only can I take care of myself, but I have you guys and I will always be armed. I haven’t been sleeping with my knives recently, but we all agreed to stay armed when we got here just in case. My reflexes are still as fast as they used to be. Ask Atty, he almost got his throat slit the second night he was at the cabin.” She chuckles as she places the plates down in front of us and we all fall silent.

I feel my eyebrows hit my hairline.

“What Sweetheart?” I ask.

“Oh, I thought he would’ve told you. He woke me up from a nightmare and I was still in it at first, so I had him pinned against the wall with my knives to his throat.”

“And he didn’t lose his shit?” Jensen asks, utter shock in his voice.

“He can’t have, we would’ve heard that!” Luc mutters.

“Nope, he even held me when in my half-asleep state, I asked him not to leave me.” She replies, a delicate blush dusting her cheeks.

“Is that why he was in your room that night? I thought you’d fallen asleep together. I remember him saying you had a nightmare, but I had no idea that happened.”

“I never thought I’d see the day when Atlas fell so fucking hard for someone.” Cash says unthinkingly and I watch Ever’s reaction closely.

It breaks my heart to see the hope light up her eyes quickly followed by dread and hurt. We all understand why he had to go and couldn’t stay in contact; well we get the jist of it since he won’t give us any details. I just hate to see her suffering like this. She puts on a good show but it’s clear, she is still hurting over it. I share a look with the guys, we’ve all picked up on it.

“I still don’t feel comfortable with you sleeping in a room on your own.” Jensen says around a mouthful of pasta, effectively changing the subject. “I know he’s not here yet, but he could be back any time, especially since I don’t think that Peter will keep the news of where we are staying to himself.”

“I wasn’t under the impression that I was going to be sleeping alone?” She replies sassily, raising her eyebrow and making Jensen grin a decidedly dirty smirk.

“Glad that’s settled then.” He smirks.

“On that subject though, I don’t think it will be just Peter who won’t keep it quiet. There was a car that followed us all the way here and then sped off once he saw which drive, we were turning into.”

“I noticed that too.” Luc says.

“So, there’s a chance that the roommate might come back earlier than we expected too.” I muse.

“We could always check out his room. Just to see how much of a threat he really is.” Cash suggests, looking through a pile of paperwork. “I’ve got a grocery order being delivered after school tomorrow. I think I got everything, but you guys go through it and add whatever you think I missed.” He passes his phone to Rafe who’s sitting next to him and he immediately starts adding things.

“It’s a good idea. I wouldn’t normally advocate going through someone’s personal belongings, but this is a matter of safety. Let’s finish food first and then we can take our stuff up and find his room. What are you looking at?” I ask him.

“It’s all the schedules, maps and shit.” He replies, “Get this, they’ve got combat and fucking weapons training on the schedule.”

“No fucking way!” Jensen exclaims excitedly, taking a piece of paper out of Cash’s hand.

“I understand self-defence maybe, but full on combat and weaponry?” Rafe, rumbles, looking over the schedule that Cash has just handed him.

“There’s something more going on at this school other than it just being for the kids of the super-rich and influential. That was clear from the fact that it’s somehow safe from whoever your dad worked for.” Luc says.

“I agree, this place is definitely more than it seems.” Cash agrees, “Slightly off subject, but I’m going to see if I can get someone to ship our cars out to us, I should be able to do it anonymously.”

“Good idea. We all need to remain on guard if these kids actually take those lessons seriously then we are in more danger than we thought. For all we know, it could be like a specialist course that only some students take and the detective knowing our background, decided that we’d do well in it.” Jensen guesses, serious again.

“That’s the best-case scenario. Is everyone done?” I ask.

“Yep.” Ever replies as she starts to gather the plates and we all help to load the dishwasher.

“Let’s go check out the Roommates room and see if we can at least get a name.” Rafe says standing and stretching.

Chapter Three

Trick

We all grab our bags on the way to the wide staircase and Ever shoots me a look when I pick up one of hers. I know that she's healing really well from her stalker's attack, but I still worry and if I'm honest, I would've picked it up regardless, she's my girl and I'll treat her like she's a goddamned queen. That line of thinking reminds me that the bastard stalker is dead and there is no doubt in my mind that Atlas was responsible.

I'm just not entirely sure how he pulled it off. I haven't even thought to question whether he's the one responsible. The way he lost his shit when she had that panic attack was extreme and squashes any doubt, I may have had that it was him. When he finally gets in contact with us again, I plan to have a very long conversation with him about what the fuck is going on.

Enough is enough, its time he brought us in.

"Wow, the rooms are just as lush as the downstairs. It looks like they've all got their own bathrooms too." Ever says excitedly, pulling me from my thoughts. "We didn't explore all the rooms downstairs but there were quite a few shut doors."

She's not wrong, the rooms are huge. Each with their own sitting areas like Cash has at home and each immaculately decorated in masculine tones. It's obvious which rooms are empty since all of the doors are open except one at the end.

"We can explore more later. I'm more interested in checking out this guy's room." Cash says, impatiently.

None of us are keen on there being an unknown man in the house with Ever. Especially one that causes the level of fear that Peter was obviously giving off. The more we can find out about this guy and prepare, the better. I'd like to say that it's probably nothing to worry about, but this school is fucked up,

I've already gotten that vibe off of it and we haven't even had a proper tour, met the students or met the teachers.

Not a great sign, but nothing we can't handle.

We all dump our bags in random rooms. I have a feeling we'll end up in Ever's most nights anyway, at least one of us will.

"Alright, let's do this." Jensen says excitedly as we gather outside the only door up here that's shut, and he reaches for the handle.

"It's locked." He pouts and Ever grins at him.

"I should be able to open it, but I'm not sure it's a good idea?" Jensen offers.

"He has a point, if we unlock it, he's going to know that someone's been in his room and that will definitely create a problem where there might not be one." Ever adds. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm not that great at re-locking the doors that I break into, never had the need to learn." She smirks.

"So that's it?" Rafe asks, his voice rough. "We just leave it until he comes back and hope for the best?"

"We don't really have much choice. It's either we break in and find some information on him, and then he's going to know that we've been snooping and absolutely get pissed with us which could mean that we're put in a dangerous situation, or we leave it locked and see what we can find out about him tomorrow at school. It didn't sound like he'd be back by the morning, since Peter was happy to pick us up." Luc sums up logically.

"Fine, second option is probably the smartest." Jensen grumbles and I repress my smile.

"I'm exhausted, I think I'm going to go to bed." Ever says as she lets out a yawn that nearly takes up the entirety of her face.

My gaze sharpens as I take her in, since we got back from the cabin, she hasn't quite been the same. My heart pangs as

she reaches up to play with the ring that Atlas gave her. A sad look crosses her face as she slides it along the chain around her neck. For as long as I've known him, he's worn that ring and never taken it off. I asked him about it once, but he became very cagey and almost disappeared into his triggered state, where he becomes completely un-emotional and barely speaks or reacts in any way. After that, I decided it wasn't worth it to question him. I have a feeling that him giving it to Ever has a meaning of great significance though.

"Sleepover in Ever's room!" Jensen yells as he races off to his room to no doubt get something to sleep in, Ever's laughter fills the hallway as she watches him.

It's because I'm watching her so closely that I notice her posture straighten, a lightness overtaking her features when Jensen mentions us sleeping in her room. Almost as if she was worried, she'd be sleeping alone, despite what she said over dinner earlier.

Like we'd ever let that happen. So long as she wants us, one of us will always sleep next to her.

"Alright everyone, go and get some pyjamas, blankets and shit, and meet back in Ever's room. If it's okay with you, Sweetheart, I think at least one of us should stay with you until we get this roommate guy figured out?" I say to her, repeating what I told her at dinner, as the others all disperse, Cash lingers, watching her worriedly.

"Of course." She replies. "I'm going to get changed." She adds moving towards me and placing her small hands on my chest as she tilts her face up to mine. I dip my head as my lips capture hers. She nips my bottom lip and I feel her smirk against my lips as my chest rumbles with a growl, she drives me fucking wild. Her tongue tangles with mine and by the time we separate, we are both breathing heavily and my heart soars knowing that I affect her as much as she affects me.

"Go get changed." I say, gently moving a piece of hair off her cheek and tucking it behind her ear.

"Yes, sir." She smirks, her eyes blazing with heat as desire pierces me.

My hands flex on her hips and I hear footsteps approaching us.

“You’re playing with fire, Il Mio Cuore.” Cash warns, desire clear in his voice as he steps up behind her, pressing in close and reaching his arm around her, his hand gently gripping her throat.

Her eyes widen as he flexes his fingers and she smirks, pushing her ass further back into Cash as she pulls me closer to her front.

“I think our Ever likes that brother.” I growl huskily.

He grins as he kisses up her neck and I take her mouth hungrily; she meets me stroke for stroke. When we both step back, her eyes are glazed with desire and I’m fairly certain the only thing that’s holding her up, is us.

My smirk widens into a full-blown smile.

“Now, go and get your pyjama’s on. The others will be back soon.” Cash orders.

Ever’s lips tilt up into a smile as she steps away from us, we watch her go admiring her delectable ass, just as she gets to the door Cash nudges me.

“Good girl.” He praises, testing the waters.

I raise my eyebrow as she stops dead and worry that we might’ve pushed her a little bit too far until I see a slight shudder travel through her.

“Damn.” She mutters. “I’m going for a cold shower. Who fucking knew two words could have that affect? Damn vagina, everything seems to turn you fucking on these days.” She finishes muttering as she finally enters her room.

Surprised laughter startles me and I can’t help but join in with the guys as they gather back in the hallway having caught the tail end of Ever’s little rant.

“What the fuck did you guys do to her?” Riot smirks.

“I told her she was a good girl.” Cash’s lips tilt in a wicked grin.

“Well damn.” Jensen chuckles.

“Come on, let’s set everything up while she’s in the shower.” Luc suggests, smacking Jensen on the chest as he starts to open his mouth, no doubt to say something about joining her.

When Ever exits the bathroom in a cloud of steam, all of the beds are set up, with me and Luc sharing her bed with her. We haven’t gotten into a disagreement about who sleeps where yet and I think that it’s because, as weird as it sounds, it just seems to come naturally to us. We have all known that we want to be with her from a young age though, so maybe that’s helped. I’m brought out of my thoughts when Luc nudges me, I look at him with a raised eyebrow and he nods in the direction of Ever. Sure, enough now that I can see her without the cloud of steam surrounding her, her eyes look red and puffy and she’s sniffing like she’s been crying.

Thankfully, Jensen seems to be too into the tv show we’ve put on to notice because I can guarantee he’d freak out and I have a feeling that the last thing Ever wants now, is to have attention brought to the fact that she’s been crying.

She crawls up the bed to lie between me and Luc, we immediately wrap our arms around her, and she sighs heavily like she’s got the whole weight of the world on her shoulders. Fear pierces through me as it occurs to me that she could’ve been crying because of me and Cash in the hallway.

“Sweetheart, if we did something you didn’t like ...” I start trying to stay quiet so the others don’t realise what’s going on, I don’t get far though because in an instant she’s rolled over so she’s straddling me and takes advantage of my shock to kiss me hard and fast, it gains the attention of the others who all turn to look at us, smirking.

“Trick, I promise you, all of you.” She says looking at the rest of them before focusing on me again, “That if you ever do something I don’t like, I’m not keen on or even just suggest something I’m not into, I will tell you. We’re in this together and communication is the only way we’re going to be able to make this work. I fucking loved it, just so you know.” She

smirks before kissing me once more and settling back down between us.

Relief floods my system; I was genuinely terrified that we'd upset her.

"Why are you upset then?" Luc asks, forgetting that we still have the attention of the others and Jensen immediately jumps up, his eyes wide.

"I'm absolutely fine, Jensen. Don't freak." She smiles and he studies her for a second before sitting back down, a worried frown on his face.

We all look at her expectantly, she's not getting off that easily especially after she just said that communication is key in making our relationship work.

"I miss him." She says in a tiny voice and it breaks my heart.

Atlas would be in pieces if he realised what effect his absence was having on her. I think I might need to mention to the guys that when he does get in contact with us, it's not going to be a good idea to let him know exactly how bad it got for Ever when we left him. At least not until we know he's not going to have to disappear again.

"Me too." Jensen agrees, his voice serious for a change, the darkness that sometimes consumes him flashing across his green eyes turning them almost black for a split second.

He's finding it harder to control than he has for a long time, and I think it's because of a mixture of reasons, the first being that the girl he is head over heels in love with has been in danger and hurt far too often over the last few weeks and that we now have it confirmed that Atlas is in some major and dangerous shit.

We always kind of suspected that he was, but now that he's told us himself that he is, it made it all too real and wiped away the hope that we were just being paranoid. The whole situation has been playing with Jensen's demons a bit too harshly, and I think the only thing keeping him grounded is Ever. I have a feeling that if she wasn't around, we would be

pulling him out of another kidnap situation or judging from the frequency of the appearance of his darkness.

Worse.

When he gets really bad, he has a tendency to act out his own kind of vigilante justice. That normally ends up with the sick fuckers in hospital with a signed confession stapled to their foreheads. We've helped him a few times when he's refused to back down, and none of us can walk away when a child is being abused or anything similar. I know Ever shared with us that she used to do something similar, but we're twisted fuckers when we have to be and I'm not sure she's quite ready to hear those stories. We've never had to worry about getting repercussions from the law. Either they are too busy dealing with the signed confession and have no damn sympathy for the fuckers, or the fuckers in question have been absolutely terrified shitless by Jensen and his very graphic description of what will happen to them if they mention us to the cops.

As far as telling Ever though, I'm not sure any of us are ready to share quite how deep our darkness runs.

Ever launches herself at Jensen as his darkness starts to consume him. His eyes blank and his face loses all expression. It's truly terrifying but immensely impressive at the same time. Ever's seen glimpses, toned down versions of Jensen's darkness, mainly due to the setting we've been in. You can't really beat someone senseless and break bones in a school cafeteria. Far too many witnesses not to mention our parents would become involved and so far, we've managed to pretty successfully keep this from them.

"I know," She says softly as she gently cups his cheeks in her palms and he grips them tightly holding them to his face, his eyes close as he struggles for control. "Hopefully, we'll hear something soon."

"I could message him with the burner phone?" I suggest, wanting to ease the hurt that we're all going through.

Ever smiles softly at me over her shoulder and takes a deep, shuddering breath.

“No, it’s okay. I can wait. I don’t think it would be a good idea to distract him, we know he’s in a dangerous position and he told us not to use the phone unless it was an emergency. We could make his situation a hell of a lot more dangerous.” She explains.

“That’s a really good point, I hadn’t thought of it like that.” Rafe says with a curious lilt to his voice.

“I’ve had it happen to me.” A dark look crosses her features and makes us all tense. “Fucked up thing is, it was my father that called the fucking phone. He knew where I was, he knew how delicate the situation was and yet, he still rang because he felt it was amusing.” She growls.

“What happened?” Riot asks, his voice deceptively soft considering the anger swimming in his eyes.

Every time she tells a small piece of her past, it shows us just how fucked up it was, and it makes me worry about things that we don’t know about.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.” She grins viciously, a proud glint in her eye.

That grin is always Jensen’s undoing, whenever she shows her more brutal and violent side, he fucking ignites. He kisses her hard, gaining a surprised squeak from her that quickly turns into a moan. He nips her lip and she tugs on his hair hard enough that it has me wincing, but he growls as he pulls her tighter against him. They’re volatile when they’re together and it’s hot as fuck.

Me and the guys try to start a conversation to give them the illusion of privacy but we don’t get very far, all of our attention keeps being dragged back to Jensen and Ever, it gets to the point where I actually have no idea what the fuck we’re talking about. Ever suddenly pulls back from Jensen and bursts out laughing.

“What?” Luc asks, as confused as the rest of us.

“Where you guys seriously just talking about llamas?”

We share a confused look before Riot smirks and answers her.

“I’ve got no fucking idea, Sunshine, we were all a bit distracted by you.” He says bluntly and pink tinges her cheeks as she grins.

“Alright, you horny fuckers. Let’s get some sleep, tomorrow’s going to be a shit show of a fucking day.” She says getting up off Jensen and crawling back up the bed, settling between me and Luc.

“What makes you say that?” Rafe asks, tilting his head slightly as he watches her curiously.

“Just a feeling.” She replies, through a yawn.

“Night, Baby girl.” He replies chuckling as her eyes are already closed.

I think she’s right; I am damn curious to know what the big deal is with this school and the roommate.

Chapter Four

Ever

“Ever?” A low voice rumbles near my ear and I groan snuggling further down into my duvet.

I do not want to wake up yet. It can't possibly be morning already, memories of the nightmare that plagues me most nights starts to try to encroach on my tired brain, and just like that I'm awake. I'm not risking going back to that dark place, thank you very much.

“You okay, Baby girl?” Rafe asks as he places a gentle kiss on my lips.

“I'm good. Tired.” I reply smiling, I could get used to waking up to kisses.

“Everyone apart from you and Jensen are up and downstairs getting ready. Peter should be here soon to get us, and Cash has already managed to arrange to have our cars delivered from home. They should be here, in a few days or so.”

“What about being followed and raising suspicions with whoever had found me?” My stomach twists in knots and my brows bunch together.

“Don't worry, Dragonfly, the people that Cash is using to transport them are used to dealing with unusual and discreet circumstances.” He reassures me.

“Well, okay then.” I smirk. “How come you didn't wake Jensen up?” I ask looking over to where he's laying starfished on the floor.

“Because how I'm going to wake him would've woken you up too and I wanted to wake you up more gently.”

I raise my eyebrow in question, and he smirks, kissing me one more time before he walks over to Jensen, grabbing a

glass of water off the nightstand on the way. I sit up to watch the show, grinning.

“Wakey wakey sleeping beauty.” Rafe booms as he tips the glass of water over Jensen.

“What the fuck man!?” Jensen splutters before promptly tackling Rafe to the floor.

I chuckle as I get out of bed and rummage through my bag and grabbing my outfit for the day, setting it out on my bed before stepping around the still grappling men. Both of them cursing but laughing at the same time.

I honestly do not understand men.

“You going to join me, Jensen?” I ask, my grin turning into a smirk.

His head whips in my direction so damn fast I’d be surprised if he didn’t have whiplash.

“What?” He asks, heat already darkening his eyes.

Rafe chuckles and leaves the room, winking at me as he goes.

“You heard me.” I reply, stripping off the large t-shirt that belongs to one of the guys as I walk into the bathroom.

I barely get two steps inside before I’m snatched up into a pair of strong arms and walked further into the room. He starts to gently kiss up my neck. I step forward and he breaks his hold on me watching me curiously. I smile as I turn on the shower, fortunately its big enough for the both of us and the activities I have planned. I strip off the rest of my clothes, he watches me hungrily as I step into the warm water, the heat of his gaze raising goose bumps on me and sending a thrill of heat through my body.

He stalks predatorily towards me, discarding his boxers as he does and my gaze travels the delicious length of him, holy hell. My clit pulses and I pull him towards me.

“A little impatient are we, Angel?” He whispers huskily.

“Aren’t you?” I mumble, kissing down his neck and across his chest.

He mutters something entirely unintelligible as I trail kisses and small bites further down. I take it as hard as steel length in my hand and pump it twice, swirling my tongue around the tip before I take him in my mouth. I move my hand at the same time as my mouth and he shudders, his hands tangling in my hair and pulling tightly, making me moan around him.

“Fuck.” He curses throwing his head back.

He pulls me up and crashes his mouth against mine in a hard and unyielding kiss. The water pours over us as my nails scratch down his back. He lifts me up effortlessly and I gasp as my back hits the cold tile. He bites my lip, as my nails sink into his shoulders and one of his hands comes up to wrap around my throat.

“Holy fuck.” A breathy moan escapes my lips.

“Condom.”

“Birth control and clean.”

“Same.”

He thrusts into me in one powerful and back arching stroke. We both groan loudly, his hand flexing around my throat. He barely gives me time to adjust before he pulls out and slams back into me. There’s no slow build up and he effortlessly holds me up, one hand on my throat and one gripping my hip in a bruising grip that is driving me wild. I don’t even attempt to be quiet and I move my hips with his as much I can without dislodging myself. He kisses me hard, my tongue fighting with his. I’m almost certain my nails are leaving marks on his back and shoulders, but he doesn’t seem to mind as his thrusts pick up speed and send me hurtling over the edge, into an orgasm that has me crying out in ecstasy, his own groan of ecstasy following shortly after.

He kisses me gently, his hand loosening on my throat. He runs his fingers down the column of my neck looking worried.

“You didn’t hurt me; I love it when you grip my neck.” I say, trying to reassure him whilst also trying to get my breath back.

He grins, looking relieved and breathing just as heavily as me before agonisingly slowly pulling out of me.

“Fucking perfect, Angel.” He says softly, emotion clouding his eyes.

I stand on tiptoes and kiss him softly.

“We should probably actually shower, first day at school.” I grin.

“Ah fuck, I forgot. You distracted me.” He grins.

We shower quickly and make our way downstairs, through the house of many doors that we still haven’t explored yet, and into the kitchen where we can hear the guys.

“Here you go, Sweetheart.” Trick says handing me a cup of coffee and kissing me softly before turning back to the bacon.

Jensen kisses me on the top of my head as he moves past to get his own cup of coffee. I take a seat between Rafe and Riot, each of them taking turns to kiss me.

“Morning, Sunshine.” Riot grins, a naughty glint in his eye.

“Morning, Riot.” I smirk in return. “You actually let Trick in the kitchen?” I ask Rafe, chuckling.

“Under strict supervision, the guy could burn toast.” Rafe replies, rolling his eyes and making me grin.

“I would take offence, but it’s true.” Trick admits, as he and Jensen place big platters of bacon, eggs, and toast on the table before taking their seats. Once everyone’s loaded their plates, Trick asks for our attention.

“There’s a couple of things that we need to go over before we get to the school. We’re running out of time, so eat as I talk.” Trick smirks shooting me and Jensen a look.

My grin widens and Jensen smirks.

“And I’d make us late again.” He winks at me and I laugh.

“Alright. I think until we know more about this school, we need to keep our relationship more discreet. I’m not suggesting hiding it or anything like that, I’m just suggesting that we be careful what we say about our relationship when we’re around other people and keep them all guessing.” He explains.

I must admit that at first, I was hurt that he’d want to hide what we have, but that’s not actually what he’s suggesting we do, he’s just suggesting that we are more cautious, which I understand.

“That makes sense to me. We don’t want to cause a problem for ourselves where there doesn’t necessarily need to be one. Although, I think keeping it quiet for too long might cause us problems too.” I explain.

“So, we keep it cautious until we understand what we’re dealing with better.” Cash says.

“Sounds good to me.” I agree, the others agreeing too.

“Good, the other thing I wanted to make sure of, is that you’re all armed?” Trick asks seriously.

“Yep.” I say.

“I’ve got enough for each of us.” Jensen grins viciously and my eyes run over his body trying to see where he’s concealed them. “You’re welcome to do a strip search, Angel.”

“Didn’t we already do that this morning?” I smirk and his eyes widen slightly.

“Alright, you two.” Trick chuckles. “Guys?”

“Yeah, we’re all armed.” Luc answers for all of them.

“Good,” He replies just as the doorbell rings. “That must be Peter, everyone grab your school stuff.”

He gets up to go to the door, and I watch as he keys in a code to open the gate before he opens the door and waits for Peter. The guys all get up to get their shoes, bags, and jackets, but I take a minute to finish my coffee knowing that if I don’t, I will become a raging bitch and no one wants that, especially when we’re trying to fly under the radar.

Which should be super easy considering I'm the only girl in an all-male school that's got some seriously dodgy shit going on.

Super easy.

Is it bad that a small part of me is excited?

"Don't forget to hide the ring Atlas gave you, Sunshine." Riot says gently as he comes back into the kitchen.

I startle slightly and look down, I had no idea that I was playing with it. I tuck it underneath my shirt, the length of the chain means that it falls snugly between my boobs. There's no risk of it falling out. I've thought about it and I still have no damn idea why it's such a big deal that I keep it hidden.

I just hope that I get the chance to ask him about it at some point.

"Are you okay, Sunshine?" Riot asks, leaning over and gently kissing my forehead as I look up at him.

"I'm okay," I smile up at him. I don't need to see myself to know that my smile is tinged with sadness.

His eyes cloud with worry but he lets it go.

"Okay, Dragonfly. I'm here for you if you need me for anything though, you know, that right?" He says sweeping some hair behind my ear.

"I know." I reply, my smile more genuine now and I stand up kissing him gently. "I'm going to go get my shoes."

He nods and I walk towards the front door where I had the forethought to leave all of my stuff last night. I get there just as Peter arrives, looking nervous as hell and standing at least two metres away from the actual door.

"Do you want to come in, the guys are just getting their school stuff." Trick offers and I can hear the thread of amusement underlying his tone.

I turn away, hiding my smirk, I don't think it would help if he thought we were laughing at him.

“Hell no.” He exclaims, “I’m not risking being seen entering his house when he’s not here. Not after what happened to Billy.” He adds shaking his head rapidly.

“What happened to Billy?” Jensen asks coming down the stairs.

“Oh no. That’s definitely not my story to tell.” He says, before sighing heavily. “Look I like you guys. I just can’t be involved. This academy doesn’t have the usual hierarchy that normal places do. We’re trained for things that teenagers shouldn’t be trained in. Bullying here is not the usual stuff you get, it’s missing kids. Broken fingers. Families being torn apart. This place is as cutthroat as it gets, and it’s all made worse because every fucker here has more money than fucking sense. With money comes connections.”

“Hmm, well at least we’re not going to get bored.” Riot grins.

Making all of us chuckle. Peter’s only confirmed what we already thought and in all honesty it sounds fun. Dangerous but fun.

I think my idea of amusement is slightly warped.

“You guys are crazy. Most people after hearing that would at least be mildly concerned.” He sounds somewhat appalled at our lack of reaction. “If you ignore everything else, please don’t ignore this ...” He starts as we all walk towards his large SUV and get in, me sitting on Luc’s lap. “Do not let her out of your sight. This is not a safe place for anyone, especially not someone who they all perceive as weaker and no matter how fucked up it is, these men are raised by misogynistic, sexist assholes who all view women as the weaker sex.”

I’m actually quite touched that he’s given us a warning, it means there’s at least some hope for him. I think he’s been surrounded by toxic masculinity his whole life and just needs someone to really accept him for who he is.

Mission accepted.

“We’ve got her.” Jensen says, darkness flashing across his eyes, I’ve noticed that happening more and more.

If he's anything like me, then he's going to need an outlet soon. I can feel my own darkness starting to swirl inside my veins. We have our first combat class tomorrow, so hopefully that will help.

"Right." He says, his eyes flicking around the guys nervously. "You know they're all taking bets on how long you'll last?"

"Oh yeah," Luc grins, "How long?"

"Maximum is two days." Peter says.

My guys chuckle darkly. I think this school is in for a shock.

"Well, here we are." Peter says, starting to sound a bit more intrigued and less worried.

We all get out of the SUV and walk through the large doors. Hostile looks follow us, and catcalls start as they spot me in the middle of the guys. Peter leads us with his head held high and showing far more backbone than he has done so far. My men are tense as fuck. I can't reassure them or tell them that they need to hold their tempers for a while as we try to fly under the radar like the detective asked us to. All attention is on us as we walk the halls and its hostile as fuck.

"Ignore them," Peter says quietly. "Your class is just a few doors down."

Riot suddenly spins, with a dark look on his face. We all stop with him and turn to see some smarmy looking guy, dressed in a polo shirt and fucking khakis grinning at Riot.

"Do not fucking touch my ass." Riot growls in warning and we all tense.

"Oooo boys, we've got a homophobic one." The douche sneers.

Before any of us can do anything, Rafe pushes forward, grabs Riot, pulls him in close and kisses the fuck out of him. The douche falls silent as his mouth drops open. He judged Riot so wrong. My eyes stay glued to Rafe and Riot who are

thoroughly enjoying each other. When they pull apart Riot turns back to the douche.

“Not homophobic, just taken. Regardless of that you didn’t have my permission to touch me.” He says on a growl, anger flashing in his eyes and making the guy take a step back towards his friends before he catches himself and stands tall again.

Riot turns, dismissing him easily and returning our grins. He throws his arm around my shoulder, much to the confusion of the watching assholes and then reaches out and threads his fingers through Rafe’s.

Peter’s mouth is literally wide open and new respect enters his eyes.

“Right, well this way.” He clears his throat; the hallway fills with chatter and he lowers his voice. “That was fucking awesome. You didn’t even hesitate, and you handled it fucking perfectly. If you had responded with violence it would’ve backed up his claims somewhat and he’s a good fighter, so you probably would’ve ended up worse off.”

Jensen chuckles darkly.

“You handled it really well though. He’s been caught doing similar things to the other guys here but won’t come out. He claims he’s an ally. But his father’s an absolute cunt. I’d feel sorry for him if he wasn’t such a fucking tool.” Peter carries on seeming to ignore Jensen’s laugh, the guy has no idea what me and the guys are capable of. “Here you are, your next class is just two doors down the hall, and I’ll meet you outside that one to take you to lunch. You know, I think you might last longer than two days.” He adds before strolling off down the hallway to his own class.

“He has his own kind of charm, I guess.” Cash muses with a smirk.

“That’s one way to put it.” Trick agrees, as he pushes through the door and into the classroom.

The room falls silent as we enter, dark looks aimed in our direction. Holy fuck, this is ridiculous. When we get to the

teacher's desk in order to find out where we're all supposed to sit, he completely ignores us, to the point where another student comes up to ask him a question. The teacher seems friendly enough with him and answers his inane question right away.

"Excuse me, Sir?" Trick tries again to gain his attention after he's dealt with the other student.

The classroom snickers as the teacher blatantly ignores us and I roll my eyes. Seems like even the teachers here haven't grown up at all. Me and the guys share a look and Rafe starts signing. Keeping his hands low in case anyone here can actually understand sign language although that seems unlikely.

"We may as well just sit down; I have a feeling that he's not going to suddenly start talking to us now. The detective did warn us that the teachers here are as bad as the students." He signs quickly.

Instead of replying, Trick nods and we all take seats near the door. It's not where I usually like to sit but it offers a quick escape and I have a feeling that even if we don't need it today, we're going to need it at some point. As predicted, we are ignored for the entire lesson, well, we're ignored by the teacher who doesn't even glance in our direction. The rest of the students have no problems in giving us hate filled looks and doing childish things like throwing shit at us.

The guys are about ready to boil over and I honestly think that the only thing stopping them from letting all hell break loose on these fuckers, is the warning we got to behave and the lack of information we have about this school and how it works. I thread my fingers through Jensen's in a bid to help him stay calm. It's getting to the point where I think we all need to let off some steam in that combat class tomorrow, and we've been here for less than a day.

Chapter Five

“That was fucking ridiculous, he didn’t even give us any books or anything like that and the whole lesson was done from a fucking book.” Luc says, agitatedly running his hand through his loose long hair.

“I don’t think it’s going to get any better. So far, the people in the school have a massive problem with us. I know it’s not just because we’re new and unknown.” Cash replies.

“No, it’s because I have a vagina and they’re misogynistic dicks.” I add in drily and they smirk.

“Let’s get this over with I’m fucking starving.” Jensen grumbles as he pushes through the door into our second class of the day and the last class before lunch.

It’s not surprising to us at all that the second lesson, Business studies, goes exactly the same way as our first lesson. The only difference being that this teacher is more open in his distaste of us, giving us as many glares and death stares as the students. We sit there, stoic faced until the bell finally rings. I’m half expecting Peter to not bother showing up, so it surprises me to see him waiting for us outside the door.

“I see you guys had a great first morning?”

“Fucking fantastic, everyone was so welcoming, made us feel right at home.” Riot replies sarcastically and Peter chuckles.

“Sounds about right. Come on, let’s get food, I’m starving.”

When we walk through the giant, ornately carved wooden doors, I can’t help but gape in awe at the cafeteria. It’s more like a posh restaurant; the tables are all made of wood that matches the carved mouldings on the high ceiling and each one is covered with pristine white tablecloths. There’s no lunch line that I can see and no serving station, instead the students are holding menus and there are servers weaving

through the tables, taking orders and dropping off plates of delicious looking food.

It takes a minute, but I watch as the tables closest to us start to nudge each other, falling silent and grinning like they know something that we don't. It creates a ripple effect and soon the entire cafeteria has fallen silent.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

I turn to look at Peter to see if he's willing to give us any sort of hint at what's going to happen next. The words stall on my tongue though as my eyes land on him, all colour has vanished from his face as he gulps nervously and his eyes dart around.

"Fuck, he's back already. Look whatever you do, keep your head down and you might get out of this fairly unscathed."

"Who's back?" Trick asks, his voice low.

"Your roommate." Peter says as he points over to a table in the far corner.

There's a ring of empty tables around it where students aren't sitting. Despite them looking fairly squished together on the other tables. Sitting on the table in the corner is a guy absolutely covered in bright and colourful tattoos, his arms are huge and even from here, I can tell that he'd tower over me, although most people do so that's hardly surprising. There's a glint of metal in his eyebrow and nose that I'm assuming are piercings and he has a head of unruly auburn curls that somehow work with his otherwise dark and threatening appearance.

The surrounding students snicker but I ignore them as I focus on the giant guy that has his back to us. There's something extremely familiar about him. The guy on the table nods in our direction and I see the guy whose standing tense before starting to turn around, when he fully faces me a huge grin tilts my lips.

Before I have time to fully process what I'm seeing, my legs are moving at a dead sprint in his direction. Peter yells something behind me and the cafeteria gasps. The guy

that's sitting on the table starts to stand up, a scary as fuck glare on his face. Getting ready to interfere and grab me.

No fucking chance, asshole.

I grin savagely, the sight of it making him pause as his eyes widen slightly, his eyebrows shooting up. I don't know why everyone is so shocked whenever I smile like this but it always gives me enough time to do what I need to so I can't complain. Back when we were walking the halls to get to lunch, I moved one of my knives from the holder in my jeans to up my sleeve, I couldn't tell you exactly why. I guess we could call it instinct.

I let the blade slip out, catching it by the handle and in one swift move, I launch it at the guy on the table, while still running in their direction. It hits its target and lands straight between his legs, millimetres from an appendage I'm sure he's very attached to. He shoots backwards cursing up a storm as the rest of the cafeteria turns into a frenzy of yelling and exclamations.

"That's my girl." I'm sure I hear one of my guys yell, but at this point I'm too close to him and I couldn't give a flying fuck about anything else.

Before anyone can do anything to try and stop me, which considering I've had enough now and next time I'll be aiming for flesh and not table, is a good thing, I've launched myself and wrapped my legs around the guy still standing thankfully he catches me despite his shock.

"What the fuck do you think you're fucking doing, you crazy fucking bitch." The guy on the table growls finally standing up and moving towards us.

Clearly enraged, which if I'm honest is fair. I did throw a knife at his junk, if he had moved, he'd be dickless right now. When I look over at him smirking though I swear I see a flash of heat in his eyes before its abruptly snuffed out.

"Man, she didn't know, as much as I'd like you to make her pay you can't here." He steps towards us and pulls at my arm.

"Don't fucking touch her."

“Atty.” I breathe, ignoring the spluttering shock from the guy next to us.

He studies my face for seconds as if not believing that I’m truly here before his lips crash down on mine. I pour my fear and need into that kiss and he gives me just as much back. The cacophony of noise in the cafeteria dies abruptly.

“What the fuck is happening?” The guy growls, when we eventually pull apart.

“Rage, this is Ever and the guys.” Atlas explains, nodding to over my shoulder where I’m guessing the guys are gathered.

He doesn’t take his eyes off me though and his grip is almost bruising, I fucking love it.

“Hey man,” Jensen starts, and without looking at him I can hear the smile he’s wearing.

“What the fuck are you guys doing here?” Atlas growls, slowly putting me down, I turn to face the guys and the rest of the cafeteria as he wraps his arm around my shoulders.

“I think maybe this is a conversation we should have in private.” Trick says, his eyes darting to the surrounding students all in various states of shock, still silent and watching us with rapt attention.

“The house might be the best bet; we know it’s safe from bugs.” Rage says quietly.

Atlas nods once and starts striding out of the cafeteria not letting go of me.

“Don’t we need to tell anyone we’re leaving?” I ask.

“No.” Rage replies bluntly and Atlas shoots him a frown.

I shrug, his attitude doesn’t bother me, I’d be a bit pissy if someone nearly stabbed me in the dick, you know, if I had one. I also couldn’t give a rat’s ass about this school and their silly rules. The doors to the cafeteria close behind us and sounds of raised voices soon follow. At this point, I’m unsure whether it’s because of Atlas’s reaction to me or because I threw that knife at Rage.

Probably a bit of both.

“Right, Trick, Jensen, Cash, Riot, Luc, and Rafe, you’re with Rage. Princess you’re with me.” Atlas orders as we get out the door and stop near a large SUV and an absolutely beautiful Harley Davidson.

“Princess?” Rage asks, incredulity in his tone that I don’t understand.

“Leave it.” Atlas replies shortly, steering me towards the Harley.

“Can I drive?” I ask Atlas, making Rage scoff.

I’m definitely going to need to apologise, I know he’s kept Atlas safe since he had to leave the guys and I know that he is one of Atlas’s best friends, he’s not going anywhere and neither am I. There’s no point in us being shitty with each other.

“Sure, Princess.” Atty replies, handing me the keys.

He pulls me closer, his lips crashing against mine in a hard kiss, my hands clench in his shirt as I pull him closer.

“I fucking missed you.” He mutters roughly.

I bring my hand up and gently run my fingers down the scar on his face, he tilts his head resting his cheek in my palm before he turns his head and gently kisses my palm.

“I missed you too, Atty. So, fucking much.”

“What the fuck is happening right now?” Rage mutters incredulously, “You left some pretty fucking big things out when you told me about her brother.”

“Come on, let’s get going.” Atlas says to me, ignoring Rage.

The Harley roars to life beneath me as Atlas wraps his big arms around my waist. The SUV squeals out of the parking lot and Atty chuckles quietly behind me.

“Show him what you’re made of Princess.” He says, kissing my neck and sending my hormones into overdrive.

Without any further encouragement I tear out of the parking lot easily catching them up and then over taking them.

“Take the handles, when I move take over!” I yell to Atlas, he nods against my neck, instantly trusting me.

His arms reach around me and take control of the bike, I bring my feet up on the seat and his long legs reach forward as he moves closer, I very carefully stand up, slowly turning around as he keeps the bike steady and wrapping my legs around his waist, I grin up at him happy with myself. His eyes burn with heat and I grin.

“Don’t crash.” I smirk as I lean forward, pulling myself closer and slowly start to kiss up his neck, he shudders.

“Princess,” He growls in warning.

I smirk against his lips, “Yes Atty?”

I let my lips softly brush against his and he groans, kissing hard and fast once. I chuckle when he shoots me a warning look as we turn into the driveway of our now home, I guess.

“If I didn’t need information right now, I’d have you naked and underneath me, writhing with pleasure within seconds.” He growls as he pulls me more firmly against him, my core heats at the feel of his hard length against me and not for the first time do I wish we both had less clothes on.

“That was fucking hot.” Jensen grins walking up to us, with heat in his eyes. “My turn next. I’ve got a few ideas.” He smirks.

“Can’t wait.” I grin, climbing off the bike and immediately being pulled into Jensen’s arms as he kisses me.

He really did like the show.

We all make our way into the house and straight to the kitchen.

“Right, what the hell are you doing here?” Atlas starts immediately.

“You know about my dad?” I reply and he nods, Rage’s eyes dart to the side as he frowns heavily. “Well, the detective

in charge of my case told us that some people who he worked for were looking for me. He said that some new information had come to light and this was the safest place for me. Of course, I refused to come without the guys.”

The more I talk, the darker the look on Atlas’s face becomes, his eyes flash with anger and his jaw clenches.

“What was your father’s name?” He growls.

“Marvin Roman.”

“Mother fucking, cunt.” Atlas explodes.

“How the fuck did that happen?!” Rage asks, “Fuck, that was the ...”

Atlas silences him with a look.

“What’s going on?” Trick demands.

“It seems that your father worked for mine.” Atlas growls through clenched teeth.

“What?”

“There’s so much you don’t know, and I don’t have time to explain it now. You heard of Liam Farlow?”

“The massive crime boss that the feds can never get anything on?” Cash asks.

“Yep.” Atlas says simply.

“He’s your father, and is after Ever because of something her father did, who worked with your father?” Luc sums up.

“Yep.”

“Dude we’ve got a job.” Rage interrupts, tapping on his phone screen before Atlas pulls out his own phone and looks.

“Okay.”

“What kind of job? Come on dude it’s time to bring us in.” Trick orders his tone leaving no room for argument.

Atlas looks at me for a long time, searching for something. I grin viciously, I don’t give a shit what he’s got going on so

long as we're in it together, all of us. Finally, he sighs and nods at Rage.

“So, you know the feds can't get anything on Atlas's father or anyone in the top tier of the organisation. Well Atlas has inside information from both his father's organisation and the feds. When the feds get wind of the location of one of his men but can't take them down either because of red tape or corrupt cops or simply because they don't have enough evidence. They call us in, and we deal with.” Rage explains.

“I'm clearing out my father's business. Getting rid of his more disgusting and questionable dealings. I will have to take over one day, if I don't my brother will, and no one wants that. So, I'm cleaning shop and legitimising as much as I can.” Atlas adds.

“So, what's the job?” Riot asks.

“That's it?” Rage asks.

“We said we wanted in.” Rafe shrugs. “You're trying to do the right thing, but in this situation in order to do the right thing you have to do questionable things to bad people.”

“It's not like any of us weren't already doing that.” I add in.

“What?” Atlas asks, his eyes narrowing on me, he knows what the guys got up to.

“Come on man, you know how Jensen gets sometimes. He's gained a reputation for stapling confession notes to fuckers' foreheads.” Luc grins.

“Hey, it's not just me. Ever's put her fair share of fuckers in the hospital.” Jensen grins deflecting the conversation back to me.

“I never met your father, but I do know off him. What did he have you doing for him?” Atlas asks, turmoil in his eyes.

“Drug runs. The other stuff I did on my own.” I say, not completely telling the truth but not outright lying either.

“Are you sure?”

“Dude what do you know?” Riot asks, tensing along with the rest of them.

“Ever’s dad, dealt in drugs, weapons and prostitutes, specialising in young ones.” Rage replies, looking sick to his stomach.

“I was safe enough until I was eighteen.” I reply, stoically not wanting to talk about my time there.

Atlas’s jaw clenches as he growls, not liking my reply.

“The job isn’t for a couple of days. For now, though our presence is required at a party. It’s the usual race which means the surrounding schools will be attending too and things can get a bit tense.” Rage interrupts saving me from having to delve further in my past than I’d like to.

“Let’s go, I need a little release.” Jensen comments, his voice low as the darkness flashes across his eyes again.

“I think we all do.” I reply and Rage looks at me as if he’s just figured something out.

“Holy fuck. If you’re Marv’s daughter that means that you’re the one...”

“Okay that’s enough story time for today.” I say getting up and cutting him off at the same time. “Don’t we need to get ready for the party?”

The guys eyes widen as they switch between me and Rage.

“Oh, come on, puddin’.” Rage smirks, “I think they want to know.”

“Rage,” I warn, it’s no good though, I know he’s already made up his mind to tell them, more than likely payback for the knife/dick incident.

“Puddin’ here, had a reputation. Even some of the higher ups were wary of her. She liked to slice, put several her dad’s men and Atlas’s fathers men in the hospital. A couple of them were never the same again. She used to like the baseball bat too.” He announces, grudging respect in his eyes.

The guys eyebrows hit their hairlines.

“I love how bloodthirsty you are Angel.” Jensen grins.

“None of it was unprovoked.” I reply.

“It’s safe to say she can hold her own in our world, Atlas. She’s been in it almost as long as we have. It just took us a while to get to her.” Rage says somewhat cryptically.

I open my mouth to question, what he meant, especially as he shares a look with Atty that is full of secrets but Atlas interrupts.

“That might be why Liam is after her. She did a lot of damage. I was there when one of the reports came in, I just hadn’t made the connection yet. She was utterly ruthless, and my father’s reaction wasn’t what it should have been. He was angry but there was a calculating to edge to it and he smiled.” Atlas replies.

“That’s more concerning than just anger.” Rage frowns.

“I’ll look into it. Right now, we need to get ready, the party will be after school which will have ended now, we’ve got a couple of hours.” Atlas says to us.

“There’s still a lot we need to know.” Trick tells him and he nods.

“I promised to bring you in, it’s just a bit sooner than I would’ve liked. If my father really is after Ever though this is the safest place for her. He can’t touch any of us whilst we’re on Academy grounds.”

“Which reminds me, the party tonight isn’t on academy grounds, all of you need to be on high alert in case Liam decides to send someone. By now he will know that a girl has been admitted but I doubt he will know your name yet. As soon as he does, it won’t take him too long to put it together. Stay wary.” Rage adds and we all nod in agreement, that goes without saying really.

Chapter Six

Considering that it's still freaking cold out, I decide that jeans and my bike jacket is the way to go for this party. Plus, I can easily hide my weapons in my jeans, not so easy in a dress, although not impossible. As I walk back down the stairs the doorbell chimes and I skip down the final few to answer it. Checking the little monitor by the door I see that it's the food delivery that Cash ordered this morning. I buzz them in and open the door waiting for them to make their way up the drive. I have a feeling the Atlas wouldn't want them in the house, so I get them to leave it all by the front door.

After making sure that they've left and the gate's closed behind them I start picking up the bags of groceries and taking them into the kitchen. I've got no idea where the guys are but apparently it takes them a while to get ready. Having nothing else to do I start to unpack the bags putting the food away where I think it should go and hoping that Atlas doesn't mind, since it didn't look like anything had a place anyway. As I sort through the shopping, I go through my mental index of recipes that I've picked up over the years.

I'm fairly certain that I got all the ingredients to make homemade pizza. As I sort, I set aside all the things I need to make the pizza dough and several different toppings. It takes me no time at all to put it away and make the dough. Whilst its proving, I make the tomato sauce for the base and sort the various toppings into bowls so it's easier to make them. Once that's done, I send out a text on the group chat asking everyone what they want on their pizza.

The front door opens, which must be Rage back from getting changed at his place. As far as I'm aware, he was the only other person that has the code. He steps into the kitchen just as I start to hear movement on the stairs.

"Hey, what do you want on your pizza?" I ask Rage, he glances around the kitchen almost as if he's wondering who I'm talking to.

“Oh, are you ordering in?” He asks staying near the doorway.

“No, I made them.” I reply smiling and trying to make amends.

“Yes!” Jensen suddenly yells, striding into the room and walking straight over to me. “Can I make mine?”

“Sure, here,” I hand him a ball of dough that I’ve already sectioned so there’s one for each of us. “You want to make yours?” I ask Rage.

“No, it’s okay. Can I see what you’ve got?” He asks cautiously, still standing by the door.

I feel like his hesitation now is about more than the knife incident, something that doesn’t really have anything to do with me. I nod and he comes up beside me standing close so he can see all the toppings. The hairs on my arms stand up and I frown at my reaction. Clearing his throat, he quickly steps back.

“Could I have, pepperoni, cheese, onion, black olives, and Jalapeños please?” He asks sounding unsure.

“Sure.” I smile. “I’m sorry for throwing a knife at you. If it makes you feel any better, I have very good aim.” I apologise before he walks off.

“Don’t worry about it, Puddin’.” He smirks.

The other guys trickle in one at a time and soon all of the pizzas are ready, and the table is set. Rage looks around at the table confused and slowly takes a seat. I think it’s going to take him longer than most to get used to the little family that he has now. Because make no mistake, he’s Atlas’s family and that means he’s ours too.

“That was delicious thank you, Il mio cuore.” Cash compliments, leaning over and kissing me.

“Wait did you guys get groceries?” Atlas suddenly asks.

“Dude, way to be observant.” Jensen chuckles, earning the finger from Atlas.

“Yeah, Cash ordered them this morning. Along with arranging a courier for our cars and my bike.” I explain, standing up and starting to clear the table.

Rage gets up to help.

“Thanks.” I say quietly and receive a grunt in return.

After everything’s cleared and loaded into the dishwasher, we all load up in one of the SUVs and follow the line of cars that are making their way off campus. It’s a twenty-minute drive until we reach a large clearing down a dirt road. It’s already busy and we stick together as we walk through the thin ring of trees, leaving the SUV parked in the clearing with all the other cars.

“Whoa, I did not expect that.” Riot mutters as we get a good look at the track laid out before us. It’s a proper track, with spectator stands and everything although I’m assuming that it hasn’t been used in a while since it’s not in the best condition.

A row of motorbikes are set up near the start line and everyone’s milling about. One guy in particular is weaving through the crowd taking bets as people dance with drinks. It all looks very familiar and reminds of the events that I used to race in for my father.

“I’ll go grab us some drinks, beer alright for everyone?” Atlas asks.

“Sure.” I reply as the guys all nod.

“I’ll help you carry.” Cash offers.

“Thanks man.”

I watch them walk away, enjoying the way their jeans hug their asses.

“Hey, look guys, it’s the whore that thinks she can survive an all guys school.” Some idiot calls out from our left.

Within seconds, Jensen has him pinned up to the wall by his throat, the darkness that I love surrounding him. I let go of Luc’s hand getting ready to intervene.

“S-s-sorry man, just a joke.” The asshole rasps.

“Jensen.” Trick orders lazily and Jensen reluctantly let’s go of the guy who immediately bends forward and rubs his throat gasping for air.

“Damn you are fucking quick.” Rage smirks.

“You haven’t seen anything.” Rafe grins and Rage’s eyebrows hit his hairline before he chuckles, looking impressed.

I’m glad that he seems to be getting on with the guys fine and it’s just me that he seems to be standoffish with.

“Open your legs for any fucker won’t you, maybe I should give it ...”

The guy is immediately cut off as Jensen swings round his eyes wild, he nails him with one punch knocking him out cold and making him crumple to the floor. His so-called friends’ eyes widen, and they all stumble off, leaving their friend on the floor and clearly drunk.

“I leave for two fucking seconds and you have all the fun without me.” Atlas mumbles as he comes back with Cash carrying beers for everyone.

“Threatened Ever.” Jensen says stiltedly, and Atlas watches him carefully.

“Did he now.” Atlas takes a swig of beer as his eyes connect with Jensen’s. “We can teach him some manners, later?” He offers.

“Abso-fucking-lutely.” Jensen grins viciously and I smirk.

“That really doesn’t bother you?” Rage suddenly asks and we all turn to him.

“Nope.” I smirk taking a sip of my beer and grimacing.

“Sorry Princess, they didn’t have any whiskey.” Atty grins.

“Seriously, you know they’re going to beat the shit of him for threatening to have a go with you, that doesn’t bother you?” Rage pushes.

“Nope, I’d offer to teach him some manners myself but honestly, I think the boys need this more.” I reply.

Rage just stands there, frowning at me as if he can't figure out if I'm manipulating him or being real. It sort of makes my heart hurt for him.

"She's not like Daisy, man." Atlas says challenge in his eyes.

"Leave it." Rage growls back storming through the crowd and down towards the bikes.

"Is he okay?" Luc asks.

"Yeah, shit in his past like most of us." Atlas replies, "Do you want to go and check out the bikes, Princess?"

"Definitely." I grin taking his hand.

It's interesting walking through the crowd with Atlas, they all part immediately scrambling to get out of his way. He clearly carries a lot of influence over the surrounding schools and colleges judging by everyone's reactions.

"Ah nice," I comment as we stop near one of the bikes, "A Yamaha YZF-R1."

"Read that in romance book, did you?" Some guy comments smirking. "Bet you wouldn't know what to do with yourself if you actually had to ride one."

I turn slightly so only the guys can see me and wink. They relax immediately and Jensen smirks as Atlas watches me warily.

"I think you're probably right; I mean I'm quite small and these are all big, heavy bikes that go pretty fast. I'm not sure I'd like that." I say my voice sugary sweet and so different from my usual one that one of the guys behind me chokes. I'm using the same routine I've done a thousand times before when my father sent me to hustle races further afield, we couldn't have angry people in our home city but in others he couldn't give a shit.

"No, these bikes aren't for women." The guy says smugly, running his eyes down my frame.

Inside I roll my eyes and scoff. They're all the same, it's like shooting fish in a fucking barrel. The guys tense at his

look, but I pop my hip and giggle like the airhead I'm pretending to be.

"Oh, I bet." I say laying it on thick and batting my eyelashes. "Maybe I could try though?"

"You want to race?" He says smirking and sharing a grin with the guys around him.

"Well, yeah."

"Sure." He replies.

"Hold up. It's not a race without a bet. Not here, you want to mess around, do it on your own fucking time." Rage says appearing out of nowhere and pushing his way through the crowd his eyes widen when he sees me stood facing off the guy.

"Fair enough, if you win, you get all my winnings from tonight. If I win, I get you for the rest of the night." He grins lecherously.

"Fuck no ..." Rage, Jensen and Cash all say at the same time while the other guys, growl their dislike at the idea.

"Deal." I say in my cutesy voice and causing the guys to start to protest again. I was expecting a deal like that to come out of his mouth it's usually the same with these dickheads.

A thrill goes through me, it's been so fucking long since I've raced and holy fuck do, I miss it. The danger, the speed.

"You can use my bike." Rage growls, coming over to me and hustling me over to his bike, which is gorgeous.

He shoves his helmet at me, and I grin happily.

I suddenly find myself surrounded by eight very angry men.

"What the fuck do you think you're playing at, agreeing to a deal like that!?" Rage explodes before any of the others can although they all nod in agreement.

"What, it's what they normally ask for. I would be more surprised if they asked for money." I shrug, pulling my hair back so it's out of my face.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Rage again explodes, I open my mouth to answer but he shakes his head, the guys all watch him, Atlas looking shocked.

“You know what, never fucking mind. Watch the second bend. I fucking hope you know how to ride.” He grabs the front of my helmet and pulls my head to face him.

Luc steps forward along with Atlas but I hold my hand up to them. He’s not hurting me.

“Puddin’ you better fucking win, I’m not in the mood for murder tonight but you can bet your fucking tight little ass that if you lose, that man will lose his life.” He threatens, his aqua blue eyes flashing dangerously and adding to the thrill. “Be fucking careful.”

Damn, he’s just a little bit fucking hot.

“Aww, you do care.” I tease pulling a face.

“Fucking hell, Ever.” Jensen chuckles.

“Only you would find it endearing when a man offers to kill for you.” Trick shakes his head as Rage grips my helmet harder.

“Promise me.” He practically begs and Atlas’s head whips in his direction complete and utter shock over his features.

“I promise.” I say seriously. “I’ve pulled this con thousands of times before.”

“You done making out with your boyfriend little girl? You won’t be needing him tonight.” He chuckles.

The guys tense and I smirk before winking at them.

“Sure I am.” I giggle, the sugary sweet voice back in place.

The lights go out and I’m off.

Rage

My heart is in my throat as I watch her speed off. I have no idea what's fucking wrong with me and I'm man enough to admit that I'm apprehensive about turning around and facing Atlas and the guys. He explained it to me, and I know that they're all together.

Not that I like her like that. I tell myself, the words sitting heavy in my stomach.

I just spoke to her like I gave a shit though and I shouldn't have. It wasn't my place, but there's something about her that triggers all my fucking instincts. I wasn't fucking lying when I said I'd murder the fucker before he got his hands on her. I know I won't be the only one not willing to let her go through with that bet. The ease that she made it though was telling.

"Well, who knew our Dragonfly was such a good actress." Rafe chuckles.

I reluctantly turn away from the track, I have to admit, she's fucking flying and easily keeping pace with the out of towners. I brace myself to be hit but there's nothing like that. Atlas studies me harder than usual seeing straight through to what, I don't fucking know because I'm confused as fuck. Jensen the fucker smirks at me and the others just nod.

"It's hardly surprising what with who her dad was." Cash replies.

None of us can take our eyes off the track for long.

"She said she raced before?" I ask hoping for some reassurance.

"Yeah." Jensen replies tensely.

"She any good?" I ask unable to stop the worry from creeping into my tone.

"We don't know, we've never seen her race." Trick says his eyes catching mine as we share a look of worry.

"I meant what I said." I reassure them.

"We know and you won't be doing it alone." Jensen growls his reply.

“Guys fucking look at her go!” Riot suddenly yells.

My heart practically flies out of my chest as I think something’s happened to her but instead, I find her flying around the last corner, knee almost touching the floor and at least a bike length in front of the out of towners. As she passes over the finish line the clear winner, she raises her arm in the air and sticks her middle finger up behind her.

I let out a relieved chuckle. *That’s my girl.*

Oh no, fuck right off, that’s dangerous thinking right there. Not mine, she won’t ever be mine and quite happily has seven men. She doesn’t need to add a broken one into the mix and I’m fairly sure one that she’s going to hate when she realises what I’ve done.

Fucking idiot.

The guys all rush to her and I force myself to go at a slower pace. That is until I see the dick head pull up beside her, fling his helmet to the ground and charge her. None of us are close enough to get to her before he does but we all start to run. The guy is mad as hell and is clearly looking to take some of his anger out on her. I swear if he fucking lays one finger on her, it will be the last thing he ever fucking does. Murder is very definitely back on the table.

In a blink of an eye, Ever has him pinned to the floor, one blade at his throat and the other by his dick.

“Tut tut,” She grins. “That’s not very good sportsmanship.” She goads.

A massive grin crosses my face as I listen to her, completely unfazed by the big bastard she’s got pinned to the floor.

Fucking hell, this girl is something else.

The guys create a semi-circle at her back making sure that no one catches her unaware not that I think they could. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Rolly approach, the guy that holds all the money and nod as he approaches.

“Now, if I let you up, are you going to be a good boy?” She practically purrs and Jensen shifts next to me his eyes riveted

to her.

“I fucking love it when she lets this side of her out to play.” He mutters and I find myself humming in agreement before I can stop myself.

I watch the guy closely, hoping that Jensen didn't pick up on my little slip up. The smirk that tilts his lips tells me otherwise, but I ignore it. The guy on the floor is absolutely fucking fuming and I don't trust him.

She gets up and moves back towards us. He immediately jumps off the floor and takes a step towards her before glancing over her shoulder and seeing us stood behind her, ready to take his fucking arm off if he takes one more step.

“She fucking played me.” He growls to Rolly, wrongly assuming that he's in charge of this event.

“Dude it's not my fucking fault you got played.” He replies chuckling and setting the gathered crowd off.

“She owes me a night.” The dickhead tries again.

“No, she fucking doesn't, regardless of whether she played you, she still fucking won.” Rolly retorts.

“I demand to speak to whoever runs this shit show.”

“That would be me.” Atlas growls, quietly.

“You, you're a fucking teenager.” He scoffs but pauses when no one else joins in and steps away from him.

“Wrong.” Atlas replies stepping closer, I step up on his left and Jensen steps up on his right.

I glance at Ever, worried that this is scaring her, but she's just watching it all unfold looking highly amused as she plays with one of her knives, she sees me watching and her grin widens before she winks at me.

The girl is fucking trouble.

Atlas is right, she's absolutely nothing like Daisy. She was manipulative and had a cruel streak a fucking mile wide. Not only that, but she pretended to be completely fine with who I am, encouraged me to show her the real me. As soon as she

saw the raw, broken me, she bolted. It's understandable, it's a lot for someone to take.

Ever, is something else entirely and that's frightening.

Chapter Seven

Ever

I chuckle quietly as Rage practically rolls his eyes at me when I wink at him. It's too late for him to pretend like he's completely indifferent to me now. What he said before I left for the race proves that. I don't know why I rub him the wrong way, but he obviously cares a little bit and I can work with that. We'll be besties before he knows what's fucking hit him.

Yeah besties. My inner bitch scoffs.

"I'm not scared of a bunch of fucking children." The guy I raced claims, pulling a gun out of the waistband of jeans.

I stand up straighter turning the knife in my hand, getting it ready to throw if I need to. I relax when Atlas laughs darkly, he walks closer to the gun, until its pressed right against his chest.

My nightmare flashes across my mind's eye, the image of him bleeding out on the cold floor after his father shot him. I force the images away and focus on the here and now. This is not the time to be distracted. The guys eyes widen as Atlas shows absolutely no fear, within the blink of an eye, Atty has the gun taken off him and pointed it back towards the idiot. One of the men that he was talking to when we first showed up slowly steps forward and whispers something in his ear. Whatever he says has the guy paling instantly and rapidly taking a step back, holding his hands in the air.

"Fuck, look I had no idea." He rushes out.

"You only get one warning, if I or one of my men, see you at one of these events or anywhere in the town, then I'll consider you fair fucking game." Atlas warns, dark promise in his deep voice.

"B-but we've just moved here." The guy stutters.

“I don’t give a fuck; you’ve got three days.” Atlas says, handing the gun off to Rage who takes it apart, keeps a couple of parts and then hands the now useless weapon back to the guy. “Escort him off of the premises.” Atlas orders and a couple of guys detach themselves from the surrounding crowd and forcibly remove him.

A smirk crosses my lips, this is actually pretty damn amusing.

Rolly approaches me grinning as Atty, Jensen and Rage talk about fuck knows what. I have a feeling they’re not going to let the guy get off that easily. After all he’s clearly played the spend a night with me card before and I’d be willing to put all the money I won tonight down on the fact that at least some of them weren’t willing participants.

“Here you go.” Rolly says grinning as he hands over a large stack of cash. “He was our best racer tonight. I have to say you’ve got some mad skills. I feel like I recognise your riding style from somewhere though, have you raced before?”

Ah Fuck.

“Nope, just messed around really nothing like this.” I grin casually. “Thanks.” I add taking the money off him.

“Thanks, Rolly.” Rage says as he, Atlas and Jensen reappear, effectively interrupting whatever Rolly was going to say, he nods and walks back through the crowd greeting everyone as he goes and settling bets.

“What were you guys talking about?” I ask.

“Going after that guy, he can’t be left to make the same sorts of deals elsewhere.” Jensen replies, sounding surprisingly grumpy.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have the time and can’t risk going after him ourselves, so Atlas is sending some of his men to discourage that behaviour in the future.” Rage smirks.

I chuckle, “That explains grumpy.”

Jensen sticks out his tongue and opens his mouth to retort but is interrupted by Riot.

“Why did you lie, Sunshine?” Riot asks, curiously.

“I made enemies.” I reply, shrugging and grinning at the same time.

They all look at me expectantly and I sigh deciding to elaborate.

“Rage told you about the reputation I had,” I start, and they nod, the looks on their faces darkening, as Trick and Cash cross their arms as if preparing themselves for what I’m about to say. “Well, a couple of those guys were from my races, they tried to make similar deals as that fucker.”

“Fucking hell, Dragonfly.” Rafe growls, pulling me close.

“Hang on.” Rage says, his eyes glowing as if he’s figured something out. “Earlier you said that you’d pulled this con thousands of times before.”

I nod, not entirely sure where he’s going with this, his eyes flash dangerously.

“How old were you when you first pulled it off?” He asks and the confusion drops from the guys faces immediately replaced by horror and anger.

“I’m not sure it really matters, even if I lost, they didn’t get what they wanted and after the first few times I lost, I made sure I never did again.” I shrug.

I don’t like the direction this conversation is heading in and they won’t either.

“Can we go home? I’m shattered and we’ve got school tomorrow.” I ask trying to change the subject.

“Firecracker.” Luc says firmly and I sigh, I’m not going to get away with this.

“How old were you?” Atlas asks through gritted teeth.

“Twelve.” I reply crossing my arms across my chest.

“Fucking hell, your father sent you as a fucking twelve-year-old to race against fully grown fucking men.” Cash growls, his hands clenching against his sides.

“There were a couple women.” I grin, trying to make light of the situation, apparently the guys don’t find me amusing.

“He got off, fucking easy.” Rage mutters and I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“Look, I’m fine. Yes, it was shitty thing to go through and there’s plenty more of those shitty experiences that fill the time between leaving you guys and finding you again. There is fuck all we can do about it now.” I say starting to get frustrated.

“Alright, Angel. We’ll drop it for now, we just hate that we weren’t there for you and that you had to go through what you did.” Jensen says, gently holding my face in his big palms and searching my eyes.

“There’s so much that you guys don’t know and none of it is exactly happy and full of fucking roses.”

“We know, and whilst we get that we can’t do anything about the majority of it. Your father already being dead and the people you’ve told us about that you’ve already dealt with, we care about you and we’re are going to be fucking angry when we find out, that’s just how it is.” Luc tries to explain as he gently turns my face to kiss me, Jensen’s large hands resting on my waist.

“Fair enough, I guess.” I reply.

They can’t help their reaction and I can’t help my story, so it is what it is, I guess.

“Come on, let’s go home.” Trick says, his eyes preoccupied, with what, I have no idea.

“You crashing at mine tonight?” Atty asks Rage.

“Sure, why not?” He replies.

The drive back to the house is fairly quiet, I think tiredness is finally starting to kick in, we’ve had a full load last few days.

“Did someone leave a light on?” Rage asks as we pull through the gates.

“Nope, I made sure they were all off before we left. It’s a habit.” I reply.

“Someone’s in the house.” Atlas growls. “Leave the car here. We’ll go in around the side ...”

While they’re discussing the plan of who goes where, I hop out of the car, I’m tired and I want my bed by this point, the adrenaline from the race starting to wear off.

“Everleigh, where are you going?” Rage asks, quickly following me out of the car, the others doing the same.

“I’m going to see who’s in the house, they can’t be that fucking clever since they’ve put a light on, which either means they are dumb as a bag of rocks or they want us to know that they’re in there. Either way, the gates made enough noise when we pulled in, that they know we’re here.” I reason.

“You know she actually makes quite a good point.” Rage agrees.

“You sound shocked.” I reply drily and he represses a smirk before he gives me the middle finger. “You’re so sweet to me.” I say sarcastically blowing him a kiss and making him narrow his eyes.

“Alright you two, fucking quit it.” Trick orders rolling his eyes.

“Let’s go.” Atlas pulls out a gun, Jensen’s already armed with his knives and I’m surprised that a couple of the others pull out guns as well.

I don’t know why it surprises me, I guess they’re just starting to let me see more of their darkness and who they really are.

The fact that they all had guns on them earlier and not one of them pulled one when the other guy did, which would’ve escalated the situation, goes to show not only the skill level that Atlas has, but it also speaks of experience and past situations they’ve been in.

I might have to ask for story time later.

We don't bother keeping quiet as we enter the house, chances are they already know we're here. The only light on is the one in the kitchen and Atlas, Trick, and Rafe, all lead the way, it doesn't escape my notice that I've somehow been manoeuvred so that I'm in the middle of the group, completely surrounded by them. I'm not even sure that they've done it intentionally. It makes me smile.

"For fuck's sake, Jynx." Atlas suddenly curses not sounding that bothered.

I know that name, I push through the crowd of guys.

"No fucking way, Ever?" She exclaims, grinning widely as she sits on the edge of the counter swinging her legs. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"You know each other?" Atlas asks, sounding mildly concerned.

"Oh yeah, we go way back." Deliberately keeping it vague as I share a grin with the blue haired woman a couple of years older than me.

"Why are you here, Jynx and how the fuck did you get on campus?" Atlas asks her, sounding more like a brother than anything else.

"I have my ways." She grins. "D sent me," She starts before looking in our direction.

"You can talk in front of them." Rage sighs.

"Sweet, I was going to tell Ever anyway but good to know I've got permission." She chuckles.

Atlas rolls his eyes, "You are fucking incorrigible."

"Anyway, you know the shipment your father has coming to one of the ports up near us?"

"Yes."

"It's bigger than we thought it was going to be, and now includes weapons as well, we need more men. D's got several teams out at the moment dealing with our own shit."

“Fine,” Atlas agrees easily, “Call in Quinn and the guys from down there. They’ve been itching to get out of that town for a while. They love it but it’s a bit too quiet after a while. Might have to start sending them out on jobs every now and then or Lyric will start causing trouble herself.”

“That’s for damn certain, the woman’s as crazy as I fucking am.”

Rafe comes up behind me wrapping his arms around my waist, I lean back resting my head on his chest and my hands on his arms, sighing happily. I missed him. It’s quite entertaining watching Jynx talk Rage and Atlas around in circles. I haven’t seen her for a long time but the last time I did we had a blast, one of my only happy memories from the years without the boys. Hang on, Quinn? Wasn’t that the guy from the bar near the cabin? I’m certain I’ve heard the name Lyric before, it’s not like it’s an easy name to forget.

“From the bar?” I ask, cutting through whatever Atty was about to say.

“Yeah, Atlas practically runs the whole town. It’s become a safe haven.” Jynx says ignoring the sharp look that Atlas and Rage send her, clearly that’s something that she wasn’t supposed to tell us.

“Quinn, the guys and Lyric all work for me. I sent Quinn and the guys in and they met Lyric, that’s an entirely different conversation but they all work for me now.” Atty says, scrubbing a hand over his face as he clearly decides that it will be less trouble to actually tell us than have Jensen asking him every five seconds.

I glance at Jensen bouncing on the balls of feet, that was definitely something that he was gearing up to do. The guy has got far too much energy considering the shit show of a day we’ve already had.

“They helped me clear the town of anything to do with my father and then stayed to make sure that any scouts that my father sends in, are dealt with appropriately.” He finishes.

“Fucking hell, man.” Trick says. “You’ve got teams?”

“Yes, I wouldn’t be able to deal with my father and his business by myself, fortunately a lot of people are sick of the way my father runs things and nobody wants my fuckhead of a brother in charge. So, they’ve sworn loyalty to me. I actually got the idea from D; he’s been doing something similar down in his area for years.” Atlas says giving us just a bit more information.

“D’s fucking awesome.” I say, grinning.

“You’ve met him?” Rage asks, eyes wide.

“Yeah, Ever’s done a couple of jobs with me and Emery.” Jynx says, throwing me under the bus.

“She fucking what!?” Atlas growls.

“Thanks, Jynx, I appreciate that.” I sigh.

“What’s the big deal?” Luc asks, his eyes darting between us.

“The jobs D deals out are dangerous. Considering I know for a fact that the last time they had a job in Fresno was at least two years ago, that means she was only fifteen if that.” Rage says, his eyes assessing me.

“I had seen and done more by that point that, that job was a walk in the park and fucking fun too.” I reply defensively.

“She kicked ass. D wanted her to come down and work for us, but she refused, it was too much of a risk with her father. I asked D to look into it and he said he had something in the pipeline but after a while I figured that nothing could be done.” Jynx says, regret flashing through her eyes.

A dark scowl descends over Rage’s features, as he shares a look with Atlas. They’re still keeping stuff from us but then again, I haven’t shared everything with them either. When I said I had blood on my hands, I wasn’t referring to a few fights, maybe a light stabbing or two. No, I’ve done serious and irreparable damage. My father didn’t just use me for drug runs. No one knows what else I used to do for him though, not even the men he worked closest with. Most of the jobs, I guess you could call them, that he gave me I enjoyed, men who

deserved it. However, there were a couple where the punishment didn't fit the crime.

My eyes drift over to Jynx and we share a dark look. She knows but I know she won't say anything until I'm ready. She was one of the jobs where the punishment definitely did not fit the crime. I sensed something in her, I helped her escape and the torture I received as a result was horrific, but the things that they did to her and wanted me to do were worse. I don't regret it not even for a second. That's how I met D for the first time, I returned Jynx to him. The second time I helped her deal out some revenge. Her eyes flash with a dangerous glee clearly remembering the same thing that I am, and my savage grin splits my face an echo of her own.

"What was that?" Jensen asks, his eyes narrowing as he glances between me and Jynx.

I glance around, the guys have caught the exchange as well and I shrug at the same time Jynx does.

"Just remembering the good times." Jynx grins.

"I don't buy that." Jensen says and I shrug.

It's not my story to tell and it's as dark as they come. I'm not ready to share my part in that story. The guys know I've done some dark things but I'm not sure how they'd react to any of that. I will put Jynx's mind at rest though.

"D, did help." Her head snaps up eyes meeting mine. Rage looks at me with something akin to panic in his own, I shelf that reaction to take a closer look at later though. "After, it didn't go as badly as I thought it would. In fact, it was like it never happened." I tell Jynx, I have no idea how it happened, but I should've ended up six feet under and I didn't.

Her shoulders relax and she grins.

"Thank fuck. I wanted to come back, but the fucktards wouldn't let me, and D put his foot down."

"How are your men?" I ask grinning steering the conversation back onto safer topics.

Before she can answer, Atty storms up to me, turmoil and dark rage flashing in his eyes. Rage takes a step towards him as if to intervene.

Aww he so cares. Atlas would never hurt me though and I shake my head at him, pulling out of Rafe's arms, that have become like steel bands around me after my conversation with Jynx. I widen my stance and look up at him.

"We will be finishing this conversation, Princess." He growls and my hackles rise.

"When I'm ready, I'll tell you all my fucked up and dark past Atlas," I start pushing closer to him and placing a hand on his firm chest.

"What the fuck?" Jynx exclaims, but we both ignore her our eyes locked in a battle of wills.

"I'll tell you, when you tell me." I finish, my voice firm.

His eyes shutter the moment the words are out of my mouth.

"That's what I thought." I say softly, "It's not so easy when it's your dark that someone want to know, is it?"

He growls, his muscles tense. "Fuck, you're right."

"Body snatcher say what now?" Jynx smirks, "Did the all-powerful Atlas just admit that he was wrong?"

"Fuck off." Atlas shoots back before moving forward and gathering me into his arms, which has a better effect of shutting Jynx up than his words as her eyes widen.

Atlas buries his head in my neck and inhales deeply. "I'm sorry, I just can't stand the thought of you being hurt and I know you have been. It kills me that I couldn't protect you."

"That's stupid." I say bluntly and his head snaps back, "You didn't know me back then you couldn't have protected me. There's a lot of dark in my past Atlas."

Chapter Eight

“Alright, what is going on?” Jynx interrupts and I’m grateful. “Since when are you okay with people touching you?”

“I’m not, just her.” Atlas replies, kissing me once and then letting me go.

Pride swells in my chest, just me.

“Well then, that’s unexpected.” Jynx grins. “Although not that surprising since its Ever.”

“How do you guys know each other?” Cash asks, as I walk over to him and plonk myself down on his lap, his arms immediately wrapping around me.

Jynx’s smile widens as she winks at me.

“We grew up together.” Atty replies flippantly before turning back to Jynx and crossing his arms over his chest as he assesses her. “You could’ve told me about Liam’s shipment over the phone, why are you here?”

“Oh well, one of the guys D sent me after suddenly took a detour up here,” She replies frowning, “Not actually sure why. Do you remember Rusty?” She asks me.

I grin, “Yeah, sleezy fucker, how’s his finger?”

“It had to be removed.” She chuckles.

At the guys curious looks, I decide to elaborate, “He didn’t quite understand the word no, so I took a blade to his finger.”

“Savage,” Rage says, his eyes heating. “I like it.”

“See, I knew you liked me.” I grin triumphantly.

“I said I liked it, not you.” Rage replies, his guard flying back up in a second.

Atlas frowns at him.

I don't know what I've done, but I clearly have some work to do where Rage is concerned. Fortunately, I kind of enjoy back and forth teasing.

"Want to pay him a visit with me?" Jynx offers grinning.

"Fuck yeah." I jump up.

"No." Trick growls, and I turn to him raising my eyebrow.

"I think what Trick means is that it's not safe for you to leave the Academy grounds." Luc says calmly.

"He's right, Dragonfly." Rafe adds, "Not while Atlas's dad is after you."

"Fuck, you're on Liam's radar? How the fuck did that happen?" Jynx asks.

"Apparently, my dad worked for him." I sigh, sitting back down on Cash and he rests his head on my shoulder, pulling me in closely.

A steaming mug of hot chocolate appears in front of me and I glance up at Riot smiling softly, as my eyes drift to Rafe stirring a pan on the stove, I hadn't even notice him move towards it.

"Well in that case, I'm definitely not risking your life by taking you with me." Jynx says, finally hopping off the counter, "Whelp it's been a pleasure, but I really should get going. Places to be, people to kill."

She grins dangerously as she salutes us and strolls towards the front door. "Ever, get my number from Atlas, we need a catch up." She yells back before the door slams behind her.

"Was she serious?" Luc asks.

"About me calling her? Definitely." I reply, knowing damn well that's not what he meant.

"No, about her having people to kill." Luc retorts, smirking.

I shrug, finishing off the last of my hot chocolate before replying, "Most likely."

“Jynx is the best at what she does.” Rage adds in.

“Impressive.” Trick says thoughtfully, his eyes trained on me.

He’s starting to figure out how me and Jynx know each other. Not all the details but the vague idea at least. I’m not ready for that conversation. They’re reaction to knowing what Jynx does gives me more hope that they’ll be understanding of what I did, but I’m still not ready.

“I’m going to bed, guys.” I say, standing up and stretching.

“Good idea, Princess.” Atlas starts, “The fuckers at the school are ruthless, do not let your guard down.” He warns.

The guys all make sounds of agreement and I nod before making my way upstairs. I get ready for bed in a daze, sleep fully trying to take hold. I have no idea who ends up in bed with me, I’m fast asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.

I wake up sprawled across a tattooed chest that can only be Atlas’s. To my absolute horror, I realise that I slept so deeply that I fucking drooled all over him.

Fuck my life.

I try to move really slowly so I don’t wake him, moving my hand so I can wipe the drool off. The chest beneath me suddenly starts vibrating and a chuckle sounds from behind me. I groan. Seriously?

“Sorry I drooled on you.” I mutter, tilting my head up to meet Atlas’s gaze and flipping Jensen off as I wipe the drool off Atlas’s chest.

Of course, my acknowledgment of it just makes them laugh harder and I grumble as I try to untangle myself from the both of them.

“Aw, where are you going, Angel?” Jensen says, pulling me back down and snuggling me back between them.

“Away from you laughing hyenas.” I snark back, trying to hide my grin.

“I don’t mind if you drool on me, Princess. At least it means you got a good night sleep.” Atlas reassures me and I tilt my head up, asking for a kiss.

He devours me, pulling me closer as his hands tangle in my hair. Jensen’s hands start to run up my back, the soft touch making my core clench. I moan as his lips start to follow the same course his hands just took. I pull myself up, moving so that I’m straddling Atlas, his hands flex in my hair and he growls as I grind my soaked, panty clad core against his hard as fucking steel dick. Without any warning he flips us, as he starts to kiss down my neck, strong fingers grasp my chin. Jensen’s eyes are wild with desire as he plunges his tongue into the heat of my mouth, my back arches when Atlas bites down on one of my nipples.

“More, I need more.” I pant.

They are more than happy to help a girl out, as I’m suddenly gifted the glorious view their naked and damn right fucking delectable bodies. Atlas slowly works my underwear down my legs, planting hot and teasing kisses along the inside of my thigh. He licks my clit once, making me moan into Jensen’s mouth, as he palms my boob, pinching my nipple and riding that pleasure pain line perfectly. I reach out as Atlas blazes a trail of searing, hot kisses up my body and grasp hold of Jensen’s dick, he trembles as I start to move my hand in long strokes. Moving so he’s lying next to me, where I can still reach him. He starts to kiss down my neck, still expertly rolling my nipples in his fingers and leaving my mouth free for Atlas. My hand starts to move faster, making him groan and filling me with pride.

Atlas kisses me hard, nipping my lip at the same time as plunges deep inside me. My walls clench around him, my hand gripping Jensen’s cock firmer.

“Fucking hell, you feel so fucking good.” Atlas growls, staying still as I adjust to his considerable size.

I smirk up at him. “No need to be gentle with me, I’m not gonna break.” I challenge, his eyes flare and my gaze moves over to Jensen.

“Fucking perfect.” He growls.

Atlas pulls nearly all the way out of me before thrusting back in. My back arches and I cry out, my hand moving quicker on Jensen. Atlas sets a relentless pace. Jensen dips his head biting my nipple and swirling his tongue around the taught peak, all of the different sensations have me hurtling off the edge and into a truly earth-shattering orgasm. My hand speeds up on Jensen’s dick as I cry out, making him groan as he falls over the edge with me, shooting hot cum all over my hand. Atlas bites down on my neck his hand gripping my thigh tight enough to leave bruises as he pulls my leg up, the new angle allowing him to go impossibly deeper. The extra bite of pain has the tendrils of another orgasm building again my hips rise up to meet his, as his thrusts become harder. I scream as I fall into oblivion once again. Jensen biting my lip and adding the sensations drowning my body. Atlas stills above me roaring his own release before we all crumble into a breathless and sweaty pile.

Atlas slowly pulls out of me, making me groan before he wraps his arms back around me as Jensen lays his head on my chest. All of us enjoy the aftershocks of having sex as we try to catch our breaths.

“That was a fucking awesome way to start the day.” I comment.

“I think we should do it every morning.” Jensen smirks, leaning over me and kissing the tip of my nose.

“I need a nap.” I reply, yawning.

“No time for that princess, we’ve got school.” Atlas says kissing my shoulder before getting up.

“Fuck, how much time do we have?” I groan stretching as I sit up.

“Only enough for one shower.” He smirks.

“Well, I guess we’re sharing!” I call after him, jumping off the bed and grabbing Jensen’s hand, pulling him with me.

“Thank fuck these showers are so big, or we’d never all fit.” Jensen adds, wrapping his arms around me just as the door

bangs open.

“Looks like I missed a damn good time.” Trick grins his eye travelling over my naked form appreciatively.

“No time for that brother.” Jensen smirks.

“Later,” I wink at him, walking up and giving him a soft kiss.

His hands trail over my curves and I sigh softly before stepping back and making my way over to the bathroom, Jensen following closely behind. I hear him groan and grin, loving the effect I have on him. We rush through the shower, and apart from a few lingering touches, manage to behave ourselves before getting out and getting dressed.

“Good morning, Il mio cuore,” Cash greets me as we walk into the kitchen. He hands me a steaming hot cup of coffee, doctored with cream and sugar.

It was only a month or so ago that I was drinking my coffee black in order to save money for food. My life has changed so much since then. I’m in more danger than I probably ever have been but I’m not alone, I’ll never be alone again.

“Hey, where’d you go, Sunshine?” Riot asks, brushing some hair back behind my ear. “Are you okay?”

“I’m good, just thinking about how much has changed in the last month or so.” I admit, sipping my coffee.

“For the better, right?” He asks, vulnerability clouding his eyes for moment.

“Of course, never doubt that.” I reply firmly.

“Good.” He replies simply, his eyes warming with relief. He kisses my lips softly before making his way over to where Rafe is putting the finishing touches to our breakfast. He leans over and gently captures his lips. Making them both smile blissfully.

I glance around the kitchen table at them all, immensely glad that I’m here. My eyes land on a surly looking Rage and I can’t help but want to poke the bear.

“Good morning, Rageykins.” I sing.

Rage’s eyebrows lower into a deep scowl as the other guys all burst out laughing. Trick shakes his head at me as he smirks.

“It’s too early for this shit.” Rage grumbles, ignoring me and turning to Atlas. “When are we going to do that job?”

“In a couple of days. He sent me more information earlier; we should be able to get to him then.” He replies, not looking that comfortable talking about this in front of us.

“Are you bringing them?” Rage asks.

“It’s time dude. I know we’re here sooner than you thought we’d be, but we all agreed that when we saw you again, you’d bring us in.” Trick says firmly, crossing his arms over his broad chest, his grey eyes hard.

“You’ve told us what you’re trying to do, and I can speak for all of us when I say, that we are all in.” Luc adds in.

Atlas stays silent as he looks over each of us, his walls fully up until they land on me and they suddenly drop, allowing me to see the fear and hesitation in their ice blue depths.

“You know they can handle it.” I say softly, keeping my eyes locked on his, “I can handle it too. This is what family does Atty, they fight for each other and they fight side by side. From what I can tell, you’ve been dealing with this shit for a really long fucking time. Until Rage came along it was by yourself. What you’re trying to pull off is a massive undertaking and you’re going to need all the loyal people you can get. I’m not naïve, I know there’s still some things that you haven’t told us. Just like I know that there’s some things the guys haven’t told me, and I haven’t told any of you.” I take a breath making sure they’re all listening. “I also know that you know exactly what they’re capable of, and as far as I’m concerned, I’m happy to prove to you that I can stand toe to toe with the fucking best of them.” I grin savagely. “I don’t run from the monsters in the dark, I end them.”

I take a sip of my coffee as I let my words sink in.

“She makes a fucking good point, man,” Rage says into the tense silence. “You’ve been talking about needing the skillset the guys have since this started. As far as Ever’s concerned, dude, I saw the guy that was sent back to Liam, the only person better than her with a blade, is fucking shadow and no one even knows who the fuck he is.”

My mouth goes dry as my heartbeat pounds in my ears, I school my features praying that none of them notice the reaction that name causes within me. They’re all focused on Atlas and his reaction though which gives me time to bury the memories back in the dark hidden box within my mind.

Not today Satan.

“You’re right.” Atlas sighs heavily running a tattooed hand over his stubbled jaw. “You all need to understand though, despite the fact that we have someone on the inside, with the feds, who gives us the information we need. If we get caught, we will be on our own, he can’t protect us. It’s not legal even though the people we take out are the scum of the earth. The things they’ve done are truly vile. Like I said before there’s various reasons why the authorities can’t take them down themselves and that’s where we come in.”

“We’re focused on disbanding and getting rid of as many of Liam’s associates and crew as possible, weakening him so it’s easier for us to take over. That’s not to say that when we finally take over the business will be entirely legal, the majority of it will be but Liam’s made such an impact on the criminal world that we’d be sitting ducks if we completely legitimised.” Rage adds in.

“The feds are aware of this. There’s an agreement in place. We will occasionally take out those that are on the feds’ radar, but nothing to do with Liam. As well as the jobs that are linked to Liam,” Atlas warns.

“Sounds like what we do lead by Jensen already, just on a grander scale.” Luc shrugs.

As they talk, I start to wonder who this fed is, he’s putting a lot on the line to pretty much be an informant. It wouldn’t just

be us that would be in some seriously deep shit if we got caught.

“It’s not always bloody, sometimes it is just information gathering. Catching the fuckers out so that the feds have concrete proof and can put them away.” Rage shrugs.

“Are you in?” Atlas asks, his face sombre.

“Fuck yeah, sounds like fun.” Jensen immediately responds bouncing on his toes as if he’s ready to go now, the feral darkness I love, darkens his green eyes.

The others nod their agreement a little more calmly but there’s an unmistakable glint of excitement in each of their eyes.

“I can’t take you all on this job with me, there’s too many of you. Rage has got something else that needs his attention and only he is qualified for tonight. You want any back up?” He asks him.

“Nah, I’m good, it’s a simple drop off.”

“Alright then, Trick who do you want to send? I only need one of you.”

There’s a readiness threading through all of them as Trick looks over them, deciding who needs to go. His eyes land on Jensen, unlike the others he’s still bouncing on the balls of his feet, his eyes gleaming with darkness.

“I think that it might be a good idea for Jensen to go.” He says finally.

Jensen’s grin is dark as he nods once in acceptance.

As much as I’d like to go, I’m starting to get that itch for a fight. More than that, the itch to protect. This is the longest I’ve gone without having to protect someone or doing a job for my father. While I’m grateful for the reprieve, especially in regard to the latter, protecting people and fighting has been my normal for so long now that it has become a comfort and a need for me.

I’m craving it.

Unfortunately, my current circumstances of being pretty much confined to the academy grounds, means that it would be incredibly irresponsible of me to go. I'd put myself and Atlas at risk, including the job itself. Looks like I'm going to be benched for the foreseeable future. I really fucking hope that the combat class here is worth it because I'm going to fucking need it.

Jensen clearly needs this more than me, he's wound so fucking tight.

"I want to know all of the details before I send both of you in." He adds, firmly leaving no room for argument.

"Deal. We can go over the details tonight after school." Atlas agrees. "Speaking of which we have definitely missed first period."

"Won't be an issue." Rage smirks.

"Grab your shit, we should make it for second period." Trick orders and we all start to stand.

I'm pretty much ready to go, my mind swirls with all the extra information we've just been given. Excitement fills my veins and I'm once again confronted with the fact that my response is not normal in this situation, but then again, I've never claimed to be normal and I'm so fucking grateful my boys aren't.

Chapter Nine

“Fuck.” Atlas curses.

I whip around and see him staring down at his vibrating cell. Trick walks up beside him and looks down at his screen. His eyes turn hard as he sees who’s calling.

“Answer it, put it on speaker.” He orders. “Guys, quiet.”

The guys all gather around, as we stand there and wait to see what’s going on, Rage’s face is set in a grim frown.

Atlas looks at Trick, and then nods, pressing the buttons on his phone to answer the call.

“Hello, son.” The voice on the other end is condescending and cold, it can only be his father.

“Father.” He replies through clenched teeth.

“My sources have informed me that there’s a girl now attending the academy.” Liam starts, making all of the guys tense and look towards me worriedly.

“Yes.” Atlas confirms cautiously, his eyes locked on mine.

“I want you to get close to her.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea Father, what do you want with some little girl?”

“Do not fucking question me, you little cunt.” Liam roars.

Atlas’s eyes grow hard, the anger building. He keeps his mouth shut.

“I may not be able to get to you or her while you’re on academy grounds, but you’ve both got to leave at some point.”

I tilt my head to the side as I listen to them talk, there’s something almost familiar about Liam’s voice. The guys all seem to know who he was and although I’ve heard of his

name, I haven't actually ever seen what he looks like. I can't seem to place why it sounds familiar no matter how hard I try.

"Yes father." Atlas finishes the conversation; I missed a chunk of it trying to work out why he sounded like someone I've met before.

"Your father is a fucking piece of work." Cash says into the silence.

"You have no fucking idea." He growls, his fists clenching.

"How are you going to handle it?" Rage asks, his eyes watching Atlas intently.

Throughout the whole exchange, Rage has refused to look in my direction as he stands as far away from me as possible, like I smell or have done something to offend him.

"We'll feed him false information. He wants to know when she leaves the safety of campus, either so he can kill her," He starts.

"I don't think he wants to kill her." Trick interrupts, looking thoughtful as he scrubs his hand over the blond stubble on his chin. "It sounded to me like he wants her for something. He wants you to watch her and get close to her. If he really wanted her dead, he could've told you to take her out."

"That's a really good point, I hadn't thought of it like that. Which is in a way more worrying." Atlas agrees, his voice dark, his eyes flashing with danger.

Riot walks over to me, threading his fingers through mine and squeezing them tightly.

"What does he want me for?" I say into the silence.

My heartbeat stays calm. Not only am I used to this sort of threat, but the chances of anyone getting close to me is pretty slim. I have the guys, I know they'd protect me, but ever since that stalker fuck, got the drop on me, I've realised that I've dropped my guard too much. The world that I find myself in now is no safer than the world I was in before. I just have people to protect me now. So, it doesn't all fall on me. It also means that I have people who I need to protect. I can't let my

guard drop. That was my mistake with Jeremy, however being back with the guys and all of the feelings that were overwhelming me, distracted me and that's okay, I'm allowed to have moments of vulnerability.

"I thought you'd be freaking out more, Puddin'," Rage comments eyeing me with suspicion.

"Freaking out isn't going to help anything, he'll still want me for something." I shrug. "It's not like I haven't been in this kind of danger before. At least this time I have people around me that have got my back."

Something akin to admiration crosses Rage's eyes but it's gone before I can really get a grasp on it.

"Damn fucking straight you do!" Rafe growls, although he's using his voice more than ever now, the years of no use have left it with a rough quality that I honestly hope never fades, it makes my toes curl in the best way.

"We'll work it out together." Luc says, his voice firm and protectiveness radiating from him.

"What's our third lesson today, I'm assuming we're now definitely late for our second one." Jensen asks, changing the subject.

"I think its political studies, we have combat after lunch. It's a double period so it's our only lesson this afternoon." Cash answers him.

I haven't even taken a proper look at our schedule.

"Let's get going." Trick says, "We can work out how we're going to handle this situation tonight. We've got to talk about the job anyway."

Everyone agrees and within minutes we're on the way to the main part of the academy. We split up into two groups, Cash, Trick and Jensen coming with me while the others all go together to their own class. When we enter the political science class just after the bell rings, the teacher gives us a nasty look but doesn't say anything. If this is going to be another day of the teachers all ignoring us instead of actually

teaching us, I have to wonder what the point in turning up to lessons actually is.

Fortunately, she does engage with us slightly more than the teachers yesterday, enough to at least hand us the books we need. I doubt she would answer any questions if we needed help though. Which I definitely do, I've never studied political science before since it's not on the curriculum at most high schools. It's confusing to say the least, I understand why they teach it here though. This academy is the school for the elite and as I look around, I can see at least two kids I know to be the offspring of very prominent political figures.

I try my hardest to engage in the lesson and absorb what is being said but most of it goes straight over my head. It doesn't help that apparently this school starts earlier than most and we're several pages into the large textbook. At least that's what I'm assuming, the teacher could just be fucking with us. At this point, it wouldn't fucking surprise me.

If I have any hope of passing this class, I'm going to have to start this textbook from the beginning.

"Did you guys understand any of that?" I ask as we leave the room and make our way to the cafeteria.

"Not a single fucking word." Jensen grins, seemingly completely unconcerned by it.

"Me neither. I would've asked the teacher for help, but I don't think that would've gone down well at all. What is it with the fucking teachers here?" Trick groans.

"I understood it." Cash chimes in.

I turn to gape at him. Noticing that as we're walking through the crowded halls all of the other students are giving us a wide berth. I'm guessing word got out about what happened in the cafeteria yesterday.

"Dad wanted to be a senator at one point, and I looked into it all to help me understand. He didn't go through with it, but I had all of the books by that point." He explains.

I thread my arm through his, "You sir, have just become my new best friend." I joke, grinning up at him.

“I hope we’re more than that,” Cash grins, his eyes darken with heat as he stops, turning to me and backing me up slowly until my back hits the lockers.

Heat swirls in my stomach as I glance over Cash’s shoulder, Jensen and Trick wear matching heated grins, their lips tipped up into smiles that promise deliciously dirty things.

Cash presses his body against mine, pinning me in place and making my body sing as his lips descend on mine. The kiss starts off slow, his lips gently caressing mine. He deepens it, his tongue tangling with mine in the most tantalising way.

“Jensen don’t!” Trick suddenly yells, we break apart, my eyes darting over Cash’s shoulder, Jensen’s eyes meet mine, darkness writhing in their depths, he takes off chasing after some guy I’ve never met.

We all instantly follow.

“He’s not completely in control.” I say as we race through the crowd.

“Fuck.” Trick and Cash growl at the same time.

That’s what I thought, I’ve noticed his darkness taking over more and more. I think Atlas being gone and the various threats we have had to deal with along with the uncertainty surrounding the school have put us all on edge.

Jensen is fucking fast and I’m realising that I’ve gotten a bit lazy since I’ve been back with the guys. That’s not going to be great if I find myself in a dangerous situation, which I will, it’s just inevitable at this point.

We race down several corridors, the further we go into the school, the less students are around, and I start to wonder if maybe we’re being led into some sort of trap. The hallways become less looked after and dusty. We turn a corner and come to a dark wood panelled hallway, lined with doors, looking like they’re leading to classrooms. This hallway is missing all of the modern conveniences of the rest of the school and looks like it’s been completely forgotten.

There’s a layer of dust covering everything. The most interesting thing about this forgotten hallway is the black and

yellow warning tape stretching from one side of the hallway to the other. Jensen skids to a stop, studying it briefly before diving underneath it. We've lost sight of whoever he was chasing for a reason still unknown to me. The dust is thick enough the other side of the tape that you can clearly see the footsteps in it. I share a glance with Trick and Cash before shrugging and ducking underneath the tape to follow Jensen.

He doesn't get far down the hall, turning one final corner before entering the only open door. We all come to a screeching halt in the empty classroom save for us.

"This is weird. It's like it's stuck in time." Cash mutters, glancing around.

I study the room as Jensen starts searching it for the guy we were chasing. Like the hallway, it's panelled in dark wood. The desks are made from the same thing and in a style not seen in modern classrooms. There are papers still scattered on the desks, as if the kids have just gotten up to leave but the layer of dust covering everything shows that it's been a long fucking time since anyone was in here.

The door slams closed, the noise echoing throughout the room and making me jump.

"What the fuck!" Jensen growls, pulling the door. "It's locked."

"I didn't even fucking hear anyone." Trick frowns.

"Can you pick it?" I ask, studying the older style lock.

"I haven't got anything with me." Jensen grumbles.

"Well fuck, what do we do now?" I ask, leaning back against one of the desks and instantly regretting it when a plume of dust rises and causes me to sneeze.

"How is it, you even sneeze cute?" Cash mutters, sounding amused.

I stick my tongue out at him in retaliation, "Call the guys and see if they can come and get us out?" I offer, ignoring Cash's comment.

“Hopefully, Atlas or Rage will know what part of the school we’re talking about. There can’t be that many abandoned hallways.” Jensen shrugs, the darkness bleeding from his eyes as curiosity starts to overwhelm him. “This is pretty cool.”

Trick pulls out his cell, tapping the screen and then frowning.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I’ve got no service.”

“Neither have I.” Cash says.

Me and Jensen pull our own phones out and both shake our heads.

“There’s something odd going on. I haven’t had a problem with the cell coverage since I got here. If we can’t call anyone, then we’re screwed.” Trick observes.

“We’ll just have to wait it out. As soon as we don’t turn up at lunch, they’ll be looking for us. Several guys saw us run in this direction, which should give them a vague idea of where we are.” Jensen shrugs once again completely unconcerned, by the situation.

“That’s true. I don’t understand what the guy’s end game is though. I mean why lead us down here and then just lock us in?” Cash asks, his brow furrowed as he thinks it over.

“What did he say to you anyway?” I ask Jensen.

His eyes clash with mine, flashing with danger, “Something disgusting enough that I’m not going to repeat it. I also wasn’t going to let him get away with it and leave the other fuckwits at this school thinking they could get away with saying the same sort of shit.” He growls.

“Oh, I love when you get all growly.” I tease, trying to lighten the mood.

“You like that huh?” He asks, stalking towards me.

My thighs clench at the heat in his gaze. Well if we’re going to be stuck in here for an unknown amount of time, I can think of worse ways to spend it. My eyes are locked on Jensen, so I

see the second his gaze goes from heated and lust filled to wide eyed and slightly panicked. I don't have time to worry that someone has snuck up behind me though because in true Jensen fashion the reason for his panicked look becomes clear as he trips on a loose floorboard and hits the floor with a thud.

"Holy hell, Jensen are you okay?" I rush over and crouch next to his head.

He just groans and starts muttering about stupid floorboards and a conspiracy.

"Dude, get up." Cash says intently.

"No, it's safer down here." He grumbles and I can't help the chuckle that escapes me, earning a half-hearted glare from him. I clamp my lips shut on the resulting chuckle that tries to escape.

"Seriously man, I think I heard something." Cash tries again.

Jensen groans, but jumps to his feet with grace and dexterity he didn't have on the way down. Cash moves forward as we watch him curiously and starts tapping his foot against the floor where Jensen just was.

"What are you doing?" Trick asks.

"Shh, do you hear that?"

I share a 'he's lost it' look with Jensen but move closer.

"It's hollow." I say, surprised.

Trick bends down and starts wiping the boards, freeing them from the dust. "The floorboards look newer than the ones surrounding this area. You wouldn't be able to tell in less you got up close. They've been made to look as close to the older ones as possible."

"What are they hiding down there, that they've gone to so much trouble of covering up?" Jensen asks.

"I've got no idea, but let's find out." I grin excitedly.

"Really?" Jensen questions, sounding unsure.

“Fuck yeah, we’ve got time to kill. Besides, I’m too curious now to just leave it.”

“Alright, Dragonfly.” Trick smiles softly at me.

“Fine,” Jensen smirks, crouching down and studying the newer boards. “Don’t suppose anyone has a crowbar?” He asks sarcastically.

“No, smartass. But this one looks a little loose. If we can pry this one up, we can use it to pry the others up.” I mutter, looking around the room to see if there’s anything we can use.

We won’t be able to fit our fingers under it to pull it up like that, but we should be able to leverage something underneath to lift it enough that we can reach under and pull. I get up, searching the room and the cupboards to see if there’s anything in here that will help. The guys get up to search as well. I love a good mystery; I always have ever since I was a kid. It wasn’t only cookbooks that I used to read at the library when I had the chance, I also used to read as many mystery novels I could get my hands on. I remember on my twelfth birthday I’d gone in wanting to escape for a bit, at that point it still hurt when my father would forget my birthday. I wanted to lose myself in a book. I hadn’t realised how long I’d been reading for and panicked when it had been hours, as I was rushing out the doors, panic flowing through my veins, the elderly librarian stopped me and handed me the next book in the series I was reading. She whispered happy birthday with a wink and told me to keep it.

It was the first birthday gift I’d gotten in years, and I held on to her kindness for years after. The beating I got when I finally got home was made somehow that much more bearable because I now had the book to look forward to. That book was battered and worn with the amount of times I read it; I can still quote the story. Of course, eventually my father found it, I made the mistake of showing how much it meant to me, and he burned it.

I shake my head to free myself from the memories and bring myself back to the present. Now that I know there is something hidden under the floor, even if turns out to be

nothing but a hatch to access the pipes, I won't be able to let it go until I know for sure. Excitement thrums through my veins as I carry on trying to search for something to pry the floorboards up.

It's nice to focus on something fun for a bit. I don't mind all the serious we have going on in our lives at the moment, but I think it's important for us to have a balance.

Chapter Ten

“What about these?” Trick asks, holding up a meter-long metal ruler. “There’s a bunch of them, if we doubled up, they’d probably be strong enough to leverage the board. At least enough that we can fit our hands in and lift it further.”

“Good, idea. Bring them over. You put pressure on them and try and lift it. Ever, Jensen, and I, will be ready to get our fingers under and help lift.” Cash explains, bending down and getting ready as Trick places the ends of the two long metal rulers under the edge of the boards. I get down next to him ready to do my part, and then look at Jensen.

He starts rapidly shaking his head from side to side, holding his hands up as he backs away. “Nope, not gonna happen.”

“What, why?” I ask, my eyebrows furrowed the confusion as I glance at Trick and Cash.

They clearly know what’s got Jensen in a spin, as they’re both trying unsuccessfully to hide their amusement.

“Why, she asks!” He repeats dramatically throwing his hands up into the air.

My eyebrows hit my hair line at his show of dramatics.

“Do you realise how many fucking spiders could be down there?” He huffs at last and I burst out laughing.

Jensen

“I don’t know why you’re laughing at me; they could be fucking huge and you’re just going to stick your fingers in there, no thank you.” I say firmly.

I am being deadly serious; my fingers will not be going under those floorboards until I can clearly see what’s beneath

them. However, I can't help but smile at Ever's laughter, even if it is at my expense. It's nice to see her so laidback and carefree. We've had some pretty intense past few weeks and although we've had some amazing moments in between all of that, it's clear that something about this mystery means something to Ever. Which you can bet your ass means that we're going to investigate it, just for her.

I will not be putting my hands into a nest of spiders though, no matter how curious I am to see what's underneath.

"Fine, you big baby." Cash chuckles, "Me and Ever will do it."

I stick my middle finger up at him, and Ever laughs harder.

"Alright guys, let's get this done." Trick interrupts, trying to get us back on track, not even trying to hide the amusement in his eyes.

Yeah, laugh it up fuckers.

I huff but stay silent. To be honest, I'm already feeling a bit embarrassed thanks to falling on my face in front of Ever, *again*. It's not like I can help being so clumsy, half of the time I don't even know what I've tripped over and I know that she doesn't think I'm an idiot, but I can't help the small thread of embarrassment that I get every time my clumsiness strikes in front of her. I walk behind them so that I get a better view of what's underneath, one because I'm curious to see what someone's gone to so much trouble to hide, and two, because if there is a nest of spiders down there, they'll get to Trick and Cash first and I can pull Ever out of the way and get us to safety.

"It's coming, nearly there. Guys get your hands under; I can feel the rulers starting to give way!" Trick grunts.

Slowly, the board starts to lift. Ever stands, her ass in the air as she bends over to lift the board, trying to get more leverage. My eyes trace her gorgeous ass, I resist the urge to smack it, barely and only because she could get hurt, if I distract her.

"Guys, you're missing out on a delectable view right now." I taunt the others and they both turn to look at me.

“Lucky fucker.” Cash growls.

My grin widens as Ever, being the minx, she is, starts to put extra sway in her ass. “You keep shaking that gorgeous ass in front of me, Angel, and I won’t be able to keep my hands to myself. Then who’s going to save you when all the spiders come rushing out?”

Her laughter is like balm to my dark soul. Unfortunately, she heeds my warning though, and stops shaking her ass. Looks like she’s not as unbothered by the thought of spiders as she made out.

Finally, the board comes loose, and they lift it up. I step back just in case and when nothing comes scurrying out, I move to get a closer look.

“It looks like a door.” Ever exclaims excitedly.

“Why the hell is there a door in the floor?” I chuckle, “That rhymed.”

“I guess we’re going to find out.” Trick, grins, completely ignoring my other observation.

Now that I know there’s not a nest of spiders down there, I help them lift the remaining floorboards. We end up having to move a couple of desks out of the way, the door beneath being bigger than we had realised. In no time at all, we’ve lifted all of the boards and made a giant mess. The door looks old, if I had to guess, I’d say that it was put in when the building was built, and this building is old as fuck.

I grab the handle of the door, chuckling as Ever bounces on her toes, her beautiful eyes lighting up with anticipation. No matter how hard I pull, I can only get it to lift an inch or so.

“A little help guys?” I mutter sarcastically.

They both grin like the assholes they are but come and help me lift the door. With all of us, it’s a lot easier but it still takes a lot of effort, it’s just so damn heavy.

“Oh, my fuck, there’s stairs!” Ever announces before taking a step toward them.

Trick reaches out and wraps his arms around her waist to stop her from going any further. The small frown that graces her features is adorable and I once again find myself resisting the urge to touch her. It still hits me sometimes; we've really got her back. We spent years missing her, until we were old enough to start looking for her, but by that point, we were becoming a bit hesitant. Our lives had taken a dark path and although we knew we could protect her, we were at war with ourselves about whether it was selfish to bring her into our world. If we had known that she was already deeply embedded into it, there would've been no hesitation whatsoever.

She's perfect for us, in every way. She always has been.

"Before you wander down the dark staircase to who knows where, it might be a good idea to use your phone torch. So, we don't get any nasty surprises." Trick smirks, kissing the juncture between her neck and shoulder.

She sighs happily, her eyes briefly closing before she replies, "Good point, I just got really excited." She shrugs.

She pulls away from Trick and fishes her phone out of her pocket, turning the torch on. She pauses on her way to the stairs and turns to me. She wraps her arms around my waist as she hugs me tightly and I drop a kiss on the top of her head. She's always such a large presence, and so strong that its only when I hold her in my arms like this that I realise how tiny she really is. She only comes up to my chest and the word *petit* fits her perfectly. A quick whip of panic strangles my heart. I know she's strong but she's not invincible.

If I lost her, the world would fucking burn.

"Don't worry, Trickster. I'll protect you from the big mean spiders." She mutters, smiling up at me cheekily.

The guys burst out laughing and I dip my head, pulling her lip between my teeth and biting. She moans, the sound going straight to my dick. I pull back, kiss her once and then step away, smirking.

"That was mean." She chuckles, making her way back over to the stairs.

Pride fills me, as her legs wobble slightly. She's so damn responsive and it's the hottest thing ever. Before she steps down into the abyss below, she pulls out one of her knives, and at our questioning looks, she explains.

"We don't know what's down there, it could still be an elaborate trap or there could be fucking zombies. Either way, I'm not risking it."

"Okay, while I agree that your first reason was sound. Zombies, seriously?" Cash asks, sounding both amused and incredulous.

"And you made fun of me for being scared of spiders." I mutter.

"I did not, I just laughed." She defends.

"Same thing." I point out, as she starts to descend the stairs. I pull out one of my own knives. There are currently seven hidden on my body and I bet even the guys could only find five of them.

"No, it is not." She replies, sounding distracted.

When we get to the bottom of the stone steps, a hallway extends off to the left, I tilt my phone torch up at the walls, made of the same stone as the steps. Lined along the rough wall, are torches meant to be lit. It looks pretty medieval. We follow the narrow hallway, there's only just enough clearance for Trick's head, Atlas, and the other guys would have to duck if they came down here. It takes about ten minutes until we reach another door, this one is easy to open since gravity isn't working against us.

"I did not expect this." Trick mutters as we enter a large room.

Its big enough that our torches don't reach the sides of it. The rough stone floor has these deep grooves, in it almost as if it's for drainage. What garners my attention though, is the long tables set against the walls that hold all sorts of things. There are piles of old dusty books, all of them have a picture of some sort of bird on the front. There are maps all over the walls, and masks painted to look like the bird on the books hung up on

one of the walls. Another wall has jars of what resembles herbs and a burner. It's a bit occult like, but I don't think that's the case here. I think it's more secret meeting room rather than occult space.

There's even a large and very dusty table surrounded by at least twenty chairs.

"It's a phoenix." Ever says, as she studies the front of one of the books.

"You okay?" Trick asks her, picking up on the note of unease in her voice.

"Yeah I'm fine, it's just this place feels dark." She frowns.

"Well yeah, there's no light." I joke trying to ease the tension.

She smiles, "That's not what I meant dickhead." She chuckles, "It feels, sinister, like something very bad happened here. You don't feel that?"

Me and Trick both shake our heads.

"I do, it's like all of my instincts are screaming at me to leave." Cash mutters.

"Exactly." She agrees.

Well fuck, Cash's instincts have always been spot on.

"Hey!" Ever suddenly yells, rushing back towards the door.

She gets there just as it slams closed, pulling on the door and trying to open it.

"What the fuck, is going on?" Trick growls as he tries to open the door as well.

"Some fucker just locked us in here!" Ever seethes.

"Did you see what he looked like?"

"No, he was wearing one of the creepy phoenix masks." She shudders.

"I don't understand the reasoning behind shutting us in that classroom and then shutting us down here. It's almost like they

wanted us to find this place.” Cash frowns, his eyes distant as he thinks it through.

Ever wanders further into the room, shining her phone torch on the walls. Eventually, the torch lights up two doors on the wall furthest from the door we entered by.

“I think we should try and find a way out of here. We can get the guys and some matches to light the sconces so we can see better.” Trick suggests, taking charge.

He walks over to one of the doors, and I thread my fingers through Ever’s, holding her hand tightly. This fun little adventure has turned into something more sinister. There’s a reason that someone wanted us to find this place, we’ve just got to figure out what it is. If it was entirely up to me then I’d suggest that we leave it. We’ve got a lot going on at the moment, what with Liam being after Ever and finding out about Atlas’s plans for his fathers’ business. We don’t need any more dangerous situations, and although so far this hasn’t been dangerous but more of an inconvenience, I’m not trusting that it will stay that way. The stuff in this room practically screams of secret society shit and in a school as rich as this one, that means a lot of danger.

Just because this room appears to have been empty for years, doesn’t mean that whoever used it are no longer around. It could just be that they’ve decided not to use this one. Clearly, someone still knows about this place enough to have one of the creepy as fuck masks.

I get the feeling that Ever won’t let this go though. It’s a mystery and you can practically see her itching to solve it. Which means we’re all along for the ride, to keep her safe along the way. We’ll fit it in around everything else we’ve got going on.

While I’ve been lost in my thoughts, Trick has managed to pull open one of the doors, behind it is a long hallway, similar to the one that led us here.

“Well, it can’t hurt to follow it and see where it leads. At worst we’ll just have to come back here and try to find some

other way out.” Cash shrugs, striding towards the door, me and Ever following behind.

“We’ve been gone for a couple of hours now,” I say, checking the time on my phone. “Classes will have ended, and the guys will be going crazy because they can’t find us.”

By us I mean more specifically Ever. Even Rage isn’t immune to her draw although he’s fighting it. Probably under the misguided view that we’d have a problem with him liking her. The only problem we’d have would be if he hurt her, at the end of the day, we all want her to be happy, if she ever decided she liked Rage in the same way that she likes us, we’d make it work.

He needs to pull his head out of his ass though.

“The floor is starting to tilt up slightly.” Ever comments.

“Hopefully, that means that we’re heading out.” I reply.

We walk down the narrow hallway for ten more minutes before finally spotting a small strip of light. Trick gets to it first and pulls, the door thankfully unlocked. The sunlight is practically blinding as we all exit the tunnels and I find myself blinking rapidly in an attempt to clear my vision.

“Where are we?” Ever asks.

“In the woods that surround the school.” Cash answers, without hesitation.

I really need to actually study the map of the school that we were given when we first arrived.

“Do you know how to get back to campus?” Trick asks, already tapping away on his phone screen, no doubt telling the guys what’s going on and that Ever’s fine.

“Erm, I think so.” He hesitates.

“Well, that wasn’t that reassuring.” Ever teases.

“If we head this way, we should come out near campus. I didn’t get to study it for too long.” He replies.

“Let’s go, I’m freaking starving.” She grumbles, her stomach growling. “And I really want to tell the guys what we

found.”

“We might have to wait until tomorrow to come back and check it out, Sweetheart.” Trick threads his fingers through her other hand, as we all follow a mumbling Cash. “We need to talk about the job Atlas and Jensen are going on tomorrow evening and how we’re going to deal with Liam and his obsession with you.”

My body tenses when he mentions Liam, he may think that he’s untouchable, but Atlas is working hard to bring him down and you can bet your fucking ass that I will personally end him if he comes anywhere near Ever. Like she always seems to, she instantly picks up on my shift in mood and squeezes my hand tighter.

“It is the weekend though,” Cash calls back, “So we’ll have longer to explore.”

“I think I’m too tired and hungry to want to go back tonight anyway.” She shrugs.

We finally make it out of the woods, coming out on the left side near the front, as we make our way across the large expanse of grass, Ever suddenly pulls her hands out of mine and Trick’s and jogs up to some guy just exiting the building. As we get closer, I realise that it’s Peter.

“Hey guys,” He says cautiously, looking around like he’s expecting Atlas jump out at him.

“Hey, I was just wondering if you knew anything about a group that uses the symbol of a phoenix?” Ever asks.

Peter’s face loses all its color as he glances around frantically, he takes a step towards Ever and we step closer as well, ready to remove him the second he makes a wrong move.

“Shh, not so loud. You can’t mention them again where people can hear you.” He says urgently.

“Okay, I won’t, but can you tell us what you know?” Ever asks. He hesitates and her face falls into a pout as she makes her eyes wide. “Please?”

“Shit, you’re good. I don’t even swing your way and yet I’m willing to do what you ask.” He grins warily.

“It’s a gift,” Ever chuckles, “You’ll tell us then?”

“Sure, but not here. I’ll drive you back to your house and tell you what I know on the way. Come on,” He sighs as he leads us across the front of the building to the parking lot.

Chapter Eleven

Ever

I quickly follow Peter, glad that my hunch was correct. When we first met him, he was full of the gossip of the school so I figured that if anyone knew what the phoenix meant, it would be him. The mystery of what was under the floorboards wasn't quite as light-hearted as I thought it was going to be but if anything, I'm just more intrigued now. Especially since it seems like someone wanted us to find it.

Once we're all settled in Peter's car, I turn to him.

"So?" I ask, impatiently.

"I have no idea how you found out about the Phoenix. It's been a closely guarded secret for a while now. The only reason that I know that it existed is because my father was at school here when it all came crumbling down. Back then everyone knew about it, it was like an urban legend, been around since the school first opened. No one had any proof that it existed, but they all knew it did. He wouldn't say much about it. Which was weird because he's as big a gossip as I am." He shrugs. "What I've gathered, is that they were a secret society of sorts. Only the elite were invited to be a part of it and once you were in, the perks were incredible. Even after you left the school. They became people of extreme power and always looked after their own. Even if they were in the wrong."

"So, like most secret societies then." Cash interrupts.

"Yeah, pretty much, except this one was backed by insane amounts of money and power. If you pissed them off, then you'd end up with your family losing their fortunes at the least. They had the power to make the richest of family's, the ones with old money, become the poorest. The initiation was brutal, and the school could do nothing about it. All of the faculty were owned by the phoenix. Even so, everyone wanted

to be in this group. But no one knew and they still don't know who the members were.”

“So, what happened when your dad was here?” Trick asks, sounding as intrigued as I am.

“Five students went missing. There was a massive investigation, a blood trail was found belonging to one of them in the woods, but no body was ever found. Eventually someone came forward and mentioned that they'd heard their roommate talking about the Phoenix. The investigation blew up after that and the phoenix was never mentioned again. The kids were never found and because of the nature of the society, the police couldn't question the members of the phoenix. They questioned the entire school but that led nowhere.

Dad said that although no one knew who was in the Phoenix, there were a couple of kids who were never the same after that, he'd be willing to bet that they knew what had happened. No one was brave enough to point this out to anyone though. After all, it looked like they had just killed five initiates or something equally as bad. It was never spoke of again, and the police just suddenly stopped investigating it.” Peter finishes as he pulls up to the gate outside our house.

“Fucking hell, that's insane.” Jensen mutters.

“Anyone can be bought for the right price.” Cash mutters.

“Thanks for the information, Peter.” I say, reaching for the handle to get out of the car.

“You're welcome, but please be careful. Nothing good can come of it, if the phoenix is back.” Peter warns and I nod.

“Don't worry, we'll be careful.” I reply, trying to reassure him.

I was thinking that we could ask him to ask his dad if he remembered the names of the kids that changed after the incident but it seems far too dangerous and I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if something happened to them because we got them involved. We're far more capable of taking care of ourselves and any dangerous situations that may arise.

I get out of the car and I'm immediately engulfed in again hug, from Rafe.

"You okay Big Guy?" I ask when he finally puts me down.

"Just panicked when we couldn't get hold of you guys. We thought someone had managed to grab you."

"I'm sorry Big Guy, we didn't have any cell service."

"We know, the guys told us, but we're still damn glad to see you for ourselves." Riot adds, his eyes filled with relief.

"Sounds like you guys have had quite the adventure." Luc grins as we all walk into the house, the guys having come out when they heard the car.

"Was that, that Peter kid?" Rage asks, curiously.

He's honestly here enough that I'm surprised he doesn't move in permanently. It's probably a strategic move on their part to help them keep more of an eye on the school.

"Yeah, he had some more information about what we found, so he offered to drive us home and explain on the way." I reply, making my way straight to the kitchen, to find something for dinner.

I'm freaking starving.

Everyone trails in behind me and the guys start to explain everything that has happened since we chased Jensen chasing that guy.

"Want some help?" Rafe asks, making me jump.

I was so focused on trying to find something for us to eat that I didn't even hear him approach. My mind is also full of everything to do with the Phoenix. I have to know what happened to those kids and if we could bring some sort of closure to the families as well, that would be amazing. We can't really do anything without more information and we're not going to find that unless we go back down there.

We have more important things to focus on for this evening though.

"Ever?" Rafe asks again, looking concerned.

“Sorry, I got lost in my mind for a second.” I reassure him. “I’d love some help. I’m starving but my mind’s drawing a blank on what to make.”

I glance over to the table and see that the guys have already finished explaining what we’ve been up to and they’ve started to disperse, going off to do their own things.

“Alright, Dragonfly, how about stuffed chicken breast wrapped in bacon, with a creamy mushroom sauce, green beans, and potatoes?”

My mouth literally salivates at what he describes.

“Yes, fucking please. That sounds amazing. Tell me what you want me to do?”

“Could you mix together in a small bowl, cream cheese, these herbs and some garlic, please?” He asks, handing me a small bunch of different fried herbs.

“Sure thing, Big Guy.” I grin.

For the next hour or so, Rafe and I work around each other in the kitchen. There’s something so comforting about it and ever since the first time we cooked together, it’s become one of my favourite things to do. Every now and then when we pass, he’ll stop me, dip me, and kiss the shit out of me. By the time that dinner is ready, I feel like I’m soaring and have the dopiest grin on my face.

I move to the table, carrying two of the already made up plates.

“You look happy, Firecracker.” Luc says, quietly, a soft look in his eyes.

He’s the first one down here.

“I am.” I smile. “Can you go and get the others please?”

He grins, before yelling, “Food!”

I chuckle as there’s a rush of footsteps, looking around at all the guys as they take their seats, I realise someone is missing.

“Where’s Rage?” I ask Atlas.

“He went back to his place.”

“Nope, this is a family meal. Get him back.” I order.

Atlas’s eyes warm at my words and he pulls out his phone. “Get your ass back here.” He says simply before hanging up.

“Thank you, Atty.”

Five minutes later, the front door bangs open and Rage rushes in. “What’s wrong?” He demands, looking over us all his posture relaxing when his eyes land on me.

“Nothing’s wrong dude, chill. Family meal.” Trick answers him.

“What?” He replies, sounding unsure as he cautiously takes his seat.

“Family meal.” I repeat. “Look, I get that we won’t always be able to do this, conflicting schedules and all that, but you’ve got a job tonight and from now on before anyone goes on a job, I want us to have a family meal.”

The guys all get this soft look, even Atty.

“I er, okay.” Rage stutters, still looking confused and unsure.

I’m thinking that a family meal, and someone demanding his presence because they actually want him there, is an entirely new concept for him. It makes my heart hurt.

The guys all start eating, unsuccessfully hiding their smirks behind mouthfuls of food. Slowly, Rage starts to relax, although he keeps shooting me confused looks.

“Alright, Rage you’ve got your job tonight. Are you sure you don’t want someone to come with you?” Trick starts.

“No, I’m good. Like I said, it’s a simple retrieval job. One of our contacts has some information about Liam’s latest weapons shipment.” He replies, sounding more comfortable now we’re talking about work and something he knows.

“Okay, any trouble message someone.” Trick orders and Rage nods.

Trick has easily fallen into the role as leader and it happened seamlessly, although I know he's itching to know all the information so he can do it properly.

"I'll go through everything with you later." Atlas tells him, sensing the same thing.

"Thanks man, I get that this is your operation," He starts, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck and looking a bit sheepish.

"Nah, we all know that I'm better at doing rather than thinking. I was hoping that you'd take over the thinking side of it. Eventually handle all the jobs that get sent through to us. That won't be possible straight away as I've got to work out a couple of things with the guy we've got in the feds."

"I think he'd be called your handler." Riot interrupts, grinning.

"Fine, my handler." Atlas replies, rolling his eyes.

I smirk, its nice to see them all so relaxed. Well apart from Rage, but we'll get him there.

"Sounds good to me." Trick answers, relief relaxing his shoulders.

"As for the job tomorrow, that Jensen's coming to with me. The guy has been known to drug young girls and then sell them for sex." He growls, lip curling up in disgust.

I swallow the bile that tries to rise, this is exactly the sort of thing that I used to take care of back in Fresno. Just on a smaller scale, I wasn't equipped to take down whole operations, but I could put the fear of god in a few fuckers. My hands twitch for my knives.

"We taking him out?" Jensen asks, his jaw clenching as anger darkens his eyes.

"Unfortunately, not, it would create a bigger ripple in my father's organisation than we're equipped to deal with right now. We do get to give him his first warning and persuade him to choose another career path though." Atlas's grin is razor sharp.

My anger settles knowing that this fucker isn't going to get off lightly, in fact, I'd be willing to bet that his fate will be worse than death.

"Good." Luc growls.

I watch him closely making sure that this conversation hasn't triggered him. Thankfully, he just seems angry as fuck.

"Small cuts on the inside of his hand, where each finger bends and across the palm. Deep enough to take a while heal. Every time he moves his hand he'll be reminded of your message. It'll also make it a bitch to do anything without breaking the cuts back open again. In addition to whatever you're planning to do." I grin viciously as I suggest it.

The guys stare at me in shock. Atlas leans back in his chair, a proud glint in his eye as Rage's gaze turns assessing.

"Tortured a lot of people have you, Puddin'." He smirks.

"I've had to send a message that will be remembered, a time or two." I shrug.

"Well fuck me, you really are perfect for us." Riot grins.

"Who?" Rafe asks curiously.

The guys all lean further forward in their chairs, just as interested in hearing who I inflicted this on.

"There was a girl in my old school, her stepdad, used to visit her room at night." I sneer. My eyes glitter dangerously, I particularly enjoyed teaching that disgusting fucker a lesson. "I had a word with him. Among other things, last I heard, he made a full confession to the cops. He's in jail and still doesn't have full use of his hands. I cut a little deeper on that one. She had a little sister."

"Fuck." Rafe growls looking a little pale.

"Why do I feel like that's not all you did to him, Princess?" Atlas raises his eyebrow.

I hesitate, I got dark getting my revenge on that guy. Its about time these guys start to understand how far my darkness extends though. We're together, they're all mine and I'm

theirs. This is our family and they should know, just a bit at a time though.

“I cut his dick to ribbons. He won’t be able to use it to hurt little girls anymore.” I say grimly.

“Fucking hell.” Jensen exclaims.

I look at him worriedly but his grin is dark and full of pride.

“That’s my girl.” He adds.

“Yeah I don’t think we’re going to have to worry about Ever when it comes to the brutality of this life.” Rage says, sharing a look with Atlas.

“Not even a little bit.” Trick grins.

I breathe out a sigh of relief that my dark past hasn’t scared them off yet. I used my darkness to save people and although I’m not ashamed of that, I do know that it would be hard for someone who didn’t grow up like I did to understand. I could’ve taken my father out, I’m aware of that, but at the end of the day he was still my father. He was also protected, I could’ve taken him out, but I would’ve lost my life at the hands of his men in the process.

It left me feeling helpless, so I started protecting others.

“As far as Liam is concerned. We’ll let him think I’m doing what he asks so he doesn’t escalate his plans or try something in order to get to Ever. I’ll also try speaking to my contact that’s in his inner circle and see if he knows why he is obsessed with Ever. Normally, if he suspected someone of betraying him or someone who works for him to the cops, he’d have them taken out with no questions asked. But for some reason, he wants you alive and brought to him. Which is fucking concerning.” Atlas, frowns staring at me intently.

“We can feed him false information.” Cash suggests, “I can even set up a couple of false social media accounts. We could post where we’re going to be and see what their response time is. We won’t actually be there; I’m not risking anyone’s safety but knowing their response time and who Liam sends could be useful information in the future.”

“Good idea, you do that but keep us all in the loop. Don’t post any locations yet just keep it simple. We’ve got enough on our plates at the moment. Try to keep faces out of it as much as possible as well.” Trick orders.

“Can you keep the location that you’re uploading them from hidden? Liam’s got a pretty good hacker on his payroll.” Rage asks.

“Yeah that’s easy enough.” Cash shrugs.

“It is?” I ask completely out of my depth when it comes to anything electronic or technical.

“It is if you know how.” Cash grins.

“Impressive.” I compliment and his grin widens, lightening his hazel eyes and making the green flecks in them smoulder.

“Great, we’ll just deal with any other issues that come up.” Riot adds in.

“Since we haven’t got anything planned until the evening tomorrow, I was wondering if we could go and check out the bunker we found?” I ask.

“I don’t see why not, I’m pretty curious about it anyway.” Riot shrugs.

“Especially since someone obviously wanted you to find it. We can take some lanterns down and something to light the sconces you guys said were down there.” Luc says, looking excited.

“I want to see if there’s any information about the members down there. I want to find out what happened to those kids that went missing. It feels important.” I say, hoping I don’t sound as crazy as I feel.

I like mysteries but I’ve latched onto this one pretty freaking hard.

“I’m up for that. It would be nice to be able to give the families some peace of mind. We do need to be careful though. The phoenix was fucking powerful in its day, from the sounds of it.” Atlas warns.

“That bunker was built when the school was built, it stands to reason that the phoenix has been around for at least that long too. Societies like that don’t just disappear, it may be gone from this school, but I can guarantee that its still out there. Are you really sure you want to drag all of this into the open, it could get deadly? Luc’s eyes land on me.

“I’m sure, but I understand if you guys don’t want to. We’ve got enough going on at the moment.” I shrug.

It means a lot to me to look into this, but if they think its too risky then I’m not going to do something stupid like try and investigate it myself.

“The curiosity and mystery surrounding the whole thing is killing me,” Rafe rumbles, “So how about we all go and check it out tomorrow, see what we can find out, and if it seems too risky at any point after that, we leave it.”

“That works for me.” Trick agrees. “Ever?”

“Yeah, that sounds good. I don’t want to risk it if it gets too dangerous.”

“Great, now that all the serious shit is out of the way, how about we watch a movie?” Jensen grins.

“I ordered popcorn in the grocery order we got.” Cash grins.

Jensen whoops and throws his hands in the air making the rest of us chuckle. We all clear up from dinner and then settle down on the huge couch to watch a film. Eventually, Rage’s muscles start to relax as the tension leaves him and he starts to enjoy the film, letting his guard down the smallest amount.

Chapter Twelve

I stare up at bedroom ceiling. Both Trick and Luc are snoring on either side of me and normally I'd be right there with them. We spent the evening watching movies until Rage had to leave for his job. As soon as he walked out of the door, I felt twitchy. Admittedly I'm worried about him. I know that he said it was simple retrieval, but I really wish he would've taken someone with him. I don't like the idea of him being by himself.

It's ridiculous to be worrying about someone who does this as regularly as he does and who clearly has mixed feelings about me. One minute he's treating me with cold indifference and the next, he's sounding impressed and advocating for me. He's a strange mix. I think that sometimes I make him nervous like he doesn't quite know what to make of me.

I lie there for a bit longer before deciding that it really is useless and I'm not going to be getting any sleep. I slowly get up, being careful not to disturb Trick and Luc. Once I make it to the end of the bed, I grab Luc's hoodie and pull on some sleep shorts before quietly making my way out of the room and downstairs, figuring that warm milk might help me get to sleep or failing that at least it will give me something to do. The house is silent, everyone fast asleep like I should be. I leave all of the lights off apart from the ones in the kitchen, cooking in the dark is not a good idea and bound to end in disaster.

My bare feet are chilly against the tile of the kitchen floor, and I briefly entertain the idea of going back upstairs to grab some socks but dismiss it quickly, I don't want to wake the guys up.

Setting the milk to heat on the stove, I search the cupboards to see if I can find any honey. *Milk and honey is the classic sleepy drink right?*

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t think anyone would still be up.” Rage suddenly says from behind me, making me jump.

“Holy shit dude, you’re like a damn ghost.” I mutter, turning the stove off before turning to face him. “Shit!” I exclaim.

Rage is leaning heavily on the doorframe, one arm wrapped around his ribs. Most likely meaning that he’s done some damage to them. His face is bruised, his knuckles bloody and split. The thing concerning me the most though, is the large gash on his forehead, even from here I can tell that it needs stitches.

“Sit down.” I order, grateful that he doesn’t try to argue with me for once and actually sits his ass down at the table.

I search through the cupboards, pulling out a medical kit, glass bowl, wash cloth, and whiskey. I carefully fill the bowl up with warm water aware that Rage is watching my every move and bring everything over to the table and take a seat near to him.

“It’s okay, I can do it.” He says swallowing nervously.

“You have a cut on your forehead that needs stitches. I have stitched up many wounds, mostly on myself. I promise you I can do it well enough that you’ll barely scar. If you’re worried about the needle you won’t even be able to see it.” I try to reassure him, before adding, “It’s pretty damn difficult to stitch up your own forehead.”

He stares at me intently. Searching for something in my eyes, I don’t know if he finds what he’s looking for, but he reluctantly nods.

“Good, clean the blood off your face while I get everything ready. Are your ribs, bruised or broken?” I ask, assuming that he’s had broken ribs before and knows the difference.

“Bruised.” He replies shortly as he dips the cloth into the warm water and begins to clean the blood off his face.

His eyes watch me like a hawk.

“What happened?” I ask quietly, still rummaging through the medic kit.

“It was an ambush, not for me but for the informant I was meeting. We both got out, but it was a fairly close call.” He explains, surprising me that he answered at all.

“Do you need to send a clean-up crew out to the location?” I ask.

His eyes snap up to mine as his gaze once again becomes assessing. “Already have.”

“Good, you need to move forward so I can reach. I found some numbing cream but it’s up to you if I use it.”

“No numbing creams.” He says his eyes going wide.

“If you’d rather I go get one of the guys to do it, I don’t mind.” I offer, starting to get the feeling that there’s more to this than not liking needles, it’s almost like a trauma response.

That thought sends anger flooding through me, but I quickly push it away, he does not need my anger right now. I watch as he takes a deep breath, briefly closing his eyes, when he opens them again, they’re filled with a steely determination that I admire.

“No, it’s okay, you can do it. Just talk to me whilst you work?” He grimaces as his voice trails off, like he’s embarrassed.

“Of course. Alright, I’m going to start now.” I warn him, moving slowly. He tenses and I try to think of ridiculous topics of conversation to put him at ease. “You know I could never finish watching titanic, it seems like an utterly ridiculous film to me. My favourite colour is black, and I’ll fight anyone who tells me it can’t be. I don’t get everyone’s obsession with chicken nuggets; I just don’t get it. When I was six before I left the boys, I desperately wanted to be a librarian, I love books. But even back then, I had terrible people skills.” I carry on listing ridiculous things about myself in a bid to distract him while I stitch up his cut.

I even catch a few miniscule smiles at some of the things I say.

“I don’t like puppies.”

“What, who doesn’t like puppies?” He gasps sounding completely outraged.

“It’s not that I like hate them or anything. I just prefer it when they get to the age where you’ve trained them, they don’t shit in the house anymore and you’ve had time to develop a proper bond with them.” I defend myself, “I like puppies, I just prefer it when they’ve grown up. Done.”

“That actually makes a weird kind of sense.” He mutters, reaching up to run his fingers lightly over the cut, “That was quick. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I say, getting trapped in his gaze, he leans closer before his eyes widen and he abruptly sits back, rubbing a hand through his curly, dark auburn locks.

“I better get going.” He mutters as he stands up and starts to head towards the door, I watch his retreating back, feeling confused.

We almost had a freaking moment then and I’m not quite sure how to handle it.

He pauses when he gets to the door, his hand on the handle ready to pull it open and make his escape. That is what he’s doing, he’s escaping from whatever the fuck that was. His back tenses and he looks over his shoulder at me.

“Do you miss him?” He asks, the question clearly important to him.

“Who?” I frown, not really understanding where he’s going with this.

He turns fully and leans back against the door, “Your father.”

“Oh, fuck no.” I growl and his eyes widen slightly as if he expected me to say something else. “It probably makes me the worlds shitiest person, but I am so grateful that he’s dead.”

I haven’t ever said that to anyone out loud before but its fucking true, I wanted to dance for joy when that cop told me he’d been killed. It may make me a shitty person, but I think

after everything that asshole put me through, it's understandable. My eyes roam over his face, unsure of where the question came from, he's frowning heavily, his jaw clenching. He seems to be fighting himself over something.

Just as I think he's going to say something, his shoulders sag slightly and he turns back to the door, pulling it open. Again, he hesitates, on the threshold. I want to tell him to just say whatever is on his mind, but I get the feeling that one word out of me and I'll spook him, I may never know what this is about. Instead, I get up and walk further down the hallway, waiting.

"I was there." He mutters, not looking back at me. His knuckles have turned white, he's gripping the door so damn hard.

I tilt my head, "Where?"

"When your father was killed. It was a job, D ordered it. We knew he had been trying to get someone out of a shitty situation for a while. He got word that time had run out, so he called in a favour. I was the one that killed your father." He says, his voice cold as he slams the door behind him.

What the fuck.

Rage

The sound of the door echoes behind me in the quiet of the night and I rush to the car like the coward I am. I don't know why I decided to tell her the truth. I was there that night, I had specific orders to take out her father. Our fed contact got me all the gear and I seamlessly blended in with the rest of them. None of them even realised that I wasn't really a cop.

I don't regret it. He deserved to be taken out, what I do regret though is the way that Ever will see me now. She said she doesn't miss him but that doesn't mean that she won't hate

the person that took him out. I hope I haven't just fucking dropped D in the shit too.

Why did I tell her?

I'm self-destructive, that's fucking why. She was so gentle while she stitched me up, never accidentally on purpose pushing the needle too deep and instead of berating me and telling me how useless I am for getting hurt in the first place, she tried to distract me from it with silly facts about herself. Women have not been kind to me, so it baffles me that she would be. She wanted me there for family dinners and insisted I'm there every time someone goes on a job, like I'm actually a part of this family.

Me?

My mind spins as I speed through the quiet streets and back to my house. I make it there in record time, easing my sore body out of the car and into the house, finally, I get to my room, lock the door and collapse on my bed, my mind still torturing me.

I'm not worthy of being part of a family, I know that, but she makes me feel like I could be. Atlas is the closest thing I've had to family, ever. The women who raised me, hated me and I've never figured out why.

There's a part of me that wanted to tell her because no matter how hard I try to keep my distance from her, there's something about her that just keeps pulling me in. I didn't want there to be this massive secret between us. I'd rather know that she hates me for it now instead of later, if I actually start to let my walls down around her, on purpose. She has an uncanny ability to make them crumble with no effort on her part.

I'm man enough to admit that it fucking terrifies me.

Send me on a job where there's a high possibility that I'll die, no problem, but put me up against Ever and I'm done for.

That's where the self-destructive part of me comes in, if she hates me then I don't have to deal with the feelings I'm developing for her. I know I can't have her; she's got seven

men who love her. I'd never get in the way of that and I can't even let myself think of the possibility of her including me as one of hers.

I stop my thought process right there, nothing good can come of that.

I close my eyes, resigned to a restless night's sleep, I can't even avoid her for a few days, Atlas wants me there tomorrow.

Fuck.

Ever

After Rage's confession last night, it took me even longer to get to sleep. He didn't give me a chance to reply, to thank him. It's become my mission for today, he needs to know that I don't hate him or any other ridiculous notion that may be going through his head. The bed dips behind me and I open my eyes, turning to face a shirtless Riot. I glance around realising that Trick and Luc have already gotten up, deciding to let me sleep. I vaguely remember them each kissing my cheek softly before they went.

"Good morning, Sunshine." Riot greets me.

"Morning, what time is it?"

"Nearly lunch, Rafe sent me up to get you." He smirks. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I couldn't sleep last night." I reply and he raises his eyebrow at me in question, "Worrying about Rage." I admit.

"That's understandable." A knowing glint in his eyes but no animosity.

I frown, "Is it?"

"Yeah, Sunshine." He reassures me.

I scoot closer to him, done with this conversation. My eyes greedily take in his bare chest, tracing the dips and grooves of his toned muscles. His eyes heat as he watches me admire him,

I swing my leg over so that I'm straddling him and his hands grip my hips, his eyes make a searing path over my curves. I dip my head down and start to slowly kiss along his collar bone, his head tilts back as he runs large, rough palms up my back, dragging my shirt up and pulling it over my head in one swift move. Once my head is free, my mouth immediately claims his. His tongue swipes along the seam of my lips and I open up for him, my hips grinding down on his hard length, heat floods my core. His hand reaches between us, dipping into my underwear, he growls as his fingers slide through my wet folds.

He gently circles his fingers over my clit, moving tantalisingly slowly, driving me wild with his teasing touch.

"More, I need you inside me." I breathe on a moan, already nearing the edge of the cliff. I want to come with him inside me.

The sudden tearing of my underwear makes me smirk against Riot's lips as he easily tears them and throws them off to the side. I lift up slightly, my lips never leaving his as he removes his sweats, his hard cock springing free. I slowly lower myself back down onto him. We both groan as he's fully sheathed in me. My walls clench around him and slowly start to move, loving the deliciously unhurried pace. His hips rise up to meet mine. I can feel my orgasm building as his hard length hits exactly the right place.

My mouth breaks from his as I rise up slightly and he raises his head, capturing one of my nipples in his mouth, and swirling his tongue around the pebbled peak. The sensation sends a zing of desire straight to my clit and my hips speed up, increasing the pressure, changing the angle slightly allowing him to go impossibly deeper. He kisses my neck, biting down and sending me hurtling over the edge and into an orgasm.

His thrusts speed up prolonging my orgasm as he reaches his, the friction making mine last longer than I thought possible. I collapse on top of him, my head in the crook of his neck as his arms wrap around me, holding me close. As our breaths slow, I tilt my head and look up at him.

“Are we late for lunch now?” I ask, smirking cheekily.

He chuckles, “Nah, he was only just starting to make it when he sent me up, we should probably hurry though.”

“Well, I’ve certainly worked up an appetite now.” I chuckle, moving off Riot and sitting on the edge of the bed, stretching. “I’m just going to shower quickly.”

“Okay, Sunshine. I’ll meet you downstairs?”

“Sounds, good.” I reply, starting to make my way into the bathroom. “Is Rage here yet?”

“Not yet, why?”

“I just need to talk to him.” I reply vaguely, not wanting to tell the guys what he told me last night until I’ve had a chance to talk to him myself.

His eyes fill with curiosity, but he just smiles softly and nods.

After a quick shower, I start to dress in some comfy sweats before remembering that we’re going to explore the bunker today. Instead, I opt for light blue, distressed skinny jeans, a grey loose oversized shirt and a dark blue zip up hoody. My doc martens are downstairs by the front door and perfect for exploring the bunker in. I quickly do my make up and throw my wet hair into a messy bun, I can’t be bothered to do much else with it right now.

My stomach rumbles, reminding me I missed breakfast as I make way downstairs. Not that long ago I would’ve been able to go days on the minimal amount of food that I could find, and my stomach wouldn’t start grumbling. A wave of gratitude over comes me at how far I’ve come since then. The added bonus of eating regularly, of course means that I actually have an ass now, I’m pretty fucking proud of that.

Chapter Thirteen

I take a seat at the table as my mind wonders over everything that's happened recently.

"Morning, Firecracker." Luc, grins, kissing me on the cheek and placing a coffee and a sandwich down in front of me.

"Morning guys." I say to everyone.

They all grin, the majority of them having food stuffed in their faces making me chuckle. Its silent for a moment while we all eat.

"I miss Dad." Jensen suddenly says into the silence and we all look at him.

"I miss my mom and dad too. This is the longest I've ever gone without speaking to them." Trick replies.

"Yeah, and you know full well your mom is going to be freaking out." Luc smirks, making us grin.

"I miss Rylie too." I add. "I didn't get to say goodbye and she was so consumed with Red that I didn't even really see her that much before we went."

"Hopefully you guys will all be able to call your parents soon." Atlas says. "There's a parent's day in a couple of weeks, the detective might let them come to that, but I doubt it."

"Yeah. Thanks man, I don't think we want to put them more at risk by inviting them to that, even if they could come." Trick mutters, before changing the subject. "So, I thought we'd all head out to see the bunker after lunch. Atlas and Jensen don't have to leave for their job until after dinner, so we've got plenty of time."

"Sounds good, Rage should be here any minute." Atlas adds.

Lunch is finished quickly as my mind stays stuck on the people we've left behind. I really miss Rob, Jenny, and Kat especially, and I wonder how Kat's relationship with Marc and Rich is going. I could really use a mom cuddle from one or both of them right now. Rylie, I was missing before all of this, but we connected so quickly that I refuse to believe that this is as far as our friendship goes. It may not be for a while, maybe even years, but we will be in each other's lives again, I've just got a feeling.

After lunch, I make my way to the door to find my boots, the guys all hanging around either doing the same thing, searching the cupboard by the door for lanterns and matches or just sitting in the front room waiting until we're all ready to go. I've just finished pulling my boots when the front door opens. Rage freezes when he sees me, a flash of regret darkening his eyes briefly before he steels himself.

Atlas's gaze switches between me and him curiously, landing on his stitched forehead and then looking at me with surprise colouring his features.

I stand up and slowly walk towards Rage, he tenses like he's expecting me to lash out at him but doesn't back up, almost as if he thinks he deserves it. Which gives me a tiny glimpse into his past and makes me angry as fuck. I push that feeling away though. Standing up on tiptoes, I gently hold his shoulder and jump slightly, pressing a light kiss to his stubbled cheek.

His eyes snap to mine as he stares at me shocked, his hand drifting up to touch his cheek.

"Thank you." I say, making sure he knows I mean it; his eyes widen even more before they dart away. "You saved me. You brought me back to the guys and for that I owe you, Rage."

I don't ever offer a debt to someone; you never know what they'll want in return. I think Rage understands the severity of the offer I just made him though, as he studies me intently. He nods slowly, seeming unsure.

"What's going on?" Trick asks.

The guys all come into the hallway, having heard what I said to him.

“Rage is the one that killed my father.” I grin.

They each look at me concerned, trying to make sure if I’m actually okay with this or not, and Rage just continues to stare at me. As soon as they all realise that I’m fine and happy, they grin.

“Come on let’s go, I want to explore.” I say excitedly as I walk towards the front door and pull it open.

“She’s a force to be reckoned with, isn’t she?” Atlas mutters behind me, sounding both amused and proud.

“She really fucking is.” Rage replies, making me grin as I walk further out of the door.

“Don’t worry dude, you’ll get used to it.” Jensen chuckles. “Well, technically you won’t, she still knocks me on my ass.”

“What car are we going in?” I ask, changing the subject as my heart swells at Jensen’s words. “Oh, holy shit that was you following us the first day!”

I turn to Rage and his lips tilt up in a smirk as he nods.

“Your car is stunning.” I compliment.

“If everyone’s okay with squishing in, we should all fit in the SUV. I don’t want us separating at the moment if we can help it.” Trick orders, pausing and looking at Rage.

“What dude?” Rage asks, seeming uncomfortable.

“That’s just his thinking face.” I stage whisper out the side of my mouth and Trick smirks.

“I think it might be a good idea for you to come and stay in the house with the rest of us. I don’t like that you’re so separated.”

You can instantly see the effect that Trick’s words have on him as his eyes fill with heart-breaking hope. I swear when I find out who hurt him so much, they better hope that they can outrun my knives. Rage’s eyes dart to Atlas, seeking permission.

“I was going to ask you to move in after I came back from my last job, but I got a bit distracted.” He waves a hand in my direction and I stick my tongue out at him. “There’s a spare room upstairs or if you prefer, there’s plenty of rooms downstairs you can choose from.”

“How have we been here for several days and I still haven’t explored the rooms downstairs!” I exclaim, throwing my arms up in the air dramatically.

“Alright miss drama queen, we can do that over this weekend.” Cash smirks, trying to stop himself from laughing at my theatrics.

“Deal.” I say, with finality.

“Come on, I think the excitements getting to you. Let’s go explore your bunker.” Luc teases.

We all pile into the SUV and it’s a squeeze but since we’re not going far and we’re staying on academy grounds I figure it’s alright. Trick’s behind the wheel of course and Atlas gets the front seat all to himself although Jensen did try to sit on his lap and a wrestling match ensued that had me in stitches.

“Rage you can grab your stuff this afternoon. I’d rather you were in sooner than later.” Trick says from the front seat.

“Yes boss.” Rage replies and the guys chuckle as Trick rolls his eyes.

“He may be the boss, but he hates it when we call him that, so we call him that as much as possible.” Jensen explains to Rage a wicked glint in his eye.

Rage just chuckles.

“Guys are we going in through the same classroom as before?” I ask, “Is the school even unlocked on the weekends?”

“Shit, I hadn’t thought of that.” Trick frowns.

“I should be able to lead us to the entrance in the woods. The one we came out of.” Cash says.

“It would probably be best to go in that one anyway, we’re less likely to be seen that way.” Riot adds in.

“Good point, alright well I’ll park in the main lot and we can walk from there.”

“Urgh, walking.” Jensen groans.

“For someone who can fight as well as you can, without breaking a fucking sweat your lack of interest in any kind of exercise is baffling.” I chuckle.

“What can I say, I’m a mystery.” He winks and I let out a surprised laugh.

It’s not long before we arrive and I jump out of the car quickly, accidentally elbowing Rafe in my excitement.

“Sorry!” I exclaim as I practically fall out of the door.

The guys burst out laughing. We gather all the supplies the guys had the forethought to bring while I practically bounce on the balls of my feet, far too excited.

“I’ve not seen you like this since you were a kid.” Rafe says quietly, as we watch the others walk ahead slightly all following Cash.

“It’s a mystery. I absolutely adore mysteries. It’s one of my favourite genres to read.” I admit knowing he loves books as much as I do.

“Mine too.” He agrees, reaching down and threading his fingers through mine.

“So, you’re just as excited as I am, but hiding it better than?” I tease, looking up at him.

His grin widens, a dimple popping in his cheek, but he stays silent.

“I knew it! I’m onto you Big Guy.” I mutter.

“My legs hurt.” Jensen grumbles from behind us.

“Dude, we’ve only been walking for ten minutes.” Luc calls back, incredulously.

“I know, we must’ve walked miles!” He groans dramatically.

“Hardly.” I snicker.

“Oh, you think my pain is amusing!” He exclaims with mock outrage. “Hey, Angel?”

“Yes Trickster.” I reply, looking back over my shoulder at him.

“Catch me.” He calls.

My eyes widen as he takes a running leap. I barely catch him and stagger, laughing my ass off. He whoops from my back. The guys all staring at him like he’s lost his damn mind.

“Dude, I’m going to drop you.” I giggle.

He gasps, “Are you calling me fat!?” He exclaims.

“Yep.” I reply popping the ‘p’, “Now get down.”

“Fine, spoilsport.” He chuckles, getting off my back. “How much further?” He whines sounding like a child.

“It should be just around this corner.” Cash replies, rolling his eyes.

“Sweet.” He suddenly darts past me and Rafe, running up to the front and around the corner.

“I thought your legs hurt.” I call after him, sounding amused.

“They’re good now. This is so cool.” He yells back.

I rush around the corner. We’re in an area of densely packed trees and bushes which means that unless you knew where it was and were looking for it you wouldn’t be able to see the entrance to the bunker. Trick and Rafe put their backpacks on the floor and start handing out lanterns and packs of matches.

“We didn’t have that many lanterns so we’ll use them to guide us to the bunker but when we’re in there, we’ll have to light all the sconces and candles so we can see everything clearly.” Trick explains.

“What are we looking for exactly?” Rage asks, accepting a lantern off him.

“Anything that could give a clue as to who was actually in the Phoenix. The names of the kids who disappeared would be helpful, so that if we did find out who was in the Phoenix at the time, we can match up names and see if they relate to one another.” I say frowning.

“We’ll figure it out, Sweetheart.” Trick says.

“I can do some digging when we get back and see if I can find anything about the missing kids.” Cash says.

“That’d be great.”

We pull open the old door and descend into the darkness. It feels a lot creepier travelling down than it did coming out. The place gives me the creeps if I’m honest but that just makes me even more determined to figure this mystery out.

As soon as we get down into the cavernous room, I start to light all the sconces and candles. It adds to the dark and foreboding feel of the room, the flickering light creating shadows along the mottled grey stonework. We leave the lanterns on to help add more light to the room. As soon as I’ve finished lighting the last candle on my side, I turn to look at the room in better light, we could barely see anything last time we were down here and a need to find a way out overtook the want to explore more.

“What the fuck.” I mutter, walking towards the other door that’s on the back wall.

The one next to the woodland entrance. We pretty much ignored it last time but now that there’s more light, I can clearly see the staining on the stone floor. It looks like it seeped out from underneath the door and started making thin trails towards the grooves carved into the floor in an intricate pattern. I’ve seen a lot of blood stains in my time. Old and new. There is no mistaking that’s what that is.

“Guys.” I call out gaining their attention and gesturing towards the door as I walk closer.

“Is that blood?” Cash asks.

“It seems like it, although it looks like someone’s tried to clean it up. It’s smudge all around the edges like it’s been spread in their efforts to get rid of it.” Atlas murmurs.

“Blood’s damn impossible to get out of stone.” Rage adds in.

“It’s coming from under the door. Or at least it did originally, that’s an awful lot of blood.” I reply.

“Which means there’s probably more on the other side.” Jensen says grimly, reaching for the handle.

He pulls it but it doesn’t budge.

“This time I came prepared.” He grins, pulling out a lock picking set.

He crouches down careful not to stand in the stain of blood and gets to work. It doesn’t take very long until we hear the lock click. We all shuffle closer morbidly curious as he pulls the door open. What lays behind is truly horror film worthy. I hold up my lantern to get a clearer look as Trick and Atlas shine giant torches into the room of horrors.

What it illuminates is truly disturbing. Like outside the door someone’s obviously tried to clean up but not succeeded. There’s a massive blood stain covering the stone floor. Arcs of blood decorating the walls in a macabre painting. The height of them suggesting arterial spray. Along two of the walls are displays of all kinds of weapons, some of them missing from their designated spots. There’s even a practice dummy used to perfect hits. There’s drag marks leading from the large blood stain on the floor towards the door. Suggesting that whoever was killed here, there’s no way anyone could survive this amount of blood loss, was dragged out to be disposed of.

“If I had to guess I’d say that this room was used to practice weaponry and hone their skills. Something clearly went very wrong.” Atty mutters.

Cash cautiously steps into the room, moving around the space and studying it closely.

“There’s too much blood for it to be from one person.” He mutters. “It’s even on the ceiling.”

The rest of us lean further into the room and look up. Sure enough, the spray of blood is decorating the ceiling as well. They'd obviously given up trying to clean it by this point though as it's a dark brown and some of it looks like you could flake it off.

Gross.

"Maybe those kids were killed in here?" I ask.

"Most likely. I can tell that it's more than one person, but I couldn't tell you how many exactly." Cash shudders as he walks back out.

"Should we tell someone about this?" Luc asks.

"I don't think that's a good idea. We know Phoenix are influential and they could easily sweep this under the rug if they have the right person in the right department which from what Pater was saying is highly likely." Rafe explains.

"So, until we've got more evidence and know the right people to tell, we keep quiet." Trick says and we all nod.

"Let's see what else we can find." I say, moving away from the room of horrors.

I'm now even more determined to find out what happened here.

We all spread out through the room looking for any more information we can find. Jensen firmly closes the door to the room of horrors.

"What about the guy that locked you guys in here?" Luc says suddenly.

"What about him?" Rage asks.

"Well, he led them down here, so he must know what's behind that door."

"If he does then he wanted you to find it. We won't know the reason why he wanted you to find it unless he tells you himself and I don't see that being likely." Jensen reasons.

"That's true, just so long as it doesn't turn out to be a trap of some kind." Rage replies.

“We’ll make sure we’re as prepared as we can be, in case that happens.” Trick assures, him.

While they discuss it, I keep looking around the room. My eyes land on a large phoenix painting, there’s several grime covered paintings hanging on the walls but this one is by far the largest.

Surely, they wouldn’t be that obvious.

I decide to check anyway because really, I’ve got nothing to lose. I’m disproportionately disappointed when the only thing behind the large, and might I add heavy, painting is just stone walls. Deciding to commit to it fully since I’ve already come this far, I decide to tap the stones and see if one of them comes loose like in the movies.

The third one I press shifts slightly and my excitement grows. *No freaking way.* I push against it harder as sounds of the guys rummaging around echo throughout the room. It doesn’t move any further back, but it does shift more. I glance around trying to find something that I can use to pry the stone out. I find this old letter opener resting on a padded chair next to the painting and I’m sure that it’s been used for this very reason in the past.

I alternate in sticking it in different sides and slowly working it out. Finally, it comes out and I can see a glint of metal hidden beneath. Once I’ve worked the first one out, the rest are easy to pry loose, and I carefully stack them to one side. They’re big enough that it only takes six to hide the large safe. They aren’t full size, as they’ve been broken in half so they’re much easier to move than the full-size ones would be.

“I don’t suppose any of you know how to crack open a safe?” I ask turning to face the guys.

Chapter Fourteen

“Actually, I do.” Luc smirks.

“You do?” I ask, not hiding my surprise.

“Yeah, my father started hiding documents and information in a safe. I wanted to know what he was hiding, mostly because he started acting shady as fuck. It’s how I found out about all of the dodgy shit he had going on.” He shrugs, stepping up behind me as I turn back to face the safe, he wraps his arms around my waist and rests his chin on my head, studying the safe. “I don’t have any of the tools I need to open this one though.”

“You might not need it, look what I found.” Riot says handing him a piece of paper.

“This looks like it’s just be written.” I say as I read the numbers.

“So, the guy that led us down here, left it for us?” Jensen asks, frowning.

“That’s what I’d assume.” Riot shrugs.

Luc turns the dial to the numbers in the sequence and the door pops open.

Inside are piles of papers, a large leather-bound journal and a small locked box. The papers look like a mixture of blueprints for various buildings, and a range of other things. My gaze immediately lands on the book and I carefully pull it out. I flick through it, getting frustrated when all the pages appear to be blank but at the very back is the thing we’ve been looking for, it’s a list of names. There doesn’t seem to be that many of them, so I don’t know whether it’s a list of who the current members were at the time, or just the most important members, or maybe even pledges. I turn the page, my eyes scanning the neat handwritten names.

“A page has been ripped out of this.” I say holding it up for Atlas to have a look at.

“You think it was the guy that gave us the combination?” Rage asks.

“It doesn’t look freshly ripped; the edges have started to yellow.” Atlas replies looking closely at the torn edge.

“I think that’s enough for today, we’ve got to get back so there’s enough time to eat dinner and for Atlas and Jensen to get ready to go.” Trick says, “Grab everything that we’ve found and load it up into the bags. We can do some more research and look over everything properly when we get home.”

“I don’t like that this guy is so involved.” Rafe says, “What’s his end game?”

“Hopefully, we can figure that out too.” Atlas says.

We all gather everything that we’ve found, blowing out all of the sconces and candles, making sure we aren’t going to set the whole place alight when we leave. When we come out of the bunker, I get the strangest feeling that we’re being watched, but looking around, I can’t see any sign of movement. There’s not even any sign of someone else other than us being here. I shake it off as just left over from the horrific discoveries we’ve made in the bunker.

Whatever happened in there was incredibly violent. I’m willing to bet that it has something to do with the missing kids. Although I think it’s safe to assume, they’re dead now.

Murdered.

I don’t know what I was expecting to find, it’s not like we could find them alive after all of these years. I guess there was a small part of me that hoped that’s what was going to happen, but there’s fairly conclusive proof that they’re all dead. I want to know why. They were either pledges or members. Someone, somewhere, must know what happened down there. Hopefully, the names in the notebook we found will lead us to more information.

The walk back to the SUV goes quickly and I'm practically bouncing with excitement again. As soon as we get back to the house, we all head straight to the kitchen and lay everything out over the table. We were only down in the bunker for a couple of hours so there's plenty of time to make dinner and for the guys to get ready to go on their job.

Cash jogs upstairs and comes back down with his laptop, "I'll set it up so no one will be able to trace the search back to us. Just to be safe, I'm not willing to risk it at this point."

"I wouldn't even know where to start doing something like that." I say.

He grins, "It took me a while to learn. I'm by no means an expert, but I can do a few basic things that come in handy."

"I figure if you search to see if you can find any media coverage of missing students from this school, we can see if we can match any names in the back of the book." Trick suggests.

"Sounds good, give me a few minutes."

I sit down next to Cash and watch curiously as he types in lines of code before he searches for something. The longer he searches, the deeper his frown gets.

"I found something, it was buried deep and looks like someone's tried to delete it, but I got it," Cash says his frown clearing.

The others gather around us to see what he's found. I pull the book closer to me so I can start scanning the names.

"So, it's really short, pretty much just tells us everything that Peter already said, but the names of the five missing students are, Thomas Blake, Dimitri Molicova."

"That's the last name of one of the men that Liam has business dealings with." Atlas interrupts.

"That's a pretty fucking big coincidence." Riot mutters.

"Then there's Trent Williams, Chase Woods, and Amelia Clydesain." Cash finishes, frowning heavily.

“A girl?” I ask frowning, flipping through the pages of the book and double checking. “There’s no girl mentioned here, all the others are though. I thought this was always a school for boys.”

“It was. They never even tried to send a girl. You’re the first.” Rage says.

“So, who was she then?” I ask.

“A partner of one of the others maybe?” Rafe says.

“They don’t seem like the type of group that would include women in their midst.” Trick says.

“The last name sounds vaguely familiar, but I can’t remember where I might’ve heard it.” Luc adds in, frowning heavily, his eyes unfocused.

“Anyone else think that this whole thing had something to do with her? That she was the catalyst to it all going so wrong?” I ask.

“Most likely.” Riot hums in agreement.

“There’s not much more that we can find out online. I had to dig pretty far to get that much information. We could start asking around about the other names, but I don’t want to raise suspicions.” Cash says.

“I can get my contact in the feds to look into them.” Atlas says, reaching over for the book.

“That would be great, they’d have access to things that we don’t and information that the media wouldn’t have known about too.” Trick agrees.

“Alright, leave it with me. I’ll let you guys know if I hear anything back from him.” Atlas says, typing on his phone, his eyes switching between the screen and the book.

I thought there were two A5 pages of names when I first looked at the book, but they are all double spaced taking up two lines each, so there’s fewer names in here than I first thought. It couldn’t have been all of the members. I know it was exclusive but in a school this size, with this many

extremely powerful and influential people in it, they had to have more members than that.

Which makes me think that this is the list of initiates.

How a woman got involved and became one of the missing students is really bugging me.

“Let’s leave this for now. Jensen and Atlas need to start getting ready soon and we all need to have dinner before they go.” Trick orders.

My heart warms that they’ve taken my request seriously.

“Want to help me, Dragonfly?” Rafe asks, motioning towards the kitchen.

“Sure.” I grin.

Cash

I read over the article again. There’s something bugging me about it, there’s very obvious holes in the story, key bits of information that no journalist would miss on purpose. It’s the basic stuff like the exact date that the kids went missing. It says that there was a blood trail found but doesn’t say where or whether the blood loss was of any significance. I repress a shudder at the thought of that blood-soaked room we found in the bunker. There is no way that the police found that and then just let the information drop. No one could get away with sweeping that under the rug unless the entire local police force at the time were on Phoenix payroll. That’s the other thing that doesn’t seem right, they mention the local police force but there’s no mention of the feds or anything like that.

In a case this big, it’s very unlikely that this would’ve been left to just the local cops. Not only that, but this is the only news article I’ve found and it’s from a local newspaper.

“Atlas,” I ask, he glances up at me, still reading over the list. “Can you ask your guy to look into a journalist, Rebecca Walsh? Something doesn’t add up with this article, and I think it might be a good idea to talk to her.”

“Sure man. Nice catch.” His gaze moves to Ever. “Princess, I just want to make sure that you definitely want to look into this. Sending this message could open a massive can of worms. He could also prohibit us from looking into it any further. We need this working relationship with him, so we’re going to have to listen to him if he does that. He wouldn’t ask us not to investigate this unless he really feels that it’s too dangerous. He knows what we’re capable of.”

Ever studies him as she thinks. I love that she doesn’t immediately jump on the defensive or try to argue. She thinks it over calculatedly weighing her options before she makes her decision. She’s lived a life where she is fully aware of the disastrous implications that can happen from making the wrong decision. While I hate that she’s been put in these sorts of positions, she’s come out the other side, stronger and able to make quick and calculated choices on a moment’s notice.

It’s fucking impressive.

“I get that. If your guy wants us to stop looking into it, then we will. I’m not putting your plans at risk and I’m also not going to make you go against someone that you clearly respect.” She pauses. “I am willing to take the risk that he asks us to stop though, I want to know what happened to them, that room was like something out of a horror movie. Someone is trying to get us to work it out and until it proves too dangerous or we get told not to, that’s what I want to do. So long as it’s alright with the rest of you?”

“I’m hooked on it.” I reply, truthfully. I have the same need to know what happened to them as she does.

“Me too. I think there’s too many things that are dragging us to look into this case. Even the fact that one of the victims has the same last name as someone who does business with Liam. It’s all too coincidental.” Trick agrees as well.

The others all call out their agreement from the sitting room where they’re playing on one of the game consoles.

“Fair enough.” Atlas grins as he sends the text.

Dinner is delicious as always when Rafe and Ever cook. The closer it gets to Jensen having to get ready, the more excited and fidgety he gets. I understand his excitement and I'm sort of a bit disappointed that I don't get to go. Trick made the right decision though, Jensen needs this. It's better that he goes on a sanctioned and specific job than he takes it out on some kid that's doing something dodgy here. It's always justified, and they always deserve it, but Jensen sometimes doesn't think past that to the consequences. Which can sometimes lead to other issues.

"You ready to gear up?" Atlas asks Jensen grinning.

"Fuck yeah, we get gear?" He replies excitedly and I chuckle.

"Of course."

We all follow Atlas as he makes his way out of the kitchen and down the long hallway of doors that we still haven't properly explored, maybe that's what we can do while they're gone, because I know for a fact that none of us are going to be able to sleep until they're back safe. Especially after Rage got ambushed, he said it was for his informant not him, but I still want to be cautious.

"This is insane." Riot exclaims.

The room Atlas has led us to is huge. It's a bit like the weapon/safe room that we have at the cabin, just bigger. Which actually makes a lot more sense now that we know who his father is. Along with the multitude of weapons, there's also various other tech like earpieces and wires. They've even got protective gear that includes bullet proof vests and helmets. I spot some suits of full leathers for riding bikes as well.

"Are you guys taking the bikes?" Rage asks, eyeing Jensen somewhat warily as he lovingly strokes a blade.

"Yeah, that's the plan. We need to be in and out as quickly as possible. While we're gone, get the guys to help you move in." Atlas orders and Rage nods.

"Where is the location?" Trick asks, folding his arms over his chest.

It's driving him crazy that he doesn't have all the information, I hope Atlas makes good on his word and fills him in on how this whole thing operates, because Trick is the best operations manager that they could hope for. He'll make sure that we're all safe, and that the job gets done.

"It's a warehouse on the outskirts of the city, about an hour's ride away. I'll give you the coordinates and we'll each put a tracker in our boots. Just in case anything goes wrong. My guy knows that we're heading out there tonight and will be on standby in case something doesn't go to plan and we need police involvement. We'll be long gone before they actually show up." Atlas says. He pulls out a file and hands it to Trick. "This is all of the details on the guy and the warehouse."

Trick grins, relieved that he's got something he can look over and make sure that they've got the best shot of succeeding. While Jensen and Atlas finish getting ready, the rest of us explore the room and Trick studies the file intently.

"What entrance are we using?" He asks.

"The west side." Atlas replies immediately.

"And exit?"

"I was planning to use the same one." Atlas says, rising his eyebrow curiously as he walks over to where Trick is still sat reading over the folder.

On his back is strapped a massive machete.

I can't help my grin. That looks fun.

"If something doesn't go to plan, then it's a good idea to have a second exit just in case you can't use the first. Look here," He says pointing to something on a map of the building and the surrounding area that was included in the folder. "Right there, you should be able to get the bikes through and circle back around to make it back out onto the main road."

"Good call." Atlas grins, "Jensen come and study the second exit. If we get separated, use this one and head home."

"Got it." Jensen grins, "You ready?"

“Yep, here.” Atlas says throwing him a leather bike jacket and pulling on his own, which hides the machete strapped to his back.

Jensen has a few knives in view, but I have no doubt that he’s got more hidden elsewhere. They’re also both armed with guns.

We say goodbye, leaving Ever with them to say goodbye more privately. She’s grinning as she waves goodbye at the door, but I can see the worry in her eyes. She knows the guys are capable, but that doesn’t change the fact that they’re still going to be in danger.

“Let’s go get Rage’s stuff. We’ll set him up and then explore the rest of the rooms, while we wait for them to get back.” Trick suggests.

“Sounds good to me. My housemates are out for the rest of the night anyway, so now’s a good time to go.” Rage replies.

The trip to Rage’s place is super quick, mainly thanks to the fact that he has very little stuff. It makes me wonder about his parents, to come to this school you have to be extremely rich unless you’re put here for protection like all of us. I would’ve thought that they would’ve mentioned it if that was the case though so why is it, he only has the bare essentials.

“Did you want the room upstairs or one of the ones down here?” Luc asks him before we start emptying the SUV.

“Have you seen the room upstairs, it’s the size of my freaking closet,” Ever announces coming out of the house.

“Yeah, I don’t think he’s been in there since we first arrived, and he’s forgotten how small it really is.” Rage chuckles. “I’ll have one of the ones downstairs.”

“It’s a good thing you decided that because Ever insisted and we’ve already started to bring the furniture down out of the upstairs one. There was barely any room to move.” Riot groans.

“We haven’t chosen a room for you though, I thought you might like to do that.” She grins at him and even from here I can see him practically melt.

It's hardly surprising.

Ever grabs his hand and pulls him into the house, to choose his room. It's a comical sight, seeing the giant, heavily tattooed man being helplessly dragged along by a five-foot-three pixie.

I chuckle as I follow behind them, this is going to be fun and at least keep us entertained while we wait for them to come back.

Chapter Fifteen

Jensen

We slow to a stop outside the warehouse, pulling in closer to the second exit that Trick pointed out. It seems deserted from here but looks can be deceiving. We park the bikes, making sure that they're out of the way and placing our helmets on them so we don't have to lug them around with us.

"We can't kill anyone in here." Atlas warns, "Unless it's a kill or be killed situation then don't kill them."

"Got it." I grin.

"According to my source, he's hiding out in there somewhere. We need to convince him to tell us where he's keeping the girls." He growls.

"How come the feds can't do this job?" I ask curiously.

"Because they've bought him in for questioning before and he stays silent, no one can get through to him. We can use methods that they can't." He grins viciously, handing me a pair of leather gloves as he pulls on his own.

Excitement thrums through my veins, this guy deserves what he's about to get, those women deserve so much better than the fate that this sick bastard has planned for them. I'm prepared to get my hands dirty in order to save them.

With that warning out of the way, we silently make our way towards the side door. As we get close, I see a guard stationed just to the right of it, playing on his phone. Atlas easily knocks him out, pulling some zip ties from his pocket and securing him to the railing.

Inside is cavernous, with piles of empty crates. There are no more guards though, which I find suspicious.

"What's the betting the idiot is hiding in the office?" I mutter quietly, pulling out a couple of knives and nodding up

to the set of metal steps in the back-left corner.

Atlas chuckles silently and we make our way over to the steps, with no more sightings of guards. The office has two large windows on either side, that are fortunately covered by blinds. So, he has no idea that we're coming. Atlas counts down from three on his hand before turning and kicking the door open easily. I immediately launch a knife, pinning the fucker's hand to the table before he manages to get his gun and making him cry out.

He scowls deeply, getting ready to make all kinds of threats until his eyes land on Atlas and he pales, falling silent.

"Fuck." He whimpers.

"Now, Donald, is that anyway to greet me?" Atlas goads.

For now, I step back watching him do his thing and keeping an eye on the warehouse floor below, it echoed pretty damn loudly when Atlas kicked the door in. So far there's been no movement, but I'll be damned if we get caught out on my first fucking job.

"Where are the women?" Atlas asks, his casual question somewhat undermined by the knife he spins in his hand.

"What girls?" Donald asks, eyes wide.

I walk over, yank my knife out of his hand and pull out some zip ties, securing him to the chair, his palms facing up. When atlas raises an eyebrow in question at me, I explain.

"Easier access." I smirk, darkly.

Atlas seems to understand what I mean as he nods, then without any warning, he punches the guy in the face, snapping his head back as blood spurts from his nose.

"Try again." I smirk.

The guy stubbornly stays silent and Atlas nods at me.

My turn to play.

I take my knife as the guy starts to struggle in his chair. He curls his hand into a fist and I pry it open, using Ever's idea I start methodically slicing his fingers everywhere they bend, I

cut pretty deeply, doing it slowly to increase the pain rather than let him have the justice of doing it quickly.

“Where are the women?” Atlas’s voice is cold and threatening.

“He’ll kill me.” The guy pants out.

“You think I won’t?” Atlas’s voice is deceptively calm.

I slice a deep cut along his palm. Moving swiftly, I grab a handful of hair and pull his head back, my knife resting on his throat, Atlas grins.

“They’re downstairs.” He gasps sounding panicked.

“You hid where you’re keeping the women?” I ask incredulously.

What kind of dumbass does that?

With one punch Atlas knocks him out. “Gag him and then we’ll go see if he’s really stupid enough to keep the women here.”

I make quick work, finding the most disgusting thing I can in his office and gagging him with it.

“If he does have them here, that would explain the lack of guards out here. They’re probably all with the women.” I comment.

“Keep an eye out.” Atlas warns.

We carefully make our way through the warehouse and towards the only door in here. Beyond the door is a long desolate hallway, the guard at the end spots us almost instantly, but I launch one of my knives adjusting my grip and aim so that it hits him handle first, right in the middle of his head. He slumps to the floor and I grin as I stride up and secure him with cable ties. I cable tie his feet as well since there’s nothing else I can attach him too and I don’t want him to escape. None of these fuckers deserve the option of escape.

We carry on moving forward, as soon as we open the next door, we’re greeted by a flurry of fists and loud booming of a gun going off. I pull my own gun as I pistol whip the guy

aiming his fist at my head and shoot another in the knee, causing him to collapse in a bloody heap on the floor. I do a quick head count, three left. Atlas has taken down two as well. I shoot the one trying to escape in the knee and take a running leap towards one of the others, a bullet whizzes past my head, so close I can feel the heat from it.

Fuck me, that was close.

He gets in a couple of good hits catching me in the jaw before I take him down, realising that now is not the time to play.

Unfortunately.

Once they're all down, we go around securing their hands and feet and knocking them out at the same time. *Whiney fuckers.* Once they're finally down for the count, I turn towards the door that they were all guarding, and brace myself for what may lay beyond, before finally pulling it open and walking slowly inside, Atlas hot on my heels. I halt the second my eyes adjust to the darkness, holding my hand up for Atlas to do the same.

I crouch down trying to make myself as small as possible as I share a horrified look with him. Huddled in a corner together are around fifty women, all of them beaten, dirty, and severely malnourished. They've tried to form a protective barrier between us and as I peer closer behind the first row of women, still keeping my distance, bile rises in my throat.

"They're kids." I whisper harshly.

"Can't be older than thirteen, if that." Atlas replies.

His eyes are bleak as he watches them. "They're eyes are unfocused." I add, trying not make any sudden moves and end up scaring them more. They all watch us fearfully, tears streaked through the dirt on most of their faces.

"They've been drugged so they're easier to handle." Atlas sneers.

"We're here to help you." I try speaking a little bit louder, they all shrink away from me and start whimpering.

My heart breaks for these women and girls. This image is going to haunt me for the rest of my life. My rage starts to bubble inside me.

“It’s no good, they aren’t going to trust us which is understandable.” Atlas says as he stands and slowly starts to back out of the room.

I do the same but as I near the door, I can’t help but turn back to them, “You’re safe now. We’re going to get you out of here.”

I turn and gently close the door behind me, kicking the nearest guard to me in the face hard.

“I’ve got a plan, first we need to make sure that these are all the guards, we need to do a quick sweep and then I’ll make a call.” Atlas reassures me, his eyes darkening with violence.

“Let’s do it then. I don’t want them here any longer than they have to be.” I say firmly.

We work quickly to clear the warehouse and Atlas stops me just before I start up the stairs to confront the disgusting fucker in his office.

“One sec, let me make a call out of ear shot.”

I nod and cross my arms over my chest, itching to find some justice for these women.

“That fucker you sent us after is keeping the women in the place that he’s hiding out.” Atlas growls into the phone without greeting. “There are nine guards, all of them have been incapacitated. You need to send several teams, female officers. The women are understandably terrified of us. Ambulances and child services.”

“What!?” I hear barked from the other end of the phone.

“There are fucking children in there. They’re in a room in the back, through the only door in the warehouse. Careful with your torches, its pitch black in there. You’ll find Donald in the office up the metal set of steps, he’ll have about half an hour from when you get here until he bleeds out. I’m not keeping

this cunt on the payroll. There's enough evidence here to convict him." His grin is dark as his eyes promise pain.

He hangs up after listening to something else his guy says. "We've got about ten minutes before they get here."

"What's the plan?" I ask.

"We can't kill him. We try to avoid doing that wherever possible unfortunately, in this case. We can make him pay for those women and girls though."

I nod my understanding I know I can't kill him, and I understand why we try to avoid doing it unless absolutely necessary if we didn't, we'd be almost as bad as the fuckers we're taking out. I follow Atlas up the stairs pulling out one of my knives, this time my face is blank of all expression. The guy starts to struggle, having come around from where Atlas knocked him out. The smell of piss permeates the air as his gaze switches rapidly between me and Atlas, unsure which one of us is the bigger threat. Have fun figuring that one out fucker, we're of equal standing in this instance.

Atlas punches him in the face, hard enough that I can hear the bones in his cheek break as it instantly starts to swell. I throw my knife, embedding it in his stomach before walking over and yanking it back out harshly. His bellows of pain turn into screams as Atlas, plunges a knife into his leg at the same time as I plunge mine into his shoulder. I twist as I pull it back, creating the most amount of pain possible and hopefully rendering his arm useless.

The image of those women trying to protect the younger girls' flashes through my mind. Even knowing their fate if they get in the way those women, drugged to the fucking eyeballs, still tried to protect the children. Their strength is truly inspiring, and it gives me an idea. I'll have to wait until we get home to put it in place though.

I stand back, watching curiously as Atlas pulls the machete from the sheathe on his back. In a show of utter brutality and without any hesitation, he swings the blade down, severing Donald's hand with one strike. Donald screams in pain and promptly passes out as his severed hand falls to the floor.

“You better wrap that or he’s going to bleed out before the cops get here.” I point out casually, as I scan the desk looking for a pen and some paper.

“Good point, let’s not give him the easy option of death.” Atlas replies.

He searches the room and finds an old jacket, covered in filth and grime. “Perfect.”

He picks the severed hand up from the floor with the jacket and places it on the desk in front of the slumped Donald. Then he tightly binds the stump, slowing the bleeding.

Checking his watch, he turns to me, “Come on, dude we’ve got to go.”

“One second.” I say, finishing writing a list of the guys crimes on the note. I search the desk finding a stapler quickly and once again grab a fistful of hair, he doesn’t even stir as I staple the note to his forehead. “Alright, let’s go.”

Atlas smirks but doesn’t say anything as we make our way back downstairs and through the warehouse, we’re both splattered with blood. But thanks to our dark clothes and gloves, its hardly noticeable. We can hear the sound of sirens in the background, getting closer as we make it to our bikes. Atlas holds out a bag and we both put our bloodied gloves in it.

“I’ll burn them when we get home.” He explains.

“We need to find a way to securely let Trick and the others know when people are on the way back from a job.” I mutter.

“Agreed, I’ll talk to my guy and see what he suggests.”

Within seconds, we’re driving away from the warehouse and it’s a damn good job that Trick found us the second exit, because we cut it a little bit too closely making Donald pay for his crimes. After we clear the warehouse and there’s no risk of any cops taking an interest in what we’re doing, we slow our speed slightly. I don’t know about Atlas, but I need a little bit longer to decompress after what I’ve witnessed in there.

“You alright man?” Atlas’s voice comes through my helmet and I almost veer off the road.

“Fucking hell dude, you couldn’t tell me that we could talk through the helmets before you decided to scare the shit out of me?”

The bastard just chuckles and I know he wants an honest response.

“That image of them huddled in the corner protecting the younger girls is going to haunt me.”

“Me too, man.” Atlas agrees, his voice bleak. “I’m worried about Ever’s reaction.”

We weave through the mostly silent streets.

“Don’t be. The thing’s I have a feeling she’s seen and how quickly she suggested that torture method. She can do this.” I reply. “I think if she was there tonight, she would’ve done exactly the same thing we did. We saved those girls and made sure he wouldn’t be able to hurt them or anyone like them again.”

“I know.” He replies and I let him ride in silence for a bit before I speak again.

“Let’s get home brother, I need to hold our girl. I can guarantee that they’re all still up waiting for us.”

“I hear that, let’s go.”

We pick up speed again and make it to the school gates, the guards don’t even try to stop us as we speed through.

“Did you pay them off?” I ask.

“Yeah they work for me, why do you think they didn’t find any weapons in your luggage or personally search each of you like they normally do.”

“Ah man, I thought it was my expert hiding skills.” I groan. “Don’t tell Trick, I’ll never live it down.”

“I also won’t tell him that you had near on thirty blades in your bag.” He replies, sounding amused as we weave down the

streets. “They felt the need to warn me about how many you had on you when I got back.”

“Whoops.”

Finally, we pull into the drive after Atlas inputs the code and the only thing I can think about is, how much I want Ever in my arms. I know that Trick is going to want a report and that’s fine, but I want Ever.

As soon as our bikes pull to a stop, the front door opens and Ever walks towards us, she studies us both intently, her eyes narrow on our jackets and she grins.

“Shed his blood then.”

“You’ve got no idea.” Atlas grins, seeming to have gotten over his little insecure blip earlier.

“Go inside and get cleaned up. I’ll start the coffee; I know Trick’s waiting for a report, but I’ll hold him off until your clean and ready.” She smiles softly.

Now that she’s mentioned it, I want nothing more than to wash that disgusting fucker’s blood off me and this whole night if I’m honest. How she knew what I wanted before I did baffles me. As much as I want to pull her into my arms, I don’t want to have her anywhere near the shit that covers me even if it has dried on the ride back.

Atlas and I move forward and gently kiss both of her cheeks, being careful to stay away from her. She grins happily, worry finally bleeding from her gaze.

“I promised you we’d all come back Angel.”

She chuckles as she follows us into the house.

“Honey, I’m home!” I yell.

“Thank fuck!” Trick exclaims. “I want a report.”

“After they’ve changed and showered.” Ever says firmly.

Trick eyes her as if deciding whether it’s worth arguing his point before he makes the right decision and nods. Ever’s grin widens in triumph as she makes her way over to the kitchen to start the coffee.

“Are you okay?” Trick asks me and Atlas seriously.

“Yes, we’ll explain when we come back down.” Atlas says.
“Rage all moved in?”

“Yeah he’s in one of the rooms downstairs.” Cash replies.

“Come on, the sooner we’re clean, the sooner we get Ever.”
I say to Atlas as I race past him and up the stairs.

I need to put my plan in place for those women and girls
too, the sooner the better.

Chapter Sixteen

Ever

I am beyond relieved that Jensen and Atlas are home safe. It's obvious just from the look in their eyes that something didn't quite go to plan tonight. As much I wanted to hug them both, I know from experience the importance of showering and changing after going through something like that. It not only cleans you, which is the obvious reason for it, but it gives you a chance to reset, cleansing your mind at the same time.

It's important.

Trick almost started to argue with me, but I guess he understood how important it was because he decided to let it drop.

Everyone gathers in the kitchen around the table and Riot comes to help me make coffee for everyone. As I bend over to get some more cups out of the dishwasher since we didn't get around to putting anything out of it away, Atlas's ring slips out from inside my top.

"What's that?" Rage asks, a sharpness to his tone as his eyes zero in on the necklace.

I briefly hesitate, Atlas told me to keep it hidden at all times, but this is Rage so I assume I can be honest with him.

"Atlas gave it to me at the cabin." I reply, holding it up.

He moves closer to me his eyes still on the ring.

"Well, fuck me." He breathes out.

"We all feel like it's a bigger deal than he made it, he never took it off in all the time that we knew him before he disappeared." Luc says, watching Rage closely.

"Oh, it's a big fucking deal alright." Rage exclaims, "But it's not my place to tell you, he'll tell you when he's ready."

“Okay,” I reply, the curiosity killing me.

“Ever, I’m sure he told you, but you need to make sure that you keep it hidden when you’re not here. It’s incredibly important.” His eyes dart away, his voice serious as he warns me.

“I know.” I assure him.

“Yes, I get Ever snuggles first!” Jensen suddenly yells, racing into the room and picking me up. My legs go around his waist and my arms around his neck as I hold him closely.

“Are you okay?” I ask softly, running my fingers through his hair.

“Yeah, they had girls there, Angel. Kids.” He shudders in my arms.

“I hope you made the disgusting fucker bleed.” I growl, anger and horror warring for dominance inside me.

“We did.” Atlas replies.

He comes to stand next to me and Jensen, without prompting, shifts me from his arms and hands me to Atlas, who holds me just as tightly. Unfortunately, I can imagine what they’ve seen tonight, and I doubt that it will leave them for a while. Looking over Atlas’s shoulder, my eyes land on Rage, he’s watching us with something akin to longing on his features. Atlas walks us over to the table and carefully places me down in a seat as he goes back and starts handing out the coffees. Finally, we’re all seated.

“Alright, give us the basic run down.” Trick says.

“Donald was hiding out in the same building he was keeping the girls in, because he’s a fucking dumbass.” Jensen starts. “There were nine guards, seven guarding the women. All of them were dispatched and secured, no fatalities.”

“There were girls as young as thirteen if that, in the back room. Although the women were drugged to make them more compliant, they were all gathered around the younger ones, protecting them. All of them were covered in injuries.” Atlas continues, his jaw clenching as he swallows thickly.

My eyes dart to Luc, his trigger is women being hurt. I'm not sure whether talking about it will trigger him or if it's when he sees it that he gets triggered. His eyes are dark, his jaw grinding, but his breathing seems normal even as his knuckles turn white, he's gripping his coffee mug so tightly. His eyes raise to meet mine and I mimic taking a deep breath, he follows along with me and slowly starts to relax a bit more. No longer on the verge of being triggered.

"We didn't want to scare them any further, so after assuring them that they were safe, and we'd get them out of there. We did a sweep of the warehouse and then Atlas got hold of his guy at the feds. It gave us roughly ten minutes to get out of there before they all arrived." Jensen adds in a vicious glint appears in his eye.

"We paid a final visit to Donald who we'd left secured to his chair in his office. That took about ten minutes." Atlas says, grinning.

"Did you leave him alive?" I ask.

"Barely, Atlas took his hand. Along with some other wounds he sustained." Jensen answers, his smile cold.

Atlas's head snaps towards Jensen, frowning before he looks at me worriedly.

"Good." I grin.

His whole body relaxes. Silly man, I'd expect nothing less from them and in all honesty, I think he got off easy.

"We used the second exit you found us to get back to the main road, by that point we'd pushed it too close and couldn't go out of the main exit." Atlas smiles, appreciatively. "I'll write all the details down in a report and you can read over that."

"You write reports?" Cash asks.

"Yeah, we may not be fully sanctioned, but the guy at the feds made sure that we knew how important it is to put everything down in a report. So that's what we do." Rage explains.

“That’s really quite smart.” Luc says, sounding impressed.

“I’m going to set up some accounts for the women and girls. I’ve got plenty of money and I can set some investments up for each of them so that their money grows. I know it’s not much, but it should help.” Jensen says, his eyes troubled.

“I think that’s a great idea. It will give them a head start and access to proper therapy to help them heal.” I reply, “Use some of mine too. I’ve been meaning to ask you to invest it and stuff.”

I’ve got no idea what the proper terms are, but he smiles.

“Use mine too.” Luc says.

The others soon all offering to give a portion of their money to Jensen to invest for the victims.

“I’ll get the names of them all from my guy, as soon as I tell him what it’s for, he’ll be more than willing to help.” Atlas yawns.

“Come on, let’s go to bed.” I say, feeling tired myself.

“Before I forget, we’ve got a party to go to tomorrow evening.” Rage announces.

“Awesome.” Luc grins.

We all make our way to our rooms, Atlas and Jensen sleep in my room, and I hold them closely.

When I awake the next morning, Atlas and Jensen are still sleeping soundly either side of me. I decide to let them sleep; they had a long night last night. I get dressed in black skinny jeans, and an oversized grey hoodie and quietly make my way out of the room and downstairs. All of the others are awake, watching TV or eating breakfast.

“Morning guys,” I call out on my way to the coffee maker.

“Morning Dragonfly.”

I reach around Rage, pulling a cup out of the cupboard, it looks like someone finally put the stuff in the dishwasher away. After doctoring my coffee to how I like it, I lean back against the counter and look at Rage, who actually smiles at me, I feel like we've made progress.

"So, what's the plan for today?" I ask whoever's listening.

"Nothing as far as I'm aware. Not until the party later." Trick answers.

"Where is the party, same place?" I ask, turning to Rage.

"No, it's down at the lake house. Several schools will be in attendance like the race, but it will only be schools. No one older." He explains.

"Sweet." Luc grins.

"Guys, the fed got back to me." Atlas announces, coming into the room and making his way straight to the coffee, a bleary-eyed Jensen hot on his heels.

"And?" Cash asks, impatiently.

Atlas holds his finger up, telling him to wait a second before he takes several large gulps of coffee and then sighs appreciatively. He walks through the open plan kitchen and takes a seat on the couch.

"All of the people on the list are dead."

"Dead?" Rafe asks, sounding rightfully confused.

"They can't have been much older than forty." Riot adds, frowning.

"According to what my guy said, they all died under suspicious circumstances, but there was never enough evidence to lead to the culprit. The cases went cold and have been forgotten about. There is one guy still alive, he's in an asylum not too far from here. He didn't tell us we couldn't investigate, but warned us to be very careful." Atlas finishes.

"We were going to be cautious anyway. So that's easily doable." Trick agrees.

"I can't believe they're all dead." Luc frowns.

“They aren’t just dead, from the sounds of it, they’ve been murdered.” Rage crosses his arms over his chest. “Someone out there doesn’t want anyone to know what happened down in the bunker and where those missing kids are.”

“So, let’s go and talk to the guy that’s still alive.” I suggest.

“He’s in an asylum, Firecracker. He probably won’t be able to tell us anything.”

“He might though. He’s the last one, he’s not even very far away. I think he’s worth a visit.” I reply.

“I mean any information at this point would be helpful we’re at a dead end otherwise.” Jensen shrugs.

“We aren’t doing anything else until later it can’t hurt.” Cash adds.

“Fine, I’ll get the address.” Atlas says, tapping away on his phone. “You know there’s a big possibility they won’t let us in.”

“I know, I still think it’s worth taking the chance.”

“That was quick,” Atlas mutters. “He’s given me the address, he also says that he’ll have the names of the victims for you by the end of the day, Jensen.”

“Good, I should have it all set up by the end of tomorrow then. It would be sooner, but we’ve got that party.”

“What about the journalist, Rebecca?” Cash asks.

“He can’t find her anywhere; he’s going to keep looking, but it’s like she’s completely disappeared, no trace of her anywhere.” Atlas replies.

“Well, we can assume that she definitely doctored the article then.” Cash replies.

“Alright, everyone get ready. We can get lunch while we’re out.” Trick orders.

Despite the original hesitation at my suggestion, everyone is ready in no time and looking excited to see where this lead takes us.

“We can’t all go in the same car.” Rage points out as we walk out the front door.

“Shit, how did I forget that?” Trick chuckles. “Alright, Rage; you, Cash, Rafe, and Luc take your car and everyone else in the SUV.”

“Got it boss.” Rage smirks, winding Trick up and high-fiving Jensen. “Atlas, send me the address in case we get separated.”

“Done. Don’t get separated from us. It’s not safe at the moment.” He orders.

Rage nods his agreement and we all get into the cars. I’m so damn excited that I can barely sit still. The guys keep giving me amused looks and I choose to ignore them rather than encourage them further.

We’ve been driving for about fifteen minutes when Trick gets a call through the Bluetooth in the car.

“Yeah?” Atlas answers.

“We’re being followed. Two cars back, red sedan.” Rage’s voice comes over the Bluetooth.

“Alright, we’ll take a couple of turns to make sure. If he’s still behind us, circle back and we’ll block him in and force him over. You guys ready to get someone to talk?” Atlas grins, his eyes meeting mine the mirror.

“Hell fucking yeah.” I reply for all of us. “I’m starting to get twitchy.”

“Twitchy?” Atlas asks, “Take a left up here. Rage, I need you to stay on the line.”

“Got it.” Rage replies.

“Yeah twitchy. You know, it’s been far too long since I had a fight.” I answer him.

“Oh, yeah I get like that.” Jensen says from the seat behind me.

“We know.” Trick chuckles drily.

We take a few more turns, the sedan clearly following us, so Atlas gives the order and Rage drops right back. The car falls for the bait and slips in between us both. Rage immediately moves up close behind him forcing him closer to our car.

“Can you see who’s driving?” Trick asks.

Cash turns around in the back seat. “No, he’s got something over his face.”

Once the guy realises what’s happening, he suddenly takes the next exit, barely making it in time and driving off in a completely different direction.

“Damn it,” I groan. “I was looking forward to that.”

The guys chuckle. The rest of the journey is uneventful, and I spend most of it hoping that they’ll let us in to see this guy or it will have been a wasted journey. Of course, it’s likely to be a wasted journey if the guy is unable to communicate with us. We didn’t even think to ask what he was in there for. When we arrive, I’m surprised by the lack of any kind of security. The place looks pretty run down, and not at all what I was expecting. He went to the academy after all, so I just assumed that he would have money. This place is large, but the paintwork is peeling, weeds are growing up through gravel drive, and there are crudely placed bars on most of the windows.

I’m pretty glad that we’ve come during the day if I’m honest. Not much freaks me out, but an asylum that looks like this one, in the dark definitely doesn’t give me warm and fuzzy feelings. We all gather outside the cars and look up at the building that looks abandoned at best. There are two other cars in the lot though, so someone’s got to be in.

“Are you sure this is the place?” Cash asks warily.

Atlas pulls out his phone and double checks. “Yeah this is it, come on, let’s go in and see if they’ll let us see him.”

“What’s his name?” I ask, feeling guilty that I haven’t bothered to ask before now.

“Clint Michaels.” Atlas replies.

“It might be best if only one of us talks to the person on reception.” Rage suggests, “And don’t take this the wrong way Puddin’, we all know it’s not the case when it comes to you, but women tend to be seen as less of a threat, so maybe you should do it.”

“Makes sense.” I agree and he looks at me surprised. “What? I can be reasonable sometimes.” I smirk.

“I didn’t think, we’re a group of large guys and there’s a lot of us. They might not let us in for that reason alone.” Trick adds.

“Well, we’re here now, we may as well try. If they don’t, I can always come back with just one of you and we can try it that way.” I suggest.

“Alright, let’s go.” Cash says, sounding impatient.

I walk through the heavy doors first and see a woman sitting behind a wide semi-circle counter reading book. She glances up when we enter, raises her eyebrow and slowly puts her book down, standing up to greet us.

I plaster on my friendliest smile and she seems to ease a little, “Hi there, we go to the same academy that one of your patient’s went to, Clint Michaels, and we were wondering if we could talk to him about his time there for a class project?” I ask sweetly.

As soon as I mention Clint’s name, her whole demeanour changes as she becomes friendlier and smiles.

“Normally, I wouldn’t let anyone that’s not a blood relative in to see one of my patients, but that man’s been here for as long as I can remember with no visitors and it’s for a good cause. It might help him to reminisce about his school days. Follow me.” She says kindly.

I feel a little bad for lying to her, but she’s probably safer not knowing the whole truth. She lifts a section of the counter and steps out, dressed in typical scrubs and bright purple nurse shoes.

“Thank you so much, we really appreciate it.”

“No problem dear. I must warn you, he’s barely coherent on a good day, so you might not get anything worth hearing out of him.”

“That’s okay, we understand that it’s a long shot.” Cash replies, giving her a charming grin and making her blush.

I grin. Cash certainly knows how to use that grin of his to his advantage.

She leads us through surprisingly quiet hallways, and we don’t see another worker.

“Where is everyone?” I ask cautiously.

“Oh, it’s only Clint and one other patient here. When they moved everyone to a newer building closer to the city, Clint’s family refused to agree to moving him and offered to pay to keep this place open. The other patient was too fragile to move anyway, so we agreed. That was the last I heard from his family, but the checks keep coming to keep us open, so I leave it be.” She explains.

I share a look with guys, something to look into later.

“Of course, between you and me, I think he became the family’s dirty little secret. They are very well off, clearly since they pay for this place and my wages. I got the impression they didn’t want to deal with him anymore, so stuck him here to be forgotten about.” She says, getting fired up. “He’s perfectly harmless and deserved better from his so-called family.” She finishes on a huff.

“Ahh, here we are.” She leads us into a large room set up like a sitting room. It’s only occupied by one person. “There’s a button by the door if you need me, I need to go and get lunch started.”

“Thank you.” I reply and she smiles, bustling back out of the room and closing the door behind her.

Chapter Seventeen

The guy doesn't even look up as we approach, seeming to be in his own world. I take the opportunity to study him. He looks a lot older than his forty-something years, hunched over on himself and so skinny that if I hadn't met the lovely nurse, I'd assume they weren't feeding him. He's not dressed in hospital scrubs like I've seen patients before but in chinos, a shirt, and a thick navy-blue cardigan, and all of them are brand names from what I can tell. We slowly approach, much like you would a wounded animal.

"I know you're there, you know." He snaps, making me jump.

"Sorry, Sir. We meant no harm," Trick says calmly.

"You can call me Clint; Sir is my dad." He says.

It sounds odd coming from the man before us, very much like he doesn't realise how old he actually is.

"Sure, Clint." Cash, grins. "These are my friends, Trick, Atlas, Jensen, Rage, Rafe, Riot, Luc, and Ever."

Clint still doesn't look at us, staring off into the distance as we all take seats around him. I let the boys carry on the conversation since they started it.

"I don't know you. You don't go to school with us." He says, confirming my earlier thought that he doesn't really understand how old he is, and he thinks he still goes to the academy. "What kind of a name is Ever, for a guy." He scoffs.

I shake my head as Trick starts to correct him, he's talking, mentioning I'm a girl might throw him off.

"Wait!" He says sounding mildly panicked but not looking at us still. "Are you cops?"

"No why?" Trick asks cautiously.

“No, no reason.” He mutters, but even from where I’m sitting I can see his hands begin to shake.

“We came to talk to you about the academy?” Trick says, changing the conversation.

“What about it?” Clint says putting his guard up.

“Start with less assuming questions. We won’t get anything out of him if we go straight for the Phoenix.” I sign, Cash and Trick nod their agreement, while Rage looks slightly confused.

Note to self, we need to teach him ASL, Rafe might not be using it nearly as often as he did but it’s a handy way to communicate when we don’t want anyone else to know what we’re talking about.

“Who are your friends at the academy?”

“Trent, Josh, and Rico, are my closest friends, we do a lot together.”

“Are they in Phoenix with you?” Cash asks, keeping his voice quiet and calm.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His voice turning hard.

“Are you sure? Phoenix is a very powerful group, I bet you’re the kind of guy that they’d want in it.” Trick adds.

Clint’s chest puffs up at the blatant flattery, “Well yes, I suppose that might be true, they’re bad, bad news though.”

“What do you mean?” Cash asks.

The rest of us have all silently agreed to let those two do the talking, adding too many different voices at the moment might affect him.

“Bad, bad news.” He repeats.

He lifts his head and starts to look around at us all for the first time since we arrived, if he’s intimidated by the guys, he doesn’t show it in the slightest, observing them calmly. When his eyes land on me though, they fill with fear, he gasps, and starts shaking as he moves himself further away from me.

“Amelia?” His voice shakes, his haunted eyes never leaving my face.

“I’m not Amelia.” I reply softly.

“Lies, you sound like her!” He yells, his head begins shaking back and forth rapidly. “There was so much blood.” He whispers brokenly, his eyes wild.

I share a look; he was there in that room with all that blood.

“What happened, Clint?” Trick asks, as Atlas and Rafe move to stand in front of me, blocking me from his view.

“So much blood, they screamed. The screams, I can hear them. No one wanted to be a part of it, but you couldn’t say no, not to him.” He seethes, “So much blood, dripping. It was all her fault. It was all her fault.” He repeats.

His rocking speeds up, as his hands weave into his hair and pull roughly.

“He’s trying to ground himself in the now, through pain.” I whisper, trying not to trigger him further.

“Blood, so much blood, she screamed. We all screamed. All of the screams echoing. Why?” He asks no one.

“I think we should go; I’ll call the nurse.” Cash says as we all back up.

As we reach the door his voice calls out, sounding so much stronger than before. When I glance back towards him, his eyes are clear for the first time since we got here.

“You shouldn’t have come here children; they’ll know that you’re looking into it now. You’re in too deep, the only way out is to solve it.”

I open my mouth to ask him for anything that he could tell us that could help, but his moment of lucidity has already disappeared. He starts rocking and mumbling again.

On the way out of the door to the lounge we run into the nurse who comes rushing down the hall. Cash pressed the call button before we left.

“I’m so sorry, I think something we asked may have brought up some bad memories for him. He’s rocking. It was not our intention.” I apologise.

She smiles softly and gently pats my arm, “That’s okay dear, these things happen, I’m sure I can calm him. There’s pie for lunch, he loves pie. I trust that you can see yourselves out, dear?”

“Yes ma’am.” Jensen replies.

We all make our way back to the cars in silence. As soon as we’re buckled in, I speak.

“That was interesting, we learned that he was there but he’s in no position to be able to tell us anymore.”

“I guess we can assume that the ‘she’ was Amelia, he looked terrified when he thought you were her. I wonder what she did?” Trick says.

“Well, it was clearly enough that the ‘he’ that he mentioned had a massive problem with all of it. Do you think he killed the missing students?” Atlas asks.

“Don’t forget about the strange circumstances surrounding the deaths of all of the names on that list.” Riot adds.

As we continue the drive home.

“I guess if he was the one that hurt the five missing students, then it’s possible that he’s also the one that’s taking out the others on the list, but why?” I ponder out loud.

“It could just be that they know what happened down there, maybe he’s lost influence over them?” Cash suggests.

“It feels like more than that.” I mutter. “While it’s all fresh in my mind, I’ll write down our conversation, it might help to see it from a different point of view.”

“Good idea, don’t forget to add that he thought you were Amelia. It’s probably only because you’re a woman and he couldn’t distinguish between the two of you in his mind. You might even have the same hair colour as she did which just added to his confusion. It’s still worth writing it down.” Trick says as he pulls the car into our driveway.

I really miss my freaking bike; I could use the utter silence that it brings me.

“Yeah, I’ll write it all down even if I feel like it’s not important. It could mean something, but we just don’t have all the information yet.” I say, hopping out the car.

“What’s the plan for the rest of the day?” Jensen asks, stretching as he climbs out of Rage’s car.

“That took far less time than I thought it would, so movies and chilling out at home until we’ve got to go to the lake house for the party later?” Luc suggests.

“Sounds good to me.” I say, toeing off my shoes and wandering into the kitchen, the table is still covered with notebooks and the stuff we found in the bunker, so I sit down and quickly start jotting our conversation with Clint down.

“You guys start without me; I’m just going to write some stuff down and then I’ll be in.”

“Alright, Princess.” Atlas says, kissing me gently on the top of my head while I continue writing and making me smile.

It only takes me a few minutes to get everything down and then I join the boys in the sitting room squishing in between Luc and Cash. As soon as I sit down, Luc wraps his arm around my shoulders, and I lay my head on his chest as Cash puts his head in my lap. I sigh happily, glad to have all my guys around me.

“My aunt sent me some more photos of my nieces.” Luc says casually, my head snaps up.

“How?”

“Cash encrypted my Facebook so it can’t be traced. We’re trying to keep all contact with anyone strictly necessary so it’s not like we can just ring or message home, just in case but I had a message from her so opened it. Want to see?”

“Are you kidding me?” I squeal, the guys turn to me shocked. “Of course, I want to see the babies!”

Luc chuckles and brings me close again before he opens his phone and starts swiping through photos to show me his

gorgeous nieces.

“Oh, my goodness, look how big they’ve gotten! They’re so adorable, I hope we can go and see them soon, give your aunt a break.” I say excitedly, wanting this whole stupid thing to be over more than ever so I can have baby snuggles. I frown as something occurs to me. “Luc, why do you call them your nieces? Technically, they’re your cousins.”

It hadn’t occurred to me before, there was so much else going on that I didn’t really pay much attention to the wording but now, it doesn’t make much sense.

“I don’t know, when my aunt got in contact with me again after all those years, that’s what she introduced them as. I was so focused on the fact that we were back in contact and she was safe and happy that the terminology didn’t register as wrong and I’ve just used it ever since, it’s not like I’m really sure of the right terms.” He answers me frowning.

The guys all share a look.

“Why don’t you ring her and find out man. It’s going to play on your mind otherwise.” Jensen suggests.

“Can I do that?” He asks Cash.

“I can probably block the call for ten minutes over messenger, but I won’t be able to safely do it for any longer.”

“Trick?” Luc asks, looking to him for advice on what to do in this situation.

“It’s going to play on your mind. Its fine with me but only for ten minutes, I can’t risk anyone after Ever knowing where we are.”

“Although to be fair, Liam already appears to know I’m here and he’s the threat, isn’t he?” I ask.

“Until we’re certain, I’m not risking it.” Trick says sternly and I nod.

“Send her a message first and make sure she’s free to talk, give me your phone a second.” Cash asks and Luc hands it over.

He fiddles with it for a couple of minutes before handing it back.

“Okay, you’re good to go. Send her a message first.”

Luc nods and types out a quick message, he receives one back immediately and starts the call. The guys pause the movie and we all turn to Luc. Being nosey fuckers but if he didn’t want us to listen, I assume he would’ve left the room. I thread my hand through his. I have a feeling this conversation isn’t just going to be whoops silly me, I meant cousin.

“Hey Luc, Ever. It’s so lovely to hear from you.” Elena beams, the picture clear on the video call.

She looks a lot more relaxed and calmer than she was the last time we saw; she’s got into the swing of being a mom.

“Hi, I’m sorry, I can’t talk for long. I just wanted to ask you something.” Luc says without any preamble.

“Why do I get the feeling that this isn’t for a catch up?” She asks, her face becoming serious.

“Probably because it’s not. Why do you call the girls my nieces? I’m not their uncle, I’m their cousin.”

Elena takes a deep breath, sadness swims in her eyes. “Because they are your nieces. I’m your older sister.”

“What!” Luc exclaims, his eyes wide as his hands begin to shake.

“Our parents kicked me out just before they moved back near Trick and the guys parents, when you were still tiny. They all went to school together, our parents were a couple years older than the guys parents, so when they left high school they moved away. I’d been asking for years to meet you and that time you came to visit was the first time they agreed. Part of the agreement was that under no circumstance was I to tell you that you are my brother. They’d spent their whole lives telling you I was your aunt anyway.”

“Fucking hell.” Luc curses, his eyes filled with emotion.

“I thought you looked damn good for someone who was forty.” I chime in, trying to give Luc time to compose himself.

She bursts out laughing although it sounds watery as hell, “Thanks I think, I’m actually twenty-seven, mom had me when she was eighteen.”

“You’re my sister?” Luc chimes, emotion catching in his throat. “I have a sister.” He inhales shakily.

“Yeah.” Her grin is wobbly as fat tears drip down her face. “You’re an uncle, Luc.”

“I’m an uncle.” He repeats, his smile is beautiful and a single tear drips down his cheek.

“I’m sorry, I can’t keep it safe for much longer.” Cash says regretfully.

“Are you okay?” Elena asks, her voice sharp.

“We’re in a bit of trouble but we’re fine. Ring Jenny and they’ll fill you in, tell them what you told me, and I can guarantee they’ll accept you with open arms, I promise. We’ll come and see my nieces as soon as it’s safe. I love you all.”

“I love you, you too Ever, and the guys.” She yells, worry clouding her eyes.

Luc hangs up the phone with seconds to spare and just stares at it.

“I have a sister.” He repeats sounding bewildered.

“And nieces.” I grin, squeezing his hand tightly.

He smiles, a wide a beautiful grin before his features suddenly darken. I watch as he gets up and starts pacing the room.

“That means that my mom wasn’t being dismissive and a down right cunt about her sister which is bad enough, but her own fucking daughter.” He bellows.

“I know, man. It’s fucking disgusting.”

“How could they fucking do that?” He growls, “What kind of sick, deranged fuckers, treat their own daughter like that? And to kick her out in the first place? She must’ve been nine when they gave up on her? Where did she go? Was she adopted? My parents obviously kept in contact with her.” He

still pacing the room, shaking his arms as he gets more worked up.

“Fuck!” He screams.

“There’s a punching bag in my room I set it up last night.” Rage says as he watches me cautiously.

I’m trying to hide it, but my father used to pace before he lashed out at me, apparently, it’s a trigger I didn’t know I had. I take a breath and start counting, Luc would be devastated if he triggered me. I’m not adding to his hurt now.

I’m safe, it’s Luc he would never hurt me.

“Come on man, I’ll spar a couple rounds with you and then we can decide how we’re going to fix this, I think destroying your fathers businesses and taking all of that money he loves would be a good place to start.” Jensen smiles viciously.

Luc’s grin is full of dark promise, as he follows Jensen to Rage’s room.

“You okay?” Rage asks softly, once they’re out of earshot.

The guys’ attention snaps to me and their face’s fall.

“What happened?” Cash says, pulling me into him.

Atlas sits on my other side and threads his fingers through mine, while Trick sits on the floor facing me. The others all move closer, even Rage. I’m surprised that he noticed.

“When Luc started pacing and raised his voice getting angry, it started to trigger me. I didn’t realise it was a trigger. My father always used to do that before lashing out at me.” I explain.

“Oh Sweetheart. You should’ve said something.” Trick mutters, his eyes sad.

“I didn’t want to add to Luci’s hurt, he would’ve been devastated.”

“What do you mean you didn’t know?” Rafe asks curiously.

“Sometimes people’s triggers can make absolutely no sense.” Rage starts, “They can be something as innocent as

someone placing a mug down too harshly, by accident but it can trigger a full-blown panic attack. It could even be certain words or phrases that don't mean much to some people but to that one person can send them back to a time and place where they weren't safe, and pain usually followed. Sometimes you don't know you even have a trigger, until it's happened." The entire time he talks his eyes don't leave mine.

Only those who have experienced it, truly understand.

"I thought I was just weird," Riot frowns. "There's a few religious phrases that used to get preached at me, if I hear them now, I go straight back."

I watch him sadly. Still incredibly angry at what his parents put him through they better hope that they never get out of fucking prison.

"I can't hug a woman." Rage says, his head bowed like he's ashamed. "My mom and my aunts used to pretend they were being kind and then pinch or cut me, hard enough it always left bruises. The cuts small enough they were never thought of as anything but normal scrapes. They loved to do it in public, if I pulled a face or made a noise, they'd do it worse. It was a game for them."

"Fucking hell, man. That's messed up." Trick says, angry on his behalf.

Rage watches him curiously.

"Thanks man."

"Okay, all of you who have triggers or the potential for them I want you to make me a promise. This includes you Rage, you're family." He says firmly, not saying anything more until Rage nods, his eyes clouded with emotion like he can't quite believe that we still want him after what he's said. "Anytime you feel yourself being even the slightest bit triggered you fucking tell one of us, don't worry about hurting our feelings or anything like that I can guarantee that all of us would rather you told us than risk triggering you again in the future, okay?"

"I promise." I reply, my love for him growing even more.

We all agree. Easiest agreement I've ever made.

Chapter Eighteen

“I’ll fill the other two in later.” Trick says.

“Good idea, let’s watch a movie. We’ve got a couple of hours before we need to get ready for the party.” Riot suggests.

They all stay close to me and I find my gaze drifting to Rage. It took a hell of a lot of courage to admit what he did. I was going to explain it myself. As much as I understand it anyway. I didn’t get triggered while I was still with my dad because my guard was up at all times. Having a panic attack means being left vulnerable and your brain goes into fight mode to protect itself. So, it buries all the bad and when you leave the situation, you start to realise that things can trigger you.

At least, that’s the gist I got from the website I read. I began to worry I really was broken when I started to get more and more panic attacks. Apparently, it’s normal.

I guess that’s reassuring.

I want to try and help Rage but I’m not sure how well it will go down.

“Rage,” I say softly, and he glances over at me. I really hope I don’t mess this up. “Have you tried to initiate the hug with a woman? You said your mom and aunts always hugged you right?” He nods, cautiously. “Well, you might find that because you initiate and it’s on your terms, that you can do it.” I shrug, “Just a suggestion.”

He studies me for so long that I begin to squirm. The guys all ignore our conversation and pretend they can’t hear, despite them being snuggled up to me.

“Thank you, Puddin’. I might just try that.” He says, turning back to the film.

I breathe out a sigh of relief, that really could’ve gone the other way, but I’m really happy he seemed to take it on board.

Halfway through the movie, Trick gets up and motions for Rage too as well.

“You can explain it better than I can.” He mutters as they leave the room.

When they all come back, Luc immediately comes over to me and holds his hands out to me, I take them and he pulls me up wrapping his arms around me as he pulls me to his chest.

“I’m so sorry, Firecracker.” He mutters.

“Not your fault.” I reply quietly.

“I know, please, please tell me if anything like that happens again?” He asks, leaning back and gently tucking my hair behind my ears as his eyes lock with mine.

“I promise.” I vow.

“Good. What time’s the party?” He asks, turning us to face the rest of them.

“In a couple of hours, it’s around a forty-five-minute drive so we need to start getting ready. There’ll be fires, there’s the cabin, but it’ll mostly be outside, so dress warm.” Atlas says, getting up and stretching.

We all go to our separate rooms to change; I decide to leave my jeans on but swap my tank for a long sleeved grey Henley and then add a black zip up hoodie, I’ll add my doc’s and bike jacket when we leave. My hair has been up in a messy bun for most of the day so when I take it out it falls in soft waves down my back, it doesn’t look too bad, so I decide to leave it. Since it’s a party and I should probably make some kind of effort for it, I re-do my normal make up but add a line of liquid eyeliner along my top lid and some dark red gloss to my lips for a bit of colour. Strapping my knives on in various places where they won’t be seen, I’m good to go.

We haven’t eaten dinner yet, but I don’t feel like cooking and I doubt Rafe does either, so we can just grab pizza on the way back. I hope we’re not out too late tonight, while I’m glad for the opportunity to let off some steam and have some fun, I’m tired and we do have school tomorrow, if I have any hope

of actually graduating this place, then I need to start going to lessons, not that the missed lessons have been my fault.

Shit, I really do need a night out.

I make it downstairs, not the first one for a change, the guys all ready to go and just waiting for me, it looks like they all pretty much decided to stay in what they were already wearing like me.

“We’ll take two cars again.” Trick says as his eyes run over me appreciatively.

I smirk.

We all split up into the separate cars and I once again find myself wishing for my bike.

“Cash, how long did your guy say it was going to be until we got our cars back?”

“A couple of weeks maybe, there’s been a delay with them. My fault, I asked them to pick up our bikes too. Our road legal ones are all kept in one of the garages at my place for the winter. Apparently, Mom gave them the third degree until they could finally get a word in edgewise and tell her the safe word, proving it was me who sent for them.” Cash grins.

I chuckle, that sounds like Kat. *I miss her.*

“I can’t wait to have my bike back.” I sigh wistfully.

“I’m missing my car too. I love travelling all together, but sometimes you just need to go for a drive.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

The car falls silent, each of us lost in our own worlds. My eyes drift to outside and I watch the world whizz by. Unlike before, we’re sticking to mostly country lanes, vast fields, and wooded verges, it all looks very pretty in the dying light. Finally, we bump our way down a long dirt track and arrive at the lake house. It’s fairly simple in design, with a wraparound porch and two stories tall. It’s not overtly large like the boy’s cabin but it’s definitely not small either and lands somewhere in between the two. There are fairy lights strung between most of the trees and around the house, enough that you can see

pretty clearly. The actual house doesn't seem to be open at all, but there's drinks tables all along the wide porch. Cars are parked just in front of it and to the left is a wide grassy area where kids are dancing. I can just about make out a couple of bonfires blazing, down on the shore of the lake. There's even a couple of small boats out on the water.

Most of the kids are dressed warmly like us, but there are the odd few girls who apparently thought that mini dresses and heels were an appropriate choice for a lake house party in winter.

I hop out of the car and slam the door behind me.

"Come on, let's go get a drink." Atty grins.

We make our way through the throngs of people, everyone moving out of the way and glancing at Atty warily.

"They've got whiskey, Sunshine. Sealed bottle." Riot grins as he hands me a red plastic cup of whiskey.

"Thanks." I smile, taking a sip.

I don't want to get drunk tonight, there are a lot of people I don't know here and not only is that enough of a reason to not get drunk, but I don't want to make it easy on the fuckers after me.

There's a lot of preppy looking rich boys here and it occurs to me that I probably should have warned the guys about the possible trigger. I'll tell them as soon as we settle somewhere. As we weave through the dance floor, I spot Peter dancing with a sandy haired guy with a swimmer's build; he's cute. Peter spots me and I wave pointing to the guy and mouthing he's hot. His grin is huge as he mouths back; he's hung too. I burst out laughing as the guy turns around and raises his eyebrow at me grinning.

"What was that about?" Jensen asks, sounding amused.

"Just talking to Peter." I chuckle. "Let's dance!"

I manage to convince Jensen, Riot, Luc, and Cash to come dance with me, the others choosing to stand and look broody, guarding the drinks.

We dance in a group at first, Peter and his partner dancing with us, it's nice to see Peter in a more relaxed environment. He always seems so tense at the school, but then he did say on our first day, that the school was filled with idiots who didn't understand that men could like men. Eventually, the guys all commandeer me for their own dances. Each one of them dances with me differently and when Cash pulls me into his arms as we move to the music, he sings his voice smooth downright panty melting.

Me and Jensen end up having a dad dance move, dance off. After a while Peter even joins in with some truly ridiculous dad moves of his own.

"My dad is the king of dad dance moves; except he thinks that they're excellent and what all the kids are dancing like these days." He explains rolling his eyes.

"Sounds like great fun at parties." I chuckle.

"With you guys sure, but at functions where the stuck-up shits from our school are attending with their parents, it becomes a nightmare."

"Fuck 'em." Jensen says.

"I wish it was that easy." Peter sighs shaking his head.

"It is," I shrug. "You don't care about what your dad dances like in front of anyone else, right? Just the fuckers at our school?"

"Well, yeah." He frowns.

"Then fuck what they think. They don't matter in the long run. I know that you're all here to make connections and that but really, they'll make the connections if you've got something they want. So long as you make sure that your business is strong and somewhat exclusive, then it won't matter to them what your dad looks like." I shrug.

"I've been telling him that ever since we started here." His boyfriend says. "I'm Nate. We've been dancing for an hour and I just realised I didn't tell you my name."

"We were a bit busy." Cash grins, "I'm Cash."

He starts to tell him our names, but Nate just holds his hand up, “Oh, I know who you guys are. You’re all the school is talking about. Well, Ever is.”

“Should’ve figured.” I chuckle.

I glance over my shoulder feeling like someone’s watching me, I can’t see anyone though, the guys are all involved in their own conversation, none of them looking my way, so I know that it’s not them. It feels different than when they watch me though. I dismiss it as just curiosity, I’m a new face here after all.

“I’m going to go get another drink.” I say.

“Wait up, I’ll come with you.” Peter adds.

Riot starts to follow, and I pause, “You shouldn’t be going off by yourself at the moment.” He says quietly.

“It’s okay, I’m not by myself. Peter’s with me and don’t forget he takes combat and weapons handling at school. He’s more capable of helping me out if I need it than most. You stay here, I’ll be back in a minute.”

He hesitates for a minute.

“It’s alright man, I’ve got her.” Peter reassures him, I didn’t realise he was stood close enough to hear.

Riot smiles tightly and nods.

I kiss him softly, before following Peter back towards the house and the drinks.

“Bit protective, aren’t they?” Peter grins.

“Oh yeah, you have no idea. They forget sometimes that I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.”

“Of that, I have absolutely no doubt.” He grins winking at me.

I grab a beer this time, despite my dislike of them, it’s the only thing that hasn’t been opened on the table. Peter does the same.

“Hold my beer a minute, I just need the bathroom. I’ll be back out in a second.”

“Sure, no problem.” I smile taking his beer off him.

It starts to get a bit crowded by the drinks table, so I move further down the porch. When I get to the end, I realise that it actually goes all the way down this side too. There are no lights decorating this end, so I lean against the railing, resting my arms on it and looking out at the rest of the party, smiling. It’s been nice, to just have fun for a while and behave our age. I chuckle as I see Jensen start dancing on one of the picnic benches clearly having the time of his life.

My beer smashes against the decking below as a hand wraps around my mouth a large body pulling me back towards the darkened end of the wrap around porch. I slam my elbow into his gut, making him grunt in pain, and stomp down on his foot.

“Stop.” He growls, menacingly.

That single word has me freezing not because I do as I’m told, but because that voice takes me back to a completely different time.

No, it can’t be, what would he be doing out here?

He turns and slams me against the wall of the house, pressing in close. I look up at his not so pretty face as he stares at me his dark eyes filled with hate. *How can he be here and why the fuck am I frozen?* I can take care of myself better than I could back then I could end him within seconds, logically I know this, so why am I frozen?

He runs his fingers across my cheek as he leans over me, he’s obviously had some work done since I can’t see the word I carved into his forehead anymore. His right eye still droops at the corner where the scar from my knife drags it down. His other hand skims up my leg as I start shaking, I can’t help the whimper that escapes me, my throat closed with terror and unable to make another sound as memories assault me.

“I thought we’d pick up where we left off,” He grins, his eyes filled with perverted glee at my obvious terror. “I figure

you owe me for doing this. All the girls in school now avoid me thanks to you carving rape into my forehead.”

“Good.” I say shakily.

He slams his fist by my head making me flinch, but causing a big enough bang that I hope like hell someone fucking heard it. His laugh is sadistic as he finds my flinch amusing. His hand starts travel up my side and I internally scream at myself to fucking do something. In this situation with this fucking deranged pervert, I’m completely powerless, I’m frozen in fear and I hate myself for it.

Not only are the memories from when he had me like this last trying to drag me under, but the memories of Jeremy and the back hallway at the diner are trying to emerge too.

His other hand comes up and forcefully grabs hold of my jaw as he moves his head to kiss me.

“Found her!” I suddenly hear Peter yell as thundering footsteps head towards me.

Not so pretty rich boy is suddenly yanked away from me as Trick and Rage start to beat the shit out of him. I collapse in a heap on the floor, shaking, my breathing coming in harsh pants. Peter crashes to his knees next to me and reaches a hand out to comfort me, making me flinch hard. He pulls his hand back and glances over at the guys. His eyes sad.

“Guys!” He yells and I flinch again. “I’m sorry Sugar, I’m just getting their attention I promise.”

I nod, “O-okay.”

“Trick, Rage!” He yells finally getting their attention. “Ever needs you!”

They immediately leave a bloodied Not so pretty on the floor, as soon as they move away though he leaps to his feet somewhat, wobbly, gives me a look that promises retribution and then takes off back down the porch heading to the throngs of partiers. Trick and Rage immediately get down to my level. Rage needing no prompting on what to do and they slowly approach.

“I’m here Sweetheart.” Trick says softly, opening his arms.

I want to go to him, but I’m still frozen in fear and my breathing is still erratic.

“Triggered?” Rage asks softly, and Peter’s eyes ping between us all understanding filling them.

I manage to nod, and Rage’s eyes grow dark with anger.

“I’m going to pick you up now, Sweetheart and take you to the guys. Is that okay?”

“Y-yes please.” I force out through clenched teeth.

Trick carefully picks me up, my legs wrap around his waist and my arms lock around his neck, clinging on as tight as I can.

“I’m going to touch your back okay, Puddin’?” Rage says softly as we walk, and I nod.

I need all the positive touch I can get right now to chase away the bad. Rage’s touch is hesitant at first, but when he realises that I didn’t flinch, he becomes more confident, gently running his hand up and down my back. It works to slowly loosen my muscles, although my breathing is still ragged.

“What happened?” Atlas demands as soon as we get back to the table we claimed as ours.

“Easy brother.” Rage warns, “She’s been triggered, give her a minute.”

Atlas growls but stays silent.

Luc suddenly appears in my line of sight and his eyes widen at whatever he sees.

“Trick, you need to sit her on the table. Get behind her and support her, if we don’t sort her breathing out, she’s going to pass out.”

“Fuck.” Trick curses moving towards the table.

Peter sweeps everyone’s drinks off the table with a flourish that I’ll take the mick out of him for, when I can breathe. Trick gently places me on the table and I reluctantly let go of him as

he moves behind me and wraps his arms around me, Luc moves in front of me and gently places his hands on my knees as the others gather around us.

“Eyes on me Firecracker, just like you did for me the other night at the table.” He starts and the guys look at him sharply. “In and out nice and slowly.”

We breathe like that until I’ve calmed down and I smile shakily, finally taking a proper full breath.

Chapter Nineteen

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“What happened, Sunshine?” Riot asks quietly.

“I meant to tell you, but I’ve been distracted and so much has happened that I keep forgetting.” I take a breath, “Pretty rich boys can trigger me if they do certain things. That fucker knew exactly what to do to trigger me.”

“I don’t know what you classify as pretty Sugar, but that fucker definitely wasn’t, he had scars all over his face.” Peter announces.

Jensen’s eyes fill with darkness, where he was bouncing before anger evident in his movements he suddenly goes still as he makes the connection.

“Hang the fuck on, is he the one you told us about before? The one that gave you the PTSD in the first place?” He growls his voice scarily calm, a complete contrast to the utter rage boiling within the darkness of his eyes.

The guys who were watching him warily, now switch their attention to me their jaws clenched tightly as their eyes flash.

I nod once.

Jensen’s darkness completely consumes him as his face blanks completely, I have never been scared of Jensen. But looking at him now, completely still and expressionless I can see why he strikes terror into the people he goes after. Of course, I find it hot as fuck.

“Don’t leave her. Cash and Rage with me.” Jensen orders, in a way unlike him.

My eyes move to Cash, and I’m shocked by his expression. He always keeps to the lighter side of everything, but eyes are cold, and his grin is biting. I’m finally starting to see how deep the darkness in my guys runs and I fucking love it.

“I’m not letting him get away with hurting her.” Atlas starts to protest, Jensen interrupts him with a look and it’s like Atty’s seen him like this before and knows better than to argue.

“Protect Ever, I want this to last.” Jensen growls menacingly, his jaw clenching.

It shocks the shit out of me and Peter, judging from his dropped jaw when he nods once, backing down as he sits next to me and threads his fingers through mine tightly.

Cash, Rage, and Jensen all disappear through the crowd. Giving off such an acute aura of danger that the crowd automatically moves away from them. Watching them warily.

“Wow.” Peter breathes next to me.

“Right.” I agree and we share a smirk.

“Are you okay now?” Luc asks calmly, as if the others going to hunt down not so pretty anymore, is no big deal.

And maybe it’s not, I know that they’ll always protect me, and they’ve said several times that some of my abusers in the past are lucky I’ve dealt with them or in my fathers’ case, that he’s dead. I did deal with not so pretty anymore, those scars covering his face are from me. I didn’t want anyone else to go through what I nearly did. He clearly has a grudge against me, I mean I did slice his face up but that was fully deserving. I am completely useless against him thanks to my panic attacks and it’s nice to have people willing to deal with it for me. I have never had that before.

“I’m better now.” I say, my smile still a bit wobbly, but surrounded by the guys, I feel infinitely safer.

“We’ll get out of here as soon as the guys are back, Peter you’re welcome at mine any time. You helped find her and stayed with her whilst Trick and Rage beat the shit out of the guy.” Atlas says, his voice still has an edge to it, he’s clearly trying to control himself right now.

I reach my hand out for him and he weaves his fingers through mine again holding tightly. He brings my hand up to his lips and gently kisses the back of it.

“I, wow. Thanks, I might take you up on that, even though you all scare the shit out of me.” He smiles wearily, “I have to admit that it’s nice to hang out with people that aren’t judging.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, happy for the distraction.

“Well, you guys don’t give a shit that I’m gay, dress uniquely. You’re not waiting for me to fail or not making the connection I need just because I’m gay. I don’t have to tone me down.”

“That really sucks,” I say sympathetically, the guys nodding their agreement. “I can promise you can always be your authentic self around us.”

“We just ask that you keep things private.” Luc adds.

“That, I am more than happy to do.” He grins easily agreeing before his smile fades. “I’m sorry I left you.”

“Don’t worry about it. If he was any other guy, he would be missing at least a couple of fingers by now.” I grin viciously.

“Sugar, I think you might’ve just become my new best friend. Gotta love someone who’s ruthless.” He replies not missing a beat.

“Deal.” I grin, feeling a thousand times better.

“Are you really, Charles Carmicheal’s son?” He asks Luc.

“Yeah, why?”

“My father is about to sign a deal with him.” He replies, his eyes troubled.

“I wouldn’t let him do that if I were you.” Luc warns him, his eyes turning cold as he thinks of his father.

“Why not?”

“Just trust me, I’ll explain at some point but just don’t let your father invest with mine.”

“Okay, I’ll call him in the morning. He tends to listen to me, because contrary to popular belief from the fuckwits at our school I’m actually good at business. Really fucking good

actually. I'll tell him I found some discrepancies in his numbers or some shit."

"I'm impressed." I praise, making him beam. "All of this shit is confusing the crap out of me. Cash gets most of it."

"I can help if you want?"

"Yes please, or this school is going to fucking drown me." I grimace.

"No problem ..." He starts before trailing off. "What the hell?"

Streams of kids are suddenly hurrying their way over to the tree line where a crowd has formed. Jensen, Cash and Rage appear at the table, splattered in blood and almost feral glee radiating off of all three of them.

"Fucking hell." Peter exclaims as he takes them in.

"Looks like you guys caught up to the fucker." Trick grins, his smile dark.

"Do you want to go and see what they've done?" Riot asks me.

"Fuck yes." I say firmly standing up.

"It's not going to be pretty, Dragonfly. He hurt you, Jensen is a vindictive fucker and Cash is downright fucking terrifying when he wants to be." Rafe warns me and the boys in question both nod.

They're done hiding their darkness from me and I'm so fucking glad.

"Rage can stand toe to toe with the both of us." Jensen adds, still smiling.

My eyes move to Rage as I grin and his widen in shock.

"She think's its hot we're violent and in a protective mood." Jensen stage whispers and I shrug as Rage's eyes widen, I'm not denying it.

Peter's eyes widen as he watches the exchange, but he doesn't back away, which I wouldn't blame him for.

“Good. I wouldn’t expect anything less.” I reply, I mean it too. God knows who else he tried that with and actually got away with it. He deserves what he gets.

We move through the silent crowd easily, the guys surrounding me until we get to the front. Jensen stands one side, Cash the other and Rage takes up position behind me. Not so pretty is tied spread eagle and butt naked to a tree.

He’s completely covered in mottled bruises already forming, blood dripping down his face from various cuts as well as slices down his chest and legs. One of his wrists is bent at the wrong angle and several fingers too. Stapled all over him are what look like confessions. The sheer number of them makes bile rise in my throat, there has to be at least a dozen, a dozen women he’s forced himself on.

The crowd starts to get nervous, it’s clear that whoever did this is brutal as fuck. Before full crowd panic can ensue, not so pretty starts to stir, groaning in pain. He suddenly snaps his head up, scanning the crowd with his one good eye and looking panicked. It doesn’t look like he’s panicking because of the crowd of kids seeing him butt naked, with confessions all over him but like he’s searching for something.

His eyes lock onto whatever he’s searching for, he pales, his eyes becoming so wide with fear that he looks like he’s going to pass out as his breaths start coming out in short gasps. I turn, following his gaze and expecting it to land on Jensen but no, his terror filled gaze is firmly locked on Cash. The crowd all takes a step away from us. Cash’s grin is full of violence, showing far too many teeth and making him look manic. The effect is disconcerting, even on me, but the effect it has on not so pretty is truly telling as he lets out a gurgled scream and passes out.

“No one is to touch him until morning.” Atlas orders. “Anyone caught helping him before then, will get the same treatment.”

“We have ways of making you confess.” Cash adds, still grinning too wide.

The kids all nod rapidly each one of them watching us terrified. The crowd quickly disperses, all making their way to their cars and getting the fuck out of here. I grin as I wrap my arm around Cash's waist, making our way back to our own cars. It's only a couple of hours until dawn, so he's not going to die and from what I can tell, none of his wounds were serious enough to need medical attention right away.

"I am so fucking glad you guys seem to like me." Peter mutters, looking a wary.

"Don't worry dude, you have to do something to deserve that treatment." Riot reassures him.

"Thanks, I think." He chuckles. He looks around at the last few cars left in the lot and sighs. "I don't suppose you guys would mind taking me home? It appears my date has abandoned me in the panic."

"Not worth your time if he runs at the first sign of trouble." I point out as we walk to the cars.

"Ain't that the truth. He's got a big dick though, so I'll keep him around for fun for now." He grins and I burst out laughing.

"We can take you back." Rage chuckles.

"Thanks man, I appreciate it."

The guy's head off to Rage's car.

"Rage wait! Thank you." I say softly, my gaze switching between, Cash, Jensen, and Rage.

"Anytime Angel, you know that." Jensen replies, kissing my softly.

Rage just gives me a nod and walks towards his car as Cash drops a kiss onto the top of my head.

We get into separate cars again and I'm more than ready to get home and wash this whole night off of me. There're only a few hours until we have to wake up for school and I'm already dreading it.

“Do we need to worry about any of those kids telling someone what happened tonight?” I ask, as we drive back home. “Also, can we stop off and get burgers on the way home, I’m starving.”

“They wouldn’t dare. They all know who me and Rage are. They know what we’re capable of and now they know what the rest of them are capable of too.” Atlas reassures me. “I’ll send one of my guys to cut him down in the morning and send him on his way. I doubt any of his so-called friends will be coming back for him.”

“Good idea.” I reply, my worry eased.

“I’m starving too.” Jensen starts to whine, “Call the guys and tell them that we’re stopping off to pick up food, we can take it back to the house.”

“Why can’t you call them?” Trick asks.

“Oh, I didn’t think of that.” He answers, pulling out his phone and dialling the guys and putting it on speaker.

“We’re stopping at the drive thru burger place on the way home.” Jensen tells them excitedly.

“Oh, thank fuck, I literally thought I was going to die of starvation.” Peter says dramatically and Jensen grins.

“I know dude, me too.” He says sympathetically, as the rest of us laugh.

I probably order enough food at the drive thru for at least two people, but I’m fucking starving, so I have no regrets. The guys get just as much as I do anyway. When we pull in our drive, Rage’s car zips past. Presumably to take Peter home, we’re only going to get a couple of hours sleep at this rate anyway.

“Let’s eat in the living room and watch a couple of episodes of big bang.” I suggest.

“Sounds like a good idea to me.” Jensen grins, slinging his arm over my shoulder and pulling me in close as we walk into the house.

Rage and the guys aren’t far behind us.

“Hey, did your guy get you the names of the women?” Jensen asks, stuffing a handful of fries in his mouth.

“Yeah, I’ll send the list to your phone.” Atty replies.

“Thanks man, I’ll work on it tomorrow after school. Hopefully, I can set it up fairly quickly.” He turns to Luc. “We can work on a plan for your father as well tomorrow if you’d like?”

“Yeah, thanks man.” Luc replies running a hand through his hair, “I just wish I knew more. They must’ve kicked her out when she was nine. Where did she go? Did she go into care or what?”

“I know, Luci.” I reply. “We aren’t going to have the answers to those questions until its safe enough for us to go and see them though. So, for now, maybe just focus on making your father pay and stopping him from hurting other people. You said he was dealing in some dodgy shit?”

“Yeah he is.” Luc says, determination filling his eyes.

“Well, it seems to me like this is the sort of thing we do now. We protect those that can’t protect themselves. We’ll set this up as another job.” Trick says firmly.

“Thanks guys I appreciate it.” Luc says.

We finish our food pretty quickly and while the guys clear up and get ready for bed, I make my way upstairs to shower. The hot spray loosens the last of my clenched muscles and I think back over everything. I’m not really sure how we’re going to progress with the Phoenix stuff. We’ve kind of hit a dead end. I’m hoping that Atlas’s contact can find something else out. I feel like we’ve gotten further than anyone else has before and that’s in thanks to the guy in the mask and the clues he’s left. It would be nice if he gave us another one. As for what happened tonight, when I think about not so pretty, I realise that it doesn’t come with the same freezing fear that it used too. Thanks to the guys, I know that he truly is no longer a threat to me. I would probably still freeze if he came anywhere near me, but I don’t think it would be as bad and I’d be able to strike out at least, which is reassuring.

The other good thing that came out of this evening is Peter, I said at the very start that he needed proper friends and I'm glad that I can be that for him. Plus, between him and Cash, I at least have a slim chance of passing my lessons this year.

I get out of the shower drying quickly and pulling on some underwear and a tank. Grabbing my discarded cell off the bathroom counter. When I make my way back into my room it's to see Jensen and Cash both passed out on their stomachs a gap left between them for me. I grin, happiness almost overwhelming me. I really do love these men. I put my phone on charge next to Cash's and slowly crawl up the bed and settle myself between them. They immediately move towards me in their sleep, wrapping themselves around me.

I had thought that I might have nightmares tonight thanks to my encounter with not so pretty, but with them holding me close, my eyes drift closed, and I fall into a peaceful sleep.

What the hell is that noise? And why isn't anyone doing anything to shut it the fuck up! It takes me a moment to realise that it's a cell phone ringing and I frown, deciding to ignore it. When it just carries on ringing and I've lost all hope of actually getting back to sleep I sit up and reach over to Cash's side. I am so going to give him shit for his phone freaking waking me up.

Except it's not Cash's phone that's ringing. It's mine, which is weird in itself because no one but the guys have my number and as far as I'm aware they're all here. I snatch my phone up when it occurs to me that something may be wrong with one them.

The caller ID is a number that I don't recognise though, so I nudge Cash and Jensen.

"I don't wanna get up." Jensen grumbles stiltedly.

"What he said." Cash adds.

“Someone’s ringing my cell and I don’t know who it is.” I say.

They both groan as they push themselves up to sitting positions and lean against the headboard.

“Answer it and put it on speaker.” Cash says sleepily rubbing his hands over his face in a bid to wake himself up more.

“It’s probably just Peter.” Jensen adds.

I do as they ask and answer the call.

Chapter Twenty

“Hello?” I say, somewhat cautiously. Everything makes me paranoid at the moment.

“Ever? Oh, thank god, girl I need your help. I was wondering if you could meet me somewhere?”

“Rylie?” I ask, shocked.

“Of course, who else would it be.” She asks, but her voice sounds strange and her laughter forced. “Anyway, I’ve got to go, can you meet me at the little coffee shop, in Humber? See you there at six, this evening, girl, love you!” Her voice catches as she hangs up.

“What the fuck.” Cash exclaims.

“How the hell did she get my number?” I ask, “We destroyed all of our sim cards.”

“Alright, downstairs. Its time wake up the rest of the house. It seems we have an issue.” Jensen says, hopping up and pulling on a pair of joggers.

I grab an oversized sweater and follow him out of the door. My mind in a tailspin. “I’m going to go and make everyone coffee.” I say getting up and making my way downstairs.

I make the coffee on auto pilot.

Arms wrap around my waist from behind and I lean back into a hard chest.

“Are you okay?” Rafe asks me, kissing me gently on my neck.

“Yeah, I just want to know what’s going on.”

He helps me take the coffees over to the table where everyone is looking bleary eyed and like they need at least six more hours sleep, apart from Trick who is watching me with laser focus.

“Alright, what happened?” He asks, once everyone has gotten their coffees.

“Rylie called me this morning asking for help, she didn’t really give me a chance to talk just told me where to meet her which is in the town we drove through last night, not far from here. She told me to be there at six o’clock this evening. Not only should she not have my number, but she didn’t sound right, and she shouldn’t be anywhere near here. Something’s going on.”

“Fuck.” Cash curses.

“Whose Rylie?” Atty asks.

“She’s my friend from back home.” I explain. “I need to get hold of the detective, he said he had people watching the guys’ family, but I don’t think he had anyone watching Rylie and if he did, I need to make sure that nothing’s gone wrong.”

Atlas and Rage share a look that I’m too freaking tired to interpret. It almost looks like they know something we don’t. Which is likely.

“That’s the first thing we need to do then.” Trick starts, his face serious. “We need to find out if Rylie is safe at her house. If she is, then we ignore the phone call and try to find out what’s going on. If she’s not, well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“I don’t know how to get hold of the detective though. He didn’t give me any contact details, just told me that he’d be in contact if there were any updates on my case, but it might take a while.” I say.

“Let me call my guy. I’ll see if he can help.” Atlas says, pulling out his phone.

I refrain from pointing out that not all people in law enforcement know each other so the likelihood of him being able to find the detective is pretty damn slim. Especially, since I can’t remember his name.

“Hey, listen, we’ve had a development here and I need you to get someone to look in on Rylie, she lives in the same town as the guys.” Atlas starts and then looks at me.

“I don’t remember her last name, but her dad owns a garage and they live behind it.” I tell him.

I’m such a shit friend, *how can I not remember her last name?*

“Did you get that?” Atlas asks into the phone, “Yeah, I need you to do it ASAP. Ever had a phone call from her this morning. Yeah, I know, man.” He finishes.

Confusion fills me, he’s talking to the guy like he knows him personally. Speaking to him with far too much familiarity. I understand that they’ve worked together for a couple of years now, but this seems a lot less professional.

“Yeah, alright. Let me know as soon as you find anything. Thanks.” Atlas ends the call.

I’m not the only one that is now watching him suspiciously. We don’t have time for that though.

“If he doesn’t get back to us, I’m going to that meet up, I can’t risk anything happening to her because of me.”

“That’s not a good idea, Angel.” Jensen says and I frown. “Hear me out, if she isn’t at her home nice and safe. Which we don’t know for sure that she’s not yet. Then it’s safe to assume that Liam or some of his men have her. Their sole purpose is to get to you. You’d be playing straight into their hands.”

“And we’re smarter than that. We’ll wait to see if she’s at home first. If she’s not, then there’s a big possibility that she won’t be at the coffee place either. We can arrive early and stake it out. When Liam’s men arrive to grab you, we can follow them back, hopefully to Rylie.” Atlas says strategically.

“I know you’re making sense, I do, and I’ll agree to it, but we need your guy to get back to us as soon as possible.”

“Okay Princess. He will, he knows this is important and he also knows she shouldn’t have been able to get your number. He’s on it, I promise. He hasn’t let me down yet.”

“So, what do we do while we wait?” Luc says.

“We could go to school, but I’m not sure that’s a good idea with tensions running high.” Trick says.

“I wouldn’t be able to concentrate.” I say.

“I’d suggest that those of us who can get some sleep to try, we might be out late tonight. If we need to stake out the coffee shop.” Luc says.

“I’m going to bake.” I say getting up from the table.

“What?” Rage asks, sounding thoroughly confused.

“She bakes when she’s anxious, it’s an Ever thing.” Rafe explains.

“Okay, sure. Can she cook though?” He says sounding slightly dubious.

“Yes, I can.” I retort.

Atlas

I stay sitting at the table while I watch Ever get up and start to pull out the mixer, baking trays, a cake tin, and various other things that I had absolutely no idea I even owned. They must’ve come with the house. I look around at the rest of the guys, all of them are watching her worriedly even Rage.

His behaviour since Ever and the guys arrived has been odd to say the least, the fucker keeps going from treating Ever like she’s going to fucking eat him to shocking the shit out of me when he pulled that protective shit when she got herself into that bike race. He holds promises in incredibly high regard and he doesn’t threaten to kill someone lightly.

He would’ve done it too; it wasn’t an idle threat.

There’s something going on with him and I know that Ever was the one that stitched him up after his job. It wasn’t something that needed to be mentioned at the time especially since he finally told her that he was the one that killed her dad, at the request of D. D didn’t really give us any information just the name and picture of the guy that needed to be taken out. If we’d known where she was, we could’ve got her out a hell of

a lot sooner. I know that D was trying his hardest to come to an agreement with Ever's father, knowing that he was a player in my fathers' business. If my father ever found out that D had one of his guys taken out, then there would be hell to pay.

I need to warn him. I pull out my phone, glad for something else to focus on right now and surprised that I haven't heard anything back from Alaric he normally gets back to me fairly quickly. I get a sinking feeling in my gut. This can't be good. I shoot a quick text off to D letting him know to call me if he gets any problems. He's a ruthless bastard and a fucking good guy. It still shocks the shit out of me that Ever knows Jynx, she definitely takes after uncle when it comes to being deadly and ruthless.

I watch as Rafe gets up and starts to talk to Ever, helping her make whatever it is that's swirling around her brain. I can't believe that she's here, I told Alaric to make sure they were all fucking safe, but I didn't think he'd orchestrate it for them to come here.

"Your guy got back to you?" Trick says keeping his voice low.

Jensen hops up and moves into the kitchen, plugging his phone into the dock and dipping Ever into an extravagant dance pose, even managing to pull out a smile. The music effectively covers up our conversation and with Rafe and Jensen distracting her with dancing, kissing and recipe ideas, we should be able to talk without worrying her further.

I won't keep anything from her, never would I do that, but I will try and reduce her stress and worry until I have no other choice but to bring her in.

"No not yet, which is unusual." I say.

"You thinking Liam's got her?" Luc asks.

"Yeah, it's looking likely." I reply. "But he wouldn't let her meet Ever at that coffee shop. He would have no leverage then."

"He also seems to know what Ever is capable of. So, he wouldn't risk Ever being able to take out whoever he sent with

Rylie. He'll need her to come with them willingly." Rage adds.

"I don't like that he appears to know so much about her." Cash frowns.

"No, it's definitely not a good thing. It also appears that he doesn't want her dead. Which begs the question, what does he want her for." I reply.

"Any chance we can convince her not to go? To let us go instead?" Rage asks, his eyes full of doubt, even he doesn't think that's likely.

"Not a chance." Riot sighs. "We're going to find it hard enough to convince her not to leave as soon as she's baked herself out."

"The best thing we can do is make sure she's prepared and that she realises she's not doing it alone." Trick says, his eyes flashing with a mixture of worry and determination as they move to her, instantly softening.

"In that case, we should get ready. Work out what we're going need from the weapons room." Rage says.

"Good idea. We're going to be outnumbered, I don't have enough time to get one of the other teams or ask for some help from D." I reply.

"Hopefully, you'll hear something from your guy soon and we'll have at least a bit more information to go on. I don't like going in blind. Everything so far is guess work." Trick's eyebrows dip together as he frowns.

For as long as I've known him, he's hated losing control, especially when it comes to the safety of the rest of us. I honestly think it stems from the times that he couldn't protect us. Like with Jensen's little sister and mom, Riot's crazy ass parents. Luc's demeaning and downright vile parents. Rafe's hurt from losing Ever and as far as Ever's concerned, her leaving in the first place and every single damn thing that came after.

None of it, he could've done anything about. Either he was too young, inexperienced or had no idea that it was happening.

“We do have the advantage of Rage and Atlas knowing the target though. They know how he works, that’s a good thing.” Cash reasons with him.

Trick leans back in his chair, reaching up, threading his fingers together and putting them behind his head. His gaze tilts up to the ceiling and he takes several deep breaths.

“You’re right. We have an advantage and we need to exploit it but first we need to work out the equipment we need.” He looks over to where, Ever is smiling with Jensen and Rafe as she tries to wrangle the icing off of Jensen. “Maybe we’ll just let her have this for a bit longer. I have a feeling shits about to hit the fan.”

“Agreed.” Cash grimaces his lips curling. He gets up, “I need more coffee.”

I run my hand over my stubbled jaw. We’ve been busier than ever since they all arrived and I’m not sorry. Sure, I wish Ever wasn’t in danger but she’s handling it extremely well, and I find I’m in constant awe of her. I watch her delectable ass as she places the last pan of something the oven. I never thought I’d find someone who I could trust enough to love. I made peace with being alone a long time ago. That she actually, wants me. All of me, she doesn’t judge, and she’s not scared of me in the slightest. Even when I’m pissed as all hell, she still stands up to me and it makes me love her even more.

“Are you planning to tell her the significance of that ring?” Rage asks.

My heartbeat pounds in my chest as soon as he mentions it.

“I will. When things calm down a bit.”

“I’d ask what the deal with the ring is but Ever really should be the first person that knows.” Trick says his eyes burning with curiosity.

“What if things don’t calm down?” Rage asks, his eyebrow raised.

“There’ll be pockets of calm. We can’t live nonstop, we’ll burn out.” Luc says coming to my rescue.

“That’s true. But if your father finds out and you haven’t told her yet, you’ll be leaving her vulnerable.” Rage presses, his jaw clenched.

“I know man, I’ll tell her after we sort this Rylie shit out. Okay?”

Rage nods, his shoulders relaxing. It’s clearly been playing on his mind since whenever he realised that I’d given it to her. He cares for her that much is obvious.

Ever puts the last of the dirty dishes into the dishwasher and then turns to where we’re all sat watching her. She moves straight for me, plopping herself down on my lap as she faces the rest of the table. My arms wrap around her waist and I try to think of anything that won’t result in my dick becoming hard just from her sitting on my lap, she’s not really helping as she moves about though and Jensen smirks, nudging Cash who hides a grin.

I reach up to itch my noes flipping them both the bird and making their grins widen.

“So, what’s the plan then?” Ever asks.

“What?” Luc replies.

“Come on I know you guys, I know you weren’t just sat here talking about fucking inane stuff. So, what’s the plan?”

Trick’s lips twitch as he fights a smile.

“Atlas’s guy hasn’t got back to him yet. Which is unusual.” Cash starts.

Ever tenses in my lap and I shoot him a glare.

“So, we’re thinking that Liam probably has her then?” She asks, sounding surprisingly calm despite the tension running through her small frame.

“Yes. Liam wouldn’t risk you saving her by letting her actually go to the coffee shop. We’re going to arrive a couple of hours early and stake it out.” Trick tells her, holding her gaze as he leans forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“When you don’t show up, he will call you again.” Rage says. “It’s how he works, he’ll make threats. However, by that point we will have already started to follow whoever he sent to pick you up.”

“If we can’t follow them for whatever reason. I can trace the phone call you will receive.” Cash chimes in.

I’m impressed. Between Cash and Luc, they have varying skills when it comes to computers and we’re lucky to have them on the team.

“What about Rylie? What’s he going to do to her when I don’t turn up?”

“He needs her as leverage, so he won’t kill her.” Rage says bluntly, I’m about to snap at him but she nods.

Apparently, she appreciates the bluntness. Good to know.

“Okay.”

“We need to figure out everything we might need. We’re going in somewhat blind. We have no idea where his men could lead us, we have no idea how much we’re going to be outnumbered by and we’ve got no idea why Liam wants you in the first place.” Trick mutters, his hand moving through his hair frustratedly the more he lists what we don’t know.

Ever gets up from my lap and moves over to him, settling herself on his lap. He immediately buries his head in her neck.

“So, we get to go explore the weapons room again?” She grins.

“Yeah Princess.” I smirk.

“Let’s go check it out.” Jensen grins, hopping up excitedly.

Trick gives Ever one last squeeze before letting her up. “Promise me you won’t go off without us?” He says seriously, and we all turn back to them, needing to hear the promise as well. “I am not above handcuffing you to something or someone to keep you safe.”

“As fun as that sounds.” Ever smirks, and my blood heats. “One, I know how to escape handcuffs and two, I am not

suicidal. It would be impossible for me to do this by myself. And I am so fucking glad that I don't have to. If I didn't have you guys, I still would've tried to rescue her alone but I'm so glad I don't have to. I promise I won't go off by myself Trick."

"Thank you, Sweetheart." He replies, I think he knew what her answer would be he just needed her to verbalise it for him, to put his mind at rest.

Hell, I needed to fucking hear it.

"We'll revisit the handcuff thing later, Il mio Cuore." Cash grins his eyes heated.

"Ooo yes please." She chuckles, sashaying her way from the room and to the weapons room.

Chapter Twenty-One

Atlas

The sound of the doorbell echoes through the hall and we all pause to look at each other, doing a head count. We're all here, so, who the fuck is at the door?

"That's not the buzzer for the gate, dude." Rage starts, "That's the doorbell."

"Who else has the code to your gate?" Trick asks me and I share a look with Rage.

"Fuck." I growl, striding towards the door, there's only one other fucker that has the code and if he's here, it can't be good news.

I had no intention of them knowing about this yet, they're safer if they don't know. Of course, that thought sort of seems redundant since they're all deeply embedded in my world now anyway. If he's here, then it's serious because he agreed with me that it would be better to keep his identity quiet for as long as possible.

"Hello, Alaric. So lovely to see you." I say sarcastically, pulling open the door.

"Hold the fuck on." Ever starts as Alaric walks into the house.

He's out of the monkey suit as he calls it, and dressed far more casually in dark jeans, and a black t-shirt showing off his ink covered arms. He walks in with a giant grin on his cocky as fuck features, he's loving this reveal the fucking dick.

"How are you on first name basis with the detective?" She asks, crossing her arms over her chest and raising her eyebrow at me.

"Oooo shit, Atlas is in trouble." Jensen sings and I grimace.

Alaric's lips twitch as he tries to suppress his chuckles and I swear I could fucking punch him right now. Would it have been that hard to give me a bit of a warning? Maybe with enough time to tell them myself instead of springing it on them. He's the closest thing I've got to a father, but holy hell sometimes he tests me.

"He's my uncle and my contact." I say, he's close enough in age to me that our relationship is more like brothers than uncle and nephew though.

"Fucking hell. Why couldn't you tell us this? Did you bring us here? Was that whole shocked thing when you first came back, a fucking lie?" Ever asks, her expression darkening with anger.

"No of course not..." I start.

"That's actually my fault on both accounts. He asked me to keep you safe but when I looked into your case, I realised that the only way to keep you safe was to bring you here. I chose not tell him for my own entertainment." The fucker grins, "And I asked him not tell you of the connection between us. For my own safety as well as yours. The less information you knew, the better. However, I'm more than convinced that you're all in when it comes to taking down my brother, and you all have the skills to help do so."

"Okay fine. That makes sense." Ever says and I've never seen a woman go from pissed off and ready to stab me to calm and understanding so fucking quickly. Clearly, I've been hanging around the wrong sorts of women.

"Thank fuck." I breathe out harshly.

Alaric's eyes crinkle at the edges as they fill the amusement at my relief.

Her eyes narrow and I tense back up. Fortunately, she turns her attention to the guys who although started out mad as fuck like she did, were grinning at my expense by the end of the exchange. Now her attentions on them though their eyes widen, and Jensen starts to fidget.

“You guys don’t recognise him?” She asks, pointing to Alaric and not giving them a chance to answer as she turns back to me. “This is the uncle you lived with when you moved near the guys right?”

I nod.

“I thought so, how come you didn’t recognise him. He’s hardly forgettable.” She says and Alaric winks at her.

I growl, “Watch it.”

“Fuck’s sake, I didn’t mean anything by it, I’d have to be fucking blind not to notice him though.” She explains, rolling her eyes, her lips tilting up into a smirk at my reaction.

I feel like I’ve been chastised.

“We never met him. Only saw him from a distance.” Trick explains.

“Well, at least that makes sense. Now I can assume that if you’re here, you don’t have good news?” She says, turning her laser focused attention onto my uncle as she widens her stance and crosses her arms over her chest as if she’s preparing for a physical blow.

I rub my hand over my mouth to hide my grin as its now his turn to squirm, *yeah not so fun when it’s you in trouble, is it you fucker.*

“No. Your suspicions were right. We did have men watching her but all three of them have been taken out. It appears she put up a fucking good fight though.” He grins.

“That’s my girl.” Ever’s grin is dark and proud.

“We’re unsure where they’ve taken her or even how they took her in the first place. They’ve got several teams out looking for her now. I told them I was following my own lead and came here to help you guys.” He looks over all of us seriously. “I know that you got a phone call from her this morning and it’s safe to say that Liam has her. As far as being able to deal with this, you guys are our best bet. You have the most information on Liam, the situation, the victim, and you also have what he wants. Plus, you can be more ruthless in

how you deal with the situation. Your team is the best for this job, they just don't realise it yet. Mainly because they have no idea that you exist."

"Well, okay then." Ever says, walking past us all and to the weapons room.

I guess that's the end of that, we all follow her. Ever likes her weapons and I'm slightly worried about the damage she could do to the room if left unattended and she starts playing.

"Did you bring any equipment with you?" Cash asks Alaric out of the blue as we enter the room.

"I brought some. Why, what are you after?" He answers with open curiosity.

"A tracking device we can attach to the car. We're less likely to get caught following them if we can do it remotely, we can also be more prepared for what we're heading into and scout out the area."

"I like the way you think. I've got the perfect thing, it's a small device that shouldn't be noticeable if you place it under the car. I take it you guys have a plan then, care to fill me in?"

Trick hangs back and fills Alaric in on what we've decided to do. I have to admit that it takes some of the pressure off of us, him coming along. It means if something goes wrong for whatever reason, he can immediately call it in.

"Aren't they starting to get suspicious? You keep saying you're following a lead more and more and then you end up finding things like the warehouse." Rage asks Alaric and I turn to him.

It's been something that's been playing on my mind recently. He faces severe consequences if he gets caught giving us tips on Liam and his men's whereabouts, not to mention giving us jobs, that not only involve Liam's business dealings, but also other sketchy people that they can't take out or find enough information on to arrest them. I think that might be one of the reasons he gets us to write a report up every time we do a job, he's teaching us the right way to do things even though we haven't formed the traditional way.

“I got called into the big bosses office the other day actually.” He says, he doesn’t seem too worried, but he’s got a pretty good poker face. “He knows that I’m coming by my information in untraditional ways. He’s also noticed that it’s mainly things to do with Liam. However, it gets results, needless violence is not used. He double checked with me that when people were taken out, it was completely necessary, and I assured him that it was. As far as he’s concerned, we’re getting results and slowly dismantling one of the largest and most feared criminal organisations in America.”

I study him, that sounds great. A bit too rose coloured for my liking, he scratches his right ear, his tell.

“And?” I ask.

“What?”

“I know there’s something else you’re not telling us.” I demand, crossing my arms over my chest.

He sighs. “Fine. He warned me that there’s going to come a time when he’s going to want to meet you all and get a proper debriefing.”

“Shit.” I curse.

“It could be a good thing. He didn’t say he wanted to bring you in, just that he will want to be made fully aware at some point in the future and for now, to just carry on how we are.” Alaric says.

“It could mean, doing it officially rather than always worrying that we’re going to be dragged in.” Rage says.

“So, we keep writing the reports and making sure that we tread the line between getting rid of the scum that we need to and not overstepping any boundaries that could be considered as using excessive violence.” Trick says, summing it up fairly simply.

“Exactly. There’s nothing we can do about it now anyway; we just need to be as prepared as possible for when it does happen. I don’t think it’s going to be an issue for a long time.” Alaric agrees.

I turn to the others, my eyes landing on Ever who's watching the exchange with interest.

"After hearing that, are you guys sure you want in? The only one of you who's actually done a job with me so far is Jensen. There's still time for you to get out if you want to."

"No fucking chance." Ever answers immediately.

"What she said. We're in and we aren't letting you do this by yourself." Rafe adds.

"Okay. Well, that's that sorted then." Alaric claps. "I'm still looking into those missing kids for you by the way. The information is buried really fucking deep, but I'm working on it."

"Thanks." Ever smiles.

"We need to get a move on if we're going to get there a couple of hours early." Trick says, getting us back on track.

"Alright, grab the weapons you want, I'd suggest at least one gun." I say, knowing that we're going to need them at some point.

"Jensen, go and get your knives. We're going to need to be as stealthy as possible for as long as possible, which means knives not guns." Trick adds in.

"I only bought the ten you told me I was allowed." He replies, his eyes widening with fake innocence.

Ever smirks, not buying it at all as she glances back at him pausing in strapping a gun to her thigh. The image is hot as fucking hell and I cross my arms over my chest to prevent myself from reaching for her. We don't have the time to get distracted right now and if I start something, I know for a fact it won't just stay me. I don't mind, but we definitely don't have time for that. Although the stress relief it would provide for all of us would be pretty fucking awesome.

"I know for a damn fact you brought more than that." Trick smirks as the guys start to chuckle.

"Fine, I may have." He admits, throwing his arms up in the air dramatically as he stomps out of the room, presumably to

go and get them.

Everyone starts to gear up and I can't help the worry that starts to creep up my spine. The people in this room are my family and I can't stand the thought of one of them getting hurt or worse, losing one of them entirely.

My fingers twitch moving to twist the ring that's no longer there. Alaric's eyes catch my movement and widen when he realises my ring isn't there, he still wears his own. He knows the importance of it, his eyes move to Ever a clear question in his gaze. I nod once hoping that he won't make a big deal out of it right now.

Determination fills his gaze and seriousness takes over his features. I know that he will now treat Ever like she's family. As is our way, when it's done correctly and not perverted like my fucking father. Ever has just become even more protected than she was before, and she doesn't even know it. My uncle understands the danger that comes along with giving her my ring too. Rage is right, after this I need to tell her what it all means, I can't leave her vulnerable if Liam ever gets his hands on her.

While everyone is busy gearing up, Alaric makes his way over to me.

"Does she know the significance of it?" He asks me, quietly.

"No, she knows it holds significance but not the extent of it. I'm going to tell her after we've got Rylie back from Liam."

"Good, she needs to understand the risks as well as the rewards." He warns, his eyes conveying the seriousness of the situation.

He waits until I nod my understanding before smiling and walking off to gear up himself.

It doesn't take long until we're all ready to go.

Ever

Jensen comes back in the room just as everyone else is finished strapping various weapons to themselves. Is it wrong that I find them so fucking hot, looking all dangerous and ready to take some names? Jensen drops a large duffle bag on the floor, and I raise an eyebrow. I knew he brought more than ten but there looks to be a lot more than that in there.

“Dude, seriously?” Riot asks, sounding shocked.

“What? I didn’t get caught with them and they’re not all mine.” He defends.

“What the hell does that mean, man?” Rage asks, this time sounding somewhat amused.

“I’ve been er, commandeering them off of the kids at school.”

“You’ve been stealing knives off the idiots at school?” Atlas questions, his eyes betraying his amusement.

“How else am I going to keep my skills sharp? You never know when you might need me to pickpocket someone.” He points out, seemingly completely unrepentant, if the proud glint is anything to go by.

“So how many did you bring with you?” Trick asks.

“Twenty.”

“And how many have you stolen?” Alaric asks.

“Twenty-five.”

“Holy fuck, that many?” Rafe adds in.

“Yep. They didn’t even notice me lift them; it was hardly challenging if I’m honest.” He replies sounding disappointed.

“We’ll come back to that later, everyone grab some knives. I assume that you’ve got the ones you want on you?” Trick orders.

“Yep.” He grins, popping the ‘p’ and seeming incredibly pleased with himself.

“Where?” Alaric asks, studying him closely.

“Don’t bother, you’ll never find them all and he’ll never tell.” Atlas chuckles.

Alaric raises an impressed eyebrow.

Finally, they’ve all got their knives and we’re ready to go. Rafe stops us just before we go out of the front door.

“We missed breakfast and we’re probably going to miss dinner. I suggest that we pick up something on the way into town, we’ve got a while to wait in the car anyway and we’re going to need all the energy that we can get.” Rafe says firmly, always looking after us.

I would’ve completely forgotten to eat, if I had been left to my own devices, my mind too focused on rescuing Rylie.

“I second that, I get stabby when I don’t eat, and I don’t think that’s entirely the goal here.” I grin, getting a couple of chuckles out of the guys. At least someone finds me amusing.

“That works. What cars are we taking, there isn’t one big enough for our whole team and Rage’s car although gorgeous, is not exactly inconspicuous. Same goes for the bikes.” Riot asks.

“Actually, I brought one of the vans with me. There’s enough room for all of us, plus equipment and Rylie.” Alaric shrugs. “I had a feeling you guys would already have a plan. Atlas has told me a lot about you over the years.”

I can’t believe that the Detective is Atlas’s uncle and his link to the feds. It works out really well. Everyone’s on the same page and at least I know I can easily contact him if I need information on what’s going on with the case. He mentioned Phoenix but not the case, so I figure there’s no update yet.

We load up into the big black van and I have to admit that it’s actually quite comfortable in the back. There’s a line of seats down each side with lap belts that offer little protection really. The one thing I’m not keen on when it comes to sitting in the back is that there are no windows. Great for protection and anonymity, but I’m not that keen on not seeing where I’m going. The guys wanted me to sit in front until I pointed out

that if Liam's guys are on the lookout for me, I'm better off in the back. If they catch sight of me then this whole rescue mission is done for.

I'm not risking it.

For the same reason, Alaric and Atlas are in the back as well. All of Liam's men know who they are. We want to stay inconspicuous to them for as long as possible. Pretty much the whole mission hinges on us staying hidden until the last minute and them underestimating us.

"Here's the plan then." Trick says from up front, of course he's driving. Luc sat up there with him. "Food, then we park up where we can see the coffee shop but not directly outside, that would be too obvious. Atlas or Alaric should be able to identify Liam's men. As soon as we've identified them, and hopefully their car, I want Luc to place the tracker on the underneath of it. Jensen, you will be look out since you're the best at creating distractions." His eyes meet Jensen's in the mirror as they share a grin.

"What if their car's not in sight?" Cash asks.

"It's unlikely that they won't park it close by, after all they're planning to get Ever into the car as quick as possible without giving her the chance to change her mind or allowing her to alert anyone that she needs help." Alaric points out.

"But if it's not in sight, you Luc and Jensen are going to have to tail them back to their car and then let us know where it is." Trick says frowning, his need to have a plan for every eventuality is pretty fucking handy but it has to drive him mad sometimes.

"Hopefully, it won't come to that." Alaric tries to reassure him.

"After that, we'll go from there." Trick finishes. "It will all depend on what their next move is after they realise Ever's not coming and how quickly Liam gets in contact."

We've just pulled up to the drive thru, a different one from last night and I realise something.

“Trick and Luc, you’re not going to want the drive thru guy to see your visible weapons, take them off and we’ll store them back here. Likewise, Jensen, you need to remove yours before you tail Liam’s men. Without them, you just look normal and you’ll be able to blend in easily with the civilians.” I reply.

“Fuck, I didn’t even think.” Cash chuckles as the guys remove their visible weapons, they aren’t left un-armed still carrying a multitude of concealed ones.

Trick and Luc quickly pass back their weapons and we carry on through the drive thru. I order two meals again; I agree with what Rafe said earlier we need as much energy as we can get.

Finally, we pull up just down the street from the coffee shop, it looks like a cute little place that under normal circumstances, I’d be happy to try out.

Chapter Twenty-Two

We are in full view of the coffee shop but not so obvious that someone would see us and instantly think that we're watching the place. It seems entirely weird to me that I've watched movies with very familiar scenarios in them and now it has become my reality.

I'm already getting freaking jittery, wanting to get on with it, it's been a long fucking time since I let my knives out to play to protect someone and because that someone is Rylie, you can bet your fucking ass I'm out for blood. That familiar tingle of adrenalin starts to thrum through me. Muscles tightening slightly with anticipation. I was right, all those weeks ago when I was at the police station in Fresno, I'm not made for the white picket fence life. I thrive in the darkness, in protecting all those who can't protect themselves.

My knee starts bouncing with the extra energy and Rage looks at me, concern flashing in his eyes.

"Nervous?" He asks.

"I'm nervous about what's happening to Rylie but I'm anxious to do something. It's been a long time since I fought, and it probably sounds weird, but I need it." I explain.

"I get that." Rage agrees, the other guys nodding.

I can't believe I've been lucky enough to find people who get me. My mind is a pit of apprehension because I'm so worried about what they could be doing to Rylie, what we're walking into. I'm even worried about why Liam wants me; I'd be less worried if he wanted me dead. That, I could understand. He thinks that one, I told the police in the first place and made them raid my father, taking out part of Liam's operation at the same time. Which also put his operation under the microscope and secondly, that I'm going to spill everything I know to the cops at the trial for the men that worked with my dad and therefore, worked for him. Which is true, I will, I want those men off the streets.

The fact that he wants me though has me worrying, what does he know?

He can't know about the other jobs that I did for my father, can he? And more than that, what if it's finally the backlash I was expecting for setting Jynx free and then helping her get her revenge.

The time we spend in the back of the van waiting gives me far more time to think than I've had recently, we've been constantly on the go dealing with one thing after another, it means that all those things that I've put a pin into think about later, are now starting to pop up in my brain.

Alaric produces a pack of cards seemingly out of thin air and while the guys play, I think about the next steps when it comes to the bunker case. Yes, I'm referring to it as a case now, Alaric called us a team and I like that. I like that we can do these jobs, helping to rid the world of the scum that plagues it. Without the red tape, jurisdictions and rules that anyone who works for law enforcement usually have to abide by. I think if I was born into another life, I would've aspired to work in law enforcement, as a detective or maybe even in S.W.A.T.

I do love solving a mystery though, as well as being the muscle so maybe a detective would've suited me more.

Which brings me back to Phoenix. We know that the list wasn't a complete list of members because they're all dead apart from Clint and I'd have to assume that the person responsible is the same guy that Clint said you didn't say no too. The same one that killed the five students. There was also the page that's been torn from the back, I don't think the guy in the mask ripped it out because the page didn't look freshly torn.

The next step would be trying to find out the other members in Phoenix. We could probably go back to Clint and see if we could get him to name some more of his friends. We could then see if they matched up with those on the list, anyone who wasn't on the list we could then look into.

It's not a great idea but it's all I've got at the moment. We need to go through all of the blueprints we found and see if the companies and buildings they belong to still exist today, there may be a link that we can follow. I'll suggest it to the guys after we've rescued Rylie, and we *will* be rescuing Rylie. She's tough as nails, it's one of the reasons why we became friends in the first place, we understood each other. I know that she's been through some shit in her past though and that has me worried that something is going to trigger her. I have no idea how long she's been gone for. Her dad must be worried sick, not to mention Darcy, her girlfriend.

"Guys, black SUV just pulled up directly outside the coffee shop, tinted windows." Trick says from the front seat and immediately, the light-hearted atmosphere in the van changes to something more serious tension running through the air as we all look towards the SUV.

"Looks like fake plates as well." I comment. I'd recognise fake ones anywhere, I've dealt with enough of them.

"Good eye." Alaric mutters sounding slightly impressed.

"Two have exited, armed with at least two guns each. I'd assume that they've got one or more guys in the back, they wouldn't want to risk Ever escaping, if they manage to convince her to get in, in the first place." Trick adds.

"That means that we need to approach as carefully as possible. Is there a chance that they'll recognise me and Jensen?" Luc asks.

"I wouldn't think so, but the window of opportunity is small, you need to go now." Alaric says, handing them back a small flat, back device. "It's got a high-powered magnet on the back as well as an adhesive that will keep it attached to the car over the toughest terrain. I suggest putting it on the underneath."

"Seems simple enough. Jensen, I have an idea, you stay by the van in case I need a distraction, we're less suspicious if there's one of us." Luc says, hopping out of the van with Jensen hot on his heels.

Jensen walks a bit further down the road leaning near a bus stop and pulling out his phone. He looks relaxed, just like a teenager waiting for his bus and not paying attention to his surroundings. He even goes as far as to put some headphones in his ears, I can guarantee that he doesn't have a music playing though. Every now and then his eyes dart to where Luc is walking across the road, but not enough to make it look like he's keeping an eye on him, but more to give the air of offhanded curiosity.

My attention switches to Luc, he walks to the SUV which is fortunately facing away from us so if there are any more people in the back, they aren't going to see Luc approach. He drops to the floor near the back of it and pretends to tie his shoe as he places the device. Cash immediately opens up the laptop that Alaric gave him and checks the signal.

“It's good. Strong signal.”

Luc gets up and walks down the street, his pace unhurried as the door to the coffee shop opens and the two guys come out looking pissed. One of them with his phone to his ear. Jensen stays at the stop looking down at his phone and keeping his face mostly obscured as they climb in and start the SUV driving past Luc just as he turns to look in a shop window. As soon as they're sure that the SUV is no longer in sight, they both make their way back to the van and climb in.

I have to admit that I'm pretty impressed with the efficiency that they pulled that off. I don't know why I'm still getting surprised at the things these guys do anymore.

“Good job, guys.” Trick says as soon as they get in the van, earning grins.

“Now what?” Rafe asks.

“Now we wait and let them get a head start. We'll give it twenty minutes and then start to follow. Luc, I need you on the second laptop as soon as we know where they're headed. I need you to bring up an aerial view of the location so we can see the best plan for infiltrating it.” Alaric says. “Cash, you keep giving Trick directions to where they are and as soon as

we find somewhere out of the way, you can pull over and we'll study the aerial view and make a plan."

"Got it." Cash agrees as Trick and Luc nod.

"Ever, keep an eye on your phone, there's a big possibility that he's going to ring you." Atlas says, his eyes worried. "He will threaten you and all sorts of other nasty shit, don't give in to it and remember the plan."

"I understand. I doubt he could say anything that I haven't heard before." I reply.

Riot's sitting close to my side, his hand on my leg and he squeezes gently, giving me the silent support that I need. Rafe is sitting on my other side, his fingers threaded through mine, my other hand holding my phone.

"Alright, Cash, is the signal still strong?" Trick asks.

"Yeah, they're travelling fast though." Cash replies, still watching the screen.

"Let's set off then. I want to go in under the cover of darkness. We've got a while before then." Alaric replies, moving from the back of the van up into the front.

With that, we're on the way. I sort of feel that Alaric's treating this like a trial run for our team. Seeing how well we work together and where our skills lie. It will give him a good idea of the kinds of jobs we can handle in the future. He already knows how Atlas and Rage work; he knows what they are capable of. When it comes to the rest of us though, other than what Atlas has told him, he's got no idea whether we can handle what they do.

My phone ringing in my hand pulls me out of my thoughts and I glance down at the screen.

"It's the same number as this morning."

"Put it on speaker." Alaric says as the van falls silent, all the quiet conversations ending abruptly.

"Ever, I'm disappointed in you." Liam's voice comes through the phone, I'm once again hit with familiarity.

I snort, “Join the club.”

Atlas stiffens slightly at my nonchalant response, but a chuckle comes through the phone and he frowns, clearly not expecting that reaction.

“I should’ve known that you would’ve been too smart to turn up. But alas, now we have a problem. See, I have your friend Rylie, she’s quite lovely actually, her screams are like music to my ears.” He taunts.

My jaw clenches and I know my eyes are flashing with violence. I swallow down my threats for now.

“How pleasant for you.” I bite out. “What do you want?”

“I want you to meet me, without your little tag alongs.”

“Where?”

“Huntington Bridge, midnight tomorrow.”

“How very cloak and dagger of you.” I scoff.

“I thought you’d like that.” He replies, missing the sarcasm. “If you miss this meeting, Ever, I will kill her.”

“I want proof of life. How do I know you haven’t killed her already?” I reply calmly trying to keep my cool.

“Logan!” He snaps.

“Ever?” I hear Rylie within seconds, sounding desperate and afraid. “Don’t give them what they want!” She adds, a steel to her voice that wasn’t there a second ago.

Suddenly, pain filled screams fills the van and my hand clenches tightly around my phone, the need for blood descending across my senses.

Atlas and Alaric shake their heads at me already guessing what I’m about to do, I ignore them. It’s not in my nature to play nicely.

“If you lay one more finger on her, I promise you that you will lose your fucking life, but before you do, I’m going to play. You seem to know me, no doubt thanks to my father, I

don't know what you want with me, but trust me, you do not want me to play." I growl, the guys share a look.

"Oh, I know exactly what you're capable of. No more harm will come to Rylie so long as you do as I've asked." He says, a knowing lilt to his voice before he abruptly hangs up.

"Fucking cunt, I'm going to enjoy taking my knife to him." I growl.

The van is silent as they watch me, Alaric, Atlas, and Rage exchange a loaded look.

"What?" I ask.

"The way you handled him was pretty fucking impressive." Alaric starts.

"And hot." Jensen interrupts and I chuckle darkly.

"What's surprising though, is the way he responded to you." Alaric carries on ignoring Jensen's comment.

"He spoke like he knew you personally." Rage continues, crossing his arms over his chest and eyeing me suspiciously.

"I've been in the same room when one of the big players in the criminal underworld has threatened him, he explodes and they're dead. You spoke to him in a way that no one has dared to since he rose to power." Atlas explains, leaning forward and watching me with a mixture of worry and awe.

"What are you getting at?" I ask, starting to get defensive as their stares bore into me.

"Next left." Cash calls up to Trick. Giving the next direction we need to take and providing a small reprieve from the tension.

I take a deep breath; my violence is riding me hard after that phone call. I know that this situation doesn't call for that so with effort I unclench my jaw and calm my initial reaction.

"His voice sounds familiar to me, but I can't place it. I've heard of Liam of course, but I've never seen what he looks like, so I can't tell you if I know him or not." I explain.

“This is the most recent photo we have of Liam; it was taken a week ago.” Alaric pulls out his phone and presses a couple of buttons before handing it over to me.

I stare down at the very familiar face on the screen, he’s cleaner, better presented, has a full head of hair, and is fairly okay on the eye, but it is definitely the fucker.

“Fuck!” I curse.

“You recognise him?” Atlas asks his eyes wide.

“Oh yeah, I recognise the fucker. He looks a lot better than the last time I saw him though.”

“What do you mean the last time you saw him? You’ve been in the same room as him?”

“Many times, unfortunately.” Everyone’s eyes widen with shock, as fear darkens Atlas’s. “I knew him as Jerry though. He was a drop I made about once a month. Always in the same run-down house, he never came to the trailer like most of my dad’s other business associates did. I guess because he’d be recognised, and I was blissfully unaware of who he actually was.” I frown.

I can’t believe Jerry is actually Liam and Atlas’s dad.

“You look nothing like your father.” I point out to Atlas; he just watches me shocked.

“Did he hurt you, Princess?” His eyes darken as the thought occurs to him.

“No, on the contrary actually. His men were the more respectful dickheads, they never tried to grab something they had no right too. Although, I did have a reputation for cutting things off people who tried that, so that might be why.” I smirk, “They also always let me go in with a weapon which gave me a level of security that was comforting. Jerry was one of my more preferable drops. Every time I was there though, he’d always ask the same thing, it became a sort of game, I guess. He’d ask me if I was finally coming to work for him, I always turned him down and he’d laugh it off and send me on my way.”

“You refused him, and he just laughed it off and let you go?” Rage asks, incredulously.

“Yep. Let me guess, people who turn him down usually end up dead?”

“Well, yeah.” Alaric confirms looking confused as hell, and still staring at me like I’m a bug under a microscope.

“And he didn’t hurt you?” Atty asks again, unbelieving and obviously scared as hell that his father’s hurt me.

I carefully move across the moving van, Cash still muttering directions to Trick, although both their attention is focused on me.

Atlas’s arms wrap around me like steel bands and I can feel the slight tremor running through them.

“He didn’t hurt me, Atty. In fact, every now and then, he’d give me a bit of extra money. More than the drugs cost, he’d give it specifically to me. I was suspicious the first time he gave me it, thinking it came with extra strings, but I hadn’t eaten for days and at that point I was desperate. I didn’t care if I got a beating for it. Nothing ever came from it though.”

“What fucking alternate universe have I just stumbled into?” Rage explodes. “He gave you money and expected nothing in return?”

“Yeah. Not every time, but often enough that I probably owe him for not starving.”

“There’s so much more going on here, than we’re aware of.” Alaric, mutters. “That is not how my brother behaves. It reminds me of the Liam he was when we were kids, before the criminal world corrupted him to such an extent.”

“What’s so important about you, though?” Rage says, I’d take offence, but I know he doesn’t mean it that way.

“I don’t know.” I shrug, feeling confused.

Although it’s a shock learning that Jerry is actually Liam, it doesn’t affect my threat. I will kill him if he lays another finger on Rylie.

“I hate not knowing why he wants you. I guess him wanting you alive has nothing to do with you testifying against your dad’s men. Could it be that he just wants you to work for him?” Trick asks, his eyes flicking to me in the rear-view mirror.

“Maybe, I don’t really know why he’d go to all this effort though. I’m more likely to cause him trouble. His men would lose appendages for touching me and let’s not be naïve and think that they wouldn’t try.”

“Well, I’m sure he likes how blood thirsty you are, but I feel like there’s more to this. Something we aren’t seeing yet.” Alaric, muses.

“It’s something else that we need to think about later. We need to focus on Rylie now.” I say, trying to get everyone on back track.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“We’re about five minutes away from where they’ve stopped.” Cash announces.

Trick finds a dirt track, overgrown enough that we know that it hasn’t been used in a long time and pulls far enough down that we can’t be seen from the road. As soon as the van has stopped, he turns in his seat to look at me.

“We do need to discuss this later, Sweetheart. We need to work out why he wants you.”

“I know and we will, I just can’t think about anything other than rescuing Rylie right now.” I reply.

“Okay, I get that. Luc, what have you found?”

“About five minutes up the road is what looks like an airfield building, you know, the really long semi-circle shaped ones?”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I don’t suppose you can see any aircraft?” Alaric asks.

“Well, I haven’t hacked into one of the satellites, that’s out of my skillset so I can’t tell you for sure, but this aerial photograph is less than a year old, and it looks abandoned and run down.”

“So, we can assume they’re just using the buildings, and not storing planes there.” Rage mutters.

“On the plans, one of the airfield buildings looks like it’s got an area below it, the same size as the top part.” He continues, studying the images on screen closely and then turning it around to show the rest of us.

“They’ll be keeping her under there.” Atlas says.

“That’s a pretty fucking big space, be prepared to find other things as well.” Alaric warns. “Our priority is to get Rylie out. Anything else we can deal with later. I can send a team in.”

Trick nods grimly.

I get what he means, I really do, but I know that if there is anyone else down there that appears to be a prisoner, I will be rescuing them as well. I'm going to take down as many of the fuckers in there as possible. I do have to remind myself that we're doing this sort of properly, so I need to keep my strikes non-lethal, so that they can be taken in and the justice system can deal with them. We also don't want to risk Alaric's boss taking a dislike to something we've done.

I'd rather avoid jail if we can.

I *will not* leave anyone behind though. If that means I have to secure the entire building by myself then you bet your fucking perky little ass that's what I'm going to do. I could do with a challenge after not being able not stretch my muscles for so long.

"I suggest we approach from the back." Jensen says, "Any vehicle you find, disable it so that anyone who tries to escape, can't."

He doesn't tell any of them how to disable the vehicles, so I presume that it's all something they know how to do.

Rafe seeing the questioning look on my face smirks and starts signing.

"Tomlinson."

Ah that explains it, their old rival school.

"Remember, disable and secure any of Liam's men you come across. Do not kill any of them unless it's a kill or be killed situation." Alaric reminds us and we nod.

None of us actually want to kill someone and all of us would only kill if we had no choice. I understand that he feels the need to say it though.

"There are cable ties in one of the drawers under the bench seat." He adds.

"Aw cool, I didn't even realise they had drawers in them!" Jensen comments sounding enthusiastic.

“As soon as we find Rylie, we need to get her out. We have no idea what condition she’s going to be in. Has anyone got medical training?” Alaric asks.

“I do.” Cash replies.

“Good, there’s a medical kit in one of the drawers too. Obviously, you can’t take the whole thing in, it’s too bulky, but take out the bare essentials you think you might need just to stabilise her so that we can move her and in case any of us sustain injuries.”

“Got it.” Cash says pulling the drawers out until he finds the kit. He searches through it and pulls out what he needs.

“Everyone who took their weapons off needs to put them back on. Once everyone’s ready, we’ll set off.” Trick says, stepping out of the van and walking around to the back opening the door.

“I’m going stretch my legs, it’s not that comfortable riding in the back of that thing.” I grin hopping out of the van.

I finally get a good look at where we are. Of course, we’re in what looks like the middle of nowhere. We’re surrounded by woods on either side and just through the trees I can make out the sun starting to dip beneath the horizon, painting the sky with reds and pinks. It’s quite beautiful and I take a moment to appreciate it, I learned a long time ago that you can’t take anything for granted. There’s still a chill in the air, winter still underway and my breaths puff out in front of me, I am incredibly grateful for my extra layers right now. As soon as we start to get moving though, I know I won’t feel the cold.

The longer we wait for everyone to get sorted the more worried I get about Rylie. I have to keep reminding myself that Liam doesn’t expect us to show up here, he wants me to be on the bridge. One that I don’t even know the location of, tomorrow at midnight. He said he knew what I was capable of, so I’m going to take him at his word and assume he took me at mine and won’t harm her anymore. The problem with that being, how much he’s already hurt her.

I suddenly find myself sandwiched between Rafe and Riot and all thoughts fly from my mind. Rafe claims my lips, kissing me in the slow and languid way that gently stokes the flame of desire as Riot nips my shoulder. My lips leave Rafe's and I turn my head searching for Riot's as Rafe's lips move down my neck in soft kisses. Riot's kiss is firm, putting all of his feelings into as usual. I'm pulled from between them and into Luc's arms, he smirks as I immediately move my arms around his neck, standing on my tip toes and bring his lips down to meet mine. Luc kisses me as if he never wants to let me go, his arms tightening around me, crushing me to him as my feet lift up off the ground slightly.

He kisses me softly one last time before I'm passed over to Cash, my legs wrap around his waist as Trick steps up behind me.

"Tip your head back, Sweetheart." Trick orders.

I immediately do as I'm told, the only time when I actually do. Cash's lips start making a delicate trail down my throat as his hands clench on my ass, pulling me closer. With my head tipped back, it makes it easier for Trick to claim my lips in a commanding kiss. By the time we pull apart, Cash only has a chance to place a chaste kiss on my lips before Jensen intervenes.

"My turn." He growls.

My feet barely hit the ground, Cash and Trick just managing to move out of the way as Jensen swoops in, pulling me up into his arms and promptly slamming my back against a nearby tree.

"Whoa, hang on." I hear Rage mutter.

"Don't worry about it, they're as bad as each other." Luc chuckles.

I bite Jensen's lip in retaliation, making him growl as his hands tighten on my legs no doubt leaving bruises. My hands weave into his hair and I tug hard, knowing he needs that bite of pain. Jensen is practically overflowing with energy right now, amped up for the coming fight. Eventually, he puts me

down and I make my way to Atty, crooking my finger to get the giant to bend down to my level, I kiss along his scar before he takes my mouth in a hard and fast, demanding and passion fuelled kiss that leaves me begging for more just like all of the others.

“I don’t like that you knew Liam.” Atty mutters when he pulls back, fear in his eyes.

“I know. I don’t like not knowing what he wants me for.” I admit.

“We’ll get to the bottom of it, Puddin’.” Rage chimes in and I turn to look at him.

I get the overwhelming urge to hug him, but I know he probably wouldn’t appreciate that, and I don’t want to trigger him.

“Thanks, Rage.” I smile softly instead.

“Is everyone ready now?” Alaric asks and my eyes widen.

Since I’m still looking at Rage, he sees and promptly starts chuckling.

“Asshole.” I hiss at him, making him laugh harder.

I can’t believe that I forgot that Atty’s uncle was here with us. I feel my cheeks heat and the guys smirk.

Assholes, the lot of them. Even Alaric looks amused.

“We’re ready.” Trick says, saving me from further embarrassment.

Alaric nods and we all set off into the undergrowth, as we walk, I notice Trick placing these little orange stickers on the trees closer to the ground than eyeline.

“What are you doing?” Jensen asks, curiously, keeping his tone quiet in case there’s anyone nearby.

“Marking our way back, it’s going to be dark by then and all the trees are going to look the damn same.” He replies.

“Smart idea putting them below the eyeline so they’re less easy to spot if anyone checks the woods or tries to follow you

too.” Alaric, comments sounding impressed.

“That’s why he’s the boss.” Riot chuckles.

“Oh, that reminds me, since you’ve met everyone now and they know our link. Trick is going to be the one who’s coordinating the jobs you send to us, so I’ll give you his number. It’s easier than me trying to be the go between you two and the jobs should run smoother with him in charge of it.” Atlas says and Trick’s eyes fill with pride.

“That works for me.” Alaric replies.

With that decided, we all fall silent as we get closer to the treeline surrounding the airfield buildings. Keeping a close eye on our environment to make sure we don’t get any nasty surprises. I’m walking ahead of the others just a step or two in front of Trick and Atlas. Which is why I get to the guy patrolling the edge of the woods first. He spots me, and charges, I dodge his fist pulling my knife and holding it with the blade pointing down my forearm. Not only does this mean that I can swipe out at him and slice, but it also means that I can smack him with handle end.

I flick my blade out as he comes for me again, and catch his arm as I raise mine to block his hit, the guy is not pulling his punches at all and he’s not a small guy so he’s got quite a lot of fucking power behind him. I kick out against his knee with force, making him grunt as he buckles and falls to the floor, I fling my knife to the side embedding it in a tree trunk and out of his reach as I grab handfuls of his hair and force his head down as I bring my knee up hard, a move that Jynx taught me. His nose shatters as blood spurts from it, it wasn’t enough to knock him out, but while he’s dazed, I aim a hard kick that knocks him out and has him falling to the floor.

“Timber!” I grin, trying not to be too loud.

I hear a snort from behind me and ignore it as I pull out some of the cable ties that I stuffed in my pockets before we left the van and secure his hands and feet together. Once that’s done, I start to try and pull him towards the tree line to get him out of sight in case anyone comes looking for him. He weighs a fucking ton though and I start huffing and puffing, only

managing to move him a foot or so. I give up and turn to face the peanut gallery who are all just standing there, amusement shining in their eyes and the twist of their lips, a good deal of heat is burning in all of their eyes as well, except for Alaric who looks impressed.

“What?” I ask, my hands on my hips. “A little help, he’s fucking heavy.”

“You looked like you had it.” Rage smirks.

“Fuck off.” I throw back, not hiding my grin.

Him and Rafe make easy work of moving the guy into the trees so that he’s not going to be seen by anyone walking by. He will eventually wake up and be able to call for help, but hopefully it’ll be too late by then. I walk over to my embedded knife and pull it out of the trunk putting it back into the holder strapped around my leg. Jensen and Atlas watch my every move with burning heat.

“You okay?” Trick asks, quietly. Checking in as usual. “That was pretty intense.” He adds as we carefully walk towards the buildings, there doesn’t seem to be any more guards at the moment but where there’s one there’s bound to be more.

“That was nothing.” I grin.

My limbs are feeling loose and a layer of tension has completely disappeared. I knew I needed the release, but I didn’t realise quite how badly.

“It was fucking impressive.” Luc compliments and I beam.

“Alright, focus now.” Alaric reminds us.

We quieten down as we approach, peering around the corner, to see three guards posted outside of the single door.

“Remember we want the element of surprise for as long as possible.” Trick reminds us quietly.

Fortunately, the door is closer to us than the other side of the building and the men standing outside all look distracted talking amongst themselves. They’re dressed in normal looking clothes, jeans, and sweaters. Each of them have

AK47s, if they start firing, not only is it likely that one of us is going to be hit, but also it's going to make a fuck ton of noise and have god knows how many other fuckers converging on us. Trick motions Rafe and Riot forward, they work together well and take down the three of the men with quick efficiency. Securing them and then moving them behind one of the vehicles that are parked outside.

Once they're secured and we're sure there's no more out here, Trick orders those with the know how, to disable all the vehicles we can find. It takes minutes and we reconvene in front of the door to the building. Alaric opens the door and we file in, there's a moment of shock as the men and women inside turn to look at us. We use that to our advantage, knocking as many out as many as we can, there's a lot of them in here though, and soon that's not enough, we've all taken a couple of hits and I can't help but yell as a bullet flies towards Jensen. He dives out of the way at the last second, but yells as he hits the floor making me think that he's been hit.

Fuck.

The guy who shot him, takes aim again, while Jensen's lying on the floor. I rush to make it to him, reaching for my gun. Before I can pull it out though he jolts as blood blooms across his chest, he looks shocked for a second before falling to the floor. My eyes meet Rage's and nod. I'll thank him properly later, that was one hell of a fucking shot.

He ducks as a fist comes near him and I pull my gun, still on my way to Jensen and shoot one of the fuckers coming for me in the knee, downing him instantly.

"Jensen?" I ask as I sink to the floor next to him, my eyes scanning the surrounding area as I guard him.

"I'm good, Angel. It just grazed my arm." He says, hopping back up.

He winces slightly in pain and I breathe out a massive sigh of relief, that could've been so much worse. We jump straight back into the fight. I end up taking a couple of hits as a woman and a guy decide to team up. Bullets are still flying, but I take the duo down fairly easily, managing to knock the guy out.

The woman is harder to take down, you can tell that she's had a hard life, fought tooth and fucking nail to be where she is, and I have a grudging respect for that. I end up having to use my knives, planting one in her stomach but making sure that it doesn't hit anything vital.

Using knives as your weapon of choice for long enough and you soon learn where the best places not hit are.

With my knife still in my hand, I stand back up, ignoring the vulgar things coming out of the woman on the floor and glance around seeing where I can help. Riot and Rafe have once again teamed up and are fighting back to back against three men. They don't need any help. Jensen jumped straight back into the fray despite his arm and is fucking playing with two more. He can end it anytime he wants, he's just choosing not to. Trick's handling one of his own, no help needed as he knocks him out cold, the muscles in his arms rippling and momentarily distracting me. Atlas has a ring of downed bodies surrounding him and he looks every bit the dangerous and deadly fucker he appears to everyone else apart from me.

It's hot as fuck.

Cash has got one fucker in a chokehold, I'm about to intervene as a guy charges at him but without breaking his hold, he whips out his gun and takes two shots shooting the charging fuck in the knee.

Damn.

Luc is wrestling with someone on the floor but smiling at the same time, so I figure he's good. Alaric is fighting a big fucker but holding his own. That's everyone accounted for apart from Rage.

My eyes scan the wide space, searching for him. Worry beginning to seep into my senses.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I finally find him, separated from the others. He's in an intense fight, the guy he's fighting against seems to be evenly matched with him and he's landing hits as much as he's getting hit. That's not what has me raising my knife to help though. Another fucker is coming up from behind, aiming a gun straight for the back of Rage's head.

My heart leaps into my throat as fear tries to claim me. *Oh fuck no.* I growl internally, my anger quickly burning away my fear. Rage manages to get the upper hand finally downing his opponent, his eyes land on mine and go wide just as I let my knife fly.

Don't move. I mouth to him, hoping that he can see my mouth from here and he fucking listens. It's too late to do anything else and I watch with horror as the guy behind Rage takes aim again, grinning victoriously. All of this happens in a blink of an eye and I worry that I might've been too late to release my knife. I should've pulled my gun, but I'm less comfortable with guns and whereas my knife feels like an extension of myself my gun definitely doesn't. My whole body relaxes as my knife hits true, straight in the middle of his forehead. The guy drops to the floor with a thud and Rage spins around and freezes at what he sees. He turns back to me his eyebrows raised.

"I told you I had good aim." Call across to him, the guys having just finished their fights and securing them.

"Brat." He grins back at me.

"You're welcome." I grin.

I bend down and start securing the men and women around me.

"Shit." Trick suddenly curses and I look up worried something's happened to one of them only to see Trick disappear down a corridor, we all race after him figuring he

must've seen someone escape down this way and if they get to the people holding Rylie and warn them, then there's a good fucking chance that they will kill her.

I push myself faster, my muscles burning slightly at the exertion and the little cuts decorating my arms from where one of the fuckers I fought managed to nick me, pull uncomfortably, not to mention the slight pain in my ribs where someone got me with a well-timed right hook.

However, I am still standing and none of them are, so I win.

The corridor slopes downward and I'm guessing that we're being led into the underground part of the building. Trick and Jensen catch up to the two escapees just before they make it into the room below, knocking them out and securing them, we cautiously peer out into the room, using the corridor as a kind of hide since its placed closet to one wall. I glance over my men quickly, noting that we're all sporting some kind of injuries but the most serious one appears to be Jensen's, thank fuck it wasn't his dominant hand. Its barely slowed him down.

We move slowly into the room, where as the room upstairs was mostly tables, a couple of couches and a few vehicles and not much else, almost as if it was a chill out area for them, down here is row after row of crates. I'm willing to bet that there's weapons or drugs in them. Maybe both. Something we can check on after we've secured Rylie. The room down here is duller, what little light there is casting long shadows, which is easy for us to move about unseen, but also making it easy for whoever is down here to move about without us knowing too.

We all move on silent feet, splitting up, Atlas coming with me, and moving further into the rows of crates. It's not long until I hear the sounds of fighting coming from where the other guys are spread out. Me and Atlas pick up our pace moving further towards the end of the crates. Rylie has to be down here somewhere; this is where the tracker led us. Unless when they called Liam, he gave them alternative instructions and Rylie's not here at all. All of this would be for nothing and I'd have to go to the meet tomorrow night.

Fuck, why didn't I think of that?

Just as I start to become convinced that she's not here and we fucked up, Atlas holds his hand up to me signalling that I stop. He motions up ahead and I see Rylie secured to a chair. Her face is swollen, her lip split. Her head is bowed, and her eyes are closed as her chest moves up and down in shallow breaths, reassuring me that she is still breathing but something might be going on with her ribs. Her leg is wrapped just above the knee with a completely blood-soaked bandage and if I had to guess, I'd say that's what they did to her while I was on the phone.

Absolute fuckers.

The one saving grace is that her clothing all appears to be intact, none of it torn or missing.

The darkness inside me seethes at what they've done to my friend, a red tint changing my vision. My eyes zero in on a table of six guys, laughing and joking, being loud enough that they didn't even hear the other fuckers being taken down around them.

I launch one of my knives, making the hit in the guy's shoulder and grinning as he bellows in pain. I rush from the shadows, the guys quickly on my heels. These guys are better trained than the ones upstairs and provide more of a challenge. I knock the gun out of the ugly fucker's hand as he waves it around in front of him, kicking it out of the way and punching him in the gut, as he goes to punch me with his left hand, his right strikes out at the last second and catches me by surprise as he cuts a large gash in my side, the pain pierces through me and I know I'm going to need a good few stitches.

Fuck.

Jensen comes out of nowhere and floors the guy, turning concerned eyes to me.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'll be fine.” I tell him, we need to get Rylie out of here, I've dealt with worse and this isn't that bad, I'll be good until everyone's safe.

The plus side to wearing black is you can't see the blood. My jacket flows behind me as I moved so its sliced through my shirt, but when I stop moving, my jacket settled back into place. I don't want the guys freaking out over me when we need to be focused on Rylie. Like I said it's not a big deal. The others have dispatched the rest of the guards down here. So, I waste no time as I rush towards Rylie. While moving in her direction, I do my jacket up, it'll create a bit of pressure against the wound, thanks to the fact that it's my leather bike jacket and it's tight enough to add a bit of pressure.

It also would've protected me from the knife in the first place if it was done up.

I rush towards Rylie's slumped form and cut the cable ties off her hands and feet.

"You guys need to step back, when she wakes up, chances are she's not going to know where she is and a group of big ass men surrounding her is going to make her panic." I tell them.

They all instantly back up, their faces creased with worry. Atlas, Rafe, and Rage all cross their arms over their chests as they stand back, their eyes scanning the surrounding area, in case we missed someone.

"We need to be fairly quick, Ever." Trick says, "A couple of them escaped and we don't know if they've called in for back up."

"Jensen, Luc, and Riot have gone after them, but they had quite a head start." Atlas adds in.

"As soon as we're out, I'll make a call and get the feds here to detain everyone. We need to get you out first, but we need to do it quickly." Alaric adds.

I nod grimly. There's nothing more that I'd like, than to give Rylie and few minutes to just breathe but we don't have that luxury, she's going to have to wait until we're out and safe.

"Rylie." I say softly, touching her arm, the only place where she's not bruised.

She jolts as she wakes up, flinching away as she tries to move her stiff arms forward, to protect her, her eyes are wild as they search the room before they finally land on me. The relief in them is staggering and tears instantly start to flow down her bruised cheeks. I pull her into my arms, and she clings to me tightly. I'm aware we're on a time crunch though and don't hold her for nearly as long as I want to.

"We've got to get going, I'm sorry. We're not safe yet." I look over my shoulder and motion Cash forward. "Cash is going to wrap your leg to stop it from bleeding as we move you, okay?"

"Yeah, thank you for coming for me." Rylie's hoarse voice whispers, her eyes clearing slightly as she realises that she's safer than she was, but we're not out of the woods yet.

"Of course. I'm sorry you were taken in the first place."

While we talk, me in an effort to distract her from the pain that it's going to cause touching her wounded leg, Cash secures more bandages over the top of the ones already there, at my questioning look, he explains.

"If I take off the ones already on there, I risk it starting to bleed again, from what I can tell it's either stopped or slowed down a lot, since the blood is starting to dry that also creates the problem that the dry blood will stick to her and the bandages and cause her unnecessary pain right now. The best thing I can do, is secure it and then leave the rest for the hospital where they've got the proper means to deal with it, and painkillers for Rylie."

"Thanks, dude. I'm all for no more pain right now. Bring on the drugs." Rylie jokes.

She holds her hands out for me and I slowly try to pull her up.

"Fuck, that hurts like a bitch." She curses through gritted teeth.

"What does?" Cash asks, sounding concerned.

"Every-fucking-thing." She smiles, but it looks more like a grimace. "As much as I hate to admit it, I'm going to slow you

down. Can someone carry me?"

"Of course." Rafe says, slowly stepping forward and gently gathering her into his arms, carrying her bridal style.

Now is not the time to admire the ease at which he did that, damn.

"I'll try not to jostle you as much as possible, but we need to get out of here, quickly. I'm sorry." Rafe says to her and Rylie nods.

"Just get us out of here, I can deal." She says, determination hardening her eyes.

We set off at a jog back through the rows of crates. Getting cursed out by those of them that have awoken tied up. Jensen suddenly lands in front of us, making me jump and the pain from the cut in my side intensify. *Ah, fuck.* I take a couple of deep breaths pushing the pain away until it's more manageable.

"What the fuck man, where the hell did you come from?" Rage says.

I grin, guns and bad guys no problem, Jensen falling from the air and landing in a superhero pose, that makes him jump.

"From up here." Luc calls, balancing on the very edge of the crates at least twenty foot in the air. "We lost one of the fuckers that escaped but caught the other one. We thought we'd see what was in the crates."

"You couldn't have jumped from up there?" Alaric asks, as he starts to lead us forward again.

"Where's Riot?" I ask.

"He's gone up ahead, to make sure it's clear. And no, he didn't, he scaled down and then jumped." Luc says, keeping pace with us along the top of the crates and making it look effortless.

"What's in them?" Trick asks, curiously.

"Weapons, we could only get into a couple but both of them contained weapons." Jensen answers.

“Well, fuck. That’s a fuck load of weapons if they’re all filled with the same.” Alaric curses. “I’ll put in the call now. We need the back up and you guys aren’t too worse for wear that you won’t be able to make it to the van in time before they get here.”

“Hang on, Atlas?” Rylie asks, sounding a bit confused, having only just realised that he’s amongst us. As far as she’s concerned Atlas had disappeared last year. There were loads of rumours at the guys last school about it.

“It’s a long story.” Atlas replies.

“I fucking bet.” She mutters, sounding tired.

We finally make it out of the building, picking Riot up on the way past, he didn’t manage to catch up to the guy that escaped, but there wasn’t anyone else out in the upper part of the building so at least there’s that. Atlas and Rage go out of the door first their guns drawn and checking for any stragglers we may have missed, or that may have arrived.

“It’s clear.” Rage calls back.

“Does anyone else have any injuries that need dealing with right now?” Cash asks, as Rafe gently sets Rylie down in the bed of one of the trucks parked outside.

“I could do with my arm wrapped.” Jensen says. “It can wait for proper medical care until we get home, but I’m dripping.”

Sure enough, blood is starting to very slowly drip off his fingers, having trailed down his arm from where he was grazed by a bullet. It’s not dripping very fast, in fact, it’s one every few minutes if that, so he’s not losing life threatening amounts of blood, but he does need it stopped. While Cash sorts him out, chastising him for climbing up the crates with it in that condition, I walk over to Rylie.

“How’re you doing?” I ask softly.

“I’m alive.” She replies.

And I get it, sometimes all you can be is alive and that’s okay. She’s been through a hell of a lot over the last few days.

“Whatever you said to that main guy on the phone, stopped them from laying a single hand on me after that.” She adds, her eyes open with curiosity.

I can feel the guys eyes burning into me.

“I just made some threats.” I say, downplaying it as I lean against the truck trying to take some of the strain off my side.

The blood is starting to dry and tug painfully.

“I can’t do this.” She says, her eyes lowering.

“Do what?” I ask, moving closer and taking her hand, she clings to me as her eyes latch on to mine.

“I just, I can’t do this. I can’t be involved with whatever you’ve got going on, I’m sorry. I got out and I’m safe, but if they find me again...” She trails off, her eyes filling with more fear than I saw even when she was tied to chair. “I can’t risk it; I just can’t. I can’t go back there.” She starts to panic, rocking back and forth as her arms wrap around her, like she’s trying to hold herself together.

“Deep breaths, Rylie. Come on, breathe with me.” I say, my heart breaking for her. “That’s it, in and out. Good, better?”

She nods, her eyes finally meeting mine again. “I don’t think we should stay in contact.”

Pain laces through my heart at the confession, but I understand. My second true female friend and I’ve lost her. “Okay, I never want to put you in danger again.” What she’s said though is concerning to say the least, I don’t want her living her life worried about whoever is after her. “Do you want us to deal with whoever it is that you’re worried about? I promise you won’t ever hear from me again, unless you want to.”

“Maybe.” She says sounding completely unsure, her eyes darting over my shoulder to the guys.

“How about this, I’ll give you my number, if you change your mind or need us for whatever reason, call me and I promise you, we will help.” I vow to her, it’s the least I can do, she was there for me from the minute that I moved back,

helped me deal with panic attacks which were a fairly new thing for me and had my back at every fucking turn.

“Thank you.” She replies, her eyes dart away and I really fucking hope that she will call if she needs me.

I reel off my number to her.

“Ever, we need to get back to the van and away from here.” Trick says gently.

I look at Alaric worriedly, he seems to know what I’m thinking.

“I’ll keep her safe until my guys and the ambulance arrive.” He reassures me. “Rylie, you can’t mention that you saw Ever and the guys here. They’re involved in something a lot bigger than this, and it would put them all at risk. As far as they will be concerned, I got a tip and when I arrived, the guards were taken care of except for a couple that I took out since I’m covered in wounds from fighting. I found you and got you out.”

“I can do that, not the first time I’ve not told the complete truth when it comes to the cops.” She smiles, but it’s strained with pain and emotion. Her eyes land on me again and she opens her arms for me. I hug her carefully. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t be strong enough for this.” She whispers brokenly.

I pull back, “Don’t you dare say that. You are one of the strongest people I know and I’m so lucky that I got to know you.” My voice chokes with emotion and I swallow thickly trying to force it down. “Promise me, you’ll ring me if you need me?”

“I promise. Love ya, girl.” Tears start to drip down her face and I force my own back, moving a little sharply, pulling the wound in my side, the pain grounding me.

Not the healthiest of coping mechanisms, but I couldn’t really give a flying fuck right now.

“Love ya too.” I give her a watery smile and turn away.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Riot

Ever moves away from Rylie, not looking back as she walks towards the tree line. I share a worried look with the guys, Rylie's words have to have gutted her. And while I understand where she's coming from, I hate that she's hurt Ever.

"Come on, let's get home." Trick orders, his eyes not moving from Ever's retreating form.

"Don't forget to write up the report." Alaric calls after us.

"Okay, I think I know how it works by now." Atlas calls back.

We jog to catch up to Ever. Cash gets to her first and opens his arms, inviting her in for a hug, she looks up at him with watery eyes that gut me and shakes her head.

"If I hug you now, I'm going to cry." She says, "Let's just get home."

"Okay, il mio Cuore. If that's what you want." He replies, worry creasing his forehead even more.

"Ah, hell." Jensen curses.

For once he doesn't look like he's about to completely panic at her tears, he looks more concerned over the fact that she won't let herself cry. We move through the woods at a fast pace. My ribs protest, the bruises forming all over me and I have a cut on my cheek that I'm almost certain is going to need stitches. I look over the rest of the guys, checking for injuries. All of us look worse for wear, but we're all still standing and no one's having to be carried back to the van.

I send up a thanks to whoever is listening, I couldn't lose any of my family.

Rafe threads his fingers through mine, his eyes glued to Ever's retreating form. We've just fought hard and I'm fucking exhausted, but by the pace Ever's setting, you would never have guessed it. I know what she's doing, I've done it before and it's not good.

"She's pushing her emotions away." I say quietly to Rafe.

Atlas and Jensen are trying to get her talking up ahead, but the others all heard me.

"That doesn't sound good." Rage frowns.

"Put it this way. It's fine until it's not and it'll all come out, most likely over something small." I try to explain.

"Shit, let's get her home. Hopefully, she'll let her guard down there." Trick mutters.

I'm so glad that he had the forethought to put the small markers on the trees because everything is pitch black now and looks the same, I wouldn't be able to guide us out of here if he hadn't done it. As we move through, Ever guiding us and shining her phone torch so she can see the markers, Trick peels them off the trees as we pass them making sure that no one can trace us back this way. The way back to the van seems to take a lot longer than it did to get to the airfield.

Finally, we see it and we all climb in warily, all of us feeling the battle we just fought, covered in blood and grime. I groan as I sit on the bench seat in the back, Trick driving of course, with Atlas sitting up front as well now there's no risk of him being recognised.

"Well, that was fun." Ever grins, no sign of her previous emotions in her face or tone.

It worries me, but I grin. As the guys chuckle.

"I think me, and you, have very different ideas of what constitutes as fun, Sunshine." I point out and earn a smile in return.

"Well, it wasn't boring, that's for sure." Luc murmurs, his head tilted back resting against the side of the van and his arms crossed.

He's got a deep gash on his arm where it looks like he's blocked a knife. That will need stitches, for sure.

The drive back is long, and we finally arrive just as the sky begins to start to get lighter with beginnings of dawn. I am bone tired and let out a massive yawn as I get out of the van.

"Before anyone goes to bed, I've noticed that you all have at least one or two injuries that need to be seen to first." Cash says as soon as we're in, already carrying the large medical kit from the van.

"Everyone in the front room, at least we can be comfortable." Trick orders as everyone takes off their boots by the front door, everyone but Ever removes their jackets and I frown slightly, wondering why.

It's not cold in here.

"I'll help." She offers Cash, her voice has a monotone quality to it that worries me.

Cash smiles gratefully as they take the bag through to the kitchen and starts to lay the supplies out on the table, seeing what they both have to work with.

"She thought of Rylie like a sister." Jensen says worriedly, watching her. "This has to be hurting, but she won't let any of us comfort her."

"Maybe it would be better coming from someone she's not so close to. She cares about you all so damn much, and right now she's obviously trying not to let her guard down. Maybe she'd accept comfort from me because it won't mean as much to her." Rage suggests.

"You keep telling yourself that, dude." Jensen scoffs and Rage shoots him a sharp look.

"It's worth a shot. Are you sure though man?" Trick asks, ignoring Jensen's comment.

"Yeah, I've been thinking about what she suggested. I think she's right if I initiate the hug, I should be okay. She saved my life in there, even if she was a brat about it. The least I can do is try to help her." He says thoughtfully, his arms are crossed

over his chest like he's trying to protect himself and his eyes never leave Ever.

"If you get triggered, what do we need to do to help?" Atlas asks, seriously.

"Don't touch me. My mind will be stuck in a memory and touch will make it a thousand times worse and last longer. I can do this." He says with determination.

"I know you can, but if you can't, there's no shame in that man. The majority of us have panic attacks, we know how they work." Luc reassures him and Rage, nods.

He drops his arms to his sides and walks toward Ever. We all shuffle a bit closer, ready to be there for him if he can't do it and panics. Also, for her. He's wrong if he thinks she doesn't care for him. It's obvious that she does even if she doesn't realise quite how much yet, herself.

"Hey Puddin', I wanted to thank you for saving my ass earlier." He says, gaining her attention and opening his arms.

He pauses as if asking for permission, she hesitates for a moment, but she gets what a big thing this is for Rage, so she nods her head. Remembering what he told us, she doesn't move as Rage wraps his massive tattooed arms around her, he pulls her close to his chest and she ever so slowly, gently wraps her arms around his waist. He tenses slightly at first but soon relaxes a look of happiness and shock crosses his features as he realises it worked.

I wonder how long the poor guy has gone without receiving a proper hug. Judging from what he said about his mom, my guess would be never. No wonder he can be a prickly bastard.

Her face is turned towards us, so I see the soft smile that graces her beautiful features when she feels Rage relax. Rage pulls her closer.

"It's okay, Puddin'. It'll will all work out." He says softly.

She breaks, her eyes squeeze closed as fat tears start rolling down her cheeks, her breath hiccups in her chest and she turns her face into Rage's chest as heart-wrenching sobs rock her frame. I watch Rage closely, worried that it might trigger him

to have her hold him so closely, but he's in complete control as he effortlessly picks her up, cradles her against his chest and moves over to the couch. Settling her on his lap, she grips his shirt, her body still shaking. Her face is buried in his neck now he's sitting down, and he gazes down at her with heartbreak written all over his normally harsh features. He gently runs his big hands through her hair as we all gather around them, gently offering our comfort.

"It's okay, Puddin'." Rage repeats. "We're all here, none of us are going anywhere."

"He's right, Angel. You're stuck with all of us." Jensen adds.

"It just hurts." She mutters, bringing her red and puffy face away from Rage's neck and then grimacing at the wet patch she's left behind.

"I know, but it *will* work out." Rage reassures her, it seems like he's finally dropped his guard at least for the moment, as he gently runs his fingers across her cheek, wiping away some of the stray tears.

I share a smirk with the other guys, hook, line, and fucking sinker.

"From what I heard, Sweetheart, Rylie's not ready for it now. She's got her own demons chasing her and when she's ready, she'll ask for help. At the moment, she wants to stay hidden and that's absolutely fine. She will call you when she needs you and we will all go to bat for her, I promise." Trick says passionately.

"You wouldn't even need to ask." Cash adds.

"Thank you, guys. That helps. I know she's not ready yet and that's fine. It might take years until she's done hiding, but it still hurts."

"That's okay too." I reply squeezing her hand.

"Hey," she says, a beautiful blinding grin crossing her features, as she looks at Rage.

The poor guy is stunned into silence as his eyes soften, his answering smile already tugging at the edges of his lips. It's rare that Ever brings that smile out, but when she does, it knocks the breath out of our lungs.

I'm kind of jealous that he's on the receiving end of it.

"I'm so proud of you." She says softly.

"What, why?" He asks, sounding thoroughly confused and slightly dazed thanks to the power of that beautiful smile.

"You hugged me, and I lost my shit, but you're doing amazing." There's a proud glint in her eye.

I'm thoroughly shocked when Rage clears his throat, his eyes darting away as two dusky pink dots appear on his cheeks.

"Thanks, your idea worked." He finally replies.

Sensing he's starting to get awkward, Ever gets up slowly, wincing slightly.

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

"Yeah, I'm fine, just a bit sore." She reassures me. "Let's get everyone sewn up. I'm exhausted and don't like that I can see the sun starting to rise right now."

It seems like all she needed was to release that knot of emotion sitting on her chest about Rylie, and now she's bounced back, ready to take on the next task. I'm not saying her feelings over it have suddenly disappeared, but I'd be willing to bet that they've been dialled down to a more manageable level.

"Jensen first." Cash orders, walking over to the table and pulling out cleaning supplies and directing Jensen to sit in the chair at the table.

"Riot, you're mine first." Ever grins, she gathers the supplies she needs and brings them over to me. I wait to see where she wants me to move.

My eyebrows hit my hairline and a grin splits my lips as she climbs into my lap, straddling my lap.

“Well, that’s one way to do it.” Jensen snorts.

She gives him a look. “What, it’s a better angle and I couldn’t reach otherwise.” She defends, chuckling.

Rage shoots her a look.

“I’m sure you could’ve figured it out, after all, you don’t see doctors straddling their patients, do you?” Rage’s eyebrow lifts.

“Hush, you.” She grins. “There was numbing cream in the bag, so I’ll put some of that on your cheek before I start stitching, okay?”

“Whatever you think is best, Sunshine.” I easily agree.

She applies the cream and then gets up, eyeing the rest of them.

“Okay, who needs stitches?” She asks.

Rafe, grimaces. “I’ve got a cut on my back.”

Ever frowns as she goes to lift his shirt and reveals a cut a few inches long and deep enough to need stitches.

“You should’ve let someone else carry Rylie.” She gently chastises as she applies the numbing cream.

Rafe just shrugs. She ends up putting numbing cream on Luc’s arm, the cut I noticed in the van. Trick’s cheek, Atlas’s shoulder. Rage has a large cut on his thigh, how we didn’t notice that one, I don’t know, although it probably helps that he’s wearing black and didn’t even limp. Ever doesn’t even offer him the numbing cream, sharing a look as he smiles gratefully. I assumed Ever was the one that stitched him up, after his job. She must know something that we don’t.

By the time she’s done, the tube is empty, looks like we had just enough. Once the cream is working on everyone else, she comes back to me, straddles my lap and pokes at the edges of the cleaned cut.

“Can you feel this?”

“Nope.”

“Good, stay still.” She orders as she threads a needle and starts to gently move it through my skin.

She’s done in no time at all and her and Cash make quick work of fixing everyone up. Ever even fixes a small cut that Cash has on his forearm in almost exactly the same place as Luc’s.

“Right, that’s everyone done.” Cash says, “Thank you, *mio Cuore*.”

“You’re welcome.” Ever smiles, moving into the kitchen and cleaning up supplies.

We all start to disperse and make our way to our rooms to shower and fall into bed.

“What the fuck!” Atlas suddenly booms, making me jump and spin back around.

I can’t quite process what I’m seeing. Ever has finally taken her bike jacket off and her black top underneath is slashed revealing a long and deep wound. Her top is wet with blood and sticking to her side.

“Ah fuck, that’s worse than I thought.” She grimaces, grabbing a bottle of whiskey and taking a sip from the bottle.

“Fucking, hell.” Rage curses going pale, “I picked her up, when she had that, she should’ve screamed.”

“Don’t worry about it, I’ve had worse.” She mutters, gritting her teeth as she starts to pull her top away from the skin.

I think we’re all in shock as we just watch her.

How in the fucking hell was she walking around with that, it’s at least twice as bad as any of our injuries?

She huffs, giving up on trying to get her top over her head and grabs a pair of scissors cutting straight up the front of her top and then taking her arms out, so she’s just sitting there in her bra, she cuts the excess fabric off carefully so it doesn’t tug the wound and then grabs a cloth, dipping it into the warm water and then presses it up against her wound, I’m guessing to loosen the blood so she can move the rest of the fabric.

A choking noise comes from my left and turn to see Rage's eyes wide with horror and anger as he takes in the scars that litter Ever's body.

"She's had a hard life." Atlas says gently and Rage's eyes flood with understanding.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell us you were hurt that badly?" Jensen asks, his eyes a storm of worry and anger.

"I even asked you specifically if you had any wounds that needed treating immediately." Cash adds, trying to keep his voice calm.

A small furrow between her eyes forms as she studies us, and it suddenly hits me with blinding clarity.

She doesn't realise what's wrong.

"But it didn't need to be treated immediately. The pressure from my jacket stopped it from bleeding too much. We needed to get Rylie out and get to safety, we didn't have time to be worrying about something that I could sort out later. I've had much worse and gone longer without treating it, the pain was tolerable and wouldn't have stopped me if we ran into anymore guards."

A glance at the guys shows their faces darkening with anger, their postures tense and their jaws clenched. Luc's eyes are flashing dangerously but he's consciously breathing slowly so he's not triggered. It's not aimed at her of course not, but I'm not sure she'll realise that.

"You're angry." She muses, tilting her head and studying us, still looking confused.

I decide to step in before one of them loses their shit and accidentally triggers her, she is genuinely confused about what's wrong.

"Sunshine. We're mad because you didn't tell us you were hurt. I understand your reasoning, but you still should've told us. If something had gone wrong and you were bleeding more than you thought and passed out for example, it would take us precious seconds longer to figure out what's wrong." I try to explain.

“We’re also not very happy because you had the worse wound of all of us, but you stitched us up first and it should’ve been the other way around.” Trick adds in, seeing that she genuinely doesn’t realise.

“Imagine if it was one of us and we did what you did?” Rafe says gently.

Finally, she gets it and her eyes widen. “Fuck, I’m so sorry. I didn’t think. I’m used to just having to get on with it when I get wounded and then taking care of it later, and I didn’t consider it something that needed to be taken care of when you asked me, Cash. I’ll do better.”

“It’s okay, Princess, you didn’t realise. Just from now on, please tell us when you’re hurt that badly. I think I damn near had a fucking heart attack when I saw it.” Atlas says.

I’d say he was being dramatic but honestly, I think we’re all a bit in shock right now. How she carried on as normal with that wound I just can’t even wrap my head around it.

I lean forward and kiss her softly; she kisses me back fiercely.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ever

“Alright, maybe we should wait to do that until after she’s stitched up.” Jensen says loudly, making us pull apart.

He probably has a point. I can hear a thread of worry weaving through his tone and my eyes seek him out.

“I’m okay Jensen, really.” I try to reassure him.

“Angel, you have a massive slice in your side. I’m not going to be happy until you’re stitched up.”

“That’s where I come in.” Cash grins. “Let me see?”

So far, they’ve all only caught a glimpse of it since it was mostly still covered by the t-shirt. I turn my chair around since it’s on my right side which is closest to the table and Cash would find it ridiculously hard to stitch it up there. Trick practically jumps to move the chair for me, and I grin. They’ve literally just seen what I’m still capable of, it’s sweet though. God help me if I ever get truly injured, I have a feeling I won’t be able to lift a finger, I might end up going stir crazy.

Cash gently helps me remove the t-shirt, which thanks to me soaking it, is no longer stuck to my skin and the slice.

“Holy fuck.” Luc curses as they all get a good look at the slice, I glance down.

“Yeah okay, that is definitely worse than I thought it was.” I grimace.

“I’ll say, you’re going to need at least ten stitches.” Atlas practically growls.

I should’ve told them; I understand that now and it won’t happen again. It doesn’t matter how many times that I remind myself that I’m no longer fighting alone, some habits are hard to shake.

“Where’s the numbing cream?” Cash asks me as he starts setting up the rest of the equipment.

Now that I understand where they’re coming from, I have a feeling they’re about to get mad again. “It’s all gone.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me!” Rage growls, “You mean that you were going to stitch yourself up, without fucking numbing cream?”

“What did you think the whiskey was for?” I grin.

“I can’t even, I mean I normally don’t understand women, but you are in a league of your own. You realise that it’s okay to put yourself first for once? I can guarantee that all of us would actually prefer it. Especially in this situation!” He rants.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.” Atlas agrees, arms crossed over his chest.

I look around at them all and they’re all in agreement with Rage.

“Look, I get where you’re coming from, but after I turned eight, I always came last, with every fucking thing. I was always on my own, I had no one in my corner apart from the brief times that Jynx was around. This is all I know.” I try to explain.

“Alright, let’s just get you stitched up. I don’t suppose you have any numbing cream around here?” Cash says ending the conversation.

“No, but I’ll get some in case this happens again.” Atlas replies, still seemingly a bit pissed at me.

I can’t help my reactions though and I think he gets that.

“It’s alright, I’ve got whiskey.” I grin taking another swig.

“Might be better to do it on the couch so she can lay down flat?” Rafe suggests.

“Good idea, come on Ever, on the couch.” Cash says, as he gets up, he bends forward and kisses my lips gently.

“I can do it myself if you want?” I ask, not liking the worry in his eyes.

“No, it’s okay. I have a better angle than you do.” He reassures me.

He guides me to the couch and Atty gently puts his hand on my arm helping me settle. I have resigned myself to the fact that it will obviously make the guys feel better if I let them take care of me for a bit. I have to admit that it’s kind of nice actually.

Cash gets to work stitching me up, the bite of the needle and the tug as it goes through my skin is familiar. I grit my teeth against the pain and allow my mind to focus on other things to distract me. The guys all stay around me, watching me closely as Cash stitches me up. Once he’s done, he sticks a large bandage over it to keep it clean and then helps me sit up.

“You need to take it easy for a couple of days and keep your stitches dry. I’ll have a look at it on Wednesday. They should be ready to come out by then so long as you don’t do anything that’s going to tug them out.” He warns, looking at me sternly.

“Yes, Sir.” I smirk.

He chuckles, his eyes flaring with heat. “None of that, that will definitely pull them out.”

I pout. “Fine.”

The guys all kiss me good night, apart from Rage, who hesitates slightly like he wants to give me a cuddle but changes his mind and makes his way to his room muttering something that I can’t hear.

Rafe and Riot decide to sleep in my room, looking highly amused when Cash reads them the riot act about not pulling my stitches.

Pun intended.

While they go to their own rooms to shower, I pull out some pyjama’s for probably the first time since I got here, I’ve been sleeping in either just my underwear, sans bra or one of the guys’ t-shirts. When I get into the bathroom, I stare at the shower like it’s an enemy.

How the fuck am I going to shower without getting my stitches fucking wet?

My gaze switches to the sink and I sigh heavily, looks like it's a sink sponge bath for me, yay. It takes long enough for me to wash everything properly in the sink that Rafe knocks on the door.

“Are you okay, Dragonfly?”

“Yeah, it's just not that easy washing in the sink.” I reply.

After deciding washing my hair is going to be an impossible task since thanks to the cut in my side, I can't raise my arm on that side to reach, I give up and get dressed, feeling even more exhausted than I already was.

“You okay?” Riot asks, from the bed as I step out of the bathroom.

“Yeah, I'm tired.” I reply.

He moves out of the way so that I don't have to climb up the middle of the bed and I settle down, both of them moving closer to me, being careful not to jostle my side.

I'm asleep within minutes.

I sleepily make my way into the kitchen the next morning or I guess afternoon if the clock on the wall is to be believed. Grabbing a cup of coffee, I hazily take a seat at the table, it's already laid out with pancakes and a hell of a lot of fruit.

“What's with all the fruit?” Jensen asks groggily as he sits down next to me, I move closer and rest my head on his shoulder.

“We've been eating like shit the last couple of days, so today we're eating healthier.” Rafe says firmly.

I finally look around the table noting that everyone is already here.

“Fair enough.” Trick shrugs, digging in and loading his plate up.

I hide my smile at Luc and Jensen’s horrified looks.

“Oh relax, it’s not going to be completely healthy today, just better than the takeout crap we’ve had the last couple of days. There’s still syrup.” Rafe points out, rolling his eyes and making me giggle.

I load up plate with as much as will fit, digging in with gusto.

“Damn, these are good pancakes.” I compliment around a mouthful of food.

The guys are used to me by now and my lack of manners, I don’t think any of them care.

“Alaric got in contact with me just before I came down.” Atlas starts, his eyes landing on me. “Rylie is safe and being treated at a local hospital, her dad arrived early this morning and won’t leave her side. Alaric said she did exceptionally well when she was questioned and didn’t even drop any hints that not everything was as it seemed.”

“That’s my girl.” I grin, although a pang of sadness hits my chest. I really hope that last night wasn’t our final goodbye.

“The weapons have all been seized and while they were doing the search, they found a large number of drugs being stored there as well. He said to let him know if Liam makes contact with you again which is highly likely. Also, that all jobs from now on will be going through Trick, I gave him your number.” He finishes.

“Thanks, man.” Trick replies relief filling his eyes.

“I need to make arrangements to pay Rylie’s hospital bill. It’s the least I can do.” I say, bluntly. I decided while I was getting up that I wanted to do it for her, I know that they’d struggle to pay for it otherwise.

“It’s already taken care of, Princess.” Atlas replies.

My heart fills with warmth at his gesture. “Thank you, Atty.”

“Anytime.” He smiles.

“We need to write up the reports.” Trick reminds us, making Jensen and Rage groan.

“I hate doing the damn reports. Why do they need to be written by everyone?” Rage groans.

“Because everyone experienced it differently.” Trick says with finality and Rage just glares at his pancakes in sulk.

It’s kind of adorable actually.

“Everyone finished?” Rafe asks.

We all nod and help clean up, as we’re walking out of the kitchen Trick calls us back.

“We may as well get it written now. Then it’s done and we don’t need to worry about it for the rest of the day.”

“Urgh, fine.” Jensen grumbles as we all reluctantly make our way back to the table.

Atty pulls out a load of sheets of paper and some pens putting them on the table.

“Any advice?” Cash asks.

“Yeah. Write them as honestly as you can and don’t leave anything out. If you permanently took someone out, you need explain why you had no other choice.” Atlas explains.

We all start writing the reports and I try to keep it to the point without forgetting anything.

“This feels like a confession.” Jensen says after a while, creases forming between his brows as he frowns.

“He has a point, surely all of this could be used against us?” I add, my own concern clear as I read over what I’ve written on the page.

“I said that when Alaric first started to get us to write them.” Rage says somewhat smugly.

“I brought it up to him and he said that if it starts to look like his big boss is tilting in the wrong direction, a one not favourable to us, then we’ll burn them all. It’s one of the

reasons that we make paper copies and not digital. We have no digital copies of our reports.” Atlas answers putting my mind at ease.

“Nothing is really private on the internet, if you have the right hacker.” Cash murmurs.

“Exactly.” Atlas replies.

“Okay, that makes me feel better. Plus, fire, I get to burn it!” Jensen says excitedly and I raise my eyebrow, he shrugs. “What, I like fire.”

“Okay, dude. Is that something we need to be concerned about?” I ask the others.

“Nah, he’s fine, but he is just as clumsy with fire as he is with everything else so on second thoughts, yeah maybe.” Riot chuckles.

“Good to know.” I grin, as Jensen flips Riot the bird.

“It’s not like you can talk we all know how much you love fire, I seem to remember a drunk on spiked hot chocolate you, wanting to burn all the wrapping paper.” Trick adds, raising his eyebrow and smirking.

I poke my tongue out at him, since I have no defence.

We write in silence for a bit longer until we’re finally done, and I decide now would be a good time to bring up my idea about the blueprints.

“I was thinking that it might be a good idea to look at all of those blueprints that we found in the bunker.” I start and they look at me curiously. “I thought we could see if any of the buildings or companies are still around today and see if there’s a link between any of them.”

“That’s a great idea.” Cash says, pulling his laptop towards himself.

“I’ll go grab the blueprints and my laptop and we can start to look. There was quite a few, so it might take a while.” Luc says, getting up.

“It’s more than we’ve got otherwise, and I think it’s a really good idea. There’s got to be a link somewhere or we’ve thoroughly hit a dead end.” Trick adds in.

“Did Alaric mention finding anything else?” Rafe asks, Atlas.

“He didn’t, but I’ll message him now and see if he’s heard anything. He’s pretty busy with the warehouse stuff and sleeping so it might be a couple of days before we hear anything.”

“Sounds good.” I reply.

“Has it occurred to anyone else that we’ve missed more school than we’ve actually attended?” Luc asks, offhandedly.

“It’s okay, we can make the time up.” Trick answers.

“I’m still looking forward to trying out a combat class.” I grin.

“Not until you’re healed.” Cash reminds me and stick my tongue out at him in retribution.

“It’s alright actually. They taught some good techniques, but it was mostly stuff that we’ve already picked up. Good for honing our skills.” Luc answers me.

“Oh yeah, I forget you guys went to combat class when we found that bunker.” I reply.

“Only for like ten minutes until everyone confirmed that we couldn’t find you guys and then we walked out and started looking for you.” Luc adds.

A buzz sounds throughout the house, telling us someone’s at the gate. Atlas gets up and goes to the door looking slightly confused. I’m guessing that before we got here, they didn’t have many guests, if any.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out.

“Got a message from Liam.” I announce.

Eyes instantly find me, worry darkening them.

“Did he threaten you?” Atlas growls, from by the door not having looked to see who’s out there yet.

“He said, well played. That’s it.” I reply.

“Well, that wasn’t what I was expecting.” He replies before finally answering the gate and letting whoever it is in. “It’s Peter.”

“It’s not what I was expecting either. I’d ask if you thought this meant he’s given up but for some reason I don’t think so.”

“I highly doubt it, Puddin’.” Rage agrees with me. “We’ll just keep an eye out. He’ll have something planned.”

“I’d suggest that you change your number, but he found it easily enough the first time. There’s not much point.” Cash murmurs, his eyes focused on his laptop screen, the blueprints spread out between him and Luc.

“I wouldn’t, anyway. I gave Rylie this number.” I reply.

His eyes dart up to mine, filling with sympathy.

“Hey guys, I hope you don’t mind me stopping by.” Peter says, Atlas having let him in the door.

“No of course not.” I grin.

“Whoa, you guys look like you’ve been in to war.” He exclaims and then pales slightly.

“Something like that.” Rage grins.

Peter relaxes, starting to realise that he’s not going to get his head bitten off, whether he realises it or not he’s now, one of us.

“How’s your man?” I ask, smirking. “Still enjoying the ride?”

He bursts out laughing plopping down in the chair next to me, today his outfit consist of lime green skinny jeans, a black cotton t-shirt, tucked in and neon suspenders that match the paint splatters on his docs. I love his style, if only I could pull it off.

“Girl, he got fucking clingy.” He groans, and pouts.

“That’s because he realised he fucked up at the party when he left you.” I point out.

“You want a drink peter?” Riot asks.

“Yes, please, I’d love a coffee.”

“Me too.” I smile.

“Oh, he realised alright, I told him exactly what he did wrong.” Peter grins.

“Ruthless, I like it.” Jensen smirks.

“Why thank you, handsome.” Peter grins.

“So, you’re just missing his dick then?” I smirk.

“Yep, pretty much.” He chuckles. “I did come to see if you guys were alright since you weren’t in school today and the kids started speculating that you got arrested after that stunt at the party.”

“I almost forgot about that.” Luc chuckles.

Peter’s eyebrows raise in shock. I can’t say I blame him, what happened with not so pretty, shouldn’t be something that’s easy to forget. But after the last day or so that we’ve had, its kind of understandable. I don’t tell him that though, instead when he looks at me in question, I just shrug.

Smart man lets it go.

“Actually, I did need tell you and Rage something.” Peter says, his face becoming harsh as he talks to Atlas. “Thomas has started dealing class A’s to the freshmen but doing it in return for favours.” His lip curls with disgust, “The favours are disgusting, degrading, and dangerous. He’s threatening them with you if they don’t do it though and not being clear about the favours when he first approaches them.”

“The fuck?” I growl, “I’ll fucking gut him, taking advantage of the younger kids like that.”

“Whoa, they haven’t exactly been nice to you.” Peter replies.

“Makes no fucking difference. I won’t stand for that fucking shit, especially not when it’s done with Atlas hanging over their fucking heads.” I growl.

Peter’s eyes shine with respect as he nods, smiling slightly.

“No, you won’t, Sweetheart. You’re supposed to be taking it easy.” Trick reminds me.

“Fuck.” I curse.

“Don’t worry Princess, no one uses my name to scare kids. I’ll deal with it personally. I might even take one of the others with me to prove a point.” Atlas grins, his eyes dark with anger.

“I’ll come.” Luc grins.

“Me too.” Rafe growls, his eyes flashing.

“Now?” Atlas asks, after all we are still all healing.

“Hell fucking yes.” Luc says hopping up.

He walks over to me and kisses me, moving out of the way as Rafe does the same but gently picks me up out of my chair being careful of my cut. He hands me off to Atlas who kisses me like I’m the most precious thing in the world to him and then gently sets me down before they all move toward the front door.

“We’ll take the bikes.” Atlas says, “It’s more fun when they run.”

“Be back soon Firecracker, I’ll make him hurt just for you.” Luc grins blowing me a kiss before shutting the door behind him.

My smile is dark.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Holy fuck, I think you’re living my dream.” Peter says, sounding slightly shocked.

Whether that’s because three of the guys kissed me one after the other or because of the casual way that they talked about seriously hurting someone and my reaction to it all, he doesn’t make clear, but I grin anyway. I hear the bikes roar out of the driveway and I know that they’ll deal out the justice that Thomas deserves. The guys were right last night, apart from Jensen’s arm I have the worse wound here and it’s going to slow me down. I don’t do well at being injured I’m far too impatient. It makes me feel vulnerable as well and that makes me a bit moody.

To put it mildly.

“Dude, you’ve got no idea.” I wink and he bursts out laughing.

“So, can I know why you can’t take care of Thomas or is that something I just pretend I haven’t heard?”

“I’ve got stitches in my side; the guys are being stick in the muds.” I reply, smiling affectionately at the guys.

“We’re trying to stop you from hurting yourself more.” Trick says, he comes and kisses me. “I’m going to go and read for a bit. Call me back down when they come back?”

“Of course.” I grin.

“Okay, tell me to fuck off if it’s none of my business, but my little nosy as fuck heart, has to ask. How many of these gorgeous men are yours?”

“We all are.” Jensen grins proudly.

“Seriously?” He asks me.

“Oh yeah, apart from Rage.” I say my eyes, landing on him, pain flashes in his eyes and I regret singling him out. Truth is

that I'm starting to realise that my feelings are growing for him and I don't quite know what to do about it. Peter looks at me knowingly. "I'm all theirs and they're all mine."

"Lucky bitch. You know any more men, maybe some that swing my way?"

I chuckle, "Nope, but I'll keep my feelers out and see what I can do."

"Thanks." He grins. "So, the other reason I'm here. The guys should all back off now after what happened at the party, they know your men are fucking lethal and they won't risk earning their wrath. I get the feeling that you're just as capable but that'll be a nice surprise for whoever steps out of line."

"Oh, that would be fun." I agree.

"Thought so, anyway, like I said the guys will be fine, but the teachers are still going to be assholes. Not overtly so, they're still scared of Atlas but enough that they're going to make actually learning pretty difficult. That's where I come in, I was thinking I could help tutor whichever ones of you need it a couple of days a week?"

"That would be absolutely amazing, yes please." I reply, relief filling me.

I don't want to fail school.

We spend the next couple of hours just chatting, Peter is as funny as I thought he'd be and as the guys start to interact with him more, he becomes more relaxed.

"Honey, we're home!" Luc yells, banging open the door.

"Well fuck me sideways, you guys look like you've just come from a fucking horror film." Peter blurts out.

The guys are blood splattered and grinning, clearly, they've enjoyed themselves.

"He had friends around, we played hunt the cunt." Rafe chuckles.

"That's brilliant, I'm using that." I grin.

“I made him send out a mass text explaining that he lied about my involvement and absolving all of his clients of their favours. He won’t be coming to school again.”

“You got him kicked out?” Peter asks curiously.

“We convinced him that it would be better if he left.” Rafe grins.

“Good job guys.” I praise.

“We’re going to go shower, there’s blood everywhere again.” Luc sighs.

“Do you want me to start a rumour about it?” Peter asks.

Atlas looks at him slightly confused but Trick watches him, his eyes assessing.

“That’s actually not a bad idea. It means everyone else will know not to use your name to threaten anyone or there will be consequences.” Trick says.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way. Go for it, thanks man.” Atty says, taking the stairs two at a time the others following quickly.

I’m pretty annoyed that I didn’t get to go. I don’t get to go on the jobs because of fucking Liam and the one thing that came up on fucking campus and I’m too injured to do anything about it.

We spend the rest of the evening relaxing and just having the first calm day that we’ve had it what feels like forever. Peter eventually goes home telling us that he’s got to start getting the rumour out there. He warned us that by the time we go to school in the morning, it will have mutated and multiplied and some truly out there theories will be flying around the school.

I’m sort of excited to see what they’re going to come up with if I’m honest. Once he’s gone we all settle down in the lounge with blankets and pillows, I end up with my head in Atlas’s lap and my feet in Rafe’s, both of them having their foot rests up on the seats, Luc is sat on the floor in front of my stomach and my fingers run through his hair playing with it as

we watch a tv show. The others all around me. I get a flash of what days in our future could be like all of us together.

Last night we all ended up crashing in the front room. It was awesome to have all the guys around me, but my side hurts today from staying in the same position all day which means I'm stabby. This fucking teacher isn't helping. She keeps eyeing the guys like she wants to take a fucking bite out of them and shooting me looks like I've stolen her boyfriend.

They're mine, you bitch.

The first lesson wasn't so bad, we got ignored but we got books this time so at least there was that. Walking through the hallways to lunch is an entirely different experience than it has been since we got here. All of the kids move out of our way even though we don't have Rage and Atlas with us, since they had a different class before lunch. Cash and Jensen keep getting given looks of either fear or admiration and some even give them those guy head nod things as we walk past. No one's said anything snarky or disgusting towards me and I'm grateful for the reprieve although, since I'm feeling a bit stabby, I kind of want to take it out on some mouthy dickhead. Not that the guys would let me with my side and to be honest, with the way it's hurting, I probably shouldn't either.

Peter was right about the rumour mill going nuts. The original and true story of Thomas being taken care of has morphed into the guys hunting him through the woods like a deer and then burying him out there. There's a couple of variations that are even more amusing and further than the truth.

"Are you okay, Angel?" Jensen asks, just as we step through the doors to the cafeteria, this time there's no silence or jeers, just wary looks, it's a nice reprieve.

"I'm in pain." I tell him honestly.

"You should've said something, *il mio Cuore*." Cash says, rummaging around in the front pocket of his bag, he pulls out

some painkillers and hands them to me. “I brought them just in case.”

“You’re my hero for today.” I smile gratefully.

“Go and sit down and we’ll bring lunch over to you.” Trick smiles.

“It’s table service.” Jensen smirks.

“Well shit, I completely forgot.” He chuckles.

We make our way through the tables daring some fucker to try something but although I feel eyes on me no one so much as mutters a word. I suppose that’s a good thing. I take a seat at Atlas’s and Rage’s normal table pulling out a bottle of water from my bag and taking the painkillers.

“What’s wrong?” Rage asks, as he sits down opposite me eyes me with concern.

“Her side is giving her trouble.” Cash explains.

“Probably didn’t help that we all slept in the living room last night.” Rage mutters.

“Nope, but it was worth it.” I grin.

My eyes search the room for Atlas finding him leading a nervous looking Peter to our table. They both take a seat and the guys greet Peter, he relaxes at the easy interaction. It seems he thought this friendship was just for behind closed doors.

No chance, once I decide that someone’s my friend, it’s all or nothing.

The waiters come over to take our orders, which is an entirely surreal experience on my part. Once they’re gone, Atlas leans forward slightly lowering his voice.

“I got a message from my guy, Clint’s dead.”

“What?” I ask shocked.

“Yeah, the official report is that it was a heart attack but he’s not buying it. The woman that worked there has gone missing and the other patient that was at the facility has too.” Atlas explains.

“That’s fucking crazy. It’s got to all be connected.” Trick murmurs.

“I hope the nurse is alright, she was lovely.” I say.

“I’m sure she just got the hell out of dodge.” Riot reassures me.

“Did you guys find anything from those blueprints yesterday?” Rafe asks.

There’s a pause in the conversation as the food gets placed in front of us and I thank the waiters who look pretty shocked to be treated with common courtesy which pisses me off.

“I managed to look a couple of them, all of the buildings have been taken over by new businesses not named on the blueprints. I’m going to try and see if there’s a link between them all, but I want to go through all of them first before I try to find the link, which is going to take a while.” Cash says.

“Same for me. I got through a couple, but they’ve been taken over.” Luc agrees with Cash.

“Do I want to know?” Peter asks seriously, you can tell he’s curious as hell but he’s also aware that there’s probably some things he doesn’t want to know about.

I share a look with the guys and Trick tilts his head into a nod giving me permission.

“It’s about what you told us about when you gave us a lift home.” I tell him making sure I don’t actually mention Phoenix, the last thing we need is for the wrong person to overhear us.

“You’ve actually found something out?” He says, leaning across the table in his excitement, his eyes burning with curiosity.

“Oh yeah.” I grin.

“Then I want in. It’s fascinated me since my dad first told me about it.” He says excitedly, that’s exactly what I thought he’d say.

“I feel like need to warn you first that it’s going to be really dangerous. Someone’s already died but we’re not sure if there’s a connection to us yet.” Rafe warns him.

“Eh, you only live once.” He grins, he’s got a backbone on him, he’ll fit in nicely with us.

“Fair enough,” Trick grins, “Come to our house after school and we’ll explain what we know. Obviously, it goes without saying that you can’t tell anyone. For everyone’s safety.”

“I know, don’t worry, I won’t be saying a word. I’m just excited to be involved.” Peter assures him.

The rest of lunch is light-hearted while I try not to laugh at Peter trying to hide his curiosity and not succeeding that well. Finally, the bell rings and its combat class. I’m pretty gutted that I don’t get to join in, it’s been the one class that I’ve looked forward to since we got our schedules.

I follow the guys to the gym, a room that I haven’t seen yet. They start to move off to the changing rooms before stopping and looking back at me worriedly.

“I’ll be fine, I can still take these fuckers out even with my injury, and I am armed.” I reassure them quietly.

They still hesitate but finally rush into the changing rooms. I can almost guarantee that it’s going to be the fastest they’ve ever gotten ready before. Once they’ve gone, I push my way through the doors to the gym. I am not disappointed, for a place that puts such emphasis on combat classes and weapons training, at least the gym lives up to the high expectation.

Its split into thirds. In the first third is a lot of workout equipment and weights including a large wall of mirrors. Next is a large area set up with several rings made for sparring, the fact that they have six in here just shows you the true size of the room. In the last third is a large obstacle course made for testing your endurance and speed.

It’s a thousand times better than the one that was at the school with guys and I can’t wait to have a go and see how far I can push myself. I wonder if this place is open at the weekends to train in?

“You can get changed in my office.” The coach says to me, sounding bored and not looking up from his clipboard.

He’s already written me off and I hate that I can’t show him how wrong he is right now. Stupid cut.

“I’m not joining in today, I’m injured.” I reply, through clenched teeth.

He looks up at me. “You don’t look injured. This class is mandatory, and just because you’re a girl, doesn’t mean you get out of it.”

Sexist fucking asshole. My blood starts to boil, I’m already feeling stabby and this fucker is not helping.

“This has nothing to do with me being female.” I bite out. Hanging on to my calm by a thread. “I am not allowed to do any strenuous activity. Doctors’ orders.”

Technically Cash isn’t a doctor, but he doesn’t know that.

“Show me.” He orders his eyes flashing the indignation and anger.

“What?” I better not mean what I think he fucking does.

“Show me your injury.” He sneers.

“No, that is highly inappropriate, and you shouldn’t be asking me to do that.” I growl, preparing to defend myself.

“I don’t care who you fucking are. You will show me, or I will fucking make you.”

The professionalism in this school is absolutely fucking stellar.

He charges me and I say a quick apology for Cash in all fairness, it’s not my fault. His hands reach out to grab at my clothes like the creep he is. He’s wrongly assumed I’m weaker than him. I grab a hold of one of his reaching hands moving swiftly and carefully because Cash will tell me off if I pull my stitches, I swipe his legs out from underneath him as I bend his arm up behind his back. As he lands on the floor, I pull his arm up straight behind him, making him howl in pain as his face is pushed into the floor trying to alleviate the strain, I place my

boot on his back keeping him in place and bend closer so he can hear me.

“Don’t ever lay your hands on me without my fucking permission or I won’t go so easy on you.” I threaten my voice dark.

He starts to try and move underneath me, but I’ve got him in a good fucking grip and he’s not going anywhere.

“You dirty fucking whore. I’ll touch whatever the fuck I like.” He retorts his voice tight with pain.

“Wrong answer fucker.” I growl, grinning as dark glee fills me.

I wrench his arm hard dislocating his shoulder. He bellows in pain and I chuckle dropping his useless arm to the floor and stepping back, bouncing on the balls of my feet and ready to go again if he gets up. From the wounded animal sounds he’s making though I doubt it and I pout, disappointedly.

“Ever what the fuck did the coach do?” Atlas growls his dark and pissed as fuck stare glaring at the idiot writhing in pain on the floor as he and the guys come into the gym, a load of other guys coming out with him.

They all pause, and their mouths drop open in shock as they spot their coach on the floor. The guys rush over to me their faces dark.

I hold my hands up. “Before you tell me off, I was careful, I didn’t pull any stitches and he deserved it.”

“I know he did, il mio Cuore or you wouldn’t have done it.” Cash says gently.

“What did he do?” Jensen growls.

“The usual misogynistic male bullshit told me that just because I’m a girl doesn’t mean I get out of this class. Then demanded that I show him my injury when I refused, he told me I would show him, or he’d make me show him.” My voice carries across the gym and my faith is somewhat restored in the guys at the school when the majority of them turn angry eyes onto the couch.

“What did he do?” Trick asks, trying to keep hold of his calm as Rafe stands in front of Jensen cutting off his view of the fucker and within reaching distance to grab him if he tries to go for the fucker.

Similarly, Cash and Riot stand near Atlas, ready to stop him from doing the same thing. My eyes watch Luc closely. His arms are crossed tightly over his chest and his eyes are dark but he’s still with us, I think it helps that the coach didn’t hurt me.

“He came at me and I floored him. I had his arm up straight behind him to keep him down. I warned him not to touch me without my permission and he told me he’d do what the fuck he liked to me.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

As soon as the words have left my mouth, Atlas roars as the guys all start cursing angrily, their reaction slightly tempered as they try to stop Atlas and Jensen going for the coach who has started to scoot back looking truly terrified for his life.

Rage rushes past me a look of pure savage anger on his features as he stalks towards the coach, there was no one stopping him and that was a massive oversight on our part. The muttering of the other students in the room dies down immediately. Rage drags the coach to his feet and slams him up against the wall, his head bouncing off of it making his eyes unfocused for a second as he groans in pain.

Rage pins him in place by his throat completely unaffected by the coach's grasping hands.

"You think you can lay your fucking filthy hands on her!?" He roars, the boom of his voice echoing around the room.

Now is not an appropriate time to get turned on, but holy fuck. Rage has just lost his shit because he cares about me.

Rage jabs the coach in the ribs and the snap rings out throughout the room. His hand tightens around his neck, cutting off the coach's air supply as his eyes go wide with panic.

Rage lowers his voice, a cold darkness threading through it. "If you ever so much as look at her the wrong way again, I will fucking end you."

The threat is clear, and the coach loses all colour, trying desperately to escape Rage's hold. Rage doesn't let go until he loses consciousness, falling to the floor in a heap.

"Nicely done brother." Jensen grins approvingly.

Rage's eyes pierce me with intensity. He makes his way over to me ignoring everyone and everything else in the room

as he gently places a large palm on my cheek.

“Are you okay?” He asks tenderly, his eyes never leaving mine.

I place my hand on his and nod, that’s all the confirmation he needs as gently removes his hand, his fingers skimming my cheek and storms out of the room, the doors slamming behind him. I stare after him unsure about whether I should follow him or not.

The feelings stirring inside me for him have me pausing.

“He’ll be okay, Princess.” Atlas says softly wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “He just needs a minute to calm down.”

I nod.

“We should probably do damage control.” Cash mutters.

“Right.” Trick replies before raising his voice and turning towards the still shocked onlookers. “Let this be a lesson to all of you no one is above the consequences if they threaten Ever. If it’s not one of us who deal with you it will be Ever. Just remember what she managed to do while injured.”

He lets that realisation sink in and then continues.

“Any snitches will also be swiftly dealt with.” His eyes are cold and there’s no doubting his seriousness.

All of the onlooker’s nod. Trick dismisses them by turning his back to them and back to face us.

“Should someone check that he’s still alive.” I say pointing to the coach.

“Nah, Rage knows how long he can squeeze someone’s throat before they die. He was fucking angry as hell, but he was in control, barely.” Atlas replies.

“We may as well get out of here. There’s no point staying.” Luc says.

I study him to make sure that he’s okay. He nods calmly and I smile.

“Sounds good to me, I was going to be bored as hell watching you guys anyway.” I think for a second. “Actually, scrap that, watching my sexy as fuck guys kick ass. That would’ve been hot as hell. I just would’ve been extremely frustrated.” I smirk.

“God, I love the things you say.” Rafe grins swooping in and kissing me.

“Thanks, Big Guy. You guys go get changed and I’ll wait out here.”

“Oh, hell fucking no.” Jensen growls. “I’m not leaving you alone again.”

“Riot, Luc, and Cash, go and get everyone’s shit. We can get dressed back at home.” Trick orders.

As soon as they’re back, we make our way to the SUV, all of us having to pile in the one car since Rage has taken his. We get back in no time and I’m relieved to see that Rage’s car is already in the driveway.

“Ever, I want to check your stitches just in case.” Cash says as soon as we get through the door and I nod.

“I’m feeling sore again, I think the painkillers from lunch are starting to wear off.” I admit.

“I’ll make us all hot chocolate and get you some more painkillers, Dragonfly.” Rafe says making his way into the kitchen.

“Thank you.” I call after him, making my way to the couch and perching on the edge, turning to the side so Cash can see better.

“I’m going to go check on Rage.” Atty says.

“Let me go.” Trick asks.

Atty nods and comes to sit down in the living room the others spreading out and turning on the TV. I lift up my top and Cash carefully peels back the large bandage covering it. He leans in his breath caressing my side and making goose bumps speckle my skin.

“It’s healing really nicely, doesn’t look like you’ve done any more damage to it, you could probably let the air get to it now and shower. Just be careful when you dry it.” He explains.

“Awesome.” I grin, relieved that I haven’t done any more damage and that I don’t have to keep that bandage on, it was tugging uncomfortably on my skin. I tie my top under my boobs tucking it in underneath my bra and settling comfortably on the couch.

“Peter’s here.” Luc calls from by the door as he lets him in. I didn’t even hear the buzzer go too distracted by Cash’s gentle touch.

“Hey dude.” I call from the couch, tilting my head to look over it.

“Had an eventful combat class didn’t you.” He smirks.

“Rumour mill?” Jensen chuckles.

“Oh yeah, Ever’s gone up in everyone’s estimations not many will mess with her when you guys aren’t around now.” Peter grins, coming around the couch. When his eyes land on my side they widen comically. “You said you were wounded but shit sugar, how’re you functioning? I’d still be in fucking bed if I did that.”

“It’s not too bad.” I grin.

“It is and I’d argue that point, but I want to know what you guys have found out about Phoenix.” Peter grins.

“Hot chocolates are ready.” Rafe says bringing in a tray with them and then handing them out.

Trick and Rage come back in the room and my heart leaps at the sight of the both of them. I don’t know what Trick said to him, but Rage seems relaxed and there seems to be a new camaraderie between them. Relief floods me as he smiles my way and doesn’t ignore me like I thought he would. There are only so many times my heart can take it when he does that after we have a moment.

Luc and Cash bring over the large pile of blueprints and the notebook and we start to explain what we’re planning to do.

“We hit a dead end after we found the notebook with all of the names in it.” I add in.

“You found a list of members?” Peter asks incredulously.

“Unfortunately not, we think that it’s a list of initiates. It contains the names of the five kids that went missing. We did some digging and it turns out that they all died under mysterious circumstances, bar the five who went missing. All apart from one who we found in an asylum not too far away.” Trick continues to explain what we learned from Clint and about Amelia, the only female name on the list.

“That is absolutely crazy. I can’t believe you’ve found so much information in such a short amount of time. My dad never mentioned a girl and he definitely would’ve, especially after I told him that they’d let a girl in.” Peter says, frowning. “Someone is definitely killing them off, but what’s the reason for it? And why after all this time?”

“That’s just one of the many questions we need answers to.” Jensen chuckles.

“Alright what can I do to help?”

“Are you any good at research? We’ve got a fuck load of blueprints to go through, organise and then try to find a link through them all. Which should be easy but so far, we’ve only managed to look at six and they were incredibly hard to find any details on, which is suspicious just from that. So, I think we’re on the right track. I have minimal hacking skills.” Cash runs his hand over his beard sounding exasperated.

“I can help with that.” Peter grins, his eyes mischievous. “I’ve been known to get into a few places on the internet that you should need top level clearance for.”

“Thank fuck.” Luc huffs with relief.

“I’ve got my laptop with me; do you want to start now?” Peter asks, unable to hide his excitement.

“Yeah, we can set up at the table.” Luc says.

While they work, we just chill out. I really want to offer to help them, but I’m more likely to get in the way and

accidentally delete everything, than I am to actually help them. I try to distract my impatient ass by watching the Tv and playing with Atty's hair as he sits in front of me on the floor. Rage moves from sitting on the armchair, which has been his seat of choice whenever we sit in here. I think he's been trying to keep some separation between him and us.

I think the idea of family scares him but what truly terrifies him is that it could be taken away from him, he could be given the small slither of hope that he could belong to a family and it could be snatched away from him.

It has made him a lot more cautious, which from the small amount of information that he's told us about his past is completely understandable. One day he will understand that we're not going anywhere, he's a part of this family. He must be starting to get it though, because he gets up out of his chair and comes to sit down next to me, pressing his entire side against mine as we watch TV and I pretend like it's not a big deal that he's voluntarily sitting next to me and isn't avoiding me like the plague after what happened in the gym.

"How's your side, Puddin'?" He asks me softly.

"It's sore," I say sipping my hot chocolate and swallowing down the painkillers that Rafe brought me. "I didn't pull the stitches or anything when I dislocated the coach's shoulder. Cash said it's healing quite well."

I move shifting Atty and turning the other way to show Rage my side.

"You are fucking tougher than most men I know who have been in this business for decades." Rage compliments, his fingers gently caressing my side. "Maybe just stop getting injured though? I don't think any of us handle it well."

"We've told her that from the very beginning." Jensen grumbles.

"Hey, you got injured too!" I point out.

"Yeah, but that's different." He shrugs.

"Not to me." I retort.

“Fair enough. How about everyone just stops getting injured?” Riot tries to pacify.

“I don’t think that’s possible in our line of work.” Rafe mutters.

“Then this is the rule, come back to me, come back to us. No matter what, come home.” I say fiercely the fun conversation taking an unexpected turn.

“I promise, if it is possible, I will always come home, Sweetheart.” Trick vows.

“I promise the same thing, Puddin’.” Rage comments sounding a little bit hesitant like he’s not sure it’s place.

Unsure if I was talking to him as well.

I smile gently at him and rest my head on his shoulder.

One by one all the guys make the same modified promise and I echo it back to them.

“If you guys decide to let me in fully and trust me, which I know is going to take time, then I promise to work behind the scenes to make sure you all always come home no matter what.” Peter vows, seriously and my trust in him grows more from that vow than anything else he could’ve said or done.

He’s closer than he thinks to being completely in, we just need to make sure that he’s up for it and is in for the long haul. This isn’t an, until the end of school kind of thing.

“Thanks man, we definitely appreciate that.” Trick replies.

“Okay, so I’ve gotten through ten of these so far.” Peter replies changing the subject.

“Seriously, you’ve only been at it for an hour!” Luc, grumbles. “I’m still on my first one.”

“Thank god, we’ve got you.” I grin.

“Thanks, got to give you a reason to keep me.” He grins.

None of us can really give the reassurance that he wants right now, like I said we need to make sure that he’s really invested in this.

Atlas chuckles as he gets up and walks over to where they've set up. "Show us what you've found so far then."

"Right, this pile is the businesses that got shut down because of some sort of scandal. I've still got to find out if there's a link between the scandals or who caused them. I've made a list of the men that all owned them. Yes, they were all owned by men." He says raising his eyebrow in a knowing way. "This pile is the ones shut down by bankruptcy except, right up until a few months before they went bankrupt, they were very lucrative." He explains. "This final pile is the most interesting so far, they just disappeared. One minute they were booming businesses and the next the buildings were abandoned and brought up. I've left a list of names for each pile so far."

"Wow, well done. That's great work." I say getting up and grabbing the notebook with the list of names and taking a seat opposite Peter and Cash, with Luc sitting next to me. I rest my head on his shoulder as I flip through the notebook to find the names.

"I'm going to start on dinner." Rafe says, stretching as he walks into the kitchen. "Peter are you staying? I'm doing spaghetti bolognese and garlic bread."

"Yes please. I haven't had a home cooked meal since I left home." He says wistfully. Before stage whispering across the table to me. "He can cook right?"

"He's the best cook, seriously. I'd pay good fucking money for his food." I reply.

Rafe, clears his throat awkwardly and even from here I can see pink darken his cheeks in a blush. I grin at Peter and he mouths adorable back at me.

"Most of the names that you guys have found so far are on the list but, not all of them are, there are three that aren't." I say saving Rafe from further misplaced embarrassment.

"Do we assume that they were official members of Phoenix, not the initiates?" Jensen asks.

“Or they could’ve been people that crossed Phoenix and they took them down?”

“Is Phoenix only present in this academy or are they in others as well?” I ask the thought just occurring to me.

“As far as I could understand from my father, Phoenix is exclusively a part of the academy. This has always been the place where the rich, famous, and influential send their kids. Kids make lifelong connections and enemies here.” Peter tries to explain.

“Well, at least there’s that I guess.” I grumble.

We seem to have so many more questions than answers when it comes to Phoenix, the bunker and the missing kids. I think I’m going to have to resign myself to the fact that this is a marathon not a sprint.

“I can give the names of the business to my guy and see if he can find out anything?” Atlas suggests.

“Yeah, it’s worth a shot.” Trick shrugs.

It’s become an unspoken agreement between all of us that we keep Alaric’s involvement and who he is, a secret from Peter. While we all like him and he is being a big help as far as Phoenix is concerned. We need to build the right level of trust in order to bring him in fully. He understands that and doesn’t ask. Just carries on typing away on his laptop. I am worried about how well he knows how to protect himself; I know we have combat and weapons classes here but in order to survive in our life he needs to be really good at both of those things. It’s something that we can keep an eye on.

“Do you want a hand?” I ask Rafe giving up on Phoenix for now it’s just frustrating.

“Yeah sure, can you make the garlic bread? I’ve nearly finished making the sauce.” He replies grinning at me over his shoulder as he stirs.

“Don’t forget, we’ve got the parents day thing at the beginning of the week after next. It’s mandatory, even if you haven’t got parents coming.” Atlas reminds us rolling his eyes.

“I fucking hate parents’ day.” Rage growls, his eyes shadowed.

“Fair warning, if your mother shows up, I’m going to play my favourite game of stab the bitch.” I shrug, completely unrepentant as his mouth drops in shock.

“Why?” He asks, sounding completely baffled and the guys chuckle softly.

“Oh dude. Ever clearly considers you one of her own now, that means that if anyone hurts you or any of us, she gets stabby and/or destroys them.” Trick explains.

“Yours?” Rage asks his eyes guarded.

I shrug, it’s been said, I’m not denying it but I’m also not letting him freak out and run if I voice it out loud. My eyes don’t leave his though and his blaze with heat the longer he holds my gaze. I break eye contact first, getting up to help Rafe and run my hand gently over Rage’s shoulder. I catch Trick’s eye as I do it and he winks at me. Not upset that I’m clearly developing feelings for Rage I have a feeling that they all realised before I fucking did.

I help Rafe finish the dinner and he orders the guys to clear the table of all work related stuff. Peter is suitably impressed by Rafe’s cooking and after his first bite tells him that he expects an invite every time that Rafe cooks. Peter has fit in with us incredibly easily after a shaky start and I’m glad. Not to sound too much like the kids here but we need to build the connections while we’re here, we’re going to need all the help we can get. We may be making the world a better place by getting rid of scum, mainly to do with Liam, but we are also creating enemies along the way and we need as many trusted people in our corner as we can fucking get.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The next week or so is slow as hell and I get progressively more stabby as it nears the end of the week. Turns out I'm not good at being made to stay put.

Who would've guessed it? Sense the sarcasm.

We get into a sort of rhythm with school and research. Peter has become completely invaluable to the whole thing and knows how to get into databases that he really shouldn't be able to get into. Every time he accesses one of these databases, I see the wheels in Trick's head turning. We may have Alaric but he's putting a lot on the line to get us the information that we keep asking for and if Peter can get into these places without being detected, and get us the information we need, then that would cut down the risk to everyone involved.

He is very quickly becoming valuable. Plus, he's awesome and has a sense of humour that fits in with the rest of us.

Cash took my stitches out on Wednesday and the cut in my side is healing really well so he's cleared me to do some easy activities at least, which has slightly taken the edge off of my restlessness but only by a little bit. Jensen finally managed to set up the investments for the victims from the job he did with Atlas, we all chipped in and they're going to be set for life. They won't need to work again unless they want to. Ever since the warehouse I'm twitchier than ever, it's like the violence in me was partially satisfied and now it has come back stronger than ever.

It doesn't help that the guys have gone out on a couple of jobs. Thanks to Trick's planning, they've all gone smoothly. I still can't leave the school grounds due to the threat that Liam poses, although he's been worryingly quiet since that well played message, he sent me last week. Instead of making the guys relax more, his silence has put them all more on edge, convinced that he's planning something.

Which to be fair, he probably is.

I'm going out of my freaking mind. The silver lining to this whole situation, is that our vehicles should finally be arriving today and should be there when we get home from school. Which means, I get my bike back. I don't even care what the guys say, I *will* be taking her for a ride around the school grounds. *I need the escape*. I said when I first got injured that I was bad at it and it hasn't changed, I hate being out of action and I really hate being told I can't fucking do something even if it's for my own good.

If I ever come face to face to Liam, I'm going to punch him in the throat just for that alone.

Because that's a really smart idea.

Finally, the school day ends and we're on the way home, the drive seems to take forever I'm so excited to get my bike back and get out on the road for a bit. When we arrive back, I get out of the SUV with a definite spring in my step.

"The vehicles have been delayed by an hour or so." Cash says, looking at his phone as he steps out of the SUV.

I pout, I can't help it.

Jensen swoops in, his teeth sinking into my lip and I tug him closer. My desire for him, sears through my veins. He growls as I pull his hair, his tongue tangles against mine as he moves me backwards until I'm pressed up against the SUV, as his hands sweep down my arms and grab my wrists. He lifts my arms so they're above my head as his hips pin me in place while his teeth nip my lip again. He gathers my wrists in one of his large palms, letting his other hand trail down my arm, brushing against the side of my boob and making my need for him burn even hotter.

"Get it!" Some idiot yells and we pull apart.

Both of us are breathing heavily. I had completely forgotten that we were outside and in full view of anyone who walks past. Jensen's face snaps in the direction of the idiot, a glare darkening his handsome features, the look does nothing to calm me down. The guy at the gate immediately holds his

hands up, backing away quickly and running off down the street.

“Stupid fucking idiot.” I growl.

Jensen chuckles, kissing me softly once more before grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the house. “I didn’t hurt your side, did I?”

“No,” I sigh heavily. “It only hurts if I do something really athletic now.”

“You’re not great at being out of action, are you?” Jensen smirks, watching me out of the corner of his eyes, as we walk into the house.

“What gave you that idea?” I gripe.

“You’ve been stomping around the house muttering.” Rage calls from the bottom of the stairs.

“You’ve been fidgety and restless as fuck.” Trick says.

“The amount of comfort food you’ve suggested we cook for dinner has gone up by a lot.” Rafe grins.

“There’s knife holes in the wall in your bedroom where you’ve been practising.” Atty adds, his eyebrow raised.

I throw my hands up in the air. “Alright, I get it! I just want to do something, go out on a job or at least do combat class or something. I feel like I’m going insane. This is as normal as my life has ever been and I don’t fucking like it!”

“I know Princess, I’d be going just as fucking nuts as you. Maybe you can come on the next job. We’ll just have to make sure no one recognises you.” Atty suggests, I could fucking kiss him that’s how happy he’s just made me.

In fact, that’s exactly what I decide to do. “Hey Atty?”

“Yes Princess?” He says looking up from his phone as he leans on the edge of the table.

“Uh oh.” Jensen mutters, seeing the look on my face.

“Catch me.” I yell taking a running leap.

He catches me effortlessly his grin blinding. I instantly plant my lips on his, kissing him thoroughly and showing him my thanks. When I pull back, he grins.

“I take it you like that idea, Princess.”

I nod enthusiastically.

“Damn, if I’d known that, that would be your reaction I would’ve taken you with me on our last job.” Luc chuckles, I blow him a kiss and then hop down.

“Il mio Cuore the cars are here!” Cash calls from the front door and wriggle against Atty trying to get down.

“Keep wriggling, and I’ll take you upstairs, Princess.” He growls, in my ear sending shivers down my spine.

He puts me down and chuckles as I stand there genuinely conflicted about whether I take him up on his offer or go and get my beautiful bike.

“Go, we can revisit that later.” Atty smirks.

I run down the hallway and out the front door. My bike was one of the first ones unloaded and I rush towards it as the guys come out helping the delivery drivers unload the rest of the bikes from the van while, Cash and Luc go to help them get the cars off the car transport thing. I’m surprised to see Luc’s car in perfect condition on the back. I had no idea what happened to it after his accident, thanks to the stalker fuck.

It’s getting late enough now that the sun is starting set, painting the sky with beautiful red and orange.

I rush to my bike, noting the keys placed in the ignition although it’s not switched on. I immediately swing my leg over and lean forward hugging it. It’s probably ridiculous to have missed something so much, but for a long time this bike was the only thing I could rely on, my only constant. I’m already wearing my bike jacket having anticipated my bikes arrival. So, I hop off my bike and rush inside grabbing my helmet. I can’t wait a second longer to get out on her.

Before I pull my helmet on, I call out to the guys, “I’m going to take my bike out, don’t worry I’m not going to leave

campus.” I say sitting back in my bike and pulling my helmet down.

“Alright Sweetheart, have fun.” Trick grins.

They all know how much I’ve missed her and how much I need the escape that she offers.

I blow him a kiss, starting the engine and waving to the guys as they turn my way. They wave back, smiling as their attention quickly switches back to their own vehicles that they’ve clearly missed as much as I missed my bike. As I slowly drive down the drive, so I don’t get in the way of the moving cars my eyes land on the guys’ bikes, I haven’t ever seen them before since they were put into storage for the winter. There are some gorgeous bikes amongst them most of them Harley style rides. I can’t wait to check them out properly.

As soon as I clear the big transporter, I pull back the throttle on my bike, opening it up and speed down the road past all of the giant mansions, despite my excitement I make sure I take note of the roads that I’m heading down so that I can find my way home. I start off fast, the need for the feel of the wind rushing past me pushing me to drive faster still. I take the corners faster than I probably should but the shot of adrenaline it gives me is worth it and starts to calm that raging need inside me that’s done with being restricted to campus. My thoughts calm and I’m left with nothing but the speed and my bike, it’s exactly what I needed.

Despite how easy it would be to leave as I drive past the guarded front gates I don’t, I’m not risking being hurt or abducted or whatever it is that Liam fucking wants me for. After a while, my speed decreases so I’m just cruising nicely, I start to pay more attention to what’s around me rather than just taking a note of the roads so I can get home. I’ve driven straight past the main building, in the opposite direction of the campus houses. I’ve never been down here before, and I am pleasantly surprised at what I find.

This side of campus seems to be dedicated entirely to sports and extra curriculars. Even though it’s dark now most of it is

still lit up. To the left of the winding road is a large athletic stadium. As well as a practice field with a track set up next to it. I drive past signs pointing to a swimming pool, hockey rink and a gun range. Which sort of makes sense considering we do weapons training here. On my right however is large sweeping fields, I can just make out the beautiful horses within them and stables in the distance.

I have no idea how we've gone this long without realising that this was here, although Cash probably knew. He studied the map and I haven't even looked at it.

I put it on my to do list to explore.

The road loops right around the back of the main building with signs pointing back to the campus houses. Whereas the front and the athletic side are incredibly looked after and clearly what the academy intends any guest to see the back is less pristine. Nothing that would be obvious normally but in comparison to the other side of the building the differences are easy to tell. Overgrown hedges, cracks in the pavement, windows that are in need of cleaning that sort thing.

The abandoned hallway of classrooms where we found the entrance to the bunker in, must be on this side. I'd be interested to see what the other classrooms look like. There might be something left in one of them that could give us a better clue. We've been assuming that the students were the members, but what if some of the teachers were as well? I wonder if any teachers are still here from back then, they'd be fairly old, but it's worth a shot. May be another lead that we can follow. Anything is worth trying at this point.

I refuse to give up on those missing kids.

Sudden bright headlights on full beam catch my eyes in my side mirrors and I grimace, the only thing I can make out about the asshole is that the car is red. The dickhead still doesn't turn his lights down when he realises I'm on the road and I figure that some asshole has guessed who I am and decided to mess with me. I try to ignore the lights and read the signs, making my way home. After a couple of turns the car behind sticks with me and I start to get an uneasy feeling in my gut.

I decide my best bet is to speed up, I'm not that far from home and the guys now. If the fucker is following me then he'll speed up too and if he doesn't, I'll know that I'm just paranoid. I really fucking hope I'm just paranoid but the churning feeling in my gut is warning me otherwise. I push my bike to go faster, riding as if I was in one of my races and paying acute attention to the car behind me and the rest of my surroundings. I can't risk making a mistake now and risk taking myself out because I missed a pothole or something equally ridiculous.

At first, the car behind stays back and I breathe a sigh of relief thankful that for once my instincts weren't right, that relief is quickly extinguished as the car suddenly accelerates forward, gaining on me quickly. Almost like it was playing with me, giving the hope that the threat was all in my head and then snatching it away quickly. I pull onto our road, taking the corner fast enough that my knee almost touches the floor.

The car behind is still gaining on me and when I see our house not much further up the road, headlights suddenly blind me, coming straight at me. My brain stutters, remembering the last time that headlights were coming at me, I thought I was going to die that time, it looks like I definitely am this time.

With the car behind and the one in front, I have nowhere to go, all I can hope is that the stupid bushes lining the streets are softer than they look. I make the split-second decision to turn into them, it has to be less painful than being hit at speed by the oncoming car or squished between the two of them.

My front wheel hits the curb awkwardly, sending me flying straight into the hedge and over the other side, the feeling of falling through the air is terrifying as the world slows down for the briefest of seconds and my body twists and turns being thrown around like a rag doll. Blinding pain rocks through my body for the briefest of seconds before the world turns black.

Rage

After all the guys have unloaded their vehicles and checked them all over to make sure they aren't damaged, they move the cars and bikes into the garage around the back. Instead of following them back into the house, I decide to stay outside to work on my car. I hadn't seen Ever drive off earlier and I'm looking forward to seeing what bike she rides regularly. From her excitement at getting it back and her riding skill, I have no doubt that her bike is beautiful. I grab some lights so I can see the engine of my car properly despite the quickly encroaching darkness and get to work.

I finished restoring this car a couple of months ago, Atlas actually helped me but in the last week or so it has started to not run as well as it should be. Since we've got a bit of time, the guys doing their own thing. I decided to see if I could figure out what's wrong with it. I think Rafe is trying to teach one of the others to cook because he's getting fed up of doing it every night but won't let us order takeout on all of the days he doesn't feel like cooking, because we need to be healthy.

I'm finally starting to feel like I could be a part of this family which is surprising to say the least. I pull my head out of from underneath the hood and reach for another tool. Headlights on the road catch my attention, the car is going far too fast for this road, the idiot has his lights on full beam and if he's not careful he's going to cause an accident.

As if my words conjure it, I hear the squealing of tires and an almighty crash, sounding like metal scraping against asphalt. Without a second thought, I run down the drive, scaling the gate, because it takes too long for them to fucking open and someone could be hurt.

I frown when I look down the street, no cars are in sight, but I know what I heard, and he definitely caused an accident of some kind. I jog further down the road, starting think I must've imagined the whole thing, when I spot the discarded motorbike lying at the edge of the road. It looks pretty badly damaged and I doubt the person who was riding it got out of the accident without at least some broken bones.

Judging from the placement of the bike whoever was riding it must be the other side of the stupid hedges that line the street, I move through a gap between them and my heart drops to my feet when I spot her.

“No, no!” I cry out, rushing towards her and pulling my phone out at the same time.

Chapter Thirty

Rage

I put my phone to my ear as I crash to my knees beside Ever, shakily reaching my fingers forward and placing them on her neck. My breath whooshes out of me in a rush when I feel the steady thump of her heartbeat.

Not dead, she's not dead man. Keep it together.

“What’s up?” Atlas answers the phone sounding like he’s just been laughing about something.

“Ever’s come off her bike just down the road from ours.” I rush out and hang up the phone.

He’s just going to ask me a thousand questions I don’t know the answer to, and I want to check her over. I’m careful not to move her, not wanting to injure her more, thank fuck the visor on her helmet is up though, so I can at least see her face.

“Ever?” I ask, trying to wake her. “Puddin’?”

She doesn’t even blink and I start to panic, her bike is in pieces, I can feel her heartbeat, but fuck knows what injuries she has.

Footsteps pound the sidewalk behind me, and I jump to my feet, dropping down into a crouch and getting ready to take out whatever fucker did this in the first place. It’s clear from the behaviour of that fucking car that this was done on purpose.

I’ll kill the fucker.

If she dies, I’ll kill every fucker who’s ever laid a finger on her. I’ll hunt them down and slaughter them.

“Whoa, it’s okay. It’s just us.” Trick says his voice strained.

I instantly stand down.

“Fuck!” Jensen yells as his eyes land on Ever.

“Don’t touch her.” Cash orders. “You could hurt her worse. Trick, ring an ambulance.” He bends down and checks her pulse.

“What the fuck happened?” Atlas growls, close to losing it.

The other guys’ attention lands on me as they all gather around Ever.

“I saw a car driving fast down the road with the lights on full beam, next thing I heard was the sounds of crash, I raced down here and found Ever. The cars had disappeared.” I explain my hands gripping my hair as I stare at her.

I have never been so damn scared in my life and the fear just keeps climbing.

“Fucking hell, her bike is trashed.” Rafe says, looking over the hedge to see the mangled remains.

“She’s lucky she’s not dead.” Riot grinds out, his voice strangled.

“Don’t fucking say that.” Jensen growls, his eyes are wild.

“She’ll be okay man, if there’s one thing Ever is, it’s a fighter.” Trick tries to assure him but the pure fear in his eyes, bellies his words.

“Where the fuck is the ambulance?” Luc’s panicked voice echoes in the dark street.

“It’s coming.” Trick replies shortly.

I look at them all, she is the glue that holds them all together, I’ve always thought that but looking at them now it’s more obvious. They’re only holding it together because of her and because that’s what she needs them to do right now, me included. I’m right there with them and the realisation shows me just how far gone I am for her.

“Do you think this was done on purpose?” Rafe asks, his voice rougher than usual and a sheen on his eyes as he gently picks up one of Ever’s hands.

The other one is stuck underneath her body and I’d be willing to bet it’s broken. It looks like she landed on it.

“I assume so, the fact the guy had his lights on full suggests it, but we can’t be sure until she wakes up and can tell us herself.” Trick answers him, his voice firm as if he’s daring someone to argue with him about her waking up.

None of us do. We all need that hope, she will wake up from this.

“Liam?” Cash growls, his eyes flashing with deadly intent.

That look reminds of how he dealt with the fucker at the party, I never thought he was capable of threatening the things that he did, and the injuries he inflicted were intently made to cause the most amount of pain without killing him, it was fucking impressive and a bit terrifying. I’m fucking glad he’s on our side. God help the fuckers who cross him, who cross any of them, each one is deadly and capable in their own right.

“Normally, I’d say yes,” Atlas starts as we finally hear the sounds of a siren in the distance, getting louder quickly.

“Thank fuck.” Cash breathes out, still tense and the fact he’s worried sends a spiral of sickening fear through me, he’s got the most medical experience out of all of us, if he’s worried then it might be as bad as we all thought.

Atlas swallows thickly, coming to the same conclusion as I have. I share a look with all of the guys, in that moment they truly feel like my brothers as we all silently agree, if she dies then the fuckers who did this and whoever orchestrated it die too.

Atlas clears his throat trying to distract us from the revelation we all shared. “I’d normally say that this was Liam’s doing, but he hasn’t made even a threat on her life so far. I’m not saying it’s not him, but we need to keep an open mind, I don’t want to miss an enemy because we were focusing on the wrong one.”

“Fine.” Trick says, just as the ambulance comes around the corner at the end of the road. “Jensen flag down the ambulance!” He orders.

The demand cuts through the panic encapsulating him and he immediately does what Trick asked him to do. Riot

stepping out to help.

“We need to keep an eye on him, this might send him over.” Trick mutters to the rest of us.

The ambulance pulls to a stop, the paramedics hopping out and instantly going to Ever, asking what happened. We all step back giving them space to work as I quickly explain what I heard and tell them no one has moved her; Cash then takes over. His words only slightly reassuring.

“From what I can tell, she hasn’t got any broken bones, but I can’t be sure. Her airways are clear, and her pulse is steady. She’s out cold though and isn’t waking when I call her name.” Cash explains to the paramedics.

“Good job, young man.” The elder one says, a small smile of reassurance.

We watch helplessly as they check her over and place her on a stretcher, it’s all a blur and in what seems like seconds the paramedics are turning back to us.

“Only one of you can ride with her.” The woman says expecting a fight clearly.

But we care more about her than any sort of ridiculous argument we could come up with.

“Atlas you go with her.” Trick says, tilting his head in a way that suggests protect her with any means necessary, his eyes darting to the paramedics.

It may be paranoid of us to be wary of the paramedics but if this really was on purpose then it looks like someone is out to kill Ever. No one is taking any chances with her safety.

Atlas pats his hip, telling us he’s armed.

He then nods, getting in the back of the ambulance, we don’t waste any time watching it leave as we all rush back to the house to get our own cars and follow.

Luc

I have never been happier that my car is fucking fixed than I am in this moment, it's fucking fast and I need fast right now.

"Jensen get in the car." I order, deciding to take it upon myself to keep an eye on him. Not only to help him and make sure he doesn't go off the deep end but also because it helps me to keep my mind occupied.

The image of Ever lying on the floor twisted and looking like she's sleeping peacefully is burned into my mind and I highly doubt anything could get rid of it. I think all of us will be having nightmares about seeing her lying on the floor for a long time to come. The rest of the guys pile into Trick's SUV which he had modified a long time ago so although it can't keep up with my car, it comes closer than any other SUV does. We pull out of the gates with speed and I race towards the gates.

Jensen's phone buzzes and he answers, automatically putting it on speaker phone.

"Rage called one of the guards at the gates, you should be able to go straight through." Trick's strained voice sounds through the speaker before he hangs up.

He's right and I speed straight through the gates, Trick and the others hot my heels.

"Jensen, pull up the directions to the hospital and tell me where to go. Ever needs us." I tell him, knowing that like me, if he has a task, he's less likely to spiral.

He hasn't said a word since he saw her apart from to snap at Riot when he said from the damage to her bike, she should be dead. That's a sure sign that he's in turmoil, we all are but thanks to Jensen's past seeing someone he love's hurt and unconscious, sends him down a dark path. His eyes are clear though and they'll stay that way for as long as Ever needs him. I just might need to remind him that she's going to need him there when she wakes up.

He gives me the directions to the hospital in a monotone voice and I'm fucking glad that we aren't too far away. Finding a space in the lot isn't that difficult since it's a small-town hospital. I hope that Ever doesn't need any specialist care though because that would mean that she's got to be flown out of here. This would be the perfect opportunity for Liam to grab her, while she's vulnerable.

As soon as we get out of the car me and Jensen join the guys and I voice my concerns as we walk into the hospital.

"We need to be extra vigilant." I start. "It would be the perfect time for Liam to take Ever and if he did plan her accident then this could be why."

"Fuck, you're right, I hadn't even thought about that." Rage mutters, he keeps running his hands through his hair and grabbing it in fists which means his hair is now sticking straight up.

Ever's going to have a field day with that when she wakes up.

"Is everyone armed?" Trick asks quietly as we step through the doors.

"Always." Jensen replies, the only word he's spoken.

I think the promise violence has him coming back to himself a bit more. The rest of us nod. Ever since we got to this school I've always been armed unless I'm sleeping and even then, my weapons are within reach. We live in a dangerous world and I'm not risking anything.

"Hello, we're here for Ever Thomas." Trick says to the receptionist, I'm glad he remembered the fake last name she was using because I had absolutely no fucking idea.

"Unless you are family, I can't let you in." The nurse says shortly, looking over us suspiciously.

We don't have fucking time for this, I need to know what's going on with Ever. I place my hand on Jensen's arm as he goes to step forward and watch worriedly as Rafe does the same to Cash, he has that cold look in his eyes that he gets right before he's about to say something truly frightening, he

has a way with words, just a couple of sentences has the most fearsome of men crumbling. That is not what we need right now, if he threatens her, the police will be called in minutes and we won't fucking get anywhere.

Trick takes a deep breath trying to calm himself.

"They're with me." Atlas grinds out from by the doors leading further into the hospital.

"Oh of course, so sorry sir. Go on through." She smiles at us her entire demeanour changing in an instant.

Fucking hell.

We don't spare her another glance as we rush towards Atlas.

"Any news?" Riot asks.

"They made me wait outside while she's being examined. I refused to leave the door though and wait in the waiting room but Rage texted me saying that you were having trouble." Atlas replies as we all rush down the sterile hallway to her room.

He's obviously come to the same conclusion that we have.

Ever is not safe.

When we get to her door, I'm pleased to see that she's been given a private room, but we still aren't allowed in the room. Whatever Atlas said to them means that they don't try to make us wait in the waiting room though and we can at least keep an eye on the door to make sure no one goes in who shouldn't be in there.

I pace the length of the hallway, the others leaning against the wall or standing staring at the door. The door opens and I think we're finally going to get some answers.

"She needs a CT scan to make sure her brain is okay; we also need to give her an x-ray because we're fairly certain that she's broken her ribs. She's been given a light sedative, so she doesn't wake up and panic in either machine. The nurses are just getting her into something comfortable and then we will take her down." The doctor tells us all.

“Is she going to be okay?” Rafe asks.

“She’s stable for the moment, but we are worried that there could be internal damage caused by the broken rib. One of you can accompany us to both rooms but you will have to stay outside.” He says firmly.

Trick steps forward as they start to wheel a very pale Ever out of the room and down the hall, Trick following swiftly beside them.

The wait is excruciating, the longer it takes to get any news, the more restless we all become. Her image keeps flashing through my mind and dark thoughts keep trying to drag me under. I’m struggling. My gaze darts to Jensen and I watch him worriedly.

“She’s going to need you, when she wakes up, man.” I say quietly to him and I can almost see him grab onto the words like a life raft, using them to keep his head out of the darkness.

“Hopefully, she will be able to tell us what happened when she wakes up.” Rafe mutters.

“She might not remember, there’s a chance she’s hit her head pretty hard and it could cause short term memory loss.” Cash warns us.

“Thank fuck she was wearing her helmet.” Rage comments.

Ever’s wheeled back a couple of hours later and we’re ignored as they go back in and get her settled, the doctor following not long after.

“Did they tell you anything?” I ask Trick.

“Nothing at all, they said we’d be told once the doctor has looked over everything.” He scrubs his hand through his hair, looking helpless.

He hates not being in control and there’s nothing he can do in this situation. The door to Ever’s room finally opens, effectively stopping the conversation as we all stand up taller and face the doctor that’s just exited. The nurse’s bustle past us, all of them give us wary looks but we ignore them as our attention stays glued to the doctor.

“She’s got a concussion. One of her ribs is broken like we thought but luckily it hasn’t punctured her lung, she won’t need surgery. She’s broken her finger and is covered in bruises and small cuts. From what the paramedics said, she’s lucky that she didn’t break anything else.” He explains seriously. “You can all go in now, but it might be a little while before she wakes up. There’s a button by the bed to call for nurses if you need them.”

He moves past us, and we all rush into the room. Ever has never looked so small and fragile. Her hand is bandaged keeping her fingers strapped together, to support her broken one. Her arms are a mottle of bruises and she’s even got some small cuts on her face.

“She’s going to be so fucking pissed that she’s got to rest for longer.” Rafe mutters a small relieved smile tugs up his lips.

“Hell, she was bad enough with just the cut. She’s going to have to actually let us help her, now she’s got a broken rib.” Rage adds.

We all take seats around the room, moving as close to her bed as possible. Jensen is starting to come back to himself now that we know she’s going to be okay and I’m so relieved. The last thing any of us want is to be chasing after him. He knows that Ever needs us and him though, so he’d never do that.

“Maybe we should think of some stuff that she can do while she’s healing, like stuff so she doesn’t get bored?” He suggests.

“That’s a good idea.” Trick replies.

I’m grateful for the distraction of the conversation as we wait for Ever to wake up, I don’t think I will completely breath easily until I see her eyes open and hear her voice.

“I could find the targets out; can she practice knife throwing with her broken rib?” Atlas frowns.

“I’m not sure. Probably not at first. In the first few days she’s going to be in a lot of pain, but she should be able to walk and stuff pretty much instantly and then in a few days, maybe a week she can do that. Maybe practising with her

other arm, opposite to whatever side she's injured on." Cash replies.

"Okay, so lots of rest the first couple of days then. No school, but I know that she's panicking about her lessons or starting to, so we can pick up her work for her." I add.

"She's not to be left alone. I want two of us with her at all times." Trick orders.

"I don't think any of us were willing to leave her alone anyway." Jensen points out.

"We can do movie nights, blankets, popcorn, comfort food, all of that stuff." Riot suggests, she loves her movie nights.

"We can also still do some of the research for the bunker." Atty suggests.

"And I'll order her some books I think she'll like." Rafe adds thoughtfully pulling his phone out of his pocket and starting to tap away.

"She's still going to get stabby." I grin.

"Oh, without a doubt, hopefully we can use distraction techniques to help her." Riot adds.

My eyes snap to Ever as she groans, lifting her arm to her face. When she realises something on it her eye's snap open, filling with fear as she tries to sit up her hands grasping for knives that aren't there.

"Ever!" Rage says sharply and I glare at him, until I realise that his sharp tone has snapped through her panic and now, she watching us with clear eyes, filled with pain.

I raise my eyebrow at him in question, surprised that it works. "It helps me when I panic, when I first wake up."

I nod filing that away in case we need it later, my attention falling back to Ever.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ever

“Ah fuck,” I groan as pain rockets through me at my quick movement. “Why do I feel like I had a fight with bull and fucking lost.”

I study the faces of the guys around me, all of them looking, worried but relieved. Now that I’m not panicking that I’ve been drugged and taken somewhere I realise that I’m in a hospital, the only reason I’m not still freaking out is that all of the guys are surrounding me and I know I’m safe.

“Interesting analogy there, Sweetheart.” Trick grins.

“You’ve got a broken rib and finger, a concussion and you’re pretty much just one big bruise.” Cash answers squeezing my hand gently, the one that’s not got the broken finger.

“Do you remember what happened?” Atty asks gently.

My mind is hazy for a second before it suddenly comes back to me with startling clarity.

“A red car started following me, so I decided to come back home. When I was on our road another car came at me, on my side of the road with their lights on full. The car behind me sped up and I remember thinking that I had a better rate of survival landing in the bushes than I did being squished between the two cars or thrown over the top of them both.” I tell them.

While digesting what I’ve told them, although it doesn’t seem to surprise them which makes me think that they’ve probably already come to the same conclusion, something else occurs to me.

That mother fucking rat bastard.

“Does anyone have my phone?” I ask.

“Erm where was it?” Jensen asks.

“In my bike jacket.” I point to the jacket draped over a chair in the corner. I think I might’ve cried if they had cut that off me.

“Here you go, Angel.” He says handing me the phone. “It looks like its survived.”

“Thanks.” I grin, aware that it probably has an edge to it thanks to my current mood.

I’m going to have to fucking rest for even longer, I just got done fucking resting. I pull up the number that Liam rang me on last and press call putting it on speaker since I know the guys are going to want to hear both sides of the conversation. It may not be the smartest thing to ring the guy that’s just tried to kill me but in my mind he’s Larry, and I’m fucking pissed at him.

Understatement of the fucking century.

“Who are you calling, Puddin’?” Rage asks, the others falling silent at his question.

I put my finger to my lips to motion them to be quiet just as the line clicks and Liam’s voice comes through the speakers.

“Hello, dear. This is a surprise, what can I do for you?”

Atlas’s eyes widen and the others look at me like I’ve gone crazy.

“Don’t hello dear me! You’ve got some fucking nerve considering you want something off me. Do you really think that running me off the fucking road is the best way to get what you want?”

“You’re hurt?” Is the only reply I get and even I can hear the worry in his voice.

That doesn’t make much sense.

“What the fuck?” Atty mutters quiet enough that Liam doesn’t hear.

“Of course, I fucking am. You had two fucking cars run me off the damn road, I’m lucky I’m not dead!” I continue to rant.

“Ever, while I can understand why you would think that it’s me that orchestrated that, I have no intention of harming you. If I wanted you dead, you would be. It wasn’t me that organised that.” He says sincerely.

The thing is, I actually believe him, the shock in his voice when I first told him and the worry, isn’t something that easily faked and the truth of it is he has never tried to harm me before and I was at his drop once a month. I know something has changed since then but we’re still in the dark as to the reason why.

My eyes lock with Atlas, his father’s behaviour is clearly confusing him as much as it’s confusing the rest of us.

“Atlas?” Liam barks through the phone.

“Yes father?” He replies cautiously.

“I assume that you are looking into who is behind this?”

“Of course. You were our first suspect, for obvious reasons.” He replies with a bite, his jaw clenched.

“Ah, Ever’s figured out who I am then. Sorry I didn’t tell you my real name, dear. That wouldn’t have ended well.” He apologises confusing the fucking hell out of me. Before I can work out what to reply, he carries on. “Atlas keep me updated. When you find the culprits let me know, and I’ll bury them.” He hangs up, without another word.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask thoroughly confused.

“Fuck knows, at this point he’s becoming as much a mystery when it comes to you as Phoenix and all that shit.” Rage grumbles.

“We still don’t know why he wants you, but he’s just confirmed that he has no intention of harming you, just harming those you love in order to get you to comply.” Luc mutters.

“But with what? He hasn’t told you what he wants from you.” Trick frowns.

“Do we believe that he didn’t send the cars?” Jensen asks, his hand absently running through my hair gently.

“I do, he was actually worried about her. If he’d sent them, he’d be gloating, going on about how this was a warning next time they’d succeed. It’s his usual go to. We’re missing a massive piece of the puzzle and he’s clearly not interested in telling us what the fuck is going on.” Atty paces as he thinks, his voice is calm and not raised though so it’s not triggering me.

“Ah, you’re awake!” A nurse says bustling into the room and ignoring the giant glaring men. “Now you’re awake, we can give you some stronger painkillers if you’d like. You’ll have to stay tonight but you should be good to go tomorrow.”

Panic spears through me.

“I’m not staying here over night, and no thank you to the stronger painkillers.”

“I really must advise that you stay here.” The nurse says, trying to put her foot down and I turn my panicked gaze on the guys.

I can’t stay here alone; I hate hospitals and I’m not in any condition to defend myself if whoever did try to run me over comes back to finish the job. Not to mention, I wasn’t that smart when I called Liam, he now knows I’m injured and easy to kidnap. He may not want to harm me, but he wants me for something and the type of man that he is, it’s not going to be anything that I’m going to want to be a part of.

The guys instantly form a wall between me and the nurse. A wall of deliciously toned backs and ass’s facing my way. If it didn’t hurt so damn much to move, I’d be tempted to bite one of their ass’s. It’s also a nice distraction from the panic that was building.

“While we understand that, Ever would like to leave. If you could get us her discharge papers, some information on what to look out for and anything else she might need, that would be great, thank you.” Trick tells the nurse giving her no room to argue.

I hear her huff indignantly before the door closes and the guys turn back to me. I don’t quite raise my eyes in time.

“Were you just checking out our asses?” Atty smirks, raising his eyebrow in question.

“Hey, not my fault. Don’t have such gorgeous butts and I won’t want to take a bite out of them. If we’re being honest, you’re pretty damn lucky I can’t move very well right now.”

Jensen snorts and one of them chuckles.

“I never know what’s going to come out of your mouth.” Trick grins affectionately.

He moves to the head of my bed his hand gently running across my leg before he dips his head and kisses me slowly.

“I’ve never been so scared in my fucking life.” His eyes flash with fear.

“You remember when we first got you back, I warned you that we were going to be clingy bastards?” Luc says, his blue eyes, haunted.

“Yeah.” I reply.

“Well, you haven’t seen anything yet, Firecracker.”

“I can’t say I’m disappointed.” I grin.

The doctor finally comes in with everything I need and what the guys need to look out for. Cash takes over that bit, understanding more of what he’s saying than the rest of us.

“I understand that you don’t want any stronger painkillers.” The doctor states turning his attention my way. “The ones that I have prescribed you are stronger than your over the counter meds, but they are nowhere near as strong as what we would normally give you, those ones carry the risk of addiction, these don’t. I highly suggest that you take them at least for the first few days as you’re going to be in a lot of pain.”

“Thank you.” I reply.

I’m glad he didn’t push the issue and instead found a way around it. I’ve been around so many different types of drugs and watched them destroy so many lives that I don’t want anything to do with them, I will admit I need stronger painkillers than I usually use though.

I'll just use them sparingly.

“Good, that’s everything. Any issues, come back and see us.” He smiles, and leaves the room, letting a nurse pushing a wheelchair through on his way out.

“I’ll just leave this here for you dear.” She smiles before leaving the wheelchair by the door and following the doctor out.

“Anyone know where my clothes are?” I ask gesturing to the hospital gown I’m currently wearing.

“They’re here, Sweetheart.” Trick says, handing me the clothes.

I look down at them, spotting an issue right off the bat. I can’t bend to put my jeans on and trying to wrangle myself into my tight tank top is going being a nightmare.

“Can someone help me put my jeans on please?”

“Of course, Dragonfly.”

“Do you want us to leave?” Riot asks.

“No, it’s okay, you’ve all seen me naked and I’m comfortable with all of you anyway.” I shrug. Flipping the covers off of my legs, then carefully and painfully starting to move them to the side so that I can hang them over the edge of the bed, making it easier to put the trousers on.

“Here, let me help, Sunshine.” Riot offers and he gently starts move my legs as I use my one good hand to help turn me. It’s fucking hard work and by the time I’ve finally moved my legs, I’m exhausted.

“That was painful to watch.” Jensen grimaces, and look over the rest of them.

All of them have them same frown on their faces, not liking to watch me struggle except from Rage who is turned facing the door. He must’ve thought I didn’t mean him when I said I was comfortable in front of all of them. After all its just like getting dressed at the beach, I have underwear on.

His consideration and respect makes my heartbeat faster.

“Ready?” Rafe asks.

“Let’s do this.” I say trying to psych myself up.

I hold my feet out and Rafe gently tugs the jeans over my feet, even the small tug to get the cuffs over my heels hurts and I grit my teeth.

“Alright. Cash help her stand up and I’ll pull them up.” Rafe orders.

I hold my hands out to Cash and he gently helps me stand.

“Aw fuck, that hurts.” I mutter squeezing my eyes shut as a wave of dizziness crashes over me.

“You okay?” Luc asks worriedly, all of them moving a step closer.

“Yep.” I say shortly.

Rafe takes that as a go ahead to pull my trousers up and I can honestly say that I fucking hate skinny jeans. Eventually they’re up and I sit back down.

“I am going to have a ritualistic burning of all of my fucking skinny jeans as soon as I can.” I growl.

“Sounds like fun, I’ll help.” Jensen grins.

“Deal.” I hope he realises I’m being deadly serious.

“Here you go Puddin’.” Rage interrupts handing me a t-shirt that can only be his.

He’s got a hoodie on so he’s not going to be walking around the hospital topless not that I think anyone is going to mind. I haven’t seen him shirtless but the way his shirts cling to him and the size of his arms, well it’s easy to make an educated guess at what’s hiding underneath.

“Thank you, Rageykins.” I grin, because I can’t help but be a smartass.

He doesn’t stop his grin in time to pretend he’s pissed at me and instead just shakes his head looking away.

Rafe even has to help me put the shirt on and as its gently dropped over my head I get a whiff of cedar and woodsmoke. I

barely restrain myself from sticking the collar over my nose and leaving it there.

It smells so good.

Finally, I'm dressed, and Jensen moves Cash out of the way so he can help settle me in the wheelchair. I'd normally protest this but I'm in pain and I'm exhausted just from putting my damn clothes on. We move through the hospital quickly since I'm in the chair, Trick makes us wait outside the doors so that he can go and get the SUV, that way we're not leaving the wheelchair in the middle of the lot and we can get home quicker, plus it means I don't have to walk.

As soon as we're in and settled, Jensen and Luc following behind in Luc's car that looks brand new, my stomach grumbles.

Rafe grins from next to me. "I'll cook breakfast as soon as we're home, Dragonfly."

"Thank fuck, I'm starving." I chuckle.

Trick takes the roads home carefully, apologising every time we go over a bump.

"Home." I grin as we pull into the drive.

Once they've helped me out of the damn SUV, I shuffle slowly into the house and straight over to the couch where I ease myself down.

"This is going to get old real fast." I grumble, resting my head on the back of the couch and closing my eyes.

"We'll keep you entertained." Riot grins.

I raise my eyebrow in question as I turn to him, sensing there's something more to it.

"We have a plan." Jensen grins, carefully sitting down next to me his hand going back to my hair as his fingers play with strands.

"Oh?" I ask curiously, "What's the plan?"

"I've named it operation entertain Ever. Two of us are going to stay with you while the rest of us go to school, we'll get

your work and bring it back for you.” Jensen starts to explain.

“You should start to feel a lot better in the next couple of days and able to go back.” Cash says.

“Although you won’t be able to do combat class still.” Rage adds.

“What happened to that coach anyway?” I ask, changing the conversation.

“He’s been reprimanded and put on leave for a while. He’ll be back eventually, but we’ll keep an eye on him. He’s had a stellar record and led the school to championships in a couple of sports, so they’re reluctant to let him go.” Atty answers me.

“Several of the guys that witnessed it, backed all of us up and aren’t pleased with him, he’s going to have a hard time when he eventually does come back.” Rage adds.

“It’s nice to know that they aren’t all assholes here.” I reply, inhaling the delicious smells wafting from the kitchen.

“Do you want to eat in there?” Rage calls from the kitchen.

“Yes please, I’m down now I don’t want to get back up.” I call back.

“I’ll go help him carry stuff.” Riot says getting up, Cash following.

“Oh no, you sit back down.” Luc chuckles pointing to Jensen who had started to get up to help. “We want to eat the food not show it to the floor.”

I let out a small chuckle, thankfully it doesn’t hurt my ribs, I stopped myself before it could. It’s not my first rodeo with broken ribs. Trouble being it’s been long enough that I can’t remember how long it took until I was able to do certain things.

Dinner or I guess its breakfast now, is absolutely delicious. I’m so exhausted though that halfway through my eyes keep closing for longer between bites.

“Is she eating while asleep?” I hear Rage ask incredulously.

“Is that safe?” Jensen asks sounding impressed.

“Alright Sweetheart,” Trick says, gently taking the fork out of my hand and the plate off my lap. He ever so gently scoops me up off the couch and I snuggle into his chest sighing happily, my eyes still closed. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“So, fucking cute.” Atlas mutters to a chorus of agreements from the others.

The gentle sway of Trick’s body as he carefully carries me upstairs has me sinking further towards oblivion. I must’ve fallen asleep for a second because before I know it Trick is carefully placing me on my bed.

“Do you want me to take your pants off?” He asks quietly, already removing my shoes.

“Yes please.” I reply sleepily, my eyes still not wanting to open. I reach down and unbutton them.

He ever so carefully starts to pull them down my legs.

“Fucking hell, I never realised how tight girls’ jeans were.” He mutters.

I let out a quiet chuckle. “No more skinny jeans.”

“Good call, Sweetheart.” He finally manages to get them peeled off my legs and pulls the covers up over me.

“Thank you, stay?” I ask quietly.

“Of course.” He says moving over to the other side of the bed, I drift in and out of sleep as he gets ready for bed.

I hear the TV turn on quietly before he gets in and I move closer to him as he threads his fingers through mine, I finally fall into a deep sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I'm abruptly awoken with pain wracking through my body, surprisingly, it looks like I slept right through the rest of the day and through the next night as the early morning rays shine through the curtains. I vaguely remember the guys coming in to check on me but not with any clarity, Rafe is in bed beside me now and I'm guessing that he and Trick switched at some point.

I must've had some painkillers still in my system from the hospital to let me sleep that long without waking from pain. Not only am I now in pain but I desperately need to pee.

I shift slightly, trying to work out how I'm going to get to the bathroom and take painkillers, preferably at the same time because I'm unsure which one I want more right now.

As soon as I've started to move, Rafe wakes up. I barely moved or made a sound and a thought completely unbidden crosses his mind.

He'd make an amazing dad, waking up that easily he'd hear the baby before I did. I've looked after a couple of babies, to try and make extra cash and help their run off their feet moms out. I think the painkillers from the hospital might still be messing with my brain.

"Are you okay? What do you need?" He asks sleepily sitting up slowly and blinking adorably at me.

I resign myself to the fact that while I'm in this amount of pain there's no way I'm going to be able to get up.

"I'm in a lot of pain and I really need to pee."

"Okay, Dragonfly. Which one do you need first painkillers or the bathroom?"

"Bathroom." I say decisively.

He nods and smiles softly as he gets up. My eyes trace over his delicious body, he's not as defined as some of the others,

but he's deliciously toned, and his back is lickable.

His face is serious as I comes to my side of the bed, completely oblivious to the fact that I was checking him out.

"Go slow and let me do most of if not all of the work." He orders, giving me a look.

He knows I'll try to do some of it, or at least I normally would but I really am in too much pain right now, give me a couple of days and I'm sure I'll be pulling my hair out in frustration. I let him help me stand and his eyes cloud with worry when I don't try to push to do more myself.

He helps me all the way into the bathroom before leaving me to it and leaving the door slightly ajar in case I need him.

Getting down onto the toilet and back up, is painful but I manage it. That simple task has worn me out again though, add in the pain and my head starts to spin, I grip the counter.

"Rafe, little help?" I ask my vision clearing as I start to shuffle towards the door.

It opens and Cash looks in, before rushing over. "You're really pale, do you want to lean on me, or do you want me to carry you?"

"You give the best compliments." I tease, a grin tugging at my lips. "I want to lean on you please."

He smirks and holds his arm out to me; I lean on him heavily as he leads me back to the room. He's set the pillows up on the bed so that I can lean back against them comfortably, once I'm settled, he hands me a glass of water.

"I've got normal painkillers or the ones from the hospital which are stronger. Which ones do you want?"

"Hospital ones." I reply and he nods like he expected me to want those ones.

"Here you go, il mio Cuore. Rafe is making breakfast and he's going to bring it up." He smiles softly dipping his head and kissing me as he hands me the pills.

I take them gratefully and hope that they don't take too long to start to work.

"What does il mio Cuore mean?" I ask, I've been meaning to ask him, ever since he first called me it, but I just haven't gotten around to it.

He studies my features, judging whether to tell me or not. "It means my heart."

I melt into a puddle; he's called me that since the first week that I got back.

"I love you." I reply, nerves swarming me as soon as the words are out, and I wish I could take them back but at the same time I mean them and the only reason I want to take them back is because it terrifies me and I'm scared of rejection.

His eyes blaze as his smile breaks across his features both of his dimples popping out. He kisses me still smiling before slowly pulling back.

"I love you too, il mio Cuore, so fucking much."

My heart feels like it's going to burst, he loves me.

He peppers my face with kisses and makes me giggle before I gasp in pain.

"Sorry," he mutters. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good, I'm happy." I smile.

"Breakfast." Rafe announces as he enters the room. The other guys all following him with their own plates and making themselves comfortable around the room. "They wanted to eat up here with you."

"Aww guys." I grin. "Thank you, Rafe." I say as he hands me a lap tray with an array of breakfast foods on it.

"You're welcome."

"Wait, aren't you guys supposed to be at school?"

They all look at each other slightly sheepishly.

“We all feel a bit raw after yesterday and none of us wanted to leave you yet.” Rage replies, his eyes locked with mine showing me more of his feelings than I think he meant to.

“Peter is bringing everyone’s work over later and he’s messaging me every ten minutes to make sure you’re okay.” Trick grins rolling his eyes.

I love Peter, he’s fucking awesome.

We stick some comedy sitcom on and enjoy our breakfast. I love having them all around me. Slowly the pain starts to recede as the painkillers kick in and I find myself fully relaxing back into the pillows. I was worried that they’d make my head feel foggy, but I’m relieved to find that’s not the case. It’s not long until my coffee and the glass of water I drank with my pills makes me need to pee again, as soon as I start to move the guys attention is on me.

“Want a hand, Angel?” Jensen asks.

I nod gratefully and hold my hand up to him, he slowly pulls me up and kisses me before holding his arm out to me, gallantly with a bow. I thread my arm through his, grinning at his antics. He slowly walks me to the door. Thanks to the pain killers I feel like I could probably do it myself but it’s fun and I know he’d insist on helping me anyway.

When I get to the door, he starts to walk in the bathroom with me.

“While I appreciate the help, I can pee by myself.” I smile up at him, amused.

“Are you sure, I don’t want you pushing yourself too hard and falling or something? I can turn my back.” He replies worriedly.

“I promise I will be okay. You guys can all hear me if I call.” I reassure him.

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

I pull him down, so I kiss his cheek and make my way into the bathroom shutting the door behind me. I take care of

business grateful that I can do it myself and silently chuckling that Jensen wanted to come in with me.

Too cute.

Once I'm settled back down, something occurs to me. "I slept through yesterday?"

"Yeah Firecracker, why?" Luc responds.

"Do you guys have any idea who's behind my crash yet?"

"No, we can't even find the cars, although neither you nor Rage had an idea about what makes they were only colours. Rage said he heard them crash, which means we can assume that one or both of them hit your bike and most likely sustained damage." Riot starts to explain.

"Oh, my poor baby, is she fixable?" I interrupt.

"It'll take a bit of work, but I can get it fixed." Atty smiles.

"I'll help." Rage offers.

"Oh, thank fuck. I can help fix her up as well, I did all the original work on her."

"Seriously?" Riot asks.

"Oh yeah, it wouldn't run properly when I first got her so I had to figure out what was wrong, I definitely couldn't have taken her to a shop."

"That's impressive." Luc grins.

"Thank you." I reply grinning proudly. "Sorry I interrupted, what were you saying Riot?"

"Yeah, because they hit your bike, we figured that there would be damage on the cars, Atlas had some of his guys scouring the campus and there's no sign of any cars that are damaged." Riot finishes explaining.

"I'm going to go down to the gate when I get the chance and see if the guards can tell me anything." Rage adds in.

"Is there a chance it could be something to do with Phoenix?" I ask.

“Possibly, I mean if they did go after Clint then it’s reasonable to assume that they watched the security tapes or something from there and know who we are.” Trick answers me thoughtfully.

“I feel like I say this a lot, but we just need to make sure that we view everyone as suspicious until proven otherwise, we can’t take any chances, especially since we don’t know what the hell is going on with Liam.” Rage sums the fucked-up situation pretty perfectly.

“Just another day at the office.” I grin.

“You’re weird.” He replies affectionately and I stick my tongue out at him in retribution.

“Alaric messaged me late last night. He wanted me to let you know that Rylie has been discharged from the hospital and that she’s made it home safely. They’ve put extra precautions around her and the guys parents. He knows that Liam’s said he has no intention of harming you but clearly he’s happy to use people you love against you, in order to get you to do whatever the fuck it is he wants you to do.” Atlas sighs his eyes troubled. “He said that you guys should be able to call all of your parents on parents’ day, when we get back.”

“Is Alaric coming?” I ask, “I know he’s your uncle, but you guys seem close.”

“No, he’s not, he can’t really. We’ve kept our connection secret while I’ve been here. There’s people here that would try and exploit the connection and that’s a complication that we don’t need to take care of right now, or ever.”

“Is Liam coming?” Jensen asks, his eyes darting towards me.

“No.” Atty replies shortly.

“Well, okay then.” I grin. “I can’t wait to talk to Kat and Jenny. I wonder how Kat’s getting on with Rich and Marc?” I grin.

“What?” Atlas asks confused his eyes wide.

Boy loves gossip, they all do. It makes me giggle.

“Turns out Rich and Marc were in a similar relationship with Kat when they were younger that we’re in now. Obviously, stuff got in the way and they split but Ever played match maker and got them all together again.” Cash explains.

“That makes sense actually, I remember whenever there was a big family thing they would share looks and Rich would find little excuses to touch her. Thought I’d guessed wrong because Marc saw a couple of times and didn’t bat an eyelid.” Atlas says surprising us all.

“Dude!” Jensen exclaims, “You could’ve fucking told us.”

“What would be the point I might have been wrong.” He shrugs and I grin.

“You know Jenny’s going to chew your ear off.” Riot points out to Trick.

“Oh, hell yeah, I’m expecting it.” He chuckles.

“Is anyone coming for you, Rage?” I ask.

I meant what I said before, I’ll fucking take the bitches out.

“No, Mom had a last-minute trip and took my aunts with her.” He says his eyes filled with relief.

“You’re welcome, dude.” Jensen grins.

“What?”

“We take care of our own, if that means making sure someone is never in the same proximity as one of us again, then we use whatever means necessary.” Trick explains for Jensen.

“Fucking hell. Thank you.” Rage says, emotion catching in his throat.

“We’re family.” Rafe shrugs as if it’s not a big deal what they’ve done.

Just by looking at Rage though you can tell it has had a huge effect on him.

“We don’t know everything, but when you’re ready to tell us we can work on a way to get her and your aunts out of your

life permanently. We can even try to get them prosecuted for the way that they treated you if you would like.” Cash tells him.

“You don’t have to answer but what about your dad?” Luc asks.

“He was never around, always travelling I think he used to come back when I was really little, but I can’t remember the last time I actually saw him. Birthday and Christmas cards is the most contact I’ve had for years. I think they split but not officially if that makes sense.”

“So, he doesn’t know how she treated you?”

“No, but I’m not sure he’d care, he’s never been around.” Rage shrugs, he clearly made peace with it a long time ago.

“Still it’s something we can look at when you’re ready.” Trick says, and Rage nods.

“Peter’s just text, he’s here. Are you okay with him coming up here?” Cash asks.

“Yeah that’s fine.”

Cash gets up and makes his way downstairs to let Peter in and my brow furrows as I hear their conversation as they come up the stairs.

“Don’t you think you may have gone a little bit over the top?” I hear Cash ask.

“Of course, fucking not, this is all absolutely necessary to the healing process.” Peter replies indignantly.

My confusion evaporates immediately when Peter walks in the room with bear the same size as he is, a grocery bag and a massive bunch of flowers.

“Don’t worry, giant pizza is on the way.” He adds, completely missing my dropped jaw and absolute shock. “Oh my god sugar, look at you! Are you okay? Of course, you’re not stupid question.”

“Honey, breathe.” I chuckle.

“Shit, thanks.” He replies taking a gasping breath. “Have you caught the fuckers yet, did you bury them? Please tell me you didn’t have all the fun without me!”

“We don’t know who did it and fun?” Atty says rising a surprised eyebrow.

“Yeah I want in on the ass kicking.” He drops the stuff to the floor and puts his hand on his hip. “Oh, hell no don’t be looking at me like that, just because I’m a computer geek and dressed immaculately.” He wriggles his eyebrows, “Does not mean I can’t kick ass. Come at me.”

It takes a moment to realise he’s serious and Jensen shrugs. Always up for the challenge and we’ve been curious about his fight skills anyway so it’s a win win. Jensen holds back massively but as he starts throwing punches and Peter constantly dodges and blocks, even trying a couple of hits, he doesn’t land any but he is fighting against Jensen.

“Well, that was fun.” Jensen grins stopping and not even out of breath.

“Dude, seriously please teach me. We’ve been learning the same shit here forever, which is surprising since they put such an emphasis on it.”

“Sure.” Jensen shrugs.

“Awesome. Have you checked the security cameras?”

“The what?” Atlas asks, suddenly serious.

“There’s security camera’s lining all of the streets. They’re hidden and the academy don’t like you to know they’re there, but I assure you they are.” He says, plopping down by the bed.

“Can you access them?” Cash asks, sitting forward.

“Yeah, of course, anyone got a laptop?”

“Mines on the desk.” I reply pointing across the room.

He hops up and grabs the laptop before sitting back down next to me.

“Password?” He asks.

“Why do I get the feeling you could get into it without it?” I ask.

His fingers fly across the keys and within seconds he’s in, a proud grin tugging up his lips.

“So, freaking impressive.” I reply.

“Why thank you, Sugar.” He grins, his eyes on the screen as his fingers move over the keys. “Okay so it was the night before last yeah?”

“Yeah, just down the road from ours, she was nearly home.” Trick says, swallowing thickly.

It’s really affected them, just like it would affect me if it was the other way around. I hold my hand out to him and he moves sitting on the edge of the bed by my legs and threading our fingers together.

“Right, here you go. I’ve put it a few frames back so when Ever starts to come into the road and then you’ve got the angle looking up the road in the other direction. So, facing the car that Rage saw.”

“That’s amazing.” Cash says, impressed.

Peter brings the laptop closer to me and all the guys gather around to watch the videos. He plays it through at real speed and watching it now I can barely believe that all I got were the few injuries that I currently have. I must admit though I look pretty badass coming around that corner with my knee nearly touching the floor.

“Can we just appreciate how cool I looked coming around that corner.” I grin my eyes still on the screen when silence greets me, I look up.

All of the guys are staring at me, faces pale and eyes darkened with fear. Atty clenches his jaw.

“I’m going to fucking gut them.” He growls, his voice dark with the promise of unrestrained violence.

Chapter Thirty-Three

“I’m in.” Jensen agrees.

“We’re all in. Fucking hell.” Trick growls, his hand a death grip on mine.

“That was fucking hard to watch.” Rage growls his eyes tracing my features and drinking them in like he can’t believe that I’m still here.

“The way they came for you, they definitely were intending to cause serious harm at the very least.” Peter comments looking disturbed. “Sorry guys, I should’ve warned you it might be hard to watch, I had no idea that it was that bad.”

“Can you slow it down, frame by frame. It’ll be easier to watch, and we’ll be able to see it in more detail.” Luc suggests.

“Yeah sure, I won’t be able to do anything like zoom in. I don’t have the software for that.”

“That’s fine. Hopefully, we will be able to see something if not, I can send it to a guy I know, he’ll have the software to sort it.” Atty replies.

Peter slows it down for us and we watch it through a couple of times in slow motion, Peter bless him, stops it each time before they witness me getting thrown over the hedge, there’s not really anything more we can see after that bit anyway.

“Why do I recognise the red car?” I mutter.

“Take it back a second?” Trick asks, moving closer to the screen. “Isn’t that the same car that was following us when we went to see Clint?”

“I mean it could be, it’s the same colour, make, and model. But there’s no plates or anything and we can’t see the faces of either driver.” Cash replies.

“So, we’ve hit another fucking dead end.” I grumble, as the doorbell, rings.

“Looks like the pizza’s here, just in time.” Peter chuckles as he gets up and goes to get it, Atlas trailing behind him.

“Let’s leave this for now, today’s supposed to be a day to chill out.” Trick suggests.

“Okay, fine. I’m just fed up with hitting dead ends.”

“I know, Sweetheart, but we’ll get it sorted.”

I’m distracted from my reply when Peter and Atlas walk in carrying the most enormous pizza boxes I have ever fucking seen. Each box is a metre squared, and I’m not exaggerating.

“Dude, I didn’t realise when you said you had giant pizzas on the way that you were speaking literally.” I grin, making grabby hands at them. “You’re the best!”

“I know.” He smirks fluttering his eyes at me.

We spread out on the bed, the couch which I’m realising I’m damn grateful to have in here despite never having used it before now and the floor. I’m happy to report that the pizza tastes delicious and it’s not style over substance.

Halfway through eating the pizza, Atlas gets a call and we all unashamedly quieten down so we can listen, he rolls his eyes with a smirk but doesn’t leave.

“Hey, everything alright?” He asks.

The longer that they talk on the phone the deeper his frown gets; I’d be willing to bet that its Alaric on the other end of the phone. Eventually he hangs up and we all look at him expectantly.

“Do you remember the journalist, Rebecca?”

“Yeah, did he find her?” Cash asks.

“What journalist?” Peter adds, sounding confused.

“We found a news article from when the kids went missing, there was nothing in national news only this one in the local paper. It was obvious that some stuff had been deliberately left

out, so I asked Atlas to get his guy to look into it.” Cash explains.

“Right, got it.” Peter nods.

“My guy couldn’t find her anywhere, like you know. He kept trying though and he managed to find a relative of hers that is in law enforcement, Luke. Apparently, it took a lot of convincing to get the guy to even talk to him and when Luke finally agreed he insisted it was in person. When they met, he was armed to the teeth and had back up, sat around the little diner they met in.”

“Clearly he knows how dangerous Phoenix is.” Trick mutters.

Atlas nods before continuing, “He definitely knows. My contact had to tell him what we had found and what we were trying to do before Luke would tell him anything. He then opened up and told him that his niece had come to him, beaten, black eye, split lip, cradling her ribs and covered in bruises. She only had to say one word, Phoenix. Luke knew that he couldn’t go through the police because Phoenix had reach everywhere, but since he was in law enforcement he had connections, he arranged it so that she had a new identity and set it up so she had a safe place to go. He told her to move regularly at least three times and not to tell him where she was or have any contact with him. He hasn’t seen or heard from her in all these years.”

“Fucking hell.” Jensen, comments. “Phoenix definitely had involvement in the article then.”

“Definitely, it’s a shame that she didn’t tell Luke what her attackers looked like.” I mutter. “We need the masked guy to make an appearance again and give us another hint at what direction we’re supposed to go in.”

“We can go over more of the blueprints and see what we can find there’ll be a connection there I know it.” Peter adds in, “The fact that so far none of them are still in business is too much of a coincidence.”

“Tomorrow, we can work on that tomorrow. Today we are resting.” Trick says firmly, looking over at me and raising his eyebrow, daring me to argue.

I seriously consider it, just for fun because I like pushing his buttons but instead, I blow him a kiss, making him grin.

Rafe

Over the last few days our priority has been, Ever. Getting her better and keeping her entertained so she doesn't do too much. She's healed really well, and although she's not back to one hundred percent she is up and about a lot more than she was, which means movies and board games aren't cutting it anymore.

“It might be a good idea to bring the targets up.” I mutter, to Atlas motioning over to Ever.

We both grin as she spins one of her knives through her fingers as she sits on the couch. In fairness we may have been a little overbearing these last few days, Jensen still waits outside of the bathroom for her, despite the fact that she hasn't needed help since the first couple of days and she's back down to taking normal painkillers instead of the hospital ones.

“I'll go get it.” He grins.

We've all been bringing work home for her and now that she's had some help from Peter to explain things, she's blasting through it quickly. It's looking like she's going to be well caught up by the time she goes back. Atlas brings the target into the sitting room and her face lights up as she sits up straighter.

“I trust that you can hit the target without breaking anything else in this room or do we need to set it up in one of the other rooms?” He asks.

“I want a go.” Jensen says excitedly.

“Me, too. I’m a bit rusty, it might be good to practice.” Riot adds.

“I’m not too bad with knives.” Peter grins, he’s pretty much been here every day after school this week and I know that Ever appreciates the company and help.

“In that case, it might be a better idea to do it in a different room.” Rage mutters.

Atlas picks the target up and we all follow him down the hallway of doors to an empty room, just a couple of doors down from Rage’s room. He sets it up at the far end and Ever’s grin is huge as, as soon as he’s out of the way she launches her knife hitting the bullseye first try.

“Don’t overdo it, il mio Cuore.” Cash says gently and she rolls her eyes and sticks her tongue out at him.

Making me chuckle quietly.

She’s a force to be reckoned with, which she proves repeatedly as she starts doing trick shots hitting the target every time. The more she throws the less tension is radiating from her and I’m glad that she’s finally getting better. I am so fucking fed up of seeing her hurt. We very easily could’ve lost her; we knew that when we found her but watching that video of it was fucking hard.

I know that I won’t ever be able to unsee that and I’ve been waking up in a cold sweat, when my nightmares decide to show me what could’ve happened. Riot or Ever are usually there and it helps. I lost her once, I absolutely can’t lose her again. None of us could deal with that, not even Rage. We can all see how much he cares for Ever, but we’re leaving it and letting them figure it out on their own. Any interference from us is just going to backfire, each of them have their own issues they need to deal with.

Peter, Luc, and Cash have nearly finished going through the blueprints and we’re hoping that once they’re done there’s going to be some sort of fucking link between them all, that could point us in the right direction. Liam hasn’t got in contact again, but I highly doubt that he’s just let Ever go, I wish we

knew what he wanted her for. Why he's looked out for her over the years. It's yet another frustration, to add to the growing list.

After a while of playing with the knives, I leave the room to get dinner started. When the guys first found out that I could cook I used the excuse that I didn't want to do it every day. Turns out that I am absolutely loving it, to the point that several of them have offered to cook and I even offered to help teach them. But I've started to turn them down finding it difficult to let anyone else in what I've been thinking of as my kitchen.

Of course, that doesn't apply to Ever, she can use my kitchen whenever she wants and one of my most favourite things to do is to cook with her. It's very quickly become my happy place but then Ever has always been my happy place.

Something by the front door catches my eye and walk over to it, picking up the envelope off of floor, we don't get mail here. Any mail is delivered to the academy and we have to pick it up from there, not only that, but we don't get mail because no one knows we're here.

The front of the envelope is blank, and I get a sinking feeling in my stomach this can't be good. I carefully slice it open, taking a knife out of my belt to do so, so I don't damage the contents. I pull out a photograph and growl as I stare down at it, Ever lying twisted on the floor, Rage's panicked face as he holds his phone to his ear. Stamped over the whole thing is a Phoenix and when I turn it over, the words on the back read, 'First warning'.

Fuck.

I storm back down the hallway and towards the room where all the guys are.

"What's wrong?" Trick asks as soon as I enter.

"Someone pushed this through the door." I reply, well aware that my voice is now more growl than anything else, I hand it over to him.

They all come and have a look and Ever curses launching her knife without looking at the target on the left in her frustration.

“Why is it always creepy ass fucking photos.” She curses.

“What?” Rage asks, sounding confused.

“My stalker.” She explains simply and Rage looks at Atlas in question raising his eyebrows, and Atlas nods. I guess that’s the confirmation that he took the fucker out then.

“So, it was Phoenix that tried to take her out then and followed us when we went to see Clint. How do they know that we’ve been looking into it unless someone here is still a part of it?” Luc guesses.

“Or multiple someone’s, we never looked into seeing if any of the teachers here taught back then or if any of the students came back as teachers.” I point out.

“So how do we find that out?” Riot asks.

We all know Ever’s not going to let this go, and the fact that they felt the need to threaten her just makes me think that we’re getting close. Besides we’re not the average group of teenagers, if anyone can take them on and succeed it’s us.

“They keep all the records of the past staff in the library, they have everyone there from the very beginning it’s like a tradition or some shit.” Peter speaks up, abandoning his go, Ever monopolised the target for a while letting out some of her frustration so the guys have only just started to have their go’s. I was curious to see whether Peter is any good, we all are curious about whether he can handle himself, we know from the bedroom when he had the mini fight with Jensen that he’s okay with fighting and is willing to learn which is a bonus so it won’t take him that long to get on the same level as the rest of us. It’s not all about fight skills though, there’s also weapons.

We want him with us, but we don’t want to risk his life, his computer skills are above anything any of us could achieve even Luc and Cash. He would be a real asset and has already proven himself to be loyal and trustworthy. However, what we do now is dangerous as hell and none of us want to risk his

life. Before we let him in completely, we need to know that he can handle himself and anything else that our lifestyle might throw at him, there'll be more time to figure it out though.

“Let’s go.” Ever grins, “And I swear if one of you mentions me not being up for it, I’m going to find very creative ways to make your lives hell. I’m fine, healing nicely and I’ll even rest when we get back.”

“I don’t think anyone here is brave enough to argue with you after that threat, Sugar.” Peter chuckles, holding his arm out for her, she grins and takes it while we watch them walk out the door and presumably towards the cars.

“I think it’s safe to say she’s done with taking it easy.” Cash chuckles and we all follow them out.

The drive to the school is quick and I start to wonder if it’s even open since school let out an hour ago and it’s a Friday.

“The library is open later for anyone wishing to study, it’s open weekends too.” Peter says to Ever whose just asked the question that I was thinking.

“Awesome. That’s good to know, it might be nice to change it up and study here instead of in the house all the time.” She replies.

“I’ve got to say, considering you’ve just been threatened your surprisingly upbeat.” Peter points out curiously, leading us into the academy and down the wide hallway to where the Library is.

“The reason is twofold, one it’s not a new thing, it happens more regularly than you think and two, I know that we can handle whatever they try to throw at us and if it looks like we can’t, we’ll pull back. I am really bad at being told what to do though so it’s just made me more determined than ever to figure it out.” She replies.

“Fair enough. The workers here are volunteers and tend not to mind you talking quietly so long as there’s not a lot of people studying and since it’s a Friday night, I highly doubt there will be a lot of people in here so we can talk.” Peter explains.

Not much has phased him so far, which is a massive tick in his favour.

He leads us through the stacks of books and right to the back of the library. Apart from the odd student the place is practically abandoned. His fingers brush over the spines of several leather-bound books before he pulls one out and puts it on a nearby table, opening it up and then moving so that the rest of us can see.

“Okay, so this is the year that it happened and the teachers that were on the faculty at the time. I think it’s safe to assume that at least one of them was a part of Phoenix.”

“Do you guys recognise anyone?” I ask Peter, Rage, and Atlas.

There’s no point the rest of us trying to see if we do, we haven’t been here long enough to really know any of them.

“Not one of the main teachers.” Rage frowns, “Do they have a list of the teaching assistants?”

“Hang on, here.” Peter grins flicking through.

“That’s Mr. Remy, he teaches equine studies. He looks really young here though, he can’t have been much older than students.” Atlas says.

“Is he still here?” Ever asks.

“Yeah.” Peter replies.

“Let’s go talk to him then, he could be the guy in the mask?” She replies clearly excited to have a lead finally.

“We can’t. There’s a chance that he is the one threatening us not the one that’s helping us. We need to go in with a plan.” Trick points out and Ever deflates.

I pull her into my side gently and kiss the top of her head.

“It’s still more than we knew an hour ago and it’s still a lead. We just need to be a bit more careful about how we approach him.” I point out.

“Besides, he’s not back in school until Monday. He told us all today he’s going away for the weekend since its parents’

day tomorrow.” Peter explains.

“There’s our in. Peter’s in his class we can use that to see how he reacts. It might be a good idea to put someone else in with him, I don’t like the idea of any of us doing anything to do with Phoenix by ourselves.” Trick muses.

“That’s easy enough, it’s an elective, you missed choosing because you guys arrived late, but I know there’s space.” Peter replies, as we all make our way back out of the library and head home.

“So, who can ride?” I ask.

“I can but I haven’t for years, mom used to take me.” Ever says, sadness clouding her eyes for a second.

“I can ride.” Rage adds. “It was a requirement in my household.”

“Any triggers?” Atlas asks seriously as we walk through the front door.

“No, I loved it.” Rage grins, slightly surprising me.

“Good, Ever, I’m not that comfortable with you going in if he is the one that targeted you and caused your accident.” Cash mutters.

“I know but I’m capable of looking after myself, I’ll have Rage and Peter with me and not only that, but I’ll make sure that I don’t put myself in any situation where I’m alone with him.”

“She makes a good point and as far as her healing, it’ll take a week or so to get it all arranged. So, she should be at the very end of healing, she’ll just need to make sure that she doesn’t fall.” Peter says.

“I can work with her before that to get her used to being on horseback again.” Rage offers.

“Awesome, it’s settled then.” Ever grins clapping her hands.

“Any sign of trouble and you’re out, okay?” Trick points out.

“Fine, I promise.” She easily agrees.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ever

I'm feeling a hell of a lot better than I did, in fact, other than the odd twinge, I'm feeling pretty damn good. I stand in front of my closet wondering what the hell I'm supposed to wear to this parents' thing, I have a feeling that jeans and a t-shirt isn't going to cut it. I'm at a complete loss, so I pull out my phone and dial the only person I know that can help me out in this situation.

"You don't know what to wear do you?" Peter says with amusement in his voice as soon as he picks up.

"Is it that obvious I don't know what I'm doing when it comes to fashion and fancy shit?" I chuckle.

"Oh, yeah, but it's alright sugar, I've got you." He reassures me sassily. "You're going to need to dress to impress. I know you like to rebel but think of this like you're undercover, the objective is to blend in. There are going to be a lot of powerful people in this room and they're going to be interested in you because you're the first girl they've let in here."

"Fantastic, just what I like, being stared at like a science experiment."

"Have you got any dresses?" He asks ignoring my previous comment.

"Yes, I've got a navy dress with spaghetti straps that hits just above my knees with a slight split in it." I reply, pulling it out, it was an impulse buy that I had no idea when I'd ever wear it.

"Perfect, I don't suppose you've got a navy cardigan?"

"Erm, I've got a like nude pink one?" I reply, uncertainly.

"That will work if you have nude shoes?"

"I don't."

“Alright, I’ll see what I can do. What size are you?”

“Six.”

“If some random turns up at the gate don’t let the guys shoot him, I’ll make sure he wears a white hat, so you know it’s him.” He chuckles before hanging up.

What is my life?

I get dressed in the rest of the outfit putting my make up on. The buzzer for the gate goes just as I’m putting the finishing touches on my hair, deciding to wear it half up. I hop up, ignoring the twinge in my side and rush downstairs. Rage is already on his way to the door and I hold in a gasp seeing him dressed in a suit that looks like its straight out of the nineteen twenties, he doesn’t have his jacket on yet so I can clearly see that he’s wearing braces over his black shirt why is that so damn hot?

Not only that, but he’s holding a gun up ready to shoot any fucker that tries to come in here and holy freaking everything, I am turned the fuck on.

Fucking hell, I shake myself before I get stuck practically launching myself down a dirty path and I avert my eyes reaching the door before he does and looking through the camera thing to see it’s a guy looking nervous as hell wearing a white hat and holding up a shoe box, even through the camera screen I can see his hands shaking.

Still avoiding Rage’s gaze, I pull open the door, “Stand down gorgeous, it’s my shoes.”

Fuck, I called him gorgeous out loud. I practically sprint out the door, despite the fact that I’m not wearing fucking shoes.

Damn my fucking mouth, no filter.

“Hey, thanks for dropping them off.” I smile pleasantly at the guy and he gives me a wobbly smile back sliding the shoes through the bars and taking off without a word.

I make my way up the drive slower, it’s fine, maybe he didn’t hear me and anyway, it’s not like it’s a lie, he is fucking gorgeous he must know that. By the time I get to the door I’ve

talked myself down, but I still avoid his eyes when I realise, he's still stood there. I quickly unpack a gorgeous pair of nude high heels that match my cardigan perfectly and lean on the wall pulling them on one at a time before standing up and straightening my outfit. The whole time I can feel his gaze on me, and I avoid it like the coward I am.

Scuffed brown boots appear in my eyeline as I stare down at my dress, and Rage's hand reaches forward his fingers tilting my face up as he caresses my jaw.

His eyes blaze with emotion as they sear into mine when our eyes finally collide. "You look absolutely beautiful, Puddin'."

His eyes search mine as my heartbeat thrums, he slowly leans forward and places a lingering kiss right at the edge of my lips, so freaking close. His hand drops from my face slowly as he gages my reaction and I smile softly, my eyes not leaving his.

"Thank you, you look gorgeous." I smirk, owning my previous comment.

He smiles, his eyes lighting up and changing his features completely. My eyes drift up to his hair, instead of his auburn curls being in complete disarray like usual, which I love, he's done something to them so that they're tamed into perfect short ringlets in a mohawk down the middle of his head.

"Did you get your hair cut?" I ask.

"Yep, I don't do it often but felt like I needed a change, what do you think?"

"I fucking love it." I reply, trying my hardest not to reach my hands out and play with curls.

I don't think he would appreciate that.

His grin widens even further as he watches me thread my fingers together, "How badly do you want to play with it right now?"

"How could you possibly know that's what I want to do?" I ask incredulously.

His grin turns into a knowing smirk and he shrugs putting his hands into his pockets and raising his eyebrow.

“Okay fine, really fucking badly. Ever since I first saw you, you know before I threw the knife at your junk.” I grin cheekily.

“Go on then.” He grins, stepping closer and tilting his head down so I can reach, his eyes dare me to do it.

I never back down from a challenge and I really want to play with his hair. I cautiously run my fingers through his hair, pulling gently on a couple of curls and grinning when they spring back, I could literally play with his hair for hours. When I finally stop playing and step back, his eyes are soft as he looks at me and my heart lurches in my chest. How he can be so ruthless and then look at me like that, the boy is worming his way into my heart alongside all the others already occupying it.

I can't help it; I open my arms and offer him a hug. Fully prepared for him to reject me and staying exactly where I am, I don't want to trigger him. He grins and scoops me up with no hesitation, gently holding me one arm under my butt as my arms go around his neck so he doesn't put any strain on my ribs. I squeeze him to me and gently play with the curls on the back of his head making him shudder.

“Thank you for letting me play with your hair.” I say quietly.

“Anytime, Puddin’.” He mutters in reply.

“Dude, you let her play with your hair?” Atlas asks, sounding shocked and amused all at the same time.

I think that Rage is going to drop me like a hot potato now that one of the guys is here, but he just turns his head and shrugs at Atlas, still holding onto me.

“It's Ever.” He answers him like it explains everything.

Atlas just nods like it's a perfect explanation as Rage puts me down. The other guys were out of my eye line and they're all nodding in agreement. My eyes greedily take in my men, ah hell, they all look absolutely hot as fuck and I desperately

stop myself from suggesting we blow off parents' day and spend the afternoon naked.

We definitely need to get dressed up more often, I could get used to this.

"Let's go." Atlas orders.

As I turn towards the door, a sharp slap hits my ass and I grin.

"That was a good one." I chuckle.

Jensen spins me into his arms and kisses me hard. "You look positively edible, Angel."

"I second that." Luc agrees gently pulling me out of Jensen's arms and pinning me against the wall, his lips devouring mine.

I grin as he pulls back, so freaking glad they aren't treating me like I'm made of glass still. "We're going to be late." I point out.

"Fine." Luc sighs dramatically and Jensen pretends to console him as we walk out of the door.

Once we're in the cars, deciding to take two again I turn to Atlas. "So, what can we expect from this thing. I can't believe I didn't think to ask before."

"There'll be mingling and then an assembly where there'll be a couple of speeches from some of the teachers and some of the parents that donate the most money to the school. Then there's a sit-down meal and more mingling and then we can finally go." Rage explains.

"I am so going to regret wearing heels." I mutter.

"It sounds boring as all hell." Cash comments.

"It is." Atlas replies. "No one goes anywhere alone, there will be a lot of unknowns there today."

"Got it." I reply.

We end up having to park in an over flow car park, there's so many cars already here, with more pulling through the gate

and being driven straight up to the doors, drivers stepping out to let the high powered people inside out. My mouth gapes as I spot some famous faces in the crowd, I know these kids are the children of famous parents but actually seeing them is on a whole other level. There are actresses, people in politics, a famous clothing designer and a couple of Rockstar's and a country singer. And that's just the people I've seen going in.

"Just remember that although they're famous, they're just normal people apart from the majority of them are bitchier and more entitled." Rage warns, his eyes flashing with resignation.

The guys watch him with sympathy, I had no idea that they'd managed to stop his mom from coming here, I think it was while I was recovering the day after, so I'm slightly confused about his reaction.

"Mom's an actress." Rage tells me as he helps me out of the car, and I try my hardest not to flash anyone my underwear.

I am not made to wear dresses, I'm not ladylike enough.

"Anyone I've heard of?" I ask curiously.

"Miranda Reedvale."

"No fucking way, she's pretty fucking famous." I gasp.

He nods, his face harsh.

"Jensen!" I call out. "Ceremonial burning of all films we own with Miranda Reedvale in later."

"Yes! Now that's something I can look forward to." He grins, threading his fingers through mine.

"What?" Rage asks confused as we walk towards the hall, for the mingling and assembly.

I'm not being funny but what the fuck is mingling?

"You didn't think I was going to still watch her stuff knowing how badly she treats you; you've got to be fucking kidding me. I know it won't affect her if I burn her films, but it will make me feel better." I grin.

"Thank you." Rage replies still sounding a bit confused.

“Don’t worry man, you’ll get used to it.” Trick chuckles.

When we arrive in the great hall, a room that I haven’t been in yet, I’m floored by the sheer size of it. I thought the cafeteria was big, but this room is staggering in its size. Towards the front of the room are neat rows of chairs all set up facing the stage area, that also has chairs on it ready for the speakers. The rest of the room is full of people doing things that I assume are classed as mingling. Waiters are moving elegantly through the throngs of people handing out drinks. We make our way to the edge of the room standing with our backs to the wall. I make a quick note of all the possible exits, the amount of people in this room is making me nervous.

It takes only a few minutes until eyes start to turn our way, a couple of them friendly, usually from the women in attendance, the rest are a mix between calculating and then downright hostile.

Pleasant.

I watch one of the women say something to her husband, who glances our way and although appearing wary his look doesn’t hold the same level of hostility as most of the other people in this room. He nods at whatever she says, and she starts to make her way towards us, smiling kindly.

“That’s Roman’s mom. She owns two companies one that runs several high-end boutiques and one that runs experiences for adrenaline junkies. Sky diving, treks up mountains, those sorts of things.” Atlas mutters quietly to us watching her approach.

I’m impressed by her companies; they couldn’t be more different from each other but whoever said that you had to choose only one thing to be great at?

“What’s Roman like?” Trick asks.

“An adrenaline junkie, keeps to himself mostly.” Rage replies.

Trick nods thoughtfully.

“Hello, I thought I’d come and introduce myself, seeing as no one else here appears to have any manners.” She grins, as

she arrives, her gaze on me. Curious but its kind. “I’m Lucy.” She holds her hand out to me.

I take it and smile. “Ever, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Don’t let these boys run you off, this schools been stagnant for far too long and I have a feeling you’re just the person to shake it up again. You remind me so much of someone I used to know.” She grins and I can’t help but to return.

“I’m certainly doing that.” I chuckle. “Who do I remind you of, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“She was called Amelia.” Lucy smiles, raising her hand as someone else gains her attention, “Excuse me.”

I watch as she walks off greeting another woman.

“That’s a coincidence, right?” I ask.

“It has to be. Although that’s two people now that have said you remind them of someone called Amelia, the chances of it being the same one is slim but it’s still pretty crazy.” Cash says.

“Clint we could’ve written off because he wasn’t in his right mind but Lucy? That’s a little harder to do.” Riot frowns.

“I wish we had a picture of Amelia or even just knew where she went to school.” I mutter, still watching Lucy.

“We could ask Lucy where she went to school, chances are if she knew Amelia, she went to school with her.” Jensen suggests.

“I’ll go, she was only really talking to me anyway.” I smile nervously, people skills are not in my arsenal.

“Not alone, Atlas you go with her.” Trick orders.

“On it, boss.” Atty grins, wrapping a big arm around my shoulders, I don’t know why but him dressed in his navy suit, looking all proper until you see the tattoos on his neck and hands is driving me wild.

Men in suits with tattoos is apparently a weakness of mine. To be fair I think most women would feel the same when faced with Atlas and Rage, hot damn.

Off subject Ever. I try to remind myself and plaster my fake smile back on my face.

“Excuse me, Lucy?” I say politely.

She turns around a pleasant grin arranged on her features. “Yes, Ever. What can I do for you?”

“I was just wondering if you went to school with Amelia, and where you went? It’s just you’re the second person who’s told me I look like an Amelia and I wanted to see if they were the same.” I explain.

“I highly doubt it, but I went Westlake prep, in the next town over.” She smiles.

“Thank you.” I reply.

She nods and walks off to greet someone else, she seems to be constantly on the move, talking to different people. Maybe that’s what mingling means?

“Did she tell you?” Rafe asks as we get back to them.

“Yeah, they went to Westlake Prep, in the next town over. I told her that someone else said I looked like an Amelia and I wanted to see if it was the same person, she seemed to think it was pretty unlikely that it was.”

“I can’t wait to see if we can find a picture of Amelia, it might be a piece of the puzzle we need to help everything else make more sense.” Luc mutters.

“Anyone seen Peter?” I ask, looking around the busy room. “I was hoping to meet his dad, he sounds pretty awesome.”

“He’s there.” Riot points out.

I wave and Peter grins, but just as he turns to his dad, the principle calls the school to order and asks everyone to take their seats. I shrug and Peter mouths later at me as he points us out to his dad. I brace myself for his dad’s reaction when his eyes land on me, but his grin is huge as he waves, and I realise where Peter gets his enthusiasm from. Peter’s dad is in his forties, fit and immaculately dressed in an Armani suit. As we take our seats though his jacket billows open and I see a brightly coloured lining on the inside of his jacket that isn’t

what it was designed like. Peter obviously takes after his dad when it comes to style although his dad is restricted by what is appropriate business attire. I am so glad that Peter's obviously had a very supportive dad whilst growing up, I'm starting to understand that it's pretty damn rare here.

I like this guy.

Chapter Thirty-Five

I stare up at the principal that, despite us having been here for a while now, none of us have met save for Atlas and Rage. He seems fairly normal, salt and pepper hair, dark eyes and dressed immaculately. His eyes drift over the crowd as he talks and smiles at certain people in the audience. All of the teachers are sitting up on the stage behind him and I'm pleased to see that the coach isn't there.

There's also a couple of people I don't recognise who I'm assuming are donors that Rage mentioned earlier. I try to pay attention to what the principal is saying, I really do, but it's boring as hell and the number of eyes that I can feel on me is starting to make me feel twitchy. I know the idea of me wearing a dress was to blend in and cut down on the attention I get, but it hasn't worked and at least if I was wearing my own clothes, I'd feel more comfortable and capable.

After about an hour of rich parents applauding and congratulating themselves for the massive donations they're giving the school, the speeches are finally over, and we're all directed to the cafeteria for the meal.

"Why is it compulsory for us to be here?" I grumble. "It's not like any of our parents are coming."

"Thank fuck." Atty mumbles.

I grin.

"Because everyone else's parents are here apart from a couple of kids whose parents are travelling, technically we're representing the school." Rage says snootily as if repeating verbatim from the brochure.

"Fantastic." I sigh.

I don't know why I thought this was going to be fun, it's really not. I just want to go home, enjoy some time with my guys. Maybe look into Westlake Prep and see if the Amelia that Lucy mentioned is the same Amelia that Clint mentioned.

Although, we haven't got a picture of the one that Clint mentioned so our only way to know if it's the same one would be if I look like the one Lucy went to school with, since they both said that I looked like her.

I have to admit, I'm pretty damn curious to see if I really do look like this mysterious woman. I also want to get going on the horse riding and see if the instructor has anything to do with Phoenix.

Basically, there are many other places I'd rather be right now than here.

The cafeteria has been transformed into more of a fine dining space than it already was before. I perk up at the thought of food, and Luc seeing my grin, smirks wrapping his arm around my shoulders and dropping a kiss onto my temple. There's a light touch on the bottom of my back and Riot guides me towards a chair as Rage pulls it out and pushes it back in as I sit.

I feel like a mother fucking princess.

"You okay, Princess?" Atlas asks. "We should be able to get out of here soon."

"I'm just looking forward to the food now." I grin.

"It's probably the only good thing about this damn day." Rage says with no small amount of disdain.

"It's making me miss my parents so damn much, can you imagine Jenny and mom here." Cash chuckles.

"It'd be a hell of a lot more entertaining that's for sure." I grin. "Liam better sort his shit out soon. I miss them." I frown.

"I'm surprised we haven't heard anything more from him about your accident. He clearly cared about what happened." Atlas mutters.

Conversation stops as the waiters put the first course down in front of us. I have no idea what it is, but it tastes fucking delicious. As we eat, I look around at the other tables, everyone looks not nearly as impressed as we are but they're still eating it so I guess that's good, I did expect some sort of

drama from the rich assholes. I also notice that we are the only table that has no parents sat at it.

I spot Peter sitting across the hall and he looks bored as fuck, although his father entertains the table expertly, keeping everyone smiling. You can practically see the charisma rolling off him from here and I really want to meet him in person. From the little bit that Peter has told us about his dad, he sounds like an awesome person.

The food is absolutely delicious, I can name maybe one thing on each plate, like I recognised that something was made out of potatoes but other than that, I have no fucking idea what I'm eating. Well, worth not knowing though. I'm grateful that Cash and Trick helped to explain what order I needed to use the cutlery in at Christmas or I would probably be panicking right now.

I catch their eyes, from across the table, smiling when I realise that they're both already looking my way and the grin proudly when I pick up the right fork.

It's the little things.

"I'm going to try and recreate this one." Rafe mutters quietly as he studies his main course, moving the ingredients around the plate and tasting things individually to see if he can pick out what it's made of.

"I volunteer to be tribute taster." I grin happily.

"Deal, you've got a good pallet, I probably need your help picking out some of the ingredients."

"Deal."

It wouldn't surprise me if he recreated this dish and did it better than they have, he has a way of taking a tasty meal and making it truly spectacular.

It's a while after the last course before people start moving about again but as soon as they do, Peter and his dad make their way over to us.

"Hello, I'm Shawn." He greets us as we stand, and he shakes hands with us all. "Peter's told me so much about you

all. I have to say it's nice to see him surrounded by some authentic friends for a change."

"Dad, really?" Peter groans.

"It's nice to meet you sir." I reply, trying not to laugh at the comment.

"You look like you're giving these misogynistic assholes a run for their money." He grins.

"You can bet on it." I smile.

"If you get into any sort of trouble, get Pete to give me a call and I'll see what I can do." He offers, sincerely. "This isn't the safest place for a girl, although from the looks of it, you're pretty well protected." He adds looking around at the guys fanned out around me.

"We're just back up, Sir." Luc grins. "She's more than capable of handling herself."

"Good." He replies, smiling and seeming relieved, he seems too nice for this cutthroat world. His eyes narrow on Luc. "Pete tells me that it's not a good idea to go into business with your father."

"It's not Sir, it would be detrimental to your own business and he is not the kind of business partner you want to have. Nor is his company one that you want to invest in." Luc says seriously his arms crossing over his chest.

"Very well, I trust my son and if he trusts you, then I trust you."

"Thank you, sir." Luc says relieved.

Shawn nods in understanding before his serious façade drops and he grins again. "It's a shame that they don't have dancing here, I've got some killer moves."

"Oh, Peter told us all about them," Jensen grins. "I think I could win in a dance off."

"Challenge accepted." Shawn grins as Peter looks on with a mixture of shock and amusement on his features.

“Pete, make sure they come to the spring ball.” He tells his son who grins.

“You have no idea what you guys just got yourselves into.” Peter chuckles, lightly.

“We’d love to come.” I accept the offer before one of the guys can reject it due to safety reasons.

“Excellent, I must go and schmooze the boring bastards over by the bar for a bit. God, I miss your Pa, he normally takes care of all the schmoozing.” He takes a fortifying breath, like he’s preparing for battle and walks off.

“Dude, your dad is freaking awesome.” Rafe grins.

“I know, Pa normally comes to these things to help reign him in a bit, but he’s gone out of town on business, so dad’s been left to his own devices.” Peter grins.

We chuckle, Shawn is awesome and from the sounds of it, Peter’s other dad is pretty cool too.

“So, what’s the deal with this ball?” I ask excitedly.

“Well, its next month and it’s black tie, so me and you will definitely be going shopping. It’s more fun than serious though, my dad’s just use it as an excuse to get dressed up and show off.” He explains.

“Sounds good. So long as no security risks pop up, we should be able to attend.” Atlas adds, grinning when I kiss him in on the cheek.

“Awesome. It’s held at my house and we have high end security year-round but there’ll also be extra security for the night who will be fully vetted beforehand. I can get their names and pictures before you guys come so you can look into them yourselves or I can help you do it.” Peter says seriously, not asking questions about why there could be a security risk just giving us reassurance and solutions.

“Thanks man, we’ll take you up on that. We can explain what’s going on tomorrow if you want to come over to ours, I think you’ve definitely earned at least a small portion of the

story. It might help you not to be doing stuff blind to our situation.” Trick offers.

“That sounds great, I’m happy to be involved in whatever way you deem it necessary.” Peter replies grinning, his eyes move over my shoulder. “Ah shit, some drama’s about to go down.” He adds nodding in the direction he was looking, and we all turn to watch the show unfold.

“What am I looking at right now?” I ask curiously.

“The woman in red is Regina, she’s a gold-digging whore who broke up the marriage between the man in the black suit, red tie and the woman in pink. This is the first outing since it came out.” Peter says taking a sip of his wine.

“Holy shit, it’s like high school never ends for these people.” I groan as I watch the woman in red go for the other one.

Before they collide and I get some entertainment finally in this boring as shit afternoon, blinds suddenly drop over the windows as the lights go out, the room falls into complete darkness, the guys close ranks around me.

“Don’t move, we could get separated or trampled if people start to panic.” Trick mutters quietly, as everyone in the room starts to shuffle uneasily, unsure if this is a part of the programme or not.

A loud bang echoes through the room making me jump and a few people cry out. It’s not a gunshot I’d recognise that but it’s still concerning. The bang comes again making everyone start to get more agitated. It starts to become faster and faster creating a deep and pound beat as the once dark room starts to flash with strobe lights to the beat.

It’s incredibly disconcerting and my senses are in absolute overload, the only thing keeping me grounded right now is the guys hands on me. In the brief moments of light, I can see the terrified faces of the surrounding diners as they start to make their way towards the door, shouting at each other and trying to communicate over the loud banging.

“We need to back up against the wall.” I yell. “We’re like sitting ducks out here in the open.”

“As one we move backwards, don’t let go of anyone.” Atlas orders a growl in his voice.

“Pete, you with us.” I yell, starting to panic that we’ve lost him in the crowd and confusion.

“I’m here.” He says grimly, thankfully taking a cue from the rest of us and staying calm.

We slowly start to move around the table and back to the wall that’s the other side of it. People start to run into us in their panic and I get jostled, my ribs protesting at the sharp movement. The knock created a gap in the wall of men around me and a hand reaches through, grabbing mine and placing an envelope in it. I follow the arm up to a face covered with the mask of Phoenix and I nearly scream, with the lights flashing over it and the beat of the banging in the background it looks truly terrifying.

I grip the envelope in my hand as Jensen sees him and viciously punches him in the face, the guy’s head snaps back, I don’t know what the hell he’s using to keep the mask in place, but it doesn’t go anywhere, even though a split appears down the middle.

I’m assuming it’s a guy, purely from his build. He’s got no other distinguishing features.

“Leave him, we need to stay together.” Trick orders as Jensen goes to move after him.

“Are you okay, Angel?” Jensen asks as he gently place his hand on my cheek, the only reason I know what he said is that I’m reading his lips.

I nod since there’s no point in answering, he won’t be able to hear me. The flashing lights are starting to make my brain swirl as we finally hit the wall. Everyone’s still panicking and trying to make their way towards the exits. Suddenly the rhythmic banging stops, the lights turn back on and the blinds on the windows rise. The sight before me is pure carnage, all of the immaculately made up people are looking worse for

wear, several have injuries from being knocked over or run into but my eyes only stay on them for a brief moment before they land on the tapestries now hanging from the walls around the cafeteria.

Each one of them decorated with a phoenix.

The people left in the room stare up at them in shock, everyone beginning to look around uneasily.

“Time to go.” Atty growls, his eyes locked on the tapestries.

The envelope is still held tightly in my hand as we use everyone’s momentary distraction to leave the room. I clench it tightly the whole way home almost scared to look at it. It’s a testament to how alert the guys are, keeping an eye on our surroundings, that they don’t notice that I’m holding it. Whoever gave me it obviously used the distraction made by the Phoenix in order to give me it. The fact he was wearing the Phoenix masks would suggest that he is a part of the group but what if that’s just what he wants me to think.

“Did that guy do anything to you when he grabbed you, Angel, you’ve been really quiet.” Jensen asks, concern flashing across his eyes.

I wait until we’re all inside the house before I reply, raising my hand.

“He gave me this.”

“What does it say?” Cash asks, curiously.

“I haven’t looked at it yet.”

“Let’s get it over with?” Trick asks gently.

“I swear if there’s another photo of me in this damn envelope I’m going to go fucking postal.” I grumble. “And my feet hurt from being in these damn shoes.”

I don’t know why I felt that was important to add but it was.

The guys share a grin and I am this close to demanding that they all wear high heels for a few hours and see how their feet feel. I tear open the envelope and pull out a folded note from within it, breathing a sigh of relief that a photograph doesn’t

fall out as well. I am so sick of those, they're ridiculously creepy, especially since I'm usually so aware of my surroundings.

I unfold it carefully, just in case there is anything extra in it and then read, the flowing and script like handwriting out loud.

"Leave the past in the past, or the consequences are going to end up deadly, Butterfly."

That one word freezes my entire mind as memories assault me of much happy times, playing in the garden and being called in for dinner, the whispered words, I love you butterfly floating through my ears, a voice I haven't heard for years. While I've been lost the guys have been talking and I jump slightly as Rafe's face appears in my line of vision.

"What's wrong, Dragonfly?" He asks.

"It says Butterfly."

"It's probably just someone who hasn't done their research properly and thinks that's what we call you." Cash mutters, rolling his eyes.

"I don't think that's it, why write it at all?" I defend.

Rafe studies my features further, his eyes scanning mine. He grabs my hands and I cling onto them tightly ignoring the twinge of pain in my hand.

"What's going on, Ever?"

At his serious tone, the guys that were starting to move away to do their own things turn back to me.

"You don't understand, the last person that called me, Butterfly, was my mom."

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About The Author

Nikita Parmenter

Nikita Parmenter lives in England, with her four children and two puppers. Coffee and cinnamon buns are what keep her going. Her Characters all have a special place in her heart and quite often enjoy throwing her curve balls that send the plot line in a completely different direction than she had originally planned, and she loves it! Not as crazy as it sounds, I promise. She writes, Paranormal Reverse harem, Contemporary Reverse Harem and has a Reverse Harem bully romance in the works too. She loves writing strong take no sh*t female character's that have become that way through fighting tooth and nail to survive and damaged alpha males with hearts of gold buried underneath all their jagged edges. Connect with Nikita via her Facebook page Nikita Parmenter - Author or Instagram nikitaparmenterauthor.

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