

VENGEANCE | ATONEMENT | RETRIBUTION

Vengeance

THE COMPLETE SERIES



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CRYSTAL NORTH

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First Edition.

Cover Art by Dazed Designs.

Editing by Charlotte Black at CB Editing Services.

Formatting by Bookish Author Services.

Life Organisation by Hannah Wenna Ass-Kicker PA at Bookish Author Services. I licked her, she's mine, and I'm not sharing.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book is strictly 18+ and comes with some severe trigger warnings for our characters, both in their present and in their backstories.

Here is the full list of trigger warnings across the trilogy:

- Murder
- Suicide
- Blood Play
- Bullying
- Sexual assault/Rape
- Drugging
- Rough sex/Sexual aggression
- BDSM themes
- Torture
- Bullying
- Birth control tampering
- Child Abuse
- Death
- Physical violence

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*For the bishes who loved my book baby series and needed
more...*

(It's me, I'm bishes...I have trouble letting go)

Xoxo

P.S.

Baxter Branson has been licked by Hannah

P.P.S

Also Rebel...

BOOK ONE
Vengeance

About Vengeance

Blurb

A suspicious death.

A school full of secrets.

And a student hellbent on uncovering the truth, no matter the cost.

What you're about to witness comes from a dark place. It's taken a lot of planning, but you should know that every single thing I'm about to do is deserved. More than deserved, it's owed, tenfold. Nothing I could do to these people will ever be enough to get even.

Charlotte McLintock has a new identity and a new look as Raven Deighton. She needs it so that she can infiltrate the elite private school that's covering up her twin's death. They claimed it was suicide, but she knows better. Her plan's been almost two years in the making.

What started off as a desire to know the truth has turned into a burning compulsion for vengeance. However, she soon finds that life at Westchester Preparatory Academy's not what she expected and that everyone's hiding secrets – even the four hot guys she's rapidly falling for.

Her one mission is to uncover the truth about what happened to Lizzie so that she can make everyone involved pay, and she's not about to let anyone or anything – even her own torturous heart – stop her from burning them all to the ground.

Vengeance is a contemporary New Adult reverse harem bully romance, with dark themes and a twist. It ends on a savage cliffhanger but is book 1 of an already completed trilogy with closure at the end of the series.

[Click Here to see the full list of Triggers.](#)



PROLOGUE

May 26th, 2017

A figure stands on the edge of a cliff and looks out at the ocean before her. It's twilight so she can't see much, but she finds comfort in the sound of the waves crashing relentlessly onto the rocks fifty feet below. It's amusing how the sound carries even over that of the howling wind. It's funny how here, in the end, she's able to find comfort when it's been absent from her life for months.

She's not dressed for the storm that's rolling in; barefoot in an ankle-length cotton nightie, her pale skin looking almost blue. It's uncharacteristically cold for this late May evening, but she puts it down to the storm. She doesn't feel the cold now. It wouldn't matter if she did.

The ferocious wind lashes her waist-length white-blonde hair wildly around her face. The rain's starting to fall now; fat droplets that turn her white gown see-through. She doesn't mind. There's no one here to see anyway. She's all alone. She's been alone for a long time, only this is different now. The wet strands of her hair become whips, lashing her body, but she doesn't feel the pain.

She steps closer to the cliff's edge, so close that her pale pink toenails peeking out from below her gown teeter over the side. That's what they wanted, but she's never had a problem with heights.

She's calm. The calm before the storm.

Suddenly, after months of confusion, there's clarity. Peace. She knows what she must do. She doesn't really want to be here. Not now, not ever. But she has to be. She has to obey them. No one ever tells them no. And as much as she wants to be the first to stand up for herself, she can't. She's never been the strong one. Part of her wishes it didn't have to be like this, while part of her knows it's the only way. They'd never allow anything else. She only hopes that her family can find the strength to overcome what she must put them through. She hopes her sister...

She falters and almost stumbles, loose rocks crumbling away down the cliffside into the ocean below. Thinking of her sister, her twin, her heart, brings pain to her chest like she's never felt before. She wonders if her other half will feel it too. She's the last person in the world she'd want to hurt, but there can be no other way. She wishes she could somehow protect her, but she couldn't even protect herself. Would this work? Could her ultimate sacrifice protect those that she loves?

She hopes so.

It's better to just do it and ask for forgiveness after. Hopefully, her twin will find the key to her journal. To unlocking the truth. Hopefully, she'll be the strong one, and they won't get to her too. If there's anyone strong enough to stand up to them and put a stop to it, it's her better half. She wishes she could've been more like her.

No, she mustn't think like that. There's no backing out now; they'd never allow it. She sends up one final prayer to the universe to protect her heart, and then she prepares to take that final step, arms outstretched into the dark stormy night to welcome oblivion and leave behind all of her pain and suffering.

Before she can take that final step though, a firm hand plants itself between her shoulder blades and shoves.

Hard.

In the blink of an eye, she's gone, flying and falling over the cliff's edge into the dark stormy night and its seas below.

She gives a surprised little grunt but keeps her arms outstretched. In a way, it's better like this. She never wanted to jump, and once again, this school took her choice from her, but it doesn't matter now.

No one sees, but she still has a serene smile on her brave face as she goes.

Hundreds of miles away, her twin awakes from a nightmare, gasping for breath and clutching at the inexplicable pain in her chest. Confused, heartbreaking tears roll silently down her devastated face.

Lizzie's last letter

Dated May 25th, 2017

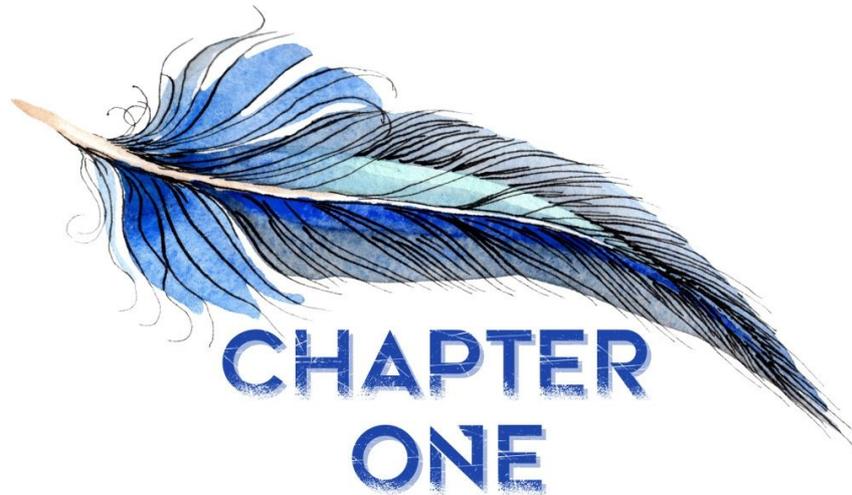
Charlotte, you're going to hear a lot of stuff about me in the coming weeks. I want you to know it's not true. Things aren't as they seem. If I could give you one piece of advice, it would be: don't come here. However, we both know that you won't listen to that.

Instead I'll say: be careful. Listen to your gut. It's never steered you wrong before. Find Michael Bloomberg. He's one of the good guys. The chapel holds the key, my journal contains the answers. I can't say any more to you than that. Just know, whatever happens, that I love you.

I really hope I'm wrong Charlie-Bear, but this might just be our last goodbye.

I love you. Be good.

I'll forever be your Busy Lizzie x



I slam the journal shut in disgust. I have no words.

What the actual fuck!?

After Lizzie's death and the arrival of her final cryptic letter, I'd had to wait several weeks for her journal to surface. I made myself busy during that time, reaching out to this Michael that Lizzie had mentioned in her final letter. We'd been corresponding during the wait, and he'd been filling me in on what life at Westchester Preparatory Academy was like. At one point I was so impatient to get my hands on her journal that I thought I was going to have to go to the school myself to search for it, convinced she'd hidden it somewhere on the grounds. However, eventually, it came on a Friday in July, around eight weeks after her death.

I should've been suspicious when the postman delivered the package late in the evening. Colin, our postie for years, was so reliable you could normally set your watch by him. But apparently, if you pay enough money, someone somewhere will be willing to break the rules. That Friday night, Colin didn't deliver the parcel, and I don't remember who did. Certainly, it wasn't anybody I'd seen before, or since. I wish I'd paid more attention at the time. I know there has to be a reason why Lizzie did this, chose this date in particular, but I haven't figured it out yet. I will, though. By the time I'm done there won't be any secrets between us.

I wasn't surprised when I opened the small brown nondescript parcel, and her journal fell out into my hands. It's not like I was expecting anything else at 8 p.m. on a Friday night. It was the journal I'd gotten her as a going away to school present: a hardback leather-bound piece with Busy Lizzie flowers embossed on the cover. I skimmed through the pages using my thumb and could immediately see that the journal was full. I thought it was strange because Lizzie had died part way through the school year, and normally she'd be meticulous enough to ensure it would last the whole time. When I flip the pages fast enough, I can still pick up the faint scent of her sweet perfume. It makes my heart ache with how much I miss her.

When Lizzie sent me the final letter telling me to find her journal, I knew that it would be encoded. As kids, we'd always been interested in codes and cyphers. We loved being twins with a secret language. We'd both read about cryptography in our spare time, and we'd tried a range of different cypher styles. I quickly figured out that I just had to use her five-or-six-letter keyword. Easy. Except it turns out that she used a different keyword for every entry. With no repeats.

I've been working my ass off to decode it. It was torturous in its simplicity. Of course, her initial clue was in the letter: the chapel holds the key. All of Lizzie's code words were linked to religion. The first codeword was in the message itself: Chapel. After that, each entry indicated with a small number in the top right-hand corner how many letters were in that particular entry's keyword. At first, I was frustrated with her for using so many keys, but as I worked through cracking each entry one at a time, I soon realised why she'd done it like that.

Lizzie was an observer, and she wrote about the things she saw. She saw a lot, and the information she knew would definitely have put her in danger if it got into the wrong hands. But then her entries had taken a turn. She'd started to write directly to me. She knew I'd read this. In the writings to me, she details the bullying in minute detail. She had no idea why she was being targeted, though. Each entry revealed more of the horrors she experienced, and her emotional reactions

speared me. This wasn't your standard high school bullying, it was brutal. The last entry I just read left me reeling.

Speechless.

Sickened.

With that thought, I jump out of bed and race into the adjoining bathroom. I barely make it to the toilet in time before I'm sick. I'm sick until there's nothing left; and even then, I'm dry heaving. My throat's raw, and tears are streaming down my face. I'm not even halfway through her journal yet, and I can't imagine how things could get any worse for her. What those monsters did is beyond brutal. My poor, poor girl. My heart breaks for her, and I vow I'll make them pay.

I finish up in the bathroom, brushing my teeth to freshen up and head back into my bedroom. I place Lizzie's journal to one side and pull out my own. Taking a pen, I begin to write a list. It's a list of Lizzie's bullies.

My hit list.

For vengeance.

Lizzie's first letter

Day 1: Wow, Charlotte, you won't believe this place! I can't believe I'm finally here after waiting for so long. I'm so thankful to Grandma for paying the tuition from my trust fund early so that my dream could become a reality.

It really is a dream come true. The only thing that could top this for me is if you were here too. I still can't believe you turned her down in favour of the local comprehensive. You're mental!

Do you know, I had to pinch myself the first time I looked up and saw the school? It looks like something out of a Victorian novel. It's so gothic, I love it. Don't let that put you off though. There are so many towers and turrets, and the stained-glass windows are simply stunning. I feel like Cinderella getting to come here and live in this magnificent palace, only without having to do all the work first. Too good to be true right!?

I'm sorry I had to miss our birthday for orientation. It felt weird not to spend it together. I hope you liked your gift though. Let's do something special when you come up to visit in the fall. Ugh, half term seems so far away now but it's only – what – 8 weeks away? Manageable, but it feels like a lifetime to be away from you!

Do you remember when I was supposed to go for a sleepover weekend with one of the girls from primary school, and I was so homesick for you that her parents had to bring me back in the middle of the night? I can count on one hand how many nights apart we've spent since then. This is going to be tough, but at least I can write to you.

Can you believe this place doesn't allow internet and phones? It's archaic, but I kind of like it. There will be fewer distractions from my studies, although I do wish I could talk to you more frequently instead of waiting for the snail mail to arrive. Still, I'm trying to stay positive: I get to use this beautiful monogrammed stationery set that Grandma got me as a going-away present. I hope you can find time to write back. Knowing you, I'll get two lines scribbled on a food-stained napkin. You never were the monogrammed stationery type.

Classes start tomorrow and I'm nervous-excited. I'm looking forward to the challenge but scared that I'll be behind everyone else. I don't mind hard work though. I can definitely catch up. I'm here to work really hard and get good grades, but I'd like to make friends too, and I'm most nervous about that.

I wish I was more confident and outgoing like you Charlie-Bear. You'd have this whole school eating out of the palm of your hand within a week – probably a day. I'm going to try really hard to be less quiet and shy, I just hope everyone's nice. Let's face it, I may be starting at the beginning of a new school year, but these kids know each other. They've been schooled together since preschool probably, so I'm definitely going to be an outsider. Scary thought. Maybe I can spin that into a positive, like a breath of fresh air? You would.

The one thing you'd love here is the food, though. I was expecting Oliver Twist style boarding school food – you know gruel and stale bread – but the dinner I had last night surpassed even Massimo's cooking, but don't you dare tell him I said that! It's like a freaking restaurant – with tablecloths, silverware and candles on the tables! I know, it's mental. Can you imagine naked flames in the cafeteria back home? Jason Pearce would have a field day and burn the place to the ground! Anyway, we get to choose our food from a menu, and it's brought to the table by servers. And they clean up afterwards too. I looked a bit silly last night standing with my plate in my hand asking where to take it, but luckily the people at my table were kind about it. I know we had Massimo and a housekeeper back home, but I'm not used to being waited on

like this. I'm not comfortable with it really, so I hope I don't get used to it. Last night I saw a guy snap his fingers at a server – he actually did that – and I was so mad! If you were here, you definitely would've marched over and given him an earful.

I'm going to have to go Char – I don't want to leave you – but I need an early night ready for classes tomorrow. Thank god I don't have to worry about what to wear to fit in – never thought I'd see the day I was glad to wear a uniform! I'll write to you at the end of the week, letting you know how it's all gone, but wish me luck. Oh, and I'll tell you all about the amazing dorm room I have too – let's just say the princess fantasy is very real!

I'm so glad there's no limit on how many stamps we're allowed because you're going to be inundated by me! Sorry, not sorry!

I love you. Be good.

Your Busy Lizzie x



CHAPTER TWO

October 2018

Nothing could've prepared me for the moment when the black town car swung around the final bend of the long sweeping oak-lined driveway that led the way to my new school.

Westchester Preparatory Academy looms in front of me, a mass of towering grey stone turrets and ornate leaded windows. I gaze up at twelfth-century gothic architecture at its finest – I don't need the handbook and prospectus on my lap to know that. The school has stood for nearly a thousand years, although it hasn't been a private finishing school for the country's elite the whole time. It's breathtakingly beautiful in its grandeur, the hundreds of leaded windows sparkling in the late summer sun. I'm not fooled by its beauty, though – to me, there was always a dark, sinister feel to this style of architecture, and I've never loved it the way my twin sister, Lizzie, had.

No, West Prep had been Lizzie's dream, not mine – for so many reasons – and yet here I am, enrolled in the place that she'd loved, but come to despise. I take a deep breath as the car slows to a stop outside the main entrance. Thinking of Lizzie in this place is like a knife twisting in my gut; it's something I have to get used to, but I can use the pain to steel myself. Nine months. Two and a half terms. I can do this. Whatever West Prep wants to throw at me, I'm ready. But I'm going to throw shit back at it, tenfold.

Before exiting the car, I look down and make sure to adjust my uniform. Keeping up appearances here is everything. The outfit is surprisingly okay, as far as dress codes go. My black heeled shoes are so shiny; I can see my reflection in them. I quickly check my stockings for runs – thankfully none – and straighten my school skirt. The skirt is a short black knife pleat with a single purple stripe around the hem, which mirrors the purple of the school logo and the piping on my blazer. The upper school students – those in the last four years at West Prep – are given the choice of blazer colour: white or black. I'd opted for black, where Lizzie had gone white. It was little

details like that which had set us apart. She was always in the light, whereas I prefer the dark. I feel like our blazer choices match our personalities perfectly. Plus, I can't run the risk of anyone noting the similarities between us – hence my now dyed blue-black hair and a new identity. I'd spent the summer tanning my usually pale skin so that it now glowed a golden bronze. Our facial similarities were easily disguised with insanely expensive semi-permanent makeup and clever contouring. Lizzie and I may not have been identical twins biologically, but based on looks, we may as well have been. The only giveaway of the link between us now would be our bright green eyes. They aren't inconspicuous, but no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't get on with coloured contacts. So I'll have to make do and hope that no one gets close enough to notice. To be fair, people rarely look that closely, and no one ever sees anything they aren't looking for. No one will be expecting a dead girl's surprise twin sister to show up at school nearly two years later, so I figure I'll be okay.

I quickly check my appearance in my compact mirror. My makeup hasn't smeared or smudged; there's nothing stuck in my teeth; my thin black crossbow tie is straight against my starched white blouse. I'm ready. Nearly two years in the making to carry out this scheme, I am more than ready.

I slide out of the town car and stare up at the imposing building that towers in front of me. The vehicle had passed under an ancient stone archway and pulled into a paved quad area. Broad steps lead up to two enormous dark wood doors with ornate ironwork hinges and a knocker. Doors which are currently shut. 'What a welcome,' I think to myself before I turn to help the driver get my stuff from the boot of the car. Appearances may be everything here, but I'm not about to let the driver unload my luggage like a servant. Not while I still have working limbs of my own.

Once unloaded, I turn at the sound of the massive doors opening, straightening and smoothing my waist-length hair behind my ears. I catch sight of the new dark shade of my hair out of the corner of my eye and struggle not to blanch. It's really going to take some getting used to after being nearly white-blonde like Lizzie my whole life. I spent most of

yesterday in the salon getting the hair makeover. My hair took so long that they threw in a manicure, pedicure and eyebrow wax, so I was polished to perfection. Lizzie would definitely approve of the more groomed me, although I doubt the so-dark-it-looks-black nail polish I've selected would've been to her pink princess taste. I smile imagining her reaction to this new me.

“Raven Deighton? Welcome.” The headmistress in front of me couldn't look less welcoming if she tried. She said my name like it left a bad taste in her mouth. Dressed head to toe in stern starched black clothing with her grey hair scraped back into a face-lift bun, she looked like an archetypal Victorian schoolmarm, and a villainous one at that. Lizzie had said as much herself, and she rarely said a bad word about anyone. Lizzie was sweet like that. I'm more...honest? Lizzie always said I was straight-talking, but I mostly get called a bitch by everyone else. Whatever. Sticks and stones and all that.

“Headmistress Archer, thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for accepting me under these unusual circumstances.” I plaster a fake smile on my face and climb the steps to shake her hand. I could schmooze like the rest of them. I'm not a stranger to the lifestyle of the West Prep students – my grandma's family name afforded me legacy status, and I knew the power that would bring – I'd just been trying to avoid using it my whole life. Now I was going to have to play the game. And I was going to have to win.

The school didn't usually allow students to transfer in for their final year, let alone once the term had already begun. It's mid-October and half-term is only a week away. I'm about seven weeks behind with my studies. But my grandmother made a sickeningly large donation to the school, which allowed me particular, special treatment, it would seem. It's a struggle not to gag at the hypocrisy, but I can't complain: said hypocrisy is allowing me to be here to carry out my plan.

Headmistress Archer makes a dismissive gesture with her hand and motions for me to follow her inside.

“Leave your things, they will be delivered to your room.”

I follow her without a word. There's no way I can lug all that stuff with me anyway. I may not have brought many personal items from home, but my new look isn't exactly low maintenance, so I haven't packed light. Who knew pretty, rich preppy girls needed so much crap when they lived in a uniform five days a week? For me, keeping up the strict beauty regime was going to be my toughest challenge. Finding the school bullies and ruining them, in comparison? Piece of cake!

I follow the headmistress into the school atrium and am pleasantly surprised by how light and airy it is. With all the grey stone I'd expected it to be dark, damp and dingy, but it isn't. Light wood floors and an abundance of natural light flood the wide-open space. It looks both cosy and welcoming. In front of me, a vast stately staircase sweeps upwards, splitting in two opposite directions halfway up. On the ground floor, adjacent corridors run behind the stairs, and large double doors are immediately to either side of me. To my left, the doors are open to reveal the cafeteria – although it looks more like a fine dining restaurant – currently empty, but already set up for this evening. I guess all the students are still in class. The headmistress turns right and heads to the other set of double doors, unlocking them with a single gold key on a pale blue velvet ribbon. She replaces the key back into her pocket and opens the door, slipping inside. I follow closely behind her.

She takes a seat behind the large wooden desk which dominates the room and motions for me to do the same. The leather bucket chair is less comfy than it looks, so I perch on the edge of the seat and wait.

“Welcome...Miss Deighton. Here is your room key.” She slides a golden key similar to her own, but with a deep green velvet ribbon, across the desk towards me. “You have your handbook and prospectus already. In your room, you will find a more detailed file of the rules and expectations while you are here. You need your house tie pin. You are in Rowan House. Here you are.” She hands me a deep green gemstone pin that's about the size of my thumbnail. Its many polished facets

sparkle in the light as I turn it over to remove the gold push backing so I can attach it to the centre cross of my necktie.

While I'm doing that, she continues, "I have switched out your swimming elective for Krav Maga at your grandmother's insistence. She has arranged for a world-class instructor to join you during your timetabled sessions, although he cannot begin until after half term. This means you will have to train by yourself in the martial arts hub for this week. Your class schedule is here," she pauses to slide that across the desk to me too, "and I have arranged for one of our prefects to show you around. He should be here shortly. Do you have any questions?"

I shake my head, leaning forward to take the key and schedule from her as a knock sounds at the door.

"Very well," she sighs. "Enter." The door opens, and a friendly smile enters the room. Seriously, I don't notice anything else. His smile's so big and so full, teeth absolutely perfect and gleaming. "Ah Michael, you are right on time. Thank you for volunteering to look after Miss Deighton. I trust you will take good care of her?"

"Absolutely, Headmistress Archer!" Somehow the boy beams even brighter at the headmistress before holding out his hand to me. "Hi, I'm Michael. Pleasure to meet you." He oozes confidence.

Now that I can drag myself away from his smile – seriously it's infectious, my lips are turning up, and even the headmistress looks less dour in his presence – I'm able to notice more about him. He looks like a model straight from the pages of a Ralph Lauren advert. He's tall and lean, but with broad shoulders and muscular arms. His skin's sun-kissed – judging by his West Prep rowing sweatshirt, I guessed from hours spent out training in the sun – and his short, dirty blond hair is slightly spiked upward in a deliberate, oh-so-carelessly tousled kind of style. He's gorgeous in a rich-preppy-athletic sort of way. Totally Lizzie's type. Bright blue eyes sparkle as I meet his gaze Damn, I've probably been staring too long. Say something, Rae.

“Hey, I’m Raven. Thanks for offering to show me around.” I take his hand, and he shakes it gently, but his grip is firm. I find it a bit weird, to be honest, that one of my peers is shaking my hand. Maybe he’s just trying to impress the headmistress.

“No problem.” He smiles at me again and pulls me to my feet, tucking my arm into the crook of his elbow. Whoa, gentlemanly. But still weird. “Shall we go?” I nod, mute, and allow him to guide me out of the office. “We’ll stop by your room first and go from there.”

We exit the office and take the stairs, choosing the right set when they split off. Michael leads me along the first-floor landing, my heels sinking into the luxuriously plush carpet, explaining that final year students are given the luxury of the top floor. At the end of the corridor, he calls for the antique lift, and we step in – me somewhat apprehensively – rising to the top level. The silence between us is comfortable, but I’m eager to talk to him.

“Michael, I—” He squeezes my forearm, cutting me off.

“Wait until we’re in your room.”

I nod. He’s right. I have no idea who’s around or listening, and I can’t be too careful. No one can know that Michael and I are already sort-of acquainted.

The elevator doors ping open, and I can breathe again. I hastily exit the lift then foolishly have to wait for Michael to lead the way. I notice as I follow him that there are fewer doors up here and that they’re more spaced apart than seems reasonable. About halfway along, Michael comes to a stop in front of room 11, and I smile at the *Angel* reference. I slip the key into the lock, and we step inside. The dorm room is breathtaking. Even more beautiful than the place Lizzie had described in her letters all those years ago. I hear the click of the door closing and the turning of the lock, but I pay no mind as my senses greedily drink in the sight before me.

The room’s enormous. Probably twice the size of my room back home. Again, it’s surprisingly light and airy with a large, seated picture window overlooking the grounds outside and framed by pale blue gauzy curtains. There’s also a row of

skylights in the roof, through which I can see the rare blue sky and mid-October sun.

The walls are painted a pale silvery grey with flecks of silver which shimmer and reflect the light. The carpet's the same silvery grey and so thick and deep I want to roll around in it. The muted tones of pale grey, blue and white give the room a luxurious feel, especially with all the rose gold accessories. It's perfect. Lizzie would've absolutely adored this room. I feel like it could be her room back home, and it comforts me.

To the right is a living area with a small grey two-seater sofa, wall-mounted TV and a good-sized desk and chair set. I spy a mini-fridge with a clear glass front under the counter stocked with snacks and bottled water. On the walls are large picture frames that hang empty, waiting to be filled I guess, with whatever I want. There are leafy green plants in all shapes and sizes dotted everywhere around the room in rose gold planters, which I adore.

To the left is the biggest double bed I've ever seen – I seriously think I might need a stepping stool to get into it – covered in blue and grey blankets and cushions. It has to be a super king, at least. It looks so sumptuous, I feel like I could sleep for days in it. On either side of the bed are two grey trunks with rose gold fittings stacked upon each other, serving as bedside tables. Tasteful bedside lamps rest on top. I'm awestruck by the style and opulence of the room. It's way nicer than I expected – even from Lizzie's description.

On either side of the bed, there are white doors, and I motion to them. "Where do those go?" I ask Michael.

"One's a wardrobe, and the other's your en suite."

My eyes widen in surprise, but before I can move towards either door to explore, Michael interrupts me.

"Charlotte—"

I whip around to face Michael, my eyes wide with horror. "Michael! You can't call me that! Ever!" Panic floods my

veins, an ice-bath wake-up call. “Even in private you have to keep up appearances, so that you don’t slip up in public.”

“Shit, I’m so sorry, Raven.” He emphasises my new name this time, looking contrite. “You just look so much like Lizzie, it’s unreal.”

I pull a face at that. “I’m supposed to be unrecognisable! This is going to be a disaster if the first person I meet can see through me to her!”

“Don’t worry.” He hastily back-pedals. “It’s just because I was so close to your sister, and I knew her so well that I can see the similarities. Plus, I knew you were coming, no one else even knows you exist, so they won’t be looking. I promise, no one else will.”

I grumble and glower at him, barely placated, kick off my shoes and take a seat cross-legged on the bed. I do have to kind of scramble to get up onto it. I motion for him to do the same and he plops down effortlessly opposite me in the same pose. Michael, of course, has no problem whatsoever getting onto the bed. Stupid short girl problems. He’s really staring at me now that we’re in private, and although it makes me uncomfortable, I figure it’s only fair as I did a thorough job of checking him out downstairs too. Not like, checking him out, just looking him over. Ugh. Not my type.

“It’s so good to finally meet you. Lizzie talked about you non-stop. Well, to me anyway. To everyone else she was quiet and pretty much kept to herself, I think. No one even knew she had a sister.” He pauses here, like he’s thinking about how it would be best to continue. “I feel like we got to know one another quite well through our letters last year.”

I nod in agreement. It’s true, I do feel like I’ve gotten to know Michael quite well since Lizzie’s death. We’ve been pen pals for over a year now, and he’s been helping me learn about the school in preparation for my enrolment. Michael was Lizzie’s best friend at this school, so I figured, if anyone can give me the inside scoop on what to expect and how to target those on my list, it’s him.

“You know, your disguise is flawless, it really is, but you’re going to have a real problem when you don your swimming cap and can’t wear all that makeup in the pool. I think you’d look identical then. The game could very quickly be up.”

I smile at him, shrug, and play my first card. “I have special dispensation to skip swim elective because I already swam for county. I don’t compete, so they can’t use me on the swim team, and they definitely can’t teach me anything in swim class, so I get a free pass.”

“Wow! That’s brilliant. What will you do for that session instead?”

“I have an outside Krav Maga tutor coming in to train with me.”

“Huh? Krab what?”

I giggle at his confused expression and explain. “Krav Maga: It’s a self-defence and fighting system developed by the Israeli special forces. It basically encompasses a range of martial arts and fighting styles, including hand-to-hand and knife combat.”

Michael’s eyes are wide with awe and respect. And maybe a little fear? I laugh, playing my second card with a falsely sweet smile. “Yeah, I’m lethal with a knife.”

“Wow, okay.” Clearly flummoxed by my admission, he doesn’t know where to go now. “Shall we go over your schedule?”

“In a minute. Tell me where we’re at with the plan?”

“Right. So, as you know, Lizzie was being bullied by a bunch of the kids here.”

I shudder at his use of the term kids. It makes them seem childlike and innocent when I know that what they’ve done is anything but. No, they need to be held accountable for their actions, but I don’t interrupt him.

“While we know some of the people who were involved – namely the popular kids who rule the school – you know from

Lizzie's journal the specifics.”

I nod. It's true. Lizzie kept the bullying close to her chest, revealing very little to me until after her death. Her revelation came several weeks after her supposed suicide in the form of an encrypted journal. I figured Michael, as her best friend here, should know more, but so far he's been very tight-lipped about the whole thing. It's okay, I don't entirely trust him yet either, so I haven't given too much away. Her final cryptic letter to me gave me the starting point I need to reveal the truth, so here I am. Although I would've come anyway, and she knew it.

There's no way my twin killed herself. I'm going to get to the bottom of whatever's going on and uncover the truth. I'm taking down the people responsible for her death, even if I have to burn the whole school down as collateral.

“My gut tells me we need to focus on the five most popular girls. They're the princesses of the school, and I doubt anything goes down without their say-so. I've started pranking some of them – nothing too bad, just low-level stuff – so that your arrival and plans wouldn't coincide with events and draw suspicion your way. People don't tend to go against them.”

I start at that, shocked. “Wow Michael, you didn't have to do that.” A warm fuzzy feeling spreads across my chest. Gratitude.

“I wanted to. Lizzie was my best friend. I absolutely adored her. More than that, I lo—” he shakes his head but doesn't finish his sentence. He doesn't need to. I could see in the way he wrote about her and now in the way he looks at me that he was utterly in love with her. I hope it won't be a problem. “I should've helped her.” He continues, “So, this is how I'll atone. I know it won't bring her back, but this is something I need to do. Whatever it takes, I'm in.” He looks so earnest, so sweet that my heart melts a little for him. There's no way I can fully involve this thoughtful guy in what I have planned, but an ally is very welcome indeed. We can work together until the time comes to end it all. I won't involve him in that. His pranks are cute, but they're no way near enough to make up for what they put Lizzie through.

I smile at him instead. “Okay, tell me all about what you’ve done and who you’ve hit.”

Michael gives me the Crib’s notes version of a Who’s Who at West Prep, some of which we’d already covered in our letters, before he regales me with stories of how he’s pranked the most popular girls in the school. From sneaking in to apple-pie all of their bedsheets (old school – love it!) to locking the queen bee, Tilly, in a janitor’s closet. He did that after accidentally catching her making out in there with a guy who wasn’t her boyfriend. Then he made sure the whole school, including her boyfriend, was there when the door was finally unlocked. Humiliating for her, but not as humiliating as the very public break up that followed, as her boyfriend dumped her sorry cheating ass.

My favourite pranks, though, were when he put itching powder in the gussets of their cheerleading shorts. Nasty. And the time he snuck into the girls’ locker room and stole their clothes, towels, makeup and hair products during swim class. That was kind of brutal. He smiles wickedly as he tells me that tale, explaining that it was probably the lack of makeup and hair products that hurt them the most. I can only imagine.

Wiping tears of laughter from my eyes, I tell him I don’t want to get on the wrong side of him, and he returns that the feeling is mutual.

Ah, he’s obviously still thinking of those knives then. Good. He needs to know that I’m not my sister. She was the kind one. I’m only here for one thing: the total annihilation of Lizzie’s tormentors.

“Listen, Raven—”

“Call me Rae,” I cut him off. Let’s just address the elephant in the room and be done with it already. “It’s fine. I get it. I really do,” I stare at him with a knowing look, “but you need to know that Lizzie and I are – oh god, were – completely different people. She was everything I’m not: good and pure, kind and true. She was an absolute angel, and I’m just...kind of a bitch. Well, I’m nice, but I’m not in her league. I’m not her. Not by a long shot. I’m here for one thing and one

thing only. To take those fuckers who hurt her down. So, I have to be a bitch. You have to be on board with that and accept that that's all you're getting from me."

Michael agrees, but I can tell he's taken aback by my upfront no-nonsense attitude. He offers me the tour, but I politely decline. The dinner bell will ring soon, and I want to unpack a little and freshen up. I tell him so, and he agrees to meet me for dinner and complete the tour tomorrow. Sounds good to me. We say goodbye, and I'm glad he's gone, as lovely as he is. I can't decide if he's helplessly in love with Lizzie, or gay. Maybe both. It wouldn't bother me either way, as long as he knows that I'm not her and I'm not interested.

I take a moment alone to compose myself before I come face to face with Lizzie's bullies for the first time. My fiery temper is already threatening to flare, and I have to dampen it down, reminding myself that I have time. I'm here to play the long game.

Dinner is a thought-provoking affair. Michael meets me outside in the foyer, where I have time to notice the giant glass-domed roof above us while I wait. It's pretty, and obviously the source of the light and airy atmosphere when we walk in. He leads me into the cafeteria (though it feels wrong calling it that). Lizzie was right. The service is better than any restaurant I've ever been to, the food itself surpassing Massimo, our private chef's, work. Michael sits me at his table at the back of the room with some of his friends, who are all really nice and welcoming. They ask me lots of questions, but Michael bats most of them away and tells them to back off. I'm happy to just sit and listen to their natural conversations and banter. It's pleasant, feeling welcomed and a part of something, and I wonder if that was what it had been like with Lizzie at the start.

To me, it seems like she'd got on well here, but now I was second-guessing everything she'd said to me – and kept from me – in her letters. That thought was sobering, and I remind

myself not to get too close to anyone, not even Michael. These people seem nice – hell they might even be nice – but I doubt that in a school this small, bullying would fly under the radar. So why hadn't they helped Lizzie? No. To my mind, they were guilty by association. Guilty by lack of intervention. But I can't take everyone down at once, so I have to bite my tongue and choose my battles wisely.

Over dinner, Michael points out the popular girls – princesses he calls them – but he needn't have bothered. I would've known who they were a mile away, even without the notes and pictures he sent in his letters over the last year. Five incredibly beautiful girls sit at the central table. I think how it's incredibly clichéd that there's a blonde, a brunette, a redhead and a girl with hair the colour of night. The fifth girl's rocking a funky, messy bob that's dyed a gorgeous blonde to pink balayage colour. I love her hair and her nose piercing. She's the only one who doesn't look like she entirely belongs there, although her beauty alone would be more than enough to earn her a top spot at that table. I guess that between them, they have all bases covered for every guys' fantasy.

Sitting in the middle of the room like that, they're like the sun, and everyone else their orbiting planets, worshipping them. No one approaches them, but you can see everyone watching their every move. I watch as they follow people with their eyes, making snide comments that I can't hear but can read clear enough in their body language and their loud cackling laughter. Only the fifth girl keeps quiet.

Yes, there is no doubt in my mind that if Lizzie was bullied to the point that she felt suicide was the only way out, then these girls had more than something to do with it. I need to start making them pay.

I glance down at the dessert on my plate, suddenly sick and not hungry anymore. I push it away and look to Michael. "I'm beat, long day," I say apologetically. He nods his understanding, and I get up to leave, unable to watch them any longer. Michael goes to accompany me, but I shake him off. I just want to be alone right now.

It's not until I'm back in my room, that I feel like I can breathe again. *Oh Lizzie, what happened to make everything go so wrong?*

Lizzie's letter

Hey Sis!

I'm loving life here at West Prep! The classes are so interesting and challenging. I actually get to think and express my opinions, rather than just being spoon-fed the correct answers for the test. So far, everyone's been really nice too. Even the teachers!

I'm back in the pool training again now. I've missed it so much. It feels really good to be getting fit again after a lazy summer, and you'll be sad to hear that I'm finally working off that food baby I grew in the summer while we were in Italy.

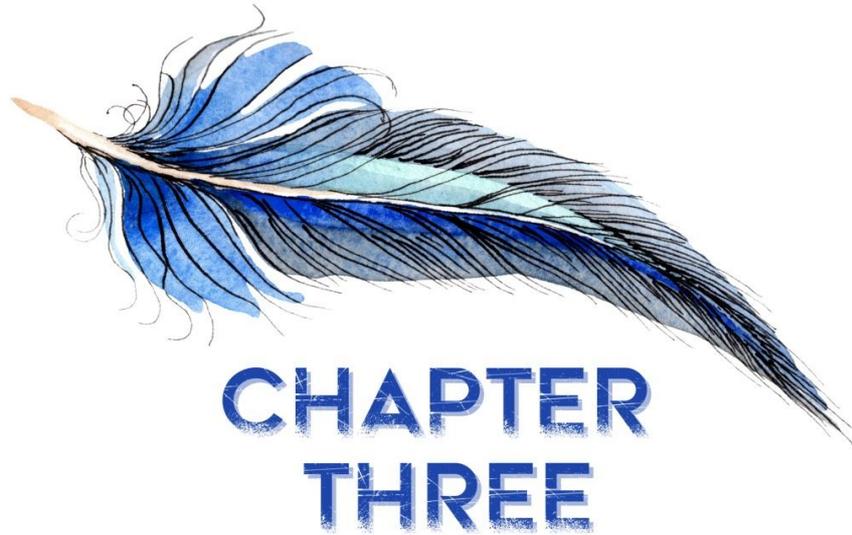
Actually, that reminds me, when you choose our holiday for this summer, can you please make a decision on our destination based on something other than the countries with the best food? I swear I put two stone on in Italy. It was totally worth it, though!

It's a good job I'm swimming again because the food here's so good, I'm in danger of becoming the size of a house! I don't want that, but I also don't want to stop eating all the amazing dishes. Life is so tough!

Right, I have to go and work off the filet mignon I had for dinner tonight! Did I mention how tough life is here?

I love you. Be good!!! I mean it this time!

Your Busy Lizzie x



CHAPTER THREE

“Shit, shit, shit!” I’m late and lost. I have my schedule in one hand and – dork alert – the map of the school in my other. Now I really wish I’d taken Michael up on his offer to go over my schedule and have a tour with him last night. However, I overslept and took so long on my face and hair that I missed breakfast and the chance for Michael to show me where to go.

My head’s bent studying the confusing labyrinth of passageways when I slam painfully hard into something. Seriously, it feels like I just hit a concrete wall, and I’m slightly winded. Staggering backwards, I teeter on my heels, and it’s only a strong masculine tattooed arm shooting out to wrap around my waist that stops me falling on my ass. Great. I know I should’ve been watching where I was going, but what was this guy’s excuse?

I huff out my frustration, stepping out of his powerful, warm embrace and smooth down my skirt. I quickly rub my chest, which smarts from the impact of hitting...whatever it was. It couldn’t be human, that’s for sure. I’m flustered, and my papers are all over the floor. Without thinking, I bend at the waist and scoop them up. The person who rammed into me gives a sharp intake of breath. Oh, good one, Rae. You haven’t even met, and already you’re flashing him, I scold myself.

I look up at the mass of solid muscle I’ve just been crushed by, and my heart stutters, skipping a beat before I attempt to

compose myself and get it beating back on track again. The blood's pounding so loudly in my head, that I'm sure he can hear it. The playful smirk on his lips makes me think he can, and I have to suppress a scowl; I hate being laughed at. Mind you, who doesn't? Comedians and clowns, I guess. Focus Rae! I shake my head and snap back to the present.

The guy in front of me can only be described as a mountain. He's easily six foot six. Maybe more. My eyes barely reach his chest even in my heels, and wow what a chest it is. This guy's so broad I wouldn't even be able to get my arms around him. The pain still smarting in my sternum tells me that it's all muscle, though. This guy's built. He's wearing the school requisite slacks and shirt, which looks like it'll be shredded to pieces if the guy even sneezes, but it's undone over a plain white T-shirt. That's it, though. No tie. No blazer. It's seriously so tight that I can see his pecs and the sexy ridges of his abdomen clearly outlined. My eyes drag down to the enticing V between his hips, making my mouth water uncontrollably. Somehow, I manage enough self-control to keep my eyes above his waist.

His arms are wider than my head, and his strong hands look like they could crush my skull in a single squeeze. It's weirdly thrilling. Dark inked tattoos cover every inch of his arms, but not his hands, the ink disappearing up into his shirt. The thin material hints that they continue down onto his chest and stomach. Everything about him screams dangerous bad boy. Holy Christ on a bike. Wetness floods my panties instantly. Now, this guy is my type.

I actually have to step back to see all of him. It feels like I'm looking up forever before I finally see his face. This guy absolutely dwarfs me. He's gorgeous, though. I'm sure my jaw's hanging, my mouth open to catch flies. I snap it shut quickly and stare intently at his face.

His face is angular and tanned, with a strong straight nose, chiselled cheekbones, and a sculpted stubble-covered jaw. His hair's dark and short at the sides, slightly longer on top, and sticking up messily as if he's been running his fingers through it. I'd like to do that. Lips that are plump, full, and made for

kissing, highlight his perfectly white straight teeth. The downward slant of brooding dark eyebrows frame his eyes perfectly. And I'm lost all over again in his gaze. Whoa. His eyes are unexpectedly the colour of a warm amber cognac and framed by lashes so thick and dark it makes me want to weep. It's not fair, guys have no need for lashes like that. My eyes feel naked in comparison.

“Holy fucking shit balls,” I stammer out. “Are you made of fucking granite or something?”

He chuckles at that, a deep rumbling growl that starts low in his chest and slowly works its way up to escape from his lips. It reminds me of the distant rumble of thunder and makes me want to step forward and lay my head on his chest to feel the vibrations. I don't of course, but damn I'm sure it would feel as good as it sounds. “Seriously, I'm not one to bruise easily, but you should come with a fucking health warning, mister.”

A slow, sexy smile spreads across his face as one eyebrow raises, and when he speaks his voice is a low bear's growl. “Oh, I do, little girl, just not for the reasons you're thinking.”

At his words, my heart does that weird stumble-stutter thing again, and I'm seriously contemplating going to the nurse to get it checked out. Maybe I have a heart murmur or something. I'm not even prepared to think about the state of my panties. Nope, not going there.

“Excuse me, I'm late, and I'm lost.” I try to step around the mountain, but he deliberately side steps, blocking me. I huff in annoyance and try to go the other way, but he blocks me again. I'm starting to feel like the mouse that's been caught by the cat, only the cat wants to play before it devours its prey. It would be sexy if I weren't already so wound up. What is this guy's problem? I tap my toe in annoyance and fold my arms across my chest while I glower at him.

“I know, little girl.”

I scowl and try to look fierce.

“I was sent to find you.”

“Stop calling me that,” I snap. “My name is Raven.”

“Ah, so you’ll be my little bird then.” Ugh. I usually hate the bird analogy but being called ‘his’ anything is surprisingly fine by me. “Come, you’re in my chemistry class, and unlike you, I know the way.”

Now that I’m not wrapped up in the gravelly growling timbre of his voice, I notice his accent. “Hey, you’re a SoCal guy?” I ask in shock.

“Yup. I’m impressed. Care to guess the county? Most girls just ask if I’m an American,” he snorts derisively, mimicking a high-pitched female air-headed voice.

“Santa Barbara? But maybe near the border. It’s not quite right.” I’m not one hundred percent sure, but I almost recognise the twang. It’s hard to tell though because his voice is so deep and gruff.

“Ding ding, get the lady a prize,” he drawls with a lazy grin. “How’d you know?”

“I have family there. What are you doing here in the UK?”

“There’ll be plenty of time to ask me questions when I take you out this weekend, little bird.” He grabs my arm and starts to drag me down the corridor in the opposite direction to where I was headed, and although I try to protest, in the end, I just have to give in and go with it. Trying to stop this guy is like trying to stop a tsunami with an umbrella.

He drags me through the maze of corridors, and I know I would’ve never found the place without him. Stopping at the right door, he knocks and enters before anyone tells him to. I follow, quietly closing the door behind me.

“Ah, Mr Lennox, you took your time.”

“Sorry, Miss, our new student here got herself properly lost. We might not have seen her before Christmas if you hadn’t sent me to the rescue.”

I scowl at the back of the granite mountain, unamused by his exaggerated brag. It wasn’t that bad. I’m sure I would’ve found someone to point me in the right direction. Eventually.

“Take your seats, you two. As you’re already acquainted, you can be lab partners for the year.” The teacher’s voice is firm and stern. But when I peek around the mountain, I notice an amused smile tugging at the corner of her lips. I follow Mr Lennox over to the only remaining free bench and slide into the stool closest to the window, mountain sitting on my right.

“So, do you have a name, or do I call you, Mr Lennox?” I whisper to him, not wanting to piss the teacher off even more. He shakes his head, grimacing.

“My father’s Mr Lennox. For Christ’s sake, don’t call me that. Call me anything else.”

“Okay!” I wink at him, teasingly. “Granite mountain it is then.”

He chuckles but doesn’t correct me or say anything, so I dig my pen into his ribs to try and force an answer from him.

“Stop that,” he warns, but I do it again. Apparently, I’m a glutton for punishment now too. “Little bird—” his threatening rumble has me squirming in my seat.

“Ooooh, scary. What’re you gonna do?” Actually, if it weren’t so sexy, it probably would be scary, but I’m not about to admit that.

He smirks and leans in close to whisper in my ear, and my breath catches. But his words aren’t what I expect. “So, what kind of bullshit do they say about chemistry where you come from?”

“Oh my god, did you just...” I grin at the reference to one of my favourite movies, lighting up.

“Yup.” He smiles, proud that I got his joke.

“I think I love you. Marry me?” I blurt out without a filter, and immediately my cheeks turn pink. I’m such a geek – something I’m not customarily embarrassed by – but I usually wait a little while before letting my nerd flag fly.

“Not until you know my name at least, little bird.” He winks with a smirk, and I swear I actually melt. Damn it.

“And I don’t plan on telling you that until our date on Saturday.” That’s the second time he’s alluded to taking me out now, but he hasn’t actually asked, so I play it off as teasing and try not to be disappointed. It doesn’t work.

After that, we don’t talk much unless it’s about classwork because I really need to focus. Easier said than done though, with the mountain by my side. His thigh keeps brushing against mine, and I’m not sure it’s accidental. He seems to be a bit of a flirt – not that I mind one bit – but I really do need to concentrate. The classes here are going to be challenging if this one’s anything to go by, and I’m already feeling the strain of being six or so weeks behind. I sigh, realising that too much of my time is going to be taken up by studying, rather than on getting revenge like I wanted. I try to focus on the positives. At least it’ll give me time to get to know my enemies a little better first. I plan to get through my first week here and then throw myself into planning the specifics during the half-term break. I figure that’s when the school will be much quieter with the students gone. It’ll be easier to snoop around that way.

As I’m packing up at the end of class and preparing to make my way to English, the granite mountain lightly catches my elbow and offers to walk me to my next lesson. I smile and accept because, in truth, I have no idea where I’m going. He links my arm in his, leading the way, and takes my schedule to scan it over as he effortlessly navigates the corridors and crowds in such a way that he doesn’t have to let me go. “We have chem and bio together. Wow, someone’s on track to be a smart little doctor... Shame, I have to leave you now. You have English, and I’m off to training. I’m looking forward to seeing you in gym though,” he adds with a cheeky wink. I know he’s thinking about the prerequisite swim class, and I have to hide my grin, knowing that he won’t be seeing me in a swimsuit anytime soon. I say nothing, though.

“This is your stop.”

We stop in front of another nondescript door, and I stare into the room looking for a friendly face from dinner the night before. I think I recognise one of the girls from Michael’s table

– Kelsie with the eyebrow piercing – but she’s not looking my way. I hesitate when my guide tenses beside me and a growl begins low in his chest. I look back to the corridor to see what has him wound so tight all of a sudden, but of course, he’s so big that he’s completely blocking my view.

“Bloomberg,” he spits.

“Lennox,” Michael responds, barging past him, knocking the behemoth into me and sending me flying. Once again, I’m saved as the granite mountain grabs me and pulls me to him, growling at Michael to watch where he’s going.

“Shit, I’m so sorry,” Michael instantly looks contrite and rushes to see if I’m okay, pulling me—none too subtly—from those tattooed arms. He drapes his arm around my shoulder, and I have to resist the urge to stamp on his foot. I’m not a tool for their pissing contest. But I do wonder what their beef is.

Instead of stamping though, I let him lead me to the desks in the back row, turning to give a little wave to my rescuer. I catch him glowering at Michael, and vow to find out the story there. He sees me looking, and his scowl instantly becomes a grin, his whole face transformed. If I thought he was gorgeous before when he was brooding, it’s nothing compared to his breathtaking beauty when he smiles like that. Damn it, my heart’s all messed up again. Yep, I definitely need to focus.

Luckily, English is just what I need to take my mind off the hunky tall hot guy. It’s my favourite subject and offers respite from the gruelling pre-med courses I’m in. A career in publishing would actually be my dream job, but the McLintocks come from a long line of obedient doctors. Lizzie had desperately wanted to be a vet, and although I encouraged her to follow her dream, she never would. I guess I should be taking my own advice, but after losing Lizzie, I feel like I at least owe it to my parents to be the good remaining daughter. They don’t need any more heartbreak.

I sit by Michael, but we don’t talk because I’m instantly transfixed by the lesson. English has always been my escape, and I find the teacher compelling as she talks about one of my favourite novels in a completely new light. I feel a frisson of

excitement shoot through me as I realise that, in this subject at least, things might not be too bad for me. I have the course reading list already and have read or studied all but one text on there. Which is good, because although I'd rather be reading, at least I can spend my time researching or catching up on my other subjects.

After a light but gorgeous lunch of tacos, I struggle my way through math, not understanding a word past copying down the date and title. There's no one in this class that I know yet, and the desks are all set up individually, so I keep my head down and furiously scribble notes. I figure if I write absolutely everything down, someone might be able to translate it for me later. Next step on the agenda: Make friends. Smart friends. Preferably Math geek friends.

During gym class, I manage to find my way through the sports facilities – bypassing the Olympic sized pool, thank god – until I come to the martial arts hub. The space is seriously impressive. A long rectangular room with a sprung floor and a variety of sparring areas set up with crash mats. I can't wait to start my training after half term. Around the edges of the room, there's a variety of equipment set up for at least seven martial arts that I can see. I know that the school also has a shooting range on its premises, but I didn't pass it on my way in, so it must be located elsewhere. Shame. I'd love to get some target practise in. Instead, I head to the far end of the room where a short-distance target range is set up. Just what I'm after.

Opposite the targets is a wall-mounted glass display case showcasing a range of knives and throwing weapons as well as archery equipment. I use the combination the headmistress gave me in my welcome pack to open the cabinet, and after perusing the options for a moment, settle on three short handled Expendables. They're a tricky knife to get used to – sporting an unusual finger ring at the handle's end – but they've always been my weapon of choice. Despite being

twelve inches long, they're surprisingly agile once you've mastered the conclave, nylon-wrapped handle. I love the weight of them.

I slip off my heels and blazer, having not bothered to change for gym, and take my place lined up to the target. I don't have the most extended throwing range, but I have enough dexterity and upper body strength to sink the blade every time in a stationary target. I was taught to use the knife as an extension of my limbs – particularly in close combat – but today, I have to focus on my throwing.

I line up my shot and take a deep breath, sighting the target across the room. I bring the knife up to the side of my face, so close the cold blade whispers against my cheek, and as I exhale, I let the blade fly. It sails through the air, too fast for me to track, and drills itself deeply into the centre of the yellow circle. It's bang on. I shift my weight slightly to the right to sink the second knife beside the first, and the third lands firmly beside the second.

I collect the three knives and begin again, repeating until I lose count. Repeating until the rhythmic thud of the blade embedding itself into the target board is the only sound that fills the room. I speed up – throwing faster, from different angles, different heights, and distances – until the knives in my hands feel like they're a part of me.

I'm so absorbed in my task that I don't hear the door opening until someone clears their throat. I'm just about to let my blade fly when I spin, startled, and let go of the knife. I watch in horror as the lethal blade sails through the air – to me it feels like slow motion, but in reality, it all happens in the blink of an eye – and sinks itself into the wooden door frame right next to my visitor's head. Shit.

The first thing I notice is that it was a really good shot. The second thing I notice is that I've pinned a lock of his long blonde hair to the doorframe. Oops.

“You trapped my fucking hair!” he shrieks. And I do mean shrieks. His voice is high-pitched and panicked.

“Yeah, but only a little.” I try not to laugh.

“You could’ve killed me,” he protests.

I walk over to him, leaning in close. He’s taller than me – but then again everyone is – so he’s maybe a little over average height? I’d guess just under six foot, with chin-length wavy blonde hair. He’s athletic and toned with sun-kissed skin and the brightest blue eyes I’ve ever seen. He smells like sunshine and summer, and it makes me want to lick my lips. Hell, it makes me want to lick his. I lean in even closer, so close that my chest brushes against his as I rise up onto my tiptoes, to whisper in his ear, “If I wanted to hit you, I would have.” I pull the knife from the door jam and step back, smiling sweetly and shrugging my shoulders like I don’t have a care in the world. I watch his pretty blond lock float in strands to the spring floor. I may act unmoved, but inside I’m reeling – that was too close. I feel kinda bad, but I’m not about to let him know that. I stalk back to my target and resume practising, expecting him to leave.

Only he doesn’t. He follows me and watches me intently as I continue to sink my knives into the target successively. I don’t know if he’s trying to put me off, but it doesn’t work. I’m used to training under high pressure, so a pair of sparkling Caribbean blue eyes aren’t about to put me off my game.

“Hey, who are you?” I sense him approaching me, but I don’t turn. Once the final knife is in the target, I walk the short distance to collect them. On my return to my starting spot, I notice he’s walked right over to me, hand outstretched. Geez, what is it with these guys and handshakes? I eye his strong, tanned hand suspiciously. He has nice hands. Long fingers. Neat nails. I like that.

“Raven.” Once I realise he isn’t going to drop it, I sigh and shake his hand. His palms are warm but dry and slightly calloused. A little zing of electricity shoots through my hand and up my arm. I pull away.

“Ah, the new chick. I’ve heard all about you.”

“Really?” I raise an eyebrow. It’s not possible. No one knows all – or even anything – about me. “From whom?”

“Ah, I’m sworn to secrecy on pain of death. He’d kick my ass if I told you his name,” he replies with a twinkle. I shit you not, his eyes twinkle. I thought that was just a movie special effect. But obviously, he’s given away who it is that’s been talking about me: the granite mountain, Mr Lennox.

“And what has he-who-must-not-be-named been saying about me then, huh?” He smiles at my Harry Potter reference, and I give him bonus points for that.

“Well—” He draws out the final letters of the word like he’s thinking of where to begin, a mischievous gleam in his eye. “Aside from the obvious – that you’re absolutely gorgeous and smokin’ hot – he said you had brains and beauty, and that you’re absolutely hopeless at reading a map... Oh, and you’re a legacy student because your surname is Deighton. As in *the* Deighton.” The last bit is tagged on, oh-so-casually, at the end there but I can tell from his intense stare that he’s waiting for me to confirm or deny the rumour.

I’m somewhat impressed. Not by the generic blah compliments, but by the fact that the mountain has managed to find out my surname, legacy status, and lineage in just a few hours. Of course, none of that tells the whole story – or the real story – but I smile up at the blond beach babe in front of me.

“You can tell your informant, that’s not bad work for a couple of hours. Not entirely accurate information, though. That’s the trouble with not getting the scoop straight from the source itself. What I want to know is what you’ll be telling him about me?”

Beachboy smiles, and twin dimples appear on either side of his cheeks. Okay, so he’s really, really cute. His smile’s infectious. *He could be a very pretty distraction*, I think to myself.

“Obviously I’m going to confirm what he said, but I’ll tell him he hasn’t done you anywhere near enough justice. I’m going to tell him you’re scary as shit with a knife, but that it’s really fucking sexy too. And I’m going to brag that, although

he thinks he's taking you out on Saturday, you're actually going out with me."

"Too bad I don't go out with boys whose names I don't know, and who don't actually ask me out then, isn't it?" I start to pack up, putting the knives back into the glass cabinet and slipping my feet back into my shoes.

"I'm Thorn, friends call me Thor. Will you, Raven, please do me the honour of going out with me on Saturday?" It all comes out in a massive rush of one breath, and I have to bite back my smile. I really like this guy. He has a good energy that lifts those around him. "There's a new ice cream place opened on the beach, and I'm desperate to try it. I'll even buy you a three scoop." He winks, and I laugh.

"Fine Thorn, friends call you Thor, you may take me out for ice cream on Saturday. But I want toppings too!" I sling my bag over my shoulder and head towards the door. I know the bell's going to go any minute and I have to get to the main hall for assembly.

"Ah, well, that might be a problem," he pauses dramatically with a mock-serious look, "where do you stand on nuts?"

"On an ice cream? Sacrilege! On other things? Delicious." I toss him a flirty wink as I leave, and smile at his groan.

"Be ready at seven! And wear beachy shit!" he calls out, and I'm gone, a smile still on my face and a spring in my step.

Okay, so I'm excited to go out on a date with Thorn. He's a pretty distraction like I said. I may be here for revenge, but I need to keep up appearances, and dating is a regular school activity. Being with him will allow me some cover, I reason to myself. Well, that's my excuse, and I'm sticking to it!

Lizzie's letter

Oh my goodness! I know I said I was here to work and not get distracted, Charlotte, but already my resolve is wavering. Sure there are a lot of handsome guys here at West Prep, but none have my pulse racing as quickly as this one guy.

The guy is stacked and smoking hot! Not my usual type – probably more yours to be honest – he's tall, dark and brooding. I can't even call him handsome, it wouldn't do him justice! He's absolutely covered in tattoos despite only just turning sixteen (how?!?), and he has a low gravelly growly voice that makes him sound so much older than his years. That voice makes me tingle all over. He's ferocious when he's angry and so tall it's intimidating...but there's something else there too. There's a sadness, or maybe I should say a darkness, in him that makes me want to drag him out into the light with me.

It sounds silly, I know. I've only been tutoring him for a couple of hours a week for the past month or so, but it's become one of the highlights of my week when I get to spend time alone with him.

Don't get me wrong, his English ability is poor, so I have my work cut out, but there's something about the way he towers over me and commands the desk space between us that has me wanting to get to know him better. I know he's a bit of a dick when he's around everyone else, but when we're alone, he's different. He makes me laugh, and he doesn't treat me like dirt. Not like a lot of the other kids here.

I'm crushing hard sis!

You'd be so proud of me! I've been invited to a party by some of the girls in my math class, and I'm actually going to

go. I thought about declining, but I'm kind of hoping that he'll be there. I don't know why, it's not like I'd be brave enough to talk to him, not like you, but he's fast becoming an addiction I can't fight. I just want to see him outside of our study cocoon. I really hope he's there!

I wish you were here Charl, I have no idea what to wear for a party or how to go about talking to him if he's there. We usually just talk about school work, and I can't exactly go up to him at a party to ask how his homework is going, can I!? Oh god, I'm going to be a total disaster.

I love you. You are being good, aren't you?

Your Busy Lizzie x



CHAPTER FOUR

The rest of my week passes without incident really. Except for math, my classes aren't too bad. Michael and I are paired together in English for a project, so it gives us an excuse to hang out, which is ideal as we both agreed we shouldn't be seen as too friendly with one another. I discover I have some combination of princesses in every class, but so far they've ignored me, and I'm okay with that. It allows me to observe and learn. The granite mountain continues to flirt relentlessly in chemistry and biology, but won't tell me his name and hasn't asked me out. I saw Thorn in my English class too, but he didn't speak to me. I'm not even sure if we're still on for our date on Saturday.

Friday night, I stand in front of my wardrobe, stressing over what "beachy shit" might be. Especially at seven in the morning! What the hell? It's just wrong to be getting up at that time on a weekend, never mind being up and ready and out by then! It's kinda putting me off the whole idea of dating Thorn. As I have no idea what we'll be doing, I sling a towel in a bag, add some squash, a book and some snacks. I opt to wear my bikini in the morning with my jeans, hoodie and flip-flops. That way, I feel like I have all the bases covered. The forecast for the weekend may be nice, but one, I don't trust the weatherman and two, it's freaking October, and it'll be cold no matter how sunny it is! Once I'm all set, I get ready for bed

and enjoy my early night with a good book. The last thing I do before turning off the light to get to sleep is set my alarm for six-thirty – it actually pains me to do it.

Saturday dawns, and I have to resist the urge to throw my alarm clock across the room when the buzzer goes off. I drag myself up, drain a glass of ice-cold orange juice, quickly scoff down some coco pops – yeah I have the eating habits of a seven-year-old – and get ready. I plait my long hair all the way down my back so that it's out of the way for whatever we end up doing, then I pull on my oversized Hollister hoodie. They seriously make the softest hoodies; I wish I could live in them. Once I'm ready, I head down to the main entrance to wait for Thorn. Surprisingly, there are quite a few people up and about, though they're mostly grabbing breakfast in their PJs.

I hear a horn blasting and suspect that might be him, so I head outside and down the steps. Sure enough, a large yellow and black Jeep Wrangler is pulling up, horn still blaring. I struggle to suppress a smile. As annoying as the horn is, I love the car. The driver's window rolls down, and Thorn sticks his head out, grinning at me. The other windows go down, and I see that the car is full; the granite mountain sits in the front seat and two guys I don't know are in the back. My smile falls, and I frown. What's going on? I cross my arms over my chest and ask Thorn precisely that.

"We're gate crashing your date," one of the guys in the back says.

"Thorn?"

"Yeah sorry, Princess." He shrugs sheepishly, and I get the feeling he's not telling me the whole story. "I couldn't tell them no. I don't want them here any more than you do."

"I don't date boys whose names I don't know and who don't have the courage to ask me out themselves." I'm being stubborn right now, but I'm a bit miffed at the mountain man for not asking me out. I'm also mostly annoyed because my date is being hijacked and I was actually looking forward to it.

"Awww come on, Princess, if you get in the car the guys will introduce themselves..."

I don't move. There's no way I'm giving in that easily.

"I made you hot chocolate, with cream and sprinkles and shit." Okay, I'm wavering. "It's in a Harry Potter travel mug... which you can keep."

Damn it, my resolve crumbles like a soggy biscuit dipped in tea, and I race around the car and wrench open the front passenger door. Granite mountain grins down at me from the height of the vehicle. "Move," I bark at him.

"No way, get in the back."

"No." I actually stomp my foot, how embarrassing. "You move. This is my date, and you're an unwanted spectator, so you sit in the back," I insist.

"Have you seen the size of me, Little Bird? I'll never fit."

"Good. You can sit in the middle too, just for pissing me off at stupid o'clock on a Saturday."

The mountain turns to Thorn with a "Dude?" but Thorn has my back. He chuckles and replies, "What the Princess wants..." which causes the mountain to sigh. He undoes his seatbelt and lets it fly back into place. Climbing out of the car, he barges past me and flings open the back door.

"Move." This time he barks at one of the guys in the back seat, but before he can comply, I tell him to stay put. He can climb over. It'll serve the arrogant ass right. Thorn's shaking with barely contained laughter at this point, so I figure I haven't gone too far. I watch as the mountain struggles to climb over the guy in the back and wedges himself into the tiny middle seat between them. He looks so utterly ridiculous that my laugh breaks free, and when he scowls at me, he looks so much like a sulky, naughty boy that tears roll down my cheeks. He actually looks so uncomfortable that for a moment I feel bad – especially for the other two guys who didn't bet on being a mountain sandwich today – but then I remind myself that I don't know who they are, and they're gate-crashing my date, so I don't feel too bad.

I clamber up into the Jeep and shut the door. Once I'm done, I turn to Thorn, hand outstretched, and say, "Chocolate,

please.” The please was challenging to get out. I’m not a morning person. He chuckles and hands over the Harry Potter mug. I take a sip cautiously, but it’s the perfect temperature, so I take a second bigger drink. A groan escapes my lips. It’s seriously the best hot chocolate I’ve ever tasted, which I tell Thorn. “Okay, now this, this was worth getting out of bed for. Where’s it from?”

“I made it.”

“What did you use?”

“Not telling you. It’s part of my secret plan to get followup dates with you; get you addicted to my chocolate, so you have to keep coming back for more.”

“So basically, you put crack in my drink?”

He chuckles. “Something like that. Belt up, we need to get this show on the road.”

He reaches for the gear stick, but my hand shoots out to stop him. The second I place my hand over his, a jolt of energy transfers between us. His eyes go wide as he stares at me. “Wait! Who are these guys? I don’t ride in cars with strangers, really.”

I turn to face the three guys in the back, and now that I’m looking at them more closely I realise the two new guys I’ve seen in a couple of my classes. The guy to my left clears his throat.

“I’m Jax Jackson.”

“Cute.”

He grins and thanks me.

“I meant your name.”

He smiles wider and thanks me again.

Seriously though, cute is not a word that should be used to describe this guy. His deep caramel skin tone reflects the early morning light, highlighting strong cheekbones, a long straight nose and luscious full lips. His eyes are a deep espresso colour that’s so dark they could almost be black. It’s seriously

intense. There's a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips, but due to his eyes, it lacks warmth.

I shiver slightly and turn to the guy on my right, ignoring the petulant mountain sulking in the middle. He introduces himself as Ace, and I detect a foreign lilt to his mellifluous voice. His speech is smooth and deep and has a soft honey tone to it. I smile at him warmly and introduce myself.

Ace is beautiful. Perhaps that's not the most traditional way to describe a guy, but he truly is. He has golden tanned skin, a square jaw with sculpted stubble and short light goldish-brown hair which is slicked up in the front. He has pale, violet eyes that are unusual and striking. The coolness of his eyes is offset by his warm, infectious smile. I instantly like this guy. He didn't even complain when the granite mountain clambered all over him.

I turn to said mountain wedged into the middle seat and cock an expectant eyebrow at him. He continues to sulk and glower at me, refusing to speak. Jax digs him in the ribs, and he sighs. "I'm Rebel," he tells me reluctantly. I nod and turn back to face Thorn, giving him a wide beaming smile. "Okay, now we can go. What are we doing today, anyway?" I ask as I go back to sipping my hot chocolate – it really is divine, and I want it to last, but it just tastes too good. Thorn tosses a lazy grin my way, doesn't answer me, and speeds off.

After a while, my drink's gone, and I'm bored. I tell the guys as much. I whine, "Are we nearly there yet?" And they chuckle like it's a joke. I'm not joking. I seriously don't do well on long journeys. I glance down at Thorn's feet and smile. "Nice flip-flops." He has nice feet.

"Thanks." He smiles.

"I fucking hate sliders." I shudder.

"These aren't sliders."

"I know. That's why I'm still sitting in the car with you. Sliders should be fucking burnt. I'd jump from a moving vehicle if you were wearing them."

“I agree. Didn’t they just used to be called flip-flops anyway? Just, you know, a different style to toe post ones?”

“Exactly. But I hated them back then, and I still hate them now.” I turn to look at the boys in the back of the car. “I swear to god you boys better not be wearing sliders! They make me want to puke.” The boys all laugh and assure me they aren’t wearing sliders. Phew. For the rest of the ride, the guys grill me about myself, but I manage to avoid anything overly personal. I keep my responses vague so that I don’t have to lie.

“We’re going to a beach, aren’t we? Hence the ‘beach shit’ clothing mandate, right? Why are we driving so far to a beach when we literally have one on campus?” I spin in my seat to ask the three guys in the back row. I catch the sideways glances that they throw each other, and I know, I just know, that I’m about to be bullshitted. Do I pull them up on it before or after they speak? Meh, I’ve never been patient. “And don’t fucking lie to me. I can see you’re about to. If you want a second date with me, think carefully about the next words out of your mouth.”

Everyone’s eyes widen in surprise, and Rebel’s jaw hangs open slightly. Ace looks out of the window, avoiding my gaze. Next to me, Thorn tenses. Only Jax meets my stare head on. Ah, so he’s the leader then. I level his stare and refuse to blink. It’s probably immature, but I don’t care. There’s a story here, I can sense it.

“No one really uses the campus beach anymore, except for parties and pranks.” Jax sighs, blinks and looks out of the window. But I’m too distracted to gloat over my stare-down win.

“Why not? It looked like a really nice beach in the prospectus.”

“There was...an accident a couple of years back.” I don’t miss the slight hesitation in his voice. I know, of course, that he’s talking about Lizzie. I don’t miss Ace’s disbelieving snort either. Interesting. I file that information away for later. I’m going to have to get to know him better.

“What sort of accident?” I ask, making my eyes go wide with innocent wonder.

“A girl died.”

I gasp, and this time it’s not acting. Not entirely. It’s a shock to hear the words said aloud.

“What?” I clear my throat and try again, “What happened? I mean, why don’t I know about this? I never saw anything—”

“You wouldn’t. Our school is very good at covering things up...ignore that. I don’t mean it to sound as ominous as it did.”

“Shit, it does sound scary. What happened? Is it safe?”

“Of course! It was nothing really...a girl just killed herself there, that’s all. She was a messed up troubled girl. A no one really. Nothing sinister. The campus is entirely safe; I can assure you.”

Strike one against you Jax Jackson: suicide is never ‘just nothing’ you fucking dick. And that’s my fucking sister you’re dismissing. I swallow my rage but let him see the tears shimmering in the corners of my eyes as I quietly tell him, “She wasn’t a no one, she must have been somebody’s someone.”

He has the decency to look ashamed of himself. Contrite, he apologises. It seems genuine. And there’s something else in his gaze too – sadness? Regret? Remorse? None of the other boys will meet my eyes, so we ride the rest of the way in silence.

Not long after that, we pull up at the beach, and I quickly scramble out of the car, desperate for some space and fresh air. When I take a moment to clear my head, I realise that they never really answered my question. Why don’t they use the beach? Is it a mark of respect to Lizzie? Is it out of fear? Guilt? Did the school prohibit it? For now, I choose to let it go. We’re a long way from campus, and I don’t want to make things even more awkward by pushing the matter.

Shit. We’re a long way from campus, I’m alone with four virtual strangers, and no one knows where I am. I’m such an

idiot. I wish I'd ignored the school's stupid no phones rule. If I had, I could have slipped my phone out of my beach bag and sent a quick text to Michael, just in case. I don't get dangerous vibes from these guys, but I do know that they were entwined in Lizzie's life – and therefore her death – somehow. I need to keep decoding her journal to get the full story. I relax once I think things through logically, knowing that at least one person must have seen me leave campus with these guys, with the amount of noise they were making.

I follow the four boys from the car park, down the path towards the beach. I'm surprised that we're not the only ones here – I mean, it's October, and it's early. But apparently for hardcore surfers, it's actually kinda late, and October has the warmest waters. Huh. Who knew? I guess you really do learn something new every day.

Once we reach the beach, the guys turn to a row of beach huts on the left, lined up close to the dunes. They walk along and stop outside a shack that's painted entirely black. Thorn slips a key from his board shorts and unlocks the padlock on the door. The inside's full of surf equipment. Like seriously, loaded to the gunnels. There's barely room to step inside, the boards are stacked in every available space, and there are piles of wetsuits everywhere. Thorn reaches out and pulls a wetsuit from a hanger and tosses it at me, telling me to pick any board I like, so I peruse the many options available. There are so many, in a variety of styles and sizes, but I know that I need a longboard, so that narrows the selection down by about half. I'm pretty small and light so I should go for a slightly shorter board. I'm about to settle for one when a larger Woody catches my eye. That's the one. I just hope I can carry it. I point it out to Thorn, and he grabs it for me with a smile. While the guys all choose their boards, I slip out of my jeans and hoodie, pulling my wetsuit on up to my waist. I shove my stuff into my bag and then go to join them outside. Only Thorn remains though, the other guys are already ahead, carrying their boards towards the ocean.

“Damn! Looking good girl.” Thorn whistles and I smile. No one looks good in a wetsuit, but the compliment is appreciated all the same.

“Have you ever surfed before?”

“A little, I guess,” I say with a shrug. “It’s been a really long time though, and I was never any good. I don’t stand up, but I enjoy catching a wave. It feels like flying.” I feel a bit silly for saying that last bit but Thorn lights up like he knows exactly what I mean and I suddenly don’t feel so bad.

I watch as he loops a board under each arm and begins to carry them both effortlessly. He makes it look so easy that I’m impressed. He may not be as stacked as Rebel, but he looks damn good, and he’s clearly strong. I scramble behind him and grab the back end of each board, one under each arm like him, just to help with the weight. He turns to me with a surprised look on his face and thanks me.

“I pull my weight,” is all I say. Thorn nods, and we continue down the beach. From my position in the rear, I get to admire his rear. And very nice it is too.

“Damn.” He peeks over his shoulder and catches me perving at him. “I picked the wrong position.” I giggle and agree, but I’m not complaining.

When we get to the water, Thorn tries to make sure I’m alright, but I shoo him away and tell him to go and have fun. I’ll sort myself out and join them in just a moment. I take the opportunity to watch the other three guys that are already in the water. They all surf pretty well, but once Thorn joins them, it’s clear to see he outperforms all of them. I watch for a while longer before pulling up my wetsuit and joining them.

I don’t go too far out, not liking the deep water, and I tentatively catch a few small waves on my front, not even bothering to try and stand. Sure my makeup is waterproof but who wants to risk total submersion on a date? I catch a few bigger waves as my confidence grows. I’m not very good, but I’m enjoying myself. I start to wonder, though, is this still a date? I’m a little confused. So far it feels more like mates hanging out, especially with the guys further out catching the bigger waves together. Whatever it is though, I have to admit I’m having a good time.

After a while, I get out and park my board in the wet sand. I take off my wetsuit, done for the day, and I sit at the water's edge wrapped in my towel. I go back to watching the guys as the morning wears on and more people start to arrive at the beach. It never truly gets busy though, and everyone that's here is a good surfer. I'm glad I'm out already, there's no way I want to make a fool of myself in front of strangers. I grab some snacks out of my bag and reach for my flask of hot chocolate. It's no way near as good as Thorn's, but it's warming me up.

Soon after, the guys join me and plonk themselves down on the sand next to me so that we make a circle. I pull out the rest of my snacks, indicating that the boys should help themselves. They do, and within seconds my stash is annihilated. We sit around chatting for a bit, and I enjoy the easy banter between them. They're clearly all good friends, and they have been for a while. I'm not quite sure what I'm doing here.

Eventually, the guys all start moaning that they're hungry and I tell them I know a place that makes a mean breakfast nearby. I turn to Rebel and shrug. "It's no IHOP, I'm afraid." I smile ruefully, and the other guys groan.

"Don't get him started on IHOP," Jax groans.

"IHOP, schmihop!" Thorn pouts. "What's so special about it, anyway?"

I glance at Rebel, and unspoken words pass between us. "It's indescribable. You have to have had it to understand. But this place is great, I promise."

With that, we get packed up quickly and head back to the Jeep. I contemplate sitting in the back this time to be nice, but I don't really know Jax and Ace that well, so I wouldn't be too comfortable between them. Turns out it doesn't matter anyway because Rebel climbs into the middle again without complaint. It's cute, and it makes me smile. I always appreciate a gentleman.

Lizzie's letter

Hey Charlie-Bear,

You would laugh so hard if you could hear the rumours going around about me. They're so absurd and outlandish that no one could possibly believe them!

Apparently, when I'm tutoring in the library, it's all a ruse. I'm actually paying for sex because I'm so so inexperienced. Although, one of the rumours was that I'm such a slut that I'm not really tutoring guys, they're just paying me for sex.

Ridiculous isn't it? Whoever's spreading this stuff is pretty stupid if they can't even realise that those two rumours alone contradict each other.

I didn't think anyone would believe the stories being told about me, but apparently, they do. As I walk down the corridors, people call out names. Pig. Bitch. Tramp. Slut. Slag. Whore. It doesn't hurt, but it bothers me that people would be so immature.

Don't worry about it though, I'm ignoring it. I figure if I do that, they'll soon get bored and move on to something else.

Love you sis, don't worry.

Be good.

Your Busy Lizzie x



CHAPTER FIVE

From the front seat, I'm able to give directions, and it doesn't take long to get to Josie's, the little American style diner that I love. When we pull up the guys don't look too impressed by the down-to-earth homely and slightly jaded decor, but I love it – it's part of the charm. I lead the guys into the diner, and I'm immediately assaulted by a bouncing screeching waitress. She envelopes me into a huge hug, her mass of chestnut curls smothering me.

“Oh my god! Raven! I haven't seen you in forever, where have you been?” Before I can answer her, she's dragging me to the back booth – the diner's largest table where I always sit – and chattering away telling me all about the latest gossip. I smile and let Carey get it all out, knowing it's pointless to interrupt her until she's done. I've been coming to this place with my dad and Lizzie since we were young. It's like a second home to me, so I'm on first name terms with everyone. Carey's about my age, the Saturday girl, with more personality than anyone can handle. She's harmless though, if you stay on the right side of her.

Luckily, it's safe to bring the guys here because the staff all know that I started going by Raven after Lizzie passed. They just don't know why.

“And your hair! You look amazing, Rae! How's life at the new school? Do you love it? Are they nice to you? Do I need

to grab Aunty J and come kick some ass?”

I chuckle and take a seat, sliding into the middle of the curved booth and motioning for the guys to follow me. When they do, it’s like Carey sees them for the first time and her jaw hits the floor. “Damn girl, I think I need to enrol at your school if this is the calibre of HOT that goes there!”

“Stop,” I laugh, trying to calm her exuberance down. It won’t work, but if we want to get fed before nightfall, I’ll have to take charge. “I’m going to order for us. Five milkshakes and”—I turn to the guys—“how hungry are you?” They indicate that they’re starving, “Two big breakfasts, a stack of fifteen to get started, and all the trimmings on the side, please. Tell Aunty Josie I said hi, and I’ll swing by for a cuddle in a bit.”

Flabbergasted, Carey turns towards the counter to ring in my order. She was so busy staring at the guys, I have no idea if she caught my order, but I’m going to have faith. I turn, a massive grin stretching across my face, to Thorn sitting on my left. He’s pouting at me in a hilarious pantomime of sadness.

“What?”

“You asked how hungry we are, we said starving, and you only ordered two breakfasts for the five of us!”

“I could say that’s because only me and you were invited on this date, so I just ordered for us.” His face brightens at that, and he’s seriously cute. Hot too, but tummy flutters cute. “However, trust me when I say I’ve ordered more than enough for all of us.”

“You haven’t seen us eat!” Rebel cuts in.

“True, but you haven’t eaten here before. Trust me. In fact, I bet we don’t even order extra pancakes.”

“You’re on! It’s a bet. What do you get if you win?”

“A date, alone, with Thorn.”

“Ahh, you want another date with me, Princess?” Thorn asks, and he has such a shit-eating grin on his face, I almost want to change my mind.

“Fine. If I win, I want a date with you. Just us two.”

My heart stutters at Rebel’s declaration, and I struggle not to let my joy show. “Deal.” We shake on it. Rebel does want to take me on a date. He’s almost even asking. Kinda. I try not to get too excited, but then my heart plummets when I realise that there’s no way he’ll win this bet. I’ve ordered enough food to feed a small country. I’m almost sad, then I remember that if I win I’ll get to go out again with Thorn and that’s in no way a consolation prize.

“Where’s my girl?” A loud voice calls out from the kitchen, and I realise I’m trapped in the middle of the booth and need to get out quickly. I stand on the leather seat and vault myself across the empty table just in time to be swept up into another massive hug, this time from Aunt J. Aunt J is the owner, manager, chef and heart of the diner. I think she’s old enough to be my great-grandma, but I’d never ask her age. She’s as sprightly as me. She treats everyone who visits the diner like they’re family and has been taking care of me forever.

“Let me look at my gorgeous goddaughter,” she says, holding me at arm’s length. “Oh Raven, you get more and more beautiful every time I see you! It’s been far too long girl, why have you been staying away?” She looks past me and notices that I’m not here alone. Her reaction isn’t quite as strong as Carey’s when she sees the guys, but she’s still taken aback by their beauty. “Never mind. I understand why you’ve been so busy now.” She laughs, and I blush, stuttering out protests, which she ignores.

She strides past me and over to the table, politely demanding that my guests introduce themselves. I’m impressed when all four of them slide out of the booth, get to their feet and shake her hand or kiss her cheek as they introduce themselves. I like that a lot. Good manners and gentlemanly behaviour. It’s kinda hot. I know Aunt J approves because she’s actually blushing, and she’s never taken in by a pretty face. She gives me a nod of approval before excusing herself to go back to the kitchen to cook our food.

We all sit back down, and the guys turn to stare at me. Carey brings over our milkshakes, putting mine in front of me and leaving the others in the middle of the table for the guys to fight over. I ignore their stares and take a drink of my milkshake from the stainless steel straw. Four pairs of eyes watch my every move.

“What?” I ask, uncomfortable with the staring, and turn to Thorn.

“Well, I was going to say something about this place, but now I want to know why you got given a specific milkshake, and we have leftovers to choose from.”

I shrug and take another drink, “This is my milkshake. White chocolate. I’ve been ordering this every visit since I started coming here.”

“And when was that?” Jax asks.

“Since I was about four or five, maybe?” I’m not too sure. A long time though.

“Ah, that explains why you’re family to these people then.”

I nod happily but point out that everyone is made to feel that way. “Come back for a second visit, and you’ll be family too.” I’m only half-joking because I know Aunt J already approves of these guys, so they’ll be made welcome anytime, even without me here.

“Anyway,” I continue, “I have it on good authority that your milkshakes will taste amazing too.”

“I don’t know which to have,” Rebel complains. “They all look so good.”

“Try them all and see which you like best.”

Before I know it, my milkshake is whisked away from me, and Rebel takes a massive drink from it – using my straw! I protest loudly – that’s way too intimate – but he ignores me and passes my milkshake to Jax. Thankfully he takes a drink from the glass but passes it on to Ace. It’s almost gone already, and Thorn finishes it off. “Hey!” I pout.

“That was a seriously good milkshake!” Thorn smiles, smacking his lips.

The rest of the milkshakes get passed around in the same way, and I make a point of trying the other four. There’s caramel, mint choc chip (which I love), dark chocolate, and a weird peanut butter and jelly combo that Rebel loves. Of course, the SoCal guy would love a Pb&J milkshake. Everyone else admits the milkshakes are amazing but that they, too, like the white chocolate best, so we order up another round of those for everyone as Carey brings the food out.

Two enormous platters of breakfast are placed on the table and the guys’ jaw’s drop. I smile smugly at them as Carey returns with the pancakes and a boy I don’t recognise follows her out with a tray full of pancake toppings. By the time they’ve placed everything on the table, there’s not an inch of spare space. I smile and tell the guys to dig in, already heaping my plate with bacon, sausage, eggs and hash browns. The guys follow, and soon we’re all tucking in to fully laden dishes, and groaning about how good the food is.

The guys make short work of the breakfast platters, and I almost worry that they’re going to still be hungry when we’re done, but then I remember that the pancakes are always overkill. I load a fresh plate up with my three and peruse the toppings. Unlike with my milkshake choice, I always experiment with different pancake toppings. On one I pile fresh strawberries and cream, on another I heap blueberries and maple syrup, and on the last, I layer chocolate spread and sliced peaches. Not the most exciting combinations in the world, but it’s what I’m feeling today. Rebel leans over and helps himself to some of my chocolate peach pancake, declaring that he likes it. I’m a bit miffed with all the food and drink stealing. I have an urge to scream, “Raven doesn’t share food!” like Joey from Friends, but I’m not sure these guys will appreciate the reference. Instead, I smack Rebel on the back of the hand with my spoon when he tried to come in for seconds.

Pretty soon the guys are all groaning that they’re full, yet they just about manage to scrape their plates clean. Rebel looks like he might be sick. “I guess I’m winning the bet

then,” I smile. He gives me a sly look before shaking his head and calling Carey over. I quickly ask her for the bill, but Rebel interrupts me.

“Can I get another stack of fifteen pancakes, please? With a selection of toppings?” My jaw just about hits the table, and so does Carey’s. There’s no way we can manage another three pancakes each! “To go,” he adds.

That sly fucker!

“No fair! That doesn’t count!”

“You only bet that I wouldn’t order more pancakes. You didn’t say anything about eating them.”

“Don’t waste food. That’s barbaric,” I scold. I can’t stand the thought of Aunt J making those pancakes, especially just for them to be thrown away uneaten for the sake of a bet. It makes me feel sick, and not just because I’ve overeaten.

“I’m not. They were so good, I’m getting them to go. I’ll have them later. You didn’t say I had to eat the extras now.” His grin reaches epic shit-eating proportions, and I want to thump him. So I do. I thump him in the arm, not caring how he reacts. He’s so frustrating. But I’m also a little excited that he won and we get to go out. How sad is that?

I’m reaching for my purse when a sharp voice calls from the kitchen, “My goddaughter better not be trying to pay for her goddamn breakfast! I can buy her a meal if she stops by once in a bloody while.” I’m appropriately chastised when she appears at the door to the kitchen literally wagging her finger at me like I’m a naughty dog. “Tip the children. They get shit pay.” This is something of a joke. She pays the casual weekend and holiday staff, or ‘children’ as she calls them, exceptionally well. Even though many are under eighteen, she pays above minimum wage. But I’m more than happy to tip. I go to open my purse when a hand reaches out from across the table and stops me.

“We got this.” I look up into Jax’s gorgeous espresso eyes and see his sincerity. I can tell from the set of his jaw that there’s to be no arguing, so I nod and put my purse back into

my bag. The guys all pull out their wallets and drop a wad of bills on the table. I don't count it, but I can tell that each one of them has more than paid for our meal several times over. Whoa.

"I didn't bring you here to buy me brunch. I just wanted to share one of my favourite places with you all. But thank you. The tip will be much appreciated."

We stand up to leave, and as the guys head out to the car, I dip into the kitchen to say a quick goodbye to Auntie Josie. I want to thank her for the meal and to promise to come back soon. I quickly join the guys at the Jeep, climbing into the front again, and we're speeding back towards the school before I know it. I've had such a good time with them all that I don't really want it to end, but I am pretty tired. I'm a little sad when we pull up in front of the main entrance and I have to get out.

"I had a really great time today. With all of you. Thank you," I say sincerely. I reluctantly undo my seatbelt and go towards the door handle when Thorn stops me.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" he asks.

"Just a run in the morning. Why?"

"You run?" Ace asks from the back seat, his gentle, foreign voice lifting with interest.

"Yeah. I was going to check out some of the trails through the woods in the morning."

"I'll join you. Six am."

"Er—" I want to protest, but I have no idea how. The way Ace speaks is so matter of fact I'm not sure that I can tell him no. I'm excited to spend some time with him, I noticed he was pretty quiet today, but I don't know if that's because he's shy or if it's a language barrier thing. I'm just not excited about another early start! It's supposed to be the bloody holidays. I groan, but reluctantly agree to meet him at six tomorrow morning.

"After, come hang out with us. We'll cook you breakfast, and you can spend the day." Jax's proposal sounds much better

than spending the day alone, so I quickly agree, and his whole face brightens. He looks amazing when he smiles.

I say a quick goodbye and climb out of the car. Just as I'm heading up the stairs towards the main entrance, I hear the windows on the Jeep go down. I turn to see Rebel leaning over a very unhappy looking Jax, half hanging out the window. "We can arrange our date then!" he crows. I flip him off, and he howls with laughter. There's no need to show him how much I like him.

"Raven?" Thorn calls out. "I know you lost the bet, but maybe we can arrange our second date tomorrow too?" I smile and blow him a kiss as I run up the stairs and head to my room.

What have I gotten myself into now?

Lizzie's letter

Hey Sis,

Those girls are so infuriating! I have no idea what I've done to rile them up so badly. I ignore everything they say and everything they do, in the hopes that they'll get bored and move on. But of course, that's not happening.

Don't bother telling me to retaliate, Charl, you know that's not my style.

I did, however, get a teeny-tiny one-up on them this morning. I'll tell you about it.

So today was school picture day, and I woke up extra early to train in the pool. I figured I'd go down and do my lengths first, then I could do my hair nicely for the pictures. I got up and went to the bathroom to get ready and...have you guessed it?

One of my eyebrows has been completely shaved off! Like, off-off. It's gone!

I have no idea how they got into my room and did that while I slept, but I suppose it could be worse. What a stupid prank anyway.

What should I do?

Obviously, I could've skipped the pictures by hiding in the toilets, which would've been fine, except I still have to walk around with one freaking eyebrow missing!

I guess I could own it like you probably would have. You don't give a damn. You'd probably start a beauty trend and have half the girls in the school shaving their eyebrows by lunchtime. But I'm not that brave.

I pulled on my beanie and headed into town. When I got there, I used a payphone to call Grandma. She wasn't overly happy about being woken up at the 'god awful arse-end crack of dawn' as she put it, but she did send a car (within twenty minutes!) which took me to a salon, where a lovely stylist cut me in a fringe. I swear Grandma must have been paying her quadruple time or something because who would even be that happy to be woken up and dragged into work at half five in the morning?! Crazy right?

So now I have bangs! I actually really like the style. But that's not the best bit...

Thankfully, I don't have classes with any of the princesses, except gym but that's later in the week, so I didn't see any of them until we were all called to the main hall to have our photos taken. I made sure I was there first so that they were in the queue behind me. I could hear them whispering and laughing, but over what, I really didn't care.

When it was my turn, I stepped forward and sat on the seat. The way the photographer set up meant that his back was to the crowd, but I was sat facing them as he took my picture. The girls were just beyond him, somehow having pushed their way up the line. They called to those around them to look at me as they started to point and laugh at me, but they stopped short when they noticed no one else was laughing. In fact, the people around them looked confused. There was nothing but a new fringe and a really good blow-dry to look at. I heard a couple of people even say how good I looked.

I couldn't help but grin at them – my only reaction – when I saw the shock and disbelief on their faces. I feel like I channelled you for a moment there Charlie-Bear, all badass and stuff. Of course, I had this ridiculous grin on my face, so of course, that's when the photographer decided to take my picture. It'll look awful, but you can't win them all.

It may just be my favourite picture yet.

I love you. Be good.

Your Busy Lizzie x



CHAPTER SIX

The next morning – is it morning? I swear it’s still the middle of the night judging by how dark it is. I drag my sorry ass out of bed and get ready. Once I wash and braid my hair, I pull on my running gear, grab my water bottle and have a quick cereal bar to put me on. I smile. Lizzie used to go crazy when I used that phrase. She’d argue that it was too northern (when we were from the south), and would always try to insist that I just say I needed something to keep me going until a main meal. I didn’t think it mattered either way, but I made a point to use the phrase all the time to drive her crazy. These are the memories of Lizzie I want to remember, not those last few months of sporadic, vague letters where something was clearly wrong, but she no longer felt she could confide in me.

I quickly head downstairs and out the front door to meet Ace. He’s not there yet, so I spend a few moments stretching and warming up while I wait for him.

When he arrives, I swear, my mouth actually waters. He approaches me at a run, slowing to jog on the spot when he gets to me. He’s wearing long baggy shorts, trainers and a red hoodie with the hood pulled up so that it slightly obscures his face. The colour makes his tan pop and his violet eyes blaze out. The top’s unzipped, and he’s not wearing anything underneath. He’s cut, toned and athletic. He even has those sexy ridges and that ‘V’ by his hips. I think ‘V’ is fast

becoming my favourite letter of the alphabet! His shorts are scandalously low. I lick my lips, then immediately feel like a total perv.

“Hi.” I clear my throat and finish up my stretches. When I stand, I notice that Ace has been watching me closely. My cheeks colour.

“Morning. Let’s go.” He turns and takes off at a fast pace. Startled, I race to catch up to him, but once I do, I easily keep up. That’s not to say that I think he’s going easy on me, just that I’m used to running. In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s in the zone and has forgotten all about me already. We’re soon crossing the school grounds, cutting across the sports fields with the damp grass tickling my ankles. When we hit the woods, the tree cover is so thick that it’s hard to see. Luckily, I’m used to running in the dark, so it doesn’t faze me.

I let Ace go ahead and set the pace because the trail is too narrow in places. We run in silence, but it feels companionable. After a while I’m glad that he made me come out at this godforsaken hour. I can hear the birds waking and calling to one another, and as the sky lightens, I get to enjoy the fantastic autumnal colours of the leaves. I always used to say to Lizzie that Autumn is my favourite colour. It’s lovely out here.

We run for a good hour before stopping for a drink. While we rest for a moment, I take the opportunity to chat to him. He intrigues me, and I want to get to know him better.

“Where are you from Ace?”

“Here.”

Okay, not what I was expecting. I wonder if he understood my question. I try again. “Where were you born?”

“Hospital.” I wonder if he’s taking the piss.

“What country were you born in?”

“Oh!” His eyes widen with understanding. “Slovenia.”

Okay so he wasn’t taking the piss, this is a language barrier thing. “Wow, cool. When did you move to the U.K.

then?”

“Erm...I think I am four years here so far.”

“Do you like it?”

“For sure.”

“Do you miss Slovenia?”

“For sure.”

“How do you know the other guys?”

“We’re friends,” he says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. Getting to his feet, he finishes his drink and takes off again. “Come. We run again now.” I have no choice but to follow. I guess the getting to know each other part of our date is over. Not that this is a date. Just, you know, he’s really hot.

Flustered, I take off after him. But I don’t get far before I trip on a root I didn’t spot and go sprawling on the ground. Fuck! Ace must have heard me because he stops his run and comes back to me and helps me sit up. I have dirt and gravel in my knees and palms where I broke my fall, but I’m more concerned about my twisted ankle. It really smarts, and I can already tell that putting weight on it is going to be a bitch. I’m generally not a klutz at all, so my face is pink with embarrassment when Ace bends down to inspect my injuries. The pink becomes scarlet when he slides one arm under my ass and wraps the other around my back, lifting me up.

“Erm, thanks,” I stammer out. “I can walk, though.” I try to get down out of his arms, but he squeezes me tight.

“No.”

“No?”

“No walk. I carry. Not far.”

Oh, my goodness. I do not want or need to be carried anywhere. It’s just a twisted ankle, probably not even a sprain. I’m mortified now – this goes beyond embarrassment. I try to squirm and wiggle my way out of Ace’s arms, but he holds me tighter, and I end up just sort of rubbing against his hard, bare chest, making things worse, so I stop.

Now, I'm not about to be a girly girl and protest that I'm too heavy for him to carry. Hell, I think he can more than handle me, plus he decided to do this, so he can live with his choices if I am too heavy. But I'm a little concerned about where we're going. He said it's not far, but I know that we haven't been running a circular route, so that means we're nowhere near the main school building. And he hasn't made any effort to turn around and head in that direction. So where's he taking me?

I soon find out, as the trees give way to a small clearing with an old wooden two-storey house inside. It's charming, painted white with little blue window frames and shutters. The wraparound porch is a nice touch, and as we take the steps up to the front door, I even notice a swinging chair.

"You live here?" I ask, confused.

"Home. Yes." Ace barges straight through the door and turns left into a kitchen and breakfast room. He gently lays me on the island in the middle of the room. Jax comes in, topless, looking surprised to see us there. He's so lean and toned, his chocolate skin glistening in the early morning sun, he makes my mouth water.

"Why do you guys live in a house in the woods away from the main dorms?"

Thorn and Rebel enter the room, and Rebel replies, "Because the headmistress has a boner for me so I can do whatever I want."

The guys snort, but Jax throws him a dirty look. Thorn tells me, "The headmistress is Jax's mum—"

"Fuck off, Thor! She's my stepmother," Jax's gruff voice cuts in. I get the impression, from the tense set of his shoulders, that he's not too happy about this conversation. As he turns away from the guys, I see he has a large Celtic cross tattooed on his right arm. His arms are muscular but proportioned well with the rest of his body. He looks athletic and fit.

“Yeah, right, sorry dude. Stepmother. And so Jax here is allowed special privileges. A bit like you were, Princess. And because we’re his bros, we get to live here too.”

“What happened?” Jax asks, turning to me.

“Fell. Hurt. Fix.” Ace grunts before I can answer. I try to protest that I’m fine, but Jax just smirks and turns back to Ace. Rebel and Thorn grab a pop from the fridge and disappear back out again. Good. I don’t need an audience.

“So your date didn’t go well then?”

“This wasn’t a date. We were just running,” I cut in.

Both boys ignore me.

“Date good.”

“A date has to involve kissing or food or something at least.” I feel like Jax is baiting him, but I’ve no idea why.

Ace stalks over to the cupboard and yanks open the door, grabs something, and slams it shut again. Jax’s espresso eyes are glowing with mirth as he watches the exchange. Ace tosses whatever he got out of the cupboard at me, and I quickly catch it. I look down and see he’s thrown a packet of crisps at me. He points at them as he stalks towards me.

“Food, see?” When he gets to where I’m lying on the counter, he threads one hand through the hair at the back of my head and firmly but gently pulls my face towards his. Before I can do anything, his lips crush mine in a burning kiss. Holy shit. I’m so shocked I don’t respond; I just freeze like a statue and let him kiss me.

A moment later he pulls away, smirking. “See? Food and kiss. Date. Good kiss. Good date.” He pauses and looks at me quizzically. “Do over.”

“Wh-What?” I think maybe I bumped my head when I fell, I’m definitely a bit slow. I think that was a question, but I’m quickly learning that Ace doesn’t really ask anything.

“He wants a do-over on his date. He’s asking if he can date you again?” Jax kindly translates, but his shoulders are shaking with silent laughter.

“Erm, yes?”

Ace smiles at me, and it's breathtaking. Wow. I said it before, and I'll say it again. He's seriously beautiful. “Good. Shower. Change. Clothes,” he tells Jax. I'm guessing they're his plans now as he heads out of the kitchen. “Fix her.” That was definitely an order.

Jax goes to the kitchen sink and takes a small green first aid kit from the cupboard underneath. With his bare back to me, I'm surprised to see an enormous black tattoo spanning his entire back. It's a pair of mismatched wings; on one side are beautifully detailed feathers that resemble angel wings, and the other looks like a leathery, veiny bat wing. I love the contrast between the two, and the workmanship is exquisite.

When he turns back to me, I try to jump down off the counter, but he barks at me to stay put. “I'm fine, really. It's just a couple of grazes,” I try to insist, but Jax is adamant that he's going to look at them. I kind of give in, wondering if he's doing this because Ace told him to. Ace might be cute as fuck, but I wouldn't want to go against his orders. So I relax and let Jax do his thing.

Jax begins by taking my hands in his and gently brushes the loose gravel from my grazed palms. He gets a cloth, wets it, and wipes the cuts clean. There's a little blood but nothing too bad. Next, he does the same on my knees – and I sigh because my favourite pair of workout bottoms are all torn on the knees. Jax carefully peels the material away from the cuts and pushes it up my thighs so that he can see the extent of the damage. My knees are in a worse state than my palms, but they're really okay. It's not like I'm going to need stitches or anything.

Suddenly, I'm hyper-aware that Jax and I are alone in the room together. I watch as he cleans the blood from my shin that's run all the way down my leg. He's standing at the end of the island, between my parted legs, and it's an oddly intimate gesture. His hands are a burning caress on my bare skin. I squirm uncomfortably. He turns to the first aid kit and then back to me and presses something cold and wet against the cut on my left knee.

“Mother fucker!” I screech and jerk away from Jax’s touch. “What the fuck did you do that for?”

“I’m cleaning your cuts. Don’t be a baby.”

“You just did that with the water. Why the fuck are you pouring liquid fire on me?”

“Don’t exaggerate,” he huffs. “I’m using alcohol to make sure they don’t get infected.”

“They’re grazes. They’re not going to get infected. You clean them with water. You know, like a normal human being would?”

The bastard ignores me and continues to dab the alcohol on my other cuts. I’ll admit, it smarts for a second, but then it’s not too bad. I may have overreacted slightly. I blame his proximity. Once he’s happy that I’m not going to die of an infection, he puts the first aid kit away and goes to my swollen right ankle. He undoes my trainers and peels my socks off. Yuck. I mean, I’ve been running, so let’s not pretend this is some kind of Prince Charming, glass slipper in reverse, sort of moment. I’m pretty sure my feet stink. Surprisingly, Jax is a gentleman and doesn’t say anything, so I give him a bonus point for that.

He tentatively prods around my ankle, gently rolling the joint this way and that. I wonder if he knows what he’s doing.

“You need some heat on this.”

Huh. I guess not then. I smirk at him. “Some doctor you are Doctor Jax, everyone knows that you need ice for swelling.”

“Wrong, Patient Deighton.” The way he says my name has my body flaming up again. Is he flirting? Oh god, I hope not, not with my stinky foot in his hand! Except a part of me hopes that he is.

“You need heat for muscle pain and joint stiffness, which is what you have. The swelling is a side effect, not the problem.”

“So what do you suggest I do? Hold cooked food on it or keep a hairdryer on it?”

He smirks at my sassy response. “Neither. I prescribe a session in the hot tub – purely for medicinal reasons, of course.”

“Of course.” I smirk back. “And where can I get a hot tub?”

“Luckily, I happen to keep one here in my garden for emergencies such as these.” He slides his arms under me the same way that Ace did, and lifts me. I try to protest, but he shushes me. He actually shushes me like a small child! “You’re not to put any weight on this ankle for the rest of the day. Doctor’s orders.”

To be honest, I don’t really mind being pressed against another firm, sculpted chest as he carries me through the house and out of the french style patio doors into the garden. I’m a little concerned about getting home later if I take his advice, but then I figure he’s taking the doctor game a bit far, and I’ll be fine by then.

Jax walks us over to the hot tub and sits me on the edge. The thing’s massive, easily big enough for twelve people, and has full body loungers built-in. Heaven. Jax’s hands go to the edge of my shirt, and he lifts it up over my head. My arms shoot up automatically to help – or maybe stop – him, but he bats them away and continues to remove my top slowly. Once I’m sitting before him in my sports bra, his fingers run down my arms to the waistband of my leggings. His fingers lightly tease my stomach, and I struggle to sit still. It tickles, but it feels good too. Damn good. He starts to tug down my leggings, and I use my arms to lift my ass up so that he can pull them off. I’m just in my bra and panties now, and his espresso gaze is roaming every inch of my skin, scorching me wherever it goes. Our gazes meet, and I feel like time stops. My heart’s in my chest, thundering under his intense stare. I think he’s going to kiss me. I want him to, I really do.

Abruptly he turns and runs a hand over his jaw. The moment’s broken, and he looks pissed. Shit, what did I do

wrong? Suddenly, I feel self-conscious. I wrap my arms around my stomach and try to make myself small. I can't believe I'm half-naked in front of the guy and I can't even walk away.

Jax scoops me up and gently deposits me into the water. He leans over and kisses my forehead in a tender gesture and tells me he'll be right back. "Relax," he instructs as he heads back inside. I'm determined not to sit and stress about why he didn't kiss me, so I lie back and close my eyes. The warm water is magic and I instantly feel myself liquefy. It feels so good. Already my ankle feels better, but I also feel months of tension slowly seeping out of my body.

The sound of someone climbing into the hot tub brings me back, and I open my eyes, expecting to see Jax, but am greeted by Rebel's crotch right in my face. It's so close I could lick it if I wanted to. But I don't. Obviously. I don't want to, I mean. Although I don't lick it either. Ugh. You know what I mean. Anyway, I know it belongs to Rebel because that guy's literally tattooed everywhere. Not there. But everywhere else. So even though his crotch mostly fills my vision (yes he's apparently built and stacked everywhere!), I can make out ink in my peripheral vision. What I don't understand is why he's climbing into the hot tub completely naked, or why he's waving his cock around in my face.

"What the fuck Rebel?" I reach out to push him away but end up touching him there. Oh god, I need to die of embarrassment right now. "Get your crotch out of my face!"

"You're literally the first girl to ever say that to me." He laughs. "Where would you like it instead?"

"Ideally? Removed, pickled, and stuffed in a jar to make a nightlight for my bedside table...but I'll settle for on the other side of the tub." I shoo him away with a splash. He roars like I've just said the funniest thing, but moves to give me some space.

When he sits on the other side of the tub, massive arms stretched wide and head back, enjoying the warmth, I take a moment to study him. All of the guys are hot in their own

different ways. And I'm definitely attracted to all of them. But Rebel's something else. He's so much *more*. He truly looks like a man already. I love his sexy stubble on his cut jaw. From across the hot tub, I still can't make out his tattoos. I can tell they're all black, and a swirling mass of intertwined designs, but I'm too far away. It's frustrating, but I'm looking forward to getting to examine them up close.

Jax comes out with two bottles of pop for us and raises an eyebrow when he sees I already have company. He doesn't say anything though, sliding into the water. He takes my feet and places them in his lap and begins to massage both of my ankles. His hands are so skilled I can't help but groan at his touch.

"Shit man, that's cheating," Rebel gripes. "No using your magic massage on a chick, the rest of us won't stand a chance."

I stick my tongue out at Rebel and tell him he doesn't stand a chance anyway, then beg Jax to continue. With a smirk at Rebel, he obliges me, and I slip back into blissful relaxation.

We sit in silence enjoying the bubbles, and after a while, Ace and Thorn join us. The tub's so big I could stay stretched out on the lounge, but Thorn plops himself down right by me, so I feel obligated to sit up. Boo. Jax keeps hold of my feet, though, which makes me happy. I wiggle my toes and flash him a smile to thank him, but I accidentally fondle his crotch. Oh, dear god. At least he's got shorts on.

The boys start to chat about their plans for the week, inviting me to hang out and go to various places with them.

"Raven, can I take you out tomorrow?" Rebel asks.

I smile sweetly. "Can't. I'm washing my hair. Sorry."

"Tuesday then."

"Painting my nails. No can do." I shrug. I don't know what it is, but I love winding this guy up. Thorn clears his throat.

"Actually Raven, I thought you and I might go out on Tuesday. Alone."

“I’d love to!” I beam at him, and Rebel scowls.

“No fair. A bet’s a bet. You owe me.”

“Fine.” I sigh. “You can take me out tomorrow. And Thorn can have me on Tuesday.” I didn’t quite mean it to sound like that, but I refuse to blush. “Any other takers while we’re at it?” I joke.

“Me. Next day. Do over.” Ace insists. I smile and tell him, “Sure thing.”

“Well, I don’t want to be the odd one out. I guess I’ll take you out Thursday then.”

“Jeez, guys, I was joking. What will people think?”

“Who cares?” Jax says. “Besides, it’s half term. We’re more or less the only ones left on campus right now.”

“Right, well I’m starting to look like a prune, so I’m getting out. Can I have a shower and borrow some clothes, please?”

Jax jumps up and climbs out of the hot tub, grabbing a towel. He lifts me out and wraps me in it, then carries me inside. I’m pretty sure I should be mortified right now, but it’s just too hot for me to care. I’m being carried like a damsel in distress, against the defined chest of a seriously hot guy while three more look on with...is that jealousy that I see in their eyes?

Better make it a cold shower.

Jax carries me through the house, up the stairs and through his bedroom (well I’m assuming it’s his) to the en suite. He sits me on the side while he turns on the shower and warms it up for me. “Clean towels are there.” He points. “Shout me when you’re out. I’ll go and find you some clothes, okay?” I nod, and he turns to go, leaving the door open a crack. I think it’s so he can keep an eye on me, and not in a pervy way.

I quickly strip out of my wet things and hop into the shower. I’m careful not to get my hair or face wet. It feels incredible, a different kind of heat and sensation to the hot tub, and I quickly pinch some of Jax’s shower gel. It’s a very

masculine, smokey cedar and sandalwood scent that I adore. Done, I shut off the shower, grab a fresh towel and call out to Jax. I've barely got the words out when he sweeps in and scoops me up again, and I wonder if maybe he was watching me.

He takes me into his room and sits me on his large comfy bed. "Do you need help dressing?" There's a pile of sweats next to me on the grey blanket. I tell him no, and he goes to wait outside while I dress, again leaving the door open a crack.

I quickly dry off and take a moment to survey Jax's room. It's very masculine, in shades of navy and grey, but it's tidy and clean and smells lovely. His bed – a giant four-poster in carved dark wood – is so comfy I'm tempted to fall back and sleep the rest of the day away. I don't though; instead, I pull on Jax's white tank top and grey sweats. They're too big, but probably the closest fit out of all the guys. The tank top's loose and somewhat see-through, cut so low on the arms that I'm showing a generous amount of side boob. Luckily, Jax left me out a grey hoodie, and the sweats have a drawstring I can pull tight. I unbraid my hair and run my fingers through it before calling out that I'm done.

He comes in, and his gaze sweeps over me. All of a sudden, I'm on fire again. He cocks his head to one side, surveying me. "Do you know," he begins, "I'm not sure if you look seriously hot right now because you'd look good in anything, or if it's because you're wearing my clothes and smelling like my shower gel."

I apologise for the shower gel.

"Don't be sorry. It's sexy as hell. I can't wait to get you downstairs in front of the others. It feels like I've staked my claim on you." His words make me blush and squirm uncomfortably. I need to get a grip because I'm not wearing any panties, and I don't want to mess up his sweats. Jax blatantly stares at my chest, so I hastily zip the hoodie up. "Cold?" He smirks, and I agree, but I know he's not buying it.

He carries me downstairs and deposits me on the sofa between Thorn and Rebel, making sure my feet are up in Thorn's lap. There's a selection of bagels and muffins on the table and Jax passes me one.

"Oh, I love muffins! Thanks." I dig in, starving, despite it only being about ten o'clock. It's been a long morning. Mostly good though, ankle aside.

"That's not a muffin," Rebel gripes. Oh, here we go. He's an American, so we have to go through the whole 'what is a muffin' debate.

"This is a muffin."

"A muffin is a giant cupcake." He points to my breakfast, "THAT is not a muffin."

"It's a breakfast muffin."

"That's a giant cupcake with oats in it and breakfast flavours. You know, like blueberry or banana."

"Fine. This is an ENGLISH breakfast muffin, and I love it."

"Meh. I'll stick to bagels."

"You have no idea what you're missing! Oh well, more for me then." I sigh happily and tuck in to another muffin. It's delicious, filled with sausage and egg. I wonder who the chef is? It couldn't have been Jax, he was by my side the whole time.

We while away the day eating tapas and later pizza, playing games and watching movies. Rebel smiles at me and chooses to watch 21 and 22 Jump Street, which I love. We make our way through about half of the Fast and Furious franchise too (Ace's choice), and Thorn opts for a rom-com I've never seen before. It's funny and lighthearted, and just what I needed to break the tension of the hot tub and shower embarrassments.

Day gives way to evening, then night, and the guys try to persuade me to stay the night, but I refuse. That would be too weird. And I'm not that kind of girl even if I did know them

better. Jax offers to drive me back to my dorm, and because my ankle still hurts, I let him. I say a quick goodbye to the other guys, giving each of them a hug and a peck on the cheek because it just feels right. Then head out to the Jeep with Jax supporting me so that I'm walking, but not putting weight on my foot. I much prefer it to being carried, to be honest.

The ride back to the school is short, and I know that I could easily have walked it any other time. Jax insists on walking me up to my room, and because there're so few people around, I let him. The ride up to the top floor in the lift is silent.

When we get to my door, I expect there to be an awkwardness between us, but Jax doesn't allow time for that. He takes my key from my hand and helps me inside. Jax leaves me standing in the doorway while he goes over to the bed and turns on the lamp. He heads straight over to my fridge and grabs a bottle of water which he places on my bedside table. He moves around the room with ease, like he's been here before, and that makes me a little uncomfortable.

"I'm going to tuck you in so that you don't have to put any weight on your foot. Do you need to use the bathroom?" I nod and allow him to help me walk in there. I quickly wash my face, brush my teeth, use the loo and wash my hands. I limp back into the bedroom, and Jax immediately meets me at the door and helps me the rest of the way. I try to tell him that I need to change into my PJs, but he shushes me.

"Sleep in my clothes. They're comfy, and I like the thought of you sleeping in my things. How many pillows do you sleep with?"

"One, why?"

He pulls back my duvet and grabs my spare pillows. Lifting me into the middle of the bed, he lies me down, placing one pillow on either side of me. The third pillow he places at the bottom of the bed, elevating my ankle.

"What are you doing?"

“Making you a princess bed. Once you sleep like this, you’ll never sleep any other way again.” He smiles, then winks. “Well, not when you’re alone anyway.” He quickly covers me with the duvet and tucks me in – literally tucks me in – and strokes a strand of hair back from my forehead.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Rest,” he tells me, turning to leave.

“What, no goodnight kiss?” I ask cheekily.

He stops and spins back to face me. He leans over the bed and presses his mouth to mine. His kiss is everything I would expect from this assertive leader – demanding, devouring and leaves me breathless. He deepens the kiss, his tongue demanding entrance into my mouth and dancing with mine. His passion is bruising, but I love it.

I try to loop my arms around his neck, but he pins them above my head without breaking from his kiss. I whimper, and wetness floods his sweats that I’m wearing. I don’t want him to stop. I don’t want him to leave.

Abruptly, he pulls away, panting hard like me, and flicks off the light. I feel bereft. “Sleep Raven. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I swear I’m asleep before I even hear the door close.

Lizzie's letter

Hey sis,

I bet you heard from Mum and Dad that Headmistress Archer called to say I had an accident. I'm fine – I really am! I just had a little 'help' falling down the stairs and broke my ankle. You can't say anything to Mum and Dad – I'm invoking twin code on that one!

It's fine. I'm pretty sure I didn't see who did it. I mean, the stairs were pretty busy between lesson changeover, so it was probably an accident anyway, and it's just a coincidence that Lexxi was there and laughing. There was no lasting damage done. Broken bones heal pretty quickly, and I didn't even need a cast. I'm just wearing a space boot so I'm still able to swim, and that's pretty much all I care about! It's actually pretty good therapy for my ankle anyway.

Thank goodness I'm thinking of joining the choir and not the cheer team!

I'm really, really excited for choir auditions after Halloween. It's still a few weeks away yet, but I need to perfect my audition piece. What do you think I should sing? I don't even have a shortlist at this point. I'm just drawing a blank. Help!

I've already noticed in my music lessons that there's some pretty steep competition. I'm not looking to win a solo at the winter concert or anything (really hope you can come to that?!), but I'd really love a spot in the choir.

Trust me, these girls are a whole other world of crazy competitiveness. I'd rather stay out of all that. A small spot at the back that lets me do what I love is more than enough for me.

Even the stars in the sky that you don't see are still shining.

I love you, sis. You are still being good, right?

Your Busy Lizzie x



CHAPTER SEVEN

The rest of my week was a blur of dates – all were amazing and involved kisses – outings and hanging out with the guys. I saw at least one of them every day, and we often spent at least some part of the day all together. After I rested my ankle for a couple of days, Ace and I ran together every morning, and we often unwound together afterwards in the hot tub (I made sure to bring a bikini and a change of clothes!) Hanging out with the guys was everything I didn't know I needed. They made me feel at ease, and they all made me laugh. Honestly, it was the best week I'd had in years. It was undoubtedly the most I'd smiled and laughed and been happy for sure.

I quizzed the guys at every opportunity I could, desperate to get to know them better. I found out a crazy amount of stuff about each guy, but my favourites were that Ace would be training in Krav Maga with me after half term, (I have to fan myself when I think about that), that Rebel is in a rock band (unexpected but not unwelcome), that Jax is the school's champion rower, and that Thorn's taste in movies is as horrible as my own. We watched several chick flicks together, and he could quote them all word for word, putting on ridiculous falsetto voices and making me cry with laughter.

I was sad for the week to end. I wasn't ready to go back to reality, classes, and dealing with bullies. Tomorrow I'll have been here for two weeks; I've had my settling in time, made

some friends, and gotten the lay of the land. It's time for action now. I need to get the plan underway.

It's time to take a stand.

Tomorrow will be the first day back in classes after half term, and everyone has returned to school this afternoon in preparation for tomorrow, so the peace and quiet I'd enjoyed all week is broken. I needed an 'in' with the girls, so it's time to flaunt the family name. I shudder at the thought. I don't want to, but I need to.

At dinner that evening I purposely make sure that I'm a little late. I need to be sure that the room's full and that all five princesses – ugh can't believe I'm using Michael's term for them – are seated. Once the coast is clear, I throw my shoulders back, flick my hair, saunter into the room like I own it, and stride confidently straight over to the girls' table. I had previously noticed it was always set for five – but there was enough room for more people – so I grab an empty chair from a nearby table, pull it over to theirs and sit down, snatching the menu. The ruse of studying the menu gives me a moment to compose myself and to try to calm my racing heart. Deep breaths, Rae, deep breaths.

“You can't sit with us.”

I hold back a smile as Tilly hisses at me. Good. I want to rile her up. Plus, how pathetic is she? I ignore her and motion for the server to come over so I can place my order. Even he looks nervous, like some major shit is about to go down. Seriously? Over a seat? Once I'm done, I place the menu down and smile up at the five faces surrounding me.

“Oh hi guys, what was that, Tilly?” It's hard to keep from laughing at the expressions on their faces. Tilly looks like she's having a fit, Belle looks bemused, and the other three are stunned and watching their leader for guidance.

“You can't sit with us.” This time Tilly is clearly struggling to control her tone and volume. I can tell she wants to shriek at me and really lose her shit. I grin now, a slow, lazy Cheshire Cat grin that I know will really tip her over the edge, but before she can respond, Belle's quiet voice cuts in.

“She can.”

“What?” This time Tilly does shriek, swivelling around to look at Belle. I can sense the tension rising as all eyes in the room swivel to our table. Who am I kidding? All eyes were on us the moment I approached their table and pulled out the final seat. But now I can hear their open whispers and feel their curiosity burning the back of my neck with a prickly heat I’m not used to.

“Rules – that you agreed to I might add – state that the richest are in the inner circle. Inner circle sits at this table. You know who she is.” Belle finishes with a simple shrug, sipping her milkshake as if she didn’t care either way.

“Look,” I begin, “I don’t want to be here any more than you want me to be,” it’s not exactly a lie, but then I go for the ultimate name drop as I continue, “but Grandma insists. Deighton namesake and all that.” I shrug as if I couldn’t care either way, but I know that mentioning my family name and my grandma in the same breath will pack a powerful punch. I know I’m right when Tilly blanches and sits back a little lower in her chair. No way will she go against Cordelia Deighton. Not if she values her standing in society. It’s a manipulative move, but I don’t care. I need to get in with these girls and gain their trust so that I can take them down all the more quickly.

“But there’s only ever been five...”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind making waves and starting a new tradition.” Ugh, this forced nonchalance is starting to grate. Luckily, the server brings our food over and so I begin to eat as if I don’t have a care in the world.

“It has to be five.” Tilly’s not budging on this. Not that I expected her to. I seriously doubt it’s because she’s a stickler for the rules, I’m sure it has more to do with saving face and keeping up appearances. Whatever. Tilly annoys me, and it’s not just because she bullied my sister. She just has a smugly perfect face that you want to punch.

I sigh and put down my cutlery, giving Tilly and her three cronies a hard stare. I purposely don’t look at Belle because

she stuck up for me. Kinda. “Okay, so it has to be five. The five richest right?” I pause, and when I continue, all fake semblance of niceness is dropped from my voice and I let my eyes turn to stone. “Who’s leaving then? Because I think we all know that it won’t be me...or Belle.” I add that little caveat at the end, and I see Belle blink at me in surprise. Ah, so she has secrets too. I’m guessing from her alternative look and the way she flies under the radar that not everyone knows. After me, Belle’s heir to the largest fortune in this school. Probably in the county to be honest, outside of royalty anyway. Her wealth alone more than rivals the rest of the school’s put together. I smile at that.

Tilly’s face drains of all colour while the other three glance surreptitiously at one another, trying to scope out who’s the weakest link. I know it’s Tilly, and so does Belle and Tilly herself, but there’s no way the others do, and Tilly isn’t about to go down without a fight. Instead, she takes a deep breath, composes herself and gives me an overly bright fake smile.

“Fine! But on Sundays we—”

“Please don’t finish that sentence with ‘wear pink’.”

Belle snorts, she at least gets my movie reference and appreciates it. The others stare blankly at me.

“We meet in one of our rooms after dinner to study. Come to my room in half an hour. We wear PJs.”

I raise my eyebrow. Did she seriously just dictate the clothing choice of five people? Six, if I want to fit in? Ah damn. I watch as they all go to file away, except Belle who stubbornly tells Tilly she’ll leave when she’s ready, and wonder what I’ve got myself in for.

Once we’re alone – as alone as you can be in a canteen full of people – Belle looks at me over the top of her glass. Her gaze is cool, assessing. For a moment she doesn’t say anything, just finishes off her milkshake before standing. Just as I think she’s going to leave without a word, she pauses and turns back to me. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Raven.” There’s something odd in the way she lightly emphasises my name. With that, she’s gone.

Phew. I let out a slow breath, glad I can finally breathe again. All in all that didn't go too badly. There's no way these girls trust me, but it's a step in the right direction. Their own stupid rules demand that they talk to and include me at least. I wonder, not for the first time, if Lizzie had come here under the Deighton name if things might have been different for her. It's too late for it to matter now, but I hate that it probably would've made a big difference.

I leisurely finish off my meal and think about the princesses. Belle, in particular, is an enigma. She isn't the ring leader at all – in fact, she seems to want to be in the circle about as much as I do – but she's not a pushover. She's the only one I've seen actually stand up to Tilly. She's definitely the only person I've seen Tilly listen to.

As much as I'd love to sit and think about the interesting dynamic between the princesses, I needed to get moving to get ready for the looming study session. Luckily I'd planned for this meeting, and thanks to Michael, I knew all about their study sessions and the required PJs. There's no way I'm getting caught out by Tilly by turning up in my cute Niffler PJs. No, thanks to Michael, I knew that 'pyjama study session' really meant dressing up to the nines in sexy sleepwear was required. Luckily, I had time to shop at Agent Provocateur before coming here.

I quickly head up to my room and change into my silk, monogrammed PJs. It makes me laugh thinking of Lizzie's letter where she teased me for not being a monogrammed stationery kind of girl. She'd have a fit if she could see me now in a matching black silk set with baby pink piping and frou-frou slippers. I look ridiculous dressing up to study but appearances, especially with the princesses, will be everything. I grab my notebook and pencil case, my water bottle, and some snacks before heading out the door and along the corridor to Tilly's room.

Everyone's already there, of course. When I knock, and from the way the room goes silent when I enter, I know they were talking about me. Tilly gives me a look that could kill

while the other three glare at me. Only Belle smiles and welcomes me in.

I look around the room decked out in so much pink and barely contain a shudder. The apartment is beautifully and tastefully decorated – I’m coming to realise that everything at West Prep is – but it’s just so pink. Not my taste at all. If I’d worn all pink, I would’ve blended in with the walls or the mountain of cutesy little cushions that seem to be piled everywhere. Belle’s seated at Tilly’s desk, books open, and seems to actually be trying to study. The others are all lounging around on Tilly’s bed, sipping Prosecco and gossiping. They’re all dressed to the nines in the finest, most glamorous, and in Tilly’s case downright sexiest, ‘PJs’ (read: underwear) I’ve ever seen. I’m glad I didn’t fall for their trick and turn up in Jax’s sweats with my boobs hanging out the sides. Can you imagine?

I enter and close the door behind me, choosing to take the sofa nearest to Belle, rather than joining the girls on the bed. I’m already uncomfortable as fuck and wondering how soon I can leave. I offer Belle the crisps I brought with me and then sit and start jotting down ideas for my English project with Michael.

“So Raven. You’ve been here, what, two weeks now?” I glance up at Tilly and nod apprehensively. The look on her face is not pleasant. “So which guy – or guys – have you got your eye on?” The way she says it, with a feral gleam in her eye, is like she already knows how I’ve spent the last week. There’s no way she can know though, so I shrug.

“There’s a few cute guys in my classes but no one I’ve approached.”

“What about Bloomberg?” Ah. That’s what she’s getting at.

“He’s okay. I mean, he’s pretty cute, I guess. Not really my type, though.”

“Oh, I heard you looked pretty tight in English together last week, and you sat at his table.”

I shrug noncommittally. “He was assigned to show me around when I got here, so it just kinda stuck. We’re paired together for this English project, so we have to hang out some, for a while at least.”

“Well a word of warning, I wouldn’t get too close if I were you.”

“Why, are one of you guys dating him?”

They laugh, a cruel, harsh sound, at my question. “No way. He used to be fuckable, maybe even datable, but he’s on the outs now. No one has anything to do with him. Even his best friends and his girlfriend dropped him, right Natalia?” Natalia’s cheeks flame and I can tell that Tilly’s dig has touched a nerve. Interesting. Michael never said anything about dating any of these girls in his letters.

“Noted. Thanks for the head’s up.” I continue to study in silence for a while, but Tilly has other ideas.

“How come you’re just joining our school now, Raven? And why didn’t we even know that Cordelia Deighton had a grandchild ’til now? Are you illegitimate or something?”

“Tilly!” Belle gasps, shocked. “You can’t say that!”

“What? Everyone’s thinking it, I just have the balls to ask.”

“It’s fine, Belle, don’t worry.” I’m not worried because I came more than prepared for questions like this. “No, Tilly, I’m not illegitimate. We’re just a very private family. You guys only know Cordelia’s name because of her legacy and donation statuses. She’s actually a very private woman and doesn’t front her empire now. So, you wouldn’t know much about her personal life. And I’m just joining now because my other school didn’t offer me the combination of exams that I wanted.”

“Oh, that’s so boring,” Lexxi complains. “I thought you’d be more interesting than that!”

“Nope sorry, I’m very dull.”

“You weren’t dull when you demanded you sit with us and allowed you entry into the inner circle,” Amber observes. Tilly throws her a death glare. “What? It’s the most interesting thing to happen in months in this place,” she adds defensively.

I laugh. “Well, it’s the most interesting thing I’ve done in months too. Cordelia decided I should have the full West Prep experience in my limited time here. So here I am.”

“Welcome,” Tilly’s voice is so much warmer this time and for a split second her complete one-eighty shocks me. Then, as I give an insincere “thanks” back at her, I study her face closely. It’s sly and calculating. It’s a face I’ve seen before, and often when people realise who my grandmother is and want to use me to get to her. That’s what Tilly looks like right now. Which is fine. She can try, but she won’t get anywhere. However, there’s something else in her face too that causes me to shudder. It’s the look of someone who wants to delve into your past, uncover all your buried secrets, and exploit them.

I’m going to have to be careful with this one. No slip-ups. Now that I’m in, I’m going to have to watch myself more than ever. I briefly wonder if the guys I’ve gotten to know over the last week can offer me any sort of protection from Tilly and the princesses, then I immediately want to hit myself. I am not the kind of girl that hides behind others or needs a man to protect her.

“Do you have a phone here with you, Raven?” Natalia asks.

“I thought they were banned?”

“They are. But for fourth years it kinda gets overlooked.” Interesting. I wonder if students snuck phones in when Lizzie was here. I know she had some trouble with bullying through the school email system.

“You should get one,” Tilly advises me.

“Hmmm sure.” I try to be noncommittal. I just don’t care all that much about having a phone. Obviously back home I had one, but I’ve enjoyed the lack of contact with the outside world for the last couple of weeks. It’s liberating. However, if

there's any way a mobile phone will help me in bringing down these bitches, I won't hesitate to get one.

As a general rule, my tolerance level for bullshit is pretty low. And my tolerance level for vapid bitches is non-existent. It's safe to say that my patience has truly worn out after another half hour or so of listening to Tilly and her cronies bitch and snipe about just about every teacher and student in our year group. I'm relieved when Belle announces she's done all she can here and that she needs to head to the library to conduct some research. I jump at the opportunity to get the hell out of the stifling pink palace and offer to join her. We say a hasty goodbye to the girls who barely wait until I'm out of the room before they start talking about me, and we head out into the corridor. We amble along towards the lift, but I stop when we get to my door.

"You know," Belle begins, "you didn't need to wait for me to leave. You could just go whenever you wanted."

"I didn't want Tilly to think I'm...weak." I'm not sure I've used the right word there to explain what I'm feeling.

"Tilly's going to think whatever she wants about you, regardless of anything you say or do. She won't be swayed. And she isn't going to like you, no matter what."

"Good to know. But why?" It's not like I care, but I have a feeling I need to know how big of a threat she really is.

"It's not my story to tell, but let's just say Tilly has big issues with your family. She doesn't like surprises, and you were a large and most unwelcome surprise for her."

"How worried do I need to be?"

"I'd watch your back. And if you can, sleep with one eye open. Talking from experience, the things she can do are enough to give anyone nightmares." Belle shudders as she continues to walk down the hall away from me. Instinctively, I know that once again, this is a conversation about Lizzie. It puts me on high alert.

"Why are you telling me this? Why are you friends with her?"

“You seem nice. Maybe even strong enough to withstand her where others have failed in the past.” Lizzie. “And you know that age-old saying about keeping your friends close...?” she shrugs and calls the lift. It immediately pings. Stepping in, she turns to me and just as the doors shut, she softly calls once again, “I really hope you know what you’re doing, Raven.”

Damn it. I let myself into my room, my mind reeling. I’m going to have to be really careful. I knew Tilly was dangerous and unhinged – clearly, what teenage girl bullies another to the brink of suicide? – but I didn’t expect to have a target on my back. No, I thought I’d be the one firing all the arrows. I might need to rethink my strategy here.

I need to do some serious digging on Tilly and her family. Michael’s notes aren’t going to cut it. Come to think of it, I need to find out his story too, without asking him outright. There must be a reason he hasn’t told me about his involvement with the princesses; I just hope it’s out of embarrassment rather than because he’s keeping secrets from me for his own agenda. I need a way to research these families on the school’s network. Everything on the system is monitored and too easily hacked. I don’t want anyone knowing what I’m up to. I need to get my hands on a phone.

I’ll have to figure out how to do that tomorrow. Right now, I’m absolutely exhausted. I quickly head to the bathroom to get sorted, then flop down into bed, rearranging the pillows so that I’ve made a princess bed. Jax was right, since that first time, I’ve slept like this every night. Being surrounded by pillows is comforting, and I could use some comfort right now. I slip under the sheets, turn off the light to get comfy and expect to toss and turn, worrying about my conversations with Tilly and Belle tonight. Instead, sleep hits instantly, and I’m out cold.

Lizzie's letter

Hey sis,

Sorry I haven't written in a while. The school work has been hectic. It's hard, but I'm enjoying it. I've had some... trouble I guess you could say. It's nothing to worry about at all – don't panic! I've just had a few girls being a bit bitchy to me. I'm not sure why, but I think it may have something to do with the guy I'm tutoring – do you remember I told you about him? Well, we've become pretty close. Friendly even. And these girls don't seem to like that.

I haven't said anything to him. And I won't. I mean, I can handle it. It's not even anything that bad. But I wanted to let you know.

Anyway, enough of the sad stuff, let me tell you all about the Halloween party I'm going to – I know! Two parties in one term. Who am I, and what has happened to your twin?!

Do you think I need to dress up for it?

Oh my goodness, do you remember when we were in our final year at primary school, and Mum and Dad let us have a Halloween party? It was so good because everyone dressed up, and Mum and Dad went all out with the food and decorations and everything. That was so good. My favourite memory from that night was Dad dressing in Mum's velvet cloak and wearing a mask to open the door and scare all our friends. But one time when he did it, it was actually the paper lady at the door, and she screamed so loud. I thought she was going to die of fright, and I thought Dad was going to die of embarrassment.

I wish you were here. It'll be so weird not having our usual Halloween tradition of watching scary movies by candlelight

*and eating all the candy that Mum got for the trick or treaters.
I miss you Charlie-Bear.*

I love you. Be good.

Your Busy Lizzie x



CHAPTER EIGHT

“Little bird,” Rebel says as he plonks himself down in the seat next to me in chemistry. It’s Monday morning, and I’m so not ready for anything remotely school related. Ugh, why can’t it be school holidays all the time? “I hear you’ve put the cat among the pigeons.”

I glower at him. I’m not a morning person. Not today, anyway. “I have no idea what you’re talking about granite boy, nor do I care.” My growl is almost as low and deep as his, only mine is in annoyance, and his is just his sexy voice.

“Granite boy? Ouch. I used to be ‘granite mountain’.”

“That was before you shoved your cock in my face.”

“Burn...you know, if you’re going to be mean to me, I’m not sure I want to pass on the gift that Thor gave me for you.” He takes a flask out of his bag and waves it tantalisingly in front of my face.

“Gimme!” I instantly brighten, knowing that Thorn has sent hot chocolate in that flask for me. It’s just what I need to get me going today. On days like today, I really wish I liked coffee, but sadly I just can’t stand the taste of the stuff. Love the smell, though. Is that strange? I make a grab for the flask, but Rebel easily holds it out of my reach. Ugh, stupid short girl problems again.

“Uh-uh.” He tsks-tsks me, and if it weren’t for my fear of spilling the chocolate nectar he was wielding, I would punch him in the arm.

“Please?” I begrudgingly beg, but he doesn’t budge.

“No. You insulted me and my cock. Say something nice.”

“Okay, fine! Please, Rebel, can I have the hot chocolate?” He stares at me, one eyebrow raised as if to say ‘Is that the best you can do?’ so I sigh and continue, “Your cock is magnificent, it’s mighty, and it’s mammoth!”

His shit-eating grin stretches from ear to ear, and I realise that half the class has just heard me yelling about how much I love Rebel’s cock. Fucking great. I turn crimson. It’s not even nine am, and my big mouth is already getting me into trouble. Rebel’s shoulders shake with silent laughter, and he slides the flask across the desk towards me. I practically snatch it from him with a snarl and scramble to unscrew the lid like a frenzied addict. Without pausing, I lift the flask to my lips and guzzle the sweet drink. I don’t need to worry about burns, Thorn always makes it the perfect temperature for me and has found a way to get the beverage to me every morning since our first date. It’s fucking delicious, and I swear it tastes better than ever today.

“That’s all you had to say. Just be nice. You’re always nice to the others, why not try being nice to me once in a while?”

A dribble of chocolate escapes my lips and runs down my neck. Rebel’s finger shoots out and catches it, then he brings his finger to his lips and sucks the chocolate drop off. That makes me pause in my guzzling and lower the flask back to the table. The move on his part was seriously intimate, and I can’t help but imagine it was his tongue chasing the errant dribble. Damn, I can’t believe I’m sitting, waiting for class to start, and getting turned on by Rebel and a chocolate drop! I clear my throat and consider his question: why can’t I just be nice to him? Because I like him too much. Because he sets me on fire without even trying. Because I want to lose control with him.

“More fun this way.” I shrug with forced nonchalance. “You’re the best whipping boy I ever had.”

“Huh? You want to whip me?” He scratches his confused head, and it’s seriously adorable. He seriously just misunderstood my meaning, but I don’t bother to correct him.

“Not my kink, but sure, darling,” I tease him with a flirty wink. Luckily, I’m spared his response by the arrival of the teacher. We share a look and get down to business, all conversation and flirting forgotten. For the time being at least.

After chemistry, Rebel and I have biology together in the same classroom. It’s tough, the three and a quarter hours in the same room with the same teacher, but Mr Cabrera is a nice guy, and he lets us go and stretch our legs and stuff in the five minute lesson changeover. Most of his chem students are doing biology like me. I guess there’s a lot of budding doctors at West Prep.

When the bell goes, Rebel pulls me from the table and starts yanking me towards the door. I pull myself free and walk beside him. “I get it! Where are we going?”

“Toilet,” he grunts.

He pulls me along the corridor and drags me into the ladies toilets. Thankfully they’re empty. “What are you doing? You can’t be in here!”

“You need the loo,” he tells me. Weird, but come to think of it, I could do with it. Though I’m sure that’s not really why he dragged me in here.

“So? I’m not going to go to the toilet with you in here!”

“Why not? There’s doors.”

“Because you’ll be able to hear!” I don’t think I’m being a girly girl here, I just think Rebel’s overstepping the line. I’ve noticed that about him. Yesterday, I was showering in Jax’s ensuite, and he walked in on me. I hadn’t thought to lock the bathroom door because I was in Jax’s room, but that didn’t stop Rebel from barging in and having a good look. I definitely would’ve thumped him that time if I hadn’t been naked.

“So? I know what you’re doing anyway. Look, it’s no big deal. Watch.” He strides into the nearest cubicle and proceeds to have a wee – with the door open. I can’t see anything, obviously, but still.

“Where’s the fucking boundaries, Rebel?!” I cry. He finishes up, flushes and turns to me before putting his junk away. He walks over to the tap, cock out, and washes it. Once it’s tucked away and he’s rezippped, he washes his hands.

“See? No big deal.” He turns to me.

“Why did you just wash your cock?”

“Always do. Keeps it mouth-ready. For the ladies.” He winks.

“You’re so gross. Enough cock talk. Aside from needing to use the facilities, why are we in here?”

“Told you. Cat among the pigeons.” Now that I’m a little more awake, I can concentrate on his words, but to be honest, I still don’t have a clue what he’s talking about. I just stare at him blankly. “Heard you caused quite the stir at dinner last night.” Ah, I think he’s talking about my choice of dinner seating. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Little Bird.” I nod, and he grins. “Good. Things were getting boring around here, and you’ve definitely shaken them up. I can’t wait to see what else you do.”

“Yeah about that...why are you guys never in the dining hall?”

“You’ve been in our kitchen, why do you think?” I smile. He has a point. If I lived in that house, I wouldn’t want to leave to eat in a dining hall, no matter how nice it is.

“Why? You miss us?” I shrug, refusing to answer that. “Aww, Little Bird, you only have to ask.” He slings his arm around my shoulder and pulls me in close. I’m so tiny next to him. I love it. “C’mon, we better get to class, Princess. Hmmm, I think Thorn has the right idea calling you that. It suits you,” he tells me as the bell goes.

It’s only when I slip into my seat that I realise I didn’t go to the loo. Damn it. He’s that much of a distraction.

That evening at dinner, I get the shock of my life. Maybe I should've seen it coming, after the time spent in the toilet with Rebel, but I honestly didn't. I'm pretty tired after starting back in class, but still, I'm usually more on the ball than this.

I'm sitting with the princesses, mostly being ignored, when suddenly the hall is full of whispers. It's a low-level noise that spreads like wildfire throughout the room in a wave. Tilly's jaw drops faster than her fork clattering to her plate. The other girls' eyes go wide, and even Belle looks mildly intrigued.

Before I can turn around to see what all the fuss is about, a strong and heavy hand lands on my shoulder. Rebel. I know it's him before he even speaks, though I'm not sure how I know it. "Princess, you shouldn't be sitting with the riff-raff. Come join us, Little Bird." His tone is softer than anything I've heard from him before, but it leaves no room for argument either. I can't believe he's just called the princesses riff-raff!

The room's buzzing now, students no longer whispering behind their hands, but gossiping outright. I try to avoid meeting the girls' gazes as I stand, but I accidentally catch Tilly's. "What the fuck?" she screeches, and the room goes dead. I guess she can't believe she's been called riff-raff either.

"Tilly—" Belle warns.

I hastily grab my plate and get to my feet, following Rebel over to the empty round table that sits next to the girls'. I'd always wondered who it belonged to. It's set for five. Rebel takes a seat, and I sit down beside him, Thorn taking my other side, with Ace and Jax plonking down beside me. They grab menus and quickly order, oblivious to the commotion going on around us.

"Guys, what's going on?" I ask them, glancing from one to the other.

"Rebel said our girl missed us at meals, so here we are." Thorn grins, arms outstretched.

“Your girl?” I raise an eyebrow dubiously.

“Yeah, our girl. Have you or have you not been on dates with all of us?” Jax asks.

“Well yeah, but—” It sounds bad when he puts it like that.

“My girl,” Ace grunts, pointing to himself. He points to each of the boys in turn, “Jax’s girl, Thor’s girl, Rebel’s girl.”

“Our girl.” Rebel smiles, his arm around my shoulders again. I let it go. This isn’t the time or place to talk about it, especially not with so many eyes on us. I can feel Tilly throwing daggers with her eyes at me. If looks could kill, I’d be dead several times over already.

When the boys’ food comes, they tuck in as I’m finishing up, and the conversation becomes laid back. They talk about their classes and assignments, their weekend plans. There’s no drama, and eventually, the rest of the crowd go back to whatever they were doing before.

“Is this your table? How come you guys have an empty table if you never use it?” I ask quietly and the guys all exchange a glance. “No bullshit,” I quickly insist.

Of course, Jax is the one to answer me, “See those girls over there?” He points to the princesses’ table, and I nod, wondering where he’s going with this.

“We’re them. But the male version.”

“You guys rule the school? You’re princes?”

Jax pulls a face at the term but confirms it. Whoa. I really didn’t see that coming. Why hadn’t Michael mentioned it? Or the girls? The guys don’t act like Tilly and her cronies.

“Who’s more powerful, you guys or the princesses?” There’s a twisting in my gut that I don’t want to address.

“Us.”

“Why? Are you having trouble with them?” Rebel cuts in.

“What? No! Nothing like that,” I placate him, sensing his quick temper. “So I guess you guys all know who I am then, huh?”

“Everyone in the school knew who you were the second you stepped out of your grandmother’s town car, if not before,” Jax confirms.

“So...this is...?”

“Us, choosing you. For you. Because we’ve spent a week getting to know you and we like you, and now we want to hang out with you more.”

That’s reassuring, but there’s still something niggling in the back of my mind. I can’t put my finger on it though. I’m sure it has something to do with the two tables being opposite each other, alongside this idea of reigning princes and princesses.

“Princess,” I know I should hate the term, but coming from the guys’ lips it sounds like a prayer, and I just can’t help but love it. “Come back to us. You were gone,” Rebel tells me.

“Sorry.” I smile.

“Do you want to come over and watch a movie tonight? We’ll walk you home.”

“Sorry guys, not tonight. It sounds stupid, but the first day of class has really taken it out of me. I’m going to have a bath and an early night if that’s all right?”

“Of course it’s all right, you don’t have to ask. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Yeah, definitely.” I stand up and say my goodbyes, leaving the guys to finish their food. I really wanted to give each of them a hug – maybe even a kiss – goodbye, but I wouldn’t do that in a room full of people who are staring and waiting with bated breath for any juicy tidbits of gossip that they can sink their greedy little teeth into. No. I’m not their cannon fodder. My stomach’s twisting painfully, and my gut tells me something’s not right. But what?

Tuesday morning dawns and I feel much better. There's still an uneasiness that I can't quite place, but at least the twisting pain has subsided. I'm looking forward to today; my day starts with Rebel in chemistry, and we're finally beginning the practical element of the syllabus. I have English with Michael and plans to get answers from him (did he really date a princess? What happened?), and I finish the day with gym, sparring with Ace – a thrilling and terrifying prospect!

I enter the chem lab with a spring in my step, pleased to see Rebel's already there waiting for me with my hot chocolate. I really need to thank Thorn for this. I don't think I could start my day any other way now. I give him my sweetest smile and hold my hand out for the beverage. He hands it over without making me beg for it, and I realise a smile really can go a long way. Sadly, I don't think I can keep it up for long where Rebel's concerned because I just enjoy ribbing him too much. I dig my elbow into his ribs and he grunts. Today's going to be a good day, I can tell.

We're about halfway through the lesson when it happens. Behind me, Lexxi and Natalia are working on their experiment, and they start arguing over which way round to add the components to the mixing beaker. I can hear Lexxi insisting that they should add the acid into the water, while Natalia insists it's the other way round. I listen to them bicker for a moment and then when I see that Rebel is distracted I turn to them and say, "Natalia's right."

It's the perfect opportunity to start my revenge plan in a seemingly innocent and accidental way.

Now, I don't tell them to add water to the acid, but I know that Natalia's wrong, so I've purposely misled them. Later, if I'm questioned about it, I'll be able to say I thought Natalia said to do the water first. I don't know, I wasn't really listening, I was busy with my own experiment and not looking their way. They kind of sound the same anyway and I haven't really been here long enough to know the difference. No one's going to blame the new girl.

I smile sweetly and turn away. Not watching is the hardest part, but I need it to look like I've just helped some friends and

am distracted by my own work. There's no mistaking the violent bubbling sound of boiling acid though, nor the screams of the two girls as the acid begins to spit and sputter. Time to win an Oscar.

I spin round, eyes wide, hand on my mouth in horror. "Oh my god! Are you okay? Rebel, get Mr Cabrera!" I rush over to the girls and grab a wad of paper towels. What's the one thing you shouldn't do to an acid burn? Apply pressure. Why? Because the acid's essentially eating through layers of skin until the chemical reaction burns itself out. Applying pressure will cause the tissue to dissolve faster, thus worsening the burn and causing deeper damage. So what do I do? Press those towels onto both girl's hands under the guise of trying to help. Tears stream down my face as I ask, "Oh my god, are you both okay?"

The teacher rushes over and quickly takes over the situation, wrapping the girls' injuries and ushering them out to the nurse. The class is in an uproar once they're gone and Rebel turns to look at me with wide eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asks me.

I shake my head, feigning shock. "I-I don't know. I think it might be my fault." I break down, and he comes to comfort me, holding me close and wrapping his enormously strong arms around me. I'm surprised by how tender he is. It's a nice feeling.

"Shhhhh. There's no way it was your fault. It was an accident."

"But I heard them arguing over the correct order. I wasn't listening properly, and I thought Natalia said to carefully add the water to the acid, so I told Lexxi she was right. I don't know how this happened." I shake my head, and Rebel gives me a squeeze.

"Not your fault Rae, don't stress. Come on, let's get out of here and get a drink and some fresh air. You'll feel better."

"O-okay," I sniff, letting him lead me from the room. "Do you think they'll be okay?"

“Of course, it was only a few little splashes on their hands and arms, nothing too bad or serious.”

That’s a fucking shame.

These bitches killed my sister. A few small mild splattered acid burns ain’t got shit on what they did to her.

Bitches, I’m just getting started.

Lizzie's letter

Thanks for your letter, sis. Yeah, the Halloween party was fine. I didn't dress up. The girls were there and, well, let's just say they've moved up past name-calling and whispering behind my back.

It's fine though! Nothing I can't handle.

I'll tell you about it anyway – though it's not as bad as it sounds – simply because I know you'll be bugging me in your next letter if I don't.

I went to the party, I wore my sparkly converse and that little white dress—you know the one that has long sleeves? When I got there, it was really busy, but I couldn't see the girls from my math class who invited me. I bumped into the guy I was tutoring though. He offered to get me a drink, and I felt a bit naff asking for water, but he didn't judge me. We spent some time chatting, and it was really, really nice. I found out he plays guitar and sings. I love his deep growly voice so I'd love to hear him sing sometime. I told him that – would you class that as flirting? – and he said I could watch him sometime!

Things were going great until one of the princesses saw him and me laughing – it was the redhead, I think her name's Amber? – but then she disappeared. She came back with Tilly, the blonde leader, as well as the other girls and they all stood in a corner watching us and whispering. I tried not to let it bother me, but I just kind of knew that something was going to happen.

I was right. Within five minutes, Tilly 'accidentally' bumped into me and spilt her drink all down me. Every last drop. And for some reason, she just happened to be drinking a

bright red slushie. Seriously, drinking an ice slushie at a party in October? Coincidence? I think not. I looked like I'd been at a massacre.

So there I was Charlie-Bear, freezing cold and dripping wet, in a ruined dress and beyond embarrassed. I was too embarrassed to speak to him, so I turned and ran while the girls just laughed cruelly. It actually felt like the whole room was laughing at me, but that might only have been in my head.

So there you have it. Nothing really. It might even have been an accident. Maybe. At worst, it was a silly prank. And anyway, it backfired on them because a cute guy asked if I was okay on my way out, gave me his jacket and walked me back to my dorm room. So it wasn't all bad. He was really cute. His name's Michael, and he asked me out on a date!

Not a bad night, all in all, I'd say!

Sorry you couldn't come up for a visit last week. I hope you're better soon. I worry about you. Are you training too hard again? I hope you're eating properly. I know you miss me too. But look on the bright side, it'll be Christmas before you know it and I get to come home! For two whole weeks! You'll be sick of me by the end of it.

I can't wait!!!

Just got to survive these exams first.

I love you. Be good.

Your Busy Lizzie x



The next day is Halloween, and I have plans. Lizzie and I always used to have a marathon movie night while stuffing our faces with candy, and I'm going to do that tonight with the guys. Everyone else is going to a party off-campus. On a school night? Crazy! The party's at some girl's house near the school whose parents are always away. Apparently, most of the parties happen at her place because it's within walking distance, she has a pool, and her older brother will supply the alcohol and drugs for everyone. Needless to say, I'm glad that I'll be missing out in favour of scary movies and four strong pairs of arms to hold on to when I get scared.

I don't actually scare easily. I love scary movies. I find them funnier than comedies. Not that I plan to tell the guys that. I can pretend in the hopes of getting a hug or two out of them. Actually, I wonder if I can find a way to scare Rebel. I bet he's a screamer. Mind you, remembering how Thorn freaked out when I cut his hair makes me wonder if he might be an easier target. I'm feeling good.

During the school day, I'm called to the headmistress' office to discuss what had happened the day before in chemistry. As I predicted, I am in no way blamed for the 'unfortunate accident' that occurred, and Headmistress Archer just wanted to check that I was alright. I get the distinct impression that she won't be checking up with my other

classmates to see how they are. More perks of being a Deighton, I guess. I'm alright about it. I'm not going to apologise or feel remorse. The only thing I'm a little sad about is that the damage wasn't more severe or permanent. You can't win them all, but maybe I can win the next one.

After school, when everyone is getting dressed up in their – ahem, 'sexy' – Halloween costumes, I'm pulling on Jax's sweats, hoodie and tank top, planning on making my way through the woods to the boys' house in my trainers. No way am I dressing up to lounge around and watch movies.

I'm just heading down the stairs towards the front door when I bump into Michael. I don't really want to talk to him right now, so I try to sidestep him and rush off, but he reaches out and grabs my wrist. "Ouch, let go, Michael." I pull free from his grip, almost falling down a step, and shoot him a dirty look.

"Sorry, Rae! I forget my own strength sometimes." He chuckles. "Besides, I can't imagine a badass ninja like yourself would be hurt by me."

I rub my wrist while he speaks because it did hurt. I think he'll leave a bruise. Totally uncalled for. "Sorry Michael, I have to go." I turn away and go to leave.

"Rae wait!" I stop and turn back to look at him. There's a kind of manic look in his eyes. "How are you? I feel like I haven't seen you in ages. Did you have a good half term? I'm sorry you were stuck here on your own. Did you find a way to keep yourself occupied?" I feel like he's fishing for information, rather than just being friendly. He's been in the dining hall the last few days so he must have noticed me sitting with the guys. Is he fishing to find out how I met them?

"Sorry Michael, I can't catch up now, I really do have to go. Maybe we can get together at the weekend?" His face instantly brightens, and I feel the need to add, "To work on the English project." He agrees, and we set a time on Saturday after breakfast. I study his face carefully, but it doesn't change when I add that. Huh, maybe I'm misreading things.

I say my goodbyes and continue down the stairs. I'm just at the bottom when he calls, "Wait! Where are you going? Surely you're not going to the party dressed like that?" I really don't like his tone now, he's definitely prying.

"Not going to the party, Michael. My family doesn't have a very good track record with them, remember?" I can't resist throwing that little dig at him, knowing that he knows what happened to Lizzie on Halloween.

With that, I walk out the door and let it close behind me. Once I'm outside, away from him, I feel like I can breathe more easily. I don't know what it is about him that makes me feel so uncomfortable. I'm usually a pretty good judge of character, but Lizzie adored the guy, and she was sensible and smart. She said he was one of the good guys, so I'll have to take her word for it, even if my gut says otherwise.

After a short jog through the woods, I'm standing on the guys' porch and ringing the bell. Thorn opens the door with a flourish and...holy shit. He's dressed up! And he looks good. Better than good. He's fucking smoking. I may be biased because he's dressed as my all-time favourite movie crush, Thor, but he can totally pull the look off. Even the geeky cape. He's also foregone the body armour in favour of being topless. In a cape. My mouth goes dry while other areas go wet, and I stand there literally speechless. He grins at me, clearly noticing my reaction, and moves aside so that I can enter. I head right into the lounge area and spy Ace and Jax topless and lounging on the reclining sofa.

"And what are you guys dressed as?" I ask. Simultaneously they turn to me and grin, flashing sharp and freakishly real looking fangs. Okay, it's not my usual style, but they look sexy as hell dressed as half-naked vampires. They definitely have the dark and brooding look to go with it. Is it me, or is it seriously hot in here?

"Awww guys, I didn't know we were dressing...up?" Or down, it would seem in their case. "I feel...underdressed." Or would that be overdressed? I'm so confused.

“I’ll undress you.” Thorn’s sexy voice comes from behind me, low in my ear and I shudder. I can’t think of a witty comeback at all, so I just stand there like a deer in headlights and say nothing.

“Oh no, Princess, this won’t do at all!” Rebel enters the room and scowls at me in disgust.

“What the hell are you supposed to be?” He’s wearing jeans, a leather jacket and sunglasses. That’s it. He looks ridiculously hot. “You look ridiculous,” I tell him.

“I’m a rebel.”

I burst out laughing at the outlandishness of his costume interpretation. “What kind of rebel? A ‘Grease’ reject? You could have at least gone creative and dressed as the Rebel Alliance in Star Wars.”

“You know Star Wars?”

“Please, I was raised on Star Wars every weekend,” I scoff. It’s true too. Our mum would work nights, and Lizzie and I would stay up late with Dad and watch the movies. We’d have the surround sound so loud that the windows would rattle and the chairs would shake.

He falls to the floor in an elaborate pantomime, clutching his chest dramatically. “Marry me?”

“Can’t. I’m busy that day.”

“Doing what?”

“Marrying Ace.” I stick my tongue out at him, and he growls while the others laugh. “Anyway. No one told me we were dressing... I have no idea if you’ve dressed up or down guys...so I went for comfort.”

“At least wear this, Princess.” Rebel comes over to me and places a tiara on my head. I love it. Oh god, when did I turn into such a girly girl? Although...am I? I’m spending Halloween dressed in sweats and planning to eat my bodyweight in pizza and Cheetos. Pretty sure that the actual princesses of the school wouldn’t be seen dead doing that... ever.

“Awww thanks, guys, I feel like a real princess. Although, if I was going to fit in with you guys, I’d be wearing the tiara and not a lot else. NOT going to happen!” I yell at Rebel before he can say anything. “Let’s get these movies started.” We quickly scramble to get set up. Rebel gets the snacks, Ace grabs the pop, Jax sets up the first film, and Thorn closes the curtains. I quickly light a ton of candles and turn off the lights. It’s kind of romantic. Well...until the movie begins.

I sit in the centre of the sofa with my legs up on Ace’s lap, but I keep the chair upright because Rebel and Thorn are sitting on the floor leaning back against it for support.

After a bit, Jax pulls me into his chest, his arm around me, fingers lightly brushing my exposed skin through the oversized armhole of his tank top. He tickles my ribs, and I’m hugely aware of the amount of side boob that he’s just about skirting. Just. He whispers in my ear how much he loves that I still have his sweats and that I’m wearing them, and I swear there’s nowhere I’d rather be right now. Ace is lightly stroking the arches of my feet, which tickles like crazy but also makes my breathing go all funny. His light little touches are driving me wild. I’m done. I’m a puddle. I can’t even concentrate on the film. I have two smoking hot guys touching me and another two just within arm’s reach.

I’ve been on dates with all of them. I’ve kissed all of them. None of them seem to mind. I have no idea what’s going on. I have no idea where this is going or what I’m supposed to be doing. I don’t feel bad for liking all four of them. I guess if they don’t have a problem with it, then I definitely don’t. I’ll just wait and see how it pans out.

Rebel’s fidgeting draws me back to the present, and I watch him and Thorn carefully. They’re both tense. Totally absorbed in the film. The climactic music is reaching its crescendo. I plant a heavy hand on each of their shoulders at just the right moment and shout, “Boo!” It’s lame, but their responses do not disappoint.

Rebel screams, a bloodcurdling sound, and leaps into the air. Thorn squeaks – it’s the sound of genuine fear; when you’re too scared to make a sound or breathe – and throws his

arms up in defence. It's fucking adorable until a shower of Cheetos rain down all over me. I piss myself laughing and Rebel hits the lights while Jax pauses the film. I laugh even harder when I see Rebel's face, and the madder he gets, the more I laugh. Tears stream down my face and I clutch my stomach when it hurts to breathe. Jax and Ace watch on with mirth and, once he calms down, even Thorn cracks a smile.

Rebel grabs me and pulls me off the sofa, and I slide to the floor, unable to support myself. He straddles me and begins to tickle me, and suddenly it's not fun anymore. I really can't breathe as I squirm and giggle and try to catch enough breath to beg him to stop.

"You're getting Cheeto dust all over the floor," Jax gripes but I can hear a smile in his voice. Rebel doesn't let up, he's relentless in the way he tickles me. He uses his enormous build to pin me to the floor, and as I wriggle and writhe futilely to get out from under him, I become aware of every single inch where our skin's touching. It's burning, zinging with electricity wherever our flesh meets. My top's ridden right up, and the sweats are low on my hips while his hardness presses into me. Now I can't breathe for a different reason.

"Stop. Stop!" I cry. "You're getting Cheeto dust in my eyes!" I'm still giggling helplessly when Rebel brings his face close to mine, so close that our noses are touching. I go silent, and all I can hear is my panting breath and the blood pounding in my ears. Holy crap he's going to kiss me, right here in front of the others. As much as I want him to kiss me, I'm not sure about that. How would they react? It's one thing that they're aware that I'm kissing the other guys, but it's another thing to have it rubbed in their faces, isn't it?

I watch him through my lashes with hooded eyes. I'm sure my eyes are begging him to kiss me. Hell, I'm begging for more than just a kiss now. But he doesn't kiss me.

Instead, he turns my head to the right and licks the entire left side of my face. "Gross!" I shove hard at his chest, and he easily lets me push him away. The spell of the moment is broken, and he gives me his shit-eating grin as he runs a finger

down my other cheek to remove the Cheeto residue, then licks it.

I scramble to my feet and call, “I’m going for more pop. Does anyone want?” but I’m racing towards the kitchen, needing a minute to recover, before anyone can even answer.

Once I’ve suitably calmed down, I go back into the lounge and notice that the lamp has been left on, the Cheetos cleaned up, and the seating arrangements switched up. Rebel and Ace are now sitting in the armchairs, and Thorn has moved onto the sofa in Ace’s spot. Jax pats the seat beside him. “Come on you,” he says. “You better sit back by me so I can keep you out of trouble before you kill someone.” I smile sheepishly, but don’t apologise, and take my seat, sitting more stiffly with my feet down this time. It’s uncomfortable as fuck, but I need the distance from the guys to cool down and keep my head on straight.

A few films later, I make a move to leave, and Thorn asks me again if I want to stay. I do, I really do, but I can’t because I have plans that involve the princesses coming back from the party. I smile apologetically and say, “Not tonight. But there’s a meteor shower in a couple of weeks that falls at the weekend. I’d love to see it, and since you guys don’t have the light pollution, we could maybe make a weekend of it, if you’re interested?”

“Absolutely! Count me in.” Thorn grins.

“Count us all in,” Rebel adds.

I smile, “It’s a date...err, a group date.”

“We can watch it from the hot tub,” Jax decides. “Come on then, trouble, let’s get you home.”

I give each of the guys a quick hug goodbye and try to give Rebel the (his?) tiara back, but he insists I keep it. Secretly I’m glad, although I wouldn’t mind seeing Rebel in a tiara...

Once I'm back in my room, having given Jax a quick peck on the cheek, I start to prepare for the arrival of the princesses. It's about two am, and the place is tranquil. I figure the party will be winding down and they'll all be heading home soon. I don't have long.

I race into the bathroom and wash all the makeup from my face. Once my face is bare, I strip off my clothes and remove the tiara, scraping my hair back into a ponytail. I put on a white ankle-length cotton nightie. My tan has faded a lot by now, but I'm still a bit too dark. Hopefully, no one will notice my hands and feet, but I need to do something about my face. I take out some white stage makeup and apply a thin layer. Much better. The finishing touch is the bum-length white-blond wig. Once I'm wearing it, I look in the mirror, and I see myself, how I used to be. Only, I'm Lizzie, not me. It's funny how quickly I got used to the dark hair. For a moment, I just stare at myself and think about how much I miss my sister. I constantly wonder how different things could have been if I had just come here with her. She never asked, knowing how much I hate this school and all that it stands for. I wish I'd just swallowed my pride and sucked it up so that we could've been here together. I would never have let anyone, or anything, hurt her. At times like this, I feel like it's my fault she's dead. But then I shake myself and focus on who's really to blame. The princesses.

Am I using Halloween as an excuse to dress as my sister's ghost and scare these pathetic bitches? Absolutely. Is it immature and petty as fuck? You bet. Do I give a shit? Hell no! Tonight's going to be a silly bit of fun, but then I'm going to step it up. I'm gunning for them, and I want them to know that someone at West Prep knows what they did and is going to make them pay.

I go into the bedroom and sit on my window seat to watch the return of the partiers. I soon hear doors opening and closing along my corridor, but I haven't seen the princesses yet. I figure they'll be the last to leave the party somehow. Once the hall's quiet, and all activity has died down, I wait about twenty minutes before I slip out of my room to leave a little message on their bedroom doors. Done, I return to the

window and soon spy the five rulers of the school cutting across the grass. It's time.

I slip out of my room once again and into the darkened corridor, racing down the stairs to the first floor. As the front door opens, I slowly walk the length of the first-floor balcony, crossing the double staircase. The moonlight gives me an ethereal glow and Natalia is the first to notice me.

She gasps. "Guys, what is that?" Her voice is tight with panic.

"What's what, Natalia? I swear you're such a scaredy-cat!" Lexxi's response is half exasperated, half teasing.

Careful not to look straight at them, from my peripheral vision, I see as Natalia raises one hand and points at me. The four other girls must follow her line of sight because Lexxi gives a little scream of shock, and I hear their footsteps stop on the wooden floor. I keep walking.

"Hey! You there! Wait!" Tilly calls out, but I ignore her.

As soon as I'm out of sight, I race along the corridor and up the stairs, needing to beat the girls to the top floor before they arrive in the lift. It's a shame that I can't hang around as they try to reason over what they've just seen.

I hurry back to my bedroom and into the bathroom. I tear the wig and nightdress from me, stuffing them into the bin. I'll deal with that in the morning. I quickly wash my face and slip into Jax's sweats, before climbing into bed.

Within three minutes, a bloodcurdling scream 'wakes' me. Ah, they got my message then. Or should I say Lizzie's message? I hear banging all along the corridors and Tilly's voice screaming at everyone to get up. Stumbling through the door, I do my best half-asleep impression and join the other confused girls in the now brightly lit hallway.

"What's going on?" someone asks.

"Who did this? What kind of a sick fucking prank is this?" Tilly's really losing her shit, but everyone's confused and dazed.

“What is going on here? What is all this noise about?” Headmistress Archer strides down the corridor, taking command of the situation.

“Someone’s pranked us!” Tilly’s voice is less fury and whinier now. It’s not like she can tell the headmistress the truth now, is it?

“Isn’t that kind of the point of Halloween?” The headmistress’ voice is acidic. She’s not happy to be woken up at nearly three a.m. on a school night. “I suggest you all get back into bed before I put each and every one of you in detention for the month!”

Suddenly, students are scattering and scurrying like mice, desperate to avoid punishment when it wasn’t their fault they were dragged from their rooms by Tilly. Not that any of them would be brave enough to tell the headmistress that. They’re more scared of Tilly.

As I turn back to my room, I hear the students whispering about what was going on. One confirms that messages had been left on each of the princesses’ doors, in what looked like red paint. I smile as I close my door. It’s actually blood. Real pig’s blood that I got from the science lab. It stains better than paint, and apparently, even if you paint over it, the enzymes in the blood mean that a few weeks later it will bleed right back through again. I can’t wait. Tilly will really lose her mind when that happens.

I climb into bed as I ponder if the message was just right. Each of the girls’ was different: bully, killer, murderer, slaughterer, and for Tilly, you’re next.

Perfect, but I won’t rest until at least one of them is as dead as my sister.

Lizzie's letter

Oh my goodness, you'll never believe what just happened today, Charlie-Bear!!!

I nailed my audition for the school choir!

I followed your advice and sang the song that you recommended, and it was absolutely perfect! I swear you know me better than I know myself. So I have to say a MASSIVE thank you, to you, because you're the reason I got in! I'll buy you an ice cream at Pete's when I get home. You can even have a four scoop with toppings! That's how much I love you.

Not only that, but something else amazing happened...the music teacher offered me a solo in the winter concert on the spot! Can you believe it!? I couldn't!

I thought for sure I was going to have trouble because two of the princesses, Natalia and Lexxi, are also in the choir, but nothing happened! Lexxi even congratulated me and said how good I was! Did hell freeze over or something?

One last thing, a THIRD amazing thing happened! They say these things happen in threes, right? Well you know the guy I'm tutoring? HE ASKED ME OUT!!! I said hell yes!

Oh! That reminds me, I need to tell you about that awful date with Michael (do you remember? The guy from the Halloween party who gave me his jacket and walked me home?) He's such a sweetie, and we've become really good friends, but that date was...cringe. I'll tell you all about it in my next letter because I don't want to put a downer on how amazing I'm feeling right now!

Today was the best day ever!

Anyway, I have to run because I have to squeeze in some singing practice around swim practice and eating, so I'm busy, busy, busy! By the way, you know this means that you HAVE to come to the winter concert now, right? Ha! I win!

Love you! Be good!

Your VERY Busy Lizzie xxx



Ugh. It's Saturday, and that means I have to meet with Michael. I really don't want to. I've practically finished the English project without him. I don't even sit by him in English now, because the teacher rotates the seating plan every half term. I'm sitting next to some cool goth girl named Ellie now. It's weird, but the more I hang around with the guys, the more something feels...off...about Michael.

I meet him in the library after I've had breakfast. We've reserved a private study room, but that just means the small room at the back of the library has glass windows and a door we can close. I feel like it's public enough to meet with him. He's suggested coming to my room, but I really wasn't keen on that. He's there already when I arrive, books spread across the desk and working.

He looks up when I enter, a smile spreading across his face. It looks sleazy to me. This guy's too polished, too perfect, trying too hard. What did my sister see in him?

"Raven, hi!" he exclaims, getting up to give me a hug. I get out of it by holding up two takeaway cups and offering him a coffee. I sit down and sip my hot chocolate from the canteen. It's pitiful in comparison to Thorn's. Ugh, that boy has spoiled hot chocolate for me forever now. What will I do for my morning beverage when I leave in the summer?

“Shall we get started?” I ask him, pulling out my notebook and pen.

“Actually, can we talk for a moment first?” he replies. Uh-oh. I don’t like the sound of this. “How close are you to the princes, Raven?” Erm, how is that any of his business?

“Friendly enough. We have a few classes together. Rebel and I are lab partners. Ace and I spar together.” I shrug.

“Do you hang out with them outside of that?” His questioning is more like an intense interrogation, and he’s beginning to get my back up.

“Occasionally. Why?”

“You should stay away from them, Raven. Are you dating any of them?”

“That is none of your fucking business!” I bark. I challenge him back, “Why didn’t you tell me about them before?”

He hesitates now, and I feel like the tables have turned. “You were so keen to tell me all about the princesses in your letters, yet you never mentioned any princes. And apparently, you dated one of the princesses. Why did you fail to mention that to me? Why are there five princesses and only four princes? What’s going on, Michael? Tell me the whole truth this time!”

“Shit.” Michael looks thoroughly chastised as he holds his hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay, just calm down. I’ll explain everything, but it’ll take a while.” I look at him expectantly, and he tells me he doesn’t know where to start. I wait, staring him out until he swears softly and begins.

“Fuck. Okay. So first of all, this school has always been made up of the inner circle, which always consists of the ten richest students. They’re almost always legacy kids, so the position has pretty much always been passed down from generation to generation. Traditionally, the ten inner circle members are made up of five girls, the princesses, and five guys, the princes. And they all pair up to date. There’s a kind of unspoken rule that you can’t date outside of the circle.”

He takes a deep breath before he continues.

“Up until your sister came here, that was the status quo... and I was one of the princes in the inner circle with Jax, our leader, Rebel, Thorn and Ace. However, I was banished during year eleven, when I was friends with Lizzie.”

“Were you banished because you were...friends with Lizzie?”

“Sort of. I refused to take part in the inner circle’s plan to bully the new girl. I don’t know why they wanted to bully her. After one conversation with her, I could see how fucking amazing she was, and I just couldn’t do it. To begin with, I just kept my head down and kept quiet, not taking part, but I’m ashamed to say, also not stopping the bullying either. Eventually though, they noticed, and they tried to make me join in. Repeatedly. I kept refusing until they threatened me and made me choose a side.”

Michael looks at me with sadness etched into every line on his pretty face. “I was gutted. You have to understand that I’d known these guys my whole life. I thought they were my best friends, my family, no matter what. I couldn’t believe it when they said that to stay with them I would have to...hurt your sister. They were forcing me to choose between staying with them or being friends with your sister. And even though I’d only known her a short time, I was falling head over heels for her. So, I chose her.”

“I thought that the bullying might stop once I chose her, but it seemed to make it worse. I was ousted from the group and dumped, and because of that, I no longer had the power to protect her. I completely failed your sister when I was the only person in this school that she relied on.” Tears are streaming down his face now, and he looks so sorry, my heart aches for him. For Lizzie too. It seems that I still don’t know or understand what she’d been put through. Will I ever really know the full extent of it?

“Are you saying that the guys were in on the bullying too?” My voice is quiet and disbelieving.

“Raven, nothing happens in this school without their say-so or approval.” Michael met my eyes with a level stare. “Everyone thinks that the princesses rule the place, but really they’re the puppets of the princes. You have to know that they all tried to date her and mess with her...for a bet, right?”

I shake my head, refusing to believe what he’s telling me. But of course, I know it must be true. Her crush, the boy she tutored, whose name she never mentioned, the one who stood her up and broke her heart a little when he dropped their friendship without a backward glance, was already stacked and covered in tattoos at sixteen. How could it be anyone other than Rebel? She even said in her letter to me that he was more my type than hers. I feel so stupid.

But Michael said they all dated her. Nothing in her letters to me ever indicated that she went on more dates. I need to go back to her journal. I’m sure I’ll find my answers there. I need to decode more. I’ve been lazy, distracted. Stupid. I thought Michael, the letters, and the few entries I’ve figured out so far, had told me everything I need to know. But apparently, that is just the tip of the iceberg.

“Raven, I’m so sorry. I didn’t tell you before because I was so ashamed of my part in all of this. I realise how stupid and wrong that was of me now. I’m really, really sorry. Can you forgive me? I’d still like to help you take them down if you’ll let me.”

“I have to go.” I stand up and gather my things, barely containing my tears. I rush to the door, and in my haste, I grab the handle and pull too hard, the door flies inward and bangs against the wall. I flinch at the sound and prepare to take off, but Michael stops me.

“Raven, wait!” I pause and look back at him. “I don’t know exactly what happened to your sister in the end, but as awful as girls can be to one another, nothing has the power to tip someone over the edge more than a broken heart. Do you get me?”

Oh yes. I understand all right. Michael’s managed to bring my whole world tumbling down in the space of ten minutes. I

race back to my room and let myself in quickly. Once inside, I lock the door and allow myself a moment to let out the tears I've barely contained since leaving the library.

Hot tears streak my face, and I cry uncontrollably. Heart wrenching sobs break free and wrack my whole body, making it shudder. I cry for Lizzie. I cry for everything they put her through and everything she kept from me. I cry because she had no one. I cry a little for Michael, for judging him so wrongly when Lizzie had said all along how wonderful he'd been. And I cry for myself. Because as stupid as it sounds, in such a short space of time, I really, really liked the princes. And I thought they were the good guys.

I give myself five minutes, not a moment more, then sharply tell myself to get it together. I go to the bathroom and wash my face, then return to my bed and pull out my journal from my bedside chest. It's buried at the bottom with Lizzie's and wrapped in her baby blanket. When she went off to West Prep, we swapped our blankets so that we'd always have a part of each other with us. I never thought that the blanket and a journal would be all that I had left of her.

I take a deep breath, then I open my own personal journal. Like Lizzie's, mine's encoded. I turn furiously to my hit list and score a line through it. On a fresh page, I scrawl 'Charlotte's Revised Hit List', and below it, I write their names.

I came here with one mission: to make those who hurt my sister pay. I got distracted by some pretty faces. I was a fool. I just found out that my list has to now double in size, but I can't let that bother me. I'm going to make those mother fuckers wish that they never met my sister or me. They'll be begging and bleeding by the time I'm done with them.

No more silly games.

This time it's war.

Lizzie's letter

Hey Sis,

My date was...uneventful. In that it never happened. He stood me up. I waited at the diner in town for ages, and he just didn't show. I was so embarrassed because it was a busy Saturday lunchtime, and they really needed the table, but I kept holding out, thinking to myself "I'll just wait ten more minutes." I think at the two-hour mark some sort of self-preservation kicked in and I headed back to school.

The princesses were waiting for me when I got back and teased me about being stood up. I don't know how they knew I was supposed to be on a date. I really, really hope that they didn't put him up to asking me out, and that it was all some sort of horrible prank. I'm trying to make excuses for him – something could have come up, and because of the stupid no phones rule he had no way of letting me know – because I always want to believe the best of people.

But he's missed a week's worth of tutoring sessions now, and I haven't seen him around at all. I think I've well and truly been dumped in every way.

I'm not going to lie, I'm gutted. I know I don't have to put a brave face on with you, but it hurts. Not that he stood me up, but the ghosting afterwards. An explanation would've been nice. More than anything, I actually miss our study sessions. I thought we'd become close. I would've said we were friends.

I feel like the only friend I have now is Michael. Even the girls from my maths class don't talk to me anymore. I don't blame them, who would want to be friends with the girl everyone's bullying? I'd tell them to stay away from me too. There's no need for them to become victims as well. Luckily,

Michael has been there for me through everything. He's such a nice guy, you'd really like him, Charlie.

Anyway, I need to go and practise some more for my solo. Can you believe it's two weeks away? I'm still excited to be singing, but some of the shine has gone away now. Never mind, you'll be there, and I get to come home with you after.

See you soon!

I love you. Be good.

Your Busy Lizzie x



CHAPTER ELEVEN

I don't know how I manage it, but I avoid the guys for a couple of days. My head's reeling. I cried off my weekend plans with them, needing time to process what I've learnt from Michael. There's no doubt that I have to get revenge on the princes, but the question is how?

I spent a lot of time debating what to do. Do I call them out on their behaviour? Do I tell them what Michael told me and see how they react? Do I pretend like everything's okay?

I spent the whole weekend holed up in my room working on Lizzie's journal, but I've hit a roadblock on it. I've been going back over her old entries that I'd already decoded looking for clues. So far, there's been no mention of Lizzie dating any of the other guys. Surely that's the sort of thing you'd write in a journal? I know I've written about the guys in mine.

I'm wondering if the best way to bring the princes down is to split them up. Can I destroy their friendship somehow? Can I continue this weird dating thing we're doing and use it as a way to get closer to them, to learn their weaknesses, so that I can then tear them apart?

I feel like that's my best option right now. I managed to dodge them all day at school today, but I know I can't avoid them much longer.

As if conjuring them up by my thoughts alone, there's a knock at my door. I quickly hide the journals and open the door, fully expecting to see one of the guys. I'm thinking it'll probably be Rebel because he's pushiest and the most impatient. Or maybe Thorn because he can be sensitive and serious. Wrong.

All four princes are crowded around my door. They don't wait for an invite before they try to barge their way in. In their haste to get to me, there's this comical moment where they're all kind of wedged in the doorway, and no one can get through. It's like something from a slapstick comedy gag. If my heart didn't ache so much, I'd be laughing.

Act normal Raven. They can't know there's anything wrong.

"Guys, to get through the door, you have to come one at a time."

Thorn and Ace step back, but there's still some kind of power struggle between Jax and Rebel. Rebel shoves his way through and launches himself at me. He scoops me up in his massive arms and gives me an enormous bear hug, my toes dangling inches from the floor. I fucking love it. Damn him.

"Princess, what's wrong? Where have you been? Are you sick? Have we upset you?" He throws questions at me in a panic, and I remember how adorable he can be at times.

"Let her breathe, Rebs," Jax barks.

"Bite me," he snaps back, squeezing me harder. Whoa, where has this tension between them come from? Eventually, he gently puts me down and releases me. I take a step away from him to catch my breath.

Ace and Thorn come into my room and close the door. Suddenly, my huge dorm feels tiny as these larger-than-life guys fill the space and steal the oxygen from the room. Except for the night Jax tucked me into bed because of my sprained ankle, none of the guys have been in my room. I certainly never expected to have them all here at once. I swear the

temperature's risen by several degrees. I want to fan myself or open the window...or take a cold shower.

Yes, these guys are insanely hot. But they fucked with my sister. I don't know how or why, but until I find out and deal with them, I need to harden my heart against them. Without giving myself away. Act normal. Pursue the relationship. Destroy them. That's my new mantra.

"Hey guys, what's up?" I manage a cool indifference like the sight of the four of them, mere feet from my bed, hasn't got my heart thumping.

"What's going on?" Jax levels me with a hard stare. "And no bullshit." Damn him. He's using my own line against me.

Shit. It's decision time: bullshit or truth? I quickly choose truth. Well, a version of the truth anyway.

"I met with Michael on Saturday."

"Bloomberg? Why are you having anything to do with that tosser?" The vehemence in Thorn's voice shocks me. I knew him and Rebel had beef, but I didn't expect laid back, easy-going Thorn to be so aggressive.

"We had an English project together."

"Okay, calm down, guys," Jax tells them. He turns to me with calmness and asks if they can sit. I nod and watch as they move around the room. Thorn heads for my window seat, Jax sits on my sofa, Ace takes the desk chair, and Rebel stretches out on my bed. I throw him a dark look and go to sit by Jax on the sofa. He's a calming presence. He takes my hands in his and turns me so that I'm facing him.

"Tell me why an English project with Bloomberg has you avoiding us."

"He said some stuff about you guys that's made me... uncomfortable."

"I'll fucking kill him," Rebel growls, but Thorn quickly shushes him.

"He said that the girl who killed herself a couple of years back was dating all of you?" My voice weakens, and it ends up

coming out as a question. Ace gives a sharp intake of breath, but Jax doesn't react at all.

“God, I fucking hate that shit-stirring prick,” Rebel groans.

“Rebel...” Thorn's voice is a low warning.

“I see. And you're feeling...?” Jax gently probes me to continue.

“Upset. Hurt. Confused. Why didn't you tell me? What is this, this thing between all of us? How's it going to end?” And then I add in a tiny voice, “Am I the replacement for her?”

“No. No way!” Ace bangs his hand down on the desk, making me jump. He comes over to the back of the sofa and leans on it, squeezing my shoulder in his big hand. “No,” he repeats, shaking his head and as I stare up into his violet eyes, I see nothing but sincerity there.

Rebel scoops me up in his arm and takes my place on the sofa, keeping me cradled in his lap, my feet dangling over onto Jax's lap. He takes them in his hands and holds them. Thorn comes around from the window to sit in front of the sofa, cross-legged on the floor, and takes my hand in his.

“Look, Rae,” Thorn begins, “I – we – really care about you. You're not a replacement for anyone or anything. We weren't even looking to like you. We weren't looking for anyone.”

“He's right you know, we're crazy about you,” Rebel tells me, kissing me on my temple.

I look from one guy to the next, really looking at their eyes and faces for signs of betrayal or deceit. I see none. All I see is genuine emotion. I may not know what these guys did to my sister, but I do know that they're not messing around with me. They actually care about me.

And I care about them too. I do. As more than just hot guys who make me melt. It would be stupid to deny there's real feelings there, and I'm not in the habit of lying to myself.

But here's the thing.

I LOVE my sister more.

“Will you tell me about her?” I ask tentatively. I watch carefully for their reactions. Ace looks heartbreakingly sad. Rebel and Thorn look resigned. Jax is unreadable, but when the others give him a nod, he begins to speak.

“Her name was Lizzie. She transferred in year eleven, which never happens. Rebel met her first when she tutored him for English, but we all knew who she was. She was impossible to miss and absolutely beautiful. We all liked her. We fought over her. We all tried to date her, and it was a disaster...Lizzie was the sweetest girl I ever met, and when she realised that we were fighting too hard over her, she took herself out of the equation.”

“You mean she...?” My eyes widen in horror.

“No! Nothing like that. Just that she stopped dating us. And she didn’t really talk to us much after that either. And it really, really sucked. We preferred to be fighting over sharing her than not having her at all.”

“Why did she...you know?” My voice is barely a whisper.

“We don’t know. We really don’t. And it still eats me up inside. There’s a chance our fighting was to blame, or maybe it contributed, even though it was months after when she jumped.”

“You called her just some girl.”

“I know. I shouldn’t have. She was so much more than that.”

“But Michael said that the princes weren’t allowed to date outside of the inner circle?”

“Fucking hell!” Rebel huffs, running an exasperated hand through his hair. “What the fuck else has he been saying that he fucking shouldn’t have?”

I flinch. “Erm that there’s always five girls, five guys, you all date each other and not outside of the circle. And that he was in the circle, but you guys kicked him out for some reason...”

“Did he say why he was kicked out?” I quickly shake my head in response to Jax’s question.

“Interesting.”

“Little fucker,” Rebel mumbles under his breath, while Ace slams his hand on the desk again and cries “Podlasica¹!”

“He’s a fucking weasel, you’re right, Ace,” Thorn adds.

Jax takes a deep breath and then lets it out slowly.

“Okay, that’s a lot of information to go through. There’s so much more to this than I can explain right now. I don’t want you to think I’m copping out, but I’m going to ask you to trust me.”

“Trust you how?”

“Trust me when I say that Michael cannot be trusted. He’s spun you half a picture using half-truths that don’t tell the full story. Let me tell you the whole story, but accept that it’ll take time. I want you to trust that we’ll tell you the whole truth.”

“I can do that.” I can wait. I can bide my time if it means finding out what really happened to Lizzie.

“Are you sure? I feel like you don’t trust us.”

“I do!” I protest. How does Jax know? He’s always watching too closely. I feel like he looks inside of me and reads my soul like it’s no more complicated than a baby’s ABC book. I’m going to have to be more careful around him. I can’t put my guard up because he’ll notice, but maybe I can take control of which parts I let him read.

“There’s different levels of trust, Raven.” He shakes his head at me.

“I’m planning to stay over, I have you all in my room right now! I’d say that’s a pretty high level of trust!”

He shakes his head again and sighs. “Yes, you trust us to be gentlemen around you, and to look out for you, and see that you get home safely. But you don’t trust *in* us. You don’t confide in us. When Bloomberg freaked you out, you ran and hid. You didn’t trust us to tell you the truth. You didn’t trust us

enough to ask or even demand answers to your questions, your doubts. You don't trust us with any of your secrets. You keep us completely at arm's length, even when we're kissing you. You don't let us in."

And that's the crux of it, isn't it? I don't – I can't – trust them. Even before I found out they were involved with my sister somehow, I couldn't tell these guys the truth about who I am and why I'm here. I can't ever tell them. So I've somehow accidentally built a relationship based on a lie. Several lies in fact. Even though the feelings are real. The stupid thing is, that even though I'm pretending to be someone else when I'm with the guys, I'm more myself than I've been in years. The realisation makes me want to cry.

"That's not something I can give yet, maybe even ever."

Jax nods understandingly and squeezes my feet. "I know. We know. There's something in your past that's made you unable to trust, we get it. But we also want you to know that we're patient, and we'll always be here for you – no conditions attached. You don't ever have to confide in us to that level, but please trust us. At least promise to try?"

"O-Okay," I sniff. I try to slyly wipe away my tears, but Rebel catches my hand and stops me. He leans over and kisses each tear away instead, and my heart somersaults and stutters.

"Come. It's time," Ace announces, standing up. The guys all stand too, Rebel gently placing me on my feet.

"Time? For what?"

Rebel looks down at what I'm wearing – PJ shorts, a vest top and a hoodie – and grins. "I hope you have some warmer clothes than that, Princess! It's bonfire night, and we have about twenty minutes before the fireworks begin."

I groan and scramble to find more suitable clothing. I figured we'd had enough fireworks this weekend and today to last a lifetime, but I guess not.

Luckily, these turned out to be the best kind.

The guys decide to make my room their new common room. Instead of going home after class or after dinner, they mostly hang out in my room, lounging on the furniture and making it virtually impossible for me to get any work done. It's frustrating because I can't work on Lizzie's journal when they're around, but I do manage to ignore Rebel tickling my feet and Thorn trying to tempt me to play the Xbox that they've installed in my room in favour of getting homework done at least. Ace studies alongside me, preferring to sit at the desk, while I sprawl on the bed. Jax joins Thorn playing games. Rebel mostly whines that he's bored.

"Do you know guys, I don't know much about you, really?"

"What's to know? I'm an open book," Rebel declares. "Ask me anything."

"What's your favourite colour?"

"Black." He's so matter-of-fact it makes me laugh. I turn to the others.

"Red," Ace says without hesitation. Come to think of it, he's nearly always wearing red when he's out of his uniform. It really suits him.

"Blue, all shades of blue. I can't narrow it down, so don't try to make me!" I laugh at Thorn, unsurprised that my surfer loves every shade of blue.

"Green," Jax gives me a wink, "about the same shade as your eyes."

"No fair!" Rebel whines. "I want to pick green too. I didn't know we were using this as an opportunity to hit on her."

"What are your real names?"

"Rebel."

"No fucking way? Your parents really called you Rebel?"

He shrugs. “I’m Californian. They love their crazy names out there. The more obscure the name, the bigger the fame.”

I laugh because it’s kinda true. But then again we have Brits calling their kids things like Apple, so who am I to judge?

“I really am called Thorn. My mum wanted to call me Thor, but dad put his foot down and said anything but that, so she chose Thorn thinking that people would shorten it to Thor. Dad says I’ve been a thorn in his side ever since the day I was born.”

“Is he joking?”

“You’ll see when you meet him.” Wow okay. There’s a story there to figure out, but I’m more sidetracked by the fact he thinks I’ll meet his parents someday.

“Jax is short for Jaxon.”

“Jaxon Jackson?” I snort.

“Yeah. I’m adopted.”

“Oh shit, Jax, I’m so sorry! I had no idea.” Wow, way to go big mouth, I feel like utter shit.

“Relax, I’m just messing with you.”

“So your parents really named you Jaxon Jackson?”

“Yep.”

“Wow. No wonder you guys are all friends. It’s hard to tell whose parents hated their child the most.”

“Ouch. Burn, Miss I’m-so-loved that my parents named me after an omen of death.”

I laugh and concede that they have a good point. “Then I guess we’re made for each other.” I stick my tongue out before turning to the only one in the room that hasn’t spoken yet.

“Ace? Is that your real name?”

He shakes his head. “My mother named me Aljaž.”

I say the name over in my head, he pronounced it like Ali-ash. “I love that. It’s so musical.” My comment makes him

smile like I just made his day, his whole face lighting up. It melts my heart.

I ponder that for a moment before asking when their birthdays are.

“What’s your favourite date?” Rebel jumps in. “Because that’s when my birthday is.” I laugh at his ridiculousness.

“Jax and I turned nineteen back in September,” Thorn tells me. “Ace is twenty over Christmas break, and Rebel’s the baby. He’ll be nineteen in May.”

“I think I’m the baby if you’re all nineteen already. My birthday was before I came here and I’m usually one of the oldest in the year, yet I’m only eighteen. How are you guys all nineteen?”

“I got held back a year in primary school,” Thorn confesses, looking embarrassed. “Jax and Rebel opted to stay back a year with me, so I wasn’t on my own.”

“Oh my goodness that is so sweet. I didn’t know you could do that.”

“You can’t. Not really. But when the first day of the new school year started in September, Rebel and Jax walked into my class and sat down, and they refused to move. Our parents and the teachers figured they’d get bored after a day or two and go back to their own class, but when we got to Christmas, and we were still together, everyone kind of gave up on us and let it be. I think that was around the time the teacher gave up and started printing them their own worksheets and stuff.”

Everyone laughs, and I find myself wishing I’d been around to see that. The three of them had been friends since nursery, so their bond was tighter than tight. I could only imagine the mischief they got into as kids. I knew that Ace joined a lot later, yet the relationship between them seemed as strong.

“Ace?”

“School is different in Slovenia.” Ah Okay. I get that sometimes when international students transfer in, they’re kept

behind a year to allow for the differences in how the education systems work.

“Awww, looks like Little Bird really is our Little Girl.”

I kick Rebel and scowl. “I told you not to call me that.”

“Whatever you want, Little Princess.” I huff. He’s so infuriating, but the more I protest, the more he’ll call me it. So I let it go. Besides, next to him, I am little. He’s so freaking huge he absolutely dwarfs me. It’s sexy as hell.

I’m just gearing myself up to ask my next round of deeply important getting to know you questions – like, maybe their favourite dessert – when the door to my room flies open and smacks loudly off the wall.

“What the fuck?” I scream, and the words echo back at me from a second female voice.

Tilly stands in my doorway, face inflamed with rage, fists clenched by her sides.

“I heard you were fucking all four of them you nasty little whore, but I didn’t believe it.”

Rebel growls and goes to get up, but I put a hand on his arm to stop him. I take a deep breath to calm my racing heart and plaster a fake smile on my face as I sit up on the bed and turn to Tilly.

“Erm Til, if you think this is fucking, I hate to tell you, but you’ve been doing it all wrong.” Rebel laughs and Thorn snorts. Even Ace looks amused. Jax is watching the exchange carefully. He hasn’t moved from the sofa, but he’s paused his game. Only the set of his shoulders, to someone looking closely, would give away that he’s as tense as the others. “I mean, we could show you, but I’d have to charge – what with me being a whore and all that – and I don’t think your family could afford the bill right now.” It’s a low blow, but I’m done pretending to be nice to this bitch.

She snarls and emits a screech that would have even a banshee covering its ears, and launches herself at me. She doesn’t get far because, in a flash, Jax is on his feet and has his hand wrapped around her wrist, holding her back.

“Get off!” she screams at him. “You don’t get to touch me anymore!”

Wait, what? I spy Tilly watching me out of the corner of her eye with a triumphant gleam, so I carefully school my expression to be neutral. I even feign boredom as I look down and examine my nails. Damn. I have a snag.

I’m turning to my bedside table for a nail file when Tilly’s next words stop me dead in my tracks. “You do remember what we did to the last little whore you all decided to play with, don’t you?”

There’s an almighty thud, and I spin around to see that Jax has Tilly by the throat pressed up against the wall. He’s thrown her with such force that the painting on the wall has tilted. I freeze. I’ve never seen Jax lose it before.

Judging from the frozen, stricken expressions on the others’ faces, they haven’t either.

If I were in Tilly’s position, with the way Jax is looking at her right now, I would be terrified. But Tilly looks...excited almost. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes are bright and, oh god, are they her nipples I can see poking through her shirt? I quickly avert my gaze. Fucking hell. She’s turned on by Jax almost strangling her? What the hell?!

I watch in a strange, fascinated horror as she reaches out and runs her finger along his forearm to his hand. When she gets to it, she wraps hers around his and presses, like she’s encouraging him to squeeze harder. “Oh baby,” she purrs – actually fucking purrs like a sex kitten! – “you know I like it rougher than that.”

Jax immediately drops her and gives her a look of such loathing and disgust that I shrink back. Tilly just laughs, flicks her long blonde hair back and straightens her shirt. She’s a fucking psycho. Rebel pushes forward and gets right in her face, pointing a finger.

“If you so much as look at Raven I will fucking end you, you psychotic bitch!” he snarls, and I swear to god it’s the

sexiest, scariest thing I've ever seen. What the hell is wrong with me?

"Jax, call your pet off," she drawls lazily, with a smirk that makes me feel sick.

But Jax doesn't say anything. He pushes past her and out of the room. In the stunned silence that follows, the guys exchange a lightning-fast glance before springing into action. Rebel pushes past Tilly and goes after Jax. Ace and Thorn following.

Without a word, they leave, and I'm left reeling. I'm staring at Tilly, breathing hard, wondering what the fuck just happened. She gives me a victorious smirk, and I want so bad to punch her face that my hands twitch.

"You may be fucking them now, but I know everything there is to know about them, and how they like it. Don't think for a second that you could ever satisfy one of them, let alone all four." With that, she spins on her heel and flounces out of my room like she owns the fucking place, slamming the door behind her and causing the tilted picture frame to fall to the floor and smash.

I slowly sink to the floor and survey the mess of the room around me in disbelief.

What the fuck just happened?

Lizzie's Journal

I told Charlotte a lie in my letter to her – as I often do now – because I didn't want to upset her. The princesses weren't waiting for me when I got back to school, they were waiting for me when I left the restaurant. They'd been sitting at the milkshake place across the road. As I left, they came over to me and started teasing me about being stood up. Teasing isn't the right word to describe it, but I don't know what else to say. They called me all sorts of names, jeering me, asking if I really thought a guy like him would be interested in a girl like me. They have a point. They finished driving their point home by dumping their milkshakes on me and calling me "milkmaid" which stuck. Everyone in the school started calling me that, and when I walked down the corridors they moo'd at me and said I stunk of cow shit. Someone filled my locker and my bed with actual cow shit.

It's stupid. It's even more stupid that I got upset by it. I feel so alone most of the time, and things only look up when I get to have meals or study with Michael now.

After that, non-date disaster, everything was going so much better for weeks, and I stupidly started to hope that the bullies were getting bored and starting to move on. Sure they still called me names and things, but nothing drastic had happened in a while.

How wrong I was to think that this would ever be over. I guess they were just biding their time, waiting for the perfect opportunity. The stupid thing was that I didn't even realise what they were doing until it was too late. They played the long game with this one, and they played me hard...

I'm so upset.

The last day of term was the moment I'd been looking forward to for months. The winter concert. It should've been one of the best nights of my time here at West Prep, with my whole family there to see it, but instead, the entire thing became a disaster from start to finish.

For weeks my voice was getting worse and worse. To begin with, I put it down to a cold, so I stocked up on medicine. I sucked throat soothers, drank plenty of fluid and rested my voice as much as possible. It seemed to work for a day or two, and I gradually started to improve, but then it took a turn for the worse two days ago.

Now, as I write this, I can't speak.

Literally at all.

For two days now I haven't even been able to produce a sound, not even a squeak. This morning I gave in and went to the nurse. She examined me and can't understand why my throat is red and raw. She seems to think it's burnt. As in, a chemical burn.

But that's not possible.

She said it must have been ingested, but I explained to her that I've only been drinking squash or warm water. I asked if it could be due to the chlorine in the pool, but she said for the level of damage that had been done, it just wasn't possible.

So I had to tell the music teacher that I couldn't do the solo. Worse still, I couldn't sing at all. I'm heartbroken. I just wanted to perform at the concert, doing what I love. The solo wasn't even that big a deal to me. I just wanted to sing. When I sing, I forget about everything; being homesick, missing Charlotte, the bullying, and my lost friendships.

Now my family had come all this way for nothing. I feared that they were going to be so disappointed, and even worse, that they would have so many questions about my voice. I don't know what I would tell them. I might be able to fob Mum and Dad off with the excuse that I was ill, but Charlotte would never fall for it. Plus, the nurse said it could take months to heal because it looks like the damage has been going on for

weeks, if not months. What will happen over Christmas break when I'm clearly not ill anymore, but still don't have a voice?

The music teacher let me help out backstage with the sound and lighting board, but in a way, it just made it worse. If I'd just sat in the audience with Charl, things would've been easier. The hardest thing of all was watching Natalia take centre stage and sing my solo. Okay, so maybe I did care about the solo, a little bit. She did a wonderful job, I have to admit, but I honestly think I would've been better. Peeking out from behind the curtain, I watched my family scan the program in confusion. There wasn't time to get them reprinted or to speak to them before the show, so they were understandably confused, looking for me.

When I turned away, unable to watch anymore, I bumped into Tilly. She shouldn't have been backstage, but I didn't say anything. I always try to avoid her at all costs.

"You know, for a minute Lizzie, I really thought you were going to pull through and sing that solo," she said to me. I asked her what she meant, and she told me, "You didn't really think you just had a cold, did you? Even when all your vitamins and throat sweets didn't make it better? I thought you were supposed to be smart!"

I stared at her in confusion, not comprehending what she was getting at.

"Oh dear. I'm going to have to spell it out for you, aren't I? Your throat hurts, and your voice is gone because we've been spiking your drinks with chemicals for weeks."

My jaw hit the floor, and I stared at her in total disbelief. I just about managed to squeak out, "Why?"

"Because Natalia wanted that solo...and we fucking hate you." She sneered at me. "How's Rebel? Seen him lately?" I shook my head. "He's probably too busy spending all his time with Amber, his girlfriend."

I pushed past her as tears started to stream down my face, and I raced out of the auditorium into the cold December rain. Within minutes I was soaked through, and it was no longer

evident that I was crying. When I turned around, I saw Charlotte watching me, but I couldn't even begin to explain to her what was going on, even if I could speak, so I just pushed past her and went inside, searching for my parents and my ride out of there.

I can't believe that these girls have risked permanently damaging my vocal cords for a three minute solo in a school concert.

Where are the boundaries?

What will they do to me next?

Can I take much more?

Winter break was hard. At the time, I just couldn't bring myself to write, but here goes.

I thought being out of West Prep and away from all the bullying would make things better, but all it did was make me worry more about returning.

I was so anxious that I couldn't unwind and enjoy my time with my family. Thanks to the crying in the rain thing I did at least end up with a nasty cold, which helped to explain the voice loss to my parents. Small mercies, right?

The worst thing of all though was being around Charlotte. I never thought anything could come between us, but there's this distance there that these bullies have caused, and I have no idea how to fix it. She's the same as always; bright, vivacious, feisty and beautiful. And I'm...different. I've changed. I know I have. And she can see it. She keeps trying to get me on my own to talk, but even if I could, I wouldn't know what to say to her.

Being back home has allowed me to see myself through her eyes. I can understand why she's worried about me. I've lost a lot of weight, to the point of being a bag of bones; my skin is sallow, my eyes are dark hollow circles, and my hair is limp

and lifeless. I don't even feel like myself anymore. I'm just... flat.

I didn't realise how much the excitement of singing that solo and being a part of the choir was buoying me up. It was the sense of belonging.

And now I have nothing and no one. I don't belong anywhere. I don't fit in at home, especially not next to my bubbly, effervescent sister, and I don't fit in at West Prep.

Despite not fitting in, I'd rather be at school than here. At least there I've never fit in. Here, I'm constantly reminded of what I was and what I've lost. And what I fear I will never be again.



Several weeks pass, and I hang out with the guys loads, but we never mention what happened in my room with Tilly that night. I have so many burning questions that I hate to leave unanswered, but I bide my time. Things are comfortable with the princes, but we don't go on any more dates. In fact, they seem to have backed off all together. Rebel's still a limitless flirt, and the others are affectionate with me, but there's no kisses or romance.

It's sort of driving me crazy really! If I want to use our relationship to drive a wedge between them, then I need to be dating them all and having a relationship with them. I need to work harder at moving things along with them, I just have no idea how.

I'm excited that all four of them are going to be around over Christmas. Like me, they aren't going home for the holidays. We're the only fourth years staying behind, and aside from a handful of international exchange students in the years below, we'll more or less be the only students in the school sticking around. They haven't asked me any questions about why I'm staying on campus, so I didn't ask them any. By some sort of unspoken agreement, it's been decided that I'll stay with them over the two week school break because they have a spare room and they didn't like the idea of me being the only girl on the top floor by myself.

I guess it could be the perfect opportunity to step up our relationship, but I can't think too much about that right now.

I have other things on my mind that need my focus and attention.

It's a couple of weeks until the winter concert, and I have major revenge plans for the princesses underway. I've decided that I'm going to hit Lexxi and Natalia right where it hurts: in their talents. Lexxi's a stunning dancer, and she's performing a solo from the school's ballet production of Swan Lake that will be put on later in the year. The idea of her performance is to give a teaser of what's to come, to gain more interest and raise ticket sales. What a shame it would be if she couldn't dance for some reason.

Natalia's a beautiful singer. I have, of course, heard her sing before at the winter concert when I came expecting to see Lizzie sing her solo that she worked so hard for months on, but Natalia took her place. What if someone did the same to her? Both of these girls did horrible things to my sister, and I feel like they need an exact taste of their own medicine for vengeance.

Lexxi's going to be easy. I just need to wait for the perfect moment – I'm thinking right before the concert should do it. Natalia will be a little more tricky to pull off, but it'll be worth it. I don't enlist any help. Despite Michael's offer, I'm still keeping him at a distance, not fully trusting him either still. It's not that I think he's lying about the guys' involvement, but that I think he's not telling the whole truth about his own.

For the last two weeks, Natalia's been obsessively drinking from a sports water bottle. She's been so paranoid about catching anything that she won't take any chances. She's also – somehow – managed to get a doctor's note to excuse her from talking in class to protect and rest her voice. Like, really, what the actual fuck? Lexxi's also snagged a doctor's note to excuse her from gym to avoid injury. There's a rumour that she even has her legs insured for a million pounds...per leg! What planet do these princesses live on? I'd laugh if they didn't make me so angry.

Luckily for me, Natalia has no such excuse for getting out of gym class, and she's an exceptionally heavy sleeper. That gives me two opportunities a day to sneak into her bedroom and locker to tamper with her drink. They made Lizzie lose her voice by lacing her bottle with chemicals. I'm just returning the favour, but going one step further.

You see, if Natalia simply loses her voice, it'll be too obvious. So I needed to devise a way to ensure that she gets sick too. Losing your voice when you have a cold isn't suspicious, just unfortunate timing. And once again it's my love of science that enables me to carry out these plans.

Chem lab gives me access to the chemical cocktail I need to ensure that Natalia can't sing. I'll admit, I'm pretty haphazard in the way I mix the solutions together, so I wouldn't be surprised if the little songbird never sings again. Oh well.

I sneak into the lab one evening to mix a giant batch of the chem-cocktail and decant it into a bleach bottle, which I decide to keep under my bathroom sink. No one will question it there.

It's biology that really gives me what I need though. We've recently moved on to microbial cultures, and part of our practical was to gather samples from all around the school to put in Petri dishes, labelled, and watch them grow. Every few days, we have to examine the rate of growth and list our findings. I don't know what kind of germs specifically that we're growing yet – that test comes later – but I figure if any were going to make someone ill, the swabs taken from the plughole of the men's urinals would be a good bet. If nothing else, it gives me pleasure to know that I'm lacing her bottle with guys' piss twice a day while she guzzles down gallons of some foul looking green herbal remedy that's supposed to strengthen her vocal folds or some shit. Whatever, honey, you're literally drinking piss right now. Lucky for me, whatever vile concoction she's devouring masks the taste of what I'm spiking it with.

I almost wish I could tell her just to see her reaction.

Anyway, it seems as though it's starting to work because she's beginning to look like shit. She's necking even more of the green gloop now – oh the irony – and has started popping pills like they're smarties. But it's okay because I've switched those out too. All she's doing is popping a shit load of contraceptives instead.

I need to make sure she can't take part in the concert though so I wait until two days before and I hit her with a heavier dose of the cocktail and lace the rim of her bottle with a special swab I collected last week. A guy in my maths class looked like he was dying; he was absolutely wrecked with flu. I watched in horror as he repeatedly sneezed all over his desk throughout the whole lesson. It was so gross, but once everyone left the room, I snuck back in and swabbed his desk. I popped the swab into a sealed plastic bag and then showered for what felt like ten years. Gross. But worth it.

The day before the concert, she looks like death. I hear a rumour around lunchtime that she's had to pull out of the concert and her parents are on their way to pick her up. Apparently, they're taking her to a top Harley Street clinic for an examination, and she might need reconstructive surgery on her vocal cords. Even then, she might never sing again.

Mission accomplished.

Now I just need to get Lexxi. My plan's simple; to push her down the stairs. I need to wait until we're close enough to the concert that a sprained ankle won't heal. I had planned to get her the evening before on the way down to dinner because there's always a bit of a stampede on the stairs, but as I'm heading back to my room after class, I overhear Tilly and Lexxi talking about her pre-show rituals, which gives me a new idea.

That night I lie in bed, ready to move, when I hear a door along the corridor open. I slide out of bed in my floor-length white cotton nightie, glad that I saved it. I quickly apply the white stage makeup to my face that's leftover from Halloween and don the long white-blond wig. I slip out of my door and ghost along the darkened corridor, barefoot.

I sneak down to the first-floor balcony where I watch and wait. Lexxi's ahead of me, already slipping into the dining room to raid the kitchen. Earlier today I heard her telling Tilly that every night before a show, she sneaks off to the kitchen wherever she is to eat ice cream. She said the one and only time she didn't eat it, the show had gone terribly wrong. Tilly scoffed at her superstition, but I was glad of it; it was going to give me the perfect opportunity to exact revenge.

I wait, but I don't have to wait long before I spy Lexxi coming back out of the dining room, carton of ice cream and spoon in hand. She looks so young without her makeup and bitchy scowl, wearing unicorn shorts PJs, that for a moment I waver and almost change my mind. Then I remember Lizzie's face when I found her crying outside in the rain after the concert she never got to sing at, and my resolve strengthens.

I wait until she's almost at the top of the steps, and I step out. She's so startled that she jumps into the air, dropping the spoon and carton as her arms flail helplessly. There's a moment of recognition as she looks at the long white-blond hair and pale face, and I see the shock on her face morph into terror. She stumbles backwards, falling down the step, and I think for a moment that I won't even need to push her because she's done the hard part for me. She's going to fall all by herself.

But where would be the fun in that?

I step forward and plant both my hands on her chest, and I shove her backwards. Hard.

Her scream is so loud I know that she'll be found in just a moment, so I don't need to worry about her banging her head and being found cold and lifeless on the ground when people come down for breakfast in the morning. I don't hang around to watch her descent into justice. Instead, I turn and walk away, pausing only to look back when I hear a dull thud. I only meant to sprain her ankle, but even I can tell in the dark that both of her legs are bent at unnatural angles.

Good, I think to myself, ignoring the way that my stomach twists painfully. All I've done is what she did to Lizzie.

I repeat that to myself every step of the way back to bed. But for some reason, I have trouble falling asleep for a long time.

The next morning, classes and the concert are cancelled. For a moment, I panic, thinking it's because the staff know that someone's targeting the performers, but then the rumours start circulating that the two girls had pushed themselves to the breaking point. For mental health reasons, the headmistress pulled the plug on the whole show for fear that the other students were behaving similarly.

Apparently, Lexxi was taken to hospital with two broken legs and a concussion. They think she hit her head pretty hard because when the paramedics arrived to take her away, she was screaming that Lizzie's ghost had pushed her down the stairs. It got so bad they had to sedate her to get her in the ambulance.

The cancellation of classes meant that term was officially ending a day early, freeing up time for students to pack. Most of their parents had been planning on coming later for the show anyway, so it didn't make much of a difference.

I'm not really going to bother packing as I'll be staying on campus, just down at the guys' house. I figure I can grab a few essentials to see me through a couple of days, and then head back and change things up. In a bag, I sling my makeup and toiletries, my work out gear and bikini, PJs and a couple of changes of clothes. All done, I set my bag by the door for later and take some time to work on Lizzie's journal again.

I've completely ground to a halt with it so far. I've run out of religious words to use to try and break each code, and so far, Google isn't helping either. Skimming the pages of what was left to decode shows me that Lizzie had switched to using only five-letter words. I have a feeling I might know why, and I am eager to test my theory out.

I quickly grab my notebook and a pen, sitting cross-legged on the bed. I scribble down my list of names: Jaxon, Rebel, Thorn, Alajž. I pause for a moment and then impulsively add Tilly, Amber, Belle, Lexxi. Natalia's name just doesn't fit, but

I wonder if maybe she has a nickname or an abbreviation or something. For the time being, it doesn't matter, I have plenty to keep me busy.

I decide to just take the list in order and start working my way through. Using Jaxon's name as my cypher key, I decode the first few words. To begin with, it's always tricky and a painstaking process for me as I translate each individual letter slowly, but once I've cracked it, and I've translated the first few sentences, I can almost fluently read it without any need to write the translation down. Thank god! I love my sister, but not enough to manually transcribe a year's worth of work! I'm kidding, of course, but I'm glad that I don't have to do that. I look down at the page in front of me and see total nonsense. Jaxon's not the key. I repeat for Rebel, and the same thing happens.

Okay, time to regroup. 'Think Raven,' I tell myself. Your sister was smart, organised, methodical. What would she do? When the answer comes to me a moment later, I want to facepalm myself for my own stupidity. Of course, Lizzie would list the names alphabetically! I quickly scribble down: Alajž, Amber, Belle, Jaxon, Lexxi, (Natalia), Rebel, Thorn and Tilly. I'll try Alajž first, but for the code to work, I'll have to swap the Ž in his name for a regular Z, I think.

I start to slowly translate letter by letter the opening of Lizzie's next journal entry. I work quietly for a few minutes, completely absorbed in what I'm reading as my right hand scribbles down each letter. I stop, drop my pen and flex my fingers, before picking up my notebook to see what I've written; if the code's worked there'll be a few sentences of text for me to read. If it hasn't, there'll be total nonsense that makes less sense than her encoded journal entry!

I look down at the paper and smile. Cracked it! Finally, after weeks of stagnation, I'm moving somewhere with it again.

Hey Charlotte, if you're reading this, you've come so far and worked so hard. Thank you for not giving up on me. I guess, if you cracked this code, you know my secret. I've been dying to share it with you...

Holy fucking shit balls! It worked. But that's not what has me excited. Well, it does, but it's not the most exciting thing. I'm excited because Lizzie's writing to me and she mentioned her secret. I feel like I'm finally about to get answers, and as I'm about to move in with the princes for a fortnight, the timing couldn't be more perfect. I quickly scribble down a couple more sentences until the cipher key's embedded in my mind. I sort of visualise it in my mind so that when I look at the journal, it kind of automatically translates itself before my eyes. It's like the letters come alive on the page and scramble to rearrange themselves so that I can read them clearly. I can't explain it well, but Lizzie always said it was a mild form of photographic memory. I argued it was just a learnable skill and proceeded to teach her how to do it too.

Once I'm able to hold the cipher key firmly in my mind, I sit down to read, all thoughts of going to join the guys forgotten.

Lizzie's Journal

24th Feb

Hey Charlotte, if you're reading this, you've come so far and worked so hard. Thank you for not giving up on me. I guess, if you cracked this code, you know my secret. I've been dying to share it with you...

I'm not sure how it happened exactly, but I seem to have got myself a boyfriend. Well, four actually. And they're all a secret. I know that sounds crazy, but I promise I haven't lost the plot! I'll try to explain it to you, so sit back and grab some popcorn and I'll share my story with you, though you mustn't blame me if it takes several entries to get it all out!

First though, can I just say I'm sorry I was so awful throughout the whole holiday period? Looking back now, I can see that I was really not myself, and maybe I was even a touch depressed. I spent the whole holiday stressing about going back to school – which really has been hell, no matter how much I try to kid myself it's not too bad – so much so, that I failed to relax and enjoy my time away from it all. I should've made more effort with you. I left you feeling like I didn't care, when in truth, I was so homesick I didn't want to leave you again.

So back to my story. Sorry if it comes out as a rambling mess, I'm just going to tell it how I remember it and let the words flow out. It started the first day back after the winter break. I went to classes as usual and then after school went to the library to study. When I first started tutoring Rebel – I guess I can tell you his name now – we reserved one of the private rooms in the back of the library for the whole year. After he ditched me, I figured I may as well keep using the space, so I go there most days after school. It's quieter than being in the dorm rooms listening to the girls playing their music and racing in and out of one another's rooms while I sit on my own and feel awful. In a way, the library became a safe haven for me.

The first Monday back at school in January I'm sitting in the private study room, working, when the door opens and Rebel's standing there in the doorway looking sheepish. I was so shocked to see him because it's been months. He comes into the room and starts apologising – he's apologising for standing me up on the date, for bailing on our lessons, for ghosting me, vanishing, the works. You name it, he apologises for it. He even apologises for me being bullied, even though that isn't something he needs to say sorry for because it has nothing to do with him.

At first, I think he's just there to ask me to start tutoring him again, but he doesn't. He sits down and starts to work beside me. Whenever I sneak a look over at him, he's busy working. I'm so confused, what's he doing there? Why is he back all of a sudden? Why isn't he asking for help?

He's still as gorgeous as ever. Seeing him again just reminds me how much I've missed him. I thought I was over my crush on him, but I'm not.

I didn't even get mad when I found out that he's actually good – like really good – at English. He didn't need help or tutoring at all! When I asked him why he made me tutor him, he said it was the only excuse he could think of to talk to me. I was too flattered to be cross with him. Yeah, I have it bad.

He works in silence by me for an hour and then gets up and leaves with only a "bye". He comes back the next day, and the next, and every day after that for a week. Sometimes we talk, mostly we study in silence. Eventually, he asks me out, promising to show this time, and I reluctantly agree. I can't help myself. There's something about him that makes me drop my guard. He slips past my defences and my common sense.

It takes another two weeks before we actually go on a date, school being crazy right now. In the meantime, I get approached by another of the princes – Ace – and asked out.

I know you're probably thinking that they must be fucking with me, right? But Ace isn't like that. He's the quietest of the princes, the kindest. I've spoken to him a few times at night when I can't sleep and have snuck down to the kitchens for hot

chocolate. He's almost always in there baking up a storm, so we've got to chatting a time or two. He's really sweet, so I think, why not? It's just a date. And he seems so happy that I said yes that he insists on taking me out the next day.

We go for ice cream, and it's such a lovely perfect date, ending with a kiss and a promise to go out again at the weekend. Nothing about it felt forced or unreal. He tried really hard to talk to me even though English isn't his first language, and he even made me laugh a couple of times. There's no way he's messing with me.

I like him. I really do.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Saturday morning I'm up nice and early, my new norm thanks to running and training with Ace, ready to take on the holidays. We've agreed to forego our training run this morning in favour of getting me settled in, whatever that means. Once I'm ready, I grab my bag and head downstairs, taking a moment to enjoy the quiet, almost empty halls.

Downstairs, the dining room is deserted, although it's still relatively early. I suspect that the few students who stayed behind are making the most of the first day of holiday by having a lie-in. Outside, it's cold and crisp, fresh and dry; my favourite kind of winter day. I can't stand when it's just grey and wet all the time, to the point where you can't remember a time when it wasn't raining. Not today though, today it feels cold enough to snow. Not that I'm a weatherman or anything, but it's that cold.

I smile when I see Ace walking towards me. After the amount of time we spend sparring together, it's strange to see him with a top on or out of his uniform. He's wearing smart dark jeans, sturdy boots, a smart navy, brushed cotton shirt which fits him well, and a smile that warms my insides. When he gets to me, he wordlessly takes my bag from me and gives me a quick peck on the cheek. That's the thing about Ace, even without the language barrier, he's not really talkative. He doesn't waste his words, and he thinks before he speaks. I

really like that about him. Ace and I have formed a bond where we're able to communicate with few words. We run, train, spar and work together in a quiet harmony that intuitively just works. He's easy to be around because I can just relax and be. I don't have to do anything or be anyone but myself.

It's refreshing. All my life I was playing a role. Lizzie's twin; the one who stayed behind, the twin with the dead sister, the daughter who reminds her parents of what they lost. And now Raven Deighton, who's a little like me I think, but I'm still figuring it out.

None of that matters around Ace. Which is why I'm not too sad when we get to the house and Ace confesses that the other three guys are out of town for the next two nights. After some probing, I find out that although the guys are staying on campus for Christmas, they don't get out of seeing their families altogether. Ace says it's too far for him to go see his family for just a few days. I don't share my excuse: that my parents can't stand the sight of me, so I live with my grandmother who's permanently on some sort of round the world cruise. The girl who was never alone because she always had a twin, now has no one.

I shake off the melancholy, determined to enjoy my time in the guys' house. Okay, so they're gone for a couple of days. It means I get Ace all to myself. Good. I quickly dump my bag in the guest room, taking a quick look around. It's a charming room overlooking the garden and the woods beyond, decorated in neutral colours with a beachy rustic vibe. The bed seems really comfy when I have a quick bounce on it, and I have my own en suite. It'll do nicely, I think.

I clomp back downstairs in my low-heeled tan ankle boots, pulling on my red wool coat as I go, and look up to see Ace grinning at me.

"What?" I ask him.

"Your clothes," he laughs. He's not being rude, just referring to the fact that we usually see each other dressed a little differently.

“You can talk,” I say, sticking my tongue out at him. “I was beginning to wonder if you even owned a shirt that wasn’t a school shirt.”

He laughs and holds his arm out for me. “We go?” he asks. I take it, and we head out the door and over to the Jeep.

“Oh, I thought the Jeep would be gone? That one of the boys would be using it?”

“Rich parents send cars.” He shrugs. I’m glad about the car though, having access to the Jeep’s more fun than having to walk to town in the cold.

“So what do you need in town? Did you leave all your shopping till the last minute too?” I ask him.

“We need tree.”

“What?! You guys don’t have a tree yet?!” I shriek at him, and he winces.

“You like doing tree.” I’m kind of touched that he remembers. When the topic of Christmas first came up, I told them how sad I was that I wouldn’t be spending it at home. Not because I’d miss my parents, but because I’d miss all our traditions – particularly choosing and decorating a tree. What a lovely thing to do, to wait so that I can go and select one with him. I lean over and give him a kiss on the cheek in thanks.

“What presents you get?”

“I still need to get Rebel and Jax. Do you have any ideas?”

“I think.”

Good enough for me. I’m sure if he thinks of something he’ll let me know. Moments later we’re pulling into the car park of a garden centre, and I give a small squeal. It looks like Santa’s grotto outside, and if the outside looks this good, I’m excited to see the inside. Ace watches me with amusement and shakes his head.

“Child,” he calls me, to which I stick my tongue out at him.

Inside, I'm like a kid in a sweet shop. There's so many colours, so many lights, so many shiny, sparkly, pretty things, that I don't know where to look first. I kind of run around, darting from this to that, to whatever catches my eye, while Ace trails behind me struggling to keep up. Eventually though, he stops me with a firm hand on my shoulder and steers me out the back of the shop to the gardens. "Tree first. Shiny later."

I mock pout at him, but I'm too happy to mean it. I get to choose a freaking tree, after all! The last time I decided on a tree was the year before Lizzie went to West Prep when Dad took us out of school for the day to go tree shopping. We spent the whole day going around town inspecting trees before finally deciding on the perfect one. We celebrated with hot chocolates and got home too late to decorate it. The memory brings a smile to my face, and thanks to Ace, the stabbing pain in my chest that usually accompanies memories of Lizzie, is absent.

I smile at him as I point to the section outside that houses the largest trees. Go big or go home was always our family motto when it came to the tree. Ace sighs at me as if he should've known all along I'd want a big tree and heads over that way. He starts to point trees out, asking, "This one?" and, "That one?" But I huff at him and explain that he has to do it properly. I show him.

You have to get each tree out and hold it up straight. You bang the trunk a couple of times to encourage the branches to drop a little from where they've been bagged up. Then you have to spin the tree to look at it from each angle. It has to be perfect. Ace doesn't agree. I think he's bored three trees in, but I ignore him and make him keep going.

"This one," he says, pulling a tree right from the back of the pile. It's still bagged, but it's enormous.

"Bagged," I tell him, shaking my head. You can't ever take a risk on a bagged tree.

"Trust," he insists, pulling a penknife from the keyring the Jeep keys are on and splitting the bag. He shakes the tree and

quickly bangs it and...I'm looking at the most perfect goddamn tree I've ever seen. It's tall and bushy, but perfectly proportioned. He spins it, and it looks equally good from every angle. There's no gaps or weird sticky out bits. It's perfect.

"I love it! That's the one!"

"See? Trust." He smiles proudly as if to say 'Didn't I do good?' and I reach up on my tiptoes to kiss him again.

"You did good," I confirm. He starts to head back inside with the tree under his arm, but I stop him and send him over to get the tree re-bagged and delivered.

"Now decorate."

I shake my head and tell him I'm not ready to go home because I still have gifts to buy.

"No, choose decorate."

"Oh, you mean choose decorations!" I feel stupid for not getting it the first time, "We can just use whatever you have at the house. We don't need to buy new."

"No decorations," he sounds out the syllables of the new word in concentration, and it's adorable. "No tree before."

"Oh my god, what? You've never had a tree before? We're going to need everything!" It's a lot of pressure suddenly to make their first-ever tree absolutely perfect, luckily I feel up to the challenge. I grab a trolley and head inside to start loading up.

"What colour do you like?"

"Red."

"What colour will the guys like?"

"Red."

"Okay. Red it is then. But I'll put some gold with it too, and we'll just have warm white lights on the tree. It'll be super pretty."

We choose tinsel, ornaments and baubles together and it's a lot of fun. Even though we decided on red and gold, we look

at all the other coloured stuff too. Ace ends up getting way more into it than me, piling the cart high with things for every room of the house. I'm really excited by the garlands he grabbed for the mantle and balustrade, but I'm most excited about the five stockings he picked up to hang on the fireplace.

It takes a couple of hours, but eventually, we're done, and the car's loaded. We grab a quick lunch to celebrate and then it's back to the shops to find the perfect presents.

The only people I need to buy for this year are the guys. But I have no idea what to get them. I've been wracking my brains for weeks now, and although I've sorted Thorn and got a few ideas for Ace, I'm drawing a blank on Rebel and Jax. What do you buy for guys that you haven't known that long, who are rich enough to buy anything their heart desires, but who are also down-to-earth and humble? I sigh as I look at yet another generic gift shop and feel completely uninspired. Whatever it is, I don't think I'm going to find it in town.

Just as I'm about to give up and meet Ace back at the car, I spy a small shop that I missed before. I cross over to it and peer into the window. It may just have the perfect gift for Jax.

Once we're home – strange to think of it like that, but I guess I'll be calling it home for the next two weeks – Ace and I get started on decorating. I crank up the Christmas tunes on the Bose sound system and sing along as we string thousands of pretty white lights around the freshly chosen and delivered tree. Even with Ace's height, we have to borrow a step ladder from the school's groundsman to be able to reach the top. Ace insists on going up the ladder, I'm pretty sure it's because he doesn't trust me not to fall, he called me 'Neroden¹' under his breath, but when I challenged him on it, he tried to insist he was just being a gentleman. After we've strung the lights, Ace unravels the gold ribbon spools that we got and adds them to the top of the tree. He adds this funky artistic twist that allows them to hang vertically in spirals from the top to the bottom of the tree. It looks really pretty, so we decide against using the

tinsel that I picked up. I'm sure we'll find somewhere else in the house for it. Once that's done, we place the large glittering gold star at the top of the tree and begin to hang the baubles and ornaments, working from the top down. Ace had wanted to leave the star until the end, but too many times Lizzie and I had tried this and had almost ruined hours of hard work by knocking the tree over as we struggled to reach it at the end. I explain this to Ace, and he concedes that I might have a point. After that, he's happy to allow me to delegate to him, and I have to say, I find him most compliant. Doing this job with Rebel would've been a completely different story. Ace is so patient when I repeatedly make him move the same bauble until it's hung 'just so', and he never complains once. I love him a little bit for that.

It takes well over an hour to decorate the tree, but once we're done, it's magnificent. We both sit back and admire our handiwork. It's getting dark outside, and we sit admiring the tree with just the fairy lights and the fire illuminating the room. Snuggled together on the sofa, my feet curled up and Ace's arm around my shoulders, it feels really cosy and romantic. Ace's been so sweet today, and I've loved every minute we've spent together.

I shift uncomfortably when I realise that I'm crushing on him pretty hard. I can't imagine him being involved in bullying Lizzie at all. The others, as much as I like them, I could see being involved. But Ace just seems too nice. That's what I realise, he's sort of like Lizzie in a way; pure, honest and good. I tell Ace I have some online shopping to do that I don't want him to see, grabbing the laptop and busying myself to avoid looking at him. I need time and space to process what I'm feeling right now, but he doesn't say anything. He just drops a kiss on my temple and disappears out into the kitchen.

A couple of hours pass before I realise that I've become totally absorbed with the screen in front of me. I've finished Thorn's and Jax's gifts and almost got Rebel sorted. I'm still undecided on what to get Ace for Christmas or his birthday. Sighing, I put down the computer to stand and stretch. I hear faint Christmas music coming from the kitchen and go to investigate what Ace has been up to all this time.

When I push open the door to the kitchen, I'm surprised to see Ace baking cookies. I smile as I watch him, oblivious to my entry as he whisks batter. On the island, there are already numerous trays of cookies cooling in what looks to be a variety of different flavour combinations. I tiptoe forward to steal one – Okay, a couple – when he spins around and catches me red-handed. In two long strides, he moves over to me and, before I can react, smacks my hand away from the cookie I was reaching for.

“Hey! That’s not fair!” I cry, pouting at him. Now that I can smell the delicious caramelised sugar scent that’s filling the air, I wonder how I missed it the last two hours. My mouth’s watering, I’m hungry, and I really want a cookie.

“No. Christmas.”

“What, I can’t even try one?” He shakes his head. “But what if they’re awful? What if we wait and on Christmas morning the only cookies we have are these, and they’re bad? You’ll have ruined Christmas. Won’t you feel bad?”

I can see Ace processing what I’ve just said, wavering. I almost feel bad for making him doubt himself because I don’t think for a second that there will be anything wrong with his cookies at all. But when he sighs and says I can have just one, I beam at him, glad I teased him.

“I need to try one of each kind. Every recipe is different...”

“Fine,” he cuts me off, grabbing a plate and starting to pile cookies on it for me. I look in dismay at the ever growing pile and think I may have bitten off more than I can chew. I’ll never eat all of those! He must have baked a dozen different types at least. I smile at him and invite him to taste them with me. We sit down at the far end of the island where there’s a little space. We sit on the stools side by side, but turn inwards so that we’re almost facing one another and our knees are touching. We munch quietly through the cookies for a moment, and then curiosity gets the better of me.

“You bake?”

“Cook too.”

“Where did you learn?”

“Family cook. Family bake. Always Christmas cookies.”

“I love Christmas cookies too...are you sad to not be going home this Christmas?”

He shrugs. “Miss family, yes. But happy here.”

“Tell me about your family?”

“Mother only. Father dead. Five sisters.”

“Whoa, you have five sisters?”

“Yes,” his face lights up, “all younger. I am oldest. Big responsibility.” Yeah, I’ll say. I can’t imagine leaving to go and live in a different country and parting with a single mum and five younger sisters.

“What are their names and ages?”

Ace rattles off their details and tells me a little about life at home in Slovenia. It sounds amazing. I can’t fathom why he’s here. When I ask him, he just says that he’s here to study, so I go back to asking him about the baking.

“TV bad in Slovenia. Family watch English show every time. Cooking old lady. Berry lady.”

“Do you mean Mary Berry? Your family all watch her show?”

“Yes!” He nods delightedly. “Big fan of old lady. Good baking. One day be like.”

“One day, you want to be like an old lady?” I tease.

He pushes me too hard, and I start to slide sideways off the stool. I quickly reach out and grab him to steady myself, but because I take him by surprise, he too topples sideways, and in a moment we’re on the floor. I’m sprawled out on my back, unhurt, and Ace is laid on top of me. Our faces are so close that his warm breath tickles my cheek.

“Neroden²,” he says again, softly this time. It almost sounds warm and affectionate like a term of endearment. He

gently kisses my lips, barely a whisper of contact. “Lepa³, krasen⁴, čarobno⁵, zapeljiva dekle⁶.” With each compliment – I just know from the soft tone of his voice and the tender look in his eyes that he’s complimenting me – he kisses me lightly on the lips. He’s still pressed on top of me, but he’s holding his weight from being crushing; instead, it’s comforting. Our chests are pressed together, and I’m breathing hard. I can feel his elevated heartbeat thudding against mine in a crazy pitter-patter rhythm. His gentle kisses have me lightheaded and greedy for more. I want this beautiful, sensitive, kind boy to kiss me properly.

A low groan escapes my lips from somewhere deep in my throat, and that seems to be the green light he was holding out for because in the blink of an eye his lips are firmly on mine, kissing me with a desperate fervour that leaves me breathless. Ace has never kissed me like this before; like he’s a drowning man in the last throes of life and I’m his one chance at salvation. His lips move against mine with bruising force, but I relish it and meet his passion equally. I want more.

When his hand slides under my top and lightly grazes my stomach, I jerk, tickled by the sensitive sensation. I don’t hesitate to arch my back a little to encourage him to slide my top up and over my head. We kiss furiously the entire time, only breaking apart for a split second to remove the shirt. My fingers frantically scrabble at the buttons on his shirt and push the material off his shoulders and down his arms. That’s when we reach a snag because I can’t seem to pull the sleeves from his arms.

We break apart, panting hard, and Ace growls, “Sranje⁷!” and makes quick work of the cuffs. While he’s pulled away from me, sat back and straddling my hips, I drink him in greedily. I’ve seen him shirtless so many times – sparring, running, relaxing in the hot tub – that I feel like I have all the lines of his body memorised, but at the same time, I feel like I’m seeing him properly for the first time.

I reach up and run my fingers over the ridges of his abdomen, loving how firm and toned he is, mesmerised by how he shudders under my touch. He truly is a work of art; his

body is pure perfection. I rise up a little to loop my arms around his neck and sink back, pulling him down to the floor with me. He's been gone too long, and I hate the distance between us. This time when my back hits the cool kitchen floor, it's only for a moment as Ace loops his arms under me and rolls so that he's on his back and I'm straddling him. I can feel his arousal pressing through his jeans, and I wriggle slightly to test its size. I'm not disappointed. "Jebemti⁸—" he groans, so I do it again. His hands shoot out and grab my hips, forcing me to stay still, and I pout at him. "Nevarna igra⁹, majhna punčka¹⁰." I have no idea what he's saying to me, but it sounds sexy as hell like he's losing control.

A shrill beeping sound distracts us from our make-out session, and I pull back, confused. "What the hell?" Ace shoves me off him and quickly clambers to his feet. He rushes over to the oven and silences the timer – oh! – and proceeds to remove yet another sheet of cookies from the oven with a mitt.

"Shoo," he waves his hand at me, and I'm seriously about to lose my shit at him. What is going on? "Out. I need tidy. Go!" He comes over and all but pushes me backwards out of the kitchen door. "Lepa moteča dekle.¹¹" He shakes his head as he turns away and disappears back into the kitchen.

I'm pissed. Absolutely fuming. What's the girl version of blue balls? Because I'm that, too. I huff and slam and stomp off upstairs to my room. That's the first time I've ever been rejected in favour of food. Food that he isn't even planning on eating either! The insult is too much. I need a long cold shower.

When I've cooled down – in more ways than one – I start to think I may have overreacted slightly. While I'd happily pull this stroppy girlie crap with the other guys, I can't help but wonder if it's pointless to do it with Ace. I don't think he'd understand my passive-aggressive, snarky comments or lousy mood anyway. I sigh as I sit on the bed and dry my hair. I'm just sulking because things were just getting interesting with Ace. If I'm honest with myself, I want to fuck him. And it doesn't have anything to do with my revenge plan. I want to

sleep with him because I like him. Really like him. And I don't know if my heart's just overruling my head, or if I'm trying to kid myself, but my gut tells me that he isn't involved in Lizzie's death at all.

Lizzie's Journal

Feb 28th

I'm trying to remember where I left off! It was so long ago the details have faded in my mind...only joking Sis! They're burned in my memory forever.

My date with Rebel was really good, taking place near the end of January. He took me out for tacos, and I got in a right mess. He didn't care, though. It was definitely an ice breaker. And he even took me straight from school, so there was no chance of him standing me up (his words not mine!) He seemed a bit shy at first, but we got to talking, and things were easier. He's really funny. He has quite a fiery temper – like you, Charl – and I loved it when he talked about his music. He's really passionate and animated. He said he'd take me out after his next gig if I came to watch it and I'm really looking forward to it.

Which leads me on to my next date: with Thorn. He took me to the cinema after approaching me at lunch and asking me out one day. He's loud and boisterous and quick to laugh so I expected that he'd picked the cinema as an excuse to feel me up in the dark. But he didn't. He also insisted on a chick flick, which I assumed he was just choosing to please me, but to be honest, I think he enjoyed it more than I did! I spent most of the film watching him. His face is so animated, his reactions over the top. He's playful and funny, and his kisses are the same. I love that he finds joy in everything.

Finally, Jax approached me to ask for a date. It was probably the one I was most nervous about because I know him the least. I find him intense and intimidating, which you'll probably laugh at because if you could see the size of Rebel you'd expect me to be scared of him. He's a pussy cat though. Not Jax. There's something...darker about him. I'm intrigued enough to want to go on a date with him though.

So there you have it, Charlie. You're probably reading this and moaning about the total lack of detail from me, but a girl has to have some secrets, doesn't she?

Love ya, sis!



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The next morning I unintentionally have a lie-in. When I wake up, I'm surprised that it's nine o'clock. I'm even more surprised that the house is so quiet. Ace must be out. He's a perpetual early riser. Although I guess thanks to him, I am now too. I quickly wash and dress in my workout leggings and sports bra, thinking I can go for a run and maybe catch up with Ace.

In a few minutes, I've laced my trainers, run downstairs and headed out the door. I'm still half asleep, missing my morning hot chocolate that I've come to rely on. Luckily, the air that hits my lungs is bracing, but it almost instantly clears the last of the sleepiness from my foggy head. I quickly stretch to warm up and take off through the woods, opting for our usual route. It feels good to stretch my legs and run again after having yesterday off. I know I'm probably going to take a few more days off over Christmas, so I work extra hard today. By the time my circuit laps back round to the house and there's still no sign of Ace, I decide to do another lap and take off again.

After the second lap though I definitely need a break, and a drink, so I head inside through the unlocked door, slip off my shoes and socks, and make my way into the kitchen to grab a glass and run the cold tap. It's only after I've downed a pint of cold water that I stop and notice my surroundings. The first

thing I notice is that the kitchen's spotless; there's not a trace of all the baking that was done yesterday, and all of the cookies have disappeared. The second thing I notice is that it looks like Christmas in here, too, when it definitely didn't last night.

Red and gold garlands run all along the top of the kitchen cupboards, and two tiny potted, real Christmas trees sit at either end of the island covered in miniature baubles. The windows are decked with three beautiful round wreaths, and red felted snowflakes dot the front of the cabinets. The pièce de résistance though is the wooden sled that's been rigged up to hang from the potholder over the island, which is loaded with wrapped gifts in a variety of red and gold papers and looks like Santa's actual sleigh.

Oh my god. It's amazing. I can't stop staring. When the hell did Ace do all this? He can't have slept last night at all. I wander from the kitchen through to the lounge and stop dead in the hallway. I don't know how I missed this before. Beautifully decorated garlands are twisted all along the balustrade up the stairs, and another loaded sleigh sits in welcome by the front door, which also has a welcome wreath on the outside. Was I dead this morning when I walked past all of this, twice, without noticing?

I hear movement on the stairs and turn around to see a sleepy Ace coming towards me dressed in only loose pyjama bottoms. His hair's sticking up at crazy mad angles, and he's yawning and rubbing his eyes like a small boy. The contrast of unbelievably cute and indescribably sexy does exciting things to me.

"Hey, Ace, this is..." I hold my arms out, indicating that I'm sort of at a loss for words.

"You like?" he asks me sleepily between yawns.

"I love! When did you do this? Why did you do this? You should've said something, I could've helped!"

"Yesterday night." He shrugs. "Wanted surprise for you."

“Thank you!” I launch myself at him, throwing my arms around his neck and wrapping my legs around his waist as I give him a massive hug and a noisy kiss. “It must have taken you all night. Thank you so much, you have no idea what this means to me. I love it!”

Suddenly, I’m very aware that I’m wrapped around a half-naked Ace, who’s very hard and only wearing thin cotton pyjama pants. My cheeks colour a little, and I drop my legs to slide to the floor. All that does though is mean that I end up sliding my entire body down the length of his. Kill me now. I have no idea what to say or where to look.

“Spar?” he asks me. It feels like a lifeline. If he’s not going to mention my embarrassing faux pas, or last night, then I won’t either.

“Please.” I nod gratefully.

“Come.” He turns and heads back up the stairs, which I find a little odd because we always go to the martial arts centre to train, but I follow him nonetheless. He leads me up the stairs and past the guest room where I’m staying, past Jax’s room and the bathroom. We pass another two doors – which must be Rebel’s and Thorn’s rooms – and he stops at the final door along the corridor, which I’m guessing is his. I’ve never been in his room before, so I’m not sure what to expect.

When he opens the door, I step inside and am taken aback to find we’re actually standing in a gym room. There’s rubber matting covering the floor, weights in one corner, a punching bag and speedball set up to one side and even a grappling dummy over by the far wall.

“Is this your...gym?” I ask him, confused. I didn’t see any more doors up here, so where does he sleep?

“Bedroom, gym, yeah.” He shrugs.

“You sleep here?” I look around the open space that’s devoid of any furniture or personal belongings. “Where?”

I watch in amazement as Ace walks over to a sizable unobstructed segment of the wall and presses a button that I assumed was a light switch. A panel that I didn’t see opens

and hydraulics lower a substantial double bed down from the wall. Wow. I want one. He waits until the bed's completely lowered, then presses the button again to make it rise and go back into hiding. If I didn't know it was there now, I wouldn't be able to tell at all. It's seriously cool and frees up so much space in the room for us to work out.

“Hand to hand combat?” I ask him, smiling. After my run, I'm nicely warmed up, my muscles loose, and I'm ready to grapple.

“Bring on,” Ace replies, dropping to a defensive crouch. He never attacks first when we train together, preferring to work on his defensive techniques, but when I come at him, he usually gives back as good as he gets. I appreciate that. When I found out that he would be in my classes with me I was disappointed; most guys usually take it easy on girls, but aside from the not attacking first thing, Ace has always treated me like an equal.

My aim today is to stay on the offensive to take him down for some groundwork. I begin with a flurry of boxing jabs and strikes to his face that has him stepping backwards and raising his guard. I come at him fast so that he doesn't have time to drop his guard to watch me, which leaves his midsection vulnerable to attack. I shift my weight back onto my left leg and plant it firmly so that I can level a front kick to his exposed stomach. Ace grunts and immediately drops his hands and attempts to grab my ankle, but it's already planted on the floor, and I'm back to jabbing him. I catch him with a cross-body punch followed by an uppercut, then step in close for an elbow strike. I spin so that my back's close to his chest and stomp on his instep. I throw my head back to head butt him and am rewarded with him swearing in Slovenian. I always know that I'm getting to him when he reverts to his mother tongue. I spin back around and execute a simple double leg sweep, and he's down.

I wonder if it's an all-time record for me to get him on his back that quickly as I stand over him, panting hard, hands on my half-exposed hips. He grins up at me admiringly, and I know he's impressed with the execution of moves I've just put

on him. He holds out his hand for me to help him up, which I take, but he yanks me down on top of him. I fall inelegantly to his chest and end up in much the same position as we were in last night on the kitchen floor. Only this time I'm breathing hard from exertion, not arousal.

In the blink of an eye, Ace rolls me to my back and straddles me, my arms pinned by the side of my head in each of his big hands. He leans into me, his bare chest pressing against my exposed stomach, and my skin alights. It feels like tiny flames are dancing across my abdomen whenever our breaths push our flesh to meet. His skin brushing against mine lights the blue touch paper, and in an instant I'm blazing for him, squirming with need. I stare up into his burning violet gaze, and I swear, even if he didn't have me pinned, I wouldn't be able to move from his piercing stare. It has me speared to the ground wondering what he's going to do next. It's like déjà vu, but a heightened, more extreme version compared to last night.

He leans forward, pushing his weight onto my entrapped wrists to the point of almost being painful so that he can lower his face to my ear.

"Today, buzzer not save you," he whispers in my ear, then nips my ear lobe. His tongue trails downward from my ear, along my neck, to the hollow at my clavicle. I'm done. I don't even try to break free from his hold. Why would I want to? He switches his tongue for his lips and kisses his way across my collarbone to my other shoulder, then works his way up my neck. When he gets to the small dip just behind my ear and kisses me, my hips buck of their own accord, and I groan. "Ace please..." I don't even know what I'm asking for.

"Shhh," he tells me, planting a light kiss on my temple. He removes his hands from my wrists, massaging them briefly to help the circulation return then taps me on the nose "Arms stay. No move," he instructs me. I nod in compliance, and he kisses my lips lightly. "Pridna punčka¹." I have no idea what he's just said, but his smile makes me think I've done something correctly. Right now, he wants me to stay still and

not move, and for another one of those smiles or kisses, I think I'd just about do anything.

Now that his hands are free, they begin to roam my body almost lazily like he has all the time in the world. Doesn't he know I'm burning here? I feel like I'm about to combust, and I need him to hurry and save me. But he just takes his time as if he knows exactly the effect he's having on me, and he's actually enjoying torturing me in this slow seductive manner.

His hands lightly graze my bare sides, and the heat from his touch causes goosebumps to rise all over my stomach. He slowly traces them with a single fingertip, and I swear I can feel every single microscopic bump that he skims. His fingers dance over my flesh with surprising dexterity and lightness, finding their way to the zip on the front of my sports bra. His scorching violet eyes meet mine for a second, asking silent permission and I nod infinitesimally. With painstaking slowness, he reaches and slides down the zipper, it feels like one ridge at a time, and I want to scream at him to hurry. But I don't. I bite my tongue, stay still and suffer in silence.

Once the bra's undone, he pulls me up to a sitting position and slides the straps down my shoulders so that I'm completely topless like him. His eyes haven't left mine the entire time, but when his hands glide from my shoulders down to my breasts it's like something in him snaps, and his mouth is on mine in a flash. He's kissing me like he did last night; that drowning man looking for a lifeline again.

He encourages me to wrap my legs around his waist again, then he slides his arms under my back. Without breaking the searing hot kiss, he lifts me up and strides until we're pressed against the wall. I'm so lost in his lips that I barely notice he's flicked the switch to lower the bed until he lifts me again and places me on it. I break away from his devouring mouth to catch my breath. Ace is standing over me, breathing just as hard as I am, and the desire I see in his eyes makes my heart stumble.

"Bed?" he asks, and I can't speak. I nod, swallow, and try again.

“Yes.” I didn’t mean to sound so needy.

He reaches out and grasps my leggings, hooking his fingers under the waistband of my thong too, then pulls them slowly down my thighs and removes them together. I’m laid on his bed completely naked, and instead of feeling self-conscious, the way he looks at me has me feeling like a goddess. He falls to his knees, using my ankles to spread my legs wider and pulls me closer to the edge of the bed.

The instant his warm breath tickles my pussy, I’m fisting my hands in the duvet and arching my back. I have no idea what this boy’s done to me, but his torturously slow teasing has got me on edge already. I’m so sensitive I writhe under him and try to pull him back up my body, but he’s not having any of it. He plants his hands on my thighs, somehow spreading my legs even further, making me even more sensitive. He lowers his head to my pussy and gives me the lightest of kisses. I’m out of my mind with frustration. I need more contact. He’s driving me crazy.

He alternates between lightly kissing, licking and blowing on my pussy, and suddenly it’s not frustrating anymore; it’s incredibly hot. He’s not even touching me, and I can feel myself winding tighter like a coil poised to snap at any moment. I have no idea how he’s doing this to me, but suddenly I’m a fan. It’s the right kind of crazy.

Finally, it feels like I’ve been waiting forever, he starts to gently suck my clit, and I see stars. I’m ridiculously close to coming, and I don’t even have to tell him; he can tell from my shallow panting and twitching hips just how close I am. He slowly inserts a finger into my opening, only going as deep as his fingernail and I swear that’s all I need: I’m gone.

My orgasm builds from the soles of my feet, which heat and tingle. I feel the warmth spread across my entire body, and all my muscles tighten to the point where I feel like I could break. My body goes rigid, and my hips lift from the bed. I go still for a moment and then tremble all over, from head to toe, as the power that’s been building inside of me breaks free. It’s like an all-encompassing avalanche, and every sensation I’ve been holding back comes flooding out at once. I cry out,

bucking hard against Ace's face as he continues to gently tease my opening and kiss my clit. He laps at me until my orgasm subsides and I collapse back on the bed, spent.

Holy fuck.

When I open my eyes, Ace is grinning down at me with devilment in his eyes. He brings his pinkie finger up to his lips and sucks my juices from it. "Prekleta okusno²," he tells me, and my face reddens. How the hell did I just come from the tip of his little finger? I have no idea how he did it, but I'm impressed. And as exhausting as my orgasm was, I definitely want more.

We're rudely interrupted by my stomach growling loudly, and I'm mortified. How unsexy, but sadly realistic. I've been up for hours, done two runs and sparred on just a glass of water. Luckily, Ace just chuckles and takes my hand, pulling me to my feet and passing me my clothes.

"Breakfast now. More after."

"That sounds like a bloody good idea." With a kiss, I vow to hold him to that promise.

Ace cooks up a feast. While he's doing that I slip away for a quick shower to freshen up and come back downstairs dressed. I don't have any plans to go out today, so I'm just wearing a large chunky knitted oversized cream jumper and matching knee-high socks. It's my favourite cosy, slobbing at home outfit, and I love it. Once I'm down, we have a full fry up and pancakes. They're not as good as Aunty Josie's, but they're a really close second. Ace beams when I tell him this. I love how simple things make him so happy.

As he heaps even more food onto my plate, I feel like he's trying to fill me up so that I have enough energy for what comes later. I'm definitely not complaining. I want to scarf my food down as quickly as possible so that I can drag Ace back

to the bedroom, but somehow I manage to refrain and eat at a normal speed, with table manners and everything.

“When are the guys back?” I ask him. I’m actually not missing them, though I thought I would. I also don’t want to be interrupted by any of them walking in on us. Especially not Rebel; he’d probably just pull his clothes off and try to join in. Hmm, there’s an idea...maybe later.

“Tomorrow night.” Wow that’s good news. We basically have two more days alone together.

“Do you have anything you need to do today or tomorrow?”

I nearly fall off my stool when he looks me dead in the eye and with a straight face says, “You.”

“Great answer.” I blush. Honestly, it’s the sort of joke I’d expect from Rebel or maybe even Thorn, but not Ace. He smiles like he’s just so damn proud of himself and it’s adorable.

After breakfast I expect Ace to grab my hand and drag me back upstairs straight away, but he doesn’t. He starts tidying up. Okay, I get it, he’s a bit of a neat freak. I can wait. I’m not an impatient animal...why isn’t he done yet?! Once he’s done tidying, washing up (even though they have a dishwasher), drying and putting the breakfast things away, he starts to wipe down the countertops and hob. I don’t know whether to salivate in anticipation or foam at the mouth in annoyed frustration. I go back to my original observation: this boy is driving me crazy!

Finally...finally he’s done, and he comes and takes my hand, pulling me from the stool and out of the kitchen. But instead of turning right up the stairs, he crosses the hallway into the lounge. He closes the curtains, lights a fire and turns on the fairy lights. It’s amazingly cosy and romantic – okay I can live with this and do without a bed – but he’s selecting Christmas films to watch! What the hell?

Ace sits on the sofa and pats the seat next to him. “Come,” he tells me, and I quip back, “Again?”, to which he smirks at

but doesn't say anything. I have to tell myself to be nice and not take my frustrations out on him, even though he's the cause of all of them. I sigh and take my seat on the sofa beside him.

Ace surprises me by reclining the chairs and pulling me down so that I'm laid in front of him, my back pressed to his front. He scoops an arm around my middle and cuddles me in. Okay, I think, this isn't so bad at all...I wriggle to get more comfortable, and I hear Ace's sharp intake of breath as my ass rubs against his cock. I pretend I can't get comfy and wriggle some more. His hand shoots down to my hip where he holds me still and orders me to stop. I'm glad he can't see my grin. I like that I'm affecting him too.

We settle down to watch the movie, a Christmas rom-com which has us both laughing, and the day begins to ebb away. One film becomes two, then three, and I relax into it, enjoying Ace's company and his warm firm body pressed up against mine. We stop for popcorn and lunch, snacks and drinks, even dinner, but always resume our PG movie watching. With the curtains closed, it's impossible to tell what time it is, but I'm starting to tire when Ace suggests one more film. I agree, reluctantly, and lie with my head in his lap for this one. Ace absentmindedly strokes my hair, and it's so relaxing that I feel myself start to doze off before the opening credits have even finished. I don't care; I've seen all of these movies before, and Ace seemed to be having a good time.

“Zbudi se³, mala princeska⁴.” Soft words and a gentle shake of my shoulder rouse me from my nap, and I look up to see Ace standing over me. At some point, he must've moved off the sofa to let me sleep, and placed a blanket over me. The movie on the TV screen has faded to black but is still on, casting an eerie dull glow to the room. I don't need the darkness outside the closed curtains to know it's late.

“Bed?” Ace asks, and I nod sleepily and stretch. Before I can stand, Ace's strong arms are under me, and he's lifting and carrying me through the house like that first day when I hurt my ankle running. This time though he takes me up the stairs. I think, given his behaviour all day, that he's going to take me

to bed, but he continues past the door to my room with me still in his arms. Instead of dropping me off and tucking me into bed, he carries me along the corridor to his room where the bed's still down from earlier.

He crosses the room, pulls back the duvet and places me in his bed. Then he gently removes my socks and jumper so that I'm naked. He watches me for a moment, his expression unreadable, before replacing the covers. He disappears to the bathroom but soon comes back, naked, and gets into bed beside me. It's too dark for me to fully perv at his naked body, and it makes me pout. I want to see every inch of him.

He goes to snuggle in, trying to pull me into the same position we were laid in on the sofa, but I quickly flip over so that I'm facing him. I'm not sleepy anymore. We lie like that, facing each other for a moment, and I can't stand the tension.

“Are you ever going to kiss me again?” I complain.

He doesn't disappoint.

His hands roam all over my body while he kisses me. The combination of passionate kisses and slow leisurely perusal of my body has me heating up all over again. It feels fantastic, but I can't go through all those feelings from earlier all over again. Luckily, Ace seems to realise this and doesn't spend an age teasing me. His hand slides down my body to my opening, and when he dips a finger in, he finds me ready and waiting.

“So wet,” he whispers, gently pumping into me a couple of times.

“Ace...” I try to beg. It's not that I don't want him to play with me, but it's late, I'm tired, and I can't stand the idea of not having him in me a moment longer. I don't care how good the orgasm was; right now, I just want him.

“Shhh...I know...condom?” he asks me, reaching for his bedside table.

“I'm on birth control, and I'm clean,” I tell him. He nods and tells me he is too, so we decide to pass on the condom. I trust him entirely not to lie about this.

He rolls me onto my back and positions himself on top of me, lining up the head of his cock at my opening. I can feel it pulsing in anticipation, the heat of it almost burning me. He pauses there for a moment, and I'm close to crying – or growling – with frustration when he grabs my hips and enters me in one smooth movement.

Fuck. I gasp. I wasn't expecting for him to go all in, in one thrust. He's big, really big, and it takes me a moment to get used to his length. Damn, it feels good, though.

He adjusts his grip on my hips, tilting them forward and up as he withdraws and sinks into me again. That feels so much better. I groan.

“More?” His violet gaze is light and playful.

“More,” I confirm. So much more.

He nods once and continues, his large hands still gripping my hips, holding them exactly where he wants them. His grip is bruising, but I welcome it. His strokes are slow but firm, controlled. He knows exactly what he's doing; driving me crazy once again. It feels like his fingertips are skimming the goosebumps again, only this time it's his cock exploring every inch inside me, slowly, unhurriedly, like he has all the time in the world.

When he pulls back, he teases my opening with the head of his cock in a move that makes me drip. As he enters me, the angle of his cock strokes that sweet spot. Every. Single. Time. And as he's fully sheathed inside of me, he rotates his hips in a way that has his pelvis grinding against my clit. Then he repeats. Over and over again.

I adore each of the sensations that he creates, sinking into each with enjoyment, then feeling bereft when he moves on to the next one. There's not quite enough stimulation in each place before he's moving on, and I have a fleeting thought that I'm not going to be able to come. Not that it matters really, since I came earlier, I guess it's his turn now.

I'm surprised though, I thought he was going to fuck like how he spars and kisses; hard and fast, holding nothing back.

But he doesn't. This is measured and controlled, slow and sensual. I thought I wanted – needed – it hard and fast, but Ace seems to know what I really need. And it's this. Exactly this. The combination of his movements create a myriad of sensations in my body, and once again, I feel that tell-tale tingling burn that starts in the soles of my feet. I don't want him to stop now. I don't want to change a single thing.

He shifts, and I see stars, my back arches up from the bed, my hands fist the sheets, a cry escapes my lips, "Fuck, Ace!"

"Popolnost⁵. Ste popolna⁶." He kisses me, and I'm suddenly the one drowning, in need of a lifeline. I drop the sheets from my clenched fingers and cling desperately to his neck. My whole body's burning, every muscle rigid and coiled. I'm strung so tight, I'm trembling.

"Aljaž, please," I cry.

I don't know if it's my begging or the way I use his real name, but something inside of him snaps, and his hips begin to pump faster of their own accord. I've lost all sense of control as he picks up the pace, pounding into me, but his movements still feel measured. Low groans sound in the back of my throat, and when I open my eyes, I'm trapped by his burning violet gaze as he watches my every reaction, every expression, every movement.

This isn't some teenage boy blindly trying to create enough friction to get himself off; this is someone who knows what he's doing, playing my body in a way that gives us both ultimate pleasure. How foolish I was to think that this was about him and his desire. The look on his face is one of concentrated adoration, and I realise he's doing this for me.

"Aljaž..." it comes out in a breathy gasp. It's a sound I've never heard myself make before. "I'm so close—" I don't know if I'm begging him to take me over the edge and release the sweet torment, or to keep me there in limbo indefinitely. I feel like I'm on a precipice with no idea which way I'm going to go.

"Vem⁷. Pridi⁸." He kisses down my neck towards my shoulder and unexpectedly bites down hard.

A wordless shout is drawn from my lips as the coil that was wound so tight and holding me together snaps in an instant. My trembling muscles release while my pussy clamps down hard on his cock. He holds still, sheathed all the way inside me as my inner walls spasm and squeeze. My pussy begins to milk his cock, and he, too, is coming with a groan, my orgasm triggering his in a delicious chain reaction.

When we're done, he holds still for a moment as we both catch our breath. Once again, I open my eyes to find him watching me intently, and my breath catches all over again.

“Wow...that was...” I'm at a loss for words.

“Popolna⁹,” he tells me with a kiss as he gently withdraws. “Sleep.”

Spent, I fall into an exhausted sleep with his arms wrapped tightly around me. This might just turn out to be my best Christmas yet.

Lizzie's Journal

March 2nd

So you're probably wondering what happened after those dates, Charl? Well, I went on more dates. A lot of them. Individually, each of the guys were great. The problem is that they were too great and I was struggling to choose. I loved how sweet and funny each guy was, and how well they treated me, so each time they asked if they could see me again, I found myself saying yes.

Then I'd feel guilty and tell myself after this next date I would choose. Because that's what I would have to do, right? Eventually choose one to be a boyfriend. I can just imagine you reading this, Charlie, and saying, "Fuck it! Have them all!" But whoever heard of such a thing?!

If you were here, I'm sure we could discuss the merits of each guy. You'd probably tell me to write a pros and cons list for each – but please don't think me too sappy when I say there really aren't any cons for any of them! Ha, I just read that back, and it sounds sappy even for me, so I can only imagine how you'd react!

Whatever. Anyway, I'm really excited because tonight I'm FINALLY going to see Rebel's band play at a bar in town. I'm obviously worried about not getting in (ha! I should have borrowed your fake ID!) because that would be so embarrassing. But Rebel keeps telling me not to worry. I hope they're good. I think they will be, but I don't know what to expect.

Wish me luck!



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The door bursts open and a voice shouts, “What the fuck?!”

It’s way too early to deal with this. I bury down under the duvet and leave this one to Ace.

“Kaj za vraga¹?!” he mumbles, sitting up all dazed and confused. We were enjoying a nice sleepy cuddle, which may have led to more before we were so rudely interrupted. “Križana gora²! Sranje³! Out! Away!”

I’m vaguely aware from my fortified spot under the blankets of Ace scrabbling for something, and then I hear a thud and someone cries, “Ow! Fuck!” It makes me smile. I’m pretty sure he just threw something at the intruder, and it met its mark. “Tristo hudičev⁴! Tristo kosmatih medvedov⁵! Out, zaboga⁶, out!” I have no idea what he’s saying, but it sounds pretty ferocious. I wouldn’t want to be whoever’s on the receiving end of that mouthful. I didn’t expect Ace to have it in him; he’s usually so calm and unshakeable. I kind of like it.

“Whoa dude, chill out, it’s just us.” Ah, now that I’ve woken up a bit I realise he’s yelling at Rebel. I’d recognise his gravelly growl anywhere. Even better. I hope whatever he threw at him really hurt. “I was popping in to say we’re home early and we were going to head out and grab breakfast if you...if you both, I guess...wanted to join us.”

“Ne⁷. No.”

“Hey come on, don’t be grumpy. If anyone should be mad, it should be me. I mean seriously, we leave you alone for two days, and you’re in bed with my girl?”

“Your girl?” I stick my head out of the covers indignantly. “I am not your girl, Rebel, fuck you. I’m not anyone’s girl.”

“You are mine, Raven, you just don’t know it yet.” He smirks and winks at me, making me wish I had something close at hand to launch at him. A missile would be good.

“You didn’t even ask me out! You took me on a date because I lost a bet. You haven’t asked me to be your...your anything! I can do whatever I like with whomever I like. Now get the fuck out!”

He crosses his arms and plants his feet in a defiant challenge. I don’t know what it is about him that rubs me the wrong way. If Ace was driving me crazy yesterday for all the right reasons, Rebel has taken over today for all the wrong reasons.

“Fine. Stay and watch, you pervert. Aljaž, I’m ready for round two.” I can’t help myself, winding Rebel up is like the worst kind of addiction. The kind that feels good, but you know is terrible for you because it makes you crazy. The kind that causes you to make all kinds of bad decisions, but still gives you a high that leaves you wanting more.

I reach for Ace and pull him to me, kissing him deeply. I’m not entirely using him to piss Rebel off – I was in the mood for more this morning – but now my anger at Rebel needs an outlet otherwise I’ll be in a foul mood all day. Luckily for me, Ace is a nice supportive guy and from the feel of it, more than happy and ready to oblige my request.

We break apart, and I give him a wicked grin before bringing him back for more. Over his shoulder, I can see Rebel still standing there watching us. His jaw is slack, and he looks completely flabbergasted. I need a way to get him to leave, right now.

I reach up and pull the covers from Ace's back, siding them all the way down so that his firm ass is exposed. Rebel gives a disgusted strangled choking kind of sound, and a moment later I hear the door slam shut. I quickly check he's left, and not closed the door because he's joining in, and once I see that he has, I turn back to giving Ace my full attention.

Sometime later, when we've finished, showered together and got distracted, showered alone a second time and finally got dressed, we head downstairs together to find Jax, Thorn and Rebel sitting in the kitchen. Rebel scowls at me as we enter, and I throw an imitation of his shit-eating grin back at him. I don't quite pull it off as well as he does, but when his scowl deepens, I feel good.

"Hey guys, happy Christmas Eve! What do you think of the decorations?"

"Looks amazing. Did you two do all this?" Thorn's the only one to answer me. He's the only one who looks happy. Rebel's still scowling – sulking – and Jax is staring intently between Ace and me. That makes me uneasy because his dark espresso eyes always seem to see everything and know too much.

"No. I just did the tree, everything else was Ace. Doesn't it look amazing? He stayed up all night to get it done."

"Impressive. Dude, it looks awesome." Thorn walks over to Ace and thumps him on the back in one of those bro hugs that isn't a hug. He leaves him and continues on toward me, a hot chocolate in hand, which makes my eyes light up. "We might have to make this a regular thing. I'm telling you, after two nights at home I couldn't get out of there fast enough! I'm never going back for Christmas again. Thank god my family isn't religious, they don't give a fuck if they see me at Easter." I watch him carefully and see lines of stress around his eyes. The last couple of days haven't been fun for him, and they've taken their toll. I feel bad for him, and vow to try and make

him feel better today. He deserves a nice welcome home to know that he's missed.

When he gets to me, I eagerly hold out my hands for my drink, but at the last minute, Thorn teasingly whips it away and takes a drink himself. "Thorn..." I whine and pout. "I missed you so much!" I'll say anything to get my hands on that drink, and he knows it.

"Brat." The term of endearment is like a honeyed caress from his lips, and I smile. "I think I should start charging you for these drinks. They're not cheap to make, you know."

"Name your price." I shrug. "You know I'll pay it."

His ocean eyes sparkle at me, mischievously. It excites me. I've absolutely loved having Ace to myself the last couple of days, but nothing beats the electric flow of having all four of them around at once.

"I think I'll charge you one kiss per drink," he says as if he's been pondering what the price of his drink will be all along.

"Done!" Before he can protest, I plant a noisy wet kiss on his cheek and slip the drink from his hands. I dance out of his way so that he can't take it from me again, and once I'm on the other side of the room, I take a long deep drink. I don't even care that the prolonged low groan that falls from my lips sounds like a sex noise – the drink is that good.

"Hey! That's not a proper kiss."

"Sorry, no refunds, exchanges or do-overs." I tsk-tsk him and wag my finger playfully. "You need to be more careful with your Ts and Cs, Thor. Let this be a lesson learnt. Check out www.ravenstsandcs.com for the fine print." I wink at him.

Rebel interrupts our flirty banter with a harrumph. He crosses his arms and tells Thorn that I got off too lightly; that one of his hot chocolates is worth way more than one crummy kiss.

I don't even have time to get mad at him before Thorn replies, "Ah, spoken like a guy who truly hasn't had one of her proper kisses before. They're fucking priceless, mate. You're

missing out.” He throws a wink at Rebel which causes the granite mountain to turn around and stomp out of the room. We haven’t kissed like that, but Rebel apparently doesn’t know this.

The rest of us laugh and follow him out to the car, only to find he’s planted himself firmly in the front seat and locked the door. Child. Jax takes the wheel, and I happily clamber into the middle seat in the back with Thorn and Ace on either side of me. Rebel turns around to grin at me like he’s won some big victory, but I stare him in the eye and drop my hands to the laps of the two guys sitting next to me. I run my fingers lightly down the inside of their thighs and watch in enjoyment as Rebel’s face turns puce. He quickly turns back around and sits back in his seat, his body rigid. I can tell he’s fuming, and I barely suppress my giggle of glee.

After an enormous brunch at Josie’s – where she came out of the kitchen to fawn all over my guys and to scold me again for leaving it so long between visits – we walk around the park. It’s bitterly cold today, but I’m wrapped up warm in my woollen coat, and feeling quite cute in my hat, scarf and gloves. If summer’s all about tans, bikinis and looking sexy, give me winter any day: snuggly jumpers, fluffy socks, matching winter sets and being a cute little snow bunny. I’ll take that over the effort involved in being ‘beach ready’ every single time.

On our return to the car, I notice Rebel fall back with Thorn and can sense that the two of them are having a heated discussion. I don’t know what it’s about, but I can see that Rebel’s trying to get Thorn to do something, but Thorn isn’t backing down. I hear Rebel’s trademark frustrated growl and his deep voice calls, “Shotgun.” Thorn punches him in the arm.

“You can’t call shotgun for the back seat, you moron!”

“Seriously guys?” I turn to them. “Are you fighting over who gets to sit in the back? Because if you both want it that much, I can just sit in the front again, you only have to ask.”

“No!” they both exclaim.

“You could always ‘eenie, meenie, miney, mo’ for the back seat,” I joke. I’m horrified when they actually do. I’m even more horrified when Thorn loses, and Rebel triumphantly punches the air.

Great. I sigh, climbing into the back of the Jeep and taking my middle seat. At least I have Ace for company back here. But when Rebel clambers into the back, I immediately feel like all the air’s been sucked from the car. Jax starts the engine, and we’re away before I can process what’s happening. Rebel’s so vast that I’m trapped up against him and Ace – who isn’t exactly small either. I squirm to try and get free to make myself more comfortable, but Rebel must think I’m playing around trying to take up his space because he plants his elbow in my shoulder and pins me back in place.

Being sandwiched between two insanely hot guys might be most girls’ idea of a fantasy, but it’s not mine, not like this. I really can’t move, and as a sticky unwelcome heat rushes my body, my breathing gets shallow, and I start to pant.

“What’s wrong?” Ace is the first to notice that I’m not okay.

“Can’t...breathe...” I pant out.

“Shit! Stop the car!” he cries, but Jax tells him we can’t stop safely on this narrow windy country road.

It’s Rebel who thinks fast, undoing my seatbelt and pulling me into his lap. He hits the button to release the window and Baltic winter air floods the car. I gulp in the air like a fish out of water, trying to calm my racing heart. I’m shaking all over, trembling, and it’s not the cold air that’s making my teeth chatter.

“Better?” Rebel’s voice is softer than I’ve ever heard it before, genuine concern lacing his voice. I nod but make no move to get up off his lap. He closes the window, wraps his massive arms around me and draws me closer, not letting go. I snuggle into his enormous chest and allow the steady beat of his heart against my ear to be the metronome that guides my racing pulse back to normal.

“Are you okay?” Rebel whispers in my ear and kisses my temple tenderly.

“Yeah,” I reply, my voice shaky.

“What happened, Princess?”

“I don’t know. I just couldn’t breathe. I felt trapped and like there wasn’t enough air in here for all of us.”

He kisses me again and holds me closer. This time it feels comforting rather than restricting. “You can have my air if there’s ever not enough to go around.”

He can be seriously sweet sometimes, and I feel kinda bad for giving him such a hard time today. I missed him. And he deserves to know that too. I turn my head to face him and tell him, but we’re so close together that our lips brush. A jolt of electricity sparks between us, and I swear I hear it crackle as it races through my body. His fingers lace through my hair, and he pulls me closer, deepening our electric kiss. The charge between us is dangerous, and I want nothing more than to lose myself in his energetic embrace, but Rebel’s touch has me wanting to tear his clothes off, even in a car full of people.

Common sense filters into my mind, a frail wisp of smoke, and I clutch at it like it’s my lifeline. I bite down hard on Rebel’s lip, and he flinches and pulls away, shoving me into Ace’s lap.

“Fuck, Raven, what the hell?” he cries. His fingers go to his lip to check for blood. “Why can’t you just be nice?”

I can’t answer that, but Thorn comes to my rescue.

“Maybe asshole, because she just had a panic attack and she doesn’t need you stealing what little oxygen she’s just managed to recover into her lungs.”

It sounds like a good excuse, and Rebel says nothing, but he gives me a dark look. We both know that I was kissing him right back and didn’t give a damn about my oxygen levels, but he kindly doesn’t call me out.

Instead, I lie back into Ace’s arms to think about Rebel’s question. Why can’t I just be nice to him?

The answer makes my stomach churn, and I have to turn away so that I'm no longer facing him. I feel sick.

Instead, I snuggle further into Ace's chest, and this time, I let his steady heartbeat guide me to a dreamless sleep.

I sigh in contentment. I've had such a good day with the guys, the moment in the car aside. I'm looking forward to tomorrow. I finally decided on gifts for them all yesterday and was delighted to come home to find everything had been delivered. Thank god for rush delivery. I snuck all my parcels up to my room and wrapped them. I'll put them under the tree in the morning because I don't trust the guys not to peek. Once we get home from brunch, everyone disappears to their rooms so I think we might all have had the same idea. I have a quick power nap and feel much better for it.

In the late afternoon, Thorn knocks gently on my door and wakes me with a cold glass of orange juice. He invites me downstairs to watch Christmas movies with the guys, and I'm happy to join them. I can't say that I'm hungry after the massive brunch we consumed, but when I entered the lounge to see a selection of hot and cold home-cooked tapas dishes laid out, I'm more than eager to dig in.

"What're we watching?" I ask between mouthfuls.

"Die Hard," four voices reply at once.

I groan. "That's not a Christmas film," I complain. I don't mind really, it's a good film. But it doesn't fill me with Christmassy warm and fuzzies.

"It's set at Christmas time; therefore, it is a Christmas film," Thorn tells me.

"By that logic, so's Harry Potter, because they always have a Christmas scene in them."

"Not arguing with you there." He shrugs.

“Fine. Well, I want a Harry Potter marathon then.” I’m not really being a brat, but I love seeing how far I can push these guys to get my own way.

“Ah, Princess,” Thorn twinkles at me, “what do you think Boxing Day’s for?” With that, he hits play on the movie, and I settle back to watch, curling up to Thorn and snuggling in. I sneak a peek over at Ace, but he doesn’t seem to mind at all. Good. Out of everyone, I think I’ve missed Thorn the most. Rebel makes me too mad, and Jax is just being weird today. But I don’t dwell on that as I get sucked into Los Angeles.

Later, only the dying embers of the fire light the room. Rebel turned everything off over an hour ago when we agreed we’d all go to bed. But here we are, Jax and I, still not having moved from the floor in front of the sofa. We’re sat facing one another, close enough that we could be touching, but we aren’t. There’s a tension sizzling in the air, and I feel like if we were to touch, it would snap, and there would be no going back. We’ve been talking for ages and Jax has just asked me what exactly it is that I want, what’s actually going on here. It’s evident that I have an ulterior motive for staying up so late, for keeping him down here, and he wants to know what I’m playing at.

I hate that about him; that he sees through my bullshit and calls me out on it. He’s always watching, assessing, staring. Looking a little too closely for my liking, seeing a lot more than I’m willing to give. He’s the one I need to be most careful around. He’s the one that makes me nervous.

I take a swig of my drink, enjoying the burn of the alcohol as it slides down my throat. “Well,” I shrug, “I was going to suggest playing truth or dare?”

“Why?” He looks weary, suspicious. He rubs his hand over his stubble and shifts uncomfortably, where he sits on the floor.

“I thought it might be fun.” I try for nonchalance, but even I can tell it’s a weak attempt at best.

“I won’t play that with you,” he informs me with a dark tone.

“Why not?” His refusal makes me want to bait him, the way I would with Rebel, but I know that won’t work with Jax. He doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want to.

“Because it’s juvenile. It’s not fun. And it’s for people with an ulterior motive. So what’s yours?” I shrug again, refusing to go there.

“I’m not going to embarrass or humiliate you with trivial tasks...why would I want to? Anything I may want from you, I’m perfectly confident enough to take without the premise of it being a dare, and I’ll honestly answer any question you want to ask me. So why do we need games?”

“How do I know you won’t lie to me?”

“Have I ever lied to you?” he counters

“How would I know? If I ask you a question, it’s because I don’t know the answer. If you lie, I’m none the wiser. If I ask you a question I do know the answer to, to test you to see if you’re lying, well then that makes me as bad as you, and I probably deserve to be lied to.” Okay, even I realise I’m getting off track here. What am I doing?

“Ask me what you’re dying to ask, Raven. You always insist on no bullshit, well I’m adding my own rule to that: No games.” His tone is firm, and I know he means what he’s saying; if I don’t get to the point soon, he’s going to leave. But the thing is, I have so much I want to ask him that I don’t know where to start.

“Are you dating one of the princesses?”

He shakes his head, and I feel relieved.

“Have you dated them in the past?”

“Yes.” He doesn’t look pleased with my line of questioning.

“Did you sleep with any of them?”

“Yes.” He doesn’t sound sorry.

“What happened when you broke up?”

“We broke up. Happens all the time.” He’s not lying, but he’s holding back on me, I can tell. I don’t want to push him to a point where he feels he has to lie to me, so I let that one go. For now.

“Okay then...will you tell me about...Lizzie instead?”

“What do you want to know?” He has a guarded look in his dark espresso eyes that wasn’t there before. In this low light, they almost look black and foreboding. The scowl on his face and the shadows cast by his sharp features make him look intensely menacing. Which thrills me.

“What was she like?” I ask softly.

“She was amazing. She wasn’t just beautiful, she was a walking contradiction.” I watch how his face lights up and relaxes as he starts to talk about her.

“How do you mean?” I’m intrigued, wanting this secret insight into my sister’s mystery life away from me.

“She looked like a tiny ethereal sprite, like a strong gust of wind would blow her away, but inside she was strong. She had a steely core. She was softly spoken and kind, but she wasn’t a doormat. She didn’t take any crap from any of us, but she was never mean. She was stunning but truly oblivious to the charm she had over everyone. Her innocence was refreshing in a place like this, and yet she was so sure of herself and who she was that she seemed mature beyond her years. She was awe-inspiring.” His voice is soft and reverential like whispering in a place of worship. It warms me to hear her spoken of in such a way. He’s described her exactly as I would have.

“Were you in love with her?”

“It was impossible not to love her. It would have been very easy to fall in love with Lizzie. She had an energy that drew you to her – a lot like you do actually – and she was so inherently good, that she made you want to be and do better for her. I could happily have spent the rest of my life trying to put a smile on her face trying to be worthy of her love and affection.”

“Sounds exhausting.”

“I think it would’ve been. Love should make you want to be a better person, but not at the expense of you not feeling good enough. That’s why I don’t think I was in love with her, not yet anyway.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“I can’t speak for everyone else, but no, I didn’t sleep with her. We didn’t have that passionate, want to rip your clothes off all the time kind of relationship. It was sweet and loving. I cared for her deeply.”

I don’t know if I’m relieved or...jealous. I’m beyond happy that I’m not entering into a relationship with a guy or guys who’ve slept with my sister, but at the same time, the way Jax talks about what he had with Lizzie makes me feel sad that we won’t ever share that kind of relationship. Ours will be purely physical. It’s just business. He just doesn’t know it yet.

I have to shake myself and remind myself that I don’t want a deep and meaningful soul connection with any of these guys. I want to destroy them for hurting my sister. But it doesn’t sound like they did hurt her...not really. If she did kill herself, it has to be for a different reason. And if she didn’t kill herself, who did? And why?

“If you felt that strongly for her, how were you just okay with sharing her?”

“I wasn’t. Not at first. We all fought a lot. We competed a lot. It’s really pathetic to think back on, but we were young and stupid. I think we probably made her pretty miserable for a while with our behaviour, but when we realised that what we were doing was upsetting her so much, we stopped fighting and competing and vying for her attention.”

“And what? Everything just fell into place?”

“Far from it. We decided to let Lizzie choose which of us she wanted.”

“And did she?”

“She couldn’t. Us asking her to choose, well, it nearly killed her...sorry that’s in poor taste given what happened.”

“Do you really think she killed herself?” I ask, changing the direction of the conversation.

“I don’t, no,” he admits.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know what reason she would’ve had. Things between us all were sorted, good by then. We made sure communication was at the heart of our relationships; she would’ve come to us if she was having doubts or struggling.”

“What if it was something outside of the relationship? Would she have kept that a secret?” I probe.

“I wouldn’t like to think so, but I guess she must have. Everyone has secrets, no one ever gives themselves to another person one hundred per-cent. No one ever truly knows another person. I just wish she’d felt like she could’ve come to one – or even all – of us. Whatever trouble she was in, we would’ve helped her.”

“Do you miss her?” Changing direction again.

“Everyday. But I don’t think we’d still be together if she were here. Not all of us anyway. I could see her being with Ace. They’d go together and compliment each other well. Both good people. Well suited. Me and Lizzie, it was a fairytale, but it wasn’t built to last.” He sounds almost sad, but resigned, at that.

I stand and stretch, yawning. I’m happy with the answers I’ve gotten here tonight, but it’s late, and I need to get to bed.

“Raven, I...” I pause and turn to him, waiting for him to finish. “Did you and Ace sleep together?” he asks. There’s no hint of judgement or disapproval, jealousy or intrigue in his voice. There’s...nothing.

“How is that any of your business?” I demand. His lack of expression has me riled up. I want to see interest, or something, there.

“Because I don’t want another repeat of the Lizzie situation.”

I cringe at the way he says that. “Don’t you think it’s a bit late for that given that you all took me on dates and kissed me?” I point out. Pretty sure my question is rhetorical; we all know it’s too late and we’re definitely headed to some sort of ‘Lizzie situation’.

“Sex is different, though. It changes things.” He stands and comes towards me like a predator stalking its prey.

“Why? Are you jealous?” I spit.

“Not at all.” His eyes flash, and I see it: his first lie to me. It equally disappoints and thrills me.

I back away quickly. No. I can’t do this, go there, with Jax tonight. Not when we’ve been talking about Lizzie; it just wouldn’t feel right. When I finally get together with Jax, I want it to just be the two of us in the room, with nothing between us.

So I turn and run, racing up the stairs, and I don’t stop until I’ve shut the door and can sink to the floor to recover. I’m barely there for a minute when there’s a gentle tap at my door, but I don’t answer it. Jax’s low, soft voice calls, “Happy Christmas, Raven.” Before I hear him walk away and enter his own room next door. I crawl over to my bed and climb in, sinking deep below the covers and praying for sleep to come quickly.

My heart’s pounding and my pulse is racing. I so wanted to kiss Jax, but I could tell that kissing him would lead to more, and I couldn’t go there tonight.

Not with all that talk about Lizzie.

Lizzie's Journal

March 12th

I quit the swim team today. It just about broke my heart to do it. I guess if I'm trying to be positive, I could say it frees up more time to spend with the princes, but I still feel hollow. It's silly, I'll get over it in a day or two, but for now, I'm happy to just let myself mourn the loss of another thing I love. First singing, now swimming.

I'll explain, Charl, as I know you're wondering why.

Amber. The redheaded princess who was, until my arrival, the star of West Prep's prestigious swimming team. When I came and tried out of the team, I was over the moon to land a spot. West Prep is super competitive in all things, so you have to be beyond good to secure a place, and even then you have to re-audition every term! No complacency or resting on your laurels allowed here!

Anyway, from a swim point of view, things had been going pretty well for me. I was winning races and helping drive my team to victory and continually beating my PB. I had a real sense of accomplishment, and even working alongside Amber wasn't a problem. I don't know if it was because in the pool we were teammates, or because she didn't have the other girls with her, but the bullying was always left out of the pool. Until the second term started and coach announced that I would be captain.

It was a massive achievement and should've been a cause for celebration for me, but unfortunately Amber didn't like being demoted. Obviously, I don't blame her, but the main thing was that we were still a team and should work together to secure the schools' cup. Sadly, she had other ideas: she bribed (or threatened) our teammates so that they wouldn't follow my leadership. They started to deliberately throw matches, and our statistics plummeted. I tried to step down, but Coach wouldn't let me. I tried to explain to her what was happening, but she said a good leader would find a way to motivate their team.

It got worse and worse – to the point that no one would talk to me or train with me – and Coach still wouldn't let me step down or quit. Eventually, I decided to call a meeting the night before the schools' cup finals in the hopes of getting the team back together. I thought at the very least we could set our differences aside for one day to win the competition and I could offer to step down or quit after.

But the meeting didn't go to plan.

First, I waited poolside for the rest of the team to show. I'd asked to meet at six, which was our usual training time, so I knew no one was busy. It was nearly nine when everyone finally showed up. Amber had taken everyone for pizza for pre-finals bonding. That's fine. I figured they'd all be in a good mood and more likely to go along with the ceasefire.

Wrong.

Amber railroaded everything I said or suggested. She demanded that I quit on the spot and that I just don't show tomorrow. When I refused, she shoved me into the pool! Fully clothed and everything.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the rest of the team jumped in and held me under the water. I'm sure it was prearranged; it all felt too smooth, too orchestrated. At first, I thought it was a bit of a joke and that they'd let me up...but they didn't. That's when panic set in.

I started to thrash, but there were too many hands holding me down, holding me under. I completely freaked out, and now with hindsight, I can see that it was a panic attack, but at the time I was frantic. I have no idea how long I was under – in reality it probably wasn't long at all – but I blacked out.

They at least had the decency to drag my unconscious body from the pool. When I came to, I was laid on the poolside tiles, alone, in my clothes, soaking and freezing. I'm ridiculously grateful they pulled me out.

I bolted from the pool, and I'm not going back. I failed to show for the finals, and I didn't even have the decency to face Coach to quit – I sent an email.

So there you have it. The reason why I quit another thing that I love. I don't know if I was overreacting. Maybe. But at the moment I can't face the water. I have panic attacks when I try. Even in the shower or the bath. I'm hoping it passes with time, but I doubt I'll ever rejoin a competitive swimming team even if I do make it back into the water.

I wish you were here sis, I know things would be different with you here. If not different, bearable at least.

I love you

X



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Christmas morning dawns bright and early. I'm ridiculously excited to be spending it with the guys, so I wake stupidly early. I sneak downstairs to hide their presents under the tree and then head to the kitchen to grab some biscuits.

I'm searching through the cupboards trying to find biscuits when I come across Ace's hidden stash of cookies. There are easily a dozen containers stacked up in the cupboard, so I gather them all down and take a few cookies from each and pile them on a plate. Perfect.

I'm just putting the last box away again when a noise behind me makes me jump. "Morning," Thorn says.

"Jesus, you scared the crap out of me! What are you doing up so early?"

"Thought I'd make everyone a hot chocolate in bed."

"Looks like we had the same idea," I say, pointing to the cookies. "But I'm shit at hot chocolate compared to you." He smiles when he hears my compliment and gently moves me out of the way so that he can take over making the hot drinks.

I watch him for a moment admiring the way his pyjama pants are slung low on his hips so that his sexy V and toned ridges are shown off. I admire his smooth golden skin and blemish-free body. I love tattoos, but there's also something

beautiful about the way that Thorn is the only guy without any. I also love that these guys seem to have an aversion to sleeping in shirts because it lets me ogle them freely any time I want.

“You know,” Thorn says, turning to me and leaning back casually on the kitchen counter. He reaches out for me, putting his hands on my hips and pulling me in close. “You need to pay for your hot chocolate. And as it’s Christmas I’m charging extra.” The softness of his voice belies the devious merriment dancing in his eyes, but I’m not complaining. A Christmas kiss with Thorn? Sign me up.

I lean in towards him until our lips brush. I’m not going to mess around with him this time by kissing his cheek; I want to kiss him properly. But I also want to have a little fun first too. I rise up onto my tiptoes and Thorn gently squeezes my hips to keep me steady. I turn his head to the side, and I begin slowly, licking his ear and then making my way down his neck. My tongue never once leaves his skin. I groan at how good he tastes like saltwater and sunshine. ‘Fuck he tastes so good,’ I think to myself. I run one hand up his chest until I reach his nipple, using two fingers to play with it, pinching it lightly and gently teasing it. His mouth drops open in shock, and I seize the opportunity to kiss him.

Our lips meet once, twice, and then a third time. I pull back slightly and pull his bottom lip into my mouth where I gently bite down, before running my tongue over it and sucking gently to help soothe any sting I may have caused. Thorn groans at my playful kiss, moving one of his hands to my ass and one to lace through my hair so that he can pull me closer. My hardened nipples, pressing through the thin cotton of my vest top, graze against his chest, causing ripples of excitement to wash over me. In an instant, the tides have turned, and Thorn takes control of the kiss. Our lips crash together, and his tongue immediately demands entry into my mouth so that it can swirl with mine.

After a minute or two, I break away, needing to catch my breath. In less than twenty-four hours I’ve had sex with Ace,

kissed Rebel and Thorn, and run away from kissing Jax. What the hell is wrong with me?!

“Take your drink and the cookies up to Rebel’s room,” Thorn tells me. At least he looks as shaken as I feel. Good. It was a damn good kiss, but it’s left me wanting more. I pull a face at him, and he asks me what’s wrong.

“Nothing. I’ve just never kissed a guy before to literally be sent away to another straight after.” I wink to show I’m joking and he laughs lightly.

“Rebel has the biggest bed. We’ll all be getting into it for breakfast and present opening,” he tells me.

“Oh, that makes it so much better... I’m being sent away by the guy I’m kissing to get into bed...with another three guys.”

“You love it,” he teases.

“Do I even want to know why Rebel has the biggest bed?” I ask.

Thorn shakes his head at me like I’m the one with a dirty one-track mind and tells me it’s because he’s the biggest. I think he means in general stature, but I can’t be sure.

I head upstairs, carefully balancing my drink and the overloaded plate of cookies, so I don’t spill anything. I head along the corridor to the door just before Ace’s room and gently knock. There’s no answer, so I slip inside, intending to wake him gently. I go in and place the plate and my mug on the dresser just inside the door and then turn towards the bed. Rebel’s stretched out in the biggest bed I’ve ever seen, covers thrown completely off. I’m distracted by the fact that he is sleeping stark bollock naked, and is sporting some serious morning wood. I think Thorn was right; Rebel does have the biggest bed. But he also has the biggest cock I’ve ever seen. I knew it was large when he waved it in my face getting into the hot tub that time, but here, now, in all its morning glory, I can safely say it’s of behemoth proportions. And, like a perv, I can’t stop staring at it. Jeesh.

I look around for something to throw at Rebel, and the first thing that comes to hand is sitting on the dresser. A baseball. Huh. That'll do. I launch the ball – none too gently – at his head and wince slightly when it cracks loudly in the silent room. Rebel lets out an enraged roar and sits up, rubbing his skull and looking poised to spring and attack.

“Jesus Reb, put some fucking clothes on. It's Christmas morning, and everyone'll be getting into bed with you in a minute.”

Rebel just grins at me, stretches out his arms and pats the spot next to him. I shake my head, I grab the cookies and my drink and climb into bed with him. I may as well get a comfy spot against the headboard with the pillows before the others come in, and I can at least check to make sure I didn't give the guy a concussion. As I do though, I bark at Rebel to cover up. His cock is seriously distracting. In fact, all of him is seriously distracting. And hot.

Once he's pulled on some boxers, which do very little to make him decent, I feel like I can relax a little. Being around Rebel is dangerous. Sure, I'm attracted to all the guys, but with Rebel, there's a magnetism between us that promises to be explosive if we act on it. There's no denying the sex would be amazing, I just can't guarantee that we won't destroy each other in the process – and not in a good way.

“Merry Christmas, Rae,” he whispers, his hot breath chilling my skin and making it zing alive.

“Merry Christmas to you too, Reb,” I reply. The words stick in my throat and come out lower and huskier than I intended. I kiss him on the cheek and damn it if I don't linger to drink him in. He smells divine. Where Ace smells of hard work and sweat, and Thorn smells of summer and the ocean, to me, Rebel smells of dewy forest mornings. It's intoxicating. I breathe deeply, drinking him in greedily and he totally notices and calls me out on it. Bastard.

“You can just have a taste if you like me that much.” He smirks. I hit him on the arm as I blush. And to think I felt bad for concussing him a moment ago!

“Jeez, can you lay off hitting me for one day? It’s bloody Christmas, after all.”

“Sorry, no can do. Your present from me is a year’s worth of punches.” I smile sweetly, and he grumbles, rubbing his arm. I love that my Krav Maga training means I know how to hit someone as built as Rebel and make it hurt.

There’s a commotion at the door as Jax, Thorn and Ace join us, all carrying their drinks and in various states of undress. Jax is just wearing sweats – ooh that reminds me, I need to steal some more from him – Thorn’s in cotton pyjama pants, and Ace has on thicker bottoms with a checked pattern that would look grandadish if he wasn’t so buff. All three are barefoot and bare chested, and only Rebel’s wearing tiny boxer shorts. Damn, I’m a lucky girl, I think. I don’t need any gifts; that right there, that visual, forever burned in my memory, is the only gift I’ll ever need.

I lick my lips, because I am a total pervert, and every single pair of eyes in the room swivels to watch my tongue dart out and drag across my full lips. Now that I’m the centre of attention, I realise that I too have a lot of skin on display: I’m wearing tiny brushed cotton hot pants, knee-high socks and a fitted thin cotton vest top, through which my hard nipples are clearly visible.

“Get in boys, it’s cold,” my lie sounds feeble even to my ears, but thankfully they’re gentlemen and don’t call me out on the arousal my perving has caused. Thorn slides in next to Ace and me, and Jax takes the far end of the bed. Luckily for them, there’s a footboard to lean back against, but I got the better spot with the cushions.

“Happy Christmas, everyone,” I say earnestly. “I can safely say this is already a hundred times better than I expected my Christmas to be, so thank you.”

We all tuck into our drinks and cookies – which are fucking delicious – while Rebel plays Santa and hands out presents from a small sack that was down by the side of his bed. There’s a small gift for all of us that’s labelled as being from Santa. All of the boys dive in, ripping off the paper in a

frenzy and then exclaiming and showing off their gifts to one another. I'm so caught up watching their joy that my own present lies forgotten in my lap.

“Rae, are you going to see what Santa got you?” Thorn asks me gently. The guys are all still chatting about their gifts; apparently, Santa got them the latest best selling games for their favourite consoles, and they're already planning a mammoth gaming afternoon later. It may not be my idea of the best way to spend Christmas day, but so far it's been good, so I'm happy to go with the flow.

I look down at the small square present in front of me, wrapped in emerald green sparkly paper with a simple silver bow. It looks too pretty to open, but curiosity gets the better of me, and I gently prise the corner open so that I can slide the contents out without ripping the paper. Inside is a small square wooden box that's about the size of my hand. The wood's polished to a high sheen that reflects the early morning light coming through Rebel's window. I love it. It's so tactile, and the wood smells amazing. I smile up at the guys, not sure which 'Santa' to thank and I see that they're all smirking or laughing at me.

I frown, confused at why they're looking at me like that.

“Aww how cute,” Thorn says. “She thinks Santa got her a box for Christmas.”

“Open, Princess,” Ace tells me, tapping the box lightly on its lid, and I feel a little foolish, but I really do love the box on its own.

I carefully open the hinged lid and inside the box, nestled on a baby blue velvet lining, is a silver bracelet with charms dangling from it. I take it out gently and begin to look at each one, examining them closely. There's a knife, a surfer, a peach, a mountain, a running shoe, a stethoscope...there's more, but the detail on each one is so exquisite that I get distracted. Every single one of the charms tells my story with the guys: surfing and pancakes on our first date; flirting with 'Doctor' Jax, slamming into the granite mountain, cutting Thorn's hair

with my knife, running with Ace. The only one I can't figure out is the peach.

"Thank you so much guys, I love it," I tell them.

"Nothing to do with me," Thorn says with a wink. Ace also shakes his head, and I look to Jax.

"Not me."

Rebel? Rebel's responsible for this heartfelt gift? My eyes widen in shock as I look to him to see him smiling shyly at me.

"Do you really like it?" My cocky mountain man sounds so unsure of himself that I can't help it; I launch myself at him, throwing my arms wide around him, giving him a big kiss on the lips and telling him that I absolutely love it. I definitely feel bad now for being so snarky with him. I think he's right; I should just be nice to him.

"I don't understand the peach though, I get all the others," I tell him.

Rebel pulls me onto his lap so that I'm sat straddling his crossed legs. My arms are still looped loosely around his neck, and his hands slide under my ass, palming it.

"The peach is for the first day we met...when you flashed me."

Seriously? I want to hit him again now. Just as I start to think he's not a jerk, he goes and says something like that! Although, the way he's palming my ass does feel good, so I refrain from hitting him, just this one time. I don't know what to say, though.

He chuckles lightly and pulls me even closer, his hardness pressing up against me as he whispers in my ear, "That peach is a reminder that your ass is mine. One day I'm having it. No one gets to touch it. It's been mine from the moment you flashed me."

For a moment, I have no response to that. My cheeks flush and my skin burns. I'm not prepared to go there with him. Although he has my mind so flummoxed I'm not actually sure

where ‘there’ is. Damn him. The boy drives me crazy, but I just can’t get enough. I can’t let him win either though so I lean in close, breasts grazing his chest, and whisper in his ear so that only he can hear, “How do you know I don’t already love it there?” I nip his earlobe for good measure and revel in the way his cock twitches below me, and he gives a sharp intake of breath. I just evened the scores a little, I think, satisfied.

Climbing off Rebel’s lap, I turn to the others who seem oblivious to our exchange and say, “Let’s head downstairs guys. Ace, do you need a hand in the kitchen?”

“No, I have done.”

“Okay. So guys, do you normally get dressed today or what?”

“Whatever,” Thorn tells me. “We can do whatever you’re most comfortable with.”

“Naked. Let’s spend Christmas naked.” Rebel gets an elbow in the ribs for that one.

“As if I’d want to see your sausage hanging out all day! You’ll put me right off my dinner!” I pretend to shudder. I refuse to think about what I could have for dinner instead... nope, not going there.

“You didn’t seem to mind staring at it earlier.” Sneaky asshole. He really has no sense of decorum.

“Oh, I just expected it to be bigger,” I lie nonchalantly, inspecting my fingernails like I haven’t a care in the world.

Thorn gives a loud barking laugh at that and throws his arm around me. “You know Raven, I think we might just have to keep you. No one’s ever insulted Reb’s manhood like that. I like you. Let’s go.”

I let Thorn pull me from Rebel’s bed and lead me downstairs. I figure if everyone’s comfy, we can head down and open some gifts before showering and getting dressed and stuff. In the lounge, we turn on the fairy lights, and Ace heads to the kitchen to get the oven warming up. I grab a seat on the sofa and pull the fluffy blanket around me. It’s not cold, but

the leather on my bare skin is chilling, so I make Thorn light a fire. I love a real fire, I'd have one in the middle of a heatwave and just wear less clothing.

We all sit around, and Jax passes out the presents. I'm surprised that I have a small pile, I wasn't expecting anything, and I assumed that my bracelet was my gift from the guys. But looking down at the ever growing collection, I realise that they all got me gifts, individually too. There's even presents from my grandma and my parents, which I definitely wasn't expecting!

I watch as the guys tear into their piles. Thorn hunts around and digs out his gift from me first. When he opens it, he smiles and laughs at the bumper collection of chick lit DVDs I got him. I smile at him and tell him there's months worth of date nights right there. He pulls out the specialist surf watch that I got him. I know he has a pretty decent watch which is waterproof, but the guy in the shop assured me this was much better for a hardcore surfer like Thorn. His face lights up as he puts it on and starts fiddling with the buttons, failing to notice the final gift lying at the bottom of the box. I smile and don't say anything. He'll find it eventually.

When he does find the gift certificate and reads that it's for a custom Gulfstream surfboard of his choice, he immediately gets up and comes over to me, giving me a huge hug and a lingering thank you kiss. As he pulls away I go to say, "You're welcome" but as I open my mouth, he kisses me again, boldly, right in front of everyone. When he pulls away, I'm blushing.

"Fuck. Where's my gift from Rae? I want to give her a thank you kiss." Rebel breaks the tension in that unique way of his, and I turn to watch him open his gift.

He impatiently rips open the package and dives in where he finds an oxcloth bodybuilders' shirt that'll fit over his massive arms, an appointment card for a session at Bar Inka, his favourite tattoo shop, and a gift certificate for his favourite music shop. He leaps to his feet and grabs me up off the sofa, swinging me around and kissing me hard. I love his enthusiasm, but I'm not sure if it's because he really loves his gift or if he just wants to one-up Thorn in the kissing

department. I'm not complaining either way. I have to pull away from Rebel's kiss because the temptation to spend the rest of the day in bed with him is just too strong. He puts me back down and goes back to studying his gifts from me.

"This is really amazing, Rae, thank you." He sounds so earnest and humble that it melts my heart a little. I don't see it often, but I love this softer side of Rebel. I give him a sweet smile in return.

I turn to Ace and tell him to open his gift next. He slowly and carefully opens the paper. Inside he finds an enrolment for an evening cooking school, a set of my favourite throwing knives, and a signed advanced edition of Mary Berry's latest book that's not due out until next Spring. His smile is so warm that I feel like a cat basking in the sunshine. I can't wait for him to open his birthday present in two days! His thank you kiss is slow and sensual. It makes me want to go back to bed to lose myself in his unhurried teasing once again.

Jax is the last to open his present, patiently waiting his turn and contemplative. His is the gift I'm most nervous about; I know him the least well, and I went off a hunch for his present. He's always so hard to read. When he opens a digital SLR camera, enrolment for an online photography course and a gift card for some camera accessories, he turns to me and studies me intently. Just as I'm starting to worry that his is the one gift I seriously misjudged, he says, "You've really put a lot of thought into these gifts. How did you know?"

"For you? I saw the black-and-white framed pictures in your room. And I had a little help. Thorn and Rebel were easy, and once I spent some time with Ace, his gift fell into place too." My stomach's still twisting painfully, unsure if he likes the gift I spent so long agonising over.

"But why? Why go to so much trouble..."

"I wanted to show you how much I care." My response is quiet as I realise it's true. I stressed over finding them the perfect gifts because in a short space of time they've all come to mean so much to me. Too much to me. My voice is a whisper when I say, "I can change it if it's no good or..."

Jax gets up and comes over to hug me. His embrace is soft, and I melt into it, relieved. He gives me a tender kiss on the forehead, but I raise up onto my tiptoes to kiss his lips. Jax causes me the most uncertainty. I think he wants me, but I can never quite work out if that's just wishful thinking on my part. I never know what he's thinking or feeling, but he shouldn't miss out on a proper kiss, though. I kiss him tentatively, not sure how he'll react to me. My kiss is a question. His response is to take control of the kiss. It's just as demanding and powerful as our first. I may not have had many, but Jax's kisses leave me weak-kneed.

I think that after that moment, things will be awkward between us all, but somehow it isn't. The boys jump straight back into opening gifts, screwing up the paper and launching it at each other. I quietly open the gifts from my parents and my grandma; the first got me a gift certificate that I can use in a range of shops, the latter got me a gift certificate for a holiday of my choice. Both are great gifts but a little impersonal. Maybe I'll use the flight voucher to meet up with Grandma on her next world cruise. I think she might like that. The guys' gifts are completely excessive and overwhelming. From experience days to festival tickets, surfing lessons to a set of new throwing knives, I start to lose track of all the beautiful, thoughtful things they got me. I thank them profusely and make a small neat pile of gifts, setting them aside to go back to and have a closer look at later.

Gift unwrapping done, Ace and I leave the guys playing on their consoles in favour of starting dinner. Ace insists he doesn't need any help, but I follow him anyway thinking I can at least keep him company. In the kitchen, he puts music on, and we sing and dance along. It's fun and silly and natural. Today's definitely been the best Christmas I've had in years.

Dinner is a fantastic feast. Ace has outdone himself, and everyone's stuffed. I don't think I can move, let alone face pudding. We just about crawl to the sofa to watch a film, but I end up dozing and not taking it in.

When I wake, I notice the guys have let me stretch out on the sofa. One of them draped a blanket over me, and there's a

refreshing glass of orange juice waiting for me to drink. It feels late. I get up, and I peek through the curtains before turning back to the guys. It's dark outside, but the sky has that funny, strange light to it that's indescribable but can only mean one thing. "It's going to snow tonight."

"No way," Rebel protests.

"It is. I can tell. Look at the colour of the sky. Listen to the eerie silence. I think we'll have a heavy downfall by morning. It'll even settle, I'll bet."

"You're wrong. There's no chance. We rarely get snow here, being so close to the coast, and when we do it never settles. What do you want to bet on it?" Ugh. Everything with Rebel has to be a game or a challenge.

"If I'm right and we have snow, you have to lie in it, face first for three minutes. Naked."

"Savage. Okay, and if I win...you have to go in the hot tub with us...naked."

I gulp. A second ago, I was prepared to bet anything that it was going to snow, but now I'm wavering. I'm pretty sure it will, but am I willing to risk it? The challenge in Rebel's eyes tells me he doesn't think I'll make the bet. Challenge accepted.

"Deal," I say and shake his hand firmly.

"Right guys, I'm going to bed. Thank you, all, for an amazing day. I couldn't have hoped for a better Christmas."

"Night, Princess," Thorn and Rebel tell me.

"Merry Christmas," Ace adds.

"I'll help you with your gifts," Jax offers, scooping half of my pile up into his arms. I'm a little apprehensive after running from him last night, but it's not like I can say anything when he's already out of the room. I grab the other half and follow him out and up the stairs.

By the time I catch him up, Jax has already entered my bedroom, put my gifts on the dresser and is sat on my bed. I add my pile of presents to his, but before I can join him on the bed, he's moved. I feel the air shift around me, rather than

actually hearing him move, and the heat of his body presses intrusively against mine. He's not touching me, but I can tell he's close.

I turn slowly and find that I'm right. Jax is mere inches away from me with a dark, unreadable expression on his face. It's dark in my room, neither of us having bothered to turn on the light, and so there's only a little moonlight shining through my open curtains. In the darkness, Jax looks...mad? I can't tell. His eyes are pools of black that I want to drown in, but which refuse to give me entry.

Just as I go to speak, his hands shoot out and grab me. He moves me away from the dresser and presses me up against my door. My arms are pinned down by my side, and I can't move. Jax steps in close once again, but now his face is entirely in shadow. I have no idea what he's thinking or planning.

“Jax, I—”

I'm cut off by the ferocity of his kiss. His entire body presses into mine, and the crushing force of his lips steal away the words that were on mine. I try to join in, to meet his kiss, but he refuses to let me move. He has me pinned and breathless as his mouth devours mine with a passion I wasn't expecting. When he moves to give my bruised lips a moment of respite and starts to kiss his way down my neck, I groan.

“Jax, we—”

He pulls my arms above my head so that he can trap both of my wrists in his one hand, leaving his other free to explore and play. He gently traces the side of my face with his right hand, stopping when his fingers curl gently around my neck. My breathing hitches. My pulse flutters in my throat, right under his fingertips like a frantic butterfly beating its wings against the glass jar it's trapped in. That's how he makes me feel; beautiful, delicate, trapped, at his mercy.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asks, his fingers lightly squeezing at my throat.

“N-no,” I just about manage to gasp. My bones have turned to jelly, and my core’s molten lava. I feel my own eyes darkening with desire, becoming hooded and heavy.

Jax doesn’t speak again. He presses his body against mine, but not in a sensual way; he uses his power as a weapon to pin me in place. His body’s hard and sharp, angles that pinch and hurt, muscles like cold, unforgiving marble. When he rubs against me, the friction’s almost painful. My body loves it. His breath is hot and teasing in my ear. He’s watching me, not kissing, fingers still lightly squeezing my throat. He increases the pressure to my neck, and I groan as wetness floods my panties. I’m glad he’s holding me up, there’s no way I could coordinate my legs and spine to work for me right now.

An unwelcome image pops into my head, and suddenly I’m picturing the way Jax held Tilly by the throat in my bedroom. I remember the way she lit up with excitement at his touch. The way she scratched her fingernails down his arm and encouraged him to squeeze harder. I don’t want to be like her, but damn if I can’t understand her reaction now. I’m so turned on, a trembling needy mess.

I close my eyes, trying to banish the vision of the two of them and the chemistry that sizzled and crackled between them. I blink hard to bring myself back to the present moment. Jax is watching me intently. He carefully moves his hand from my neck, and I whimper at the loss of contact. That small sound from me causes something in him to snap. His fist grasps my hair roughly, jerking my head back so that my throat’s exposed to him, and this time, my whimper is one of pain. That seems to excite him more, and he returns to my lips, crushing them in a punishing kiss that seems to go on forever until I’m dizzy and lightheaded.

Jax pulls away from my lips and nips his way along my jawline and neck. When he reaches the soft juncture just before my neck meets my shoulder, he sinks his teeth in and bites me.

Hard.

With a cry of painful pleasure, I yell out his name...

And I come.

Holy fuck.

I just came, without even being touched down there. I came from being kissed, bitten and...choked. Oh god, I don't even know what to make of that. If I weren't so turned on, I'd probably be embarrassed. My thoughts are as scrambled as my breathing right now. I lean back against the door, panting hard.

Jax grabs me roughly and spins me around so that I'm no longer pressed against the door.

I blink at the sudden rush of cold air around me and realise that I've been left standing – barely – alone in my cold dark room, still panting, and wondering what just happened. I actually start to question if I imagined the whole thing, but then I spy the single thumbprint sized bruise that's beginning to form on the inside of my right wrist. No, this was real all right. I just don't understand why it ended. Is it the confirmation that I needed? That Jax wants me? Or is he just really good at fucking mind games? I have so many questions racing through my mind, but the one that's screaming loudest inside my head is: What the actual fuck?

Lizzie's Journal

March 18th

How can such a perfect night that started so well, end so badly? Last night the princes threw a party at their house. How silly that I've been here over half the year and I didn't even know that they had their own home on campus! And even though I've been dating four of them for nearly three months, this was the first time I ever went to their place.

The party was brilliant. Everyone was there, but because I was with the princes, nothing bad happened to me. It was like being untouchable; a heady feeling. I danced the night away without a care in the world. It's the most fun I've ever had. The princes danced with me and the night was almost perfect. Almost.

It started when Ace kissed me. On the dance floor, right in front of everyone. Up until now, my involvement with each of the princes had been secret. I wasn't about to draw attention to myself by saying anything – mainly because I know they all used to date the princesses. I'm not stupid. Letting the cat out of the bag would paint a massive target on my back, and I was under enough fire without one already.

But I did love it when Ace kissed me. For a split second I thought maybe if the princesses could see I was with Ace, they would leave me alone.

Stupid, I know.

What I didn't expect – of all things – when Ace kissed me, was for Rebel to punch him! All hell broke loose when the two started fighting and smashing up the lounge. It was pretty bad. But Jax quickly split them up while Thorn kicked everyone out of the house before walking me back to my room. We didn't speak on the way back, and when he left me, he didn't kiss me goodnight. He just told me not to worry.

As if that'll work. I'm already worrying! I really really hope that the kiss wasn't what triggered Rebel's flipping out.

The thought that maybe it was, sickens me. The last thing I want to do is come between four life-long best friends.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On New Year's Eve, I head back to my empty dorm to restock my clothes, despite the guys insisting I stay and just wear their stuff. It's nice to get a break. Plus we're going out tonight, all of us, even though Thorn's asked me to officially be his date for the evening. There's no way I can wear my PJs, workout gear, or sloppy clothes wherever we're going, so I escape to my room for some girly pamper time. I have the perfect dress for tonight, and I'm excited to be going off-campus. A change of scenery's just what I need.

I glance at the chest beside my bed and feel a pang of guilt. I really should use this time to work on decoding Lizzie's journal...but I don't want to. I feel absolutely shitty for thinking that, but I don't want whatever I find out in there to ruin what might happen tonight. Thorn and I have been spending a lot of time together, and we've gotten really close. I'm pretty sure tonight's headed somewhere further than making out, and I don't want to read something in that journal that will change that.

It's selfish, I know, but the last week and a half has been an absolute dream. I only have a few days left, and I don't want the fairytale to end. I promise Lizzie and myself that once school's back in session, I'll throw myself back into decoding the entries and my mission to take everyone down. I haven't forgotten, not really, but it's been nice to have a break from all

the planning and scheming. Amber and Tilly are next on my hit list anyway. I'm still trying to figure out how I'm going to get the guys. I sigh and leave the journals where they are, heading into the bathroom to run a bath. A long soak should help relax me.

While I'm in the bath, I refuse to dwell on what happened between Jax and me Christmas night. It's on him, whatever his problem is. I'm not going to get sucked into typical girl drama and self-doubt. The boy wants me, I know he does, and for some reason, he's battling his own demons and refusing to give in to his desires. That's fine by me. I'll find a way to use this against him later.

I contemplate how the rest of the Christmas break passed in a blur. We awoke on Boxing Day to the heaviest snowfall our part of the country's seen in years. I spent most of the day tangled on the sofa with Thorn, watching Harry Potter movies and sipping hot chocolate. We had the lounge to ourselves, so we spent a large portion of the films making out under the blankets. We took a break in the afternoon to go outside and have a massive snowball fight with the guys before taking to the hot tub to warm up. It was only once we were all warmed up and had feeling back in our fingers and toes that I made Rebel execute his forfeit for losing the bet. He bitched, moaned and whined every single second that he was stuck face down in the snow, and I would've felt bad if it wasn't so funny. He got his own back, though, by lifting me up out of the hot tub to give me an icy full-body hug. Git. Even the chill of his body didn't stop me overheating at his close proximity.

For Ace's birthday, we went for a walk through the woods, and I showed him how to use the knife set that I got him for Christmas. He decided he wanted to have a takeaway rather than go out in the snow, so we ordered Mexican and drank Coronas while geeking out old-school style with board games. Surprise, surprise, Rebel was a sore loser.

I waited until much later to give Ace his gift. I had to call in a favour from my grandma to arrange this for him, but I know how much he'll love it. When he opened the handwritten personal invitation to join Mary Berry for a day of baking in

her home in Henley, something inside Ace snapped and he dragged me to his bedroom. I teased him about an eighty-odd-year-old woman getting him turned on, which earned me a rather unexpected slap on my ass. After that, things got very interesting, and we ended up awake all night, but in the very best way.

I lounged around the house for a couple of days, spending time alone with Rebel, Thorn and Ace. Never Jax. He's definitely avoiding me, but is careful enough to be around when we're in group situations so that the others don't get suspicious or ask questions. When he's there, Jax is cold and distant, but the others don't seem to notice. It hurts, and it bothers me, but I try not to let it show.

I smile at the memories as I finish up in the bath. Once I'm done with all that girly but necessary pampering shit, I get out of the tub and set to work on styling my long dark hair into loose curls. Because of the length, it takes ages. But I know it'll be worth it to get dressed up for tonight. Once that's done, I get to work on my makeup, opting for a smokey eye to compliment my dramatic dress. The guys have kept the details of tonight to a minimum but told me it's a very dressy affair. My dress is a sweetheart neckline, strapless, full-length black gown with a full skirt of folds, but with a daring split all the way up one thigh. I absolutely adore it. It makes me wish I still had my tiara from Halloween, but that might be overkill. I really do feel like a princess in it though. I even slip a surprise under my dress, just in case Thorn and I do get any alone time together.

Eventually, it's time to go, and I grab my lipstick and head downstairs. I've not bothered with a bag, I'll just make Rebel carry my lipstick. Damn, maybe I should've grabbed a bag; I'd love to see Rebel carrying a tiny, sparkly purse. I step out of the front door, and the sight in front of me stops me in my tracks.

The four guys are standing in front of a limo. That's about as much as I can take in before my brain – and legs – turn to mush. My mouth is dry. Or watering. Is it possible to be both at the same time? I don't know. I can't think straight.

How can four guys dressed in identical tuxedos look so different? And yet so freaking hot. My eyes greedily drink in the sight of them. Jax and Ace are wearing their black tuxedos properly; straight bow ties, jackets buttoned-up, shoes shined to perfection. They look amazing. Ridiculously hot. Rebel and Thorn have taken a more laid back approach to their formal attire; Rebel has his top shirt button and jacket undone, along with his bow tie hanging loosely around his neck, and he's sexy as sin. Thorn's dressed the most casually out of all of them; his jacket and shirt are completely undone, showing a white top underneath. There's no bow tie anywhere that I can see and he's wearing black Converse. He looks half-dressed – like he's been having sex, or is just about to. I hope it's the latter. I would laugh at Thorn's idea of formalwear, but it catches in my throat. I can't laugh at something that looks so good.

As I stand at the top of the steps and stare down at the four guys who have made my heart stutter, stumble and fall, I think to myself, 'how the fuck do I choose?' Not that they've asked me to. We haven't even spoken about our relationship – or whatever this is – at all. I can't figure out if they're leaving it up to me to decide or if they're just casually fucking around with me and assuming I'm easy. I really hope it's not the latter, although it shouldn't matter to me either which way. I just feel like there's an unspoken expectation that I'll have to choose one of them at some point. When that time comes, it's going to kill me, I already know it will.

It's at that very moment that I realise how completely and utterly fucked I am.

I'm supposed to be using these guys to screw them over, and instead, I imagine a scenario where I get to fuck – and if I'm honest, keep – all four of them. It's unrealistic at best, and bloody stupid considering what I'm supposed to do. I'm walking away in a few short months. I need no attachments. It's dangerous territory, and I can't allow myself to go there.

I want to run down the stairs and pull all four of them into the limo with me for some fun. But I don't. Instead, I take a deep breath and head down the stairs carefully. The last thing I

want to do is go arse over tit and break my neck. I feel four pairs of eyes on me all at once, watching my every move, and my skin tingles under their intense scrutiny, but I throw my shoulders back and smile at them.

“Hey guys, looking good. Shall we?” I nod toward the limo, glad that my voice comes out strong and smooth, nothing like the shaky mess I feel on the inside from looking at them. They part and Ace, my gentleman, opens the door for me. I slide in and take my seat, allowing the others to clamber in around me. I accept the regular back seat, and the guys take the sideways facing bench seats opposite one another. In a way, with how I’m feeling, it’s probably better that no one’s sat next to me, but now I feel like I’m on display with them staring at me again. All eyes turn to the focal point in the room like a TV or something.

“Beautiful.” The compliment from Jax makes me blush. He rarely speaks first, despite being the leader, so it’s nice to hear. Somehow it makes it seem more genuine than when he tacks on an agreement to whatever else the boys have said.

“Thank you,” I mumble quietly, remembering how distant he’s been the last few days. Things feel less awkward now, but that might only be because we’re all together. I’m not sure I’m ready to be alone with him yet.

Ace captures me in his violet gaze, his eyes blazing with approval and admiration as he gives me a slow once-over. All he says is, “Stunning” but it makes my insides do a funny little squirm.

“You look gorgeous, Princess,” Thorn says, reaching out to squeeze my hand. Tingles shoot through me at his contact.

“Princess...” Rebel growls at me. “You look fucking amazing.” His giant paw lands on my leg, shifting the material of my dress and exposing the other thigh. Instantly four pairs of eyes swivel to the broad expanse of exposed smooth, creamy skin. Their synchronised movements would make me laugh if my skin wasn’t heating under their scrutiny. It’s only now, as the heat slowly rises in the limo, that I become aware of just how daring that split is. I freeze, unwilling to risk

moving and exposing more of myself, but also not wanting to shift and pinch the material back together.

“Is there anything to drink in here?” I ask instead, hoping to divert attention away. Jax quickly and efficiently produces a bottle of champagne and proceeds to fill a glass for each of us. When he’s done, we toast to the night and the new year, and I give my own silent resolution to see my plan through to the end, even if it kills me. I owe Lizzie that much.

We drink and Ace puts the radio on. The driving beat of ‘Jungle’ by X Ambassador fills the small space, and it just serves to amp up the tension in the car. I love this song. The bass makes it perfect to fuck to, even if the lyrics are irrelevant. It definitely gets me in the mood. Already, I feel like I can’t breathe. The driving beat I can feel in my bones, the guys’ too-close proximity and heat, the mingling cacophony of their voices like too-sweet honey to my ears; their scents and colognes blending together to make a unique, heady scent that’s getting to me. All together it should be too much, but it works. The problem is the result: I’m a puddle on the seat, incapable of doing anything other than clutching and sipping my champagne. I feel like this limo ride’s neverending when in reality it’s only been a few minutes.

One track bleeds into another, and I feel like Ace has inadvertently selected my ideal ‘getting in the mood’ playlist. I squirm uncomfortably, but no one seems to notice. The guys are all content to chat with one another while I sip my drink and stay quiet. I’m just trying to focus on my breathing and counting down until we reach our destination.

It takes about half an hour – and three glasses of champagne – to get to the party. The limo pulls up outside a massive grand hotel. It’s breathtaking in its opulence, even from the outside. I’m so eager to get inside that I don’t wait for the driver to come and open my door, I fling it open and climb out, staring up at the swanky exterior of the hotel.

The five of us walk towards the entrance and are greeted by doormen dressed in full livery. They almost make the boys look scruffy. The foyer boasts marble floors and giant chandeliers which sparkle and cast pretty rainbows on the

walls. All around us are couples in ball gowns and tuxedos, dressed to the nines. The overall effect is beautiful, like something out of a fairytale. The guys have taken me to a real life ball. Wow. Everything looks so gorgeous, it's too much to take in.

I give a low whistle, impressed. "I'm so glad I had this dress just in case. I don't think my sweats would cut it somehow."

"You look gorgeous in anything. You're perfect." Thorn's words make me smile as he hooks my arm through his and leads the way to the main ballroom.

It's a dream. There are fairy lights absolutely everywhere and candles on the tables which surround the large dance floor on three sides. The fourth side boasts a small orchestra with a DJ booth set up behind, which I'm guessing is for later. We check the seating plan and make our way to our table, and I'm relieved that I'm sat between Ace and Jax with Thorn and Rebel next to them. I hate sitting by strangers. Once I know I'm safe I relax, not caring who else is seated with us. Turns out it's a couple of old people who are insanely stuck up.

I see them watching us all throughout the meal, trying to figure out the pairings. They don't look too happy to be sat with 'gay' couples, and I have to stifle my giggles when Rebel and Thorn start playing up, feeding one another and calling each other 'honey' and 'darling'. By some sort of unspoken agreement, Jax and Ace decide to join in, both pretending to be my date and the old lady's face goes from shocked and uncomfortable to outraged. Her husband watches us a little too keenly. Ick. After each of the courses, we swap seats between us, and each guy that comes to sit by me lavishes me with attention and compliments, constantly touching and kissing me. The old lady looks like she's going to have a fit. The old man looks close to coming in his pants. Double ick.

Somehow I make it through the meal, but as soon as the last plate is whisked away, I escape to the bar and let out my laughter. Keeping a straight face for that long as the guys got more and more outrageously flirty and touchy-feely with me was hard. Not to mention how hot and bothered it's got me. I

know they were only messing, but to have all of their hands on me continuously, almost simultaneously, was mind-blowing. I'm regretting my decision to forego panties tonight in the hopes of surprising Thorn.

A few drinks later and the party's in full swing. I've danced almost non stop, and I'm ready for a break. After dinner, the old couple left and haven't been seen since. I tell Thorn that I feel bad: I hope we didn't ruin their night. He scoffs and tells me they've probably gone back to their room to bang – his words, not mine – because watching me squirm under their ministrations had gotten them harder and wetter than they'd been since the Berlin Wall went up. I have no idea what he meant by that, but it made me laugh.

I'm dancing with Ace, hours later, in desperate need of a drink and a rest when Thorn approaches us on the dance floor.

“Hey sexy, come with me.” He taps me on the shoulder, interrupting my dance with Ace, who I look questioningly at. Ace nods that it's okay for me to go, but tells Thorn that it's almost midnight so make sure he has me back in time. I giggle at the Cinderella-like reference, but I let Thorn take my hand and lead me off the dance floor. I have no idea what he has planned, but it's always fun with Thorn. He pulls me out of the hotel's ballroom to the entrance where we came in. It's deserted now, and even the staff have disappeared – I guess because the party's in full swing and welcome staff are no longer needed. Thorn pulls me close, turning me so that my back's pressed against the wall beside a door. He quickly scans the foyer, and upon spying that it's empty, drags me through the closed door we were beside.

The room's dimly lit, but it's easy to work out where we are: the cloakroom. There are rows and rows of clothing rails, all full of expensive-looking coats, jackets, cloaks and shawls, all expertly organised. There are beautiful soft wall lights and a thick, luscious carpet underfoot. At the back of the small room is a chaise lounge, although why they have one in here beats me. There's even framed artwork on the walls in ornate gilt frames. Everything about this room is lavish and over the

top like the rest of the hotel, and even this cloakroom is swankier than most places I've ever been. How sad is that?

“Really, Thorn?” I turn to him, crossing my arms and frowning. “An entire hotel to play in and you drag me in here?” I mock-scold him, and he knows I'm only joking. His eyes are alight with mischief, mine with excitement.

“I could hire a room for the night, but where's the fun in that?” he asks, stalking towards me. I back up, enjoying the way he prowls.

“I could think of lots of ways to have fun in a private room with a bed and a shower for the next twelve hours.” My reply has just the right amount of snark and teasing. I'm considering running, but it's like he reads my thoughts. As fast as lightning, he reaches out and captures me, pinning me against the nearest coat-free wall, and leans in close. He's careful to make sure that the only part of us that touches is where his hands wrap around my wrists. Somehow it's even more electric than having contact with him.

“But that won't excite you as much as the idea that in here we could get caught at any moment.” His whisper in my ear has me frantic. I pull and tug at his hold, trying to break free, but he refuses to let me. Instead, he captures my lips in a kiss which is equally teasing and scalding.

He's right. The idea does excite me. I flush.

“I wonder if the guys will get impatient and come looking for us?” he whispers and I kiss him back with ferocity so that he knows how much his words affect me. I want to break free of his hold so that I can devour him. He smirks knowingly at me before giving me a chaste kiss on the lips and falling to his knees.

“Stay still,” he orders. “I've been dying to do this since I saw you on those steps, but once you flashed that thigh in the limo, I couldn't think of anything else.” His hands smooth over my ankles, gently pulling my feet further apart. He then starts to slowly slide his palms up my exposed left leg, following his hands with a blazing trail of kisses. When he

reaches my thigh, he runs his tongue up the inside, stopping and pulling back to gaze up at me when he finds my surprise.

“No panties?”

I shrug and grin wickedly at him.

“Naughty girl, I love it.” He dives right in, lavishing attention on my pussy which is already wet and waiting for him. The sensation of Thorn between my legs is the total opposite of Ace. With Ace, it felt like a marathon, not a sprint. He ate me out like he was having a twelve-course taster menu and had all day to finish. Thorn’s more like a starving man at an all you can eat buffet, enthusiastic and aware of the time constraints. But skilled too. Oh so skilled. Within minutes of just using his tongue, he has my knees buckling and my juices running down my legs. I love it when he pauses his sucking to slowly catch my arousal with his tongue, grinning at me and insisting, “Got to keep you presentable without panties to hold this nectar in.”

He licks and sucks at me like he really can’t get enough, and that’s a huge turn on. The sight of Thorn’s handsome blond head moving between my legs has me groaning. I have to close my eyes and focus on breathing; otherwise I won’t last. I feel that heavy tightening deep in my belly and know that resisting it is futile. I’ve never come so quickly, been so unaware of the sensation building. But with Thorn, my orgasm sneaks up on me like a thief in the night. He gently sucks my clit between his teeth and grazes the sensitive skin just as he slides two fingers fully into me. The combined sensation causes the crest of my orgasm to break, and I come crashing down hard. Thorn braces one hand against my lower abdomen, the pressure driving my orgasm further and further on as he continues to lap up every last drop. My knees finally give way, and he catches me, lowering me gently to the lavishly carpeted floor before reaching for a condom.

“Don’t.” I put my hand out to stop him. “We don’t need...” He nods his understanding and throws the condom off somewhere over his shoulder. I have a fleeting image of some stuck up aristocratic lady finding it in the pocket of her fur

coat later, and I giggle. Thorn looks questioningly at me, and I tell him what I'm thinking. His face lights up.

“Oh my god, that's such a good idea! We could have all sorts of fun fucking with these coats. How hard do you think it is to get jizz out of real fur?”

“Let's not waste it or get distracted,” I tell him, pulling him down so that our lips meet.

I know we don't have much time, and I'm impatient to feel Thorn inside me. He scrambles back and drops his trousers, showing that he too is commando. His cock makes my mouth water. It's perfection.

“Wow. You have a beautiful cock,” I tell him. He pulls a face.

“Thanks, I...think?” It comes out as a question. “That's not something I usually hear.”

“Trust me, it's a compliment. It's like I'm having the Goldilocks moment of cocks; it's just right.” Oh dear god, why on earth did I say that to him? I need to stop talking.

“Oh is it?” he teases. “And whose cocks are you comparing it to?”

“Shut up,” I groan, embarrassed. “Please.”

Having sex with Thorn is as much fun as hanging out with him. He's as playful and energetic in the bedroom – erm, cloakroom – as he is at everything else. He enters me fully; straight as an arrow, a perfect seven-ish inches with enough girth to make me really feel it, but without pain. I gasp at how good it feels and immediately want more. I drag my fingernails down his back and dig them into his firm toned ass, using my purchase to pull him in closer. When he's fully buried in me, I raise my hips and grind against him. It feels fucking amazing.

“More?” he asks.

“So much more,” I tell him. He pulls back, almost entirely withdrawing before sinking back into me again. He does this a few times, and I groan.

“Don’t tease.” I don’t know if I’m chastising him or begging.

“Yes m’lady.” He grins.

And then he really lets me have it.

He flips me over so that I’m on my hands and knees where he’s able to enter me from behind. It’s almost my favourite position. Thorn starts to pound into me, not holding back. He’s buried himself all the way to the hilt, the force of his thrusts giving momentum to his balls which slap against me. The extra layer of sensation feels amazing, and the sounds of our fucking fill the room.

Thorn fists my hair and yanks my head back, the sudden sharp pain making me wince, but also creating a rush of wetness between my legs. He notices, of course, and chuckles. “I knew you’d like it rough.” His low growl in my ear sounds more like Rebel than his usual laid back self, and it turns me on to know I’m getting to him as much as he’s getting to me. Thorn shifts and I cry out as he hits that sweet spot inside of me, and he uses the opportunity to change positions, pushing me face down onto my forearms but keeping my ass up in the air. The almost-pain of each thrust is exquisite, and I can’t hold back my cries of delight and pleasure.

In the background, I can hear the partygoers celebrating. Their eager cries begin the countdown to the new year “10... 9...” As Thorn continues to move inside me, I realise he isn’t going to get me back in time to see in the new year with the guys. I hope they’re not too mad. But it’s hard to care too much right now; my new orgasm is building like a wave, the rhythmic percussion of our bodies crashing together like the sound of violent water smashing the rocks.

“8...7...” The sound of my breathing, small cries, and whimpers breaking free, fill my head. I wonder if they’re filling the space around us; if they’re actually as loud as they seem in my head. To me they feel like a roaring ocean, ferocious and deafening. But Thorn makes no move to silence me, so I’m trusting him that it’s alright and that what we’re doing isn’t going to bring a crowd.

“6...5...” My toes curl, and I realise I’m so close I couldn’t stop now if I wanted to. Crowds be damned, if they want to watch, let them. I just don’t want Thorn to stop what he’s doing.

“Thor, please—” I beg him, but he keeps me right on the edge. I’m at the crest of the wave, that terrifying moment you watch and wonder how it’s all going to come crashing down.

“Hang on, Princess, trust me,” he murmurs. He continues to pound into me at just the right angle but I’m barely able to hang on.

“4...3...” The cries continue. Thorn slips a hand down to my clit and massages it in time to his relentless thrusts. My hands fist. My back arches. My legs tremble. I bite my lip so hard I draw blood.

“Fuck.” It’s a desperate plea.

“2...1...”

“Now, Princess.” I don’t need to be told twice, I’m already halfway there. I couldn’t hold back a moment longer if my life depended on it.

I scream – actually scream – with the intensity of my release. There’s a roaring in my ears and a myriad of colours exploding behind my closed eyelids. All the feelings and sensations crash down on me at once, and it’s only Thorn grabbing my hips that stops me collapsing in a puddle on the floor. He’s timed it seamlessly so that I can’t be heard over the raucous celebrations outside. I can faintly hear fireworks exploding in the background, but it’s hard to make out anything other than my own ragged breath and pounding heart. It takes a moment for me to realise that Thorn’s movements have slowed and stopped. Holy shit, we came together.

I look over my shoulder at him and am relieved to see that he looks as ruined as I feel.

“Happy new year, Princess.” He leans over to kiss me.

“Happy new year. That’s one I can tick off the bucket list!”

“What? Sex in a cloakroom?”

“No. I’ve always wanted to spend the very last and first moments of a year coming, and you just made that a reality. Thank you.” I grin at his shocked expression and kiss him. “We better get cleaned up. You can bet the others will come looking for us if we don’t show our faces soon.”

Thorn pulls out, and I swear he’s still semi-hard. On impulse, I lean forward and take him into my mouth, licking and sucking our mingled juices from his cock. When he’s clean, I let him slide out of my mouth and wink at him. “Can’t have your cum ruining that Tux now can we, Mr Commando?”

He grins at me, and sort of returns the favour by pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and handing it to me to clean myself up. I don’t know what’s more shocking; that Thorn has a tissue, or that he’s had the foresight to consider that I may not want to spend the rest of the night dancing as his juices slide down my exposed leg.

“Such a gentleman,” I tease.

“No. A real gentleman would use his tongue to clean up the mess, but somehow with you, I think it would actually lead to us making more mess. And probably getting caught in here...are you decent?”

I have no idea if I’m decent because I can’t see myself. But I feel thoroughly fucked, and his words have me turned on all over again and ready for round two. How the hell am I supposed to meet up with the others and act normal? I’m pretty sure my flushed cheeks, swollen lips and wild hair will be a dead giveaway.

Thorn looks me up and down then groans like he’s tormented. “The others are going to know we’ve had sex.” I hastily try to straighten myself and flatten my hair, anything to look more presentable. “It’s not your appearance,” he moans. “It’s your smell. You smell of sex, and it’s fucking amazing. It’s the most intoxicating thing I’ve ever smelt. The others are going to go wild. We’ll be lucky if the limo ride home isn’t just one big orgy!”

I don't correct him, that he means ménage rather than orgy, but I'm no way near as disappointed by that idea as he seems to be. I ignore his teasing and grab his hand, pulling him from the room without even checking to see if the coast is clear. At this point, I don't care if we get caught. I'm fucking proud of what we've just done. It was incredible. And I want a repeat.

As we come out of the closet together (hehe), we're met in the foyer by the other three guys that we abandoned. Ace looks happy, Jax's expression is guarded, and Rebel looks pissed like always. Standard MO for these guys then. They might not suspect anything.

I walk over to Ace, rising up on my tiptoes to give him a hug. "Happy new year, Aljaž," I tell him with a peck on the lips and a smile. I move to Jax and do the same. When I turn to Rebel, I see that he isn't wearing his usual pissed off expression. No, he looks enraged. Before he can say anything though I step forward and give him a gentle look. I hold out my arms, asking for a hug, and when he hesitates, I whisper, "Do you really want our first words of the new year to be in anger, Reb?"

He sighs and steps into my embrace. Relief floods my veins. I try my hardest to hug Rebel tight, but I can barely get my arms around him. He grunts and shifts so that I'm wrapped in his embrace, which makes me feel tiny and doll-like. Rebel could crush me in the blink of an eye, and although he looks mad enough to do that right now, he holds me with a tenderness that makes my stomach somersault.

I step away from his embrace, and we all go back to the ballroom together for more drinks and dancing. It gets late – or is it early? – and we decide to head back to school. I'm momentarily disappointed that we don't have a hotel room, but it's probably for the best. In the foyer, I excuse myself for the toilet, and when I come back, the guys are nowhere to be seen. I wonder if they're waiting for me at the limo, so I step outside.

Raised voices, tight with the strain of withholding unleashed anger, are the first thing that greets me outside. The guys. I can't see them, but I can hear their deep hissed

conversation. It's a fast exchange like they're hurrying to get what needs to be said out before I return. I pause for a moment to listen.

"What the fuck, Thorn? I thought we agreed." Jax. He sounds mad.

"No. You dictated. I didn't agree to shit."

"First Ace and now you, this is getting out of hand."

"Fuck off." I'm not used to angry Ace. "Don't blame me."

"You've both slept with her. You ARE to blame."

"Better that than running away."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I saw you leaving her room the other night. Looked like you couldn't get out of there fast enough. At least she knows we like her."

Shit, Thorn saw us? My stomach twists. I don't like where this is headed. I don't like that Rebel is silent.

"You can't play with her emotions like that."

"Fuck you. I'm not playing. Unlike you." Thorn is getting really mad now, his control slipping and his voice rising.

"It's fucking complicated," Jax spits.

"Yeah, but does she know that? Have you spoken to her since or are you giving her the cold shoulder? Surely she deserves to know why you're being such a dick to her!"

"Shut up. I'm not discussing it with you. Guys, we need to be more careful. I do not want this turning into another Lizzie situation."

"FUCK!" Rebel roars, and it's followed by a dull thud that I know is the sound of him punching something or someone. Shit. What should I do? Step around the corner and break this – whatever this is – up? Or wait and let it burn out?

"Fuck you Rebel! What the fuck did you hit me for?" Ah, so it was Thorn that got punched. Another dull thud. Another.

Shit. Time to intervene. I rush around the corner to the side of the hotel entryway. This part's in darkness with a single low light casting shadows on my group of guys. Rebel's standing to one side, punching the wall, and even from a distance, and in the dark, I can see that his knuckles are bleeding profusely. Thorn's sat on his ass, tentatively touching his lip which looks split. Ace is checking if Thorn's okay and Jax is standing with his arms folded glaring at me. Wait, what? Why the fuck is he glaring at me like this is somehow all my fault?

I push past him, refusing to rise to his bait. I can chew him out some other time. My gut screams at me to go to Rebel first, but I rush over to Thorn to check that he's okay. When he sees me, he quickly scrambles to his feet and gives me a rueful grin. It makes him wince slightly.

“What the fuck is going on here?” I shout at them. It wasn't my intention at all, but now that I'm here anger seems to work well for me, too. “I leave you alone for five fucking minutes, and you're at each other's fucking throats? What the actual fuck!” Whoa, I realise that's a lot of f-bombs even for me. I feel too far gone to stop now, the adrenaline of the night taking me over.

Ace steps towards me, palms up in a placating gesture but I sidestep him and storm over to Rebel. Finger-pointing, I step forward and poke him in the chest. “What the fuck is your fucking problem, Lennox?” It's not my finest move; he's made of fucking granite, and I'm pretty sure the sharp shooting pain running through my finger means I may have just broken it, but I'm beyond feeling at this point.

“You are such a dick. You all are. I've had the most perfect night until now, and you're all ruining it for me!”

Amazingly, those words are what do it. Instantly Jax looks contrite. Ace looks sorry, and Thorn looks ashamed. Rebel won't look at me, but his shoulders have slumped forward in defeat.

“I want to go home.”

“Of course, sorry, it's late. We should go back to the house.” Jax starts to usher us towards the waiting limo.

“I mean, I want to go back to my dorm. I think I should move back. I’ll collect my stuff tomorrow.”

Disappointment flashes in his eyes, but he nods and doesn’t try to fight me. I would’ve been leaving in another day or two anyway before the other students came back, but it’s probably best if I just go now before things get any bloodier.

Without a word, we enter the limo and once again, no one sits beside me. This time though, I’m not the star attraction as none of them meets my eye. There’s no music or champagne or flirting. There’s tension, but this time it isn’t sexual. The atmosphere’s electric, but in all the worst ways. It’s too dark to see anything out of the window, so the journey becomes impossibly long and uncomfortable as I stare at my clenched hands in my lap. No one speaks at all the whole way back.

When we pull up outside the main entrance to the school, my heart hammers in my chest. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to go back to my room on my own. I don’t want to leave things like this. But I also don’t know what to say. I’m not weak, and I don’t see crying as a sign of weakness, ever. Which is why when I turn to the guys and thank them for making *yesterday* the best night of my life, I don’t attempt to hide them from the tears that are sliding down my face. It’s true, my last day of 2018 was fantastic. It was 2019 where it all went to shit.

I meet their gazes – well all except Rebel’s who still won’t look at me – unflinchingly. They all look awful. Guilty. Sorry. Tormented. Good. They should feel bad. They took something perfect and broke it with their own petty jealousies and fighting.

I exit the limo alone this time and walk towards the school with my head held high. I don’t look back, even when Rebel calls my name.

I think they may have just broken whatever this was starting to be, beyond repair.

Lizzie's Journal

March 23rd

I knew it was stupid to think that being seen with the princes would afford me some kind of immunity from the princesses' torment. It was even more foolish to think when nothing happened for a day or two that I was safe.

I was a fool.

It's almost too awful to say, but I will because when I'm ready to share this journal with you Charlie-Bear, I'd rather you read my story than me have to tell you it all. Excuse me for skipping the final details, but you'll understand why shortly. So here goes...

I came back to my room last night to find horrible words scrawled all over my door. When I went into my room, I found it had been absolutely trashed. Everything was ruined: my bed was wrecked; all my clothes had been ripped and tossed; my desk emptied; the furniture and TV broken. And scrawled everywhere were more awful horrible words – like slut, whore, cunt and slag – in what appeared to be red paint.

It wasn't.

It was blood. And it was everywhere. Worse, when I pulled back my bedding, I found my bed was filled with used sanitary products. The smell was horrific.

I just sank to the floor and cried. I had no idea how to go about cleaning it all up or repairing the broken things. I didn't want to report it to administration and risk getting into trouble or losing Grandma's security deposit. And I definitely didn't want to tell the princes and deal with all the questions that would follow. So I turned to Michael.

He was brilliant. He took me to his room and made me a drink to calm me down, told me to stay the night in his room, and promised to take care of it all for me. I wasn't really keen to stay in his room, but there was no way I could remain in mine. And besides, after the hot drink, I felt really tired and sleepy. I guess it's just the stress of everything.

So I woke this morning to find Michael had got me clean uniforms and all my school stuff in the night. He brought me breakfast in bed and let me use his en suite to shower in and get ready for school. He assured me that by the time the school day was over, my room would be as good as new.

Only, it's even better than new! I don't know how he did it, but my room is amazing. Everything in here has been replaced and updated with nicer, newer things. Even my clothes have been replaced. I have no idea how he pulled it off, but I'm eternally grateful. I have no idea how I can pay him back for this.

The best thing of all though was the looks of shock on the princesses' faces when I turned up to class on time, freshly showered, wearing a pristine uniform and somehow managing to look like I hadn't a care in the world.

It felt good to have the upper hand for once.

X



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It's the end of the first week back after the holidays, the boys aren't talking to me at all – which is lonely as fuck. I probably should've made some other friends for moments like this. I haven't even seen the guys because they've skipped class and meals all week. Even Ace hasn't turned up for my morning runs or sparring sessions. That hurts even more than the hot chocolate withdrawal.

To make matters worse, I'm back to sitting at the princesses' table which is as much fun as sticking red hot poker up my bum. On the plus side, I've got loads of studying done in preparation for our exams that are in a couple of weeks. It makes up for not studying at all over the Christmas break.

Two interesting things have happened this week. First, Lexxi and Natalia didn't return to school with the rest of the students, and there are so many rumours flying around about why. Second, Tilly's waging all-out war on me. In private anyway. In front of the rest of the school, she's the epitome of a gracious leader bestowing kindness on her fellow princesses. In private, however, she's gunning for me. It definitely has something to do with the guys.

Word has somehow gotten out – to her at least – that I basically moved in with the guys over Christmas, and now she's hissing “whore” and “slut” at me under her breath at

every opportunity she gets. If only she knew. She even tried to trip me in the corridor, and there was a nasty incident where she 'tripped' in the canteen and tried to make me wear her dessert. Obviously, she didn't take my ninja reflexes into account, so I easily dodged her, and she ended up covering Amber instead. Both were furious and fell out over it, but I just found the whole thing hilarious. If custard yellow isn't Amber's colour, green with envy isn't Tilly's.

What I don't understand is why she isn't bringing her A-game. She clearly dislikes me for a multitude of reasons: transferring in late, getting special privileges, being a princess, being a Deighton, being involved with the guys...the list could go on. Surely she has more reasons to hate me than she did for hating Lizzie, so why am I not getting the same treatment that she did? I know she has it in her, but at the moment her endeavours to embarrass or harm me are weak at best. Can I get that on a T-shirt? 'Your bullying game is weak'. I want to goad her, really push her, to see how she'll react. But I'm playing the long game, so I bite my tongue. In fact, every time she strikes, I smile at her in a pitying 'I thought you would do better than that' kind of way, which I'm pretty sure is enraging her. Good.

Friday night, I'm home alone in my dorm for the first time in ages, which really sucks. I desperately want to see the guys, to clear the air and put things right, but I don't know how. I could just head down to their house right now, but it would be awkward. What would I say? I still don't think I've done anything wrong. Besides, tonight I have other plans.

I wait until Tilly and the rest of the girls on our floor are out at a party before picking the lock to her room. It's a piece of piss. The locks on our doors are more for show than anything, it's honestly easier than breaking into those suitcase padlocks with universal keys. Part of my more informal Krav Maga training includes lock picking, and frankly, her room's an insult to my abilities.

Anyway, once I'm in, I head straight for the bathroom, decanting half of her shampoo and conditioner down the drain, and topping each bottle up with hair removal cream. I have no

idea if this shit actually works, but it's got to be worth a try. As I'm turning to leave the bathroom, I spy one of those leave-in deep conditioning treatments, so I add my replacement to that too. That will definitely work.

Next, I move to the corner of Tilly's walk-in closet. I kneel down and peel back the corner of the carpet. It's perfect. I wrench up the floorboard, glad I came prepared for this, and drop my little 'gift' (a small dead bird I found in the woods) inside, before replacing the board and the carpet. It's unnoticeable that the rug's been tampered with. Just in case that does get discovered though, I slip a little surprise inside her hollow curtain pole too. Fresh kippers. It'll take a while for this plan to work – namely waiting for the first to rot – but it'll be worth it. Even if they gut the room, I doubt anyone would think to check inside the curtain rail. That smell's going to permeate everything and longer for years.

After that, I slip over to her bedside table and switch out her birth control pills for the fakes I secured online. They're a good copy, there's no way she'll be able to tell that they're different. I don't know if she's sexually active enough for this to work, but it doesn't hurt to cover all bases. She should be going Double Dutch anyway – ahem, hello pot have you met the kettle, I think to myself with a snort.

There's one more thing I came in here to do. I move to her desk and pull out the drawer. Bending down, I tape the small bags of cocaine and pills to the underside of the drawer's bottom. There are five bags full in total, more than could be considered recreational. It's my back up plan if it comes to it.

While I'm by her desk, I take the opportunity to snoop around. The silly bitch has left her laptop open, unlocked, and signed in to all of her social media and emails. Her school email catches my eye, however.

At the top of her inbox is an opened email from the school nurse. Interesting. I click on it and read. It's confirmation of an appointment this Saturday for a full STI screening. Obviously not going Double Dutch then. Perfect. This, I can work with. A plan's already forming in my mind. I just need some help hacking the medical database in school, but it shouldn't be too

hard. As much as I don't want to, I'll have to ask Michael. I'm going to make sure that Tilly – and the rest of the school – thinks that she has an STI.

All in all, it's been a good evening, I think as I slip back out of her room and head back to mine. I'm feeling buoyant and ready to get shit done. It's late, but not too late, so I pull on my running gear and decide to do a quick circuit of the grounds. That should burn off some excess energy.

I'm heading out the door when I bump – literally – into Michael.

“Shit, watch where you're going!” The words fly out of my mouth without thinking. To be fair, they would've come out that way no matter who I bumped into so I should probably be glad it wasn't Headmistress Archer that I smacked into.

“Sorry, sorry! Oh, hey Raven.” His face lights up when he realises it's me. “How was your holiday?”

“Great thanks, yours?”

“Meh, too long with the parents. I'm glad to be back. Maybe we can work together in English this term? I missed you.”

“Mmmmm-hmmmm.” I make a vague noise. “I should head off. Don't want my muscles to get cold.” I regret saying that the instant it leaves my mouth. Michael's eyes drop to my feet and give me an agonisingly slow once over. It makes my skin crawl, and it's challenging to keep the fake smile plastered on my face.

“Maybe I should take up running.” His tone is just...ick. He's trying to flirt with me, and it's just wrong on so many levels. I feel bile rise up into my throat and – gross – quickly swallow it back down.

“Maybe... hey, while you're here I wanted to ask you something.” His eyes spark with interest, and I hastily plough on so that he doesn't get the wrong idea. “Who would I need to speak to if I needed help with...a computer problem? A sensitive one.”

Michael laughs, “You don’t have to search far at all for help...” When I give him a blank stare he elaborates, “Just ask one of your guys.”

“My guys?” I raise an eyebrow at him but don’t comment further. “They know computers?”

“Hell yeah. Rebel’s one of the best hackers I’ve ever come across.”

“Wow. I had no idea.” He gives me a strange look, but I don’t want to get into it. I start to jog on the spot to warm up. “Thanks! I’ll speak to one of them then. See you in class.” I wave goodbye and head out into the cold winter air, my mind whirling with possibilities.

Typically, it would be Rebel that I need help from. That means I’m going to have to go and talk to him in the morning. That’ll be fun. Hopefully, all the guys’ll be there so we can clear the air, and then I can get Rebel on his own to ask him how to hack the medical records and results. That’s the plan anyway, I think to myself as I start my run on this dark, icy night.

The next morning it’s early, but I’m up and ready, standing outside the boys’ house. I’m riled up, and I’ve decided that I’m not leaving without answers at least. I try the door, but it’s locked. When I stayed here over Christmas, it was never locked. I ring the bell, but there’s no answer. I’m guessing, from the loud music that’s rattling the windows, that they just can’t hear the sound. So I lean on it continuously until the music stops abruptly and a moment later the door’s thrown open with force.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Rebel towers over me, his face a mask of rage.

“Trying to get someone to open the damn door.” I glower back at him and cross my arms. He grunts and goes to slam the door, but I shoot my foot out and block him. “I’m coming in.”

He doesn't respond, turning on his heels and storming off into the house. I follow, and as I shut the door, I spy him disappearing up the stairs. I quickly scout the rest of the house, but it sounds as though everyone else is out. I head upstairs and pause outside the door to 'my' room. I miss being here. I miss how things were. A jolt of anger sparks in me. It's not my fault that things are different. I didn't change anything or do anything wrong. No, this horrible, awkward atmosphere is on Rebel and the other guys. Unfortunately, he's the only one here right now, so he's going to be on the receiving end of my wrath all on his own.

I stomp down the landing to his door, intending to confront him, and huffing in frustration when I find his bedroom door is locked. "How fucking petty," I mutter under my breath. I could pick the lock, but I really can't be bothered, and Rebel's callous shitty attitude has got my back up. I back up a couple of steps and raise my foot, aiming for the weak spot just above the door handle. With one swift, powerful kick, my foot collides with Rebel's door and swings open on its hinges with a crack and a bang.

"What the fuck?!" he screams at me as I step into his space. He's sat cross-legged on his enormous bed, strumming an acoustic guitar.

"What the fuck is your problem, Lennox?" I'm so mad at him; I can't even use his name. It feels too personal, too close. I watch as he slams the guitar down onto its stand, the force causing a discordant twang to fill the air, making me wince.

"My problem?" His voice is low and dangerous as he slowly gets to his feet and stalks towards me. "My problem? You're the one that's come in here and kicked my fucking door down."

"I didn't kick the door down, I kicked it in. There's a difference. If you notice, it's still standing, just a little broken." I'm being pedantic, but he just gets under my skin and riles me up so that I can't help it.

"Semantics, Deighton." Ooooh, he's on last name only terms now, too. Good.

“What’s your problem, Lennox? Why have you ignored me and vanished all week? Why did you try to keep me out of the house and shut me out of your room?” As I rant at him my voice becomes weaker and I get more and more deflated until my last question is practically a whisper, “Why did you ruin everything?”

His nostrils flare but he doesn’t answer for a minute. Instead his warm cognac eyes skim my body and flicker alive. There’s a spark of interest but it’s gone as quickly as I spotted it.

“Go away, Deighton,” he tells me in a flat voice, turning away.

“Fuck you! Don’t you dare walk away from me! You owe me answers, you prick!” I’m so enraged that I run and launch myself at him, landing on his back and reaching round to wrap my arms around his throat in a light chokehold. He easily flips me over his shoulder and cushions my landing down onto his bed. I stare up at him from my back for a second before scrambling to my feet again.

“Stop being a bitch,” he growls at me.

“If I’m a bitch to you, you need to ask yourself why. You don’t get to treat people like shit without an explanation at least.”

“Go home, Deighton.” Why won’t he budge on this? Why won’t he fight me? My frustration levels are rising, and I feel almost desperate. I’d do anything to get a rise out of him.

I flounce past him, out the door, and head for the stairs as I call over my shoulder, “Fine. Throw our friendship away like you couldn’t give a fuck, but you don’t get rid of me that easily. I’m going to be here all the time, and I’m going to fuck your best friends – plural – right next door until you snap.”

That does it. His anger starts low, a rumbling that makes its way up from the bottom of his diaphragm and morphs into a guttural growl that shakes me. From my position at the top of the stairs, I can see his face turning red. His shoulders are rigid, hands fisted. One more push and he’ll snap.

“I hope you enjoy listening as Thorn takes my ass. I’ll be sure to scream loud enough that you’ll know it’s happening.”

He roars – actually roars – and lunges for me. For someone so big, he sure can move quick! I clamber to get away from him and, a moment too late, I realise there’s nowhere to go. My eyes widen in panic as it registers that the only thing behind me is thin air and a drop down the stairs. Before I can react, or my training on how to fall safely kicks in, Rebel’s enormous fist shoots out and grabs my top, yanking me back against the safety of his chest, my feet once again on solid ground. His lips crush against mine with so much force that if he didn’t have a hold of me, it would’ve pushed me down the stairs again. He uses his purchase on me to keep me from escaping the bruising attack on my lips.

A moment later, my brain catches up with my treacherous body and I plant both hands in his chest. I shove hard. He staggers a little but doesn’t let go, turning me so that I’m no longer dangling on the edge of the top step. As he does, I seize my opportunity and elbow him as hard as I can in the stomach. He grunts and stops kissing me in surprise.

This time it’s his face that registers shock as he teeters on the edge. I don’t know if I want to step forward and save him or shove him. My choice is swiftly taken away from me as Rebel begins to tumble backwards down the stairs, hands still tangled in my shirt. Oh, Fu—I think before I’m cut off by the sensation of falling.

Rebel thinks fast, pulling me close and locking his arms in a protective cage around me. Together, we smash down every step, but no matter how we tumble and fall, Rebel always angles himself just right to take the brunt of the force and keep his weight off me.

I hear the sound of splintering wood and know we’ve just taken out several wooden risers to the balustrade. And then we’re kissing, in a way which is as violent as our fall. Rebel hits the floor with a painful thud, and I jar against his chest. I think he got the worse end of the deal. In the tumble our kiss broke apart so now we’re staring at one another, inches apart, panting hard.

I quickly jump off him and flee to the kitchen for a drink and a breather. As I'm downing a pint of cold water Rebel comes into the room and stares at me. I can't tell if the tension between us is aggressive or sexual. Once again, he stalks towards me, and I don't know what he'll do when he gets to me. I contemplate...

Fuck it.

I throw the glass into the sink, not caring if it breaks, and make a run for it. Immediately, Rebel chases me, causing a sick thrill to course through my veins. I bolt out of the second kitchen doorway, skidding as I turn into the hallway and run back towards the stairs and front door. I jump over the broken risers and pause near the door. Out of the door? Or into the lounge? Back into the kitchen to run in circles all day long?

My hesitation costs me as Rebel jumps and tackles me to the floor, twisting me onto my back as we go down. And go down hard I do, like a sack of shit, smashing through the side console table. I groan in pain. And although Rebel doesn't land on me, the force of my fall still steals all the air from my lungs. My head smacks back on the ground, and I bite my lip hard enough to draw blood.

"Shit, baby, I'm sorry." Rebel's voice is panicked. He reaches out and gently runs his thumb over my split lip. This time it's his tenderness that steals my breath away. I love that he called me baby. But then he ruins this soft moment between us by popping his thumb into his mouth and sucking the blood from it. He stares intently into my eyes the whole time. I know it's supposed to be gross, and I really shouldn't like it, but it's insanely hot for some reason. I love it all. The fighting. The adrenaline from the fall. The kiss. Feeling Rebel's enormous arousal press against me. Is it any wonder I'm a hot wet mess?

The kiss this time makes me whimper with painful pleasure. He nips and sucks at my split lip, and it's like a hotline to my pussy. His kiss is cannibalistic, consuming, destroying. It steals my breath and my mind. His light stubble grazes along my jawline, his mouth nipping and biting the whole time. My skin comes alive with every pass of his mouth

and my hands fist in his hair to guide him. I pull him against me, silently encouraging him to go harder. He grinds his hips against me, and suddenly it's not enough. I'm on fire, and I need to feel him.

Frantically I tear at his shirt, yanking it over his head and raking my nails from his shoulders down his biceps. They're freaking huge. My hands look tiny against them. I lift my torso so that my mouth can meet his skin, and I sink my teeth into his chest. His groan nearly undoes me. He slides his hands under my ass and lifts my pelvis to meet his. He breaks away from kissing me and stares at me hard.

“Why has this taken so long?” he groans.

“You never asked.”

“Can I fuck you?” He smirks.

I sigh and hit him. “Idiot. That's the one question you never ask. It's such a turn-off. Now you'll have to wait even longer!”

“Fuck that!”

In an instant, he's on his feet, and I'm in his arms, my legs automatically wrapping themselves around his waist as he slams us against the front door. The impact barely registers as we devour each other like starved beasts. My hands, his lips, our tongues, are everywhere. Frenzied. Rebel uses his hips to pin me against the door, freeing his hands to drag my top up over my head. He tosses it to one side, and as soon as his hands are empty, he's grabbing my breasts. He gives a grunt of frustration and rips open my front fastening bra, jerking the straps down my arms, before returning to cup my bare flesh.

“Still turned off?” he teases, and I stick my tongue out at him. He captures it between his teeth and gently sucks.

Fuck.

I need him inside me now. I drop my legs from his waist so that I'm standing, and my hands fly to his belt, fumbling to get it undone. He does the same to me, and we're tearing at each other's clothes in a race to get naked as quickly as possible.

As soon as we're naked, he lifts me into his arms again, supporting my ass, lips back on mine with a passion. He walks us into the kitchen and over to the island. Holding me with one arm, he uses the other to sweep the island countertop clean in one swing. Paperwork flies everywhere, and the fruit bowl crashes to the ground, splintering into a thousand pieces while apples, oranges and pears roll everywhere.

Rebel lays me on the counter and kisses his way down my body until he rests between my legs. He doesn't hesitate, diving in with his tongue to lap at my pussy enthusiastically. He sucks my lips into his mouth and bites down with force, making my back arch up off the cold counter as I cry out. I'm dripping but still so tight as Rebel slowly inserts a finger into me while he sucks and grazes my clit. It's electric. He adds another and pumps slowly for a beat, before adding a third. It's too much, and I whimper.

“Shhh, baby, trust me, you need this.”

“It's fine. I'm fine,” I assure him. He doesn't understand that it feels too good. I don't want to come. But I know that he's trying to use his fingers to prepare me for his huge cock, so I let him continue. I might like it rough, but I don't want to literally be torn in two. I know his cock is at least ten inches from all the times he's waved it in my face, but he's impossibly wide too. Is there such a thing as a cock being too big? Not if he knows how to use it.

When it gets too much – when I'm too close – I sit up, looping my arms around his neck. “I need you in me,” I tell him in a low husky voice. “Now.”

The island is way too high for that – even with Rebel being as tall as he is – so he scoops me back into his arms and looks around for where he can take me. The kitchen's a no go, with counters lining all the walls. The dining table's also too high. The floor's covered in broken glass and crockery – oops – and the hallway's full of splintered wood. I'm too impatient to make it to the bedroom, kissing and biting his neck as he walks and begging him to fuck me right now.

Quickly, He takes us across the hallway into the lounge, pressing me against the one bare wall and gently lowering me down onto his hard cock. That's the point all thought leaves me. I swear I feel my IQ dwindling as my jaw slackens and my eyes roll back. "Fuck," I hiss out. I'm convinced I've just died and gone to heaven. He lowers me, inch by inch, until he's fully sheathed inside me. I'm deliciously full; stretched and stuffed to the breaking point. If I weren't so turned on and ready for him, it would be painful. I love it, and he's not even moving yet.

When I open my eyes, he's giving me that shit-eating grin of his. Bastard. I squeeze my internal pussy muscles around his mammoth cock and watch this time as his jaw goes slack and profanity falls from his lips. Two can play that game. I grin at him, and it is on. Our brief reprieve from fighting is over, and we recommence with a passion.

He thrusts up into me so hard that I'm pushed up the wall several inches and I cry out. His arms brace against the wall above my shoulders, so I tuck my arms under his to grip on to his back. I bury my nails into his flesh, deep enough to draw blood, and take my nails slowly down his inked skin. He hisses in pain and retaliates by thrusting into me even harder.

"Is that the best you've got?" I goad him.

"Challenge accepted, little girl." He grins wickedly, slamming me to the floor.

Rebel captures my arms down by my sides and pins them by my hips. His hands are so large that he can clamp my wrists in place and hold my hips with a bruising force. I can't move, so I'm forced to absorb every powerful thrust, trapped under him.

I take it – what choice do I have – but I don't make it easy for him, digging my heels into the carpet to try to buck my hips and knock him off. It doesn't work, but I enjoy fighting him. He gives a half-amused, half exasperated growl but lets me wiggle free.

We roll continuously, struggling for power and dominance, bodies meeting furiously, relentlessly refusing to give in.

Rebel's cock spears me and stretches me, my pussy squeezes and milks him. We're well matched. I egg him on, begging him to go harder, faster. He always complies. Our coupling is fast, noisy. Delicious.

Dexterously, his fingers work my clit with finesse while still kissing and thrusting into me. I have to use all my willpower to stave off my orgasm. It's so hard though. I grab onto his ass and sink my fingers in, leaving ten crescent moon shapes embedded in his toned flesh. The move pulls him closer to me, crushing his fingers so that he can't massage me any longer.

"Come," he orders me, breaking apart from an intense kiss.

"Bite me!" He takes that literally, rather than as the 'fuck' that I meant it to be, and sinks his teeth roughly into my shoulder. It's fucking exquisite.

"Come," he repeats.

"Fuck you, you fucking come." I'm not giving him my orgasm. No way. That feels too much like giving in, like defeat. I want to be the one who makes him come undone. I want him at my mercy, broken. I can't lose. But I'm going to have to move fast because I can feel the orgasm approaching and my resolve to fight it slipping.

I indicate to Rebel that I want to shift positions and he takes the hint, rolling us over so that I'm straddling him. I give him bonus points for ensuring he stays buried in me the entire time. Once I'm on top, I put my bring-him-to-his-knees plan into action, and I don't waste any time in doing it.

I suck Rebel's earlobe and gently tongue the little dip just underneath it as I begin to move slowly. I take his huge cock all the way, grinding my hips in a circular motion when I hit the bottom. I kiss and suck from his ear, along his neck to his shoulder, leaning in close so that my breasts press against his chest and my taut nipples graze him with every movement. I stay with my head nestled in the crook of his neck, my lips in constant contact with his skin.

“Come for me Rebel,” I whisper in a breathy, needy voice. His groan and the way he digs his fingernails into my ass to grind me harder against him tells me he’s close.

I shift, dipping my back so that my ass pops upwards and outwards, altering the angle of his dick inside me. The friction inside my tight pussy is incredible. Like this, I have him hitting all the right spots. So many people think there’s only one or two, but my god, there are so many more. I love how Rebel’s cock has stretched my opening, and his extra girth means he can stimulate that thin wall of skin between my two holes, building a delicious pressure that feels almost as good as having a finger or two back there. Ummm, we’ll have to do that next time I think as I flick my ass again and really begin to move. I keep my body entirely still so that only my hips and ass are moving. It feels like I’m vibrating, I’m flicking it that fast, but I guess it could only be described as twerking. On his cock. Sounds ridiculous, feels insane.

With my head still firmly nuzzled in the side of his neck, I beg him once again to come. His guttural groans are nearly my undoing, but I hold on tight, refusing to give in. Instead, I distract myself by sinking my teeth into the side of his neck and sucking hard. I suck as I feel his orgasm build, biting and applying more and more pressure as I feel his cock swell and throb inside me. His breath leaves him in tortured groans and his, “Please” is a tortured prayer that’s dragged unwillingly from his lips. I give a final burst of speed, and with a roar and a groan, he’s emptying his load inside of me. It feels never ending.

He grabs my hips and tries to halt my movements, but I know the trick is to drain him dry. I continue my gruelling pace, grinding down on his cock until his trembling limbs go limp. Only then do I slow to a halt and lie my head on his chest to recover. I’m panting as hard as he is, and a sense of victory floods me, making me grin. I realise that I’m finally close enough to study his tattoos in detail, but I can’t be bothered. I feel boneless. Like jelly or water. But the heavy concrete kind.

We lie together, limbs entangled, trying to catch our breath. A couple of minutes later, Rebel blinks up at me in awe, his breathing ragged.

“Where the fuck did that come from?” I love the admiration in his voice, and I smile at him, kissing his chest and snuggling in.

“It was great. Not rainbows coming out of my pussy great, but still great,” I tell him with a smirk, which earns me a sharp stinging slap on the ass. It’s enough to almost have me ready for the next round. But Rebel envelopes me in his massive arms and rolls us over. At this point, I don’t even care what room we’re in or who might catch us. Spent and exhausted, for now, I relax into his hold, and within minutes we’re both fast asleep.

I’ve no idea what time it is when I hear the door open later, except that it’s fully dark outside. I’m laid in Rebel’s huge bed, with his arm slung around me, in a post-sex haze of bliss. I don’t even remember making it back up the stairs to his room; I feel like we’ve been having sex for days. Or involved in a severe road traffic accident, if my sore joints and bruises are anything to go by.

In reality, it’s only been one day, one deliciously long day of rough, noisy, painful sex. Lots of it. Every round was a battle of wills, neither one of us willing to submit or surrender. It was almost violent in its intensity. I’m deliciously sore in the best possible way. But I’m not complaining; I’m insatiable when it comes to Rebel. I can’t get enough. He’s my drug of choice, and after just one hit, I’m totally addicted.

“What the fuck? Have we been burgled?” Thorn’s loud voice carries easily up the stairs to Rebel’s room.

“No. Not burgled,” Jax’s response is calm, almost amused.

“Then what the hell happened here?”

“I think Raven and Rebel happened.”

“Finally,” Ace chimes in.

“I’ll get a broom...oh fucking hell, it’s like Armageddon happened in here too. Shall we check the rest of the house?”

“I think we’re lucky it’s still standing at all.”

“Damn, to be him right now.”

It makes me giggle, but I snuggle in closer to Rebel, not willing to break this delicate truce between us just yet. It feels kind of...nice. For once, the others can wait.

Lizzie's Journal

March 24th

I'm so torn. I don't know what to do.

Somehow, word's gotten out that I stayed the night in Michael's room two nights ago. The princes are livid!

I can't even give them the real reason why. I said I'd fallen asleep there studying, but I know they don't believe me. Rebel flipped out, threatening to beat the shit out of Michael. The princesses are telling everyone I got the 'Crown Jewels' which is some stupid term for sleeping with all five of the princes apparently. Never mind that I haven't actually slept with any of them! So, of course, I'm being called tramp and hussy and slag by everyone.

It wouldn't be so bad if the princes believed me when I said nothing had happened – but they don't. They haven't said as much, but they've been more distant, and both Thorn and Rebel asked for space. That hurts because I would've thought they'd know me better than that by now – especially Rebel. I haven't 'put out' for any of them, so why would I be sleeping with Michael behind their backs? It feels too ridiculous to have four boyfriends and be accused of cheating on all of them with a fifth guy!

I'm starting to wonder if it's worth the hassle. Maybe I should just end things with all of them? At least that way I wouldn't have to choose.

What would you do, Charl?

X



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Luckily, I did manage to get Rebel's advice about the hacking the following morning. I didn't tell him what it was for, but he seemed pretty okay with whatever. He said it wouldn't be too hard to do and the best news he gave me was that I could do it remotely. He even let me use his computer, promising me that he would erase my tracks afterwards.

The first thing I did once I was into the school's medical system was set up a flag with Tilly's name, and an automatic reroute of her results to my email. I knew it would take a week to ten days for the results to come in, but I also knew that having money would speed everything up – even waiting for test results. I set it up so that when they did come in I'd be able to re-access the system to store, edit and mail out her results. Rebel also gave me a virus to download into the software so that it looked like a glitch at their end when Tilly's personal and highly confidential test results 'accidentally' got sent to all.

Within five days (thank you rush test service) everyone in the school – students, staff, governors and even some parents – received an email informing them that Tilly did indeed have an STI, two, in fact, thanks to chlamydia and gonorrhoea being mutually contractable, and that she was legally and morally obligated to inform her sexual partners. There was also a

follow-up appointment for the next day for her to go and arrange treatment.

The fall out was brilliant.

Tilly waltzed into breakfast the next morning as if she didn't have a care in the world. Everyone fell silent as she moved through the room. It was only once she was sat at the table that Belle quickly leaned over and whispered to her. Judging from the way the colour instantly drained from her face before rushing back to turn her skin a horrible shade of purple, she wasn't aware of the email or the error. She raced from the room, which erupted into frenzied gossiping before she was even out of the double doors, and she wasn't seen again for the rest of the day.

I smile into my breakfast while Rebel watches me closely.

“You had something to do with this,” he accuses me.

“I don't know what you mean.” My face is a picture of innocence. “And that's not a question.”

“No, bullshit: did you have something to do with this?”

Damn him adding in that little caveat. I can't lie to him. I won't. I have to accept that the feelings in our complicated relationships are real, which is why as silly as it seems because my whole identity is built on deception and lies, I pride myself on being as evasively honest as possible with the guys.

“I think you need to remember that I'm nice as fuck, so if you see me being mean to Tilly, you need to know that she earned that shit. Big time.”

He nods once, I think in agreement and gets up to leave. The next time I see him it takes every effort not to mount him where he stands: the line to the nurse's office is snaking down the corridor, and it seems like every single guy in the school – bar my four – are queuing to see the nurse. I'm sure it's a coincidence, but there's even a couple of male teachers in the queue. It can't be, but it looks like they're *all* queuing to see the nurse for STI treatment, which would imply that Tilly's a massive skank. Nasty. Next to many of the guys, there are also

furious looking girlfriends. It's the gift that keeps on giving. I could never have predicted a fall out like this.

I spy Rebel sat further down the hallway, an amused smirk on his face and I slide up next to him. Taking a seat on the bench beside him, I say, "No bullshit: you had something to do with this, didn't you?"

He turns to me and grins. "Who, me?" He bats his eyelashes at me in an elaborate pantomime of innocence (which he sucks at), and I laugh. "This is the most fun I've had in ages. I didn't even have to pay these guys off. I spoke to a couple of mates who owed me favours, and it all snowballed from there. I think it's more of a bragging opportunity 'I slept with the head princess' or some stupid bullshit. I know for a fact that over half these guys queuing are bloody virgins. Still, I don't care. Tilly's on the outs. We've been trying to dethrone her for ages, you just gave us the ammo we needed to kick her out once and for all." He kisses me in thanks. It starts off sweet enough, but he quickly deepens the kiss in a way that has me wanting to skip class and lose myself in him again. His hand reaches up to cup my breast through my school shirt, and I gasp. That's way too much for a PDA.

"But why did you do this?" I pull away, still a little confused.

"Aside from it being amusing as fuck and because I hate her guts?" His smirk is quickly replaced by a seriously intense look. "Because if someone treats you badly, you have every right not to tolerate that bullshit, Raven. I support you one hundred per-cent." He pauses, fixing me with a hard, sincere stare. "But if someone fucks with the people I love, I burn them all down to the ground."

My stomach flip-flops at his words. I know he doesn't mean it – he doesn't love me, love me – but the fact that he cares about me enough to side with me and help me means so much. The girl with no identity, no friends, no family, no love, is cared about by Rebel Lennox. It's a tender moment for me, but I'm not about to show it.

“Why aren’t you four in the queue?” I ask to change the conversation instead.

Rebel visibly shudders, and I don’t think it’s put on. “Fuck no. I wouldn’t touch her with a barge pole.”

“But neither have most of these guys you said.”

“Yeah but we’re the princes. By not standing in that line we’re sending a powerful message. We rejected her. We didn’t touch her. She’s beneath us. And once that word gets out? She’s done.”

I understand what he’s saying – it’s brilliant really – but I can’t get that interaction between Jax and Tilly out of my head. I shift uncomfortably, and Rebel reads my thoughts.

“Not my story to tell, Princess. Ask him. But I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

I nod, relieved that I don’t have to ask, give Rebel one last peck on the cheek, and leave him to head to my gym class with Ace. As I go, I can’t help but smile at how perfectly this turned out. But I’m not done with Tilly, not by a long shot.

I practically float to the martial arts hub to meet with Ace. When I arrive, he’s already there with a sweet smile on his face. My heart flutters and I realise how much I really missed him – all of them really – last week.

“We good?” he asks me. I hesitate. Rebel and I are good – for now at least – but we didn’t really talk about the issue, what I overheard at the party, or why the guys ghosted me for a week. But looking up at Ace’s uncertain face, lined with worry, I find myself crumbling faster than a soggy biscuit dipped in tea. I nod, and his whole face brightens like a Spring morning, making me glad I made the decision to forgive him.

“I need to skip training today though, I have something I need to do.” I’m deliberately vague, not wanting him to ask questions, it’s also my way of trying to protect him in case I get caught.

“Okay.” He senses that I’m not going to give more and lets it lie. “Come later?” I so wish he meant what I was thinking, but sadly it’s just a language barrier thing.

“Sure, will you cook for us?”

“Pleasure.” Damn, he’s done it again, one word and all I can think about is sex. I tell myself to focus: I have a job to do.

I rise up on my tiptoes to give Ace a quick peck on the cheek before leaving the hub, and head through to the girl’s poolside changing rooms. Class will soon be in session for everyone, but for now, the changing rooms are empty. I slip inside and head to Amber’s locker, easily picking the lock and breaking it open. There’s so much I could do once I’m in, I’m almost spoilt for choice. There’s no time, though.

I take a deep breath and quickly do what I came in here for, reaching for Amber’s stash of swimming caps. I immediately pour my peroxide solution into each of them, hoping that it’ll be too late for her to notice. I just have time to switch out her school-issue swim towel with one I’ve rubbed with chilli, managing to slip out before the first students start to enter. It’s small, but it’s a start. I only wish I could be there to see the moment where the chilli she’s rubbed all over her body activates and sets her skin on fire. Shame, I’ll have to rely on the gossip network to report back to me.

Once I’m done I head back to my room, skipping last period. I use the time to work on Lizzie’s diary, once again feeling bad for neglecting her. Once I’ve put in some work on that, I take time getting ready. If Jax and Thorn are at the house tonight, it’ll be the first time we’ve all hung out since New Year, and I want to look nice. I can’t just pretend that nothing happened though; tonight, we’re all going to talk.

When I get to the house a little while later, I let myself in through the unlocked door, walking in on a very naked Jax. He’s only got a small towel wrapped around his waist, and his dark skin is glistening wet. He looks like a Greek god carved to perfection.

“Oh sorry, the door was unlocked so I…”

“It’s fine.” His voice is like molten chocolate: sweet, seductive and moreish. I don’t quite know where to look though. I’m such a perv. I’m mentally willing the towel to drop from his waist to show me the goods. I meet his eyes and am lost in their dark depths. I lick my lips, and Jax watches my every move. My heart’s thrumming in my chest and my pulse is racing. I want him. It’s greedy and crazy, and I already have more guys than I know what to do with, but that tension between us from Christmas hasn’t gone. If anything, it’s grown.

I step towards him at the same point he walks towards me. We meet in the middle, and he grabs my ass, his hand easily sliding under the dress I’m wearing. When he feels that I’m not wearing any underwear, he pulls back and whistles.

“No panties? Are you trying to kill me? That’s all I’m going to be thinking about all night now!”

He captures my lips in a sensual kiss, and I lose myself in him. I’ve missed him so much, and I love that this time he hasn’t pinned me, so I’m free to let my hands wander over his warm bare skin. I want to taste every inch of him because he looks, smells and feels so good. I may or may not help his towel come loose while we’re kissing. Jax’s length is impressive – almost matching Rebel’s I think – but more of the perfect girth of Thorn’s. I’m so lucky. All of these guys have fantastic dicks, and so far three of them have demonstrated that they know precisely how to use them.

I kiss Jax back boldly and wrap my hand around the base of his cock, slowly pumping his shaft. Whenever my hand reaches the tip of his cock, I lightly twist with a flick of my wrist. It makes him pulse and groan. I feel a small amount of pre-cum leak out of the top, and I’m desperate to sink to the floor and take him in my mouth.

Just as I’m about to, Jax pulls away abruptly and steps back, putting several feet of space between us.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, dazed and confused.

“I can’t do this, I’m sorry.” He looks tortured as he runs his hand across his jaw.

“Wh-What?” I blink, not believing what I’m hearing. “You don’t want...?”

“No! I mean, yes! I want to. I want you. I really do. But I can’t.”

“Why not?” I blink back tears. Oh my god, I seriously need to get a grip. Who cares if he doesn’t want me when I have three insanely hot guys who do. And I’m leaving in a matter of months. I tell myself it doesn’t matter, but it does.

“Because,” he draws that one word for so long I think he isn’t going to continue. But then he does. “Because I need to get tested.” He finishes his sentence with heavy emphasis, and I know exactly what he’s talking about.

It sends me spinning. I know he dated one of the princesses. He told me. But I just had a feeling it was Tilly he slept with – I could see the sexual chemistry between them that day in my room. I just hadn’t wanted to believe it. But here he is, telling me without telling me what I never wanted to hear. I blanch, feeling sick, and Jax quickly steps forward to comfort me, but this time, I step back out of his reach.

“I’m almost certain I’m clean, I swear, but I can’t, I won’t, put you at risk until I’m one hundred per-cent sure. That is, if you still want me, knowing...”

I shake my head. It’s too much to process. I really do want to vomit. And the worst thing is, I’m desperate to blurt out the truth: that it’s not true, Tilly doesn’t have chlamydia or gonorrhoea, because I doctored her test results. I’m so desperate to be with him that it’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him when I mentally kick my own ass to shut the fuck up! No sex – no matter how wonderful it promises to be – is worth risking exposure for. But I do want to facepalm – my scheming essentially has me cockblocking myself.

Nice one, Raven.

I glance up at Jax and see his cool, calm demeanour he usually wears has slipped and he’s looking intently at me with a pleading look in his eye. That’s when I realise I didn’t answer him. “I’ll wait,” I tell him quietly. For me, it feels

momentous. Sex with the other guys just kind of happened (although I was pretty certain with Thorn it would be a sure thing) and yet with Jax, I'm making plans. That's significant. And from the way his face lights up at my words, Jax thinks so too.

“Why didn't you go to the nurse today?”

“I don't want to be part of the circus.” He shrugs, and I really like that he feels that way. I nod in understanding, then indicate that he should probably go and put some clothes on, just as Rebel comes crashing through the door.

He freezes, takes in the situation, and then bursts out laughing as Jax races upstairs to get dressed. Rebel turns to stare at me, taking in my swollen lips, messy hair and dishevelled clothes before grinning slowly. He takes a step towards me, eyes on fire, and draws in a long deep breath through his nose.

I shit you not, he just fucking sniffed me, like a damn dog.

I scowl at him and chastise him.

“Fuck, little bird, you smell fucking amazing,” he tells me, coming even closer. “You smell so good when you're aroused. It's going to drive the other guys wild...” My cheeks burn, I'm so mortified.

“You're cockblocked, aren't you?” he asks, nodding his head and ignoring the glower I'm throwing his way. “Why didn't you tell him the truth?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, for a moment frozen in panic.

“I'm pretty sure that Tilly doesn't have an STI any more than you or I do,” he says pointedly. “I also know that you wouldn't do anything like this without good reason, but that for whatever reason, you can't share it with us yet. But you still could've told him.”

“I couldn't,” I shake my head. “It would've led to more questions, and I don't think Jax is the kind of guy to let things lie until he has all the answers he needs.”

“That’s true.” Rebel bites his lip, deep in thought. “Want me to take care of you instead, Princess?” I thought he was making a joke, but I look up to see he’s deadly serious. There’s a fire blazing in his amber eyes; it’s not about sex – well not *only* about sex – but about a genuine desire to take care of me. It makes me breathless.

I shake my head, as much as I want to say yes. Now that Jax and I have an arrangement, I sort of want to wait for him. I just hope he’s rich enough to get his results rushed through like Tilly did. With a sigh, I stomp off to the kitchen to get a cold drink in the hopes that it’ll calm me down as Rebel chuckles behind me from the hallway.

The rest of the evening is perfect. All of the guys are there, Ace cooks up a feast, and the atmosphere is – mostly – relaxed. Every so often, I catch Jax’s eye, and he’s staring intently at me. It makes me glad he has such iron self control because the way he’s looking at me has me wanting to say fuck the tests, to drag him to bed with me. Instead, we all sit around the table, playing cards late into the night.

Eventually though, I clear my throat and ask the guys if we can talk. All four instantly stop what they’re doing and look at me. My bravery to confront them wilts fast under their blazing stares. I don’t understand how simply being looked at can be such a turn on, but there’s something in these guys’ gazes that makes me feel like a puddle of goo and an absolute goddess at the same time.

“I want us all to talk.”

“Okay, Princess, talk.”

I hesitate, not sure if I want to continue. Everything up until now has been great. What if my questions mess that up? Still, I’ve never been one to shy away or take the easy route, so I plough on ahead.

“What is this? This thing between us, I mean.”

“What do you want it to be?” Jax asks me wearily, giving me pause.

“What’s it to you?” I counter. “Am I – dating? – all four of you, or are we just fooling around? How serious or casual is this?”

“It’s serious,” Thorn states.

“We’re dating,” Rebel interjects. “I already told you how I feel.” I give him a blank look at that, unable to recall when he’s ever talked about his feelings.

“Exclusively,” Ace insists, making me flush with pleasure.

“I’m exclusively dating four guys?” I shake my head, bemused. “How does that work?”

“It can work however you want it to work,” Thorn tells me. He quickly shoots a glance at the other three then says, “But I speak for all of us when I say yes, this is exclusively between the five of us. We aren’t dating anyone else, and we don’t want you to date outside of us four. Are you okay with that?”

I nod slowly. I’m more than okay with that. Between these four, what more could a girl want? I’m relieved that I don’t have to share them with some other girl – or girls – but it does feel kind of selfish. In a deliciously naughty sort of way. I’m not complaining. But two things are bugging me: the princesses and Jax. He hasn’t spoken. Maybe he doesn’t consider us to be dating because we’ve not done...stuff. Or maybe he doesn’t want to date? Or share? Oh god, how will sharing work?

“Before I agree to anything, I want to know about that dating rule...from before.”

The guys exchange looks and collectively sigh when Jax nods at them to tell me.

“It wasn’t a rule exactly, more an arrangement of convenience. The princesses kept desperate girls from constantly throwing themselves at us, and we gave the princesses an elevated status, so it worked for everyone. Until it didn’t anymore. You already know that Jax and Tilly dated. Ace dated Belle. Thorn was with Lexxi. Michael was with Natalia. And I hooked up with Amber.”

“The redhead?” I ask, and he nods. I hate her that little bit more now.

“Why did it suddenly stop working?”

“Lizzie happened. It’s complicated.”

“Okay. So how will this work?” I ask, changing topic. I know better than to push my luck too much in one day.

“However you want it to. Spend as much or as little time with us as you want. Go on individual dates, go on group dates. Stay over. Whatever.” Thorn seems utterly relaxed about the whole thing.

“Individual sex...group sex...I’m up for anything,” Rebel jokes. Or at least I hope he’s joking. I refuse to acknowledge that, or the effect his words have on me.

“But what about jealousies?”

“No jealous. Brothers. Love them, love you. Share.” I adore Ace’s simplistic way of thinking. Why can’t I embrace that?

“Okay... Jax? Where do you stand on all of this?” I can’t read his face.

“Look, I’ll be honest with you,” he sighs deeply, “I don’t think this is going to work.”

Before I can ask why – which is just as well because the lump in my throat and the tears threatening to spill would prevent me anyway – the other three guys jump in to give him hell.

“Hang on, hang on,” he holds his hands up in defence, “I want it to work, but I just can’t face another Lizzie situation. Can you?” he asks the guys. And I watch in horror as their faces start to waver.

“It’s not like Lizzie though, is it?” Thorn asks. “We never got that far. We never talked. We never knew this could be an option.”

“I’m not Lizzie,” I say quietly. “I don’t know what she would’ve done in this situation, but I can speak for myself, and

even if this doesn't work out in the long run, I'd like to try. But only if all four of you are on board. I don't want to create a rift between you." I can't believe I'm saying – and meaning – that.

Rebel and Thorn look relieved, and Ace seems made up. But Jax still looks uncertain. It's like an arrow piercing through my chest.

"Let's wait..." I nod to show I understand what he's referring to, "I'll take you on a date, and we can see where things go. Then after we...you can decide if you still want to include me in that equation."

"Okay," I tell him. I'm a little apprehensive, but I'm not about to show any doubt or fear. "It's a date." I yawn and check my watch, realising it's late.

"It's getting late, I should probably go." I really don't want to. Every time I come here, it's harder and harder to leave; I know it's not good, but I've decided to just embrace it and see where things go.

"You can stay if you like," Rebel offers.

"In my room?" I ask.

"Anywhere you like," Jax confirms.

"Anywhere? Even with you Jax?" I'm teasing, but actually, I realise that's exactly what I want. Even if we can't do anything, I suddenly desperately want to get closer to this enigmatic boy.

"Yes. If that's what you want." He looks at me like he doesn't believe I could possibly want to stay with him, like I'm messing with him.

"Please."

He blinks in surprise before nodding his assent. I smile shyly and get to my feet. May as well go to bed now. I steal a quick glance at the other three guys, but there's really no jealousy there. They look happy. Okay, I'm just going to go with the flow.

I walk over to Ace and give him a big hug, then I kiss Thorn goodnight, and Rebel pulls me into his lap – good god is he always hard? It must be painful – before whispering in my ear that he was serious about the group sex. I smack him on the arm and bite his lip by way of goodnight. He chuckles and releases me, slapping my ass as I go.

I hurry over to Jax, who was watching the whole exchange. His face is closed off and guarded, but he gives me a smile when I reach him and holds out his hand for me to take, which I do. I follow him up the stairs and into his bedroom, which is next to mine. I've been in here before, but I still glance around to see if anything's changed. It doesn't appear to have, though there are fresh sheets on the bed. Their smell fills the air.

Jax closes the door then turns to me. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay, do you want to use the bathroom first, and I'll look you out something to sleep in?"

"Sweats will be fine." I smile.

"No, you can have a shirt, I don't have many pairs of sweats left for some reason," he teases, and his smile brightens his whole face. Joking Jax – that's new! I like it a lot. It's nice to see him relax a little. I hurry into the bathroom and get sorted, and when I come out, Jax hands me a T-shirt. He heads into the bathroom, so I quickly change, folding my clothes and placing them on the chair in the corner. Then I stand awkwardly in the room; it feels too strange to just dive into his bed without invitation, so I study the beautiful black-and-white photos on his walls instead. I'm not sure, but I think they've changed since the last time I was in here.

"They're new," he tells me, coming out of the bathroom and making me jump. I turn to look at him, and when I see that he's wearing just boxers my mouth waters. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. I don't know if I have the self-control to stay away from him for the next week.

“I took those last week when we weren’t around much. I used your camera.”

“It’s your camera,” I correct, “But they’re amazing. Is that the woods on campus?” I ask, pointing to one.

“It is.”

“Wow. I love it.”

“Come on, it’s too cold to stand around,” he says, pulling back the covers and sliding into bed. He pats the space next to him, and I join him. The sheets are cool on my bare legs, and I snuggle into Jax to steal his body heat. He doesn’t complain, popping an arm around my waist and pulling me in closer so that I’m tucked up against him. The press of his hard cock against his boxers is nestled against my bare ass where the shirt has ridden up. I squirm.

“Er, Jax...”

“Shh, don’t worry about it,” he tells me. “How could you doubt how much I like you?” He kisses the back of my neck, briefly, as if he’s well aware that any other contact will set me off, and I relax into his warm embrace.

I may have slept with the other three guys, but this here, sleeping in Jax’s arms, is the most intimate I’ve ever been with anyone. And it thrills me as much as it terrifies me.

Lizzie's Journal

March 25th

Oh my goodness, Charlie, you wouldn't believe what happened to me last night! I was studying in my usual room in the library after school, trying my best to avoid everyone in my dorm because Tilly's gunning for me over some imagined slight, when Belle walked in.

Belle isn't like the other princesses. She's always been on the periphery, never one of the main instigators of the bullying, just always watching quietly in the background. She doesn't look like the others either – with her short wavy bob that's dip-dyed a rosy pink-gold colour and a small ring in her nose, she looks more punk than princess.

When she came in, I was really wary. We've never really spoken before, but she's always present when the other girls are giving me stick, so I was instantly on my guard around her.

She sat down to study, much like Rebel did, without saying a word. I thought it odd that she wasn't off at whatever party the rest of the princesses were deigning to visit, but here she was on a Friday night, studying.

After a while, we got talking about the classes we have together, the teachers, other mindless things. And I realise I like Belle. She's smart and funny and really cool. If it wasn't for the bullying, I really think we could've been friends.

Imagine my shock when she leaned over and kissed me! Right on the mouth. I was so surprised I didn't even pull away! She did though, grabbing her stuff, apologising and bolting from the room. I don't know what she was apologising for. I kinda hope it was the bullying and not the kiss.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Two weeks. Two freaking weeks it takes for Jax to get tested and for the results to come back. I stay over in his bed every weekend, and he takes me out on several lovely dates. We hold hands a lot. Occasionally he kisses me. And every night we spend together his erection presses up against me. The guys have been amazing, understanding that I needed time to get to know Jax. But no contact with any of them for close to three weeks is killing me. To say I'm ready to explode is an understatement.

Tonight is the school Valentine's dance. Valentine's day isn't until next week, but it falls during half term break and lots of students are leaving campus, so they're throwing it tonight instead. I'm excited, not for the dance, but because tonight I move back into the guys' place for the week. I'm really hoping I can put an end to this dry spell. With four boyfriends you'd think I'd be getting plenty of action, but no. I sigh.

Tonight I'm planning to take out two of the princesses, but I have to move fast this afternoon to get everything in place. I wait until classes finish – thankfully early on a Friday – before sneaking down to the kitchens. It's heaving in there, but they're so busy preparing the food for tonight's buffet that no one notices me. I steal the large packet of peanuts that I need, plus a pestle and mortar, before heading back to my room to

start grinding. And mashing. And pulverising. It takes forever, but eventually, I have a giant stash of peanut powder.

I sneak into Amber's room and swap out a small portion of her loose mineral foundation for the light brown powder I mixed up. I stash the rest in my clutch for the dance later and head down to the hall where the dance will be held. Once inside, I sneak into the DJ booth and insert my memory stick into the laptop. Some of the tech geeks in my English class were talking last week about the slideshow of images that would be played at the dance – mostly photos of couples and love notes as a Valentine's special. I add my selection: snippets from diaries, photos, love letters, and best of all, video footage taken from the princesses' laptops. Done, I headed back to my room to get ready for the dance.

When it's almost time, I head down to the school hall where the dance is being held. I'm early so that I can sprinkle the rest of the crushed up nuts across the buffet food. I heard that Amber has an allergy to nuts, so I'm hoping my stunt tonight will be enough to send her to the nurse for a day or two. I think the powder in her foundation was a genius touch, just enough to trigger a slow reaction and hopefully make her face swell up enough so that she resembles Sloth from *The Goonies*. The school has hired professional photographers to capture every moment on camera tonight, so my fingers are crossed that this moment will be immortalised forever. The nuts in the food are an extra failsafe, just in case I was too light-handed with the foundation. Once I'm done, and all of the powder is gone, I slip back out of the hall to go and meet the guys.

The dance is actually very well put together. Rather than decorate the hall in garish reds and pinks and an abundance of tacky love hearts and cupids, the decorating committee opted for black and red, giving the whole place a sensual feel. The DJ's playing pretty decent tunes; songs with driving beats you can grind to, rather than mushy love songs. I approve.

When we arrived, the five of us posed together for a photo. I make a note to ensure I get a copy of it, something to preserve the moment. Since then, I've danced non-stop, and I

always seem to have one of the princes within touching distance. I'm having a wonderful time, but I'm continuously keeping an eye on the princesses. I'm closely watching Amber in particular, trying to gauge if her face looks just a little bit puffy.

Since I found out that Rebel dated Amber, it's been like an obsession – wanting to take her down. None of the other revelations bothered me as much as this one. I think it's because Lexxi and Natalia are gone, and Ace and Belle actually make quite a sweet match. Or maybe it's because Belle isn't a threat. Amber's stunning, her silky straight hair hangs down past her waist like mine, and she has bright green eyes like me too, but her hair's a deep fiery red that matches her confident take-no-shit personality. She's like me, and I can see why Rebel would like her. I hate her. I had such smug satisfaction when she had to go to the nurse for a skin salve after the chilli incident, and when she had an 'emergency' hairdresser's appointment when the peroxide in her swim cap turned patches of her hair an ugly shade of orange. Before they fell out and left gaping bald spots. Expensive hair extensions soon sorted it, but not before half the school saw the damage, and she freaked out. I'm not going to lie, the satisfaction I got from that was so much more than simply revenge for Lizzie.

But this is the girl who bribed the rest of the swim team to turn their back on Lizzie in an attempt to oust her from the one thing she absolutely adored. When that wasn't enough to make her quit the team, Amber and the others held her under the water until she blacked out. After that, Lizzie didn't swim again. I could've taken revenge in the same way on Amber, but it didn't feel like enough. I wanted to really scare her. Terrify her even.

I watch her as she walks over to the buffet and starts to load her plate. The food's exquisite, as always. I had some earlier and couldn't taste the nuts at all. My eyes track her to a nearby table and stare as she begins to tuck in. It starts with a slight cough like a tickle in the back of her throat that she can't quite clear. I'm absolutely fascinated. I can't tear my eyes away from her. She reaches for her water and takes a sip before continuing to eat. When the coughing starts again, she

switches to something else on her plate, but it continues. She downs the rest of her drink and resumes eating.

Even from the next table over, in the low light, I can see her face starting to change. It's taking on a purple hue, and she's beginning to resemble a chipmunk. It's like watching a CGI morph in slow motion. But she mustn't feel it because she finishes everything on her plate. And then she really starts to cough. A hacking, ugly, wet sound that makes several people around her throw dirty looks her way. Her normally petite elfin face is now grotesquely misshapen, and her lips are starting to look like a seriously botched Botox job. It takes a moment more before she realises, but when she does, her hand moves to her lips and her eyes widen in horror.

With morbid fascination, I watch as realisation dawns in her eyes and panic sets in as she understands what's happening. She clambers to her feet, hands flying to her throat as she begins to gasp. She can't breathe. My gaze is impassive as I watch her stumble around, trying to make her way to the exit – where maybe she thinks fresh air will help her? She's halfway across the crowded dance floor, stumbling and shoving people out of her way to a chorus of angry, indignant shouts when she collapses.

Instantly the room springs into action, running to help her, yelling for an ambulance to be called. A couple of teachers come over and help lift Amber up, supporting her as they half drag, half carry her from the room. I watch Rebel the whole time, to gauge his reaction, but there is none. He looks as dispassionate as me; like he literally couldn't give a fuck if she lives or dies. I like that. I like that a lot.

Silence ensues, the music cut off in the commotion, and the DJ announces that it's time for the slideshow. It's an excellent way to draw attention back to the party and to stop the whispers. A low pulsing beat begins, and everyone turns to face the large drop-down screen behind the DJ booth, giving it their full attention, Amber's drama instantly forgotten. I watch the crowds' reaction to the sweet, cheesy and sometimes even naughty, notes that flit up on the screen. They laugh, giggle, blush and whisper behind their hands as they speculate over

which person sent which message. It's an excellent way to break the tension from before. The slideshow rolls on until suddenly whispers spread like wildfire across the room.

I look at my guys and see Thorn and Rebel all looking shocked. Jax looks bemused. They didn't know. Ace just looks sad, and I wonder if maybe he was keeping the secret for her. My eyes flit over to Tilly, who looks incensed, and Belle, who looks absolutely mortified. She's close to tears. I feel bad for her, I do. I didn't mean to out her in front of our whole year group, but I couldn't find any other dirt on her. She may not have bullied Lizzie, but if she really loved her like she professed in the letter that's showing on the screen, why the hell didn't she stop the bullying and step in to save her?

The students all spin round to stare at Belle, who colours and goes to rush from the room. Before she can get far though, Tilly grabs her by the arm and whirls Belle around to face her. In the background, the love letter she wrote to Lizzy fades out, and the recording of the two of them in Belle's room begins to play, the sound cutting over the music.

"What the fuck?" Tilly screeches at Belle, who looks completely shell-shocked. She doesn't reply. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me you're gay?" Yep, she said that loud enough that if anyone was in any doubt about who wrote the love letter on screen, they now knew without a shadow of a doubt.

"I—" I don't know what Belle's trying to say. She's as white as a sheet, swaying unsteadily on her feet.

"I let you sleep in my bed you dirty fucking...dyke!" A resounding slap fills the room, and Belle's head flies to one side under the force of Tilly's slap. She bursts into tears and runs from the room. This time I don't feel so good about the events that have happened, but at least I've exposed Tilly for the homophobic bigot that she is. Everyone's staring at her in disbelief, looks of disgust evident on their faces.

"Fuck off," she snarls at the room, flouncing off in the opposite direction to Belle. I feel like only Tilly could make someone else's sexuality about her somehow. God, what a bitch.

Jax sidles up next to me and slips his hand into mine.

“That’s enough drama observing for one night, don’t you think?” My heart stops, convinced that he knows I’m responsible for everything that’s happened tonight, but then he squeezes my fingers and gives me a smile. “Want to get out of here and create some drama with me?”

Absofuckinglutely! I’ve waited far too long, and now that my work here is done, I couldn’t be happier to leave. I beam at him and nod, glad to let him lead me from the hall, outside and back to his house. The other guys don’t come with us.

I follow Jax into the darkened house, up the stairs to his room. I’m well acquainted with it by now, but my stomach’s dancing with butterflies tonight. This is different. The air tastes electric, and my skin tingles with anticipation. It’s been a long time coming, teasing, and now the moment is finally here, I’m nervous. Excited, but nervous too.

He’d hinted that I might not want to be in a relationship with him once we were intimate. There was the way he’d interacted with Tilly, and then that Christmas kiss-bite-choke thing that made me explode, so I had an idea what he might be getting at. The idea didn’t leave me cold. Quite the opposite, in fact.

I watch as Jax closes and locks the door, turning and stalking towards me like a predator. I swallow nervously, and his dark eyes track the movement of my throat. I feel trapped, skittish, unsure if I should run. When he nears me, he reaches out and runs a single finger down the side of my face and over my lips, gently parting them. He slides his finger in and orders me to suck.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, watching me closely, and I melt. I don’t want to, but his pet name instantly thrills me, and I find myself wanting to please him. “You like that.” He doesn’t word it as a question, but I nod anyway.

He slides his hands down my sides and hooks them under the hem of my short dress, pulling it off over my head in one smooth motion. He steps back to stare at me.

“No panties. You are trying to kill me.”

I smirk as I stand before him completely nude.

“Exquisite.” I blush at his compliment. I want to see him naked. I want to touch him. I reach out, but he steps away. “No,” he tells me, and I blink at him, confused. “Let’s do this my way, Okay?”

Again I nod, but I’m not too sure what I agree to. Jax doesn’t seem to want to be touched by me, but it’s never been a problem for him before. I decide to just relax and go with it. Jax slowly removes his clothes, one item at a time while staring at me, until he’s as naked as me. I give a sharp intake of breath; he’s a work of art. Beautiful and flawless.

“Lie on the bed. On your back,” he tells me.

“Why?” I ask, my stubbornness kicking in. It’s not as bad as it would’ve been with Rebel – who I probably would’ve just told to fuck off – but it’s still there.

“Because you agreed to do this my way and that means trusting me, not questioning me and simply saying no or stop if there’s something you don’t like. Okay?”

“Okay.” Sounds fair enough. I lie on the bed in the position he asked, and Jax joins me, standing at the foot of the bed. He grabs my ankles and pulls, simultaneously sliding me down the bed closer to him, and spreading my legs a little.

“Don’t come,” he tells me.

Errr, okay? Like I have any choice? I refrain from saying that, though. There’s a fiercely dark intensity in Jax’s eyes that makes me think he wouldn’t appreciate my sass right now.

He slowly spreads my legs with his hands and takes several long seconds to admire the shape of my pussy lips while I squirm uncomfortably. I put my hands on the bed behind me and sit up a little to watch as he spreads my legs wider. Jax kisses each of my inner thighs softly, reaching higher each time. It tickles, but the way he has me pinned, I can’t move. He rubs his hands on my thighs, up and down, and it feels like velvet. Then he follows the trail that his hands have made, ever so lightly, with his lips. He holds me firmly in

his warm embrace and urges me to relax back against the bed, so I do.

Jax leans over to kiss my lower stomach, making my sensitive skin jump, then each of my thighs again. With his hands, he lifts my legs, keeping them spread, kissing the soft, thin skin at the highest point of my inner thighs, just next to my pussy. My eyes roll closed. His mouth brushes against my pussy as he kisses each side, then lands on my pussy lips. First a soft kiss, then another. He kisses my pussy up and down, still holding my legs with his hands, pressing his mouth more firmly against me, and I groan and sigh in pleasure.

His hands slowly caress me, and I gradually begin to melt. He can feel how hot and wet I am. His tongue slides out of his mouth and makes contact with my core, sliding it up and down between my outer lips. I let out a soft moan as he licks me inside, long slow strokes. I twitch, and his hands move to my hips to hold me still.

Jax's mouth hovers over my clit. I beg him to taste me there. He takes the small sensitive nub into his mouth and sucks it softly, with his tongue circling all around it, like a sensual, naughty massage. My mouth forms an "O" as I gasp in surprise. His mouth forms an "O" and presses around me as he flicks his tongue on my pussy. It's almost too much, and I whimper.

I'm trembling with the effort of staving off my orgasm as I watch Jax's head bob between my legs. I'm on fire, my skin glistens, and I'm desperate for release. But he said not to. And I want to please him, I do, but it's so hard.

My hands reach for his head as his tongue slides down my pussy again, all the way inside and down, feeling my wet heat all over his tongue, lips getting all wet. He slides his tongue up to the skin between my pussy and ass.

My body bucks.

My back arches.

I cry out.

He presses his tongue there for a few seconds, then moves it against my tight hole, teasing it with the tip of his tongue. My hands are holding his head now, rubbing it, encouraging him, and he slides his divine tongue back towards my pussy.

The moves of his mouth on my pussy are getting faster and stronger, and I hear my breathing becoming faster and louder...

It's so shallow. So hard to catch my breath. My skin glistens and trembles.

My hands on his head are getting firmer and firmer as he licks me faster with each stroke. I start to move my hips against his mouth, to accelerate the motion even more. It's driving me wild.

Jax's strong hands are holding my thighs spread really wide, and he's licking me up and down oh so very fast. His chin, mouth and nose are soaked from my pussy.

"Good girl," he murmurs to me.

"Please," I beg.

I have no idea what I'm begging for.

My moans make him even more excited, more eager, and as his tongue reaches my clit once more, I let out a long moan while pulling his head tightly against me. Jax slides two fingers into my pussy and goes back to the relentless licking.

He pumps, curls and twists, finding a rhythm that feels like heaven and I'm crying out.

"Good girl," he says, breaking from the licking. "Look how wet you are. I can hear it. I can smell your arousal. Rebel was right; you do smell fucking divine. Be a good girl and come. For me."

With an animalistic howl, I come undone at his words, his hands, his tongue. His mention of Rebel. My orgasm goes on as he continues to attack me with fervour, refusing to let me come down from the high.

Finally, I'm an exhausted whimpering mess, and Jax soothes me down from the high. He looks up at me and sees

my eyes, so hungry for him. He knows exactly what I want, but I know he's read my mind when he pulls me so I'm sitting up and, grabbing my hips, flips me over so I'm on all fours.

Snatching my hair up in a fist, he painfully wrenches me up without hesitation and plunges into me. It hurts, but in a deliciously moreish way. All of a sudden, I'm alert and begging for more.

His hands roam down to my hips, and over my heart-shaped ass, smacking my right cheek with a loud crack, leaving an angry, red handprint I would imagine, judging by the force he hit me with. I yelp and push back, begging for more.

"I know you did what you were told. You're a good girl. But I'm going to punish you anyway. Just because I think you'll like it."

Revelling in my tortured squeal, he spanks me again. And again, and again, alternating from one cheek to the other until I can feel that both are burning bright. It hurts, bringing tears to my eyes until it morphs into something else. A darker, warmer feeling deep in my belly that makes me groan low and long.

My ass stings from the spanking, and I can feel his cock is rock hard from the control he's exerting over me. He slides his full length into me once more, thrusting in and out a few times to coat his shaft with my wetness.

He silently glides round to the other side of the bed and guides my mouth onto his throbbing cock. I open wide and allow him to slide his entire length down my throat. My eyes water, but I barely even gag when he pushes past my defences. It feels fucking fantastic, but he pulls out quickly.

Jax scoops me up into his arms and lifts me with ease. I snuggle in against his naked chest happily. Once deposited on the floor on my knees, he pushes me down so that my torso is spread on the mattress. He presses down extra hard on my back to make sure my sensitive breasts grind into the bed. He positions himself back behind me and presses his chest to my back where he kisses my neck tenderly. Sweeping my hair to one side, his hand trails along the length of my back. He

positions himself at my entrance, and I'm sure that even in the dim moonlight shining in through the open curtains, he can see that I'm glistening wet for him.

Before entering, he leans over and growls in my ear, "This is for me. I am going to take you hard and fast for my pleasure, not yours. Do not come. Do not move. Do not make a sound. Understand?"

"Yes." God. My mouth goes dry and my pussy gushes at his words and hard treatment. Smack! My ass instantly reddens under the sharp stinging slap he delivers.

"Call me, Sir," he corrects, making me blush. I bite my lip, unsure. I mean, I get that Jax is a pretty dominant lover, but I feel kind of silly calling him that.

With one hard slam, he forces his way into my silky depths, and he gives a groan of appreciation at my tightness. He doesn't start slow and work up to it; he instantly gives me his all, pounding into me and forcing me to take it. Which I do, with relish.

He continues to pound away at me, and it's hard not to come when I feel myself tightening all over again. He slams into me even harder as my muscles clench around him, trying to milk every last drop. "Naughty girl," he groans, but I can tell he doesn't mean it. Reaching fever pitch, he empties himself into me, holding my hips tight so that every last drop is pushed in deep. He rests for a moment, panting hard, before pulling out, making me wince at the loss of him.

Climbing onto the bed, he lies with his head on the pillow, cock level with my mouth. I open wide and take him in whole, sucking so hard my cheeks are practically touching inside. I run the tip of my tongue under his foreskin and greedily chase away the remains of his cum. When I do that, his eyes roll back in his head, and his cock twitches again. If he isn't careful, he's going to get hard again.

Too late. My greedy slurps have taken him over the edge, and even though his cock's grown once again to its impossibly hard state, I never let go, instead swallowing the entire thing

whole, sliding up and down his shaft. I think I'm enjoying myself as much as he is when he abruptly pulls away.

"It's no use, baby girl, I'm going to have to have you again," he tells me.

He climbs out of bed and once again takes his place behind me. Our combined wetness glistens all over my thighs, and when I look down, I see ribbons of his cum stretching down from my sopping pussy. I watch as Jax scoops some up and uses it to lube my ass. My eyes widen in shock.

Gently, much more gently than he was with my pussy, he slides a finger into my ass. I instantly relax, loving the feeling. There is no resistance, no fight, just total acceptance.

Slowly he slides it in and out a few times murmuring about how tight I am. I push back on his fingers, wanting more, but remembering Rebel's promise that he would be the one to have my ass. I almost say this to Jax when he stops and withdraws his finger, explaining why he's stopping for that very same reason.

I'm almost disappointed. But I quickly get over it when he inserts three fingers into my pussy, stretching it wide. I'm panting, giving away how desperately needy I am for him. He removes his fingers and slowly slides his cock into me, this time stopping every few moments to allow me to adjust. His fingers find my clit and begin to massage, my head falling back in bliss.

Before I know it, he's buried in my pussy up to his balls. I'm delirious with pleasure and desperately trying to keep still, panting heavily, too fast, in a desperate attempt to stave off my orgasm. This time Jax moves slowly, painstakingly so, until I'm begging him to fuck me harder, faster. But he resists, doing everything his own way, my pleading cries be damned. He whispers in my ear that I can come, on one condition: I have to call him Sir.

I'm so beside myself I don't even care anymore, my hips are bucking against him as he continues to slowly torture my clit and my pussy. I'm desperate for release, so, so close.

“Come! Let me hear you scream!”

“SIR!!” I come apart under him, and I’m sure the force of my orgasm nearly breaks him in half. Instantly he’s coming again, filling up my tight pussy and reeling in the aftershocks of my spasming muscles.

And then I fall limp on the bed, wrecked. He gently pulls out and lifts me off my knees and back into bed. He rubs my knees and strokes the hair from my damp forehead, and I’m touched by his caring tenderness.

He casually lets his hands wander down my silky soft body, caressing my smarting ass from his spanks, soothing the tender skin and tucking me into bed. Scooping me into his arms, he whispers, “Sleep now, baby girl...I may need you again in the morning.”

I can’t help but obey.

Lizzie's Journal

March 26th

I'm writing this from the school's infirmary, Charlie, and it's pretty bad this time. I have a broken arm, a swollen lip, two black eyes. As well as chunks of hair – scalp it feels like – missing. Several cracked ribs, and so many cuts and bruises. It hurts to swallow and talk and even breathe where I was choked so hard.

I'm still not entirely sure how it happened, but I'll try to tell you the story as best I can. And I'll tell you the 'official' story.

I was in bed, asleep, when the door burst open. Five figures rushed in. They were all wearing black with hoods up, but come on, who else was it going to be? They placed a pillowcase over my head and dragged me from the room, carrying me. I know they took me outside and into the woods somewhere because it was a lot colder outside and when they finally dumped me on the ground, it was rough.

They didn't even remove the pillowcase before they started beating me. I swear to God Charlotte, I've never felt pain like it. The first kick to my stomach winded me, and I've never been so terrified in all my life. I know that, logically, my lungs would work eventually, but at the moment blind panic set in, and it felt like I was dry-drowning. It petrified me. I think they did it on purpose to distract me from fighting back.

And it worked. I was so feeble. I lay there and took it, crying and pleading with them to stop. I had no resistance. No fight left in me. I remember at one point, I begged Belle to help me, but that just earned me harder hits. I tasted blood, chipped a tooth and bit my tongue so hard I thought I'd lose a chunk. Even if I didn't have a cover over my head, I wouldn't have been able to see anything for the amount of blood in my eyes. Their pièce de résistance was to remove the hood and drag me back to the school by my hair.

They dumped me on the front steps and vanished, and I passed out, waking this morning in the infirmary. The matron

was livid, saying my injuries were so severe I should be in hospital, but apparently, my 'friends' had convinced the headteacher that I had a phobia of hospitals and that it would set my recovery back if they sent me. They also told her that they called for me this morning – like they always do – to find my bed empty. So they went looking for me – get this – because I'm a known sleepwalker and they were worried I may somehow have gotten hurt in the night.

I can't believe anyone would buy that story, but they have. My so-called 'friends' are the heroes for finding me earlier enough this morning before the hypothermia set in.

I don't want to, but I think I'm going to break up with the princes. No amount of happiness is worth the price I'm paying. No amount of joy is worth this level of physical pain. I may not know the reason why they started bullying me – if they even had one – but last night's beating was definitely because I'm dating the princes. They told me as much between hits and kicks and spitting on me. I think the spitting was the worst, in a way. I'm bruised, battered, bloody and broken. I give in. They win. I can't do this anymore.



CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE

On Valentine's morning, I'm woken by a gentle knock on my door. Last night was the first night I'd slept in my own bed all week. While I'd spent plenty of time with each of the guys during the day, somehow I ended up in Jax's bed every night. There was very little sleeping involved. It was safe to say my dry spell had been well and truly broken, with all of the princes. The sex with each of them was different; equally amazing, but all so different. Ace is so sensual, Thorn's playful, and Rebel's intense. Sex with him is always a violent clash of wills. And then there's sex with Jax. It's intoxicating. He's like a drug I can't get enough of. I love what he does, the way he pushes my limits. But last night I'd been yawning and falling to sleep during his kisses – oops – so he sent me to bed on my own to rest.

Sitting up, I make sure I'm decent before calling for whoever it is to enter. The door opens, and Thorn walks in with two hot chocolates. I smile at him and pat the bed beside me. For hot chocolate, I'll let anyone in my bed. I give him a massive smile and a kiss on the cheek before snuggling up to him to enjoy his warmth and my drink.

“Do you have plans for today, Princess?”

“Hmmm? No, I don't.”

“Good. We have plans.”

“We, as in...?”

“The five of us.”

My face lights up at his words. It feels like ages since the five of us spent time together.

“How soon do we leave?” I ask, excited. Thorn laughs at me.

“I reckon we’ve got time to shower first,” he tells me.

“Together?” I raise my eyebrows at him.

“If you insist.”

I laugh, pushing him off the bed. “What do I need to wear?”

“Definitely a dress. In fact, I don’t think we’ll be coming back tonight so maybe enough dresses for...two days?” He says it like a question, but he’s talking to himself. “Yeah. Clothes for two days. A bikini, like a really tiny slutty one, and don’t bother with underwear.”

“Boys are so useless.” I sigh. “Get out. I need to shower and pack, and your unhelpful vague instructions just lost you showering-with-me privileges.”

He sulks and protests, but I stay firm and kick him out of my room – making him take the empties with him for washing up – then quickly get to packing. I have no idea what the guys have planned, but I do know that I need to pack a little more than what Thorn suggested. I even pack underwear, but I do pick out some cute matching sets. I live for matching underwear. One of my biggest fears is that I might die in mismatching underwear – or worse, be buried in an odd bra and panties set. Once I’ve thrown everything but the last-minute essentials into a bag, I jump in the shower quickly and then get ready.

I’m just finishing up when there’s another knock on my door and this time Rebel enters. When he sees me, he scowls.

“What?” I ask. My tone’s challenging, but I’m a little self-conscious.

“You’re dressed,” he huffs like it’s the biggest insult known to man.

“Yeah, Thorn woke me pretty early.”

His expression heats and darkens. “He didn’t do a very good job if you didn’t fall back to sleep after.”

At first, I don’t understand his logic, but then I realise what he means. “Not like that!” I tut. Jeez, these guys and their one-track minds.

“Good,” he says with a wink. “I’d offer to take care of it, but you’re already dressed, and it might be better if you wait till later anyway.”

“Will you tell me what’s going on?” I plead. I’m definitely intrigued now; Rebel’s never passed up the opportunity to have sex with me.

“Nope!” He grins and gives me a quick peck on the cheek. “See you later, Princess.”

The surprise turns out to be a children’s soft play centre, which I find odd at best. Even stranger is that it’s closed.

“Er guys, are you sure this is the right place?”

Thorn smiles wickedly at me before pulling out a bulky set of keys on a ring. He shifts through a few before selecting one and unlocking the shutters and door. We step into the deserted play place, which is eerie, abandoned, and devoid of life, and Thorn quickly keys in a code for the alarm.

“Should we be here? I mean, is this okay?” I ask.

“Relax Princess, we’re hardly breaking and entering, are we? We have a key.”

“Besides, Thorn knows a guy.” That doesn’t fill me with confidence. How does he know the owner of a play place? Why does he?

I have to admit, now that I'm here and can see we have the whole place to ourselves, I'm quite excited. Is it immature? Probably. Do I care? Hell no! I slip off my boots and charge into the play zone after Rebel and Ace. Thorn's already leading the way, stuck well into the giant ball pool. Jax brings up the rear, veering off to the office to turn on the sound system. A moment later, the whole area comes alive with the sound of summer tunes blaring across the speakers. It may only be February, but it feels like I could be on holiday.

I dive into the ball pool, and immediately Rebel begins to pelt me with a variety of different coloured plastic balls. Squealing and laughing, I chuck them back at him while trying to half crawl, half swim to safety. I race up the stairs to the next level where I find giant buoys on zip lines. I jump onto one and swing to the other side, laughing the whole way while Thorn chases me and jumps onto the one beside me. When we reach the end of the rail, he grins at me.

"Race you back! 3...2..." He's already gone way before one.

"CHEAT!!" I scream, jumping on mine to chase after him. "Ace! Thorn's cheating! Come get him for me."

Sure, I could've kicked his ass myself, but it was so much more fun having a boyfriend to order around to do my dirty work for me. Ace's head pops up, and he smiles at me.

"Princess, you okay?"

I pout and point at Thorn. "He's bullying me," I lie. "Get him."

"Pleasure." He grins wickedly at me and clambers up, heading for Thorn. Ace approaches him slowly, then lunges at the last second, grabs the buoy from between his legs and tips Thorn onto the floor.

"Better? Enough?" he asks me triumphantly.

"No." I shake my head. "Make him pay."

"Happy to." He straddles Thorn and starts to beat him over the head with the buoy while Thorn laughs and begs for mercy. The sight of the two guys roughhousing is hot. So

much so, that I decide I want in on the action. I race over and jump on Thorn too and start to elbow him in the ribs. He squeals – a high pitched girly sound like the day we met – and I do it harder.

“Now!” Thorn suddenly yells, and I instantly find myself on my back, Thorn straddling my hips and Ace using his hands to pin my shoulders down.

“Boys, what...?” Before I can finish though all the breath is stolen from my body as they simultaneously start to tickle me.

I try to fight by bucking my hips and writhing, but they have me pinned too tight. I’m gasping, struggling to breathe and laughing so hard tears are rolling down my face.

“Stop! Stop!” I yell. “I can’t breathe!” I gasp.

“If you’re talking, you’re breathing, Princess,” Thorn tells me, and Ace tickles me even harder.

“Ace! Ace! Please!” I decide to appeal to my softest boyfriend for mercy, but he leans down and grins at me. “Aljaž, please.” I can’t believe that he tricked me like this! I thought for sure that he was on my side, but he’s ganging up on me with Thorn. I’m beyond shocked.

“Me help you breathe.” He leans down and kisses me passionately, stealing the little breath I had left, and suddenly I’m burning. I have two hot guys pinning me down, and all I can think is how much fun this would be with less clothing. Thorn obviously reads my mind because as Ace kisses me, he slips his hands down my thighs and under my dress, stroking the soft skin as he slides higher, playing with the edge of my panties.

“What the fuck?” Rebel’s angry growl breaks up the party, and the guys pull away, leaving me spread-eagled, dress hiked up and panting hard. It looks worse than it is, but I still scramble to right myself.

“Pretty sure you’re going to get us fucking arrested, fucking around doing shit like that in here,” he grumbles.

“Pretty sure you were watching for a good five minutes,” Thorn retorts.

“You can get arrested for that too, you know,” I mock-scold Rebel with a wag of my finger.

“Little bird, I’m American,” he tells me. “We can get arrested just for crossing the road.”

“True that.” I laugh. “So why don’t you join us and get arrested for something far more fun?” I didn’t mean to say that, but it slipped out. My voice doesn’t even sound like my own; it’s low and sultry.

Shit, I can’t believe I just propositioned Rebel! He laughs and shakes his head at me, grabbing me by the hand and pulling me to my feet.

“Later, Princess, I have plans for us. Come, there’s a death slide with our name on it.”

“Gee, that sounds like so much more fun than what I had in mind,” I grumble.

“Patience, little bird, I’ll make it worth your while I promise.” He chuckles.

We all continue to have lots of fun racing around, playing games and play fighting in the soft play. I even manage to drag Jax in to play, though he whispers in my ear that I’ll pay for it later. A delicious shiver runs through me at those words. Eventually though, we tire, and I complain that I’m hungry.

We head out to the Jeep while Thorn locks up and posts the keys through the letterbox, and the guys ask me if I’m ready for the next part of my Valentine’s surprise. I’m happy to go along with whatever they have planned, so I nod happily as Jax starts up the engine and sets off driving to the next mystery location, which turns out to be a restaurant overlooking the sea.

Once again it appears to be empty, but it's early afternoon, so it's probably a bit soon for dinner. We all enjoy a massive sharing platter of lobsters, steaks, salad and chips before we're on our way again and the guys tell me that the hotel we pull up in front of is our last stop for the night.

The hotel's gorgeous. Utterly different from the ornate, opulent one we visited at New Year's, this is a trendy artisan boutique. It's beautiful – all steel and glass and abstract art prints on the walls. I really like it. I love it even more when we check in, and I discover that we're all sharing a suite, with enough beds for all of us (although each bed would comfortably sleep the five of us!)

After quickly dumping our bags in the rooms and changing, I head down to the health suite and spa with all of the guys. We arrive at the health suite and have a good look around. All of the facilities look lovely – really new and high tech – and I like that it's quiet and private. We discover we have the whole place to ourselves – though the guys assure me it's a coincidence, and that they didn't pay anyone off. The spa's gorgeous, dark with low mood lighting that slowly changes colours with soft music playing in the background.

The guys and I part ways at the changing room doors and agree to meet poolside. I'm mortified when I reach into my bag expecting to pull out my one piece halter neck black suit to find that one of them – probably Rebel – has snuck in and replaced it with a brand new two-piece. A white two-piece! I frantically search through my bag looking for the alternative, but he has, of course, removed it.

With growing trepidation, I pulled on the bikini and look in the mirror. The halter neck pushes my breasts up to my chin, and the cutaway detail on the bottoms draw attention to my hips. I have to admit, it looks good. But won't it go completely see-through when wet?

I don't hang around worrying any longer. Knowing the guys will be getting impatient, I chuck my stuff in a locker, grab my towel and wrap it around me as I head out to the pool.

Jax greets me by the door and immediately confiscates my towel. I wordlessly let him, though if it'd been any of the others, I would've given them hell. Once I'm exposed to him though, his dark impenetrable gaze becomes hot as he slowly appraises my body. He gives a slow lick of his lips and nods at the pool, so we head in.

I sink down into the water, and it's like stepping into a warm bath. It's amazing. I groan and encourage the guys to join me, which they do. The water feels like silk caressing my smooth skin. It's incredibly sensual, and my nipples instantly harden into tight buds. Jax notices, smirking, and I try to hide from him, but he just grabs me and pinches them hard. It sends a thrill right through me, and I feel it between my legs with a delicious twinge.

After a while, I notice how quiet and peaceful it is in the pool. Darkness is falling, and I can no longer admire the view out of the floor to ceiling windows which overlook the Moors. I decide to go for a soak in the hot tub, and Jax joins me.

I barely relax back into the hot water and close my eyes when I hear voices approaching. Looking up, I see the rest of the guys all approaching the hot tub, so I scoot over to make room for them, practically falling into Jax's lap as I do.

He rights me, kisses my forehead and stands up, declaring he's going to use the sauna on the other side of the room.

"Shall I come with you?" I offer.

"No, you stay here and...relax," he replies. "All yours," he adds to the other three at the side of the jacuzzi.

I lie there for several minutes, eyes closed, entirely oblivious to my surroundings. When one of them speaks to compliment me on my bikini, I jump, and self consciously look down. The white suit is see-through, and my nipples are clearly visible. Blushing, I try to cover up, but Rebel slides closer to me and catches my wrist before I can.

A spark of electricity shoots through me at his touch, and although I lower my arm from my breasts back below the water, he doesn't let go, holding me in a firm commanding

grasp. My breath catches in my throat with a little gasp, and my eyes widen.

“Relax,” he whispers in my ear, and his warm breath tickles my neck. I shudder again, but it isn’t nerves. I let my eyes flutter closed, and my head falls back once again. I can feel Rebel’s and Thorn’s bodies pressing against me on either side now while Ace is opposite us. With their heat and the steam coming off the water, it’s a heady feeling. Their bodies are so hard. And close. Rebel still holds my wrist and has placed it casually in his lap.

Suddenly, in some sort of unspoken arrangement, they simultaneously grasp my legs and hook them over their own so that I’m spread wide between them. They gently caress the inside of my thighs, and a low moan escapes from my lips. I feel a hand at my neck gently guide me forward and barely notice my bikini top being undone and removed, until two mouths are sucking on my engorged nipples. My side-tie bikini bottoms soon follow, and before I know it, I’m naked, in a very public hot tub, being pleased by three of my boyfriends. And I love it!

I feel myself being slid forward again and lifted slightly. But with the delightful sucking on my breasts, I can’t bring myself to care what’s happening to me. Firm hands guide me to their two thick throbbing cocks, and I understand what they want from me. Deftly, I circle their shafts, my fingers barely reaching around their impressive girths – especially Rebel’s – and I begin to pump.

Ace’s fingers spread my pussy lips and slide seamlessly into my wet and waiting entrance, causing me to moan low and long. I can feel the orgasm building inside me, and the dual sensations of hands and mouths are sending me close to the edge.

It’s the finger probing at my ass that finally sends me over.

With a loud cry, I come undone. Hands lift me from the tub and lie me gently on the poolside tiles. A mouth clamps itself around my clit and sucks relentlessly, causing me to cry and thrash from side to side. I beg for mercy, but two other pairs of

hands hold me firmly in place. They won't be satisfied until they drag a second ragged orgasm from my broken body. As I slowly come down from the high, panting on my back, I notice the chill of their absence all of a sudden.

Opening my eyes, I stare up into the unreadable black eyes of Jax. Pulling me to my feet, he snatches up my bikini and holds it out to my outstretched hands. I hastily put it on before scrambling to follow him. He asks me if I want to join him in the steam room. I much prefer the dry heat of the sauna – though I'm not good at staying in either for too long – but I agree because I love spending time with him. Especially as when we're all together, he rarely seeks me out for one on one time, usually preferring to sit back and watch from the sidelines.

I allow Jax to tug me by the hand into the steam room. The heat hits me, and a cloud of steam caresses my bikini-clad body as I step in. I look around and see that we have the room to ourselves. For now. The other guys are enjoying the sauna at the moment, but other than that, we're alone in the dimly lit spa with sultry mood lighting and sensual incense burning.

Dirty thoughts run through my mind; my skin tingles at the possibilities. Jax is sat on the tiled bench opposite me, head back. He's in his element – a slave to the heat. Already a light sheen's breaking out on my body, and I have to wonder how long I can survive in here.

Through lowered lashes, I feel Jax watching me. The heat in his gaze scorches me, and I feel the temperature in the room rise by a few degrees.

“Pull your top down.” Jax uses that voice that clearly indicates there's to be no argument. It makes me throb. With shaking nervous hands I lift them to my barely there bikini and gently tug it down so that my breasts spring free. Despite the heat, my nipples are hard and begging for his attention. Jax's face gives nothing away, as ever. But his body betrays him – the benefit of swimming shorts.

“Lie down.”

I immediately comply, twisting my body around so I can put my feet up on the bench seat and lie back with my small white towel as a makeshift pillow. Is it just me, or is it getting hotter in here?

“Play with yourself.”

My hands fly straight to my breasts, trying to relieve their heavy ache. I squeeze and massage them with firm hands before turning my attention to the bullets that are my nipples. Pinching them firmly between my thumb and forefinger, I begin to twist them back and forth while tugging them tight. My breathing’s becoming shallower and more laboured. When I manage to catch my breath and prise my eyes open I see Jax smirking at me.

“Fuck yourself.”

A soft whimper escapes my lips. I really really want to – I do – but what about people? The other guys? What if there are cameras? I chew the corner of my lip and worry it. Despite my apprehension, my hands are already moving south of their own accord, and a naughty thrill is running through my body.

I plunge my right hand into my tiny bikini bottoms while my left continues to play with my nipples. I’m soon writhing, hips bucking and breath gasping as I furiously rub my clit at Jax’s insistence.

“Don’t stop,” he says, and then with a rush of cold air that sets me alight all over again, he’s gone.

A moment passes, and then with another rush of cold air, the door opens, and I let out a lusty moan – so glad he’s back – but a startled gasp lets me know that it’s not Jax. My eyes snap open, and my hand falters for a moment. My eyes lock onto Rebel’s, and behind him, I see Jax smirking.

I quickly pick up the pace – because Jax said not to stop and I won’t. Even as my cheeks flame. Am I embarrassed? Mortified? Turned on?

Rebel slinks past me, giving me a sultry wink, the bulge in his trunks evident – as he disappears into the inner chamber – a second steam room that’s too hot for me to handle.

Jax chuckles, and I groan, so turned on.

“You loved that, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Sir.” I know nothing but honesty will do, as my confession is dragged from my reluctant lips.

Jax slides over to me and kneels on the floor beside me, careful not to touch me even though I’m silently begging him to. He reaches over and gently pulls my bikini top back up. For a moment, I’m confused until I feel it. Puzzled, I glance down and notice the jagged bumps in my top. I realise: he’s filled it with crushed ice from the fountain outside.

Before I can catch my breath, he pulls my bottoms to one side, and he fills those too. It’s breathtaking: Such a sweet bite. So cold it burns. He slowly begins to push some small shards into me, and as they melt with the heat of my pussy, it trickles out to lube my ass.

My hands are moving frantically now; my climax nearing. I can feel it swelling and building up inside me, ready to crash down in a tidal wave. The soles of my feet tingle and my legs are so taut they begin to tremble.

I can’t hold back, I’m crying out, begging for release. So close. I’m dangerously close to coming without Jax’s permission, despite trying to hold back. All thoughts of being quiet, discreet, to avoid being caught, are long gone from my mind. I’m writhing on the bench, drenched in sweat and ice-cold water, thrashing my head from side to side as I desperately fight it.

“You’re such a good girl. Come.”

His one-word command is my undoing, and I explode with a scream. I don’t know how long my climax is drawn out, but when I come to, Jax is stroking his large, hard cock slowly. He looks so satisfied with himself that it makes me flush with pride.

A movement out of the corner of my eye makes me realise that Jax isn’t the only one stroking his cock and enjoying the show. The door to the inner chamber’s open wide and Rebel’s standing in the doorway, slowly masturbating with his eyes

glued to my body. It's such a turn on that I'm almost tempted to call out for him to join us, but the main door opens once again and the other guys file in.

Quickly, I sit up and adjust myself so that I'm decent, and they all take seats next to and around me, chatting about what we might do tomorrow. The moment's lost, but it takes a long time for my breathing to return to normal as I sit and listen to Jax and Rebel acting like nothing just happened.

That evening we all slob out in the suite in our PJs and order room service burgers. It makes me laugh that we were tucking into fine dining a few hours ago and as lovely as it was, I'm equally happy now, having a dirty burger in my sweats. We watch a horrific selection of rom-com films – which Thorn loves – and the guys scoff and take the piss the whole way through.

“Guys, this has been the best day ever. Seriously, thank you,” I tell them as the final credits roll. We're all filmed out, so we're debating what to do next.

“You're welcome, Princess, we thought it would be more memorable than buying you some cheesy Valentine's plastic shit.”

“Boo,” I pout and tease. “I want it all: chocolates, plastic flowers, cuddly toys and vending machine promise rings.”

“You want ring?” Ace asks eagerly. “I get you ring.”

“Erm, it's okay...I'm joking, Aljaž,” I hastily clarify, scared he'll get the wrong idea. He actually looks disappointed.

The guys smirk, exchanging knowing glances but don't say anything. They decide to teach me how to play canasta. It's a card game that's played in teams, and because I make an odd number, I get to sit on Rebel's lap and play his hands with him. It's hard to concentrate on the game, though, with Rebel's

hands on me and his mammoth cock digging in my ass the whole time.

Eventually though, I tire, curling up on the sofa next to Ace, my head in his lap. He strokes my hair as I doze off while they're still playing, and the last thing I think I remember is Rebel tucking me into bed and telling me he loves me.

In the morning I'm sure I dreamed it, though.

Lizzie's Journal

April 9th

I did it. I broke up with the princes.

Obviously, I had to wait until I was out of the infirmary and well enough to return to classes to face them. They bought into the sleepwalking story, which hurts. I wanted them to see through the bullshit and rescue me. They're the princes; they rule this school alongside the princesses, so how can they be so blind to my suffering and what I've been going through all year?

I felt dead inside as I broke it off with them. They protested, begging me to reconsider and asking my reasons why. I didn't tell them the truth: that if I didn't, the princesses had threatened to kill me, and I believed they meant it. Instead, I told them I just couldn't face the multiple relationship thing. It was too hard. Too complicated. I worried about jealousy and coming between them. I basically rattled off any excuse I could think of, and when they still wouldn't take no for an answer, I left.

I've avoided them ever since, and yet, the bullying still hasn't stopped.

I can't win. At least before, the princes made me happy enough to make the bullying bearable. Now, I feel like I have nothing to live for. For the first time ever, I'm really tempted to quit and just drop out. But I'm so close to the end.



CHAPTER TWENTY - TWO

The rest of our stay is fantastic. We have a lazy morning breakfast in bed with the full works, followed by a swim (the pool was busy this time so we kept it PG!) After checking out we go for a lovely, but bracing, walk on the beach and then we find a gorgeous little country pub with a real roaring fire to have lunch in. I really don't want to go back; it's been perfect.

Just as we pull up outside the school's main entrance and I'm about to get out of the car, Ace hands me a small gift box.

"What's this?"

"Open it. Look," Ace insists.

"I thought we said no gifts for Valentine's day?"

"No, you said no gifts for Valentine's day," Rebel interjects. "Besides, this isn't a Valentine's gift, this is a Happy Friday gift." Shit-eating-grin-boy looks like a dog with two dicks, he's that pleased with himself. I want to smack him, but he's just given me a gift, so I probably shouldn't.

"Happy Friday, Princess." I laugh and give in.

"Okay, okay! I'll open this in my room, I have to go grab a few things for the weekend...I'm assuming it's okay for me to stay? I really need to study."

“Of course. I’m an excellent fuck – I mean study – buddy.” Thorn smirks, and I lightly smack him in the arm.

“Ow,” he deadpans.

“Don’t make me hurt you.”

“Promises, promises...” He winks cheekily and sticks his tongue out.

“Right. I’ll go grab my books, chuck in some washing and see you guys in an hour, okay?”

“Sounds good! Bye, Princess.”

I climb out of the Jeep and head into the school, carrying my overnight bag and the small gift. When I reach the top floor, I’m met with absolute chaos.

“What’s going on?” I ask the nearest girl to me. Everyone’s out of their rooms, the corridor in chaos. Before she can speak, the putrid stench hits me.

“Oh god, it smells like dead things!” I heave.

“Exactly,” the girl tells me. “And it seems to be coming from Tilly’s room. You can imagine the fit she’s throwing! They’ve already ripped up all the carpets, changed all the plumbing and stripped the walls back for replastering. Honestly, it’s a joke, if it’d been any of our rooms we’d have been told to suck it up.”

The girl – I think her name’s Amanda – would almost look gleeful if the smell wasn’t affecting us all so severely. I can hear Tilly’s shrill screech over the sounds of workmen. Shit. I didn’t think my prank would affect everyone in the hallway. Not this badly.

“God, it’s awful. If I were Tilly, I’d make sure they changed over all my fixtures and fittings. Did they check under the floorboards for something? Sometimes mice get in, and if one got trapped by a heating pipe or something it would smell pretty bad.”

“Great idea! I’ll go and suggest it to her.” Amanda’s face brightens, and she scurries off to speak to Tilly. Hopefully she’ll take credit for the idea in the hopes of getting into

Tilly's good books – especially now she's on the lookout for friends – and the builders might fix the problem without me having to come clean.

I hurry along the corridor to my room, holding my breath all the while. When I get in, I slam the door shut and breathe deeply. I'm lucky that my room's far enough away from Tilly's that the smell hasn't travelled this far. Yet. I dump my stuff out on the bed and quickly replace the dirty clothes for fresh, repacking efficiently so I can head back out. I was going to do washing, but I just want out of here now. I'm sure the guys won't mind if I turn up earlier than expected.

That reminds me to open their gift. I hunt under the pile of dirty clothes for the small blue box with a silver ribbon on the bed. The box's small, maybe a couple of inches square, and made of thick card. When I undo the ribbon and slip the lid off, a folded piece of paper flutters out. I reach for it, unfold it, and immediately recognise Rebel's messy scrawl.

“Princess, we deliberately put your gift in a shitty box so that you didn't embarrass yourself by thinking that the box is the gift. Enjoy.”

He's such a bastard, he'll never let me live that down. I refold the note and pop it in the lid of the box, then look down at the gift nestled in the soft white velvet of the box lining. It's a ring. Oh my god, they actually got me a ring!

It's a beautiful sapphire heart on a platinum band. The heart's large, but not gaudy, and its facets sparkle like crazy at the slightest movement. I slip the ring from its cushion and hold it carefully between my thumb and first finger. Out of the box it's even more stunning. The band's thin but substantial, polished to high shine, and the sapphire's breathtaking. Obviously it's way too much, and I won't be keeping it, but I can't resist slipping it onto the ring finger of my right hand. It's a perfect fit, looking like it was made for me. I don't want to take it off, but I do, securing it safely back in its box. I pocket the box, grab my things, take a deep breath and head back out along the corridor to head back to the guys' house. I'm so glad I have three more nights with them; hopefully the problem in Tilly's room will be fixed by then.

When I knock on the door, and Rebel answers his gaze flies right to my hands and when he notices they're bare, he scowls.

"Don't you like it?" His low growl is accusing.

"I love it, Reb, but it's too much. I can't accept it."

"Nonsense. Don't be stupid. It's a gift."

"Don't call me stupid!"

"I'm not. I said don't BE stupid. If you refuse our gift, THEN I'll call you stupid."

I sigh. Why do we always end up fighting? I enter the house and follow Rebel into the kitchen where all the guys are sitting around the table.

"What's going on? Why are you fighting now?" Jax asks.

"She doesn't like our gift."

"I did not say that Rebel! Do not put words into my mouth or I'll put a brick in yours." I glower at him.

"Ooooh, good joke!" Thorn calls out. "What's red and bad for your teeth?" He pauses. "No one? A brick! Now shut the fuck up!" He starts laughing like it's the funniest thing ever. And it might have been at any other time, but Rebel and I just glare at him. He's oblivious though.

"Well then, you tell me," Jax cuts in before either of us can start attacking Thorn for his insensitive humour and poor timing.

"It's beautiful. But I can't accept it."

"Why not?" Jax's voice takes on a low, dangerous quality that he usually saves for the bedroom, and I shudder.

"Because it's too much."

"I see...and if I...requested that you accept it?"

"Okay, okay," I sigh. It's a battle I'm never going to win, so I give in and slip the ring from the box in my pocket and back onto my finger. "Happy now?" I snap.

"I will be if you keep giving me attitude," Jax threatens.

“Yes.”

“Very.”

“No.”

I blink in surprise as each of the guys except Ace is satisfied by the ring on my finger. I turn to him with wide eyes and ask him what’s wrong. He points to my hand.

“It’s wrong.”

“Wrong? How?”

“Wrong hand.” I look down at my right hand with the gorgeous stone the colour of heaven. I blankly look at my left hand, then back to my right, as if expecting a third, correct hand to suddenly appear.

“Erm, Ace, in this country, we only wear engagement rings on that hand’s finger,” I tell him awkwardly when I realise there’s no other hand.

“Yes. I get you ring. You wanted ring.”

The others are barely containing their laughter at this point as I continue to stare at Ace in puzzlement. He huffs in frustration and waves both hands around.

“Thor, how say brezpogojna ljubezen¹? Zavezanost². Safir³.”

“Sapphire means unconditional love and commitment. That’s why Ace suggested this stone for you,” Thorn tells me. My jaw drops. It’s incredibly romantic, but suddenly I feel the weight of the ring – it’s significance – more than ever. I definitely can’t accept it now. I gulp.

“Guys…” My tone holds a warning.

“Don’t worry. We told him he can’t just give you an engagement ring on the sly, that he actually has to ask you.”

Ace drops to one knee in front of me, and I start to panic, but Thorn laughs and tells me to relax. “Just accept it as a pretty trinket, okay, Rae, don’t sweat it.” Thankfully, Ace gets to his feet grinning.

I nod and sag in relief. “Well thank you all. I love it.”

They all laugh. “You should’ve seen your face. I’ve never seen blind panic like it. I thought you were going to run,” they tease.

“Haha,” I grumble, not seeing the funny side of the joke yet. Or ever. “Joke’s on you, morons. What if I thought he was serious and accepted? You’d be stuck with me then.” I stick my tongue out at them while I let that sink in.

I take a seat at the table and proceed to tell them all about Tilly’s dorm room drama, which makes them howl with laughter. Jax even tells me that I can stay with them till it’s sorted, but I decline. It’s one thing staying on weekends and in the holidays when there aren’t many people about, but it’s something else to move in during term time. I don’t even know if it’d be allowed. Jax assures me that his stepmother wouldn’t mind, but I’m reluctant. I’m pretty sure there are already whispers and rumours about me dating the four guys – thanks no doubt to Tilly – but I don’t want to make it worse.

We spend the rest of the weekend studying, though the study sessions are frequently interrupted by hot tub breaks. The guys have very creative and exciting methods to try to get me to remember chemical equations, but no matter how fun it is, I have to knuckle down and study the good old fashioned way. They test me often, and there’s always a fun reward when I do well. Equally, Jax dishes out punishment when I don’t do so well, but I quite like that too. Not that I’d tell him that.

The next month passes in a blur of activity. Everyone’s so busy and under so much pressure that we barely have time to socialise. Even Rebel and I keep our fighting to a minimum because we’re so focused on our studies. The mock exams shake us all; they’re much harder than we expected, and everyone bombs on them. I can’t help but wonder if the teachers deliberately flunked us all so that we’d freak out and work harder for the real thing. Whatever the reason, we’re all

pulling triple time in the library. I can't study at their house, there are too many distractions. Being out in public's much safer. Even the fun and sexy revision games have stopped. Everyone's knuckling down to try to get through to the end of term.

I'm looking forward to the Easter break that we're barrelling towards at an alarming speed. Most people are dreading it because it means that the exams are nearly upon us when we return. But I don't care about that so much. I just want a whole two weeks off from classes and pushy teachers. I'll still be working hard, but at least I can set my own pace.

I was planning on spending it with the guys, possibly off-campus somewhere, until I read Lizzie's last journal entry. She genuinely feared for her life, so she broke up with the princes, even though it broke her heart to do it.

I slam the book shut and stare at the wall for a moment. Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I feel them threatening to fall. Why am I crying? For Lizzie? Or myself?

Maybe a little bit of both. As the exams draw closer, my stomach's continuously clenching, not because of that, but because the end of term is approaching and that means leaving the guys forever. The thought breaks my heart, so I can only imagine what Lizzie actually went through. My head's reeling, and I just feel like I need some space to think and clear my head.

Of course, that's right about the time Thorn comes in and asks if they can all talk to me downstairs. Bleurgh, nothing good has ever come from the words 'can we talk?'

I stomp down the stairs, already in a lousy mood and dreading what they're going to say, only to walk into the dining room that they rarely ever use and stumble to a standstill.

The table's full to bursting with a feast fit for a king. A vast selection of makings for fajitas are laid out, and there are coke floats on the table – all my favourite things.

“What’s going on?” I ask nervously. It’s not my birthday, an anniversary or a special occasion.

“Sit down, Princess, let’s eat.”

The spread’s breathtaking, and it all looks delicious, but I’m so worried by those three little words that I can barely touch a bite.

“What’s up, Princess?” Rebel asks me when he notices that I’m picking at my food.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“Don’t worry,” he tells me, and I pull a face at him.

“No one in the history of the world has ever stopped worrying because someone said ‘don’t worry’ to them. It’s stupid.” I’m being snarky, and I know it, but I can’t help myself. It’s a defence mechanism I use to protect myself when I’m feeling insecure.

“Seriously, you have nothing to worry about. Eat. You’re ruining dinner.”

Those last three words were entirely the wrong thing to say to me. It’s like lighting the blue touch paper. I’m instantly enraged.

“I’m ruining – I’M ruining dinner?” I yell at him, springing to my feet. “How can you say that when you drag me down here sounding ominous, telling me we need to talk, and then act like nothing’s going on? What am I supposed to think? My stomach’s in knots here. I feel sick. Of course I’m worried and unable to eat!”

Four guys blink at me, clearly shocked by my outburst and unsure what to say. It would be funny if I weren’t so worked up. I don’t think I’ve ever rendered all of them speechless in one go before. Thorn’s the first to recover. He stands and takes my hand, pulling me in gently for a hug.

“Baby, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know I’d made you feel like that. I used the wrong words. There’s absolutely nothing wrong, I promise. The opposite in fact.” He pulls us both back into our seats, and I turn to face him.

“What do you mean?” I ask, and he quickly glances at the other guys. Jax gives a tiny nod.

“We just wanted to have a nice meal with you tonight and to say that, although school’s ending soon and next year’s all up in the air, we’d really like to keep seeing and spending time with you.”

“Dating you,” Ace adds.

Well, now I feel pretty stupid. I may have overreacted slightly. Maybe. Just a tiny bit. I take a breath and let my lie, that’s also the truth, out.

“I’d love that, too.” It’s the truth, there’s nothing I would like more in this world than to have the guys be part of my future. But it’s also a lie because they think I’m agreeing to it, when in reality we only have a few weeks together before I disappear. They all look so happy, so hopeful, that it nearly kills me. Plastering a fake smile on my face, I get to my feet again and announce I’m going for a drink in the kitchen.

I take a moment while I’m in there topping up my glass of coke to breathe and compose myself. When the tears no longer threaten to fall, I feel like I can go back in. But when I spin around with my glass in hand, I almost drop it when I see Rebel standing in the doorway, arms folded and watching me intently.

“Shit, Reb, don’t sneak up on people like that!”

“I didn’t sneak. You just didn’t hear me over all those deep breaths you were doing. Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you breathing like that?”

“It’s just breathing. Shut up. Get out of my way.” I’m being mean, but I’m scared my walls are going to crackle and crumble. If anyone could bring them down with a single word or touch, it would be Rebel. He’s always been the most dangerous to me.

“No.”

“No?” I’m incredulous. “Why won’t you let me leave?”

“I wanted to get you on your own to speak to you.”

“Well, you’ve succeeded. What is it?”

“Look, Raven, I...”

“You....?” I prompt when he trails off.

“I really care about you.”

“I know? I care about you too, Reb.”

“No. I really care about you. Like, I’m prepared to change uni next year so that I can be with you.”

“That’s really sweet, Reb, but I can’t ask you to do that when I don’t even know if I’m going to go to uni anymore.”

“You’re not asking, I’m offering.”

“And it’s really sweet of you, but I can’t let you do that. It wouldn’t be right when I have no idea what I want to do anymore. But we can still see each other, whatever happens.” I wish so much that those words were real. It makes me sad having to force the bitter lie from my mouth.

“No, Raven, you don’t get it...” he pauses for a beat and stares at me. His look is anguished and I only just notice how ragged he looks. “I think I’m in love with you.”

“I...What?” My jaw’s slack and I can’t quite believe my ears.

“I think I’m in love with you.”

“No.”

“Yes. I am.” He sounds slightly bemused at my denial.

“You can’t be.”

“I can.”

“You’re not,” I tell him sadly as the weight of his words sink in, and I can see that he’s starting to get pissed off.

“Raven, I’m not messing with you. I’ve felt like this for a while. I think this is it. I think you might be it for me. For good,” he insists while I shake my head and slowly back away from him.

“No, Reb. I want – I need – a guy that will raze ruins for me.”

“I can do that. I will.”

“I need someone who knows. Who’s sure.”

“I... am.” It’s the first time he’s hesitated. He honestly does think that he loves me. And he probably does. But is he in love with me? How can he be when he doesn’t even know my name?

“You can’t be, Reb,” I stress. “You’re not.”

“Damn it, Raven!” he explodes, “Do not try to tell me how I’m feeling!” He’s yelling so loud that I can see the other guys starting to get to their feet to come and investigate what’s going on.

“Rebel, if you were in love with me – with anyone – you would know. There wouldn’t be any ‘I thinks’ or ‘maybes’ or ‘might bes’. If you love someone, the realisation hits you like a truck going at full speed. You can’t fucking miss it or mistake those feelings. It floors you. It’s not something you have to ponder and consider. So you can’t possibly love me.”

“I do. I feel those things. I’m just expressing it badly. I’ve never done this before.”

“We barely know each other,” I tell him sadly.

“I know enough.” ‘If only that were true,’ I think to myself sadly. Tears slowly wind their way down my cheeks.

“What’s going on here guys? I thought everything was all good? Why the shouting?” Jax asks.

“Yeah, what’s he done to fuck up now?” Thorn jokes.

But he’s hit the nail right on the head. Rebel’s fucked up. He’s taken a good thing that somehow between the five of us worked, and he’s fucked it up beyond repair.

As the guys all crowd into the kitchen, the walls seem to press in on me. I’m already edging my way backwards past the island towards the front door.

“Raven, wait. Don’t go. Whatever he’s done we can fix, if you stay and talk about this.” Jax is as calm as ever on the outside, but I can detect a note of panic in his voice.

“Princess,” Ace pleads, but I’m shaking my head and backing away.

“What the fuck did you do?” Thorn shouts at Rebel.

“Nothing! I just told the truth, but someone isn’t ready or willing to hear it,” Rebel spits back.

“Fucking put this right! We’re not about to lose the girl we’re all in love with because you’re a fucking dick and have upset her!”

Deafening silence fills the room for a moment. Then Jax says, “Way to go and ruin the surprise, dickhead,” and smacks the side of Thorn’s head, looking pissed.

Oh. Dear. God. Holy fuck. They all think they’re in love with me? This is what tonight was about?

It’s too much.

I can’t breathe.

I need to get out.

I turn and run for the front door, ignoring the shouts from the princes behind me. I need...I don’t know what I need, but space and fresh air sound like a good start. I wrench open the door and race out into the crisp, calming air. I run, not caring that in my haste I forgot to grab shoes, and I don’t stop running until I’m safely in my dorm room.

Now what the fuck am I going to do?

Lizzie's Journal

April 15th 2017

I woke up this morning feeling so groggy. My head was foggy, and my joints were aching. My mouth was like the desert. If I drank, I would've put it down to a hangover. But I don't. I think I must be getting the flu or something. It makes me glad that it's a Saturday today. I can have a quiet weekend to relax and get better. I can't afford to be ill and miss classes.

I know that I went to a party last night, but I don't remember why I agreed to go. There must've been a reason. I try to keep a low profile now. The bullying's getting pretty bad, despite me breaking up with the princes, but for some reason I allowed a couple of the friendlier girls in my maths class to talk me into going to an off-campus party.

Only, I don't remember anything after arriving. I can't really even remember what the house was like when we got there. I have no idea how I got home. I woke up completely naked. I wondered if one of the girls from my maths class slipped some vodka into my coke last night in an attempt to get me to unwind and lighten up. It doesn't seem like their style, though.

When I went to get up, my legs gave way entirely. Luckily, I landed on the bed and not the floor. It was really odd. I tried to stand again, more slowly the second time and managed it. But I'm at a total loss as to what could be affecting me like this. Painstakingly slowly I made my way to the bathroom. I sat on the loo, and my breath was stolen from me. It hurt so bad. It brought tears to my eyes I was so sore down there. I finished and stood to wash my hands, and that's when I noticed the bruises.

The tops of my arms are ringed with small purple bruises that look suspiciously like finger marks, and there's even some around my neck. What the hell happened last night?

I stumbled back into my room, and that's when I spied my clothes from last night lying in tatters on the floor. My dress is shredded as are my panties. Even my bra's wrecked.

Ripped clothes, bruises, pain down there and no memory, with flu-like symptoms. Ice cold dread filled me, and I fell to the floor; this time in shock. I felt sick. Writing this now, I still do.

I think I need to visit the campus nurse for a rape kit.



CHAPTER TWENTY - THREE

“Grandma?”

“Raven?”

“Yeah, it’s me...I need to get out of here.”

“For good?”

“No. I just need to get away. Have a break, some time...”

“I’ll send a car. Two hours. Be ready.”

Click. The line goes dead.

I breathe out a sigh of relief. I’m immensely grateful to my grandmother for not asking any questions. We may not be the closest or have the most conventional relationship, but I know I can rely on her. I replace the phone on the receiver and immediately get to packing.

I pull out my small case from the bottom of the walk-in wardrobe and lie it open on the bed. I have no idea where I’ll be going with my grandmother – only that we won’t be at home – so I pack a little of everything to cover every option. I also pack mine and Lizzie’s journals, and the flight voucher Grandma gave me for Christmas.

It doesn’t take long, and I find I still have about an hour to spare before the car comes. I spend it going back over Lizzie’s journal entries. I can’t face reading anything new at the

moment; any more revelations like the last might send me over the edge. But I have an almost sick fascination with rereading her story. Even with the journal entries addressed to me, I can see there are still huge gaping holes in her story. Holes that will never be filled. Questions that I'll never know the answers to. That's a difficult pill to swallow and accept. Sometimes I feel like a detective scouring for clues, going over her journal with a fine-toothed comb like a CSI might comb a crime scene.

Lizzie's rapid descent from being a bright, vivacious, perfect student with a whole world of possibilities and opportunities ahead of her, to the empty, hollow, shell of a girl I've come to know is...compelling. It's awful to read, upsetting, harrowing almost. But I can't stop myself from revisiting the pages whenever I get the chance.

Maybe it's because we'd drifted so far apart in the last nine months that she spent at West Prep. Maybe it's because seeing her writing on the page – despite her painful words – is a way for us to reconnect and feel close again. Perhaps I just miss her so much that I long for any form of contact with her, even if that means repeatedly reliving her suffering. I don't know. But it's an addiction I can't stop.

The phone in my room rings once, and stops before I can even move towards it. An hour's passed, and the car's here. Relieved, I slip Lizzie's journal into my case and quickly zip it up. I have one last glance around the room to see if I've forgotten anything before grabbing my case and my passport and heading out to meet the sleek black town car that my grandmother's sent. Thankfully, I don't meet any of the princes on my way out, and I'm able to stash my case in the boot and slide into the back of the cream leather interior without detection. Once the gates of West Prep are safely behind me, I sit back and relax, knowing that time, space and physical distance from the princes will help me clear my head.

“Raven, darling.” My grandmother stands to greet me, a vision in cream chiffon. The woman in front of me, Cordelia Deighton, is ageless, beautiful and intimidating as hell. Yet she holds out her arms to hug me and gives me an affectionate kiss on the cheek. European style, of course. “I’ve missed you. I’m glad you called and decided to join me.”

Obviously, that’s not quite how the conversation went down, but I decide not to say anything.

“Hi, Grandma,” I say, chewing my bottom lip nervously. “Thank you for having me.”

“Nonsense. I’ve been dying for you to join me since I sent you that voucher at Christmas. I’m glad you’ve cashed it in. How long do we have together?”

“Two weeks.”

She beams at me like this is the best news in the world and then indicates for me to sit opposite her, which I do. The small bistro table’s set up for two, and there’s a dainty three-tiered cake stand between us set with afternoon tea for the both of us.

“Tea?” asks a waitress that’s hovering nearby waiting to pour. I hate tea. But I feel like I should be polite. I hesitate.

“She would prefer hot chocolate, please. With cream and marshmallows. And maybe a glass of pop too, to quench your thirst, Raven?”

“Erm, yeah...I mean, yes please,” I stammer out.

“Relax Raven. You have nothing to be nervous about. You don’t need to stand on ceremony with me. I want you to have a good time.”

“Thank you.” Her speech hasn’t really done anything to ease my nerves, but I know that she means well.

The problem is that from the moment the car picked me up and drove me to the private airfield – where there was a private plane waiting to take me to a private island – I’ve been feeling uncomfortable. I figured my grandmother would be flying me to meet her somewhere, and I knew it would be exclusive and remote and for the insanely rich, but come on!

Really? A private island? The extravagant display of wealth nauseates me.

“Are you not hungry?” Cordelia asks me, watching me closely.

“Sorry. Just tired from the journey, I guess.”

“Did you not sleep? Was it not comfortable?” She manages to sound both concerned and mildly offended at the same time.

“No, no, I mean, yeah...I mean, yes I slept and yes it was very comfortable, thank you. I’m just tired. School’s been very busy and tough recently.”

“I see. Shall we discuss why you felt the need to ‘get away’ as you put it?”

“I’d prefer not to.”

“I see. Perhaps later then. Come, let’s enjoy this lovely spread that Dicky’s put on for us.”

“Dicky?”

“Yes, Richard, he’s a dear friend, and it’s his island we’re staying on. I can’t wait to show it to you .”

“Okay. Where exactly are we?” I ask.

“The British Virgin Islands.”

“Oh.”

After that, we lapse into silence while we eat our afternoon tea. The food – though simple sandwiches, tiny little cakes and patisserie style deserts – is divine. I polish off every little morsel and feel surprisingly stuffed afterwards.

Cordelia has a member of the staff show me to my room – which turns out to be my own luxury hut right on the beachfront. That’s about the time I stop huffing about the extravagance of the island and start to appreciate it. Hell, a girl’s on holiday, I deserve a little ‘R ’n R’.

I spend the week relaxing. Sure I study some, but I mostly relax on a sun lounger by the pool. There are a few really cute guys hanging around by the pool, but it just makes me realise

how much I miss the princes. Despite vowing not to, I find myself thinking about them often. I'm not interested in anyone else. Occasionally I take myself off for walks on the beach or through the rainforest, but mostly I swim or read in the sun. I have a killer tan developing which I'm quite pleased about.

We're about halfway through the holiday when Cordelia decides it's time for us to have a chat. I've been dreading it since the moment I arrived, on tenterhooks waiting for the moment she'd demand to know what's going on. At least after tonight I'd be able to relax a little. Maybe.

I dress up for dinner as I have every night since I arrived, and go to meet my grandmother at her 'cottage'. I say cottage, it's more like a mini-mansion squirrelled away on the grounds of the main house. It's beautiful like everything I've seen on this island so far, but I much prefer my little beach shack.

My jaw hits the floor when I see my grandmother. She's dressed to the nines. Beyond the nines in fact. She's wearing an elegant white pantsuit with a turquoise silk camisole and matching heels, stunning chandelier earrings hang from her lobes, and a matching necklace adorns her neck.

"Wow! I feel seriously underdressed," I complain when she air kisses me. "Is that an actual tiara in your hair?"

"Is it too much?" She tentatively touches the small diamond-studded band in her perfectly coiffed hair.

"That depends on who we're having dinner with...is it the queen?"

"Don't be absurd," Cordelia scolds me before smirking. "She couldn't afford to stay here."

"Grandma!" I laugh, shaking my head. We're lucky there's no one around to hear. Poking fun at the queen definitely wouldn't go down well at home in our royal loving society. "Seriously though, who are you all dressed up for?"

"No one. We've just been invited up to the main house for dinner tonight with Dicky. It's been a while since I've seen him so I thought I'd make an effort. It's too much, isn't it?" she asks again, clearly worried.

“I dunno,” I shrug. “Didn’t Chanel say something about taking the last thing you put on, off?”

“Not quite darling, but close.” She sighs and looks at herself in the mirror. “What should I lose then? If I take the barrette out, I’ll have to redo the whole style again. I don’t have time for that.”

“Lose the earrings and the necklace. Here, wear mine.” I slip my simple silver knot studs off and pass them to her, then slip her my delicate silver chain with a Busy Lizzie flower on it. When she puts them on, she looks like my beautiful grandmother again; elegant and understated. Just, you know, with a diamond clip in her hair. Life’s about balance I guess.

“Let’s go. I don’t want to keep Dicky waiting.” I smile at the affection in her voice, and we head off to the main house. I have to admit, I’m looking forward to meeting this Richard guy. I want to know what he does for a living to afford a private island as insanely opulent as this one. I hope he’s not a drug lord. I’m keen to know what his intentions towards my grandma are too.

It doesn’t take long to get to the main house, which is a freaking mansion. No, what’s bigger than a mansion? I don’t know, but this is it. Cordelia’s cottage is surprisingly close to the main house. I think she wanted to talk to me about my situation at school on the walk over, but there wasn’t time. Now she couldn’t quiz me in front of her friend, could she? We cross through the beautifully sculpted gardens and up the stairs at the back of the house towards large glass French doors. Inside, a man dressed in a white linen suit with longish white hair stands with his back to us.

When he hears us enter, he turns around and – holy fucking shit balls! Dicky? Richard? Yeah, I know him. He’s a pretty famous entrepreneur and billionaire. And he’s looking at my grandma like the stars were hung in the sky just for her pleasure.

After introductions are made and I’m very quickly and clearly made to feel like a third wheel, we’re guided towards the informal, exclusive boutique dining room for dinner. A

second surprise for the night awaits me when I enter the cosy decadent room. There's a guy about my age sitting at the table already. He's exceptionally well dressed for dinner, but that's about where the positives end.

“Ah, Charlotte. Sorry, Raven. This is my grandson, Baxter. Baxter, this is Cordelia's granddaughter, Raven.”

I cringe at the way he muddles my name up and sigh, knowing that it's going to lead to awkward questions I don't want to answer. I eye Richard's grandson wearily.

I think most would consider him attractive. As he stands to greet me, I notice he's tall, a medium to slim build, has dark hair which is slicked back with an undercut, and beautifully shaped pouty lips. His Cupid's bow is seriously perfect. His nose is long and straight, his cheekbones high. The overall look is strong, but a tiny bit effeminate. Okay, next to my princes he'd look ridiculous, but here, in this over the top decadent setting? He does look good. Only, his eyes do something strange to my stomach.

I don't know how to describe them. It's like they're colourless. Obviously, they can't be, but there's no colour I can think of that matches his gaze. They're black, but that isn't enough to describe them. Worse, they're gazing at me with a fierce intensity that's completely cold. Like, devoid of all expression, feeling, emotion or reaction. It makes me shiver. And not in a good way.

“Nice to meet you.” His mellifluous voice is like honey being poured over warm toast, a strong contrast to the icy, impenetrable stare he's giving me. He holds out his hand for me to shake over the table, and I step forward quickly to engage him.

“And you?” Damn it, why did it come out as a question? I need to get a grip. My hand feels too warm in his icy crushing handshake, and I barely contain a squeal when he gives it a squeeze. He raises the back of my hand to his lips and kisses it, all while staring at me with his dead gaze.

I'm seriously uncomfortable now, but that only ricochets up even further when he fails to drop my hand and uses it as a

lever to pull me in closer. I have to go up onto my tiptoes to lean across the table, and I'm seriously worried about smashing the cut crystal glasses. He pulls and pulls until I'm virtually lying across the tabletop and then he leans in to kiss me.

In a panic, I try to pull away, but obviously can't with my hand clamped in his, and he ends up kissing me on the lips instead of – I hope – his intended cheek. It's as cold as his gaze. Like kissing a dead fish. Gag. And in my haste to get the hell away from him, I yank my hand back, just as he loosens his grip, and my elbow sends a wine goblet flying across the table with a loud clatter. To make matters worse, the entire exchange has been watched by Cordelia and Richard.

“Ah, young love,” Richard titters with a smirk. I send him a death glare and vow to call him Dick from now on. He ignores me and turns to my grandma. “Shall we dine in the formal room and leave these two to get to know each other a little better?”

I plead silently with my grandma to stay, suddenly desperate to be their third wheel rather than this guy's date, but she only has eyes for Rich the Dick, and she's not even looking at me. Instead, she nods her assent and allows him to lead her from the room where he closes the door behind them. Firmly.

It feels like the sealing of a tomb.

I stand awkwardly for a moment while he just stares at me, and then I sit down. May as well, I get the feeling I'm not going anywhere until my grandmother's done so I may as well eat at least. Baxter watches me silently for a moment before sitting down much more elegantly than I did. Luckily I'm spared having to make conversation with the creep because as soon as his ass touches the seat, doors at the opposite end of the room fly open, and the first course is served.

Baxter doesn't speak. He doesn't eat. He doesn't even move. He just stares at me until I'm squirming uncomfortably in my seat. I dig into the starter, not caring what it is. It looks divine like everything else on the island does, but I can't taste

it. I'd hoped that my starting to eat would stir Baxter into movement, but it doesn't. He just sits and stares at me, elbows on the table, fingertips together, resting pensively against his chin.

“What's up with the name thing?” he finally asks.

Ugh. I preferred him mute. I don't want to talk about this, and his stupid sultry voice has me wanting to open up and confide all my secrets to this jerk. No way. Not happening.

“What's up with the name Baxter?” I bite back. “Your parents really like soup or something?” Ah there it is, the snark that shows how uncomfortable I am. Still, I'd rather be rude than wrong-footed with this guy.

To my surprise, he chuckles lightly, and his face completely changes. I can see it now – that he could be charming if he wanted to be – that he could easily dupe many girls. But not me, I've seen what lurks beneath his pretty polished exterior, and I won't be fooled.

“Touché,” he says, still laughing slightly. “So you don't want to talk about that then. What shall we talk about?”

I shrug and keep eating. He's yet to touch a bite.

“You a vampire or something?” I ask.

“Pardon?” Ugh, why so polite?

“The not eating thingy.” I wave my fork inelegantly at his plate.

“Oh. Sorry, I didn't notice. I was distracted by the beauty in the room.” He gives me a look that's supposed to be smouldering but falls flat on account of his eyes being dead and all, and I realise that this is his play. Whenever he goes on a date – not that this is a date – this is how he behaves. Every single time. Gag. No, I'm actually gagging at his words. Does shit like that actually work on anyone with a brain cell? Apparently it must as his face registers shock at my failure to melt and simper at his words.

“Well I'm starving, so if you could begin, I'll be able to get my main course sooner. I hope it's more substantial than

whatever this fairy food is.”

“Fairy food?”

Damn it. Why is he still not eating? I stare pointedly at his plate, refusing to answer until he gets the hint and digs in.

“Yes, fairy food. All pretty and dainty. Portion sizes only big enough to fill a fairy.”

He snorts in amusement, picking up the tiny morsel from his plate and popping it into his mouth in one go.

“This is a five hour, twelve-course tasting menu. The portion sizes have to be small; otherwise you’d pop.” He laughs. He really does have a beautiful sounding voice. Damn him.

“Wait! What? Five hours?”

“At least.” He smirks, enjoying my discomfort. I think he knows that I don’t want to be here. He certainly seems to be enjoying himself at my expense tonight.

“I’d rather have a steak and ice cream,” I blurt out, just as the servers enter to take away our plates. There’s a look of horror on each of their faces, and one rushes from the room immediately, leaving the other girl to collect both of our plates. Two empty plates, however will she manage on her own?

When we’re alone again, we sit in silence. Awkward. I sigh. I need to do something otherwise this will be the longest night in history.

“What do you do?” I ask him.

“I’m about to graduate from university.”

“Oh, how old are you then? I thought you were my age.”

“I’m older.” Seriously? That’s all he says. Like, no shit Sherlock I didn’t figure that one out if you’re graduating. Dickhead.

“What do you read?”

“Books.” He’s being pedantic now, trying to wind me up. It works.

“Funny.”

“My degree is in business management.”

“Oh, where from?”

“Knox Academy.”

“I’ve never heard of it.” I pull a face, and a dark look passes across his features briefly.

“You wouldn’t have.”

“Ooooh is it like some super-secret posh school for the rich? Or is it a spy school?”

“Something like that,” he evades.

“Let me guess; you’re going to manage a business with that degree?”

“Wow, you’re so clever I can’t believe you’ve not graduated early. Yes I’m going to run businesses, my grandfather’s for one.”

“Well, that’s stupid,” I say, pulling a face.

“Why?” He scowls.

“Because what idiot would be stupid enough to hand over the reins of their company to a kid fresh out of school with no practical business experience? Why does a piece of paper that says you read a few books and wrote a few essays make you more qualified to run an actual business than, say, people who have decades of experience?” I finish hotly.

I almost regret speaking when I see the look Baxter’s giving me. Dark, like he’d love nothing more than to cause me pain right now. It’s fleeting, gone as quickly as it manifests, but I catch it.

“Interesting idea,” is all he says.

Once again, the doors open, and the next course is served. I want to weep in relief at the interruption. I’m half tempted to

invite the servers to join us for dinner, but there wouldn't be enough food to go around.

Or so I thought.

I look down at the plate that's been placed in front of me and see that it's full to the brim with the juiciest, most delicious looking steak that I've ever seen. There are chips and veg on the plate too, but the steak holds my full attention. My mouth is actually watering as the server passes me a steak knife. This is so much better than fairy food!

"Now this is more like it!" I exclaim, digging in.

"Glad you're happy."

"Please tell me this is it instead of another ten courses?"

"Nine. You have ice cream for dessert."

"Awesome!"

"Do you really love steak and ice cream that much, or do you just want out of here quicker?" he asks with a smile that could almost be construed as warm.

"A little of one, a lot of the other." I'm not joking, but he laughs like I am. Whatever. I don't care if I'm being rude. The food's phenomenal though, the steak's so tender it melts in my mouth. I don't even need the knife to cut it, so I leave it discarded on the table.

We eat in silence, which means I can thankfully enjoy my meal. I really don't like this guy, but I can't quite put my finger on why. Other than his eyes, which hardly seems fair because he can't control his genetics. However, my gut says there's something off about him.

Lizzie always used to say to me that I should listen to my gut, but I always laughed and told her it was just complaining about being hungry. Now though, I wonder if there's something in what she was saying.

After dinner, we move swiftly on to dessert, and everything's fine until Baxter gets up from his chair and comes to sit beside me. I tense, but don't say anything and keep

eating my ice cream sundae with all the works. It's weird, though. Why's he moved?

He watches me eat my ice cream with interest – weirdo – but I refuse to let him make me feel uncomfortable. That is until he places his hand on my thigh.

“What the fuck?” I say to him, dropping my spoon and turning to glower at him. He smiles, but this time the smile isn't the kind that would have girls swooning, it's a smile that's as cold and absent of feeling as his eyes.

“What?” he asks, amused. “I got you the dinner that you wanted, so why don't you show me how grateful you are?”

I stare at him in shock for a minute. I think it's an actual full minute before I can do anything other than blink.

“No, thanks. I'm taken.” I have no idea why I'm not punching this guy right now. Is it because of who his granddaddy is? Or because I don't want to embarrass my grandmother?

“I don't see a ring.” He smirks.

I wave my beautiful sapphire ring in front of his face, and he laughs again. “It's on the wrong hand, honey.” The term of endearment actually threatens to bring my dinner back up.

“Means the same thing though. I'm taken. And not interested.”

“Is that so?” he draws. “Then why haven't you moved my hand?”

I glance down at where his hand is still sitting on my bare thigh and wonder how the hell I didn't notice that his hand was still there. Even now I've made no move to remove it, staring at it like it's a completely alien life form. I can't even feel it until he starts to lightly stroke and work his way higher.

When he squeezes my thigh, it's like the spell I'm in suddenly breaks, and I snap. My hand shoots out on autopilot and grabs the object nearest to me – which turns out to be my unused steak knife. Without thinking I bring it down hard into the back of his hand, and he howls in pain. I shoot to my feet,

not caring that the chair topples over, and rush to the door. Before I can reach for the handle though, the doors fly open, and my grandmother's there with Richard the Dick.

"What's going on?" Dick demands.

"Is everything okay?"

"No, it's not! Baxter's had a little accident," I tell them. I don't know how he'll explain accidentally stabbing himself with a steak knife during a dessert course, and I don't really give a fuck. One look at his face though and I know he's not about to out me. "I think he might need stitches. I have to go, I'm so sorry, but if I see blood I'll faint," I bullshit, rushing past them.

"Raven, wait!" Cordelia calls. "I'm so sorry, Dicky, I have to make sure she's alright." I hear her say and then she's racing after me, and we're fleeing into the warm balmy night.

The rest of the Easter break is uneventful. Cordelia and I reach some sort of unspoken arrangement not to talk about anything related to that night. Which also gives me a free pass to not have to talk about Lizzie, West Prep or my reasons for being on holiday with her. I feel like I dodged a bullet, so in a way, Baxter did me a favour by trying to cop a feel. Talking about my parents with Cordelia is also out of the question, so we hardly speak at all in the end. I don't really mind. She keeps to herself, I keep to myself. It works for us. I stay the hell away from all meals and activities that involve Dicky, she doesn't invite me anywhere with them, and I avoid his lecherous grandson like the plague. Yuck.

I just want to get back to my guys, so it's a relief when I finally board the private plane to go back home. I'm so glad to be leaving that I don't even bitch about the unnecessary expense when I could take a commercial flight. Instead, I lie back and gratefully accept the cashmere travel blanket from the flight attendant, before getting some much-needed sleep.

Lizzie's Journal

April 22nd 2017

I can't.

It's been a week since the party now and that awful morning after when I had to take myself to the hospital.

I decided against going to the school nurse. I didn't want to be seen or gossiped about. I get enough of that already. One of the bullying bitch princesses also works on the reception there occasionally, and the thought of her having access to my medical files made me sick. So instead, I called a taxi and headed down into town on my own to go to the hospital. I probably could've asked Michael for a lift, but I was too embarrassed to tell him why I needed to go.

It was horrific. I can't say any more than that, other than I'm glad I can't remember anything from the night before.

The nurse was kind, but it didn't make the news any easier to hear.

I don't really recall getting back to school or my room. I do remember having a shower so hot that I still have scald marks left on my body a week later.

But I don't feel them.

I've been entirely numb all week. I've not left my room – not even to go to class. Everyone thinks I'm ill, and the few teachers who've popped in to see me could confirm it just based on how awful I look.

I'm barely eating.

I'm not sleeping.

I'm having waking nightmares of an event I don't remember. How is that even possible?

The worst thing is, I don't know if I'm having flashbacks, or if my twisted mind is trying to fill in the blanks with a complete fabrication of what happened that night.

If I do fall asleep, I dream of loud music and flashing lights, then a dark room and pain. I feel strong hands pinning me down and hot breath against my skin. A faintly familiar voice whispers something I can't decipher in my ear, and I wake up shaking in a cold sweat.

No. It's better not to sleep at all.

I just can't.



CHAPTER TWENTY - FOUR

I return to school late on Monday night. It's a bank holiday, so I don't have to worry about missing school because term doesn't start until tomorrow, but I'm also back late enough that I know I'll be able to avoid the princes. I'm still not sure what I'm going to do there. How do I explain to them why I ran away and have been avoiding them?

It's not like we can all have a little chat about the truth: oh hey, I ran away because I think one of you may have raped my twin sister who died here. I'm pretty sure she didn't commit suicide but was murdered. Oh and surprise! I'm not who I've been saying I am, so our whole relationship is based on a lie, so there's no way any – let alone all – of you can be in love with me? Sounds swell. Maybe we can do it over pizza.

Of course, I don't actually think any of them raped my sister. Jesus, the idea is abhorrent. I feel I know them well enough to know, in my bones, that none of them would ever have laid a finger on Lizzie. So it's not that which is upsetting me, it's more that I'm struggling to accept that they were all so oblivious to what she went through.

I still have so many questions.

I mean, firstly, they're supposed to be these all-powerful princes that run the school. I haven't seen any evidence of that at all. They seem to keep to themselves, they're on the edges

of society, almost outcasts. From what I've seen, they're not feared or revered the way that the princesses are. I want to know why. What happened to change them from the princes Lizzie knew, to the ones I know, in just the short space of a school year?

Also, Michael said that nothing in this school happened – at least back then – without the princes' say so. If that's to be believed it would mean that Tilly and the girls were bullying Lizzie at the princes' green light. Why, though? What did Lizzie do that was so awful that she deserved what happened to her? Was it personal, or random? Did they just pick on her for being new? At the very least, the princes would have to have known about the bullying, even if they didn't give the go-ahead. So even if they sat by and let the girls do their own thing, doesn't that make them guilty by association? Guilty for not intervening and helping her? I mean, what kind of person – much less four of them – sits by and lets their girlfriend be bullied?

Or were they in on the bullying? Were they all dating Lizzie as part of the act? Was it a cover to avoid suspicion? Or to keep her here longer to stop her from dropping out? Was it a sick joke? A really fucked up way of trying to get close to her so that they could bully her more?

It just doesn't feel right to me. Not after the conversation with Jax. It felt genuine like he really cared for Lizzie and mourned her loss. So what the hell was going on? Why did Rebel stand her up, ditch their lessons for months and then suddenly reinsert himself into her life?

Then there's Michael. Can he be trusted? He was the fifth prince. So what happened to change that? Lizzie said he was a great guy and a good friend, but why didn't he help her more? Especially if he had the weight and power to be able to do so as a prince. Something isn't ringing true there.

As I toss and turn in my bed, sleep alluding me, I realise that the truth is, there are still too many gaps and unanswered questions. Some of which I may never know, even if I was to sit down and reveal the truth to the princes – which I could never do. I wish Lizzie'd left me more to go on than a few

cryptic journal entries. There's only a handful left for me to decode, and I get the feeling that they're not going to magically hold all the answers.

“Raven, can we talk?” Despite my best efforts to avoid the guys, it's Jax that corners me after class at the end of an insanely busy week. There was no gentle easing us back in, the teachers walloped us. I guess with under three weeks to go until the exams begin, it's understandable. But after only four days of class I feel like I never even had a holiday!

“Ugh.” Those words again. You'd think that they would've learnt their lesson from last time.

“Not like that. We owe you an apology.”

“Okay. Talk.” I fold my arms and stare stubbornly at Jax, not prepared to just melt at whatever he has to say.

“Can we go somewhere more private?”

“I don't think that's a good idea. I have to study and get to the library, so can we make this quick?” I look at my watch in a pathetic attempt to look as busy as I'm claiming to be. It's weak. He knows it.

“Let me walk you to the library and then I can talk to you real quick and leave you to it.”

“Okay,” I reluctantly agree. I'm not sure what other choices I have with Jax. He's not one for letting things go until he gets what he wants. And I want to avoid a scene as the rest of the class slowly packs up around us in an attempt to eavesdrop and gain some good gossip. I sigh and head off in the direction of the library, and Jax falls into step beside me. We walk in silence. It's pretty awkward. People stare as we pass. Jeesh, does word really spread that quickly around here?

We reach the library, and Jax immediately steers me towards one of the private study rooms at the back. I briefly wonder if it was the one Lizzie used to use. He indicates that I should sit, so I do. Anything for a quiet life and to avoid yet

another fight. I start to pull out my revision books as there's no sense in moving to a different part of the library when we're done, but Jax asks me to stop.

"Can you just focus on me for a minute?"

"Sure," I say, pausing and looking up at him.

Jax doesn't sit. He paces. Up and down the tiny space so many times that I start to feel motion sick just watching him.

"Can we get on with it please?" I try hard not to sound bitchy, but I really do have to work.

"Sorry. Sorry," he mutters, still pacing.

"Jax!" I raise my voice, and he stops to look at me. "Can you sit down or something? All the back and forth is making me ill. You'll wear a hole in the carpet."

"Oh sorry," he apologises again, sounding most unlike Jax. "I just don't know what to say."

"You wanted to speak to me?"

"I know I did. I do. It's just, now that I'm here with you all the things I wanted to say have gone from my head, and I'm just trying not to kiss you."

Heat flushes my cheeks at his words. I may not have seen him in nearly three weeks, but my feelings definitely haven't changed, and I'm glad to hear that his haven't either.

"You better not," I warn.

"I wouldn't," he hastily adds before I can continue.

"Only because if you start kissing me, there's no way I'll get any work done. For the rest of the night." When he hears my words he blinks at me, and as it sinks in that I wouldn't punch him for trying to kiss me, a small grin stretches across his beautiful face.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"But I thought..."

“Look,” I take a deep calming breath. “I’m sorry I freaked out and ran. I shouldn’t have done that, and I definitely shouldn’t have run off on holiday and avoided you guys for two weeks.”

“Three,” he adds softly.

“Well yeah, but the avoidance this week is more out of embarrassment because I know I behaved poorly and I wasn’t sure how to put things right.”

“You don’t need to put things right. We do. We have to apologise.”

“You don’t. Honestly, it’s fine.” And I do mean that. Now that we’re together, yes it’s a little awkward, but what happened three weeks ago over dinner really doesn’t matter to me anymore. Time and space have cleared my head, and I realise that all the Lizzie stuff aside, I care deeply for these guys and I want them in my life for as long as I can get away with. I’m not about to waste the few short weeks we have left together, fretting over their feelings for me. It is what it is, and I plan to enjoy every moment we have left. I tell some of this to Jax. Obviously I don’t say the stuff about me leaving and our time being limited, but I gloss over the rest.

“I’m sorry – we’re all really sorry – for how everything went down that night. It wasn’t the plan. I have no idea what went so horribly wrong, but I can see now that sitting you down and making a big deal out of the whole thing was not the right way to go.”

“Look–”

“No, let me finish, please.”

I nod at his request, squirming uncomfortably in my chair.

“We definitely went about things the wrong way. And we’re sorry for that. But you must know that our feelings are real.” This time when he tells me that, I get flutters in my stomach instead of knots. If I just relax and let things be, it’s actually quite a nice feeling to know that you’re loved. “And, we’re all absolutely fine with you knowing how we feel. The guys also wanted me to tell you that they don’t expect you to

feel the same. We completely understand that what we did was overwhelming, and we understand why you ran. There's no pressure for you to say how you feel, now or ever. We just wanted to let you know that we care. And nothing's changed for us in the last three weeks."

I don't really know what to say to that. Ironically, how Jax has apologised for overwhelming me has, in fact, completely overwhelmed me again. I won't tell him that, though. I feel like this is an olive branch I should grab.

"Thank you. Apology accepted. Can things just go back to normal now?" I ask, unsure how else to move forward.

"Well, kinda." Jax smirks at me.

"What do you mean?" I ask as dread creeps in.

"There's a party next Friday. And we wondered if you'd like to go?"

"Oh, is that all? Yeah, of course." I sag with relief.

"As our date. Our girlfriend."

"What? With all of you? As all of you's girlfriend?"

"Yes. Don't freak out."

"I'm not freaking out. I'm just thinking...how would that work?" I nibble my bottom lip as I think about the logistics of going on one date with four guys. It's stupid really, because we hang out together all the time, but this feels more formal. It's the first time they've all actually asked me out.

"The same way a normal date works. Just you'll have four of us to dance with and talk to and to dote on you...like New Year's." I pull a face, and Jax laughs. "Without the fighting, I promise."

"Erm, okay. But what will people think?" New Year's was different. There weren't people from school there. It's one thing to hang around with four guys and go on individual dates with them, and for there to be rumours about me. It's another thing entirely to confirm those rumours by bringing four dates to a student party.

“Have you ever given a fuck what people think?” Jax challenges me.

“Well no, but...”

“Do you intend to start now?” he pushes.

“No...”

“Do you want to go dancing with us?” He’s got me.

“Yes. Definitely.” My response is emphatic.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll all go to the party together.”

“Okay. Sure.” I sound a little shell-shocked, but I’m happy. I think. I have a feeling this will complicate things, but I’m just going to go with it. What will be, will be, as Cordelia always says.

“Okay, it’s settled. So, do you want to come back to the house with me to hang out? We’re going to watch a few movies?”

“I would love to, but I really do have to study. I hardly did any when I was away over Easter.” I’m tempted to say screw it and go anyway, but I’m trying to be good.

“How about tomorrow then? You can come for the weekend, bring your study stuff, tell us all about your holiday.”

“Yeah, okay.” I smile at him.

“Great. Now about that kiss....” I laugh and tilt my head up to meet his, happy to accept his kisses any day.

Saturday morning, I get up late feeling happier and more rested than I have in a long time. I get ready and head down to the guys’ house, hoping I’ll be there in time for one of Ace’s delicious breakfast creations. Hopefully Thorn will make me a hot chocolate too, as this is the longest I’ve ever had to go without them and I’m definitely in withdrawal.

I ring the bell and slip in through the unlocked door. Sure enough, remarkable smells hit me as soon as I step inside, and I follow the sounds of Ace whistling into the kitchen where the master's at work. Silently, I slip into one of the seats at the island counter where I can watch him cook. His back's to me, and he's wearing sweatpants and an apron. The toned muscles of his shoulders create fine lines and ripples down his back as he moves. It makes my mouth water. I wish his sweatpants were tighter so I could see his ass more clearly.

He spins and catches me staring. He doesn't seem surprised to see me, but a slow grin stretches across his face. "Pervert," he scolds me with a wink, and I blush. I shrug my shoulders, unapologetically.

"I've missed the view," I tell him.

"You missed food," he corrects.

"Maybe a bit of both."

"And kisses? Miss those?" He switches off the gas and takes the pan of sizzling bacon from the ring before slowly walking towards me.

"Maybe. It's been so long I can't really remember them," I tease.

Ace huffs and grabs my shoulders, spinning my stool so that I'm facing him. He steps in close between my legs and his hands drop to my hips. He grasps them hard and slides me forward on the seat so that I'm pressed against his firm sculpted apron-clad chest.

"Can we lose the apron?" I ask him. I want to feel his bare skin with my greedy fingers. Without hesitation, he pulls it off without putting an inch of space between us and then before I can blink, his lips are on me.

He kisses me with a bruising force that shows me how much he's missed me. I meet it equally, telling him how sorry I am. His hands fist in my hair and mine fly to his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin without complaint from him. We're tougher with each other than we've ever been before, but I'm certainly not complaining. When he drags his hands

down the front of my light summer dress to my breasts, bolts of electricity shoot through me on contact. I moan into his mouth and drop my hand to the large bulge in his sweatpants.

“Children!” A mock outraged voice interrupts us, and we pull apart guiltily. I’m breathing hard and annoyed by the interruption. I turn with a scowl to see Thorn smirking at me from the doorway, merriment dancing in his eyes. He wags his finger at us and tuts. “I thought we were having bacon for breakfast, not sausage.”

“Always time for sausage,” Ace tells him. I blush at his crassness and smack him lightly on the arm, but Ace only laughs. Thorn pushes past us to the hob and resumes cooking the bacon.

“Don’t let me stop you,” he says. “I love free porn.”

Yeah, that’s like a bowl of icy water chucked over my head. No way am I about to put on a show for Thorn. He’s far too much of a pervert. I scowl at him, and Ace moves to smack him on the back of the head.

“Mood kill,” he tells him. The two of them start play fighting, and the bacon lies forgotten. I sigh in feigned annoyance at their roughhousing and move to rescue the bacon before it burns.

“Oh fuck yeah, do I smell bacon?” Rebel’s voice calls out from the hallway.

“Hell yeah, you do!” I hear Jax answer him with a joyful whoop. A moment later, both boys crash into the kitchen but stop when they see Ace and Thorn fighting.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Jax asks, but they don’t pull apart, just glance up and then resume their scuffle on the kitchen floor. I plate up the bacon and step around them carefully, heading for the table at the other end of the room.

“My bacon brings all the boys to the yard?” I joke. “They’re fighting over who gets first bite.”

“Of you? Or the bacon?” Jax asks with a raised eyebrow and a hot look.

“Oh, definitely the bacon. It’s far more tasty.”

“Agree to disagree on that one,” Rebel adds with a look that makes my stomach backflip.

We take a seat at the table and start to pile bacon onto the bread that Ace has thankfully already buttered. I add ketchup to my sandwich and dig in while Jax grabs juice and glasses for us all. I’m just finishing my first sandwich as Rebel tucks into his third, and I call off the fighting between Ace and Thorn with a warning that the sandwiches are evaporating. It works, and they join us at the breakfast table. Thankfully everything’s normal like it was before. There’s teasing and hitting, swearing and banter, and everything just feels right. I relax and enjoy myself. I’ve missed this.

After a long, slow breakfast, which somehow became brunch, I spend some time studying in the lounge. The guys keep trying to entice me out into the hot tub, but I shoo them away. It’s better with all of them out of the house, I can actually concentrate and get things done. Jax is really good at keeping the guys out of the house and stopping them from interrupting me every ten minutes, though I’m grateful for the continuous line of drinks and snacks that magically appear in the room for me each hour.

I’m just starting to get stiff and in need of a break when Rebel appears at the door and asks me if I want to go for a walk with him. It’s perfect. A pause and a chance to stretch my legs, fresh air and good company. I readily agree and get to my feet to join him. He holds out his hand for me, and I slip mine into his as we head out of the front door.

We walk in companionable silence through the woods holding hands, although I can sense that Rebel wants to say something. I hope it doesn’t lead to a fight, but I won’t hold my breath. He turns off the path and starts pulling me deeper into the woods, off the beaten track. He’s heading with

purpose now like he has somewhere specific in mind that he wants to take me.

Eventually, he slows and stops, but we're still deep in a pretty nondescript part of the woods, and there's nothing around. Rebel spins, catching me off guard and pulls me into him for a massive hug.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs into my hair.

"Don't be. It's fine. I'm sorry too," I tell him back.

"I missed you like crazy. Promise me you won't ever run away like that again."

"Reb..."

"Please. I love and hate fighting with you, but you can't run."

Before I can say anything, he kisses me. And it's not the burning bruising kiss I've come to expect from him. It's soft, tender, a plea. But it steals my breath as much as his fast and furious kiss would. He gently cups my face in his massive palm and strokes the side of my face.

"Don't ever tell me what I feel again, Little Bird," he tells me earnestly. I nod, and that's all it takes for him to pounce on me again, this time kissing me with the burning hot passion I'm more used to from him. He walks us backwards while kissing me until I feel my back hit the unforgiving bark of a tree. He presses me hard against it, pushing his whole body into mine, cupping my ass and lifting me so that I have no choice but to wrap my legs around him and cling on for dear life. His arousal, probably only at half-mast, is pressing against me and damn, I've missed him. As our tongues continue to battle and dance for dominance, he stirs and grows impossibly hard beneath me. I make the mistake of wriggling against him, and he gives a low primal growl that makes me drip. He grinds against me, rubbing my exposed back against the tree trunk in a deliciously painful way. I can't get enough of him, and I start to pull at his shirt, desperately needing to feel his hot skin beneath my fingertips.

It's only when his hands sneak beneath the hem of my dress that I remember where we are. In the woods, on campus. I'm not having sex out here. I pull away from Rebel, plant my hands firmly on his chest and push, hard, to get some distance from him. I can't think straight when he kisses me like this.

“Home?”

I swear he reads my thoughts.

“Quickly,” I tell him. He wraps me even tighter in his arms and starts to barrel through the trees. He's moving faster than I thought anyone of his size could. I'm too busy clinging on for dear life to notice if anyone's around to see us or to worry about flashing my ass. It feels like I blink and we're back at the house.

We don't even make it up the stairs before we're tearing each other's clothes off. The raw need for each other is overwhelming and all-consuming. We go at it like rabbits, not caring who's in the house to hear or see us. I'm so far gone at this point I couldn't care less if Jax's stepmom was around for tea. That's how desperately I need him.

I can't get enough of him. But after four or five rounds, we're finally calm enough to make it upstairs to the bedroom where the fun begins all over again.

The door slamming wakes me on Sunday morning. It feels early, but that could just be on account of how tired I am. Needless to say, Rebel and I got hardly any sleep last night. I sit up and glance around his room. It looks like a war zone. I sigh, but smile, and wonder if we'll ever be able to just have normal sex in a bed without breaking anything.

I'm contemplating getting up to start tidying the room when the bedroom door flies open, and Ace comes barging in.

“What the fuck?!” Rebel yells, sitting up and glaring at Ace. I have to laugh at the *deja vu*. It reminds me of when

Rebel barged in on Ace and me that first morning. I wonder if he's been waiting to get revenge ever since.

"Get up," Ace tells us.

"Yeah." Thorn's head pops around the doorframe, and I groan. They're all there. I can see Jax in the background. I quickly pull the sheet up to cover my chest, but it's obviously too late. "You've had her all day and all night. It's time to share."

"What?" My eyes go wide. "Share?"

"Not like that," Jax calls.

"Unless you want to." Thorn winks, stepping into the room.

"Ugh. No way!" I lie, secretly excited at the idea. "Get out."

"Get up, Princesses," Thorn teases. "If we're not having an orgy today, then we'll do the next best thing."

"Fuck off. I'm a king, not a princess!" Rebel says, flipping him the bird.

"Which is?" I ask, flopping back against the pillows, ignoring Rebel's interruption.

"A surprise. Now get dressed."

"Hey," I sit up suddenly as a thought occurs to me. "What happened to you guys? I didn't hear you come back last night."

"You wouldn't hear anything over the noises you were making," Thorn replies and my face flames scarlet. "But we actually decided to give you guys some privacy, so we stayed elsewhere."

"Oh my god. Where did you go?" I ask. I'm pretty mortified.

"We slept in your room," he tells me, deadpanned, and I laugh until I realise he's not joking.

“Get the fuck out!” Rebel roars at them, grabbing me and pulling me underneath him. The covers slide off, but he’s covering my indecency with his body. His indecency, however, is on display for everyone to see. “It’s time for round two,” he tells me with a kiss.

“Erm, Reb, I think we’re way past round two by now.”

“Shush, you’ll make them jealous,” he tells me nodding towards the door where the guys are all still standing with various looks of amusement on their faces. I start to push Rebel off me to make him stop, but then he grinds his hardness up against me, and suddenly I don’t give a fuck who’s watching, I’m pulling him into me and kissing him back.

I have no idea if the guys stay and watch, but by the time we’re done, the doorway’s empty, and breakfast’s ready. I’d call that a pretty good start to the day.

Lizzie's Journal

April 28th

The party seems to be the gift that keeps on giving. I've spent nearly two weeks in my room, barely eating or leaving for anything, and today I have to go to the nurse.

When I went to the hospital after the party, the nurse also did an STI check. It's where they take swabs, bloods and a urine sample to test for all of the major STIs. Results take around two weeks and if you don't hear anything you're fine. You know what they say, no news is good news.

The nurse actually said that to me: No news is good news. The same nurse who's just performed a – I can't even say it, I'll call it an assault kit instead – on me.

I'm not a violent or confrontational person, but I wanted to react...somehow...when she said that to me. She'd literally just blown my world apart and confirmed my absolute worst nightmare, only to tell me to look on the bright side; no email response would mean I'm just an assault victim, not a diseased one.

I know that's not what she said, but it's how she made me feel. Instead of saying anything, though, I gave her a very weak and wobbly smile and nodded. Charlotte wouldn't have. Even with her whole world in tatters around her, she would've found the strength to give that nurse hell for her insensitive comment.

Anyway, it's been about two weeks now, and I'm looking at the one email sitting in my inbox that I didn't ever want to receive. The sender line says, 'Devon Medical Centre', and the subject line is, 'Your test results'. I don't even have to open it to feel sick. What's the opposite to that no news saying? Any news is bad news? Sounds awful. It is awful.

I have an STI.

I just need to open the email to find out which one. That sounds like one of those fake 'You have won' pop-ups that you

get on the internet, where it says you've won a prize, and you should click to claim. They're always fake though.

I wish this email was fake.

I feel like I need a bit of tough love to get myself to open the dreaded email. Charlotte's brilliant at tough love. I should channel her... Look, I tell myself, you've been assaulted, and there's nothing worse than that. This is just a small...infection in a cut. Yeah. You just need to rip the bandaid off quickly to see what the damage is underneath.

Ok, so that doesn't sound like Charlotte at all; she'd never be so insensitive, and she's actually a total sweetheart, but it's the pep talk I need to give myself to see this through. I think briefly that it doesn't matter what STI it is really; it's enough to know I have one, but then logic kicks in and I shake myself. I need to know to get the right treatment.

Chlamydia. He – this nameless, faceless presence that haunts my every moment – has given me chlamydia. If I were capable of feeling anything at all at this point, I'd probably be numb again anyway. Is it possible to get more numb? When will the anger come? Anger's good. I need an outlet for this black void that's eating away inside of me. If I could just push it out somehow – through anger – maybe I could start to... what? Heal? Be okay? Mend? I don't know if I can do or be any of those things.

So that's how, after two weeks of being bed-bound, I came to leave the sanctity of my room to go to the nurse to get treatment. It was painless enough after that – just a course of antibiotics to clear the infection right up. As if just a course of any drug could take away the memory or the pain. No, they just wash away the symptoms, not the cause.

That stays with you forever.



CHAPTER TWENTY - FIVE

Tonight there's a party off-campus to celebrate the start of the exams. Yes it's weird to party at the start of the exams, but I think everyone just needs to let off some steam and ease the tension before the exams kick off next week. I'm incredibly nervous for tonight, partly because the guys are all taking me as their date, and partly because I'm planning something dangerous to take care of Tilly. I try to calm my nerves as I get ready and wait for the guys to collect me.

The house that the party's at is enormous. It's the most opulent and ornate place I've ever set foot in and, considering who my grandmother is, that's saying something. But it's all a bit much, too showy like it's trying too hard. This is the house of someone who desperately wants to belong, but doesn't quite. That said, the party's actually pretty decent. I don't know who's technically hosting it, or whose house we're in, but it's widely considered to be Tilly's party. It doesn't bother me, because I stay away from her, and she mostly ignores me.

To begin with, the guys and I head out to the garden where there's a pool and take up residence on the sofas out on the terrace. It's just the five of us with the music from the house in the background and a small fire pit that's been lit next to us. Thorn managed to score some marshmallows from somewhere inside the house, so he's got those toasting on sticks while we sit and chat. It's kind of my idea of a perfect party – just us.

Eventually though, the other partygoers realise there's a pool and they all come out and disturb our peace. I watch as half-drunk girls strip down to their underwear and dive into the pool shrieking and giggling. I wonder idly how much they want to swim, and how much they just want to have all eyes on them by getting naked.

“Damn, why didn't we think of that?” Rebel moans as he watches them. I smack him on the arm for looking. “Ow! Not like that, I meant the five of us should've gone for a swim when it was quiet.”

“Couldn't,” I tell him with a wink. “Not wearing any underwear to swim in.”

“Damn, Princess. I'm down for skinny dipping.”

“You're such a SoCal guy.” I laugh and hit his arm again, but in a much more playful way.

“Guilty as charged.” He winks back.

Thorn grabs my hand and spins me around, pulling me into his arms and dancing with me on the terrace. I snuggle into his chest and let him lead me around our impromptu dance floor. After a while, Ace cuts in for a dance. My guys and I dance loads, not caring who sees us, and have a laugh together. It's the most fun I've had in ages, and there's no drama. It's easy being around them, and somehow the five of us just click and fit together like the pieces of a perfect jigsaw puzzle.

We move inside when it gets cooler, and squirrel ourselves away in a quiet corner of the kitchen. “Pop, Princess?” Ace holds a drink out to me in a tall glass. I take it gratefully, appreciating both his thoughtfulness and that this party is boycotting single-use plastics. I hate needless waste, and I'd made a point of buying reusable hot chocolate cups for all the guys earlier in the year.

I smile at him and give my thanks, taking a drink. “Another dance?” he asks me, and I nod, passing my bottle to Rebel and putting my hand in Ace's outstretched one so that he can lead me to the dance floor. It feels like we dance for hours, swapping partners out every few songs, bouncing all

together to the upbeat tunes. It's even more fun inside in the centre of the action because the party atmosphere's infectious.

After a while I excuse myself to go to the loo and get another coke. I stand in a quiet corner catching my breath. My hands are shaking, my palms sweaty. I can't believe I'm about to do this, but I'm putting all my trust into the princes. They don't know it, but my life could very well be in their hands shortly. I slowly raise my cup to my lips and take a drink of my coke. Holding the liquid in my mouth, I slip the small pill between my lips and swallow the whole lot together. It'll work fast, and things'll go to shit quickly. Tilly smacks into me as she passes, hissing "Slut" at me under her breath. Her blow glances off me, and I ignore her in search of one of the guys, but she seems to have other ideas.

She reaches out and grabs my hair, yanking my head back hard. "Fuck off Tilly," I bite out through clenched teeth. When she pulls my hair again, my patience snaps. I spin around and elbow her in the gut. Then I quickly down the rest of my drink – which tastes odd but I put that down to the residue of the tablet I just took – so that my hands are free to defend myself.

"Whore!" she spits. Like, she actually spits in my face. It's fucking gross.

"Green really isn't your colour, love," I tell her with a smirk. She's wearing pink, so she knows exactly what I mean. She gives a wild scream and lunges at me, her talon-like fingernails coming for my face, which I quickly block. Instead of making contact with my cheeks, her nails rake down my exposed arms, and I feel that she breaks the skin. She's fucking savage. I need to get myself out of this situation because I can already feel my head spinning. Is it my imagination, or am I swaying slightly on my feet? Fuck.

I step back and look for a way out. I can't believe that the guys have all vanished. Tilly steps in close and snarls at me, "Run away, slag. You'll get what's coming to you." She shoves me hard, and I stumble backwards, barely managing to keep my footing. She looks at me like I'm absolutely pathetic – and right now I am – before she flounces off.

It takes a few minutes for me to recover and find my feet, and when I do, I go off in search of the guys. I bump into Michael who takes me by the elbow and tries to guide me upstairs – to the loo I think – but I manage to shrug him off and tell him I’m looking for the guys. Once again he takes my elbow and pulls me towards the stairs, saying he’ll take me to them, but why would they be upstairs at a party?

I tell Michael this, freeing myself from his grip, and quickly move back towards the lounge. I push through the crowds, a little unsteady on my feet now, searching for any of the guys. It’s Rebel I find first, and he’s quick to notice that I’m feeling funny. “Princess, are you okay?” he asks, placing a concerned hand on my clammy forehead.

“Yeah, just hot,” I tell him. Even I can tell I’m slurring my words.

“Have you been drinking?”

“No. I hardly ever drink. I think I’m just hot. Dance with me?” He agrees and sweeps me into his arms for a slow dance, but he keeps a close eye on me. It doesn’t take long before I’m burning up and swaying on my feet. Rebel tugs me outside, grabbing Ace on the way past.

Once we’re outside Rebel gets me to sit next to Ace on a bench, instructing him to keep me awake, then disappears in search of Thorn and Jax. Ace notices that I’m bleeding where Tilly has scratched me, but when he asks me what happened, I can’t get any words out. I’m shaking so hard my teeth rattle.

I don’t know when Rebel returns with Thorn and Jax; I’m pretty out of it by then, barely able to keep my eyes open. I’m vaguely aware of being lifted and carried to a car, and of Rebel stroking my hair and telling me to stay with them, while Thorn yells at Jax to drive faster. I like Rebel stroking my hair, it makes me sleepy, but all the yelling is hurting my head. I want to tell them to stop, but my tongue feels thick but loose, and I can’t control it at all. Shit. My head’s pounding, and there are so many lights spinning and flashing.

“Stop.” I just about manage to get out and then I’m vomiting. Someone holds my hair back and rubs my back, but

I just keep being sick. Griping stomach pains consume me with every heave. “Oh god,” I groan. I’ve never felt pain like this. Something doesn’t feel right.

“Fuck guys, I think we need to get her to a hospital.”

“No! Snowkay ’mmmmmfiiiiine.” Fuck, I don’t even know what I’m saying.

Then the ground’s suddenly rushing towards me, and I’m going down. Hard. I think someone catches me before I face plant, but then there’s only darkness.

It’s scary, but also something of a relief.

When I come to, I’m expecting the soft sheets and low light of my room, or one of the guys’ rooms at least, but instead, I feel starchy, scratchy sheets and blink awake to harsh bright white light. Instantly I know that there’s something wrong and I’m not where I expected to be; I’m in hospital instead. There’s a drip in my right arm and as soon as I notice it my skin feels like it’s on fire and I want to pull the needle out. I reach across to scratch at it with my left hand, and my movement makes the room come alive.

The blonde head in my lap stirs and lifts, Thorn blinking awake and smiling shakily at me. His bright blue eyes look tired, and there are lines in his face that I don’t think are from the blanket he’s been sleeping on. “Hey, Princess.” His voice is gruff with sleep and worry, but when I offer him a shaky “hi” back, I discover mine is too.

Our exchange seems to spur the others into motion, and I realise that there’s a sofa to my right under the window of my room, which Jax and Rebel are sat on. Ace is to the left of them in a single armchair. This seems to be the nicest hospital room I’ve ever been in, but they don’t exactly look comfortable. The three of them simultaneously get to their feet and approach me tentatively, asking how I’m feeling.

“Tired. Groggy. What happened?”

They exchange a glance so quickly that I almost miss it.

“Listen, baby.” Rebel steps forward and comes around the bed to my left side, taking my hand. “What do you remember?”

“I was at the party with you guys, having a good time. I was drinking coke, Tilly...banged into me, we danced, and then I didn’t feel so good...oh no, did I get sick?” I trail off.

“Shush, it’s okay, no one minds. What day was that, darling?”

“Friday. Yesterday.”

“Friday, yes. But it’s Sunday evening now,” he tells me this gently like he’s afraid I’m going to freak out.

“Oh.” I blink; processing. “What happened?”

“You were drugged. A date rape drug we think.” I gulp and swallow, but this isn’t news to me, “But something went wrong. The doctors think you had an allergic reaction to whatever it was you were given.”

I nod my head slowly, trying to let that information sink in. I really did put my life in their hands then. That wasn’t part of my plan. What went wrong?

“The police are going to want to talk to you, but we won’t let them anywhere near you until you’re rested.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, starting to shake and shiver. I’m not acting; I’m shit scared. I’ve lost two days, and by the looks on the guys’ faces, I nearly died. I don’t want to talk to the police. Not now, not ever.

“Princess, baby, tell me please if you remember anything else.” His voice is pleading, heartbroken. My heart twists.

I close my eyes and relive the moments before it all went black.

“Tilly,” I whisper. “She hit me and...called me something. I think there was blood? She hates me, but I don’t think she’d do this. Although...” I trail off, unsure.

“Although what, Little Bird?”

“The girls said...everyone knows...” I swallow and continue like I’m scared to get her in trouble. “She sells drugs. She stores them in her desk somewhere. But I think it’s just coke. Do we know what I was given?”

“We don’t, not yet, darling, but the doctors are running tests to find out.”

Jax storms from the room looking enraged and after a pointed look from Rebel, Thorn and Ace follow him.

“Where are they going?” I ask.

“To sort this out.”

“Oh. How?”

“I don’t know, Princess, don’t worry about it.”

“Why did you stay?”

“Baby, we aren’t going to leave you alone. Ever.”

“But why did *you* stay?”

“Because I’m so angry right now, I’d kill anyone who I think even looked at you wrong. Princess, I’ve been out of my mind with worry. You scared us – me – so bad. Don’t do it again.”

“Okay,” I promise quietly. “I won’t.” I give him a small smile and squeeze his hand gently. “Is it okay if I sleep now? I’m really tired. Can you get the guys to come back?”

“Sleep, Princess.” He kisses my hand. “I’ll sort it out. I’ve got you.”

This time the darkness that engulfs me isn’t so scary.

I slip in and out of consciousness, but I have no idea for how long. Sometimes when I wake it feels like I’ve been asleep for days, other times it feels like my eyes have been closed for minutes. The only constant seems to be that when I wake, one of the guys is by my side, and the other three are close by in

the room. Whoever's by my side is always touching me, and we have a few mumbled conversations before my heavy eyelids droop, and I'm gone again. Occasionally, doctors and nurses are poking and prodding me, but they're pretty easy to ignore when I have the four worried faces of the princes to focus on instead. I've given them quite a scare. I've given myself quite a scare. I only hope it was worth it.

When I come round – again – it's to Jax asleep with his head in my lap. I blink hard in surprise, needing to check my eyesight's working properly. He's holding my hand, and there's no way I can move it without waking him.

The door clicks open gently, and a nurse comes in to take my obs. She looks at Jax and shakes her head. I worry for a second that she might insist on waking him, but she doesn't. She works quietly and efficiently around him and smiles at me. "You've got those boys wrapped around your little finger missy, they resorted to fighting over who would stay with you last night."

"Why didn't they all stay?" I whisper.

"Sweetie, they need their rest too. They've been here since they brought you in, and once you'd woken up and the initial danger had passed, we do try to insist on two visitors at a time. I know you have your own private room so they can all visit, but sleepovers are pushing it a bit."

I nod because I totally get it, and I don't want special treatment. But I'm so glad that one of the guys at least did stay with me. I just didn't expect it to be Jax. I use the opportunity to stare at him while he sleeps. He really is gorgeous. In his sleep, his face is relaxed, and it really suits him. He's softer, and I'm not used to seeing that side of him.

He blinks, and I'm suddenly staring into his dark espresso eyes.

"Hi," I whisper as he stares intently at me.

“You should be resting.”

“I am. I’m just lying in bed, not doing anything.”

“Don’t argue with me. You’re not too poorly for me to put you over my knee and spank you, you know.”

“I’m afraid, Mr Jaxon, she is too poorly for that.” The voice that comes from the doorway is accompanied by a white coat, and I blush flame-red in mortification at the implication of what he heard Jax say to me. Nope, I can’t even respond to that one. And Jax? The fucker just laughs.

“I’ll owe you one when you’re home and feeling up to it then.” He winks at me, and I don’t feel so bad anymore. In fact, I suddenly feel like I could go home quite soon. Jax obviously notices how my face brightens because he laughs and shakes his head at me. “Insatiable,” he mutters under his breath, affectionately.

“Miss Deighton,” the doctor begins.

“Please, call me Raven.”

The doctor smiles like he’s relieved I’ve asked him to do this and then continues, “How much do you remember?”

“I remember the party, feeling unwell and a few snippets since then. The guys filled me in pretty well when I woke up.” He nods.

“And when was this?”

“The party? Friday.” He nods again.

“And – humour me here – what date was that?”

“Erm, May 3rd.”

“And when do your exams start?”

“May 13th. Do you need me to tell you the year too?”

“No,” he chuckles, “it’s quite alright.”

“Gee thanks.”

“No problem.” He totally misses my sarcasm. “That’s good that you remember things. Now, I know the police are keen to get a statement from you, but I support Mr Jackson’s

sentiment that they can wait until you're better and home, so rest assured that you'll be able to rest and relax in peace while you're still with us."

I sag with relief at that. It buys me some time at least.

"What happened?" I ask the doctor shakily.

"Well, we were hoping you could tell us that, but your tox screen came back with a cocktail of drugs – four or five different ones it would seem – and your young gentleman friends assure me that you do not do drugs of any kind. So we're assuming that whoever did this to you slipped you a combination of drugs to create a very adverse reaction in you."

I know that the doctor's dumbed-down his medical speak for me, but to my fuzzy brain I feel like he's speaking Greek or something. Five drugs? That's not right. I only took one. I shake my head.

"I know it's a lot to take in. But you were either targeted by multiple people spiking your drink, or you were deliberately given a cocktail of drugs which could've been lethal."

"Reb- Rebel said I had an allergy?"

"Initially we believed that to be true, that you had had a particularly violent reaction to whatever you'd taken, but when the drug report came back we realised it was actually the drugs reacting with each other in your system that had caused the seizures."

"Seizures?"

"Don't worry. You're over the worst. We're just keeping you in for a while longer to keep an eye on you and to make sure that everything's out of your system. We'll look after you, I promise."

"When can I go home?"

"Maybe tomorrow. We'll see."

"Can I go out; of this room, I mean?"

“Sure, I don’t see why not. So long as you’re accompanied. Maybe use a wheelchair initially until you build some strength up. You’ve been off your feet for a while, and it’s always a shock to people how that can affect them.” I nod. “Excellent. Do you have any other questions?”

“No. Thank you, doctor.”

“Okay then. I’ll leave you now, but I’ll be back tomorrow to see how you’re getting on.” He beams at me and says goodbye, and then he’s gone, leaving Jax and me alone for what feels like the first time in ages.

“Hey,” I offer lamely. I have no idea what to say to him. “You okay?”

He gives a harsh laugh. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“I’m okay. Thanks to you guys.”

His face darkens, his eyes becoming stormy. “I can’t even think about what could’ve happened if we weren’t there. It’s awful. You were with us most of the night, and then the one second you were gone, this happens.”

“What are you saying?”

“I don’t think this was random. I think you were targeted.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what to say to that.

“Don’t worry, we’ll take care of it.”

“Is that what you were doing...” oh shit, when was it that I first woke up? “Yesterday?” I guess, and he nods.

“Yeah, it’s Monday night now. I guess I’m having a second sleepover. I don’t mind. Yes, we left to report what you said to the school. But we can talk about that when you’re home.”

“Home?” A flash of panic races through me. I can’t go home yet. I’m not done here.

“With us. Do you really think the others will let you out of their sight?” Relief floods me at his words, and I relax back into the pillows on the bed. “I take it you’re happy about that?”

“Yeah. The only thing I’m sure of is that the four of you had nothing to do with this. I don’t trust anyone else, so yeah, I’ll be glad to move into your spare room until the end of term, if that’s not too much of an imposition?”

“Never an imposition. But be sure to tell the police you don’t think it was us.”

“What? Why?”

“You were brought in unconscious by four guys, dressed for a party. It didn’t look good. They wanted to keep you away from us until after the police had spoken to you – to make sure we weren’t coercing your story I guess – but after Rebel threatened a few people and punched the wall, they let us sit with you.”

“Jesus, that’s awful.”

“He didn’t do too much damage, don’t worry.”

“Not that, although you can hit him for me for being an idiot. I mean it’s awful that you basically saved my life, but we’re treated like suspects for it. I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault, baby.” He shrugs.

“I’ll be very clear about your involvement when I speak to the police, I promise.”

“Just rest, we can worry about all that when you’re better and home.”

“Home.” This time I smile. I have something to look forward to. “Oh, do you think one of the guys could swing by my room and grab my revision notes?”

“You don’t have to sit the exams if you don’t want to. The doctors already said they’ll give you a medical certificate.”

“Thanks but no,” I pull a face, “I can’t do that. I’ve worked hard, I’m ready. Seems stupid to throw it away now.” He seems really pleased – proud almost – by my answer, and it makes me glad that I chose to do the right thing.

“I’ll get your notes here for the morning. Do you want to rest now? It’s not too late, but this is the longest you’ve been

awake for a while.”

“Actually, I’d really love to get out of this room and maybe, if it’s not too much trouble, see the others too?”

“Absolutely. I’ll message them now and go find a chair. Do you need anything before I pop out? I’ll only be a minute.”

“No, I’m fine,” I tell him. He leans over and gives me a quick, tender, and wholly unexpected kiss on the lips and then heads out, pulling a phone from his pocket as he does. Huh. So the no phones rule doesn’t apply to everyone then? He is the headmistress’ stepson after all, maybe he’s allowed special privileges. Although, he said he’d message the others, so they must have phones too. Odd, they’d never said anything or asked me for my number.

Overthinking causes my head to hurt, so I lie back on the pillows, just closing my eyes to rest until Jax comes back with a wheelchair for me. But before I know it, I’m out like a light.

When I wake up on Tuesday, all of the guys are there with my revision notes, which they won’t let me read. Instead, they take turns reading them to me and quizzing each other, using game-show host voices and funny sound effects. It entertains me and helps me get back on track with my schoolwork. They even stick me in a wheelchair and take me to the cafe – which is surprisingly good – and for a little spin outside. It feels incredible to get some sun and fresh air. I’m so sick of being in hospital already, I’m constantly harassing them about when I can go home. I try to leave with them Tuesday night, but they’re having none of it. It’s only because Ace stays with me in the hospital that I agree to stay and spend one more night. I threaten to revolt and self-discharge if they try to keep me any longer than that.

Thankfully, the doctors finally let me out of hospital on Wednesday afternoon. I think they probably would’ve let me out sooner, but Rebel got a bit overprotective and insisted they run all sorts of tests and scans and things. It was completely over the top, but also totally adorable. Not that I let him know I thought that. I bitched and moaned at him instead and blamed him for my prolonged incarceration.

I was beyond happy to pull back onto campus, nestled in the front seat of the jeep with Jax's hand resting on my thigh whenever he didn't need it for changing gear or signalling. To my surprise, Jax pulls up in front of the primary school entrance, and I turn to him with trepidation.

"I thought I was coming to your place?"

"You are. Of course."

"Why have you stopped here then?"

"We're going to go up to your room to grab some stuff, and my stepmother wants to see you in her office."

"Shit. Okay." I swallow nervously. "Can you come with me?"

"I will if you want me to, but I don't think you have anything to worry about."

"Please," is all I say. I stare at the entrance to the school with dread swirling in my stomach. I don't want to go in there. I don't want to speak to anybody. I especially don't want to talk to Headmistress Archer. But of course, I don't say any of that. I smile and nod and climb out of the car.

"Make sure those two pack panties," I tell Ace, pointing to Thorn and Rebel as they head inside and off to pack my bag. "I need practical items too."

"Trust me," Ace replies with a quick kiss to my temple, which is reassuring.

Just as we're about to knock and enter the headmistress office, I hear laughter on the main staircase and look up to see not only Tilly but Belle, Amber, Lexxi and Natalia coming down the steps towards me.

In total dismay, I turn to Jax and ask, "What the fuck are they doing here?"

"Good question," he replies, and I've never seen him look so mad. "Let's ask Mummy dearest." With that, he knocks on the door to her office hard enough to take it off its hinges, barging in and not waiting for a reply. I quickly follow, closing the door behind us, and take a seat opposite the headmistress.

“What the actual fuck?!” Jax spits at his stepmother.
Well, yes, my sentiments exactly.

Lizzie's Journal

May 14th

Rape.

Apparently not calling it that doesn't help you to deal with it at all. I'm not going to lie, I'm not coping well. I feel so sick all of the time.

I've decided it's the gift that keeps on giving. Or is it taking?

So far the attack has taken from me:

My virginity

My freedom

My confidence

My friends

My ability to relax

My safety

My sleep

My health

My dignity

My ability to trust anyone ever again

My reputation

I feel like I could go on with this list, but I probably shouldn't if I want to remain functioning.

I say that because that's all I do now; just enough functioning to get through each day. Most days now I manage to wash and eat maybe one or two small meals, to go to class and to rest in bed. I still don't really sleep, but that's preferable to the nightmares that wake me up screaming, anyway. My schoolwork's suffering – hell, it's probably beyond all repair by now – and I can't bring myself to be around people.

I do have to add one more thing to the list of things stolen from me though...

So far the attack has ripped from me:

My virginity

My freedom

My confidence

My friends

My ability to relax

My safety

My sleep

My health

My dignity

My reputation

My ability to trust anyone ever again

My future

The positive pregnancy test has definitely put an end to that.

Fuck.

As you would say, Charlotte, everything is so very fucking fucked.

I have no idea what to do. Charlotte, what would you do?



CHAPTER TWENTY - SIX

“What the actual fuck?!” Jax repeats, incandescent with a forced, biting calmness that belies his rage. It’s a terrifyingly wondrous thing to behold. I’ve never seen him like this. And while it’s not the time, it does make my thighs clench together and tingle.

“Watch your language, Jaxon,” Headmistress Archer barks at him. If I thought she was cold with me when I first arrived, that’s nothing compared to how she’s speaking to Jax right now. Aren’t families supposed to be all hugs and kisses and rainbows and shit? There’s definitely beef here. It would be fascinating to watch if it weren’t for the fact that I’m reeling by the return of the princesses.

“No, I will not watch my language, Mother,” he spits the last word with such sarcastic vehemence that a little spit actually flies from the corner of his mouth. Cool, calm, unflappable Jax, just spat in fury. What the fuck? “I want to know what the fuck she’s doing still in this school when she almost killed another student!”

“There wasn’t enough evidence to expel her, son.” While still cold, her voice is wary now. She says ‘son’ with a sadness to her voice that I didn’t expect.

“BULLSHIT!” Jax explodes, making me jump. “She fucking confessed to drugging her! Her room was full of

coke!”

“Tilly confessed?” My voice is tiny, lost in the tempest of this family feud.

“She denies the coke is hers.”

“For fucks’ sake!” Jax slams his hand down on the table, and even though I’m watching him, expecting it, I still flinch. I don’t know how his stepmother doesn’t. She must be made of steel.

“That’s quite enough of that, Jaxon.” Her voice is sharp, commanding. The stepmother has left the room, and the headmistress has stepped into her place. “Tilly realises that she is in a lot of trouble for the drink spiking incident. She says it was supposed to be a silly prank between friends but that it had inadvertently gone wrong. She was very upset when she heard how serious things were. I’m sure the only reason she didn’t visit Miss Deighton in hospital was that she is feeling so guilty. As such, the school board and I, after a long telephone consultation with Tilly’s parents, decided that Tilly should not be expelled for a silly, mindless prank which ended badly.”

I’m flabbergasted. Completely disbelieving. There was so much wrong with that well-rehearsed speech that I can’t even comprehend where to begin. Angry tears prick at my eyes, and I dash them away furiously with the back of my hand.

“You fucking bitch,” Jax’s voice is so low I could easily mistake it for Rebel’s growl. I give a shocked gasp, scared that he’s crossed a line.

“Jaxon!” Headmistress Archer says his name as a pained gasp.

“NO!” Jax tells. “You do not get to be upset. You do not get to be the victim.” He spins and points at me. “She is the fucking victim! She has been another victim of bullying by Tilly’s hand. She is the victim of an assault. That’s an actual crime Mother. If we hadn’t been there, she would’ve been the victim to one of the worst crimes known to man. And you’re telling me Tilly is fucking sorry? That it was some sort of fucking prank? That you’re letting it slide? With what, a slap

on the wrist? FUCK YOU! I cannot believe you are letting history repeat itself. When will you learn? I am fucking done with your bullshit. I am done with you!”

During his rant, Jax gets up from his seat and stalks towards his stepmother. He’s inches from her, yelling in her face by the time he finishes and not once, until the very end and those five final words, did she react or flinch.

“Fuck it, Raven, we’re out of here. There’s nothing she can say to you that will make this alright.”

“Jaxon, I—” her tone is weak, pleading

“No.” His is emphatic. He won’t hear her out.

“How much?” he asks like it’s just occurred to him. I have no idea what he’s going on about though.

“Wh-What?” She’s as shaky on her feet as her voice is.

“You heard me, mother,” he spits. “I want to know how much Tilly’s parents paid for her to stay here.”

“Jaxon, please understand...”

“How. Much,” he grinds out between clenched teeth.

“A lot,” she whispers, looking shamefaced. “Too much. More than I can go against.” It makes sense now. Of course rich people would find a way to pay to keep their kid here. I bet if she ever did anything bad enough to land her in prison, they’d pay their way out of that too. Life really is fucking swell when you have money, status and privilege. It makes me sick.

“And a nice healthy chunk of that will line your pocket too. You make me sick. I fucking despise you. I don’t care if we’re the last goddamn family each other has on earth. For this, you’re dead to me.”

She gives a strangled sort of sob, like she might cry, and sinks to her chair.

“Jaxon, please...” she begs.

“The police are coming tomorrow to interview Raven. I expect your statement that Tilly confessed, and for you to hand

over the coke and date rape drugs we found when we searched her room on Sunday. We will be pressing charges, regardless of the school's stance on this matter." Jax's voice is steel. It makes my legs weak, and his fury isn't even directed at me. Yet somehow his stepmother looks like she wants to protest. He sees this and levels her with such a hard, despising stare that it takes my breath away.

"Do this one thing right, and you might be on the path to redeeming yourself," he tells her. She looks absolutely miserable, but she nods her head dejectedly. Whose side is she on? What's going on here? Why does Jax sound like he's bossing his stepmother around? Honestly, right now he's more like the adult and she the child than how it's meant to be. Why? Not to mention that the firm, strong, matter-of-fact way he handles his stepmother reminds me of the way he...ew. I don't even want to voice that thought.

Jax grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet, heading towards the door.

"Raven is moving in with us until the end of term," he tells her as he pauses at the door.

"Jaxon! No!" she gasps. "What will the board think?"

"I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks. I have a duty to keep her safe where you've failed and are choosing to continue to fail. Until Tilly is gone, Raven is not setting foot anywhere near her. You better make special arrangements for Tilly to sit her exams in your office because if I see her in the hall, I won't be sitting in silence filling in my exam papers like a good little son. The least you can do is put her in isolation now until the end of term. And I expect you to keep a very close eye on those cronies of hers too. I don't want any revenge or retaliation coming back at Raven for this."

"Jaxon..."

"Keep her away from us, or you will regret it."

With that final, ominous threat, he drags me from the room and slams the office door shut behind him. Exhaling a large breath, he turns and punches the door. "Fuck!" he grinds out.

I've never seen him – anyone – this worked up before. I don't know what to do or say. I'm a bit scared to touch or speak to him because I don't know how he'll react. I wish the others were here.

“Jax?” My voice is softer and more tentative than I've ever heard it. He exhales noisily once again, eyes closed, head resting against the door. “Jax?” He turns to look at me, and I can see the effort it takes for him to calm himself.

“I'm sorry...I'm so sorry, Raven.” His anger has instantly dissolved into sadness and regret.

“You have nothing to apologise for.”

“I have everything to apologise for. I shouldn't have let her wind me up like that. I shouldn't have let her treat you like that. I shouldn't have let you get hurt.”

“I wasn't hurt.”

“Six days in hospital? You were hurt. Just not in the way she planned.” His voice is dark and brokers no disagreement.

“C'mon, let's go home. I want takeaway and cuddles and a stint in the hot tub. If that's okay with you, Doctor Jax?” I tease him with a twinkle, trying to lighten the mood.

For a moment I think he didn't even hear me, he's so absorbed with brooding on his thoughts. But then to my surprise, he cocks a half-smile and replies, “Absolutely. But I'm not leaving you alone, so you'll have to put up with me in the tub with you.”

“Promises, promises,” I joke, smiling at him, relieved. We quickly walk back to the house once we realise the Jeep's gone so the guys must've grabbed my stuff already. Despite it being quite a beautiful day, the grounds are quiet, so we don't see anyone else on the way.

“You okay?” Jax asks me when we get to the door. I swallow nervously and lie.

“I'm fine.”

“Go and get straight in the hot tub.” He rubs my shoulders. “I'll speak to the guys, then bring you a drink.”

“Okay.”

I don't put up a fight – though I rarely do when it's Jax telling me what to do – because I'm still reeling from what I just witnessed in the headmistress' office. Instead, I head upstairs to get my bikini and a towel, before heading down to the garden and slipping into the warm water. Instantly, everything seems less wrong. My stress and worries seem to just melt away. Massage jets can do that for a girl.

“Hey, Princess,” Thorn calls out coming out of the French doors at the back of the house. He moves over to join me, dressed just in his board shorts. I appreciate the view and give him a salacious wink. “Scoot over,” he tells me, climbing in, so I comply. When he's in, he reaches out and pulls me over, tucking me onto his lap where I have to snuggle into his chest to keep my shoulders under the water. “Sorry about what happened with Jax's mum. She's such a bitch. I'm not surprised that she let Tilly's parents pay their way for her to stay.”

“I—”

“Don't worry, Princess, we won't let anything happen to you.”

“Thanks.” I give him a weak smile. “Where are the others? Are they coming?”

“Jax is just getting drinks. Ace is...calming Rebel down. He'll be fine once they've gone a few rounds sparring together upstairs.”

“Rebel and Ace spar?” Jesus, the thought of that makes my mouth water. How is it nearly the end of the school year and this isn't something I've seen? I'm half tempted to get out of the water to go and watch them, but when Thorn's hands find my shoulders and begin to knead my knots out, I figure I can leave it for another day.

“Damn your hands are mighty fine, Thor,” I groan.

“Just my hands?” My eyes may be closed in bliss, but I can hear the teasing smirk in his voice. Luckily, I'm saved from having to answer him by the arrival of Jax with our drinks.

“What’s this?” I ask when he hands me a tall glass with greenery in it.

“It’s a mojito. Virgin because I know you don’t really like to drink.”

“What’s in it?” I eye the drink suspiciously. There’s a cocktail umbrella in it for goodness’ sake!

“Lemonade, lime, mint, ice and sugar.”

“I don’t really like mint,” I tell him, unconvinced.

“Try it. Trust me.”

I sigh and take a sip of the drink through the metal straw he’s provided. It’s light and fresh, sharp with the twang of citrus but with sweetness from the sugar. It’s amazing.

“Oh wow.”

“See? I told you.” He beams at me, and I take another longer slurp of the drink.

“That’s seriously good. I wish I’d discovered it sooner! You said it was virgin? What should be in it?”

“Well, it’s usually made with soda water.” I gag. “But I know you don’t like that, hence the lemonade. And usually it has white rum.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound so bad.”

“I’ll make you a proper one next time then.” He smiles and climbs in beside me.

We sit in the hot water with the jets going noisily for a while, which prevents all conversation. I observe Jax warily, and although he never fully relaxes, I do see him unwind. It’s a while before Ace and Rebel join us, both wet from showers and looking slightly worse for wear when they slip into the water with a fresh round of drinks for everyone. Eventually Jax knocks the jets off so that we can talk.

“Okay, let’s run over the plan of action,” Jax says.

“Plan?” I ask

“Yeah, we have exams starting next week, and then it’s – what, three weeks? – til the end of term. We have to keep you safe until then,” he tells me.

“Okay. No school,” Ace chimes in.

“I agree, Ace. For the rest of this week at least. Once the exams start, we can go to class once I check that Tilly’s in isolation. I don’t want us even bumping into her in the corridors.” I watch their exchange and can see why Jax is considered to be their leader, he’s efficient, to the point and practical.

“I’ll cook,” Ace offers.

“Great. I don’t want to see her in the canteen so we’ll have all meals here. What else?” Jax looks to Rebel and Thorn.

“The exam hall?” Thorn suggests.

“I’ve demanded that Tilly sit her papers in the office so we should be fine there,” Jax tells him.

“That’s good. Sounds like you’ve covered everything.”

“What about the others?” I ask in a small voice.

“What do you mean?” Rebel’s head spins to focus on me.

“I know they didn’t do anything, but they’re her friends. Do they pose a threat?”

“Good point,” Rebel ponders. “Jax, what do you think?”

“I think without their leader around they’ll be timid, but we can keep a close eye on them, and if there’s even a hint that they’re up to something, I’ll sort it out.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. I’m not going to lie, I was shocked and unnerved to see the princesses reunited. “But why are Lexxi and Natalia back?”

“Their parents struck a deal with the school board to allow them back to complete their exams despite their drop in attendance. The board agreed because they’re both model students who are on track to get good grades. Good grades make the school look good...plus they made donations.”

“Oh.” It always comes down to money, doesn’t it? I was sure that Lexxi and Natalia at least were gone for the year because of their poor attendance. More to the point, why were they all together and laughing? The last I remembered, Tilly was looking for new cronies because Amber was in hospital and she was too homophobic to hang out with Belle anymore. Were they friends again? I wouldn’t have thought Belle would put up with that kind of behaviour, but then again, she did allow the girl she allegedly loved to be bullied without doing anything, so what did I know?

“You okay, Princess?” Rebel breaks me out of my thoughts, and I spy him watching me closely.

“I’m fine.” I shake my head to clear it. “Are we going to start studying then?”

“Tomorrow. We have four days before the exams start. Don’t worry, there’s plenty of time.” Rebel winks at me.

“What do you fancy for tea?” Thorn asks.

“I’ll cook,” Ace offers.

“She wants takeaway,” Jax tells them. “Right, Princess?”

“Please. Takeaway, a film, and maybe cuddles on the sofa?”

“Your wish is our command.” Rebel smirks.

We get out of the hot tub a while later and get showered. I change into my PJs – Jax’s sweats – and snuggle on the sofa with the takeaway menu.

“What you having, Princess?” Rebel asks me.

“I can’t choose. I don’t know what I want.” I sigh.

“Do you want us to just order a selection and we can have a picnic?”

“Yeah, that’s perfect,” I reply, brightening. “Can you choose the film too? I just want to switch off and not think.”

“Of course, baby girl. Consider it done.”

True to his word, Rebel takes care of everything that night. He orders a selection of Thai dishes, and I end up loving all of them. Jax makes me more mojitos and laughs when I tell him I prefer the virgin version. We all sit together on the reclining sofas and watch a couple of films that are just easy to switch off through. I get my cuddles with each of them, but I thought there might be...more. To my surprise though, none of them makes a move. They're perfect gentlemen – much to my disgust. I think Jax must have warned them off on account of me being just out of hospital, but to be honest I would've welcomed the distraction. I was missing all of them. Craving their touches, kisses, attention. It was the longest I'd gone without since we started dating. I wasn't happy about it. But as the evening wore on and I was fighting back yawn after yawn, I had to concede that Jax may have had the right idea in getting the guys to back off and let me rest.

Still, that doesn't stop me grabbing Rebel for a passionate kiss when he carries me up to bed. I'm tired, not dead. And some opportunities are just too good to pass up. Rebel's lips always being one of them.

“Guys?” I yell up the stairs on Sunday evening. “I’m going for a run.” I feel like I’ve been cooped up too long. Don’t get me wrong, the last four days have been amazing, cocooned in our little bubble where the outside world can’t get in, but I feel it’s time to rejoin the real world. We’ve spent the last few days chilling and relaxing in the hot tub, revising for the exams and studying hard. None of the guys have touched me, though. The most I’ve managed to get from any of them is a cuddle and a kiss on the top of my head. It’s driving me crazy, so hopefully a run will help me...let off some steam. Tomorrow the exams begin, and I have to go back to school, back to classes, back to normal...I’m not ready. I figure that a run now might help prepare me for tomorrow.

When none of the guys protest or offer to come with me, I slip my running trainers on and head out of the door. It’s late

evening, yet light out, thanks to the balmy summer evening, but I still grabbed a jacket because the woods are much cooler with their leafy shade. After a couple of minutes stretching and warming up, I'm ready to go. I set off at a moderate pace, feeling stiff and out of touch. Damn, I need to train more. I can't remember the last time I went for a run, let alone had a good sparring session or practised my knife-throwing skills. I need to focus and work harder. Academic exams aren't all I have to focus on.

I'm pretty deep into the woods when I hear raised voices. Although it's strange because other students don't usually come to this part of campus, I don't think much of it until I realise I know those voices. Curious, I slow to a walk so that I can catch my breath and listen to see who it is.

"What the fuck are you playing at you fucking bitch?" Whoa. That's Jax's voice, somehow sounding even angrier than that day in his stepmother's office. Who is he talking to?

"Oh, calm down." Shit, that's Tilly. Why are they in the woods? Together? "Nothing fucking happened."

"She could've died, you stupid bitch!"

"But she didn't." There is no remorse whatsoever in her voice.

"You drugged her. With a cocktail of date rape drugs. What the fuck, Tilly?"

"You know how I operate. You've seen my work. This wasn't my first rodeo." Is she admitting to drugging others before me? Did Jax know? She's making it sound that way, but I know she can be manipulative as fuck. Shit. What to believe?

"You make me sick," Jax spits, and I can hear the absolute loathing that he has for her in every word.

"Not what you used to say." Her voice has taken on a low seductive quality. Gag. "Darkness speaks to Darkness. You should know." She laughs, and the sound turns my stomach.

"I'm done with this conversation. With you. I'm warning you Tilly: I'll fucking kill you if you go near her again."

I hear footsteps, and a moment too late I realise they're coming towards me. The sight of Jax storming out of the trees coming towards me jolts me into action. That's when I turn on my heels and run. I hear Jax swear and call my name, but I'm off before he can catch up to me.

I don't stop running until I'm locked away safely in my room. My heart's pounding, but I don't think it's from the exertion of getting back to the house. I can't even begin to process what I've just overheard between Jax and Tilly. I feel sick.

I jump into the shower, and once I'm done, I settle onto my bed to do some last-minute revision. I have no idea how many hours I'm at it before there's a soft knock at my door and Thorn enters.

"You okay?" he asks after gazing at me for a moment. A wrinkle creases his brow as he frowns at me in concern. I nod in response to his question and invite him in. He moves over to sit by me on the bed, and I shove my revision stuff out of the way to make room for him.

"What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you stormed in here like a whirlwind hours ago and have been shut up in here ever since. Jax got back moments after you and has been like a bear with a sore head ever since. Did you two fight?"

"What? No!" I exclaim. Then I shake my head and force my voice back to normal. "Nothing like that. Ask him. I'm trying to study."

"Doesn't look like it's going so well for you." Thorn smirks, gesturing at my closed books.

"Idiot." I elbow him. "I closed these when you came in."

"Sure you did."

"I am having trouble concentrating though," I admit. I yawn and stretch. "What time is it anyway?"

"After eleven."

“Shit!” My eyes fly open wide, and my jaw hangs in disbelief. “I am so screwed.”

“Why?”

“I have my chemistry exam in the morning, and I don’t feel ready. It’s late, I need to sleep, and I feel about as tired as an insomniac.”

“Wouldn’t an insomniac feel really tired on account of not ever sleeping?”

“You know what I mean.” I scowl at him. “Stop being pedantic. I have as much chance of getting to sleep as an insomniac does.”

“Again—”

“Stop!” Suddenly a massive noisy yawn escapes me, and Thorn laughs.

“Oh yeah, some insomniac you are,” he teases. “Go get ready for bed.”

I don’t bother to explain that yes I’m tired, exhausted actually, but somehow too wired to sleep. My mind’s churning, thoughts of Tilly and Jax buzzing alongside chemical equations and formulae. It’ll only lead to more questions. So I slip away from Thorn and head into the bathroom to get ready for bed like he suggests.

When I’m done, and I come out of the bathroom I notice several things almost at once. Thorn has closed the curtains and turned off the lights, leaving only a soft bedside lamp on. He’s also cleared and turned down the bed. And got in it. The covers are pulled up to his waist, so I don’t know if he’s fully naked, but he’s undoubtedly topless. I lick my lips like a perv at the deliciousness of him, then ask him what the hell he thinks he’s doing.

“Relax, Princess. C’mere and get into bed. I’m going to help you sleep. Well, I’m going to help you...relax, then sleep,” he amends with a wicked wink. I don’t think he has sleep on his mind at all. Mind you, neither do I anymore.

As I climb up onto the bed and crawl over Thorn to get to my side, he smirks at me.

“What?”

“You’re not wearing sweats.”

“Too hot,” I tell him, self consciously pulling the long white tank top further down my thighs. There’s probably an indecent amount of thigh showing.

“I like it.” He gives me a dirty grin, staring at my side and that’s when I realise there’s also an indecent amount of side boob showing too. I smack his arm and tell him off for being a perv, but he doesn’t apologise, just laughs harder.

Once I’m in bed though he rolls onto his side to face me and languorously begins to stroke up and down my exposed ribs. His fingers lightly brush the side of my breast and all my nerve endings tingle and stand to attention. My hips jerk involuntarily, and Thorn grins at me. “Relax, Princess.”

“Tickles,” I tell him breathlessly. And it does, but we both know I’m at least partially lying. My nipples harden and poke against my top, clearly visible for us both to see.

“Cold?”

“Shut up,” I groan, embarrassed and flipping onto my back. I throw my arm over my eyes to hide my blush – as if I can’t see him, then he can’t see me. Toddler logic I know, but I’m not thinking straight right now. I stay that way until I feel the mattress move, and suddenly Thorn’s straddling me, knees on either side of my hips, causing the bed to dip.

“What are you doing?” I say too loudly.

“Shush. I’m going to make you relax if it’s the last thing I do.”

He decides I’ve seen enough and slips a satin blindfold over my eyes before adding something on top, a weight of some sort, that ensures I can’t peek. The move’s entirely unexpected. So, unlike Thorn, that I’m startled. I’d expect a blindfold from Jax. The instant loss of sight is arousing, and my breath catches in my throat. Next, I hear the faint strains of

music in the background. Finally, he brushes the softest of kisses across my lips, so gentle I wonder if I imagined it. I'm sure I can feel the weight of his stare on my body though, and my temperature rises imperceptibly. A light sheen of perspiration breaks out across my body, and I labour to keep my breathing regular. I feel beautiful, nervous, excited.

“You're beautiful, Princess.”

His words, whispered in my ear, make me shiver and moan. When the warmth of his breath is gone from my face, I feel bereft without him. I can't feel him near me, nor sense his approximate presence, and I start to worry. A warm hand on my hip, meant to reassure me I'm sure, causes me to leap and cry out. Soft lips replace his hand, and I try to calm my racing heart, but it's too hard, too much.

His lips press against my temple, and a gentle hand caresses my hair. It has the desired effect: I calm and melt into the mattress. I need to relax, let go and trust him. I have nothing to fear. As he kisses along my cheekbone and down my jawline, I turn my head away from him to give him better access. His hand holds me firm, bringing me back to where he wants me, and I feel his lips press hard against mine. When he's done kissing me with a ferocity that takes my breath away, he moves my head back to the side and kisses along my exposed neck. I tense, waiting for his delicious bite, but it doesn't come. His hand drifts down to my chest, and I'm sure he'll grope my breasts, but he doesn't.

What's going on?

Instead, the palm of his hand rests in the centre of my chest, and he continues to kiss my neck. I feel his lips turn up into a smile against my skin when his palm feels my heartbeat rise. His lips trail lightly to my collar bone and back up to the dip between my ear, and I barely manage to hold back a whimper. I'm melting fast; putty in his hands.

Suddenly his lips are gone, and I feel the tip of his tongue tracing up the inside of my arm, making me tremble once again. He gently removes my shirt so that I'm naked in front of him, but unable to see his reaction.

What's he planning?

His velvet touch trails down both of my sides simultaneously, a feather-light touch. When his fingers reach my hips, I want to buck away from his touch, but he holds me too tight. It's torturous.

Deliciously torturous.

I sense him moving to the end of the bed, standing between my spread-eagled legs. I don't know how much more of this light touching I can take. I'm expecting more feathery whisperings on my sensitive flesh, so I'm surprised when this time his touch is firmer.

He starts by massaging the length of my legs, from my upper outer thighs down to my ankles and back again. He focuses on my feet, gently but firmly kneading my heels and the soft arches. He moves to my toes, individually stretching them, causing me to groan. Light nips on the pads of my toes make me cry out, but he soothes the sting with tender kisses. Then he moves to my calves, stroking and kissing them as he makes his way north between my legs with teasing kisses on the inside of my thighs.

My breathing's laboured, and my heart rate feels out of control. The air is thick with the scent of my arousal. I'm so sensitive I can hardly bear it.

He bypasses my mound and continues to slide north, dragging his firm body against mine. The friction is a welcome contrast to those teasing touches.

He stops when he reaches my breasts and begins to lightly trace their outline. I groan in frustration as he circles them with one finger and whenever he brushes the undersides, I tremble. He chuckles and begins again. And again. And again.

He blows on my nipples, causing them to harden even further but other than that he ignores them. He lavishes attention on the silky soft flesh around them, and he kisses down between them, trailing down my sternum and along the undersides of my breasts.

I feel worshipped. Adored.

When he grasps my hip firmly in his hands again, I jolt. I'm nervous, hyper-alert. He replaces his hand on my hip bone with a kiss, and I can't help the pitiful mewling sound that escapes from me. My breathing hitches and deepens, I tremble, my muscles tense and flex below me. God, I want him.

He slides his hands down my body and presses down on my mound while taking a nipple into his mouth. He sucks gently while pressing firmly, swirling his tongue over my bud before switching to the other side. He gradually begins to suck my nipples, applying more pressure to them. And as he does, he lessens the pressure on my mound so that the touch becomes light. His teeth graze my nipple, and my response is electric: my hips buck upward with ferocity. I like that.

He slides down my body, kissing everywhere as he goes until he comes to nestle between my thighs. My arousal is evident, I won't be able to hide it from him. He kisses the inside of my thighs, and I feel my sticky wetness. I blush, embarrassed. He doesn't seem to mind, though. Instantly I'm nervous about what he's going to do.

"Ssssh, relax baby...You need this," he murmurs reassuringly.

I try to take a deep breath to calm my racing pulse, but it's impossible: I'm wound too tight now, too sensitive. But then he slowly starts to stroke my labia, which does have a somewhat calming effect. I try to force myself to relax and give in to him. He's building something inside me, a warm glow that could turn into a low simmer if I let it. And I desperately want to.

He gently sucks my outer lips into his mouth one at a time, and it's all I can do not to cry out. It's all I can do to try and breathe, it feels so good. No, it feels incredible. He gently, and not so gently, sucks them one at a time before taking them both into his mouth at once. He sucks harder, and I want so much to wriggle and thrash. I don't want him to stop, but it's hard to take. He lightly bites them, and I let out a muffled scream.

Parting me with two fingers, he lightly blows on my exposed, engorged clit, before thrusting two fingers into me. He begins lapping at my clit, occasionally sucking as he pumps his fingers into me at an excruciatingly slow pace. I'm begging and pleading, desperate to come. That glow has bypassed the low simmer stage, and I'm now burning. Feverish almost.

My muscles are so tense, I'm trembling. I can't take any more. It's building. I can't escape it, can't move. There's no way out. There's nowhere for me to go. Tears pool in my eyes at the intensity. It's too much. I squeeze his fingers like they're in a vice. I'm going to break any moment.

He forces a finger into my ass, and I scream. It's an animalistic howl. My pussy clamps down around him and the force of my orgasm propels his fingers from both of my holes, followed by my gushing wetness. He keeps his tongue on my clit as I thrash on the bed, still screaming. My orgasms show no signs of letting up.

As my cries turn to whimpers, he releases my clit from his mouth and slides his tongue down to my opening. He laps up every drop until I'm squirming and moaning all over again.

He keeps tonguing my hole and moves back to toying with my ass. I soon come again, a smaller orgasm this time, but still as delicious. I feel invincible yet broken. Thorn removes my blindfold, and I blink as even the low light shocks my system. I look up at Thorn as he looks down at my spent body sprawled in a heap on the bed. I'm a mess. A beautiful mess, panting hard and covered in sweat.

Jesus, after that there's no way I can be stressed about Jax, Tilly or the exams starting tomorrow. I grin and stretch out in bed, sated. Before I can overthink, I drift off into a dreamless slumber, not even hearing Thorn let himself out.

"Raven?" Belle's voice cuts through my last-minute panic. We're standing outside the main hall where the exams are

held, waiting to go in. I'm chanting chemical equations and frantically trying to remember the periodic table when she asks me if we can go for a chat.

"Erm? Like right now?" She nods at me, her short funky pink bob flying.

"Please." She doesn't wait for my reply, merely walking off expecting me to follow her. She may have been the least diva-like of the princesses, but that move right there showed she was still a princess through and through. I sigh and move to follow her, feeling four sets of eyes burning a hole in my back the whole way. The guys have remained true to their word and not let me out of their sight.

"What is it, Belle? Can't this wait until after the exams?" I ask exasperated. I really can't deal with drama and distractions right now. I need to focus. I need to concentrate. I need at least another four hot chocolates before my nerves stop jangling.

"I know it was you," she tells me in a flat, dead sort of voice.

"What are you talking about?" I'm too confused and stressed to even worry about what she knows.

"I know it was you that outed me. I don't know what your connection to Lizzie is exactly, but I know that there is one."

"Huh?" I have to admit, I'm still reciting chemical compounds at this stage so I'm only half-listening to her, but my head snaps to attention at the mention of Lizzie's name.

"Look, I'm just staying that I know what you did. What you're doing. It's because of what we did to Lizzie, isn't it? I don't blame you. We deserve worse...just...be careful, okay?"

"Why?" I blink at her, confused. Is this a trick? A trap?

"Because Tilly's figured a few things out and she's gunning for you. I don't think I can keep her in check this time."

"Why are you telling me this?" I gnaw on my bottom lip. Shit. What do they know?

“Because you don’t deserve to go the same way Lizzie did.”

“What do you mean?” I press urgently, grabbing her hand as she turns away, needing answers. She’s definitely alluding to Lizzie’s death, and suddenly I’m desperate to know what she knows, all thoughts of chemistry and exams forgotten.

“Nothing. Forget it. We’re being called in now, so we’d better go...Just watch your back at the grad party, okay?” She pulls out of my grip and walks back towards the hall where most of the students have already entered. I follow her and see my four guys waiting by the door for me, arms folded and stony expressions on their faces. At the door Belle gives them a nod, which they ignore, then turns to me with a quick, “Good luck.”

“What the hell was all that about?” Rebel demands before the others can speak.

“Nothing,” I sigh, “Come on, let’s just get this over with.” My head’s spinning and I have no idea how I’m going to get through the next three hours of chemistry.

“C’mon on then, Princess,” Rebel says as he takes my hand. “Let’s go and write some bullshit about covalent bonds.” He gives me a wink, and I laugh, tension easing for a moment at least as he drags me into the hall and leads me to my seat. Once we’re through the doors there’s supposed to be silence and zero communication, but Rebel kisses my hand and wishes me good luck, ignoring the scowls of the staff and invigilators, before taking his own seat.

I take a deep breath, wait for the go-ahead, and then turn my exam paper over. I almost laugh out loud when I see the first question is about covalent bonds. Maybe I can do this, after all.

First exam down, three more subjects and 11 more papers over the next six weeks to get through. I can do this. Not for Lizzie, but for me.

Lizzie's Journal

May 23rd

Somehow life has gone on. I'm a shell of what I once was, but I'm just about functioning. I have no idea what I'm going to do about this thing growing inside of me. I think I'm supposed to hate it, but I'm not sure I can. Would you get rid of it, Charlie? Should I? I have no idea what to do. I don't know if I can get rid of it, but I don't see how I could keep it either.

I guess the one small mercy of being absolutely broken is that the bullies seem to have backed off. I'm glad that I'd broken up with the princes before all this happened. I wouldn't be able to stand their affection now. Though that doesn't mean that I don't still long for it.

Don't you think it's ironic that I'll never be alone again with this life growing inside of me, yet I feel more alone than ever? It's like I've died or become invisible at school. I'm completely ignored. All I ever wanted when I was being bullied was to be left alone, and now that I am, I hate it.

Even Michael seems to have disappeared. I thought he was my rock. I still see him around, but he's wary now. He keeps his distance. I think it must be because I dated his friends, but there's a look in his eyes that wasn't there before when I was dating them. I must've done something wrong. I hope I didn't make a fool of myself at the party. Although that should probably be the least of my worries right now.

How funny that my life's in tatters and I'm still worried about others and what they think of me. I need to be more like you, Charlie and not give a damn.

I love you

X



CHAPTER TWENTY - SEVEN

As I descend the steps, it seems like the guys all had the same idea as me – to dress up for our last night. I'm wearing a short black body con dress with a chiffon cape that I feel really good in. Judging by the appreciative looks on the guys' faces, they think I look good too. My mouth waters when I spy them standing in front of the Jeep. They're all in smart black slacks, dress shirts and thin coloured ties. They look insanely good. I once again find myself wishing that the school didn't have the stupid no phones rule so that I could take a photo of them to remember this moment forever. Mentally I scan them, taking a picture in my mind, trying to preserve their image. I hate that with time my memories of them will fade. I hate that tonight's the last time I'll ever see them again. I swallow and plaster a smile on my face, determined to enjoy these last few hours with them.

"Princess," Ace holds out his hand for mine and gently kisses my knuckles when I give it to him, "Beautiful."

"You look stunning, Princess." Thorn steps forward and kisses my cheek. I drink in his sunshine summer smell before he's rudely elbowed out of the way by an ever impatient Rebel who grabs me in a full-body hug and slides his hands under the hem of my dress to cup my ass.

"No panties? Naughty girl! You are so fucking hot," he growls in my ear, sending tingles all the way down my spine.

And then it's like the parting of the Red Sea, they stand to one side and my gaze zeros in on Jax's unreadable face. The whole world fades away in an instant, and it's just him and me, eyes locked. I nibble my lip and hold my breath waiting for his judgement. When he gives me the tiniest nod I sigh and sag in relief and rush forward into his outstretched arms. He pulls me close, holding me tight in his embrace, and I feel his hardness press against me.

"How could you doubt the effect you have on me, silly girl?" he whispers in my ear.

I love it when he's soft and tender like this, but the moment's over too soon as he pulls away and heads to the driver's side door of the car. The other three guys all climb into the back but when I go to take the front seat – the only free seat remaining – Jax tells me to climb in the back and sit on the guys' laps. Confused, I comply, settling on Rebel's lap and letting him pull me close to his chest.

"I thought the party tonight is inaccessible by car?" I asked.

"It is, but we're not going straight to the party."

"Where are we going?"

"Shush, Princess. Sit back and relax. You'll find out soon enough."

It's not easy to follow Jax's instructions with Rebel holding me close. His fingers are absentmindedly tracing patterns on my bare thigh. At first, it tickles, but soon it morphs into a heat that has me squirming on his lap.

"Hold still," he tells me.

"Can't." He smirks. He knows exactly what he's doing to me, the git. But then again, judging from the impressive hardness pressing into my side, I'm having a similar effect on him too. Good. Karma's a bitch. I hope he gets blue balls.

When we arrive at our destination, I'm surprised to find we're at the beach. It's a lovely summer evening, so I'm a bit shocked that the car park is deserted. All of the guys except

Rebel get out of the car, and Jax tells the two of us to stay here for ten minutes.

“Don’t worry,” Rebel smirks, “I’m sure I’ll find a way to keep her occupied for a while.” I quickly punch him on the arm, thinking about how much I’ll miss hitting him after tonight. I settle back into his arms, thinking we may as well enjoy our time together. We sit together in companionable silence. I expect him to put the moves on me as soon as we’re alone, but he seems content to just hold me.

Since the incident at the last party, Rebel’s been even more protective than the others. It’s driven me crazy at times, but I’m actually touched by how much he cares. I can tell from the tense set of his shoulders that he’s not entirely happy that we’re going to the grad party tonight. I don’t think he plans to let me out of his sight. I let out a gentle sigh, and Rebel asks me what’s wrong. I’m spared from answering however when Thorn knocks on the window, making me jump.

“Don’t worry. Let’s go,” I tell him, jumping from the car and letting Thorn take my hand to guide me.

My first thought when we approach the beach is how strange it is that the beach is deserted – I mean, I know it’s late June so not quite tourist season yet, but the locals are usually out and about, especially on a night like this. But as we turn the corner and I see what the guys have done for me, all thoughts of other people fly from my head. In front of me, set to a backdrop of a beautiful ombré sunset over the ocean, is possibly the most romantic scene I’ve ever seen. An enormous picnic rug is spread out and surrounded by hundreds of tiny candles in glass jars. On the rug there’s a pile of blankets and cushions, a traditional wicker basket, a bottle of pink champagne and a box of what looks like my favourite chocolates – made by Ace. And my guys are all standing to one side by a small fire, waiting for me.

They remain standing until I enter the ring of candles and settle back in the middle of the rug on a pile of cushions. It’s warm still, so I don’t need the blankets yet, but I appreciate the thoughtfulness that they’ll come in handy later. Once I’m comfy the guys all step into the circle to join me. I giggle

because it kind of reminds me of a witch's casting circle, but I don't say anything. Rebel sits on my right, Ace takes my left, and Thorn and Jax sit down by my feet. Jax immediately grabs the champagne bottle, gently pops the cork and pours us all a glass of fizz.

Initially, I thought this was all down to Ace, it's so romantic that it's just the sort of thing he'd do. But as I start to look around and notice the small details, I realise that all of the guys had had a hand in making tonight special for me. The beautiful warm scent of jasmine caresses me, coming from the gently flickering candles around us. It reminds me of a conversation I had with Thorn about jasmine being one of my favourite scents. I'm touched that he not only remembered but that he went out of his way to source jasmine scented candles for tonight.

Classical music's playing softly in the background, and I know that Rebel's responsible for the playlist of my favourite tunes. Ace will have handmade and prepared everything in the picnic basket for us. And Jax... well, he will have been responsible for making sure everything came together perfectly to make tonight a reality. I also strongly suspect that he's the one who made the beach empty tonight, but I have no idea how.

"What are we celebrating?" I ask.

"What do you want to celebrate?" Jax counters. He always does that – turns my questions back on me with another question. It drives me crazy. His stare is intense.

"Erm, how about the end of the exams?" Jax pulls a face that tells me he isn't impressed with my idea. "Okay then, the end of term? The end of the year? Leaving this place?" More faces, each one more sour than the last. I huff in frustration and throw my hands up in the air. "I give up! What are we celebrating then?"

"How about we celebrate you, Princess?" Rebel suggests. I pull a face. No thanks. Despite having four boyfriends, I'm actually not that comfortable being the centre of attention.

“Yeah!” Thorn exclaims, jumping to his feet and coming round to sit down behind me. “Let me show you how much I appreciate you, Princess.” He reaches out and begins to knead my shoulders, my head flopping back and a groan escaping my lips because it feels so good.

“Oh, she likes the idea now,” Rebel chuckles.

“So good,” I murmur.

“Baby, you ain’t seen nothing yet.” I laugh at Rebel’s lyric and sing the next line back to him, much to the amused confusion of the other guys. Huh, I thought that song was a classic? Oh well, Rebel gets it, and that’s good enough for me. We share a look and a laugh.

As I relax back into Thorn’s massage, I contemplate how perfect this moment is. The sun’s setting over the ocean in a myriad of fiery watercolours so beautiful that it takes my breath away. I don’t want to leave. The realisation’s like a punch in the gut. It hurts to think about what has to come next. The guys think we’re all meeting up after our respective holidays. And they will. It’s just I won’t be there. They just don’t know it yet. Tears threaten to spill, so I force myself to focus on the present and enjoy the moment.

When Thorn finishes, I sit up on my knees and turn to Ace. I take his cheeks in my hands and gently kiss him. I’m not usually one for public displays of affection, especially with the other guys around. They usually have other ideas, but I try at least to be respectful of their feelings. Especially after the New Year’s fight. But tonight it just feels right to kiss Ace, even with the other’s gazes burning into me. As I kiss him I try to convey everything I feel. Without words, I thank him for the most fantastic year. Done, I turn to Thorn and give him the same treatment, the same kiss. I let my kiss tell him how much I care for him and how much I’ll miss him.

Of course, when I turn to Rebel my plans go out of the window. He doesn’t allow me to kiss him how I want; instead he grabs my ass and pulls me into his lap so that I’m straddling him. My dress rides up, but Rebel’s huge hands have me covered, so I’m not too worried about flashing the others.

Besides, they've all seen it before anyway. Rebel doesn't kiss. He consumes. He devours my lips in a way that steals my breath and my senses. His message is loud and clear: he won't be letting me go. After the summer, he's coming for me.

My heart flutters. Rebel's obnoxious, loud, unique way of caring has gotten under my skin. He's buried his way deep into my heart...maybe even more deeply than the others. Here, at this moment, I think to myself that if I could stay, if I had to choose, my heart would choose him. Even though my head knows it would be a total disaster. I love... shit. And that is why I have to leave tonight. Any longer and I'll fuck everything up. When he's done kissing me, I pull away, and my eyes flick to Thorn and Ace. My heart squeezes, and I realise that I can't let them go either. That's testament to how Rebel's kisses are so powerful, they steal all rational thought from my mind. At the moment, with his lips, I think he could convince me to do anything.

I lean forward and give him a chaste peck on the lips, my goodbye to him, before climbing off his lap and approaching Jax. I wait until he opens his arms and invites me in before making contact. To my surprise, Jax allows me to kiss him my way, not taking over the kiss like I expected him to. When I pull away he whispers low in my ear so that only I can hear.

"I know what you think you're doing. It won't work."

"Oh?" I raise my eyebrow. I try to exude calm, but Jax has always panicked me. He watches too closely, sees too much. If anyone could devour my secrets without even trying, it's him.

"You're trying to say goodbye, to push us away."

"Am I?"

"Yes, because you think that after the summer we'll forget about you... but I'm telling you now, Princess, that isn't going to happen."

"You don't know that."

"I do." He fixes me with a hard stare, one that says not to question him.

“How would it work, though?” For a moment, I allow myself to buy into the fantasy that can never be.

“We’ll find a way to make it work.”

“How? It’s impossible.”

There’s no way the others can hear us. Sitting behind us like this, it probably looks like we’re still making out.

“Decide where you want to be. We’ll come to you,” Jax tells me. I shake my head. “Wherever you go, I promise we will follow.”

Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of. I don’t doubt Jax’s promise to follow me. I don’t say anything, but the thing I’m most worried about is how I’m going to disappear and vanish without a trace. For a moment the desire to tell them the truth burns within me. I feel my secrets dancing on the top of my tongue, threatening to spill if I open my mouth, so I simply say nothing and nod at Jax. He thinks I’m giving in, agreeing to choose a location where we can all be together in the fall. But I’m not. I’m just trying to stop my life from imploding with my next breath.

I carefully pick up my champagne flute and raise it to my lips. In one mouthful I swallow the fruity dry liquid before turning to Ace for a refill. “Thirsty?” he asks, and I nod, still not trusting myself to speak as he refills my glass like a perfect gentleman. “Hungry?” He begins to unpack the wicker basket with a selection of small boxes. I help him remove the lids and see a variety of tapas-style hot and cold dishes that make my mouth water.

“Wow Aljaž, this looks amazing,” I tell him, thankfully distracted from my truth-telling thoughts. He smiles at me, and we all tuck in, enjoying the delicious creations he’s made for us. My favourite is the spicy slices of chorizo that have been cooked in a sticky-sweet red wine reduction, and the Thai style crispy pork and prawn wontons with a plum dip. For dessert, he’s made mini floating islands with a burnt caramel sauce, and they’re just divine. I leave room to toast marshmallows on the fire though.

There's a heated moment when the guys declare we're making s'mores for dessert, only to pull out a pack of chocolate-covered digestive biscuits. I try to be polite about it, but Rebel snorts in disgust.

"That isn't a fucking s'more," he gripes. "It's a fucking biscuit marshmallow fucking sandwich...thing."

"Shush, Reb, it's fine. That's how they do them over here," I tell him.

"But...But..."

"I know. I get it. I really do. But it'll still taste nice, and it's the thought that counts." We tuck in, and they do taste amazing, but they're not really s'mores. I, at least, am gracious about it, Rebel's not. You can take the SoCal boy out of Cali...

By the time we're done eating and toasting, the sun's set, and twilight's fallen. A slight wind's gotten up, so the guys have all moved closer, and Ace has draped a blanket over my shoulders. I lay back and watch the stars slowly appear. At first it feels like they're popping up one at a time, but then I blink, and millions are shining down on us.

When Rebel's hand slides under the blanket and onto my thigh, I stiffen. "Reb..." My voice is a warning.

"Shush, Princess," he tells me, sliding his hand higher.

"Relax," Thorn adds with a kiss. Does he know what Rebel's doing to me under the blanket? Thorn's words have the opposite effect on me, there's no way I can relax now. I blink at him and notice the gleam in his eyes. Turning to Rebel, I see wickedness in his. Even Ace looks mischievous. Only Jax is unreadable, as ever. Shit. Are they really doing this? Here and now on a beach which, although deserted, is public and could have visitors at any moment? My stomach clenches, and oh god, I don't know if it's in trepidation or excitement. When Thorn's hand lands lightly on my other thigh, I'm pretty sure it's in excitement.

We're so late to the party, and I'm covered in sand somehow despite the rugs and blankets, but I'm way too blissed out to care. When we get to the old chapel, I stand just inside the doors, I watch in amazement at my fellow students enjoying themselves. The leavers' party is in full swing. This is it. I've completed my year here and taken revenge on those who'd hurt my sister. I'm almost done. Almost, but not quite.

It was stupid to have a party in a church. Especially in the school chapel that was far out on the edge of the school's land on the other side of the woods. The students always moan that it takes a good twenty minutes to walk here, but it's tradition to sneak off and party here on the last night of term. Like most things at this school, it's another event that the staff are aware of, but turn a blind eye to. Which is perfect for me.

The church has been gutted, most of the old wooden pews removed to make room for dancing, but the few that remain are pushed out along the edge of the walls. Currently, couples are making out along them, and one is being used to cut and snort lines of coke. I stay clear of that. The altar's been set up as a bar, although every available surface in the chapel appears to be groaning under the weight of the myriad of booze that is on offer. A group of guys are doing tequila body shots off a half-naked girl who's stretched out on the large marble altar. I steer clear of that too. The thousands of candles that litter the room give the space a shadowy hedonistic feel, and the students are definitely feeling that vibe with the way they're celebrating. The air's electric with people doing far more than kissing in the dark corners. I have to admit, the coloured stained glass windows look beautiful in the low light. But aside from that, the party isn't really doing it for me.

At the centre of the dance floor, the five princesses dance seductively, reunited once more. They command the attention of almost everyone in the room. Everyone from our year group is here, except Michael, who asked to meet me later. My four guys are set up behind the altar at a makeshift table, playing

cards and ignoring everyone else. I half expected them to be playing poker or something, but when I went over to them it turned out they weren't gambling at all.

“Hey guys, what's going on?”

“This party blows,” Rebel scowls.

“Yeah, can we leave?” Thorn adds.

“But there's fireworks at midnight.” I pout. “I'd love to stay and see them.”

“What time is it?” Jax asks.

“A quarter to.”

“Okay, Princess, for you we can just about stomach another fifteen minutes,” Rebel smirks with a wink.

“Thanks!” I smile at them. “Do you guys want a drink or anything?” They all shake their heads no. “Okay, well I'm going to grab a pop and have a dance before we head out.”

Ace offers to come with me, already halfway to his feet, but I shake him off, insisting that he stay and finish his game. Rebel stands and drags me close to him for a dance. I don't fight. He holds me so close that my body instantly moulds to his despite the heat. He liquefies me at the slightest touch. He bends his head to whisper in my ear, and I strain to hear what he's saying. It takes a moment for me to realise that he's singing the lyrics of the song to me. Something about waiting and stargazing and not giving up. It's so romantic I want to cry. I try to listen carefully so that I can look up the song later.

My heart hurts.

I kiss Rebel at the end of the song and walk away, promising him I'll be back soon. I feel his eyes on me the whole time, so I head to the toilet to catch my breath. After waiting a few minutes I head back out. As I slowly make my way across the room, I make sure I'm seen by several people. I smile, I wave, I compliment dresses. Then I loiter by the door for a few minutes. It's eating into my precious time, but it's so important that I'm not seen.

Just as I'm about to slip out of the door, I catch one of the large towering pillar candles that line the entryway with my elbow. It teeters and topples, crashing to the ground. I freeze, sure that someone will notice. But no one does. The party continues to rage on, everyone oblivious as the candle flame catches, dances and starts to spread. I walk out of the door, closing it firmly behind me.

I hesitate for a split second, the old gilt key in my hand.

For Lizzie.

I take a deep breath, strengthen my resolve, and slip the key into the lock. I turn it, wipe my fingerprints from the key, then turn and walk away into the mild summer night. There are other exits. I made sure of that. But I also know that this location is inaccessible by vehicles and help is far away.

What was it Rebel said?

If someone fucks with the people you love, burn them all to the ground?

Consider it done. Because as far as I'm concerned, there's no line to overstep where vengeance is concerned. I don't care about collateral damage. Every single person in that church was responsible for Lizzie's death, in one way or another, even if it's merely by inaction. Sitting by and watching while Lizzie was destroyed by the bullies of this school. Fuck them all. They deserve to suffer too.

Now I just have to take care of one last thing.

Lizzie's Journal

May 26th

I think last night was the final straw. Since the party I've completely kept a low profile, and yet I'm still being targeted. After everything that's been done to me, it was the stupidest thing that broke me – though isn't it always? We keep going and going until we're triggered and we snap.

My trigger?

Paper slipped under my door.

I told you it was ridiculous, Sis.

I bumped into Micheal last night on my way back from the library. He apologised for being a bit distant with me since the party – it turns out he made a bit of a pass at me and tried to kiss me and was embarrassed that I turned him down. I don't remember any of it, of course, thanks to the date rape drug. He said he'd seen me looking sad the last few weeks and thought I was mad at him. I'm so relieved that we're talking again! I didn't realise how lonely I'd become since ending things with the princes. It felt good to have someone to talk to after what feels like weeks of debilitating loneliness and silence. We've arranged to go out – just as friends – for a walk around the grounds later tonight. We might even go to the beach. I'm really looking forward to it. If I can make this friendship with Michael work, I might actually be able to bear the last couple of months of term here.

Anyway, so once I got back to my room after bumping into Michael, I really struggled to open my door, which I thought was odd. I managed to heft enough weight at it to be able to slip inside, and that's when I discovered reams and reams of paper that had been shoved under my door.

I scooped up as much as I could and took them to my bed to read them. I definitely should've just binned them Charlie. Every single note was in different handwriting, every single one was full of hatred and loathing, telling me to kill myself. There were pictures and diagrams even suggesting how I could do it. It was sickening. But I couldn't stop reading them all. One stood out from the rest, though I had to read it a couple of times before I understood it fully.

It was a suicide note.

In my handwriting.

Looking like I had written it.

What the fuck? It was so convincing even I would think I'd written it. It made me feel sick.

And that's the paper that broke me.

I'm done. I'm not staying here anymore. That note scared me. It would fool anyone – even you. I have no desire to kill myself, but I'm scared by what they might do. I think self-preservation has to win out over pride at this point. I don't care that I wasted my inheritance in coming here for nothing. I'll move back home and start year eleven all over again at the local comprehensive, even though it means being held back a year, I don't care.

I just can't do this anymore. Especially now it's not just myself to think about.

I have to protect this new life inside me, at all costs.



CHAPTER TWENTY - EIGHT

It takes me ages to walk to the top of the cliff. The path is long, winding and full of loose stones that don't work well with my heels. I slip them off and tentatively pick my way along the jagged track, trying to avoid injury from the sharpest rocks. I'm not entirely sure why Michael asked to meet here. It's a bit morbid, meeting at the site of Lizzie's death, but I guess something is fitting in visiting there tonight. I'm leaving, not hanging around till morning to see the fallout. My grandmother sent a car, which I spied as I crossed campus, waiting in the drive. All my things are already loaded up. I'd be lying to myself if I said I was one hundred per-cent glad to be leaving the place. Despite the horrors my sister had to face here, I have good memories rooted here too. No matter what, I've come to care deeply for the guys, and it hurts that things had to turn out this way. I'm assuming that they make it out of the fire unscathed. Dear god, I hope they do. I don't want anyone's death on my conscience, least of all theirs.

When I finally get to the top of the cliff, it's dark, and the wind's getting up – the cape of my dress is swirling all around me. Michael's already there waiting for me, sat on one of the giant rocks right on the cliff's edge with his feet dangling down overlooking the ocean.

“Hey,” I call out softly to him. Despite the wind, my voice carries, and his head whips around. He stares at me for a

moment, his face unreadable, before speaking.

“Is it done?” he asks quietly.

“Yeah. Almost. Yeah.” I shake my head to clear it, feeling all kinds of mixed up. Now’s not the time to go soft. Now’s not the time for regrets. “I can’t believe I’ve managed it.”

“You’ve done well.” There’s something odd in his voice. I move over to his rock and lean back against it, facing the land while he looks out to sea. I prefer keeping my feet on firm ground. I stare at his back for a moment thinking how easy it would be to push someone off the edge of the cliff, especially if they were sat unawares like he is. I wonder if that was how Lizzie went then quickly shake my head to clear it again. I need to focus.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, Raven.” He turns to look at me.

“Oh, I think you can call me Charlotte tonight. I’m leaving, so it doesn’t make any difference now. Anyway, I wanted to ask, did you tell anyone who I really am?”

“No. Why would I?” He looks at me, and I can see he’s baffled. Good. I wonder how long it’ll last.

“Well, I just thought, with you and Tilly fucking that you might have told her.” I shrug nonchalantly, but I’m watching him like a hawk. His eyes widen in shock for a moment, but he recovers quickly.

“Wh-What?” He coughs and gives a nervous laugh. “That’s absurd.” He’s lying. The single bead of sweat rolling down his temple is a dead giveaway. It’s so clear to me now, and I feel like it’s that final jigsaw piece falling into place. I had my suspicions, but that single, salty droplet just confirmed it. Everything suddenly clicks into place for me. I suspected. But now I know.

“That’s what I thought too when I heard you both last night. Well, obviously I heard Tilly calling out ‘Mikey’, but I figured it was you. I confirmed it this morning when I checked the school roster, and unless she’s sleeping with a girl in year

seven who's the only Mikey on roll, I'm pretty sure it's you... cute nickname by the way."

"I...we..."

Michael rapidly blinks at me, and I swear I can see the gears turning in his head, in a, 'How the fuck do I get out of this one', kind of a way. I want to laugh. I really do.

"Okay, another question for you," I plough on. "For how long? All the way back to year eleven?" I know in my gut that I'm right.

"Thanks for that. Your nickname was the final five-letter key I needed to unlock Lizzie's last journal entry. It's safe to say she definitely wasn't feeling suicidal. Although if she had to listen to you and Tilly going at it like a pair of demented walruses, she might just have changed her mind." I'm on a roll now, unable to stop my mouth running away from me. It always happens when I'm nervous. The snarkier I get, the more I'm covering my feelings up.

His mouth is just gaping open, flapping like a fish out of water.

"You should see your face!" I tell him, fake laughing like it's the funniest thing I've ever seen. I get fully to my feet and stand on firm ground, taking a few steps back from the rock he's still perched on.

"It would be hilarious if I wasn't confronting my sister's rapist and murderer."

I drop that bomb and let it lie, watching him closely. For a moment I think he's going to deny it. I see him hesitate, swallow, and then it happens; there's a shift in him. It's like the veil of him being that nice guy next door drops and suddenly reveals the narcissistic monster he is under it all. There's a nasty darkness in his eyes, his nose flares and his lips sneer. He gives me a despotic, 'Fuck you', stare and I know it's game on.

He slowly gets to his feet – like he hasn't a care in the world like he wasn't just accused of two of the worst crimes

known to man – and stalks towards me. He thinks he’s the hunter, that I’m his prey, but he’s grossly underestimated me.

“Why wouldn’t you tell Tilly who I am?” I ask him. I gulp like I’m nervous and fiddle with my hands. I want him to think I’m stalling for time. I am stalling for time...just not for the reasons he thinks. I can see it now, how narcissistic he is, and I know I can win if I just play him right.

“Because she’s a fucking cunt. You all are,” he spits. “But at least it’s free pussy. There’s only so much you can take by force before the admins start to investigate.” I’m almost shocked by the vehemence in his voice. Almost. But this guy’s a misogynistic asshole. So, of course, he thinks we’re all worthless.

“So you and Tilly have...an arrangement?” I’m disgusted. “What, you fuck until she needs you to drug and rape someone she doesn’t like?” Fuck, that’s fucked up. He raped my sister at someone else’s command? What kind of fucked-up monsters am I dealing with here? I want to drag Tilly from the burning building just to inflict a whole new world of pain on her right now. I don’t even know where I’d begin. I strongly doubt I’d have enough self-control to walk away with either of them still alive though.

He sneers, confirming I’m right, and I want to punch the smugness right off his face.

“I have to admit, I didn’t expect that,” I say with forced calmness. “I thought the drugging and rape was a nasty coincidence, but Tilly truly has you pussy whipped doesn’t she?” My words have the desired effect of riling him up. He turns a nasty shade of purple and sputters.

“I’m not whipped. She doesn’t control me.”

“Really?” I scoff. “Then why keep my secret? She would’ve had a lot of fun with me this year if she knew who I was.”

“She didn’t tell me to push Lizzie off the cliff.” His words, though expected, are a punch to my gut. But I can’t show him that.

“So, why did you?” I ask like I couldn’t give a shit that he just confessed to murdering my sister.

“She came to me, all meh sob whinge this and poor me that...I wasn’t really listening, but when she said she was pregnant, I knew I had to take care of it.”

“Because it was your baby?”

“Oh yes, I fucking ripped a hole in her virgin cunt and ruined it for anyone else. It was my fuck trophy she was carrying.”

Rage, white-hot and burning, flares through my veins at his vile brag. I see red, and I struggle to rein my emotions in. I need to have patience if I want to win this game, think ahead, plan and strategise. ‘I’ve come too far to blow it in a temper now,’ I remind myself. For Lizzie, I’ll bide my time that little bit longer. I grit my teeth, trying not to grind them. He’s lucky the princes are trapped in a burning building right now, and that they’re not here to witness this. There’d be a fight over who gets to kill him first.

Patience, I tell myself, breathing deeply to try to calm myself. It doesn’t work, I’m still incandescent with fury, but it gives me a semblance of control.

“So why help me?”

“I needed to know what you knew. It’s been fun watching you run around all year trying to piece it together. It was an added bonus that you took out some of those bitches too.”

“Okay, but now I know. I can go to the authorities with this.” I pull out the old school tape recorder that I’d hidden in my bag and wave it in front of his face, but he just laughs. It’s a maniacal sound that fills me with dread. He stalks towards me now, and I realise, for the first time, I don’t have the upper hand.

“The only way you’ll be leaving this cliff is the same way your pathetic ruined sister did. Dead. I heard Jax could barely identify her broken body by the time they fished it out of the sea. I guess you had a closed coffin funeral.” He cackles before continuing, “I watched her you know, from this very

spot as the waves bashed her brains out on the rocks down there. It was too dark to see the water turn red with her blood, but I have a good imagination. It got me hard all over again. My only regret was not bleeding her a little first. I would've loved to bathe in her hot blood, palms stained red as I jerked off to her corpse down below."

Sickened, I back away from him, slowly like I'm trying not to startle a wounded animal, but he follows me step for step. I'm near the edge of the cliff, the ocean roaring below like a hungry beast that's demanding to be fed.

"The best thing is, no one will be coming to help you. No one knows where you are because you locked them all in a church and set fire to it, you little maniac." He wags his finger at me playfully, and I want to vomit. "Even if they knew to look for you, they'll be dealing with the fire first, and it'll be too late for you. They'll either think your body burned in the fire or that you jumped off the cliff after setting the fire. It's perfect." His voice is smug, his soulless eyes dancing with glee. He's beyond repulsive; I have no words.

"I'm so happy you're here, Charlotte." He stresses my name in a way that makes my skin crawl. "I'm excited for two reasons. As I'm such a great guy, I'll share them with you." His grin makes my stomach churn, and I barely manage to hold onto its contents.

"Oh?" I try to sound interested, keeping one eye on him and one on the path out of here. I don't think I can make a run for it and beat him, and the trail winds too close to the cliff top to safely risk running for it. Fuck. Plan B it is then.

"First, I've grown bored of drugging cunts. It's too easy. I'm looking for a challenge, and I think you're it. I've decided I quite like the idea of my pussy fighting back. The added bonus is that I can make sure you bleed to make up for my missing out on that with your sister..." He pauses, pulling out a long lethal-looking knife and admiring the blade in the moonlight. Ice-cold fear trickles down my spine. Shit. He's threatening to rape me. No, he's telling me his plans. He plans to rape and cut me. Even though he knows I'm recording him. What the fuck is wrong with this...this monster? How the fuck

am I going to get that knife away from him without getting close?

“And second, I’ve always wanted to collect twins. You’ll be the first pair I’ve fucked – ah hell let’s call a spade a spade as I know you like that and call it rape...so you’ll be the first pair of twins I’ve raped *and* killed. Double whammy. All the firsts for me tonight.”

Fuck. There’s bile in my mouth, and it takes everything I have to swallow it back down. Michael’s so excited he can barely keep still. He’s still prowling around me with his blade like a twisted sadistic dancer, and I’m still stuck between the cliff edge and freedom.

It’s time.

I pull my shoulders back and harden my stare. Planting my feet firmly into the ground, I keep my knees loose and my body supple. He may want his rape victims to fight him, but he’ll only get one out of his three firsts from me tonight: I’ll fight. But I will win.

He charges towards me, bent low, racing too fast, knife in hand. I have to ignore the blade and focus on him first; his momentum could easily take us both over the edge when he hits, so when he crashes into me I swing us round onto firmer ground. He’s going down, but he won’t be taking me with him. Instead of it being macabre that we’re at the site of Lizzie’s death, suddenly it’s poetic. Justice will be served.

We fall hard, rolling together in a way that reminds me of Rebel and me in the bedroom but I quickly banish that thought. He sickens me, and nothing I’ve shared with any of the guys can be comparable to this moment with him. We struggle for purchase, and eventually he ends up on top, knife pressing to my throat, but we’re right on the edge of the cliff once again. I can see it in his eyes; he thinks he can rape me, right here, then roll my broken body off the edge of the cliff to dispose of the evidence. It excites him. In the struggle, my short dress has ridden up, and his hardness is pressing against me. The small mercy I’m thankful for is that he’s at least still clothed. I deeply regret not wearing panties now; they

would've at least offered another layer for him to break past. Not that my skimpy thong would put up much of a fight. He makes me sick to my stomach. I despise this psychopath, but for Lizzie, I have to do this.

I force myself to stop fighting, relaxing all my muscles and going limp. He grins and grinds against me, leaning in to kiss me. The shifting of his weight causes the blade to press into my neck a little, and I feel a thin line of wet blood appear. He moves to my neck and licks it. Repulsed, I turn my head to the side to avoid him, but he grabs my jaw and turns my mouth to meet his with surprising strength. I'd forgotten that he's a champion rower and that brings power. He forces his tongue into my mouth and, even though it kills me to, I pause, biding my time. I taste my own blood as I let his vile tongue plunder my mouth. It's horrific.

I wait a moment more, and then I strike. I bite down hard on his tongue, tasting his blood this time, and he pulls away with the pained scream of a wild animal. He rears back and attempts to swing a punch at my face, but I'm too quick for him. He's underestimated me and forgotten about my training.

Thankfully, that shit's ingrained in me, and I'm going to use it now to save my life. My hand flies out to catch his fist, squeezing hard. You don't have to be the biggest, strongest fighter to incapacitate someone – you just have to know where to apply pressure. I do. Bones crunch and he howls a high pitched sound like a wounded dog, dropping the knife in his other hand as he rushes to cradle his broken bones. I quickly pull him towards me and roll to dislodge him from my hips. Twisting to the side, I bring my feet up and plant them firmly in his solar plexus. And then I push with everything I've got.

He stumbles backwards onto his ass and teeters on the edge. I jump to my feet and scramble after him, determined to see this through to the end. I spy the knife off to one side and grab it. My pulse is racing, and I'm panting hard. My hair's tangled and wet with sweat. I know I must be a mess, but I can't let him fight back now. I stalk towards him, the predator now.

“For Lizzie,” I tell him. “And for me.”

A swift kick to the stomach is all it takes to send him sprawling over the edge. He barely has time to register shock, and he's gone. I don't hear his body hit the water below. I don't step closer to the edge to look. I toss the blade over the cliff after him, and I sink to my knees. Then I finally breathe deeply for what feels like the first time since I came up here.

My blood's pounding, racing through my veins, filling my ears so that I can't hear anything above the din in my head. Even the roar of the ocean below pales into insignificance.

I can't believe that just happened.

I shake uncontrollably, lurching unsteadily on my feet, retching. Sour bile burns my throat and taints my mouth. I spit and wipe at my mouth, confused when my hand comes away wet. Tears are streaming down my face, and I didn't even realise.

I stand, glued to the spot, numb.

I don't know what to do. Where to go. Adrenaline courses through my body. Somehow I manage to shakily make my way back towards the school, heels and handbag in hand, hoping that the car's still waiting for me. It should be, it will be, but the adrenaline has my thinking all screwed up. I need to get out of here before it all kicks off. Before I get caught. I think I already hear sirens in the distance, but I don't know if they're for the fire or the murder.

Murder.

Holy shit I'm a murderer.

Fuck.

I stop and empty my stomach all over the path. I just want to curl up on the ground. I genuinely believe that it was a him or me situation, though. The look in his eyes absolutely terrified me. I'm more shaken by that than his death I think. I guess I just had more to live for when that fight or flight instinct kicked in.

Part of me now desperately wants to go back to the chapel to make sure the guys are okay – that they made it out. But I can't. I have to see this through to the very end. I have to stay strong. I have to believe that they're all fine. Safe. I don't care if my heart's telling me that I love – am in love – with those four amazing guys. They all have to pay for what they did to Lizzie, and if the only way I can hurt them is by vanishing, I will. Every last one of them has to pay, no matter what the consequences are, no matter how much it hurts me to do it.

I'm close to veering off towards the chapel anyway when the car comes into sight. I sprint for the black town car and quickly scramble into the back seat. As soon as I'm in, the car pulls away and the phone in the rear rings. I reach for it and answer, knowing who it is.

"It's done," I tell her, taking a deep breath in an attempt to hide my shaky voice.

"Good. And the other thing you were worried about?" The voice at the end of the phone is clipped, uncaring, harsh even.

I reach into my small clutch bag that I've somehow managed to keep hold of despite everything I've been through tonight and pull out the small piece of white plastic that's shaped like a pen. I look down at the little pink X in the window. A bittersweet smile spreads across my lips.

"Confirmed. But—"

"Don't worry, everything will work out fine. I promise. The car will take you to the private airfield and fly you out to meet me. It's time for me to take care of you. Both of you."

The line goes dead, and I settle back into the plush leather seat, knowing I have a couple of hours drive ahead. I stare at the positive pregnancy test in my hands, turning it over and over in my hands. It wasn't my idea, wasn't planned, but now that I'm carrying the child of one of the four princes, I'm not sorry at all. I don't know whose it is, and I don't care. I'll love this child no matter what. It won't replace Lizzie or the baby that she lost, but I'll ensure their memories live on.

My plans for the future have once again changed. But this time I don't mind at all. I'm tired. A year of vengeance has really taken it out of me. I'm glad it's done and that I've managed to come away unscathed – more or less – in the process. I'd hoped that leaving West Prep would mean the end of the lies and the deceit, but now I realise that when I meet up with her, I'm going to have to hide how I really feel about each of the four princes. I'm going to have to hide that my heart's breaking. But if my year walking in Lizzie's footsteps has taught me one thing? It's that I'm nothing if not resilient.

Fake it until you make it, Raven Deighton.

I relax back and close my eyes, gently rubbing my still-flat tummy, wondering what my – our – future will hold.

Vengeance
BONUS CONTENT



DELETED SCENE:

JAX

(Set before Raven's arrival at West Prep)

"You summoned me?" It's impossible to keep the snark out of my tone as I take in the woman sitting behind her desk, typing furiously at her computer like it's personally done something to offend her.

If I didn't already know that being summoned to the Headmistress' office so early in the term was a bad thing, the tense set of her shoulders and savage scowl on her face would be a dead giveaway. She looks perpetually uptight, like an entire branch of a tree has been rammed up her arse – rather than just the proverbial stick.

Nothing good is going to come from this meeting.

"Ah, Jaxon." She gives me a tight smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes. With how tight her silver bun is scraped back, I'm surprised she can move her face at all. Why pay for Botox when a Croydon facelift is free?

"Don't call me that. It's Jax."

"Son—"

"Definitely don't call me *that*." I stare at her in horror.

Yes, it might be common knowledge that the principal of West Prep is my stepmother, but I don't need to remind people of that. And I sure as shit am not *her* son.

She sighs and tries again. "Jax—"

I nod for her to continue.

"Can you at least come in, close the door and take a seat?"

She's being nice, despite her stress levels, which makes me even more reluctant to enter, but I do as she says. Whatever it is she wants to discuss, neither of us need an audience. This school is fucking rife with social-ladder-climbing snakes and gossip piranhas, more so than any other. The last thing I need is to become a source of yet more bullshit rumours.

“Thanks,” Headmistress Archer says as soon as I take a seat. I blink at her, managing to refrain from raising my brow. She never says thank you. I wasn’t even aware that she knew the term.

When I don’t say anything, she shifts the papers around on her desk. Anyone else would confuse it for a nervous gesture, but I know better. She’s beating around the bush, therefore she wants something from me.

“So...” she begins. “How are your classes going?”

This time she gets the eyebrow. “Small talk, Headmistress Archer. Really?”

“Please don’t call me that, Jaxo—Jax.” She tries again. “Are you at least settled in your house?”

“Yes.”

“And your friends...are they happy?”

“With the accommodation? Of course. I couldn’t possibly comment on their happiness at a soul level.”

“Jaxon—”

“Jax.”

“Jax.” She pauses and sighs.

“What can I do for you?” I cut to the chase when she stalls again.

“We have a new student starting.”

“And that concerns me, because?”

“Jax. This is complicated.”

“Complicated how? I thought we didn’t accept transfers once the school year started. The last one didn’t exactly go well.”

Inwardly, I cringe at the necessary coldness in my tone. Lizzie. The last transfer. Most students at West Prep have been here since nursery. Some joined throughout primary school, a handful joined in their teens.

Then there was Lizzie.

She was a no-one, as cruel as it sounds to say it. She wasn't a legacy student and she didn't come from money. I don't know if she had a scholarship or some old beneficiary, but it was clear the moment she stepped through the gates here that she wasn't one of us. Wasn't born into privilege. She joined just to complete her GCSEs, and it didn't end well.

I shudder a little as a ghost walks over my grave, then shrug it off. Usually I'm good at keeping my emotions, especially ones about Lizzie, at bay. Sometimes though, especially when she's brought up out of the blue, I get blindsided.

"That's exactly why I wanted to speak with you," my stepmother replies tartly, causing my stomach to churn. She doesn't know the truth – not the full truth anyway – about what happened with Lizzie, but she's shrewd enough to know that the school can't afford any more bad publicity. Even if Lizzie's death never actually made it to the tabloids, Westchester Preparatory Academy runs on a different kind of press. The *money talks* kind.

"Go on," I prompt, because what else can I say?

"We can't afford another...Lizzie situation."

"Which part? The one with the bullying or the...suicide?" Why did I hesitate to call a spade, a spade? Lizzie killed herself after less than a year at this school, and I fear – no, I *know* – that I had more than a little to do with it.

"Both. As well as the one where my son—"

"Stepson."

"The one where my stepson *and his friends* decide to simultaneously date and fight over the poor girl like she's fresh meat during feeding time at the zoo!"

I scowl. It wasn't like that. At all. What happened with Lizzie was...tragic. A shit show. An absolute clusterfuck. But it's nothing like she's making it sound. I hate that she's taking the emotions out of the situation. What I felt for Lizzie was so...real. I can't tell her that though. It's too raw. Too personal.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I can hear how sullen I sound even to my own ears.

Fuck.

Lizzie.

Will I ever be done with her haunting me?

Deciding I’d better add something to placate her, I continue assertively, “What happened with Lizzie is history. History which won’t be repeating itself. I’m not some desperate, horny dog sniffing around any new girl who happens to join our campus.”

“Well, this new girl is going to cause quite a stir, and I’d rather you stayed out of it.”

“How so?”

“Besides transferring in for her final year, and arriving late? She’s a Deighton.”

I pause a beat. That’s not possible. “How?”

“Long lost granddaughter, apparently.”

“I thought Cordelia Deighton didn’t have any living family?”

“I smell bullshit too, but there you go. She’s paid her dues and a hefty donation. The Deightons are legacies and they won’t be told no.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It doesn’t matter. I need you to make sure that this girl doesn’t go the same way as Lizzie did.”

“To an early grave?”

“Jaxon! Don’t be vulgar,” she admonishes. “But yes.”

“So you want me to, what, befriend her?”

“Absolutely not. I want you to stay well away from her. If she doesn’t even register on your radar, it will keep her off *their* radars. It’s less than a year. We should be able to manage.”

My stepmother is barking up the wrong tree if she thinks that having a Deighton in school isn't going to make waves, with or without my involvement.

“I'm having Michael show her around.”

“Do you think that's wise?” I ask cagily. I fucking hate that guy. I can't believe he used to be one of us. I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him.

“Would you rather I asked one of the girls?”

I scowl at that too. No. I wouldn't. They're as bad as Michael.

“I thought as much. Just...try to keep your nose clean this year, Jaxon.”

I grit my teeth, seething. There's so much I want to say – should say – and yet I don't utter a word.

My head's spinning. Reeling.

There's a new girl coming to West Prep, and the sense of dread growing in my stomach tells me that she's going to fuck shit up just as much as her predecessor.

Maybe even more.



Ah for fuck's sake. I'm seriously pissed that the chemistry teacher has sent me off on a wild goose chase looking for the new kid. Admittedly, we don't get much fresh blood here, but I still don't get why everyone's all caught up in a bubble about it.

"Shit, shit, shit!" a voice calls out from further along the corridor, and I smirk in amusement.

As if the cussing isn't enough to give away that I've found the new chick, the nerdy map in her hands is a dead cert. I cock an eyebrow at said upside down map. No wonder she hasn't made it to class yet. I watch in amusement as she blunders down the hallway towards me, completely oblivious to my presence. I'm not used to that; I don't exactly cut a small figure, and most people in this place know who I am.

She's totally absorbed in her disastrous map-reading skills. I'm contemplating saying something when she slams into me, barely reaching my chest even in her ridiculous high heels. She staggers backwards and wobbles like she's about to fall, and without thinking my arm shoots out to save her and wraps itself around her slender waist. Damn she feels good, and this close to me, she smells so good too. Like Parma Violets mixed with something a little darker. I like it.

She steps out of my reach and huffs in annoyance like I'm the one that did something wrong. Why isn't this chick thanking me for saving her from landing on her ass? Why does she look pissed? She rubs the spot between her breasts and I don't bother to avert my gaze. A free show's a free show after all. She flicks me a look of total annoyance before glancing away.

I follow her gaze to the floor that's littered with her dropped papers, but before I can make a move to help her pick them up, she spins away from me and bends at the waist to reach for them. Her already short school skirt rides up and - holy fuck - she's wearing a thong. A minuscule piece of dental floss. My cock stirs, and I breathe in sharply as my mouth instantly starts to water - her ass is that delicious. Like a perfectly ripe, juicy peach that I just want to take a bite out of.

When she's finished picking her shit up, she finally sees me. She ogles me for a good minute, I swear, so I smirk at her. That's more like the reaction I'm used to. She scowls in return and it makes me want to laugh. I keep it in though; she looks like a firecracker, and I'm not too sure I want to piss her off just yet.

The chick in front of me is teeny. Possibly five foot two, maybe even less without the heels? She steps back to take me in, so I do the same, staring unashamedly at her, checking every inch of her out. I like what I see.

She has long dark hair - a sexy kind of blue-black colour - that falls in a mirrored sheet, almost down to that gorgeous ass I just got a look at. She has the most striking green eyes framed by long lashes, and full pouty blow job lips. High cheekbones and a gorgeous golden glow to her skin give her an exotic look that's unlike any of the other girls in this place.

She barely even reaches my chest, and despite the ridiculously perfect uniform, I can tell she's fucking hot; a tiny curvy little pocket rocket. I can't wait to get to know her better.

"Holy fucking shitballs," she stammers out. I like her already. She asks me if I'm made of fucking granite or

something and I give a low, amused chuckle.

Close, little girl, parts of me are getting there.

She tells me that she doesn't bruise easily but that I should come with a health warning. The innuendo is too good to miss so I allow a slow panty-dropping smile to grace my face before telling her in a low growl, "Oh, I do, little girl, just not for the reasons you're thinking."

She stares at me agog once more, and her hand flutters to her chest to massage it again. I don't even think she knows she's doing it.

"Excuse me," she says in a snippy tone, "I'm late, and I'm lost."

Now I want to play.

She tries to side-step around me but I only have to move a fraction of an inch to my left and I've easily blocked her. She lets out this prissy little huff that's more cute than threatening and tries to go round me the other way. I shift my weight to the other leg and she's blocked once again. It's like a dance, a tussle for power. I stare intently at her. Me and this little girl could have a lot of fun together, I think.

When she folds her arms over her ample chest and glowers at me, I know we're gonna have chemistry. She's like an angry little bee; and I want to poke her.

"I know, little girl," I drawl at her. She scowls and – I think – tries to look fierce. "I was sent to find you."

"Stop calling me that," she snaps. "My name is Raven."

"Ah, so you'll be my little bird then," I reply.

It doesn't escape my attention that I just used the word 'my'. Shit, did I just claim her? Already? I guess so. I'm calling it; I want this little firecracker as my own. Everyone else can back the fuck off. I saw her first; she's mine. Hell, if I could lick her to seal the deal, I would.

"Come, you're in my chemistry class, and unlike you, I know the way."

I go to move away down the corridor, but my little bird doesn't move.

"Hey," she calls, making me look back over my shoulder at her, "you're a SoCal guy?"

"Yup. I'm impressed. Care to guess the county? Most girls just ask if I'm an American," I snort derisively, mimicking a high-pitched female. Fucking airheads. Everyone wants a piece of American ass. They don't give a shit about me beyond what I can do for them, especially when they find out who my family are.

"Santa Barbara?" She hedges, sounding a little uncertain. "But maybe near the border? It's not quite right."

"Ding ding, get the lady a prize," I drawl with a lazy grin. "How'd you know?"

"I have family there," she tells me. "What are you doing here in the UK?"

"There'll be plenty of time to ask me questions when I take you out this weekend, little bird." I don't like talking about my past and my sister and niece's death, so I'll avoid it, at all costs. Hopefully, my suggestion of taking her on a date is enough to distract her from all her questions. Although, maybe actually taking her out wouldn't be such a bad idea. It would certainly send a message to everyone else to back off if I publicly claim her first.

I grab her arm and start to drag her down the corridor in the opposite direction to where she was headed. She gives some feeble protest, which I ignore, and in the end she just has to give in and go with it. Like she could stop me if she tried; it would be like a mouse halting a herd of rampaging buffalo.

I drag her through the maze of corridors, deliberately taking her on a roundabout route to the classroom. She doesn't need to know she was only one hall over from being in the right spot. I want to spend more time with her and I want her to be grateful that I found and rescued her. So, yeah, we take the scenic route to class.

Stopping at the right door, I knock and enter before the teacher tells me to. I check that she's following me, and she quietly closes the door behind us.

“Ah, Mr Lennox, you took your time.”

I cut my eyes to the new girl, to see her reaction to my name. The reaction is always the same; greedy little eyes light up with recognition and the dirty cogs of manipulation and plotting start to turn in their mind... but she seems oblivious, like the teacher just called me Mr Smith or something. Huh. Maybe she's just got a dynamite poker face. There can't really be any chance that she's enrolled at West Prep and doesn't know who she's rubbing shoulders with right now, can there?

“Sorry, Miss, our new student here got herself properly lost,” I quip. “We might not have seen her before Christmas if you hadn't sent me to the rescue.”

The teacher gives an amused sort of snort while trying to look stern – fail – and announces that we're going to be lab partners for the year. Perfect. Without any words, I stroll over to the bench, let the little bird take her seat, and slide onto the stool next to her. I usually prefer the window seat so that I can daydream, but I'm feeling like a gent today and let her take it. The teacher resumes her lecture right where she left off, but I'm not worried about having missed anything.

She leans towards me. “So, do you have a name, or do I call you Mr Lennox?” she whispers. Her voice is so low I have to dip and lean in to hear her.

I shake my head, grimacing. She just won't leave it alone, will she?

“My father's Mr Lennox,” I tell her. “For Christ's sake, don't call me that. Call me anything else.”

“Okay!” She winks at me. Interesting. “Granite mountain it is then.”

I chuckle but don't bother to correct her or say anything. But then she digs the sharp end of her pen into my ribs. The fuck?

“Stop that,” I warn, but she does it again.

“Little bird—” I release a low, threatening rumble and she squirms in her seat.

“Ooooh, scary. What’re you gonna do?” she teases.

I smirk and lean in close to whisper in her ear, and her breath catches. Her reaction to me has me reacting to her, and suddenly granite mountain isn’t a bad way to describe me at all.

I pause for a moment to tease her right back, and then say the last thing she’s expecting to hear, some goofy line from a movie.

“So, what kind of bullshit do they say about chemistry where you come from?”

“Oh my god, did you just...” She actually grins at the reference to one of my favourite movies, lighting up. Hell yeah, this just got interesting. She’s got a bit of spark to her, something going on upstairs. It’s piqued my interest even more.

“Yup.” I smile, proud that she got my joke.

“I think I love you. Marry me?” she blurts out unexpectedly, and immediately her cheeks flame.

“Not until you know my name at least, little bird.” I wink with a smirk, then add, “And I don’t plan on telling you that until our date on Saturday.”

It’s the second time I’ve alluded to taking her out now, but she hasn’t risen to the bait at all. What is with this chick? How do I get her to take me seriously? If she wants to marry me already, why won’t she date me? I let out a silent little frustrated groan and turn my attention back to whatever bullshit the teacher is banging on about. I need to figure out a way to get under this girl’s skin. I throw her a glance, and she’s absentmindedly nibbling on the end of her pen.

My cock jerks.

Yeah, I need to get with this girl, fast.



WHEN THORN MET RAVEN

I'm supposed to be in gym class but it's absolute bullshit that a school this good, this close to the ocean, doesn't run a surfing program. I've already tested out of the mandatory swim class, and unless I want to join the teacher in instructing – which I don't – I basically have a free period now. Unofficially. So long as no one catches me.

Which is why I'm making my way through the sports facilities trying to find the head of PE. I want to petition him *again* to add competitive surfing on the curriculum. Not that shitty, extra-curricular, summer term only, just for fun bullshit.

The sound of someone working out in the martial arts hub as I walk by catches my attention, and I quietly open the door. I'm not stupid, whoever's in there is either playing with knives, kicking ass, or firing arrows, and I don't want to be on the receiving end of any of that. Which is why I carefully peer through the gap in the door before slipping inside and standing in the doorway.

There's a girl practising throwing knives. She's in her school uniform – rather than her gym kit – and she's taken off her blazer and shoes. She must be new. Any other student would be in their gym kit. She's tiny, even from across the room I can tell.

Fucking lethal too by the looks of it, judging by the way she's throwing knives at the target and sinking every single one. She throws in quick succession, her movements a precise blur, her body lithe and agile.

She's terrifying poetry in motion to watch, and I find myself unable to take my eyes off her. This is the girl Rebel hasn't shut up about. He keeps calling her little bird, which I totally get. But even though he was clearly smitten with her, he didn't mention how gorgeous she is. He said he was going to take her out, but I don't think anything was officially arranged. Besides, until there's a ring involved, she's fair game in my opinion.

Time to make my move.

I clear my throat and realise a moment too late that this might not have been my best move. Startled, the knife wielding chick turns in my direction and the blade slips from her fingers. *No big deal, it'll just clatter to the floor, right?* Wrong. She was mid launch and so the absolutely deadly weapon sails through the air like a missile locked on its target. Me. I'm the target.

A flicker of horror passes over her face leaving me just enough time to think oh shit, this is the end, but somehow – miraculously – the blade skims my cheek and embeds itself in the wooden door frame beside me. I'm too stunned to move.

My heart is trying to punch its way out of my throat, and my knees are trembling so hard it's lucky I'm still standing.

I stare at my attacker with wide eyes and then hesitantly step to the side, away from the blade. Except, I don't get far because I'm somehow pinned.

"You trapped my fucking hair!" I cry, ashamed how my voice comes out all high-pitched and panicked.

"Yeah, but only a little," she replies dismissively, with a shrug.

I glower at her, but she just looks like she's trying not to laugh, which pisses me off even more.

"You could've killed me!" I chastise.

All thoughts of being angry trickle away like sand on the tides as she saunters over to me, leaning in so close that her breasts graze my chest. I tower over her – like I suspected – but she still has a way of making me feel small. She’s like a goddess, her confidence giving her the height to intimidate.

I can’t drag my eyes away from her perfect Cupid’s bow or her full bottom lip that’s begging to be bitten.

She rises up onto her tiptoes and leans in to whisper in my ear. Her hot breath tickles my sensitive skin, stirring my long blond locks and sending the sultry scent of cherry my way. My cock stirs to life at her proximity, the press of her body heat searing me despite the layers of clothing between us. Fuck. No wonder Rebel equally couldn’t shut up about her and was surprisingly tight-lipped.

She’s an absolute vixen. A package of temptation more deadly than any apple or Pandora’s box.

And yet I still want to sin and be damned, just for a taste of her.

“If I wanted to hit you, I would have.”

She jerks the knife from the door jam and steps back, smiling sweetly and shrugging like she doesn’t have a care in the world, like she didn’t just almost kill me.

My hair – my pride and joy – flutters slowly to the floor like pretty flakes of snow, teasing me a strand at a time. I don’t take my eyes off her, but when she turns and stalks back to her target and resumes her practice, I can’t help my fingers flying to inspect the damage.

I’m not about to cry or anything like that, but I don’t have to be *happy* about my impromptu haircut.

Instead, I flick my hair back from my eyes, follow the girl over to her target and watch her from a safe distance.

“Hey, who are you?” I eventually ask. I wait until she’s got all her knives in the target and safely out of her deadly hands before approaching her. She fetches the blades while I wait in her spot, and when she returns I hold out my hand for her to shake.

She eyes it like it's a snake about to bite her, which is rich given that she just attacked me! Eventually she sighs and takes my hand, her delicate yet strong fingers causing tingles to rise along my arm as she introduces herself.

“Raven.”

“Ah, the new chick.” I grin. “I’ve heard all about you.”

“Really?” She raises an eyebrow like she knows I’m absolutely bullshitting. Which I am because Rebel didn’t really tell me shit. Still, it’s opened up a conversation between us, so I’m not complaining. “From whom?”

“Ah, I’m sworn to secrecy on pain of death. He’d kick my ass if I told you his name,” I tease her.

“And what has he-who-must-not-be-named been saying about me then, huh?” I crazy grin at her Harry Potter reference, already planning exactly how I’m going to seduce this girl.

“Well... Aside from the obvious – that you’re absolutely gorgeous and smokin’ hot – he said you had brains and beauty, and that you’re absolutely hopeless at reading a map... Oh, and you’re a legacy student because your surname is Deighton. As in *the* Deighton. Granddaughter of the legendary Cordelia Deighton.”

She unfreezes, losing the momentary panic-stricken look that was in her eye and grins at me.

“You can tell your informant, that’s not bad work for a couple of hours. Not entirely accurate information, though. That’s the trouble with not getting the scoop straight from the source itself. What I want to know is what you’ll be telling him about me?”

I smile. I can’t help it. This girl is gorgeous and has good banter. She’s fun to be around, and I feel my energy lifting to bounce off hers.

“Obviously I’m going to confirm what he said, but I’ll tell him he hasn’t done you anywhere near enough justice. I’m going to tell him you’re scary as shit with a knife, but that it’s really fucking sexy too. And I’m going to brag that, although

he thinks he's taking you out on Saturday, you're actually going out with me."

"Too bad I don't go out with boys whose names I don't know, and who don't actually ask me out then, isn't it?"

Ah, so that confirms it. Rebel is full of shit; he's not taking her out this weekend. But I will be.

She starts to pack up, putting the knives back into the glass cabinet and slipping her shoes on. I act fast. She wants to date a guy whose name she knows? I'm on it.

"I'm Thorn, friends call me Thor. Will you, Raven, please do me the honour of going out with me on Saturday?" I take a deep breath before continuing. "There's a new ice cream place opened on the beach, and I'm desperate to try it. I'll even buy you a three scoop." I wink, and she laughs. There's no way she'd manage a three scoop but ice cream is life.

"Fine Thorn, friends call you Thor, you may take me out for ice cream on Saturday. But I want toppings too!"

She slings her bag over her shoulder and heads towards the door.

"Ah, well, that might be a problem," I call after her, serious. "Where do you stand on nuts?"

"On an ice cream? Sacrilege! On other things? Delicious." She tosses me a flirty wink as she leaves, and I groan, my dick jumping to life at her suggestive tone.

"Be ready at seven! And wear beachy shit!" I yell after her. She gives no indication that she heard me, but whatever. I'll knock on every dorm door to find her on Saturday morning if I have to.

I have to take a minute to get my over-excited dick to calm down again before I can go out there and head to my next class. Shit. I've got assembly, not class. The bell rings, and I know I can't be late, so with a stern look at my crotch and a "behave, boy" I hurry out of the hub and make my way to the assembly hall.

“What’s got you bouncing around like a dog with two dicks?” Rebel grumbles at me later that night. We’ve just had dinner in the kitchen and for once, I’ve happily cleared the table and started clearing up. There’s been a spring in my step all day, and I can’t help but smile.

“Nothing.” My reply comes out more cagey than I intended.

“Sranje¹!” Ace laughs.

“I agree. Absolute bullshit.” Rebel’s tone is a lot more menacing than Ace’s. I sigh. He won’t let this go unless I confess, and I’d rather he didn’t beat the crap out of me today.

“Actually, I’m happy because I’ve got myself a date on Saturday.” At this, even Jax sits forward and takes interest. I mean, none of us have *dated*, dated since the whole...Lizzie thing. Before, we just sort of hooked up with the popular girls – fucking *princesses* they call themselves – and it all sort of fell into place. So I guess this is news.

“Oh?” Ace prompts. God, even he looks curious and nothing ever phases him, usually.

“Yeah. I’m taking her surfing and for ice cream.” They all laugh. “What?”

“Dude, have you seen the chicks that go to our school? There’s no way any of them are going to risk getting their hair wet. No way. And ice cream? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“He kind of has a point,” Jax adds, backing Rebel up.

“Not this girl. She’s different.”

I know the cat’s out of the bag when Rebel’s face falls, and he gets to his feet, his chair scraping angrily across the floor.

His hands curl into fists, but thankfully Jax reaches out to stop him charging at me.

“You bastard!” he spits.

“What’s going on?” Jax demands, ever the peacekeeper.

“Nimam pojma².” Ace shrugs.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on,” Rebel seethes. “He’s putting the moves on my girl.”

“Huh? What girl?” Ace’s head whips back and forth between the two of us, but I don’t say anything. I fold my arms across my chest in a defensive manoeuvre.

She isn’t *his* anything. They met one time, and he didn’t even tell her his name or actually ask her out. He has no right to claim anything.

“Thorn?” Jax prompts.

“Unlike *some* people, I actually had the courage to ask the new chick out. And introduce myself properly. So she said yes. We’re going out this Saturday, and I plan to make it a repeat affair.”

“Like hell you are!” Rebel shouts. I laugh, baiting him.

“Erm, and how do you think you’re going to stop me?”

“I-I’ll—”

“Enough!” Jax barks. We fall silent but we’re shooting daggers at one another. “You’re both being ridiculous.” Rebel opens his mouth to protest but quickly closes it at the look Jax fires at him. “Reb, you didn’t even ask this girl out, so you have no reason to be all butt hurt about it.”

I grin triumphantly at him, but Jax’s stony gaze swings to me. “Thorn, do you actually like this girl or are you just taking her out to fuck with Rebel?”

“I like her.” I shrug, downplaying how I basically feel like I’ve been walking on a cloud since meeting her. I’d sound like a right sap if I said that out loud, and Rebel would probably punch me in the nuts. Rightly so.

“Well, in that case, have fun on your date.”

I grin.

“But—”

My face falls again.

“You don’t get to be pissed off if anyone else asks her out either.”

I grumble under my breath, but I know that he’s right.

“Agreed?” Jax snaps.

“Yes.” I sulk.

“Rebel?”

“Agreed.”

“Agree,” Ace adds cheerily.

“Mate, I wasn’t talking to you.”

“I know. I ask out anyway. Fun.”

I shake my head, hoping Ace is joking, but he’s probably not. He’s a man of few words but he has a sadistic sense of humour and judging by the scowl on Rebel’s face too, he’s thinking the same thing as me.

“Fuck it, why don’t we all just date her,” I mutter sarcastically under my breath.

“Because, Lizzie, you moron,” Jax snaps, and my happy, cloud-like feeling bursts.

“Whatever,” Rebel cuts in before I can formulate a reply. “If I can’t stop your date on Saturday, I can gate crash it.”

“Like fuck you will!” I cry.

“Idea good. I like.”

“Fuck off, Ace. Fuck off the pair of you.”

“No, I don’t think I will. I like the beach. I can surf. Ice cream’s good. Let’s do this.”

“Rebel—” I warn but it falls on deaf ears. I turn to Ace instead. “Mate, please...” but he just rattles off something in Slovenian, grins at me and wanders off. “Jax, can’t you stop them?”

“Sorry dude, no can do.” He claps me on the shoulder and shoots me a vaguely sympathetic look. “But I’ll be tagging

along too...just to make sure you don't all kill each other.”

Fuck my life. How the fuck will I explain this one to Raven?



It seemed like a good idea at dinner. To joke about gatecrashing Thorn's date. It's fun to wind him *and* Rebel up. Rebel's too highly strung and takes himself too seriously, and thinks because he saw this girl first that he has some sort of claim over her.

I didn't actually intend on following through with it.

But then throughout the week I kept catching glimpses of the mysterious girl with the *krokarjev las* – raven hair. Black but with shimmering highlights of blue and purple depending on how the light hits it.

She was in the corridors, disappearing around corners, a flash of movement between buildings.

I found myself going to the dining hall just to try and see her, like an addict who just can't stay away.

She was proving completely elusive all week; I wasn't able to catch more than a passing glance of her. Then Friday, I walked into history class and stopped dead in my tracks.

There she was.

Sitting in the middle of the room, getting her books out of her bag, completely oblivious to everything.

Just like me.

Until someone walked into the back of me. I tripped and ended up slamming into her desk. Our eyes locked and I got completely tongue-tied.

So I ran to the back of the room and hid, crouching low in my seat and keeping my head down.

My eyes kept staring her way though. I didn't hear a thing the teacher said because I couldn't take my eyes off her.

That was the moment I truly committed to gatecrashing Thorn's date, and it was absolutely worth facing his wrath this morning when he got up and came downstairs to find us all up, ready and waiting for him.

He thought we were joking.

To be honest, so did I. Until I wasn't. Until I saw her face and the way she didn't laugh when I fell at her feet, even though the rest of the room did. I decided I had to get to know her better.

And now I'm sitting in the back of the Jeep trying not to grin as the little dark-haired beauty gets feisty.

Her arms are folded across her chest, and she's frowning but it doesn't diminish her...beauty doesn't feel like the right word. She's a *boginja*, a goddess.

"We're gatecrashing your date," Jax explains while I remain watchful to see how this plays out. She's not happy, but she hasn't turned on her heel and walked away either.

"Thorn?"

"Yeah sorry, Princess. I couldn't tell them no. I don't want them here any more than you do."

"I don't date boys whose names I don't know and who don't have the courage to ask me out themselves."

I love her fire. This girl could kick ass, I'm sure.

Thorn tries to wheedle his way onto her good side but she stands her ground and my admiration grows. But then he throws out his ultimate weapon – his hot chocolate – and her determination dissolves right before my eyes.

So she has a softer side too.

That pleases me.

She stomps around the car and wrenches open the front passenger door to bark at Rebel. “Move.”

“No way, get in the back.”

“No.” She stamps her foot and it’s ridiculously cute. “You move. This is my date, and you’re an unwanted spectator, so you sit in the back.”

They argue back and forth, with Rebel looking to Thorn for backup – which he doesn’t get. Eventually Rebel sighs and gives in, moving to get in the back with us. It’ll be a squeeze.

“Move,” he grumbles at me but before I can, Raven looks over her shoulder and tells me to stay put. That he can climb over. And I have no choice but to bow to her every wish.

I feel like a knight wanting to take the knee for his queen. Especially when she smiles at me.

I’m a goner.

But as she takes a sip of her hot chocolate I realise that I’m going to have my work cut out for me. I don’t know if this is a competition or what, but Thorn’s definitely winning with his stupid drink and Harry Potter mug.

I love it when she stops him from driving off.

“Wait! Who are these guys? I don’t ride in cars with strangers, really.”

She stares at us intently, and Jax goes first introducing himself. I swallow nervously. She doesn’t remember me making a fool of myself in history.

She looks at me expectantly.

“I am Ace.”

The smile she gives me turns my insides to honey and I’m floating for the rest of the journey, staring out of the window oblivious to the rest of the world.

My mama would love her.

My sisters too.

She spins to face the back seats. “Why are we driving so far to a beach when we literally have one on campus?”

I give Jax a sideways glance, and she immediately pulls me up on it.

“And don’t fucking lie to me. I can see you’re about to. If you want a second date with me, think carefully about the next words out of your mouth.”

I return my gaze out of the window, avoiding her.

Jax sort of explains, but he isn’t telling the whole truth. I wince when he says the girl who died – Lizzie – was a messed up troubled girl. If she was, I feel it’s because we made her that way.

Unintentionally. But that doesn’t change the outcome.

Then Raven’s quiet voice says, “She wasn’t a no one, she must have been somebody’s someone.”

I feel like shit and become lost in a painful downward spiral of that time.

If I could go back and do it again, would I? If I thought it could save Lizzie, I would.

We arrive at the beach, and I’m grateful for the space and fresh air. We walk down to the beach hut, Thor unlocks it, and we wait patiently for Raven to choose her board. She picks a wooden board which will be nice and buoyant, and I grunt my approval. Then I grab a board and make my way down the beach. After a moment, Jax and Rebel join me, leaving Thor to his date with Raven.

Just because we gatecrashed, doesn’t mean we won’t give them some time alone. Well, that’s what I tell Rebel when he starts moaning.

“Leave them,” I insist.

We hit the water and catch our waves. It’s fun, but the ocean doesn’t call to me like it does Thor. I much prefer to keep my feet on solid ground. I miss the gorges and wild

walks of my homeland. But I still enjoy spending time with the guys, so I'm not completely inept at surfing.

I lose myself for several hours, and by the time I'm ready to get out, the others are too. I look around for Raven, but she's not in the sea anymore. Shit. Did all four of us abandon her? Some date this is. I wonder if she's been waiting long. If it were me, I would have left.

When we get out and find her sitting on the sand, she seems content enough. My stomach growls and she pulls some snacks out of her bag, smiles at me and tells us to dig in.

We never turn down free food, but I at least manage not to look like a total animal in front of her. When we've finished eating, the others talk and take the piss out of each other, with Reb and Thor seeming to be competing with each other to see who can make her laugh the most.

Thor's smashing it.

Mostly I watch. Join in with smiles and laughter and the odd well placed Slovenian insult. But my mind is elsewhere, fretting.

I don't stand a chance with this girl.

She's bright in every sense of the word. Intelligent and dazzling with her humour and beauty. She's charming. And the other guys are too.

I can't compete at their level. Not when I can barely string a sentence together and when I do, I sound like a delinquent.

She'd never pick me.

Lizzie did.

I refuse to think about that, about *her*, today.

I force the fog of negativity away and shake myself back to the present.

Rebel's moaning that he's hungry, and they're fighting about IHOP.

I brighten when Raven says she wants to take us somewhere, and after dropping the boards off, we all traipse

back to the car. Rebel gets in the back without complaint, and it hits me how bad he's got it for this girl too.

I'm so screwed. We all are.



'DOCTOR JAX AND PATIENT DEIGHTON'

I stand in the kitchen, staring out of the window as the machine makes my coffee. Ace walks by, completely absorbed in his thoughts. He doesn't notice me, but I can tell he's more excited for his run this morning than he's ever been before.

Because of her.

The new girl.

He stayed up all night baking, and I don't think he's slept at all.

I knew this was going to be a disaster. The second my stepmother called me into her office and warned me away from the new girl, I knew there was nothing but trouble ahead. They're all fucking smitten. It's barely been a week and they're all in way over their heads. To begin with, I was sure Thorn just asked her out to fuck with Rebel, but then I observed everyone.

Thorn really likes the girl. They have English together and even though Thorn didn't speak to her once all week, his eyes were constantly on her. Mine were too, but for a different reason. Michael. I don't trust that snake. He was trying to play it cool, but he was watching the new girl far too intently for my liking.

Raven Deighton. Who is she? Why is she here? What havoc is she going to unleash?

I went on yesterday's date to try and figure her out a little better – keep your friends close, enemies closer and all that – but nothing stood out as being suspicious at all. If anything, she earned my respect when she stood up to Rebel outside the school, and then again when we all went surfing. She took it in her stride, didn't bat an eyelid, and when she'd had enough, she simply sat on the sand and waited for us. I've never known any girl to be that chilled. Especially not a West Prep girl. They certainly wouldn't be cool with three extra guys gatecrashing their date.

But Raven was. And then, as if sensing that Thorn had shared something incredibly personal with her by taking her to the beach, she returned the sentiment by taking us all to a rundown diner from her childhood. It was clear she was family to those people, and it felt special that she shared that with all of us too. The conversation was easy and flowed, and there was good banter between all of us. Being around her was just...easy.

She's different. Completely different to any of the girls at our school. Lizzie was different too, but Raven and Lizzie are nothing alike. Lizzie was sweet, timid, shy. Raven is the opposite. But that doesn't mean that things will be different this time.

The machine beeps to signal my coffee is ready, and it draws me out of my daze. I grab the mug and turn away from the window, shutting down my concerns for the time being.

It was one date. Maybe I'm overreacting.

I take my coffee and head upstairs to Ace's room. He has one of those fold-away beds so his room doubles as a gym space for us to work out. He doesn't mind. I strip off my shirt and take a sip of the scalding hot drink'. Ugh, tastes like shit. I hate it. No matter how much I try to convince myself to like tea or coffee, I can't stand either. But I needed the caffeine hit this morning, and Thorn isn't up yet to make me his special

hot chocolate. Not that there's much caffeine in chocolate, but still, it usually gives me the pick me up I need.

I strap on my wrist guards and then cross to the punching bag that's hanging from the ceiling to begin my workout.

How much time passes before I'm drenched in sweat and absolutely parched, I don't know. The coffee tastes even worse cold, so I ditch it and head back to the kitchen for some water.

I do a double take when I walk in. Raven is half lying, propped up on her elbows on the island in the middle of the kitchen. She asks about the house as Thorn and Rebel enter, and Rebel makes some shit joke about my stepmother. I glare at him, then cut Thorn off when he tells her that the headmistress is my mum. Stepmother. They know I hate it when they make jokes about her, and my tension rises.

I turn away from them all to get that glass of water and once I've downed it, I turn back to Ace.

"What happened?" I ask.

He grunts back at me, "Fell. Hurt. Fix."

He wants me to look at her ankle? Raven protests that she's fine, I smirk and turn back to Ace.

"So your date didn't go well then?" I tease. Raven cuts in, insisting this wasn't a date because of some stupid rules which prompts Ace to throw a packet of crisps at her and then kiss the shit out of her. It makes me smile, even though it probably shouldn't.

So I guess Ace likes her just as much as Thorn. I'm yet to work out if Rebel really cares, or if he's just staking his claim on principle because he saw her first. But no, Ace is definitely under her spell.

He asks for a do-over and I have to explain to Raven what he means. He wants another date with her. A real one. One where she doesn't get hurt.

She agrees.

Interesting. So that's two dates with Thorn and Ace, plus another agreed to with each of them, plus her date with Rebel

which was part of the bet. Even I invited her over for the day and agreed to cook breakfast for her. It's not a date, but it's not *not* a date.

Fuck. What was I thinking? Am I really behaving like this just to piss my stepmother off or is it so that I can keep a closer eye on the others to avoid another Lizzie situation?

Or has this girl already gotten under my skin too?

I turn away to retrieve the small green first aid kit from under the sink, but when I return, she's trying to get down from the countertop.

"Stay put!" I bark.

"I'm fine, really," she protests. "It's just a couple of grazes."

I give her a stern look. "You're not going anywhere until I've looked at you, so shut up and stay put."

Amazingly, she doesn't fight me, but relaxes and allows me to get to work cleaning her up.

Everything is fine until I clean the cuts on her knees and she screeches like a banshee at me.

"Mother fucker!" She jerks away from me. "What the fuck did you do that for?"

"I'm cleaning your cuts. Don't be a baby."

"You just did that with the water. Why the fuck are you pouring liquid fire on me?"

"Don't exaggerate," I huff. "I'm using alcohol to make sure they don't get infected."

"They're grazes. They're not going to get infected. You clean them with water. You know, like a normal human being would?"

I ignore her and continue to dab the alcohol on her other cuts. She doesn't complain about those so much.

Once I'm done, I put the first aid kit away and check her swollen right ankle. I undo her trainers and peel her socks off.

Tentatively, I prod around her ankle, gently rolling the joint and assessing how much movement she has.

“You need some heat on this,” I tell her. She snorts and then smirks at me.

“Some doctor you are, Doctor Jax, everyone knows that you need ice for swelling.”

Is she flirting with me? Is dating three of my friends not enough for her? She wants me too?

And yet, I find myself flirting right back along with her.

“Wrong, Patient Deighton. You need heat for muscle pain and joint stiffness, which is what you have. The swelling is a side effect, not the problem.”

“So what do you suggest I do? Hold cooked food on it or keep a hairdryer on it?”

I smirk at her sassy response. “Neither. I prescribe a session in the hot tub – purely for medicinal reasons, of course.”

“Of course.” She smirks back at me, and it’s hard not to let my lips curl up into a genuine smile.

“And where can I get a hot tub?”

“Luckily, I happen to keep one here in my garden for emergencies such as these.”

Without giving her a chance to stop me, I slide my arms under her legs and lift her. She tries to protest, but I shush her. She splutters at me, wordless with indignation but I fix her with a stern look and tell her, “You’re not to put any weight on this ankle for the rest of the day. Doctor’s orders.”

I carry her through the house, out of the patio doors into the garden, and over to the hot tub, then place her down on the edge.

I hope she doesn’t think I’m being too presumptuous as my hands lift her shirt over her head. I can’t help myself, I run my fingers down her arms to the waistband of her leggings. My fingers lightly tease her stomach, and she squirms. When I

tug down her leggings, she uses her arms to lift her ass up so that I can pull them off.

Once she's sitting in just her bra and panties, my eyes roam every inch of her skin. Our gazes meet, and she stares at me like she's begging me to kiss her. My blood's pounding so hard in my ears that I can't think.

I want to kiss her, I really do.

But I shouldn't.

Abruptly I turn away from her and run my hand over my jaw in frustration. I'm pissed. I shouldn't be flirting with this girl. Inviting her into my home and undressing her. She's going on dates with my best friends. My stepmother warned me away from her. The Lizzie situation...there are so many reasons why this is a bad – no, a horrible – idea.

And yet, as she wraps her arms around herself and tries to make herself as small as possible, guilt gnaws at me.

Feeling like shit, I scoop her up and gently deposit her into the water. I lean over and kiss her forehead in apology.

"I'll be right back. Relax," I instruct as I head back inside.

In the kitchen I grab a couple of bottles of pop, but I can't help but watch her through the window. She's beautiful.

And then Rebel joins her in the tub, and disappointment lances through me. They shriek and banter together and my heart sinks.

This isn't going to end well.

But it's not like I can kick her out and demand that she never comes back.

I just need to get through today and then I can make my case to the others about why this isn't a good idea. They have to know that this – getting involved with, falling for, a girl like Raven – isn't a smart move.

Returning to the garden, I raise my brow at Rebel. He gives me a sheepish look, and I slide into the water wordlessly.

My happy mood from before is gone, but I won't let it spoil Raven's day here.

I take both of her feet and place them into my lap, and then start to massage her ankles. I'm really careful with her injured one but she still groans at my touch.

"Shit, man, that's cheating," Rebel gripes. "No using your magic massage on a chick, the rest of us won't stand a chance."

Before I can reply, Raven sticks her tongue out at Rebel and tells him he doesn't stand a chance anyway, then she begs me to continue. With a smirk at Rebel, I oblige her, wishing she was serious when she told Rebel he didn't stand a chance with her. Sadly, I could hear the teasing in her tone.

We sit in silence enjoying the bubbles, and after a while, Ace and Thorn join us. Raven moves to make room for them, even though she doesn't need to, but I manage to keep hold of her feet.

She grins and wriggles her toes, but she accidentally brushes my crotch. Well, I think it's accidental.

We chat about our plans for the week, the others inviting Raven to hang out and go to various places with us. I don't say anything. We really do need to talk about this though, before things go too far.

"Raven, can I take you out tomorrow?" Rebel asks.

She smiles sweetly. "Can't. I'm washing my hair. Sorry."

"Tuesday then," he insists. Yeah, he's got it bad.

"Painting my nails. No can do." She shrugs, and he gives a growl of frustration. I like the way she stands up to Rebel and teases him, but if she's not careful he will snap. He's not used to being told no, or not getting his own way.

Thorn clears his throat.

"Actually, Raven, I thought you and I might go out on Tuesday. Alone."

"I'd love to!" She beams at him, and Rebel scowls.

“No fair. A bet’s a bet. You owe me.”

“Fine.” She sighs. “You can take me out tomorrow. And Thorn can have me on Tuesday. Any other takers while we’re at it?” She jokes.

“Me. Next day. Do over.” Ace insists. She smiles. “Sure thing.”

Before I even know what I’m saying, the words are leaving my mouth, “Well, I don’t want to be the odd one out. I guess I’ll take you out Thursday then.”

Everyone stares, seeming to be in as much shock as I am, but Raven recovers fast with a laugh.

“Jeez, guys, I was joking. What will people think?”

“Who cares?” I shrug. “Besides, it’s half term. We’re more or less the only ones left on campus right now.”

“Right, well I’m starting to look like a prune, so I’m getting out. Can I have a shower and borrow some clothes, please?”

I jump up before the others can and climb out of the hot tub, grabbing a towel. Then I lift her out, wrap her in it, and carry her inside and through the house. She’s easy enough to carry, and I like the way she feels in my arms.

While I take her to my room, I tell myself it’s so that she can enjoy the privacy of the en suite, but really it’s because I just want to see her in my space, amongst my things, wearing my clothes.

I sit her on the side while I turn on the shower and warm it up for her. “Clean towels are there.” I point. “Shout me when you’re out. I’ll go and find you some clothes, okay?” She nods, and I go, leaving the door open a crack. Not to perv on her like Rebel would, but just so I can keep an ear out in case her ankle gives way, and she needs help.

Most of my stuff will be massive on her, but I grab some clothes that I think won’t drown her and place them on the grey blanket on my bed. She shuts off the shower, and I’m already moving towards the door when she calls to me. I scoop

her up again, return to the bedroom and put her down on my bed. “Do you need help dressing?”

“No. I’m fine, thank you.”

I’m being the perfect gentleman today, so I wait outside while she dresses, again leaving the door open a crack for safety.

When she calls out that she’s ready, I return and my gaze immediately seeks her out, sweeping over her.

I cock my head to the side, surveying her. “Do you know...I’m not sure if you look seriously hot right now because you’d look good in anything, or if it’s because you’re wearing my clothes and smelling like my shower gel.”

She apologises for the shower gel.

“Don’t be sorry. It’s sexy as hell. I can’t wait to get you downstairs in front of the others. It feels like I’ve staked my claim on you.” I have no idea where this brutal honesty is coming from. It’s like seeing her in my space has flipped a switch inside my brain and...

I blink, realising that I’ve been staring at her chest like a creeper. *Like Rebel.*

And apparently I’ve got it as bad as the others.

“Cold?” I smirk, and she agrees, but I’m not buying it. She likes what she sees as much as I do.

What I wouldn’t give to push her back down onto my covers so that I can taste her right now.

Instead, I force myself to continue playing the gentleman, carrying her back downstairs and depositing her on the sofa between Thorn and Rebel. I make sure her feet are up in Thorn’s lap.

I pass her some breakfast, and her and Rebel immediately start bickering about the muffins.

The rest of the day – and well into evening – is laid back, chilled and easy. We watch films, eat good food, chat plenty. I know I should probably leave them to it and go to my room to

work or something, but I can't bring myself to get up. There's something compelling about being in Raven's presence, a magnetism to her personality that's drawing us all in like flies to honey. I don't think I could fight it even if I tried.

And I'm not going to lie; I'm not trying. I like being around her. I like her. And I'm excited that I might get to take her out on Thursday, even though she didn't technically agree. I'll work on it. I have time.

When it starts getting late, Rebel and Thorn badger Raven to stay over, but it's too weird. We just met the girl, even though it feels natural and easy and right. It *wouldn't* be right for her to stay, and I'm relieved when she denies them their request. I see the disappointment in their faces and although a part of me mirrors their emotions, I know this is for the best.

"I'll drive you back to your dorm. I don't want you walking on that ankle still," I tell Raven. She gives me a grateful smile, and I wonder if she's been worrying about how she'll get back. Is she in pain? I probably should have offered her some tablets, but the thought didn't really cross my mind because I use them so rarely myself.

"Thanks."

I help her to her feet, and the others all get up to say goodbye to her too. There are hugs all round, and she even gives each of them a kiss on the cheek. It's nothing, a mere peck, but it's enough to get their hopes up.

Maybe she's just being friendly. She's new here, she could sure use some friends. But...I don't know. The way she looks at each of them feels more than just friends.

My pulse races and my palms become slick with sweat. *We really need to talk about this.*

I wrap my arm around her back so that I can help her out to the Jeep, and once she's buckled in I drive back to the main school building. The ride is short.

"I'll help you up the stairs to your room, okay." I don't word it as a question but she agrees nonetheless.

The stairs to the main door prove difficult. I long to scoop her into my arms and just carry her but she shoots me a warning look, so we persevere at a snail's pace. Once we're inside, we take the lift in silence to her dorm floor and at her door, I take her key and let us in.

I help her across the threshold and leave her in the doorway while I turn on her bedside lamp. The room is nice. Laid out like all of the girl's dorms are, though this one lacks those personal touches that the others have added to theirs.

I head over to her mini fridge and grab a bottle of water which I place on her bedside table.

"I'm going to tuck you in so that you don't have to put any weight on your foot. Do you need to use the bathroom?" I ask.

Raven watches me from the doorway, looking uncomfortable.

Maybe I'm being too presumptuous, too pushy. But this is my role; I've always been the leader of the group, the one who fixes things.

Despite her discomfort, she nods and allows me to help her into the bathroom.

When she limps back into the bedroom, I immediately meet her at the door and help her the rest of the way. She tries to tell me that she needs to change into PJs, but I shush her.

"Sleep in my clothes. They're comfy, and I like the thought of you sleeping in my things. How many pillows do you sleep with?"

"One, why?"

I pull back her duvet and grab her spare pillows.

Lifting Raven into the middle of the bed, I gently lie her down, placing one pillow on either side of her body. The third pillow I place at the bottom of the bed, elevating her swollen ankle.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

“Making you a princess bed,” I tell her. On the rare occasion I’m home, I make this for my stepsister. She loves it. “Once you sleep like this, you’ll never sleep any other way again.” I smile, then wink. “Well, not when you’re alone anyway.”

I tuck her in and find myself stroking a strand of hair back from her forehead.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Rest.” I turn to leave.

“What, no goodnight kiss?” she asks cheekily.

I stop and spin back to face her.

It’s a bad idea.

I’m already leaning over the bed and pressing my mouth to hers.

If she’s expecting some chaste goodnight peck from me, she has another thing coming.

She tries to touch me, but I pin her arms above her head and deepen the kiss, my tongue demanding entrance to her mouth. She tastes of strawberries and toothpaste.

She whimpers, and it’s an alarm bell sounding in my head.

I pull away, panting hard, and flick off the light so she can’t see the pain and indecision on my face.

“Sleep, Raven. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The door closes softly behind me, and I take a minute to get myself under control. My breath, my emotions and my dick all need to calm the fuck down.

I shouldn’t have done that.

I need to keep my distance. One of us needs to keep a clear head where this girl is concerned.

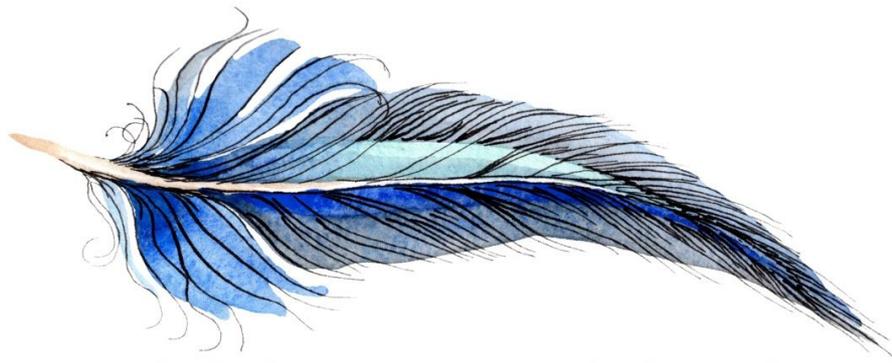
Or maybe...maybe we don’t.

Maybe an open and honest discussion, where I lay down my fears and my stepmother’s threats, is in order. If we had that talk soon – tonight even – we could all proceed with caution.

I'm not going to tell the others that they can't date Raven. I know that would blow up in my face. But I am going to explain why we need to be incredibly careful.

As I think of Lizzie, of her pale, smiling, delicate face, beautiful big eyes filling with tears, I shake my head.

I'll do whatever it takes to keep history from repeating itself.



DELETED SCENE:

ACE AND RAVEN'S DATE PREP

“Kurac¹!” I cry when what feels like my thousandth Google search comes back empty. Fuck. My date is less than twelve hours away and I have nothing.

The surfing date was amazing. Fun. Funny. I laughed a lot more than I usually do, and was able to put a lot of my *krivda*, my guilt, to the side. That rarely happens on weekends. Monday to Friday I’m studying so hard I hardly have time to think of my family back home and feel bad, but weekends usually hit me hard.

Not last weekend though. Not the beach or the diner or the hot tub or the day spent watching movies. I loved every single second of it. Which is how I came to find myself demanding a date with her right after Rebel and Thorn staked their claims.

I like her. Raven. She takes no shit, but isn’t *težko* – hard. She’s strong. And a good runner too.

I felt bad when she fell that morning. Like it was my fault. I do not like the women in my life being hurt. It made me feel *nemočen* – powerless – and I hate that.

The girls, my sisters, back home...I do what I can to help them, but often it is out of my control. That’s why I should protect Raven better, because she is right here with me and I can control that.

It's why I left her with Jax and insisted *he* fix her. I was too shaken to help her myself, but I also knew that my demons would make my hands tremble, and I wouldn't have been able to give her the best care. Sometimes protecting people means sharing with others and asking for help.

I am not too big of a man to admit that.

Something Rebel would do well to work on.

He was full of boasts about his date with Raven. He is not skromen...humble.

"What's wrong, Ace?" Jax asks. I shrug and mutter to myself in Slovenian. "What is it? Maybe I can help."

"Doubtful."

"Try me."

I scribble down what's bothering me because it's quicker and easier than trying to gather my thoughts and explain in English out loud. Even after all my time here, I still suck. I try so hard to learn, but my brain is just...broken, like the rest of me I guess.

Jax's Slovenian is very good, but I don't think he would understand what I'm trying to do.

I do not care to listen to Thorn and Rebel gossip about their dates. I do not wish to grow green with envy. So I block them out and concentrate on planning my own date. I try to think what Raven would like to do, but I do not know her well enough.

I think I would like to share some pieces of me with her, but I do not know how.

Maybe I should do something traditionally Slovenian with her. But we have already missed the Cow Ball and we are too early for Day of the Dead. Coming from a country which literally has the word love in it, puts a lot of pressure on. We believe that only the best will do for love.

"Ah I see," he says a moment after reading my note. "You want to create a unique date for Raven. Something that shows her a taste of your homeland, yes?"

“Ja².”

“Why don’t you cook some traditional dishes for her?”

I pull a face. Cooking, particularly baking, is my therapy. I’m not ready to reveal that much of myself on the first date.

“Preveč osebno³.”

“Too personal?” Jax asks. I nod.

“Okay. What would you do if you were at home? Where would you take her?”

“Outdoors. Beautiful sights to see. Explore caves, lakes, castles, the gorges.”

“Why don’t you do that then?”

“We are not there.”

“But we have those things here too. They may not be the exact same but if you explain to Raven why you chose them, she’ll love it.”

“You think?”

“I know. It’s a good idea. You could take a picnic.”

“Yes. I know. Date must have food and kissing.”

Jax laughs.

“What did Rebel do?” I ask after a moment of hesitation.

“Took her to the cinema.” I pull a face. “Super American, right?”

I mumble that it’s a horrible date.

“I agree. And Thorn just took her surfing again, so whatever you do, you’ve already got the upper hand, mate.”

“What will you do?”

“Dunno yet. I’ll wait and see what you pull out of the bag, and then I’ll figure out a way to one-up you,” he says with a laugh. He’s teasing. I think. “You better decide quickly, and then get your beauty sleep. If all else fails, you can always take her for a run.”

He claps me on the shoulder and leaves me alone in the kitchen, staring at my laptop screen, contemplating.

An idea is beginning to take hold.

“Hi.” She smiles shyly at me, and my nerve endings dance along my skin.

“Dobro jutro⁴,” I murmur.

Fuck. I should speak English but I’ve lost the power of speech.

“Does that mean hello?”

I shake my head no and her smile falls a little. I hate that I’m responsible for taking away her joy.

“Means good morning.”

The smile is back and it makes me feel warm. I want to bring her joy. Only joy. “Dobro juto?”

“Jutro,” I correct gently, with a wide smile. She is trying to speak my language! She is moje veselje, my joy! Is it possible to fall in love with a single greeting?

My father fell for my mama with a single glance. She was the most beautiful woman in all of Slovenia, and their love was epski...epic.

I long for a love like theirs.

“Are you ready? Shall we go?” Raven asks when I don’t make a move.

“Sorry. Yes. I have the nerves.”

“You’re nervous?”

“Ja. Yes. Sorry. My English is never good. Not easy. The nerves make me have twisty tongue.”

She laughs kindly, a musical sound full of understanding and not a trace of scorn.

“I get tongue tied when I’m nervous too. Or defensive. And you definitely don’t want to see that side of me.”

“Rad bi imel vsak vidik tvoje osebnosti, če bi bil moj⁵,” I sigh under my breath.

“Sorry, what? I didn’t catch that.”

“Nothing. No matter. Come. We go.”

I turn and walk away from the main school building and over to the Jeep we all share. I don’t have my own car, it is too much of a luxury and unnecessary. I do not need transport while I am boarding here. I go to school and I work hard and I send what little money I earn training people on the weekends home to my family. If I need to go somewhere, I walk or run. I do not care for machinery and vehicles. I prefer nature. Anything that reminds me of home.

In the car I’m at a loss for words so I turn on the radio.

“You choose,” I tell Raven, waving towards the stereo to convey my point. She should pick the music. Then I don’t have to worry about making conversation and driving and not crashing the car because all I want to do is stare at her.

Raven chooses a station, and we settle into a comfortable silence. I focus on driving but when she starts to sing along to a song I don’t know on the radio, I find it hard to concentrate on anything but her voice. It’s melodious and captivating.

I don’t know if it’s her or the song, but there’s a haunting quality to her voice that gives me chills. I flick my eyes from the road to her face and see her eyes are filled with tears.

Without thinking, I slip my hand into hers and squeeze, trying to send comfort and love through my fingers. She gives me a thankful smile and relaxes, keeping her hand in mine.

“Am I allowed to ask where we’re going?” she asks once the sad song finishes. The tears are gone, but they didn’t fall. Even more proof that she is strong and worthy.

“It will be a surprise,” I tell her, even as I’m reluctantly releasing her hand to signal and turn off. We are here.

“What is this place?”

“We walk. You see. I need bag.”

I grab the picnic bag out of the back of the Jeep and then turn to Raven. I hesitate, offering her my hand once more. I don't know if she will take it now that she is not sad, but my happiness bursts out when she does. She makes me feel like sunshine and Mama's potatoes.

All the best things.

Our fingers slot together like a key in a lock, and I know that today will be perfect.



DELETED SCENE: REBEL

She's in such a hurry to get the fuck away from us all – but me especially – that she runs out the door barefoot. Doesn't even stop for shoes, for fuck's sake! And where the hell is she running to anyway? We all know where she lives. It's not like there's anywhere else she can go. If we wanted to, we could just follow her. Turn up at her door and force her to listen to us.

Force her to listen to me. To believe *me*.

It's tempting: to go after her and make her see reason. But if I'm honest, my pride is more than a little wounded. I didn't think the first time I told a girl I loved her that I'd get a reaction like that. I know I messed it up a bit, but I did mean every word. I love Raven. I'm *in* love with her. And I'd do anything to prove that.

What did she say? She wanted a guy that would raze ruins for her? I'm her man. I can do that. I *will* do that if she'd just let me. I'm not stupid, I know she keeps us at arm's length and that we don't know an awful lot about her. But I thought, maybe if she knew how I really felt about her, she might start to open up a little more.

If the others hadn't interrupted and if Thorn hadn't decided to make things a million times worse, I probably could have

talked her round. Maybe. She can be pretty stubborn, but I can be pretty charming when I want to be.

Right now, I don't want to be. I glare at Thorn and the others who are all staring at me like this is somehow *my* fault.

“Don't look at me like that!” Thorn snaps.

“You fucked everything up!” I bite back.

“Looked and sounded to me like you were doing a stellar job of fucking everything up yourself just fine.”

I growl in frustration because he's possibly, probably right...but I'm not giving him the satisfaction of admitting that out loud.

“You're both idiots,” Jax says with a sigh.

“Agree,” Ace chips in. I scowl at him and he chuckles lightly, not giving two shits about the death glare I'm levelling his way. If anything, he seems even more amused, and that just pisses me off even more. “True.”

“You're both idiots,” Jax repeats. As I open my mouth to argue with him he cuts me off. “But...I think we may have gone about this whole evening the wrong way. We shouldn't have made such a big deal out of it.”

“Agree. Too many...too much...veliko hrupa za nič¹.”

“It's not nothing, Ace,” Jax says calmly. “But we did make too much fuss, you're right.”

“Be that as it may, I could have done without you coming out here and dropping the bombshell. It definitely made things worse,” I point out.

“Sorry, mate, I panicked. Should we go after her?” Thorn asks.

“I think we should let her cool off and process tonight, and we can seek her out tomorrow. Maybe individually would be best.” Jax is right, but I plan on damn well being the first to see her in the morning.

I saw her first and I damn well loved her first, and I'm going to make sure she knows – and accepts – that.

“Good plan.”

“Come on, let’s go finish dinner,” Jax suggests. “It would be a shame to let it go to waste.”

I’m not fucking hungry.

I’m up early the next day. Well, early by my standards. I set an alarm to beat the others to Raven. There’s a chance Ace might already have approached her because he likes to run at the arse crack of dawn, but maybe I’ll be first. I doubt Thorn will be up yet and although Jax never seems to sleep, it’s unlikely he’ll go see Raven first anyway. I’m surprised he admitted his feelings at all, and I’m borderline dubious as to whether he’s even capable of having feelings.

I haul my ass out of bed, sniffing my pits to see if I need a shower. I don’t. Well, I do, but it can wait. I’m not about to make anyone pass out from the damn smell at least. I want to get straight to Raven, so I pull on a band shirt and some basketball shorts. It’s a horrible clash of colours and styles but I don’t really care. Both items are clean – ish – so they’ll do. Besides, if I get to Raven early enough and we kiss and make up, hopefully the clothes will spend more time on the floor than on me. Maybe I can even convince Raven to shower with me.

I let myself out of the quiet house and walk up to the main school. I did contemplate taking the Jeep but that would be unbelievably lazy, and I don’t think Raven would approve.

As expected, the corridors are deserted at this time of the morning. I knock quietly on Raven’s door, not wanting to wake the whole dorm but when she doesn’t answer I risk rapping my knuckles on the wood a little harder. Still nothing.

I try the door and it unexpectedly opens. I peek my head inside preparing to have to squint through the dark, but the room is bright and airy. The bed is perfectly made. In fact, it doesn’t even look slept in.

There shouldn't be a reason to panic, honestly, but a sense of dread settles on me. Something feels wrong. Despite her belongings still littering the surfaces, the room feels deserted. She's not just out for a run or grabbing an early breakfast.

She's gone.

The lack of any lingering scent of her in the air makes me think she's been gone for a while too.

I check the bathroom, just to be sure, but it's empty. There's no case in her closet, and a bunch of clothes are gone, judging by the empty hangers, and a quick rifle through her desk and bedside drawers show there's no passport.

She's *gone* gone.

"Fuck!" I roar, forgetting all about the early hour and waking people up. For good measure I bang my fist against the wall, knocking one of the pictures askew.

I slam the door behind me and rage all the way back to the house. I'm not mad she's gone, I'm mad that yesterday's giant fuckup has caused her to run.

"Guys! Get down here now!" I bellow as soon as I walk through the door. I have to yell a few more times before everyone appears at the top of the stairs.

Jax takes one look at me and comes down to join me.

"What's happened?"

"Raven's gone!"

"Gone? What do you mean gone?" Thorn asks, coming down the stairs too.

Only Ace waits at the top, watching to see how this plays out.

"I went to her room to...I don't know, fucking apologise or some shit for yesterday but she wasn't there."

"She might be running," Thorn points out calmly. I want to punch his stupid logic right out of him.

“Her bed wasn’t slept in.” I shake my head. When he opens his mouth to argue I growl. “I’m not a fucking idiot, okay? I searched her room. Her things are gone. There’s no case, no passport.”

“All of her things?” Jax asks sharply.

“No. Just some stuff. But that’s not the point—”

“It’s the end of term. She’s entitled to leave, Reb.”

“But what if she doesn’t come back?”

“If she’s left some of her things here it would indicate that she is planning to return, no?”

“But—”

“It’s two weeks. She’ll be back after the holidays. We just have to wait and see.”

“But that’s ages! What if someone collects her things and she just vanishes?”

“She’s a Deighton. She can hardly vanish,” Thorn scoffs.

“It’s because she’s a Deighton that she can, idiot,” I snap.

“She isn’t going to vanish. For all we know she’s had this trip planned for months and she just didn’t tell us.”

“But why wouldn’t she? I mean, we’re dating. You tell your partner when something big like this is coming up.”

“Maybe she didn’t know how. Perhaps she was going to last night and then...”

“And then we fucked everything.”

“Look, I really don’t see that we can do all that much.”

“Ask your stepmom,” I plead.

“What?”

“Just ask her if Raven had a holiday booked in on the system or something, please? I’m going out of my mind and I don’t think I can handle two weeks of not knowing!”

Jax sighs and grabs the keys from the replacement console table by the front door.

“I’ll be back in a few. Try to keep your head until then.”

And then he’s gone.

I look up and meet Ace’s impenetrable violet gaze staring down at me from the top of the stairs.

“What?” I snap.

“Ti si tepec². Moraš se popraviti³.”

“In English, mate!”

“Idiot. Fix. Popravi to, ali ti ne bom nikoli odpustil⁴!”

I have no idea what he’s fucking saying but he glares at me before spinning on his heel, stalking back to his room and slamming the door hard enough to make the whole house shake.

I look hopelessly at Thorn.

“What are we going to do?”

“Mate, I don’t know. But she’ll be back, right? She has to come back.”

“I don’t know. I have this feeling.”

“Well fucking stop listening to it. Mind over your goddamn gut, Rebel. Raven is fine. She’s gone on holiday and she’ll be back in a couple of weeks. And then we can all start doing damage control over your stupid fuck up.”

“My stupid fuck up?! It was you that ruined everything! You admitted as much last night!”

“Yeah, well, I’ve slept since then and I think you’re to blame!”

Our bickering is interrupted by Ace opening his door and screaming at us, “nehajte se kregati⁵!” before slamming the door once more. A second later, loud music blares from his speakers and Thorn and I are left staring at each other.

“What was that about?”

“Not a clue.”

“I’m going to get some breakfast. You want?”

“No. I’m waiting here for Jax.”

“Suit yourself, but waiting in the hallway versus the kitchen won’t bring him back any quicker.”

I flip him the bird and he shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

The second he’s out of sight, I begin to pace.

Who could I call? Who do I know that might know where she is? She’s a Deighton – we don’t move in the same circles. She doesn’t seem to have made many friends here. Aside from that twat Bloomberg, but even then, she’s been distancing herself from him I think.

Annoyed and frustrated, I wait for Jax to return. It feels like hours pass before he reappears in the doorway.

“Well?” I demand, pouncing on him as soon as he steps through the door.

He shakes his head and all the air leaves me. I deflate, shoulders slumped.

“Sorry, mate. She said there wasn’t any holiday request put in and that Raven was down to stay on campus over Easter break, but because it’s a school holiday, she’s actually free to come and go as she pleases, so she doesn’t *technically* have to submit a holiday request.”

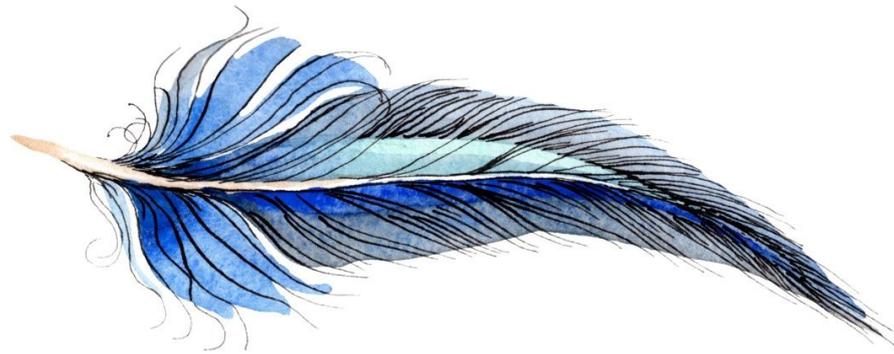
“So she’s gone then?”

“For now, yeah.”

Jax claps me on the shoulder and gives me a supportive squeeze before heading into the kitchen.

I can’t accept that she’s gone. That I just have to wait two weeks to see if she comes back. I can’t. *I won’t.*

I need to make a call.



WHEN BAXTER MET RAVEN

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED IN F*CK YEAH

I've been summoned to dinner. Actually, my grandfather summoned me to a family dinner, but as his whore is going to be there, I refuse to acknowledge a familial connection. I've been ordered to dress up, which is utterly ridiculous. I always look smart. I take pride in my impeccable appearance. I can, however, understand the mandate to be on my best behaviour. I'm just not going to abide by it.

I think tonight is finally the night I get to officially meet the whore's granddaughter. I say officially, because she's been on this goddamn island a week already and while they've done their best to keep her away from me, I've been able to snag glimpses of her here and there.

Colour me intrigued. I want to know why she's here. I think she's hiding or on the run or something, but even my Order connections couldn't turn up any dirt on her. Which in itself is suspicious.

Besides, this whole thing is an absolute joke. First, I get told to stay away from the girl, and then I'm summoned to have dinner with her.

As if that wasn't bad enough, when I get to the main house, Grandfather ushers me into the informal dining room and I discover it's set for two. Then he leaves me, to go and greet his guests.

What the hell is he playing at? He obviously has some sort of agenda here. Why else would he have had a complete 180? I pray The Order isn't involved somehow. I can't fuck with the girl if she's somehow tied to The Order. I'm pretty sure my life is dangling by a thread with them anyway, and if they're going to such great pains to hide this girl's identity...well, I'm just saying, no pussy is worth all that.

When I hear voices in the hallway outside, I sneak over to peek through the small crack where Grandfather didn't quite shut the door. I smirk as the object of my interest recognises my grandfather and her jaw goes slack. Her bright green eyes are like saucers. Interesting. So she's never met him before but she recognises him. That's good; she'll be easier to seduce if she knows who I am and what I'm heir to. Chicks dig that rich heir shit.

I have to move away from the door when I see how Cordelia and my grandfather are looking at one another. It's enough to put anyone off their dinner, and I'm actually quite looking forward to this.

The girl looks beautiful. That's my first thought when the doors swing open and they step across the threshold. She looks surprised to see me, obviously unaware of my presence – which is good because it means she hasn't noticed my... observing her all week. I definitely wouldn't call it stalking. More, keeping tabs on. A friendly watchful eye.

Finally, seeing her up close and from the front, it's like all the little missing pieces of a puzzle come together and I get the overall picture. Before I just had snapshots, flashes, glimpses, but now I can stare to my heart's content. She's stunning. But not what I was expecting.

Her cheekbones are high, her nose straight. She has the perfect blow job pout that could keep a man hard for days. Her long black hair flashes with shades of blue even in the intimate lighting of the dining room. I can just imagine wrapping those long tresses around my fist to control her every movement. My dormant dick starts to stir like a predator coming out of hibernation.

I knew she had shapely legs from watching her sunbathe by the pool, but now in her short but elegant – and clearly grandmother approved – dress, I can't take my eyes off them. In heels, she's a vision. I hope she keeps them on later while we're fucking. I may have to insist on it.

“Ah, Charlotte. Sorry, Raven.” My grandfather getting flustered pulls me out of my fantasies. Shame. “This is my grandson, Baxter. Baxter, this is Cordelia's granddaughter, Raven.”

I watch her closely as she cringes at the way my grandfather muddles her name up. I feel her eyeing me wearily. She doesn't like his slip up, she knows I'll have questions and she doesn't want to open up to me. I can see how guarded she is in everything from her shuttered eyes to the tense way she's holding herself.

I stand to greet her, always polite and on ceremony when my grandfather is around. It's one of many roles I'm used to playing. So many roles. In The Order, I'm the silent assassin, ruthless and efficient. To the Knox brothers, I'm a misconceived threat to the girl they love. To Amelie I'm...a friend. That's not a role I'm used to playing, but I'm finding it quite enjoyable.

The girl is staring at me, for a beat too long. I don't see the usual appreciation flare in her eyes. Nor is there the cold calculation of a gold digger. She doesn't even look afraid of me, like the people who know what I'm capable of always do.

No. There's simply a hard, wary defiance in her eyes that piques my interest. I want to get inside this girl's head, not just her pants. I could crack open her skull and watch her secrets spill alongside her blood. She would make a pretty addition to —

I shut those dark thoughts down. I don't do that anymore. Well, I don't do it often. The Order gave me a legitimate outlet for those urges, and I haven't lost control since I painted Amelie's mural with Knox blood. And no one even died that time so maybe I'm getting better. It would be both a dream come true and a crying shame if I was.

Although, I haven't got my hands on whoever drugged me yet. They're in for a whole new world of unimaginable pain.

The girl in front of me intrigues me. I want to know her secrets, not spill her blood. I repeat that to myself a couple of times until I almost believe it.

I gaze at her with a cold, fierce intensity, devoid of all expression, until I know I've got my darkness back under control. It doesn't help that she shivers and my cock twitches, like a bear stretching when it first wakes up or some shit.

"Nice to meet you," I say smoothly, slipping into full charm mode. I even put some expression into my tone. If my grandfather wants to switch plans from keeping her hidden from me, to thrusting her into my path, I'll play along and he can reap the consequences.

I hold out my hand for her to shake, not moving out from behind the table to keep my curious dick hidden. She doesn't move for a beat, then shakes her head and steps forward quickly to place her hand in mine. Her silken skin burns mine like fire, and I can't help but squeeze her small delicate bones in a crushing handshake. I like the feel of her under my hands. I want more.

"And you?"

I bite back a knowing smirk when her reply comes out as a question. So she's not completely immune to me either then.

Feeling our grandparents' disapproving eyes upon us, I raise the back of her hand to my lips and kiss it, all while holding her gaze. It's a chivalrous, dead move, not really me at all, but I love how uncomfortable it makes everyone in the room.

Keeping hold of her hand, I use it to pull her towards me. Even in her heels she has to go up onto tiptoes to reach me as I draw her closer and closer. She's bent over the table and I finally get a good look down her top. I'm not disappointed. Beneath the modest neckline she has an excellent rack. What I wouldn't give to be standing behind her ass right now though. The only thing I'd love more than to fuck her from behind

over this table, would be to lay her out on it and make *her* my twelve-course-meal.

She freaks and tries to pull away as I lean in to kiss her, but I still have hold of her hand. She can't do anything without making a scene, and I'm *just* trying to be polite. As I close the distance between us, the panic in her eyes and her air of desperation teases and provokes me even more. Fuck decorum. I deliberately aim for her lips.

And they're so fucking soft and pillowy I know I'll die if I don't get to experience them wrapped around the base of my cock.

I'm so distracted by that thought, my grip loosens on hers. Unfortunately, she chooses that exact moment to yank her hand from mine and she sends a wine glass clattering across the table. I grin.

"Ah, young love," my grandfather titters with a smirk. I cock my head and study him, curious. The girl sends him a death glare. He ignores us both and turns to Cordelia. "Shall we dine in the formal room and leave these two to get to know each other a little better?"

She desperately makes eyes at her grandmother, probably begging them to stay and not leave her alone with me, but Cordelia only has eyes for my grandfather, and my grandfather has a plan. I'm on his side with this one. Go. Leave. Thank you for bringing me a nice little lamb to play with.

The door closes and the girl in front of me swallows nervously. A wicked grin stretches across my face. I'm going to have some fun tonight.

With impeccable timing like always, as soon as we are seated, the doors at the far end of the room fly open and the servers enter with the first course. I nod my head in silent thanks as the first plate is placed before me, then I sit and wait. Even once the staff are gone, I wait. I watch. She grows more and more uncomfortable.

Finally, she begins the starter. I think it's so that she doesn't have to look at me any longer. I wish I could eat, but my brain is too busy taking in every inch of her. I just sit and stare at her, elbows on the table, fingertips together, resting against my chin. I'm plotting.

"What's up with the name thing?" I ask. We've been silent for minutes and I'm just not comfortable making small talk. It's not something I often have to do. Usually people are either too scared to talk to me, or too in awe. Those who are brave enough, I quickly shut down. So having to initiate conversation at an intimate dinner for two? Pure hell. I'd rather have a sleepover with Kalen Knox than have to do this.

"What's up with the name Baxter?" she bites back. Okay, she *really* doesn't want to talk about it. "Your parents really like soup or something?"

I chuckle lightly, unable to help myself. She's the first person to ever connect my name to the Scottish soup company, usually people are too obsessed with the Branson name to consider much else. It's a coincidence though, my mother just really liked the alliteration.

"Touché," I say, still laughing slightly. "So you don't want to talk about that then. What shall we talk about?" She shrugs and keeps eating.

"You a vampire or something?" she asks me. I snort back a derisive laugh. Is she for real right now? Doesn't she know people are monstrous enough without inventing new creatures to terrify people?

"Pardon?"

"The not eating thingy." She waves her fork around like she knows how to wield a weapon. It's sexy *and* intriguing.

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't notice. I was distracted by the beauty in the room." Ah fuck. I glower. What the fuck did I say that for? My brain can't decide if it wants to fuck with her or be genuine, and now I'm coming off like some deranged sociopath. *Pick a path, Baxter. Fuck her to fuck with Cordelia*

or try to make a meaningful connection for once in your sorry life.

I sigh. I guess I'll pick the first path. It's a damn sight easier. And it'll at least end in sex. I need to be more charming, less creepy, but this girl is looking like a hard sell. There's a look in her eyes that says she isn't going to fall for any of my usual bullshit, and I might just have to try harder with this one. I'm surprised. I'm not used to trying, and I'm certainly not used to high society girls posing any sort of a challenge. Although this one seems as far from high society as it's possible to get. Is she even Cordelia's granddaughter? I don't see any resemblance.

"Well, I'm starving," she says, drawing me from my thoughts. "So if you could begin, I'll be able to get my main course sooner. I hope it's more substantial than whatever this fairy food is."

"Fairy food?" Again, I want to laugh. My lips twitch and I don't remember the last time I had so little control over my own damn body. My dick bobs in agreement and I mentally tell it to calm the fuck down too.

She stares pointedly at my plate, ignoring me until I get the hint and pick up my fork to begin.

"Yes, fairy food. All pretty and dainty. Portion size only big enough to fill a fairy."

I can't help but snort in amusement, picking up the tiny morsel from my plate and popping it into my mouth in one go. She's right of course, but usually chicks dig this fancy ass shit. Does this one even care that she's eating food created by the most decorated celebrity chef in the world? Obviously not, because if he could hear the way she's derisively describing his food, his ego would be beyond wounded.

I decide that I definitely like her. She was born into this world and she doesn't fit at all. But rather than try to be fake, she's giving everyone the finger. Like me.

"This is a five hour, twelve-course tasting menu. The portion sizes have to be small; otherwise you'd pop." I laugh

again easily. There's a...lightness in my chest I've not felt in a long while. I get something similar around Amelie but to a lesser extent. There's always some concern there, knowing how much danger she's in, and having to deal with my wanting to protect her and not just because I'm paid to.

No, this girl makes me feel...happy? I'm not sure. Am I capable of that emotion? Fucking makes me feel good. Plotting too. Revenge, killing, torturing all make me feel sated. But happy? That's a new one for me.

"Wait! What? Five hours?"

"At least." I smirk, enjoying the clear discomfort on her face when she realises that she'll be stuck here with me for a while yet. I'm pretty sure she planned to eat and run, but it gives me time to seduce her course by course. They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I never understood that. I eat to keep my body functioning. But maybe the way to a woman's heart is through food too? I have no idea. In the past it seemed to be through my name and bank balance but this girl doesn't seem that way inclined.

"I'd rather have a steak and ice cream," she blurts out, just as the servers enter to take away our plates. There's a look of horror on everyone's faces and my shoulders shake. Uh-oh, she's in trouble now when the chef finds out.

When we're alone again, we sit in silence. She seems uncomfortable, sighing and fidgeting. I don't mind; every time she wiggles, her dress slides a little further up her thighs. I wonder what colour her underwear is.

"What do you do?" She breaks the silence.

"I'm about to graduate from university." I appreciate the thoughtfulness of her question. Most people assume I don't do anything, just sit around waiting for Grandfather to die so that I can start blowing his legacy on booze and breasts, or pills and pussy.

"Oh, how old are you then? I thought you were my age." She looks at me with curiosity. Damn. I should have lied. This is going to lead to more questions.

“I’m older,” I reply flatly, hoping to shut her down.

“What do you read?” she digs. It’s like she can sense I don’t want to go down this line of questioning, and is trying to provoke me.

Is she stupid? I’ve killed guys for less. I level her with a hard look.

“Books.”

“Funny.”

“My degree’s in business management.” I sigh. Here we go...

“Oh, where from?”

“Knox Academy.” The fucking school of the bastard devil. It stole my soul in exchange for a tuition I never even asked for.

“I’ve never heard of it.” She pulls a face.

“You wouldn’t have.” Nice girl like her at a school for people like me? Ha. As if. Amelie barely fits in. She thinks she’s so badass but she didn’t even kill that guy. She’s too kind, her heart’s too big, she’s taking the rap for that twat back home. Wouldn’t mind spilling a little of his blood.

Actually though, looking more closely at the girl in front of me, I can see she has something about her. There’s mettle there. Knox would eat her alive, sure, but she’s clearly not some society bimbo like I first assumed.

“Ooooh is it like some super-secret posh school for the rich? Or is it a spy school?”

“Something like that,” I evade.

“Let me guess; you’re going to manage a business with that degree?”

“Wow, you’re so clever I can’t believe you’ve not graduated early...” I drawl back sarcastically. She’s touched a nerve. “Yes I’m going to run businesses, my grandfather’s for one.”

If I live that long. I'm still not sure how to get out of The Order. When Grandfather first collected me and word got back that I was 'missing', I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to disappear, but my damn curiosity got the better of me and I called Frost. He has to be the reason Amelie found me, and if she knows I'm alive, the Knox brothers will know I'm alive, and so will The Order.

Which means I'm dead.

"Well, that's stupid," she says, pulling a face.

"Why?" I scowl.

"Because what idiot would be stupid enough to hand over the reins of their company to a kid fresh out of school with no practical business experience?" My jaw hangs in shock. I'm so astonished by the brazen way she speaks her mind, that I'm half tempted to spill my secrets just to shut her up. She wants experience? If only she knew what I've done.

"Why does a piece of paper that says you read a few books and wrote a few essays make you more qualified to run an actual business than say, people who have decades of experience?"

She swallows nervously at the look I give her – like I'd love nothing more than to cause her pain and fuck her senseless right now. I quickly try to school my expression, but I know she catches it because her eyes harden in defiance.

"Interesting idea," is all I say, too enraged to say more. She's so close to being bent over the table and taught to hold her goddamn tongue.

Once again, the doors open, and the next course is served. I have a pretty good idea what's coming and sure enough, the chef doesn't disappoint. She looks down at her plate, lip already curling in a disapproving sneer when she blinks in shock.

Our plates are both full to the brim with steak and chips. I can practically see her mouth watering as the server passes her a steak knife.

“Now this is more like it!” she exclaims, digging straight in, excited.

“Glad you’re happy.”

“Please tell me this is it instead of another ten courses?”

“Nine. You have ice cream for dessert.” I grin. Her happiness is infectious.

“Awesome!”

“Do you really love steak and ice cream that much, or do you just want out of here quicker?”

“A little of one, a lot of the other.”

I laugh at her joke and join her, eating in silence. I enjoy the steak almost as much as the view and the company.

After dinner, as she starts on her dessert, I change seats and sit beside the girl. She doesn’t say anything but I can tell from the tense set of her shoulders that she’s not happy.

I drop my hand to her thigh.

“What the fuck?” She growls, dropping her spoon and glowering.

“What?” I ask coldly. She’s not behaving like normal girls do, so maybe she needs a not-so-subtle reminder of how this is going to work. “I got you the dinner that you wanted, so why don’t you show me how grateful you are?”

My voice is steel. My eyes, ice. The weight of my intention presses down heavily on her bare skin. She doesn’t reply, move, react in any way.

“No, thanks. I’m taken,” she eventually says stiffly.

“I don’t see a ring.” I smirk.

She waves her hand in front of my face, and I laugh again. Her grandmother could have given her that ring. It means nothing to me.

“It’s on the wrong hand, honey.” I don’t like the taste of that term of endearment on my tongue. It doesn’t suit her at all. This girl isn’t sweet.

“Means the same thing though. I’m taken. And not interested.”

“Is that so?” I drawl. “Then why haven’t you moved my hand?”

I’m more than a little smug as she glances down at where my hand is still resting on her leg. Even now she makes no move to remove it.

Trying to provoke her further, I start to lightly stroke and work my way higher. Then I squeeze the soft skin in my grip.

She snaps.

Her hand shoots out and grabs something. She moves with such lightning fast reflexes, I can’t even process what it is. Fiery pain explodes through the back of my hand and I howl in pain. It’s the shock that does it. I’ve sustained far worse with barely a sigh passing my lips before now.

It turns out to be her steak knife which she has driven through my flesh. My dick springs to fucking attention like a goddamn masochist soldier reporting for duty.

She shoots to her feet, the chair toppling over, and rushes to the door. I grab the nearest napkin and attempt to staunch the blood. Before she can reach for the handle, the doors fly open, and both of our grandparents are taking in the scene with horrified looks on their faces.

“What’s going on?” My grandfather demands.

“Is everything okay?”

“No, it’s not! Baxter’s had a little accident,” she says with a falsely sweet little smile.

An accident? Really?! How the hell would I accidentally stab myself with a steak knife during a dessert course?! How the hell am I going to explain that one?!

I purse my lips and glower at her, but I won’t say anything. The Order taught me better than that.

“I think he might need stitches.”

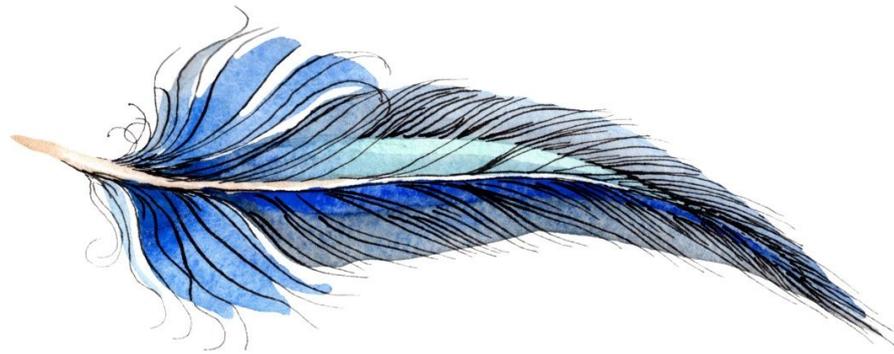
No fucking shit, darling! Of course I'll need bloody stitches! I'm pissing blood everywhere. I have a steak knife still stuck in my hand!

"I have to go, I'm so sorry, but if I see blood I'll faint."

Yeah I call bullshit on that, I think, as she rushes past our grandparents.

"Raven, wait!" Cordelia calls, turning to grimace apologetically at Grandfather. "I'm so sorry, Dicky, I have to make sure she's alright." Is she kidding me right now? I'm the one who just got fucking stabbed!

I shift in my seat, subtly trying to rearrange my pants. I'm harder than steel. That girl looks like she loves to bathe in the blood of her enemies. Holy fuck. I think I just fell in love.



DELETED SCENE:

RAVEN'S SEX ON THE BEACH

Thorn flexes his hand on my thigh and I flinch, my skin already over sensitive as trepidation swims in my stomach.

“Relax,” he murmurs again, low in my ear, before kissing the little divot just below my lobe. I shudder.

My gaze flicks back to Rebel. His signature shit-eating grin is on his face, but his eyes hold a heat that rivals that of the fire beside us.

Thank god I’m lying down. I can just close my eyes and pretend like this isn’t happening.

Well, not that it isn’t happening, but at least I don’t have to meet their stares and let them see the nervous questions in my eyes.

Holy fuck. Are we doing this?

Yes, we are!

Rebel’s huge palm caresses the skin of my bare thigh, gradually moving higher as my muscles relax. On my other side, Thorn does the same. It’s the strangest sensation, having both of their hands on me at once and I’m immediately thrown back to New Year’s Eve when Thorn and I got frisky in the cloak room and he teased me about the others getting impatient and coming looking for us. Did he know how much

his words turned me on? Did he remember and initiate this tonight?

I'm distracted by someone sliding their hands under my shoulders and lifting me slightly. My eyes open and lock onto Ace's violet orbs. He gives me a soft, reassuring smile and settles my head back down in his lap.

“Ljubim te¹,” Ace tells me. “Ne bomo te izpustili². Ne moreš bežati od nas³.”

When he begins to run his fingers through my hair, lightly massaging my scalp, I relax once more and my eyelids flutter closed.

I'm transported back to Valentine's Day, when Ace kissed me at the soft play while Thorn teased me under my dress... and Rebel interrupted us before things got interesting. He was so mad then, yet seems completely on board now.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised given that he had no problem sharing me later that day in the hot tub, or watching me in the steam room as Jax barked orders at me.

This reminds me of that in a way, yet somehow it's so much more.

The memories and the moment are working their magic on me. Just as I'm thinking I could probably drift off like this, strong hands grip my ankles and wrench them apart.

A squeal of surprise falls from my lips and I don't have to look to know that it's Jax's firm grip. He shifts so he's holding my feet, his thumbs applying pressure to my sensitive insteps and making my back arch up off the pile of cushions and blankets. A mewling sound follows my squeal when he squeezes and a bolt of heat courses straight to the apex of my thighs.

Holy shit, they're all touching me. At the same time!

I force myself to breathe and remain calm, but my heart is racing just from this seemingly innocent contact.

Who am I kidding? Nothing about these guys is innocent!

Ace's hands move from my scalp to my shoulders, constantly massaging and turning me into a puddle of goo.

I can do this. I can relax. Just breathe. Breathe and enjoy the moment, Raven.

Without speaking, Rebel and Thorn switch from sliding their palms across my skin, to tiptoeing their fingertips up the delicate insides of my thighs. It tickles and I squirm.

“Keep still, Princess,” Jax orders. I gulp and try to relax but I can't help it. The higher up they go, the more I wiggle. I'm becoming uncomfortably warm under the blanket but there's no way I'm going to take it off and expose myself to the cool sea breeze.

Ace moves under my dress to my breasts at the same time Rebel and Thorn make contact with my clit.

It's like electricity coursing through my body between the two points of contact and when I rear up, Jax puts me back in place with firm pressure to the soles of my feet.

Fuck!

“We will, soon, Princess,” Rebel promises, and I can hear the smirk in his voice. Shit. I guess I yelled out loud. Stubbornly, I clamp my lips closed, which earns me a chorus of chuckles.

“Spravili vas bomo v krik, princesa⁴,” Ace whispers in my ear. Fuck knows what he's saying, but it adds to the throbbing between my legs. I whimper as Ace presses his lips to mine, desperately pouring my need into our kiss, silently begging him to help me...I don't even know what. It's too much. Too intense.

The perfect goodbye?

Rebel immediately puts those thoughts to bed, stroking along my folds and probing at my entrance with his thick fingers. Thanks to the way Jax has positioned my legs, Rebel has pretty easy access to whatever parts of me he likes.

Thorn teases my clit with featherlight circles and little taps while Ace gently circles my nipples.

I gasp for breath, already forgetting my resolve to keep my mouth closed.

“Please!”

“Please, what, Princess?”

Fuck. This is torture. Rebel is teasing my entrance, barely pushing inside, and Thorn is driving me crazy. Even Jax is lightly stroking my insteps.

“Touch me, please,” I beg.

“But we are touching you,” Jax replies. I open my eyes again and they lock on his. Even in the twilight, with only the fire and candles providing light, I can see his smirk and his dark eyes dancing with mirth.

“It isn’t funny! Touch me *properly*.”

“Oh, you hear that, boys? She wants us to stop and touch her properly.”

Immediately their touches become PG and I groan in frustration. “I didn’t mean that! Don’t stop.”

“Don’t stop what? Touching you properly, or touching you how we were before?”

I grit my teeth and glare at Jax, not in the mood for his power games. He holds my stare expectantly, not letting me off the hook. Eventually I cave, sighing and then spitting out from between my clenched teeth, “like before.” He raises his brow at me, eyes hardening to coal. “Please,” I hastily, albeit reluctantly, add.

“Pridna punčka⁵,” Ace beams at me.

They return to their previous ministrations and tear my eyes from Jax in an effort to bring back the relaxed bliss of a moment ago.

It’s no use.

I’m electrified. Already on edge. *Fucking* sensitive.

“Ace, please,” I beg, choosing wisely. I know he’s the softest touch out of the four. He rarely tells me no, always my

white knight in shining armour.

“Yes, princess?”

“Harder please.”

He chuckles but does as I ask, finally touching the aching pebbled points he’s been dancing around and taking them into his capable fingers. He twists and tugs, making me cry out, and earning him an admonishment from Jax.

“Slow down! She’s too close.”

“That’s the point!” I snap, once again throwing a ferocious, savage look at Jax. How dare he dictate my orgasms! He’s not the boss of me.

“Careful, Princess,” he warns. “It would be a real shame with all these hands on you, if not one of them let you come.”

Chastised, I shut up. Again.

Until I can’t hold my tongue any longer.

“Reb, are you probing for an opening or going in?”

“Neither. I’m going diving.”

He yanks the blanket away, exposing me to the night sky and their gazes, the cool air kissing my exposed, burning lady parts. My dress has ridden up, and I’m powerless to pull it back down.

Thorn backs away from my clit – thank fuck, I swear he couldn’t find it with a flashlight and a map – and moves up my body.

“Let’s get this dress off you.”

“Agree,” Ace adds, helping me to sit so that Thorn can remove the offending item.

Now I’m naked on the beach and they’re all fully clothed. It’s not fair.

Well, if I don’t get to come, it won’t be fair. If they give me my happy ending, I doubt I’ll be complaining too much.

They lay me back down and Rebel situates himself between my legs, forcing Jax to let go of my feet. He fixes me

with a stern look though and demands that I keep my legs splayed.

I'm unlikely to move with Rebel's wide shoulders stretching me open.

When his tongue makes contact with my heat, I'm a goner. Jax might be trying to control the situation and when I come, but one thing's certain; so long as Rebel doesn't stop, my juices are going to be decorating his face in no time at all.

"Here, Princess, take this," Thorn tells me, presenting me with his dick. I lick my lips in eager anticipation and lean forward to take him greedily. Ace keeps tormenting my nipples and I don't give a shit where Jax is so long as he's not stopping the fun.

I hollow my cheeks and take Thorn as deep as this position will allow and he responds as he always does; enthusiastically. Actually, I have to do very little of the work with him thrusting into my mouth, but the added sensation is driving me closer to the edge.

Fuck.

Rebel's tongue, his fingers still inside me, Thorn pushing my limits, Ace abusing my nipples...it's all mind blowing.

Frantically, I push myself to take Thorn deeper, desperate to get him over the edge as quickly as possible so that my mouth is free to scream my release. The pressure building in my body is too much, and I know that it's going to explode out of me in a torrent of noise.

"Fuck, Rae. You look so stunning like this," Thorn says, staring down at me with reverence on his face. If I weren't so close to falling apart I'd snort at his comment. Women always become more beautiful in the eyes of men when they're taking cock. And yet men rarely do when they're giving cock.

I groan and the vibration has its intended effect on Thorn. He gasps, thrusts impossibly deep and stills. With a moan that sounds almost painful and a lurch of his hips, he pumps his release into me and I swallow every drop eagerly until his cock quits twitching on my tongue.

I slip him from my lips and then fellate the remaining juices from his cock, making sure he's nice and clean and just starting to get hard again.

Fuck the party. I want to stay here and do this all night!

Ace swaps places with Thorn and when I open my mouth eagerly to greet him, he chuckles. Placing his hand under my chin, he gently closes my mouth and leans down to kiss me.

I pull away. "Don't."

"Meni je vseeno⁶. To me ne moti⁷."

I shake my head. "I don't understand."

"No care. No bother."

He takes advantage of my distracted state to kiss me, and when I gasp in surprise he slips his tongue straight in and turns the kiss dirty.

Thorn lowers his mouth to my nipple and sucks with as much gusto as I gave him, pushing me to the edge so that I'm teetering on the brink of my release.

There's just...something missing.

"Ace, please," I beg, breathless when he breaks our kiss."

"Ja, princesa⁸?"

"I need..."

"Tell me. Povej mi kaj potrebuješ⁹. Naj ti dam svet¹⁰."

Rebel shifts and I scream, my muscles locking up, my entire body trembling. My eyes are burning with unshed tears, my nails digging into my palms.

"Jax! Please! I need Jax!" I cry.

"I love it when you beg." He moves into my line of sight, smirks at me. "It's time for you to come now, Princess."

Leaning down to take my other nipple in his mouth, he bites down hard – *fuck!* – and I break.

My screams shatter the peace of the night, even over the roaring waves, and are swallowed up by the stars above us.

Before I've even caught my breath, their touches are gone and I feel bereft. Shivering, I reach for their warmth and Ace quickly drapes a blanket over me and helps me to sit up. He drops a second blanket over my shoulders and cradles me into his arms.

It's the best feeling. The perfect way to come down from the high.

"What now?" I ask, sometime later.

"Now we go to the party," Jax tells me.

I pull a face.

"What, Princess?" Rebel asks.

"I thought...I mean...aren't we going to...fuck?"

They laugh.

"Oh we will, Princess," Rebel assures me with a wink. "Later."

"Oh."

I don't think I do a very good job at hiding my disappointment because Jax demands that Ace passes me to him and the next thing I know, I'm sitting in Jax's lap being cradled carefully like I'm something precious.

He rubs my back and runs his fingers through my hair, like Ace did, gently tugging the strands to make my scalp tingle.

"Umm." I breathe out a sigh and relax.

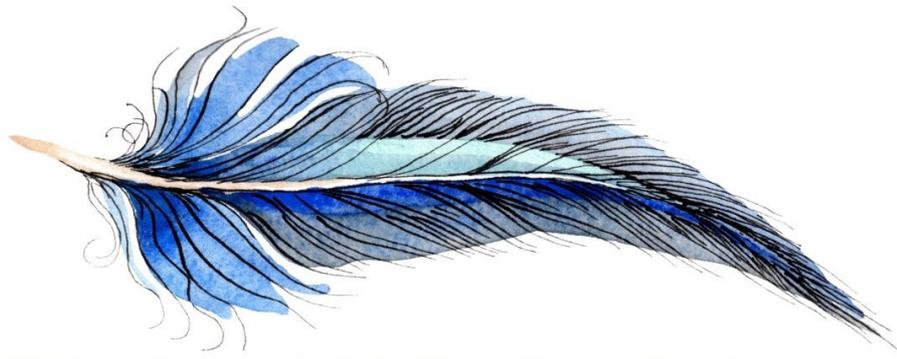
Cuddles with Jax are rare, but so good.

Around us, the other guys begin packing up our stuff, and someone passes over my dress, which Jax helps me into.

One the fire is out and we're ready to go, trepidation settles in my stomach. It's time.

One by one, each guy takes me in their warm embrace and whispers how they love me. I sigh in contentment, closing my eyes to hide the tears forming.

They've made it impossible to let them go, and that's not just the sex talking.



EPILOGUE: PART ONE
THE FIRE

Jax

It's been a strange night. I know I've been quiet, unreadable. It's funny how the likes of prom and things are always shown as the pinnacle of that moment in time, but always seem to disappoint. It's because months of planning and excitement go into that one day or evening or moment, but time carries on. The next day will always roll around and life will return to the mundane. I don't know if we've just realised that ahead of our peers, or if we're feeling out of sorts because this, our time together, is drawing to a close.

Raven's pulling away. It was so obvious earlier at the beach with her goodbye kisses. She doesn't realise how extensively we've talked about what comes next.

I'll be the first to admit that I had my reservations about us becoming involved with her, but this has been nothing like what we had with Lizzie.

I was so worried we would end up fighting again or falling out, but we've been open and honest with each other every step of the way, and communication has been key. If only we could get Raven to open up, everything could be perfect.

"Hey, guys, what's going on?" she asks, coming over to join the four of us.

"This party blows," Rebel scowls. I have to agree. I wish we'd stayed on the beach. Maybe we could have convinced Raven that everything will be okay.

"Yeah, can we leave?" Thorn adds.

"But there's fireworks at midnight," she says with an adorable pout that makes me want to put her over my knee and spank the truth out of her. "I'd love to stay and see them."

"What time is it?" I ask.

"A quarter to."

I nod. "Okay, Princess, for you we can just about stomach another fifteen minutes." Rebel smirks with a wink.

“Thanks!” She smiles at us and asks if we need anything. When we all shake our heads no, she adds, “Okay, well I’m going to grab a pop and have a dance before we head out.”

Ace offers to go with her before I can, already halfway to his feet, but she shakes him off, insisting that he stay and finish the game.

Rebel stands and drags her into his body and for once she doesn’t fight him. He holds her so close that she instantly moulds to him and they dance together.

She looks content, but there’s a sadness in her eyes too. Even with something laying heavy on her heart, she looks beautiful in her black caped dress.

Unspoken, we all wore black. I think we were going for a formal look, but now it just feels funereal. I didn’t expect tonight to feel so melancholy.

I lose myself in memories of earlier, wondering if I said enough to convince her.

“How could you doubt the effect you have on me, silly girl?”

“I know what you think you’re doing. It won’t work.”

“You’re trying to say goodbye, to push us away.”

“We’ll find a way to make it work.”

“Decide where you want to be. We’ll come to you. Wherever you go, I promise we will follow.”

I could see it. The burning need to crumble and confess her fears to us. It was bubbling just under the surface, swimming in her eyes but just out of reach. I wasn’t able to coax it out of her but I can tell she has secrets that are eating away at her inside. I wanted to take her in my arms and insist that if she just told us, just trusted us, that we could make whatever it is that’s bothering her go away.

I fix things. It’s what I do.

“Jax? Can I speak to you?” Tilly asks, appearing behind me. I turn to glare at her.

“Fuck off.”

“Please, Jax—” she whines. Fuck. How did I ever let her get her claws so deeply into me?

“I said, fuck off. I warned you. You’re dead to me, Tilly, and if you keep hanging around like a worthless, unwanted, used up old cunt, then I’ll see to it that you’re dead, full stop.”

She sobs, turns on her heel and runs. Good. She’s lucky she’s still breathing. If she doesn’t heed my warning, I really will be forced to take matters into my own hands.

I turn back just as Rebel takes his seat.

“Good dance?” I ask but he’s glaring over my shoulder.

“What did that bitch want?”

“Don’t know. Wouldn’t give her the time of day to find out.”

“Good. Fuck. I can’t wait to be out of here and away from all their drama and bullshit. And I didn’t even have it as bad as you.”

I give him a tight smile. Like I need reminding. “Where’s Raven?”

“She said she’d be back in a minute. Toilet I think. You know how girls are. They like to pretend they’re reapplying their lipstick because they don’t want us to think they shit and piss like mere mortals.”

I frown. “Raven isn’t like that.”

“Obviously, but you know what I mean.”

“So she might not be in the loo?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say, but where else is there to go?”

“She might have gone to get a drink. I don’t want her alone tonight. Especially not with Tilly out for blood.”

“Don’t sweat it.” Rebel kicks up his feet and leans back, studying his cards and oblivious to the dread churning in my gut.

I can't put my finger on it, but something just doesn't feel right. I force myself to let it go.

It's not his fault we're all in a sombre mood tonight.

We return to our card game. We're not even gambling, it's just a way to pass the time.

A commotion gets up, but I spare it little attention. It's a party. There's always drama.

"Hey! Watch it!" Rebel barks when someone raves around the altar and crashes into our game.

That's when I notice it. The panic. It's borderline hysteria.

"What's going on?" I demand as swarms of people flee past the altar and cram themselves into our small space. "What's happening?"

The noise level has become intolerable, and it takes several attempts for me to work out what the guy I'm holding is saying.

"F-f-fire!"

"Where?"

He points to the front of the church but I can't see a thing past all the people crowding us. I drop him.

Shit.

"Ace!" I bark, jumping to my feet. "Go look for an exit out the back."

"Ja, seveda¹."

Everyone springs into action, Rebel immediately trying to help some girls who are so drunk they can't stand properly.

"Thorn, clear the front of the church. Get everyone to come to the back."

What fucking idiot thought it was a good idea to light church candles at a party? We'll be lucky if the whole place isn't up in minutes and burned to the ground around us by morning.

Fuck!

I wrack my brains for what to do. Climbing onto the altar and knocking bottles of booze out the way, I cup my hands to my mouth and attempt to shout over the chaos.

No one pays me any attention.

Raven.

Where is she? Which direction did she go? Is she in the toilets? Is she trapped by the fire? How long has it been since anyone saw her?

I jump down and begin pushing my way through the crowd. A wall of heat hits me and sweat trickles down my temples. Smoke envelopes me. I cough. It's got nothing on the fear choking me as I desperately hunt for Raven in the crowds.

Ahead of me Thorn is reaching for the door handles—

“Thor! Don't!” I yell.

Thorn

As soon as Jax barks orders at us, we spring into action.

Clear the front of the church.

That's where the crush of people is coming from, meaning I'm heading right into the blaze. How could this have happened? It feels too fast, too fierce, to be from someone smoking carelessly.

“Move! Fuck! Out of my way!”

I push against a rising tide of panic and battle my way back to the front of the church.

I'm directing people towards the back but most are moving on auto pilot. I appear to be the only lunatic heading *into* the flames.

The smoke slams into me like a solid, tangible wall, then wraps its arms around me and engulfs me in its jaws. The flames are towering infernos along the pews on either side of me, licking at the walls, reaching for the ancient wooden beams above my head and slithering along the spilled liquor on the flagstone floor.

I know that if I can just reach the doors, I'll be able to free us all from this nightmare, but the smoke and the heat are becoming unbearable. My eyes are streaming and stinging as I pause to shrug off my jacket. I abandon it to the flames and pull my shirt up to cover my mouth but it doesn't help.

With every snail's-pace step forward I take, I point people towards the back of the church. I'm pushing them to get them moving faster, wondering why I can't do the same.

I have to stop as a coughing fit overtakes me. Sweat pours from me, but I swear the heat of the blaze is evaporating it before I can even swipe it away.

This feels fucking futile, but I force myself to keep going. To put one foot in front of the other and to push forwards. If I can just get to the doors—

Finally my destination comes into sight, and miraculously the doors themselves are clear. I send up a quick prayer of thanks as I reach for the antique handle.

A voice screams out, shrill even above the chaos of the room, but I can't make out the words. A terrifying sense of urgency washes over me – *someone's hurt! I need to move!* – and I grab the handle tight.

An inhuman sound is wrenched from my chest as blinding agony sears my palm, locks my muscles and holds me captive in its agonising embrace.

I scream and scream and scream until there's no air left in my lungs and I'm barely standing.

The acrid smell of my flesh cooking swamps me. I try to pull my hand free, but I'm locked in place. Frozen in fire. I can't force my brain to tell my hand to let go.

Nothing's working. I'm trapped inside my own body, suspended in this moment of suffering and torture, unable to do anything to free myself from this nightmare.

And the trauma just keeps on growing and growing until I reach the point where I think I'm going to pass out.

My vision blurs and I sway on my feet, my stomach somersaulting violently.

My arm jerks. And again. I'm able to twist the handle but it doesn't budge.

I feel like I've left my body and I'm standing to the side, an impartial witness to this moment. I can see myself twitching the handle but lacking the strength to turn it and become the hero everyone needs tonight.

Come on, come on. Open the door! I internally scream at myself. I beat my good hand against the wood as realisation slowly sinks in.

I'm not weak.

The door is stuck.

Or locked...

Flattening my uninjured palm against the wood, I brace my arm and pull.

Somehow I manage to wrench myself off. My hand comes free, but my skin remains on the metal like the shed skin of a snake. Bile floods my mouth, and I have to turn away.

I stagger to the side, doubled over and heaving for breath. One look at the twisted, scarlet, mangled mess of my hand and the contents of my stomach spill all over the floor.

Then I'm coughing again. Automatically, I press my hands to my mouth to contain my cough and scream at the white-hot light that flashes behind my eyes. I vomit again.

I'm so lightheaded I don't know which way is up. All I know is that I need to get back to the others. If I pass out now, if I give in to the lightning shocks of agony coursing through my body, I'm going to lie down and most likely die in here. And so might everyone else.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath. I can do this. I don't have any other choice.

Turning back towards the altar, I make my way along the aisle. It's calmer now, or cleared at last.

I bump into someone and curse.

"Thor, it's me."

I blink, the sound taking an age to reach my ears. Am I underwater? Everything sounds so far away. "You're in shock. I'm going to get you out of here okay?"

I blink again, slow as molasses, as Rebel would say, and try to process...everything.

What's happening? Where's Rebel? Where's Ace?

Where's Raven?

My panic rises once more and I push against Jax, desperately trying to return to the flames while Jax keeps an iron grip on me.

Did I see her? Did I pass her? Was she one of the people I pushed to the back of the church? Or is she fallen, trapped,

injured somewhere in the crush?

Shit!

She was right with us, and I wanted to tell her...but Rebel took her and they danced and then she was...gone.

“What was that?” Jax asks, giving me a shake.

I mumble again, struggling to get my words out and slurring like I’m drunk.

“Whe...where’s...Rae...?”

Ace

“Sranje²! Kurac!³” My pulse races, and the room lurches dangerously on its side.

Or is that me? The walls are definitely closer than before.

It's not their fault. They don't know. They weren't to know because I never told them. Why would I? It's not something you have to confront every day.

I'm not good with fire.

Prekleta podcenjevanje⁴!

Not that it will stop me from helping, but I have to force my locked up muscles to obey me and get moving. I'm clumsy and slow. Trapped. Cumbersome with the burden of the demons of my past trauma.

I push through the crowds with difficulty. It feels like swimming against a rip curl. Futile and exhausting. Like fighting my uncle's hand when he held me under the water, like trying to escape his grip as his goons set alight to—

“Fuck!” I scream over the chaos surrounding me pushing back the darkness with the force of my bellow alone.

I will not go there right now. I cannot.

I disappear into the bowels of the church, pushing my way past clueless partygoers in search of an exit. There has to be one. At least one.

I just have to find it.

Screams go up, and the air becomes thick with panic. Or maybe that's just every cloying breath I'm taking.

Passing the toilets, I bang on the doors to the men's and women's, shouting for everyone to get out, but not stopping to make sure they do. I need to find a way out. I need to breathe. There's no point dragging more people out into this chaos if I can't find a place for us all to go. There will be a crush.

I stumble around blindly, bumping into people and snarling at them rather than apologising. It's been a long time since the students at West Prep saw me this way, and many do a double take at my monster rearing its ugly head.

Lizzie made me better. Calmer. Nicer.

But she's gone. And even though Raven brings out the best in me, she's not here to fight my demons, and my fear is making all my worst qualities come to light.

"Get out!" I bark at a couple fucking as I crash into the sacristy. They blink at me in shock, but I ignore them and head for the small wooden door on the far wall. I slide the bolt open and turn the handle, grateful to find it unlocked.

Flinging the door open, I'm relieved to see it's an external door. I turn back to the couple who are hastily straightening their clothes and point out of the door to the midnight forest beyond.

"Go!"

They stare at me like I'm a fucking moron. Am I not speaking English? Did I stutter? "Out! Now!"

They finally move and race towards the door, the guy I don't recognise hopping on one foot as he tries to pull on his boots. Who takes off their shoes for a fuck in public? Pička⁵.

Just before he slips through the door, I grab his shoulder to stop him and let him see the fear in my eyes.

"Call help. Get help. Fire. Ambulance. Help."

He nods, finally understanding the gravity of the situation and takes off running.

Surely someone here will have a phone, even if they *are* banned? Since when did teenagers follow the rules?

There's no time to waste. I head back to the main part of the chapel, funnelling everyone I meet along the way towards the door out of here.

They're desperate enough to listen but too frantic to comprehend.

Is *everyone* drunk?

When I make it back to the altar area, there's a rush of people. I see Rebel but I can't find the others. He's busy helping a girl who's hurt. She appears to have fallen and twisted her ankle.

I force my way over to him and touch his shoulder. He wipes sweat from his brow and that's when I notice how hot it's gotten out here.

Oppressive.

Choking.

That's when I notice it.

The fire.

Slithering towards me like a deadly snake on the attack. It's coming for me, creeping across the flagstones, seeking me out specifically.

“Hudič je prišel, da pobere moje grehe v meso⁶.”

I stumble back a step.

“You okay, mate?” The voice is distant, underwater. *I'm* underwater. Drowning in fear, but the water doesn't offer any respite from the flames.

They're close enough to reach out and touch now.

Licking at my flesh.

Tantalisingly close.

I blink and I'm gone. Dragged back to a different time and place, forced to confront the demons I've been running from.

“You think you can burn my house down, boy? You think you can play with fire and not get burned?”

His blow does nothing to calm my racing heart. Stifling heat is roaring from the fireplace and I don't understand why. It's the middle of summer, the day is already far too hot for a fire.

Yet I can't take my eyes off the poker he has resting in the flames.

"It's time you learned a lesson, otrok⁷."

He grabs the poker and turns on me, wielding it dangerously close to my face. I take a step back, my legs trembling so much they're threatening to give way.

I don't want to get burned!

"Spoštuj starejše⁸."

He swipes at me and I fall back, crashing to the floor and twisting my ankle in the process.

My uncle laughs. "You are so šibka⁹. Pomilovanja vreden¹⁰. You act like a big man but you can't even protect your own."

I cower under the towering stance of my uncle, knowing that whatever I do, I will only anger him more. He spits on me.

"Zadrega¹¹!"

Then throws the poker down on top of me, and it's a knee-jerk reaction to bat it away and scramble to safety.

With a nod from my uncle his bodyguards step towards and seize me. He turns back to me, a sickening smile on his face. A curl of his lip that makes my stomach churn.

"You'll see what happens to little boys who play with fire. Bring in Cora."

"No!" I scream, already knowing what he has planned.

I fight to get free but what power do I have against two fully grown men?

More guards drag in my sister who is shaking and terrified. I can see she has already wet herself in fear and tears roll down my cheeks as I plead for my uncle's mercy.

"Uncle, please! It was an accident!"

"That may be so, but you need to learn to be more careful. Doesn't he, Cora?"

My sister sobs and nods. My uncle caresses her cheek and she flinches, which angers him.

Grabbing her face, he spins her towards him and pulls her in close.

“There was me thinking you were a good girl who knew she should be seen and not heard. But then you went and pulled away from me, brat. You need a lesson just like your worthless, idiot brother. You should be more like Valentina.”

“Leave my sisters alone!” I scream, renewing my futile efforts to free myself. It’s hopeless. They’re bigger, stronger and armed. We’re outnumbered. I don’t even know what I would do if I could get free.

Sobs are wrenched from my chest as my uncle ignores me and drags Cora closer to the fire. She struggles every step of the way, but he tugs her along like a weightless doll.

I thrash wildly until one of my uncle’s goons loses patience and gets me in a headlock. He angles me so that I have a front row seat for Cora’s punishment.

Gripping the back of her neck, my uncle thrusts Cora’s face into the flames.

The sound...the smell...the screams.

The world went black.

“Ace! Ace, mate! Come on! Fuck!”

A slap to the cheek brings me back to the present. My entire body is drenched in sweat. I blink, and I don’t know if it’s the perspiration or the smoke that’s stinging my eyes.

With effort, I force myself to breathe and focus on the fearful gaze of Rebel. He’s abandoned the wounded girl on the ground and is fully focused on me.

“Give me,” I tell him, holding out my arms.

He hesitates.

“No time. Give.”

This time he bends down to pick her up and then passes her to me.

“Is there an exit?” he asks.

“Yes.” I nod stiffly. “Tell to follow.”

Rebel brings his fingers to his lips and lets out a shrill whistle. The people nearest us wince and stare.

“Oi. Everyone! Stay calm. Follow Ace. Help each other.”

He nods at me, and I jerk my head in a poor imitation of a response.

Shifting the girl in my arms to better balance her weight, I turn and head back along the narrow corridor I just came from. The injured girl in my arms is sobbing softly. I think she’s in my Maths class but I can’t recall her name. Marie maybe? Marnie? I don’t care. It’s not important.

This time, a horde of people follow me, and it feels less terrifying knowing I’m not alone and that I’m actually doing something to help. The coward in me is glad to be leading people to safety instead of battling the fire on the front line.

I didn’t even ask about Thorn and Jax.

I should go back in. I know I should. But with an endless stream of people filing out of the small exit, it would be impossible to fight my way through. Like swimming against a tide. Jalov¹².

And if I’m honest, the thought of returning to the scene of the crime petrifies me. I don’t want to go back to *that* time. To be forced to witness once again what my uncle did to my sister. All because of me and a stupid prank gone wrong.

“Fuck!”

What should I do?

I try to organise the chaos around me instead, trusting my brothers to have things under control within the church.

“Phone? Anyone? Phone?” I yell above the chaos. No one answers. I run from gathered group to group, shaking people

to get their attention and asking if they have phones. Most just stare at me blankly. Maybe they're in shock? I don't know.

“Stay. Don't go. We need...” Fuck. What's the word?
“Count. Count people. Check no missing.”

Why aren't the guys out yet?

And where's Raven?

Rebel

I'm anxious to get out of here now. The blaze is getting too bad, it's completely out of control and I'm scared someone's going to get seriously hurt.

Too much old dried wood and spilled liquor. A lethal combination. We should never have had the party here. Certainly not with fucking candles lit.

I carry the people who have been hurt in the crush as best I can, but some people are too drunk, or high, or out of it to realise what's going on. So it becomes a battle to help them out as best I can too.

But fuck my life, drunk chicks are hard to wrangle in a panic.

I swear every three paces I have to stop because I'm coughing up a damn lung. We need to get out of here. Hopefully by now, help is on the way.

"Reb!"

I turn towards the voice calling my name above the crowd. Jax. He's dragging Thorn towards me. Thorn looks...shit.

"What happened?"

"He grabbed the door handle. He's in shock."

"Fuck. How bad is it?"

"We need to get him looked at."

"Okay you get him out of here. Are there many more people?"

"We're the last...I think."

"Okay. I'll do one last check. Toilets. Shit like that. Can you help these two out?" I ask, nodding to the girls I have under each arm. They're okay, just drunk, but quickly sobering up given the situation.

"Sure. Be careful. It's pretty hard to see in there now."

“Got it.”

Jax adjusts his grip on Thorn and puts his arm around the girls who are clinging to each other, suddenly – finally – looking terrified. I push past them trusting Jax to ensure that Thorn gets whatever help he needs.

As soon as I round the corner, a wall of smoke hits me and I stagger back. My eyes are instantly streaming. I pull my shirt up to cover my mouth and nose and squint my eyes. I don't have to go back into the main part of the chapel – thank god – but the toilets are a little way down the corridor.

It's a blind fumble in the dark – and not the good kind.

I pause before pushing the first door open. The wood is hot on the back of my hand, but not burning. I doubt I'm about to meet with a blaze behind this door. Swinging the door open reveals the men's room, completely empty. I let the door close and push on to the ladies'. Again, I test the door with the back of my hand and again, it's hot but not scalding.

Inside, the cubicle doors are closed, and it's a lot smokier in here than in the men's. Fuck. I try every door and they're all unlocked, all empty. Relieved, I turn to go.

In the seconds I've been in the bathroom, the smoke in the corridor has thickened. Everything...the heat, the smoke, my raw throat, my streaming eyes...it's all just too much.

I push through the pain and try to get out as quickly as possible. As soon as the cool night air hits my lungs, I start coughing up a storm once more. It takes a few minutes to get my breathing under control, and for my eyes to clear enough for me to see.

It's fucking chaos out here too. Absolute carnage. A real mixture of blind panic, hysteria, and bedlam.

I see Jax, Thorn and Ace, and immediately race over to them.

“Inside is all clear. What's going on here?” I ask once I've caught my breath again. Even that short distance I've moved has knocked it out of me. Fresh air has never tasted so sweet, even with the bitter tang of ash on my tongue.

“It’s carnage,” Jax says. “People won’t stay still. Ace has been trying to do a head count but people have been running off.”

“Won’t stay still,” Ace adds.

“Is help on the way?” I check.

“Yes. The school has been alerted, teachers are here trying to organise everyone. My stepmother has opened the dining hall, and they’re trying to corral everyone there to take a register. Some are too stupid to go.”

“Why?” I don’t understand.

“I guess they think they’re going to get in trouble for drinking.”

“Like that’s anyone’s priority right now,” I scoff, annoyed by their stupidity and their misplaced fear. They should be scared of remaining in the woods where a building is on fire. If the wind direction changes...it doesn’t bear thinking about.

“I know,” Jax agrees.

“Idiots,” Ace murmurs.

“So, is everyone accounted for? The chapel is definitely empty,” I confirm.

“We think so, but with everyone so scattered it’s impossible to tell.”

“Think the chapel’s salvageable?”

“By the time the fire crew gets through the trees? Doubt it.”

“Are there medics here yet?”

“Maybe about...ten minutes away.”

“How bad is he?” I nod to Thorn.

“It could’ve been a lot worse.”

“Have you guys seen Raven? Is she helping?”

Jax and Ace both reply together, “No.”

“She’s not hurt is she?”

“No. I mean, I’ve not seen her. Have you?” Jax clarifies.

“Not since we were dancing.” I frown, my panic beginning to bubble to the surface.

“What? That was ages ago,” Jax exclaims. “Did anyone see her after that? Ace?”

“No.”

“Thorn?”

“No.”

“Fuck.”

“Where is she?” I demand, the fear I’ve kept bottled up until now, finally spilling over and presenting as anger.

I’m not angry.

I’m *terrified*.

“Stay calm, she’ll be here somewhere.” Jax’s attempt to placate me is feeble, at best. It does nothing to reassure me, and I refuse to stay calm. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. “When did we last see her? She said she wanted to stay for the fireworks and that was...what time?”

“Quarter to,” Ace answers.

“Yeah, that’s right. And then you guys danced. Did you dance for the whole song?” Jax asks me.

I nod. “Yeah. Then she said she’d be right back.”

“So a couple more minutes added on. Takes us to around ten to twelve. We didn’t make it to midnight because there would have been an announcement to go outside and watch the fireworks, so she couldn’t have gone far in under ten minutes.”

“The toilets were empty.” I’m sure I’ve already said this, but...my head is scrambled. I don’t know which way is up now. I feel like my world has been knocked spinning on its axis, and it won’t right itself until she’s back in my arms.

“...and everyone’s sure that they didn’t see her while trying to get people out?”

“No. Definitely not.”

“We should ask around, see if anyone remembers seeing her or knows where she is,” Jax suggests. “Would she have gone to the school? Maybe she’s in the dining room?”

“I don’t think so,” I hedge.

“I’ll send someone to check. I think the four of us should stay close by.”

Ace breaks away from us, swearing. He races through the trees, asking everyone if they’ve seen Raven in broken English, calling out her name frantically.

“Are you sure the toilets were empty?” Jax probes.

“I-I think so.” They were. Weren’t they? Fuck. I don’t know anymore. “Maybe I should go back in and check.”

“I don’t think that’s safe.”

“I don’t care! If she’s in there—”

“What if she’s not? You’re putting your life on the line—”

“I don’t give a fuck! I don’t want to count the clock and work out timelines and bullshit. All we’ve established is that it’s been too fucking long since one of us laid eyes on her and I don’t want to waste another fucking minute!”

“Alright. Alright. Take a breath.”

I shake my head. “I’m going back in.”

“Me too,” Thorn announces, struggling to his feet.

“No, mate, you need to stay here and see the medics.”

“No. I’m coming with you.”

I shake my head again. There’s no arguing with Thorn when he gets like this. The fucker can be almost as stubborn as me.

“Fine. Let’s go.”

Jax tries to dissuade us again. “I really don’t think—”

“I don’t give a fuck!” I explode. “You’re not the boss all the time! We’re doing this.”

I grab Thorn by the forearm and drag him back towards the back door.

By the time we've battled our way into the main chapel, the blaze is so fierce we can't see a thing.

But we don't let that stop us searching for her. Calling her name whenever our bruised and battered throats will allow. There's no sign of her. There's no sign of anyone.

That should make me feel better, but it just mounts my growing panic. If it was bubbling and spilling over before, it's ready to explode out of me with devastating consequences.

I lose sight of Ace. *No. It was Thorn who came back in with me.* Where's Ace? Is he safe? *Raven. We're searching for Raven.* Fuck.

I Stumble. Fall.

Pain explodes in my kneecaps and I realise that Jax was maybe, possibly, probably right. Coming back in was stupid.

I can't regret it though.

And as everything fades to grey, I know I'd make the same decision time and time again.

Eventually the emergency services must have arrived because after what feels like an age, firefighters fully suited in all the gear appear and drag me out of the blaze. I hope they got to Thorn first.

I can barely fight them, and I certainly can't protest. My throat feels like...I cough so hard it hurts. I'm unable to see a thing, but I swear I'm bringing up blood.

Then me and Thorn are being forced into the back of an ambulance and given oxygen masks. I don't even know how we got from the chapel to the nearest area a vehicle could reach.

I sit in the back of the van for as long as it takes to clear my eyes and my head. When I can breathe more easily, I rip the oxygen mask from my face and toss it to one side. It takes several attempts for the woods to stop spinning and swaying, and three goes before I can actually get to my feet.

“Son, I don’t think that’s such a good idea—”

“I’m not your fucking son,” I rasp out, every word agony but a pain which pales at the very real possibility of losing Raven.

“Sir, you need to sit down.”

“No.” I shake my head emphatically and the motion almost makes me sick. “I have to go back.”

“Sir, you need to let us do our job, and let the firefighters do theirs.”

I grit my teeth, close my eyes and shake my head more carefully this time. *You can do this.* The ambulance sways and I clutch the rail as I lurch.

I fall out of the back more than I climb.

“I have to go.”

“Sir...Sir!”

I ignore the voices calling me and use the blaze as the beacon I need to guide me through the trees, back to the chapel. *I have to find Raven. Giving up is not an option.*

Suddenly someone is blocking my way, pushing me back. Barring me from going any further.

“Stop, Rebel.”

Blinded by my desperation, I take a swing at Jax. He blocks it.

Then there are several pairs of arms holding me – my brothers – and I’m struggling and fighting and yelling while firefighters try to reason with me.

I’m roaring as best as my raw throat will allow, practically pleading with them to let me return.

“You don’t understand! I have to go back in there! My girlfriend is missing. I have to find her. I can’t give up. I can’t live without her.”

It takes a colossal effort, but Jax talks me down enough to listen to reason and see sense.

“You’re risking Raven’s life further by keeping the firefighters outside, when they need to be inside looking for her body. Stop being a fucking dick.”

I nod stiffly and quit fighting, letting the firemen go do their thing.

The chief medic comes over to us a few minutes later.

“You guys seem to have suffered the worst effects of the fire and smoke, and really you all need to go to the hospital to get checked out.”

“No.”

“No chance.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I know where Raven is.”

“Sorry. I’m with them on this one.” Jax at least has the decency to apologise on our behalf. I don’t give a fuck.

“Well, at the very least you need to go back to the school.”

“I’m not moving!” I yell, which then causes another coughing fit. My head is pounding and if I never cough again, it’ll be too soon.

“Our men can’t do their job while they’re watching over you.”

“Then don’t watch us! Just go. Do your job and find my girl.”

“I think he’s right, Reb—”

“What?”

“Let’s give them space to work. As soon as there’s news, we’ll know. Come on.”

Reluctantly, I let them drag me back to the school. Every step I’m forced to take makes my heart scream that I’m doing

the wrong thing, that I'm failing her by leaving, even as my head knows Jax is right and the firefighters can work best with us out of the way.

Doesn't make it any easier though.

In the dining room, students are huddled together in groups, the mood sombre. Everyone seems to have sobered up, and staff are passing out hot drinks and bottles of water. Some students have blankets draped over their shoulders, some are barefoot, and there's a medic working in the corner dealing with minor injuries.

My eyes scan everything and everyone, searching out the only thing I give a shit about.

My heart falls.

Raven is nowhere to be seen.

Wordlessly, we split up and the others start searching, but I know in my gut it will be futile. She isn't here.

Jax goes to speak to his stepmother, but I can't bring my feet to move and join in.

Maybe I didn't check the chapel well enough. What if there was a basement or a room that we missed? I should have looked better, fought harder.

Where is she?

This is it. It's now a waiting game. The beginning of the longest, most agonising night of my life.

It's taken them over eight hours to get the blaze under control and even though most students have been given the all-clear and sloped off to bed, the four of us remain huddled together in the dining room.

"Boys, there's not a lot more we can do now," Jax's stepmother says placatingly, coming over to us with a pitying

look on her face. She's wrapped in a blanket and has a smudge of soot on her cheek.

There's...something akin to respect forming in my gut. She's been really hands on tonight and although I'm sure it's just damage control to avoid another scandal, she's at least tried to *do* something, which is more than can be said for last time.

"What do you mean?" Jax demands. He seems calm, but there's no missing the tremble in his curled-up fists.

Me? I'm much quicker to anger once more.

I finally stopped pacing about half an hour ago and I'm already back on edge and close to starting again just from her words.

"Just that the blaze is under control and there's no longer a risk of it spreading to the woods—"

"I don't give a fuck about the damn trees!" I growl.

"Language, Mr Lennox," she admonishes sharply.

"Cut him some slack. It's been a hard night," Jax snaps, coming to my defence even though I don't need it.

His stepmother pinches the bridge of her nose, takes a deep breath and nods, letting it go.

"It's a waiting game now for the blaze to die down. And then everything will need to cool before they can go in and search for bodies."

I wince.

No. There aren't any *bodies* to search for. We emptied that chapel, I'm sure of it. I don't know where Raven is, but I do know that she's alive. I would know if she wasn't. *I'd feel it.*

"Can they speed that process up?" Jax checks. I don't understand what he means.

"Yes. They'll bring in bowsers from neighbouring stations to douse the remains and bring the temperature down quicker, but obviously, access has been an issue."

“What can we do to help?” My gaze bounces between the two of them, taking in their conversation. Jax is asking all the right questions, but I just want to be out there, doing something. I should never have agreed to come back to the school.

I resume pacing.

“Honestly? There’s nothing you can do. I really want you guys to get some rest and I would prefer that you didn’t go back to the house for a few days at least. I don’t want anyone in the woods unnecessarily. We have two spare rooms set up here. You’ll have to share.”

My gut reaction is to tear up in protest. I’m not resting! I have to get back out there to look for Raven. It’s daylight now, the fire is under control; it’s no longer dangerous for me to be out there alone.

The headmistress’s request is met with silence, and when I glance at my brothers’ faces, I see that they’re with her, not me, on this.

I don’t fight them. I *do* want to stay on the main school site. I want to be nearby for any news that comes in. I’d just be happier if I could be out there *doing* something, rather than waiting around to hear.

The silence stretches on. I guess we’re all staying then.

I suppress my sigh of frustration. The others look dead on their feet. Especially Thorn. He really does need to go to the hospital to get his burn looked at. He allowed the paramedics to patch him up and put a dressing on it, but it probably needs serious care.

I can’t see him agreeing to leave campus with no word on Raven though.

“Are all of the other students accounted for?” Jax asks.

“All except Raven and a handful of other students.”

I suck in a sharp breath. I didn’t expect that.

“Who?”

“A bunch of kids we suspect ran off site instead of coming in for roll call. They might be down at the beach sobering up, or even in town trying to catch a ride home. I want to wait until the morning to see if any stragglers turn up before calling parents.”

“Okay. Makes sense. Anyone we know?”

“Besides Raven? Michael Bloomberg – he was your friend, wasn’t he?”

What? I share a glance with the others, doing a double take.

“Michael’s missing?”

“Yes. Do you think it’s likely he’s with Raven somewhere?” My stepmother asks.

“He better not be,” I growl under my breath.

“Only, I know I buddied them up together when Raven first arrived, and they share some classes.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re not friends,” Jax tells her diplomatically.

If Raven is anywhere near Michael, I’d put money on it not being willingly. But even *that* would be better than the alternative.

The expression on the guys’ faces tells me they’re thinking along the same lines as me.

“You guys go up. The rooms are ready. Here are the keys. I’ve had some clothes, shower things, bottles of water and snacks put in there, but don’t hesitate to come to me if you need anything.”

I take this for the clear dismissal it is and this time, release my sigh. It’s got to be getting on for nine in the morning, maybe later, and the sun is up.

There’s no birds chirping though, which is eerie as fuck.

Still, I know that the second my head hits the pillow I’ll probably be out like a light. I don’t want to sleep, but the aches in my limbs tells me I may not have a lot of choice in the

matter. Stiffly, I get to my feet and stretch out my aches and pains. I should shower, but I just want to crash.

“Thank you,” Jax tells his stepmother, and the others murmur their thanks too. A moment too late, I join in.

“Come and wake us immediately if you get any news.”

“I will of course, son.”

Jax doesn't even correct her on that one, nor does he pull away when she suddenly pulls him into a hug, the blanket that was draped over her falling to the floor.

“I'm so glad all of you boys are okay.”

I nod, and Jax gives her a squeeze in return before pulling away.

“Come on, guys. We should get some rest.”

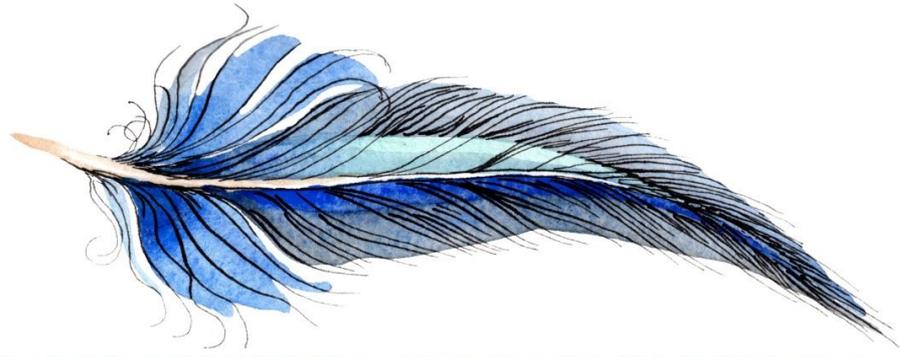
“No. The sun's up. I want to search the grounds for Raven. Maybe she's at our house, or the beach, or lost in the woods somewhere,” I protest. I really should rest. But I'd feel so guilty for doing so.

“Raven ran those tracks all the time. She's not lost in the woods, nor would she go to the beach or our house in a crisis. We will search for her, but we need a couple of hours rest and some decent food before we do,” Jax tells me firmly. We're all dead on our feet and Thorn looks about ready to collapse. Again. “Let's go. We can strategise on the way to our rooms.”

We file out of the dining room and towards the sweeping staircase that leads off to the different dorms. Despite Jax saying we would discuss strategies for the morning...well, I guess it's morning now...we traipse up to the top floor in silence.

Wordlessly, we pair off into our rooms. I strip my stinking clothes off, leaving them in a pile on the floor, then climb into bed without thought.

Who knows what tomorrow will bring.



DELETED SNIPPETS:

EPILOGUE

Raven

“Are you okay, Miss?” The driver asks. I meet his gaze in the mirror and see confusion and concern creasing his brow.

“I’m fine,” I reply shakily. I’m hardly about to spill my secrets all over the back of his car. “Please call me Raven.”

“You’re bleeding, quite badly, Miss Raven.”

I reach up to my throat where Michael held the blade and just breached the barrier of my skin. It smarts a little, but it’s no worse than a papercut. My fingers come away clean, the tiny puncture wound already clotted. I frown.

“Your arm, Miss Raven.”

There’s a lengthy slice running from my wrist virtually all the way up to my elbow. I never even noticed that. I can’t feel a thing, but my forearm is a bloody mess.

That’s gonna hurt like a bitch in the morning.

“Shit, I’m sorry! Do you have, umm, a first aid kit or anything I can borrow?”

“Yes, Miss. Let’s get off school grounds, and when it’s safe to stop I will pull over and help you. I think that might need stitches, but we can patch you up as best we can.”

“Thank you.”

“You should rest. There’s water in the cooler. Do you need food?”

“No. I’m good, thanks. Do you have anything stronger than water?”

“I think it’s best we save that for if you do need stitches.”

I grimace, knowing he’s right, but really wishing I could drink the memories of tonight away into oblivion.

I don’t know how long I stare out of the window but eventually the driver pulls over and opens my door. I scoot over and he climbs into the back seat, a bottle of liquor in one

hand and a small first aid kit pinched between his fingers on the other and a small towel tossed over his arm. He looks like a macabre butler.

“Let me see.”

I hold my arm out and he whistles. “That’s a doozy. Clean cut though. What was it?”

“Knife,” I grunt.

“That’s good at least. Was it clean?”

I hesitate. I mean, it looked clean, but Michael was a fucking maniac, so who knows what was on that blade.

“I don’t know,” I admit.

“Alrighty then. This is going to hurt.”

He tosses me a towel and holds up the bottle of clear liquor. Vodka. Fun.

Knowing what he intends to do, as he unscrews the bottle, I bunch the towel up underneath my forearm.

“Fuck!” Sure enough, the burn of the alcohol being poured on the wound reignites the feeling in my arm.

“I am sorry, Miss.”

“S’okay,” I gasp out as the driver passes me the bottle and begins to unpack his supplies. I take a long swig, hating the burn it leaves in my throat, but preferring that discomfort to the searing pain in my arm which is now throbbing in time to my racing heart.

Deftly, the driver patches me up, cleaning the wound and the surrounding area, while I drink more vodka than is probably needed. Or healthy.

Shit! I shouldn’t be drinking at all. How stupid am I? How could I forget?

“Fuck.”

“You do need stitches,” he declares.

“I don’t have time to go to A and E,” I tell him, shaking my head and only slurring my words a little.

“I can, but—”

“It will hurt. Yeah, I know. Just do it...please.” The manners are an afterthought, and a weird one at that. I’m half cut, bleeding profusely, and begging someone to inflict more pain upon me. But it seemed rude not to ask nicely.

Fuck.

I hiss when the hot needle pierces my skin, and look away.

I just need for this nightmare to be over.

I don’t know how to achieve that though. Dawn will be approaching soon and somehow I don’t think a fresh day will wipe away the horrors of the night before.

Guilt settles heavy in my gut. It’s an uncomfortable feeling.

“This will leave a pretty scar,” the driver tells me when he’s done. I take one final swig of the vodka, because I really fucking need it, before handing the remnants back to him. He pours what’s left onto a clean cloth and attempts to dab some of the blood from my skin. It’s pretty futile actually. I look like I took an actual blood bath but I appreciate his effort.

I give him a tight grin and thank him, and he thrusts two tablets into my hand alongside a bottle of water from the cooler.

“For the pain,” he tells me, gathering up all the mess and climbing out.

I don’t think he means the pain in my arm, which to be honest, isn’t all that bad. Glancing down at the two tiny little pills in the palm of my hand, rounded and with a pale blue hue, I realise that they’re not paracetamol.

I throw them into my mouth and quickly swallow them down with a gulp of water.

The driver catches my eye in the mirror once more, nods approvingly, and pulls off. I settle back on the leather and let my eyes drift closed, welcoming the peace of oblivion.

I'm jerked awake from my nightmare by the harsh blare of a horn.

"Wha—?" I mumble sleepily.

"Sorry, Miss Raven. This zasranej řidič osla just cut us up."

The foreign tongue makes my ears perk up.

"Oh. That's okay. Hey, what did you just call him?"

"Sorry, Miss Raven. I should watch my mouth and my temper."

"I won't tell."

"I am sorry, Miss. I called him a...a fucking donkey driver."

A surprised laugh tumbles from my lips, and I catch the driver's wry smile in the rear-view mirror.

"I like that," I tell him. He nods. "What language was that anyway?"

It sounded so similar to Ace that my heart hurts.

"Czech, Miss Raven."

Oh. I sit back in my seat, disappointed. I don't know what I was expecting.

"Are we nearly there?"

"Yes, Miss. Not long now and the plane will be ready to depart as soon as you are comfortable. You can sleep better on the plane."

"Thank you..."

"Michael."

The name slams into me with enough force to knock the air from my lungs. All I can do is give him a tight smile and a nod.

I lift up my headphones to show him I don't want to talk anymore, and he slides up the partition that separates us.

Michael. Fuck.

I wasn't expecting *that*.

I blink and the tears fall.

It's probably a good thing that the driver woke me up with the horn; the nightmare I was trapped in was taking its toll on me.

Only to wake up and discover a reminder of what I did, staring me right in the face.

Stifling a yawn, I pull out my diary and a pen, check the time, and begin writing. It's been about three hours since I left the chapel behind, and it's hard to believe how much has happened in that time. How close I came to dying...

What happened on the cliff was close. Too close. I wasn't cocky or overconfident, nor did I underestimate Michael's strength.

What I misjudged was his sanity. Or lack thereof. His insanity made him stronger, more determined to claim his prize, and ultimately, it came down to the grace of god which of us survived.

I feel sick.

Rebel's words keep repeating in my head, and my stomach is churning.

I slam the diary closed.

I can't do this.

Just when I think I'm going to have to ask the driver to pull over – thinking of him by name makes me feel sick – he announces that we're here and I flee from the car before the wheels have even stopped rolling.

Racing towards the private plane that's waiting for me on the small airstrip, I take the steps two at a time and turn right for the back. I find the bathroom just in time.

When I've finished and there's nothing left to bring up, I quickly freshen up and exit the bathroom. The staff are waiting patiently for me.

“Sorry.”

“It's quite alright, Miss Deighton. If you are feeling ready, take your seat and we will prepare for lift-off. When we reach cruising altitude, you may release your seatbelt and move to the bedroom to sleep, if you wish.”

“Sounds good.” I give them a tight smile, knowing that the last thing I want to do is be woken at forty thousand feet, screaming because of nightmares, but I also don't want to explain that.

I take my seat, clip my seatbelt, and stare out of the window. As is normal for this time of year, dawn is already beginning to break, splitting the sky into a pretty rainbow of pastel hues.

Like a promise of something better to come.

If only.

How silly of me to think my grandmother might actually meet me at the plane. No. There was another black town car waiting, ready to whisk me back to Dicky's resort. Ugh. I wish she would just call him Richard. It's bad enough I'm thinking of him as Dicky in my head, I might die if I have to call him that out loud.

I expect the car to take me to the main house or the cottage I shared with my grandmother the last time I was here, but it doesn't. It drives to a slightly more remote part of the island, but not too far away from the main facilities.

Pulling up outside a small but modern holiday home, the driver climbs out, opens my door for me and then removes my bags from the boot. There's no sign of my grandmother still, and the house before me looks deserted.

I take my bag from the driver, who also hands me a key – thus dashing my last hope that maybe my grandmother was inside, waiting for me – and murmur my thanks.

I let myself inside, dump my bag in the hallway and look around. The place is gorgeous – everywhere on this island is – but it's the private pool out the back that really impresses me.

There's a serenity to this place that instantly eases some of the pressure in my chest. It doesn't stop my broken heart from hurting, but it does allow me to breathe.

I think I could heal here, with time.

The phone on the kitchen counter rings, and I pick it up.

“Hello, dear. How are your accommodations?”

“Hi, Grandma, they're gorgeous, thank you.”

“Good. Good. I thought you might like a little privacy and time to settle in, so I'm up at the big house. The kitchen should be fully stocked but if you need anything, just dial zero and the concierge will get it for you.”

“Thank you. I'm sure I'll be fine.”

“That's the spirit. Now, would you like to join us for dinner tonight?”

“I'm actually pretty tired, Grandma. That was quite a trip. I think I'll just have a quiet night with a nice bath, if that's okay.”

“Of course it's okay, anything my granddaughter wants, she will get. Just don't have the bath too hot, dear...I have to go, but I'll speak to you tomorrow. Bye, dear, bye!”

She's gone before I can even ask her why I shouldn't have the bath too hot. Maybe it's an old person thing and she's worried about me scalding myself. I shake my head. I like my bath hot but I know my limits. I'm not about to boil myself alive.

After my bath, which melted the tension of travelling from my muscles as well as any masseuse, I curl up in my pjs. I try to write in my diary, but can't focus. There's nothing on the

TV I want to watch and even my favourite book isn't holding my attention.

Every couple of minutes I come to, only to realise I've been staring off into space, reliving the last few days. Whenever I think of the boys, my heart hurts. Then my thoughts turn to the fire, and guilt consumes me in the same way those flames consumed the chapel. Thinking of that night inevitably leads to thoughts of Michael, and that's where things get complicated.

I don't regret killing him. It was him or me, and the death he had planned for me was a lot less merciful than the one I gave him. But I do feel...remorseful maybe...that I never considered the deeper implications of my plan.

My grandmother supported me in this endeavour, encouraged it even, swearing that she would be there to help me every step of the way. But once I got to West Prep, I was on my own. I hoped that once it was done and I got the island, that she would be more supportive, but I'm alone once more and I'm not entirely sure that I want to be.

Maybe that's not fair. She did offer for me to join them for dinner and I turned her down. But I had hoped she would meet me, alone, so that maybe we could discuss things in more detail than our brief, tense phone call.

Maybe I'm just looking for reassurance. Confirmation that we, that I, did the right thing. That these feelings of guilt and confusion will settle down and go away with time.

My broken heart will begin to mend.

I should have done things differently.

I can't believe I've been here on the island nearly a week and I've barely seen my grandmother in all that time. I've hardly seen anyone.

To begin with, I was tense. Constantly waiting for Baxter to spring up, convinced he would want his pound of flesh for

my stabbing him, but after Cordelia eventually told me on the phone that he wasn't expected, I was able to relax a little. At least *one* of my past mistakes wouldn't be haunting me, for now.

When I have seen Cordelia, there's always been other people – staff or Dicky – around and so we've been unable to talk about anything meaningful.

It's driving me insane. I'm so desperate to just verbalise what happened, to relive it somewhere other than my nightmares. I want to go over the cold, hard facts with someone that knows the situation, and the only person I can do that with is Cordelia.

Thankfully, she called last night to say she'd be over this morning for breakfast, which the staff just delivered while I was in the shower. Like I can't make us our own damn breakfast.

Looking at the spread that's been put out on the terrace, I think my grandmother believes she's having tea with the Queen. It's ridiculous, lavish, and way too much food for the two of us.

Oh god, I hope she's not bringing Dicky.

The bells rings, and I answer the door, letting Cordelia in. Thankfully, she's alone. She looks me up and down disdainfully before she passes me.

“Did we not say breakfast at ten?”

“We did,” I reply.

“Then why aren't you dressed?” she sniffs.

“Because it's *breakfast*. It's meant to be eaten in your pjs. Besides, I already showered.” I point to the towel on my hair. “I didn't have time to dry it, and I didn't want wet hair ruining my outfit.”

This second explanation seems to please her more than the first, and she nods then walks through the open plan living space and out to the terrace.

The water sparkling in the sunlight looks so inviting that I almost regret washing my hair already. I've been in the pool every day, and although it's no hot tub, I think all bodies of water have magical healing properties. I always feel so much better, more grounded, after a swim.

We take our seats and load our plates. I opt for pancakes with fresh berries, ignoring the pang of longing I have for Ace's breakfast pancakes, and then drowning the lot in syrup.

Cordelia pulls a face. I'm not sure if it's at me, my breakfast choice, or her plain natural yoghurt. Yuck.

"You should watch what you eat."

"I do. Otherwise I'd be wearing it," I quip. She doesn't break a smile. If anything, her expression sours even more. I sigh. "It's just one breakfast, Grandma."

"And you're not just eating for one anymore," she reminds me.

Like I've forgotten. I shake my head. *Only I kind of had. It's easy to lose time in thoughts of the boys and the fire and the good memories wrapped up with the bad.*

I forgot I was pregnant. I'm going to be a horrible, terrible mother.

I can't do that.

"I had eggs yesterday," I tell her, forcing myself to remain calm on the outside, even while I freak out and fall apart on the inside. "That's healthy."

Okay, so it's a small lie. I *did* have eggs, but they were leftover chocolate ones. I have no idea whose stash they were, but Easter egg chocolate is life. I wish they could make it that good all year round.

But anyway, she doesn't need to know that.

"I'm going to get Dicky's personal chef to make some special balanced meals for you. We can stock up the freezer and all you'll have to do is reheat them. How does that sound?"

Delicious. Not.

“Great. Thanks. But don’t go to any trouble, please.”

“Nonsense. It’s the least I can do for my girls.”

“Girls?”

“I just have a feeling.” She beams at me. “Another little Deighton darling to love and dote upon.” She claps her hands together, genuine excitement on her face. It makes my frosty sarcasm thaw towards her. It’s not her fault I’m miserable.

She’s only trying to help.

“Actually, I’ve been wondering if we could talk,” I begin, taking a deep breath.”

“Absolutely. I’ve been thinking you should talk to someone.”

“Oh, please,” I breathe out in a rush, tears pricking my eyes. “I’m so grateful for the space you’ve given me, but I-I’m ready.”

“Excellent. I’ll set up an appointment.”

“What? Why?”

Why can’t we just talk now? Isn’t that why she’s here? Why on earth would I need an appointment to speak to my own grandmother?

“What do you think I’m talking about? I’ll set up an appointment for you to talk to someone.”

“Is that wise? I thought I could talk to you.”

“I’m no expert, dear,” she laughs.

I frown. “What are you talking about? I thought you were here to talk! I thought we could finally talk about...about *that* night, and what happened.”

“Shh!” she hisses, dropping her spoon noisily to her bowl and frantically looking around the private, enclosed garden space as though spies are waiting to jump out on us. “You must never speak of that!”

“But—”

“No buts, Raven,” she replies sharply. “What’s done is done, and it’s time for you to move on. It is unbecoming to discuss such matters after the fact.”

“But you want me to talk to someone else about it? How is that safe? Only you and I know—”

“I want you to talk to someone about your pregnancy! I don’t mean a shrink! Good Lord!” She stares pointedly at my stomach, which is still flat – not even a hint of a food baby in there despite my recent carbs and chocolate binge.

“But—”

“Enough, Raven! I will not discuss this matter further with you. I came here to have a nice breakfast with my pregnant granddaughter and that is what I’m going to do.”

I swear the *or else* is silently implied at the end of her heated speech.

Dipping my head to stare at my plate, I return to my breakfast. It tastes like sand in my mouth now, whereas a few minutes ago there was a riot of flavour bursting on my tongue. I force myself to chew and swallow, take a sip of my water and then push away my half-eaten plate.

Cordelia *tsks* at me but doesn’t say anything about my not eating.

I was relying on this moment, on talking to Cordelia, to get me through everything I’ve been struggling with. And now she’s shut me down, the panic I’ve been trying so desperately hard to bottle up is rising in me and threatening to explode everywhere.

“I don’t need to see anyone.”

“Well, I think you should. We can check everything is alright, and find out how far along you are. And the doctor will write you a prescription for antenatal vitamins.”

“God knows how babies were born before vitamins came along,” I mutter under my breath.

Not quietly enough it seems, as Cordelia snaps at me, “Don’t be petulant, Raven! It’s unbecoming and you’re not a

child anymore.”

Does she mean because of my age, my pregnancy, or the fact that she made me a murderer?

She never even knew me as a child.

“I don’t want to see anyone...yet.” I shake my head. I’m not ready. It’ll make it too real. Too hard to ignore. “There’s no point.”

“Of course there’s a point!”

“There’s really no rush. Yes, I am going to have a baby at some point in the next nine months. But it’s not coming for a while yet, so there’s plenty of time.” Despite her face pursing up like she’s sucked on a super sour lemon, I continue. “Besides, I don’t know what my plans are yet?”

She sucks in a sharp breath. “What do you mean?” she demands. “You’re not thinking of getting an ab—”

“No,” I reply emphatically. “No. But I don’t know where I want to settle when I leave the island. There’s no point in finding a doctor now when I could end up miles away and having to start the search all over again.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” she sniffs. I can tell she’s furious, but I can’t figure out why. It *does* make sense, what I’m saying, even if it’s an excuse. I’m not staying here on Dicky’s island for nine months to have my baby, and making it so they need to fly a doctor out to me. I’m not ill, injured or dying.

Cordelia lets it go, but she’s not happy about it.

We finish our breakfast in an awkward, tense silence. Well, Cordelia finishes her yoghurt. I just play with my glass of water. So much food is being wasted and she doesn’t seem to care.

When she’s done, she delicately wipes her mouth – still pursed in disapproval at me – and gets to her feet. Wordlessly, I copy and follow to see her out.

I feel like my nerves are in knots from her visit. Fuck my freshly washed hair, the second she’s gone, I’m going for a

swim to calm down.

I open the door and she gives me a cold, distant hug, which almost makes me crumble. All I've wanted since I left the chapel was to be wrapped into someone's warm arms and to be told everything is going to be okay. The juxtaposition of Cordelia's embrace is almost cruel by comparison to what I want, what I need.

When will I next be hugged or held? When will someone have my best interests at heart? Not for a long time, I fear.

"Oh, I can't believe I almost forgot to tell you, dear," Cordelia says brightly, turning to me at the door. "Baxter is arriving tomorrow!"

Throwing a dagger to my chest would cause less damage than her words. No, not her words as such, but the way she delivered them. With a glint in her eyes. *She's taking pleasure in my pain. Why?*

She's kicking me while I'm down. Exacting her revenge for my, what? Not agreeing to see the doctor she picked out for me? Why would she do that? Why would she care? She knows how I feel about Baxter, how uncomfortable he made me feel the last time I was here, and now she's throwing him in my face like a triumphant weapon.

She doesn't wait for my response, blowing me an air kiss and wiggling her fingers in a jaunty, dismissive wave and stepping over the threshold.

When she's gone, I close the door and sink to the floor.

Baxter. Shit.

The End
(of Book 1)

Did you enjoy the bonus content?
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BOOK TWO

Atonement

About Atonement

Some sins can never be atoned.

I feel like I lost the love of my life.

Nearly four years after running from the scene of not one, but two crimes, Charlotte McLintock is barely managing to survive and keep a roof over her head. With her daughter to look after, a degree to finish, and several jobs to juggle, life is hard. But they're not the only battles she's facing: guilt, secrets, and a broken heart still haunt her every waking moment, and stalk her dreams.

When shadows from her past resurface and threaten to unravel everything she's worked so hard for, Charlotte must decide if it's time to come clean or run once more. Will she be able to earn the atonement she so desperately craves, or will those hunting her demand their own special kind of vengeance?

Atonement, book two in the Vengeance series, is a contemporary New Adult reverse harem second-chance romance, with dark themes and a cliffhanger.



16/10/19

Ace

Ugh. I hate waiting. I quite often get given the shitty jobs by my mates because I'm usually the patient, calm, quiet one. I don't kick up a fuss, preferring to observe rather than jump in and mouth off. Maybe I need to start speaking up for myself more to avoid crap assignments like this?

I sigh, shift my numb ass in the hard unforgiving plastic cafe chair, and sip my disgusting but completely overpriced coffee. I don't even like the stuff. I'm not sure when I started drinking it, but somehow it has just become a habit that I don't even enjoy.

That's a lie.

I do remember when I started drinking coffee, I just don't like to think about it. Tough shit, a small voice in my brain says. I glance down at my watch. It's 2:37pm. I've been up since six. That's got to be a record, going over half the day without thinking about...her.

That's when the coffee drinking started. After the fire, after everyone was out, accounted for and checked over by paramedics or shipped off to hospital, and we realised she was missing, that's when the police officer handed me a really shitty cup of coffee and I drank it on autopilot. And it was awful. But I can understand why people get addicted. I don't even like the stuff but it's like liquid crack coursing through my veins - one taste and the caffeine monster I didn't know existed inside of me awoke and now he demands to be fed.

The summer has been a total wash out. No one has wanted to do anything, everyone mourning her absence. It took two weeks for the chapel to be completely gutted and checked after the fire was out and there was no sign of her body. Thankfully. It was hell; waiting and wondering. Because although in my gut I knew she was alive, a part of me always worried.

When the dead body washed up on the next beach along shortly after, it was the same fresh hell all over again. Until

Thorn bribed the coroner to tell us it was a man's body they found. Relief flooded through me until we discovered it was Michael Bloomberg.

That was a huge shock. Things may not have been good between us all for the last few years, but there was no denying that we were all like brothers once, so I didn't take it too well finding out he had passed. Especially as there was so much mystery surrounding his death.

Eventually after the inquest ended, it was ruled that he had probably started the fire in the chapel and then thrown himself off a cliff in an act of remorse. I wasn't convinced though. Neither move seemed like his style. But still his loss hit hard.

Not as hard as the loss of her though. She just vanished.

We spent the whole summer searching high and low for her, following any lead we could find, but nothing proved fruitful. Which was exactly how I came to be sat in this bloody cattle shed airport in the arse-end of nowhere waiting for a flight that's already been delayed by six hours. Apparently Rebel got a text from his old friend Baxter Branson - fucking rich people names - that she was due in today on this flight. Apparently she had deferred from all of her university applications for a year, which we knew thanks to Jax's sleuthing, and had been hiding out on Baxter's grandfather's private island somewhere in the Caribbean for the last three and a bit months. So now we had the where and when, but I needed to know the why.

I stand and stretch, bored. I'm contemplating sacking it off and ditching but I don't want to face the others' wrath if this is the one time a tip off proves useful. I'm pretty sure Baxter can't be trusted for shit, but why would he lie about this? No, I better stay. I'm going to need more coffee though.

I'm just walking up to the counter when they announce that the flight I've been waiting all goddamn day for is here. Finally. I quickly order my coffee 'to go' and head over to the arrivals gate. The one small mercy of being at the UK's smallest commercial airport is that she's not likely to slip by me if she is on the flight. I position myself out of sight but

with a clear view of the arrival hall. There's only a single set of sliding automatic doors to keep an eye on. Which I do. For another forty minutes. It's testing my patience and I'm definitely antsy when my phone rings. I glance down at the caller ID and see that it's Rebel.

“Kaj zdaj¹?” I snap after I've hit answer.

“Fuck off dude, you know I don't speak your language,” he whines.

“Kreten².”

“Oh no, don't tell me, I know this one...did you just say you love me? Or that I have the biggest cock you know?”

“Close. Dickhead,” I sigh, biting back a laugh. I'm pissed at all of the guys right now for sending me on another shitty time wasting mission, I don't want to be joking around right now.

“How's the assignment going?” “Time waster.”

“Any hot chicks or eye candy to help pass the time?”

“As if,” I know as well as he does that no girl has caught any of our eyes since we met her.

“Has the flight at least arrived? I heard it was majorly delayed.” “Yes and yes.”

“But no sign of her?” “No.”

“Bummer! Sucks to be you! We're having a bbq at the weekend before we head off to uni. Can you make it?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool. See you then!”

The line goes dead and I slip my phone back into the pocket of my jeans and resume my people watching. But during my distracted conversation with Rebel, a crowd of people have surged through the gate and I've - potentially - missed her.

“Shit! Fuck!” I exclaim earning myself dirty looks from the old couple next to me. No time to apologise though, I race

past them and begin pushing my way through the crowd towards the exit. I catch a glimpse of long blue-black hair and start to really shove my way through. People all around me shout and protest but I don't give a fuck. I need to get to that flash of long dark hair. It's a compulsion that drives me forward. I know it's probably not her - I mean, what are the chances? - but I have to check.

Just as I get close enough that she might hear me and turn if I call her name, something in my gut tells me to stop and not shout for her. Instead I give one last surge forward, lightly touching her arm with an "excuse me." I don't know why I did that exactly, but I figure if she's hiding and doesn't want to be found she might duck and run if I call her name. Acting like a stranger may keep her defences down.

"You dropped..." my ruse tails off as the woman I've just grabbed slowly turns towards me.

"Oh I'm sorry," she says before she can fully turn and see who has stopped her.

And it's her.

Oh my fucking god it's actually her! I do a lightning fast scan of her body and I'm relieved to see that there aren't any scars or marks from the fire. I sag in relief.

"Raven, baby..." I croon.

I watch as her eyes widen in recognition and her expression slowly morphs into one of horror then panic. I see it written all over her face; she wants to run. Luckily, I'm still holding her arm. "Ace? What are you doing here?" her voice wobbles and I see tears form. Shit! I don't want to make her cry. I'm going about this all wrong. I feel like I'm the last person they should have sent to

check this lead out now that it's proved fruitful.

"Princess, what's wrong?" I ask her in a concerned, but panicked tone.

"You shouldn't be here," she says taking in a shaky breath. I watch as she visibly tries to steady herself and shutters come

down over the windows to her soul. Fuck, it's bad. I've never seen her shut down and lock me out like this before.

"I have to go," she whispers at the same time as I say, "We have to talk."

"I can't. There's a car waiting for me."

"Wait! Stay," I sound like I'm begging but I don't even care. I'd get down on my knees for her if I thought it would help.

"I can't," she pleads. But she hesitates and she stops pulling away from me. I feel like we're two magnets being drawn together.

"I just need...you okay?" Fuck damn! I hate that I can't get my words out. I understand spoken and written English perfectly, but when it comes to speaking it myself, I always fuck up and end up sounding stupid.

"I'm okay," she whispers so quietly I have to dip my head close to hear her. I bend down so that I can look up into her face and that's when I notice.

Fuck.

There's a faint outline of a bump showing through her white lace dress. I don't think it's a food baby either.

"Rae?" It's all I can get out. For a moment I can't stop staring at it. Then she lets out a sob and my gaze is wrenched away from her midsection, flying to her face which is covered in fat wet tears. Her arms protectively curl around her stomach and that's all the confirmation I need.

"What the fuck?! Baxter? He hurt you? I kill him!" I instantly see red, raging. Fucking Baxter Branson isn't safe to be around any female and she's just spent the best part of four months in his dangerous company. And now she's pregnant...I will fucking kill him.

"Shush, no! No! It's fine. It's...complicated. I really have to go." She sounds panicked, desperate, eyes flying from side to side. I follow her movement and realise we're attracting

quite the crowd. “No! Explain.” I force myself to calm and release her from my

grip a little. Hopefully it’s enough to make the gawkers move on. “I can’t. Not right now. Maybe in a day or two...?”

“Give me number.”

I pull out my phone and she rattles off a number which I save. I will be calling her. I promise her that.

“Ace?”

“Yeah?” I can’t stop staring at her. Even covered in tears she is indescribably beautiful. I want to wrap her in my arms and take care of her, even though I know she’s more than capable of taking care of herself.

“You can’t tell the others you’ve seen me.”

“Why not?” I don’t understand. Why is she still hiding?

“Please, Aljaž.”

When she says my name I know I’m fucking done for. I can’t resist her or deny her anything when she says my real name like that. It’s somewhere between a plea and a prayer, and I would die the happiest man in the world if I got to make her say that to me for the rest of our lives.

“Okay. For now. We meet soon.” “I promise. I have to go.”

On the off chance I hold out my arms to her, not expecting anything, but to my surprise she flings herself into my embrace and sobs. I pull her close, rubbing her back, trying to soothe her without my clumsy words.

“You’ll keep my secret?” she murmurs into my neck. “Yes. Promise.”

“Thank you, Aljaž. Thank you.”

“I love you.”

It’s all I can think to say. Because despite her promises, I’m not stupid. I won’t be seeing her in a few days. She’s about to vanish again. And I’m about to let her go...why? Because even though I feel like she’s tearing my heart out of

my chest as she walks away, and even though I'm going to regret this for the rest of my life, what else can I do? I love her.

I stand and wave sadly as I watch her go. She only looks back once and I can see she's still sobbing her heart out. It takes everything I have to stay still and not chase after her. I want to sweep her up into my arms and fix every problem she has. But I don't. I respect her wishes and let her leave.

After a moment I take out my phone and pull up the entry she added. I hit call and I'm not surprised when the automated voice tells me that this number isn't in use. It's stupid, but even though she's given me a fake number, I can't bring myself to delete it.

I'm still staring at my phone in my hand a moment later when it rings. Without thinking I hit accept and the group call connects me to my three brothers.

"Plane has to be emptied by now? I saw that it has landed on my app."

Jax could be a professional stalker I think. He's scarily efficient at this shit. He's also the mastermind behind everything we do, which is why he never has shit jobs like sitting on a hard plastic chair for hours on end waiting for a girl who doesn't want to be found.

"Well?" "Was it her?"

"No. False alarm," I sigh. There's no point in saying anything else.

"Fuck!" Thorn exhales.

"I'll fucking kill Baxter! Why'd he lie?" Rebel sounds pissed, but that's nothing new. Since she disappeared, his only emotions have been somewhere on the rage-scale.

"Relax, Rebel," Jax cuts in, saving me having to think of a lie to placate him. "She may have given him the slip and changed her flights."

"You're right," Reb sighs.

"So what's next?" Thorn asks.

“We keep searching,” Rebel insists and I nibble my lip. I’m going to have to say something.

“Guys, hear me out okay?” Jax asks. No one says anything so he continues, “We all start classes next week, yeah? I think it’s time we call off the search.”

“No way!”

“Fuck no!”

“Listen, listen! I don’t mean stop looking for her altogether...just that we stop using every waking moment to hunt for someone who, for whatever reason, doesn’t want to be found. We have classes to focus on, new digs to move into, a lot going on. How about we just...cool things for a while, just until we get settled in?”

There’s a four-way silence on the line as Jax lets his suggestion sink in.

“Okay,” Thorn agrees as Rebel reluctantly grunts, “fine.” I can tell they’re not happy, but they know this is the right thing to do. We put our lives on hold for four months to find her. It’s time to move on.

“Ace, mate? You there?” “Here.”

“What do you think? If you want to keep searching we can...” “No.”

“No?”

“It’s time,” I force the words out past the lump in my throat. “Stop looking. Let go.”

We briefly make arrangements to meet up at the weekend, but we’re all subdued and eager to be off the line. Probably to wallow in our own misery. It all feels so final, despite Jax saying we’re just taking a break for a bit. I don’t know if the other guys feel like I do. Thorn is fickle as fuck so he’ll probably be shagging his way through freshers next week anyway. Rebel too, probably in an attempt to numb the pain though. Jax is unreadable, but I think he’ll move on eventually too.

Me though?

I feel like I just lost the love of my life.

Charlotte's Diary

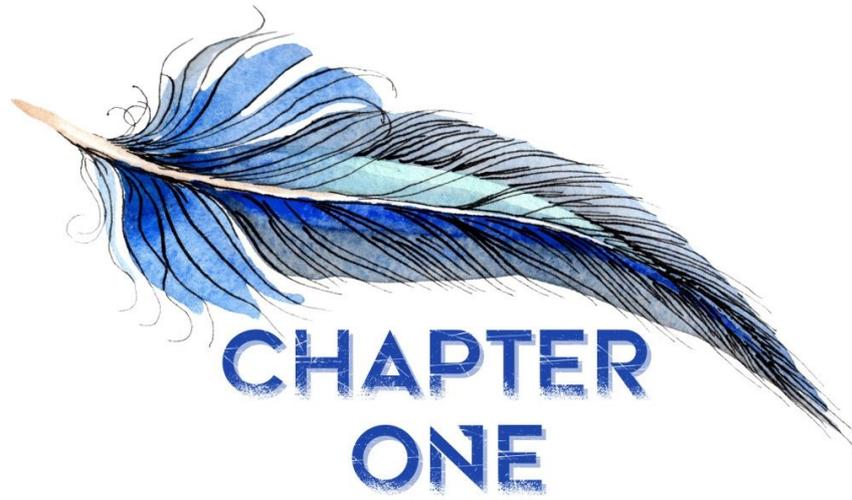
3 hours post-blaze

If someone fucks with the people I love, I burn them all to the ground...

Rebel's words keep swirling around and around, in time to the churning of my stomach.

Fuck.

I just can't write right now.



4 years later

Rebel

“Fresher fucker!” Ugh. I instantly regret answering Thorn’s call. He thinks it’s hilarious that I drove my cousin, Elena, to Edinburgh University last week to help her settle in. Fuck knows why she wanted to leave California to come to school over here, let alone why she’s chosen to go to fucking Scotland of all places. It’s rained non-stop since I arrived and it doesn’t show any signs of stopping. But for some unknown reason, I decided that I may as well stick around for a while and see the sights. It’s not like I had anything to rush back for. Of course, Thorn thinks that’s code for fucking as many freshers as I can get my hands on, but given that my cousin is a freshman, it just feels fucking wrong.

“What do you want, dickwad?” I sigh.

“When are you back? I want to hang out with your ugly mug. I get the better chicks when you’re with me.”

“Weekend.”

“The fuck? It’s only Tuesday. Surely you’ve shagged all the students by now?”

“Hilarious,” I deadpan. “I have to go.”

“Oh my god,” his voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper, “You got a girl right now? I hear ya man.” I hang up, relieved to be off the phone, and go back to scanning the campus coffee shop. It’s busy with students grabbing lunch or a fresh coffee on their way to their next class.

It’s been four days now since I unexpectedly caught a glimpse of a girl who looked like Raven, and I can’t find anything out. I’m frustrated as fuck. It probably - almost definitely isn’t her - but why does no one recognise the girl with the long blue-black hair? I’ve quizzed all the freshmen friends of Elena’s, and none of them seem to know her. She hasn’t been at any of the fresher events I’ve gate-crashed and I’ve not seen her on campus since. I’m starting to wonder if I imagined seeing her - wouldn’t be the first time in the last four

years - when I catch sight of a flash of blue through the window.

I leap to my feet and am off out of the door before I can blink and lose her. I think I'm crazy. I must be crazy, chasing after a ghost after all this time. But there she is. The girl - whether she's Raven or not - is the one I caught sight of the other day, for sure, and right now she's hurrying across campus with her head down to avoid the pouring rain. I don't have such luxury; I have to keep my eye on her as I chase her across the quad towards an academic block.

I slip inside, glad to be out of the driving rain, just in time to see the girl entering a classroom. I relax for a moment and catch my breath, knowing that she's not going anywhere. When I'm a little less breathless and I've swept the water out of my vision, I cross the corridor and approach the door I saw the raven-haired girl go through. Room number twenty-three. 'C Cox Snr' is the name on the door, with 'Chief Professor of Literature' printed in gold underneath. Fancy. But the literature reference gives me hope; it used to be her favourite subject in school. She certainly wasn't studying medicine anywhere in the country, thanks to Jax I knew that much.

Peering in through the glass in the top half of the door, I skim the rows of bored looking students, trying to zero in on my target. It doesn't take long. She's sitting in the centre of the front row and is the only one paying attention. I watch as she furiously scribbles notes while everyone around her sits in a trance. I stare intently, silently willing her to look up from her notebook. I need to see her face. I need to know if it's her.

The others tease me for still having a Raven obsession, but I don't know how they haven't still got one. That chick stole my heart and

- Thorn would say - my sanity, but I don't care. I have to find her; I need answers. When we realised that she wasn't dead and that she must have somehow escaped the fire, Jax hired someone to find her. When they came back to us empty handed, Jax hired several other people to find her. But no one could. Raven Deighton does not exist. And we couldn't even get to her through her alleged grandmother, Cordelia

Deighton, because the woman doesn't have any grandchildren, and she's untouchable. Always off on some world cruise or on a private island or something. No one can get close enough to ask her. For that reason alone, I need to find her. My brain won't rest, won't quit playing the 'What If' game until it gets answers. I tell myself that's all I need, closure, but it's bullshit. After all, she stole my heart.

Laughter snaps me out of my trance and through the glass I see the class are all laughing at something the professor has said or done. The girl in the centre of the first row puts down her pen and looks up to smile at the professor. My first thought is of how arresting her smile is, it lights up her beautiful face. Then it sinks in.

It's her.

I blink, convinced my eyes are playing tricks on me. It has to be some kind of mirage. I actually rub them like a fucking sap, as if somehow that will clear them. But it doesn't make a difference. What I see before me is real.

It's really fucking her.

Holy shit! It's her! It's fucking her! Here in the fucking shitty wetlands of Scotland, at uni when she should have graduated, studying literature, not medicine. What the fuck?! Excited, I pull out my phone and rattle off a quick message on the group chat. I'm not surprised by their instant responses: they range from outright disbelieving ("fuck off" from Thorn) to cautiously reproachful ("this has happened before, make sure you get proof this time" from Jax). What do they want, a blood sample? I'm standing no more than twelve feet away from her, and I can see it's her with my own eyes. Granted, there had been a couple of false alarms in the past, but that was usually because I couldn't get a direct look at her face. Not today though. Right now, as she gazes up at her professor like he hung the fucking moon, I'm able to stare directly at her face. Her beautiful face that I've dreamed about every night since she vanished.

Suddenly I can't even believe I thought I saw her all those other times. She's so unique and perfect, that all the others

were poor imitations that didn't even come close to the real thing. I feel foolish for all the false alarms, but triumphant that I've finally found her.

I need to calm down, I need to think and plan this out. I can't just go barging in there demanding to speak to her. No matter how much I want to. I could follow her when class ends I guess, but I run the risk of losing her again. Damn it, Jax would know what to do. Think, Reb, think...

I click my fingers when I have an 'ah-ha' moment and move away from the door. I take out my phone and play some games as a way to pass the time. I reckon the class will be an hour - maybe two - long. I'll grab someone on their way out and get all the details I need to know. Maybe I'll even speak to the professor. Who knows. One thing I'm certain of though, is that I won't be letting Raven slip through my fingers ever again.

When the classroom empties, she's thankfully one of the first out the door and rushing off. She's in far too much of a rush to see me even if I hadn't moved slightly out of sight. I grab one of the kids loitering behind in no rush to get to his next class.

"Yo. You there. Give me your schedule," I say. The kid looks like he wants to argue with me, but when he takes in my size, and probably the muscles and tattoos, he obviously thinks better of it and meekly hands his timetable over. I scan it quickly to see when she next has literature, notice that it's a third year schedule and I snap a quick picture of it on my phone, before giving it back to him with a thanks. I walk off before he can say much else.

When the classroom is completely empty, I knock on the door. "Excuse me, Sir?" I call through the open door, ever so polite.

Raven once told me you catch more bees with honey or some shit, so I was being nice in the hopes of getting what I want.

"How may I help you, young man? Come in, come in," the professor replies.

He seems friendly enough, if a little formal and stiff. He's pretty old in my opinion, but probably too young to be Chief of Literature. Pretty sure that means he's in charge of the whole department. I don't know. He has grey hair but it's kind of trendy, and he's well dressed in a traditional Harris Tweed three piece suit and he doesn't appear senile. Raven would probably have said he looked dapper. I can see why she'd like him on looks alone, and with his extensive knowledge of her favourite subject, yeah, I can see why she was looking at him like that. When he speaks I notice he has one of those clipped British accents that screams upper class, but, you know, he's a teacher so how rich can he be really?

"I was wondering if you could help me. I'm trying to find someone and I believe she takes one of your classes? I'm not sure what year she's in though."

"Go on..." he sounds a little more weary now and I wonder if he'll be willing to help me. I mean, I could be anyone and he probably shouldn't be revealing students' identities to strangers.

"Her name is Raven?"

"I'm sorry young man, I don't teach anyone by that name," he shakes his head and looks genuinely sorry that he can't help me.

"Oh, it's just that might be a nickname? She's about five two and has long dark hair. Like, really long. And it's blackish blue. I'm pretty sure she takes your class."

"Ah you must mean Charlotte!" His face lights up when he realises who I'm talking about. Charlotte? WTF? "She's in my third year class. You actually just missed her, I'm afraid. Wonderful girl, one of my best students in fact."

"Oh wow that's brilliant. Thank you. When do you have her class next, maybe I can swing by and meet her after?"

He looks at me suspiciously, clamming up. "Who did you say you were again?"

"I didn't. I'm an acquaintance of...Charlotte's. I met her the other day and we agreed to work together on a project for

one of our other classes but I lost her number and I'm really bad with names."

He doesn't look entirely convinced when he turns to me and says, "why don't you leave me your name and number? That way I can pass it to her and she can get in touch with you...if she wants to. Or I can pass it to my son, they're dating so he'll have plenty of opportunities to pass it along for you."

"No, don't worry. You've done more than enough, thanks. I'll just swing by and see her some other time. Thanks again, but I better be off, I don't want to be late for class." I back out of the room and take off quickly.

Fuck. She has a boyfriend? I mean, it's been four years so it's not like I expected her to be loyal to us or anything, but it still fucking smarts hearing that she has moved on. With some rich tosser's bratty little kid no doubt. I already hate him. What is she thinking?

I storm from the building and march around the quad in the rain which has slowed to a light drizzle. Thank fuck for small mercies. I'm not sure what to do. According to the kid's schedule that I snapped on my phone, Raven doesn't have Lit again for two days. I can't wait that long to see her. Maybe I should have followed her from the classroom, but it's too late now. The itch to see her is stronger than ever now.

I head back to the coffee house and grab a hot chocolate. It's the first one I've had in years but I suddenly fancy one. I pull out my phone and start digging, searching for Professor Cox. Too many hits come up so I add Edinburgh University. It brings me straight to the university's faculty page where there's a photo and a short bio all about Professor Charles Cox Snr. It's all pretty generic stuff but at least I have a name and some things to go off. Another half an hour searching and I know that the professor is married to a high flying socialite and has one son, Charles Junior. Original, I sigh. What is it with rich folks naming their kids after themselves? Talk about narcissism. Oh well, at least I know who the boyfriend is now.

Searching for him online brings up plenty. All of his social media is public - stupid twat - and he's on absolutely

everything with thousands of followers. How is that even possible? I don't even know a hundred people - much less like them - so how does he have thousands? There are hundreds of pictures of himself, most of them with different girls, none of him with Raven. His most recent Instagram post was last night and it looks like it was taken in a nightclub. There's three - no, four - girls hanging off him and not one of them is his alleged girlfriend. Maybe daddy dearest got it wrong and they're not dating, but I suspect that Charles Junior is a fucking prick. And a sleazy one at that.

I grind my teeth. I don't want Raven anywhere near him... I sigh and head towards the admin office. I need to find out more about this fucker she's dating. Only question is, how?

The answer comes to me just as I enter the administration building. The young receptionist behind the desk looks at me expectantly when I approach and then flushes when she takes me in. I'm used to it, but prepared to use it to my advantage today. Flashing her a winning smile, I ask if she can help me, in a low seductive voice. Her flush turns to a deep red blush as she recognises the suggestion in my voice.

"C-c-certainly, Sir," she stammers. Jax would have a field day with the 'Sir' title but it does nothing for me. She - Amanda her name tag declares - is very pretty. But I seriously only have eyes for Raven right now. I always did.

"I'm looking for a student. I need to know what dorm room he's in. Do you think you could help me, Amanda?" I croon her name in a way that I know she won't be able to resist, and sure enough, she simpers and stutters that she'll do her best. "Thank you. I'm looking for Charles Cox. Junior." I have an elaborate excuse prepared but it turns out I don't even need it.

"Oh you mean Charlie, Professor Cox's son? He's in Havilland Gate, the penthouse suite. It's the nicest halls of residence on campus so you can't really miss it, but there are signs posted if you need a hand." She doesn't even have to look him up on the computer, which says a lot about this kid. In my opinion, none of it good.

“Thank you so much Amanda, you’ve been very helpful. I don’t know what I would have done without you.” Okay, so I’m probably laying it on a bit thick, but I just made her day. And to be honest, she may have just made mine. I flash her a panty-dropping smile and head out again, determined to scope out this rich prick’s building. Hopefully I’ll catch a glimpse of him, or if I’m lucky, Raven might even come by.

Dickwad’s building is stupidly nice. Who provides bratty teenagers and twenty-somethings with accommodation like this? Surely it all gets wrecked in drunken parties or decorated with stolen traffic cones? It’s madness. I lounge around in the lobby waiting area, which is nicer than most hotels, as I watch the campus’ elite go by. Of course there’s an elevator, couldn’t have the little darlings taking the stairs like commoners now, could we? I’m impatient; I hate waiting. It always makes me feel bad tempered and gnarly. Luckily, I don’t have to wait too long though. There’s a commotion at the door and I look up to see a large group of lads entering the foyer. They all look like carbon copies of each other, with slight variations on hair, eye and clothing colours. They all look preppy and studious. Poncey, with their curly hair and corduroy jackets, striped scarves and designer ripped jeans. I swear one or two are actually wearing fucking loafers. With no

socks! I shake my head. It’s not okay.

Despite them all pretty much being clones of one another, one boy stands out. He’s blonder than the others, slightly taller, somehow more refined. He’s the ring leader. And he looks just enough like daddy dearest for me to know that this is Raven’s boyfriend. What the actual fuck? How does she go from having boyfriends like me and my brothers, to this prick?

They’re all laughing about something the Dickwad has said like it’s the funniest thing ever, when one of them asks him a question. “So, did you fuck them? All of them?” a kid with brown curls

asks eagerly.

“What do you think?” Twatface replies with a smirk. He already had a face I wanted to punch, but that smirk has my

hands curling into fists. The sycophants laugh. “And she doesn’t have a clue?”

“No idea,” he smirks even wider. “Silly bitch.” I grind my teeth and file that response away for later. If I find out he was talking about Raven, I will make him suffer.

“So are we going out again tonight?” Brown curls seems keen to get in on the action.

“Can’t. I have dinner plans with Charlotte. Although I might be able to join you later, depending on how the night goes.” The blonde wanker sighs, and it’s the first time he’s looked less than pleased with himself.

“She still not putting out?” I breathe out slowly to calm myself and mentally add brown curls to my kill list too.

“What do you think?” Dickwad snaps. A ghost of a smile crosses my face at the knowledge that Raven is at least not sleeping with this prick.

“Why you dating a chick that ain’t putting out anyway? From what I hear she’s poor as fuck. I don’t get it,” a guy with dirty blonde wavy hair chimes in.

“Because, assholes,” he grinds out, clearly annoyed, “my mother has it on very good authority that she’s actually a Deighton. As in, Cordelia. And that’s just the ‘in’ that we need right now. I have no idea why she’s hiding behind a fake name but I’m determined to get a ring on this girl’s finger before the semester’s out. Now change the fucking subject.”

Over my fucking dead body. There’s no way Raven is ending up with this guy. He’s fucking vile.

“So you’ll join us later if she still doesn’t put out?” another preppy asshole asks.

“I’ll join you later even if she does. Have you seen her?” he gives a cruel laugh, “Miss fucking priss, who dotes on every word my idiot father says, isn’t about to be much fun in the sack is she? I bet she’s a fucking virgin. Ugh. They’re the worst to fuck, they don’t have a clue what they’re doing.”

The preppy clones all laugh heartily and head towards the elevator. Fucking hell. I don't know how I didn't kill them. But at least I know when I can see Raven again. Tonight. I just have to follow this fucking asshole without killing him first.

Charlotte's Diary

3 days post-blaze

As expected, Grandma flew me out to the island where we had stayed together over Easter. I was beginning to wonder if all the times she'd said she was on a cruise, she was really here, shacking it up with Dicky.

I wasn't thrilled to return, but things did look up when she gave me my own cabin this time, disappearing up to the big house. A couple of tense days later, I learnt that Baxter wasn't going to be around. Once I knew that, I felt like I could relax a little and try to mend my broken heart.

That's what I have to focus on; mending my heart. I can't even begin to think about what happened...what I did... because every time I do, I break down.

I may not be sure exactly who I am, but I'm not a stone-cold killer. I'm not a remorseless hardass. Nothing in my plan for vengeance prepared me for the aftermath of having to actually live with what I have done.

And no matter how hard I try to block it out and not think about it, it's keeping me awake at night. Questions swirl around and around in my mind, twisting my stomach and fraying my soul into tattered pieces.

How will I live with myself?



CHAPTER TWO

Rebel

I head back to the dickless wonder's apartment block early after spending most of the afternoon doing more research on him and his family. It seems that I was both right and wrong in my assumptions: The rich prick does come from money, but it's Mummy's money and not Daddy's. As I expected, Daddy really is a poor-as-piss teacher, and mummy is a has-been socialite who married beneath her.

Judging by her never ending string of affairs, she has regretted it ever since. Using some of Jax's contacts, I was able to quickly discover that the son's place at the university is secured by his father working here, though his grandparents pay for the nicest suite on campus for the sake of keeping up appearances. The money's gone, and so the burden of the family name rests on his shoulders, to make a suitable match. At this point, things are so bad that only marriage or a miracle will save the family name. Hence why he's sniffing around Raven. I don't know where he got his intel. Somehow he's managed to find out that the girl we couldn't even find, is masquerading once again under a false name and is actually the heir to the Deighton fortune. How can that be? Cordelia Deighton doesn't have any grandchildren. But one way or another, this family truly believes that Raven is the answer to all of their problems. My discoveries tell me that I need to be careful. This guy - and his family - is desperate, and not about to go down without a fight. Intimidating the hell out of him in order to get him to leave Raven alone clearly isn't going to be an option, so I'm going to need to think carefully and plan ahead here. One thing's for sure though, I will protect

Raven from this family of vultures no matter what it costs me.

As expected - I guess just following a hunch after he made such a stellar first impression on me - he gets Raven to come to him before their date. He does at least come down in the elevator and greet her in the foyer. She looks beautiful in a simple black dress with thin straps on the shoulders. Her long

hair flows freely down her back like a sheet of silk. Despite her heels, she's really short next to her date, and I can't help but notice the way she cringes when he throws his arm around her neck as they exit the building. She doesn't look comfortable at all, but she doesn't say anything. If I had done that to her, she would have given me hell. Where has the feisty girl that I once knew gone?

I follow at a safe distance from them, but the prick is loud enough to be heard from a block away. He's so self-absorbed I needn't have worried about being seen, but I need to keep an eye on Raven. She's sharp. He asks if she minds walking to the restaurant because he's just had his car - a Bentley - valeted and he doesn't want to get it dirty. I smell bullshit. I think he's scared to drive the car off private property in case it gets repossessed. Mummy dearest didn't continue making the payments on his extravagant birthday present, and so the car is currently an expensive ornament that's not being used. Raven agrees to walk, despite the fact that it's clearly freezing and she doesn't have a jacket. Her arms snake around her torso in a desperate bid to keep warm, but the twat is totally oblivious, and doesn't offer her his jacket. It makes me grind my teeth in anger.

He takes her to the flashiest restaurant in town and I wonder how he'll pay for it. I quickly debate whether I should wait outside or follow them in. Fuck it, I don't want to miss anything. I give it a moment and then follow them into the restaurant, luckily getting seated nearby, but out of sight. My fists clench when he orders for the both of them; a steak for himself and a salad for Raven. He obviously doesn't know my girl at all. She could almost eat me under the table and steak is her all-time favourite. Looking at her closely actually, she seems a bit thin. She could do with a good meal, not rabbit food. He orders a bottle of the most expensive wine but when Raven quietly asks for a soda, he scowls and orders her a water. Why isn't she punching him? Or at the very least walking out? I huff in frustration and annoyance.

The dinner conversation is bland and one-sided. Aside from Raven's occasional nods and non-verbal cues, Dickwad is basically giving a monologue. I've never known anyone this

self-centred before. She isn't engaging with him at all, but that doesn't seem to bother him. I don't think he's even noticed how quiet she is. In fact, she seems distracted, checking her phone and fidgeting uncomfortably. Though I did notice that she devoured her salad and stared mournfully at his rib-eye. The only time the prick stops talking about himself is when he asks - and by that I mean grills - her about her family. If I thought she was nervous and quiet before, that's nothing to how she clams up at his constant probing questions. His questioning has reached interrogation levels of prying and I can see that he's really starting to piss her off. Good! I hope she'll finally give him hell and storm out.

But she doesn't. She simply clams up, whispers to the table that she doesn't want to talk about it, and asks him a question that is guaranteed to get the self-absorbed dick back on track with his favourite subject: himself. And so the meal continues to drag on.

Thankfully, he decides they'll forego pudding, and so the date is actually over quite quickly. It just feels like it's lasted an eternity. I'm somewhat surprised when he doesn't walk her home, and instead leads her back towards his apartment block once they're on campus. Has this guy not got any manners at all? I loiter in the shadows as I wait for them to say goodbye.

"I had a nice time tonight, thank you Charlie." Raven says in a timid voice that's all wrong.

"Do you want to come up?" he asks. I can feel the heavy weight of suggestion in his question.

"It's pretty late," she hesitates. Maybe it's wishful thinking on my part, but to me she sounds like there's nothing she'd like less than to follow him upstairs to his shag pad.

"It's early. It's only...eleven," he states after checking his watch briefly.

"I have school in the morning, and work. I should really head back."

"Come on, it's still early. You stay out later than this when you work in the club," he wheedles. "Why don't you come up

for coffee?”

“You know I don’t drink coffee,” she points out.

“I know.” He winks. I gag. “So why don’t you just come up?” “Okay,” she sighs, sounding resigned. “But just for one quick

drink. I really do have to get back.”

“Sure, sure, whatever you say, babe.” By the light of the building I can see the slimy grin he throws her. It makes my skin crawl. What I wouldn’t give to step out of the shadows and save her right now. Somehow though, I don’t think that my appearance here would go down too well, so I force myself to remain hidden, and I pray that I don’t have to wait too long to see that she gets home safely.

To pass the time, I rattle off a group chat to the others, once again insisting that they need to come up here. I get that I’ve made mistakes in the past, but there’s no denying that this is Raven, for real, this time. I’m restless and antsy until Jax confirms that they’re all coming and booked onto flights in the morning. Good. I relax a little. I’ll show them that they’re wrong; it is worth the trip up.

I sit on my phone, mindlessly scrolling through social media, unable to concentrate on anything when I hear the ping of the elevator doors. I look up, not really expecting it to be Raven, but I’m pleasantly surprised that it is. I quickly check my watch and notice that it’s been less than an hour since she went up to the penthouse with him. It takes me a moment to realise that she’s raging. I scan her and take in her dishevelled hair, the heels and clutch in her hand, and the torn straps on her dress, which is still hiked up. Her cheeks are flushed with anger.

Rage, white-hot and bubbling, fills me and I jump to my feet from where I’m sitting behind some foliage in the foyer. I’m about to call out to her, go to her, do something when a moment later the dickless wonder bursts out of a side door, panting, having obviously run down the stairs after her. His fly is still undone. Bile fills my mouth. I swear to god if he fucking touched her...

“Charlotte, wait!” he cries with an air of desperation.

“Fuck you, Charlie!” she quietly seethes back at him. “No means NO, you fucking dick!”

I want to hoot and clap her for finally standing up to this prick. It’s nice to see a little of the fire I used to love so much, returning. I turn to face him and flush with pride when I see that he’s sporting a split lip and a bloody nose. Good! I hope it fucking hurts and stops him getting laid for the rest of the week. I spin back to Raven, with a view to seeing her safely home, but she’s vanished into the cold, wet night. Fuck!

To make matters worse, Charlie - the absolute bellend - shakes his head, turns on his heel and heads back to his apartment via the elevator, leaving Raven to find her own way home in the dark. As I slip out into the vile black night with no hope of finding Raven, I think to myself, ‘this guy really needs to be taught some manners’. I hope I can be the guy to teach him. With my fists.

Charlotte's Diary

1-week post-blaze

Obviously my good fortune (ha!) couldn't last. I was happily wallowing in my misery, content to be left alone, when total chaos ruined my plans.

Yesterday, Cordelia came to see me and started making plans for me to be seen by a doctor. I thought she meant a head-doctor, until she stared pointedly at my still-flat stomach.

Oh, yeah, that. Sounds crazy to say that I'd almost forgotten my situation.

Anyway, she thinks I should be checked out. Find out how far along in the pregnancy I am...that sort of thing. But I'm reluctant. I don't want to, because it will somehow make it all real. And I'm not ready for that.

The last thing I wanted or expected was to get pregnant at this age, but I am. And I know I have to deal with that sooner or later, but as I said to Cordelia - there's no rush. It isn't going anywhere. It'll still be there after the summer. Specifics can wait. I'm pregnant, yes, and a baby will come...but there's plenty of time.

I think she was pretty pissed at me, even though she let it go, because as she was leaving she turned to me and told me that Baxter would be arriving tomorrow. It felt like a dagger thrown at me; a way to wound me and kick me when I'm down. She knows how I feel about him, and it's like she took joy in causing me pain, just because I disagreed with her over something.

Baxter. Shit.



CHAPTER THREE

Jax

Fucking Rebel. I slam my phone down in annoyance. I really thought we were done with this shit once and for all, but no, it seems like every time I think we're through and we can finally all move on, that bitch reaches out and drags us all back into hell. I grind my teeth and seethe silently for a minute, allowing myself this moment.

Raven Fucking Deighton. The girl that I've wasted four years of my life on, in one way or another. I knew right from the start that getting involved with her was a bad idea, but I stupidly allowed myself to get sucked in and wrapped up in the whirlwind like the others did. And then she vanished. It wasn't a carbon copy of the Lizzie situation, but it might as well have been: we all fell for a girl, she's no longer in our lives. It fucking hurts. And although I've done my absolute best to forget her and move on, the others just can't let it lie - no, they insisted on dragging me back into the drama. Every. Single. Time.

We didn't even know where she was, and she was ruling – and ruining - my life all over again. Part of me hopes that this time Rebel has managed to track her down. I don't know what Rebel hopes to achieve by hunting the girl who doesn't want to be found, but I would like to get answers so I can be done with her once and for all. In all honesty though, the way I feel right now, I'd actually be scared of what I might do to hurt her if I was around her. So maybe it's best if it's another false alarm.

Part of me dreams of making her pay for everything she put us through for the last four years. I want to punish her for the pain and hurt that she's caused. I dream of making her beg for forgiveness, to spend a lifetime earning it. But that's too dangerous. The best I can hope for at this point is answers. And then I will walk away. I'm not a fucking masochist; I won't willingly put myself through that hell again.

With that final sentiment held firmly in my mind, I take a deep breath and force myself to cool down. Calmer, I pick up my phone once again and set to finding flights for Ace, Thorn and myself. Once done, I book us into a hotel. I don't fancy crashing on the couch of some fresher like Rebel seems to be doing. And I certainly won't be in any of their beds. Since...I don't even want to think her name...my bed has been empty. I go elsewhere to find my release. I know Ace has been virtually celibate. Thorn seems to have gone the other way, turning into a total man whore; acting as if he can fuck the pain of losing her away. And I have no idea what Rebel does. I know Thorn drags him out most nights as a wingman, but I never hear Rebel boasting about conquests the way Thorn does. I expect he's like me, somewhere in the middle between Thorn and Ace's behaviours.

I quickly rattle off a group text to everyone with the morning's flight times and details, and then throw some stuff in a carry on bag. Reb had moaned about the cold wet weather so I pack layers and a jacket. I think we'll only be gone a few days at most, so it's not like I need much. Done, I set my alarm and head to bed, wondering why Rebel waited until it was so late to call us.

Somehow I manage to sleep through my alarm the next morning. It's unlike me. I blame this trip, and Rebel's call, for making me toss and turn all night. No matter how much I didn't want to think of her, she ended up filling my dreams all night long. I sigh, exhausted, and stumble around my flat in more of a hurry than I like.

I meet Thorn and Ace at the airport. I blink in horror as Thorn tries to extract himself from his...date? I'm being polite, it was his lay for the night and I highly doubt he took her out first. I can't help but stare at their exchange. She looks a mess; in last night's clothes which may have been well-suited to whatever seedy club he picked her up in, but here as we wait to go into the first class lounge, they just look tawdry

and cheap. She stands out like a neon sign, and not in a good way. I'm getting impatient, tapping my foot, when he finally manages to break free. Without a backwards glance he storms past Ace and me into the lounge, and we quickly follow.

"Why the hell did you bring her here?" I demand once I join him in the lounge. The three of us are the only ones in here. I guess there's not much call for first class tickets on an internal flight.

"I couldn't get rid of her! Believe me I tried. Last night I had no idea that she'd turn out to be a stage-five clinger. I had to tell her the flight was fully booked because she wanted to come with us!" I stare at him in total disbelief. How he can go from having a girl like Raven, to one night stands with chicks like that is absolutely beyond me. I shake my head at him and get myself a drink from the liquor cabinet.

"Bit early to be drinking isn't it?" Thorn smirks at me.

"Fuck off." I snap. Ace has remained silent throughout the whole exchange and I study him closely, trying to gauge if he's alright. Whilst there's no denying that Rebel is still head over heels crazy for Raven, Ace has always been quiet on the matter since the day we decided to stop searching for her. I know that he was in love with her - probably still is - and I can't help but wonder where his head is at right now.

I sigh and take a sip of my drink. It's tough being the leader of the group. I'm responsible for all the organisation and practicalities. I feel a heavy weight of responsibility to make sure that my brothers are alright and to check in on them. Ace is difficult to read, but I know he must be anxious about this trip. Thorn is a fucking mess. I'm actually worried about him. Rebel causes me so much stress that I get migraines. And here I am, not knowing how I feel about the whole thing.

Thankfully, I don't have to sit and examine my feelings for too long, as we're called to our flight. As soon as I slip into place and fasten my seatbelt, my lids flutter closed.

When they next open it's because Ace is gently tapping my arm and telling me we've just touched down. I shake off my

sleep and glance at Thorn. He's half-cut. Fucking great. Why couldn't he find anything else to do during our short flight except hit the free drinks trolley? As we disembark, I take that back, noticing several of the crew pass him their numbers. I guess he did find several things - or women - to do during the flight. I pinch the bridge of my nose for a moment to calm myself and then rub a hand quickly over my jaw. For fucks' sake. It's like having an unruly dog. I try to keep him on a leash but it doesn't make the blindest bit of difference. Like a dog, he'll hump anything that moves.

Thankfully we cleared the airport fairly quickly, and Rebel is waiting for us in his new Land Rover in the pick-up zone outside. I slide into the front passenger seat, fold my arms and blink expectantly at Rebel. He waits until we're out of the airport grounds before speaking.

"I'm glad you guys came. You won't regret it."

"Where have I heard that before?" Thorn grumbles, and I agree. We've been here too many times to count now. Ace says nothing, just stares out of the window at the scenery for a moment.

"Huh." He sighs.

"What?" I turn to look at him frowning out of the window. "Disappointed." He grunts.

"Why?"

"Expected more green."

"Oh," Rebel says. "Well, Edinburgh is a city. And the airport isn't too far out of town so it's not that green. Like any other city I guess, just older. You'll like The Mile, I think. I guess if you want to see green we could take a trip to the highlands."

"Hang on," I interject. "We're not here for a sightseeing holiday. And we're not here indefinitely. You have something to show us." I point out.

"Yeah and when you realise that this is the real deal this time, you're not going to want to leave."

“I’m only here - if you’re right this time - for answers. And then I’m gone. The past needs to be laid to rest. Besides, she might not even want to see us. She might have a boyfriend and a whole new life.”

“She doesn’t. Well, she does, but he’s a total douche and she’s going to end it with him.”

“How do you know all this?”

“You said to get proof. I spotted her, tracked her down, got her class schedule, spoke to one of her teachers, stalked her boyfriend, followed them on their date and saw when he pissed her off and she stormed out of there. All without being seen.”

He grins, like a fucking canary winning a medal, and I scowl at him. I have to admit, I’m pretty impressed though. He’s only been here since the weekend.

“How’s your cousin settling in?” I ask to change the subject. “Elena? She’s fine. She’s staying on campus this year so the house I bought for her and her friends was a bit of a waste, but I can always rent it out for the year or just keep it empty till she needs a place next year. Whatever.” He shrugs but then throws a fierce glare at Thorn in the rear-view mirror. “Don’t even think about fucking her.”

“What about her friends?”

“They’re old enough to consent. Just use a condom for Christ’s sake. The last thing I need is Elena bitching me out cause you gave her friends an STD.”

“That happened ONE time. And it was a false alarm, it wasn’t even me.” Thorn insists.

“You want me to take you to the hotel, or do you want to stay at the house? It’s fully furnished and set up.”

“I’ve booked a hotel. I thought the house would be full of freshers.”

“Ok. It’s no bother. Elena asked if we could go out with her and her friends tonight. I figured that would be okay. I

could drop you at the hotel, we could do a little sightseeing, grab some food and then hit the clubs with them.”

“What about the other thing?” I frown. “What other thing?”

“The reason you dragged us up here, moron.”

“Oh yeah, that. I mean her. Well, we can do a bit of stalking on campus tomorrow. I still don’t know which dorm she’s in but it shouldn’t be too hard to find out. We might just need to scope things out for a couple of days and then decide the best plan of action for approaching her.”

“Fine.” I still don’t think it’s going to be her, but I have to face facts: Rebel’s whole countenance is different this time. He’s excited, I can see, but he’s also calm. In the past he’d been almost manic with hope and desperation that whoever he had caught a glimpse of, was her. Now he seems sure. Self-assured. But not smug. Dread swirls in the pit of my stomach. I’m not ready for it to actually be her.

I have to force myself to take a deep breath to calm down. I tell myself that it’s settled, one way or another, I know exactly when I will see this woman. I can relax. I have tonight and a couple of days. I can enjoy myself and push her from my mind until then. Easier said than done, but I’m determined to get at least one good experience out of this trip. Whatever the morning holds, it can wait.

Charlotte's Diary

2 weeks post-blaze

Baxter Branson has been infuriatingly annoying. Everywhere I go, he's there. He seems to have made it his personal mission this summer to wind me up. I can't escape him! He keeps appearing and dragging me off to do 'fun' activities with him, refusing to take no for an answer. Trying to duck and dodge him is exhausting, and proving futile!

Cordelia is as bad; she keeps encouraging him. I feel like they're plotting against me. They're certainly ganging up on me. Is this a set-up? Oh dear god, I hope Cordelia isn't thinking that Baxter could be a solution to my baby-daddy problem! The thought makes me want to vomit and laugh in equal parts.

Why don't they understand that I just want to be left alone?

Cordelia should know better at least! She's the only one who knows what I'm going through. I don't know what she hopes to achieve by constantly thrusting me into the path of Baxter Branson. I refuse to seriously consider that she has romantic aspirations for the two of us...

Whatever it is, it can't be good.



CHAPTER FOUR

Ace

I'm nervous about seeing Raven again. The guys are a mess. I guess in our own individual ways, we all are. I don't know who to be most concerned about. I'm not buying Jax's indifference or Thorn's anger. Rebel's desperation I can relate to though. The secrets that I've been keeping have been driving me crazy. I may have watched her walk away, but I never truly let her go.

I've spent so long wondering where she went, how she is, what she's doing now...I think about that final meeting at the airport all the time. Did she have the baby? Was it a boy or a girl? What would they be like now? Was Baxter really the father and she just denied it to stop me from killing him?

Thinking of that, of course, brings on the worry. I'm worried about what will happen when the truth comes to light. Which it inevitably will; it always does. What will happen when my brothers find out that I not only kept things from them, but that I lied about finding her at the airport that day in October four years ago? I know that they'll feel the sting of my betrayal as sharply as I felt the loss of her leaving.

I need to get out of my head. It's day two on campus and we've not seen much of her so far. Glances here and there. Flashes of that long dark blue-black hair. I swear I thought I heard her laugh yesterday, but it might just be shadows of the past haunting me. It's like she appears and disappears at will; vanishing without a trace.

Rebel assures us that we'll see her on campus today; he plans to stake out her Literature class. He wants to follow her afterwards to discover where she lives. So far all our on-campus digging hasn't been fruitful. No one seems to have considered the possibility that she might not be living on campus, but I don't know how to go about suggesting this, so I keep quiet.

We all traipse across campus after Rebel as he leads us to the Literature building. I'm surprised, because I always

thought Raven was on track to becoming the doctor that her family wanted her to be, but I guess a lot can happen - can change - in four years. Besides, she always had a passion for Literature anyway, so I'm glad she's following her dream.

Rebel points to the room she's supposed to be in, and one by one we take turns peering through the small glass window in the door to try and catch a definitive look at her. I patiently wait my turn while my nerves jiggle and bounce. The guys grumble about not being able to see her clearly, Thorn moans that we should just confront her directly. I'm not sure if he means when she comes out of class, or storming in there and causing a scene. Either way, Rebel calms him down. Now I know the world has gone crazy, and she must really be real, if Rebel is the voice of reason.

When it's finally my turn to look, I approach the window slowly. I'm eager to finally see her of course, but I'm nervous too. Trepidation, cold and sickly, slithers down my back as I peer through the small square glass and wait with bated breath to see if it's really her...

It is.

Of course it is.

My shoulders sag with relief as hope, triumph, excitement somersaults through my veins. My heart leaps and races, and I can't help the smile that stretches across my face.

"Oh man, did she turn around?" I hear Thorn ask. To me it sounds like he's far away, in a tunnel or underwater, and I'm only half aware of his presence. No, I'm captivated by Raven. She's looked up from her notebook and is laughing at something the professor has just said. She's beautiful. Exactly how I remember her. Better in fact.

I'm quickly shouldered out of the way by Thorn. "Kreten¹," I grumble at him under my breath as I begrudgingly move away. He pays me no mind though. "Kurac²," it makes me feel better at least. And then we wait. The guys take it in turns to stare at her through the window, each demanding their turn and keeping time on the others. Yeah, I'm not buying Thorn and Jax's attitude at all.

They've got it as bad as the rest of us.

Luckily, Rebel warns us before the bell goes, so we're able to move further down the corridor, deeper into the building and away from the door. It prevents the risk of being seen, as the students file out. Somewhere during the waiting game, it was agreed that we wouldn't ambush her, we'd simply follow at a distance to see where she keeps vanishing to.

I thought following Raven would be hard because she'd rush off-campus, jump into her car and go tearing off. I figured it would be difficult to keep up. But that's not the case at all. No, it's a challenge to follow her because she doesn't jump in a car, and four tall, large guys trying to be quiet and inconspicuous is suspicious, at best.

Luckily, Jax is pretty good at following people, so he takes the lead and we follow him. At one point Thorn whines loudly about how far we're having to walk and I worry that she might hear him, but a swift punch in the gut from Rebel has him keeping quiet. Ish. He has a point though. We walk a long-ass way. Well over a mile - maybe even two - and as we go we see the less shiny, touristy parts of Edinburgh. I don't mean to be rude, but some parts look...rough. Downright dangerous in fact.

"Ne maram tega³," I mutter under my breath. I don't like this at all.

We've followed Raven to a small block of flats in a seedy, run-down part of town. They've definitely seen better days. The building needs tearing down before it falls down. I wonder why she's come here? Visiting someone perhaps?

We watch from across the street as she approaches the small cluster of ground floor doors, stops to remove a key from her bag, and then lets herself into the first door on the left. Not visiting then; not if she has a key to let herself in. I frown. I can't figure this out. Surely she should be living on campus? Or at the very least, close to campus. And why would she be in a grotty little flat in a dingy part of town? She wasn't a stranger to money at school.

I glance at my brothers and see the same confusion etched on their faces.

“Well?” I ask. “Weird,” Rebel mutters. “Really weird.”

“It’s strange alright.” Thorn adds. “This place is a dump.” He’s not wrong there.

“What do we do now?” I look to Jax for answers. It’s probably stupid how I still view him as the leader of our group, but he’s had my back since day one and it’s easy to defer to him when it comes to decision making. “Shall we knock?” I add.

“No,” Jax replies, thinking. He pauses for a moment before continuing. “If we knock now, she’ll know we followed her.”

“What should we do then?” Thorn asks.

“You guys head home. I’m going to wait a while, check to see if she goes out again or if she lives here. If this is where she’s staying, we can come back tomorrow to speak to her when there’s more time.”

It sounds like a pretty good plan to me, and the others agree, so we say our goodbyes to Jax and head off back towards campus, Thorn bitching about the walk every step of the way. Eventually Rebel crumbles and gives in to his whining, calling us an Uber to take us to where the car is parked.

On the drive back to the hotel, I can’t help but wonder what tomorrow will have in store. And once again, my stomach is in knots and I’m back to worrying.

Charlotte's Diary

4 weeks post-blaze

Okay, so I will - begrudgingly - admit, here and only here, that Baxter is not so bad. He's certainly fine for a good time, though I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him with anything of real importance. But he has been good to me the last couple of weeks. To begin with he strolled in as cocky and as lecherous as he was before, but that soon changed. Once I'd spurned his advances for the fourth or fifth time - threatening to stab his other hand or something further south this time - he backed off and seemed to understand that he was in the 'friend zone'. Not that we were friends, or anything. I just needed to make it clear to him that it was never gonna happen. Ever.

He's been perseverant, for sure though. He quickly changed tack and decided he'd spend his summer trying to annoy me instead of bed me.

Only, he wasn't that annoying...and he kept suggesting we do things that sounded really cool.

Once I stopped resisting and trying to escape from him, giving in and just going with the flow, I realised that he's a really good distraction.

Every morning, without fail, he's arrived at my door with breakfast and a picnic for later. He invited himself in and ate with me on the terrace overlooking the ocean, then dragged me out for the day on various adventures. Yesterday's snorkelling and hand-feeding sea turtles may have been my favourite yet.

I would never admit it, but I look forward to him showing up each morning. I wonder what he'll have planned for us next. And although we don't talk about the deep stuff, there's the beginning of a tentative bond forming. He's not a friend... more a potential ally? I don't know.

What I do know is that I was wrong. About so many things...but most of all, I was wrong about wanting to be left

alone.

From the moment Baxter leaves me, until the moment he arrives the next morning, I'm crippled by loneliness, confusion, doubts...the list - like the guilt - is never ending.



CHAPTER FIVE

Charlotte

I'm rushing around like always, running late for class, when the doorbell ringing takes me by surprise. No one ever calls round here unannounced, so that's one surprising thing, but the other thing to shock me is that there's actually an electronic appliance in this flat that works. Huh, who knew, I muse. When the sharp sound shrills again I mutter under my breath "hold on, hold on, impatient asshole."

As I unlock the door and throw it open I have a moment of panic - too late - that it might be bailiffs at the door. Shit! I vowed to myself that if it wasn't them this time, I'd definitely be more careful about who I opened my door to from now on. We can't afford to lose what little we have, just for the sake of a couple of missed payments on a bill or two...okay all of the bills, but I get paid in a few days and I'm sure I've made enough this month to cover everything and feed Phoenix. When faced with a choice between bills and feeding Phoenix? Phoenix will always come first.

"Raven?" One of the voices of my past, one that haunts my every waking moment, calls out the name that I no longer go by. I try to react, retreat inside, but as fast as lightning a hand shoots out and grabs the door before I can slam it closed. Damn, my reaction was a dead giveaway. I should have pretended they had the wrong person. But I panicked and it is too late now. A foot follows the hand, completely barring my way. I can't get out of the flat and I can't shut the person out.

I sag in defeat and let the door swing open. I'm shocked to find four pairs of feet on my doorstep. Gulping nervously, I slowly look up. The sight before me almost stops my heart and a small strangled sound escapes from my throat.

"Oh my god Raven, it is you!"

"We've been searching for you, forever."

"Where have you been?"

"What happened?"

“Where did you go?”

“Why did you run?”

“Were you hurt in the fire?”

“How did you get out?”

The cacophony of their questions being fired at me like bullets makes my head spin, and I sway on my feet. I hold a hand up in defence, like I can stop their verbal attack of concern with my bare hands, and beg them to stop. Instantly they quiet.

“One question at a time please.” I insist.

“Can we come in?” Jax asks in a cool, cordial tone. For a split second I hesitate. Is there any way out of this?

I nod, because let’s face it, there’s no getting out of this. I step back and let them into my tiny two bedroomed flat. They file into the open living space and then stand awkwardly when they realise there’s nowhere for them to go.

“Can I get you guys a drink? I don’t have much I’m afraid, I need to go to the shops...” I trail off.

“No thank you. We just came here for answers.”

I turn to face them but don’t speak. There’s nothing I can think of to say.

“Who are you? And no bullshit.” Jax fixes me with his firmest stare, one that would have had me wilting back in school. Who am I kidding? It has me trembling even now. Before I can answer him - as if I’d even know how to - he continues. “I’ve spent years trying to track you down - we all have - and Cordelia Deighton isn’t listed as having a granddaughter. Raven Deighton doesn’t exist. I could barely find reference to Cordelia’s one and only daughter. It’s like she died or vanished or something.”

My heart stops. Dread, ice-cold and bitter, fills me from top to toe. My stomach drops, churns, threatens to spill. I freeze, and that burning hot flight-or-fight tingle starts at the base of my neck. The urge to run is overwhelmingly strong,

panic reaching its fingers around my throat and threatening to choke.

I swallow my fear down, sigh...It's time to tell them the truth. But it won't be the whole truth and nothing but the truth. There's too much at stake for that.

"I am Cordelia Deighton's granddaughter, but my name isn't Raven Deighton." I pause and glance at the four men in front of me. All at once they're home and complete strangers to me. How is that possible? They've clearly come for answers and I owe them that. Their expressions range from pained, to completely closed-off.

I take a deep breath and continue, "You won't find any trace of me, or my family, because Cordelia's daughter, my mother, ran away from home at the age of fourteen. Cordelia didn't approve of her boyfriend and so they ran away to be together."

"At fourteen?" Rebel asks and I nod. "Fuck. That's crazy." He gives a low whistle.

"Why didn't your mum go back when the relationship crashed and burned?" Thorn asks.

"Because it didn't. Even to this day they're still together. Just about," I add, thinking about how my sister's death has torn their love apart. "They lied about their age and ran away to Scotland because you can get married at sixteen there. They married and found jobs, and somehow made a life for themselves. At nineteen she found herself pregnant with twins, and it was only once my sister and I were born that she reached out to Cordelia."

"Wait, you have a twin?"

"Had. She died."

"Shit, I'm sorry."

"So how did you go from being Cordelia's estranged granddaughter, to using her namesake and attending one of the most prestigious schools in the country?" Jax presses me with a scowl and I can see his impatience. He won't let it go until he has all the answers he desires.

“Don’t freak out,” I warn them and watch as they quickly exchange glances. Some things never change. The familiarity of it almost makes me smile. Almost. I’m too anxious for that. “Growing up, my sister and I occasionally saw Cordelia, but it was mostly a long-distance relationship. Our parents claimed that they hated her world - the world of wealth and privilege I guess, although they certainly enjoyed the perks of it themselves - and had wanted to protect us. However Cordelia set trust funds aside for us and, probably to piss my mum off, made it so that we could access them early.”

“I don’t understand what that has to do with...”

“If you’d quit interrupting I’d tell you!” I snap. Chastised, Thorn drops his head. Rebel smirks at him and mutters something under his breath, but I let it slide.

“My sister used her money to attend a really good private school, wanting to get the best education she could. I didn’t. I don’t believe in paying for a perceived-to-be-better education. I find the idea abhorrent.” I pause to breathe and glower at Rebel who’s about to interrupt. “Yes, I know I paid for my education at West Prep. Shut up.” He smirks and my heart flip-flops. Damn.

“After my sister died, Cordelia encouraged me to follow in her footsteps and attend West Prep...so I did.” I finish lamely. Once again they explode with questions.

“Why?”

“Wait, did your sister go to West Prep too? Or did your grandmother just want you to go to any private school?”

“Why did you give in so easily?”

“Is that it?” Jax scoffs. “Because there are really big holes in that story and you still didn’t tell us who you are.” He scowls at me.

“My sister went to West Prep, specifically, so I chose there too. I’ll get to explaining why in just a moment.”

I take a huge fortifying breath, knowing that when I release it the shit will well and truly hit the fan.

“My real name is Charlotte Raven...Mclintock.”

As expected, instant recognition dawns on Jax’s face. Ace’s too, a moment later. Rebel and Thorn look confused, scratching their heads muttering “Mclintock...Mclintock...?” under their breath like they’re trying to place the name.

“Lizzie.” Jax supplies for them in a flat tone and their regard snaps to me in total disbelief. I can see the shocked question in their eyes and when I give an almost imperceptible nod to confirm it, they slump forward in defeat.

“What the actual...” Thorn starts.

“Fuuuuuuuuck!” Rebel finishes.

I say nothing, letting the revelation sink in for a moment. “Explain.” Jax’s voice is tight with anger.

“Someone killed my sister. Cordelia helped me get into the school so that I could figure out who did it, and to...to bring them down.”

The shock that registers on their faces would almost be comical if it weren’t for the subject matter.

“The fire?” Jax demands.

“Me.” My voice is low, barely audible and I don’t look them in the eyes. That sharp twisting pain in my gut that I get whenever I think of that night starts up again.

“People got hurt. WE got hurt in that fire. Someone almost died.” I can’t handle the accusation in his tone and so I respond how I always do when cornered and guilty; with attitude.

“Someone did die,” I blaze at them defiantly. “My sister... I have no regrets.” That last statement is a lie. I have regrets. Huge ones that either keep me up at night or wake me screaming from my nightmares, but I’m not about to tell them that. I will not back down or show them weakness.

“We thought Michael...” Thorn begins.

“No.” My response is emphatic.

“If someone hurts the people you love...” Rebel whispers.

“Burn them all to the ground.” I finish quietly. He remembers. I desperately want to look at him to see what he’s thinking, but I don’t dare. I hope and I pray that he gets it; that he understands. Please let someone understand.

“So what happened to Michael then?” Jax cuts over us. His attitude is pissing me off, rubbing me up the wrong way, and I want to stun him into silence.

“I killed him.”

Their collective sharp intakes of breath feel like thousands of knives in my gut. Their shock and horror that I could really be so casual and callous describing what I did hurts me. Do they really think I’m like that? There’s several moments of silence as they process. I can’t meet their gaze but I can look up enough to see the horror and revulsion on their faces.

“Why?” Ace whispers. It’s the first time he’s spoken and his quiet question makes me want to weep in relief. He gets it; he knows I wouldn’t set that fire and toss a body off a cliff without reason.

“Because he raped and murdered my sister. He shoved her pregnant body off a cliff to hide his dirty secret. And he tried to do the same to me. He just wasn’t expecting me to fight back.” My eyes quickly flit to Ace’s and I swear I see a flash of pride there.

“Pregnant? Rape?” Thorn’s face pales. “He tried to...hurt you?”

“How do we know this is true?” Jax demands, twisting the knife in my gut a little more. I forgot that they were all friends with Michael once. I never got to the bottom of the story of why it ended.

“I wouldn’t lie about this. Not about Lizzie. I recorded him confessing and I still have the tape. You can listen to it if you want, but I’ll warn you now, it isn’t pretty, and I can’t go through that again so I’ll have to step out while you do.” I make a move towards my bedroom to retrieve the tape but Ace’s hand shoots out and stops me. Where his skin makes contact with mine, my skin comes alive. Electricity crackles

between us making those fine hairs stand on end, and I gasp quietly. Ace drops my wrist as if burnt and that hurts too.

“Stay where you are,” Jax commands and damn him, but I do. I freeze right where I am and slowly turn to face him. “You can get that later. I still have questions first.”

I gulp but nod, knowing I owe them this much at least. I owe them the truth where Lizzie is concerned. Thank fuck they’ve not asked any questions about Phoenix. I will lie through my teeth to protect her. She’s one secret I will not be giving up today. Or ever. My eyes flit once again to Ace, trying to decipher if he kept my secret. His face gives nothing away.

Exhausted, I take a seat at the small shabby wooden dining table that seats two and motion for the guys to find their own seats. Jax immediately takes the floral wingback chair, and Ace takes the other rickety dining chair close to me, leaving Thorn and Rebel to squeeze onto the dusty-pink velvet moth-eaten sofa. They look ridiculous squeezed on it but my stomach is in too many knots for me to smile or make a joke. Yeah, matching decor hasn’t been my priority lately. Raising Phoenix, keeping a roof over our heads and trying to complete my degree kind of took priority.

“What do you want to know?” I ask Jax.

“What was your agenda in coming to West Prep?”

“To destroy anyone who was involved in my sister’s bullying and death.”

“Bullying?” Thorn interjects.

“Yes you idiot. Her bullying. She was tortured at that stupid school and yet somehow you four magic ‘princes’ who ruled the place were completely oblivious to the shit Tilly and her cronies put her through,” I burst out, my anger getting the better of me once again. I’d done so well over the last few years to be calmer and to keep my temper under wraps, but within an hour of being in these guys’ company I felt like a hot headed eighteen year old all over again.

Time and distance gave me the space I needed to think things through logically. They were always cagey where Lizzie's story was concerned, and once I was no longer infatuated with them, I was able to deduce that they never told me the whole story. Yeah, the rulers of the school didn't know their girlfriend was being bullied? Bullshit. I'm not buying it. I just regret not being more clear-headed to question it back then.

"Tilly?"

"Are you just going to repeat everything I say in that dazed and confused tone, you moron?" I snap.

"Ouch, jeez, give me a break Raven. You're dropping bombs left, right and centre today." Thorn grumbles at me, pouting. Damn if it doesn't still look cute on his unchanged baby face though.

"Charlotte. I don't go by Raven anymore." I tell him firmly. "Why not?"

"Let's not get off track." I hastily supply. I can't explain that either; that it's too painful of a reminder of my time spent with them. Being Raven was the one time I ever felt like myself, when I liked who I was...Murderer aside that is. Leaving the guys behind meant leaving Raven behind. Confused and heartbroken all I could do was return to that lost person I was before; Charlotte with the confused identity. It matched my state of mind well.

"Because it probably serves as a harsh reminder of what she did. What she is. A killer. A cold blooded murderer." Jax's voice is so cold, so distant, that I could be talking to a total stranger. It makes something inside of me snap.

I jump to my feet and storm from the open plan living space into one of the three doors to the left.

In my bedroom I don't bother to turn on the light, knowing I can find what I'm searching for in the dark. I bend down and pull the wooden box from under the bed before returning back out to the boys and shutting the door behind me. I carry the wooden box that's about the size of a shoe box over to the

scuffed table and place it down gently. I may have stormed off to get it in a mood, but this box is precious to me so I handle it with care. I slip the lid off and remove the two journals that lay on the top, placing them to one side.

Underneath there are various letters and pieces of paper folded up. There are a couple of photographs of Lizzie and I, and even one of me with the guys which I hastily push aside. At the bottom of the box is the tape recorder. I reach for it and pull it out. Turning the volume up I press play and place it on the table. There's a moment of silence and then I hear my own voice gently call "Hey" before the voice of the monster from my nightmares cuts in with, "Is it done?"

That's all it takes, the three most innocent little words that he said during our whole exchange, and my gut is violently protesting. I jump to my feet and race to the bathroom door beside my bedroom, only just making it in time to spill the contents of my stomach into the toilet. I can still hear the recording playing in the background but I can't make out the words. I don't need to, that night is forever ingrained in my memory. I relive it every single night. I know it word-perfect.

I begin to sweat and shake uncontrollably as I sink back onto my ass and hug my knees to my chest. A noise in the doorway has me looking up and I'm not surprised to see that it's Ace standing in the doorway. I wave him away, not wanting to be seen like this, but he steps into the minute space and closes the door behind him. I expect this to make me feel worse, like all the air has suddenly been sucked from the room at his intrusion, but it doesn't. He approaches me in one step - the bathroom is that small - and somehow finds the room to sink down beside me.

"Princess..." He begins and it breaks me. No one has called me that since that night and I sob, loud heart wrenching sobs that wrack my whole body. Instantly Ace slides his arms around me and pulls me into his lap. I cry like my heart is breaking - because in so many ways it is - and he just holds me and strokes my hair to comfort me. He doesn't tell me to shush or try to stop me, just lets me pour out the tears of pain and regret that I've kept bottled up inside me. It should be

cathartic, but by the time my tears dry up, I'm spent. I can't face going back out there to go another round against Jax.

Thankfully I don't have to. With difficulty, but surprising dexterity, Ace gets to his feet in the tiny space all the while still holding me in his arms. I'm too tired to protest. He carries me back out to the dining table and sits with me in his lap. I worry about the ability of the rickety old third-hand chairs to hold our combined weight, but it feels so good to be held again, to be taken care of, that I don't say anything.

Thankfully the recording has stopped. Unfortunately the silence left behind in its wake is deafening.

"What..."

"No." Ace cuts off whatever question Jax was going to throw at me and I'm so grateful to him that tears prick my vision again. "Enough. Leave."

"Ace..." Thorn tries to reason but he's having none of it. "Out. Now."

"It's okay, it's fine Aljaž." I placate him with a hand on his chest. The tingles of electricity start up again but this time he doesn't pull away from me. I sigh and look at the guys. "I'll answer whatever questions you have but then you have to leave." My voice sounds so broken and dejected that Thorn offers to come back tomorrow. I shake my head and tell them I need to do this now, all in one go, like ripping off a plaster.

"Baby, are you okay? Did he hurt you?" Rebel's low growl, full of worry and concern, melts my heart. The roughest and gruffest of the boys, he was always secretly the softest and most protective of me. He was the first of the boys that I truly fell for. He is the one I am reminded of almost every single day when I deal with Phoenix's sass.

"I'm okay, he didn't hurt me. Not like he wanted to." My right hand automatically reaches over to rub the scar on my wrist and, although I don't even notice I'm doing it, Rebel's keen eye tracks the movement. In an instant he's on his feet and grabbing my left hand, turning my wrist over so that he

can examine the long smooth scar that runs from my wrist to my elbow that was made by Michael's knife in our scuffle.

"Son of a bitch...I'll kill him." He growls. "You can't, Reb," I tell him softly.

"I want to."

"I know. But he can't hurt anyone else...Lizzie wasn't the only one."

"Was that true...about Tilly....?" He can't even say it. I don't blame him. I couldn't either for a long time.

"As far as I know, yeah."

"Then I'll fucking kill her instead." His voice is murderous and I believe him.

I also know there's no talking him down while he's like this, so I say nothing. Instead, I begin to relax a tiny bit as he strokes his thumb absentmindedly over my scar. It's funny because I'd always considered the tissue there to be dull, devoid of feeling, but with Rebel's thumb lightly skirting over it, it feels more alive and sensitive than any other part of me.

Suddenly the silence is broken by the alarm on my phone going off.

"Shit is that the time?" I jerk out of Rebel's hold and leap up from Ace's lap. "Guys, I have to go, you have to leave. We'll have to continue this another day." I fly round the room grabbing my keys and bag, pulling on shoes and a jacket. "But don't come here unannounced," I hastily add, stopping only to scribble my number on a scrap of paper. Turns out it's ripped from the bottom of a final demand bill. Shit. I need to deal with that when I get back too. "Here's my number." I thrust the paper at Ace. Right now, he's the only one I trust. "Call me. Let yourselves out."

With that I rush out of the door, leaving it wide open behind me and race off towards the childminder's house to collect Phoenix. I was supposed to be in class today but obviously the princes' arrival got me sidetracked. God I needed to stop thinking of them as princes; it was silly and juvenile, even if that's what they were to me in my mind. I

remind myself that years have passed and none of us are the same people anymore.

I can't believe that with all my confessing, I didn't even think to ask them how they found me. I thought seeing them, revealing some of the secrets of the past, would feel like a weight being lifted off my shoulders, but it doesn't. If anything, I feel worse, because now I'm burdened with the task of remembering which truths I've revealed and which - like Phoenix - I need to remain hidden.

Charlotte's Diary

29/08/19

I can't believe I've been on the island for nearly ten weeks already. The days have flown by in a whirlwind of fun adventures with Baxter.

We're definitely becoming closer. And he's different. I'm not naive enough to think he's a reformed character - Rebel told me some horror stories about him - but I've certainly only witnessed him on his best behaviour around me. Maybe he saves his debauchery for the evenings when he's dropped me home?

I shouldn't care. I don't care.

Anyway, I've been avoiding Cordelia like the plague, not wanting to discuss the situation. Any of my situations. Like, what am I going to do when we leave? Or what am I going to do about the life growing inside of me?

I think I'm about 13 or so weeks gone, but I'm really not sure.

I've always been hopeless at keeping track of my periods and stuff. I have a distinct little bump appearing, which I won't be able to hide for much longer.

Not that it matters that much. Out here on this island there's no one much to care. Except...

Well, I don't want to have to answer questions from Baxter.

Since the moment we became more than enemies, he's hounded me for my story. Why am I on the island? Why am I so sad all of the time? What am I hiding? What am I doing in the autumn?

It's overwhelming.

He'd have a field day with this. No. Much better to keep it hidden as long as possible, and when it's no longer possible... well, sadly, that'll mean it's time to leave.

The thought makes me feel...sad?

Why would the thought of not seeing Baxter everyday make me sad?

Crazy pregnancy hormones!



CHAPTER SIX

Thorn

I sip my beer, lost in my thoughts and oblivious to the conversation going on around me. Tuning in for a moment, I realise that no progress has been made, so I tune back out.

I don't know how I feel about seeing Raven. I've spent so long forcing myself to hate her, that I didn't want to see her today. I didn't even want to get on that flight and come up here. I guess that's why I got pissed and fucked the cabin crew. The entire cabin crew. Jesus. Probably not my best idea. It doesn't work anyway - fucking away the pain - each and every lousy lay just serves as a harsh reminder of what I lost when she left. Not just amazing sex either.

Then today she looked amazing, and it wasn't fair. She doesn't deserve to look so good after what she put me through. When she told us her story and didn't even apologise - even went as far as to say she had no regrets - I wanted to...I don't know what I wanted to do. They hurt, her words, but they angered me too. At the very least, I wanted her to be sorry for leaving, vanishing without a word, putting us all through absolute hell. But she wasn't sorry. It made my blood boil and my stomach churn. Even now, reliving it, my hands curl to painfully tight fists.

Then when she said that Michael had tried to hurt her, I saw red. I wanted to cause him so much pain, even though he's dead, and that surprised me. Why would I care, if I hate her? I'm so confused right now. The only thing that seems to be helping is the alcohol. Only it's not helping this time. Usually it makes me forget. Today it's making me think. Obsess. I hate it.

"Yo! Earth to Thorn. Bro!" I blink rapidly and realise that my three best friends, my brothers, are all staring at me as if waiting for my input.

"Huh?" My brow creases in confusion. Smooth. I'm an idiot.

Maybe I should sober up.

“Look, why don’t you stop drinking, snap out of it, and pay attention? We’re trying to figure out what to do next.” Rebel snaps at me.

“I don’t give a shit,” I lie. Even I can tell I sound petulant and sulky as shit. Moron.

“I came, I saw, I got answers...well, some answers.” Jax cuts in. “I’ll go back in a few days and get the rest of the answers that I need, then I’m out of here.”

I nod, like I too share Jax’s sentiment, but it’s all an act. Now that I’ve seen her again I’m not sure I can walk away. How pathetic is that? She’s like this colossal magnetic pull that I can’t resist, no matter how much I want to. I hate myself for being so weak that I want to stick and sniff around the girl who remorselessly ripped my heart out. Maybe Jax isn’t the only kinky one, maybe I’m a masochist.

“Don’t be stupid! You can’t leave, not when we’ve just found her.” Rebel and Jax are in a heated argument. I glance over at Ace and he just looks miserable. He always had it bad, wore his heart on his sleeve more than the rest of us. I bet the poor bugger is completely messed up by seeing her again. I take pity on him, and wordlessly offer him a sip of my beer, which he takes with a simple nod of thanks. I guess he’s feeling as confused as I am right now.

“Look guys, we have to face facts. She ran from us, and she’s not pleased to see us. She’s not even sorry for what she did. It’s over,” I state, cutting into the bickering and causing silence to fall all around.

“No,” Ace says shaking his head. “No? What do you mean no?”

“Not sorry. Act. Tough guy,” he insists.

“You think Raven saying she’s not sorry and has no regrets is just an act?” I think I understand what Ace is getting at, but I’m not sure I’m buying it.

“Yes.”

“Mate, you’re deluded,” I retort.

“She clearly doesn’t give a shit.” Jax comes to my aid.

“I think Ace is right!” Rebel jumps in. I sigh. Two against two. The romantic and the desperate optimist, versus the liar and the heartless cynic. We’re getting nowhere.

“Be that as it may, it doesn’t hide the fact that she doesn’t want us here. We should go,” I insist.

“No,” Ace crosses his arms across his chest in stubborn defiance.

“No?”

“Not leaving. See again. More answers.”

“Are you forgetting she just confessed to murder?” Jax hisses through clenched teeth. The bar is relatively quiet but the few punters that there are have all turned to stare at us.

“Keep your voice down,” I snap.

“She didn’t confess to murder. She said she killed him,” Rebel points out.

“Semantics. He was our friend.”

Only, he wasn’t, was he? He hadn’t been our friend for a while. We all knew he was dangerous. Maybe we didn’t realise the extent of his depravity, but we certainly sensed he was dangerous enough to drop his ass years ago.

“Self-defence,” Ace insists. He’d know, he was Raven’s sparring partner, the only one of us who truly knew what she was capable of.

“Some friend,” Rebel scoffs. “Given what he did, I’m glad she killed him before I found out.”

I have to agree with him, though I say nothing. “You can’t believe a word she says!” Jax cries.

“Dude, are you fucking crazy? We all heard him confessing on the tape!” Rebel has a point and Jax shuts up immediately.

“Look, this isn’t getting us anywhere. What do you want to do next?” I ask, exasperated.

“Stay,” Ace states.

“Go back, see her again, get more answers,” Rebel adds.

“Jax?” I watch as our leader after all this time runs a hand over his jaw and lets out a long heavy sigh.

“Fine. I’ll meet with her again. But once I have the answers, I’m done.”

“Me too,” I lie.

Who the hell am I kidding? After one glance I’m already hooked all over again, like an addict that never truly recovers. You’ll always be an addict; you can never risk the temptation of a single hit. And Raven’s my drug of choice. I’m putting myself in temptation’s way; threatening to get burnt all over again.

But I can’t resist.

Charlotte's Diary

14/09/19

I think I felt the baby kick today, for the first time. It was the strangest sensation; like little bubbles or ripples dancing along my insides. Weird, but sort of nice.

When I felt it, I initially thought it was gas, but when I stopped to pay attention to the ongoing sensation, I got excited. It definitely wasn't gas! I wanted to tell someone, to share the moment, to share my joy, but there was no one around.

I couldn't tell Baxter, even if he were there, and with things between Cordelia and I being a little strained, I didn't think it worth going up to the big house to find her and tell her. Besides, I doubt she'd share in my enthusiasm anyway. No one wants to know when you can feel the baby kick, they just want the opportunity to feel it for themselves.

So now it's really real; I have a baby growing inside of me. And I'm equal parts terrified and blown away by that realisation. I mean, obviously I knew I was pregnant before, but this is the first time I've really felt pregnant.

Soon, I'm going to have to sit down and really think about my future. I need a plan. And I'm going to have to involve Cordelia in that plan, because I don't want to be - or do this - alone.

I briefly thought about going home to my parents' house, but I don't think they could cope with the shame of having one dead daughter and the other one knocked up, and single, with zero prospects.

No, I'll stick with Cordelia. She may have been driving me crazy since the day I got here, but it's only because she cares. She's stuck by me through everything and helped me when no one else could, so I know I don't have to worry; she's got my back.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Rebel

I ring the bell with some apprehension. I know as she rushed off, Raven - shit Charlotte - said to not come by unannounced, but I was hoping that because I was on my own she might not mind too much. Oh well, it's too late now, I think as the door starts to unlock. Hopefully she won't slam it in my face.

When the door opens and I don't see anyone, I drop my gaze. Confusion fills me at the pint-sized kid standing in the doorway. Shit, did I get the wrong house? I frown in confusion. I'm pretty sure this is the right one. I'm looking around to check this is the correct block when a voice calls from inside.

“Who's at the door?”

I'm pretty sure it's Raven's - Charlotte's goddamnit - but I just can't fathom why there'd be a kid opening her door. Maybe she's babysitting for a neighbour or something? Yeah, that would make sense.

“Mooooooooom,” the girl drawls with a slight American twang, “it's Rebel!”

Before I can blink in surprise that this kid seems to know who I am, the door is slammed in my face.

What the fuck?

I hear the voices inside as clearly as I had when the door was open. Shit the walls are paper thin in this dump. I can't help but wonder what has happened to...Charlotte...to put her in such a place. Especially as she's Cordelia Deighton's granddaughter. Surely she can spring for nicer digs than this?

“What have I told you about telling lies Phoenix Elizabeth?” I chuckle at Raven's stern voice, telling off - I'm assuming - the little girl. She sounds exactly the same as when she used to rail me out for shit. Believe it or not, I've missed it. Still, it's nice not to be on the receiving end of her sharp tongue, for once.

“But Mooooooom, I’m not lying!” the little girl’s voice insists. Hang on a fucking minute...mom? As in MUM? As in...Raven?

What the actual fuck? That little rugrat is Raven’s kid?

Ah fuck it, that’s too much information to take in whilst still trying to get my head around her name change. I’m going to keep calling her Raven and she’ll just have to lump it.

Mum! Fuck! My head is spinning; I think I’m going to pass out.

The door clicks open again and this time it’s the face I expected to see: Raven’s. She’s so stunning she takes my breath away. She always did. Although I know it’s my brain playing tricks on me, to me she looks the exact same as the last time I saw her.

“Hey?” I say lamely and it comes out as a question. Shit.

“What are you doing here?” she hisses at me, clearly mad. Okay, maybe she was serious about not coming by unannounced.

“Didn’t you get my text?” I hedge.

“Bullshit, you didn’t text.” Of course she calls me out on my bullshit.

“Mumma!” The little sprog’s voice is indignant. “You said a bad word.”

I laugh and that earns me a death glare from Raven, making me laugh harder. Fuck, I’ve missed her so much; every expression, every mood. I want more.

“Sorry, Nix, I was surprised.”

I watch with amusement as the girl, Phoenix, tuts at her mum like she’s not amused and I see my way in. Bending down to speak to her directly, I give her a level stare.

“Hi, Phoenix, can I come in?”

She nibbles her lip in a really cute way like her mum used to absentmindedly do when she couldn’t reach a decision.

Actually, now that I'm down at eye level with her, the similarities between her and her mum are like a punch in the gut. She has beautiful huge green eyes and the same wicked smile. Her skin is paler than I remember Raven's being and she has a veil of long white-blonde hair, where Raven's is black.

Actually, I realise, doing a double take, that she has Lizzie's hair. Phoenix is like the bridge between Raven and Lizzie, showing me what I can't believe I missed before. Whoa.

I realise Phoenix hasn't spoken and has been staring at me as intently as I've been looking at her. "Will you tell me secrets about my mom?"

"Phoenix!" Raven cries.

"Sorry, I mean secrets about my mum. She hates it when I say mom," the little girl is so earnest that I can't help but laugh.

I grin at the little girl and promise to tell her whatever she wants to know. Phoenix gives me a smile that lights up the room and invites me in. I follow her into the open plan living space which looks completely different than the other day. There are toys strewn all over the floor and Phoenix immediately plonks herself down to start colouring. I follow her mum into the kitchen...area of the room. Shit this place is tiny. I'm scared to move in case I break things.

"I'm sorry, Rae, I thought you might not mind if I came round on my own."

She sighs and puts the kettle on, grabbing two mugs from a cupboard overhead. I can't help but watch her. She moves around the tiny space with the grace of a dancer, making me feel even more clumsy and out of place.

"Can I help?" I ask and she eyes me up and down. Fire ignites all along my skin where her scrutiny flickers and I want to kiss her. Without thinking I step towards her but her words stop me in my tracks.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea, Reb.” Her voice is so quiet. I don’t know if she’s talking about me helping or me kissing her. Both are probably a bad idea.

“I love it when you call me Reb. I’ve missed you, Rae.”

“I don’t go by that name any more.” Her voice is so soft I have to strain to hear it. I step closer to her and she backs away. I follow until she’s pressed back against the counter.

“Did you miss me?” I press. I need to know. It’s been torture living without her, but I never gave up hope that I’d find her. I never thought when I did find her that she’d have a kid and a whole new life. Shit, she might even be married by now. My gaze drops down to her left hand and the only ring I see there is the one we gave her. Fuck. Even after all this time she’s still wearing our ring. Pride fills me and I struggle to keep the smile off my face. “What are you smirking at?” she snaps, and I smile wider. “You. You kept our ring. You wear it.” I watch as she brings her left hand up to her chest and protectively cups it like I might try to take it from her. She couldn’t be more wrong. I want it on the proper finger it was bought for.

“How did Phoenix know who I was?” I ask her, stepping back to give her some space. I go to sit on the dining chair and although she yells out “stop!”, it’s too late and I’m already making contact with the wooden seat and crashing through it. I should have known the rickety thing was a piece of shit that wouldn’t hold my weight.

“Fuck!” I yell, totally forgetting that there’s a kid present.

“You said a bad word!” Her little but loud voice calls out from behind me.

“Awwww, shit, yeah I did.”

“And again.” She giggles. It’s a lovely sound.

“Phoenix, Rebel just can’t help himself.” Raven fixes me with a firm stare that has me instantly hard. “But he’s going to try and control his potty mouth, isn’t he?”

“Yes ma’am,” I reply, chastised. I’m not, not at all, but she doesn’t need to know that. The kid is too cute when she

giggles and so I plan to make her laugh as much as possible.

“Phoenix?” I call out, getting to my feet and kicking the broken splintered wood to one side as I turn to her. “I think we’re going to need a swear jar.” Her whole face lights up and she tells me she has just the thing before racing into her room to retrieve it.

“Do you mind? I just figured it might help me if she bleeds me dry, you know I sprinkle that shit everywhere like confetti. Most of the time I don’t even realise I’m using the sentence enhancers.” Raven looks totally bemused by something I’ve said but agrees that I can use a swear jar with Phoenix. Her eyes skirt past me to the mess I’ve left on the floor and I immediately jump in to tell her I’ll replace it. She doesn’t argue with me - which has to be a bloody first I’m sure - and that sort of tells me that life is hard for her. She was never big on charity, but looking round this place, I can see

that she’s desperately in need of some.

The little rugrat races back into the room holding a jar that’s too big for her little hands and an enormous smile on her face. “How much do we owe you?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” her brow creases in concentration and she looks so much like a mini-Raven that I have to hide my laugh behind a cough. “But I heard the S-word slipped in while I was gone.”

“Damn you’ve got the hearing of a bat.”

“Mummy? Is damn a naughty word?”

“Absolutely.”

“Ah for fu-“

“Reb!”

“Okay okay, Jesus-“

“Bad word!”

“No it’s not! It’s a name. I was going to say, Jesus, please look after this child who is going to make me so poor that I have to live on the streets. I wasn’t swearing.” But Jesus is she

sharp. I pull my wallet out of my back pocket and pull out a tenner. I think that'll cover it, so I shove it into her empty jar. The little girl's eyes go wide with wonder. She shakes the jar and then her bottom lip trembles like she's going to cry.

"Shit, what's wrong?" I rush out. Raven is going to fucking hate me if I make her kid cry.

"N-n-naughty word," she sobs as huge fat tears roll down her face. Fuck me but doesn't my heart just clench at the sight.

"Phoenix honey," Raven says getting down to her level and holding her hands in both of hers. "Copy me." She starts to take long slow breaths in and then she lets them out in a noisy whoosh. It takes two breaths before the child joins in but it calms her down and stops her crying. "Now tell me what's wrong," she prompts when Phoenix is finally calm enough to speak.

"The jar doesn't rattle." Her huge green eyes fill up with tears again and I feel like the biggest shit in the world. Clearly, you can't use money to buy over children. I thought she'd be impressed with the higher value note. Obviously not. Before she can get all worked up again, Raven gives Phoenix a quick kiss and grabs her purse.

"Easily rectified baby girl," she tells her, and she drops some coppers into the jar along side my note. The little girl tentatively shakes the jar again and when it jingles satisfactorily her whole face lights up and she races off to play.

"That was amazing," I tell Raven, a little bit awe-struck by how good she was with her.

"Reb, you can't buy my kid. That tenner is more than I have to spend on groceries in a week."

Horror fills me at her words when I look in her eyes - why didn't I notice how tired they were before now? - and see that she's telling the truth. Fuck.

"Fuck."

The giggle and rattle of the swear jar behind me draws my attention so I turn to address that first. I carefully squeeze past the small dining table, which, now that I look at it, seems like

it'll come crashing down as easily as the rickety old chair did if I even blow on it. Once safely past, I let out my breath and crouch down on the floor by Phoenix.

"I'm sorry I don't have any noisy money with me right now, but if I give you a whole heap of paper money can I have a free pass on the swearing until I leave? Consider it paying in advance or something for the next time I come around."

"...okay?" she tells me uncertainly.

I pull out my wallet again and grab all the notes that are in there. I don't have a fucking clue how much is in there, but I shove the whole lot into her jar without any regrets.

"Reb-" I can hear the chastisement in Rae's voice coming from the kitchen.

"Leave it, Rae. Let the kid get an ice cream or something."

"Mummy! Can I really get an ice cream? Do I have enough?"

"You do baby, yes." She sighs but I don't get it. Phoenix is so happy now, why isn't she smiling? "Can we go?"

"Maybe at the weekend when I'm not working baby, okay?" Her face falls a little and I feel the pain that flashes through Raven's eyes as we both watch Phoenix and my heart twists. Shit. I thought I was helping but I get the feeling I've seriously fucked up right now.

"Listen, I think I need to head off. Rae, see me out?" She nods. "Bye, Phoenix. I hope I can see you again soon."

"Come for ice cream! He can, can't he mummy?"

"We'll see," she says at the same time I say, "Absolutely."

Luckily, I'm that bit louder than she is and the little girl's face lights up. I don't know what's wrong with me but I feel like putting smiles on both their faces is my new obsession. I guess I need a new one when my obsession for the last few years has been finding Raven. I walk towards the door and step outside, motioning for Raven to follow me. She does, and I pull the door closed behind us.

“Baby.” Shit that slipped out a little too easily. I try again. “Raven, can I help?” I leave it there because she knows what I’m offering and I don’t want to piss her off too much. I fully expect her to hit me just for offering.

“Thanks, Reb, but no.” She shakes her head, voice soft, eyes sad. “Baby, please...” I practically beg but she shakes her head again.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s too hard. I’ve had help in the past and it’s great while it’s there, but it never lasts. And it’s so much harder to go back to how things were before, when you’ve had nice things.”

“How about I just get some basic groceries? Some meat, fresh fruit and veg...” Her words have twisted a knife in my gut and now I feel a compulsion to help them both.

“That’s the nice things I was talking about, Reb,” she tells me sadly and my heart fucking breaks. I can tell she isn’t going to budge on this so I let it drop. I’m going to get the biggest mother fucking food delivery sent direct to the house so that she can’t argue with me. I’ll set it up as a regular delivery too so she never has to go without. Kids need fresh produce and shit, somewhere to sit and eat. I’ll get a new chair too. May as well get a matching set. My mind starts to race off thinking of all the ways I can take care of them and it’s only when Raven gives a soft little cough that I’m brought back to the present.

“Baby, I have no intention of not helping you. And you’d better get used to it, because me, and my help, aren’t going fucking anywhere.”

She looks like she’s going to cry - and I couldn’t fucking stand it if she did - so I quickly do the only thing I can think of. I grab her, pull her in close and melt my lips into hers. I kiss her softly at first, comforting her and reassuring her, but then I deepen the kiss when I feel her shock morph into desire and she starts to respond. I pour everything into that fucking kiss. How much she hurt me when she vanished. How I

wouldn't give up on her. How I loved her then and how I still do now.

She pulls away, breathing hard. I understand that there's still unfinished business between us. I'm sure Jax still has a million questions he'll demand answers to, but I don't give a shit. I lost my girl once and there's no way in hell I'm losing her again, no matter what she's done. I gently lean forward and kiss her nose.

"I missed doing that, Princess," I tell her, and I swear I see the ghost of a smile pass her lips, but she doesn't say anything. "How did Phoenix know who I was?"

"You're not some dirty secret. I talk about you. About all of you. Phoenix and I don't really have secrets."

"So she knows everything?" I ask incredulously.

"Don't be stupid, Reb. I'm as open and honest with her as I can be, but let's not forget that she's...a child." The way she finishes her speech is a little odd but I can't figure out what she might have wanted to say.

"Can I come by again?" I ask her.

"You bloody well better. Phoenix is expecting you to come for ice cream. Text me and I'll send you the details. It'll probably be Saturday. We always spend the day together."

"Oh? Doesn't Phoenix's dad ever have her at weekends?" She pulls a face at my question.

"He's...not exactly on the scene."

"Fucker! Want me to beat the shit out of him?"

"No! No, it's okay. We do just fine without him."

I pull a face at her idea of doing 'just fine'. I'll soon sort that out though. As I say my goodbyes and get into my car and head off, I can't help but think about Phoenix's father. What a shit. From the little I've seen of her, I can already tell that Phoenix is a great kid. What kind of a dick would walk out on her? More to the point, what kind of a dick would ever be fool enough to let Raven go?

I never would.

Charlotte's Diary

18/09/19

I did something stupid today. Even as I write this, my cheeks are flaming and I want to throw my pen down to cover my burning face in my hands. Cringe.

I kissed Baxter!

I don't even know why. Or how. Or...anything. One moment we were climbing over some rocks to access yet another private cove that he had been telling me about, when I slipped.

Baxter caught me easily, holding me in his arms. And it was like time stood still. We were staring at each other, breathing hard from the climb, and I thought there was a moment. I felt the little zing of electricity. I thought I saw the desire flash in his eyes. And it was just so nice to be held again, that I leaned forward to close the gap between us and gently planted my lips on his.

For a moment he did nothing - Shock? Horror? Repulsion? - and then he jerked away and dropped me so suddenly that I almost fell down the cliff face!

God, I'm so embarrassed. I would have been mortified anyway, but the fact that he rebuffed me makes it a thousand times worse.

The rest of the day was awkward as fuck because there was no where to run to or escape to.

There's no way I can look him in the face ever again. I'm due to leave the island in a month. Surely I can avoid him until then?



CHAPTER EIGHT

Charlotte

I'm absolutely reeling after Rebel's visit. As if the four of them turning up on my doorstep unannounced wasn't bad enough, Mr Impatient just had to come back uninvited. Now he knows about Phoenix and although he's promised to keep my secret, I'm worried that he won't. Not out of malicious intent or anything, but because he's got such a big mouth he probably won't be able to help himself.

His kind words and promises to help, to not leave or go anywhere, have me tearing up. I doubt he means it, but the offer is so sweet.

I sigh and pick up my phone. Not long after I left last Friday, Ace texted me all of their numbers. I haven't contacted them yet, but I think I need to arrange something soon. With less than a year of my degree left, it's not like I can up and run away again. Besides, I have Phoenix to think about now and she's settled in at a great nursery with a wonderful childminder who I couldn't live without. The other option, going back to Cordelia for help, is not something I want to consider. Besides, the guys want answers, understandably, and I kind of want answers too.

I'm just about to rattle off a generic text to each of them - not ready to deal with them all in a group chat just yet - when the bell rings. It amuses me every time I hear that it's still working. A quick peek out of the window shows it's not bailiffs, phew, but a Tesco delivery man. He's probably got the wrong flat. I can't afford the luxury of shopping at the main supermarkets and I certainly don't pay for the privilege of having my groceries delivered for me. I open the door and before I can tell him he has the wrong flat, he asks "Raven Deighton?"

Of course this is Rebel's doing. I no longer go by that name and no one in my current life would know that alias.

"That's me," I say, because what else can I do? It's not this guy's fault he's been told to deliver food to me. I'm pretty sure

I can't refuse to accept the delivery.

"Where do you want it? The items aren't bagged, as per your request."

"Oh, leave them in the doorway and I'll quickly unload," I want to smile at Rebel remembering how I feel about single use plastics. No bags definitely puts a brownie point in his favour.

"Okay, I'll go grab the rest. It's quite a large order so I'll have to make a few trips."

I groan when the delivery guy disappears out of sight. Bloody Rebel. I'll stress about that later...First, I have a shit ton of food to find a home for. As the delivery crates pile up, I get more and more overwhelmed. I don't have space for all of this. I'll need a bigger kitchen for everything Rebel's sent. When I get to the crates full of fresh produce - vegetables, fruit, berries, cheese - I almost want to weep. It's pathetic, but Phoenix has never had real fresh fruit at home. Her nursery costs me a fortune but at least I know she's getting a good meal there on the days that she goes. Now, thanks to Rebel, we'll be eating like royalty for the rest of the month. At least. I'm already eyeing up the delivery and working out what I can cook and how I can stretch it to make it last. We'll have to use up the fresh stuff first, but there's loads more than that in the delivery, including all kinds of sweet treats that Phoenix rarely gets to have. When I pull out a tub of hot chocolate, I smile. I still love the stuff, but it's a luxury I've not been able to afford in a long while.

Once I've packed away all of the food as best I can, I make myself a hot drink and sit down, eyes skimming over the delivery receipt for the groceries. I can see that Rebel has really thought of everything that we might need, and I'm touched by his thoughtfulness. I'm loathe to accept charity, but I'm not about to turn down free food, for Phoenix's sake. I quickly text him my thanks and immediately he calls me back.

"Hey, thank you so much," I say as I press the accept call button and raise the phone to my ear.

"What for?"

“The groceries?” I ask.

“Oh! Yeah. Cool. I thought you meant the other thing.”

“Huh?” I’m so puzzled. “What other thing? You don’t mean the...kiss, do you?” I ask, aghast.

“You can thank me for kissing you all day long, Princess,” he chuckles. “No, there should be...”

“Reb, I have to go, there’s someone at the door,” I quickly interrupt him as the bell rings. It gives a dying wheeze and cuts off. I knew it was too good to last, having an actual working appliance in this dump.

“Another delivery. That’ll be it. I’ll call you later. Bye!” He’s gone before I can question him so I put my phone down and head to the door.

“Raven Deighton?” I’m going to have to accept this aren’t I?

Both the delivery and Rebel’s insistence on using my old name. “Yes?”

“We have your new dining table and chairs here. We’ll just take the old ones out of your way and then we can bring in the new one and set it up.”

“Oh erm, okay?” I move to one side and allow two workmen

in overalls into the flat to take away my rickety old furniture.

I mean, Rebel did say he’d replace the broken chair, so that’s good, but to be honest, he could have just grabbed any old thing from the tip and I’d be happy. Matching chairs and a table is definitely too much for me to accept. I groan quietly as I realise these guys have their orders and a job to do, and that I should just let them do it. I can take my issues up with Rebel later.

It takes the guys a little over twenty minutes to set everything up and when they’re done, it’s clear what the problem is. The younger of the two scratches his head before turning to me.

“Excuse me, ma’am, did you not measure the space for the table before you ordered?” Rebel has somehow managed to order a monstrosity of a table big enough to seat twelve, although it ‘only’ came with six chairs. I blush.

“Erm yeah, but I’m moving soon,” I awkwardly stammer out a lie. Anything to stop the pair of them looking at me like I’m crazy. Or incompetent.

“Ah I see, you should have waited a little. We could have delivered this to your new place for you.”

Great. I still look like an idiot.

“That’s okay,” I say quickly, “the other one broke and we were pretty desperate so...” I trail off. They both nod kindly and make a move to leave. “Thank you so much for your help,” I add. I scramble for my purse to tip them, but the older of the two assures me it’s all taken care of. That’s a relief. I don’t think I had anything other than coppers in there, and I could do without anymore embarrassment today.

As soon as they’re gone I squeeze past the mammoth table that’s now eating into my lounge space, and grab my phone, hitting redial.

“You’re welcome.” Rebel’s deep voice instantly gets my back up.

“You idiot! Why on earth did you do that?”

“What? I broke a chair, I replaced it,” he insists, defensively. “Rebel, this thing is huge. It fills my kitchen and my lounge. I can barely squeeze past it. I was so embarrassed when the delivery men looked at me like I was a crazy person for not checking the dimensions.”

The fucker laughs.

“It’s not funny!” I snap. “I had to lie and tell them I’m moving soon so that they didn’t call the men in white coats on me.”

“Now it’s funny you should mention moving...”

“What?”

“Just keep an open mind okay?”

“Rebel...”

“Just promise me, you’ll let me finish. Princess, promise? Okay? And no hitting me.”

“I can’t hit you, you’re not here.”

“Promise me!”

“Okay, okay,” I grumble at him.

“And open the door. The bell isn’t working.”

Of course he’s at the door! He just can’t keep away. I huff out my frustration, clamber around the stupid bloody table and fling open the door, glowering at Rebel who stands on the other side with a shit-eating grin on his face. Fuck, I’ve missed that grin. Not that I’d ever let him know that.

“Holy shit, I’ve never seen one that big!” he exclaims, laughing at the absurdity that is my new table.

“You. Are. Ridiculous.” I grind out into the phone. “Baby, can we hang up now?”

“No.”

“Awww, why not?”

“I’m scared I might still hit you. I think communication through mobile is safest for you.”

“You don’t mean that. C’mere.” He hangs up the phone and pulls me into his massive bear-like embrace, and I have to say I find myself thawing towards him quite quickly. He moves us across the threshold and shuts the door, making it impossible for me to kick him out. Damn him!

“Okay, Princess, go sit and I’ll grab us a drink. We need to chat.” “Which of the extra chairs would you like me to take a seat at?”

You know there’s only two of us living here, right?”

“Actually I didn’t. I was worried there might be a boyfriend on the scene.”

“Yes well, even if there was, it’s not like I’d need six chairs now is it?”

“I dunno, we used to need five for you and all your boyfriends. Now you have Phoenix too.”

“We were kids then. In the real world, women don’t have four boyfriends. Single mums have even less.”

“Fewer,” he corrects me with a twinkle. “Bite me.”

“You’re the literature student.” He shrugs.

“Wait, how do you know that? In fact, how did you find me? It’s been ages.”

“Accidentally, actually. I was helping my cousin settle in as a fresher, I caught sight of someone who looked a lot like you. I decided to stick around to see if it was you...the rest is history.”

“When was that?”

“About a week...ish...ago, I think?”

“So you’ve been stalking me for a week?”

“Oh no, Princess. I’ve been stalking you for the last four years and four months. I could probably tell you the days, hours and minutes too. I’m just really shit at it and you were good at hiding.”

“That was kind of the point. I didn’t think anyone would still be looking for me at this point.”

“I wasn’t. Well, not consciously anyway. But I’m always seeing flashes of you wherever I go. The others get pissed off with me. They almost didn’t come this time.”

“This time?” I glower, though it’s hard to be mad at him; what he’s saying is pretty sweet. I think.

“Let’s just say there’s been a false sighting or two of you,” he says sheepishly.

“But why not approach me yourself? Why did you call the guys and ambush me? I nearly died.”

“I didn’t want you to run again. It’s harder to run away from four people.”

“I can’t run. Phoenix is settled and I’ve almost finished my degree.”

“But you would have run from us the other day, if you could?”

“Reb, I…” I can’t answer that, but the look he gives me says he sees the truth in my eyes. I hate the pain I see in his.

“You will have to tell me why, one day, but I’m not about to demand and force answers from you when you’re not ready to confide in me. I’m not Jax.”

He looks so sad, like it breaks his heart to know that I don’t trust him enough to let him in. It almost makes me crumble. But I don’t. I have Phoenix to protect, and for that reason, I have high stone walls built around my heart. Stronger than stone; they’re made of fucking granite.

I let out a loud noisy breath and nod to him. “Okay,” I say shakily. He’ll give me time, that’s something at least. “So, what am I going to do about this table? I appreciate the thought, but it’s way too big for the flat. Please tell me we can change it?”

“Nope, sorry, no can do, Princess. When I bought it, the manager said all sales were final. He seemed quite glad to be rid of it really, but I don’t know why.”

“Gee I wonder? Maybe because nobody besides the Queen could fit this monstrosity in their dining room!”

“Pah, don’t exaggerate. I’m sure all of the major royals could fit it in their homes.”

“I don’t even have a garden I could use it in,” I moan. “Would you like a garden?”

“I’d love a garden. Especially for Phoenix. I definitely miss the hot tub you guys had. I don’t think there was anything quite like it for melting stress away.” I smile at him nostalgically.

“Okay, so if you could move to a bigger place, what would you want?”

“A place big enough for this table which I have to keep because it was a gift?” I smirk at him and then think. “A garden, a bigger space for Phoenix to play, and appliances that work.”

“What, no hot tub?”

“Oh well, while we’re dreaming, let’s add in a swimming pool, library and a fully stocked walk-in closet,” I tell him with an exasperated sigh. Really, what good did it do to torture myself with things that could never be? “I’d settle for a nicer neighbourhood where Phoenix could grow up safely.”

Rebel nods at me, like he understands and pauses for a moment. “Okay,” he eventually says. “Leave it with me.”

“Haha,” I mock. “Like I could ever afford a place like that. I can barely afford this place.”

“Trust me.”

“Yeah, okay,” I let it drop because I know there’s no arguing with him. “What?” I ask when I see he’s smirking at me.

“I expected more of a fight.”

“I spend my days fighting with a feisty headstrong young lady. I’m not wasting my battles on you.”

“Touché.” He laughs. “Where is the little rugrat anyway?” He looks around like she might be hiding under the table or something. Please, if she were in the house, he’d know it already. I love her, but the girl is loud.

“She’s at the childminder’s house for the night,” I tell him and his smirk turns into that knowing grin that I’ve missed so much. “So you’re saying that we have the house to ourselves for the night?”

“No, I’m saying I have to leave in…” I check my phone for the time. “Twenty minutes, to get to work. And I have class tomorrow at 9, so it’s easier for Phoenix to have a sleepover. She does a couple of times a week.”

“What do you mean you have work?”

“Seriously, Reb? Work? You know the thing that people who are born without a silver spoon in their mouths have to do in order to put actual food in their mouths?” My voice is heavily laced with sarcasm.

“No, I mean, how do you find the time to work, study full time and raise a little one?” He sounds somewhere between aghast and awe-struck.

“I don’t have any choice. I slot shifts in around school and I have an amazing childminder. But as you can see,” I gesture to the state of my small but clean flat, “I’m barely managing.”

Rebel doesn’t say anything, he just scowls, deep in thought. I leave him to it and wander into my room to change for work. Two nights a week I work in a trendy bar in town which means painfully late nights, and five days a week I pick up shifts in the campus library. It pays a pittance but I can slot in short shifts between classes and it means I can print all my assignments for free. Doing a literature degree makes me think I’m getting the better end of the deal. I also clean for my neighbours on a Sunday while Phoenix plays with their children. The only day Phoenix and I have completely together is Saturday, so those days are sacred to me.

I leave the door ajar so that I can still chat to Rebel and quickly change into my work uniform of short black skirt and tight black shirt. It’s a small mercy that the sleazy owner lets us wear flats. I slide those on too and grab my bag, not bothering with makeup or doing my hair, as always. I check my phone is charged and send a quick message to the childminder to make sure Phoenix is okay. When I come out of my room, I don’t miss the way Rebel’s gaze sweeps over me. Nor do I miss the way his eyes heat with desire. I wish I was oblivious to the way my body responds to his reaction though. My nipples instantly harden and my stomach flips.

“Whoa, you look amazing,” he says, getting to his feet and crossing the room towards me.

“Thanks,” I cough out as I dodge around his open arms and duck into the kitchen space. I grab a cereal bar as a quick

snack and toss an apple into my bag for later. That's more food than I've had all week.

I feel Rebel's eyes on me with every move I make. I check my phone again. I need to leave in Fifteen. Why is time dragging so slowly? I pour myself a glass of water and drink it down in one. I could leave now but he'll know it's because I want to get away from him and not because I need to leave. Damn, I shouldn't have told him I had twenty minutes. I feel like the flat is getting even smaller. It's certainly getting hotter. Still, he watches me. I feel like prey, squirming uncomfortably.

Goddamnit. I've never been Rebel's prey. I've always met him head on and given as good as I got. I've fought and won harder battles than fighting my attraction for him. I'm not surprised in the least that it's still there after all this time. He was hot at nineteen, he's even hotter now. Of course I'm attracted to him! His words, promises, and the kindness he's shown me since he came back into my life are bound to stir up old feelings. But that doesn't mean I have to act on them. The kiss the other day was stupid - a phenomenal mistake - but something that I didn't need to repeat. I take a deep breath, square my shoulders, and brave stepping into the same room as him.

The whole time he hasn't taken his eyes off me and now he's smirking at me knowingly.

"What?" I snap.

"Every emotion you just had flashed across your face." He smiles smugly. "You want me."

"So?" I hate that he's right, but I'm not going to back down on this.

"Here I am, Little Bird." He holds his arms out invitingly. "Are you brave enough?"

He's baiting me. I know he is. But still I react. I step forward into his embrace and plant my lips firmly against his. It takes him a moment to respond because I've caught him off guard, and that makes me smile. It's all the encouragement I need to continue. Instead of running away, instead of fighting

my attraction to Rebel, I give in to it, kissing him like the last four years never happened. I kiss him like I'm a teenager again, without real responsibility, fisting my hands into his shirt and dragging him down to meet me. I'm seconds away from dragging him into my bedroom to show him that I'm not afraid, that I'm not the hunted, when we're rudely pulled apart by my shrill alarm.

"I have to go," I'm panting hard. Rebel groans at my words and readjusts his jeans. It makes me smile with satisfaction that I've made him hard. I give him a quick peck on the lips and tell him to let himself out once again.

As I walk to work, I realise that the chemistry between us hasn't dulled at all. If anything, it's grown. If it was a raging fire before, it's a towering inferno now, and I know that it's only a matter of time before he's in my bed.

Charlotte's Diary

30/09/19

Baxter came to see me today. There was me thinking I'd been successfully managing to avoid him, when he turns up on my doorstep apologising for disappearing on me. I was baffled.

Turns out, the morning after our kiss he was called back to the UK on business and he'd actually been gone from the island for twelve days. As soon as he landed back here, he raced to come find me to explain.

Allegedly.

I'm not sure if I'm buying his story. The timing is a little suspect. And when I quiz him about his 'business' he was pretty evasive. When I pushed him to tell me more, he completely clammed up...but not before admitting he had seen Rebel while he was gone.

A million questions raced to the tip of my tongue and it pained me to swallow every single one of them back down, unasked and unanswered. I must have given myself away though, because Baxter gave me the strangest look.

After a beat, he asked outright if I was pregnant. And, fuck...well, there's no denying it now.

Of course I had to confess. And once I started, it was like damn floodgates had opened and almost all of my secrets came pouring out. Almost all. I'm not stupid enough to let everything fly free, no matter how cathartic it felt.

I expected Baxter to be horrified, repulsed by what I told him. But he wasn't. There was a strange kind of glint in his eyes that made my stomach drop and twist...

Like when a monster knows it's just met one of its own kind.



CHAPTER NINE

Rebel

Fuck, I'm tired, I think to myself as I rake my hands through my hair, not caring if I mess it up. I've staked out Raven's work for her last few shifts at the bar. I wanted to make sure she was safe. Mostly she stays behind the bar, which is good, but I've noticed that her boss is a real creep. He watches her way too keenly, and tries to send her out into crowds to collect glasses. It's an obvious trick to bring more guys back to the bar to spend money, especially as their eyes follow Rae wherever she goes, but I hated having to watch dirty sleazeballs getting too handsy with her. She handled them all though...without even breaking their fingers or faces, which I would have done.

But then, obviously, I had to make sure she got home safely too. Late, late nights by the time she walked home. One night it was absolutely pissing it down. She needs a car. I don't like her wandering the streets late at night. It's not safe. And she's more likely to get sick, walking in the rain...then how would she manage?

I take a massive gulp of some vile coffee concoction that I picked up at the service station, and manoeuvre the car into a parking space right outside Raven's place. It looks even worse in daylight. It's a fucking dump. I can't wait to get her and Phoenix out of here; both for the day, and permanently.

I hop out of the car and eagerly make my way towards the front door. Out of the corner of my eye, I spy a dark van parked just down the street. It's been there the last few nights, but this is the first time I've noticed it in daylight. I could be being paranoid, but I'm pretty sure it's watching Raven's flat. Fuck. I need to get her moved out of here faster.

I knock, and smile broadly when Phoenix answers the door. Then my face falls. She shouldn't be opening the door; it's not safe. She invites me in and races off to get her shoes, clearly hyped by the idea of getting ice cream.

“Hey, gorgeous,” I say as Raven enters the room. “I’ve missed you this week.”

“Really?” She raises an eyebrow in disbelief.

“Of course! I’ve gone four years without seeing you, now four hours is too much!” Shit that’s a bit sappy, shouldn’t have said that.

“Is that why you’ve been stalking me at work?” she asks.

Fuck. I look at her, trying to work out how much she really knows and just how mad she is. Luckily, she’s smiling. She seems more amused than pissed. Phew.

“How did you know?” I grin sheepishly.

“Please, you’re not exactly inconspicuous! Besides, all my colleagues were lusting after you.” She sounds mildly exasperated. “I was hounded by them to pass on your number once they realised I knew you.”

“Aww, baby, don’t be jealous, I’ve only got eyes for you!” I placate her teasingly.

“Let’s go!” She shakes her head like I’m just too much and calls for Phoenix to get a move on.

She locks up and I walk over to the car, stopping when she doesn’t follow me.

“Erm, Reb?” she calls. “We’re walking to the ice cream parlour.”

“No, we’re not,” I reply emphatically.

“We have to, I don’t have a car seat for Phoenix,” she tries to insist.

“Nope. I got one.”

“What?”

“I picked up a car seat yesterday, it’s top of the range so you don’t have to worry. She’ll be safe,” I try to reassure her.

“That’s too much.” She frowns.

“Nah,” I scoff. “It’s a purely selfish move. I’m sick of walking around following your fine ass everywhere. Besides, the place we’re going is too far away.”

“But there’s an ice cream place just down the road.”

“I know, but we’re going to my place. Stop arguing, get in.”

Thankfully she listens, belting Phoenix safely into the backseat and then climbing in the front beside me.

“What?” she asks when she catches me grinning.

“Thought you were going to go all stubborn on my ass and I was going to have to fight you a little more, that’s all.” I shrug, eyes twinkling.

“I choose my battles a little more carefully now,” she replies.

“Shame.” I fake a sigh. “I really miss fighting with you.” I throw her a wink and her cheeks colour a little which really makes me grin.

“Shut up,” she groans.

I glance in the rear-view mirror and notice that although silent, Phoenix is giving us her full attention and hanging on our every word.

We drive in companionable silence, my phone connecting automatically and playing quietly in the background. After a while Raven begins to sing along in a low, hushed tone. I don’t think she knows she’s doing it, but I love to listen to her sing, so I don’t say anything.

“Mummy!” Phoenix cries when the song finishes, “you have the voice of an angel.”

Raven laughs and blushes a little more, but thanks her daughter for the compliment. I have to say I agree wholeheartedly with Phoenix on that one; everything about Raven is angelic.

Well, almost everything.

We arrive at the indoor play place which sells ice cream, horrifically named after some abysmal play on words, and I just know that I'm going to be entering the seventh circle of hell for the afternoon. Still, it'll be worth it to put a smile on Phoenix's face, and to get some alone time to chat with her mum.

As predicted, Phoenix is hyped to be here, having never been before. We queue, pay and enter, and before we've even settled at a table she's torn her shoes off and raced off to play.

"I should go after her," Raven worries.

"Stay. We've got eyes on her, she knows where we are, the place is secure...besides I want to talk to you a little while she's gone."

"Okay," she drags out the vowel in uncertainty, nibbling on her bottom lip like days of old. My cock stirs at the sight but I mentally chastise myself; now is definitely not the time nor the place.

"Do you know anyone with a dark coloured van? Navy or black maybe? A Ford?"

"No, why?" I hear the apprehension in her voice. She's not lying to me, but she is worried.

"It's probably nothing, I just noticed it hanging around your place quite a bit lately. Usually late at night, but I saw it again today."

She blanches, gripping the tabletop for support.

"I won't let anything happen to you, or Phoenix," I promise her. "But do you have any idea who it might be?"

"My first thought was maybe..." she seems embarrassed, "bailiffs. But not late at night surely?"

"I thought so too, we'll see. Do me a favour okay? Well, two actually..." I wait until she nods. "Don't let Phoenix open the door anymore."

"I won't." She's vehement.

“And promise me you’ll call me if anything happens, anything at all, no matter what time of day or night it is,” I finish.

She hesitates, as I knew she would. Time to play dirty. “For Phoenix’s sake?”

“I promise,” she whispers.

“Good. I’m gonna go scope out the ice cream choices ready for when Phoenix gets bored. You want anything?”

“I’m good,” she murmurs, wrapped in her own thoughts.

As I walk away, I think about how much I hate that I’ve put a dampener on today and inadvertently wiped the smile from her face. But I have to tell myself that needs must; their safety is my number one concern now.

Once I’ve grabbed the ice cream menu and ordered a couple of bottles of Coke, I head back to the table and sit opposite Raven.

“So, are you ready to talk? Will you tell me what happened with Cordelia?” I probe.

“Reb...” she sighs, reluctantly.

“Come on, you know you can talk to me. There’s no judgement here.”

“It’s a long story,” she says. “I don’t know if I’m emotionally ready to tell it yet. But I can give it a go...maybe give you the Cribbs’ notes version? Just promise me you won’t tell the others. Not yet anyway.”

“Of course,” I promise her. “I’m good at keeping secrets aren’t I?” I smile and she gives me a wobbly one in return.

“Okay, long story short, when Cordelia found out I was pregnant, she was really supportive to begin with. She really looked after me. I wondered why my mum hadn’t just gone home and asked for help when she found herself pregnant with Lizzie and me. Cordelia seemed so good with me, I was sure she would have been great with mum too.”

She pales. I notice it, even though she takes a deep shuddering breath and continues.

“But as I got further along in the pregnancy, she became really controlling. To the point where I felt...trapped. Like I couldn't breathe, or do anything without her say-so or approval. She was really judgemental and disapproving.”

She pauses, nibbling on her bottom lip, only this time it does nothing but fill me with the urge to protect her and wipe the anguish off her face.

“One day, I just...snapped. I had to get away. When I tried to leave, she stopped me. Cut off my trust fund to keep me reliant on her. So I reached out to the only person I could think of...”

“Baxter.”

“Exactly. He'd been in and out of my life a little, and I didn't know where else to turn. He helped me get out and break away from her. And even though I was loathe to ask for help, I knew I needed some support. He helped me in so many ways.”

“So Cordelia doesn't have anything to do with Phoenix?” There's no judgement in my voice, if anything, I'm glad.

“No, she does,” Raven tells me sadly. “What? Why?” I'm outraged.

“We had to come to an arrangement. It was Baxter's idea actually. If I allowed her access to Phoenix, without me being there, she would call off the lawsuit for full custody of her.”

“What the actual fuck? Explain!”

“Cordelia didn't like me leaving. She was sure that I couldn't give Phoenix as much as she could - which is true of course - but she was wrong in thinking that her wealth would make her a better guardian than me. Love is powerful,” she finishes quietly.

“Don't I know it,” I murmur absentmindedly but Raven catches it and gives me a sad smile.

“So she brought a case against me that I was an unfit mother. Obviously, because of her wealth and connections I didn’t stand a chance. But it was worse than that...because she knew what had happened with Michael, she threatened to bring a murder charge against me too.”

“Fuck. What a bitch.” It’s actually not enough, to call her that. My fingers curl into tight fists and I feel rage unfurl in my stomach.

Like a beast awakening, it roars and demands to be unleashed, but I push it down.

“I didn’t have any choice. At least this way I get to be Phoenix’s mum...I can’t do that behind bars.” I watch in horror as she wipes a tear from the corner of her eye and all I want to do is sweep her up into my arms. Fuck. I’ll forever be in Baxter’s debt it seems. I look at Raven sitting opposite me, as beautiful as the day she left, and I wonder at the change in her. She’s stronger than when I knew her before, yet softer and more vulnerable too. I want to take care of her and Phoenix. I want to be her rock, her knight in shining armour. Hell, I want her to look at me like I hung the fucking moon in the sky just for her. I want what Baxter has.

I’m contemplating what to say next as Raven cradles her glass of coke, when Phoenix comes rushing over, flushed, excited, and demanding ice cream. Simultaneously, Raven and I plaster smiles on our faces and fall upon Phoenix, lavishing her with attention.

The perfect distraction.

Charlotte's Diary

08/10/19

Fuck! It's happened. Cordelia cornered me today and is forcing me to get medical treatment. For a moment I was terrified that she was going to try and force me to have an abortion, and I realised that I really don't want that.

But that's a whole other can of crazy to think about some other time.

The relief at realising that she wasn't doing that, and the subsequent adrenaline coursing through my body, decided to manifest itself in a snarky comeback and then all hell broke loose.

She went mental, screaming all sorts of horrible things at me, and threatening to cut me off from my trust fund.

I screamed right back at her, not caring in the heat of the moment about her money, and I just feel like my safe haven has been ruined. Instead of a paradise, the island now feels like a prison, and I need to stretch my wings and fly. I need out. I need off this island.

I fled from the argument, the raised voices and angry words triggering me right back to that night. And I ran straight into the arms of Baxter. Literally.

When he finally managed to calm me down enough to explain what had happened, he vowed to get me off the island sooner than planned. He said to give him a few days to set something up.

It can't come fast enough.



CHAPTER TEN

Charlotte

We're just pulling up to the house after a lovely afternoon out when Rebel lets hiss a "fuck" from his lips. In the backseat, Phoenix giggles and calls "naughty word", making me smile. I turn to Reb and ask him what's wrong. He doesn't answer me though, he just points to the car across the road. My gaze flicks to where he's pointing and my body is instantly ice. I can clearly see Jax and Thorn sitting in the front seat, and I can only assume Ace is sitting in the back.

I turn to Rebel in a blind panic.

"Fuck, Reb, what am I going to do? Drive away! Go, go, go!"

"Rae, calm down." He tries to console me but I feel like he's far away. I can hardly hear him over the pounding rush of panic in my ears. My chest constricts and squeezes me, my breaths coming in shaky short gasps. Fuck, I'm having a panic attack. Fuck, fuck, fuck. "Rae...Raven...breath!" he's shouting at me but I can't; I can't breathe. All I can think about is Phoenix in the back seat and how I don't want them to see her. They can't. I'm not ready. My eyes fill with tears and I beg Rebel to take us away. Anywhere.

"Princess, I would," he tells me gently, taking my hand. "But they've already seen us. They're getting out of the car."

My hand's already on the door handle, blindly fumbling. I have no idea what I'm going to do. Run? Ridiculous.

"Mummy?" Phoenix's tiny scared voice comes from the back seat. "Are you okay?"

Shit. I instantly feel awful as guilt consumes me. I shouldn't have let myself get worked up like that in front of Phoenix.

"I'm okay baby, I'm fine. Sorry for scaring you, mummy just had a shock is all," I placate her.

"Are we going home?" she asks.

“Yes,” I tell her resignedly, undoing my seatbelt and climbing out of the car. “I’ll let you out in just a moment.”

Jax and Thorn are already striding towards me, Ace trailing a little behind. Thorn is grinning, like he’s happy to see me, but Jax is scowling.

“Where have you been?” he demands. I don’t reply. Is he talking to me? What’s he doing here? How is it any of his business?

I feel anger - white hot - begin to rise up within me. That’s better. I’d rather be angry than fearful. The heat of my annoyance is better than the ice-cold dread I felt a moment ago.

“Why are you checking up on me?” Rebel replies to Jax’s question.

Ah, so not talking to me then.

“Where have you been? Is this why you keep disappearing on us? You’re, what, seeing her?” If I hate the way Jax fires questions at Rebel, it’s nothing compared to how I feel when he won’t even use my name.

“Excuse me,” my voice is ice as I push past him to get to the back seat. I wrench open the door, then unclip Phoenix from her seat. Keeping her in my arms, I slam the door shut behind me and carry her across the road towards my front door.

The arguing behind me dwindles off to complete silence as I open my front door and take Phoenix inside. I quickly pull out my phone and text the lady upstairs, asking if she can watch Phoenix for an hour for me. She immediately replies that it’s no problem and that she’ll be down in a minute to collect her. Phoenix runs off to grab some toys to take with her and I sigh and fill the kettle. Thanks to Rebel’s delivery, I can at least offer them more than tap water.

I’m surprised when there’s a knock at the door and it’s not them. I call Phoenix over and say goodbye to her, sending her off upstairs to play. I stick my head out the door, confused as to why they hadn’t followed me in, only to see them arguing

by the car still. I can't hear what's being said, but I know that they're fighting from the body language, pissed off expressions, and energetic arm waving. Only Ace is quiet. He catches my eye and I wave him over. This is going to be painful enough as it is, without airing our dirty laundry in public.

Ace wordlessly enters my flat and I quickly make drinks for everyone, guessing that hot chocolate will be fine. I can't be bothered to mess around with heating a pan of milk, so boiling water from the kettle will just have to do. Wordlessly, the other guys trail behind us and enter. The quiet click of the door closing makes me jump and the panic returns. There's no way out, my brain screams at me. Run! It takes immense effort, but I manage to keep my feet firmly planted where I am.

"Drinks," I say, pointing to the table with the mugs on. No one moves. I sigh.

"Explain," comes Jax's one word reply.

As if I even know where to start. I say nothing. "Where were you today?" Thorn asks softly.

Ok. That's an easy one I can answer. "Out with Rebel."

"Where?" His tone is at least polite.

"We went to Wicked Wonder World," I reply calmly. "What's that?" he asks.

"A kids' play place." Still easy enough to explain. "You took that little girl?"

"Yes." I don't feel the need to elaborate. I can see Jax is desperate to jump in with questions but Thorn blocks him again.

"Where is she now?"

"In the flat upstairs. With my neighbour."

"Does she live there?" I can hear the hope in Thorn's voice that this will be a simple answer. As much as I love Phoenix, I don't want to cause Thorn pain; I wish I could tell him she's a

neighbour's child I was simply babysitting. But I can't do that. I wouldn't.

I hesitate.

"Who is she?" Jax finally manages to demand.

"Her name is Phoenix, and she's my daughter." My tone is defiant. I am not ashamed. Far from it; she's my greatest accomplishment.

"What the fuck?!" Jax explodes. "You have a fucking kid and you didn't think to fucking mention it?"

His outburst - when he used to be so unflappable, so cool - has me reeling.

"Is she ours?" he demands.

"What?" I scoff, "all four of yours?"

"You know what I fucking mean!"

"Do you realise how ridiculous you sound right now? I haven't seen any of you in years!"

"Answer the question. How old is she?"

I take a deep breath. It's okay, I knew this question would come.

I just have to be convincing. "She's three. Just," I lie.

I can't tell them she's nearly four. I just can't. What would be the point? No one needs that pain and heartache. And besides, knowing her true age wouldn't help any of them figure out if they're her father or not. I don't even know.

I see the four faces in front of me mentally doing the math. Thorn looks relieved, whereas Rebel looks upset. I can't figure out why. Ace is frowning slightly, like my dates don't quite add up with when he saw me at the airport. He's right of course; probably wondering why I'm lying. Does he still think Baxter is the father? Would Ace be wondering why I'm protecting him?

I catch his eye and silently beg him not to say anything, but then I realise that he won't, because he doesn't want to

reveal his deceit either.

“Who’s Phoenix’s father?” Jax demands, getting my back up. He’s just worked out that she’s not, that she can’t be, any of theirs, so why does it matter?

“That isn’t any of your business.” My voice is icy, steady, strong.

Everything I’m not.

“Why didn’t you tell us you have a kid?” Jax spits. He says ‘kid’ like it’s the dirtiest word in the world, which considering he recently called me a cold-blooded killer, is saying something.

“Why would I? It’s nothing to do with you. You turned up demanding answers and didn’t ask a single question about how I am, who I am, or what my life is like now!” I exclaim in return. I hear the emotional wobble in my voice and cringe. I hate to show weakness.

“Why was Rebel with you though?” Thorn asks, changing topic slightly. It calms me. A little.

My eyes cut to Rebel wondering what I should say. Does he want them to know that he’s been sneaking back to see me? I didn’t realise it was a secret, but obviously their reactions today tell me it was.

“I turned up unannounced the other day and Phoenix invited me to go get ice cream with them,” Rebel confesses.

I’m relieved that he told the truth. If he claimed to have just met Phoenix today it would blow up in our faces the second Phoenix came back and was overly familiar with him.

“I see...” Jax scowls. “What’s going on with you two?”

“Nothing,” Rebel replies a little too quickly. It’s a good question actually; what is going on? What am I doing? This is stupid. “What do you guys want?” I counter. “You don’t live here. You came because Rebel called. You came, you saw, you got answers...now what? Surely you have lives to get back to?”

The four of them exchange a glance, their silent conversation instantaneous. It's so familiar it at once makes me want to smile and weep.

"Nope," Rebel's reply is emphatic. Instantly it's echoed by Ace. "I need more answers," Jax insists. "Then I'm gone." Thorn echoes his sentiment and I feel a pang in my chest.

"I don't know what more I can tell you," is my sorrowful reply.

"Aren't you sorry, at all?" Thorn asks, aghast. He stares at me, equal parts horrified and hopeful.

How do I even begin to answer that? I sigh and reach for a drink, determined not to waste perfectly good hot chocolate even if no one else wants one. I close my eyes and cradle the mug in my hands like its warmth can give me strength. Stalling for time, I inhale the sweet aroma and take a long deep drink, savouring the silky sweet taste on my tongue. I swallow, open my eyes, find everyone staring at me.

"More than you'll ever know," I whisper too low for anyone to hear, as unwelcome tears roll down my cheeks.

Charlotte's Diary

13/10/19

Baxter's done it; he's managed to arrange a flight for me to get off this island, hopefully without his grandfather or Cordelia finding out. It's all a bit cloak and dagger - something I'm used to - but he's going to come with me on the flight to the mainland on the pretense that the flight has been booked for him alone. Once there, he'll wait 48 hours before returning, and I'll take a chartered flight back to the UK. He has me flying into one of the smaller airports and has arranged for a car to be waiting for me. He's even given me the use of his London flat for a few weeks while I get myself sorted out.

I honestly don't know what I would have done without him. So now I have to pack and prepare to get out of here, not really thinking too far ahead.

When I do think of the future, blind panic courses through me. Hundreds of questions fill my mind and I feel like I'm drowning in uncertainty. So instead, I'm focusing on one thing at a time.

Pack.

Leave.

Fly back to the UK. Then take it from there.

I'm really going to miss Baxter though. I wish he could come back to the UK with me, but I'd never ask him to do that. He hasn't offered - and I wouldn't expect him to - but it's still going to be hard to leave him behind. I've really enjoyed his company. What started as an annoyance, which then became a distraction, actually morphed into a friendship. And God knows, I don't have many friends waiting for me back home.

As much as I need to leave, I wish I didn't have to. It's going to be lonely.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Charlotte

Things have calmed down a lot since earlier. The guys have stayed for some unknown reason. It started with Rebel refusing to go, and Ace deciding to join him, then it seemed to become some sort of pissing contest with none of them wanting to leave. Probably due to a fear of missing out. Pathetic. But, also, kind of nice.

And so here we are; Phoenix has returned but there's an uneasy tension in the room. Jax's sharp shrewd stare keeps flitting between Phoenix and I, a thousand questions in his eyes. I'm scared he's going to start asking them, when the doorbell rings.

It starts off a sharp trill, but sort of dies half way through. All eyes in the room swivel to the door in amusement. It breaks the tension at least.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. My place is a dump," I grumble, slowly picking my way through the bodies that litter my lounge. Rebel is lying on the floor colouring with Phoenix and makes no effort to move or make things easier for me. I shoot him a glare, which he's oblivious to, as I scramble over him and make my way to the door.

"Baxter?" I frown in surprise when the door swings wide. "What are you doing here?" I ask softly. His presence isn't unwelcome, just unexpected.

"What? I can't call in and see my two favourite girls when I'm in the area now?" he counters with his trademark smirk.

"BAX!" Phoenix screams. Her colouring with Rebel is instantly forgotten as she flies through the air and launches herself at him. He laughs, picks her up and swings her up into the air - where she squeals with delight - before showering her with kisses. I bite back a smile; I love how amazing he is with her. Most unexpectedly, he's been my absolute rock the past few years; the one I could call on, rely on, when I had nowhere else to go.

“You know I’m always happy to see you Bax, but now’s not really a good time...” I indicate the crowd behind me, who have all got to their feet and are glaring at Baxter. I groan. This isn’t going to end well.

“Baxter?” Rebel puzzles.

“What do you mean, your girls?” Jax’s eyes flash dangerously.

“What the fuck dude?” Thorn adds.

Ace just mutters “sranje¹” under his breath so low I don’t think anyone but me catches it. Our eyes meet and I see the worry in his violet look. I’m sure my own eyes must be filled with blind panic because he gives a tiny shake of his head to let me know it’s okay, and I breathe out slowly.

“You better come in,” I say resignedly, moving out the way and closing the door behind him when he steps over the threshold.

“What the fuck is going on?” Rebel asks as soon as the door clicks closed. Phoenix’s gasp fills the room.

“Bad word!” She cries but no one pays attention.

“Yeah, why did you say Raven and Phoenix were your fucking girls?” Jax growls.

“Someone better explain this shit.” Thorn glowers.

“BAD WORDS!” Phoenix yells. She clamps her hands over her ears and unleashes a bloodcurdling scream that has everyone in the room falling silent. Well, almost everyone.

“What the actual fucking fuck?!” Rebel yells over the din. Phoenix stops screaming long enough to bellow “bad words” again before resuming.

I race over to her, crouch down and gently prise her hands off her ears. “Phoenix, baby, look at me...” I cajole her. “Let’s breathe together.” I take a deep breath in and gently exhale, repeating until she’s copying me. Once I can see she’s calmer, I cuddle her close and glower at the five grown men-children that have managed to upset my baby. “You all owe Phoenix

money for her swear jar.” I demand. Rebel sheepishly pulls his wallet out and is the first to pay up, Baxter following.

“Let’s go play in your room, baby,” I tell her, leading her away from the crazy. Ace follows us.

“You go. I stay,” he tells me.

“Are you sure?” I ask him, wavering. “Yep. Phoenix, we colour?”

“Yeah!” She beams, racing back out to the lounge to grab her stuff and bring it back. I’m forgotten as she pulls Ace by the hand onto her bed and starts to share her pencils with him.

I leave them to it and go back out to the lounge. Thankfully the bickering hasn’t started up again. Yet.

“Is she okay?” Baxter comes over and hugs me. “I’m so sorry. You know I’d never upset her intentionally.” I relax into his embrace and allow him to hold me for a moment. I’ve never really had feelings like that for Baxter...not really, though I sometimes wondered...but that doesn’t mean we’re not close. And it is nice to be held. Especially since I’ve been avoiding Charles. I sigh; that’s another drama I need to sort out soon.

“I know, Bax. She’s okay. Just a little overwhelmed,” I smile weakly at him. That makes two of us.

“You two have some explaining to do,” Jax rounds on us and I jump guiltily out of Baxter’s arms. We exchange a quick glance and I hope to convey the message to him to keep his gob shut. I needn’t have worried though; weirdly, Baxter has always had my back.

“Sure thing, guys,” Baxter says. “What do you want to know?” He sits on the sofa and pulls me down into his lap. He’s definitely being more touchy-feely than normal. What I don’t understand, is why?

“Are you two an item?” Rebel grinds out from between clenched teeth. I feel Baxter shaking with silent laughter behind me. I can’t help but lean back into him.

“Not at the moment,” Baxter replies. I whip around to face him and give him a WTF look, but he winks and whispers for me to trust him. And I do. “But you never know,” he adds.

“And...were you dating before?”

“I wouldn’t call what we did ‘dating’, but whatever.” Baxter shrugs. He places his hand on my thigh, too high, and gives it a squeeze. Something flutters in my stomach. Rebel’s blazing stare tracks his every move. It’s hard not to tense up under Baxter’s unusual touch, but I have to trust that he’s helping me somehow.

“Are you Phoenix’s father?”

“Did you hear her call me daddy?” Baxter counters with a raised eyebrow. “But can you please keep your voices down, we don’t want Nix asking questions and the walls are paper thin in this place.”

Shit. Did he just...holy crap! Did he just imply that he might be Phoenix’s father? My heart starts to pound and my palms clam up. Why would he do that?

“How are you two so friendly?” Jax furrows his brows.

“We’ve been friends for years. Cordelia and my grandfather are old...friends.” Baxter’s voice is heavy with emphasis and Thorn makes a gagging sound.

“Ew, old people shagging. That’s gross!”

I’m sat, balanced precariously on Baxter’s lap, worrying about how the hell I’m going to get these guys to leave, when Ace comes back into the lounge.

“She’s sleepy,” he tells me with a smile.

“Okay, guys, I need you to go so that I can get Phoenix into bed.” “Of course!” Thorn rises to his feet, Ace is already putting his coat on. Rebel, Jax and Baxter seem to be stuck in some sort of three way standoff, none seem willing to break eye contact first. “Erm, hello?” I wave my hand back and forth in front of Baxter’s

face. “A hand please?” I guess we have some sort of charade to keep up.

“Absolutely, babe,” he tells me with a wink. He jumps to his feet and heads towards Phoenix’s door. “I’ll tuck her in and read her her usual bedtime story while you see the guys out. Then we can share a bottle of wine and catch up once she’s asleep.” I know it’s a ruse, but there’s no mistaking the suggestion in his voice. A vein in Jax’s temple throbs and Rebel looks about ready to explode as I say goodbye and practically push them out of the door.

“When can we see you again?” Rebel asks on the doorstep.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, Reb,” I say softly.

“We still need answers,” Jax insists.

“I don’t know what more I can tell you.”

“Please,” Rebel begs and my resolve crumbles instantly. “Okay. Text me. We’ll sort something out,” I barely finish what

I’m saying when Rebel captures me into a giant bear hug and squeezes me tight.

“Night, Princess.” He kisses my cheek and I melt.

“Night, Reb,” I whisper quietly. I wave them off down the path and then turn back into the lounge, surprised to see Baxter’s already sitting on the couch with two large glasses of red.

“What about Phoenix?” I ask.

“She’s already fast asleep in bed. I think Ace tucked her in and just came out as a ruse to get everyone to leave. I owe him one.”

Me too, I think, plopping down on the old sofa and reaching for the glass from Baxter.

“What the hell was all that about?” I ask him.

“Charl, when did they find out about Phoenix?” Baxter asks me. “Well, Rebel’s known for a while now, but the others just found out today. Why?”

“And are you prepared to come clean?” he asks, ignoring my question completely.

“No! You know I can’t do that,” I gasp, horrified.

“Exactly. So I’ve helped you out. By hinting that I might be Phoenix’s father, they won’t waste time doing the math and trying to figure out which one of them is. I’ve done you a favour,” he points out. I sag with relief knowing he’s right, but I still can’t help how guilty that makes me feel.

“It’s for the best, babe,” Baxter tells me gently when he sees my face.

“I know. But how do we stop this from backfiring? Or worse, blowing up?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m fully prepared to play the bad guy on this one; it’s a role I know well.” I smile sadly at him, knowing he’s referring to his dark past. I’m just going to have to trust him on this one.

“Does that mean you’ll be around a bit more now then?”

“Whenever I can. Grandfather has me taking on more and more of the business, but I can work remotely a lot of the time. I have a suite at the local hotel. I’m hoping I can spend some time with Nix and give you a bit of a break.”

“Sounds great. But I don’t need a break. We’ll both be happy to have you around more. I could definitely use a friend right now,” I tell him.

After that we don’t talk much; Baxter puts the TV on, keeps the wine glasses filled, and gently rubs my shoulders until I relax. Soon my eyes start drooping and he carries me to my bed, tucking me in like a perfect gentleman and promising to let himself out and be in touch soon. I try to think about the way the events of the evening took a twist, to analyse the strange behaviours of the boys, but as soon as my head hits the pillow, I’m out like a light, in an almost peaceful, almost dreamless, sleep.

Charlotte's Diary

16/10/19

I'm...Fuck. I can't believe I was caught out. After working so hard to cover my tracks and stay hidden, somehow they managed to track me down. At the airport no less. That can't have been a coincidence. But who would have tipped them off?

The one small mercy is that it was Ace who found me at the airport today. Shit. I hope he keeps his promise and doesn't tell the others that he found me. I need to disappear again. But how? Where?

Is it time to go home and face my parents? Even the thought of that fills me with dread. We barely spoke after Lizzie died, even less so when I started seeing more of Cordelia and she agreed to help me with my plans for West Prep. I disappeared on them for a year and they've made no effort to get in touch with me or my grandma. How would they react if I turned up pregnant and alone? No. That's not the solution for me. I need to think of something else. Cordelia's out. The parents are out. Is there anyone left?

I know Ace would help me in a heartbeat, but his loyalty doesn't lie with me. No. He's not an option. It would be too easy to welcome the four of them back into my life, to beg for forgiveness, to reveal the truth about the life I'm carrying inside of me. No.

There's literally only one option left, and I'm loathe to take it. He's already done so much for me. More than I can ever repay. But, I guess, needs must. Because this baby is coming soon whether I'm ready or not, and I don't want to raise it on the streets.

I'll contact him. I'll have to. Tomorrow.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Jax

I pace around the hotel room impatiently, twitching as I wait for Baxter fucking Branson to arrive. I called him the morning after he turned up at Raven's, and I demanded that he meet with me, but allegedly this was the soonest he could. It's been, what? Four days now? And I've not been back to see Raven. I've barely even seen the guys. Instead, I've spent the time holed up inside my hotel room, trapped inside my head and my own spiralling thoughts.

The others seem a little too happy to forgive and forget where Raven's concerned. I can't do that. Maybe it's because they're innocent, they can forgive her so easily. Maybe it's my own guilt with the Lizzie situation...maybe that's what's preventing me from accepting her apology. Ha! What apology? She won't back down. Has barely uttered a word of remorse since we found her, and certainly hadn't actually said "sorry" to any of us.

No, she doesn't deserve - or seem to want - forgiveness.

I'm pulled from my thoughts by a singular sharp knock on the door. I open it, and step aside, gesturing wordlessly for Baxter to come in.

"Why am I here?" he asks me warily. "Because I need your help."

"Oh." He looks puzzled by what I've just said. "I thought you'd be demanding answers, like you usually do."

I shake my head. "Of course I want answers, but I don't think you're going to give them to me. So let's draw a line under it and move on." When Baxter nods his assent, I continue, "I trust you know what happened that night with Raven?"

"Pretty much yeah. She's talked about it once or twice. I've never heard the recording, but I've spent enough nights with her to know she's plagued by nightmares that reveal the truth of what she went through."

I take a deep breath in through gritted teeth; I want to punch this guy. I've never liked him, always found him smarmy as fuck, but now I want to kill him. I hate that he has a relationship with Raven, that he's been warming her bed for the last however many years. Oh, he might claim that their relationship is casual, but I've seen the way they look at and touch each other. Fuck, I'm jealous. Wait, what did he say?

"Nightmares?"

"Oh come on dude, you don't really buy into all that devil-may-care attitude of hers do you? If you do, you're more stupid than I thought and I may just lose the last ounce of respect I had for you."

"I...didn't think," I reply. I'm confused, torn. Do I know this woman at all? She said she had no regrets. She killed a friend of mine. She didn't seem to care. She doesn't care that she's put us all through hell the last few years...Yet now Baxter's saying it's all an act? That she's plagued by nightmares and wracked with guilt?

I don't know what to think or who to believe. I feel a migraine coming on and pinch the bridge of my nose in a futile attempt to keep it at bay.

"Every single night, Jax. Phoenix is so used to her mum waking up screaming that she's always slept through it. I think she'd be unsettled if she didn't hear Charlotte's screams. They're like a fucking lullaby to her."

"Fuck." Why is he telling me this? My stomach twists painfully. "And where do you fit in to all this?" I eye him sharply. I'm not buying this redemption act. Baxter fucking Branson is as dark, twisted and fucked up as they come. He makes what Tilly's done look like child's play in comparison. There's no way he reformed to fucking sainthood. Raven's captivating, but she's not that good.

"I've tried to help her wherever I can."

I scoff at that. He's never helped anyone unless there was something in it for him.

“How the hell have you helped her? She lives in a hovel! What the hell happened for the sole heir to the Deighton fortune to be living below the poverty line?”

“That’s not my story to tell,” Baxter states evasively. It immediately gets my back up.

“Then why haven’t you helped her?” I explode in helpless, guilty rage.

“I have. I am. You know what she’s like; how stubborn she is! I do what I can.”

“Like what?” I refuse to back down. I know there’s logic in his words, I just don’t want to accept it.

“I watch her house 24/7. I pay off the bailiffs every time they’re on the doorstep. I top up her utilities just enough to prevent them being cut off...” He pauses for a moment before continuing.

“I subsidise her childminder. Ha! Charlotte thinks the woman took pity on her and only charges her £2.50 an hour, but I pay the rest. She doesn’t know. She’s too proud to accept my help...I pay the babysitter that she thinks works for free because she just loves Phoenix so much. I pay most of the nursery fees.” He takes a deep breath and before I can reply continues again.

“There’s a woman down the street with a kid a few months older than Phoenix. Every month or so I buy a load of new clothes and give them to the neighbour. She washes them and scuffs them up a bit, then passes them to Charlotte as hand-me-downs for Phoenix...I do what I can,” he finishes sadly.

He sounds pained that he can’t do more, and a new-found respect for Baxter Branson blooms in my chest. I understand exactly what he means about Raven being too stubborn to accept help, so I know that he’s doing all he can.

“But why do you bother? I’m not being funny, Branson, but Rebel’s told us all about your antics. Being the nice guy isn’t exactly your style.”

“I know. But I’ve changed. And she literally had no one. What was I supposed to do?”

I don't answer that. Has he changed? Or is there something in this for him? Is he playing the long - very long - game? So help me if he intends to fuck with Raven in the long term. I grit my teeth, fists curling.

"Do you love her?" I spit, dreading the answer.

"She's very easy to love, is she not?" he counters. That's not an answer though, is it? It makes me...I don't know. Uncomfortable? Jealous? I don't want to think about it too closely.

"I don't love her," I lie and Baxter gives me a look that immediately cuts through my bullshit. I'm not going to admit it though, even if we both know the truth.

"Look, you said you needed my help?" Baxter prompts. It's probably for the best that the conversation gets moved onto safer ground.

"I'm going after Tilly. I want your help," I tell him.

"That fucking bitch?" Baxter spits.

"She's behind all of this, if Michael was to be believed."

"Doesn't surprise me at all. Her reach knows no bounds. She destroyed several girls' lives, even at my school."

"Shit? She reached all the way to Knox Academy?" I ask, aghast.

"Yeah. I'd happily see her taken down. What do you plan to do?"

"Seduce her. Make her fall in love with me. Gain her trust. Destroy her," I state it like it's oh so simple, when I know it will be anything but.

"Sounds like you've got this already taken care of. What do you need me for?"

"I need you to do the same."

Recognition dawns on Baxter's face and I know he gets the message. It's time to give Tilly a taste of her own medicine. I just hope that Raven can forgive me when it's all done.

“She’ll hate us both, you know,” Baxter voices my fear. There’s no question of who he’s referring to. Raven.

“I know. But it’s a risk I have to take.”

“There’s no risk. It’s a given. She’ll never forgive you. She’ll never forgive me either.”

He sounds sad. I don’t blame him; it’s a huge ask. They’re close.

I think he loves her. She’ll hate us.

“I know. But don’t you think it’s worth it? Are you in? Can I count on you?”

“Absolutely.”

His one word answer fills me with relief. I sigh and nod. “Let’s get started. Can you track her down?”

“Consider it done.”

“Call me when it’s sorted. I’ll be ready to leave at a moment’s notice.”

He goes to get started straight away, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

There’s no escaping this. Since the moment I laid eyes on Raven and she pressed play on that tape, I knew I needed to make someone pay. For Lizzie and for her. I need to make things right somehow, even if it means losing Raven forever in the process. I’m just keeping everything crossed that once I’m done and can explain why, she’ll let me spend the rest of my life making it up to her.

Because if I’m honest with myself, now that I have her back in my life, I’m not prepared to let her go again. For anything or anyone.

Charlotte's Diary

29/10/19

Such a huge surprise today... Well, several surprises.

I've been staying at Baxter's flat for almost two weeks now, and I finally got round to registering with a doctor and a midwife nearby a couple of days ago. I can't exactly go home to my parents' place and see my family GP, so I registered as a temporary patient at a surgery near Bax's flat. The doctor was pretty horrified that I'm around halfway through my pregnancy and not registered with anyone and haven't had a scan or anything, so he registered me with a midwife and arranged for an urgent scan.

Which was scheduled for today.

I was getting ready to leave and go to the appointment, when the doorbell rang. There, on the doorstep to his own flat, was Baxter!

He said he couldn't let me go to my first scan on my own, and that he'd love to go with me, if I wanted him to. Hell yeah I did!

So together we went off to the hospital and they did my scan.

They think I'm around 22 weeks but the baby is a little small.

I got a lump in my throat when the image appeared on screen. Then they turned on the sound and I cried so hard when I heard the heartbeat. It's fucking real. The little bean that's been relentlessly kicking me all day long is an actual real tiny human. I expected the image on screen to be grainy, but it was so clear. It was a breathtaking moment, and Baxter held my hand the whole time.

And then they asked us - as if we were a couple - if we wanted to know the sex of the baby.

It's a girl...She's a girl...I'm having a girl! And I couldn't be happier.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Baxter

Fuck. I'm reeling after my meeting with Jax. When he called to say he wanted to meet with me I wasn't expecting that he wanted my help. I didn't expect to be roped into his elaborate revenge plan. But I'm glad he called on me.

For four years now I've been trying to convince Charlotte to let me do something about Tilly. But the stubborn headstrong girl always refuses. She insists that she's got all the closure she needs for Lizzie, through Michael's death.

Obviously it's bullshit.

Closure wouldn't make her scream at night. Closure wouldn't make her constantly look over her shoulder in fear. Closure wouldn't manifest in a fear to commit or be intimate with anyone. She keeps everyone at arms' length. Hell, she'd probably even try to keep me away if Phoenix didn't love me so much.

I never expected for those girls to worm their way under my skin. When Charlotte fled the scene of the crimes - the fire and Michael's death - her grandmother once again whisked her away to the sanctuary of my grandfather's island. Freshly graduated from the prison that was Knox academy and looking forward to a long hot summer of sun, sea, and sex with scantily-clad beach goers, imagine my horror when I was met with, not the feisty young woman who had remorselessly stabbed me a few months before, but the broken fractured pieces of a girl who had lost everything.

Over the time she spent on the island with me, I was able to get her to slowly open up and trust me. She never told me the full story, but I got snippets...enough to piece things together myself. When she could no longer hide her pregnancy, I confronted her, but she would never admit which of the four was the father. I don't think she knew. Not that it mattered. She had no intention of seeing any of them again, and despite offers of support from our grandparents, she was determined to go it alone. Actually, now that I think about it,

she spent that whole summer majorly cock blocking me. I never noticed at the time. All of my enjoyment came from taking care of her and slowly helping to rebuild her into the strong person she was before.

Not that she ever fully recovered, of course.

Then she left. And I right royally fucked up. I gave Rebel a head's up on which flight she was on. Luckily, they never caught her, and she never learnt of my betrayal. We kept in touch throughout her pregnancy and I took her advice and went to work for my grandfather - starting at the bottom and working my way up - earning the reins he would pass to me. I wanted to be worthy of the power; Charlotte made me want to do better. Be better. But I never wanted to be a hero; not Charlotte's, not anyone's.

Then Phoenix arrived. Charlotte's second chance; her daughter rising from the fiery ashes of her past. After one glance, I was hooked. She stole my heart; cemented my life-long bond with Charlotte. I've been by their sides every step of the way ever since. And I've never regretted it. Never longed for the chaos of my past. But if I'm honest with myself, Jax's plan has got me excited. He's stirred something in me that I thought was dead, or that I thought

I had at least outgrown.

The need for chaos. Destruction. Pain. The need to cause all of those things. Jax's plan has awoken the dark dormant monster within me that now rises, hungry, and calls to be unleashed.

Exhilaration, potential, the unknown...it all crackles along my skin with palpable possibility. I'm excited, thrilled, aroused.

Tilly is going to get so much more than she deserves.

Charlotte's Diary

03/11/9

In a moment of weakness, I allowed Cordelia to talk me into moving in with her. I'm not quite sure what I was thinking, other than I can't hide in Baxter's flat forever and I don't want to raise my baby girl all on my own. So I said yes, and I went back.

Cordelia is like a different person compared to the summer. She's so excited to be having a great-granddaughter, and she's been really supportive.

Things are much better between us, and Baxter seems happy that we've made up and that I have a support network around me. I think he was worrying about me being alone. Cordelia may not be an army of help, but she certainly has the power of one!

When I told her what the hospital had said, especially about the baby being a little on the small side, she instantly sprang into action, getting me the best vitamins and putting me on a strict and healthy diet.

It's funny how militant she's been about these things, but it is nice to have someone that cares taking care of me.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Charlotte

I'm walking back towards the house with Phoenix in tow when something catches my attention and pulls me up short. Something about our building looks...off. I can't quite put my finger on it.

"Mommy, why did we stop?" Phoenix asks, practically bumping into me.

"Mummy," I automatically correct her. I have no idea where she's picked up the Americanism, but it drives me crazy. "Sorry, baby, I just...never mind." I continue along the cracked uneven slabs that make the rickety path to the front door and that's when I see it. A single sheet of white paper taped to my dilapidated door. In bright red writing the notice declares, "eviction notice", and my whole world crumbles.

"Mommy, why are you crying?" I pull Phoenix close and don't even bother to correct her speech this time.

Fuck. What am I going to do? Why has this happened now? I'm so close to being paid and making the payment this month. Surely I'm not that far behind? My utilities are still on for christ's sake! I wrack my brains trying to recall if I've had any correspondence or contact from the landlord, but I'm coming up blank.

I'm distracted from my blind panic by my phone ringing. It's the only small luxury I allow myself and always pay on time because I need that contact with Phoenix's childminder. There aren't many people who have the number, but in my distress, I don't bother to check the caller display.

"Hello?" I say, barely containing my sob.

"Charlotte?" The last person on earth that I want to speak to right now is Charlie. "Are you crying?"

"What? No. What do you want, Charlie? I've not heard from you in weeks." My voice is cold and unwelcoming. I haven't missed him at all. Why is he suddenly sniffing around me again?

“Watch how you speak to me, Charlotte,” he warns, his voice ice-cold. For some reason I don’t say anything. I know he treats me like shit; I just don’t know why I tolerate his bullshit. Maybe it’s because I don’t actually care about him all that much.

“Sorry,” I sigh. It’s easier to just give in and apologise. I might get rid of him faster that way. “It’s been a long week. What can I do for you, Charlie?”

“I haven’t seen you around campus at all. It’s been ages since we went out. Dad was asking about you. Do you want to come over for a family dinner tonight?”

“Charlie, I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I don’t think we should see each other any more.”

“Oh come on, Charlotte, don’t be like that. I said I was sorry. It was just a joke anyway.”

“You think trying to force yourself on a girl is a joke?”

“If you’d just put out I wouldn’t have to force myself...”

“Goodbye, Charlie...”

“No wait! That was a joke too! I didn’t mean it! Come on Charl, Dad misses you.”

His words have the desired effect; I hesitate. I adore Charles Snr. And it would be nice to see him outside of the classroom again. I wish Charlie could be more like his dad. I sigh, wavering. Charlie must sense my crumbling resolve, but isn’t smart enough to win this round when he adds “And maybe you could stay over at mine after? I bet all that literature talk gets you hot.”

“Goodbye, Charlie. It’s over. Don’t call again, and stop using your dad to manipulate me.”

“Charlotte, wait!” Goddamn him, I do. “Is this because you’re shackled up with those four guys that have been seen on campus, like a dirty little slut? What’s the matter, you’re too tired from all your gang bangs to be intimate with your boyfriend?”

“Fuck you, Charlie!” I angrily cut his call off and quickly apologise to Phoenix before she can chastise me for swearing. When the phone immediately rings again I step away from her, hit answer and whisper-yell into the mouthpiece, “Fuck you Charlie, you don’t get to speak to me like that. Especially as you are NOT my boyfriend. You haven’t been since that night. And if you come anywhere near me I will tell the dean, admin, and your father what you tried to do to me!”

“And what exactly was that?” A new, dangerously low voice growls down the handset. I nearly drop it in shock.

“Shit! Who’s this?”

“Check the caller display, Princess,” As soon as I breathe, I realise it’s Rebel on the line.

“Reb, sorry I thought you were someone else.”

“Evidently. Whose ass do I need to kick?”

“No one’s Reb, I got it.”

“Why do you sound like you’ve been crying?” he accuses. Shit, how can he tell even over the anger I’m feeling towards Charlie?

“I got some bad news.”

“About that dick?”

“No. Just before. Don’t worry, what can I do for you?”

“Well, I was calling for a chat, but as I’ll be there in less than five minutes I suggest you get the kettle on. I want hot chocolate. It’s time to show Phoenix how to have it properly.”

I chuckle and acquiesce.

“I’d love to see you. But should you be driving and chatting to me?”

“It’s hands free, Princess,” he points out.

“You still have to concentrate,” I counter.

“Fine. Hanging up now. See you in three.”

“Wait, what?” I call, but the line’s already dead.

“Come on, Phoenix. We need hot chocolates all round.” I smile when her face lights up and she races to the front door. Following her, I snatch down the eviction notice and head inside to put a pan of milk on to warm. If we’re having hot chocolate, we’re damn well having it properly. None of this boiled water shit.

I’m just putting the finishing touches on three mugs when there’s a knock at the door. Obviously, the bell has well and truly died. Phoenix runs to open it and lets Rebel in. She squeals with excitement when she sees him and launches herself at his kneecaps to hug him.

“Whoa, rugrat, what are you doing? Trying to kill me or something? You almost knocked me over!” Phoenix giggles at the absurdity of her being able to knock Rebel over but then proceeds to try her best to rugby tackle him to the floor.

“Okay, time out, Nix, come have your hot chocolate.”

I carry it over to the sofa and put the TV on for her, selecting the cartoons. Her face lights up at this rare treat and she happily settles back with her mammoth hot chocolate and Scooby Doo. I give Rebel a nod to join me in the kitchen.

When he’s squeezed past the ridiculous table, we take a seat and I pass him his drink. He takes a long sip and tells me it’s amazing.

“Not as good as Thorn’s though is it?” I sigh. “Damn, I’ve missed that.”

“Me too.”

“What? Why? I would have thought you could have it whenever you wanted,” I puzzle.

“He wouldn’t make it after you disappeared.”

I stare at my drink, unsure what to say. Finally I settle on “I’m sorry”, but I know it’s not enough. It will never be enough.

“Tell me what’s wrong, Princess. You said you had bad news?” “There’s nothing you can do...” I begin.

“I’ll be the judge of that. Tell me.”

I slide the eviction notice across the table towards him. He scans it and scowls, then looks up at me.

“I’m sorry, Rae,” he states simply.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do, Reb,” I tell him honestly. “Don’t say no...”

“What?”

“I have a place you can go.”

“What? No. I can’t leave Edinburgh now, not when I’m so close to finishing my degree.”

“I have a house in Edinburgh. You can have it.”

“Don’t be crazy.”

“Listen. I bought the house for my cousin who’s a fresher here, but she’s decided to live on campus for this year at least. Which means I have a big empty house, that’s been paid for, just sitting there collecting dust. It’s too late in the semester to rent it out, so you’d be doing me a favour by moving in.”

“I don’t know Reb, it’s a bit much isn’t it...?”

“Shut up, Raven, take the fucking house.”

“Bad word!” Phoenix cries from the sofa. Obviously we weren’t being as quiet as I thought.

“Hey, Phoenix,” Rebel calls. My eyes go wide with fear and I frantically shake my head at him not to say anything. Which he ignores of course. “Would you like to live somewhere with a garden?”

“Yeah!” she cries.

“And would you like to have a nice big bedroom for all your toys?”

“A pink one?” She asks hopefully. Oh dear god, there’s no getting out of this now. Rebel has manoeuvred me right where he wants me.

“You can decorate it any way you like, rugrat,” he tells her. She leaps off the sofa - thankfully her mug was empty - and races over to us, cheering.

“Mommy, can we? Please please please?”

“Yes, baby,” I say, because really, what else can I do at this point? I send a look at Rebel, intending to chew him out, but when I see how genuinely happy he is, I just mouth “thank you”, instead. He gives me his trademark shit-eating grin and I kick him under the table.

“Ow, fuck!”

“Bad word!” I laugh as Phoenix races away once again to get her swear jar. “Mommy? When can we move? Can I go pack now?” she calls from her room.

“Soon, baby,” I tell her. “We have to sort some things first.”

“It’s ready when you are. Clearly you don’t have to give notice here. And aside from the table, which you can bring with you, it’s fully furnished so you don’t need a removal van or anything. The guys and I could move you in this weekend, we’ll even take you shopping for bits to decorate it however you want.”

“No, Reb, that’s too much. We’ll stay there for now while I search for something more suitable.”

“You’ll stay in my house for as long as you bloody need to.”

“Well, until your cousin needs it.”

“I’ll buy her another house.”

“Don’t be absurd. I finish my degree soon, I might not even stay in Edinburgh after that.”

“Don’t you get it? Wherever you go, I’m going to follow you. And I’ll buy you a goddamn house, and groceries, and anything else you need, every single time. I will look after you.”

His words cause tears to pick at my eyes and I give a soft sniff. “Okay, we’ll take the stupid frat house.”

He laughs, “Yeah, a frat house...sure thing.”

“What? Reb, where is this house?”

“It’s in town...” he evades.

“Where in town?”

“New town?”

“Reb...” I growl.

“Okay, okay,” he holds his hands up in surrender. “But remember you said you’d take it so there’s no take-backs now.”

“Rebel...” I threaten.

“Okay. It’s on the Royal Circus.”

Fuck. My jaw drops open. When I finally manage to recover I start to frantically shake my head no, but Rebel just laughs at me. “It’s too late, Princess, Phoenix is already picking out her curtains. It’s yours now.” He slides a key towards me across the table and my hand shoots out on autopilot to stop it from clattering to the floor. The weight of the key burns my palm. I can’t accept this; it’s too much. I feel sick.

“Nope, you’re not backing out of this one, Princess. And you can’t run either. I’ll have you microchipped if I have to, so that I don’t lose you again.”

“Microchipped? I’m not a bloody dog!” I cry indignantly.

“Stop running away then. Just say ‘thank you’.”

“Thank you, Reb,” I reluctantly pout.

“And kiss me.”

I flick the remainder of the whipped cream on my spoon at him and tell him not to push his luck. He lunges for me across the table, easily capturing me in his huge embrace, and slides out of his seat to claim me. Just as his lips are about to descend onto mine, I’m saved by Phoenix entering the lounge. She’s carrying her small pull along bag that she takes to the childminder’s for sleepovers, and under her arm is her favourite teddy bear.

“Can we go now? I’m all packed!” She beams and we both laugh.

Charlotte's Diary

17/12/19

Things have well and truly deteriorated between Cordelia and me. I have no idea how, or more importantly why, but I'm going to have to reach out once again to Baxter to ask for help.

For a while everything was fine. But I noticed that things started to change.

Sure, there was the vitamins and the food, but they felt like sensible changes to make, for the good of me and the baby. But then other little things started to change. At first it was silly: a change to my favourite shampoo brand, the temptation of unhealthy snacks being removed, pop, and even juice, disappearing from the house. And I thought, okay, it's a bit sly, but she seems to be looking out for us in earnest.

Only, then she wanted to know where I was. At all times. And I thought, maybe she's just being protective. But pretty soon, she made it very clear that she didn't want me to go out, at all. She frowned if I used my phone, always demanding I tell her who I was speaking to. Curfews came in, as did 'screen down time' where she literally made me hand over all of my tech for the day, twice a week. I felt more stifled than I have in my whole life. I can't even say that she was treating me like a child because Lizzie and I had never been treated that way by our parents.

I felt completely stifled. Suffocated, actually. I keep trying to convince myself that she has mine and the baby's best interests at heart, but something feels off.

I'm going to sneak away and try to contact Baxter. I'll see what he thinks; if I have any other options available to me at all, he'll know what they are and be able to help.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ace

Moving day. I can't believe that Rebel managed to persuade Raven to move so easily. I expected more of a fight. He must've been putting in extra time, seeing her a lot more than I expected. It has to be the only explanation as to why she would agree to move. Not that I'm complaining, I wanted her out of that dump just as much as Rebel; I just wish that I'd had the confidence to go back and see her without the others, like Rebel did.

I've showed up today to help her move. It's sad really that her and Phoenix's belongings all fit in the back of Rebel's car. I knew the furniture wasn't worth taking, so I didn't expect to need a moving van, but I thought we'd need several trips in the car.

I sit in the back seat of the car and watch her closely up front. She's stressed, anxious, preoccupied. It's not until we pull up outside the house that the enormity of what she's agreed to dawns on her face.

She turns in the front seat to gawk at Rebel. "This is too much, we should go back ..."

"It's too late for that, Princess," Rebel replies with a smirk. "You're evicted, remember?"

She doesn't respond to that, just goes back to staring out of the window at the extravagant mansion that is about to become home. I told Rebel when he bought it for his cousin that it was too much, but the boy's got even more money and less sense since his band had that one hit out in Europe somewhere.

"Shall we?" I ask, nodding towards the front door.

"I thought these were all apartments?" Raven turns to ask Reb, who shrugs.

"If you throw enough money at anything, you can get what you want." His tone is careless, and he fails to notice the way Raven flinches. I wonder what that's about?

I don't say a word, instead choosing to get out of the car and grab a box from the boot. Raven slowly follows me, staring in awe at the massive house in front of us. As we walk up to the bright blue door, she looks dwarfed by it. Rebel follows with Phoenix comfortably in his arms.

"Mummy!" Phoenix cries in wonder. "Is this a castle? Am I a princess?"

I can't help but smile, while Rebel laughs outright.

"No, you're a princess in training, Phoenix. Your mum is the original princess," Rebel tells her, causing Raven to scowl at him, even though her cheeks flush at his compliment, or the memories or something.

"I knew it," Phoenix whispers in awe, eyes wide, staring at her mum. I chuckle.

"Go. Heavy," I complain, shaking the box to show what I mean. Raven hesitates a moment longer and then opens the door to reveal a wide, airy, light hallway with a wooden floor. It's welcoming and stylish, without being over the top.

"This is completely over the top," Raven complains. "Who needs four floors in a house?"

"Five. There's a basement," Rebel points out.

"Not helping," she grumbles.

"Hey, Phoenix..." Rebel calls out, "wanna go find your room while we unpack?"

"Yeah!" Her eyes light up and she races off upstairs without a backward glance, at home already. Good.

"Knock, knock," Thorn's voice calls from the open doorway and we all spin to greet him. Raven's face lights up at the sight of him. "Thorn! Come in! Thank you for coming," she cries with excitement. "Is Jax with you?"

"Erm...no, sorry," Thorn tells her sheepishly. "He had some...business in London to attend to."

It sounds like a lie even to my ears, and I hate the way Raven looks crestfallen. She recovers quickly, plastering a

smile onto her face, and welcoming him in again.

We make short work of unloading the car, Thorn and I easily lugging boxes up to the first floor to place them in Phoenix's pink princess, unicorn, sparkly room. It makes my eyes hurt, but the little girl is beyond happy, so I guess that's all that matters.

A couple of things end up in Raven's room, but that's it. Two lives unpacked in a couple of short trips. It makes me sad. It reminds me of when I arrived in the U.K., with pretty much just the clothes on my back. I wouldn't wish that life on anyone. I want to fill this house with happy memories and mementos.

"Oh my god, how will I ever manage to afford this place?" I hear Raven cry as they re-enter the kitchen where Thorn and I are grabbing a drink. Rebel's obviously been giving her a tour of the vast space. By the looks of her beautifully windswept hair, they've just been checking out the garden...I hope. Surely they've not been gone long enough for...no. No.

"What? What's there to stress about? The house is all paid for, as are the bills, your groceries are sorted, and so's your car," Rebel tells her easily, cutting through my panicked thoughts about the two of them hooking up.

"I don't have a car," she points out.

"You do now," Rebel replies, tossing his keys into the bowl on the side. "Sorted."

"Reb..."

"Shut up, just say 'thank you'." He smirks.

"Thank you," she sighs, smiling softly. "You know this is all too much."

"Nothing is too much to ensure yours and Phoenix's safety. Take the car, house and whatever the hell else I want to give you, for her sake."

Much to my surprise, she doesn't say a word, doesn't put up a fight. Her and Rebel used to spark and clash all the time. She's softer than she was before. Less feisty. It seems like

she's lost her spark, the only time I catch glimpses of it is when she gets protective of Phoenix.

"Do you guys want to stay?" Raven asks. She seems nervous. I can't tell if it's because she's hoping we'll say yes, or no.

"No. First night. Family time," I tell her. I'd love to stay. There's nothing I'd love more, but it's their first night in their new home and they should spend it just the two of them, settling in. Only, when her face falls, I instantly feel awful for saying no. It's too late to take it back though.

"Come tomorrow?" I ask hopefully, and she brightens to give me a smile.

"Absolutely! I'll make breakfast, as a thank you for carrying all those heavy boxes."

I scoff, because the boxes were nothing, but I'm not about to turn down the opportunity to see her again.

"Besides," Rebel jokes, "I don't want to be here when you explore the basement!"

"It's not full of..." she hesitates, and doesn't finish her sentence.

"Dead bodies? No," Thorn laughs, oblivious to Raven's cringe. I want to smack him for his thoughtlessness. I give her an apologetic smile and she shrugs it off.

"I'll see you guys out." She smiles, walking us proudly to the door. I'm glad she likes the house. I want it to become a proper home for her and Phoenix. I hope it's a happy home, one where I'm welcome to visit and help them make memories.

On the doorstep, she pauses awkwardly, like she's unsure how to say goodbye to us. I don't blame her; what is this? What are we? She hesitates, then steps forward and throws her arms around Thorn in a giant hug. He's taken aback, a little tense, but eventually relaxes into her embrace.

Rebel throws his massive bear-like form around her tiny elfin one, and strangles her in his overbearing hold. She

doesn't complain though, even when he lifts her clear off the ground.

Finally she turns to me and I'm ready and waiting, arms outstretched, and she steps smartly into them, allowing me to envelope her. I hold her a moment too long, smelling her hair and drinking in every curve, inch, and memory of her. Too soon, she steps away, leaving me bereft.

I don't know what this is between us right now, but I know that I want to stick around long enough to let it develop into something.

Charlotte's Diary

24/12/19

Baxter helped me see sense. He was horrified by Cordelia's behaviour and encouraged me not to go back.

Obviously, I had to, but only to back a bag and leave. She tried to stop me and things got pretty ugly, but I was able to escape. It sounds so overly dramatic to be saying I had to flee from my grandmother's house, but it was like something out of a bad film.

Now I'm back at Baxter's flat - with him this time - and we're going to be spending Christmas together. He's promised to help me find a flat in the new year.

Here's hoping I can find something affordable.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jax

What I'm about to do sickens me. But I have to do it. I grit my teeth, take a deep breath, and get my game face on. I ring the bell.

It takes a moment but eventually someone opens the door. I have a story concocted in case it's not her who answers, but I needn't have worried. The blue townhouse door swings open and I'm staring into the face of the person I loathe the most in the world. My stomach dips.

"Jax?" Tilly asks, surprise evident on her face. Already, she is breaking out into a huge grin as I try for a nonchalant, "Hey."

"Oh my god! How are you? What are you doing here? Come in! Come in!" she gushes, moving aside and gesturing for me to enter. I do, closing the door behind me and stopping for a second to look around. The hallway is wide, with a sweeping staircase that ascends four floors. The downstairs features open doorways, lots of white space, and tasteful gold furnishings. The effect is clean, sleek, modern, yet opulent. I wouldn't expect anything less from Tilly.

"Nice place, Til," I say, using my old nickname for her.

"Do you really like it?" She beams.

"It's a lot less pink than the last room of yours I was in," I reply, referring to her bedroom when we were at school. She smiles knowingly, but cocks her head and bats her lashes in a falsely coy way that makes me want to gag. "How have you been?" I ask her. Getting Tilly to talk about her favourite thing - herself - has never been hard.

And just like that she's off. I follow her silently through to the sitting room, as she tells me all about her new life in London, the wealthy stock exchange husband she bagged herself, how all her dreams to marry well and have the house and connections and money that she always aspired to have come true. As vile as the things she did in the past are, at least

it made her interesting. Now she's just a vapid bitch. It will make things more fun for me; she apparently has everything to lose.

"Miss Tilly?" A small voice comes from the doorway and I whip around to see who spoke. A small boy, surely no more than three years old, stands in the doorway in teddy bear pjs, rubbing his eyes.

"Go back to bed, Stefan," she says coldly. "Juanita! Put the boy back to bed!" she screeches. Close to tears, the boy turns around and walks away.

"Sorry, Tilly, I didn't mean to interrupt your evening. Do you need me to go so that you can see to your...son?" I'm thoroughly confused. There's no way she's the maternal type, and the boy didn't call her mum.

"Stefan?" She laughs, but it's not a warm, joyful sound. "Christ no! That brat isn't mine. I can't stand kids...no, that's Archie's son. Previous marriage. Thankfully we only have to deal with him once a month." She shudders.

I'm not going to lie, I used to have similar views about kids myself. But spending time with Phoenix has definitely started to change that view for me. I'm not saying I'm ready to race out and become a dad tomorrow, but I'm not saying never. The boy seemed sweet enough, and if Tilly's dead against him, it confirms in my mind that he must be alright.

I grin at her as if I agree with what she's saying, and she pats for me to join her on the sofa. I take a seat, and she jumps to her feet to quickly fix me a drink. Bourbon on the rocks. I need liquid courage for this.

"So what brings you to London?" She bats her lashes at me again and I realise that they're false. Overly long, overly thick, over the top. Like everything about her.

"You'll laugh, but actually you." She does indeed laugh and leans towards me on the sofa.

"What?" She breathes.

"Well, I heard you were in the area, and I had some family business nearby, so I thought I'd swing by and catch up with

an old friend.” I wonder if she’ll call me out on my bullshit; we’re not friends, never were.

“If you were nearby, you didn’t come for me,” she pouts. “Driving fifty miles out of my way to see you is in the area isn’t it?” I tease with a wink. She preens, like a cat that caught a mouse. This could be too easy I think to myself. I’d better slow it down. I need her to fall for me; it’s not a fuck and duck.

“Oh,” she giggles, “now I feel special.”

I fix her with an intense look. It could easily be construed as earnest, but I’m acting out my eyeballs here.

“I missed you, Til. You look good,” I give her a slow, deliberate once over, and run my tongue over my bottom lip, “really good.” I down my drink in one, placing the empty glass back on the table with a quiet chink of the ice that didn’t have time to melt.

“I’m sorry to call by unannounced. I honestly didn’t realise that you had this amazing life. I wouldn’t have come by if I’d known.” I pause and sigh wistfully. “Of course, I should have known that someone like you would have been snapped up by now. I guess I’m just reminiscent of the old days. We were good together, weren’t we?”

“We were,” she agrees breathlessly. And that’s when I know I’ve got her; hook, line and sinker. She leans in, brushes her breasts against my arm, and pats my thigh. I go to move and she lets out a tiny sound of protest.

“I should go, let you get back to your evening.” There’s no sign of the husband. No sign of anyone actually living here at all. The place is cold, sterile, a museum. I can’t help but think of Raven’s dilapidated shack of a flat. In every sense Tilly’s place is so much better, nicer, fancier. But Raven’s is warmer. And I realise there’s nowhere I’d rather be.

I shake that thought from my head. I have a job to do and I need to focus. Thinking of Raven now could fuck everything up. I make my way back out to the door, Tilly trailing in my wake like a sad puppy who doesn’t want its master to leave.

When I reach the door I turn to her and she's so close behind me she falls into my arms. Without thinking, I impulsively pull her to me and kiss her hard on the lips. Only, it's Raven's lips I'm kissing. It's Raven's small moan that makes me harder than steel. It's Raven's hands that snake up and grip my shoulders.

Abruptly I pull away, a pained look on my face. "I'm so sorry, Til, I shouldn't have done that! You're married. Happily married to a wonderful guy. You have everything you've ever dreamed of. I shouldn't have come." I open the door and step outside. She calls out in a panic.

"Wait!" I pause, a small smile on my face which I carefully school before I turn back to face her. "Will you be in the area again?" she asks, her eyes full of hope.

"I...could be." I hedge.

"It would be good to catch up properly, don't you think? With more time?"

"I'd like that," I lie.

"Archie is away next weekend and the brat won't be around. We could meet up?"

"Sure. Sounds good. I'll book somewhere nearby to stay, then I won't have to race off to drive home."

"You could stay...I mean, there's plenty of spare rooms here."

"Wouldn't your husband mind?" I hesitate.

"Oh no, he won't mind at all," she insists.

"Wow, Tilly, that's really kind of you. Thank you. I won't have to race off then and we can really catch up," I make sure my voice is heavy with meaning. Her nipples pebble beneath her thin top and I know, not only has she caught my meaning explicitly, but that she's gagging for it.

I quickly turn back to her and kiss her on the cheek. I linger for a moment so that she can soak in my scent. Then I pull away and pass her my card. "Text me the details. I'll see

you next week.” I turn away and head down the stairs, pausing at the pavement to look back at her. “Oh and Til?”

“Yeah?” she asks, flushed and flustered.

“Wear something...nice.” I wink. “I’ll take you out.”

I walk away, whistling. This is going to be easier than I thought.

Charlotte's Diary

07/01/20

Got the keys to my new flat today - rented of course, and closer to Cordelia's house than I would have liked - but Baxter insisted I stay local to the midwives and hospital where I'd be having the baby. I know it makes sense, but I just can't relax knowing that she's nearby.

Baxter is hanging around a lot more, which is really nice, but it's going to make being alone even harder when the day finally comes. I'm really worried about how I'm going to survive on nothing - thanks to the frozen trust fund, a parting gift from Cordelia as punishment for my leaving - without adding in the crippling loneliness of my only friend's absence too.

I have to admit once again that I definitely got Baxter all wrong. He's gone above and beyond, showering me with all the things I need for the baby and renting the flat for a year for me, under the pretense of it all being a Christmas present so I couldn't say no to his charity.

I got him socks.

I don't know how I'll ever repay him for everything.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Thorn

I pace on the pavement outside her house, unsure. Should I walk up to the door and ring the bell? It seems such a simple, easy thing to do, but I can't bring myself to actually do it somehow.

A quick glance at my watch tells me I've been dicking around for nearly twenty minutes. If I don't ring the bell soon, someone will call the police on me. Decided, I stride up the steps to her front door, ring said bell, and wait.

I wait a few minutes, then ring again. Maybe she's not home. It's not too late, and it isn't a 'school' night, so maybe she's out. I give the bell one last ring for luck and then turn around to head back to my car.

My foot just hits the bottom step when I hear the door behind me swing open and Raven's breathless voice calls out "Thorn?" in question. I hesitate, unsure. But it's too late to back out now. Instead, I spin to face her and head back up the steps.

"Sorry, I was in the shower," she tells me. "Were you waiting long?"

And that's when I notice she's in a towel. Well, if you can call it that. It looks more like she's grabbed a face cloth and is desperately trying to cover her naked body behind the door and the tiniest scrap of material I've ever seen. Droplets cover every inch of her skin, and her hair is a waterfall down her back. Fuck. My dick twitches and jerks to life. I silently groan because his timing sucks.

"Do you want to come in?" Raven asks me, frowning, and I realise I didn't reply to the last question she asked. Shit. Have I lost the power of speech? I nod in reply. "Okay, come in. Go through to the lounge and I'll be with you in ten. I think I still have conditioner in my hair."

As she says this, she reaches up to run a hand over her hair, and the towel slips significantly. She races to correct it

and hastily shuts the door.

“Be right back,” she cries, bolting for the stairs.

I enjoy the flash of her bare ass as she goes, but it does nothing to stop my hardening erection. Fuck.

The world’s fastest ten minutes later, she’s back with me, dressed in ass-hugging yoga pants and a t-shirt. No bra, I can’t help but notice. Her damp hair is now pulled forwards over her shoulders and has left wet patches on her shirt. Oh dear god she’s trying to kill me.

And still I don’t speak.

What. The. Fuck. You fucking idiot! Say something! “Coke.” Ah shit.

“Huh?”

“You were gonna ask me what I wanted to drink. Coke. Please.” The manners are an afterthought. Wordlessly she disappears again, this time into the kitchen, and I smack myself on the forehead. Get it together.

“Here,” she says softly a moment later, holding out the can.

“Thank you. Sorry.”

“Don’t mention it,” she smiles. After a beat, she adds, “I’m happy to see you Thorn, but did you want something?”

“Yes. No...ah crap, I don’t know.” I shake my head and take a drink, stalling.

“Let’s sit,” she offers kindly.

“Am I going to disturb Phoenix by being here? Do I need to go?”

“No, she’s on her sleepover at the childminder’s tonight. It’s not her day to go but her daughter is having a party and Phoenix didn’t want to miss out. It feels like she’s three going on thirteen sometimes,” she laughs. I love the way her face lights up when she talks about Phoenix.

“I wanted to talk,” I tell her.

“I would never have guessed,” she teases, but when I don’t crack a smile, her face falls.

“Aren’t you sorry? At all?” I can’t help but blurt the question out, right into her face with the force of a ton of bricks. She actually shrinks back as though hit by them.

“Thorn...” She looks uncomfortable.

I drain my drink nervously, and ask for another. She eyes me warily, sighs, then grabs my glass and gets up. This time I follow her. On my feet, I feel more confident, more in control.

In the kitchen I watch her from the doorway as she gets another pop from the fridge. She pauses for a moment in front of the open door, taking deep breaths, like she’s drawing strength from the chill.

“Don’t you care?” I spit as soon as the door closes and she spins around to face me.

I take three long strides towards her and thrust my left hand under her nose. “Look what you did! You did that! And it could have been so much worse!”

Her eyes drop to my scarred palm and she gives a surprised gasp that ends on a sob. Her hands fly to her mouth and tears instantly spill down her cheeks.

“Wh-what happened?” she stammers.

“I grabbed the door, tried to open it,” I tell her, shaking my head. Jax had shouted at me to stop, but it was too late. The instant my hand wrapped around the handle, white-hot pain seared my flesh and I couldn’t let go. Eventually I wrenched it free, but the damage was done.

“Thorn, I’m so so sorry!” She sobs, really sobs, like she feels my pain, and her slender fingers delicately trace along the edge of the puckered scar. “I’m sorry for everything. I regretted it the moment I did it, I never wanted to hurt you.”

“But you wanted to hurt someone. Most people,” I don’t word it as a question and she doesn’t answer it anyway. Instead, she grabs my hand and raises it towards her face, like

she needs a closer look at the mutilated skin that's twisted and puckered up.

"This kills me," she tells me, her warm salty tears flowing freely onto my palm. That's when I realise that she's wounded too. Only, aside from the one on her arm, I can't see her scars.

All of the fight leaves me.

I feel like an absolute dick. I didn't come here to make her cry. I didn't want to hurt her. Hell, I didn't even want answers, not really. What do I want? Why am I here? Because I'm a fucking addict and I need another hit.

My injured hand tangles itself into her wet locks and I wrap the length of her black tresses around my fist. With a short, sharp tug, I jerk her head back so that it's tilted up to meet me. I take another step, pressing my body into hers, pushing her back against the cold stainless steel fridge.

"Wha-?"

I cut off her questions by crushing her lips in a bruising, punishing kiss. My hips pin her against the unforgiving metal and I devour her relentlessly. Body has overtaken brain at this point. I don't question it.

She gives a strangled sort of gasp, then a long low groan that has my erection straining against her. She wants this as much as I do! The realisation is the green light I need to really let loose.

I bite her bottom lip, loving her mewls. My tongue forces its way between her teeth and tangles with her own. I chase her, stealing her breath, her gasps, her moans of pleasure. I punish her with my kiss, using it to send the message that what she did is not okay. I was not okay.

I am not okay.

Grabbing the bottom of her shirt, I fist it and rip it up over her head. Her arms automatically shoot up, and she gives no protest. My hands find her breasts and cup them, before tweaking her nipples. Her sharp intake of breath at the pain I've caused her has my dick dancing.

I close the space between us and return to kissing her.

Suddenly, it's like I've been burnt. The heat of her body pressing against me transports me back to the night of the fire. The heat of the blaze presses down on me, choking, threatening to consume.

Instantly, I pull away, dropping Raven down onto her feet. I need space. I withdraw, putting distance between us. I need air. I'm panting hard, heart pacing, temples pounding. I need to breathe. I move into the hallway.

"Wha-?" I hear her start to say. But I'm already out the door.

Charlotte's Diary

03/02/20

I phoned Baxter in a panic today. A routine growth scan showed reduced movement and the hospital is worried that the baby may be in distress. They want to keep me in to monitor me, and induce me if necessary.

I was terrified.

I phoned him in floods of tears because I don't know what to do...I'm not ready. She's not due for another month. It's too soon, too early!

He was amazing; calming me down and instantly promising to be with me in a couple of hours. He even said he'd go to my flat first and collect my hospital bag with everything in it that I'd need for the baby.

There was a lot of waiting. I was so tense, so worried, so scared. There were tests and examinations and monitors, even talk of surgery. I kept praying that Baxter would get to me in time.

And then Bax was there and everything was suddenly calmer.

He instantly sprang into action, talking to the midwives and doctors, finding out what was going on, what my options were. I felt like I could finally breathe.

And then all hell broke loose.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Baxter

I smile down at the text on my phone from Jax. Game on. I saunter into the bar he sent me the address of and find my way to a back corner. It's pretty dark and crowded already, so I don't have any concerns about being seen until I'm good and ready. When the waitress comes, I order a scotch on the rocks. And then I wait.

It takes about half an hour, but Jax soon enters with Tilly. She's dressed to the nines, ridiculously so, and it's hard for me not to snort into my drink. This is going to be too easy.

I have to say, she's exactly what I expected. Although I'd heard of her - I think every elite boarding school student our age in the country had - I'd never actually laid eyes on her before this point. Still, if someone had asked me to pick her out of a lineup based on reputation alone, I could have done it with my eyes closed. She's fake: Fake nails, tan, hair, lashes, breasts, lips, and cheeks. Blonde from a bottle, too thin, overly made up, highly strung, past her prime, trying a little too hard. She looks a decade older than she really is, but with a savage hardness to her eyes. Not one to be messed with. Or so she'd like others to think.

My favourite kind of prey.

I sit back and enjoy the show as Jax leads her to a table not too far from me and orders a bottle of champagne. It's such a cliché, but of course Tilly laps it up. Women like her live for extravagant displays of wealth. Hence why I'm wearing ridiculous designer labels tonight that her greedy eyes won't fail to notice.

She laughs at something Jax has said, leaning forward seductively to place a hand on his arm, and to flash her cleavage at him too, of course. Her flirting technique is not subtle. She laughs too loud, too often, and is constantly flipping her hair. Or attempting to; with the amount of hairspray she has lacquered on, it barely moves. It's a wonder that she hasn't given herself a crick in the neck attempting to

toss it over her shoulder. Did no one ever point out that mane tossing is incredibly horse-like? I shudder at the thought of having to sleep with this plastic wannabe Barbie doll.

I have to remind myself that the end-game is worth it.

I give them another half hour or so, before I'm so bored I can't stand it any longer. I rise to my feet and walk slowly past their table, faking a double-take when Jax's surprised voice calls out "Bax? Is that you?"

I spin on my heels to face his table and give an almighty grin. I fucking hate smiling. I think the first time I genuinely smiled was that summer on the island with Raven, and she asked me if I'd cracked my face or hurt myself. Genuine emotion isn't something I often show. Or even feel, for that matter.

"Jaxon? Jaxon Jackson?"

"The one and only!"

Jaxon rises to his feet and we do this weird fist-bump-back-slap move that idiots our age like to do. A quick surreptitious glance at Tilly shows she's seriously pissed off that she's not the centre of attention.

"How are you?" I ask, feigning actually giving a shit.

"Really well!" Jax goes on to gush about some bullshit business deal he's working on, dropping figures and profit margins and exotic locales. I assume it's bullshit anyway. I don't really care to get to know him well enough to find out. What we're doing here doesn't make us friends; we're allies at best. United on a common mission to destroy the girl who hurt the person we care about most in the world.

I nod along for a while, wondering how long Tilly is going to stand being snubbed and ignored for, when she clears her throat loudly.

"Jaxon, baby," she whines with a sugary sweetness that's more artificial than sweetener, "your friend was leaving and you're holding him up."

That seemed surprisingly tactful for her.

“Oh gosh, Tilly, you’re so right!” Jax exclaims. “Sorry Bax, I should let you go...”

“Not before you introduce me to your delectable friend here,” I croon, giving Tilly my full attention, acting like, now I’ve seen her, I can’t bring myself to take my eyes off her. She barely spares me a glance and clicks her tongue in annoyance at my attention. I bite back a smile of amusement.

“How rude of me, Bax this is my...dear friend Tilly,”

“Date,” she clarifies with force.

“My date. And Tilly, this is Baxter...Baxter Branson.”

The effect is instantaneous: her jaw drops; she blinks in disbelief; her eyes scan my designer clothes and my custom-made Italian leather shoes before lighting up, and then she sits up straight, pushes out her breasts and smiles at me like she’s pure sunshine itself.

“Mr Branson, Sir, what an honour it is to meet you,” she gushes, thrusting a hand into my face for me to shake. I clasp it gently and bring it to my lips to kiss. She preens, lapping it up.

“Please, call me Baxter. Mr Branson is my grandfather,” I pretend to shudder at the thought of being confused with him, but everyone at the table knows that I am the sole heir to the four billion pound Branson fortune, so it’s all an act.

“Oh, Baxter,” she giggles lightly, “you’re practically a celebrity in your own right!”

“Ah, you’re too kind, Tilly - is it okay to call you Tilly?” she nods and I continue, “But I think perhaps I’m more infamous, than famous. Much to Grandfather’s chagrin.”

I barely manage to hold back my amused smile as Tilly devours me with her greedy eyes. It’s funny - in a completely non-humorous way - how she barely spared me a glance as I approached them, but now she’s practically drooling, pound signs in her eyes, once Jax ‘dropped’ my name. He won’t have missed it either; he’s far too sharp for that. Like me, he’s seen more than his fair share of gold diggers in his time, although fucking with them was always my favourite pastime, not his.

“Actually, Mr Branson-” she begins.

“Baxter,” I insist with a charming, practiced smile.

“B-Baxter.” She stumbles over her words and I can’t quite work out if it’s an act, or if she’s just that awe-struck by me. Either way it’s pathetic. “I was wondering, I’m sure you don’t, but maybe if you did...”

“Breathe, love,” I tell her, capturing her hands and staring intently into her eyes. It has the opposite effect, as I intended, and she lets out a weird swooning noise. I bite my tongue to keep from laughing. In my periphery, I see Jax doing the same.

“Sorry!” She takes a deep breath to calm herself. “What I meant to say was, I help to run a charity for orphaned children, and I would really love if someone of your calibre could get involved with us!”

I beam at her.

“I’d love to get involved with you,” I gently stress the difference between her and the charity. Her cat-like smile tells me she caught it. “I was just thinking about how I would like to do more philanthropic work.” I hear Jax snort behind a fake cough. “And I adore kids!” I add as an afterthought.

“Oh me too,” she gushes.

“Why don’t I give you my number and you can call me to discuss something at a time that better suits you,” I say, indicating Jax. She looks shocked to see him sitting there still. “I’m sorry to intrude on your date,” I remind her that she’s taken, “Jaxon, you are one lucky son-of-a-bitch! Look after this one, she’s a real gem!”

I wink, kiss her hand once more, and depart. Inside, I’m laughing about how easy it is.

Charlotte's Diary

Phoenix's birth 04/02/20

She's so tiny. I don't know how I've managed to make something so perfect. I've never been in love like this before. The feelings overwhelm me. Why didn't anyone warn me what it would be like? Nothing could have prepared me for this.

So many feelings! So much fear. The need to keep her safe, to give her the best life possible, to do right by her, to fix all the fucked-up relationships that I've left in my wake...it's crippling and overwhelming at the same time. She shouldn't have to suffer because I'm a train wreck.

I can't help but wish things were different as I watch him cradle her in his huge arms. She looks even tinier next to him. He looks absolutely smitten. It's love at first sight for him. He smiles at her like she's his own.

Things would be so much easier, so much simpler, if that were true. If I could just feel that way towards him. He's been my absolute rock. I don't think either of us would be here today if it weren't for his help, support and friendship. Who knew it would be him?

He hasn't pressured me at all, but I know he wants me to reach out to Cordelia. I'm not ready to have a relationship with her yet, but I can't deny her one with her great-grandchild. Phoenix Elizabeth.

I'll call her. Soon.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Charlotte

I can't believe it's Monday and I'm driving to campus. I didn't miss the parking pass that Rebel slipped onto the dash at some point. He really does think of everything.

I've just dropped Phoenix off at the childminder's house and it was so lovely to be able to let her sleep in longer, and to be able to give her a nutritious breakfast before she went. I don't feel comfortable in the house knowing what it costs, knowing that I'm accepting charity, but Phoenix's joy is definitely rubbing off on me. I sigh, because I'm partly content, and partly nervous; waiting for the other shoe to drop. I don't want Rebel to leave. Or the others. It hurts that I've not seen Jax since he found out about

Phoenix. Or was it Baxter that triggered his hasty exit?

Who am I kidding; I know that they can't stay here and hang around me forever. They must all have lives, jobs, girlfriends - hell, maybe even wives - to go home to. But it still stings that he didn't say goodbye.

I've arrived on campus without even realising, pulling into a parking space easily. I'm still too early for my classes, overestimating how long it would take to drive across town to drop Phoenix off and then get to school. I guess tomorrow we could have a lie-in. That would be a novelty; to spend longer in bed rather than getting up early. It will be nice.

As it's so early, I jump out of the car and make my way over to the campus coffee shop. Just this once I'll allow myself the luxury of a shop-bought hot chocolate. I soon regret it though, when it still doesn't taste as good as Thorn's. I sigh, and vow to speak to him soon about last night.

He left me baffled...not to mention my heart being a little bruised by the rejection. Of all the guys, he's definitely changed the most. Despite still looking so young, his easy boyish charm is gone. There's something heavier and darker in its place. I think of the scar on his hand and shudder, eyes

welling with guilty tears. I don't know how to make things better between us. But I do know that if I could take his scar and his pain away, I would do it in a heartbeat.

It's later and the coffee shop has filled while I've been wrapped up in my thoughts. I notice a strange buzz, a weird atmosphere, and start to pay more attention. It feels like a thousand whispers humming away at once, and I swear I'm being paranoid, but I think I hear my name a few times. I pack up and leave, determined to get to class in plenty of time.

As I walk across campus, I feel eyes on me, tracking my every move. The buzzing continues, only out in the open people are less subtle. There are groups of students whispering behind their hands, and some even go as far as to point outright at me. I imagine I hear insults thrown my way.

What the hell is going on?

I can only wonder if this is because I've somehow been seen out and about with Rebel. Or maybe moving into the new house? I've always kept a low profile on campus, but maybe moving into one of the country's most expensive houses has got tongues wagging. It's definitely an odd - and unwelcome - feeling, being the centre of attention once again. I much prefer blending into the background.

I stick my head down, quicken my pace, and seek refuge in the front row of my favourite class. I have about ten minutes of peace before the rows start to fill. The chatter continues but this time it feels more normal, though I still feel eyes on me and the odd whisper of my name.

Five minutes past lesson start time, the professor hasn't arrived. He's never late. Whispers start. Ten minutes later and a substitute walks through the door. The noise is tumultuous. I don't think Professor Cox has ever missed a class.

"Quiet down!" the sub yells over the din of the room, but students still fire questions at her. "If you shut up for a moment, I'll be able to answer your questions!"

Surprisingly, the room listens, though one lone voice still calls out "Where's The Prof?" The substitute doesn't even

crack a smile.

“He has been called into an urgent meeting but-”

That’s as much as she can get out before the room erupts again, loud angry chatter drowning out her feeble attempts to regain order.

“This is all her fault,” an angry voice close to me spits, and I turn in time to see the speaker throwing me an evil glare. What?

“Yeah, she’s ruined it for the rest of us.”

“Dirty skank.”

“Slut!”

The catcalls follow me as I grab my bag and make a hasty exit out of the room. The blood is pounding in my ears but I can still hear their jeers long after the door is shut.

I’m contemplating what to do, when my phone buzzes in my bag. I pull it out and discover an email from the dean marked as urgent. Shit. They want me in a meeting right away!

I hastily toss the phone back in the bag, and then race across campus to the administration building. Breathless, I pant at the disapproving secretary that I have a meeting with the dean.

“You’re late!” he snaps when I enter his office a moment later, still slightly winded from my sprint. I catch my breath, force out a hasty “sorry”, and then notice my professor sitting in one of the chairs. “Take a seat Ms. McLintock.”

Confused, I fall into the other chair and wait for the dean to take his seat behind the desk. When he does, he looks expectantly between the two of us and then asks if I know why I’ve been called in.

“No sir,” I instantly reply. I have no idea what’s going on here. I glance at Charles Snr, but he won’t meet my gaze.

“It has come to our attention, Ms McLintock, that you have been trading...services...for grades.” The dean looks like a nasty smell has crawled up his nose. I don’t blame him.

What he's suggesting is abhorrent. My stomach churns in disbelief and horror at what he's suggesting.

"Excuse me, what?" I blink in confusion.

"We have several anonymous reports claiming that you have been having sex with Professor Cox," the dean continues, "possibly in exchange for higher grades."

A disbelieving strangled sort of noise escapes my throat. "You're not denying it then?" He raises a greying bushy eyebrow at me expectantly.

"What? Yes! Of course I'm denying it!" I cry. I turn to my teacher who is sitting silently in the chair beside me and beseech him. "Why aren't you denying it, Charles?"

"Ms. McLintock! It really does not favour your claim of innocence that you are on a first name basis with the teacher in question!" The dean gasps, scandalised.

"I did deny it, Charlotte," Charles tells me sadly. "Many times. I've been here for hours."

"This is outrageous! What evidence do you have?" I demand, turning back to face the Dean.

"Several anonymous reports that you have been seen going into Professor Cox's house, and the fact that you are the highest scoring student in his class."

"That's because I work bloody hard!"

"Language, Ms. McLintock!"

"And I went to the house because I was dating his son!"

"A 'fact' which Mr Cox Jnr vehemently denies," the dean tells me.

Realisation dawns. The fucker. I will fucking kill Charlie for this! This is all his doing. Revenge for my ending things with him...or refusing to put out. Probably both, as his ego is so wounded.

"Charles, please, you need to speak to him about this. This is because I finished things with him. You know what he's like," I beg my teacher to help me.

“I told you, Walter, that it was all lies, and Ms McLintock has corroborated everything I have just said, without any guidance or ‘conferring’ between us. You have to chalk this up to a silly prank.”

I’m devastated when my favourite professor won’t meet my eye, but eternally grateful that he is at least defending me.

“Be that as it may, I’m going to have to insist that Ms McLintock drops out of your class. Now, you can transfer-”

“What? No!” I practically scream at him. “I can’t change classes. I’ve almost graduated and I need this course on my resume. The other courses don’t fit with my work and childcare schedules!” I blurt out my secret without thinking.

“Childcare?” Charles Snr asks.

“Shit!” I cringe, slapping a hand over my big mouth. “Language!” the dean retorts.

“Please don’t say anything, Charles. Please don’t tell Charlie! He doesn’t know. No one knows,” I beg.

“Look Walter, there has to be another solution here,” Charles states placatingly. “Why not let Ms McLintock finish my course and I will have someone else in the department grade all of her essays?”

“I would, Charles, but there’s one other piece of evidence that I’ve neglected to mention before now.” The dean stares at me, challenging and expectant, but I have no idea what his ace is. “I was hoping you would come clean Ms. McLintock and we could have saved everyone in the room this discomfort and embarrassment.”

Only, his expression doesn’t match his words; of anything, he seems gleeful and it makes me uncomfortable.

“What evidence?” Charles asks with a hint of trepidation.

The dean doesn’t answer, instead turning his tap top screen around on the desk to face us. There, in 21 inch widescreen full colour HD glory, is a photo of a girl stretched out on red satin sheets wearing a tiny black lace thong. Nothing more.

She has long dark hair, full pouty lips, and huge green eyes which are..

Fuck. It's me.

Only it's not.

It can't be.

I've never laid on satin sheets in my life and I've certainly never taken sexy photos of myself, let alone sent them to someone.

I glance at Charles Snr and his face is aflame, eyes averted, ever the perfect gentleman refusing to look at something so tawdry.

"This was found on your work email server this morning, Charles, sent over a week ago from Ms McLintock's email."

"That's not possible!" I cry.

"I've never seen that image before in my life," Charles adds quietly.

"And yet it was marked as 'read' in your inbox," The dean replies.

"It's not even me!" I blurt out.

"Pardon? Ms. McLintock, unless you are claiming to have a twin sister," he chortles humourlessly at his joke, unaware just how in poor taste it is. "I am very much certain this is you in the photo," the dean replies firmly.

"The face is, but the body isn't. It's been photoshopped, look," I insist, pointing to where 'my' head meets the shoulders. "The skin tones are completely different for one and..."

"That could just be the lighting," the dean dismisses. I feel like he's gunning for me, like no matter what I say he has already made up his mind that I'm guilty. Why?

"AND," I continue loudly, hating his interruption, "I don't have a vine tattoo trailing down my side."

I point to the torso of the woman where the hint of a tattoo can just be seen along her right left side. I jump to my feet, raise my shirt to show my own ink-free abdomen and sides.

“See?”

“I...I...” the dean stammers. “Put that away Ms. McLintock! Your behaviour is entirely inappropriate!”

“I’m assuming this matter is dealt with now, Walter?” Charles asks, getting to his feet in an attempt to leave.

“Actually, it’s not,” I declare.

“Ms. McLintock, please accept my sincerest-”

“Revenge porn is a crime,” I cut him off. “I want this reported to the authorities and investigated. I’d say it’s blindingly obvious who’s responsible, so why don’t you drag him in here and read him the riot act?”

“Well, Ms. McLintock, there’s no need to overreact. Students do play harmless pranks on one another from time to time.” The dean simpers.

“I will take this to the police and I will press charges if the university doesn’t take serious action on this,” I refuse to back down. “You have until Friday. Until then, I’ll leave this in your incompetent hands.”

I stand up from my chair and turn to Charles on my way out. He offered no apology. He knows his son is responsible and hasn’t made a move against him. My blood boils.

“Sort your son out, Charles, before I do.” With that ominous promise, I walk out of the dean’s office, slamming the door shut behind me.

Too angry to go back to class, I stomp across campus - thankfully avoiding all people - and climb into my new car. A few deep breaths later, I’m no calmer.

Yeah, it’s time to make Charlie Cox pay. Only...how?

Charlotte's Diary

25/02/20

Today was so hard, I wouldn't have survived without Baxter by my side. We took Phoenix to meet Cordelia. I didn't want to stay and be around her, but I wouldn't leave Phoenix with her either. Thankfully, Bax acted as a buffer between us and we kept the conversation completely focused on him or Phoenix. Cordelia even managed to keep almost all criticisms to herself.

It was strained. But she seemed quite taken with Phoenix. It would be impossible not to be; the girl is an angel.

Every time I look at her, I find myself assessing her features, trying to work out who she looks like. At the moment she's not giving any clues away as to who her daddy might be; she's a little mini-me. White blonde hair and huge green eyes that are way too old for her. Perhaps she'll change later. Or maybe the paternal genes will show in her personality or other traits...I guess only time will tell.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Charlotte

Things haven't gotten any easier. Clearly, the fact that I'm still on campus and haven't been kicked out should be message enough that I was wrongly accused, but of course people don't see it that way.

With the university failing to release any kind of statement about my innocence, rumour and speculation were still rife all over campus. Charlie was, at least, suspended for a week for his part in the revenge porn. A joke really, but the school gave out the minimal punishment they could to get me off their backs. They didn't like my threat of involving the law at all.

And today he'd be back. I was dreading it. My name is splashed all over campus too. I've tried to keep my head held high, to turn a blind eye, ignore the comments and jeers, but I'm tired. Having the guys back in my life has made me realise how lonely I am. As awful as Charlie was, at least he offered sporadic company. The highlight of my life at the moment is whenever one of the guys calls by, but I rarely know when that's going to happen.

"That's her," the whispering starts as soon as I enter the campus coffee shop. It's like a buzzing of angry voices hitting me all at once, stinging.

"I heard she fucked them both!"

"What, father and son? At the same time?"

"No the prof and the dean. It's how she got away with it."

"Charlie said he shared her with all his friends."

"He was only dating her for a bet."

"She writes essays in exchange for sex."

"I heard she was easy."

"Charlie said she was frigid."

"Probably too tired to put out for him after spending all of her time working on her back."

The laughter is what hurts the most. Do they not realise I can hear them? Of course they do. They just don't care. Can't they understand that their words hurt? That, even if anything they said was true, it's rude and hurtful and unkind to point and whisper and laugh?

I leave. I don't even grab my drink to go, I just leave it on the table. I grab my bag and race out of the door, slamming into someone because I've got my head down, trying to be invisible.

"Ooof! Sorry!" I cry, trying to sidestep the chest I've hit. I move right as it goes left. Repeat. I can't get past.

"Well, well, well," a cold voice drawls. "If it isn't the campus slut."

"Don't," I whisper.

"Oh sorry, do you prefer whore? Prostitute? Jezebel?"

"Charlie, don't," I cringe at the pleading, begging tone of my voice. Fuck. Where's my strength when I need it? Why am I always Charlotte when it comes to dealing with him? Why can't I be takes- no-shit Raven?

He just laughs. The sound turning my stomach and sending shivers down my spine.

"Please Charlie, I'm sorry about the way things ended. You've had your fun. Please, can we let it go now? Call it a day."

"I'm not even close to being done with you yet, Charlotte." The way he says my name has bile rising up my throat. "The way I see it, my fun is only just beginning."

I try to step past him but he shoves me. I stumble and fall, landing off the path and in the mud. I can feel everyone's eyes on me through the window of the coffee shop. I feel rather than hear their whispers, their laughs. Tears prick at the corner of my eyes, but then Charlie spits at me, a large white gob landing right by my feet, and rage fills me.

I scramble to my feet and shove him back.

“Fuck you, Charlie! I’ve tried to be nice about this. I could have gone to the police about what you did, but I was kind.”

He laughs, without even looking back at me, and walks away. The coffee shop door jingles and a cacophony of sounds assault me for a moment before the door closes once more. For a second I contemplate storming in there after him, but I don’t. I don’t want to make a scene. Instead, I dust myself off and head to class.

Literature. Great. I forego my favourite front row seat in favour of hiding at the back. I try to keep my head down but I’m still the centre of attention. I don’t raise my hand once in class, and Charles doesn’t look my way at all, even though he must know I’m not in my usual seat. It’s miserable. I’m miserable. My literature class was the one joy I had and that’s been taken from me.

“Psssst, Charlotte,” a low voice hisses from my left. I turn to see a guy that I’ve never spoken to a few seats down. “I wanted to sleep with the prof for an A but it seems I’m not his type,” he laughs, “so I was thinking, if I slept with you instead, could you write my essay for me in exchange?”

I look away and don’t bother to reply. I just need the day to be over.

When the bell goes, I’m up and out of my seat before the ring has even died. I’m relieved to be free and I race across campus avoiding anyone’s gaze as I go.

Only, when I get to the car I skid to a stop as a sob of dismay escapes me. Every single window is smashed in, and scrawled in the paintwork across the bonnet is the word, “slag”. I fucking hate that word.

“Do you like your gift?” Charlie steps out from behind the car parked next to mine.

“Charlie, stop, please,” I beg. I’m so upset about the car. What am I going to do? How can I afford to fix it?

“Always knew you were a lying whore. Pleading poverty, yet somehow hiding this nice motor. What were you hoping? To bag yourself a ring from me to chase away all your money

worries? Or after I dumped you did you shack up with someone new with a fat wallet to give you nice things?"

"You dumped me?" I ask incredulously as anger sparks in my chest. "How deluded are you?"

"You know, if you fell to your knees right now and begged for forgiveness, I could make this all go away."

"Fuck you, Charlie, I have nothing I need to atone for where you're concerned."

"Of course, you'd have to suck my cock right here in the car park too," he continues like I never even spoke.

"You're fucking sick!" I tell him. My words get through; his eyes glitter triumphantly and he seems to actually view my words as some sort of compliment.

"You better believe it. Because when I'm done with you, that'll be my line of defence."

I shudder inside at his words because I know he means it, but outwardly I scoff. I can't give this man any more power over me.

"Go home, Charlotte, or should I say back to the Royal Circus mansion of whoever you're spreading your legs for this month." His words send a frisson of fear through me. He knows where I live; he's been watching.

"I swear to God, Charlie, you better stay the fuck away from me and my home. You have no idea what I'm capable of and I won't be threatened and pushed."

He laughs, a cruel, terrifying sound.

"Oh, Charlotte, I know more about you than you think. And I plan to use it all against you." It's a threat. An empty threat. It has to be.

Against my better judgement, I yank open the driver's door, sweep broken glass off the seat as best I can, and climb in. No need to wind the window down to speak to him as I start up the engine.

"I'm warning you, Charlie, stay the fuck away!"

He smacks the side of the car as I rev the engine and start to drive.

“And I’m warning you, Raven...you better keep a closer eye on your daughter.”

Charlotte's Diary

11/03/20

Fuck, I didn't think it would be this hard! Some days it's just a haze, others I'm surrounded by a darkness that threatens to swallow me whole. Is it this tough for everyone? Or just single mums? Or is it just me?

Don't get me wrong, the baby is great.

I'm pretty sure, is actually an angel. But why don't people tell you that it's not the sleepless nights or the worrying that kills you? Why don't they tell you that it's the crippling loneliness that hurts so bad it makes you feel like you can't breathe? That while the baby sleeps peacefully without a care in the world, you'll be wringing out your pillow of all the tears you've shed? The weight of my regrets sits heavily on my heart, choking me.

Maybe it is just me.

I doubt anyone else would fuck their life up so spectacularly that they'd find themselves in this situation. Struggling to make ends meet; too stubborn to accept help; too proud to crawl back to the family I once had, begging for forgiveness and support.

No.

Some nights I consider it, come close to packing my bags even, but I won't. I can't go back. I've never been a quitter and I don't intend to start now. Phoenix may be too young to understand, but I know what I'm doing. And I'm going to set an example for her.

We are survivors.



CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE

Thorn

It's been a few days and here I am, back on the doorstep, being indecisive. I try telling myself to just ring the fucking bell already! When I do, it opens immediately.

"I wondered how long it would take you to ring it this time," are the first words Raven says to me when she opens the door with a massive grin.

"Oh, shut up," I tell her, stepping into the wide hallway and giving her a good natured shoulder barge. "Are we alone?"

"Yeah, Phoenix is at nursery," she tells me. "No classes today?"

"No," she hesitates. "I'm taking a break this week."

"Why?" I pounce, smelling a story.

"I'm having a bit of a tough time at the moment. Don't worry about it. What can I do for you?" She smiles.

"I came to apologise," I tell her. She bites her lip nervously and I feel the need to clarify, "for freaking out and leaving. Not the kiss. The kiss was freakin' awesome!"

"It was." She smiles back at me.

"I should never have left like that," I confess. "Coke?" she asks and I nod in response.

"I'll wait in the lounge, it might be dangerous if I follow you into the kitchen again," I half-joke, making her laugh.

Whilst she's fixing the drink, I take my time to look around. She's made it cosy in a short space of time. She moves around the place like she's at home here, comfortable, and I like that. I wonder if she'll stay in Edinburgh when her degree finishes and what she might want to do with her qualifications. I've been clueless about my own future, only now I find myself wondering if I could have a life in this city too. If I

could have a life with her. And Phoenix too, I realise as I look at a photo on the fireplace of the two of them smiling.

Framed pictures fill the small space and I pause when I see a picture of Raven and Lizzie; it must have been taken a few years before Lizzie came to West Prep because they both look young, and absolutely identical. I step closer to scrutinise the image better. Striking green eyes framed by thick lashes, wide rosy smiles and veils of long straight white-blonde hair frame their perfect heart-shaped faces. I can't tell them apart. At all.

“Care to guess?” Her voice makes me jump and I spin guiltily like I just got caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

“Huh?”

“Do you want to guess which is me?” She nods at the photo. “Go on, you've got a 50-50 chance of being right.”

I peer at the photo so hard my breath fogs up the glass, but I'm none the wiser.

“That's you,” I wildly guess, pointing to the girl on the right.

“Nope.” She laughs. “But good guess.”

“Damn, I couldn't tell you apart at all,” I confess. “I wish I'd known you both together,” I add without thinking.

“That would have been awkward,” she jokes, and I immediately realise my mistake.

“Shit, I'm sorry! I didn't think!”

“It's okay, we were pretty close, but not that close!” She laughs, and I relax a little.

“When was this taken?” I ask, changing the subject. “Last day of primary school,” she replies.

“Oh wow, I thought you guys were older than that.” She doesn't reply, just shrugs and looks at the picture herself for a moment. “Will you tell me?” she asks in such a quiet voice I almost miss it.

“Tell you what?” For a minute I think she's going to say about Lizzie, which makes me feel awkward as fuck, but then

she surprises me.

“About that night, the night of the fire...”

Shit. Am I ready to go there again? I try so hard not to even think about that night - futile I know - but to willingly relive it? To bring it to life again? I shift uneasily.

“You don’t have to,” she offers, but I shake my head.

“No...No, it’s fine. I need to,” I return.

And I do need to, I just don’t want to. I guess it’s time to suck it up and lay the scars bare for all to see.

“Was it awful?” Raven whispers, horrified by the haunted expression on my face.

“Let’s sit,” I tell her, striding over to the couch. She sits beside me and turns to face me, but I stare off into the distance, unable to make eye contact with her.

“You know what happened in the lead up to the party,” I begin. “The beach,” she smiles nostalgically.

“The kiss...it was your goodbye wasn’t it? Jax knew. Or suspected at least. I didn’t want to see it.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“So we went to the party, and it sucked,” I say. Actually that’s not entirely true, parts of the dance were good; holding Raven in my arms and spinning her across the dance floor as she giggled was a highlight I’ll never forget. “We played cards and you said...”

“That I wanted to stay for the fireworks,” she supplies.

“Yeah, and that you were going to grab a pop and dance before we had to leave. I wanted to offer to go with you but Ace got in there first. Then Rebel jumped in and snagged you for a dance, singing those stupid lyrics to you.”

“I remember the song. It’s been one of my favourites ever since.” She smiles, but it’s sad.

“Well, it should have been me. I wanted to tell you how much I loved you.”

The confession sits heavily in the room, so silent you could hear a pin drop.

“And then I left.”

“Then you left,” I repeat. “How did you do it?”

“I walked out the front door, I had the key - always did - and I knocked over one of the large pillar candles on my way out. I knew it would catch quickly; all that dry old wood and alcohol was a recipe for disaster.”

“So you meant to lock the door?” I ask. I don’t know why I’m asking; I know the answer. Part of me desperately clings to the idea that it was an accident, that she freaked and ran, that the last four years have all been some horrible misunderstanding and that she’s been waiting for us all along.

Fantasy. “Yes.”

She shatters my dreams. “And the back door?” She hesitates.

“I was supposed to lock it. The plan was always to lock it. But...I guess I had an attack of conscience at the last minute and left it. You guys were near the back of the chapel when I left, I wanted you to be okay.”

I snort at that. She locked us in a burning building but she wanted us to survive? That’s a fucked-up psycho girlfriend test if ever I heard one; trust me, I dated a ‘princess’ of West Prep, I know all about fucked up shit.

“It’s true,” she says quietly.

“Well, I don’t know how long it was between you locking the door and the fire catching hold, but when people began to realise, panic spread faster than the flames. It was chaos.” I pause and take a massive gulp of my drink. Sweat beads at my temple and begins a slow descent. I swipe it away with a trembling hand.

“Why did you lock us in?” I ask, stalling for time. “You had to pay for Lizzie.”

“But you have to know that we didn’t bully her! We had nothing to do with it!”

“Everyone had something to do with it. You were the princes of the school, all-powerful, and you all dated her for a while. Why didn’t you protect her? Why didn’t you stop it?” Her questions reveal the anguish and heartbreak she’s unable to hide.

“We didn’t know. I didn’t know. I swear. You have to know that,” I beg. Tears prick the corner of my eyes but I don’t try to hide them; there’s no shame in crying, showing emotion, feeling.

“At the time I deemed everyone guilty by association. I was blinded by rage. You all had to pay.”

“Then why the unlocked door?”

“Because I loved you,” she states simply with some kind of crazy fucked-up girl logic that I just don’t get.

My brain registers her use of the past tense, but my heart ignores it, soaring in my chest. She loves me! Loved, loves, whatever...I’ll take it.

“So then what?” she prompts.

“Chaos, as I said. People panicked. There was a lot of inebriated people in that small space. Everyone flocked to the back of the chapel where we were still playing cards, oblivious of the time or your absence. As soon as we realised what was going on, we sprang into action. Jax took charge. He sent Ace to find an exit but I stupidly thought I could get through the front doors. The flames had spread from the right side of the door, all along the pews, but the doors were unblocked. He tried to warn me, but I didn’t listen. I elbowed my way through the crowd and tried the doors.”

“Your scar.”

I glance down at my injured hand and curl it into a fist.

“Yes. The pain was like nothing I had ever felt before, though it soon paled in comparison to the pain of losing you.”

“Oh,” is all she says. That almost hurts as much as the fire. Oh?

Oh?! That’s all I get is a fucking oh?

“I managed to wrench my hand free. I never knew that the shock makes your muscles contract, so it was some sick kind of torture that I couldn’t let go. And even over the smell of the burning wood, I’ll never forget the stench of cooking flesh.” I shudder. “So I fight my way back to the guys, and find Jax is ordering people out through the back, Ace had found an exit. Rebel is carrying the people who have been hurt in the crush, and I fall to helping him. Some people are too drunk, or high, or out of it to realise what’s going on, so we help them out too.”

“Once everyone’s out we try to do a head count, but it’s pretty dark, and it’s bedlam. People won’t stay still, they’re hysterical, racing back to the school. And when I finally get to regroup with the guys, we immediately notice your absence.”

I look over at her and see big fat tears streaming down her face. She looks broken. And I’m doing that to her; my words, the story, filling in the blanks of what she missed. And it doesn’t feel anywhere near as good as I thought it would. Wordlessly I reach for her and pull her up into my lap. I cradle her against my chest and continue.

“I’ve never known fear like it; the moment when we realised it had been ages since we’d seen you. Ace was beside himself, racing through the trees, asking everyone if they had seen you, calling out your name.”

“Jax started working on a timeline, trying to ascertain how long it had been since you left us. But Rebel and I weren’t interested in counting the clock, we worried you were still in there. Maybe trapped in the toilet. So we went back in, even though we know you’re not supposed to. As if we were going to patiently wait outside for the fire brigade to get to us! We didn’t even know if they’d been called at that point...”

“By the time we got back into the main chapel, the blaze was so fierce we couldn’t see a thing. Didn’t stop us searching for you though.” A sob interrupts me as it wracks her body and causes her to shudder from head to toe. I can’t help but squeeze her tighter. “Eventually the services came. We were still inside when they arrived, though I think we were both pretty useless at that point. I remember coughing so hard it

hurt, being unable to see a thing, then being forced into the back of an ambulance and given an oxygen mask. I don't remember how I got from the chapel to the nearest area a vehicle could reach. I remember several firefighters having to hold Rebel back as he roared and fought to go back in to find you."

"Jax calmed him enough to get through. He told him that he was risking your life further by keeping the firefighters outside, when they needed to be inside looking for you. Only, he said your body...like it was already too late."

"It was the longest night of my life. A bit of a blur really. We refused to go to the hospital to get checked out, and we remained on campus in the dining room, awaiting news. It took them over eight hours to get the blaze under control, and a further twelve before they could go in and search for bodies."

She trembles in my arms and I feel like such a dick for continuing. But she asked. And now I've started, it's like I need to finish. I have to see this through to the end, she has to know. If we're to stand any chance of moving forward we have to be brutally honest with one another.

"And of course they never found any. It was a relief, and also a lead weight. Like a blessing and a curse all rolled into one. No bodies, no casualties, the only injuries were minor burns and smoke inhalation. In a twisted kind of way, it probably saved a few lives because they were forced to stop the party early and some kids were well on the road to self-destructing that night. But that didn't help us."

"We were beside ourselves. It didn't make sense! You'd vanished without a trace. We spent days going back through the rubble, looking for your body, or any clues that the firefighters might have missed. We searched the woods, the local hospitals...everything. Of course, students fled campus in that limbo period. The school could barely keep track of who was around and who had gone. And then the body washed up on shore."

Her sobs now are noisy, uncontrolled. All I can do is hold her and rub soothing circles on her back with the palm of my good hand. My scarred hand seeks out her perfect one to hold.

“It was horrific. Sickening. They wouldn’t even tell us if the body found was male or female. It felt like days stuck in a void, desperate to know, aching to never find out. It was the worst day of my life when they finally told us the body belonged to a male. I was elated that it wasn’t you, but at the same time, I despaired. Because, if that wasn’t you, where were you?”

“I didn’t even care,” I confess, “when Jax’s mum called us into her office and told us that the body was Michael’s. I was relieved.” That’s the first time I’ve ever said that out loud. Hell, it’s the first time I’ve even admitted it to myself. I wipe at my wet face, surprised to find I’ve been crying too. When did that start?

“And then term ended and we had to leave. Shit got real. Jax went psycho, demanding that his mum call in the authorities to search the premises properly for your...for you. She insisted you must have just been missed in the head count, and had already gone home. That’s when we started to discover that not all was as it seemed with you.”

“We spent the whole summer trying to track you down,” I confess. I hold her closer, not caring that I’m probably hurting her with how hard I’m gripping her to me. She’s my life raft; the only thing getting me through reliving this ordeal. I can’t let her go. I won’t.

“When did you give up?” She whispers, finally looking up at me. Her eyes are huge, greener than ever, and her beauty steals my breath.

“When we found you.”

“Thorn, I-”

I don’t let her finish her sentence, my lips crashing down on hers and stealing the apology she was about to offer. I don’t want it. I don’t need it.

I need her. I need her like I need air to breathe. Only somehow, more.

Charlotte's Diary

Notice of Intent Dated 18/04/20

Dear Ms. C McLintock,

We are writing on behalf of our client, Ms. Cordelia Deighton, to inform you of her intent to bring legal action regarding the guardianship of your daughter, Miss P E McLintock.

Our client is hopeful of reaching a suitable agreement with you, in regard to access to the child, providing you reply to this correspondence within 10 days of the date of issue, as stated above.

Please find enclosed an outline of the basis for our client's concerns.

Failure to respond to this letter will result in our client authorising us to go ahead with legal proceedings.

*We await your communication. Signed,
Boddington & Crypt Solicitors.*



CHAPTER TWENTY - TWO

Charlotte

The only thing more shocking than the story Thorn has just told me, is the way he's kissing the shit out of me now. I can't breathe, but at the same time, he's my oxygen and I'm drowning. My arms wrap around his neck and tangle in his long blonde surfer locks and I twist so that I'm straddling his lap. I'm vaguely aware that I've managed to move without breaking our kiss, and I'm impressed with myself.

He breaks away, breathing hard and rests his forehead against mine. His ocean, saltwater, sunshine scent envelopes me, and I inhale him like I'm trying to commit his smell to memory. Only, I already have. The beach brings equal parts pleasure and pain for me, Phoenix even realises that mummy cries whenever she goes to the beach and stopped asking to visit.

"Now you," he pants. "Tell me what happened."

Dread fills me, but how can I not after all he's just bared to me? "You listened to the tape?" I ask and he nods.

"It's a long and complicated story. Lizzie and I were exceedingly close. They talk about the bond between twins and I swear on my life it's real. The night Lizzie died, I woke from a nightmare that I was falling, tears streaming down my face, and not a clue as to why."

"She wrote to me you know? During her year at West Prep. To start with she was so happy. And then things started to change. She didn't reveal much, and she always downplayed what she would confess, but it soon became clear that she was being bullied pretty badly. She was always reluctant to reveal names too. I think she was worried that I might come to the school and kick some serious ass," I laugh humorlessly.

"I really noticed the change in her over Christmas. She was so different from the light, happy, effervescent girl I said goodbye to in the summer. She was depressed, but the worst

thing was how completely she shut me out. It was the first time I'd ever experienced heartbreak."

I pause as Thorn strokes my face gently. My eyelids flutter shut and I lean in to his touch, allowing myself his comfort for just a moment.

"I couldn't comprehend that Lizzie killed herself. It didn't make sense, even knowing she was depressed. Things had seemed to be looking up for her. It was about eight weeks after she'd died that her journal arrived. We always used to write codes to one another so I wasn't surprised to find her diary was encrypted. I was surprised that it came with a letter addressed to me. There was a story, a mystery, and I was determined to get to the bottom of it."

"Cordelia helped me get into West Prep. I had to tell her what was going on and she pulled strings, got me the makeover, the full works."

"You don't look anything like the girl in the picture. Your skin tone isn't even the same," he says.

"I've had work done," I laugh.

"Weren't you tempted to go back to being blonde once you left the school?"

"Yes and no...it's hard to explain but being Raven felt like a fresh start. I wasn't half of a twin, or a dead girl's sister. My parents hadn't coped very well with Lizzie's death, and I was a constant reminder of that. It was easier to look different and be independent."

"So why did you go back to being Charlotte?"

"Because I needed to hide."

"From?"

"You all." I give a sad, sorry sort of smile.

"Sorry I interrupted. Tell me about the diary."

"To begin with it was normal. As I said, it didn't surprise me at all that it was written in code - that was standard practice for us both - but things changed when she started addressing

the diary entries to me. That's when I knew I needed to do more."

"Did you come to West Prep knowing everything?"

"No! Not at all. The diary was pretty tricky to decode and it took me most of the year, though of course I was a little distracted at times," I smile again.

"Were you just with us to find out about Lizzie?"

"Never! It was a complete coincidence falling for you guys. In the beginning I didn't even know you had been involved with Lizzie, and by the time I found out, I was already in too deep. I tried to tell myself that I would use our relationship to drive a wedge between your friendships, to try and get to the bottom of the mystery, but when the time came, I couldn't bring myself to do it."

"Yet you drove a wedge there anyway," he mumbles.

"I'm so sorry, Thorn." I capture his chin in my hand and force him to meet my eyes as I speak. I need him to know how much I mean those stupid insignificant words.

"What happened when you started figuring things out?"

"Well I came to West Prep with a decent knowledge of what was going on. In her final letter to me, Lizzie told me to reach out to Michael - said he was one of the good guys - and we spent the time between her death and my arrival getting acquainted. I knew about the princesses, though he was strangely quiet about you guys, and I came up with a game plan to target them."

"It wasn't until the night before...before the party that things finally fell into place. I had thought Lizzie's rape and pregnancy were a horrible coincidence, but once I found out that Tilly and Michael were fuck buddies, it all just seemed to fit and make sense. I was sickened, the worst thing being that Lizzie had trusted him so fully. So completely. And that I had trusted him too."

"I felt like I had let her down," I add with a sniff as more tears threaten to fall.

“I don’t think anyone would ever say you let your sister down, Rae,” Thorn tells me gently.

“Thanks.”

“Look, I’m not going to make you relive what happened on the cliff, but I do have some questions?” He words it as a question himself, like he’s asking permission, so I nod. “Why did you run?”

“Two crimes, remember? The fire. The...the cliff. I was terrified.”

“You should have come to us. We would have helped.”

“Even though I locked you all in a burning building?” I smile ruefully.

“I would have walked back into that building and stayed there till I was dead if it meant saving you.” He’s so earnest, so adamant, that I actually believe him.

“Why did you hide, after?”

“No matter what I said, even with the recording, I threw a man off a cliff! Self-defence or not, I knew there would be repercussions for what I did.”

“We would have protected you.”

“I had Cordelia for that.”

“So she hid you. Where did you go?”

“Dicky’s island,” I reply.

“And when you left? When you came back, what did you do?”

“I just moved back in with Cordelia for a bit.” It’s the first lie I’ve told but I have to; protecting Phoenix is my priority.

“But, no offence, how did you end up in such a shithole?”

I smile weakly to show I’m not offended by his question, but also because I’m relieved I can go back to telling the truth. Almost. “Cordelia flipped when she found out I was pregnant. She became really controlling and it stifled me. I had to get out. But of course, that meant being cut off financially. Not

that I minded. I was better off out of her control. But you know...shit hole,” I finish with a laugh.

“Thank you for sharing,” he says quietly, kissing me softly. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive you, though...”

“Sorry isn’t enough, is it?” I whisper as the tears fall. “It doesn’t begin to cover all of the regret and the guilt that I feel. I wish I could spend a lifetime making it up to you, but I don’t even know where to start.”

“The honesty helps,” he says and my stomach twists painfully. “So, I’m willing to try.”

His words send a soaring warmth through my chest, which freezes and dies as quickly as it takes flight. That’s when it hits me; the last few weeks have been a dream, a fantasy. I stupidly allowed myself to imagine a future with these guys in it once again, but it can never be. Because we could only ever work with 100% honesty, and there will always be secrets between us. I won’t give Phoenix up for anything. Not even my own heart.

And if I ever came clean about her? Well, I’m not stupid enough to think they’d welcome us both with open arms. It would tear everything apart.

Checkmate.

How do I get out of this one?

Charlotte's Diary

20/04/20

Oh my fucking god! What a nightmare. That letter from Cordelia's solicitors has sent me into a complete tailspin. I don't know what to do about it. It has to be a joke, right?

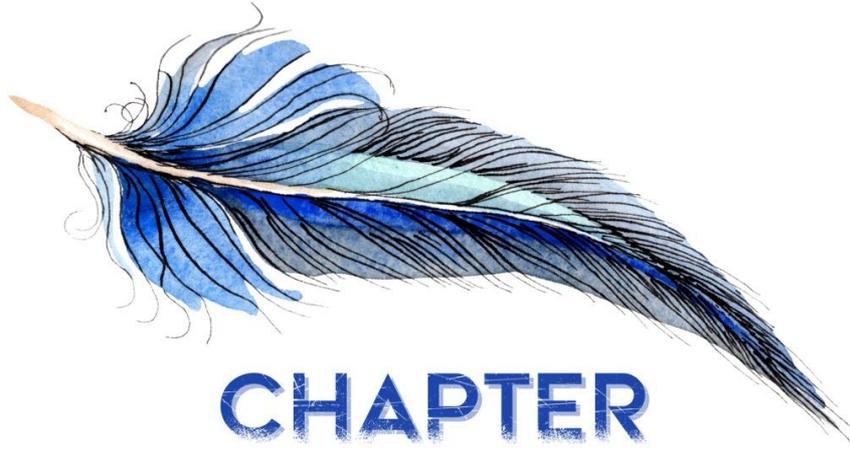
How on earth can she bring legal action against me where Phoenix is concerned?

I'm her mother!

Surely this has to be intimidation tactics, punishment for not taking Phoenix to visit her often enough or because I didn't let her have Phoenix over Christmas or something.

I can't afford a legal battle or a solicitor. Hell, I can't even afford a stamp to reply to the stupid goddamn letter in the first place!

I need Baxter's help with this one.



CHAPTER TWENTY - THREE

Rebel

“Hey, you guys ready or should I come in for a bit?” I ask when Raven opens the door. I’m glad she’s stopped letting Phoenix open the door, but as soon as the little rugrat hears my voice she comes tearing out of the lounge, racing along the hallway and launches herself at me. I remember to crouch just in time to avoid the nut shot. I found out earlier in the week that she’s gotten taller.

“Reb!” she cries, all excitement and giggles, as I lift her and shower her with tickles. This kid is too cute. She’s wormed her way right into my heart. “Come play with me!”

She grabs my hand and attempts to drag me into the house, obviously I let her, chuckling and closing the door behind us.

“Hey, gorgeous,” I say to Raven as I pass her, gently kissing her cheek. “I guess my question got answered.”

She laughs and a glance over my shoulder tells me she’s following us into the lounge where Phoenix has spread toys all over the rug. I join Phoenix and somehow manage to fold my huge frame so I’m sitting cross-legged in amongst a plethora of pink. Phoenix immediately dumps a doll in my lap and tells me I’m playing Polly.

“Would you like some tea?” I ask in a ridiculous high pitched, posh old lady voice and Phoenix immediately starts crying with laughter.

“Mummy! He sounds like Grandmama!” she cries, wiping away tears.

“You really do,” Raven laughs.

“Sorry.” I shrug. “I’ll try again: would you like some tea?” This time I growl in a low, menacing witchy voice and Phoenix squeals with delight.

“No! We’re not playing tea parties, silly!” She scolds me.

“Well, what are we playing?”

“Dinosaurs!” she yells, pulling out a large plastic T-Rex and waving it dangerously close to my eye.

“What type of dinosaur is Polly meant to be?”

“Silly,” she giggles, “she’s not a dinosaur!”

“Then how does she fit into the game?”

“I eat her!” Phoenix lets out an almighty roar - which is so unexpected I jump a little - before launching herself onto my lap and savagely attacking poor Miss Polly with the rabid Rex. I just sit back and let the chaos unfold.

After a moment I catch Raven’s eye and she’s shaking with silent laughter.

“What?” I silently ask her.

“Sucker!” she tells me, letting a chortle fly free. “You’re going to be stuck there all day now!”

I shrug like I don’t care. I mean, we did have plans for today, but I’m happy to cancel them in favour of staying home with my girls...shit.

“Phoenix, would you mind if I just watch the game for a little bit? I’ve not played this one before and I think I should learn it a little first,” I tell the screaming rugrat.

“Sure! You’re really bad at it anyway!”

“What? Why?” Suddenly I’m wounded and I want to dive back in and rise to the challenge.

“You’re not fighting back!”

“Against a dinosaur?” I’m incredulous.

“Girls rock. We don’t need saving and we can beat all the monsters, can’t we mummy?”

“Absolutely, baby,” Raven chimes in, the pride ringing out loud and clear in her voice.

“Ok, you show me, and I’ll move out of your way a little.”

With difficulty I return to my feet and move over to Raven on the couch, keeping my voice low I ask her if she wants to cancel today’s plans and just stay home.

“It’s ok, we’ll let her have a little play and then she’ll nap in the car.”

“Okay,” I reply easily. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” she asks, suddenly wary.

“When we were at school, why didn’t you tell me what you were planning?”

“I...what...how could I?”

“Not at first, obviously, but once you realised we didn’t have anything to do with...” wow, I didn’t expect it to be so hard to have this conversation, to say her name, “with Lizzie...why not tell me when we got close?”

“Reb,” her tone is reproachful.

“I would have helped you,” I insist, and instantly I know it’s 100 percent true.

“Reb, you don’t mean that.”

“Don’t tell me what I mean.” My temper flares. Why does she always do this? “If someone fucks with the people I love, I burn them to the ground.”

“You didn’t love me.”

“Fuck! Don’t do this, Raven!” I whisper-hiss, trying to keep our conversation under Phoenix’s radar. I didn’t need to worry though, she was currently rolling on the rug, using Polly to beat the shit out of the T-Rex all whilst screaming “Die! Baddie die!” It makes me smile momentarily before I refocus on Raven’s torn and frowning face.

“I didn’t say fucking loved. I said love. Present tense.”

“Reb...”

“Always have, still do, always fucking will,” I interrupt her.

Wow, that did not go as expected. I run my hand through my dark hair and sigh. I need to try again. I grab her hand and stare into her eyes.

Taking a deep breath to calm my racing heart and cool my fiery temper, I tell her earnestly “I love you, Raven.”

When she doesn't reply, I plough on.

“I want to be with you. You and Phoenix. I want to date you, at least. Hell, I want it all but I'm trying not to freak you out right now! And if the others have a problem with it, I choose you and Phoenix. I'll always choose you.”

Ah fuck, I really need to put the breaks on my verbal diarrhoea. What the fuck is wrong with me? I just said I don't want to freak her out, but Raven's looking at me like she wishes she could run.

Again. Fuck.

I'm panicking, wondering what the hell I should say, when Phoenix interrupts us.

“Mummy? Why do you have so many names?”

I glance at Raven and she's smiling. It's strained, a little shaken and wobbly, but a smile nonetheless.

“Well, baby, you know how you're the only one who gets to call me mummy?” The little girl nods. “The boys are the only ones who get to call me Raven. To everyone else I'm just Charlotte.”

“I like Raven more than Charlotte,” Phoenix declares.

“Me too, baby, me too,” Raven replies. It causes a flash of white-hot hope to surge through me. Does she mean...?

“Reb?” She draws my attention away from thoughts of her, back to the real thing. “I need some time to think.”

I'm crestfallen. This isn't how I saw it going at all. I feel... stupid.

Embarrassed.

“Right, well, shall we get going or do you want to just leave it for another day?” I sound sulky, but I don't know what to do. Does she want me to leave? Or do we still have our day out as planned? Isn't it going to be awkward as fuck?

“I don’t know,” she says quietly. Well, she might not know, but I do. That’s an answer in itself.

“Right, well, I’m gonna take off. And I’ll speak to you in a few days or whatever, when you’ve had time to think.” It’s a dick move, but I have to protect myself.

“Phoenix, I have to go sweetie. I’ll see you soon,” I tell her and I bend down to give her a little hug. She whines that she doesn’t want me to go - you and me both, rugrat - and begs me to stay. I promise to come back soon. I hope I don’t have to break that promise.

“Reb...”

“I’ll see myself out, Charlotte.” It’s a low fucking blow to use her real name after what she just said to Phoenix, and when she gives a sharp intake of breath I know my arrow has hit its mark. Good.

No, not good. I don’t want to hurt her. I’m being a fucking dick. But now I don’t know how to put things right. I walk past her and she rises to her feet and follows me anyway.

At the front door I pause and turn to her.

“I’m sorry, Princess,” I tell her, pulling her into my arms for a hug. Thankfully she returns it, clinging on for dear life. “Take as much time as you need, Raven.”

I give her one last squeeze, and let her go. Then me and my damaged ego leave, heading off to lick our wounds.

Charlotte's Diary

07/05/20

Starting to fear I sound like a broken record but thank God for Baxter. He tackled the Cordelia situation with a calm efficiency that I could only ever dream of being capable of.

He immediately offered to hire the best solicitors in the country and fight Cordelia to the bitter end, but, actually, despite everything she's done, I don't want that.

Lizzie and I went through most of our childhood not knowing our grandparents. We had no family besides our parents and each other, and we were always envious of the kids at school who had big family Thanksgivings or Christmases, or even just cousins to play with.

I don't want that life for Phoenix.

Sure, Cordelia is just one extra person in Phoenix's life, but it's better than it being just me.

When I explained this to Baxter he got really quiet, and I sense there's a story there (not that he'd ever open up and confide in me) but after a moment or two, he seemed to understand. He suggested we reach out to Cordelia to come to an arrangement.

She agreed, we met, a deal was struck. I'm not exactly comfortable with the outcome, but it's better than dragging Phoenix through the courts.



CHAPTER TWENTY - FOUR

Baxter

I flick back through the messages I'd gotten from Charlotte over the last couple of weeks. Everything seemed fine to begin with, but the last week definitely showed a change in her mood. I want to know what's going on, and a phone call yesterday to Rebel revealed nothing, so it's left me feeling twitchy. I could phone her myself but I don't think she'd be open and honest with me on a phone line.

My phone rings and I groan when I see the caller display: Tilly. Of course it's her, it's always bloody her. I'm so sick of her lick-arsing me. I just want this all to be over and done with now. I don't have the fight in me anymore, so I ignore her call.

I want to go home. I want to see Phoenix and Charlotte. I need to reassure myself that they're okay, because I'm not buying Charlotte's texts and I won't be satisfied until I've checked in with them using my own eyes.

Damn Charlotte! She's only gone and bloody changed me. I don't even know when she got under my skin and started to work her magic on me, but there's no denying the witchcraft she's spun on me: I'm more mature, wanting to settle down, hating every moment of this stupid game with Tilly. I thought I'd love it, enjoy every moment and relish the opportunity to wreak havoc on her life. But in reality, the whole thing has left me cold.

I need to talk to Jax and see if we can reach an alternative arrangement. But until then,

I have work to do, a role to play...

I sigh and hit answer on the call just before it goes to voicemail. "Tilly, hey, I'm so glad I caught your call!" I make sure to sound a little out of breath, like I had to run to catch her in time. Girls like her love that shit.

"Baxter!" she giggles, delighted at hearing my voice, like I fucking called her or some shit. "I was just thinking about this

charity gala. I think we really need to nail down a location.”

“Sure thing. I mean, I have the date so wherever it ends up, just let me know and I’ll be there. I’ll go anywhere for you,” I silently gag and my own smarminess but I actually hear her simpler down the line.

“Well that’s just it, there’s so many great places to choose from,” her tone is hedging; I can tell she wants something. It pisses me off when people drop hints but don’t just outright ask for what they want. She clearly has an agenda, a reason for calling, so why not just spit it out?

“I was thinking about that,” I offer. “I mean, London’s great, don’t get me wrong, but how about choosing somewhere out in the country? It would offer a really unique experience for the city crowd. A truly memorable gala that everyone will be talking about for years to come.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she replies, pondering my idea. Obviously I have an ulterior motive here, I need her out of the city and isolated for us to be able to carry out our plan.

“I know quite a few places that would work. Shall I send you a list?” I offer.

“Please!” she gushes. She continues speaking but to be honest, I’ve zoned out.

“Though of course, you’ll want to check the short list out in person. Maybe you could go with a member of the board?” I suggest.

“Hmmm, you’re right. I could never book a place blind. But I’m not too keen on involving the board, I’d rather this remain my baby, so to speak.”

“Of course, I understand. Still, it’s a big decision to make, a lot of pressure to find the perfect venue. I mean, if you wanted a second opinion, I could help...”

“You’d do that? For me?”

“Absolutely, Til. Why don’t we make a weekend of it? I’ll tell you what, I’ll send you the list of venues and you narrow it down to two or three. Next weekend we’ll check them out,

even stay the night to test out the facilities...sorry! I got carried away. I mean, if you'd like to. If next weekend's good for you?"

"No! No! That sounds perfect. Let's do it," she insists, breathlessly.

"And you have to let me pick up the bill. I don't want you charging anything to the charity and taking away from their profits, so leave all of that to me. Have a think about what experiences you'd like to offer the women, and I'll take care of the men."

"Sure, sounds great. Thank you so much, Baxter."

"Anything for you, Tilly! Call me when you've had a chance to go through the list and I'll sort everything out."

"You're a hero. What would I do without you?" What indeed.

We say our goodbyes and I rattle off a text to Jax to inform him of the plan. Maybe I can use the weekend to move up the timeline a little. I could try to convince Tilly to bring the date forward. I'm not comfortable with waiting six months for the gala to roll around for us to bring her down. No. I need to end this quickly so that I can get back to my girls.

Charlotte's Diary

01/08/20

Haven't written in ages. Things have been crazy busy, of course, but they've been pretty...dark at times too.

I continue to be plagued by nightmares. Every night. There's never a reprise from it. I wake screaming, and it must be normal because Phoenix doesn't even stir. How messed up is that?

So between being a single mum and all that that entails, the nightmares, the shit sleep, and working during the day to bring in some cash, I just don't have time to write.

When I think of Lizzie meticulously keeping her journals, I feel ashamed and guilty. She once joked about me writing letters to her on a dirty napkin, but I feel like that's actually an accurate representation of my ability to record my feelings.

Although, with the way I'm feeling, it's probably best not to have a record or a reminder of it in too much detail.

Things will look up. They have to.



CHAPTER TWENTY - FIVE

Charlotte

I've dropped Phoenix off at the childminder's for the night, but then got a call from the bar asking if I can change my shift. It's rare for me to end up with an evening to myself, and I'm unsure how to spend it.

I'm just making myself a drink when my phone buzzes with a text from Rebel.

Are you free tonight? Netflix and chill?

Yeah, wanna come over and watch a film?

Just Netflix.

We can negotiate the chill ;) Be there in an hour?

Lol. No chance. But the rest sounds perfect. Maybe we can talk about...stuff

Bring Thai?

You're perfect. I'm on it x

I put my phone down and smile, glad to have some company this evening. Grabbing some plates, cutlery and glasses, I lay them out on the counter, and then head out of the kitchen to take a quick shower.

When I'm rinsing my hair I think I hear a dull thud, but I don't think too closely on it. Houses of this size always make strange sounds, and the neighbours aren't too quiet either. If Phoenix had been at home, a bang like that would have me racing from the shower and flying to check on her, but because I know I'm alone, I dismiss it as nothing.

Done, I step out and dry off, wrapping myself in my robe to blow dry my hair. Despite the length, it doesn't take too long, so then I'm left contemplating what to wear...and then I scold myself for being so silly. I'm not about to dress up for Rebel. I pull on yoga pants and a top. I know some people have issue with athletic wear being worn outside of the gym, but I don't care because it's comfy as fuck. I pull an oversized

fluffy jumper on over the top and grab some cabin socks too. Perfect.

I head back down to the kitchen and pause when I can't find my phone. I was sure I left it by the plates. Something about the scene in front of me just doesn't look right. I frown, trying to work out what's different.

Then it hits me; the glasses. I left two empty glasses out and now there's only one, and it's filled with white wine. Condensation beads on the side and slips tantalisingly down the side.

"Hello? Reb?" I call out, picking up the glass he'd left for me and wandering through to the lounge in search of him. I take a sip and savour the riot of fruity freshness that explodes on my tongue. Damn, that tastes good. I'm not usually one for wine, but Rebel's certainly got good taste.

I frown again when I realise I don't have my phone on me; I want to check the time. I'm sure I wasn't in the shower an hour. And how would Rebel have got in anyway?

Then I dismiss that thought, because of course he has a key! It's his house. I sip my wine and wonder where he is. Maybe he came in, poured the drinks, and went to the toilet.

"Hello, Charlotte." The low voice behind me has me jumping out of my skin. I spin around, and to my dismay, it's not Rebel sitting on the sofa.

"How did you get in here, Charlie?" I ask warily, eyes wide in shock and darting around, frantically searching for my phone.

"For such a posh house, you don't have very good security, Charlotte. Or would you prefer me to call you Raven?"

"Charlotte please," I whisper. I don't want the name Raven tainted by him.

"I agree, much more refined. More fitting for someone of your breeding and connections." The way he says 'breeding' makes me feel sick.

“You know who I am?” I ask, stalling. I sink down onto the other sofa, keeping a healthy distance between us.

I’m trying to work out how to get out of here, how much danger I am in, but my mind’s gone blank. I have a skill set that’s never failed me before, but I’ve not had to use it in so long. Think.

“I know everything about you. I always did.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” I need to keep him talking. “Things could have been different between us.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. As much as my mother wanted me to put a ring on your finger, it was never going to happen,” he scoffs.

“What? Why would your mum want us to marry?” I’m puzzled.

Something isn’t adding up here.

“To access your fortune, of course.”

“She’s mistaken. I don’t have a fortune for her - or you - to access. Besides, you hardly need it.”

“If only you knew,” he mocks. “Enlighten me,” I say softly.

“I guess it doesn’t matter if you know now,” he says quietly. My heart races; I don’t like the sound of that.

“Well, for starters, my family is poor as fuck. Absolutely brassic, broke. And you’re the heir to the Deighton fortune, so it would make sense for us to wed.”

Except, it didn’t make sense at all. My brow creases and I tell him, “I’m not the heir to the Deighton fortune.”

“But you’re Cordelia’s granddaughter and everyone knows she cut her own daughter off. With your twin sister’s death, it makes sense that you’re the sole heir.”

“I would have been, but she cut me off.”

“It doesn’t matter now anyway. I’m not going to marry you. I never was.”

“I think you’re forgetting that I have a say in this. I would never have married you, Charlie.”

“We have ways of making people do what we want.”

His words send a shudder of repulsion through me and I don’t doubt that he’s telling the truth. Hadn’t Cordelia tried to prove as much? Hasn’t Lizzie’s experience at West Prep irrevocably confirmed it?

“But why me? Why the Deighton fortune? There are richer society girls out there who would love to be your trophy wife, Charlie. They wouldn’t even mind your adultery,” I add bitterly.

“You really don’t know anything, do you?” he asks with such glee that it sends my stomach lurching.

“I guess not,” I reply quietly.

“Allow me to educate you,” is his slimy reply. He grins at me like this is the most fun he’s had in months. “My grandmother was a twin...I guess you’d know all about it, but it often skips a generation.” He pauses to give me a significant look, but of course this isn’t news to me. I nod, so that he’ll continue.

“Wow, you really are dumb aren’t you?” he sneers. “Cordelia! Cordelia is a fucking twin! My grandmother’s twin. And after being shafted out of the family fortune, we want it back!”

“I...I...I had no idea,” I stammer in disbelief. Cordelia has always been very closed off about the family. She always led me to believe that Lizzie and I - and now Phoenix and I - were all that she had left.

“Yeah, I gathered,” comes his snide reply.

I’m barely registering his words anyway. Cordelia drama is something I can live without. I just want to get this guy out of my house before Rebel gets here. He’ll kill him. And as much as I dislike Charlie, he doesn’t deserve to die.

I certainly don’t need any more blood on my conscience. “What do you want from me, Charlie? You’ve already said

you

don't want to marry me, so what now?"

"There's a part of the family tree you're just not getting, Raven." It's his change of name that really throws me. There's something dark about the way he says it this time. Sinister.

Poignant.

What am I not getting?

I get to my feet with the intention of pacing, moving...
doing

something.

Only, I stumble a little.

My hand shoots out to steady myself on the edge of the sofa and I bite my lip, trying to work out what's wrong.

Charlie grins at me and lifts his wine glass to his lips slowly, deliberately. Fuck.

"How are you feeling, Charlotte?" Black spots dance in front of my eyes. "Ready for your family history lesson?"

There's a ringing in my ears and it's like I'm underwater.

Everything is far away.

"I believe you knew my cousin; your sister certainly did... intimately."

I shake my head in disbelief, but I'm moving in slow motion. "Do you like your wine, Charlotte? It's a family blend."

I lurch towards the kitchen but it's like wading through treacle; I'm that slow, Charlie is able to take his time getting to his feet, draining his glass and placing it purposefully on the side table, before crossing to me in a few short strides and capturing my wrists.

He pulls me against his chest in a move that could be deemed romantic or passionate to an outsider looking through the window. That's how I feel right now: an outsider. Like all of this is happening to someone else, like I'm removed from

my body and watching through a screen. It's not me, it's not my life, it's a soap. When he kisses me, I try to jerk away but he bites my lip, drawing blood. I raise my knee to hit him where it hurts but my limbs are so heavy, I'm so sluggish, that he easily blocks me.

"Tut-tut, that's not very nice," Charlie warns with a shake of his head. "My cousin warned me about you. I think he was half in love with you."

What? That doesn't make sense. I blink slowly.

"Well, in love with the idea of you, anyway," Charlie explains. "Did you know, when we were younger, we were as thick as thieves. Best friends. We made our first kill together. Sure, it was only a goldfish, but at the age of six it was a pretty powerful feeling."

"Who?"

"Jesus, maybe I gave you too much. You shouldn't be this slow!

Michael! Michael you stupid bitch; he's my cousin."

"Was," I just about manage to correct.

That earns me a backhander across the face that sends me reeling. I stumble, but of course, he still has a tight grip on me and he easily keeps me upright.

"Why...why...school?" My tongue feels thick in my dry mouth. How is it possible that a wine which tasted so fruity has left me feeling so dry?

"Why didn't I go to his school?" Charlie guesses my intent.

"My parents freaked out the day we drowned the neighbour's cat. Well, the day we got caught drowning the second one; even with the evidence staring them in the face, they still thought the first had run away. They decided Michael was a bad influence and sent me away to a boarding school in Switzerland."

"Didn't stop us though!" he brags. "Imagine being pen pals with someone who thinks like you, has the same dreams

and aspirations as you. We made wonderful plans together. And when I was allowed home during the holidays, he was always there waiting for me, eager to try out our ideas.”

“Losing our virginity together was my idea. It was made more special by the fact that the girl never consented,” he laughs, and even in my hazy state I can tell he’s completely deranged.

“What...want?”

“What do I want?” he parrots back at me. “Revenge, sweetheart. Michael told me what he did to your sister. I was always so jealous that I hadn’t been there for that one. He insisted it was too good an opportunity to miss, but I always felt betrayed; our first human kill should have been together, don’t you agree?”

Bile rises into my mouth and it takes every ounce of strength I have not to pass out or puke. I feel like the temperature has increased by twenty degrees; I’m sweating with the effort of simply trying to stand up. The dizziness is overwhelming but somehow I know that I have to stay conscious, otherwise bad things will happen.

“He told me his plans for you. He was beside himself when his plans at the party were thwarted. He was determined to get you too before the end of term; he said twins would be his crowning glory. I told him pregnant twins would be the real coup.”

What? I stumble and fall to my knees. What? He’s telling me something but...but...

Distracted, I spy my phone under the sofa. Slowly I crawl towards it, trying to make it look like I’m going to use the sofa to get back up. If I can just reach my phone...

I scream as I’m wrenched backwards by my hair and shaken so hard my teeth chatter. My eyes roll back and darkness dances across my vision.

“You’re not even listening are you?” Charlie screams. He’s crazed. Out of control. “I told Michael to make sure you got

pregnant! When you switched out Tilly's birth control pills, he did exactly the same to you!"

F-f-fuck. My phone lights up under the sofa but I can't see the caller display. Please let it be Rebel, please let him be outside and not phoning because he's delayed. Why can't I fight? I am not some helpless victim; I never have been.

"I can't believe you killed him you fucking bitch!" The kick to my solar plexus steals all the breath from my lungs and my eyes water painfully as I gasp like a fish out of water.

Fuck.

"It should have been you!" he screams in my face, spit flying everywhere.

I don't have the energy to care.

And then he pulls out the knife. My own carving knife from the kitchen.

Fuck.

"But now it's my turn! I will avenge his death!" Silver dances before my eyes, chased by black spots.

I think I hear a roaring in my ears, but it could be anything. "But first, I'm going to have fun with your cunt that you've denied me for so many months. I'll have something Michael was never able to!"

Greasy, hot hands on bare skin are the last thing I feel as the world starts to tilt, slide...fade to black. I send up one silent, final prayer as an almighty roar fills my ears: please, Rebel, hurry...

Charlotte's Diary

09/07/20

Such a good day today! Phoenix sat up all by herself for the first time!!! Admittedly it was only for a few seconds and then she seemed to topple over onto the cushions in slow motion, but I'm counting it! I was so proud of her. I just wish someone had been there to share the happy moment with me.



CHAPTER TWENTY - SIX

Rebel

For fucks' sake, I'm fucking late. I lean on my horn and cuss out the stupid fucking wanker who can't fucking reverse, or park or pull-the-fuck-over. Hell, he can't even fucking drive! I wish I had a smaller car, the 4x4 is too big for moments like this. Though the bull bar on the front is enough for me to ram him out of the way, I exercise a modicum of control.

My phone beeps with a message - probably Raven cancelling on me cause I took my sweet time getting there - and because I'm going nowhere fast, I think fuck it, and I pick it up to check.

It's the group chat.

Thorn: Yo! @Reb Dude! Where you at? Just swung by the hotel and you're not around. Plans?

Ace: Beer tonight, guys?

Thorn: I'm down for that! @Reb?

I sigh and type out a quick response:

No can do, I'm on my way to Raven's tonight. Got Thai and Netflix.

I shouldn't be bragging but I know my brothers will read between the lines. They'll know I'm putting the moves on her tonight. They don't need to know about the disastrous declaration of love from the other day. They'd tear me a new one with all their piss-taking. No, much better for them to think I'm getting lucky.

Ace: Enjoy, srečen prasec¹!

Thorn: Sounds good, we'll be there soon!

I grind my teeth in annoyance and hit call.

"Don't even fucking think about it!" I bark as soon as the call connects. Thorn pisses himself.

“Chill out, dude! I thought a good old fashioned movie night would be just what Raven would fancy!”

“Fuck off!”

“Should I text her and ask, or just show up?”

“I’m fucking warning you...” I growl, but the fucker has disconnected. “Fuck!” I beat my fists down on the steering wheel, not caring that the blare of the horn makes people jump.

If Thorn’s being serious - and I’ll kick his ass if he is - he’s likely to get to her before I do! Stupid fucking Thai restaurant. I just had to go over to the other side of town to hit up the best Thai place in the city. Stupid idiot, trying to impress Raven. I should have just focused on getting to her.

Without checking my mirrors, I slam the car into reverse and complete a turn in the road. It’s narrow as fuck so it takes me about six attempts but I’m too wound up to give a fuck. As soon as I’m moving again, I use my phone to recalculate a new route to her house. My ETA is ten minutes now. Good. Hopefully the food is still warm.

I beat the sat nav, pulling up outside her house and parking easily. I frown when I spot the same dark van that was hanging around her old house. Not bailiffs; I paid everything off. It makes me feel uneasy. I grab the Thai and quicken my pace up the steps to her door.

I ring the bell and wait, but there’s no answer. Weird. She knows to expect me. I ring, knock, peer through the windows as best I can. I can’t see her. I ring her phone; no answer.

And somehow, I just know in my gut that something isn’t right. I’m debating racing back to the car for my spare key when a thud from inside makes me panic. I run for the car, grabbing my phone and hitting redial.

“Chil the fuck out dude, we were just teasing,” Thorn groans when he answers.

“Get here now!” I pant and hang up. I wrench open the passenger door and rummage in the glove box, pulling

everything out in my frantic search for the small golden key I decided to keep for emergencies.

Locating it, I spin and race back to the front door, throwing it open and not caring when it hits the wall behind. The car door also hangs open, abandoned in my haste to listen to my gut.

Something's wrong...something's wrong...something's wrong...

“RAVEN!!!” I roar at the top of my lungs. “Raven! Baby! Please! Where are you?” My voice cracks at the end and the worst sickening dread fills me from top to toe. The kitchen is empty. The lounge is too, though I do notice signs of a scuffle. I race for the stairs, chanting prayers as I take them two at a time. Thank fuck Phoenix isn't here. Please let Raven be okay. Please let me be here on time.

On the first floor landing I race for the nearest bedroom. It's a guest, not the master, and the door is locked. Throwing my shoulder and full weight at it, I hear the wood splintering as the frame gives way and I crash into the room.

Raven is unconscious and half-dressed on the bed. That's the last thing I see before the red mist comes down and tunnel vision sets in. I zone in on the asshole on the other side of the room, spinning his knife like he hasn't a care in the world. Everything in my awareness hones in on that silver glinting blade, his smug face.

I charge.

When I collide with the bastard, the momentum of my movement slams us both into the wall behind him. The element of surprise has somehow caught him unaware and made it easy for me to disarm him in one simple move. I toss the knife under the bed; I won't be needing it. Unlike Ace, I fight with the weapons nature gave me.

The first blow to his face ruptures his nose and sends blood spraying everywhere. My second punch fractures his eye socket. And then it's all a blur as I rain down flurries of deadly punches. The rage is all-encompassing; so much so, that I

don't even notice the moment when he passes out. I don't stop. I can't stop. It's like, now that I've unleashed all of my pent-up fury, there's no off switch.

I pound his face, his stomach...any inch of him I can land a blow to. He's slipped down the wall to the floor, but one of my hands is fisted in his shirt, holding him up. The other hand moves with a mind of its own but it isn't enough. I need to hurt him. I need to make him pay.

I swing wildly at the arms that try to capture me from behind, barely registering the frantic shouts of my name.

“Rebel! Reb!”

“Relax! It's us!”

Like the flick of a switch, the fight leaves me and I sag back onto the floor, resting on my heels. I'm panting hard, my head resting on the edge of the mattress. I'm too scared to look up; I don't want to see what's happened to Raven.

Too late...too late...you got here too late...I torture myself. “Reb! Get it together! We need to check on Raven.” Thorn barks.

“Ace, call an ambulance.”

My brothers spring into action while I sit, unmoving, unable to respond. Is this shock? This feels a thousand times worse than searching for Raven's body in a burning building.

She's so still.

And just like that, I realise that I've moved. I'm now on my knees at the side of the bed, worshipping a deathly pale, lifeless Snow White. I can't tear my eyes from her face. She looks so pale she could easily pass for her sister. Blue veins across her eyelids catch the light, and it would be beautiful to behold if she wasn't so...still.

I lumber clumsily to my feet and drink in the rest of her. The white cotton bedsheets are crimson with blood.

“Whose...whose...?” I can't get the words out so I point.

“It's hers, Reb. It's Raven's blood.”

That can't be right. Was it there when I came in? I couldn't save her. How many more times am I going to fail?

"Ambulance coming," Ace says as he re-enters the room. "Not too late."

He knocks me out of the way and springs into action, checking her vitals. I just stand there, immobile.

A fucking mountain of fucking useless granite.

Charlotte's Diary

27/12/20

Spent Christmas with Baxter and it was perfect. It was so good of him to come to us and help make Phoenix's first one so special. It's silly, I know, because she won't remember it. But I will, and I'll never forget the kindness and generosity that Bax showed us both. He's spending the day with me today, taking me out, as we have to drop Phoenix off with Cordelia for a few hours so that they can have their own Christmas together.

She had tried to push for me to take her on Christmas Day, but thankfully Bax negotiated for me, because I would have just told her to go to hell.

Anyway, I better go and get ready!



CHAPTER TWENTY - SEVEN

Thorn

“Breathing. Pulse. Weak.” Ace snaps. “Help.”

A surge of adrenaline - it's not too late! - courses through me and I race to his side.

“What do I do?” I ask. I want to help, to be useful, but I don't know how.

“Hold this. Press hard.” He nods to his hands which are pressing a towel down onto her wrist. I blink in confusion because on the other side of the bed, Ace is making Rebel do the same to her other wrist.

“Did she do this?” I ask, frowning. Guilt courses through me that we might have led her to such a drastic action. I'll take being locked in a burning building over Raven hurting herself any day of the week.

“No. Never,” is the curt reply from Ace. “Why's there so much blood?” I panic.

“Don't worry,” is all he says. Either he's too busy making sure she doesn't bleed out, or he doesn't have the language skills to explain. I hope it's the latter. But I might just pay for some English lessons for him anyway. He works too hard to be sending every penny home, and I have more than enough to share. We should have tried harder to teach him English. We've not been good friends.

Sirens bring me back to the present and before I can process what's happening, I'm being pulled out of the way. EMTs fall to work on Raven, a harmonious team moving as one to lift her onto a stretcher and, once they're happy she's stable, out into the waiting ambulance.

“Who's coming with us?” The one paramedic asks.

“Me!” Rebel barks before anyone else can get a word in, immediately leaving the room to follow Raven out to the ambulance.

“Ok,” the medic replies. He looks over at the piece of shit on the floor. “What’s the story there?”

“Intruder,” Ace mutters.

“And you guys beat the shit out of him?” The guy isn’t judgemental, just curious.

“Clumsy intruder,” Ace corrects and the medic laughs. “Hurt before he got here.”

“Sure,” he says. “Not my circus, not my monkeys.”

“Huh?” Ace’s brow creases.

“He means he’s not interested. That story will be for the police,” I clarify and Ace nods his understanding.

“Don’t suppose either of you guys want to give me a hand getting him downstairs?” the medic asks.

“Fuck no,” I reply. I know it’s rude, but this bastard may have just killed Raven. I don’t trust myself anywhere near him.

Ever the good boy, Ace silently helps. I follow them down the stairs, assessing the damage as we go. There’s no blood up the stairs or along the hallway, so it looks like the bulk of his attack was contained to the bedroom.

I don’t know how I feel about that.

I traipse out to the ambulances - they sent two but the prick doesn’t deserve one if you ask me - and I speak quickly to the lead EMT who’s taking care of Raven.

“She’s going to need blood tests. I think he may have put something in her drink. There’s no way she would have been overpowered by him if she was at full health; she’s martial arts trained.”

The guy acknowledges my words and moves to shut the doors, so I quickly shout to Rebel, “We’ll follow behind and meet you there. I’ll phone Jax and Baxter too.”

I know one of us should phone the police - probably me - but that’s just not my priority right now. Besides, the paramedics will probably have phoned it through. So help me

God, I think, if that piece of shit gets taken to the same hospital as Raven and it turns out that he's seriously hurt her.

We jump into Rebel's car, using the spare key we all have a copy of, and follow the Ambulance. They don't have the lights and sirens going like you see so often in films. They don't even drive through red lights. It's like they don't register this as an emergency and it takes every ounce of self control I have not to lean on the horn to make them drive faster.

"Why are they going so slow?" I complain out of frustration.

"Good thing. Means stable," Ace tells me calmly.

I give him a sideways glance out of the corner of my eye. He was amazing back there - which I tell him.

"Done before." He shrugs and promptly clams up - as he always does when alluding to his past in Slovenia. It makes me wonder what horrors he must have witnessed as a boy to be able to respond to such a horrific event so calmly. We've been his best friends in the world and only family for years, and yet sometimes he still feels like a stranger to me. I vow to change that. No more secrets between any of us.

No more denial.

I love Raven and I don't give a shit what she did in the past. I feel awful for saying I may never be able to forgive her. As if it matters now! No, all that counts is that she's okay. No forgiveness necessary. I just want my chance to tell her how I really feel.

I'll beg her to take me back. I'll spend a lifetime making it up to her if she'll give me a chance and forgive me for hurting her.

I hit the speed dial to Jax using the car's hands free system. "Now's not a good time," he says on answering.

"Raven's hurt," I cut straight to the chase. "Tell me," he insists.

"Not too sure, got an emergency call from Rebel to get to the house, arrived just in time to find Rebel in the bedroom

beating the shit out of Charlie...”

“The asshole she was dating?”

“Yeah. Seemed he broke in, maybe? I don’t know. But he’d got Raven upstairs, half naked on the bed, unconscious...”

“Fuck,” he hisses, interrupting me.

“With her wrists slashed. It...it was bad, Jax. They’ve taken her to the hospital and Rebel’s gone with her, we’re following behind.”

“Fuck!!!” He spits. “Ace, you there?”

“Yeah,” Ace joins the conversation. “How bad was it?”

“Strašljivo¹,” Ace replies, immediately cutting me out of the conversation. I’ve picked up a cuss word or two over the years of friendship with Ace, but as he rattles off a string of sentences in his native tongue, I don’t have a clue.

“V redu²,” Jax replies. Out of all of us, he’s the most fluent in Slovenian, though he wouldn’t declare himself fluent by a long shot. “I’m on my way back, but it’s a long drive.”

“Call Baxter,” I instruct. “She’d want him there, he has connections to get you both here faster, and we may need someone to pick up Phoenix once we know what’s going on.”

“Good point. Baxter knows the childminder, we don’t. I’ll call him now and let you know what the plan is. You keep me updated, you hear? Any change at all - I want to know about it. Got it?”

“Yes, boss.” I salute, even though he can’t see me. Old habits. I end the call just as we’re pulling into the emergency department and I realise that I can’t literally follow the ambulance any longer. I turn off and head for the nearest car park, park and lock up, and then head for the main entrance to A and E.

“Excuse me,” I say as soon as I get to the front desk. “An ambulance has just brought a young woman in...”

“Relatives only. I can’t disclose personal information,” comes the insolent reply. I grit my teeth.

“I am a relative,” I force out in a fake civil tone. “She’s my fiancée and I’m her next of kin. I followed in the car. Where do I go?”

“Through those double doors. You’ll have to see where she is though; if she’s just come in, she won’t be booked on the system yet, so we can’t tell you any more than that.” The colleague sitting next to the bored-looking teenager is much more helpful, perhaps sensing my frustration.

“Thank you,” I tell her with a tight smile.

“Wait!” The first cries out. “You can’t both go. Who are you?” she asks, turning to Ace.

“Fiancée,” is his simple reply.

“But...you can’t both be engaged to her.” She frowns.

“Look, lady,” I harrumph, fixing her with a pointed stare, “do you really want to start something with us right now? Because when I know that my fiancée isn’t dying, I will be more than happy to report your discrimination against polyamorous families to your boss.”

“Go on through,” the nicer receptionist tells us calmly and I don’t spare a second to look back.

Once we’re through the relative calm of the A and E waiting area, behind the scenes it’s chaos. We wander through the maze of corridors with curtained bays coming off them, trying to find where they’ve taken Raven. There are people everywhere, on trolleys in corridors, in bays on beds, in makeshift seating areas, even just sitting on the floor. It’s like a war zone of walking wounded. I hate it.

Ace grins at me.

“What?” I snap. Could he be any more inappropriate right now? “Fiancée,” he smirks.

“Wouldn’t let us through otherwise,” I point out sullenly, but his grin stretches even wider.

“You like it,” he states, smirking.

I flick him the bird and go back to scanning the open bays in search of Raven.

Yes, I did like it. I fully intend to make her my actual fucking fiancée as soon as possible. But first, I need her alive.

Luckily, Rebel soon stumbles out from behind a curtain and we make a beeline for him, relieved that the search is over.

“What’s going on?” I ask. “Jax and Baxter are on their way, I called from the car.”

“Good,” is his tense reply. “I don’t know.” He runs a hand through his hair in an agitated motion. “Doctors are with her now. She’s stable, they’ve stopped the blood, but she’s still not conscious.”

“Shit.”

“They think she did this to herself,” he drops the awful bombshell to a shocked silence.

“Fucking ridiculous!” I explode. “Didn’t you explain?”

“I tried, but they’re not the police; they don’t want a story, they just treat the symptoms.”

“But we think she was drugged. Aren’t they checking?”

“They’ve taken bloods, but they probably just suspect an overdose.”

“Fuck!” I bark, mirroring Rebel’s stressed hair manoeuvre, by combing through my own long blonde locks. “Fuck.”

My phone rings and I instantly hit answer and fill Jax in on the situation.

“Fuck,” he hisses when I’m done.

“Tell me about it. Can you pull any strings?”

“Leave it with me,” Jax replies. “Listen, we’re taking off in fifteen - Baxter has a chopper on standby - and so our ETA is about an hour and a half.”

“Yeah listen, when you get here, just say you’re both her fiancée or next of kin otherwise they won’t let you in,” I tell

him hurriedly. “Bet the staff are loving that,” despite the tightness in his voice,

I can sense his weary amusement.

“I don’t give a fuck. They wanna try kicking one of us out? Good luck to them!”

“Alright,” he placates. “Stay strong guys, be there for one another. Make sure one of you stays with her, always. We’ll be there as soon as we can. Baxter says Phoenix is on a sleepover tonight so we don’t need to worry about that til morning.”

“Okay, bye.” I hang up.

Now it’s just a waiting game. I pace.

Charlotte's Diary

04/02/21

Happy Birthday Phoenix! Can't believe it's been a year already; where did the time go? I know every mother gushes about how fast time flies but it honestly feels like yesterday that I was bringing you home from the hospital in your tiny Harry Potter onesie and hat. You were so so small, and now look at you!

We didn't do much to celebrate your birthday - spending a couple of hours at Grandmama's house (she spoiled you rotten with all sorts of things that no one year old could ever need!) and then you, me and Baxter went to the park. Yes it was freezing, but you loved being pushed on the swings, so it was worth it to see your face light up and hear your perfect little laugh that sounds like pure sunshine.

I'm writing this note to you in my diary, but I'm going to tear it out and put it in your keepsake box for when you are older. You may not have the biggest family, but you aren't short on love, and you never will be, my darling.



CHAPTER TWENTY - EIGHT

Jax

My heart is pounding in my ears, even over the noise in the chopper's engine as we're coming in to land. Have to hand it to Baxter, he's useful to have around in an emergency. There's no way I could have got us from London to Edinburgh in such a short space of time.

Speak of the devil. Baxter's voice comes over the intercom, the headphones drilling his words straight into my skull. "We've got a ten minute ride to the hospital. I tried, but they wouldn't let me use the air ambulance landing pad. Wankers. I have a car waiting." If I wasn't so desperate to check that Raven was alright, I'd probably laugh at his entitled attitude, but at the moment I agree fully with him. Hospital wankers. I appreciate his efficiency though, usually that sort of thing falls to me to sort out.

As soon as the engine cuts and we're given the all-clear to disembark, I'm ripping off the phones and clambering out. Not my first experience in a chopper, but definitely my least favourite. I know it slashed the journey time, but it still felt like an eternity.

Once in the limo that Baxter had promised would be waiting for us, we're able to talk. Hell, I can finally think. The pounding is still there though.

My phone buzzes in my jacket pocket, but I ignore it.

"What's going on? Any news?" Baxter immediately pounces when the car pulls off.

I check my phone. A missed call from Tilly. "Nothing," I sigh my reply.

"Tell me what happened again," Baxter insists.

"Rebel called, said he found Raven half naked on the bed, wrists slashed, unconscious, possibly drugged. Beat the shit out of Charlie until Thorn and Ace arrived and pulled him off."

“Charlie? The dickwad she was dating? The guy who fucked her car over?”

“Yeah...wait, what? When was this?” I frown in confusion.

“The other day. She phoned me in a panic, said he’d smashed her car up real good, and threatened her.”

“What?” I yell. “Why didn’t the guys tell me?”

“Well, she probably didn’t say anything to them, with the car being a gift and all - you’ll have to tell me how Rebel managed that by the way, stubborn brat won’t take shit off me and I’ve been trying for years! She was mostly worried about the car and not being able to fix it. I sent her the money to get it sorted straight away.”

“Whoa, back up...threatened?”

“Well, yeah, she mostly laughed it off, but she was pretty shaken up because he alluded to Phoenix.”

“I’ll fucking kill him,” I grind out, blood boiling. My scalp prickles all over, sending white hot spikes down the back of my neck.

“I wish I had,” Baxter mutters. “None of this would have happened if I’d just ditched Tilly and got my ass back up here. I knew something was wrong, I could just tell.”

“Absolutely. I hear you,” I reply, turning to stare out of the window.

“Look,” Baxter begins. “About that-”

“We’re here,” I interrupt, throwing the door open and climbing out before the car has come to a complete standstill. Baxter can follow at his own pace. Or not. Whilst we’re not exactly friends, I know he’s not the enemy anymore, but I’m still not about to hang around for him. Not when I need to know Raven’s okay. I won’t take anyone’s word for it; I need to check with my own eyes.

Luckily, I’m saved from having to hunt around the hospital for her, when Ace appears at the entrance and leads the way. As we wait for the lift, I ask him how she is.

“Not good,” comes his hesitant reply. “Won’t wake.”

“And Rebel?” I check, knowing that he’ll be reeling.

“Bad,” Ace confirms. I knew it; he’s such a unique combination of temper and kindness, fire and heart. He’ll already be blaming himself, it’ll be unbearable if anything happens to her.

“And the prick?”

“Very bad. Bad for Rebel.”

“I’ll-” I start to reply when my phone buzzes again and Baxter interrupts from behind me.

“I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry.” He makes to head off in the opposite direction and I call him back, asking where he’s going. Doesn’t he want to see Raven? I need to. “Sort Charlie, the police, cover for Rebel, inform Cordelia, take care of Phoenix. You call me the second she wakes up, if not sooner. Any news, change, anything - you call. Got me?”

“Of course,” I promise. “Thank you, Baxter.” The words are surprisingly easy to get out. They don’t leave a bitter taste in my mouth because I genuinely mean them.

He nods once and disappears through double doors marked ‘Staff Only’. Doesn’t surprise me; he’s a law unto himself. Lucky for us, some things never change.

Once we arrive on the correct floor, Ace hurries us through to Raven’s bedside. I meet Rebel pacing outside her room. The fact that they’ve processed her through A and E so quickly, got her onto a ward and given her a side room, fills me with dread. Most people would be impressed by the efficiency of the NHS, but their sense of urgency alarms me.

“What’s going on?” I demand curtly.

“She won’t wake up! They still haven’t found out what’s in her system. I swear, it’s like they think she’s a junkie or suicidal or something! They keep asking so many questions!” As Rebel replies to me, his voice rises until he’s practically shouting, and people along the corridor are starting to stare.

“Thorn?” I call softly. His head pops out around the door frame and I raise an eyebrow in question at him. He gently shakes his head in the negative, which confirms what I suspected: that Rebel is exaggerating.

“Cool down, Reb,” I placate. “I’m sure that’s not true at all. The paramedics would have debriefed the team on their arrival.”

Rebel will know this; he’s just too worked up to be logical right now. It’s my job to tell him straight. I’m the only one he listens to. “Be smart, mate. Think about it,” I tell him evenly. He grumbles at me, resumes pacing, but quiets. I’ll take that as a win for now.

My phone buzzes, again and again and again. I grit my teeth and send it to voicemail. Fucking Tilly; I don’t have the patience for her at the best of times, but I really can’t handle her right now.

I walk into the room, and the sight before me stops my heart. She looks so small in the bed, so fragile...broken. The starched white sheets bleach her skin, making her look pallid, and her long black hair is too dark against her chalky complexion. It doesn’t look like her at all.

Dark circles ring her closed eyes, a web of thin blue veins snaking across her eyelids, her cheekbones looking too high and sharp against her gaunt cheeks. The shining purple bruise that’s already developing on one makes rage bubble in my stomach. Even her lips have lost their fullness and rosy hue. I hate it.

I hate that she’s in a hospital gown once again. I hate that I wasn’t there to protect her once again. And as my eyes trail down to the bandages wrapped around her wrists, I realise that I hate the fucker that did this to her.

I wish I had followed Baxter, taken care of things like he is. Breathing in sharply through my nose, I close my eyes and imagine slipping into his room, assessing his condition, and then finding a way to make it worse. Permanent. I wouldn’t hesitate, the way I’m feeling right now, to kill him with my own bare hands. And that’s when it hits me: this is how Raven

felt the entire time she was at West Prep. The love she had for her sister and the love I have for her...they're the same. To steal Rebel's idea; I'd burn the

entire world to the ground for her. I... Fuck.

I'm saved from having to explore those feelings by the arrival of a doctor. I spring into action, asking questions, demanding answers, insisting on the best care possible. Should I pay to get her private care? Does she need it? Despite our combined wealth, none of us have ever gone private; we could never fault the NHS. But suddenly, in my desperation to ensure Raven is okay, nothing seems good enough.

I don't even realise that I'm getting myself worked up until a calming hand rests on my shoulder. Ace. His presence instantly has a comforting effect and I feel like I can breathe again, even before he tells me to.

The doctor reassures us that Raven is ok: the lab results shouldn't be long and then it will just be a waiting game until she's ready to wake up. Rebel growls out a question, asking how long that will be, and although I shoot him a look, I completely agree with his desperate impatience. Even more so when the doctor is unable to answer him.

We wait, and it's torture, pure torture. I lose track of how many times Tilly calls. My phone keeps notifying me that I have voicemails; Ugh, how fucking desperate can you be?

It's hours before anything happens. Rebel paces and grumbles, unable to sit still. Thorn leaves the room in search of food and drink for all of us. Ace sits silently by Raven's bedside, gently holding her hand. And I stand immobile, unable to do anything. Even when Thorn returns, even though I'm starving, I can't move. I finally snap out of it when Baxter arrives. He tells us that the prick who hurt Raven has been taken care of - I don't know what he means, but knowing his history, I can guess - and that he has informed Cordelia and arranged to have Phoenix picked up and taken there. It's a relief. I wouldn't have known what to do with the kid, and I certainly don't have a way to get in touch with Cordelia. I fleetingly wonder if we've done the right thing, sending

Phoenix there, but then I remember that we don't really have a huge amount of options right now and that it's probably best that Phoenix doesn't see her mum like this.

A phone rings - Baxter's - and he pulls it hastily out of his pocket. He glances at the caller display, frowns and mutes the ring, apologising in a hushed tone.

"Bax," a raspy voice pulls me from my thoughts. My head whips around to see Raven blinking slowly and frowning. Relief ignites in my stomach and sparks through my body like an electrical pulse - she's okay! - and all at once everyone in the room swarms in around her, pressing closer like bees in a hive around their queen.

"Bax," she croaks again, her tone tired and raspy. Baxter fights his way to her side and takes her free hand.

"Yes Charlotte?"

She cringes when he says her name and withdraws her hand from his embrace.

"Don't," she begs hoarsely. "Please don't call me that now."

"Okay, babe. I'll call you whatever you want. How can I help?"

"Phoenix..."

"Is taken care of," Baxter reassures her. He quickly checks his watch and adds, "she'll be with Cordelia now."

Raven nods slowly and closes her eyes again, takes a deep breath, and reopens her eyes like it pains her to do so.

"I don't want to be alone," she whispers. My chest does this weird...tightening sensation. I can't describe it, it's nothing I've ever experienced before. I don't like it. I think again how much I hate her looking so broken. She's too small, too pale, and now too scared-looking.

All at once, all five guys in the room - myself included - are clamouring and offering to stay with her, get her things, whatever she needs. Big fat tears roll slowly down her cheeks and she sobs, overwhelmed, I guess. It makes me rub my chest

absentmindedly where the pain is; right over my heart where my black raven feather tattoo lies. I've refused to look at it - hell even think of it - for years. And now I can't stop touching it, like it's a direct lifeline back to Raven.

"Bax?" she calls and he immediately leans in towards her. She whispers something in his ear, he nods, kisses the back of her hand, then leaves. I watch him scowl at his phone again as he goes. "Reb?" She turns to him. "Not now, but can you take care of the house?"

"On it, Princess. Don't you worry about a thing."

"I'll sort security," I jump in, telling Rebel. He can sort the mess inside but there's no one I trust enough to take care of her safety anymore. It has to be me. It always should have been me.

I already know, plans forming in my mind, that I'm going to go way over the top. But I don't care.

"Do you want to stay there? We can get you a new house," Thorn jumps in to offer. Hmm, that's actually not a bad idea.

"No. It's Phoenix's home. He doesn't get to take that from her," she replies firmly. It makes me feel a tiny bit better; there's still a bit of steel, a bit of fight, left in her. Thank god, she's not broken yet. Or ever, if I have my way.

There's a knock at the door - the doctor - and we all leave briefly so that she can check Raven over. I shoot a wary glance at Rebel when I spy two policemen walking into the ward.

"Thorn, take care of it," I order, jerking my head at the uniformed officers coming towards us. "She's not to speak to anyone yet."

"On it, boss," he replies, pressing his way through us and going to head them off. No way are they taking a statement from her when she's barely even come round yet.

Baxter returns, shooting me significant looks when he sees Thorn charming the police, before joining us. I briefly explain that the doctor is with Raven and he informs us that he phoned Cordelia to say she was conscious; though it was at Raven's request and more for Phoenix's benefit than anyone else's.

My phone goes off again - still on silent but buzzing nonetheless - and I sigh.

“You too, huh?” Baxter asks. “She’s driving me insane,” I reply.

“Tell me about it,” he says as he runs a hand through his hair. “Listen, can we talk about that?”

“Not here,” I instruct, pulling him into an empty side room a moment later.

“Shoot,” I encourage him.

“I don’t think I can do it, Jax. I’m sorry,” he confesses.

“Okay,” I reply cautiously. Relief courses through me once again. I’m glad he’s said something first, because in truth, I don’t think I can either. “Which part?”

“I want revenge, I do. But I don’t think I can sleep with her.” He confirms my own feelings. The thought of sleeping with Tilly sickens me.

“We need to get her a different way,” I say thoughtfully.

“You don’t mind?”

“No,” I admit, “I couldn’t bear to get any closer to her either. But how do we take care of this then?”

“Leave it with me; I’ll figure something out,” he promises. I’m oddly glad to be off the hook. It’s also nice not to have to be the one planning and juggling and overseeing everything.

Once again, I find myself grateful that Baxter is such a huge part of Raven’s life. If things go to plan, we’ll be in each other’s lives a lot more too, because I don’t plan on fucking things up with Raven again. I’m not leaving. No, it’s time for a new plan; operation put things right with Raven. Needs a catchier name, but I can work on that later. For now, I just need to make her fall in love with me once more.

I just have to figure out how.

Charlotte's Diary

31/08/21

Agh! I can't believe that today is moving day! Baxter has, of course, taken care of everything, and all Phoenix and I have to do is supply the Yorkie bars as he drives the van to our new home.

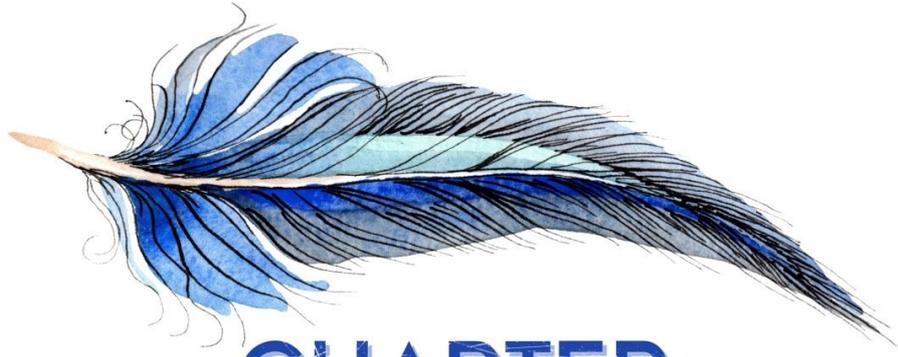
I'm glad to be moving, excited to be starting university in a week, but a little sad that we're going to be so far away from Baxter now.

But I have to focus on the positives. On to new adventures.

Edinburgh University offers the best course for me, and a change is as good as a rest...is that right? I'm not sure, but I'm going with it.

So today we go; the first step in changing our lives for the better! I never could have got here without the endless hours of studying when Phoenix was in bed, the many many part time and work from home jobs I took on in the past year, and of course, Baxter's subsidised accommodation.

But it's time to stand on my own two wobbly, nervous feet.



CHAPTER TWENTY - NINE

Raven

Finally! I'm allowed to head home today. Some things never change; hospitals make me crazy. It's only been - what? - two days, but I've already had enough. I just want to get out of here...although, I'm not going to lie; I'm not totally comfortable with heading 'home'. I'd never say anything to the boys, especially with Thorn trying to offer to buy me a new place, but I'm dreading going back. I can't move though, where would I go? And I meant what I said about not uprooting Phoenix. She loves her room, the space, the garden. No, I'll suck my discomfort up, for her.

The police came to talk to me yesterday and it was tough. Way tougher than I expected it to be. I didn't want to be alone and I certainly didn't want to relive that night. Between the doctors physically poking and prodding me, to the police probing me for answers, I feel completely wrung-out.

For me, the hardest part was facing how useless and stupid I was. Why didn't my training kick in? After what felt like a lifetime of running and looking over my shoulder, why was I suddenly complacent? I feel so stupid. Embarrassed. Angry with myself.

Ashamed.

Thankfully, the police officers were understanding and supportive; I didn't feel judged at any point. I expected to have to defend myself, to prove I was somehow the victim, but it wasn't like that at all. That was a relief; I don't think I had the fight left in me to plead my innocence. They assured me that Charlie wouldn't get away with this - no matter who his family are. That helps me to feel a little better anyway.

But there's a part of me, a dark little voice in the back of mind, that's been whispering to me. That maybe, this is my fault. This is karma for the fire. For Michael...

I'm pulled from my thoughts by a gentle knock at the door. Assuming it's one of the guys returning from lunch, I call for

them to enter. Only it isn't them.

"Charlotte," a familiar voice says and I cringe away from the name, the memories it now invokes. "Charlotte, can I talk to you?" Charles Snr doesn't wait for my reply, entering my side room and closing the door behind him. The click of the handle snapping back into place causes a cold sweat to break out all over my body.

My heart rate rises.

It would seem that I don't relish the idea of being shut in a small space with any of the Cox family. My pulse is so loud I can hear it beating in my ears. I feel like the walls are closing in on me and my breathing gets shallow and pained.

"Charlotte, I am so so sorry for what has happened to you," Charles begins. A foolish person could be tricked into thinking he was being genuine, but the twisting in my gut tells me otherwise. He wants something.

I frown slightly at his wording. Is he trying to distance his son from what he did? 'Happened' makes it sound like an accident. That's not how it went down at all. His son did this to me. Made a conscious decision. Actually planned it and broke into my house to execute it. The only thing I don't know, is how far he planned to go, or would have gone, if Rebel hadn't saved me.

"Don't call me that," I snap, gasping for breath. "Sorry, what?"

"I said, don't call me Charlotte. I don't ever want to hear that name again after your son...he..." The violent shakes that overcome me prevent me from speaking.

"I'm sorry. So sorry. Please know I am absolutely appalled by what Charlie has done." I watch as he hangs his head in shame. It would seem that he can't bring himself to say the words either. "But I'm here to beg you, Cha-, I mean, please. Please don't press charges."

I can't believe what I'm hearing.

"You don't want me to press charges against your son?"

“He has his whole life ahead of him. I promise, I will make him spend it repenting for what he has done, but please don’t take away his future.” I’m so incredulous, I can’t even speak. “He swears it was a prank that got out of hand.”

The fuck?

“What, exactly, did Charlie say happened?”

“He said that he - stupidly, I might add - broke into your house to try and convince you to take him back. That he surprised you at the top of the stairs and you both fell. He’s scared you’re going to press charges for the breaking and entering.”

I almost want to laugh. It’s actually a painful bubble that lodges in my chest.

“How did both my wrists get slit, if we tumbled down the stairs?” I ask quietly. Is this the panicked desperation of a cornered, broken man, or is this a cleverly crafted plan? What’s his excuse for my unique set of injuries?

“S-Sorry?” Charles stutters, though I’d bet my life that he heard me.

I thrust out my bandaged wrists for him to see.

“How did this happen as we fell?” I repeat. I take a deep breath and continue, “and when we fell, how did that result in him...trying to...r-r-rape...” I swallow hard. I can’t finish the sentence. I close my eyes and painful memories assault me. Snapping them back open again, I see that Charles Snr has gone deathly pale.

“W-what?” He stutters in disbelief.

“Your son is a liar and a...a rapist. He deserves everything he gets.”

“Charlotte, I had no idea...”

“Leave.” The fury in that one word makes my skin tingle. My eyes cut to the door where I didn’t hear the newcomer enter.

Baxter stands in the doorway, shaking with barely contained rage.

“Mr Branson,” Charles Snr begins, clearing his throat nervously, “I was just-”

“I don’t give a fuck.” His voice is tight and restrained as he replies. “I called you out of courtesy because no parent deserves to be left wondering where their child is. But make no mistakes about it; I will kill Charlie for what he has done. And if you come anywhere near Raven again, I will fucking kill you too.”

Charles Snr obviously believes him because he hastens from the room without so much as a pleading glance in my direction. The door bangs behind him and a moment later Baxter spins and slams his fist into it, making me jump and whimper.

He whirls round to face me and I must look absolutely terrified, because the storm instantly leaves him and he hangs his head to look at me with complete remorse.

“Raven, I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“It’s-it’s fine,” I croak. “I’m just a bit jumpy.” I try for a lighthearted laugh but it gets stuck. Baxter slowly approaches my bedside and takes a seat beside me, before reaching to clasp my hand in his. My palms are sweaty.

“Shit, you’re trembling,” he murmurs.

“So are you,” I point out, deflecting. “You called his dad?”

“I did.”

“Did you mean what you said?” I ask timidly, referring to the cryptic comment about parents knowing where their children are. “Every word,” he promises, meaning so much more. “Wouldn’t be my first time.” Oh.

I don’t know what to say to that. Should I be horrified? Repulsed? Afraid? I look at Baxter out of the corner of my eye. He’s been my saviour and friend, my rock and confidante. I could never be afraid of him. Phoenix worships him. I...My stomach flips.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here to keep him away. What did he want?” Baxter asks.

“Came to beg that I don’t press charges.”

“What?!” he explodes.

“Charlie hadn’t told the truth. At all. I doubt he’ll be expecting me to let him off for ‘his little prank’ now.”

“He said that?” Baxter growls.

“More or less.”

“I’ll fucking kill him.”

“Who?”

“Both. Fucking idiot.”

“No parent wants to think badly of their child,” I say. Then I cringe because it sounds like I’m making excuses for him, and I’m really not. “Can we change the subject?” I ask instead.

“Sure. Are you ready to head home?”

I cringe, and of course, Baxter spots it. “What?” he demands.

“Nothing! It’s nothing,” I insist.

“Bullshit. Tell me now.” His tone compels me to talk.

“I’m nervous about going back...there.” I gulp. Baxter nods once and pulls out his phone.

“It’s me,” he barks to whoever’s on the end of the line. “Change of plan. I’m taking her to my suite...I don’t give a fuck! Is it ready? Well then...Yes, if she’s okay with that. I’ll let you know...Yep, bye.”

He hangs up and looks at me. “Sorted, babe. Anything else?”

“What’s happening with Phoenix?”

“She’s with Cordelia for the rest of the week. Longer if needed. We switched around the holiday arrangement so that she’ll have her now. She’s having a great time and I’ve spoken to her every day.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That you were poorly and didn’t want her to catch it. She thought you were very sensible.” He laughs lightly. “I promise, she’s okay. And I’m going to visit at the weekend and take her out, so you have nothing to worry about. I’ll bring her home as soon as you’re ready.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, suddenly overcome by emotion. “What’s the change of plan then?”

“You’re coming with me to my hotel. The house isn’t ready for you yet anyway, so you don’t need to worry about that. We’ll go relax in the lap of luxury for a while. It’ll be so good, you won’t want to leave!”

“Because the Royal Circus is slumming it?” I quip.

“Exactly.” He winks at me, making a genuine laugh bubble up. That’s when I realise, I might just be okay after all.

Charlotte's Diary

14/07/22

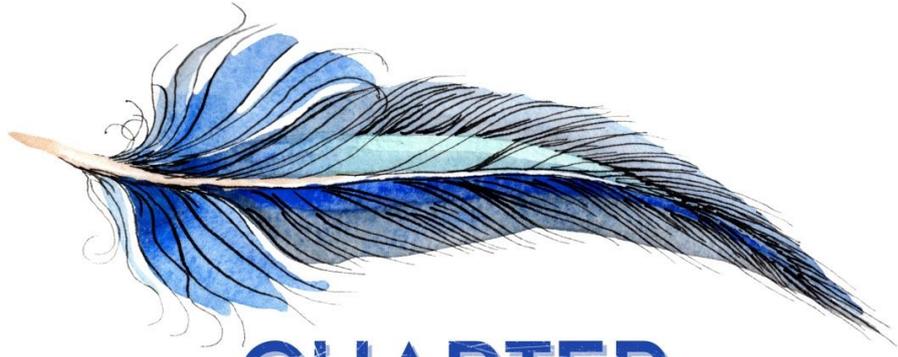
*Somehow, I have survived year 1 as a Fresher at university!
Just. Barely.*

Not going to lie, the workload has been absolutely insane. The older Phoenix gets, the more time and attention she demands. I never thought that those early days of spiralling darkness and depression would actually have turned out to be 'easier' in some ways.

It's been hard keeping up with the demands of a full time literature degree. I think there's more work involved there than any other subject, besides medicine and law I guess. Add to that, raising a one year old alone and trying to keep a roof over our heads...well let's just say I've been a typical student many a night and just eaten beans.

I know, I know, the joke is that students just eat beans on toast, but I couldn't afford the bread. No joke. And when we were low on gas, I wouldn't heat the beans either, preferring to save energy for keeping Phoenix warm.

BUT we've survived. And will continue to do so.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Baxter

I don't hesitate to take Raven back to my hotel suite instead of sending her back to the house. I understand her hesitation; I only hope that the guys can spruce it up enough that she feels comfortable to go back, especially as Phoenix has made the place a home. If I thought she'd let us buy her a new place, I wouldn't think twice. She'd never allow it though. She must have been really desperate to give in to Rebel's offer in the first place.

In the hotel room, dressed in what I can only assume is sweats belonging to one of the guys, she looks small and lost. She stares at the huge bed and shudders, before moving over to the sofa and curling up in the corner, making herself as small as possible. I hate it.

"Pop?" I ask her, offering her a can, which she wordlessly takes. I put the tv on and flick it to the movie channel. Too late, I panic about what might come on TV, but when I see the ghost of a smile pass her lips, I look to the screen to see it's one of the Harry Potter movies. Good. She loves that shit and it can't do any harm. I take a seat on the sofa, sitting at the far end. I feel uncomfortable, unsure what to say or do.

"You hungry?" I ask. She shakes her head no. "Tired?"

"A bit," she replies.

"Do you want the guys to come over? They're texting like crazy to check in on you."

She looks around, as though she's searching for her phone and suddenly she freezes, like it's just hit her why she doesn't have it anymore.

"I have a new phone for you. It's all set up, on charge and ready to go."

"Thanks," she croaks.

"I'll tell the guys to stay away tonight."

"Please."

I rattle off a quick text, knowing that my message won't go down well, but not really caring. I just want to make sure she's okay.

“Can I get you anything? Do you want a bath? A shower?” She bites her lip, unsure.

“Maybe...a bath?” she words it as a question,

“Absolutely. Want to wait here while I run it for you?” I ask. She nods, and I race into the bathroom to sort it for her. Somehow she seems more fragile here than she did in the hospital bed. I fucking hate it. I'd give anything to make her feel whole again.

When the bath's ready, I head back into the room to find Raven staring blankly at the TV screen, fat tears rolling slowly down her cheeks.

“Babe? Are you-” I hesitate. Of course she's not okay, dickhead. “The bath is ready. Do you need...anything?”

“No,” she replies, getting to her feet and shuffling past me like a zombie. I leave her to it but keep a close ear out to ensure she's okay.

“Babe, do you want clean sweats or something to sleep in?” I call through the closed door.

“Don't mind,” comes her muffled reply.

Right. I grab some of my stuff out of the drawer and toss it onto the bed. She can use it if she wants. Or not.

My phone rings - Tilly - and I send it to voicemail. I check the time and realise I need to call Phoenix before she goes to bed. I dial Cordelia's number.

“Baxter,” Cordelia's clipped RP tones come over the line. “How is my granddaughter?”

“She's been released from the hospital,” I inform her. “Is she home?”

“Not yet. We're doing some work on the place, so she's staying at the hotel with me for a few days.”

“I see. I will arrange for the flowers I have ordered to be sent to her there then.”

“Thank you Cordelia, that’s really kind. How’s Phoenix?”

“She is fine. We’ve had a lovely day at the botanic gardens today, but I shall let her tell you all about it. She is very excited for your call. I am waiting to get her to bed so please do not take too long.”

“I won’t. Goodnight Cordelia.”

“Goodnight,” she replies before handing the phone over to Phoenix.

“Baxter!” Phoenix’s delighted squeal comes over the line.

“Hey darling!” Her chipper voice makes me smile. “How’s my favourite small girl?”

“I’m good!” she giggles.

“Have you had a good day?” I ask.

“Yeah! We went to the bo-bot-a big garden. It was pretty!”

“Lovely. What did you see there?” I prompt.

“Lots of flowers and Grandmama knew all the names! And guess what! They even had bees inside! My favourite was the big fat bumble bee. It got so close I could see how fuzzy it was.”

“Wow that’s cool! Weren’t you scared?”

“Silly! Why?” She laughs.

“In case you got stung.”

“No! Mummy says there’s no point being scared of things that might happen.”

“You’re mummy is very clever, isn’t she?”

“And wise. How is she?” she asks after a beat.

“She’s doing really good, darling,” I tell her. It’s only a white lie. I know Raven would normally kill me for lying to her kid, but I think needs must right now.

“Good!” She pauses and then asks in a quiet voice, “Do I have to come home early?”

“Do you want to?”

“I want to see mummy, but I would like to finish my holiday,” she replies quietly, like she doesn’t want to upset anyone.

“Then that’s what you’ll do baby.” I tell her cheerily. “I’ll get mummy to video call you in a day or two, how does that sound?”

“Great! I have to go now Bax, Grandmama says it’s bedtime.”

“Love you kid, I’ll give mummy a massive kiss from you, yeah?”

“Hahaha,” she giggles. “Okay. But no tongues!”

“Eeeeew tongues are gross.” I play along.

“Love you!”

“You too. Sleep tight,” I say, blow a kiss, then hang up. I’m not ashamed to admit that I love that kid. Have done since the moment she was born and I first laid eyes on her. Hell, if it’s possible, I think I loved her before I met her. And I’m starting to think I might feel the same about her mum.

If only Raven would love me back as easily as Phoenix seems to.

“Rae?” I knock gently on the bathroom door. “You okay in there?”

The door opens and Raven’s stood in front of me in a towel. She looks a little better with her cheeks flushed from the heat of the water. I hope I didn’t run the bath too hot though.

“I just spoke to Phoenix. Do you want some food? I can order and tell you about her day while we wait.”

“No food please,” she says, pulling a dressing gown on over her towel. A second towel is wrapped around her long dark hair, piled up on her head, and even with the extra inches

she's still tiny. I'm not even the biggest of guys, and I tower over her.

"Wanna sit on the sofa or the bed?" I ask.

"Sofa," she doesn't hesitate. I briefly wonder how I'm going to get her to sleep in the bed, but dismiss the thought. If there's no point being scared of things that might happen, there's no point worrying about things that haven't happened yet either. Smart girl.

We sit on the sofa and Raven looks at me while I tell her about the phone call with Phoenix. When I tell her what Phoenix said about her mum she even manages a smile.

"I never said that to her," she says. "That's all her thinking."

"She's astute," I reply.

"Scarily so sometimes." She smiles.

"She kinda reminds me of Jax," I say, with some hesitation. "Frequently," she replies with a rueful look.

"Do you find yourself doing that often? Looking for their traits in her?"

"Always. Jax's brains, Rebel's temper and sass, Thorn's playfulness, Ace's heart...she's amazing."

"Rae, what are you going to do? It's her birthday soon and the guys seem like they're still going to be around..." I trail off, letting the suggestion lie.

"I'll keep it quiet. Celebrate just the three of us, like always."

"Don't you think-" I begin.

"No, absolutely not," she cuts me off. "I'm actually really tired. Can we go to bed?"

"Okay. Sure. How do you want to do this?" She bites her lip.

"I'm happy to stay, or go. There's a second bedroom through there or I can sleep on the sofa. Or you can. Tell me

what you want.”

“I don’t want to be alone,” she says. “But I don’t want to sleep in the bed either.”

“Shall I set up the sofa bed?”

“Please,” she nods.

“Okay, go brush your teeth and I’ll sort it.”

“Yes, Dad.” She smiles.

“Hush you, everything seems better after you’ve brushed your teeth, don’t you know?” I gently tease. She said that line to Phoenix one time when she was sick and lo and behold it turned out to be true. I tried it the next time I was hungover, but I didn’t tell her that though.

“Shut up.” She smirks, but does as I suggested. I quickly make up the bed, grabbing the nicer pillows and duvet off the bed, turning out the big lights in favour of the lamps, and putting a few snacks from the minibar on the side table. I’m painfully aware that she hasn’t eaten anything in a while, so I’m hoping some popcorn might tempt her.

She comes back into the room minus the towels, hair brushed out and wearing my clothes. There’s no denying the funny little leap my heart does at seeing that. Like she’s mine.

“What?” she demands and I realise I’ve been staring, smirking.

“My clothes look good on you.” I grin. I’m desperately trying to make her smile and it works; she gives me a tiny twinkle.

“It’s like constantly getting a hug from you,” she replies snuggling in to them.

“C’mere,” I say holding out my arms. She hesitates for the tiniest second and then steps into my embrace. She’s tense and she trembles from head to toe, but she doesn’t pull away. “I’ve got you. And I’ll never let anything happen to you or Phoenix ever again. I’ve got you. Always.”

When she finally relaxes in my arms, I gently let her go and lead her over to the sofa bed. I allow her to climb in, choosing her side, and then I settle down on top of the covers beside her, but not too close.

We watch another film - no idea what, seems to be a pretty harmless Romcom - and I even manage to get her to have a few snacks. It's all junk food, but I don't give a fuck at this point. As the night wears on and she seems reluctant to sleep, she moves closer to me until her head is in my lap. I don't make a move to touch her, letting her control the contact. I just want her to be comfortable.

I almost laugh. If my old self could see me now, he'd rip the piss out of me. In bed with a chick and not doing the naughty? Has to be a first. I don't care. He'd laugh over my blue balls too. But now isn't the time. There might never be a time for that. And I'm okay with that. This thing that's developing between Raven and I...well, it feels special. And I don't want to do anything to fuck it up.

I look down and see that she's finally fallen asleep, head in my lap. A quick glance at the clock tells me it's the early hours of the morning. My phone lights up, thankfully on silent, as a call comes through. Tilly. Again.

Guilt floods me.

I don't know what to do. I promised Jax I would take care of things, find another way to take Tilly down, but I don't have the first clue how. For once, all my evil ideas have left me. Absentmindedly, I stoke the hair back from Raven's face and pull the covers up around her.

I don't know how I'm going to take care of things. But I realise that I have to see it through to the end. I need something to focus on otherwise I will kill Charlie, and then where would that leave me with Raven?

Charlotte's Diary

Charlotte's Letter to Bax 14/01/23

Hey Bax,

Year 2 is going okay so far, thanks for asking. I've managed to get Phoenix into a brilliant nursery (which I can actually afford!) and have a wonderful childminder who is an absolute godsend.

We stayed home over Christmas - apart from the obligatory visit to Cordelia's - and we were sorry we only got to see you so briefly. Although, with the way Phoenix continues to adore you, no visit will ever be long enough in her mind! I think she'd have you move in and sleep in a bunk bed with her forever if she could.

How's business going? One of these days you're going to have to explain to me exactly just what it is you do, because I don't have a clue! I hope whatever it is, is legal. Only joking, I just hope it's going well for you!

As you know, Phoenix's birthday is coming up soon. I hope you're able to swing by and see her. Maybe we could get the train down and meet you halfway? I'm sort of dreading it; as you know, Cordelia's mandate came into play last year when she turned two, that she gets to have Phoenix overnight one weekend every month. I know I should have been glad to get some 'me' time (ha! More like catching up on everything I've neglected the rest of the month time!) but in truth, I'm really, I just really miss her and spend the weekend pining for her return!

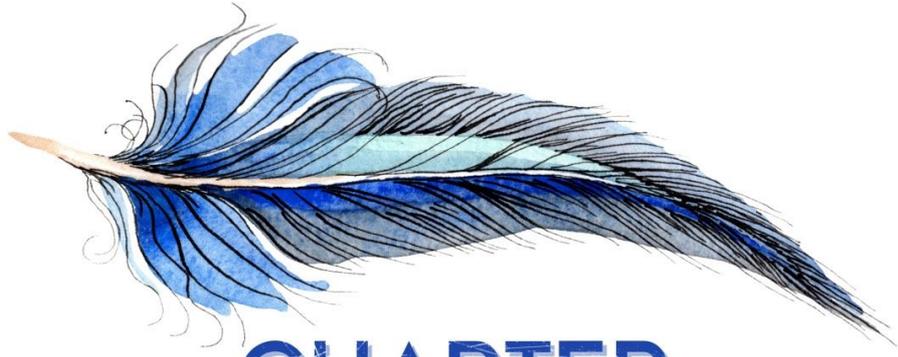
I don't know how I'll cope when she turns three next month and Cordelia gets to have her 6 weeks of the year.

Anyway, I better go and see what Phoenix is up to. I'm impressed she's been quiet long enough for me to write to you, but when I told her what I was doing, she was desperate to "write" to you too, so she raced off to draw you a picture. It's enclosed.

FYI: that's you, me and Phoenix, and you have an exceptionally large...arm...because you always lift her one handed! Don't get any ideas, your ego's big enough as it is!

Charlotte

X



CHAPTER THIRTY - ONE

Raven

I'm surprised with how well I've been sleeping. Not in the bed, of course, but on the sofa. I try to delay sleeping for as long as possible, fearing what new nightmares will arise to haunt me, but so far there's been something comforting about Baxter's presence that's keeping everything at bay. I fall to sleep late, but sleep late, and it's been much needed.

I don't remember the last time I did so little. In a way, being able to rest has been nice, even if the reasons for it are... shitty. Baxter has taken care of everything: Phoenix, whom I speak to everyday; my course, which I'm graduating early from; my job at the bar, which I'm pretty sure I've quit without knowing. It's been such a relief to have someone to lean on.

Whilst he's always had my back and helped out in the past, this time it feels different. He's around a lot more. Seeming reluctant to leave my side. It'll sound stupid, but the way he looks at me has changed. He seems as devoted to me as he has always been to Phoenix. It's been a long time since anyone looked at me like that.

I like it.

Not the attention - though that's lovely - but the fact that it's Baxter looking at me like that...well, it makes my stomach flip. And I don't know what that means.

Except, I can't stop thinking about the kiss we shared all those years ago, when he promptly rejected me and disappeared. My cheeks heat with embarrassment even now. I relive that kiss over and over, wondering...

Anyway that's stupid. Maybe I'm imagining the change in him, after he rejected me the last time. Why would anything have changed since then? I'm sure it must be in my head. My mind playing tricks on me, seeking out comfort where there's been none for so long.

Until Charlie...I didn't realise what I was missing.

My new phone rings, making me jump, even though I have a new number and there's no way Charlie has it. I still check the caller display before answering.

"Hello?" It's Jax. It's always one of the guys. They've been checking in with me regularly, and trying to visit, though I've been putting that off.

"Is Baxter there?" Jax's voice cuts in.

"Erm, no. He's down in the gym, I think." He wasn't here when I woke up. But it's not the first time that's happened and he usually comes back in gym gear, covered in sweat that doesn't smell as unappealing as I expected it to. I've had some...interesting thoughts of him showering.

"Good. Open the door," Jax tells me. "Huh?" But he's already gone.

I go over to the hotel room door and sure enough, checking the viewfinder, I see Jax standing there, waiting. No getting out of this one then.

"Hey," I say lamely when I open the door. "What are you doing here?"

He enters without invite which is awkward; the hall area isn't that wide and suddenly I'm pressed against the wall with Jax so close I can feel his heat.

A myriad of emotions assault my senses as sharply as Jax's aftershave does. My stomach dips and soars, my heart rate spiking. I bite my lip uncertainly and stare up at Jax, breathing hard. What...is he going to kiss me? Do I want him to?

I do. I want him to kiss me. I lick my lips and Jax watches me closely, eyes darkening. I'm not sure, but I think I move closer to him. But he pulls away.

"We need to talk," he says. Disappointment floods me and I instantly think of Baxter's rejection. Now I have another to add to my list. I'm gutted. But there's something akin to relief there too. I don't want to think about that.

I follow Jax back into the main room and take a seat on the sofa, glad that I packed away the bed we've been using.

“Sorry about that,” Jax says. “About what?” I ask quietly.

“For coming around unannounced. I felt like you would have said no if I called. The others said you haven’t seen them either.”

I shrug, not sure how to reply to that.

“I’m sorry for...well, in the hallway too. I should have given you more space.”

Not what I wanted to hear. I pull a face.

“The house is ready. Are you going to see it?” Jax changes the subject.

I’m halfway through another shrug when I stop myself. I tell myself what I so often say to Phoenix ‘use your words’ and reply, “I’m not sure.”

“Phoenix is back at the weekend, right?”

“Yeah.” I bite my lip because I know that means I’m going to have to go back to the house. Get my shit together and pretend like I’m okay. Phoenix thinks I just had the flu or something so she needs me to be ready and waiting for her; excited to hear all about her holiday. Fake it til you make it, Raven.

“I think you should see the house before she gets back. You’ll have to explain that we’re slowly redecorating parts of it.”

“That’s a good plan.” I don’t know what else to say.

“Raven, are you okay?” Jax seems concerned.

“Me? I’m fine!” I beam at him. Too bright. Too fake. I cringe.

“Let’s talk,” he says.

“I don’t really feel-”

“You listen. I’ll talk,” he interrupts, so I clamp my mouth shut.

Fine by me.

“I have to tell you...stuff. A whole heap of shit, actually. I don't really know where to start.” He rubs a hand over his jaw and my fingers automatically flex in response to the familiar gesture. I don't interrupt, thinking it's best to let him find his train of thought.

“I have to tell you, I was terrified. When I got the call to say you were on your way to the hospital...well, it felt like my whole world crumbled. I couldn't be mad at you anymore, I didn't care. I just needed to know you were alright, and I needed to see you to confirm it with my own eyes.”

“Raven, I've been living in denial. I'm not mad at you, I don't think I ever was. Not really. I was mad at myself for not protecting you...for not protecting Lizzie.”

At the mention of my sister's name my heart lurches - painfully this time. I look at Jax, really look at him this time, and the expression on his face has trepidation climbing up my spine. I don't want to hear this. I start to shake my head, to get up from the sofa, but Jax's hand shoots out to stop me. Tingles like pins and needles shoot up my arm from his touch.

“Raven, if we're to have any chance at all you need to hear this,” he warns. But I don't want to; I don't want to hear this. I'll risk it and take a chance on never having to hear the next words that come from his mouth. Because my gut knows what he's going to say before he says it.

“I love you. I am in love with you. And I want to be with you. But...I was behind Lizzie's bullying.” Fuck.

“You knew she was being bullied?” I ask shakily.

“Worse. I started the bullying. I asked Tilly to take care of it.”

“Why?” I'm horrified. My gut knew it but my head - my heart - was completely in denial.

“Because we already lost Michael as a good friend because of a girl. And when the guys started to show an interest in Lizzie...I panicked. I thought-”

But I didn't find out what Jax thought, because I was up on my feet and running to the bathroom, throwing up the little

food I ate the day before, and sobbing uncontrollably. I knew it. All those years ago, I suspected, but I stupidly ignored the warning signs and chose to follow my heart instead. Stupid, stupid girl.

“Raven, I-”

“Don’t touch me!” I yell, pulling free of the hand he placed on my shoulder.

“I have to tell you,” he insists, pleading with me. “I need you to forgive me!”

I frantically shake my head, backing away from his outstretched arms. I can’t. I can’t stay. I can’t listen.

I run.

Only, Jax chases me. Fuck. Strong arms encapsulate my waist and then, with his weight at my back, I’m falling onto the bed.

He twists me so that I’m on my back, pinned under him, and oh fuck...the memories.

In the blink of an eye, the room darkens and I’m back at West Prep. I’m in their house, their beds, and each of their faces flashes before my eyes...they’re kissing me and I never want it to end.

But then the scene shifts and I see Michael’s face, then Charlie’s and I’m fighting, screaming, lashing out.

I’m back and Jax is holding me gently, talking, soothing and trying to calm me.

“Just breathe, Princess, I got you. Listen to my voice... Deep breaths...in...and out...” His low chocolate timbre has the desired effect and I calm. “I’m sorry baby, I’m so sorry.”

“I’m just gonna say it all and let it all out. Michael wasn’t always one of us. He joined the friendship group late and always seemed to be trying a little hard. Eventually though he proved his worth and became one of us. Then, he stole Ace’s girlfriend. And although we were young and it wasn’t serious, we never quite trusted him after that.” He takes a deep breath and continues, “then, right when Lizzie joined West Prep, he

slept with Ace's girlfriend. And Rebel's and Thorn's. He was out. Instantly. Natalia dumped him, we dumped him, everyone kicked him out of the inner circle and he became something of a pariah at school."

"What's that got to do with Lizzie?" I frown, dread clawing at my insides like an unwelcome monster.

"I didn't want the same thing to happen. I saw how the guys were interested; starting to bicker and fight over her already...I knew Michael would be interested too. I didn't want sex to tear apart our friendship group. Losing Michael was a blow, but necessary. It would have killed me to lose the others. They're like brothers to me. So I spoke to Tilly - we were dating but on the outs - and said how I didn't like this new girl. I dropped hints about her being taken care of, knowing that Tilly was so desperate to stick with me, that she'd do anything I suggested."

My stomach churns and I feel sick. Again. His words sicken me. He's just admitted to ordering the bullying of Lizzie. Did he issue her death warrant?

I ask him to let me up and race back to the bathroom, but nothing happens. I quickly brush my teeth before joining him back by the bed. I'm reluctant to sit, but he grabs my hand and pulls me down beside him. I yank my hand free but remain seated. My legs feel shaky anyway.

"Did you know...how far it was going?" I whisper. I'm too angry to shout. How ironic is that?

"To begin with, yes. But then when I got to know Lizzie myself, I tried to get Tilly to stop. She wouldn't, so we split for good this time."

"But that made it worse." My voice is dangerously low.

"That made it worse," he confirms sadly. He sounds full of remorse but fuck that. "I'm so sorry," he adds.

"Sorry?!" Rage, white hot and incandescent, erupts from me before I can think. "You're fucking sorry for killing my sister?!"

I want to launch myself at him, to kick and scream and make him pay. But I don't have the fight in me anymore.

"Were the others-" I begin to ask.

"Absolutely not. They had no idea. They still don't, though I will tell them," Jax jumps in. He holds his hands out; is he trying to placate me, or is he pleading?

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask in dismay. I would have been more than happy to go the rest of my life without knowing that one of the men I love was directly responsible for my sister's death.

"Because I love you and I want to be with you. And I don't think we can do that with secrets sitting between us."

"Love? You killed my sister!" Furious tears stream down my face as he talks, and I notice that he's crying too. Full of shame, and equally without it too. He's not ashamed to be crying, he's ashamed of the reasons why. And I want to comfort him. Damn it!

"Jax, I can't-"

"Please, Raven, you have to forgive me."

"I can't-" I'm not trying to say that I can't forgive him, just that I can't do this right now.

"You have to!"

"I need...time," I blindly reply. I'm reeling. I have no idea what I'm saying. "You need to go."

"Raven, please," he begs.

"What the actual fuck?" Baxter growls from the door. "Why the fuck is she on the bed? Why is she fucking crying? What have you done you fuckwit?"

"Nothing!" Jax yells.

"Get the fuck out!" he replies in a low, dangerous tone that makes me shiver. He takes a menacing step towards us, and although he isn't anywhere near as intimidating or as big as Rebel, I can't help but shrink away in fear of the imposing fury he possesses.

“I’m going,” Jax tells Baxter and me. He sees himself out without another word and Baxter comes over to sit by me on the bed. He holds open his arms, giving me a choice, and I throw myself into them and sob.

“Did he hurt you?” is the only thing Baxter asks. I shake my head no.

“He said he was the one who started Lizzie’s bullying.”

“I’m sorry, babe,” Baxter says, rubbing soothing circles on my back.

“He wants me to forgive him so that w-we can be together. He said he l-l-loves me.”

“Well, that isn’t so hard to believe now, is it?” comes Baxter’s cryptic reply.

“What do you mean?” I sit back and look at him, wiping my eyes.

“I mean, of course he still loves you. He’d have to be crazy not to.” He gives me a small smile that I can’t help but return, before snuggling back into his chest for another cuddle. I rest my head on his chest and hear the steady beat of his heart; strong and dependable, just like him.

“I have to go back to the house,” I murmur.

“I know. I’ll be with you. I won’t leave your side,” he promises, stroking my hair. I sigh gently and lean into his touch, craving more.

I reluctantly pull away and look up at him. “Bax, I-”

Only my words are cut off as Baxter’s lips find mine. Holy shit. He’s kissing me! He’s actually kissing me. For a second I worry that I launched myself at him and he’s about to pull away, but he doesn’t. He just continues to kiss me gently, calmly, patiently. He’s waiting for me, I realise.

Oh! My lips part in shock and I give a gasp of surprise, and that seems to be the signal Baxter was waiting for, because he slides his tongue into my mouth and deepens the kiss.

I expect to freak out, but I don't. It feels good. Nice. Right. I relax into his arms and begin to kiss him back, like the girl starved of affection that I am.

And then it feels better than good. More than nice. But I pull away before things get out of hand. I'm breathing hard as I smile shyly at Baxter.

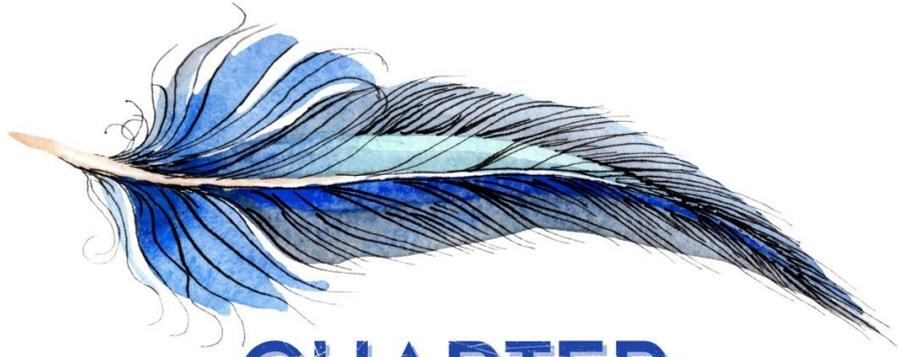
I'm unsure about my feelings - especially in light of Jax's revelations - but I have to admit there's something growing between me and Baxter. I just hope we get to see what it is, without it destroying everything we already have.

Charlotte's Diary

27/03/23

Sooooo, weird thing happened today...I got asked out on a date! I have no idea why, but in a moment of madness, I said yes! His name is Charlie and he's my favourite professor's son. I figured the son of a professor was a good choice, he was charming and attentive, and actually, pretty adamant about taking me out...so I crumbled and agreed. He's kinda cute I guess. Not like anyone I've ever gone for before, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. I have to get Phoenix ready for the childminder's - she's having a sleepover - and then I can worry about what to wear.

God, I don't remember the last time I went out on a date. Do I even remember what to do? Say? What do people talk about? Maybe I should cancel; I'm going to suck at this.



CHAPTER THIRTY - TWO

Raven

It's today; the day I have to return to the house. Fuck, I'm so nervous, I feel sick. I thought I'd be okay and that I could put it out of my mind, but it's always been there on the periphery and now I have to face my fears. I have a couple more days to settle in before Phoenix comes back, which was Baxter's idea. Pretty smart on his part, I think. All of the guys are going to be there and I understand that Jax has taken care of security and Rebel has hopefully made some changes that will make me feel more comfortable with being there. I've asked them to stay tonight - there's room - because I'm not quite ready to be alone.

"You ready?" Baxter asks me, grabbing up the duffle bag that has my stuff in it. After the first day wearing Bax's clothes, mine suddenly started magically appearing. I didn't ask how he was getting them; he certainly wasn't leaving my side.

"If I have to be," I reply with a rueful smile. I'm not ready, but I

do have to be.

"Everything will be fine, I promise."

I nod once and walk past him, out into the hotel hallway, where I stride purposefully towards the stairs. I'm not taking the lift - never did get over that phobia - but now I'm committed, I just want to get it over and done with as soon as possible. Baxter follows behind me, without complaint, as we take the stairs down to the basement parking.

He doesn't try to take my hand, or make things weird between us, but we haven't kissed again since last night, though he did sleep a lot closer to me on the sofa bed and was a bit more cuddly. Ha! Baxter and cuddly were not words I thought I'd ever put together. He's surprisingly good at it though. Not that I'd ever tell him that.

Once safely belted into his car, he turns on the stereo and we head for 'home'. It's crazy how quickly the house on the Royal Circus came to feel like a real home, but crazier how easily that illusion of safety and comfort was shattered. I let my guard down and I shouldn't have. I don't know what I would have done if Phoenix had been at home. Was Charlie watching the house? Did he deliberately wait until she was gone?

I wonder where he is now. I have no idea if he's still in the hospital, or what his injuries were. I don't care. All I know is that Rebel had to go into the station for an interview a few days back, but that he was released without any charges or anything. Baxter is in talks with a lawyer to get a restraining order, but I highly doubt a piece of paper would stop him if he wanted to come after me again.

"What are you thinking about?" Bax asks me, so I tell him. He pulls a face. "I promise you now, he is in no fit state to come after you. He's still in the hospital, and when he gets released, he won't be able to come after you because I'll be going to visit him."

I shudder at his dark promise, but it does make me feel better. We pull up to the house and before I can climb out of the car, Rebel's at my side helping me and guiding me gently to the front door which stands open, lined by faces on either side. Jax is there too and my stomach twists. I'm not ready to interact with him. I can't pretend that everything is okay.

"Welcome back, Princess," Rebel says as he plants a kiss on my cheek. Instantly he's all touchy-feely with me, which is...surprisingly okay. I allow him to tug me through the front door into the hallway which looks exactly the same. "We've made some changes. I'll let Jax talk you through the security though - this place is like Fort Knox now. I'm sorry I didn't make it so before."

"Shush," I tell him, because he literally has nothing to apologise for.

"Let us show you your new lounge," Thorn grins at me. I go to turn right into the lounge but Rebel swerves me left past

the kitchen and into the dining room.

What was the dining room. Because now, it's a completely redecorated sitting room with all new furniture. And I mean all new. There's not a single item I recognise in this room; even the TV is new. The whole room has been decorated in navy, gold and yellow, giving it a decadent sumptuous feel. Houseplants are everywhere I look, bringing life and a pop of colour to the space. It's beautiful. I feel like I've stepped into a different world, or home at least.

"This is amazing, thank you," I say quietly.

"Let's see the dining room," Thorn suggests, taking my hand and tugging me away from Rebel.

It stands to reason that the new dining room is my old lounge, but I hesitate on the threshold. This house is plenty big enough that I never have to set foot in this room again. We can eat in the kitchen. There's no way I'm letting Phoenix get greasy fingers all over that velvet sofa in the lounge, but that doesn't mean we need to use a formal dining room.

"Ready?" Thorn asks but he's already dragged me through the doorway before I can answer.

I shake, release the breath I didn't know I was holding, and open my eyes that have inadvertently closed. The room is... unrecognisable. I breathe out a sigh of relief. Everything has changed. The space is transformed. Even the carpet is different. The whole space is fresh, light and airy. The fireplace wall is covered in framed photographs. I spy old family photos of Lizzie and I, recent pictures of Baxter with Phoenix, and even some of the guys from school. Tears prick at my eyes as I greedily drink in all the details.

"Is it okay, Princess?" Rebel asks, watching me closely. I'm lost for words so I simply nod and throw my arms around him for a massive hug. "We made a new playroom for Phoenix too," he adds, pointing down the hall to the conservatory that we never really used before. That's good. Much better than having her drag her toys into the sitting room each day.

“It’s great. Thank you so much.” I want to say that it’s too much, but really, it’s done now, so what would be the point? I don’t want to spend this time fighting or bickering. Besides, there’s just no telling Rebel. I should have known better when I asked him to take care of the house, though at the time I meant to simply clean up the mess.

The guys seem to understand that I don’t want to see upstairs, and so they don’t mention it. Instead, we file through to the kitchen where Ace is pulling freshly baked cookies from my oven.

“Damn, those smell good!” I exclaim to lighten the mood. “Welcome!” He beams at me. Damn I missed that smile almost as much as I missed his cookies. My hand shoots out to swipe one from the cooling rack and despite the heat I shove it whole into my mouth before he can confiscate it back.

“Ow! Fuck! Hot!” I cry.

“Can’t cook it cold,” Thorn quips as I desperately try to fan cool air into my mouth and blow to cool the cookie down. I just end up spitting cookie everywhere. “That’s attractive!” he snorts, laughing at me.

Everyone freezes, stares at me aghast, waiting for my reaction. I snort. Then choke on the half chewed piece of cookie in my mouth. Next thing I know I have several hands thumping me on the back. The cookie piece dislodges, flies from my mouth and I’m left with streaming eyes, a red face and snot everywhere.

“Now that’s attractive,” Rebel barks and we all laugh.

“Great cookies, Ace,” I compliment.

“Thanks.” He grins.

“So what’s the plan?” I ask.

“Takeout. Movies?”

“Perfect. Please.” I nod. That’s exactly what I want. What I need. “In the lounge? Is there room?”

“Absolutely. We planned for sleepovers like the good old days,” Rebel tells me. “Not that I’m inviting myself to stay

over!” he hastily adds.

“A-hem!” Baxter’s throat clears.

“With hang-ons,” Rebel adds.

“Fuck you,” Baxter snaps good-humouredly, whipping Rebel with the tea towel. It feels pretty natural actually.

“Don’t let Thorn pick the film,” Jax warns. It’s the first time he’s spoken since I came back and it causes me to pause. I ask myself if I want him here, then instantly realise it wouldn’t be right without him. But that doesn’t mean I forgive him. I don’t want tonight to be awkward. How will we make this work?

Actually, with them all here, tonight is the perfect time to tell them how I’m feeling. Not about the house and stuff, but about them. Besides confused as fuck I mean.

Yeah, I’m going to do that. “What food are we wanting?”

Oooh food! Yeah, food before feelings. That shit can come later.

A girl’s got to have her priorities in order.

“I want Thai!” I yell, to multiple groans around the room. “What?” I pout.

“You always want Thai,” Baxter moans.

“Some things never change.” Rebel winks at me.

“Never change, Thai good,” Ace adds. I blow him a kiss and announce to the room that he’s my favourite. There’s a shocked silence for a beat, but then good natured banter and ribbing starts up. Ace beams like a supernova. I missed that; seeing the easy joy light up his face.

“Anyway, I’m ordering pizza,” Thorn declares to the room. “Chinese!”

“Indian!”

“Let’s just get everything and share,” Jax suggests. “Raven doesn’t share food!”

“You pinch mine all the time!” Baxter shouts at me.

“Raven doesn’t share her food,” I clarify. “Yours is fair game.”

He laughs and Rebel reaches for the menus, spreading them out across the countertop for people to make their choices.

“Bax? Grab me my usual?” I ask, comfortably falling into an easy routine with him.

“Absolutely, babe,” he responds. Rebel pulls a face. “What? What’s the problem?”

“We call her Princess,” Rebel says. “So?” Baxter asks, frowning.

“You wanna be one of us, you call her Princess too.”

Baxter laughs, but I’m not convinced that Reb’s joking. The guys grab the drinks and I grab the cookies, not caring if it’s before dinner.

I enter the lounge with the others and take a seat in the centre of the velvet sofa. I run my hands over it, admiring how soft it feels. I love the feel of velvet; always have.

“What?” Ace grins at me.

“I li ke the velvet,” I tell him.

“Okay, Lennie,” Baxter teases and I snort. Kudos to him for the literary reference.

“What are we watching?” I ask.

“Who cares!” Rebel replies. “Where are we sitting?”

I pat the spaces on either side of me. There’s plenty of room, but there’s also other seats available. Rebel immediately jumps on the space to my left and slings his arm around my shoulders and I cringe. Slipping out from under his arm I ask him not to do that.

“Do what?”

“Don’t...don’t put your arm around me...like that. Please,” I beg.

“Sorry, Princess, I won’t do it again.” The guys shoot significant looks to one another which makes me feel awkward as fuck, so I sit back and try to act normal.

“It’s just...Charlie...always threw his arm around my shoulders, and I hated it.” His name is hard to say; it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

“No problem. C’mere,” Baxter sits on the other side of me and pulls me into his chest so that I’m falling sideways. Rebel grabs my feet and pulls them into his lap. Ace sits on the floor in front of me, despite all the room, like he can’t bear to be any further away from me. Thorn takes an armchair, but Jax hesitates in the background. Our eyes meet and I give the tiniest nod in response to the question in his eyes. Yes, he’s okay to be here. I can be in the same room as him without wanting to kill him. Actually, the anger has subsided - don’t get me wrong it’s still there - but now when I look at him I just feel overwhelmingly sad. Hurt. Betrayed.

Am I allowed to feel betrayed? I don’t know. But I can’t deny how I feel. I wish he hadn’t told me. Some secrets don’t need to be shared.

And some do.

“Can you pause the film,” I suddenly blurt out, just as the opening credits are rolling. Thorn quickly complies with my request and Rebel switches on a side lamp.

“Everything okay, Princess?” Rebel asks. “Yes. No. I have to say something!”

“Floor’s yours,” Baxter smirks with a sweeping gesture. I flip him the bird, because, why not?

I take a deep breath and I’m just about to begin when the silence of the room is interrupted by the ringing of a phone. Jax races to pull the phone from his pocket, glances at the screen, scowls and sends it to voicemail. I wonder who’s calling. I mean, everyone’s here.

“Sorry,” he quickly mumbles. “While I’ve got you all here-”

Only, I don't get any further than that because Baxter's phone rings. I whirl to face him and level him with an accusing glare. It's too much of a coincidence.

"Who's calling the both of you?" I ask quietly. I have that weird feeling in my gut again and I can feel my elevated heartbeat thrumming in my fingertips. Jax laughs nervously and squirms in his seat. I catch the panicked expression he throws Baxter. I whip around to face Baxter once again and just catch the end of the shake of his head he throws Jax.

What. The. Fuck?

"No bullshit," I quickly throw out as Jax goes to open his mouth. I shoot him a look; it's make or break. Will he really risk lying to me right now?

"It was nothing, Raven, relax," Baxter tells me with a squeeze to my shoulder. He pulls me back against his chest. "It's just a work thing."

"Since when do you two work together?"

"Jax has a...unique skill set that he's using to help me with a project."

"Jax?" I ask, wavering. What Baxter's saying makes sense but something doesn't sit right with me.

"He's right, Princess." He doesn't meet my eyes. He's lying. And he called me Princess whilst doing it.

"What did you want to say?" Rebel asks me, drawing my attention back to the other guys in the room. They're all watching me closely, except Jax, who still won't meet my gaze.

"I-nothing. Start the film," I say, deflated. The moment's gone and it doesn't feel right. There's something going on with Jax and Baxter; but what?

We watch the film with the lights out, but I barely pay attention. It's a relief when the bell goes to signal that the food is here, but my heart rate spikes at the thought of having to answer the door. "Do you have your phone on you, Raven?" Jax asks, watching me closely. I nod and pass it to him. "This

app here,” he presses a button on my home screen I hadn’t really noticed before now, “takes you to the front door camera. You can see who’s there without having to open the door. I’ll talk you through the rest of the security tomorrow.” He shows me the delivery guy standing on the doorstep, raising his hand impatiently to ring again. “I’ll get it. Guys, get plates,” he orders and everyone springs into action, leaving me alone in the lounge for a moment.

They soon pile back in and we tuck in. It’s hard to withhold orgasmic groans of delight with how good the food tastes. I feel all eyes in the room on me and my cheeks heat.

“What?” I say defensively after swallowing.

“Do you have to make those sounds?” Rebel groans.

“Yes! Hospital and hotel food is shit. This is food of the gods.”

“Hey!” Baxter cuts in with a mock pout. “That was a five star hotel!”

“It was a lovely hotel, I’m not debating that. But the food was shit. Always is in hotels.”

“I don’t understand your logic,” he argues.

“It’s not a starred restaurant. It’s a hotel. If the chef was any good, he’d have his own restaurant and not be cooking scrambled egg on toast for tourists.” I shrug.

“It is a starred restaurant,” Baxter insists. I bite back a smirk because I’m totally fucking with him, but he’s rising to my bait. “It’s Michelin starred!”

“Whatever,” I shrug again. “This is better than anything you’ve fed me all week.”

“Ungrateful brat!” He laughs.

“Snob!” I retort before returning to my food. It’s insanely good. I’m not even tempted to try the others’ food; I’m enjoying mine that much. I catch the amused glances of the other guys and wonder what has them so entertained.

After dinner, I'm quick to polish off the rest of Ace's cookies. I share a few, but mostly scoff the lot. I've been starved of his culinary genius for far too long, so I don't really apologise for my behaviour. Another film goes on but I can't concentrate at all. I have all this pent-up nervous energy that's making me jig.

Eventually someone gets annoyed with me so Thorn pauses the film and Rebel flicks the light on again.

"Out with it," Rebel barks.

"Wh-what?" I stammer, blinking at the sudden change of plans. "Something has your panties all in a twist, Princess, and I want it out in the room so that we can deal with it together," comes his no-nonsense reply.

"I..." the words die in my throat and my hands twist in the hem of my top.

"I'll beat it out of you," Rebel threatens. His comment is so out of the blue that my jaw drops.

"Wh-what did you say?" My eyes are wide in disbelief but other parts of me are heating up.

"You heard me. Out with it, or we'll drag it out of you, kicking and screaming if we have to."

"We?"

"Yeah," he glances around the room quickly and catches Baxter's eye, throwing a questioning glance his way. Baxter nods and Rebel grins. Guess that cat is out of the bag. "Yeah, all five of us."

I gulp nervously. Or am I excited? Damn. What did I want to say again?

"5..." Rebel starts a countdown and blind panic course through me.

"Stop!" I plead. "4..."

"Stop! Stop! I can't concentrate when you do that!"

Thankfully he does, giving me his shit-eating grin. I smack him on the arm and take a deep breath.

“Fine! Here goes...I want...I’d like.” I sound ridiculous. Get it together, loser. “I’d really like for you all to stay over tonight.”

“Huh?” Thorn frowns, giving me a look like I’m actually crazy. Rebel’s laughing at me. The bastard. Even Baxter looks amused.

“I hate you all,” I groan into my hands, face hot. I don’t want to have to say it again.

“Relax, Princess. I got you,” Rebel laughs. “You’d like all of us to stay over tonight?”

“If you want to,” I mumble. “Sorry, what?” Baxter grins.

“Yes! Okay! I want you to stay tonight!” I explode, face on fire with embarrassment.

“You only had to ask.” He smirks. “See, that wasn’t so hard was it?”

“I hate you.” I pout and stick my tongue out, before getting off the sofa and fleeing to Ace’s lap. “Save me, Aljaž,” I cry burying my head in his chest.

“Always.” He kisses the top of my head and wraps me in his arms.

“Well if that drama is over with, can we get back to the film?” Thorn grumbles.

“Yeah,” Baxter says at the same time I yell “NO!”

All eyes are on me again and I wriggle on Ace’s lap. He coughs and gently holds me still with a pointed look. I flush and murmur a quick apology.

“I just wanted to say something else,” I add. I take a deep breath and continue, “I want to tell you how I’m feeling.”

“I’m so confused right now,” Thorn complains.

“Me too,” I confess. “I’m really really confused right now. I have feelings...I thought to begin with it was just old emotions resurfacing but it’s more than that.”

“Are you saying...” Thorn begins.

“I don’t know what I’m saying. It’s more than like. It’s more than fond memories. There’s new...stuff growing there too.”

“What do you want to do about all this new stuff?” Baxter asks gently while Ace rubs my back reassuringly.

“I’m not sure. I’d like to see where it can go. I’m not making any promises though, so I understand if you don’t want to wait, or if you don’t want...competition...but for now at least, I’d like to work on rebuilding the friendships and trust.”

“Princess, we were happy to share you then,” Rebel states.

“And we waited over four years for you,” Thorn adds.

“Wait forever,” Ace finishes.

“Baxter?” I bite my lip.

“I’m with you, babe,” he says. “Happy to see where this goes. I’d only have to share your heart with them anyway, if they weren’t around.”

Silence settles over the room and everyone turns expectantly towards Jax. I don’t say a word.

“Jax?” Rebel prompts with a frown. “Yeah, sure, whatever.”

“The fuck, dude?” Thorn throws a cushion at him. “It’s fine, it’s fine,” I quickly cover.

“It’ll take time,” Jax says. “But we’ll get there.”

He peers at me, and I give him a single nod. I think we can get there. Maybe. If I can ever stop seeing Lizzie’s tear-stained face whenever I look at him.

The guys whoop and restart the film. I lay back into Ace’s chest and relax, already feeling so much better.

Charlotte's Diary

30/06/23

I can't believe that we're days away from finishing year two. The exams have been a killer this time around, but I'm sure I've done enough to pass. I've been picking up extra shifts in the campus library and studying during quiet periods. Between working a couple of other jobs and looking after Phoenix, most of my studying replaced sleeping time. It'll all be worth it in the end.

Despite going pretty steady with Charlie for a few months now, I fear we're on shaky ground. There's been a few... instances...that he rang alarm bells - just small things when he doesn't get his own way - but yesterday we had our first real fight.

I guess it's my fault. I haven't told him about Phoenix. I don't think he's the sort of guy who would want to be tied down by a kid. So I can understand his frustration when he asked me to join him and his family in Crete for the summer. I politely declined, but, in his opinion, was unable to give satisfactory reasons why. Apparently, needing to work to pay rent and keep your home isn't a good enough reason to ditch your boyfriend for the summer. He was pretty insistent that I go. I, obviously, was adamant that I couldn't.

We got into a row...and now I have no idea what's going on. He flies out in a week and I haven't heard from him since our fight.



CHAPTER THIRTY - TWO

Rebel

Last night was fucking amazing; today is the happiest I've woken up in years. I can't believe that it's possible to feel this good without having sex, but I guess all I ever needed was the reassurance that there was still a chance with Raven. Okay, so she might not have declared her undying love for me, and she may have declared feelings for four other guys, but I'm okay with that. Really. I need to have her in my life, no matter the circumstances. Falling to sleep alongside Raven on the sofa was perfect. If a little cramped. Hence why I'm up first this morning and making breakfast for everyone. I'll leave the hot chocolate to Thorn though.

Whilst I'm waiting for the hash browns to cook, I wander around the kitchen. It's sleek and modern, equipped with all the mod cons. It's the least homely room in the house, almost kind of clinical, but the brightly coloured calendar on the fridge door catches my eye. I move over to it and smile at what can only be Phoenix's nursery artwork as the monthly image. I flick through it absentmindedly, enjoying the warm sensation that's created in my chest by looking at anything to do with Phoenix. I wonder if Raven has our birthdays written on the calendar? Of course she won't, but I could add them. I grab a pen and start to flick through but stop on February when something catches my eye.

There, the first week in February, it says 'Phoenix's Birthday' on the 4th. The entry is surrounded by sparkly, glittery star and unicorn stickers. It makes me smile even wider. It's certainly eye-catching, and totally Phoenix. I wonder if she decorated it herself once Raven wrote it in.

Only...hang on...didn't Raven say that Phoenix had just turned three?

I must be mistaken. Yeah, must have misheard.

I finish off the breakfast and just as I'm about to go wake everyone up, they start to appear one by one. It's the bacon. It always works. I swear the smell of cooking bacon could turn a

vegetarian to the dark side. I idly wonder if it would work as a car air freshener scent. I consider googling, but decide I better not; I'd constantly be hungry with that scent driving me insane all day long.

“What’s up, dude?” Thorn comes into the room, giving me a high five.

“Smells great. Thanks for making this.”

“Left the hot chocolate for you, can you?”

“On it, dude.”

Everyone else files into the room, crowds around the island and starts piling their plates high. I’m not the best cook, but I do make a mean breakfast, and I could get used to this. Cooking for a big family. I kinda miss that Phoenix isn’t around right now to join in the fun and banter. Which reminds me-

“Hey Raven, it says on the calendar that it’s Phoenix’s birthday in February?” It comes out as a confused question because, well, that would make her nearly four, not just three.

Weirdest thing is that Raven freezes. She completely clams up and stares at me like a deer in the headlights. I thought there would be a simple explanation, but Raven’s reaction is so out of sorts that I can’t help but wonder what’s going on.

“I...err...it’s funny, it’s actually another Phoenix...at Phoenix’s nursery,” she stammers, without meeting my eye.

“There’s two Phoenixes?” I frown, incredulous. What are the chances? It’s a pretty unusual name, isn’t it?

“Raven-” Baxter’s tone is a warning, but I don’t get why. He shakes his head at her. “It’s time.”

Huh?

“What? What’s time? Time for what?” Thorn asks, head whipping back and forth between them. My thoughts exactly.

What’s going on?

Raven looks like she’s going to puke. Or run. I move to the doorway to the kitchen, blocking her off. I’ve had what feels

like a lifetime of her running from me, and so I'm not about to take anymore chances and risk losing her again.

"What's going on, Rae?" I ask gently. I hate the fear on her face. I want to wipe it away and take back my question. I don't want to hurt her. Ever.

"Phoenix is older than she claimed. What do you think it means?" Jax spits contemptuously.

Why is he so hostile all of a sudden? I get that there was a funny atmosphere between them last night - no idea why - but obviously things weren't too bad if she was happy for him to stay the night too.

I whirl around and stare at Raven in disbelief. What is Jax saying?

"What's going on?" I ask reluctantly. I don't want to know.

Dread causes my stomach to sink and my heart rate to spike.

"Rebel, please..." she implores me with wide tortured eyes. I want to go to her, scoop her up into my arms, cradle her to my chest and kiss that pain away. But I don't; I don't move a muscle. Somehow, I've become frozen to the spot.

"Raven, if you want this to work you have to come clean," Baxter pushes. I flick him an angry glare. Why is he pushing this? Can't he see that she's uncomfortable?

"Shut up!" she cries, real tears forming in her eyes. Anger rumbles through my chest like thunder. I want to hurt Baxter for upsetting her. I may have inadvertently started it, but he's the one pushing it. Whatever it is.

"Come clean about what?" Thorn asks. I can hear the confusion in his voice, his easygoing smile that's only been back in place since we found Raven, is already gone.

"Will someone explain what the fuck is going on!" I yell, losing my patience.

"Please! Don't do this," Raven begs. She's shaking her head and imploring...Bax? Jax?

Are they all in on it? Thorn is clearly as puzzled as I am, but Ace just looks desperately unhappy. Resigned. Whatever this is, he knows.

“You are such a fucking hypocrite, Raven!” Jax snarls with venom. It’s so unexpected I blink in shock. “After I said I didn’t want secrets between us! You made me feel like you couldn’t forgive me when it’s you that needs to beg for forgiveness all along!”

“Hold on, what did you do?” I demand, pressing him.

“Yeah, why are you asking for forgiveness? What secrets?” Thorn seethes. Like me, he’s pissed at being left out of the loop.

“Tell them, Jax. Thought you were going to come clean? Not such high morals after all!” Raven taunts him. It’s almost good to see the fight back in her, but I have no idea what’s set her off.

“Someone fucking explain, right now!” I holler. There’s a beat of silence and then Raven speaks.

“Jax is responsible for Lizzie’s death. He set the bullies on her.”

“When did you call them off Jax?” Raven demands. “At what point exactly did you ask those girls to stop their vile hate campaign?”

“Was it when they broke her ankle?” she continues. “No, it must have been later, after the dates started to happen. Did you approve their ideas for torturing her yourself? Hell, maybe you even came up with a few! I bet the toxic cocktail was your doing!”

“Jax?” Thorn asks. “What is she on about? Is any of this true?”

“Guys, I didn’t want to tell you like this,” Jax starts to say.

“Just tell me when!” Raven screams at him. “You want forgiveness? How can I forgive you until I know exactly what you’ve done?”

“Don’t do this, Raven,” Jax warns. “You do not want to relive Lizzie’s world of pain.”

“It was after you started dating her, wasn’t it? I bet in the early days your dates were just to get more info on her.” Raven presses. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. If what she’s saying is true...fuck! I stare at Jax: my best friend, my brother, a stranger. That’s when it hits me. Right after Lizzie quit the swim team, he was so different, so messed up for weeks. We just had no idea why. He played it off that his stepmom was giving him shit. But..but...

“Shit! When she quit the swim team?” I ask. I don’t have to say a word more because Jax’s guilt-ridden eyes lock on mine.

“You were responsible for that?” Raven’s voice has dropped.

The fight leaves her and she shrinks.

“It was an accident - please I never meant - it got way out of hand and as soon as I found out, I tried to stop it!”

“What the fu...” Thorn begins but I don’t hear anymore because I’m roaring, my blood is roaring, and I’m flying across the room and launching myself at Jax.

My huge hands find their way to his throat and circle his neck easily. I squeeze and I shake him back and forth, rattling his teeth in his head. I want to kill him. I will kill him.

What. The. Fuck.

“Explain!” I bellow right in his face, spit flying everywhere. I don’t give a fuck. He killed Lizzie? Surely not?

But my reaction was so instinctual, that something inside of me must know that Raven isn’t lying. No, not lying, she could be confused. It could be a misunderstanding. That’s what I try to tell myself, but my fingers continue to restrict Jax’s air flow, to the point that his complexion is changing, so my subconscious knows it’s true. No matter how much I’d like to deny it. No, Raven must be right. The question is why?

Thorn is scrambling at my shoulder to get his hands on Jax too.

Together we could easily kill him. Maybe I want to. Why?

I cared for Lizzie, sure. But killing Jax now wouldn't bring her back. So why do I care so much? It's the sobs from Raven that give me my answer: Jax has hurt the woman I love, and I need to make him pay for that.

"Stop! Oh my God! Stop it!" Raven yells somewhere in the background. "Please," she begs. She sounds like she's hysterical. "Baxter, Aljaž, do something."

Her anguish makes me pause and loosen my hold for a second. Jax gasps for breath and pushes me off, but that's the opening Thorn seems to need, because as soon as I move, he's swinging at Jax and landing a punch to his cheek, then raining down a flurry of blows.

"Tell them Raven!" Jax gasps between blows. "Tell them what they're too blind to see!"

"Shut up," she screams and I hear the absolute desperation in her voice.

"Tell them or I will!" He threatens. "Okay! Okay!" she cries.

The room falls silent and I don't know where to turn. Jax is nursing a bloody nose - evidently Thorn got a few more good hits in - and Thorn is breathing hard. Raven has tears streaming down her face but she's not allowing Ace or Baxter to comfort her. She opens her mouth to speak but Ace interrupts.

"Father Baxter?" He sounds so puzzled.

"You said he wasn't?"

"No," she whispers. "I said he didn't hurt me."

"Raven," Baxter warns. "Don't make out that I'm Phoenix's father..."

"Hold on, back up!" I insist, turning to Ace.

"When did she tell you Baxter didn't hurt her?"

“At airport,” he replies. Before Raven even gasps, his eyes go wide with horror and he slaps a hand over his mouth in disbelief.

“Jebenti¹! Oprosti²!”

He reaches out for Raven but she pulls back from him and turns away from us all.

“What the fuck?” I growl.

“Explain,” comes Jax’s tight voice.

“Shit! Sorry! Fuck!” Ace panics.

“EXPLAIN!” Jax roars, making everyone jump.

“Raven, tell them,” Baxter says softly.

“Ace found me at the airport, the day I returned to the UK four years ago.” Her voice is barely above a whisper.

“You said it was a false alarm!” I accuse Ace.

“Why didn’t you say?” Thorn exclaims.

“I begged him not to,” she cuts in.

“I begged him not to tell you that he had seen me, and I pleaded with him to keep my secret.”

“That you were pregnant,” Jax says in a low tone. She nods.

“Why would you do that, man?” Thorn asks Ace.

“She asked.” Ace shrugs.

“So? We’re your brothers!” I shout.

“Love her,” comes his simple reply. Everything is always so black and white with Ace. In the past I envied his simple outlook on life, right now I want to curse him for it.

“So when...” I begin.

“When I left West Prep, I knew I was pregnant,” she blurts out. Fuck. It’s like she’s just pulled a pin from a grenade and launched it. There’s that moment of slow motion as it sails through the air, lands, and lies innocuously before everything explodes into chaos and pain.

Fuck.

The room explodes into chaos, and I feel the pain. She's just decimated everything I know. Everything I thought I knew.

Think, Rebel, think. "So...one of us..." I begin.

"Is Phoenix's father? Yes," she whispers.

"Fuck!" I whisper as all fight and anger leaves me. I grip the side of the counter because my knees suddenly feel weak. Because this revelation? Not the worst I've ever heard. It doesn't fill me with horror, or disgust. It...excites me? My heart soars and I'm filled with...hope?

"Who? Which?" I whisper back, barely daring to dream.

"I don't know." She's barely audible but I catch her reply and my soaring heart plummets.

"Well, there's an easy way to fix that," Jax harrumphs. "We need a paternity test. For all of us."

"I don't," Baxter points out.

"How do we know you didn't sleep together over Easter break when she ran away? She told us you two met then," Jax points out.

"We didn't sleep together. Then or ever," Raven tells him.

"Excuse us if we don't take your lying cheating word for it,"

comes Jax's cutting response.

My stomach churns and Raven turns green. She's already shaking her head before any of us can respond.

"No. No way. I'm not getting a DNA test done."

"What? You have to! You owe us this!" Jax exclaims.

"I don't owe you anything where Phoenix is concerned," she declares indignantly, her flight or fight mechanism seems to have kicked in and I see old Raven flaring to life; she's a fighter.

“What?! How can you say that?! Did you do this on purpose?” Jax demands.

“What?” She’s incredulous, and I can’t say I blame her. Cool, unshakeable, unflappable Jax has completely lost his logic. He’s a mess; pacing, alternating between pinching the bridge of his nose and rubbing his jaw in agitation.

“Did you get pregnant on purpose?” he repeats.

“Oh my god, no! Why would I?”

“You said Lizzie was pregnant. Was this some sort of revenge move? Or were you trying to trap one of us?”

“Are you fucking kidding me!” she screams, enraged now. “Can you hear yourself right now? If I got pregnant on purpose to trap you, why the hell did I run and hide for four years?!”

I tear at my hair, stressed as fuck. I don’t know what I’m hearing. I don’t know who to listen to, what to believe.

Ace, the fucker. Why?

Red mist comes down and I swing for him. I just need to hurt...everyone. I can’t punch Raven, so I’ll lash out at everyone else instead.

Fuck!

One of us just became a dad. One of us has been a dad for nearly four years. We’ve missed out on so so much. How will we ever put it right? And which one of us is Phoenix’s father? Do I want it to be me? I do. I want to be Phoenix’s father.

“Fuck!” I roar, slamming my hands down on the counter top. I gotta get out of here.

“Reb-” Raven and Jax call, Jax reaching out a hand to stop me as I pass. I shove his arm out of the way.

“Don’t fucking touch me! Leave me alone. ALL of you.” I throw that last sentence at Raven directly but I can barely stand to look at her. I need air. I need out. Need to breathe. Think.

Fuck!

“You all need to go,” I hear Raven call as I move out into the hallway.

“Raven...” Baxter tries to placate her.

“No. You too Baxter. It didn’t have to be like this, but you made it happen. Get out.” Raven’s response is firm, as uncompromising as her refusal to have a DNA test.

“Raven, Princess, sorry,” Ace pleads.

“You too. Out. Everyone...NOW!” Obviously they weren’t moving fast enough because she screams the final order at the top of her lungs. I don’t need to be told twice; I’m gone.

I shove my feet into my trainers, wrench open the front door and step out into the fresh morning air. I slam the door behind me, and breathe deeply in an attempt to calm myself.

Only, it doesn’t help. I still can’t breathe. I feel like my whole future, my dream, everything I ever wanted, has crumbled like a sandcastle stolen by the tide.

Charlotte's Diary

11/09/24

I can't believe I've just completed the first week of my final year. The future's so close and so bright, I can almost taste it! I was so excited to see that I have my favourite Professor again this year, and it was wonderful to see him in class, looking all tanned and relaxed from his holiday.

I know that Charlie is back, and has been for a couple of weeks, but he hasn't returned any of my texts or calls. I've bumped into him a couple of times this week on campus, but he's being really distant and cold after the summer. In truth, it's left me a little confused. I'm not sure where we stand. Are we together? Broken up?

I can't say that I'd be heartbroken to learn that we'd broken up, but I guess it would be kind of nice to know, one way or the other.



CHAPTER THIRTY - FOUR

Ace

Shit. I've well and truly fucked up.

I run my hand through my hair and pace my hotel room, half tempted to actually tear my hair out with how frustrated I'm feeling. At times like this, when I'm this stressed, I'd normally bake. But somehow I don't think that would go down too well with the kitchen staff here.

I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I was more than happy to take Raven's secret, and my betrayal of my brothers, to the grave with me. But somehow in the heat of the moment, in all that chaos, it erupted out of me and I had no control or power to stop it. The second the words slipped past my lips, I knew I'd made the most terrible mistake of my life.

And now I've ruined everything. I glance at my startlingly silent phone. None of my brothers are speaking to me, even though I've tried calling them all and sent several texts. Raven isn't responding to any of my messages. I don't know where the others are, although I wonder what they're doing, how they're reacting and coping with the news.

I have no idea how to put things right.

Since leaving and returning to the hotel I've been tempted to go back and try to explain. I'm torn between wanting to respect Raven's wishes, and needing to put things right with her. I don't know what to do, so I'm just...pacing...at a loss.

I'm actually so preoccupied by my own guilt, that it takes quite a while for Raven's bombshell to truly sink in...Baxter isn't Phoenix's father. He never was.

One of us is.

Excitement courses through me. I could be Phoenix's father...Her actual biological dad. The thought makes my heart race, but in a good way. Images of 'what if' flutter through my mind, sparkling with the promise of possibility.

Although, even if it turns out that I'm not the dad, I would be a father to Phoenix anyway if Raven and I could be together. That would be a dream come true; to make a family with them.

But I'd really really like it if I were her dad.

Charlotte's Diary

Present Day

I'm fucking fuming! I always knew Charlie was an absolute asshole but tonight he really sank to new depths. I can't even say it started out okay. Charlie was being a dick from the moment the date was arranged. I didn't even want to go on the stupid date, but he insisted. He gets funny about things like that from time to time. I can usually put him off and dodge him, but he wasn't taking no for an answer on this one. He insisted, knowing that I don't drive and that I live off campus, that I return to campus so that we could go to the restaurant together. It would have been a lot less hassle if I had just met him there, but he wasn't having it. He wouldn't even come and pick me up - even though he has that insanely expensive, flashy car. A dick extension, my dad would have called it. So I traipse back to campus in the dark and he tells me that we're walking to the restaurant too! He gives me some shitty excuse about his car just being cleaned, but I swear that had better be a lie because otherwise how crappy is that? I'm too...what, dirty to go in his precious clean car? At the restaurant he had me grinding my teeth together. He wouldn't let me order the drink I wanted - getting wine and water instead - and he ordered for me! A fucking salad! I almost wouldn't have minded, but for the fact that he ordered himself a steak. A goddamn juicy ribeye steak that made my mouth water the moment it was brought out. He didn't even offer me a bite. And my salad didn't come with any protein. I think it was a side salad. I was so hungry. Walking home, he threw his arm around my neck - which he knows I hate! - and was constantly checking his phone. Probably some girl. We walked back to his place, which again, is out of my way, but better than him seeing where I live, I guess, and he laid on the pressure for me to go up for a drink. I tried to say no, but couldn't get out of it. So up we went. He basically turned into a horny octopus-cum-bloodhound in the lift, slobbering all over me with slippery hands going everywhere. Gross! It didn't get much better in his flat either, and when he tore the strap off my dress and forced his hand roughly between my legs, I had to call timeout. He

didn't listen and it was only the swift kick to the balls that allowed me to flee. I then had to walk home, in the dark, heels in my hand, in a broken dress...in the bloody rain! You couldn't make this shit up. Then later that night, a couple of the girls off my course posted on their social media that he was out in several clubs, getting it on with several women. Nice. I don't even care. I just want to disappear because I know if I try to end it with him, he'll just make a scene.



CHAPTER THIRTY - FIVE

Raven

The door slams and I sink to the kitchen floor, sobbing like my heart just broke. Only, it really did just break, all over again.

I can't believe after such a perfect night, when the future was looking so bright, that today has landed me here. What the fuck went wrong?

I cry until I have no tears left. And then I realise that Phoenix is coming home tomorrow and I have to get it together for her. She deserves to come home to a happy mum who is pleased to see her. I drag my ass up off the floor and start to clear up the remnants of breakfast, discarding the unfinished plates of food that were abandoned in all the drama.

Done, I stand helpless and wonder what to do next. I should shower, right? Only, I don't want to go upstairs yet. Not a problem, I tell myself. I'll shower down in the basement. While I'm down there, I decide to have a workout in the small home gym that Rebel had installed. He tried to insist it came with the house, but I'm not buying it. Maybe a soak in the hot tub after would help too?

I head downstairs, snagging some clean workout gear from the laundry room, and getting ready to run. Flight or fight well and truly kicked in earlier, and I could tell that Rebel noticed; I caught the way he moved to the door to stop me from fleeing. Whilst I'm not proud of myself at all for what happened, I do feel a sliver of satisfaction at the way I stood up for myself.

I set the treadmill and begin. Quickly increasing the tempo and the incline to something more challenging, I begin to run. I race until I find a rhythm, until I can't think or obsess anymore. I run until my body is aching and tired, and then I push some more. I keep going until the physical pain replaces the emotional pain, and then continue some more.

I run until I collapse, exhausted, on the floor of the gym. I know it's not healthy, but what else can I do? I lie on my back

panting hard, trying to catch my breath and wondering how I'm going to get up.

Eventually, feeling returns to my legs and I'm able to get up and grab that shower. Only, I don't have any clean regular clothes down here. I'm scared if I put clean gym gear on, I'll start running again. I wrap myself in a towel and realise that I'm going to have to go upstairs to my room to get changed. I can do that.

The problem is that to get to my room, I have to pass that room. I tremble on the stairs as it draws closer. I should go in there. I should face my fear. It seems insignificant now, to be scared of a room, when your whole world is crumbling around you. A room should be the least of my worries.

I bypass the room, get dressed, do my hair, procrastinate in any way I can until I have no choice but to return. My palm is so slick with sweat, it slides from the handle a couple of times. My hand grasps the handle but it takes several extra attempts for me to actually work up the courage to pull it down and open it.

The room is transformed, I expected that. But what I didn't expect is what it has been transformed into. I was expecting new sheets, maybe a new bed and carpet if I was lucky. I just wanted all traces of blood removed.

What I'm staring at instead, is my very own library.

Which just makes me cry all over again. Damn it. And damn Rebel for being so perfect. He literally thinks of everything.

I close the door as I leave the room to explore in depth another day, and wander aimlessly around the huge house. I hate it. I hate how empty it is. The guys are all such big personalities that they fill the massive space. Even when it's just Phoenix and I, she's such a character that she makes this place home. Now I feel like a giant pinball rattling from room to room, trying to stay up, but with no end destination in sight. I don't belong.

I head back down to the lounge but I can't get comfy; too many good memories of last night. The kitchen is tainted. I have no need to go in the dining room. Instead, I take myself out to the conservatory that's filled with Phoenix's toys. I'm glad that we didn't use this space much before; it means it isn't tainted like the others.

I take a seat in the corner and stare at the vast amount of toys that she has. We never had that many before - certainly not enough to fill a whole room - and I realise that the guys must have been shopping. Probably Rebel. I should thank him.

I pull out my phone but the words die on my fingertips. I can't text. I've no idea what to say. How would I even begin to go about putting things right with him? With any of them?

So I curl up in the chair and pull up the book I'm reading on my phone; it's about a woman who doesn't have to choose between the guys who love her. Guys plural. She doesn't have to deal with any of this shit though - her story is much more straightforward. I sigh, but soon get sucked into her happily ever after. I long for one myself, and it's easy for me to transpose myself and my guys into her storyline.

It's dark when I come out of the story. Early hours of the morning if my phone is reliable. Shit. I don't know where the time went. My stomach growls - unsurprisingly as I haven't eaten anything since breakfast. I wander into the kitchen but I just don't fancy anything in the fridge, other than a cold glass of pop. A pint of ice cream probably wouldn't be the best choice right now.

I check the cupboards and find a cake tin that I definitely don't own. I pull it down and prise off the lid. Inside, wrapped in tissue, with a note addressed to me but written entirely in Slovenian, are two dozen cookies. I smile because Ace has clearly squirrelled these away for me, and actually that's just perfect right now. I snag six and grab that pint of ice cream from the freezer to dunk them in.

I'm standing at the kitchen island scoffing them down when I hear a noise. Freezing, I tell myself not to panic. It's probably just the boiler kicking in. At 2am? Yeah right.

Another bang has me reaching for my phone and hitting that app icon that Jax showed me last night. He never did talk me through the rest of the security in the house. The camera shows there's no one at the front door, but I didn't really expect there to be. Hitting some other buttons on the app randomly pulls up cameras in other parts of the house but there's nothing there. I try to relax and tell myself it's nothing, but I hear it again.

The reaction is violent and instant; I shake so hard my spoon clatters onto the counter. My breathing becomes shallow, sharp little gasps that hurt my chest. My vision darkens, blurs about the edges. The room sways, swims... fuck.

If this morning hadn't happened, I wouldn't have hesitated to call one - or all - of the guys. But I don't. I can't. It's most likely nothing, and if I call them they'll come jumping to my rescue, and if it ends up being a false alarm, they might accuse me of attention seeking. Of forcing them to forgive me. Of luring them in under false pretences.

My heart races and a cold sweat breaks out all over me. My hand trembles again as I reach for my glass of pop.

Should I investigate? Stay put? Run?

I slide a knife out of the draw closest to me and grip it's reassuring weight in my right hand. I can do this. If I have to, I will defend myself. I will not be a victim ever again. I won't freeze. I won't be helpless.

My phone is ready to call 999, I just have to hit connect with my left. I keep my thumb poised and ready to go.

I sneak towards the stairs and see a light coming from upstairs. Fuck. Did I leave that on? I don't remember. It's coming from that room.

A creak on the landing has me bolting for the front door. I grab my keys from the side table as I race past and run for the car. Once inside, I lock the doors, trying to calm my breathing. It's probably nothing. I'm just being silly. But I should get it checked out, right? Just then my phone rings and I scream

before dropping it in fright. I grab it back up off the floor and hit answer when I see Ace's name on the caller ID.

“What's wrong?” he immediately asks. I don't ask him how he knows, I just blurt out what happened. “Stay away. Drive. I'll fix.”

I do as he says, throwing the car into gear and tearing out of there. I don't know what Ace is going to do, but I follow his instructions without question. For about an hour I drive blindly around Edinburgh, then decide it's stupid. I may as well head to Cordelia's ready to get Phoenix in the morning. I can pull over and nap in the car if I need to.

Charlotte's Diary

Present Day

Fuck! I can't believe they all just showed up on my doorstep. It was like something out of a nightmare, or a fairytale or something. I'm so fucked. The urge to run was so overwhelming it crippled me into complete inaction. Though, really, where would I have even gone? Shit! I'm so lucky that Phoenix wasn't in the house and that I'd had a tidy up. These guys cannot find out about her under any circumstances. Don't even get me started on how they haven't changed; it was like being stuck in a time warp, the feelings I thought I'd buried long ago came rushing back, hitting me with the force of a truck. It's not fair that after all this time they still looked so good. No, better. And that they could collectively in still fear and thrill me at the same time. Stupid, stupid, stupid! I have too many secrets, too much guilt, too much atoning for my sins to do, to start falling for any of them again. Besides, it's just not done like that in the real world. I want to see more of them though. I'd love to have them in my life...but not at the expense of revealing Phoenix. Never. The cost is too high. It's a price I'm not willing to pay. If I could run, I wouldn't hesitate. Always have a back up plan to your back up plan! Lizzie's words ring in my ears. But it's hard to have back up plans when you're barely managing to put food on the table.



CHAPTER THIRTY - SIX

Jax

I fucking hate her.

I can't abide liars and this is the ultimate betrayal.

I knew it. I knew she couldn't be trusted and that letting her back into our lives would be a huge mistake. I'm so angry; both at her and myself! I spent four years learning how to protect my heart from her and in a few short weeks, she's managed to worm her way back in, under my skin, burrowing so deeply that I half managed to convince myself that I can't live without her.

How could she do this to us? To me? Just when I thought we were getting somewhere and could overcome all the shitty deceitful mistakes of our pasts, she goes and drops this bombshell. What she has done, what she has kept from us, is so much worse than what I did with the Lizzie situation. Sure, I didn't start out with the best intentions, wanting to see Lizzie suffer to protect my brothers, but at least my motives were true. I just went about

things the wrong way. And at least I tried to stop it.

It's not even comparable to what she's done.

And then, to refuse a paternity test! It's just...cruel. Hurtful. Why deny it now, when the cat is out of the bag? I just don't understand why she would do that. It makes no sense. What can she hope to achieve by denying us this knowledge? Maybe she's terrified that Phoenix is mine. I'd certainly be the worst choice out of the four - or is it five? - of us.

I refuse to acknowledge the sliver of something inside of me that just doesn't give a fuck if I am Phoenix's father...it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. I never planned on having kids, and given the choice I probably still wouldn't, but that choice may have been taken from me anyway, so I may as well embrace the idea.

Besides, I could do a lot worse than be a father to a kid like Phoenix. I will admit that Raven has done a great job with raising her, especially in the face of all the difficulties she's had to overcome.

But I could never ever be with Raven knowing what she's done.

What she's kept hidden.

One of us has missed out on nearly four years of that child's life because of her. And whilst she might have had her own fucked up, warped reasons for doing it, I cannot forgive her for dragging Ace into her mess.

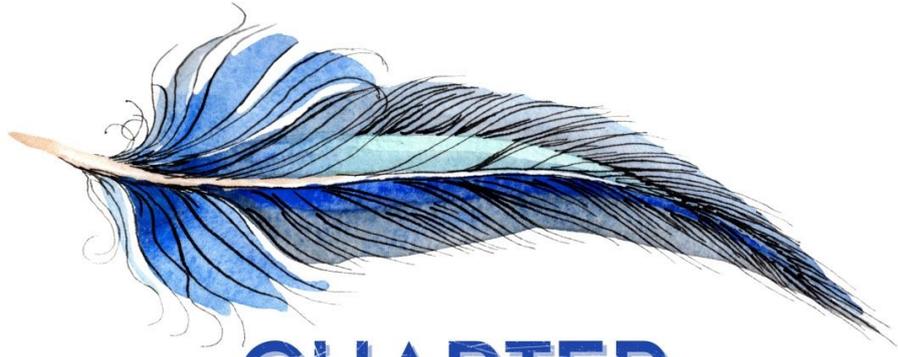
She's bewitched him and manipulated him into doing her bidding, to the point where he'd keep secrets from his own brothers! It's abhorrent.

No. Whatever happens next, the one thing I know for sure, is that I will never forgive Raven for tearing my family apart.

Charlotte's Diary

Present Day

Shit shit shit. The only thing worse than the four princes turning up on my doorstep? One of them returning unannounced and discovering Phoenix. Fuck. I have no idea if Rebel is going to keep my secret. I can only pray that he hasn't put two and two together. I don't know what I'm going to do if he has. Or, god forbid, if the others find out. Just thinking about it makes me feel sick.



CHAPTER THIRTY - SEVEN

Rebel

I fucked up. I shouldn't have left like that. I need Raven to know that I'm not mad at her; I just don't deal with surprises well.

At least, not bad ones anyway.

Fuck. I don't mean like that. Phoenix...being Phoenix's father isn't a bad surprise. But learning that my brother lied to me for years is devastating. I can't believe that he watched me pine for and chase a ghost girl all over the country. When all along...well, if he'd just said something that day...I'm not saying that we would all have been living happily ever after together for the last four years, but at least we might have had some closure or something.

That's about the worst kind of surprise anyone could hit me with.

I'm reeling.

I can't bring myself to answer his calls and messages. I have no idea what to say to him. He can't even explain why he did it, because I know him well enough to know that his only reasoning would have been that she asked him to, and because he loves her it wouldn't occur to him to do anything else. But...every cloud has a silver lining, right?

I hope to God that mine does. My silver lining is the hope I'm clinging onto; that I am Phoenix's father.

Charlotte's Diary

Present day

I can't fight this attraction with Rebel any longer. Chemistry continues to grow between us and whenever he touches me, my skin sparks. I haven't felt this alive in so long. I want him. When we're alone, it's dangerous. The pull between us is so strong that it scares me. When we're apart, I can't stop thinking about him. And don't even get me started on the way he haunts my dreams...Even when he's around Phoenix, my attraction - and love - for him grows. He's amazing with her. A natural. He would make such a good dad.



CHAPTER THIRTY - EIGHT

Thorn

Shit. What the...what the actual fuck is going on? What the hell just happened back there?

When I left - or was I thrown out of? - Raven's house, I did what I do best: found my way to the nearest bar and proceeded to get shit-faced.

For the first couple of hours, the slutty bartender chick was all over me, and I was down for that. Drowning your sorrows is all well and good, but sinking them into a hot wet pussy is even better. The two together? Dynamite.

It's just unfortunate that the more inebriated I got, the less she returned my sloppy winks and slurred cat calls. Fuck her. She wasn't anything special anyway!

Only she was. She is. She's the mother of my child. Maybe. No, that's not right.

Who was I fucking? What was I thinking?

The barmaid. Yeah, well, fuck her. I can go get my dick wet anywhere. Ain't nothing special about her.

She throws me a filthy look and I think I might have just said that out loud. Whatever. It's true.

I promptly find myself thrown out on my ass onto the pavement so I guess I said that out loud too.

"Fuckers!" I scream. They didn't even let me finish my pint. Wait...was I drinking pints? I must have had a lot to be this wasted. Seems more likely I was drinking something harder. Without ice. I fucking hate ice. Why would I want my drink watered down?

Fuck.

I can barely hold a thought in my mind before it's running off to play hide and seek like a fucking child.

A child...fuck...I have a child. Don't I? Do I? I definitely don't want a child.

Only...well, Raven's kid isn't so bad... Fuck.
I'm going to be sick.

Charlotte's Diary

Present day

Oh my God! I can't believe I was so stupid, so careless. I allowed myself to get caught up in the whirlwind of playing family with Rebel and it came back to bite me on my ass. Now everyone knows about Phoenix and the reactions were explosive. I don't know if Baxter turning up, pretending to be my boyfriend and alluding to the idea that he might be Phoenix's father, was a blessing or a curse! Speaking of Baxter; it was so good to see him again. It has definitely been too long since he last called round, and I was so happy to see him - even if his timing sucked. There was a funny moment actually, where he sort of sat me on his knee and squeezed my thigh. I think he did it to make it seem more believable that we were a couple, but it made my stomach somersault. Weird, right?



CHAPTER THIRTY - NINE

Raven

“Mummy!” Phoenix squeals in delight and launches herself at me. I catch her and scoop her up into the biggest hug, holding her tightly and breathing in her strawberry scent. I drove all night, haven’t slept in days, haven’t eaten in hours...and it was totally worth it.

“Baby, I’ve missed you so much!” I smile, tears welling in my eyes.

“Me too, mummy!” Phoenix beams at me. I put her down and she looks around me in search of something. Or someone. I sigh; I know what’s coming. “Mummy, where’s Bax?”

“He had to work, baby, he’s so sorry he couldn’t be here.” I hate lying to Phoenix but I can’t tell her the truth. This is the first time I’ve come to Cordelia’s without him, but I’m just too angry to be around him still.

“Oh. Why don’t you have shoes on, Mummy?” She stares down at my slippers. I didn’t have time to stop and pull on my running shoes last night.

“Silly me! I was so excited to get to you, that I forgot to change!” I laugh and Phoenix squeals like it’s the funniest thing she’s ever heard.

“Have you had a lovely time?” I ask, distracting her.

“Yeah! The best! And guess what?”

“What, baby?” I grin at her, waiting to be regaled with all of her adventures from the last week.

“Grandmama is sending me to a special school!”

My blood runs cold. Then boils. Over my dead fucking body. No. No way. She must be mistaken. Why on earth would Cordelia do that?

“Have you packed everything, baby?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“I think so.”

“Can you go and check every room really carefully for me? I’m just going to speak to Grandmama real quick.”

Phoenix beams at me, oblivious to the strain in my voice, and races off to gather up the overlooked items. She’ll still leave something behind, she always does. But it buys me some time.

I stride through the wide, decadent halls that were once so familiar to me.

“Charlotte?” Cordelia’s cold clipped tones make me cringe. “Raven,” I correct.

“My apologies. It’s good to see you looking...well,” she falters.

It’s a pathetic lie; I look like shit. “Long drive,” I murmur.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” she asks. I don’t blame her. This is the most we’ve spoken in years. I usually collect Phoenix while she stays out of the way so that we don’t have to interact at all.

“Care to explain why Phoenix thinks she’s going to a special school?” I’m livid, but force my tone to remain civil.

“You know she’s due to start school in September.”

“I do. She’ll be going to our local primary,” I state firmly.

“I would have thought you would want the best for her. I know I certainly do.”

“Define ‘best’,” I force through gritted teeth.

“I’ve enrolled her at Westchester Preparatory Primary Academy, of course.” She sniffs condescendingly.

“Over my dead body,” I growl.

“Well dear, that can be arranged you know.” She gives a false laugh that leaves me cold.

“You best be fucking joking!”

“Language! Of course I’m joking, dear. I’d never have you killed.” She smiles in a patronising way that makes me want to punch her.

Think of Phoenix, I tell myself.

“Like I give a shit about your death threats! I meant you best be kidding about sending her there!”

“Why would I joke about education? I want my great-grandchild to have the best opportunities in life. Don’t you? Where else would I send her?”

“Lizzie died there! She was raped and murdered. The same nearly happened to me! How could you even fathom sending her there?!”

“Because it’s the best,” Cordelia replies, as if she’s puzzled by my reaction. Why doesn’t she get it?

“I hope you didn’t pay the fees yet, because there’s no way she’s going there.”

“We’ll see...”

“No, we won’t see. She is NOT going there! I’m warning you: don’t interfere. Not if you want to continue having Phoenix in your life.”

“I really didn’t want to have to do this, Raven.” Cordelia sighs, like I’m the biggest disappointment in her life.

“Do what?” I ask, instantly on edge.

“This.” She turns and takes a large Manila envelope off the table behind her, then passes it to me.

“What is this?”

“Court papers,” she says resignedly. “What? Why? What for?”

“I’m taking you to court for custody of Phoenix.”

“WHAT?” I screech. “Why? No fucking way! This cannot be happening!”

“With language like that, I hardly need a reason. But I have provided several in the paperwork. To give you the overview: Phoenix is not safe in your custody.”

“You evil, vile bitch. I bet you’ve been planning this since the day I said I was pregnant!”

“Think what you like, dear. I’m just doing what’s best for Phoenix. Someone in this family has to.”

“I will kill you.”

“I truly believe it, dear. We all know you’ve killed before. In fact, that reason isn’t cited in the court papers, but maybe it’s not too late to get my solicitors to add it in...” she trails off with an ice-cold smirk that makes my blood boil.

My hands curl into fists and I take a menacing step towards her.

“You...you...”

“Mummy?” Phoenix’s small, scared voice has me spinning on the spot. I stare aghast at her tiny tear-stained face. “Why are you and Grandmama shouting?”

“We’re not, baby. It’s fine. Come, say goodbye to Cordelia. You might not see her for a while.”

It breaks my heart when Phoenix runs over to hug Cordelia. I’d hate to shatter her world, but I can’t stand the way she looks at Cordelia like she hung the moon. I long for the day Phoenix can see her for what she really is; I just hope she doesn’t find out the hard way like I had to.

We say our goodbyes and leave in silence. The whole car journey home Phoenix chatters about her week and all I can think is fuck, what am I going to do? Cordelia can afford the best lawyers in the country, if not the world, how do I compete?

I drive home on autopilot, arriving outside Baxter’s hotel before I know what I’m doing. That was dangerous, to drive in such a state, but what else could I do. I dial Baxter and he picks up on the first ring.

“Raven, I’m-”

“I need your help. We’re outside. Can we stay tonight?”

“What? Of course. I’ll be right down to meet you. Park up.”

I hang up and drive into the underground parking garage. I park in Baxter's guest spot - seriously what hotel has extra parking for the guests of guests? - and then help Phoenix and her things over the lifts. Baxter steps out when the lift pings its arrival, and I don't hesitate to step inside. I just hold my breath the whole way up to his suite.

"You okay?" he asks me when we arrive and I let out my breath and gasp for fresh air.

"Inside," I say. He nods, lets us in, guides Phoenix over to the TV and puts Frozen on for her. She loves that film. Her face lights up, she gives him a massive cuddle, and then sits on the sofa to watch.

"Can we talk somewhere?" I ask throwing a pointed look at Phoenix.

"Of course, come," he beckons me through to the bathroom. It's fine. He sits on the edge of the bath and I close the door then pace.

"What's wrong?"

"I...Cordelia..." I don't know whether to burst into tears, to scream or yell. I'm so angry. I'm terrified. I've never known fear like this. There's a very real chance that I could lose my baby.

"What has she done?" Baxter asks with urgency. He can see how much more messed up I am by this visit than any of the others in the past.

"She's given me these," I throw the brown envelope at him, "and is threatening to tell people that I'm a murderer."

"You're not a murderer," he automatically corrects. It's an argument we've had a thousand times.

"Killer. Whatever. She's going to fight for custody of Phoenix and she's going to win."

Baxter pulls out the papers and scans them quickly. When he realises what they are he whistles sharply between his teeth.

"Fuck," he says grimly. "It's really bad isn't it?"

“She states that you’re incompetent to be Phoenix’s primary caregiver. She states the poverty issues that you had...”

“But that’s so much better now!” I cry. I don’t want to think about the charity from Rebel that I’ve come to rely on, or what might happen now that he hates me.

“It’s not just that. It says your ‘immoral lifestyle choices’ are having a detrimental effect on Phoenix’s health and wellbeing.”

“What the fuck?”

“I’m guessing she’s referring to your five boyfriends...”

“Well that’s not an issue anymore is it?”

“Fuck!” He hisses. “What?”

“She cites me as a reason. The fucking bitch!”

“How can she?”

“It says you have an unhealthy relationship with a known criminal, it has to be me.”

“That’s too far!” I exclaim. I mean sure, Baxter has a very dark past that we don’t talk about, but everyone has a history.

“Raven, babe, it gets worse...”

“That’s not possible. She said she didn’t mention the killing...”

“She didn’t. But she cites your mental breakdown and a... a suicide attempt...as the final straw that’s spurred her into action.”

“But I didn’t try to kill myself. I would never...”

“I know, shush, I know,” Baxter says soothingly. He grabs me and pulls me close, forcing me to stop pacing, and wipes away the tears that are streaming down my face.

“What am I going to do?”

“I don’t know, not right now. But I promise, I will do everything in my power to help you fight her on this. There’s

no way we're letting Phoenix go without a fight. Okay? Listen to me. I will fix this," he insists.

He stares into my eyes and I can see the furious fire blazing in his gaze and I find myself nodding my assent. He'll help. I know he will.

"But right now, there's not a single thing we can do. So we're going to go out there and have a great evening with Phoenix, do you understand? Let's give her a proper welcome home." Again, I nod, sniffing and drying my face.

"You go out. I'm going to have a shower to freshen up. It's been a while."

"Yeah, Ace called. We can talk about that later when Phoenix is in bed. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Just need to wash the day away, you know?"

"Of course," he says, switching on the shower for me before pulling me close for another hug. He kisses the top of my head and then goes to see Phoenix. I can hear her singing along to one of the songs out there. I smile briefly and then my entire being crumples. I hit the floor hard and break. I don't know how much fight I have left in me. I will die trying to protect Phoenix with all I have, but I fear that the war with Cordelia may just finish me off in the process.

Charlotte's Diary

Present Day

My heart just about stopped when I saw that eviction notice. I've worked so hard, for so long, to keep a roof over our heads and food in our mouths. Or in Phoenix's mouth at least. I couldn't believe I was about to lose it all, right when I was so close to graduating and being able to make a better life for the two of us. I was crushed. Devastated. And then I got that stupid phone call from Charlie. I really need to deal with him and cut ties once and for all. He's not a nice guy. I've known it for a while now, but didn't want to admit it. I guess having Rebel, and the others to a lesser extent, back in my life, really highlighted how awful he is. Speaking of Rebel: he's fast trying to knock Baxter off the top spot as my knight in shining armour. I was so lucky that he was there to pick up the pieces. I hate to accept charity, especially after having to rely on Baxter so much and then working so hard to stand on my own, but I'm not so stupid as to put Phoenix's safety in jeopardy - I can recognize when I've lost. We needed to keep a roof over our heads somehow. I'm starting to wonder how I'll live without Rebel when he leaves Edinburgh and goes back to wherever he came from. I've tried not to get emotionally involved, but it's already way too late for that. I just hope that I can survive a second round of heartbreak.



CHAPTER FORTY

Baxter

The need to cause pain and destruction is stronger than anything I've ever felt before in my life. That's saying some serious shit considering my background, my family.

When it all came out in the wash like that, I expected a blood bath so much worse than what transpired. I thought I wanted to see the chaos unfold, but I didn't.

That monstrous part of me is still very much alive, but now rather than just blindly feeding on pain and destruction at anyone's expense, I'm learning the hard way that I have people in my life I care about. And seeing them - seeing Raven - hurt like that? It almost killed me.

Now she's turned up on my doorstep, once again forcing me to play the unwitting role of knight in tarnished armour. And I love it. I'm more than ready to step into the role every time she comes running. I'll continue to do it for as long as she'll have me.

If she'll have me.

I'm not stupid; her presence here is a knee-jerk reaction to her circumstance. I've been her go-to for five years whenever there's been Cordelia drama, and I'm not foolish enough to think that this new development means that everything from before is forgiven and forgotten.

I fucked up. I pushed her to come clean when the timing, the circumstances - hell everything! - wasn't right. I fucked up so bad I spent the best part of two days trying to figure out how to make it up to her.

I didn't expect an opportunity to land in my lap so easily. Cordelia.

I'm going to take her down once and for all to show Raven how much I care.

Only, reading through the court paperwork while Raven and Phoenix sleep on the sofa bed nearby, has confident,

cocky me finally faltering and wondering how the fuck I'm going to be her knight this time around.

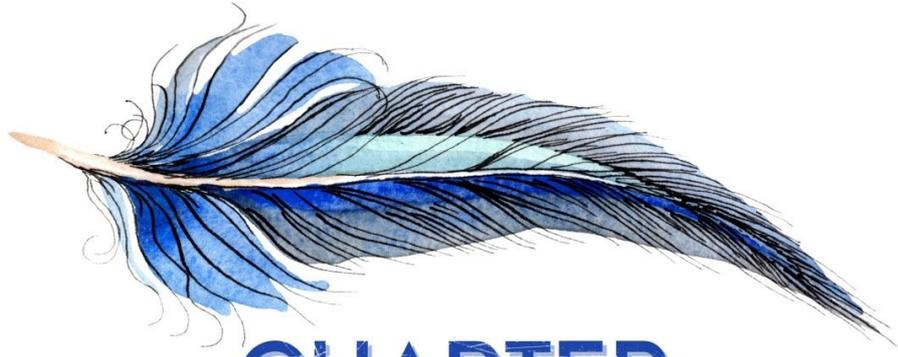
It wouldn't surprise me if Cordelia has been planning this since the day Raven finally left once and for all. Because inspecting the massive stack of papers tells me that Cordelia has an air-tight case. And the worst part in all of this?

I don't have a fucking clue how we can win.

Charlotte's Diary

Present Day

I keep staring into space, my fingertips absentmindedly touching my lips which are still bruised and swollen from the force of Thorn's punishing kiss. I make no bones about it, his kiss was a punishment. I could feel it in the passion he had for me, the way he seemed to delight in the little spikes of pain he caused me. As if that wasn't enough, the message was received loud and clear when he suddenly pulled away and bolted from my side. I could claim that I was confused by his sudden disappearance, but in truth, I wasn't. From the moment he hesitated on the pavement and reluctantly came into the house, I knew he was conflicted. He threw questions like knives, each one hitting its mark harder than the last. Do I resent him for hurting me? For punishing me? No .I welcome it. I have no idea how to show I'm sorry. The words themselves are insignificant. How do I prove my regret through my actions? Where do I even begin? If violently kissing me helps Thorn to deal with the trauma of what I've done, so be it. I welcome it. He can use me to feel better. He can take his pound of flesh. I will happily submit to his needs if it earns me the atonement I so desperately crave.



CHAPTER FORTY - ONE

Raven

The next morning I wake up on my favourite comfy sofa bed with Phoenix next to me. She's sat up in bed watching cartoons already and she brightly informs me the second I crack open my eyes, that Baxter has gone for a run. I assume that means in the gym on a treadmill, because he's never struck me as the sporty, active or outdoorsy type.

I stretch out in bed and enjoy cuddles with Phoenix before the memory of yesterday punches me in the gut all over again. I sniff in a vain attempt to hold back tears - again - and Phoenix tells me off for interrupting her program. Why do I always seem to be crying these days? If there was ever a time for it to be okay to cry and be a wreck, it would be at the prospect of losing my child, but how am I supposed to fight for her if I can't pull myself together.

I get washed and dressed in the same clothes I've had on a couple of days now - truly a walk of shame - and then pull out some clothes from Phoenix's bag. Of course Cordelia will have washed and ironed all of Nix's stuff, and judging by the bulging bag, has bought her a load of new stuff too.

I'm just finishing getting her ready when Baxter's phone goes off. It makes me jump but I don't manage to find it in time to answer it. Only, it rings a second and a third time too. What if it's an emergency? Whoever is calling seems pretty desperate to get hold of him.

I locate his phone, tangled in the sheets of his bed, and actually see he has several missed calls. That's when it starts again, this time pinging with messages coming through left, right and centre.

Tilly: are you up?

Tilly: we need to talk!

Tilly: you and Jax can't keep ignoring me like this!

Tilly: dammit Baxter! You can't ghost me like this And the final one before I drop the phone:

Tilly: I thought we had something special, the other weekend was amazing.

I want to sail on the river of denial, but the mention of Jax is just too much of a coincidence. Why on earth would the two of them be in contact with her? And what does she mean about the weekend being amazing? Is there a simple explanation, or am I fool?

Thoughts of betrayal slither through me like a toxic gas, contaminating everything it comes into contact with. I want to scream and lash out, but I just don't have room in my head or my heart for any more drama. I certainly can't cry anymore tears. Jax, I could understand. We're not technically anything to each other. But Baxter's deception hurts more than anything.

I gather Phoenix up, along with all her stuff and head out the door. She asks where we're going and I tell her home, she asks if Baxter's coming and I say no, then she wants to know why we can't wait to say bye to him and I have to lie and say he's been called into work, but she accepts this as pretty normal.

When I pull up outside the house, a figure sits hunched on my doorstep. They're dressed all in black, wearing a hoodie so I can't see their face. I park and pull up the camera app, but of course they're not facing the camera. I make sure all of the doors are locked before I wind down the window and call, "Can I help you?" The figure starts and jumps to its feet - has to be a guy with that build - and makes his way towards us. I must be really tired because I swear he's about four foot away before I realise it's Ace.

"Aljaž, what are you doing here?" I ask warily.

"Waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"You."

"Oh. Why?"

"Need to see you okay."

I smile at him and climb out of the car. I quickly unload Phoenix's bag and move to get her out too, but Ace has beaten me to it.

"Morning, Phoenix, Rebel says you are princess in training," he says to her delight. "Permission to carry the mala princeska¹?"

"Hi, Aljaž," Phoenix grins at him, and he beams back at her when she uses his full name. "Yes, please carry me!"

He easily scoops her up like a princess and carries her to the front door, over the threshold and down the corridor to the playroom, with Phoenix giggling the whole way. It warms my heart, until I remember the shitstorm Cordelia has stirred up.

I'm not letting my baby go.

"Hey," Ace calls softly, making me jump when he quietly sneaks into the kitchen on me.

"Thank you for the cookies," I blurt out, spying the tin still sitting on the side. I plate one for Phoenix and myself, and offer him one too.

"Welcome." He smiles easily.

"Were you waiting long? Outside I mean," I ask him. "Since yesterday," he replies.

"You sat out there all night?" I'm horrified.

"Not cold." He shrugs.

"Ace! That's not good for you. You didn't need to do that." I mildly scold him. "What did you want?"

"Check okay."

I hesitate before answering. "Not okay? House fine. I check."

"No, it's not that..."

Just then, Phoenix wanders into the room, looking for a snack. I show her the cookies and sit her up at the island on a stool. She happily munches through them, saying with her mouth half full that they're really good.

“What’s this?” she asks, holding out Ace’s note to me.

“It’s a note. It came with the cookies,” I tell her.

“What does it say?”

“I don’t know. Ask Ace.”

“Ace, what does this say?”

He takes the note from her and reads it aloud in fluent Slovenian. Phoenix giggles.

“What does it mean?”

“Ah, you want know, you learn like your mum!”

“Will you teach me?”

“Absolutely.” He beams at her enthusiasm while she finishes off her cookie and then races back to play with the toys she’s missed.

“Phoenix great,” he tells me. “I don’t care.”

“Don’t care what?”

“Who father is. Love anyway.”

“Aljaž...” I try to warn him but he shakes his head at me.

“Yes. Always love. You. Phoenix.”

“But...” I try to argue but he’s having none of it. “Nothing changing.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“Your turn,” he looks at me expectantly. Is he expecting a declaration of love? Obviously I love him, but I can’t say it yet. He smirks, like he knows exactly what I’m thinking.

“What’s wrong?” I sigh and tell him all about Baxter’s phone and the messages from Tilly. I confess that I don’t know how Baxter and Jax have both ended up connected to Tilly, but that there are warning bells ringing.

Ace is calm, patient, a really good listener. So I also decide to tell him about Cordelia. I even manage it without crying. Ace on the other hand unleashes a violent string of Slovenian

cuss words. I don't know exactly what he's saying, but I can imagine.

"I don't know what to do," I finish forlornly.

"I help. We all help," he replies, even though I shake my head because I think that's unlikely. "Promise. Trust, Princess."

"How?"

"I get guys to help. But," he pauses, taking a deep breath, and I knew it was too good to be true. "I think they need test to help."

My heart sinks and fear bubbles like acid in my stomach.

"Aljaž, please no."

"Do test. Best. Get help."

I frown, because I feel like Ace is trying to tell me something more than what he's saying, and I feel a flicker of frustration at the language barrier for the first time ever with him.

"Unite. Fight. Show Cordelia stabilnost...stable? No... stability?" I nod. I know what he means by that.

"Result no matter. Test, no test, love always." I can't help but wonder if he refers just to himself in that sentiment. To be with a guy as caring and lovely as Ace would be more than enough, I tell myself.

I stare into his gorgeous violet eyes. He strips my soul bare but the message in his gaze says he loves me despite my faults.

Wordlessly, he diminishes the gap between us and gently presses his lips to mine. He surprises me, but I like it. I lean in and try to deepen the kiss but I sense him holding back. Even though his lips don't move, it feels like he's pulling away. Gentle hands cup my face tenderly and there's still at least a foot of space between us.

I shuffle forward and try to pull him closer, but he prevents me.

"Aljaž." I sigh in frustration.

“Princess,” he hums back as I pull away. “Stop that!”

“Huh?”

“Stop kissing me like that!”

“You don’t like?”

“No!” His face falls and I quickly backtrack.

“Yes! I love kissing you, but not like that.”

“Bad kiss?”

“Never. But you can’t hold, touch and kiss me like I’m broken. Because I’m not. I’m not fragile or broken or in need of TLC. I want you to show me how you really feel.”

He doesn’t respond with words. Actions speak louder anyway, and the way Ace grabs me and pulls me to him, annihilating any air between us, tells me plenty. His lips crush, dominate, overpower mine, and I’m instantly transported back to that drowning sensation of when we used to kiss. His fingers tangle in my hair, gently, but at least he’s not holding me like a vintage china doll anymore.

He steals my breath as his hands slide under my ass and pull me even more tightly against him. I wrap my legs around his waist when he lifts me, and I can’t help the groan that escapes me when he grinds me against his hard length.

“Sranje²!” He mutters as we break for breath. I dive straight back in; like the moon pulls the tides, I can’t resist him.

“MOM!” Phoenix screams and we jump apart guiltily. “MUMMY! Come here!”

I relax infinitesimally when I realise that she hasn’t come into the room, but is in fact calling me to her. Shit! How can I get so carried away with Phoenix in the next room.

“Ace, I have to...”

“Go. It’s fine. I fix. Speak soon.” He quickly rattles off everything I needed to hear as he gives me a quick peck goodbye and vanishes out the door.

I take some deep breaths, fan myself, down a pint of water...I try everything and anything I can think of to cool and calm myself down. As I head towards the playroom to see what Phoenix wants, I catch sight of myself in the mirror.

Whilst I no longer look like crap crap, in a death-warmed-up kind of way, I do look like crap, in a I've-been-making-out kind of way.

Thankfully, Phoenix is three and way too young to understand- "Mummy! What's wrong with your face?"

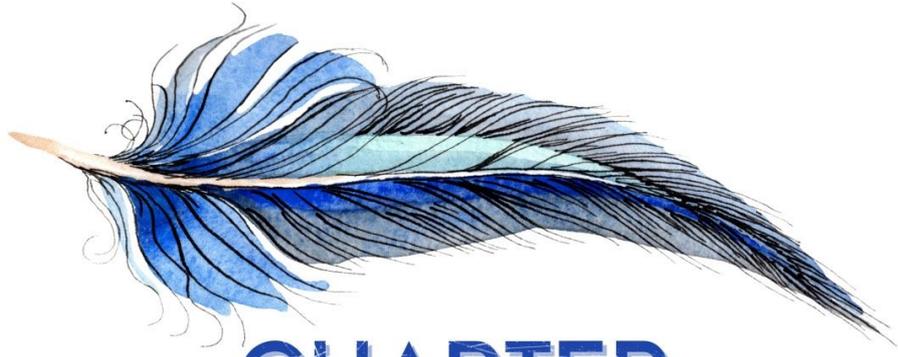
Ah fuck.

CHARLOTTE'S DIARY

Charlotte's Diary

Present Day

Now that I know I'm not going to be expelled, I feel pity for Charlie. Imagine being so insecure that when a girl dumps you, you feel the need to destroy her life by making up lies and spreading rumours...even if it hurts your own father! Don't get me wrong, I'm still mad enough to kill him, but at least it's over with. He's had his revenge, made his point. I just want to forget and move on. Although, looking Charles Snr in the eye in class is going to be difficult! Oh god, that's going to be awful...



CHAPTER FORTY - TWO

Raven

I don't like to be alone in this house. I was fine with Ace here, a little wobbly when it was just Phoenix and I, but now she's asleep, I'm a nervous wreck. I can't sleep and I can barely sit still. Which is why I've let myself into her room and curled up on the rug beside her bed with a blanket and a cushion. I think I'll sleep better knowing she's close.

After Ace left, I spent the rest of the day playing with Phoenix. I had a couple of missed calls from Baxter and a few texts, but I ignored them all. I don't know what I'd say to him if I answered and it's not a conversation I would want to risk Phoenix overhearing anyway.

I know we will need to talk though. As much as I want to trust Ace - and I do - I don't believe he has the power to bring the guys back together and to unite them alongside me in the fight against Cordelia. As harsh as it sounds, I'm going to need Baxter more than ever. Which is why it might be best if I put my feelings for him to one side.

Easier said than done though, as images of him yesterday playing with Phoenix flood my mind. He's exactly what anyone would want in a father; he's never fulfilled anything less than that role in her life, going back to before she was even born. He's been my friend, rock, confidante, saviour. A perfect partner. But it's the murkiness of his past, and the glimpses of the dark monster that still lurk within him today, that really draw me in and have me wanting more.

I think to myself how fucked up it is that, even though there has clearly been some kind of betrayal with Tilly, I still want him.

Baxter could be my best chance at fighting Cordelia and winning. My easiest shot at a simple love life.

But Ace could be my happily ever after.

He's always been there, standing silently in the shadows, defending me and looking out for me. Sure, Baxter has too,

but that's because I've needed him to. I called on him, begged at times. But Aljaž was the cheerleader I didn't know I had. A guardian. For four years he kept my secrets and tried to protect me to the end. When everyone left, he was the only one who called, the only one who came back.

And he loves me. Truly loves me. Whereas this...thing... with Baxter is so new, it could just be a phase or a whim or a passing fancy. Do I want to throw everything away, risk our friendship and, more importantly Phoenix's relationship with Baxter, on something that could fizzle out and die before it really gets going? But with Ace, things would always be more complicated.

Despite his simple outlook on life and his amazing ability to see everything in black or white, it would tear him apart having to choose me over the others. I know they're closer than blood, true brothers in every sense of the word, and it would kill him to lose that, even though I know he'd do it in a heartbeat without my even asking him to.

I worry my lip as I lie in the dark listening to Phoenix's deep, even breaths. She sleeps with the clear conscience of an angel, no clouds ever darken her doorstep and I would give my life to try and keep it that way for her - no matter how unrealistic that hope is. Her soft childish snores comfort me momentarily, but then my puppy-like mind fetches me another scenario to obsess over.

If I were with Ace, I would have stability. Admittedly, it wouldn't be the financial stability that would be guaranteed with Baxter, but Ace is a solid enough choice to appease the courts. A genuine loving relationship with Ace would show the courts that I am capable of being a proper mum to Phoenix. Someone with a past like Baxter's could jeopardise my chances of winning.

Fuck, that's a shitty thing to think.

Besides, whether they forgive me or not, my heart is telling me that this isn't just a two-horse race. I love Baxter in a unique way; our shared history of my pregnancy and Phoenix's childhood is unparalleled and something I will

never have with the others. But I am, and always have been, in love with the other four, and even if they want nothing to do with me, I can't just switch those feelings off. If I didn't manage it in the last four years, who's to say I'll ever get over them?

You're rambling, Raven, I sternly chastise myself. Shut the fuck up and get some sleep.

Charlotte's Diary

Present Day

Oh my god. My car is trashed. How on earth am I going to fix it? More importantly, how am I going to fix it without Rebel finding out and trying to pay? Charlie is out of control. I knew he wasn't a nice guy, but I never expected him to stoop this low. Especially after that business with his dad and the selling sex for grades accusations. It hurt, but I thought at least we're done now. He's made his point, had his fun. I embarrassed him and he got his revenge. But then the car too! Why? Why would he do that? And how the hell does he know about Phoenix? His threat made my blood run cold, even though I laughed it off. I should tell someone. But who? I can't tell Rebel, he'll kill Charlie, and Baxter's not around much at the moment. I need to protect her better.



CHAPTER FORTY - THREE

Thorn

I grumble and groan when I accept Ace's call on my phone. It feels like it's the crack of dawn, but in all honesty I don't even know what day it is, let alone what time of day it might be.

"Fucker?" I answer, a weak attempt at humour and a pathetic attempt at trying to hide just how hanging I am. Ace just sighs impatiently at me.

Pretty sure I'm meant to be mad at him about something. "We need talk. Meet at Raven house. One hour."

The line goes dead.

Excitement leaps in my stomach at the thought of seeing her. It feels like ages since I last saw her. Then it quickly sinks when I realise I'm supposed to be mad at her about something too.

I move - too quickly - and find myself racing to the bathroom as something else this time leaps around in my stomach.

Fuck. How much did I drink? Or, looking at my phone to find out both the time and the day, I think I should switch that to how long have I been drinking? It's been days since I saw or heard from anyone.

I smell like ass. Feel like it too. Lumbering clumsily across the bathroom, I switch on the shower and step in before it has a chance to heat up.

Icy water blasts me back to my senses, and the grim reality of what happened a couple of days ago. Fuck. Raven, Phoenix, Ace. The realisation hurts far worse than the needles of ice pelting me. Without looking, I grasp the shower knob and spin it all the way around.

Jax and Lizzie. Fuck. Scalding hot water that feels like magma has me jumping out of the powerful jets of lava and reaching, more carefully this time, to find some middle

ground. Beyond the wall at Westeros or the blazing fires of Mordor are not my cup of tea.

Once some semblance of normality - think a gentle monsoon in the tropics - is found, I safely step back under the spray and relax. I let the water wash away the stains of the last few days. And the evidence.

Shit.

I really hope I didn't sleep with anyone.

I may not know what's going on with Raven and I and the guys, but I do know that I don't want to fuck it up even further by sleeping around. I can't cheat on Raven - if I can even call it cheating when we aren't together and she doesn't know how I feel. But my heart is very firmly telling me that it would be wrong, so for once I'm gonna try and listen to it, rather than my dick.

Showered and refreshed, I shut off the water, step out, dry off. I comb my long blonde locks back out of my way and finish with all that cosmetic shit that chicks love; aftershave and clean teeth and that. I want to impress Raven today and vomit stale brewery breath isn't likely to do that, so I even floss and mouthwash. I'd fucking deny it if anyone ever asked though.

Done, I dress in dark jeans (clean, no rips), a t-shirt (white, creases, but no stains) and pull on a blue shirt over the top. It's a little wrinkled but it's pretty smart. I slide my feet into some Vans, pocket my phone, keycard and wallet, and head out. On my way, I check my phone for any sleazy texts or random call history, but everything seems clean, thankfully. I can walk into Raven's with a clear conscience.

Well, as clear as a coward who ran away and hid for days' conscience can be.

It doesn't take too long to get to Raven's place from the hotel, shortcutting across one of the lovely parks. It's too cold now, at this time of year, but I imagine it would be a lovely space to hang out, have a picnic and play with Phoenix in the summer.

If Scotland even has a summer? It's pretty fucking bleak right now. I'm glad I grabbed a jacket at the last minute, but if we're planning to stay here any longer I might have to consider investing in a winter coat. And a place to live. Hotels suck.

Whoa, check me out, planning for the future and shit. I guess I need to see how today pans out before I go getting ahead of myself like that.

I ring the bell, smile and wave at the security camera, and am just considering mooning it for shits and giggles when Phoenix opens the door alongside Raven.

Phew, close call that I didn't pull a moony then.

"Thorn!" Phoenix lights up, oblivious to the tension etched all over Raven's face. I bend down to say high to the kid - my kid? My gut twists - and she gives me a killer high five. I idly wonder what age I can get her on a surfboard, already mentally outfitting her with all the gear. Have to take her to warmer climes for that though.

"Thanks for coming over," Raven says tightly.

"No problem, Princess." I smile at her to show I'm okay. It's okay. We're okay. But she barely manages a quirk of her lips in response.

"Everyone else is here."

"Shit-" I go to apologise but I'm interrupted.

"Bad word!" Phoenix yells with glee. I pay up and apologise to both girls.

"Sorry, am I late?"

"No. But I think everyone was as anxious to get here as much as they are reluctant to actually be here," she replies. Not gonna lie, that statement makes my head hurt. Am I still a bit hungover? A bit drunk? Damn, should have eaten something first.

"Can I have some water?"

“Sure, help yourself, then come through to the dining room. We’re all in there,” she tells me, wandering off towards the playroom with Phoenix.

I follow her instructions and join her at the door to the dining room at the same time. Before she can reach for the handle though, my own hand shoots out to capture hers.

“Look, Raven, I just need you to know that whatever happens today, I’m okay. For me, nothing has changed, okay?”

Tears spring to her eyes but she rapidly blinks them away, nodding at me. She swallows, takes a shaky breath and gives me a wobbly smile.

Once again she reaches for the door, but I feel like she doesn’t really believe me, so without thinking - or maybe just thinking fuck it - I grab her and pull her to me for a searing kiss.

My brain shuts off as I lose myself in her, my hard kiss juxtaposing the softness of her cherry flavoured lips. That’s new; but I really fucking like it. So does my dick, which has stirred to life and is slowly climbing to attention. Fuck, I’ve missed her. The hugs and few kisses we’ve shared aren’t enough. I need to take her to bed and lose myself in her for days...got a lot of lost time to make up for.

The sound of someone approaching the door pulls me from the kiss and I smirk at Raven. Just as the door swings open, I quickly swipe a smear of gloss from the side of her mouth and stick my finger in between my lips for a last taste with a wink.

Yeah, looking at the slight way she wobbles as she enters the room ahead of me, I’d say that got the message over to her, loud and clear.

Charlotte's Diary

Present Day

I had a nightmare last night, for the first time in ages. I know why: my discussion with Thorn. Reliving the fire and its aftermath through his eyes has stirred up all that pain and guilt again. It was almost unbearable, listening to Thorn talk about it. I wanted to beg him to stop, but I forced myself to listen. I needed to know his pain. I needed to feel it, experience it with him. I'm glad I did. But I wish it hadn't brought back such vivid memories and nightmares for me. I spent the rest of the night reading, unable to switch off. Every time I closed my eyes, the room was ablaze. I could feel the heat of the flames as if I were the one trapped inside. No. It was much better to keep busy. Stay awake, stay safe.



CHAPTER FORTY - FOUR

Baxter

Have to hand it to Ace, he did the impossible in getting us all here today. We're all sat around the table uncomfortably ignoring one another when Thorn and Raven finally join us. Raven looks shaky on her feet, her lipgloss is gone and her lips are swollen from kissing.

Interesting.

Jealousy flickers through me but I dismiss it. If we manage to sort shit out today, there will be plenty of time for me to kiss her later. To be fair, I'm not mad at her; I'd kiss her now if I thought it wouldn't end in me getting a black eye. I'm not that stupid, I know I need to get her forgiveness first.

"Ace, why are we all here?"

"Sort problems," he replies to Jax's surly question. "Bigger problems to fix."

Ah, so he knows what's happening with Cordelia then. Good. If Raven has agreed to have us all round, then she must know we need to put up a united front to beat this bitch.

"Explain," Jax barks.

God, he fucking annoys me. Just when I was starting to think he was alright, he reverts back to being a total asshole. Who does he think he is to be making demands? Of all of us, he has the most grovelling to do. I decide to speak up.

"We have a new problem that needs sorting out," I begin, before Jax interrupts.

"Besides her," comes his scathing reply, "I can't see what any of us have in common. And she is not my problem."

Raven gives a sharp intake of breath and looks down at the table. Pretty sure it's to hide tears at his harsh words. Dick. This better be a damn good defence mechanism because if he's this much of a tool in real life, I don't think I can stomach him long-term.

I throw him a withering glare that tells him exactly what I think, before continuing.

“We need some rules and I’m going with one: don’t interrupt. Two: be nice, and three: if at all possible, don’t be a fucking bellend.”

“Four: no drama. We deal with everything as fucking adults with Phoenix’s best interests at heart.” Rebel adds with some force.

“Harsh, but necessary,” Thorn chuckles. He’s in surprisingly good spirits. “Right, so let me get this straight... So we’re here to sort shit out so that we can move on and sort some new shit out.”

“Got it,” Ace replies. “Jax and Lizzie. Phoenix. Father test. What I did and...” he gives me a sideways glance and I nod for him to continue. “And Jax, Baxter and Tilly. Lot to cover.”

“Okay, let’s do this!” Thorn seems extremely keen to get going. I guess he has nothing to lose right now; unlike the rest of us.

“I need to hear about Tilly first,” Raven says. There’s a steel in her voice I haven’t heard in a while, and if it wasn’t aimed at me, I’d smile. Can still be proud of her though. “Jax?” she prompts.

He just scowls, unwilling to comment. I sigh at his immaturity and decide to take the reins.

“Okay, so, I know you saw my phone, Raven, and saw a load of messages and missed calls from Tilly. I need to explain what’s going on and you can ask questions or whatever, but please just hear me out, okay?”

“Fine,” is the only reply she gives.

“Jax approached me after they discovered you, and asked for my help in taking down Tilly.” I reach for my drink and take a sip. “I agreed because, babe, you know I’ve wanted to help you for years and you wouldn’t let me. Jax’s plan to bring Tilly down, by giving her a taste of her own medicine, appealed to my sense of chaos.”

“What do you mean, a taste of her own medicine?”

“Jax planned to get back in touch with Tilly and to seduce her,” I watch Raven’s reaction carefully. She blanches but otherwise stays strong.

“So what did he need you for?”

“The same. Once she met me, I was the trophy to be won. She wanted my name and prestige.”

“Why both of you?”

“Because,” Jax finally jumps in. “she needed to be destroyed. Annihilated for what she did.”

“So you both slept with her?” I don’t miss her gentle emphasis. “That was the plan,” Jax tells her coldly.

“But we didn’t,” I quickly clarify. Why is Jax being a knob about this?

“I see,” is all Raven says.

“Look, we should have told you. But,” I glance at Jax for confirmation and he meets my eye with a steely stare. “We aren’t going to stop. We’re going to change the method, but we don’t rest until we have the desired outcome.”

“You want to ruin Tilly?” Raven whispers. “Yes. For you,” I tell her.

“And for Lizzie,” Jax adds.

Raven’s head whips up to stare at Jax at his words. I can’t decipher the look she gives him, but it isn’t one filled with contempt. It’s a good sign.

“You should have told me,” she says, turning to me.

“You would have tried to stop me.”

“I need a...well, I’ll never have a clear conscience, but for Phoenix’s sake, I need to set a good example. I don’t want anymore bloodstains on my hands.”

“That’s why we didn’t involve you, Princess.” I blink in surprise as the term of endearment slips easily from between my lips. It feels right. “We needed to keep you clean.”

“Okay. I need to process this and see how I feel. You promise you didn’t sleep with her?”

“On my life.”

“Jax?”

“I couldn’t do it,” he grumbles. “Cared too much about someone else.”

“But...” she hesitates, like she doesn’t want to ask this question, but knows she’ll never forgive herself if she doesn’t. “You guys kissed her?”

“I’m sorry, Raven,” Baxter replies. Jax just nods once, a sharp reluctant jerk of his head and Raven hisses out a pained breath. She closes her eyes briefly and when she re-opens them, the pain is erased. No, not gone, masked.

I snort at Jax’s unwillingness to just say how he feels. Everyone in the room knows he’s talking about Raven but the stubborn prick won’t admit it to himself.

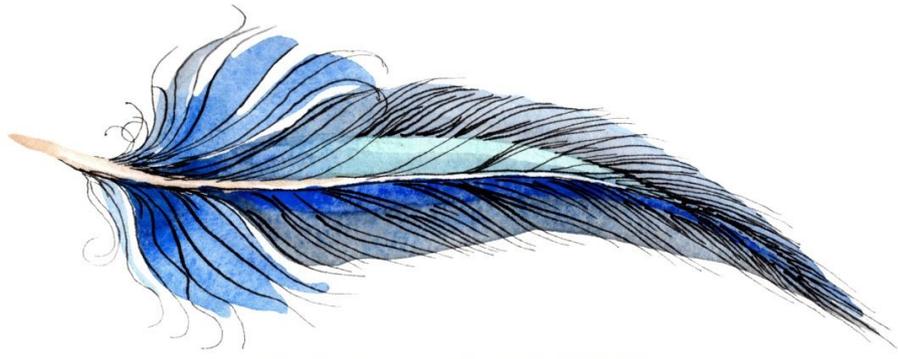
Fool, I’ve been there. Never again. Who knew I had a heart capable of love after all? Without thinking, I open my mouth and the words fly out:

“I fucking love you.”

Charlotte's Diary

Present Day

Just when I'm getting my head around the fact that I have feelings for Thorn, Rebel goes and drops his bombshell. He loves me. He's in love with me. And he wants to be a family. It's a dream come true, everything I've ever wanted...so why am I feeling so conflicted? It's all getting too much to deal with.



CHAPTER FORTY - FIVE

Rebel

“Awww thanks, babe,” Thorn teases, breaking the shocked silence of the room as everyone titters.

Man, I know we fucked up a few times when we told Raven how we felt, but I don’t think we did anything that awkward.

“Bax...” Raven begins. She bites the corner of her lip.

“You don’t have to say anything, but unlike some, I’m not living in denial anymore. And if you can forgive me, I’m not going anywhere.”

She nods at him, trying to keep a poker face on her feelings, but I can tell she’s fucking made up by his revelation.

Awww shit. Makes me want to spill all the feels.

“What’s next on the list of shit to deal with?” I ask, keen to move this party forward.

“Ace,” Jax cuts in.

“Okay, what’s the problem there?” I shrug. Because I get it, I do, but I also understand that that’s just Ace’s way.

“He should have told us.”

“Yes, he should,” I reply. “But I also understand why he didn’t.” Jax scowls at that so I feel the need to add, “Like you wouldn’t have kept secrets from the rest of us if she asked.”

Jax remains quiet. Surprising, as I expected him to argue and lie.

“Do it again,” Ace adds unhelpfully. I catch the smile Raven tries to hide at that.

“Moron,” Thorn sniggers, slapping him on the arm. Ace just shrugs unapologetically.

“It’s done, guys. We can’t change anything so you just need to get over it,” I announce to the room in general. “Raven, you good with Ace?”

“I am. I don’t regret asking him to keep my secrets back then, but when you guys found me and discovered Phoenix, I shouldn’t have expected him to keep lying to you. It’s not his fault it all came out so horribly. I’m sorry, guys.”

Ace leans over and takes Raven’s hand, gently kissing the back of it.

“Hvala vam, lepa¹.” He smiles at her.

Phew, two down, how many to go? Who else am I supposed to be pissed at?

“What’s next?” I ask.

“Phoenix,” Jax says at the same time as Raven says “Lizzie.” Jax scowls but shrugs, as if to say okay, let’s do this.

“What the hell happened with Lizzie?” I ask. I’m worried about this one; if anything is likely to flare my temper to life, it’s this.

“When Lizzie first came to West Prep, I could see straight away that you were all interested in her. I didn’t want us to fight over another girl; I couldn’t face losing any of you the way we lost Michael,” Jax begins to explain.

I pull a face because any mention of that bastard makes my blood boil.

“So I dropped hints to Tilly, that I wanted to get rid of the new girl, fast. I knew what that would mean.”

My nostrils flare as I try to keep my temper under wraps. I’m not surprised by Jax’s confession. He used to do all kinds of stupid shit in school, often using Tilly to take care of old girlfriends who had trouble letting go. They often transferred out by the time Tilly was done with them.

“When you all started to show an interest in Lizzie, I knew I was doing the right thing in trying to protect us. But as I got to know Lizzie more, I realised my methods were way off.”

As Jax pauses and takes a drink, I look around the room. Baxter looks uncomfortable, Raven looks sick, even though I’m guessing she’s heard all of this before. Ace and Thorn look like they’re barely keeping it together.

“I tried to make Tilly stop, and I think she laid off for a while, but...but when we all started dating Lizzie, it reared up again. I think it was worse than ever.”

He looks devastated. As well he should. What an idiot!

“I’m pretty sure when Lizzie broke up with us all, and said it was because she couldn’t cope with all of us and couldn’t choose between us, it was a ruse. I think she was trying to distance herself from us to stop the bullying once and for all.”

“Did...were the others involved?” Thorn asks quietly.

“Yes. All of the girls were. And Tilly probably roped in the rest of the students.”

“Fuck. How...keep...secret?” Ace stammers.

“Yeah, what he said. How the fuck did the whole school manage to keep it from us? Or are we all just stupid as fuck?” I demand.

“I have no idea how they kept it quiet. You were pretty oblivious. And Lizzie was really good at hiding it when she was around us. At times she even had me believing it had all stopped. You shouldn’t blame yourself.”

“Fuck that, I blame you!” I exclaim. Damn temper. How am I supposed to be all zen and shit when he’s saying this.

“How bad was it?” Thorn asks quietly.

“She wanted to end her life at times. She was strong, but it was too much. It was only when she found out she was pregnant that she decided to fight, to survive. For the sake of her child.” Raven informs us. Tears stream quietly down her face.

“And she was...Michael did...Tilly made...” Thorn stammers.

“Yeah.” She gets his meaning, but no one wants to say it.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah,” she repeats.

“I don’t know how to make this right,” Jax says.

“I don’t think you can,” I tell him softly. “Lizzie’s gone.”

“I know that. And I’m not saying that I wanted what happened, but we would never have met Raven any other way, would we?” He turns to her and continues, “And I hate that what I’ve done has caused you more pain and suffering when you’ve already lost and been through so much.” When he finishes his speech, he actually looks shocked by his own admission about caring for her, much to my amusement. He can huff and puff all he likes, but it’s pretty plain to see he has it as bad as the rest of us.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, barely audible. My heart hurts at the sadness on her face. How can I fix this? It may not be my mess to fix, but I do see it as my job to make Raven happy and to help her heal.

“I am sorry,” Jax says.

“Let’s acknowledge that that is going to take time,” I say, at a loss to say anything else.

Silent nods all around, the mood sombre.

I don’t really know how I feel about this now. It’s complicated. God, that sounds like such a cliché, but it’s true. On the one hand, it’s a really shitty betrayal from Jax. On the other, well...does it really matter now? I’m not sure. I guess we’re all gonna need time to process.

“Phoenix. Now.” Jax growls. I don’t understand why he’s being such an asshole right now. Everyone seems willing to forgive him, so why’s he riding Raven so hard?

“Hold that thought,” Raven exclaims, getting to her feet. “No,” Jax grumbles.

“Sorry, I’m just gonna check on Phoenix...and have a drink...and a wee.”

“Raven-” Jax warns, “I’m not buying your excuses.”

“I need a nervous wee, okay! I need to go.” She races from the room. Jax sighs, but it just makes me smile. I forgot she has the bladder of a small child. I’m sure we all want this over with. Why are we here? I get that Ace wants everything to be

all sweetness and light, but it's just not going to happen yet. Maybe ever, if Jax's attitude is anything to go by.

"Guys?" I ask while we wait. "We good?"

"Yeah," all three reply, though somewhat reluctantly. Baxter just shrugs.

"Sorry, sorry! I'm back." Raven breezes into the room a moment later. She has a fresh drink of pop in one hand and a jug of water for the rest of us in the other.

"We need to talk about Phoenix," Jax says.

"Yes, I know. But before we do, can I just say something?" she blurts out. Give me strength. I watch Jax bite back another sigh and indicate that the table's hers.

"I'll do it. I'll do the paternity test for Phoenix."

"Why?" Jax jumps in, instantly suspicious about her sudden change of heart. A few days ago she was adamant that she'd never do it. I'm sure he wants to know what changed. We all do.

She doesn't answer, just looks to Baxter and Ace for guidance.

Fuck that. She can speak for herself. "Tell me," I growl, losing my patience.

"Cordelia," Ace says.

"What? What has she got to do with anything?"

"Cordelia is bitch," Ace spits.

"Well yeah, we know that. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Cordelia is trying to take Phoenix away from me," Raven tells us. "Through the courts. And I'm going to lose."

Shock and disbelief trickle through me. What? She can't do that! Why would she want to? Anger flares and I struggle to get control of my emotions.

"No, Princess." Ace shakes his head.

“We won’t let that happen,” Baxter adds. “Look guys, Cordelia has an airtight case against Raven. She really could get custody of Phoenix, and I think the only way we can win this, is if we fight. Together.”

“How will a DNA test help?” I frown, confused. Some things just aren’t adding up.

“Besides showing the courts that unlike Cordelia thinks, I’m not a raging slut? It’s a...peace offering? I don’t know. Maybe it’s the right thing to do. Maybe it’s not. But I’m willing to, if it means you’ll help me fight Cordelia,” Raven responds sadly.

“Are you sure you want to do the test?” I ask, because as much as I want it, I don’t want to force Raven to do anything she doesn’t want to. I glare at Jax, pretty sure that twat would.

“Yes. I want the test. It will make everything clearer, going forward.”

“Okay, how do we do this?” I enquire.

“Tests can take three to twelve weeks for results,” Baxter informs us.

“What!” Raven cries. “That’s way too long!”

“I know. We can get a rush test for a fee - which is fine of course - and that will get the results back to us in three days.” “Thank God,” Raven breathes, relieved.

“But we have to send off for the test and get it sent out to us first and that could take some time. Unless you want to go to a clinic...”

“Shit.” She slumps down in disappointment. “I have test,” Ace announces.

“What?”

“Test here,” he repeats. He gives Baxter a funny look and sheepishly adds, “test five people.”

“That’s really not necessary,” Baxter begins but Raven cuts him off.

“It’s fine. Just do it.” He nods.

“Okay, let’s sort that in a minute. First, tell us everything,” I press urgently.

And they do. Between the three of them, they tell me, and the others, exactly what Cordelia was up to. What the court papers say, the reasons cited for the custody battle. Raven fills us in on what Charlie has said: how his family was connected to both Michael’s and Cordelia’s. There were still gaps in the story, but things were becoming a lot clearer.

“We’ll help,” I announce when they’ve finished speaking.

“Of course we will!” Thorn adds.

“Jax?” Ace prompts when he doesn’t say anything. I look at him and can see a muscle twitching in his jaw. His fingers are gripping the edge of the table and he seems to be vibrating with rage. I don’t think it’s aimed at Raven though.

He jumps to his feet and begins to pace around the room, thinking hard. He mutters to himself under his breath the whole time.

“Jax?” I prompt. No answer. “JAX!”

He stops pacing and stares at me blankly.

“Are you going to help us?” I ask.

“No.” He says and my heart starts to sink. “I’m going to fucking kill the bitch.”

*Charlotte's
Raven's Diary*

Present day

I can't go by that name anymore. I won't. And I don't want to talk about what happened with Charlie him. Just writing his name makes my throat burn with bile. I'm putting on a brave face, but...I feel devastated. I don't even have words to describe how I'm feeling. I refused to talk to anyone at the hospital about it. I shut the guys out when they try to bring it up. I don't even want to know what's happened to...him. And the lies he told his father! Or that Charles Snr claimed. I couldn't believe it when he appeared in my hospital room, begging me not to ruin his son's life. But it's okay for his son to ruin mine?! His behaviour sickens me almost as much as his son's. I don't ever want to see or speak to either of them again. I don't care about pressing charges if I just don't have to deal with it. Maybe that makes me a coward...Lord knows I'm nowhere near as strong as Lizzie. When I got home I unearthed her diary from the box under my bed and reread through her diary entries. The ones from after her ra the party. I was horrified and sickened the first time I read them, and consumed by guilt for not knowing and being able to support her. Now, reading her words on the page, every single word is like a knife to my gut, and I know all too well, exactly what she had to go through.



CHAPTER FORTY - SIX

Jax

My blood boils as we sit and discuss everything that has happened with Cordelia. I've taken a seat once again, but it takes a concentrated effort to keep still.

How can a person be this evil?

"Start again, what do we know for sure?" I ask.

"Guys," Raven interrupts softly. "Before we go over this again, you might want to sort the test out, that way we can get it in today's post before it gets too late."

"Good point," Thorn agrees.

We turn to the instructions on the kit and Baxter quickly reads through them.

"So we just have to swab our cheeks, bag and label the swabs, then post?" Rebel murmurs. "Huh, who knew it could be so simple?"

"I'll go and get Phoenix's sample," Raven offers, before slipping from the room silently.

I get to my feet and follow her, watching as she disappears into the conservatory turned playroom to speak to Phoenix. I peek round the corner and watch the two of them interacting. Phoenix doesn't hesitate to let Raven swab her cheek, and in return Raven gives her a small chocolate bar. I watch as Phoenix's eyes light up and, instead of diving straight into the treat as most kids would, she throws her arms around her mum for a massive cuddle. It's sweet. She's a sweet little thing.

I watch her play for a moment trying to find clues as to who she belongs to. Is that stubborn set of her jaw when she can't quite do something a part of me? Her easy delightful laughter when she masters it is just like Thorn.

Seeing Phoenix again, hearing Raven apologise, discovering what Cordelia is up to...well, it changes things.

I don't mean to bounce around like a yo-yo, but a lot of the anger has left me. No, that's not right, it's been displaced. Rechanneled to its rightful place: Cordelia.

I don't hate Raven. I don't think I ever could, even if Phoenix wasn't in the picture and potentially mine. I'm going to have to let things go, forgive and forget, because we've got one hell of a battle on our hands. Regardless of who Phoenix's father is, or what happens romantically with Raven, I need to support my brothers. One of us is a father, and for whatever reasons - right or wrong - we've missed out on nearly four years of being a dad. I'll stand by my family to rectify that and to ensure that whoever it is gets the chance to be the best parent that they can to Phoenix. But that isn't going to happen if Cordelia gains custody and ships Phoenix off to a boarding school.

"Jax?" Raven's voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I realise I just got caught spying. "You okay? Do you need something?"

I shake my head no, because I don't need anything. I just wanted to see Phoenix. I wondered if, just by seeing her, I'd instinctively feel something...if I'd automatically know if she's mine or not.

"I felt something," I say without thinking, then promptly want to smack myself in the face. "But I'm confused."

"I understand," she says in a low voice that's free of judgement. "Whatever the outcome, we'll always be here. There's time to build any kind of relationship with Phoenix - and me - that you'd like."

Her kind words, when I've behaved so appallingly, hit me hard. She's a good person. She's not malicious or cruel. She never set out to intentionally hurt us.

"You really care about us all, don't you?" I realise.

"Always," she smiles sadly. "Can't turn it off."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything," she says earnestly. "I'm done with secrets."

“Why did you flee the house the other night? Ace called after he spoke to you, we all came over and searched this place high and low, but we couldn’t find any signs of an intruder or anything.”

“I...I...don’t know. I heard something and I just freaked out. I tried to stay calm, be logical, check the security cameras - thank you by the way - but it didn’t work. I had a full blown panic attack and just had to get out of there.”

“Princess,” I say softly, tugging her gently into my arms and folding her into my embrace, holding her close for a moment. “Did you come back too soon?”

To my surprise, she allows me to hug her and stills at my chest. Tucked up under my chin I can clearly smell her shampoo and the faint remnants of her perfume. She must still use the same products because memories flood me when I close my eyes and inhale her scent.

“What choice did I have?” she says.

“Do you want to be somewhere else?” I feel her hesitate, and I add quickly, “If money wasn’t an issue, would you move?”

“I don’t know,” she confesses. “My gut says yes, but my heart says this is Phoenix’s home. My head says, leaving would be letting him win.”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s not winning if you force yourself to stay somewhere where you’re miserable.”

“I’m okay when I’m not alone,” she murmurs.

“I’ll stay with you then. Or one of us will,” I offer. I’m deadly serious. I’m not leaving her alone here if she’s having panic attacks or triggers back to her attack.

“I’ll be fine,” she protests, but I’m adamant.

“I don’t care. Fine isn’t good enough. I need you to be safe and happy.” With me, I silently add.

It feels so good to hold her again. Calm. Peaceful. Right. I don’t want to let go.

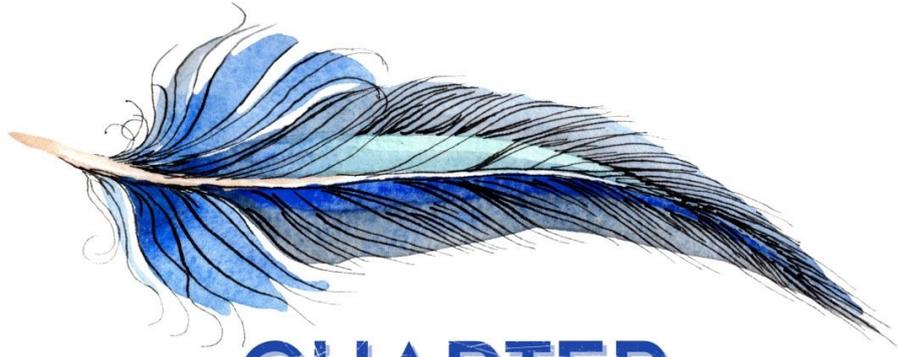
Eventually I do though, and she seems as reluctant to step away as I am to release her. We walk back along the hallway in a companionable silence, together, but not touching.

I'm not going to say that one small hug suddenly makes everything okay, but it does give me hope that we can salvage something between us.

Raven's Diary

Present Day

Jax's confession has shattered my world and my heart. How can he claim to love me after what he did? Was I supposed to be grateful that he went after Tilly for the Michael thing? Or impressed because he said he was doing it for Lizzie too? How can he expect me to ever be able to look him in the face again. I see Lizzie, devastated and crying in the rain at the winter concert every time I close my eyes. Every time I look at him. And the worst thing of all? It hurts so much more because I still love him.



CHAPTER FORTY - SEVEN

Baxter

“Is Phoenix okay?” I ask as soon as Raven and Jax re-enter the room.

“She’s fine,” Raven responds as she passes me Phoenix’s sample to bag up and label.

“We’re all done.” I indicate the samples laid out on the table. “Just you now Jax,” I tell him.

Wordlessly he takes the swab, swipes the inside of his cheek, and deposits it into the clear plastic sample bag. He seals it, reaches for a pen, scrawls his details, and then passes the final test piece to me.

I bag them, seal the envelope and stick the postage label on the front.

“Let’s get this to the post office,” I declare. “I’ll be right back.”

“Actually, Bax, do you mind if I take it?” Raven offers.

“Sure. Need company?”

“No. Just fresh air. Clear my head a little.”

I nod. Hand over the parcel and watch her leave. We wait in silence for a moment until the front door clicks and then, dropping all pretense, Jax asks: “How fucked is she with this Cordelia shit?”

“Honestly? It’s really fucking bad.” I confess. “I don’t want to be a harbinger of doom, but I can’t see a way out of this one.”

“Let’s go over things again. What are her reasons?” Jax asks, in a matter of fact way. He wants this sorted as much as me. We’re both organisers, doers, fixers.

“She states that Raven is incompetent to look after Phoenix, she says the poverty is the main factor, but that Raven’s ‘immoral lifestyle choices’ also have a bearing.”

“What the fuck?!” He growls, sounding a lot like Rebel.

“Yeah, she means you guys. But I also get blamed. Apparently she’s putting Phoenix’s safety in jeopardy by associating with a known criminal.” I tell them.

“How does she know about that? I thought everything was kept off record where possible, or sealed?” Rebel chimes in.

“Grandfather is well and truly blinded by her. It’s safe to assume that she knows everything about me and my past.” My stomach churns uncomfortably at that, but now isn’t the time for me to be worrying about myself and what that bitch knows about me. My only concern is how she can warp the truth to suit her own means.

“Then she should know what an amazing protector you are!”

“Ah but the role of a knight doesn’t fit in with her plans to make me the villain of the story.” I smile ruefully.

“Ok, what else?” Jax prompts.

“Cordelia has told the courts that Raven had a mental breakdown and attempted to take her own life.”

“WHAT?” Rebel explodes. “That’s bullshit, man!”

“Fuck!” Ace’s eyes go wide. “Bitch.”

“Cunt,” Thorn corrects. “She’s an absolute cunt. Cuntdelia is henceforth her new name.”

“I know,” I try to placate them, holding my hands up in peace. I chuckle at the moniker for the vile witch, despite the seriousness of the situation.

“Surely Charlie could set them straight on that?” Jax asks thoughtfully.

“He’s not in a position to answer any questions at the moment. It would seem his injuries were more severe than initially thought. He’s in a medically induced coma.”

“Your doing?” Jax raises an eyebrow at me and I shake my head. “I visited him and definitely assessed his injuries. May

have added one or two of my own as a calling card of what's to come, but no. I didn't do anything that bad, yet." I reveal.

"Then who?"

"I'm going out on a limb here and suggesting that Cordelia paid the doctors to put him in the coma so that he couldn't talk."

"Fuck..." Jax hisses. "That sounds like something she would do."

"Tell me about it," I agree.

"Okay, so we're going to have to prove to the courts that Raven is stable, a great mum, in a healthy relationship - possibly with Phoenix's father - and that she's not suicidal and never has been." Thorn joins in to sum up the extent of our problems like a simple fucking shopping list.

"Not that simple," I correct. "Normally if allegations this serious were made, social services would be sent out to check up on the child, do a home visit, interviews and so on...but that hasn't happened here. Cordelia has enough power and money to bypass the system, which means it isn't going to be a fair fight."

"So you're saying that normally we could just prove that it's all lies?" Rebel asks.

"Normally, yes. But we're up against Cordelia fucking Deighton. It's not that simple." I take a deep breath.

"Let's not forget, this woman disowned her own daughter, played her granddaughters off against their own parents, pressurised one granddaughter into going away to boarding school, then the other into committing arson and murder," Jax reminds us.

"Then," I continue, "she became increasingly controlling throughout Raven's pregnancy, taking away her freedom and trying to hold her hostage in the house. When Raven fled, she threatened to bring her down and go to the authorities about Raven's past until Raven had no choice but to fold and give Cordelia access to Phoenix. She's played nice for nearly four years, but now she's enrolled Phoenix at West Prep, and

because Raven has refused to send her daughter there, she's started a lawsuit against her."

"It sounds like it's been in the pipe work for a long time," Jax points out and I nod, relieved that someone is on the same page as me.

"Exactly. This isn't a knee-jerk reaction to not getting her own way. This case is water-tight. She's been planning this for years."

"Fuck," comes the low hiss from everyone in the room.

"What do we do?" Thorn asks.

"We lawyer up." I say. "Separately. Cordelia can afford the best lawyers in the country but she had the court papers drawn up by a freelance company, they're not on retainer that I can gather from my research. I suspect she's planning on using my Grandfather's company once the trial gets underway. I'm going to prevent that by hiring them. I want you guys to all do the same with the four top companies in the country. I'll pay for the sixth on behalf of Raven. I may even get Phoenix representation, but I'll need to look into how I can make that happen."

"You want to narrow down Cordelia's options."

"Absolutely. Six teams of the UK's best lawyers should send a strong message not to fuck with us. But I doubt she'll back down." I say. I pour a glass of water and down half of it before continuing. "Next, we'll need to get a name on the birth certificate, but that's going to be taken care of quickly. Once we have the results, I have someone who works at the Deed Poll Office who can help us rush the changes through."

"Sounds good."

"But that's where I get stuck. I'm a fighter, sure, but I don't usually fight in courts and with words. I need your help, guys."

"We need to go after Cordelia," Thorn declares, and I pull a face.

“We do. But not in the way you’re thinking, Bax,” Rebel tells me.

“Evidence,” Ace says.

“Yeah, we need evidence that we can use against her that Cordelia was responsible for all the things she’s done.” Rebel clarifies. “She’s too smart to leave a paper trail or anything obvious, but I think if we hire someone.”

“Jax, you still have your team of people?” Thorn asks him. “Yeah, but fat lot of good they were, they didn’t find Raven.”

“Well, they were up against the best,” I smirk. “I paid a lot of people a lot of money to keep her hidden.”

“You did well,” Jax admits - a compliment for sure from him.

“We should combine teams.”

“Consider it done,” I say. “Anything else?”

“I’m sure we’ll think of more as things arise, but for now we’ll get straight on with hiring the lawyers first thing tomorrow,” Rebel states with confidence.

“Tilly. And Charlie,” Ace reminds me.

“Well, we’re going to go after them both still, but obviously we will have to change our methods and be a lot more careful. We need to be squeaky clean. Not even a hint of a shadow can come back on us if we’re going to protect Raven and win this case.”

“Okay, if that’s it...” Thorn begins to get up.

“Wait! I have one more thing. Well, two things actually,” Jax suddenly declares. “I was speaking to Raven and she admitted she had a panic attack the other night, when she was in the house on her own. She says she’s fine when Phoenix is here, but I think she has some sort of PTSD or something, so I don’t want her here alone. Ever, not just at night.”

“Okay, we can do that,” Thorn agrees.

“I’ll get us all added to the biometric door locking system, easily,” Jax states. “But I’ll need you to come down to the

security firm's lab to get scanned.”

“Scanned?” I raise an eyebrow.

“The burglar alarm uses a retinal scanner to disarm.”

“Jesus.” I whistle, impressed.

“I’ll also have the cameras and mics added to all of our phones. And anything else I later think of...I just need to get Phoenix and Raven to somehow agree to wear the tracking jewellery I got for them.”

“Isn’t that a bit overkill, mate?” I ask but he just shoots me a withering look.

“While we’re all around and fighting Cordelia, I think we should all agree to focus on rebuilding the trust and friendship between us all,” Jax continues as if I never even spoke. Knobhead.

“Agreed,” we all reply.

“That means no romance. At all.” He fixes Thorn with an especially hard stare.

“Agreed,” we all add, a lot less enthusiastically this time.

Though to be fair, romance of any kind is probably going to be the furthest thing from Raven’s mind at the moment, and I think we’re all going to be too busy for anything anyway.

“What are you all agreeing on?” comes Raven’s amused voice from the open doorway.

“That we want Thai for dinner, of course!” I immediately quip, making her snort.

“Does that mean you’re staying a while longer?” Her whole face lights up.

“Actually, if it’s okay with you, can we stay the night? You have enough bedrooms, right?” Jax asks.

“Yes,” she laughs. “God knows why Rebel thought we needed a house with 10 bedrooms!”

“Nine. You have a library now,” he points out.

“And I love it!” She beams. “But it’s still more rooms than I need.”

“We stay. Family. Friends. Whatever.” Ace shrugs.

We all file out and wander off to various parts of the house, some going to check out the spare rooms, others going to play with Phoenix.

I hang back and clear up the dining table, smiling to myself; Raven is totally oblivious to the truth. Rebel’s cousin is safely tucked up in Halls of residence this year, but ready to move into the house that he bought her on the other side of Edinburgh next September. No, he bought this house especially for Raven, Phoenix and the guys to build a family in. And I’m glad he’s shit at counting, because it looks like there might just be enough room for me too.

Raven's Diary

Present day

Holy shit. I feel so sick. I can't believe that everything just came out in a horrific mess like that. It's too much to even begin digesting right now. I don't even know where to begin. I shouldn't have thrown everyone out. I regret that now. Since they left, I've reached for my phone more times than I can count, but I haven't been able to bring myself to send a message. Just when things were starting to look up, everything had to fall apart. I'm just not sure if we can put this mess back together again.



CHAPTER FORTY - EIGHT

Rebel

We spend the rest of the day settling into the house. One at a time we return to the hotel to pick up some stuff, but in all honesty I'd rather just move everything out at once, drop the pretenses and move into the big house that I got for us all to share.

That might freak Raven - and Phoenix - out too much though, so it's probably best to wait. Besides, if Cordelia found out about Raven shaking up with five guys with Phoenix under the roof, she'd have a field day with that one! Or a fit. Whichever, it wouldn't help our chances in court.

So that means it's baby steps for now, and separate beds for a while at least. Boo.

I don't agree with Jax's no romance idea, at all. I'm not great at following instructions, and I'm even worse with direct orders. If I damn well want to kiss Raven, I will. And I want to. So if the opportunity arises, I'm jumping on it.

I walk through to the sitting room and see Phoenix curled up on the sofa with Ace watching a film. I smile and ask if I can join them.

"Yeah!" Phoenix grins.

I take a seat beside them on the sofa and Phoenix snuggles into me, making me warm all over. It feels really nice. I glance over her head at Ace and he's grinning like a loon at me.

"Good, yeah?" he asks me, and I know he's not on about the film.

"Surprisingly, yes."

"Get used to?"

"Yeah I could get used to this pretty quickly," I agree. The house is comfortable, big enough to hold everyone without us going crazy or trying to kill one another, and it feels like home. Though that's probably more to do with the people in it, than the bricks and mortar.

We watch the film in silence, with the odd giggle from Phoenix. It's some sort of animated movie - not my usual choice at all, but I do find myself getting sucked into the storyline. It's pretty funny, full of these weird little yellow characters that look like fat giant Tic Tacs, that don't really speak any English. Phoenix thinks it's great, but from the way she keeps muttering the next lines under the breath, it makes me think this isn't the first time she's seen it.

After a while though I notice that Nix has been quiet for a while and has gone really heavy on me.

"Ace?" I call softly.

"Yeah?"

"Is Nix asleep?"

"Yeah." He chuckles softly. We must have worn her out this afternoon and evening with all the games we played.

My favourite was the mammoth game of hide and seek that we all played. Thorn and Phoenix together were a sneaky double act that proved almost impossible to find. It was only the cookie crumbs that gave them away and we found them both, nearly an hour later, hiding in one of the spare wardrobes stuffing their faces. They thought it was hilarious. We're going to have to keep an eye on that pair; they're far too mischievous when they get together.

Although, playing Twister with Raven was a lot of fun too. Too many male body parts up in my face for it to really be arousing, but I did appreciate it when she got up close against me. I may have thrown the match on purpose as an excuse to 'fall' down on top of her.

"I'll take her up to bed...wanna track down Raven to come and tuck her in?" I ask Ace. He agrees to help and disappears off to find her. Carefully, so as not to wake her, I get to my feet and cradle Phoenix in my arms against my chest. She stirs, snuggles into my chest, then settles.

Thankfully, Phoenix's room, alongside Raven's and the library, are on the first floor. I'm relieved I don't have to carry

the cute little rugrat up to the top floor. How is something so small, so heavy?

I manage to get her into bed without incident, drawing the curtains and tucking her in. I switch on the nightlight on her bedside table, just in case she wakes in the night, and then I just pause and watch her for a moment. She looks so peaceful in her sleep. So much like Lizzie, though she definitely has Raven's full pouty lips. That pout is going to be Nix's ultimate weapon; one tremble of that bottom lip and I'll be a goner, ready to give in to any of her demands in order to keep her smiling.

"Hey," Raven calls softly from the doorway, making me jump.

"Hey," I whisper back. I move out to the hallway to meet her. "Is this okay? She fell asleep on my lap when we were watching a film. I figured I'd bring her up."

"It's fine," she says. She reaches out and lightly places a hand on my forearm. Electricity zings up my arm and the hairs stand on end. I stare down at her hand on my bare skin. Raven gives a soft chuckle.

"What?"

"I didn't think I'd ever miss anything about that awful flat, but not having to carry Nix up a flight of stairs at bedtime was certainly a bonus!"

"Tell me about it," I pretend to grumble with a twinkle. "I'm just glad you don't have your rooms on the fourth floor!"

"Oh, I never go up there."

"I know."

"How?" She frowns, not believing me.

"Well, earlier when we were playing hide and seek I noticed two things: There was dust on the doorknob, and the room was locked."

"It's more space than I need. But maybe I should check it out. Seems stupid to live in a house and to have rooms I've never even set foot in."

“Don’t,” I tell her.

“Why not?” she asks and I lean in close. I don’t need to, we’re already close enough to hear each other despite our whispering, but I’m going to exploit any excuse to get closer to her.

“You’re not ready for that room yet,” I whisper-growl in my lowest voice. I intend to be seductive to hint at what might lie behind the locked door, but Raven just laughs in my face.

“Okay Bluebeard,” she smirks. Hmm, maybe I sounded more psycho than sexy stud?

“Besides,” I wink at her, “I have the only key.”

“That’s really creepy you know,” she points out.

“If you’re good, I’ll show it to you. Nothing creepy in that room - just everything you’ve ever wanted,” I tease.

“You got me a bigger library?” She grins batting her eyelashes at me.

“Better.”

“There’s nothing better than a library,” she retorts.

“It must have been too long, if you’ve already forgotten all the things that I can offer you that are way better than a library,” my tone is heavy with innuendo, because let’s face it, I’m flirting hard. But she’s definitely returning my vibes.

“Maybe we should go into the library and see which is better,” she suggests in a low tone that instantly makes my dick hard.

“Lead the way, little bird,” I growl.

Raven's Diary

I can't believe Cordelia is doing this. It's like the worst case of deja vu from my nightmares. She's done this before - brought a case against me with the courts, or at least threatened to - but once I granted her access to Phoenix she dropped it. This time, when she handed me those papers, I couldn't help but wonder what she wanted. It stood to reason if she wanted something last time, she might be after something this time. But I don't know what. Since I got those papers, I've been wracking my brains to try and figure it out - Baxter has too - and we're coming up blank. Which means that the grim alternative is that she means it this time; she truly intends to take Phoenix away from me. Why? If I force myself to believe that she's acting with Phoenix's best interests at heart, why would she do this? I've assessed myself with brutal honesty and I just can't see that I'm that much of a bad mother - bad enough to warrant having my daughter taken away? So that means there has to be an ulterior motive. And even worse than losing my own daughter, is the thought of losing her to someone who may not have her best interests at heart.



CHAPTER FORTY - NINE

Ace

I wake early and decide to make breakfast for everyone. I enjoy the peace and solitude while I work, whipping up a pancake batter and letting it stand for a while. I prepare everything ready to cook fresh at the last moment and when I check the time and see that it's still way too early to start cooking, I decide to do some baking to pass the time too. There's a new cookie recipe I've been toying with the idea of, so I figure I'll give it a go. If it's a disaster, I can bin the evidence before anyone wakes, and no one will need to know I failed.

While I work, humming lightly, I allow myself to get lost in my thoughts. We've all spent three nights in this house together now, and I've been observing everyone closely.

Everyone seemed to be on their best behaviour on Friday when we moved in, although I did spy from the shadows of the top step on my way to shower, Raven and Rebel practically tripping over one another in a rush to go into the library.

I don't think they were checking out the books.

I left them to it and didn't bother to time how long they were gone, but both seemed happy when they resurfaced later, claiming to have been reading Phoenix a bedtime story.

The weekend was when it really got interesting.

To start off, there was a lot of flirting over breakfast on Saturday morning. The guys tried to play it off as being nice and rebuilding friendships, but I don't know any friends that are that touchy-feely with one another. Plus they seemed to be trying to out-do each other to try and make Raven and Phoenix laugh, so there was a lot of silly behaviour and good-natured teasing going on. It made for a really nice atmosphere.

After breakfast, Thorn and Rebel offered to take Phoenix to the park, while I took Raven down to the gym to practise some sparring. She was complaining that it had been ages since she had done any sort of training, and I knew that she

was still thinking about failing to fight Charlie off, so I offered to train with her, like the good old days.

Big mistake.

She turned up in tight black yoga pants and a tiny sports bra, hair plaited back off her face, eyes bright with excitement. She looked beautiful and sexy. Grappling around on the floor with her did nothing to help my “let’s just be friends” mantra that I constantly had to repeat to myself.

I was so distracted by trying to control my awakening erection, that she floored me...twice. The second time, I swept her legs out from under her and she landed on top of me, hard. Her body still moulded to mine perfectly, like she was made for it, for me.

Time stood still as she pressed her lips to mine.

I kept thinking ‘fuck, fuck, Jax said we shouldn’t be doing this’ but my body was saying finally, and before I knew it, I was kissing her back with passion. I wrapped her long braid around my fist and gently tugged her head to the side a bit so that I could deepen the kiss. When we broke for air it was like a dam had broken; I couldn’t keep my lips off her, and while she panted hard trying to get her breath back, I tugged her hair once again to expose her long neck to me and kissed my way along that too.

Her groans of pleasure led us to have a pretty hot and heavy make out session, but we didn’t go any further than kissing...and a little grinding. Maybe a little over the clothes petting too. It was insanely hot; maybe because it was forbidden? I don’t know, but it left me aching and wanting so much more.

On Sunday morning I walked in on Baxter and Raven in the kitchen. They jumped apart when they heard me enter, so I’m pretty sure they were doing more than just talking about what roast to have for dinner.

Then, last night, Thorn basically kicked the lot of us out of the lounge to have a date night with Raven!

He didn't call it a date of course, but he claimed there was some new chick flick out on Netflix that he wanted to watch and that the rest of us would hate, so I can pretty much guarantee that he would have been putting the moves on Raven; cuddled up together on the sofa, in a dark room, watching a couple of screen fall in love...how could he resist? I couldn't have, if I was in his position, and I know that Thorn is even more of a hopeless romantic than me. Raven wouldn't have stood a chance.

The rest of us all split and did our own thing. I sparred with Rebel in the gym and Jax went for a run outside. I've no idea where Baxter disappeared off upstairs to, but he's been interesting to watch these last few days too.

Whatever Raven's claiming and no matter what he says, it's clear to me that Baxter is a father to Phoenix. She might not biologically be his - and I'm pretty certain she isn't, because I believe that they haven't slept together before - but that guy was born to be a father through and through.

If Phoenix is around, he can't take his eyes off her. If she's off playing somewhere, he's constantly going to check on her. He tucks her in every night, and if he's not the one to put her to bed with a story, he's there first thing in the morning when she wakes. Raven hasn't batted an eye though, so it makes me think that this is just his natural way with Phoenix. She clearly adores him, lighting up for him in a way that she doesn't for anyone else, even though she seems to love having all of us around.

I think, if we stick around - and God I hope we do - that Phoenix will come to love all of us, the way she clearly loves Baxter already. I can't help but wonder what the test results will show. They should be with us later today, and I can't help but feel concerned that we're making a mistake in finding out. The result is going to change everything. I worry that Baxter isn't going to like taking a back seat with Phoenix's care; but of course, things will change, because bedtime stories and piggyback rides and scaring away the monsters in the night are the roles that her real father is going to want to take on.

And that's going to confuse Phoenix, for sure. Is she going to be able to cope and adapt with a new daddy in her life? Will we? Will she understand what's going on? Will I be able to cope, seeing the bond between Raven and the father strengthen and develop into something the rest of us will never have with her?

I'm not sure I'm ready. I'm not sure I'll ever be.

A gentle timer draws me back into the kitchen and away from my spiralling thoughts. An hour has passed, the cookies I made on auto-pilot are ready, and it's time to start cooking breakfast for everyone.

As I get stuck in, I can't help but really worry that we're making a huge mistake.

Raven's Diary

Present day

I can barely dare to hope that everything might just be okay. To begin with I was against the guys knowing about Phoenix, but the more I see them all interact with her, the more at peace I am with it. It's been perfect having them all here in the house. I really wish it wasn't a temporary measure, but it feels too soon to ask them to stay indefinitely, even though that's what I'd really like. Phoenix is going to be gutted when they go. Especially Baxter. She's not had him around for such a long stretch of time since she was a tiny baby, but of course, she wouldn't remember that. And then there's the other, more selfish reason why I'd like them to stay. For me. My heart is so twisted up right now. Logically, I know that things aren't okay between all of us yet, and there's still a long way to go, but my heart is saying I love these men and I want to be with them. Which is another problem. Despite them claiming they'd be happy to share, this isn't high school or some warped fairytale. I can't see how it could work. What, we'd all just stay here in this big house and shun the rest of the world? Phoenix goes to school in September and I don't want her picked on because of my 'immoral lifestyle choices' as Cordelia puts it. If I'm honest, Ace, Bax and Rebel have the strongest hold on my heart, but I still couldn't bear to be without Thorn...even Jax. I love them all. So how do I choose? Baxter would be the logical choice; choosing him wouldn't tear apart four lifelong friendships. But...I don't want to let the others go either. I know, I'm selfish. I should let four, or even all, of them go...but when I think of them getting with someone else, jealousy bubbles like acid in my stomach. Just imagining it crushes me. I've never been overly religious, but right now I would pray to anyone listening to help us find a way to make it work, together.



CHAPTER FIFTY

Raven

I stretch out in bed and yawn, the smell of bacon frying making my mouth water and my stomach grumble.

I can't believe today's the day I will finally find out who Raven's father is. After years of wondering, guessing, hoping...even dreading, it seems surreal that I'll soon know. It's even weirder to know that all four potential fathers and Baxter will be there when we find out together.

I'm still reeling from the fact that Jax insisted Baxter get tested too. It was easier to give in and humour him, than to fight anymore. I guess it just means that he still doesn't trust me. I can't blame him, but I thought he would have been able to take Baxter's word at least. He surely has nothing to gain by lying.

In some ways, it's been the longest three days of my life, waiting for the results, but in other ways, it's gone by so quickly. I had a really lovely weekend with all of the guys in the house, and Phoenix seemed to really come alive with the extra company. The guys were all so keen to bond with her that I often found myself with 'free' time on my hands - a novelty for sure! I was able to get back in the gym, have a sparring session with Ace, bake (though I'm nowhere near as good as Aljaž!) and even have a soak in the hot tub - which was divine. The best thing of all though, was being able to go into the library and relax with a good book.

Rebel helped me replace bad memories with good on Friday night, and his kisses certainly proved that there are some things out there that are better than a library. Not that I'd ever admit that to him.

In fact, over the weekend I was lucky enough to share kisses with Rebel and Ace. There was a moment with Baxter which could have led to something more, but we were interrupted, and Thorn and I got pretty cosy on the sofa. The only one who hasn't really come anywhere near me is Jax.

I'm disappointed, but I understand. He has at least been nice, and he's made a real effort to play with Phoenix, so I can't complain.

Besides, with everything going on at the minute, I probably shouldn't be worrying about which guys are into me. When I think about their kisses - hell, even just their attention - I feel guilty. I shouldn't be having fun and enjoying myself with the threat of Cordelia looming over us, but I think their touches just about kept me sane this weekend.

I sigh, fling back the covers, and shuffle into the bathroom to get ready for the day. I peep into Phoenix's room on my way past and spy that she's gone. I'm not worried, there's clearly people up and cooking, so I know she'll be taken care of. I have time for a lightning quick shower.

Done, I dry off quickly, wrap up my hair, pull on my robe and head down to the kitchen. I can finish getting ready later; I don't want to miss the food.

When I walk into the kitchen everyone is there, but Ace hasn't started serving yet. Phew! I don't have to go hungry. Phoenix waves at me from the island, perched on a stool and squeezing oranges to make fresh juice.

"Look mummy! I'm making juice for you!" she cries with glee. I can see the pride etched on her face, hear it in her excited tone.

I squint at the glass but I can only see what looks like a few millilitres in the bottom.

"Wow, that looks lovely, baby!" I tell her. "I can't wait to drink it." I might die of dehydration before she gets a glass to me, but I'm sure it'll be worth it.

Thorn laughs and slides me a full glass of juice that's clearly come from the carton in my fridge; the condensation on the glass is a dead giveaway.

"While you wait for the good stuff to come." He winks at me and I take it gratefully. I love ice cold juice, but it has to be smooth. I can't abide any bits. I eye Phoenix's glass

suspiciously and sure enough there's pulp swimming in there. I shudder and wonder how I can get out of having to drink it.

"Breakfast served," Ace announces, passing around plates of bacon, eggs and pancakes. It smells divine and it tastes even better.

"My God, this is good," I moan with a mouthful. I quickly chew, then swallow, so that I can speak a little more elegantly. "Phoenix, baby, eat your breakfast before it goes cold. Your orange will still be there for squeezing afterwards."

She gives me a stubborn little frown, but does as I suggested, reluctantly putting the orange to one side. She brightens when she sees that Thorn has drizzled syrup all over her pancakes, swiping her finger through the sticky mess before popping it into her mouth.

"Syrup, Mummy! For breakfast!" She laughs.

"It's a treat," I warn. "Don't get used to it."

"Shh, don't tell your mum, but I'll put syrup on your pancakes every single time we have them, okay, Nix?" Thorn whispers conspiratorially to her with a wink. She squeals with delight then fake coughs to hide it. Subtle.

I smirk; those two are trouble together alright.

We eat, the guys clear up, and I'm left to help Phoenix with her orange squeezing.

"Why is she doing this anyway?" I ask the room in general.

Thorn laughs so hard that it's Rebel who has to answer me. "Phoenix came into the kitchen and saw the juice. Thorn told her that Ace had been up since dawn squeezing enough oranges to make juice for everyone, and she wanted to help."

"Don't lie to my kid." I smirk at him to show I get that it was a joke, but I don't want Nix being the butt of his jokes and pranks. She's too young to understand. "Phoenix, baby, Thorn was teasing. Ace got all our juice from the carton. You can stop."

“No, Mummy,” she stubbornly insists. “It tastes better like this.”

“Oh wow, she’s a juice snob, just like Jax!” Thorn howls.

“Shut up! I’m not a snob, I just happen to prefer the good stuff. It’s called having tastebuds, which you’d know about if you didn’t burn them all off with hard liquor.” Jax bites back with a smile.

Just then, I’m distracted by the pendant around Phoenix’s neck. I reach out to gently touch the delicate golden heart with a feather engraved on it, surprised by the weight of it.

“Nix, this is a very pretty necklace,” I say cautiously. “But where did it come from?”

“I gave it to her,” a voice says quietly at the exact same moment Phoenix beams “Jax” at me.

“He’s got one for you too Mummy,” she continues. “So we can match, and always wear them together.”

She’s so excited, bless her, that I don’t have the heart to say no. I do however throw Jax a questioning look. He comes over to me, dips his hand into the back pocket of his jeans and pulls out a slightly larger version of Nix’s necklace.

“May I?” he asks, dipping his head once towards my neck. I nod and spin around to allow him to put it on, which he easily does with my wet hair up out of the way in my towel.

The heavy pendant falls just to the top of my breasts, the weight of it allowing it to nestle comfortably against my skin, dead centre.

“It’s beautiful, thank you. But why?” I ask, confused.

“Just saw them and thought of the two of you. I figured you probably didn’t have too much jewellery...” his eyes flit to the ring they gave me which I still wear, “and I thought it would be nice if you had matching pieces.”

“Well thank you, it really is beautiful and I love it,” I tell him earnestly. “Phoenix, did you say thank you?”

“She did. She has impeccable manners,” Jax informs me, making me flush with pride.

“Ok. Well, if you guys are happy to watch Phoenix play for a bit, I’ll go upstairs and get ready.”

“No problem, there’s no rush,” Rebel replies. “Nix and I are going to gather supplies to make a fairy garden.”

I raise an eyebrow but say nothing, instead opting to go get dressed, leaving my beautiful stubborn daughter still trying to squeeze every last drop of life out of an orange.

Done, I’m just coming back down the stairs when the doorbell rings. I open the door and sign for the special delivery envelope. The results are here.

Closing the door, I turn to find all five guys have popped their heads out of the various rooms they were occupying, and are now staring intently at me.

“It’s here,” I whisper, nervous and sick and shaking all at once.

“It’s fine, babe,” Baxter reassures me. “Nothing changes remember?”

I nod uncertainly, because I’m not sure I believe that.

Everything is about to change.

“You guys go into the lounge, I’ll set Phoenix up with a game and then join you,” I say. At the last second I fling the envelope at Baxter, trusting him above all others to wait for me. “Here, you take this.”

I race down the hallway to the conservatory and tell Phoenix that I need to have a quick chat with the guys. I set up some colouring things for her and tell her that Rebel will help her look for items for the fairy garden after we’re done. She doesn’t seem to mind, so I give her a quick kiss and a squeeze, then race back to the lounge.

No one is seated, everyone looks tense. My stomach is in knots and my hands tremble as I take the envelope from Baxter.

Can I do this?

I bite my lip and slide a finger under the sealed flap. Gently, I start to tear the join, opening up the envelope an inch at a time.

I'm about halfway through when the doorbell goes once more.

The room freezes and we all stare at one another. I have no idea who that might be.

“Want me to get it?” Thorn offers and I nod gratefully. He disappears. My legs are jelly as I hold the trembling envelope in my hands. It'll have to wait. After four years, another minute won't kill me.

“JAX!” Thorn roars at the top of his lungs, and the frozen room shatters and springs into action. Jax, Baxter and Rebel are gone from the room in the blink of an eye, responding instinctively to the wild panic we all heard in Thorn's voice.

I start to move but Ace lightly tugs me back.

“Wait. Not safe,” he says. I don't care. If it's not safe I need to get to Phoenix. I tell Ace this but he won't let me go.

“Rebel has her.”

A moment later we hear raised voices out in the hallway and I have to go and investigate.

At the front door are two people dressed in sharp black suits; a man and a woman.

“Charlotte McLintock?” they ask, and I cringe away from the name but acknowledge that that's me. “We're from social services.”

It's lucky Ace is holding me because I feel faint.

“We have a Court of Protection care order to take Phoenix into protective custody, with immediate effect.” The woman speaks, nodding to a stack of papers in Jax's hand. Thorn looks dumbstruck, like I feel, but Baxter and Jax look ready to kill.

“Wh...what's happening?”

“The care order has been issued because the court believes that within these walls a child is suffering or is at risk of suffering significant harm.”

I violently shake my head. No. This can't be happening.

“What does that mean?” I hear Rebel growl, in a real effort to keep his temper under wraps.

“It means, Sir. That we are here to remove the child, Phoenix Elizabeth McLintock, from the property with immediate effect.”

“No!” I cry.

“And where will you be taking her?” Rebel demands. “I'm not at liberty to say,” comes her snotty reply. “BULLSHIT!!!” Rebel roars.

“Come on Marge, give them a break,” the suited guy prompts. Marge doesn't even blink. He sighs. “We're taking her to her grandmother's house, okay?”

Fear like nothing I've ever known before in my life takes root. It wraps itself around every fibre of my being and threatens to choke the life out of me. I can't speak, can't move, can't think. I'm fucking uselessly standing there, gaping in disbelief like a fish, wondering how the hell this has happened.

“When?” Jax asks.

“With immediate effect.”

“Can someone go with her, in the car?”

“It's highly unusual, but I don't see why not, so long as it's not the mother.”

“I'll do it,” Baxter immediately says. “Are you Mr Branson?” The guy asks. “I am.”

“You are on Phoenix's approved list of visitors so it'll be fine for you to come with her.”

“I'll follow in the car behind,” Jax offers. “So that you have a lift back.”

The social services duo nod and the woman - Marge? - claps her hands together as if to say let's get this show on the road. I loathe her.

“Can we pack a bag of some of her things?”

“Quickly.” She tuts impatiently, checking her watch.

“What’s going on, Mommy?” Phoenix’s small voice calls from behind me. I turn around to see her standing beside Rebel, her tiny hand held tenderly in his ginormous paw.

I open my mouth to speak but no words come out. I’m mute. What can I say? How do you explain to a child that they’re being taken away from their mother, their home, their world?

“I’m so silly, Phoenix!” Baxter calls, coming down the hallway to crouch in front of her. “I totally forgot to tell your mum that your Grandmama is taking you on holiday this week!”

“Really?” Phoenix beams.

“Yep! I forgot all about it, and now these nice people are here to take you to her.”

“Is Mummy coming on the holiday too?”

“No, baby,” Baxter tells her softly. “But you always have such a great time with Cordelia, don’t you?”

“I guess.” She shrugs, suddenly less excited at the thought of going away again without me, so soon after the last visit. “Why isn’t Mummy or you taking me?” she asks.

“I’m going to come with you in the car, but first we need to go pack a bag real quick, okay?”

She nods shakily and Rebel passes her hand from his to Baxter’s and Baxter leads her away up the stairs.

I sob and fall; Ace catches me and cradles me to his chest. He rocks me, hushes me, pats my back, but I’m inconsolable, hyperventilating.

Eventually Jax comes over and catches my attention enough for me to take a deep breath.

“Listen,” he urges. “They’ll be down any minute. Do not let Phoenix think anything is wrong. She already knows that something isn’t right and is probably a bit nervous and scared. If she sees you right now she will freak out.”

I know what he’s saying makes sense but I can’t stop.

“Raven, look at me...we cannot stop or fight this right now, not without making this a million times worse. I promise you, we will get her back. But you can’t let this be the last memory Phoenix has of you as she leaves.”

I jerk my head in agreement and furiously dash the tears away. I take several deep, shaky breaths, and when I’m convinced that I can stand without falling or vomiting, I tell Ace to put me down.

I’m just back on my feet when Baxter and Phoenix come back down the stairs.

“Got everything?” the man asks gently. Baxter nods. “Let’s go then.”

“Wait! Can’t they say goodbye first?” Jax whisper-hisses at the pair, not wanting to upset Phoenix.

“I’m afraid not,” he replies, pulling an apologetic face. The woman’s expression is like stone. She seems completely impervious to what is happening here. How can anyone be that cold? That callous?

They move to open the front door and step out. I panic. What are they doing? Where are they going? I haven’t said goodbye!

They can’t do this!

“Phoenix!” I yell.

“Mummy!” she screams, bursting into heart-wrenching tears. Her little sobs wrack her whole body and Baxter scoops her up into his arms. Jax hurries forward to whisper something to Phoenix and her tiny hands fly to her heart necklace, just as my hands mirror her and clasp mine.

“I love you, Mummy!” she calls through her sobs. “I love you too, baby!”

The door closes with a deathly soft click, louder than any bang or slam could make.

They didn't even let me say goodbye.

Without warning, my world crumbles and collapses around me, faster than my legs do.

Raven's Diary

Present Day

I just...I can't even...If someone fucks with the people I love... How is this happening? What does Cordelia want? I burn them all to the ground...How could she do this to me? Rebel's words keep swirling around and around my mind, in time to the churning of my stomach. How could she do this to Phoenix? Watch out Cordelia, I'm coming for you. I won't be coming alone, and we won't stop until we've burnt everything you care about to the ground.

Atonement
BONUS CONTENT



CHARACTER INTERVIEWS

***You asked me, I asked them, they [mostly] delivered!
We'll start with the group interview from the original
guys...***

[Jax, Rebel, Ace and Thorn are present]

**Welcome guys, thanks for agreeing to do this
interview. I know you've had a rough few weeks.**

Thorn: Why am I always listed last?

Ace: Youngest

Rebel: Least important? Most disliked? Take your pick

Thorn: Fuck you!

**Okay, let's get started...our readers don't know a lot
about your backstories, so how did you all become
friends?**

Rebel: Was it our mutual hatred of most people that bonded
us?

Thorn: Nah, it was Mr Shepherd. That guy was a cock.

Ace: Kreten¹!

Rebel: Oh! I'd forgotten all about him! I wonder if he's still
teaching?

Thorn: Christ, I hope not. That man clearly hated kids. Why would you do something you hate?

Rebel: Beats me.

Jax: Actually, we've all been friends for so long now, the details don't matter any more.

Ace: I join friendship later. Best decision.

And where did Michael fit into that friendship?

Jax: It's irrelevant.

Rebel: Yeah, he's dead to us.

Thorn: ...Dude!

Rebel: What?...Oh! Yeah. Umm, you know what I mean. He was dead to us long before he was actually...you know, *dead* dead.

Thorn: You've said the word dead so many times it sounds weird now. Like it's lost all meaning.

Rebel: Dead. Dead? De-ad...yeah, you're right!

All of you boys, if you could be any animal what would it be??

Rebel: [just laughs]

Thorn: I think I'd be a tiger

Rebel: Dream on, sloth-boy!

Ace: Burn.

Thorn: I like surfing too much to be a sloth.

Rebel: Housecat then. Lazy, likes to be the centre of attention, catty and short-tempered.

Thorn: Asshole. Cats hate water.

Rebel: True...

Thorn: Okay then, what would you both be?

Rebel: A bear, obviously.

Ace: Fits.

Thorn: More like a pufferfish! All huff and puff and show.
Ace?

Ace: Hmm...

Jax: I think you'd be a panda. Soft, but protective.

Ace: Yes! I like! Jax, you swan.

Jax: Swan?

Ace: Yes. Mute swan.

Rebel: I think he'd be a snake. He's sneaky enough.

Jax: Because *I'm* the one that's been sneaking around lately?!
Why a swan, Ace?

Ace: Protective. Strong. Ter... Terra... territorialni?

Jax: Territorial.

Thorn: Also swans are all calm on the surface and shit, but underneath they're bricking it as much as the next animal.

Jax: What are you implying?

Thorn: You figure it out, smart guy.

**We asked Raven the same question about you guys?
Want to hear her answers?**

All: Yes!

Okay.

[reading from sheet] *Rebel would obviously think that he's a bear, even though he's secretly a pussycat.*

Thorn: Ha!

Thorn's a dolphin because he's so playful and fun. He's also secretly really smart, even though he hides it.

Rebel: [fake coughing] Bullshit!

Jax is a moose; lovely from afar, deadly up close. Or maybe one of those birds that are so beautiful to look at but will tear you to shreds in an instant? Ace

is a lynx. He's majestic, strong and deadly. But cute too.

What do you guys think of that?

Rebel: [laughing] She knows us well.

Ace: Agree.

Thorn: I guess.

Jax: Hmmmm...

So our readers really want to know, did Raven NEVER seem familiar to you? Her and Lizzie were identical twins, right?

Rebel: No, never. I mean, Raven has black hair and Lizzie was blonde.

Thorn: Dude! Is that the only feature you noticed?

Rebel: Obviously not, dickwad, but I just don't see the similarities.

Jax: They were polar opposites when it came to personality.

Ace: Agreed. Didn't see. Not together.

But then, if they were so different, how did you all end up liking them both?

Jax: I can't speak for all of us, only myself. Lizzie was sweet. Pure. Unlike any of the girls we'd grown up around in West Prep. It was refreshing.

Thorn: Yeah, but Raven was...well, she was everything. I didn't even know I'd fallen so hard.

Rebel: It's like the difference between what you think you want, in your head, and your heart saying "nope, we want that!"

Ace: One day burger good, next day like chicken.

Thorn: Yeah, we're allowed to like more than one food, so why not more than one chick? They both liked all of us, so why can't that work both ways?

Rebel: And it's not like we liked them both at the same time. That would just be super weird.

So you never picked up on any resemblance?

Rebel: Not 'til I met Phoenix. She's like the bridge between the two, I guess.

Jax: Maybe if we ever got to see them side by side, the similarities would be more obvious.

Thorn: Yeah, but at this point, Lizzie's more of a distant memory...it's been years. I don't even have any pictures of her.

Ace: Kids then. We were...neumni idioti²

Okay guys, let's move on to something a little more challenging. Why did you fight at the New Year's Eve party?

Thorn: Can I plead the ninth on this one?

Rebel: It's plead the fifth, you dick.

Jax: Actually, we're in Britain, so it's neither.

Thorn: Whatever. I don't want to talk about it.

Jax: Tough. We fought because we agreed that we wouldn't sleep with Raven, but Thorn went ahead and did it anyway. At the party, in a broom cupboard.

Thorn: Fuck you! We did not agree! You *dictated*. Anyway, it was the cloakroom.

Jax: Semantics.

Thorn: It was fucking good.

Rebel: Besides, Ace slept with her first.

Ace: Guilty. Not sorry.

So, is Jax just pissed because he wasn't getting any at that point?

Ace: Yep

Thorn: [laughs]

Jax: [glowers] No. I was trying to prevent our friendship from being destroyed.

Was it the first time you ever fought?

Ace: No! Brothers fight.

Rebel: Yeah, it's no big deal.

Thorn: We always kiss and make up in the end.

Rebel: Fuck you, we don't kiss.

Thorn: But you want to!

Did you fight over Lizzie?

Jax: So much.

Have you fought since?

Rebel: Only every day.

What do you fight about?

Thorn: Mostly Rebel's obsession with being unable to let Raven go.

Rebel: Yeah but now I bet you're glad I didn't let it go!

Rebel, what were you thinking when you saw her this time?

Rebel: I couldn't believe my luck to be honest. I wasn't looking for her, and yet there she was, right under my nose. Just when I'd given up. I didn't think she was real to begin with and then when she was...well, it was a unicorn moment for sure.

And how did the rest of you feel when you got his message?

Ace: Excited.

Thorn: Really?

Ace: Yes.

Thorn: I didn't care either way.

Rebel: Bullshit!

Jax? You're awfully quiet on this...

Jax: No comment, next question.

What were you all thinking when you saw Phoenix?

Rebel: Well, it took me ages to figure out that Phoenix was Raven's daughter. Even Nix calling her 'Mom' didn't clue me in!

Thorn: You've always been slow, dipshit. I was gobsmacked. Shitting myself actually, until she told us how old Phoenix was and I thought I was in the clear...sort of. Until the truth came to light. But at that moment? Pure relief. I didn't want to be a dad, I was battling a serious drinking problem.

Jax: Oh, so you can finally admit you have a problem?

Thorn: I can *now*. No way would I continue that behaviour with Raven and Nix in my life.

So you don't want to be a father then? How about the rest of you?

Thorn: Not this young, and not with someone who doesn't want to be with me.

Rebel: I want kids with the right person.

Ace: Football team.

Thorn: Huh?

Ace: Kids. Lots. Football team. Minibus full.

Jax?

Jax: I was actually worried about when Raven was drugged and in hospital that time. I thought that maybe she *was* attacked and Phoenix...

Thorn: Dude, that's fucked up!

Jax: Tell me about it. I was relieved when the dates didn't work out.

Because you were glad Phoenix wasn't yours? Do you want kids?

Jax: No, because it meant that Raven wasn't raped.

Rebel: Fuuuuuck! Is it wrong that it never even crossed my mind? I mean, obviously at the time it did, but not when I saw Nix. I trusted Raven when she said she was okay and that nothing had happened.

Jax: But she's a liar.

Thorn: Yeah, but the doctors confirmed it, man.

Jax: I know, and at the time I believed them too. But when I saw the child I just wondered if maybe she had got them to lie to us too.

And the kid thing?

Jax: It's never been my plan. Ever.

Okay moving on...

Jax: But plans could change, in the right circumstances...and with the right person.

And is Raven that person, Jax?

Jax: You said we were moving on.

Interesting. So who do you think is the father?

Ace: Don't care.

Rebel: Me

Thorn: Me

Jax: Not me. She's pretty...white.

Thorn: Dude! You can't say that shit!

Jax: Why not? It's true enough.

Rebel: Yeah, but it's not like you're...*Black*, Black, if you know what I mean.

Jax: Whatever. I'm not sure *you're* allowed to say that.

Rebel: I think we've known each other long enough to be okay. You're practically my brother from another mother anyway.

Would any of you be happy having Raven all to yourself, even if it meant the other guys were hurt?

Thorn: Seriously? You're asking us that here, now? In front of the others? Surely it could have waited until the private interviews.

Rebel: I love my brothers, but I also love Raven. Do I want her all to myself? No. I don't. I loved the setup we used to have, it worked. Most of the time. But if...certain...members of our group were unable to forgive her and be with her, would I walk away from her? Absolutely not.

So you're saying, your brothers would be dead to you, in favour of being with Raven?

Thorn: Harsh.

Ace: Divjak³!

Rebel: If that's what it had to come to, then yes.

[the interviewer would like to add that there was a stunned silence at this point before the room erupted into chaos. After the fighting subsided and two members had walked out, Rebel informed the host that this part of the interview was now over]



Welcome, Raven. Our readers want to know why you chose to go by the name 'Raven'?

It's nothing exciting, it's simply my middle name. You'd have to ask my parents why they picked it. It's a far cry from the traditional 'Charlotte' of my first name. I suspect my mother just did it to piss my grandmother off.

Okay, so why did you keep the black hair?

I liked it. I didn't have to be reminded of Lizzie every time I looked in the mirror. I *mostly* liked the person I was when I was Raven with the dark hair. Besides, I think it suits me better.

Looks-wise?

Maybe. Maybe more like my personality?

We need to know: who's the father?

I don't know! We were so close to finding out and then...well, I just don't care now. I can't see how it matters. My priorities have shifted, and I guess there's no running and hiding anymore.

Are you in love with Baxter?

[She hesitates to answer] Possibly. I definitely have feelings for him and they're just as strong as for the other guys...just

different. After all he's done for me and Phoenix, how could I not love him? I literally owe him our lives.

If you had to pick one of the guys to be Phoenix's father, who would you want?

That's not fair. They're all amazing. How could I possibly choose? I guess not choosing was what got me into this situation in the first place.

But if you *had* to pick one of the guys to be with, who would you choose?

For Phoenix's sake? Baxter, because they have the closest relationship and it would crush her to lose him. Or whoever is her biological dad, I guess, because he deserves the chance to make up for lost time.

But for you?

I wouldn't want to pick. My feelings on that matter haven't changed. If anything, seeing them all again has just made me even surer that I don't want to give them up...gosh that sounds incredibly selfish and presumptuous...but you know what I mean.

Okay. So did you ever think about what would happen if people got hurt by locking doors?

In truth? Absolutely. But I had to steel myself against such thoughts. I felt like I had reached the point of no return. My grandmother was pretty insistent on our plan. Our whole year group was in that chapel, and they were *all* responsible for Lizzie's bullying in one way or another...or so Cordelia had led me to believe. They all deserved to be there. They knew what was going on, and they chose to participate or watch. There was no such thing as an innocent bystander in that situation.

Or so I told myself.

The plan was always to lock *all* the doors, but I had an attack of conscience at the last moment and made sure the back door was clear. I was incredibly emotional at the time, not to mention hormonal, young and stupid, and while it's not an excuse, with hindsight I can see now that I wasn't in a safe and

stable place mentally back then. I think my grandmother knew that, and exploited it for her own gain. She definitely manipulated me to do her bidding, I just wish I hadn't been so blinded by grief to realise it.

After it had happened I spent weeks, if not months, and later years, being eaten alive by guilt, waiting to hear word of the fire in the media. When none came, I didn't feel any less guilty, but I did breathe a little easier.

Phew! Tough question. What's next?

**How in the world are you going to redeem yourself?
Because you're in deep...shovels will be required.**

Fuck. That's a bit savage, isn't it. Are the others getting a grilling like this? You really don't like me, do you.

I don't know how to redeem myself. Do I regret the fire? Yes. I was young, stupid, full of anger, like I said. It was...wrong to expect or force everyone to take responsibility for what happened to Lizzie. The thought of hurting people that, I *now* realise, were innocent, kills me. The guys...I can't talk about that.

But what happened with Michael? On the cliff? Although guilt still eats me alive every night, I don't regret that. I don't regret choosing to fight, to live, over what he had planned for me. The thought that if things were different he could still be out there...I just know he'd be doing the same thing to countless others. A leopard that dark cannot change its spots. I did the world a favour by removing him from it, even though I have to pay the price for his death on my conscience.

I know that there's an impermeable stain on my soul, and that I can't hope for redemption fully, but I try to make up for it every day by being the best mum that I can to Phoenix.

Do I need to make amends with the guys? Absolutely. How? I have no idea yet. But once we have her back, the priority will be ensuring that she has time to build a relationship with her father...if he wants to.

I need to take a break. Can we? Can I have a minute?

[Raven has left the room]



Jax, care to spread some light on your past relations with the princesses?

No. This interview is over.

Come on now, don't be like that. Enquiring minds want to know...

Be more specific with your questions then.

Fine then...why did you fuck a princess when they're all bitches?

That's unnecessarily crass, but I'll tell you. Power. Keep your friends close...you know the saying. My relationship with Tilly allowed me to control her, and by default the rest of her group, and ultimately the whole school. Satisfied?

Not at all. If you had so much control, how did Tilly come to bully Lizzie so badly? Why didn't you stop her? And while we're at it, do you really expect anyone to buy that BS that you didn't know what she was doing?

I believe Tilly bullying Lizzie was down to my interest in Lizzie. Yes, initially I used Tilly to scare off Lizzie, but when I got to know her better, I tried to call it off.

I was aware of some...unpleasantness from Tilly towards Lizzie continuing, but didn't deem it to be overly extreme. Teenage girls are rarely sparkles and light.

But you knew Tilly bullied others before?

They were of no concern to me.

That's cold.

It is what it is. And *that* was not a question.

Okay, let's change tack. What do you think of Raven?

I think she can't be trusted.

So with that, is it all over between you now?

I don't know. I doubt Phoenix is mine, but one of my brothers is her father, which means that all of my feelings for Raven aside, she will continue to be in my life whether I like it or not. If we're to have any sort of relationship – even just a civil one – there's still a lot of conversations that need to be had between the both of us.

And how do you feel about Phoenix?

She seems like a nice enough kid.

But you've not warmed to her like the others seem to have?

I don't let people get close easily. It's not Phoenix's fault, but every time I look at her, all I can see is the lies and betrayal of her mother. I don't know how I can forgive that.

You've said Phoenix isn't yours several times now. You know that she *could* be, right?

It's not impossible, sure. But it's unlikely.

How would it change things if she were?

It would make everything worse.

Why?

I'd hate Raven even more for denying me that time with Phoenix. All those firsts you never get to see. All that missed

time that you never get back.

Sounds like you care a lot more than you're letting on.

[Glowers] [Silence]

Jax, why should people root for you? You make it hard to get to know you.

I don't care to get to know people. I rarely let anyone in. It usually has disastrous consequences for me. Remember Lizzie? That didn't go so well and we barely knew each other.

But my brothers have stood by me through everything, so I may have some redeeming qualities. You'd have to ask them.

I feel like we're done... We *are* done.

[exits]



Baxter, how did you feel when Raven stabbed you?

Do you mean emotionally? Because when I got stabbed, I felt pain.

Obviously.

It was interesting. I don't really feel emotions too frequently. It was...puzzling to have a new creature capturing my interest.

You can speak freely here, you don't need to mind what you say because of who your grandfather is.

Like I give a fuck...When Raven stabbed me I was enraged, impressed and aroused.

Okaaaaay, that's weird. Why impressed?

Girls don't usually stand up to me. Her strength, her sass, was impressive to me. Stupid on her part, but impressive nonetheless. She reminded me of Amelie, with her sass.

Thank you. Moving on...

You're not going to ask me why I was aroused?

Erm, no. No.

I'm going to tell you anyway...I like a good fight. Someone with a bit of spark or spunk about them.

Don't you have that with Amelie? Why did you never get with her?

I never looked at Amelie in that way, despite joking to the contrary. That was mostly just to fuck with her little harem of wannabe brothers. It would be too clichéd to say she was like a little sister to me, given that I don't have any siblings since I killed— Anyway. I never fancied Amelie. She's far too annoying. I felt nothing when we kissed either, except the satisfaction that comes with pissing so many people off.

Okay, so how did you feel when you found out Raven was back on the island?

I was...intrigued. I didn't expect to see her again so soon. I found myself...not apprehensive, but...maybe happy? To see her again. And that was puzzling.

Why was it puzzling?

Because I don't usually care or form attachments. Being – what's the word for being apprehensive but not in a negative way?

Excited?

Really? Huh. Usually I only get excited by killing...never mind. Okay. So maybe I was a little excited at the thought of seeing Raven again. I was definitely hoping she'd stab me.

What did you do when you saw her again?

I was my usual charming self, but she didn't seem to notice.

Did you notice any change in her?

Of course. She was completely different to when she stabbed me at Easter. All that spunk was gone. Not a hint of a knife in sight.

So what did you do?

I kept showing up. She was clearly going through... something, and I thought at the very least I could, I don't know. Piss her off enough to make her snap out of it.

Did that happen?

No. But she slowly came back. And I guess we ended up having fun.

How did you feel when you noticed that Raven was pregnant?

I didn't much care, besides being disappointed that a previously hot chick was about to get fat and ugly. Although, given how much she moped around all summer, she'd lost her appeal anyway.

Why did you keep seeing her then?

Seemed the right thing to do.

You don't strike us as the type to do the right thing.

I like to keep people on their toes.

And can you tell us about the kiss?

No.

Did you really get called away on business?

That's classified.

Seems coincidental...

That's not a question.

Why did you give the guys a tip-off that she was flying home?

I don't know. Seemed the right thing to do, again. When Rebel reached out, he was pretty cut up. He's one of the few people I owe.

Can we ask why that is?

No. Next question.

But you were previously helping Raven. So wasn't it a betrayal to her?

Was I? Did Raven say that? She was pretty hormonal at the time, she probably read the situation wrong.

Did you tell the guys she was pregnant?

No. Not my secret to tell.

Are you really a reformed character?

I never claimed to be. Who said I was? Tell me and I'll kill them.

We think you have feelings for Raven. Do you love Raven like the need to breathe, or do you love her like she's a friend, like ride or die?

I don't know what that means. But I do know that I'm incapable of love. Does that answer your question?

Okay. I get the feeling that you're not being entirely honest with us here...

So?

Well the point of the interview is for our readers to get to know you a little better.

I don't give a fuck.

You are capable of love. You know that right?

Fuck off.

You love Phoenix, don't you?

Obviously. She's just a kid.

So doesn't it make sense that you would love her mum too?

Stop with the psychoanalysing bullshit. You're boring me now.

Okay. We want to ask you about your time with Raven after she left the island.

What about it?

Why did you stay in touch?

She needed me. She didn't have anyone else. And we became friends. I'd rather have her, and Phoenix, in my life than not. I don't have many friends.

What happened during that time?

That's not my story to tell. Ask Raven.

Okay. So you told Jax that you tried to help Raven whenever you could, in secret.

Yes...

And that you had people watching the house.

So?

What was your reaction when you found out Rebel and the other guys had found her?

I was away on business initially and so the message was delayed in reaching me. When I found out, I raced to her flat as soon as I could. I knew she would be spinning, freaked out and contemplating running. I couldn't allow that to happen. Arriving when they were there was pure coincidence, but I'm glad about it. Raven didn't know, but I always sort of had a plan up my sleeve in case they ever tracked her down and turned up unannounced.

The plan to pretend to be with Raven you mean?

We didn't outright lie about it, but a few well-placed hints definitely knocked them off the scent a little.

Will you tell us what you did to Charlie when he was in the hospital?

[Grins] Now that is classified.

Are you done with him?

Not by a long shot.

What did you think when you found out Cordelia was suing Raven for custody of Phoenix the first time? Were you surprised? What did you do to help her?

It wasn't the first time I wanted to kill Cordelia, but it was the first time I came close to saying fuck it all and just doing it. That woman is vile. There aren't words strong enough to explain what she's like. A poison. A cancer. Something that spreads like a disease and infects everyone it comes into contact with. Nothing survives.

I've never wanted to kill someone so much in all my life.

And I wasn't allowed to.

The only thing I could do, and it killed me to have to do it, was play peacekeeper between the two of them. I encouraged Raven to play nice and give Cordelia access, because I knew that if it went to any court of law, Raven would lose custody.

Because she was a bad mum?

Never. But because there's *no* losing to Cordelia.

What will you do this time? If Cordelia always wins, isn't fighting her futile?

I won't give up. Last time, it was just me. I have help now, and Jax and Ace make formidable allies. Even Rebel is useful.

But not Thorn?

I'm sure he's good for something. Raven obviously likes him. Beats me as to why though.

Do you regret not neutralising the threat of Cordelia all those years ago?

Of course. But that wasn't my call to make. There were higher powers involved, including Amelie and my grandfather, and of course, I had to take Raven's wishes into account.

And now?

Things have changed. Most of those obstacles are no longer in my way. And...it's reached a point where I'm willing to go against Raven and her wishes in order to keep her and Phoenix safe. I don't have a lot of family, and sometimes you have to hurt them to protect them.

Even if it means losing them both forever?

Yes.

Will you kill Cordelia?

Of course. But that's classified.

[exits]



Thorn, what's your hot chocolate recipe?

Ha! I'd tell you, but then I'd have to kill you! *sings* my hot choc brings all the chicks to the yard...

Awww, please?

I'll give you a clue – I don't use water. I can't share that! It's like...my kryptonite. No, that's not right. Without the mystery of my recipe, I'll be like that dude in the bible and shit who lost all his appeal without his hair!

Do you mean Samson?

Not a fucking clue. Do I look like I read the bible to you?

You're really not going to tell us?

Do I have to?

Well, no, but it would be nice.

Ha! You should have asked Ace for a baking recipe then – he's the nice one!

So, you're originally from Devon? Whereabouts?

I grew up in an awesome ocean location between two North Devon villages. I guess it's classed as a village in its own right, but all that's there is a beach and some posh as fuck hotels and houses.

Wasn't one of those houses yours?

Well, yeah. But I'm not a stuck-up aristocratic dick.

Is that how you got into surfing?

Yep! Ocean on my doorstep meant surfing at sunrise every day from as old as I could walk. I used to disappear whenever I could to get in more wave time. Usually when my parents were throwing some poncey dinner party. Skipped school a few times too.

Why do you like surfing so much?

It gives me total freedom. The ocean doesn't discriminate, so long as you respect it. And if you get too big for your boots, it knocks you back on your ass to remind you who's boss. I'm cool with that. It's the only authority I respect.

Have you caught any waves recently?

No... I've not much fancied it in a while. But I'm starting to feel the itch again.

Some would say you have a drinking problem...

It's only a problem if you don't like what you're doing.

And what are you doing?

I *was* having a good time.

Why, though?

I don't want to talk about it. This is boring...change the subject or I'm gone.

Do you think you'll ever forgive Raven?

No. Yes. No. I don't know. I'm done.

[The interviewer would like to add that she thought Thorn meant he was done with Raven, but he actually just left the room, so I guess he's done with us too.]



Rebel, do you think the push and pull makes the sex hotter with Raven?

Not pulling any fucking punches I see...interesting opening question.

I'm always burning for Raven, in one way or another. I've had sex with Raven when the push and pull is undeniably hot. But we've also shared some tender moments, and that sex is equally as enthralling and sacred to me.

It's just her. She's just fucking hot no matter what she's doing. I swear the KoL song was written about her.

Why do you insist on calling Charlotte Raven?

I'm crap with shit like that. I knew her as Raven. I loved her as Raven. To me, she'll always be Raven. Besides, that's what she wants to be known as now.

We noticed that you – and the other guys – all have new ink. Care to explain it to us?

After she disappeared, I needed something to hold on to. When she vanished, and we literally couldn't find a trace of her, it was like she wasn't real. Like she never existed. I needed to know she was real, hence the Raven feather tattoo over my heart.

And then the others followed suit?

You'd have to ask them for their reasons, but yeah, I was first.

Don't you mind being copied?

Why would I? It's a statement of how much we all loved her. I don't have a problem with that. If I didn't mind sharing her, why would I mind sharing a tattoo dedicated to her? Weird question.

Okay, let's talk about Phoenix. You clearly would love to be her father...

Right.

But if you were, would you be okay with keeping it a secret from her?

To begin with, absolutely. I need to build a relationship with her first. But hopefully in time Raven would consent to us telling her. I don't want to wait until she's sixteen or eighteen or anything crazy like that.

Can you forgive Raven, if you are the dad, for taking away four years of time you could have spent with Phoenix?

At this point, there is nothing to forgive. After nearly losing her, I couldn't hold anything against her. It's not important anymore.

What about Baxter? Can you forgive him for knowing where Raven was, the whole time you were searching for her?

You know, that never even occurred to me. Fuck...I don't know. I guess I'll have to now, won't I? As I said before, more important things. I may have to have words with him though. Our bond goes way back, and I owe him...too much. I couldn't hold anything against him.

Do you want to tell us more about your friendship with Baxter?

Absolutely not. That's not my story to tell. Baxter will open up about Casey and Beth when he's ready.

But they are your relatives, right?

Were. I won't talk about this. Move on.

How did you feel learning everything about Lizzie?

This is going to sound bad...

Go on...

But it was really hard to care. I mean, obviously I feel really bad about what happened to Lizzie. But I also feel relieved that she didn't kill herself. That we weren't to blame.

You're right, that *does* sound bad.

You have to understand that I've been obsessed with finding Raven since the moment we realised she was gone. It's taken over my entire life, lost me my record deal and band mates. Everything.

But I *found* her.

So it was all worth it.

Learning Lizzie's story when we did, didn't massively impact me because I was still so elated over finding Raven. I didn't think anything could destroy that high, and learning about Lizzie didn't, until I found out Michael's involvement and what he tried to do to Raven.

She's always my focus. Always has been, always will be. Lizzie was a horrible tragedy, but it was a long time ago, back when we were kids, and dwelling on the past won't help anyone.

Okay. Thank you for your honesty.

[Shrugs]

Do you have a new house waiting for Raven and Phoenix?

I have houses all over the world, but the dream would be to build somewhere big enough for all of us, wherever Raven decided she wanted to be. I'd love to build her dream house.

Jax has once again decided that none of you should get romantically involved with Raven. How do you

feel about that? Do you think it will cause more fights?

I'm not good at following orders! I've already failed a little bit by kissing her...and things. I'll definitely go for more if I feel like she's interested. But yeah, I think Jax got this one wrong again, and so it could be a repeat of New Year.

After Raven was drugged and brought to the hospital, what was your reaction?

I was absolutely beside myself. I was so scared. It was like the night of the fire all over again, but instead of being unable to find her and wondering what if, there she was laid out on the bed with all the horrors plain for us to see.

I had a flashback to that damn tape recording and I saw red. It was like Charlie became Michael and it was my opportunity to protect Raven, and to make him atone for his sins.

It wasn't enough. Even death is too good for those scumbags.

It was mentioned between you all that initially you guys were suspects. How did you all react to this?

I didn't handle it as well as I could have. But then again, I've never been the calm and sensible one. It was fucking bullshit. And I let the police know as much. I'm ashamed that I kicked off in the hospital and took my anger and my fear out on the wrong people. Those nurses didn't deserve the damage I did to their workstation, or the abuse I hurled at them. But with the police, I have no regrets.

How did you get out of being held accountable for what you did to Charlie?

You'd have to ask Baxter.

Finally, one last question. Did you tell Raven that Hannah licked you?

[he looks terrified]

Erm, I don't know what you're talking about. And I have to go.

[Rebel has left the room]



Ace, have you ever thought about taking classes in English or is your limited English part of your appeal?

Parents very strog¹...old school. Say throw in deep end and swim best way to learn. Potoni ali plavaj². Send to school with no help. I try hard with English but I have bad teachers by my brothers. Rebel bad English American. I dream to take the lessons one day for sure, but very drago³...expensive? And family need money more.

Do you plan on cooking professionally?

Yes, I would like to cook very much for my living. Very hard to cook experience in good restaurant. Prefer baking. Maybe I am having pekarna⁴...cake shop? I need make money for shop first, but send paycheck home for sisters. I am happily doing this. Life in Slovenia tough. Help where I can.

Do you love Raven?

Yes. Seveda⁵.

Why did you let her go at the airport?

Because I love her.

When did you fall in love with her?

First day. Stamp foot at Rebel. Tell Rebel off. I think ‘she is strong. It is good’ and then...love.

What was going through your head when you noticed that Raven was pregnant?

So many. First, shock. Then I wonder...bad things...never mind. Shock. Lots of shock. Angry to Baxter. Concerned? Worried at Raven.

Why did you train in Krav Maga?

Important to be strong. Otroštvo⁶...Child...time?

Do you mean childhood? Your childhood?

Yes. Childhood...bad for me. Not want to repeat. Be strong. Fight. Protect what I love.

Is that why you taught Raven to fight?

Raven strong. Fun to spar. Make stronger. Drive out demoni⁷. I see her žalost⁸. Ne maram⁹.

How do you feel about Phoenix?

kri moje ljubezni je moje življenje¹⁰

**Erm, can we get that translated, please? Anyone?
Oh... ‘The blood of my love is my life’... What does that mean?**

I love her.

Phoenix?

Yes.

Because she’s Raven’s daughter?

Yes.

Who do you think Phoenix’s father is?

Don’t care. Love anyway. Always.

**That’s sweet. Thank you for meeting with us today
and for actually staying to complete the interview.
You’re the first.**

Ace: Of course.

The End
(of Book 2)

Did you enjoy the bonus content?
Read on for even more in the series finale!

BOOK THREE

Retribution

About Retribution

Some secrets refuse to stay buried... it's time for Retribution.

The blood of my love is my life.

Raven hasn't had it easy; her life has been a whirlwind of clusterfucks and disasters, but the latest has left her reeling. She's faced with a tough decision: crumble and break, or rebuild and come back fighting harder than ever.

With the help of the guys she loves picking her up and supporting her every step of the way, she chooses the second option. But as secrets and lies are revealed, even with fierce love on their side, it might not be enough to help Raven in the fight of her life.

Can a secret that refuses to stay buried be the key to serving up the ultimate retribution to Cordelia and finding Raven's happiness once and for all? Or is this a secret too far – something there's no coming back from that will threaten to tear them all apart for good?

Retribution, the final book in the Vengeance trilogy, is a contemporary New Adult reverse harem romance, with some dark themes. Series complete.



PROLOGUE

Baxter

I'm really fucking worried about Raven. I've never seen her like this before: not after the fire and what happened with Michael; or even after all the shit with Cordelia. Hell, there was even that brief period when Phoenix was a baby, when she sank into a very dark place...even then she wasn't this bad.

And I don't blame her, at all. If I were in her shoes, I wouldn't be able to function either, but I don't know what I can do to help.

We can't move forward without a plan, and to plan, Jax seems to think we need to know who Phoenix's father is. I'm not so sure. But we can't do that without Raven's permission anyway. Only, she's refusing to speak, or eat, or even come out of Phoenix's bedroom. It's been three days and I'm starting to get really scared.

If things don't change soon, Jax is threatening to go in there, all 'tough love' on her ass, but I really don't think she needs that right now. I'm debating sending Ace in. He seems to be the calmest. If anyone can get her to move forward, it's sure to be him. Until then, we're all just stuck in this awful limbo.

I'm not used to being this redundant. I've well and truly failed in my promises to protect her and Phoenix. It's no wonder she won't look at me; I can barely stand to look at me either.

The car ride to Cordelia's was tense. Nix knew something was going on and sobbed the whole way, clutching my hand. Eventually she tired herself out and fell asleep. When we got to the house, I wasn't allowed in, but I gave her a massive cuddle goodbye, promised to call every day, and to come back and visit as soon as I could. She sniffed a bit but seemed okay with going into Cordelia's house. If she hadn't been, I would have picked her up and walked out of there, courts and consequences be damned. I'd call in favours if I had to. Anything for the two girls in my life.

In Jax's car on the way back he thrust his phone at me and told me to access the HeartSafe app on his home screen. I did, and a simple interface popped up with a small and a large heart. He told me to push the small heart button, and when I did, a small GPS dot on a map appeared. He explained to me that Raven and Phoenix's pendants were trackers, linked to this app, because he couldn't bear to lose them again. I downloaded the app straight away and haven't been able to stop checking it since. It's accurate to within two metres so I'm able to track Nix's movements intricately. I know the house well enough to identify which wing she's in or when she's in the garden. So far, they've stayed at the house, but I've put people on standby, watching and waiting for my signal if there's any sign that they might leave. I don't trust Cordelia.

That reminds me. I need to check with Raven where their passports are. Not that it would stop Cordelia taking Phoenix out of the country if she really wanted to. Maybe I should call my grandfather. I need backup on this...but would he choose me over her?

"Hey." Rebel's voice cuts through my thoughts. "Do you mind if I sit with her for a while?" he asks. He has his acoustic guitar slung over his shoulder.

"Sure. She's not responding though."

"It's okay, she only needs to listen." He shrugs.

"Didn't know you still played," I say, pointing to the instrument he's tuning in his hands.

"Only when I'm stressed these days."

"So that song with your band...the number one...?"

"Yeah, it was about losing her."

I thought as much at the time, but it's good to have him confirm it. It was a damn good song. I wonder if she knows it.

"You really love her, don't you?" I ask.

"Always have, always will. Don't you?"

“I do,” I don’t hesitate to reply. I think the love I have for Raven is different to the love he feels though. Not any less, just different. I don’t know how to explain it, so I say nothing.

I always told myself I didn’t have a heart, that after Casey and Beth died, I would never find love or happiness. That I didn’t deserve it. But it’s time to stop lying to myself.

“Do you think of them much?” Rebel asks softly, reading my thoughts on my face.

“Every day.”

“Still? It’s been a long time, mate.”

“Don’t you?” I challenge.

“Every damn day!” he replies hotly. “But I don’t let it consume me... You know, no one blames you. It’s time to let it go. Move on. Find peace.”

I have no words to say to that. Of course they must blame me. Rebel lost so much that day, so much more than me. And his family...how he can even stand to be around me beats me. Surely every time he looks at Raven and Phoenix, he sees Casey and Beth? I can barely stand to think of their names. That’s a demon to address another day.

He must look at Raven and Phoenix and want to keep me as far away from them as possible. Everything I touch turns to shit: case in point, the current situation. We wouldn’t be in it if it weren’t for my involvement with Raven.

I know they’d be better off without me, but I’m damned if I can tear myself away. Especially now, when they both need me so much.

I need to put things right.

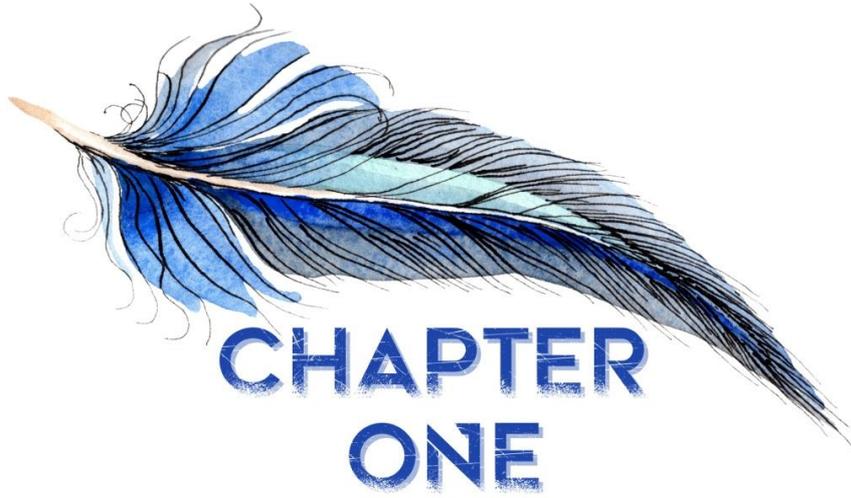
Raven's Diary

Present Day

I just...I can't even...If someone fucks with the people I love...How is this happening? What does Cordelia want? I burn them all to the ground... How could she do this to me? Rebel's words keep swirling around and around my mind in time to the churning of my stomach.

How could she do this to Phoenix?

Watch out Cordelia, I'm coming for you. I won't be coming alone, and we won't stop until we've burnt everything you care about to the ground.



**CHAPTER
ONE**

Jax

I've had enough of this shit, I decide, throwing my weight against Phoenix's locked bedroom door. It's been four days now since Phoenix was taken and enough is enough. Raven is not going to come out of there willingly, so it's time to make her.

"Go away!" Her hoarse, muffled voice calls through the door just moments before I bust it open. "Hey!"

"Enough, Raven!" I bark, striding over to the bed where she's huddled. "Get up."

"No," she replies petulantly. "Go away."

"I'm not leaving without you, so do us all a favour and pull yourself together. Let's get this show on the road."

"Just go," she tells me, stubbornly. I remember how frustrating she can be now. I grit my teeth as my temper flares up.

"Look at you, you're pathetic," I sneer, playing a dangerous game. "What good are you to Phoenix like this? I thought you wanted to get her back but the courts were right, you *are* unfit to take care of her!"

"Fuck you!" she spits at me, a little fire starting to bring her back to life. She glares at me and tries to look fierce but it's hard to pull off from under a Hello Kitty bed set.

"You look like you've given up and Cordelia has already won."

"Don't say that bitch's name around me!"

"Why not? She's going to be Phoenix's new guardian. We're going to have to make nice with her if we want to see our daughter."

Her eyes widen in shock and she sits up abruptly.

"Did you open...?"

“No. We wouldn’t without you. But you need to get up so we can fight this right now.”

“What’s the point?” She flops back into the bed, deflated. Damn, tough love isn’t working, time for phase two.

I don’t bother to answer. Striding across the room to her, I stand at the end of the bed and grasp the edge of the mattress. With effort, I lift and flip it so that Raven slides out of bed and hits the floor with an unceremonious thud. I leave the mattress as it is so that she can’t get back into bed.

“Hey!” she cries scrambling to her feet, hands on hips, a little more fire in her eyes.

“You stink. Get in the shower,” I demand.

“Make me!” she bites back. Big mistake sweetheart. Challenge accepted.

My eyes harden at her defiance, palms burning to teach her a lesson. I stomp over to her and lift her into a fireman’s carry over my shoulder and stride from the room. She, of course, kicks and fights the whole time. I don’t cross the landing to the family bathroom, instead choosing to carry her weightless, too-thin body up another flight of stairs to my room.

I kick open my bedroom door and put her down. I quickly close and lock the door when she lunges for it, taking the key from the lock and crossing to the window. She watches me, puzzled, and realises a second too late what my intent is. She dives, but I drop the key from the window, out into the garden somewhere three storeys below.

“What did you do that for?! We’re stuck!”

“Are we? I didn’t realise,” I reply with sarcastic innocence. “You need a shower and I don’t trust you not to run.”

“How are we going to get out of here now?” she panics. Ironic considering she was content to remain in a locked room downstairs, indefinitely. I decide not to point this out to her though.

“When I’ve finished with you, I’ll call one of the others to go and retrieve the key,” I lie. She doesn’t need to know I have

a spare. “Now, the bathroom’s that way.”

I point to the door that leads to the en suite, and she storms off in a huff. Still, that went better than expected.

I give her a few minutes after the water turns on and slowly strip my clothes off. I need to get her out of her head and I think tapping into her anger is the best way to do it.

Naked, I kick my clothes aside and follow Raven into the bathroom. I immediately spy my toothbrush on the counter, not where I left it, and know that she’s used it. I only hope she stole it to brush her teeth and not clean the toilet as revenge for hauling her ass out of bed.

She doesn’t hear me quietly open and close the door, so she jumps when I climb in behind her in the shower.

“What are you doing?” she demands as she spins to face me, but the fight isn’t really there.

“Shhh, I’m helping,” I tell her. I gently remove her hands from her hips and turn her back around so that she’s facing the wall, palms against it. Memories flood me but I suppress them. Softly, I run my fingers through her tangled hair. When it’s clear that it won’t be enough, I load up her long dark locks with conditioner.

“Some help you are, shampoo goes on first,” she snarks at me. I bite back a smile and say nothing. I reach for a comb and begin to work my way through her tangles, being as gentle as I can. When I’m done, I run my fingers through her silky, glossy mane and rinse it through. I then repeat the process with shampoo, and again with conditioner. To my surprise, Raven lets me, not moving a muscle from the position I put her in.

I reach for a loofah and the soap, taking my time to lather up her arms, her back, her legs. I reacquaint myself with every inch of her skin, turning her to face me so that I can clean her front. I kneel before her, washing her legs, and she gazes down at me. There’s fire in her green eyes alright, but it isn’t anger. Not yet.

I stand, dragging my body against hers, invading her space, pushing for a reaction, but she gives me none. Her

breathing is a little fast, her nipples standing to attention, but other than that, she's not backing down. So I continue to wash her, waiting her out. Will she snap if I kiss her? Will she hit me? Or kiss me back?

"Feel a little better?" I ask softly.

"Much," she agrees. "I need to change those sheets." I worry that she means so that she can get back into bed again but she surprises me by adding, "The room needs airing and tidying, ready for Phoenix's return."

A huge grin spread across my face at the fight in her words and I crush my lips to hers, approving of her determination to get Nix back.

"I think they're clean now," she tells me with a hint of amusement in her voice when I pull away from kissing her. I look down to see that I've been paying a little too much attention to soaping up her breasts.

"I'll be the judge of that," I tell her harshly. Desire flares in her eyes and my cock jerks a little. It stirred to life the moment I pressed my lips to hers. Hell, if it had its own way, it would have been hard the second I walked into the bathroom and saw her naked, but I've mastered very good self control over the years.

"Are we done here?" she asks. I wonder if she means with the kissing, but then she nods up at the shower head.

"Done *in* here," I clarify, turning off the water. I lift her again, this time allowing Raven to wrap her legs around my waist, and move us through to my bedroom. I don't bother with towels for either of us, moving towards the bed.

"No," Raven says suddenly, causing me to stop.

"No?"

"Not the bed. Spent enough time in bed lately," she mutters, making me smile.

"As you wish," I grin at her, pushing her up against the locked bedroom door. Now *this* brings back memories, memories which make my cock twitch and pulse with desire.

I press even closer, invading her space, aligning my body against hers. She sucks in a sharp breath. Warmth and pride flood me. I still affect her. She still *wants* me. I smirk to hide how pleased that makes me, ignoring the little flutter in my chest. Instead, I wrap one hand around her dainty little neck and apply a gentle pressure. Her pupils dilate, her nostrils flare, and she swallows noisily, the action causing ripples under my palm. With every ragged breath she takes, my cock hardens more and more. Fuck, I want her.

Leaning in, I run my nose up the length of her neck, inhaling her scent as she invades my senses. Memories assault me, hard and fast, and with a strangled groan my mouth descends on hers.

I am so fucking lost in her, I'm fucked.

Raven's Diary

Present Day

Fuck this shit. I never let the monsters in my life win before, I don't plan to start now. I'm getting my baby back and I'm taking that bitch down in the process.

I should have severed all ties to Cordelia years ago. I didn't for Phoenix's sake, but actually, I don't want that kind of toxicity in her life.

Being around the guys again has made me realise that family has fuck all to do with blood. And that the only people I trust to truly have Nix's best interests at heart are the guys downstairs.



CHAPTER TWO

Raven

I'm pinned to the door, soaking wet, and insanely turned on. I guess him joining me in the shower may have something to do with my current state. It's easy to go from shaking with rage to trembling with lust in an instant. Especially when emotions are running high.

And my emotions are definitely hyper alert right now. I want to fight, kick and scream, draw blood. I need to hurt someone or something, but not as much as I need to feel physical pain. Anything to replace the agony in my chest caused by losing my baby.

Jax's kiss does a brilliant job of almost distracting me.

Almost.

When he bites my lip and I yip in pain, I'm firmly back in the room and the moment. I glare at him.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" I snarl.

"Oh, so you are paying attention then."

"I'd have to be dead not to notice that bite. It hurt."

"Good. Stop acting like you're dead. Get your head out of your pity party and come back to the land of the living."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you weren't so busy sulking in your pit the last few days, you'd know we've been working non-stop to get Phoenix back. I've had enough of everyone tiptoeing around you!"

"Stop."

"You need to be told, and you damn well need to hear it!"

"Shut up," I growl, low and dangerous.

"Make me," the challenge slips from his lips without a hint of a smirk, his eyes almost black with blazing anger.

So I do the only thing I can think of, while also *not* thinking: I kiss him. If the almost savage way I attack his lips can be called something so innocent as a kiss. And then I bite him back.

“Ouch!” He pulls away and glares at me.

“If you can’t take it, don’t hand it out,” I snark at him, annoyed with myself about the way my heart is racing.

He doesn’t verbalise his response, but I *feel* it as he spins me around and slams me back against the door, keeping a firm grip around my throat. I have to turn my head to the side so that my cheek is pressed into the door, otherwise I’d probably be nursing a bloody and broken nose right now. Like this, my breasts are smooshed up almost painfully, but at least like this, my arousal is somewhat hidden.

“Just because your tight little nipples are pressed against that door right now, doesn’t mean I didn’t see how hard they were a moment ago.” His hot breath burns against my sensitive neck. “Your breathing’s a dead giveaway too. You always liked it rough. I bet you’re dripping now.”

A strangled groan escapes me and my eyes flutter closed in agreement. Part of me desperately wants him to dip his fingers between my legs to find out, but the more dominant urge in me is just to fight.

I buck my hips and kick backwards, landing a soft blow to his shin. He steps closer and pins me flush to the door with his hips, his length pressing against my ass. With a firm grip still on my neck, his other hand squeezes between me and the door where his dexterous fingers find my nipple and pinch, hard. My body jerks and his cock twitches in response.

“Just fuck me already,” I manage to gasp out through his grip. He releases my throat and I gulp air like I was drowning. I’m hoping he hasn’t left bruises, but then he sinks his teeth into my shoulder and I find I really don’t give a damn.

I stretch right up onto my tiptoes to coax his length down between my legs. Thankfully, he takes the hint and helps settle his cock between my thighs, rubbing back and forth in a slow

and teasing manner which equally frustrates and excites me. My slickness coats his shaft and even though he has me trapped so tightly, I'm still able to push back against him a little to build the friction.

Jax surprises me with his sudden movement, spinning us around so that his back is against the door and I'm wrapped in his embrace, my back pressed against his chest. The cold air caresses my bare skin and I decide I hate this position. I'm too exposed. There's nowhere to hide. *Which is probably why he's done it.*

My huff of frustration turns to a sigh as, with one arm wrapped across my chest, his other hand slides between my legs. He sucks the soft spot on my neck while he flicks my clit. It's embarrassing how fast my orgasm crashes into me. Pathetic really. I swear I can feel him smiling against my tender neck.

"By the bed. All fours. Now." He barks at me. Damn I've missed that no-nonsense tone.

I'd love nothing more than to refuse and challenge him, but I'm sure the second he lets go of me, I'm going to sink to the floor in a boneless puddle anyway, so I simply nod in agreement and comply.

As soon as I'm in place, his hands grasp my hips and he slams into me with a force that propels me against the bed.

"Fuck!" I hiss in pain at the intrusion.

"I thought you wanted me to fuck you," he smirks. I can't see it, but I can damn well hear the smugness in his tone.

"Asshole," I mutter.

"Oh, I can and I will fuck your tight little hole at some point, princess, you can count on it." He promises in his deep velvet voice. I tremble. "But this is going to hurt, so I'll go easy on you today and stick to your delectable pussy instead."

I didn't even notice that he had pulled back while he was talking, until he slammed into me again. I cry out, more from surprise than anything else. Though I know I'll be sore

tomorrow. Instead I grit my teeth and push back, inviting him to give me more.

I want to challenge him to do his worst with me, but I keep my mouth clamped closed so that I don't make a fool of myself.

He takes my silence as a challenge instead, punishing me with powerful thrusts that seem designed to drag unwilling sounds from my lips. I don't want to give him the satisfaction but it feels so damn good. He fists my wet hair and uses his grip to pull my head back, my back arching in a delicious stretch.

Losing patience with me, Jax goes back to playing with my clit while still pounding into me with bone-rattling force.

“You can't deny me forever,” he growls.

Can't he tell I'm barely hanging on? My release is so close but I don't want to give in to him. If I can just make him come first...

I dip my hips and he hisses at the new angle, and I know I've got him where I want him. He retaliates, pulling on my hair in time with his thrusts and pinching my damn clit like he's popping bubble wrap. It fucking hurts and feels so damn good.

With a gasp and a yell I come hard, though inside I'm screaming my release. My spasming muscles tip him over the edge and he fills me with a pained groan. Collapsing onto the floor, I pant and slowly come down from the high.

“I guess we need to call someone to get the key and come let us out,” I say after a long moment of catching my breath.

Don't get me wrong, walking everywhere, living so far off campus, racing around after Nix...I'm not exactly unfit. But it's been a long time since I was put through my paces like that, both in and out of the bedroom. I need to start training again. I miss it.

Jax gives me a sly grin.

“Well, I guess you could call the others if you want them to know what we’ve been doing...Or I could just unlock the door with my spare key.”

“Bastard,” I hiss, punching him in the gut for good measure. He gives a muffled ‘oof’ sound which makes me feel a little better. “You’re lucky I didn’t punch you in the dick.”

“You like it too much to hurt it,” he snarks back with a teasing smirk, leaning over me to grab a small key on a green ribbon from his bedside drawer.

“There’s four more dicks in this house I have access to. I don’t need shit from you.”

“Except you do...You appear to need this key from me,” he taunts, swinging it on his finger in front of me.

“Dick,” I spit.

“If you ask nicely.”

I punch him in the junk this time, grab the key and take off back to my room, naked. Thankfully don’t run into anyone.

I clean off, freshen up again, pull open my wardrobe and grab the first outfit I happen to get my hands on: workout gear. Actually, that’s kind of perfect. I’m in the mood to kick the shit out of something. I quickly get dressed and exit my room, pausing at the top of the stairs to listen to the voices below. I can’t hear Jax down there, so I wonder if he’s still up in his room. I can’t believe he – we – just did that. Whoa. It was oddly...what I needed.

Guilt crashes into me, making my knees buckle. Holy shit, what did I just do? My daughter has been taken from me and I’m hooking up. I feel sick with shame.

I quickly slip into Nix’s room and strip her bed. As I do, something flutters out from inside her pillowcase. Bending, I pick it up and discover that it’s a small, folded piece of paper. I unfold it and see Ace’s familiar writing in his unfamiliar language. I have no idea what it says but tears prick my eyes when I realise that Nix holds this note dear enough to hide it. I slip it into my pocket.

I head down the stairs, feeling a sharp pain in my chest at how quiet the house is without Phoenix in it. I'm going to treat it like she's on holiday with Cordelia. I can just about handle that usually. So, yeah, this is just a vacation...she'll be back in a couple of weeks. *Repeat it until you believe it, Raven.*

"What's the plan?" I ask, stepping into the kitchen where everyone besides Jax is. They jump when I speak and spin to stare. Their shocked faces are almost comical.

"Raven, are you...?"

"Stop right there!" I interrupt, holding up a hand. "I don't want any questions. Let's get this shit show on the road. Call all the fucking lawyers, detectives and dirty bastards you know. I'm taking the bitch down no matter what, and I'm getting my daughter back."

"Our daughter, little bird," Rebel growls.

"I...did you...?" I gasp, eyes wide. Did they open the envelope without me? I know Jax said he didn't, but Rebel was never good with secrets or temptation.

"No. But we've decided it doesn't fucking matter. I don't give a shit what a piece of paper says, she's ours and we're not letting her go."

I'm touched by his passion, but unsurprised. "Ace?"

"Same."

"Thorn?"

"Behold," he cries, throwing out his hands, "the field of fucks that I give. And see that it is barren...I'm all in."

I laugh and give him a soft smile.

"Baxter?"

"I've got your back, as always." His reply is a little more cryptic, but I expect that from him.

"I don't care either," a voice says from behind me, making me jump. Jax. I spin to face him, knowing he was the most unsure about us.

“Are you certain?” I ask hesitantly, shy of him after what happened upstairs.

“The only thing I’m more certain of is my love for you. Both.”

I don’t want to think about that declaration. It’s just a sex haze, isn’t it? He was so ready to walk, so unwilling to forgive.

“So what’s the plan? What do we do?” I rub my hands together, impatient for action.

“Do you trust us?”

“With my life.” I don’t hesitate to reply.

“We’re calling everyone and everything we have in, like you just said,” Jax replies. “The first step is getting Phoenix back, then making this court case go away. Once that’s done, we’re taking Cordelia down for good. And all who are associated with her.”

Thorn raises his hand like he’s in school and has a question for the teacher, making me smile. Old habits and all.

“Yes, Thorn?” I smirk.

“And a holiday. We need a fucking holiday in there too.”

“Agreed,” I laugh. My last real holiday was Italy with Lizzie. We hadn’t booked anywhere for the summer after she finished her exams at West Prep, but we had been talking about going to France again – just the two of us. I miss her. Even now all these years later, I miss her so much it hurts. Especially when she unexpectedly pops into my head at random moments like this.

“So what do we do first? I mean, I know it’s get Nix back, but how do we do that?” I ask.

“We’ve lodged a complaint with social services, petitioning to get Nix home. We have to submit evidence to counter the claims drawn against you, which we have ready to go.”

“Such as?” I frown. It’s not possible. This isn’t a battle we can win. Because although twisted and warped, a lot of what Cordelia is claiming *is* true. Sort of.

“We have a father on Nix’s birth certificate and the deeds to this house have your name on. We have your bank statements to prove your steady finances, and character testimonies to what an amazing mother you are from several reputable witnesses. They’ve got nothing.”

I’m overwhelmed by the onslaught of information coming my way. To begin with, I was sure that once Nix’s father was revealed, all of the other guys would disappear from our lives. Now they’re telling me it doesn’t matter? What’s more, they’re prepared to stay and help and fight to get Nix back. I don’t know what to say.

“No crying, little bird,” Rebel warns, coming over to wrap his enormous arms around me. I sniff and do as I’m told.

“How can you do all of that stuff?”

“Easy. The moment you agreed to move in, I signed the house over to you, princess.” I shake my head, because of course he did; it’s a classic Rebel move. I thank him with a soft kiss on the cheek.

“What about all the other stuff you said?”

“Taken care of,” Jax says. “We have your old neighbours, your old employers, your childminder, pretty much anyone you came into contact with in the last four years, ready to testify to what an amazing mum you are. Your bank account is healthy, Nix has a modest trust fund that you regularly add to and have since she was born—”

“Wait! I know that’s not possible!” I interrupt.

“Check your online banking app,” Baxter tells me.

“I don’t do online banking.” I frown, pulling out my phone. Sure enough, there’s an app installed for RBS. “I don’t bank with Royal Bank of Scotland.”

“And yet you know what your login details will be.”

Baxter's right; I use the same details for everything, so I quickly sign in. When I do, I gasp and almost drop my phone when I see the obscenely high current account balance. Below that there are two savings accounts listed too. One named 'Phoenix Future' and the other 'Rainy Day'. Uncomfortably large sums of money sit in each.

"How's this possible?" I gasp.

"Don't question it. It's all above board. That's all you need to know," Baxter insists.

"And the birth certificate?"

"We had to move fast on this one," Jax tells me. "So we didn't have time to consult you. We picked the one person we knew couldn't be Nix's father and put him on the certificate."

"Baxter." I smile. "Why him though?"

"Because Cordelia thinks she has an army on her side. My grandfather's army to be precise. He won't lift a finger to help her when he learns that she's waging war against the mother of his only great-grandchild," Baxter explains.

"Genius," I whisper. And it is. They've thought of everything while I've been moping around in a toddler bed the last few days. I feel pathetic. "I don't know how to thank you."

"We can sort all of that later. Let's get Phoenix back first," Thorn says with a dismissive wave of his hand and a cheeky wink that lets me know exactly what thanks he's expecting.

"Breakfast first," Ace grunts, pointing to the offerings he's laid out.

"It all looks amazing Ace, and I promise I'll have something later. But first I need to kick the shit out of something. Is anyone game?"

Raven's Diary

Present Day

Oh holy crap, how did I get myself into that position? One minute I was happily wallowing in my den of self-pity in Nix's Hello Kitty bed, the next Jax is breaking down the door and dragging me off to his lair like a caveman. When did that get hot?

Afterwards I wanted to kill him when I realised he had a key to the room all along. Would it have changed what happened between us though? Probably, almost definitely, not.

Racing down to the kitchen and declaring war was the easier option. Part of me was tempted to crawl back into bed. Not to wallow in self-pity over Nix being gone, but to torture myself over what just happened with Jax.

Any sort of action was better than dissecting that. I've kept busy since but now that I'm in bed, alone, the guilt is starting to eat at me.

No more sexcapades with Jax.



CHAPTER THREE

Thorn

I follow Raven and Ace down to the basement to the workout area. She's keen to get going but Ace insists she warms up properly with stretches and a run on the treadmill first. She grumbles about the treadmill but I can see a flush of excitement on her face. She's back and she's ready to fight.

Good.

Upstairs, Baxter, Jax and Rebel made it all sound too simple. Too easy. I know that we can win this fight and get Phoenix back with us, but that is only stage one. A battle. We're going to have to get dirty to win the war. Baxter has resigned himself to being the one that gets left behind. If we end up having to do some illegal shit – and I'm sure we will – he's preparing his end game. He's already given us strict instructions to safeguard Phoenix and Raven's futures. He gave us the 'talking to' on day one. The door was there if we wanted out; but if we decided to stay, from this point on, we're in it for life and there's no turning back.

I didn't hesitate.

I love them both and would walk through fire – again – for them. But I will do my absolute damndest to make sure that Baxter is beside us for the happily ever after at the end too. Losing him would destroy them both and I don't want that on my conscience.

"It's time," Ace's voice cuts through my thoughts and I see Raven punching the emergency stop on the treadmill and climbing off with a massive grin on her face. It's been a long time since I saw her this...light and free. She's happy, but it's spurred on by a determination to succeed. She's focused. Driven.

Sexy as hell.

I never got to watch her train when we were at school. Obviously, there was the day we met when she speared me to the spot with a knife, but after that, training and sparring was

very much hers and Ace's thing. Luckily, neither of them seem to have noticed my presence yet.

Raven begins to spar with Ace. She's fast. Fit, despite being undernourished still – though I can see Ace is working to rectify that with his outrageous breakfast spread – she's a little stiff, but all the moves are flooding back to her. They say muscle memory is a powerful thing, but I didn't really believe it until now. Raven's body is responding to Ace's advances before her mind can even process what to do. Her shock every time she dodges him is amusing to watch.

“Again,” Ace grunts, making her take the attack position to repeat a pattern of flurrying jabs and punches.

“Faster.”

It's interesting to see this side of him. Dominant, commanding, teacher. I'm so used to him being the quiet, easygoing, keep-the-peace member of our group, that I sometimes forget he has the training to be a lethal killing machine. All of us can hold our own in a fight, of course, but Ace's training surpasses ours by miles. The only person I'd be interested to see him fight would be Baxter. That guy's got a past murkier than the Thames. He's definitely got Training with a capital T. I should ask Rebel about him. He's always been pretty tight-lipped about his friendship with Baxter, but I reckon if I pushed him, he'd crumble and tell me. He's not great at keeping secrets.

“Again. Concentrate.”

Raven grunts and repeats the move – some sort of kicks this time – repeatedly striking Ace's thigh. She's focused, yes, but I can see it in her face, she's thinking and trying too hard.

“Wanted to ask...” she puffs. “What this means.” She flicks a small piece of paper at Ace and he catches it effortlessly.

He unfolds the piece of paper, reads it and smiles.

“Well?” She demands.

“Kri moje ljubezni je moje življenje¹,” he repeats from memory without having to look at the paper.

“Yes, but what does it *mean*?” she pushes. His grin widens.

“You win...I translate.”

“Ugh,” she grunts again, and goes back to punching with fervour. I smile, liking Ace’s method to get her to focus.

“Grabež²!” he barks, and they instantly come together to grapple and wrestle with one another. He trips her and she lands softly on her back. “Osredotočenost³!”

I’ve been on the receiving end of that command enough times to know that he’s telling her to focus.

He helps her to her feet and they go again. This time, Raven lasts much longer before she’s sailing backward and landing on her ass.

“Oaredotočiti⁴! You think too much!”

It seems counter intuitive to me, to tell her to concentrate and then berate her for thinking too much in the same breath, but what do I know?

I watch as she once again gets to her feet and comes at him with a fierce determination that makes my dick twitch. I can’t help it. She’s one hot, sexy chick. Maybe even more so than when we were at school together. Damn, I don’t know how Ace managed to have her trapped under him, wriggling and writhing every day for months on end. I would’ve been permanently buried inside her back then. Hell, I’m supposed to be an adult now, and I don’t have much more control than when I was a horny teenager.

I remain a while longer, watching them fight. I think Raven’s amazing, but Ace continually barks and pushes her. He obviously sees something that I don’t, because I’m pretty sure she could kick my ass, but it’s been a while so maybe she’s out of touch. Better hide the knives, just in case.

Smiling at the memory, I head back upstairs and bump into Jax.

“What’s got you all happy?” he asks.

“Watching Raven train with Ace,” I explain. “She seems more like herself. I knew Ace could get her out of her head and bring her back to normal.”

Jax snorts.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, that snort was something.” I frown. “What?”

“Ace didn’t get her out of her head. I did.”

“Really?” I scoff. “How the hell did you manage that? You can barely stand the sight of one another.”

Jax says nothing. Just grins at me and after a moment the penny – along with my good mood and my stomach – drops.

“You fucked,” I say, deflated and he just grins wider at me. “I thought you said no romance?”

“Anger can be a powerful motivator. It wasn’t romantic.”

“So you used her?” I demand, disgusted. Jealous.

“I got her out of her room and ready to fight, didn’t I?”

“Oh, so I should be thanking you?” My fists curl and I long to punch him.

“It got a job done.”

“Fuck, that’s cold. Even for you, dickhead.” I turn and walk away, seething.

How dare he use Raven like that! Of course I’m happy that she’s come out of Phoenix’s room and is ready to fight for her, but not like this.

Only, there’s a little voice in the back of my mind whispering the truth. That I don’t really care about Jax using Raven like that. Not really. I’m just gutted it wasn’t me.

Ghost

(Piece of shit working title)

A flash ~~of blue~~ in a crowd

A glimmer of hope

~~*Haunted*~~

I'm haunted

You're hunted

Or is it the other way round?

Torn

~~*Searching*~~

~~*Restless*~~

~~*Restless, Searching*~~

Restlessly searching

How did you slip through ~~my fingers~~?



CHAPTER FOUR

Rebel

Fuck. My head still feels like it's going to explode, even now. I wasn't meaning to eavesdrop the other day, I just happened to be around the corner when Jax and Thorn started talking about Raven training with Ace. I was going to join them and say how happy I was to see her too when Jax's derisive snort stopped me in my tracks. Instead, I listened. And ever since I've been questioning myself, wondering if I heard them right?

Jax used Raven.

He had sex with her.

Just to get her to come out of her room.

Two days later and I'm no calmer. I'm still raging. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad as hell that she's out of Nix's room and fighting, but at what cost?

The thing that pisses me off the most is the hypocrisy. That Jax of all people, Mr play by the rules, slept with her after badgering us to leave her alone with his stupid 'no romance' directive.

I was so close to storming after him and confronting him. The red mist came down and I wanted to hurt him. Probably still do. Instead, I forced myself to go to my room and I've stayed here ever since. Raven missed me but I claimed to have a headache when she came to check on me. I didn't open the door. I knew that as soon as I saw her face, I'd either burn up with rage all over again and go hunt Jax down, or my control would snap and I'd throw myself at Raven.

While both of those options sounded quite appealing, I didn't think they'd be good choices to make in the long run, hence staying shut up in my room for two days now.

Today I've been calmer. It's been so long since I've played my guitar properly, but mindlessly strumming helps clear my thoughts. It's a relief to be able to sit on my bed and play around with different riffs. Lyrics have been taunting me all night, and I know that I won't have any peace until I get them

down. But fuck am I rusty. The floor is littered with all my fucked up and failed attempts to convey what I'm feeling. At least I'm no longer mad at Jax, now I'm mad at myself for not being able to find the words I want to say.

And to make matters worse, my brain has decided it wants to slip into the dark and murky past. I don't want to think about Casey and Beth right now, but ever since I stupidly brought it up with Baxter, I've not been able to stop.

He's so misguided.

For some reason he wears the guilt of their deaths heavily upon him like a shroud. But I don't see it that way at all. We were kids, there was no way Bax or I could have saved my big sister and baby niece. I owe Bax everything for going after my sister's killers. He did the one thing I couldn't: served up justice where the authorities failed.

My phone buzzes, distracting me from reliving their deaths on repeat, and it's a welcome interruption. Until I see that the message is from Thorn.

Get your head out your ass, stop sulking and come the fuck downstairs! We have shit to do.

He's a fine one to talk about sulking! He's barely been sober for more than twenty-four-hours at a time the last four years. I shake my head at his crappy reformed angelic attitude, not buying it for a second, and rattle off a quick reply.

Busy. Working. Some of us have contracts to uphold.

I can't resist the little dig. He's such a spoiled little brat. I don't think he's ever done a day's hard work in his life.

My phone buzzes again, with a call this time. His annoying ugly mug flashes up on my screen.

"What?" I snap.

"Dude. One: I told you not to sign that contract. You've literally handed over a piece of your soul."

"Your second point?" I sigh. There's no point in telling him I didn't sign shit. My band's manager has been hounding us to sign the new contracts for weeks now but there's no way

in hell I'm signing it. I can't go on tour. I'm not leaving Raven, and I'm sure as shit not leaving Phoenix. I'm convinced she's mine, and even if a crappy piece of paper says she isn't, I'm going to love her like she damn well is.

"There isn't another point," Thorn says, confused. I shake my head. He clearly started his little speech indicating that he had more to say, but he obviously doesn't have the brain cells anymore to remember that.

"Fine. Can I go now? I'm working."

"No! I told you, we have shit to do."

"And I told you, I'm busy." I run my hand through my hair, frustrated.

"You're going to want to help with this. Trust me. Get your ass downstairs."

Grumbling, I hang up and toss my phone down on the bed. I could do with stretching my legs anyway. But first I'll have a damn shower and take my time to show Thorn I'm nobody's bitch.

"Jesus you took your own sweet time getting down here," Thorn whines like a petulant child when I enter the kitchen. Ace is pottering around the kitchen, moving things and muttering under his breath in Slovenian. I think he's bitching about the layout of my state-of-the-art kitchen.

"I needed a shower. You didn't say it was a damn emergency, or I'd have come quicker."

"That's not normally your problem," he snickers.

"Asshole." I flip him off. "What's so important that it couldn't wait until I was done working?"

"You mean sulking?" he jibes. Ace chuckles.

"You can fuck off too," I say to Ace. "And if you hate the damn kitchen so much, rip it out and get a new one. I don't

care.”

“No need. Re...Preurediti¹? I move. Need space.”

I stare in disbelief at him. The kitchen’s huge. How could he possibly need more space? My confusion must show on my face because he smirks at me and clarifies, “For Phoenix.”

Because that makes so much more sense. The smallest resident needs more kitchen space? I shake my head and Ace shrugs, coming to sit at the breakfast island in the centre of the room. I join him and Thorn on the stools.

“Well? What’s this about?”

“We need to get organised—” Thorn begins.

“Aha!” Ace interrupts. “Organise. I reorganise kitchen. Make better.”

“Huh? Oh, whatever. Forget I spoke. Can somebody get to the point, *please?*”

“We need to get organised for Christmas. It’s just around the corner and we need Phoenix back so that we can give them both the best damn holiday they’ve ever had. Agreed?”

“Agree,” Ace says with a firm nod of his head.

Actually, Ace does have a point. It would be nice to make up for the no doubt shitty Christmases that they’ve had in the past, but paramount in all of that is having Nix back where she belongs.

“Yeah, good point. Yeah, we should do this.”

“So Ace, you’ll take care of—”

“Food.”

“That’s what I was going to say,” Thorn tuts. “And I’ll do the decorations.”

“Yeah, make it look like one of those cheesy ass romantic chick flicks you both love,” I say.

“Yeah but I won’t go tacky. I’ll keep it nice.”

“Whatever. What do you want me to do?”

“Presents. Obviously.”

“Is there a limit?”

“It has to fit in the house?”

“Hmmm, no deal.”

“Well, what did you have in mind?”

“Dunno yet, but I like to keep my options open.”

“Ugh. Fine. Do what you want.”

“I always do.” I smirk.

“Don’t we know it.”

“What are you lot whispering about?” Raven asks as she enters the kitchen, making me jump guiltily. Ace laughs while Thorn shoots me a withering look. I can’t keep secrets for shit, and I vowed there wouldn’t be any more lies between us so before Thorn can jump in with something, I answer her.

“We’re talking about Christmas.”

For a second her eyes light up but just as quickly her face falls again. I pull her into my embrace and kiss the top of her head.

“I promise it’ll be the best damn Christmas you and Phoenix have ever had. Together.”

She gives me a small smile like she doesn’t really believe me and I decide there and then that it’s a promise I will not break, even if I have to go there and kidnap Phoenix myself to bring her home.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper in her ear on impulse.

“What for?”

“I’ve been a moody asshole, haven’t I?”

She smiles because she’s too polite to say yes, even though once upon a time she’d have called me out on my shitty behaviour and probably broken my door down to chew me out.

“Did you at least channel it into something creative?”

“I tried.”

“Well there you go then, it wasn’t a waste. But maybe the next time you need some inspiration for your muse, we could get creative together.” She winks and my dick instantly stirs to life. I want to drag her to my room for *inspiration* for the rest of the damn week. It’s been way too long since I had a taste of her. I’m formulating my response when Ace interrupts my filthy thoughts.

“Princesa²,” Ace calls. “Help me.”

“Sure. What do you need?” Raven pulls away from me with a bright – forced – smile on her face.

“Shopping. We go?”

“Of course.”

Together, they leave the room, and I start plotting how I can bring Phoenix back, the law be damned.

Ace's Letter

(Translated with help)

Good morning princess in training. I hope you are having a lovely time with your grandmother. We are all missing you, but we are getting ready for your return.

I cannot decide if we should decorate for Christmas or if we should wait so that you can help us. We are going to have a real tree and it is a lot of fun to pick one out, so maybe we should wait and take you with us.

I also thought it would be nice if you decorated your bedroom too, so we will have to go shopping for pink Christmas decorations when you come home. Or any colour you like.

Until then, I am baking lots of cookies and freezing them so that you can try them when you come back. I have lots of new flavours but they never turn out as good as when my favourite helper is with me. I miss your help in the kitchen.

I can not wait to have cuddles. Did I say we miss you?

Be good.

See you soon.

Love,

Aljaž

P.S. I baked these cookies for you yesterday and used a special delivery man to bring them to your house with this letter, so they are fresh. Tell me what you think, are they too chocolatey?



CHAPTER FIVE

Ace

“There is no unexpected item in the mother fucking bagging area!” Raven screams like a wild banshee. I grin. I love angry Raven. I’ll take her over sad Raven any day. I don’t even care that people are staring.

“Princesa¹,” I make a half-arsed attempt to calm her down, secretly loving the show. I wonder if I can rile her up some more. I lean a little on the scales as Raven desperately tries to flag down a member of staff to help the malfunctioning equipment.

I dragged her from the house after our now daily workout and our sadly separate showers, under the pretence of needing to get baking supplies. Since she came out of her room and her shell a few days ago, she’s been committed to training and ‘getting into shape’ – her words, not mine. I think her shape is perfect. I also don’t think she needs to train for anything, but I can tell she likes having a focus, something to do to take her mind off Phoenix.

I sigh. We’re not getting anywhere with bringing the little girl home and it’s frustrating. I miss her. Whenever I bake, I still expect her to come running in to pinch the cookies while they’re still hot. I got used to having her as a shadow.

“It’s not *unexpected* you digital *fuck!* I just scanned it. I did the wavy-wave, you did the bleepy-bleep...it’s how this partnership works.”

I silently laugh, shoulders shaking, because she’s seriously scolding the self-scan checkout right now, having a conversation *and* a relationship with it. I’m almost jealous. Except, I’ve been on the end of her tongue lashings before and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. Even a machine.

Raven willingly came with me and for the last couple of hours we’ve been wandering around the supermarket with a basket picking up all sorts of goodies. I don’t need any of it. I

just wanted to spend time with Raven and get her out of the house for a bit.

“But oh no, you just had to go and have a digital stroke on me and die, didn’t you! And great, now you’re calling for backup. I don’t *need* help! *You* need help. You and your judgemental flashing red light can fuck off. I’m not a thief *or* an incompetent moron.”

The sales assistant comes over to fix the problem and Raven mutters under her breath the whole time – something about being paid to babysit a bathroom scale with delusions of grandeur – and I can’t hold my laughter in anymore. It breaks free, loud and clear, and Raven turns to death glare at me.

“What?” She demands. I just shake my head and pay for the shopping, scooping up the bags and following her out of the self-service area.

“I don’t know why you’re laughing,” she grumbles when we get outside and closer to the car.

“Best date ever,” I grin.

“This wasn’t a date. A date has to include—”

“Food and kissing,” I cut her off. “Food.” I shake the bags at her then drop them to the floor. “And kissing.”

She’s in my arms before she can blink and I kiss her like my life depends on it. Fuck I missed her. She feels good. Tastes good too. We’re pulled apart by horns blaring and someone yelling “get a room.” I grin at her.

“See? Date,” I tell her stubbornly.

“You broke the eggs,” she points out.

“No need,” I shrug.

“What do you mean you don’t need them?”

“Don’t need shopping. Rebel gets delivery home.” I tell her easily. I just wanted to get her out of the house for a bit, and this seemed like a good excuse.

I walk toward the car, but Raven picks up the discarded bags and follows after me.

“So why the hell did we just spend two hours buying all this stuff?” she demands.

“Date,” I reply.

I flash her my most charming grin and it works; she loses the angry confusion and shakes her head with affectionate exasperation at me.

“Good?” I ask.

“Was it a good date?” she clarifies and I nod. “Not my worst. Now take me for actual food. I’m so hangry I could kill.”

I laugh, not bothered by the blasé way she jokes about killing. I know she doesn’t mean it, even though she can kill and has in the past. You have to be able to joke about these things. Joking is better than crumbling from the guilt. I like strong Raven. I will make her stronger.

Impulsively, I stop the car and lean over to kiss her again. She laughs and hits me on the arm.

“You can’t stop here!”

“Can. Have. Will.” Another kiss with each word. More laughter from her. It’s music to my ears.

I decide to tell her what the note means.

“Kri moje ljubezni je moje življenje²,” I say, and her reaction tells me she knows exactly what I’m talking about. “Means, the blood of my love is my life.”

“Phoenix,” she whispers, tears springing to her eyes.

“And you.”

She gives me a smile that could rival the light from the sun, and I bask in her approval until more horns blaring make us jump and I remember that I’m blocking the roundabout, so drive on.

Raven slips her hand into mine whenever I’m not changing gears and I know that the day is good.

Baxter: I need...not a favour. Help. I need help on a project I have hanging over me. I want it gone. No. I need it gone. For good this time.

Unknown number: I'm all ears. Does it involve blood?

Baxter: Not this time.



CHAPTER SIX

Baxter

Enough is e-fucking-nough. Throwing my phone across the room in anger, I pace up and down the lounge. I don't give a fuck about wearing a mark into the carpet, I can't sit still.

“Kaj je narobe¹?” I startle. “What bothers you?”

Turning, I see Ace standing in the doorway watching me intently.

“I can't stand it!” I lash out. “The inaction. We're all just waiting for Cordelia to make her next move, when we should be going on the offensive.”

“Suggest?”

“What do I suggest? I don't know. I just need...” I trail off. I can't tell Ace that the need to inflict pain is coursing through my veins, pumping so hard that there's a constant roaring in my ears. That the intoxicating bloodlust is so strong I can't see straight. He'd freak the fuck out and never let me near Raven or Phoenix again. Rightly so.

“Talk.”

“Cordelia. The court case. Getting Phoenix back. Tilly. Charlie,” I say the last name with a fierce bite, hands fisting so tight my nails make crescent moons on my palms. “Where do I start?”

“What's this?” Jax asks, entering the room to stand beside Ace. I'm still pacing back and forth, agitated and unable to calm my burning need for revenge.

“Baxter mora prelitu kri²,” Ace says to Jax, though I have no idea what he just said. Jax obviously does because he turns to me with a raised brow.

“You can't kill Cordelia.”

“I know,” I growl.

“You can't kill any of them,” his tone is reproachful.

“*I know*,” I repeat, gnashing my teeth together in frustration.

“But...” Jax pauses and I halt my pacing to meet his gaze. His dark eyes are full of understanding and...need? Does he feel like I do? Is there more than one monster among us? Impossible. “But you can send a message.”

“To whom?” I can barely conceal my enthusiasm. Does Jax realise what he’s doing? What he’s offering? What I’ll do if I’m allowed to let the beast out of its box and off its leash? My heart pounds harder – with excitement not rage this time.

“Charlie. I think he’s had long enough to recover from his injuries. It’s time we sent him and his father a message. Just because Raven is a nice person and isn’t going to pursue Charlie for what he did, it doesn’t mean that we won’t.”

“And you want me to deliver this message?” I check. I need Jax to be absolutely sure what he’s giving me permission to do, even as my mind is already selecting the toys I’d like to use on him.

“Yes. I’m sure we can find someone to go with you. To keep you in check and to ensure he’s still breathing when you’re done.”

Disappointment lances through my chest but I shake it off. I *know* I’m not allowed to kill him, but it’s true that I could lose control in the heat of the moment. I’m not used to crimes of passion, who knows how I’ll bring myself back from the point of no return.

“I go,” Ace offers. I blink in surprise.

“You?”

“Ace is the perfect choice,” Jax explains, nodding slightly. “He has training but is levelheaded enough to stop you. Thorn and Rebel would go along with anything you suggested in their current frame of mind.”

“Fine,” I snap, even though I know he’s right. “When?”

God knows why I’m deferring to Jax for permission on this. Normally I wouldn’t give a fuck; I do what I want and

damn the consequences. I have enough money and connections to get away with most shit. But I guess it's not just me anymore. I have to think about how this will impact Raven, and I guess, the rest of the group. Hence why I'll listen – begrudgingly – to Jax.

“No time like the present.” He shrugs. “How about tonight? Or do you need some time to plan and prepare?”

“I don't plan. No preparation necessary.” I grin. I've been dreaming of this moment since I found out that fucker had hurt Raven. Marching into the operating room to demand and pay off the surgeon hadn't been enough. A medically induced coma was to buy us some time. Now it's time to collect on the pain and suffering he owes for every single drop of Raven's blood that he shed. “Tonight's perfect. Does that work for you Ace?”

“Popolno³.” He nods. “Perfect.”

The rapist is no longer in his penthouse dormitory. I've been keeping tabs on him. It seems daddy dearest, Charles Snr, *did* feel something about what happened to Raven because he promptly quit his position at the university. Admittedly, it was probably more to do with his own shame and embarrassment, but once he handed in his notice, his son was no longer entitled to his fancy ass scholarship.

“Ustrana luknja⁴,” Ace mutters under his breath as we sit in my car outside the rapist's flat and wait for his company to leave. I raise a brow at him. “Shithole. Makes Raven's seem nice.”

I nod in agreement; the place is worse than Raven's old flat, but I know that it could have been much worse for her if I wasn't doing my bit on the side to help her out, undetected. With his grandparents unwilling or unable to support him any longer, Charlie now resides in a small flat close to campus while he desperately relies on his socialite mother to secure him a wealthy wife. For now, the grandparents are still paying

for his education, but without the perks he's used to and no doubt thinks he's entitled to. He's actually waiting on a transfer to a less prestigious university, and I have it on good authority that his place has been fast tracked. His parents, now separated, have been informed that he has transferred already.

Basically, no one is going to miss him for a few days. Maybe even longer.

“Look out,” I say, pointing to the opening door of the block of flats we've been staking out. Three rowdy guys are leaving, bottles in hand, and I know they've been visiting the rapist because they all look like his sycophants. “Let's do this.”

Wordlessly, we climb out of the car and I quickly check my pockets to ensure all of my equipment is where I need it. It's been a long time since I had a range of toys to play with. I'm determined to make this guy pay, but I'd rather put a bullet in him than get carried away. I need to be smart. I need to hit him where it's going to hurt. Maximum damage and impact.

He needs a wealthy wife. He has to keep up appearances – they're everything to him. So I'll start by carving up his precious face. It's logical, and in no way reminiscent of the way he carved up Raven's body with his knife. Maybe he can afford to lose a finger or two as well. His ring finger could be a good place to start.

“Dihati⁵,” Ace tells me. “Breathe.”

I give him my signature smile, the one that's all psycho. I don't need to breathe or calm down. I am ice. I'm *excited*.

Getting in is no trouble. The lock on the main door into the flats is broken so we waltz right in. I knock twice on the first door we pass and immediately loud heavy metal music blares through the flimsy door. A moment later, a cacophony of metal floods the entire building as all of the residents switch on their music. It pays to have connections – or to at least be able to pay people off – although in a dump as shady as this, I doubt the residents would ever dream of seeing or hearing anything. There's certainly no security or surveillance anywhere to be found.

We cross the hallway to the one silent door. The rapist's. I nod at Ace and he uses his bulk – nowhere near as big as Rebel but still impressively built – to bust open the shitty lock and pathetic chain.

“What the fuck?!” The piece of shit cries from the sofa where he has one hand in his sweatpants and a cheesy porno blaring from the speakers. His guests just left, so either they're into some kinky shit or this guy moves fast. I'm betting on the latter. Although, it's probably both.

Ace sniggers at catching him with his pants down but before the fucker can jump to his feet, he screams. It's raw and agonised and music to my ears. Ace has moved in a blur that I didn't even see and launched a knife into the thigh of the screaming cunt.

I blink, impressed. What kind of training *does* this guy have? Raven mentioned they used to spar together and I know she's handy with a blade too...

“Izmet⁶,” Ace spits. I've never seen him wound so tight. He's enraged. An emotion I honestly didn't think him capable of. He's always so laid back and easy going. But there was emotion behind the way he threw that knife; it sunk into the rapist's flesh right up to the hilt.

The scum is so busy screaming at his leg, he fails to notice our approach. We grab him under the arms and haul his ass up over the back of the sofa, dragging him into his bedroom. I toss him on the bed like the filthy trash that he is, wiping my hands of the stain of him on my pressed slacks. Ace, dressed in far more practical sweatpants, T-shirt and hoodie, grins at my actions.

Coward on the bed doesn't even try to move.

“Please! Please! What do you want? I have money! My family's rich!”

“If you're so rich, where's your fancy penthouse now?” I give a hollow laugh. His eyes widen.

“Oh yes, Charles Junior. I know everything about you—”

He pales.

“—And your fucked-up family tree.”

I spy the wrist restraints wrapped around the bars of his headboard. They're far too heavy duty to be for consensual sex. It turns my stomach knowing why he has them, but I steel myself. It just makes my job easier. I nod towards the cuffs and Ace takes the hint, easily restraining the guy.

I distract him by twisting the knife and making him scream. He turns a funny shade of green, and I just know that we're going to be here all night.

“This pussy doesn't have the stomach for it. I bet he passes out in the next ten minutes,” I mutter disgustedly.

“Five,” Ace barks as I pull out my favourite blade, caressing it like a lover. It's been far too long since it saw any action, and it craves the taste of blood as much as I do.

Hopping up onto the bed, I straddle the guy's chest, knees either side of his pathetic torso. Anger and disgust bubble up inside me as I stare down at him and wonder what the hell Raven ever saw in him.

I spit in his face.

“Ace. Open his mouth.”

Grabbing his tongue and yanking it as far out of his mouth as I can, I dance the tip of my blade along the sensitive organ while he desperately tries to buck me off. I don't even have to ask Ace to take care of his legs for me though, he moves instinctively to tackle the problem. Luckily, there's ankle cuffs too. Bastard.

I stab straight through his tongue in one angry motion. Fucking rapist scum. I enjoy his gargled screams as his blood runs down his throat. Then I admire the way my blade, skewered through his tongue, prevents him from retracting it back into his mouth. The blood running in rivers of red from the corners of his lips is a sight to behold.

Taking a second, smaller and more lethal knife from my inside jacket pocket, I neatly cut away slithers of his flesh, alternating between his face and his tongue until he's seriously close to passing out.

I sigh, disappointed that it could already be time to take a break, and yank the knife from his tongue which flops onto the side of his face like a lolling dog.

Too late. He's blacked out.

Unknown number: What's in it for me then if I don't even get to kill someone?

Baxter: Pussy.

Unknown number: Can I hurt it?

Baxter: Maybe.

Unknown number: I'm in.

Baxter: I'll call you from a secure line.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Thorn

“Where is everyone?” Raven asks, coming into the lounge and curling up on the sofa next to me.

I shrug and lift the corner of my blanket in invitation. She accepts, scooting closer so that the blanket covers both of us.

“I think Rebel is in his room, doing some music stuff. Jax went out about an hour ago and Baxter and Ace disappeared together a few hours ago.”

“That’s odd.” She frowns.

“Jealous?” I tease.

“Hell yeah!” She laughs. “If those two are getting it on, I want a front row seat.”

“I don’t think Baxter swings that way,” I say pulling a face. I wouldn’t care if he did – if anyone did – but he doesn’t seem the sort.

“But you think Ace would?”

Again I shrug. “Not my place to care,” I say.

“Fair point...so what are you doing?”

“Just watching complete and utter crap on tv. Why?”

“I’m...” she hesitates.

“Hey, it’s okay. Whatever you’re thinking or feeling is totally justified.”

“Thanks.” She gives me a small smile. “I guess, I’m just a bit...lonely? Bored maybe?”

“Well let’s turn this shit off and watch a film together. What do you fancy?”

“I don’t know. Can you pick? I’m tired.”

“Shall we watch a film in bed?” I suggest. “No funny business. Just it’ll be more comfortable and if you fall asleep I can slip out and not disturb you.”

“What if I want funny business?” She asks with a challenging smirk that’s all kinds of sexy.

“I’ll choose a rom com,” I quip, refusing to get my hopes up.

“Okay.” She laughs and stands, stretching her arms above her head as she fights off a yawn. I know I should be getting up and moving too but I’m captivated by the sliver of skin that’s showing where her top has ridden up.

“Earth to Thor? Come in?” she teases.

“I love it when you call me that.”

“You’re my blond sex god. It’s fitting.”

“So you only want me for my body?”

“Well, Ace bakes...” she teases. And even though I *know* she’s joking, I feel a stab of disappointment.

Because she’s right. Baxter has been her rock. Ace is this amazing homemaker who can also kick ass while showing them how to protect and defend themselves. Jax is fiercely protective, the organised planner who has everything covered. And the chemistry and fireworks between Raven and Rebel are undeniable.

Then there’s me.

What am I good for?

A chick flick and maybe a crappy joke or two.

“Maybe we should stay here,” I suddenly declare, my mood soured. “You go make the popcorn, I’ll line up the film.”

Thankfully she doesn’t question my sudden change of heart. By the time she returns with the scent of butter and salt filling the air, I’ve set up a new romantic film on Netflix. Everyone’s been banging on about it for some reason, and even though it’s not a comedy, I’m sure Raven will like it.

She settles beside me on the sofa, our thighs touching, and offers me the popcorn. I take a handful and sit awkwardly, unable to relax. A few minutes into the film, Raven sighs.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“Huh? Nothing.”

“You’re stiff as a board. What’s up?”

“Nothing.” Even I can hear how defensive I sound. I sigh again, shake off my morose mood and sling an arm around Raven’s shoulders, pulling her to my chest. “Better, princess?”

“Much,” she replies, snuggling in and stealing the popcorn out of my hand.

“Hey! Get your own, there’s a bowl full right there.”

“It doesn’t taste as good as yours,” she whines, making me smile.

We watch the film for a while, and I have to resist the urge to snicker at how bad it is. Sure the sexy scenes are steamy but the acting is diabolical. Don’t even get me started on the piss poor script.

“This is crap,” I eventually complain. Raven smirks at me. “What?”

“You’re just jealous,” she sniggers.

“What? Of what?”

“His wealth? Power? Good looks? Sexual prowess?” she shrugs nonchalantly, like he’s all that and more. I toss popcorn at her.

“Princess, there’s nothing wrong with my sexual prowess, good looks or wealth,” I huff. I could mention how much power we have too, but at the moment I actually feel pretty powerless and I don’t want to remind her of the whole Phoenix situation right now.

“Oh really?” She smirks in challenge. “Prove it.”

“You wanna see my bank account?”

“I thought maybe you could prove the other part to me.”

“My good looks?”

“Or…”

“Oh you want me to prove how sexy I am?”

“I wouldn’t say no.” She laughs dismissively. “If you can catch me first.”

“Oh, challenge accepted, princess.”

She gets to her feet and attempts to run but I pounce, the bowl of popcorn tumbling onto the floor, forgotten. I tackle her to the carpet and straddle her. Instantly my dick jerks to life but I have more important things to focus on right now: tickling the shit out of her.

“Stop! Thorn, stop! Please!” She squeals and laughs, twisting and wriggling under me in a desperate attempt to get free. I don’t let her though.

“Nope. Sorry, I guess I’m just too jealous to know when to stop.”

“Alright, alright! I’ll admit it!”

“Admit what, princess?” I ask, pausing from my attack to stare down at her.

“You have nothing to be jealous about!”

“I think I still need to prove that,” I reply, before capturing her lips with mine. The tickling is forgotten as she groans and laces her fingers into my hair, tugging me closer and wrapping her legs around my waist. This time when my dick jerks to life, I listen to it.

Unable to help myself, I grind my hips against her, loving the reaction she gives me. Her gasp of surprise is swallowed by my tongue demanding entry into her mouth. Under the thin material of her top, I feel her nipples harden against me and I groan in frustration. There’s too much material between us.

Pulling back, breathing hard, I gaze down at her. Her lids are hooded with lust and she’s panting just as much as me. Either we’re both really unfit, or both really into it.

“Do you want to watch the rest of the god-awful film?” I ask. She silently shakes her head. “Want me to stop?” Another shake. “Shall we go upstairs?”

She nods. It's all the encouragement I need. I move to my knees, freeing her, but before she can get up, I scoop her into my arms and stand. Cradled in my arms she's tiny, but I love the way she snuggles in against me, running her tongue seductively along my neck.

"Stop that princess, or I'll drop you right here and take you on the stairs," I warn.

"I wouldn't mind," she replies cheekily.

"We're doing this right," I insist, climbing the stairs with her still in my arms. Like fuck am I gonna take her up to my room though, not because I can't manage her weight, but her room is closer and I'm feeling impatient to prove myself.

I may not have anything to be jealous about with that entitled psychopathic asshole on the TV, but measuring up against four other boyfriends means I have everything to prove. Kicking open the door to her bedroom, and slamming it shut behind me, I walk over to the bed and place her down gently like the precious cargo she is. She blinks up at me and reaches for my hand.

"You're too far away," she complains.

"And you're wearing too many clothes," I counter, pulling off my shirt and dropping my jeans to the floor. She takes the hint and wastes no time in removing her clothes and then we're staring at one another and no one is making a move.

"Join me," she says, scooting back further onto the bed to make room for me and climbing under the covers. There's a chill in the room but it's not *that* cold. I can keep us both plenty warm enough, but I don't say anything, choosing to just join her instead.

Once I'm under the covers with her, she pulls me close and kisses me. I run my hands down her back, unable to resist how silky soft she is. The scent floods my brain with happy memories and I feel like I'm *home* for the first time in years. While we lose each other in hungry kisses, I run my fingers up and down her ribs, and play with the dimples on her back at the base of her spine. My hands smooth over the round globes

of her ass, skimming lower to the backs of her thighs. I can't get enough of her, can't stop touching her.

I roll her onto her back and tease her with feather-light touches until she's squirming and begging for a proper touch. Grinning, I kiss my way down her neck, stopping to worship her breasts, before continuing my path down to her thighs. She's even softer there, and her scent intoxicates me. I draw my tongue along her sweetness which elicits a low groan from her. I repeat the action until she's grinding down on my face, trying to force my head into the position she needs it to hit that sweet spot. I deny her until she's begging, mewling out my name in equal prayers and curses.

Eventually I give in, delivering what she needs: my tongue on her clit drawing figures of eight. I slide two fingers inside, curling them to brush against her G spot so that her hips buck up off the mattress and she cries out. It doesn't take long for her muscles to tighten, her thighs clamping up around my ears and trembling as she desperately tries to stave off her release. But I'm not having that. Relentlessly I pump my fingers into her, picking up the pace and ensuring my strokes meet the rhythm of my tongue.

With a wordless shout she comes apart under me, and after riding out the aftershocks of her orgasm her thighs relax and drop back down to the mattress. She's boneless, jelly, ruined on the sheets which she's fisted beneath her and her beautiful body is covered in a light sheen of sweat. Her hair is ruffled from where she's been thrashing against the pillow, her chest heaving from her struggled pants, and she's never looked more beautiful.

I kiss her deeply before slipping from the bed and moving to the bathroom to grab a washcloth. I soak it in warm water, wring it out, and head back to the bedroom. Only, when I get there I find Raven absolutely sparko on the bed. Carefully, I clean her up and tuck her into bed. Then I grab my discarded clothes and let myself out, quietly closing her bedroom door behind me.

I need a cold shower.

Breaking ~~More~~ Shit

Masks and false faces

Shadows and ???

Dark spaces?

~~A~~ a domino ~~vizard~~ visage

Can't see beyond ~~your~~ ~~the~~ your mirage

I know you have identities to hide

Baggage in the attic and skeletons in your closet

truths you feel you need to disguise

But your time is up

you can no longer conceal

~~Or obscure~~ your feelings,

It's getting real

~~Your veil is wearing thin~~

~~I'm breaking out~~

~~smashing through~~

~~the smoke and mirrors~~

~~and the camouflage you tried to hide~~

~~Two faced~~

~~Two sides~~

~~Every story tells a lie~~

Fucking shit



CHAPTER EIGHT

Ace

I want a turn. I thought I could be calm. Dispassionate. Use my training. But I'm staring into the eyes of a monster. A *real* monster: the one who hurt Raven. Not Baxter and his demons. He just likes to *think* he's a monster.

It's clear that there's a darkness in him. Rebel only ever mentioned that they were friends before some big tragedy struck and that they drifted apart afterwards out of guilt. I'm not entirely sure what happened, but I'm almost certain it has something to do with Rebel's sister and his baby niece. He never talks about them, but Thorn accidentally let their names slip once. Casey and Beth.

I've always itched to know their story, but would never dare ask. How can I when I keep my own secrets and tragedies wrapped up tighter than a boy scout's best knot. I love the guys like brothers, but I'm not convinced they would feel the same if they knew the things I was forced to do back home, and at such a young age too. It's why I send every penny I earn back home: to save my sisters from a fate worse than death.

"Shall we bring him round?" Baxter's voice brings me back to the present. Back to my anger.

"Huh?" I blink.

"Shall we wake him up?"

"Yeah." I nod. Let's do this.

I exit the bedroom to find something to revive the creep with. It helps to clear my head, getting out of the small room with the overwhelming stench of blood and fear.

I like that Baxter's incapacitated his tongue. I don't ever want to hear tortured screams again. Even if I'm the one inflicting them.

I find a cooler filled with beers and ice. Perfect. I could use a drink about now but I don't want to touch anything belonging to this *baraba*¹. I dump the beers in the sink and

carry the cooler back to the bedroom where Baxter is lighting a blow torch. The fierce jet of purple-blue flame and the unique roar of the torch captivates me.

I dump the water over the bastard's head and he immediately comes round, spluttering and coughing.

"May I?" I ask, nodding at the blow torch. Baxter does a double take before wordlessly handing it to me. The smell of propane envelopes me and drags my memories, kicking and screaming, back home. It burns nearly a thousand degrees hotter than a butane torch, and the differences the two have on the skin are remarkable.

Captured in a trance, I marvel at how it is always the colour of the flame that I love. How something so pretty can be so lethal. How at just the right temperature the flame matches the violet of my eyes.

"Open your fucking mouth or I swear to god the next thing I feed you will be your own rapist cock," Baxter growls in a low, terrifyingly dangerous voice.

I glance over just in time to see Charlie reluctantly opening his mouth and Baxter dropping slivers of his own flesh down his throat. My stomach churns but I ignore it. He deserves so much more.

With that, I turn back to my own task and start with the bare soles of his feet. It's a love hate relationship, the smell of burning flesh. I miss home sometimes. But I don't miss this.

While the worm writhes on the bed in a desperate – but futile – attempt to avoid my flames, Baxter moves to the head of the bed. Fisting Charlie's blonde locks, he effortlessly slices a circle around his scalp. His head falls back to the pillow but there's more than just hair left behind in Baxter's fist. He's scalped him. A perfectly neat little round bald patch like an old man. He flings it carelessly over his shoulder somewhere and I'm glad he's not into taking trophies back home with him. Imagine giving *that* to Nix to play with.

I let the blowtorch heat his balls until he's twitching and the smell of singed hair turns my stomach. Flesh I'm fine with.

Blood's okay. Fear is...harder to ignore. But hair's a fucking trigger.

Shutting it off and tossing it away in disgust, I palm a knife instead. Baxter's carefully digging the tip of his blade in a neat circle around the guy's nipple, the way you'd carefully try to detach a cake from a tin. The guy's whimpering around his swollen face – obviously Baxter threw in a few punches while I was distracted – and sobbing silently too, if the jerking motion of his chest is anything to go by.

I figure I may as well do the same with his fingers, switching out a knife for pliers. Can't marry if there's no ring finger to slide it on. Not that any woman will even think about looking his way by the time we're done. The blistering burns running all up his legs alone are sickening.

Baxter grins wickedly at the sound of the metal crunching through the bone.

“Do his dick next.”

The worm whimpers.

“Did I say you could make a fucking sound?”

The second nipple comes off in a furious slash and then he straddles the guy, right on his bleeding chest, and gets to work carving up his face. I don't need to watch, I know what'll be written there by the time he pulls away.

Rapist Scum.

If it were up to me I'd carve it on every inch of his skin, though I expect Baxter will do the same anyway.

I scan my eyes down the piece of shit's body, unsatisfied with the damage inflicted so far. It's not enough. I don't want to kill him – it would be too easy for him – but I want to do *more*.

I consider Baxter's suggestion, *do his dick next*, and I think of Michael and their rotten family tree. I think of Raven and Nix. I think of Lizzie and the unborn baby in her belly, put there under the most horrific circumstances, but she was determined to love it anyway.

No.

There's no way this fucker is being allowed to do this ever again. Hopefully this family's depravity begins and ends with Michael and Charlie. I won't allow this gene pool to hurt anyone else. I'll weed out and cut down every bad vine on the family tree. Starting with incapacitating the one in front of me. Permanently.

My resolve firms, my grip on my knife tightens. I step up to the bed once more. With the ruthless efficiency of a butcher, I remove his testicles, my blade slicing through his flesh like a hot knife through butter. It's almost *too* easy.

"Going to clean," I grunt at Baxter, taking my tools with me into the bathroom. I can't go back to Raven like this.

Shaking my head, I quickly clean off my tools in the sink and then step under the lukewarm shower spray to rinse off the blood before it dries. I refrain from using any products; the last thing I'd want is to go home to Raven smelling like *him*.

Done, I quickly dry off using a towel from my kit bag and pull on my spare change of clothes. I survey my reflection in the mirror. Warm violet eyes stare back at me, no guilt, remorse or shame in my gaze. I'm still me, and I'll kill, maim and torture for anyone I love.

Please refrain from sending food in the mail to my great-granddaughter. It is uncouth and unhygienic. They went straight into the bin, along with your poorly written, virtually illiterate note.

You are not on the child's list of prescribed visitors and you will be hearing from my lawyer shortly as I intend to update the order to include barring my granddaughter from phone, video and written correspondence.

You will be denied all contact, and if you continue to attempt to reach out to Phoenix Elizabeth, I will take this further.

Good day,

Ms C Deighton.



CHAPTER NINE

Jax

As if I was going to send Baxter and Ace off to take care of Charlie alone. I watched as Baxter called in some favours this afternoon but I still couldn't leave anything to chance.

I've had surveillance on Charlie since the day he came out of hospital. His flat is rigged and bugged with every type of spyware I could get my hands on. I've not taken an eye off him since the day he laid his hands on Raven.

And I don't intend to stop now.

Hence why I'm currently sitting in a shitty cafe on The Mile with my laptop, headphones, a paperback and some god-awful coffee. I have the flat's audio running and a tiny window showing the bedroom. I don't need to worry, I'm sitting with my back to the wall and the all-night cafe is dead anyway.

On a separate document I'm making a list of what needs to be done. Obviously bringing Phoenix back home – legally – is top priority, but that doesn't mean it has to be dealt with first. We have a slew of lawyers wading through all sorts of bullshit accusations that the witch has filed against not only Raven, but the rest of us as well. The only person who seems to be made of Teflon right now is Baxter. Whatever shit she throws at him, just won't stick. I feel like he's key to getting Nix home, I'm just not sure how.

Hence why I don't mind them taking care of Charlie right now. There's nothing else to do right this second, and I could tell that Baxter was close to snapping. Better to give an inch than let him take a mile. The last thing I need is some unknown, unstable catalyst going off and making things worse.

Besides, I trust Ace with my life so I know he'll rein him in.

I take a sip of my lukewarm coffee and wince. It really is vile. But *this* is the only place open with free public Wi-Fi, and I have other marks I need to check in on.

I know there's a piece of the puzzle that just isn't fitting. Michael and Tilly. Michael and Charlie. Charlie's family and Cordelia. What am I missing?

I pull out my phone and scroll through my contacts until I find the guy I hired to hunt down Raven all those years ago. He's the best in the business, and even though he couldn't find Raven, I'm sure he'll come through with this task. I hit dial, not caring that it's the early hours of the morning.

"Lo?" A voice gruff with sleep answers on the final ring.

"It's me." I huff in annoyance.

"Sup mate?"

"I need you to find someone for me."

"Sure thing, shoot."

"I need information on a family tree. I'll send you the details."

"On it boss. I'll get started right away."

The line goes dead because I have nothing else to say. I email the details of what I need and the little information I already have. There's a piece of the puzzle missing and I'm not going to rest until I find it.

Happier now that I've set things in motion, I signal to the server that I'll take another mug of the shittiest coffee in the world. Once the steaming mug of shit is in my hand and the barista is back behind the counter, I maximise the video screen and sit back to enjoy the show.

Baxter: Update report.

Unknown number: Contact has been made.

Baxter: Is that all?

Unknown number: Are you sure I can't kill her?

Baxter: Not yet. She may be useful.

Unknown number: Do you even realise what a nightmare she is?

Unknown number: My fee just doubled.



CHAPTER TEN

Baxter

I'm having fun removing the weasel's toenails with pliers when Ace returns and I give him a grin. He winces slightly before returning it, and I wonder if maybe I look a little *too* maniacal right now. Tough shit. I'm having fun.

"...maybe enough?"

I missed the start of whatever Ace was suggesting but I scowl when I catch the ending. It'll *never* be enough.

"The fucker's still breathing isn't he?"

"Barely."

I glance down at the body on the bed and see that Ace is right. He's virtually a corpse. Shit. When did he stop screaming? I was lost in the moment, the music. But...I don't want to stop. I don't want this guy's last memory of me to be something as simple as losing a fingernail. That's shit. I need this worm pissing his pants in fear every time the wind blows.

"Wake him up again," I demand roughly.

"Baxter—"

"I'm done, okay? I just want to talk to him before we leave." I sigh. I don't want that at all, but I made a promise and I'll damn well keep it.

"No ice."

"Get an extinguisher. Even this fucking shit hole will have one somewhere."

I reach over and wrench the sleeping beauty's mouth open, yanking his front two teeth out with my pliers and carelessly dropping them down his throat. That's one way to dispose of evidence, right?

Ace huffs but disappears to do as I asked while I look the bastard over. Every inch of his skin is marred in some way or other, the damage irreparable. Even if his family still had their

enormous fortune, no amount of plastic surgery would ever put him back together again.

I take out my phone and snap a quick picture of him, wondering if I'll ever show it to Raven. It automatically uploads to a secure server and deletes itself from my phone. Nothing I trust more in the world than Rebel's software, it's never failed me before.

Ace returns and I hold out my hand for the extinguisher, which he hands over. Albeit reluctantly. I could bash the cunt's skull in so easily with it, but what would be the point if he's not awake to see his final moments? Instead, I keep my word and spray the shit out of him, even though I want nothing more than to ram the nozzle down his throat. Shame it's just a water extinguisher really. You can have a lot of fun with the chemical based ones.

He coughs, splutters and groans as he comes round. I get right in his face, and his eyes bulge in absolute terror. A moment later the acrid stench of piss fills the room. I smirk.

"If you think I'm scary, you have no idea what hell will rain down on you if you even think about looking at a woman ever again." My tone is low and menacing. "I will be watching you, always. My eyes will never leave you. Every time the lights are out...When a shadow moves...Know it could be me...Coming back to claim what is rightfully mine...Your death."

I step away from the scum but I can't resist glancing back at him. I spit in his face.

"Zločin iz strasti¹!" Ace snaps in warning. I spin around to glare at him. "Untie?"

"You can. I don't give a fuck," I snap back. I don't know what he said but I don't like his tone. I scowl at him. "What the fuck did you say?"

"Passion crime."

I throw my equipment into my bag, keeping my favourite blades out and wiping them down on the bedcovers before pocketing them.

“Where’s your shit?” I ask Ace.

“Bag,” he grunts.

“Leave it here. I have a cleanup crew on standby. They’ll take care of everything and return any gear you want to keep.”

“Enostavno².”

I shrug. I don’t know what he’s saying but his attitude seems better so I brush it off. It is easier this way. I come in, do the job, leave. Someone else cleans up and takes care of the mess for me. It helps me remain untouchable. Obviously Ace was expecting something similar though; he’s already cleaned up. I snort in amusement. Pretty boy.

“Funny?”

“You. All clean. Did you take a fucking shower?” I mentally make a note to tell the clean-up crew to torch the fucking place. Between the cooler, the extinguisher and goddamn shower, Ace has contaminated just about every damn room.

“How are you...” He waves his hands around, searching for the word. “So damn čisto³. Clean?”

“I’m a pro.” I smirk. “And you stopped me having any *real* fun.”

“This wasn’t fun?”

“Not the best date I’ve ever had, princess.” I wink at him and he chuckles.

“Let’s get out of here. The music’s shit.”

Ace nods to me and turns, releasing the useless sack of shit from his confines. He rolls him over with one hand so that he’s prone on his front, and slowly starts to count in Slovenian.

“Eno... Dva... Tri...⁴”

It takes me a moment to realise he’s searching for something. When he finds it, he smoothly slides his blade into the cunt’s back before pulling free.

“What the fuck was that?” I demand. Turning to me, he shrugs and grins.

“Walking him no more.”

“What did you do?”

“Passion crime.”

“I thought we weren’t allowed to do that,” I reply dryly and this time the grin he gives me reaches shit-eating proportions.

“No. Just you.”

Appeal for Witnesses

Today the hashtag #TrackDownTilly has hit record highs across several social media platforms after concerned friends raised the alarm that model, socialite, and wife to stockbroker Archibald Harris, Tilly Harris, hadn't been seen or heard from in days.

Officials have been notified, and an investigation is being launched. At present, Mr Harris hasn't given a statement on the matter.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Raven

I'm jolted awake by the front door. I know there's no intruder; I have the most state-of-the-art system known to man. The door closed with such a soft click that I just know it's the guys coming home, hence why there's no need to worry. Rolling over, I glare at my alarm clock. It's four a.m.! Where the hell have they been? And why the hell would Baxter and Ace be out together? I may not need to worry, but I sure as hell can be mad.

Creaking floorboards on the landing outside my room have me jumping out of bed and wrenching my door open, wanting to demand answers. It doesn't occur to me until the landing night light spills into my room that I'm naked.

I smack into a wall of muscle and stumble back with an 'oof'. Whoever I've hit keeps coming, bumping against my chest until I have no choice but to walk backwards or fall on my ass. When the back of my knees bump against the bed, I fall onto the mattress anyway, and as my intruder tumbles down on top of me, we're cast in just enough light for me to see that it's Baxter that's assaulted me.

"What—"

But I'm cut off from asking what the heck is going on, where the bloody hell he's been, or what the flying fuck he thinks he's doing coming in at four in the morning, because his lips crash down against mine even harder than his body just did.

It's not a kiss, it's a claiming. He devours me, like he needs to brand his name on my soul. And all I can do is lie there and take it because my brain is still catching up...Baxter. Fuck. *Baxter* has me pinned to the bed and is kissing me senseless.

The only thing more forceful than his bruising kiss is the sizable erection digging in my belly.

What...

The...

No words.

I can taste the darkness on his lips, like a promise of the fun we could have if I just gave in. Gone is my best friend and confidante. Gone is the steady reliable rock that's been my anchor for all these years. Gone is the amazing father figure that Phoenix adores. All that's left is the *real* Baxter Branson. He tastes like wickedness and sin, pain and pleasure, hope and destruction. And I realise that I love it. Want it. Crave it.

A sharp pain radiates through my bottom lip, making me pull away.

“Fuck!” I hiss, shoving against Baxter's chest to get some distance between us. I need to think. I need to *breathe* damn it.

With a modicum of space between us, my hand flies to my lip to inspect for damage. Not only is it swollen from the force of his kiss, but my hand comes away wet too.

“I'm bleeding!”

Fuck. The grin he gives me could melt my panties, if I were wearing any. Instead, it makes my insides combust. No smile that devilish and dangerous should be so arousing. But he's still an ass for biting me hard enough to draw blood, so I force a scowl onto my face instead.

“Asshole!”

His smile widens so I smack his chest. And then he notices I'm naked and his grin becomes wolfish as he takes in every inch of me with the confidence of a predator that knows he can't lose. Damn it why didn't we shut the door? Everything is easier in the dark. He wouldn't see my flaws. My scars. The battle wounds from bringing Phoenix into the world. I know Baxter has seen me at my worst, my lowest, but he's never seen me like this.

I close my eyes and pull him closer, returning his kiss with passion this time. Yes, I want him. But I also want him to stop looking at me. He stares like he's cataloguing every mark, committing it to memory and filing it away to be inspected more closely at a later date. I didn't miss the white-hot rage

flaring in his eyes when he saw the scars Michael and Charlie both gifted me with. He needs a distraction as much as I do because I don't like to think what he might do if he stares at those particular marks for too long.

I wrap my bare legs around his waist, grinding up against him as he bites my nipple. I gasp at the pain, arching up, before melting back down into the mattress as he soothes the sting with his tongue. I don't expect to like it. In fact, I'm sure I *don't* like it. But my body clearly has other ideas and is scrambling for more.

He presses into me, pinning my arms above my head and the simultaneous stimulation of the rough brush of his clothing against my soft skin, and the gentle way he kisses the tender skin of the inside of my bicep makes me tremble. Of course Baxter's wearing a three piece tweed suit, barely a crease out of place, while I'm a panting mess below him.

With a final bite to the inside of my arm that really makes me yelp – and causes a rush of heat between my thighs – he releases my arms and begins his descent between my legs. My hands instantly fist his hair, desperate to rumple him a little but to also make sure he doesn't pull away.

Until his lips caress my scars and suddenly I'm shoving his head away with all the force I can muster and scrambling up the bed, clutching the sheets to my chest.

“What the hell?!” I don't know which of us says it loudest.

“Don't touch me there! Those. Don't...don't touch them...”

Baxter stares at me in astonished confusion. I wipe my hand over my face to dash away the tears I didn't ask to fall. It's when I notice the small dark smear of blood on my hand. Tacky. Virtually dry.

“What is this?” I ask, my fear masked as anger suddenly leaving me as concern replaces the emotions swirling inside of me. “Are you hurt? Have you been bleeding?”

“Fuck...No.” Baxter runs a hand through his hair and inspects his own hand for the same smear that’s on mine.

“Don’t lie to me,” I snap. Guilty eyes meet mine for a split second and then snap away.

“Where have you been?” I ask quietly.

“Raven—” his tone is pleading. Begging me to drop it. But I can’t.

“Why are you coming home so late, covered in blood?” I ask. Yes, I know it’s only a smear and not a covering, but I’m allowed to freak out a little. As realisation hits me, I add, “It’s not your blood is it?”

“Please—”

The heat, need and desire he stoked in me goes out like a bucket of iced water over hot coals. The concern evaporates in a cloud of hissing steam. I’m *mad*.

I shove him again, so that he falls back onto my bedroom floor and get to my feet. I can’t stay here with him. It’s clear he isn’t going to tell me *shit*. Despite his declarations, there will always be secrecy and lies between us. At least I don’t have that with the others anymore. I was stupid for thinking this could work, that Baxter would somehow fit into the group. I thought his friendship with Rebel and relationship with Phoenix would be enough to make him belong, but it isn’t. Because he doesn’t belong. He’ll never belong if there’s secrets between us.

Eyes flooding with tears once more, I push past him and flee my bedroom, needing space to clear my head, but not knowing where to go.

I run downstairs, because where the hell else can I go? The house is in darkness, everyone asleep, so I pause in the kitchen to catch my breath. Taking a glass from the cupboard, I pour myself a glass of water, hating how my whole hand trembles as I lift the glass to my lips. I down the whole thing in one, the

glass slipping from my fingers and clattering noisily into the sink. Where it shatters. Like the illusion of what was building between Baxter and me.

I'm too angry. I can't go back to bed. I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway. And what if he's still there? He certainly didn't follow me despite his pleading. And now my sheets will be tainted by the smell of him. May even be covered in fuck knows whose blood. I shudder. I'm sure I've seen enough blood to last me a lifetime. How dare he! How dare he take something so fragile and precious, and shatter it with such disregard.

I need to work out.

Deciding to leave the mess in the sink for the morning, or later in the morning at least, I slip through the door and down the stairs to the basement. I grab some clean workout clothes from the laundry pile and carry them through to the gym and training room, stopping short when I see Ace pummeling a weighted punch bag.

Beads of sweat roll down his beautifully defined shoulders and my greedy eyes follow their descent along the hollow of his back and down into the waistband of his shorts. My mouth is suddenly parched and there's nothing more I'd like than to follow that droplet's path with my tongue.

"Fuck."

It's barely a whisper but Ace startles and spins around to stare at me. His gaze heats and I remember that I'm holding the clothes I meant to put on to work out.

"Sorry, I should go—" I stammer, but my feet remain rooted to the spot. I couldn't tear my gaze away from the desire in his eyes if I tried.

"Stay." He shakes his head and the raw need in his face is gone, replaced with concern. "Are you...okay?"

"No."

"Talk?"

"No."

“Fight?”

“Please.” That sounds just about perfect.

“Clothes on,” Ace grunts before muttering under his breath about *damn distractions*.

I quickly do as he says, feeling his heated gaze upon me the whole time like a lover’s caress. Interesting how a flash of bare skin evaporated his concern in an instant.

“Come.” *Oh I fucking wish. Damn Baxter ruining what could have been a great night between us.* Ace smirks, obviously having read every thought that flashed across my face. “Make deal?”

“What?” I ask reluctantly.

“You win, you come.” He grins, and a little of my anger ebbs away. Oh I like the sound of this challenge a lot.

“And if you win?”

“I come.” He shrugs but I’m suddenly panting. Which outcome do I want? The orgasm that still tingles tantalisingly between my thighs, or the invincible feeling of bringing Ace to his knees before me? Both. I want both.

“Deal,” I agree.

Ace flashes me a grin, but it’s gone as quickly as it appears as he drops into training mode. He’s a formidable opponent, always was, but the only thing I’m more in the mood for than fucking, is fighting. I copy his stance, loosening my limbs and getting in the zone. I’m not warmed up, but I have rage on my side. He doesn’t stand a chance.

I take on the role of the aggressor, attacking him with a flurry of punches and jabs, which he blocks easily. I land a kick to his side but he barely reacts. It makes me even madder. Although Ace has done nothing wrong, I take out my anger and frustrations on him. He becomes Baxter in my mind and my attack becomes frenzied. I spar with him, desperately trying to bring him down onto the mats to grapple with me, but he manages to avoid all of my manoeuvres designed to bring him down.

“You were...going easy...on me...before.” I grunt out. His smile is wicked.

“Warm up.”

“And now?” I huff as he lands a solid blow to my solar plexus to bring my concentration back to the mat.

“Teaching.”

“You’re teaching me?” I spin and elbow him in the gut. He grunts but doesn’t shift, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. I’m so distracted by the pressing length of him against my ass that I almost miss his reply.

“Be better.”

Before I can figure out what he means, I’m thrown down onto my back and he’s straddling me.

“Get out.”

I frown. What does he mean get out? Why does he want me to leave?

“How can I leave if you’re on top of me?” I huff in frustration, my anger building once again. My brain seems to yo-yo between rage and arousal, both completely distracting and unhelpful right now.

“No. Not leave. Get out. Of hold.”

Oh! I feel like an idiot. My brain’s so scrambled I can’t even begin to fathom *how* to get out of his hold. I kick and buck, but of course it does no good. Ace has only gotten more built in our time apart. He’s solid. Absolute perfection. And... I’m distracted again.

“Osredotočiti¹!” His bark is gentle but chiding. He leans forward and his body covers mine, moulding into me like the shape of water. One arm crosses my chest, pinning me more firmly in place, but he still makes my heart race and my temperature spike.

Focus.

How can I focus, damn him?!

He doesn't know what's going through my mind. He wouldn't understand how my heart feels like it's breaking. How I feel betrayed by Baxter. How his silence, his unwillingness to confide is a rejection. How everything is falling apart because if I lose one, I've already lost them all.

A sob ricochets around the room and Ace's arm slides from pinning my chest to hauling me into his embrace. He rolls so that I'm straddling him and then sits, so that I'm cradled in his lap.

"Shh, princesa²," he croons, wiping my tears away and stroking my hair back from my wet face. "It's okay."

That only makes me cry harder. Right now, maybe he truly does believe that everything is okay, but in the cold light of day, when everyone wakes, I have some explaining to do.

This isn't going to work.

I shake my head to argue with him but he silences me with a kiss. It's so tender, so loving, that my heart breaks all over again. I need him. I need that contact. But I can't stand the thought of being loved right now.

I deepen the kiss, threading my arms around his neck and tugging at his hair. He doesn't take the hint, continuing to kiss me like a precious treasure he can't bear to lose. I wriggle on his lap, groaning in frustration. I can feel that he wants me, so why doesn't he *act*, damn it!

I try to take over the kiss, thrusting my tongue into his mouth, speeding up the movement of my lips...he doesn't respond. I huff, grind against him, scratch my nails down his back.

"No." He pulls away sharply and fixes me with a hard stare. Ace has *never* looked at me like that before. My heart crumples.

"No?" I hate the tremble in my voice. Weak. "You don't want me?"

"Not like."

"Like what?"

“Angry. Escape. Punishment. Distraction.” He hits the nail on the head in four simple words. No explanation necessary. But then he adds one more and he obliterates my heart. “Desperate.”

With careful thumbs, he wipes the tears from the corner of my eyes and kisses the tip of my nose. I feel like shit. Of course Ace knows I was using him. He’s not stupid.

“Sorry.” I can’t meet his gaze through the shame weighing me down.

“No need. I here, always. All you need.”

“I need—” I start to say but trail off. What do I need? Truly? To start this night all over again, to do everything differently and stay in my own damn bed. If I had, everything would be the same and my heart wouldn’t be shattering like glass.

“I know. Trust?” Ace stares at me with intense violet eyes and I nod sadly, the fight leaving me for good this time, as I give in and give up.

Once he feels me relax, he lies me back on the mat and slowly removes my clothes until I’m naked before him once more.

The lights in here are so much brighter than my bedroom and I desperately try to cover up, but Ace gently grasps my wrists and pushes them down onto the mat with a soft tut of disapproval.

“Ustavi se³. Popolna si⁴.”

I don’t know the words, but I can tell his meaning from the love in his eyes. He holds me down for a moment until I accept his truth, and when I nod he releases me. This time, I stay put, bared before his worshipful gaze.

“Naj te ljubim⁵.”

He kisses my lips.

“Naj vam dam, kar potrebujete⁶.”

He kisses my jaw and collarbone.

“Naj preganjam bolečino⁷.”

He takes my tender nipple into his mouth and I cry out.

“Naj iztisnem vaš dvom⁸.”

He teases a finger around my entrance and my hips buck to welcome him deeper. But of course he ignores me. I moan with need, my skin heating as he continues to circle my opening in perfect rhythm to his tongue around my breast.

“Naj dokažem⁹.”

I tense as my ready orgasm rebuilds in record time.

“Ne bom odšel¹⁰.”

He dips the tip of his finger into my opening and I groan. How the hell did I forget this trick of his? I want to beg him to go deeper but if memory finally serves me right, it's futile.

“Ta ljubezen je za vedno¹¹.”

He shifts, moving down my body until his warm breath caresses my clit as he speaks, his single finger still pumping into me by only a few centimetres, and torturously slowly.

“Nenehno¹².”

His lips gently envelope my clit and he sucks, my hips bucking up to meet him. It's so sensitive, but feels so good as his tongue begins to circle the sensitive nub, almost sending me into orbit. My walls clamp down around the tip of his finger, desperately trying to prevent him withdrawing and my legs tremble from the tension in my muscles. I'm so close to coming, my breathing ragged, useless pants.

“Pridi po mene, dojenček¹³. Odnehaj¹⁴. Popustiti¹⁵. Ti si moja¹⁶.”

He thrusts his finger all the way in, curling to hit that sweet spot. Stars erupt. I start to spasm...

“Poroči se z mano¹⁷?” I'm sure he's asking me if I'm ready to come.

“Yes!” I scream and I finally, finally come undone in his arms. Every single sweet word and kiss a healing balm to my

tattered soul. Ace kisses me deeply even though I have no breath to spare, and when he pulls away he looks at me like I'm the sun, the moon and the stars all wrapped up in one perfect package. It's almost too much. But this is Ace. He's always loved big and hard.

An exhausted yawn escapes me and Ace doesn't hesitate to scoop me up into his arms, carrying me upstairs to the lounge. He must be pretty exhausted too, not wanting to carry my ass up extra flights of stairs to the bedroom. He places me down on the sofa like fragile porcelain, and grabs a blanket to cover me with. I give a noise of protest, already half asleep but not wanting him to leave. He shushes me, climbs onto the couch beside me, and covers us both with the blanket. I fall asleep in his arms, my heart full and healing as he whispers words of love in his native tongue.

Guys' Chat

Baxter: Ace, Thorn, can you help me with something?

Ace: Yes.

Thorn: Don't you want to know what it is first?

Ace: No.

Thorn: But it could be disposing of a dead body or something.

Ace: No matter. Brother now.

Thorn: What do you want, Branson?

Baxter: I need to come clean with Raven.

Thorn: Oh so it'll be your dead body we're disposing of then. Should have asked Rebel, he's a strong mother fucker and I bet you're heavier than you look.

Baxter: Fucking forget it.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Rebel

Everyone is too damn...weird this morning. Raven looks green and she won't meet Baxter's eye. Jax is pensive. Thorn is downright hostile and Ace is whistling and grinning like all his Christmases just came at once.

I don't get it, but I feel like I missed some serious shit going down last night. I open my mouth to ask – well, demand – that someone starts talking, but just as I do, Ace plops a massive greasy fry up down in front of me. *Eat first, questions after* I decide, picking up my cutlery to tuck in.

As I shovel food into my mouth, I watch the others more closely. The powers of observation have never been my strong point, but the more I look, the more I *see*. Thorn can't take his eyes off Raven, but she's avoiding his gaze. When she notices him staring at her, she blushes. Shit went down between them last night.

And Ace. He's far too happy. Which makes me think he had a taste of Raven too. They don't strike me as the sharing type though.

I'm just turning my attention to Jax, who is constantly on his phone, when Raven distracts me.

"Were you smoking last night?" she asks Baxter, affronted.

"No," his response is terse.

"You stank of smoke when you came home. I can smell it all through the house, so why lie to me?"

The air thickens with tension. Even Jax puts his phone down and watches warily. What is going on?

"I don't lie," Baxter grinds out angrily from between clenched teeth. He looks fucking formidable but Raven doesn't so much as flinch.

"I know what I smelt."

"You're mistaken."

“Here you go, zaročenka¹.” Ace breaks the tension, beaming at Raven like she hung the fucking moon as he gives her

breakfast. Jax slams his phone onto the worktop.

“Zaročenka²?” he barks.

I frown. I’ve not heard that word before. But then again, Ace is always coming up with weird terms of endearment. I wouldn’t be surprised if he just called her baby corn or some shit. I don’t know what’s crawled up Jax’s ass and died.

“Ja³.”

“Since when?”

“Last night.”

“And is she aware?”

“Vprašal sem⁴.”

“In English?”

“Rekla je da⁵.”

“Hey! Want to let the rest of us in on this little tête à tête?” Thorn snaps just as I’m about to demand something similar.

“Maybe Raven should be the one to announce it,” Jax replies. But Raven looks as confused as the rest of us. Now Ace looks murderous.

“No.”

“Tell us, Raven, why is Ace so happy this morning?” Jax taunts unkindly. He sounds like a total bastard right now but I want to know what’s going on so I don’t say anything.

“I-I-I’m not sure,” she stammers but she’s blushing so I call bullshit.

“Tell us what happened last night,” Jax prompts. Raven’s eyes cut to Thorn.

“I watched a film with Thorn.”

“And then?”

“Went to bed.” Her face is bright red now. Yeah, bullshit. They fooled around at least.

“So why is Ace like a dog with two dicks this morning?” I interject impatiently. If she was messing about with Thorn, where does Ace come into it?

“And what does za-zar zaro...whatever you called her mean?” Thorn adds. Only Baxter remains silent.

“Zaročenka⁶,” Jax repeats. “Means fiancée.”

Raven gasps, staring at Ace wide-eyed in shock.

“Why would you call me that, Ace?”

“Last night, I asked. You said yes.”

“I thought you were asking if I wanted to come! Of course I said yes!”

“Oh well, that’s just fucking great isn’t it,” Thorn snaps bitterly.

“Thorn,” she spins to face him. “I’m sorry! I—”

“This feels like Boy Scout shit, and it clearly doesn’t concern me, so I’m out,” Baxter drawls before walking from the room.

“Baxter! Stay!” Raven cries. She looks torn, like she wants to go after him but she stays. “What does he mean, ‘Boy Scout Shit’?”

“Probably referring to us being friends. I think he still feels like the odd one out sometimes. Or this being a repeat of last time. Or maybe even how, compared to him, we’re squeaky clean like good little Boy Scouts,” Jax points out in a huff.

“But it *does* concern him—”

“I know, princess. But you should know better than anyone that Baxter does what he wants.”

“It certainly seems like history is repeating itself. Ace, you idiot! You can’t trick a girl into marrying you,” I snap at him. He looks a little sheepish but not nearly sorry enough.

“No regret.”

“You can’t do that!” Raven protests.

“We date. Make sense. Have ring already. Make official. At home, no ask.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” I follow Baxter’s lead and leave them fucking to it.

Once I get to my room I seethe. I cross to my bedside table and pull open the drawer with too much force.

“Fuck!” I bark as the contents spill all over the carpet.

Fucking Ace! And damn Jax to hell! Has everyone fucking had a taste of her but me? Why am I the only one playing by the goddamn rules for once? Fuck this shit. Jax is such a goddamn hypocrite for messing with her. Of course Thorn would follow suit. But I expected better from Ace and Baxter.

It’s not okay that Ace uses his language barrier to steam roller his way into getting what he wants. I know the guy has some severe learning disabilities that he keeps hidden, but he damn well knew what he was doing when he proposed to Raven in the throes of an orgasm. It’s unacceptable.

Ignoring the mess, I sink to the floor and grab the small silk box from the disorder. I flick it open with my thumb and stare at the two rings inside. This ring box has given me nothing but trouble. I agonised over the design of its contents, and for what? She’ll never wear it. Hell, I’ll never get to give it to her.

I had it all planned out, how I’d take Raven and Phoenix out for the perfect day before proposing to them both with their matching bands and asking Nix’s permission to marry her mum. I could just see it now: both of them walking up the aisle in white dresses on the big day. And although they’d officially be mine, nothing between the rest of us would change. I just need that security, the reassurance that I’m in her life as more than just Phoenix’s possible father.

Does she even want to be with me, or is she just keeping all of us hanging around until she knows who the daddy is? Or maybe she wants to be with them, but not me. But why? Did I do something wrong? I know I come on strong but only

because I need her to know that she's it for me. I told her four years ago and my feelings haven't changed.

Sighing, I snap the lid of the box shut and stuff it in my pocket. I need some fresh air. I need to think things through. I guess I can do that on my way to return the rings. I can start the Christmas shopping while I'm out there too.

I wonder if Nix would like a pony?

I throw open my door and barrel into Raven who's standing on the other side with her arm raised ready to knock.

"Ah, shit. Sorry," I say, reaching out to stop her from falling over.

"What's wrong?" she asks me, eyes full of concern. She leans round and surveys the mess of the room behind me and frowns. "Did you trash the place in a strop?"

"It was an accident. I didn't have time to stop and pick it all up."

"Where are you racing off to all of a sudden?"

"I have errands to run."

"Do you want company?"

"No," I reply tersely.

"Rebel, what's—"

"What really happened last night? Tell me."

She sighs.

"Okay, can I come in though?"

I step back and motion for her to enter, glad that the ring box is in my pocket and not on the floor where she'd see it straight away. She crosses to my bed and perches on the edge of it looking uncomfortable. I lean back against my dresser, arms folded over my chest, brow raised expectantly.

I know I'm being a bit of an asshole but offence is the best form of defence, right?

"So last night Thorn and I watched a film. We went up to my room together and he...went down on me." Her cheeks are

on fire. “Afterwards he went to get a cloth to clean me up but I-I fell asleep. When I woke up he was gone.”

“Okay,” I say tightly. It’s not that bad. But it still doesn’t explain everything. “But how did you come to be engaged to Ace?”

“Well, I woke when he and Baxter came home. Baxter—” Holy shit. She’s talking about Baxter now? She must be fucking tired. “We kissed and probably would have done more but he kissed my scars and I freaked. Then I noticed blood on my hand and I freaked out even more. I shoved him away and left.”

She takes a deep breath and even though I want to cross the room and comfort her, I don’t. I need to see how this story plays out. She acted like she didn’t know he proposed but it still feels like she made a choice to me.

“I ended up downstairs, where Ace was training. We trained. Then I-I got upset. He asked me to trust him to make me feel better. And he did that damn magic finger trick until I was begging. And he was saying all this stuff in Slovenian. It sounded so nice, romantic, and I was right on the edge and so worked up. He wouldn’t let me come until he said something - I swear I thought he was asking me to beg to come – so I screamed yes and begged him to let me.”

I nod my head, unfolding my arms to grip the edge of the sideboard.

“I didn’t know. I was so tired afterward he carried me up to the lounge and we fell asleep on the sofa together.”

I have to say I believe her. I know it’s the sort of shit Ace would pull. Hell, it’s something I would be tempted to do.

“Are you choosing one of them?”

“What? No!” she cries. “Why would you think that?”

I shrug.

“Do you want to know who Nix’s father is? Is that it? Once she’s home, we open the envelope and you choose that guy...is that why you’re keeping all of us around?”

“What? No! You’re being stupid.”

“Don’t call me stupid, princess,” I growl.

“I didn’t! I’m not choosing! I didn’t know I had to. If you want me to choose between the five of you that’s a conversation we need to have as a family. But I won’t be ‘choosing’ anyone based on a DNA test. Love doesn’t work like that.”

“But it would be simpler if you just chose to be with Nix’s father,” I point out.

“It might appear simpler on paper, but it’s far from simple. Have you ever had your heart broken?”

Yes. By you, when you fucking vanished.

I shrug noncommittally.

“Well, if you *had* you’d know how shit it is. Imagine your heart breaking multiple times over because you’ve lost four people you love in place of just one. I couldn’t do it.” She shakes her head. “So if you have a problem with the way we are *trying* to do this, you better damn well call a family meeting to air it, because I’m telling you now, if it’s a case of choosing, I will pick Phoenix every single time, my heart be damned. If I can’t make this work with *all* of you, then I won’t have *any* of you.”

She’s flushed with anger and breathless from the passion of her speech. I *really* want to kiss her.

“And if I don’t have a problem with the way things are?” I ask in a low tone, pushing off from the dresser and stalking towards her.

She moves until she’s nose to nose with me and jabbing her finger into my chest with every word screamed at me. “Then get your damn head out of your ass and start acting like it!”

Before I can kiss her, she pushes past me and storms from the room, slamming the door behind her.

A grin spreads across my face – I can’t help it – and I pull the ring box from my pocket. Placing it on my bedside table, I

decide I'll keep hold of it a little longer. I grab a notebook and pen from the mess on the floor and flip down onto the bed, lying on my stomach.

Words, lyrics, promises flow from the tip of the pen like wine at a party, as I pour out my assholeish heart on the paper, bleeding words of love and regret for my muse.

Guys' Chat

Thorn: Jesus keep your panties on!

Baxter: I want help wining and dining. I have an idea, Ace, to recreate the meal when we first met.

Ace: I cook. Happy help.

Baxter: Thank you.

Thorn: I can't cook for shit. What do you need me for?

Baxter: I wanted to make it...romantic.

Thorn: Why do you need me for that?

Baxter: Because you're the biggest fucking pussy I know, and because my idea of romance is the heads of her enemies served up on silver platters.

Thorn: You're right. You do fucking need me. But it'll cost you...



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Baxter

“We need to talk,” I say as soon as Raven enters the dining room.

“Erm, okay.” She glances around the dining room which is all set up for an intimate, romantic meal for two, and frowns in confusion. Those words tend to be synonymous with bad news.

The candlelit table looks like something out of a movie, thanks to Thorn. We should probably stop taking the piss out of him for his love of romcoms because it’s certainly working in my favour now.

I didn’t sleep at all last night. After Raven took off and I finally managed to get my stupid ass up off the floor, I knew it was pointless to go after her. Instead, I took a shower to remove all traces of my deceit. But it didn’t help me unwind. I was still hard as hell, but when I grasped my shaft in the shower to take the edge off, it didn’t feel right. Which is ridiculous because I’ve been taking the edge off that exact same way for years. Whenever being around her got too much.

So I sat up in my room and I plotted.

I’m no fool. I know I’m about to lose her. Because really, I’m a stranger to her. The only one to ever really know me is Amelie, and she accepted me exactly as I am. Too bad we couldn’t love each other in that way. I love Raven so completely that even now, the knowledge floors me. I didn’t think I had the ability to love, let alone at this capacity. Which is why I’ve always kept her at arm’s length from the real me. Partly to protect her, because she isn’t privy to this lifestyle like Amelie is, but also to protect myself. To protect my heart. Because if she knew the truth, she would surely be incapable of loving me back. And then I’d lose her.

But if I don’t tell her, I’m going to lose her anyway.

So it's time. I decided in the early hours of this morning that I have to come clean. There can't be any more secrets or lies between us. I have to tell her *everything*. Even though I'll still lose her anyway, at least she'll know why I kept her at arm's length all these years, preferring to step into the role of the hero she cast me as. It was nice not to be the villain for once.

I'll walk away, even though it'll kill me, so that she can still have the life she deserves with the others. I won't let my shit storm destroy their love too. Besides, if The Order even catch wind that I'm spilling our secrets, they'll have me taken out. Even with Amelie at the helm, the rules are still concrete.

But it's worth the risk.

Raven clears her throat and I'm pulled back into the present.

"Don't look so worried," I say smoothly, even though my heart is knocking against my ribs so loudly I'm sure she can hear it.

I pull her chair out for her, helping her to sit and placing the napkin in her lap like a proper refined gentleman and everything.

"I wish you'd told me about dinner. I would have dressed up." She squirms uncomfortably in her seat, her gaze darting between her loungewear and my immaculate three piece tweed suit. All I see is her perfection.

"It's just dinner in your home. No need to get dressed up."

"Our home," she instantly corrects, and I smile at her with warmth. How nice it sounds to be included, wanted. It's a shame she won't feel that way for long. My bags are already packed, a plane waiting on standby to take me away.

"What's the occasion?" she asks in a shaky voice as I sit down opposite her. I'm sure she feels wrong-footed, probably still spoiling for a fight after last night. Rightly so. She should have kicked my ass.

"No occasion. I just wanted to treat you to a nice meal that doesn't come from a takeaway container and to spend some

time one on one with you.” I know it’s a lie, sort of, but I’d just like to wait a little before the confessions start.

Before either of us can say another word, the door to the dining room opens and Ace enters, carrying our plates. I roped him in to help with the food. She probably won’t realise but I asked him to replicate the meal from the night we met. I barely believed in love back then, but damn if she didn’t have me hard as steel. Especially when she drove that knife through my hand.

I groan at the memory and Raven gives me a funny look.

“Smells good,” I lie.

Damn. I need to stop lying.

It’s just, after all these years and my training with The Order, it comes as naturally to me as breathing.

“Looks nice,” Raven says, unconvinced, before muttering under her breath, “for fairy food.”

I smirk.

“I’m sure you’ll like the main course better.”

She gives me a small smile and finishes the first dish.

I don’t have to worry about small talk because Ace clears the empty plates and returns straight away with the mains. Raven’s smile is much warmer when she spies the juicy ribeye steaks and homemade chips on the plate. Now she recognises the significance of the meal.

We continue to eat in silence, and although it’s still strained, it feels less hostile now. If I can just get through the dessert course, I’ll start talking.

“Done?” Ace asks, appearing at the door once more.

“It was delicious, thank you,” Raven beams at him. “Do I get ice cream now?” He chuckles and leaves with the empty plates to go fetch it. I surreptitiously check to make sure all the steak knives have gone out to the kitchen with him too.

I want to bang my fists on the table and demand that she gives *me* her attention. That it’s my date, and that if anyone is

having ice cream, it'll be me, eating it off her naked body when I lay her out on the table like a buffet. But I know what has to come after the final course, and so I keep my mouth shut and say nothing.

We eat our ice cream in awkward silence. It's not her fault, it's me. I sigh.

“Are you okay?” Raven asks me tentatively.

“No.”

“Okay, it's just, the first thing you said when I walked in was ‘we need to talk’ and you've not said a word to me all night.”

“I know.”

“I don't understand.”

“We do need to talk. I just wanted to have a final nice meal with you.”

“Before what, exactly?”

“Before you hate me.”

“Why would I hate you?” I hear the anxiety in her tone and internally I cringe. I'm going about this all wrong – which I tell her.

“Going about *what* all wrong, Bax? You're starting to scare me...”

“Okay.” I huff out on a sigh again. “This is really hard to know where to start, to figure out what I can tell you—”

“Just the truth please.”

I nod. I can do that. I don't have to give the whole truth. Though I won't lie to her, what I mean is, I don't have to tell her everything.

You should tell her about Casey and Beth, a small voice in the back of my mind says. I quickly shut *that* down. Not my story to tell. Only, it kind of is, isn't it?

No. I should stick to the facts that are relevant to our situation. Raven can have a glimpse into my past, and if by

some small miracle she doesn't run away screaming, I can slowly open up and spill a few more secrets.

“Back when we first met—”

“I don't want a trip down memory lane. I want to know what the hell happened last night!”

“Would you believe me if I said Ace and I got a bit carried away with sparring last night?” I ask hopefully with a half smile. She levels me with a stare that could melt my bones. It makes my dick hard. “Okay, okay! But trust me when I say it's all connected.”

“Fine. Talk.”

I love that she speaks to me with no fear. People have lost their tongues for speaking to me like that. I can't help but wonder if she knew what I'm capable of, what I've done, if she'd still treat me the same. Probably. She's fucking badass, even if it's been in hibernation for a while. I can't fight the grin on my face.

“Okay so when we first met I was in my final year at university.”

“I remember. Knot something or other. Posh toff place.”

“Something like that. It's actually more of a private school and university for...troubled teens.”

She raises an eyebrow and smirks at me.

“You? Troubled? Who'd have thought it?”

“Well, I'd been at Knox the longest time. I was sent there a little younger than most, and I was kept back a couple of times.”

“Is this where you confess you're actually in your forties?”

“Would it matter if I was?”

“You'd still be kinda hot,” she teases.

“While I was there I was recruited into an organisation.”

“Like the Boy Scouts?”

“Imagine the total opposite of the Boy Scouts.”

“Okay...”

“So this organisation is top secret and dodgy as fuck. It’s not an exaggeration to say that if they find out I’m telling you about it, they will kill me.”

A look of deep concern etches itself on her face.

“But I’m not stupid. I know that if I don’t start opening up to you, I’m going to lose you. And I’ll do anything to avoid that.”

“What does this organisation do?”

“They’re called The Order and they basically run, or at least influence, governing bodies all around the world.”

“Is it dodgy?”

“Yes. Though some operations are above board.”

“Is it dangerous?”

I level her with a hard look. “Extremely.” Didn’t I just say they would kill me for telling her this?

“What’s your role?”

“It’s changed over time. I take more of a backseat now.”

“You’re around more than you used to be.” She nods. “What changed?”

“You and Phoenix, mostly.” I shrug like it’s no big deal, but this is my biggest confession to date. I care about them more than anything or anyone else. She won’t know that though, or recognise the significance of my admission. “I have an agreement with the leader of The Order. But I used to be the guy who...handled problems.”

“As in making them disappear?” Raven snorts.

“Yeah,” I reply flatly. She needs to know I’m not joking. What I’m capable of.

“Like in the mafia sense of the word?”

I don’t reply. There’s no need. The teasing glint in her eyes is suddenly snuffed out and her face falls. “Were you on a job last night?”

“Sort of.”

“What do you mean? And why was Ace with you? Is he in the group too then? Are the others?”

“No, Ace isn’t in The Order. Nor are the others, though Rebel knows a little about it, so I’m sure the others do too. Ace came with me because last night was a little more... personal.”

“So you’re just killing people for fun?”

“I didn’t kill anyone.” I shake my head and then realise I’d better clarify. “Last night. He was definitely alive when we left.”

I don’t bother telling her that the injuries he sustained might kill him, or that once my clean-up crew arrived and saw the mess that we had made, they might have called it in to Amelie and killed the guy anyway. What happens once I leave the building is none of my concern.

“I don’t really understand.”

“Which part?” I ask patiently.

“Any of it.”

“If you’d gone to my school and the headteacher could see what you’re capable of doing with a steak knife, you’d probably have found yourself recruited and inducted too.” I smile ruefully. “I’m not sure how else to explain it. I mean, I guess if you have questions I could try and answer some things, but I have to be careful. I’m already breaking all the rules just by telling you this much.”

“You don’t strike me as the kind to give a damn about rules.”

“I’m not.” I grin. “But I give a damn – more than a damn actually – about you and Phoenix, and I don’t want to put you in harm’s way by saying too much.”

She pauses for a moment as if letting my declaration sink in. I guess it’s a lot to process, but I’m taking it as a good sign that she hasn’t started screaming at me to get out. Yet.

“I need to process. I just don’t understand why you’re telling me this.”

“I want you to know me better. You and Nix know the real me, but I guess you need the shadows of my past filled in to fully trust me.”

“I do trust you!”

“To trust in us then.”

She goes to argue with me but stops. I’m right. We both know it. Eventually she nods.

“Okay. Can I ask some questions?”

“I’ll try to answer them, shoot.”

“Does this organisation mean you’re well connected?”

“Incredibly.”

She hesitates for a moment.

“Can we use those connections to stop Cordelia?”

“I promise you, we can and we will,” I say earnestly, meaning every word and vowing to call in every favour I’ve ever accrued if I have to. I’ll even go back to working for The Order full time if we get Phoenix home for good and Cordelia neutralised permanently.

“Okay. For now, that’s all I need to know...” She pauses, then takes a deep breath. I just know that something else is coming. Something bad. “But if you ever come home covered in blood and pounce on me like that again, I’ll gut you while you’re sleeping and let Ace take care of your body.”

I groan because *of course* she just threatened to stab me. It seems we can’t make it through a meal alone without her vowing to do that now. My dick is painfully hard. Begging me to plead with her to make good on that promise and bleed me. Just a little. Fuck. Is it too soon to introduce a little blood into our relationship?

Judging by her reaction last night and the nature of the threat she just made against me, I guess probably.

Rebel: I'm sorry.

Rebel: I'm really shit at this. I keep messing everything up when that's the last thing I want to do.

Rebel: I wrote you a song. It's better with the words than I am.

Rebel: Audio attachment Breathing.mp3

Raven: You made me cry.

Rebel: Shit. I'm so sorry, princess. That wasn't my intent.

Raven: In a good way, you fool.

Rebel: Are we good?

Raven: We're good. ILY x

Rebel: I had to google that shit. I love you too x Do something for me, okay?

Raven: What?

Rebel: Wear the ring we got you. Please. I don't care who did the asking, I just want to know you're ours x



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Raven

“I feel sick,” I complain to Baxter.

“Don’t worry. It’s a standard mediation meeting.”

“Ugh it sounds like I’m getting divorced.”

“Never.” I glance at him and his eyes are blazing with fierce intensity.

“I didn’t strike you as the ball and chain type.”

“I’m not,” he scoffs. “But I don’t believe in divorce.”

“How can you *not* believe in it? Like what? You don’t think it exists? You just refuse to acknowledge and accept it? Or do you—”

“Ms Deighton?” My barrage of confused but teasing questions is interrupted by the conference room door opening. A suited lawyer is standing in the doorway staring expectantly at me.

“Yes.”

“Come on in. We’re ready and waiting for you.”

“Oh.” I falter a little because I know for a fact we’re fifteen minutes early. I wanted the upper hand ready for facing Cordelia again. I had envisioned being sat at the huge boardroom table, all calm and collected as she walked in, and now I’m all wrong-footed and flustered.

“Don’t worry,” Baxter whispers, taking my arm to guide me. Strength in numbers. “We’ve got this.”

We enter the large conference room and take a seat at the oversized oval table, we’re facing the enormous floor to ceiling windows but I’m too nervous to enjoy the view. My stomach is in knots, and Baxter has to prise the leather folder of documents out of my white-knuckle grip. Opposite me are a team of three lawyers. Cordelia is nowhere to be seen.

My own lawyer takes a seat beside me and starts the meeting.

“Where’s Cordelia?” I ask.

“Ms Deighton sends her apologies that she can’t be here today. She was unable to arrange suitable childcare for the meeting,” one of her lawyers replies.

I grind my teeth. She could have brought Nix with her or let any of my guys watch her. Hell, even Baxter’s grandfather could have babysat!

“Let’s begin, shall we?” My own solicitor, Melissa, suggests. I nod. “Okay, so we’re here today to present financials and other evidence to rebuff Ms Deighton’s claims against my client. We are hoping to reach an updated suitable arrangement for the shared custody of the child in question.”

I open my mouth to refute this but Baxter squeezes my hand. No way in hell am I sharing any more of Nix with Cordelia than I currently have to, but Baxter has warned me that if mediation fails and we end up in court, it will look bad for me if I didn’t appear willing.

“Very well,” Cordelia’s solicitor says. So far he’s the only one who’s done any talking. He’s definitely in charge in her absence. “Let us see what you have to present.”

Baxter slides over the folder of documentation and my heart beats erratically in my chest. I feel like my entire life is in his hands, contained within that smart black binder. The lawyer wordlessly takes it and flips through each document, slowly. I can tell he’s not reading everything in full but is skimming. Probably just looking for the numbers on the ledger. My own lawyer already has all of this information so she sits beside me with a serene smile on her face. Baxter is impassive, but he seems calm. Is it only me sweating like a pig in here?

“Can I get some water please?” I say nervously.

“Of course.” Melissa gets to her feet and grabs a jug and three glasses from the sideboard behind us. She returns to the

table and pours me, Baxter and herself a glass. She doesn't offer drinks to Cordelia's lawyers.

I'm not even thirsty, though my mouth is dry. I just wanted something to do with my hands besides twisting the material of my top around and around. But I know as soon as I have a sip of water, I'll need to go for a nervous wee. Shit. My hands are shaking so much I almost knock the glass over.

Cordelia's lawyer glances up quickly and blinks at me in surprise.

"As you can see," Melissa begins. "My client has provided more than enough evidence to refute the claims that she is a poverty-stricken, incapable mother with no idea who her child's father is."

"I don't believe it," the lawyer mutters under his breath and Melissa pounces.

"I can assure you that all documentation is real and official. You may request authentication from each source if you wish, but I believe that will be a waste of time. You have enough there that we should be able to come to some sort of agreement, out of court."

"We need to take this new evidence to our client," he replies tersely. He nods at the other two and they all get to their feet. He taps the folder in his arms. "May I take this?"

"Of course, it's yours," Melissa smiles. She looks all sweetness and light but she's an absolute shark. Out of all the lawyers the guys retained on my behalf, she's been my absolute favourite.

"Very well. We will present our findings to our client and be in touch shortly."

They file from the room, no one rising to see them out. When the door closes behind them I let out a long breath.

"That went well." Melissa beams.

"Did it? We didn't agree on anything."

"Oh, these things never work the first time. But we've rattled them, clearly. This is a good thing, Raven."

“How soon do you think we can get Nix back home?” Baxter asks.

“It’s hard to say. It’s highly unlikely this will go to court in light of the financials, character witnesses, deeds and updated birth certificate you’ve provided. That said, if she’s as stubborn as you’ve led me to believe, then we have to prepare for the worst. Which I am doing. If she wants to drag us all into a messy court hearing, your team is more than ready to take on the challenge. Hopefully though, she’ll see the new evidence and will back down a little so that we can come to some sort of increased shared custody agreement.”

“I don’t want to share custody with her.”

“I know. But for now, we battle the fight on our doorstep, later we can challenge new threats,” Baxter reassures me. I know it makes sense but it’s still hard to even fathom ‘playing nice’ for a short period of time.

“You did great today, Raven. Well done,” Melissa says with a reassuring smile. “Let’s wait and see what they come back with, I bet it’ll be a shared custody offer, which we can negotiate.”

I nod and thank her for today.

“Of course, it’s what I’m here for. We will win this one way or another, I promise you.”

We say our goodbyes and Baxter leads me out to the car. Before we climb in I pull him into a big hug.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m just disappointed.”

“What? Why?”

“We didn’t get anything. I had hoped it would be enough to at least allow me phone calls with Nix. It isn’t fair.”

“I know. It’s highly unusual for a mother not to be allowed any contact at all in situations like this, but we know how much pull and sway Cordelia has,” Baxter explains gently. I know he’s right, and we’ve spoken about this before, but I really had pinned my hopes on today and now I just feel

deflated. “It’s my visitation day with Phoenix tomorrow, I promise I’ll take lots of pictures, okay? And if I can get her away from the witch long enough, I’ll even sneak in a video call.”

“Don’t do anything to risk us getting Nix back!” I say in a panic. He cuddles me closer and kisses the top of my head, rubbing soothing circles on my back.

“I promise, I won’t.”

#TrackDownTilly

The #TrackDownTilly movement gains momentum as it seems like the whole world is suddenly asking “where is Tilly Harris?”

Husband and Stock Exchange guru, Archibald Harris, has launched an appeal to bring Tilly home after her disappearance.

Archibald, Archie to friends, claimed that he was working away on business which is why he didn't notice his wife was missing. He claims it's not unusual for them to go long periods of time without contact.

In a statement he said, “Please Tilly, wherever you are, just make contact so that we know you're alright. Stefan misses his step mummy so much.”

Police say no ransom demands have been made, but friends continue to insist this disappearance is out of character for Mrs Harris, and that foul play must be involved.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Baxter

I make the long drive to Cordelia's house, relieved that I'm able to see Nix again. I'm pissed that she's been gone a month already and I'm no closer to bringing her home. The lawyers are dragging their heels for some reason and I'm losing patience. It's time to act. Either by speaking to my grandfather or by calling in some favours with The Order.

Still, I'm grateful at least that I'm on Phoenix's approved list of visitors. I intend to take full advantage of the fact by taking her out for the day and spoiling her. It's not her fault her grandmother is a vile witch who has stopped us from visiting. I'll even let her see her mum. I know it's against the rules for Raven to have contact with Phoenix, but no one said anything about not video calling. I think it's worth the risk after seeing how upset Raven was yesterday.

I know that I've been able to track Phoenix on the app but it's not the same as seeing her with my own eyes, in the flesh, to check she's alright. I'd drive triple the distance for that. More in fact.

Yeah, I've got it bad for them both.

Still.

When I pull up outside the ostentatious manor, no one comes out to greet me. I pull up the HeartSafe app and check Nix's location. She's not here. I'm guessing that Cordelia isn't either. She's usually the first to pounce on me when I show up.

I get out of the car and walk around to the back of the house, helping myself to the back door key under the plant pot. It's crazy that after all this time Cordelia still hasn't moved it. Raven used to use it to sneak around when she was pregnant and Cordelia got too controlling. Imagine locking a grown adult in the house and giving them a curfew. I shake my head at the levels of crazy Cordelia sunk to. We need to prove it though, for the courts. And more importantly, we need to

figure out why she did it. Why is Cordelia so hell bent on controlling everyone and everything?

I let myself in and disable the alarm – Cordelia never bothered to change the code either – and then I explore. Raven once told me that Cordelia had a safe installed in the downstairs office, behind a painting, so I decide to head there first. I don't know what I'm looking for, just a gut feeling that says to check it out. It's easy enough to find.

Safes have always been my strong point, and cracking Cordelia's is a piece of piss. She uses my grandfather's birthday as the code. Desperate idiot.

Inside there's only one folder. I pull it out and open it to discover it contains a single document. The *Last Will and Testament of Ms. Cordelia Eliza Deighton*. Why would this be the only thing in the safe? I check the date...it was updated a few months ago. Why?

I, Ms. Cordelia Eliza Deighton, being of sound mind and body, do decree that my entire estate, fortune and possessions are split equally between my two granddaughters, Elizabeth McLintock and Charlotte McLintock, and my great-granddaughter, Phoenix Elizabeth McLintock...

I stop reading, frowning over the questions racing through my mind. Why would you update your will and still include the person you are bringing a custody battle against? Is this supposed to form an apology later on? Is Raven supposed to be impressed?

I almost think that Lizzie still being listed on there is an oversight...only, Lizzie was never alive at the same time as Phoenix, so how can they *both* be listed? It makes no sense. There's no way any decent lawyer worth their salt would miss a glaring error like that. Unless...

Holy shit.

I freeze.

Does Cordelia believe that Lizzie is still alive?

Fuck.

My heart races at the possibility as I pull out my phone and bring up the number for someone I haven't spoken to in a lifetime. She answers after the first ring.

"Long time no talk," she drawls. I can hear the smile in her familiar Australian voice. "You're calling in that favour aren't you? I'm not going to sleep with you Baxter," she says and I chuckle at the long-standing joke between us.

"Close, but there's something I need even more than you," I joke.

"She must be special."

"She is. She's everything. They both are."

"Embracing the harem life at long last?"

"Something like that," I evade. "I don't really have much time."

"Okay, shoot."

"I need you to find someone for me."

"Consider it done. You know the resources I have at my disposal."

"It won't be that simple," I warn.

"You are part of The Order, you know what I command now."

I do. It would be terrifying if she weren't so grounded and trustworthy.

"How *is* ruling the world treating you?" I ask with a grin.

"Can't complain, it's a tough job but someone has to do it."

"And your entourage of worshippers...?"

"Still worshipping strong at my altar," she laughs. I smile at the genuine joy I hear in her voice. If she's happy, and in charge, that's all I care about I guess.

"So tell me how you plan to challenge me with this missing person you need finding."

“I need you to find a dead girl,” I tell her. There’s a beat of silence before she replies.

“Oooh, I love a challenge!” I hear her clap her hands together in excitement. “Do you have anything to go off of?”

“I’ll send you what I have, but I suspect at least one other person may know this girl is alive. So I’d start there. There may not be much of a paper trail though.”

“There doesn’t need to be. I deal in people, not paper.”

“Ruthless and efficient. I miss you, sidekick,” I joke.

“Ha! You’d be *my* bitch now, you couldn’t handle me. I’m definitely Batman.”

I chuckle. “Can you help?”

“Of course. I owe you, I pay my debts, so consider it done. Leave it with me, I’ll text you the details.”

I thank her and sign off, already eager to hear back from her. I’m just closing the safe when I’m interrupted.

“Baxter? What are you doing?” Cordelia asks in her cut-glass accent.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” I shrug. “Admiring the artwork.”

“Why are you here?” she questions, choosing to ignore the painting in front of the safe. It’s not straight. I don’t care. I’m not about to piss around playing games with this bitch. I don’t care if she knows I’ve been in her safe.

“I came to see Phoenix,” I reply. Not a lie, the safe was just an added bonus. What secrets is she hiding?

“We were out.”

“I can see that. Unless you make it a habit to leave her alone. Where were you? And more importantly, where the hell is she?”

“Baxter, with the trial coming up you can’t really be here...” she begins. She’s forcing herself to be polite to me,

because of my grandfather, but I don't need to extend any such courtesy back to her.

“Actually, I can. I'm on the approved list of visitors and you can check it if you like. Where's Phoenix?” I push, frowning. She can't be in the house, it's too damn quiet.

“She's upstairs, in her room,” Cordelia sighs.

“Why?” I ask, suspicious.

“Because she just got a new toy and she wants to play with it. Why all the questions Baxter? Honestly...” She tuts disapprovingly at me.

“You can't buy her love. There's nothing you can give her that Raven can't.”

“I can give her stability. A nice home.”

I laugh at that. As if the words nice and Cordelia could ever go together.

“You have no idea, do you?”

“What?”

“Social services didn't tell you where Phoenix was picked up from, did they?”

“Her home. That disgusting shack of a flat, I'm guessing.”

“Wrong, old lady. She was picked up from her home on The Royal Circus.” I love watching the shock settle on Cordelia's face.

“That's not possible.” She shakes her head.

“Oh but it is. And if you look into it, you'll find that it *is* Raven's house, no one else's. Her name is on the deeds and her bank account is healthier than yours. Now what's your next argument?”

“How...?”

“It doesn't matter. If you'd bothered to turn up yesterday then you'd know. Call your solicitors if you don't believe me. But I do have a message for you before I go and find Phoenix. I'm taking her out for the day and you can't stop me...I want

you to think very carefully about what you're about to do. It's not too late to change your mind and stop this. I want you to consider how you plan to take that girl away from her family, without any help or support."

"Your grandfather..." she begins, but I cut her off with a cold, humourless laugh.

"Do you really think my grandfather is going to stand by you? He may have been fucking your withered old pussy for decades now, but is it good enough to tempt him to pick you over his own flesh and blood?"

"Your grandfather loves me!" she cries indignantly.

"I don't doubt that you do *think* that." I put a slight intonation on the word think, and from the angry glare of her nostrils, I know she heard it. "But does he love you more than me? More to the point, will he love the woman who is trying to tear his only grandson's family apart?"

"You...your family?"

"Yes."

"So you and Charlotte...?"

I ignore her probing question and continue.

"Do you really think he will choose you over his *own* great-grandchild?"

A shocked gasp escapes her. I smirk, all teeth and danger.

"Oh did you not know? Phoenix is my daughter. And my grandfather has assured me that I will have full access to his lawyers and other, shall we say, *resources* during this fight."

Cordelia pales, hand flying up to clutch her pearls. Yeah, she knows what I'm talking about. She might not know anything too specific about The Order, but she can't have been in my grandfather's life for all those decades and not have picked up on a little of what he does. Who he is. What we belong to.

I give her my predatory smile, ice cold and 'fuck you'. I've not let the psychopath out of the box much lately, and he's

itching to fuck with this bitch.

“That’s not possible.” She shakes her head in denial.

“We have the paternity test to prove it.”

“How?”

“Given how long you’ve been doing the nasty with my grandfather, I’d have thought you would still remember how it works.”

She glares at me, a look full of loathing and hatred, but says nothing.

“So, my *daughter*?” I stress, to really drive home the point. I smile because I like fucking with her, but also because I really fucking like pretending that Phoenix is mine. “I’d like you to fetch her for me now. Run along like a good little granny. It’s got to be time for your nap.” I turn my back on her, effectively dismissing her like staff or a lesser being, and I stare out of the window, enjoying how she gets all puffed up and angry. Ultimately, though, she does as I say. She’s stupid, not suicidal. She fears me. As she should.

I pull out my phone and send a quick text to the guys. *Stage one complete*, I type and send.

Fucking with Cordelia and revealing Phoenix’s parentage, done.

I don’t notice Cordelia returning because my entire focus is on Phoenix as she squeals my name and races towards me. She throws herself into my arms with an ‘oof’ and I’ve never been so glad to see her, even all those months at a time I was away from her when she was younger.

I pull her away from my body so that I can get a good look at her and two things catch my attention at once. I see Cordelia has returned and I notice that Nix is hurt.

Over Phoenix’s head I shoot daggers at Cordelia.

“Nix! What happened to you?” I ask brightly, pointing to the bright purple cast on her arm.

“Do you like it?!” she beams at me, twisting the cast awkwardly to show it off to me. She’s super proud of it but dark emotions swirl inside of me as I force myself to stay calm and fake a smile for her.

“I love the colour! I bet everyone will want to write and draw on it for you.” I give a strained grin but she doesn’t notice. Behind her, Cordelia gulps.

“Will they?!” she asks, eyes wide as saucers.

“Yeah!” I promise with enthusiasm. “But how did it happen?”

“Oh! I fell over.”

“How?” I frown. I can’t believe that the woman who is professing that she can give Phoenix the best life has allowed her to get hurt. “Did someone hurt you?”

“N-no?”

I don’t believe her. “No worries, Nix. We can talk about it at home.”

“Home! Do I get to go home now?”

“Absolutely.”

“Baxter—”

“Don’t you dare!” I snap. “Nix, do you want to go and grab your stuff?”

She races off, excited to finally get to see her mum again.

“Baxter, you can’t take her! You said you were having her for the day. She can’t go home! I have the court order. She’s in my custody—”

“You think I give a fuck what I can and can’t do? You think there’s a single judge in the country that is going to go against *me*?”

I take a menacing step towards her letting a little of my psycho shine through, and she scampers backwards like a frightened hermit crab returning to its shell. I sneer at her

cowardice, disgusted by her show of fear while also revelling in it.

“You have no idea who I am or what I’m capable of,” I warn. “You don’t know the connections I’ve made or the people in my pocket. It surpasses my grandfather’s reach even if he was on your side. Count yourself lucky that you’re still breathing right now. I am taking *my* daughter and we *are* going home. And if I find out that you have anything to do with her injury, I promise you, I will kill you in the most slow and painful way possible. And then I’ll bathe in your blood. With a fucking smile on my face.”

For good measure I flick open the knife that I always have on me and point it in her direction. She pales.

“Ready!” Phoenix calls, coming back into the room with her favourite teddy bear and dragging a bag that’s far too big for her. Wordlessly, I return the knife to its hidden spot and turn around to greet Nix with a smile.

I grab her bag with one arm and lift her up with the other, loving the way she buries herself into my neck. She smells of the sweetest strawberries and it brings a genuine smile to my face.

“Let’s go home and see your mum,” I tell her. “Say goodbye to your grandma.” I turn to walk out of the house, not putting Phoenix down.

“Bye grandma, I had fun!” Nix calls over my shoulder, content to stay in my arms and not attempting to go to the old bag for a hug or kiss. My grip tightens and I grit my teeth. If Cordelia hurt her...

Shaking my head, I clear away visions of sweet and bloody revenge. Even if she didn’t hurt Phoenix, Cordelia will get her comeuppance soon enough. I can wait. After despising the woman for so long, a few more weeks won’t make a difference.

At the car, I strap Phoenix into the car seat in the front and she waves happily out the window to Cordelia. I send a quick text in the guys’ group chat that the plan has changed slightly

and then I pocket my phone, knowing it will automatically connect to the in-car system once the engine is started.

“Have you had lunch, Nix?” I ask, pulling down the stupidly long driveway away from Cordelia’s house. I hope we never have to return.

“No, we were shopping and grandma said she’d make some when we got home.”

“Your grandma was going to make lunch?” I raise a brow and Nix giggles. “Or was she going to have *someone* make lunch?”

“Yeah that one.”

“I thought so.” I smirk. “Fancy chips?”

“And ice cream?” she asks hopefully.

“Chips and ice cream together if you like.”

“Yeah!” she cries. God only knows when the last time this kid got a treat was. Sure, Cordelia will have lavished her with expensive gifts and probably more toys than she needs, but she’ll also have made sure that Nix has eaten nothing but salads and healthy meals. I mean, it’s not necessarily a bad thing, but I think balance is important, and right now I want to treat my daugh—my girl.

I shake my head at myself, bemused by how easily I allowed myself to fall into the fantasy of believing Phoenix is really mine. Maybe one day...

I’d happily share with the others if I could figure out a way to tell Raven how I feel. How I’ve always felt. I mean, I know I kind of blurted it out at her already, but I want to explain and say it properly. I don’t know. Maybe with some grand romantic gesture.

Like Cordelia’s head on a platter?

Hmmm, no. She might not appreciate that so much with Nix in the house. Might be a bit awkward to explain... Maybe I could build her a love shrine somewhere else and fill it with the heads of those who have wronged her? The idea has merits. I’ll think about it for a while.

Beside me, Phoenix chatters away, playing with her teddy and humming along to the radio. My phone rings and I look at Nix, holding a finger to my lips to ensure she stays quiet. She nods solemnly at me.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me.” Rebel’s voice comes through the speaker system and Nix beams.

“Shhh,” I remind her before turning my attention back to the road and the phone call. “What?”

“What do you mean there’s been a change of plan?”

“Are you with Raven right now?”

“No. Why?”

I nod at Nix to indicate that she can say hello.

“Rebel!” she squeals.

“Hello, little princess.”

She giggles, blushes, and buries her head in her teddy. I chuckle.

“Don’t tell Raven...” I hesitate.

“Don’t tell Raven what?”

“We’re coming home.”

“What the fuck?!” Rebel roars across the hands free, making me wince.

“Naughty word!” Phoenix cries.

“Dude? What the fu— fudgolina?”

Nix giggles again as Rebel drops his voice to a whisper.

“I’ll explain when I get home. We’re a few hours away, and I’m going to stop for lunch and take Phoenix out for a few hours to break up the journey. We want to surprise Raven, don’t we, Nix?”

“Yeah!”

“We’ll get back pretty late.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll keep your secret,” Rebel grumbles, but I can tell he’s overjoyed at the news. “I better go and distract her. Let me know what time you’ll be home and I’ll take her out for dinner. That way you can sneak Nix up to bed and surprise Raven in the morning.”

“Great plan,” I agree. “Right. See you later.”

“Bye dude.” I cut the call and glance at Nix. She’s bouncing in her seat with excitement. I smile at her. Raven is going to flip, in the best way.

Raven's Diary

Present Day

Today was harder than I expected. It was Baxter's day to visit Phoenix. He promised to take lots of pictures of their time together and to even call if he could. I told him not to do that though because I don't want to risk breaking any rules that might stop us getting Phoenix back.

But I almost broke today and called him. Almost.

I thought I could keep busy and not think about it, but it's been almost as hard to breathe today as the day they took her from me. Knowing that he's there with her when it should be me makes me bleed.

I have so many questions for him, for her. I just need her home now. Everything is taking too long and I feel like the longer it takes, the more the chances of bringing her home are slipping through my fingers.

I will absolutely lose it if that happens. I thought after the mediation she'd be home temporarily at least, but no. She's still so far away, beyond reach.

I don't know how I'm going to fill the rest of the day. It's not even noon and I'm already going out of my mind. My skin is crawling with anxiety.

I've emailed the dean for special permission to complete my studies off campus, and I really hope it'll be granted. It's hard enough to worry about studying right now without the added pressure of having to turn up on campus too.

I should probably be studying now but every time I try to read the text for my assignment, my mind wanders back to Baxter and Phoenix.

I need her home. Failing that, I need him back to tell me exactly how she is.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rebel

“Go get dressed, little bird, I’m taking you out,” I say, giving Raven a heated look as she turns to me from the movie we’re watching together. “Wear something nice.”

She groans and settles back further into the cushions.

“Nope. Not moving.”

“Come on, princess,” I cajole.

“Reb, I’m not going out.”

“Why not?”

“Because Phoenix—” she starts, but I cut her off.

“You went out with Ace.” I pout. I remember that she used to love it when I did that shit. I happen to think I look damn good when I do.

“To the supermarket,” she points out. “It was hardly going *out* out.”

“He said it was a date.”

“We got groceries. Gotta eat.” She shakes her head.

I spoke to Ace about their little outing. Despite Ace’s insistence that it was a date, it really wasn’t. Though he did admit to kissing her. Which is fine, but now it’s my turn.

I watched them once they returned home and started baking together. Ace would find any excuse to keep Raven by his side. Mostly with kisses. It’s like a dam has broken and he can no longer hold his affection back. I’m not complaining at all, I just want a turn.

I know what Ace was trying to do: distract her. I’m sure anyone watching us would wonder how we’re able to smile and kiss and fool around when Phoenix has been ripped from us – not to mention what Thorn told me happened with Jax – but we’re just trying to take every opportunity to remind

Raven that we're sorting it, that life goes on. We won't let her beat herself up. But that's easier said than done.

"Fine. We need to eat. So I'm taking you out for food."

"Can't we just get takeout?"

"Would you pick it up from the restaurant?" I counter.

"Yes. If they didn't deliver." She frowns and it really is adorable.

"Good. So we'll go somewhere they don't deliver. Or do takeout. Just put some goddamn clothes on little bird and let me take you somewhere nice."

Knowing that there's no way I'm going to let this go, she sighs and gets to her feet.

"Fine. Give me an hour to get ready."

I give her my signature triumphant, shit-eating grin which makes her huff. She looks like she wants to hit me, but I guess she decides to play nice if I'm taking her out. Even if she doesn't want to go.

Once she's ready, which takes way longer than an hour, she comes downstairs to where I'm waiting for her in the hallway. Absentmindedly, I lick my lips as I check her out. She looks goddamn hot in a tight fitting short black dress, her hair in loose waves cascading down her back. Her hair has always turned me on, and I'm so glad that she's kept it long all these years. I can't wait to wrap it round my fist as I sink into her.

I've changed into dark denim jeans and a dark blue button up shirt, and styled my hair with some product. I don't look bad, but from the way her eyes heat up as she drinks me in, I'd say she likes the view.

"Ready, princess?" I ask, my heated gaze still checking her out. It's been so long since I've been on a proper date – if that's what this is – that I have no idea what the etiquette is, but I'm pretty sure that mauling her before we even get to the restaurant is frowned upon.

Minx that she is, she sashays towards me on impossibly high stilettos that make her legs go on for days, a playful smirk on her lips.

“Do I look nice?”

“Hell yeah!” I swallow thickly, mentally telling my dick *down boy!*

“Is this *nice* enough for you?” Her hands skim down her sides to the hem of her dress, gripping the edge and raising it a couple of inches to show her stocking-clad thighs and suspenders.

My dick doesn't stand a chance.

I move over to her, pinning her against the wall and inhaling her intoxicating scent into my soul.

“Fuck this shit, we're staying in,” I growl. I'm already half tempted to throw her over my shoulder and drag her upstairs, but she laughs like I'm fucking joking and pushes me away.

“Actually, I'm hungry. I could eat.”

“I'll order pizza,” I insist.

“And waste this dress? I don't think so! I contorted myself into it and it's damn well not going unused!”

“Oh little bird, it won't be squandered, don't you worry.”

“All the same, if it's alright with you, I'm looking forward to a night out,” she says firmly.

I groan and give in, holding out my arm for her to take like a goddamn gentleman when all I want to do is rip that dress off her and wrap those stocking-clad legs around my head.

Fuck. I set myself up and walked right into that trap, didn't I?

In the car she reclines her seat a little and relaxes back, her dress riding up enough to flash a small expanse of creamy flesh above her lacy stocking tops. My mouth is salivating and I'm so captivated by her that I can't start the engine.

“Restaurant’s that way,” she says with a laugh, pointing out of the front windscreen.

“Where are we going?” I manage to grunt out, tearing my eyes away from her thighs. All I want to do is feast on her. She can be my starter, main and dessert all in one. And I’d still never have my fill of her.

“I don’t know. Wasn’t this your idea? Didn’t you book somewhere?”

Did I? I honestly don’t remember.

“Pretty sure you begged me to take you out. I just wanted a quiet night in,” I tease with a wink. She smacks my arm.

“Shut up and drive, doofus.”

“Fuck that.”

I lean over, and plant my lips on hers, sliding my hand up her thigh as I do and hooking my fingers under her suspender straps. While my tongue plunders her mouth, I squeeze her hip until she flexes up towards out of her seat with an anguished sob.

And then I pull away, breathing hard. My dick hurts, it’s straining against my trousers so hard.

“You’re trying to torture me,” I complain.

“Yep.” She cackles evilly, although she sounds a little shaken herself. “I plan to torture you all evening.”

“Bring it on, little bird.” I wink at her as I pull off. “Because sooner or later this date will have to end and when we get home you won’t be able to run from me.”

We drive to the restaurant in silence – I did book a place I think she’ll like – and when we pull up I hand the keys to the valet before helping Raven out of the car.

“This seems posh,” she says, sounding worried.

“The poshest,” I confirm. She swallows nervously and I take her hand in mine. “It’ll be perfect, because while you’re eating your ridiculously overpriced meal, you’ll know I’m thinking about all the ways I want to spread you out on the

thousand-thread-count linen tablecloth to eat you as *my* meal. And I don't give a fuck if every pearl-clutching or snuff-sniffing twat in that place watches us."

"You wouldn't," she whispers, scandalised and thrilled.

"Try me, little bird. Keep up the teasing and I'll make good on my promise. You're such a good girl I know you'll put on a show for them all."

"Rebel..." she whispers disapprovingly, but her pupils are dilated as fuck so I know I'm getting to her.

"Come on, princess. Let's go eat."

I take her into the stupidly fancy restaurant where the maitre d' shows us to our table. It's a cosy little booth in the back, away from prying eyes. Raven relaxes a little when she sees the privacy, but after her little hallway tease I don't intend to let her off that easily.

We take our seats and order drinks without even looking at the menu. Two Cokes. It's probably a bit sad, but I'm driving and I want her to have a clear head tonight. The last thing I need is to give her a headache when she's going to be unexpectedly woken up by Nix in the morning.

"Do you want wine or anything?" I check.

"No, Coke's good." She grins at me and checks out the menu. I barely spare it a glance, I'll just order whatever she does. "It all sounds good. I've never been here before. What are you having?"

"Whatever you pick," I say with a shrug. She gives me a funny look and I sigh. "Fine. The chicken."

"Oh, I didn't see that," she says, looking back at the menu. Like I know if there's chicken on the menu. I mean, it's not exactly a stab in the dark is it, most places offer chicken. Well, unless you're at a vegan restaurant. Which I think wouldn't be caught dead at.

"What's wrong?" Raven says, looking up at me. "You have such a scowl on your face."

"Vegans."

“What?” She laughs.

“I was just thinking, how much it pisses me off that most restaurants *have* to provide vegetarian and even vegan options on the menu now, but they don’t offer us the same courtesy.”

“You want to be able to get a bacon sarnie at a vegan restaurant?” She raises a brow at me.

“Or a steak. Why do steakhouses have to offer a veggie dish? I mean, it’s a *steakhouse* for god’s sake! Surely the clue of what to expect is in the name?”

“Reb, this is just a normal restaurant. Order what you want. And don’t worry, I won’t ever take you to a vegan place.”

The waiter returns with our drinks while Raven is still laughing at me, and we place our orders. She opts for the steak and I copy her. She shakes her head at me.

“I told you princess, I don’t give a damn about this meal. I’m biding my time until I can eat you.”

“Shhh!” she hisses, glancing worriedly at the waiter’s departing back.

“He’d watch. He couldn’t take his eyes off you,” I say.

“Shut up!” Her cheeks flush.

“God, you look so sexy when you blush. I love the way that heat spreads down onto your chest and your nipples—”

“I-I’m s-sorry t-to in-interrupt, I have your bread basket,” the embarrassed waiter stammers. Raven glares at me, mortified, but I smirk at her and wink at him. He drops the basket like it’s on fire and runs back to the kitchen to hide. I laugh, and Raven kicks me under the table.

“Careful, princess,” I warn. “What you do to me will come back to haunt you later.”

She takes a gulp of her drink, and I decide it’s time to take things up a notch. I slide around the booth so that our legs are touching, and I place my hand on her silky leg.

“Rebel,” she warns, warily eyeing the other, oblivious, restaurant goers.

“Shush, I’m just checking something,” I whisper, raising my hand a little higher to meet her bare flesh.

“What? What could you possibly be checking?”

“The state of your panties right now.”

“If I’m wearing any,” she quips. Well, if she thinks that’s going to stop me then she doesn’t know me at all. I shake my head and push my hand a little higher, meeting a silky barrier.

“Tease.” I pout. She laughs.

“I could always take them off.”

“Do it.”

“I was joking.”

“I’m not,” I growl. “Slide them down, right here at the table.”

“No way!”

“Go to the bathroom then and take them off.”

“Reb—”

“Do it, or so help me god I’ll rip them off you right now.”

“Alright, alright, keep *your* panties on!” She slides out of the booth, shaking her head in disbelief and wanders off in the direction of the bathroom.

Holy fuck I can’t believe she’s actually going to do it. The thrill ignites in my veins as I eagerly await her return.

When she comes back she looks even more radiant than before. Her skin is flushed and her cheeks are sparkling. She slides back into the booth and I reach for her to pull her close once more until there’s no space between us.

“Where are they?” I ask.

“In my bag, why?”

“Hand them over.”

“What? Why?! No!”

“I want to check you’ve done it. I mean, there *is* another way I could check but with all these people here you may not...”

“Alright, alright,” she grumbles, snatching up her bag and rummaging through it before slapping the silk item down on my lap with too much force.

“Ooof.”

“Ooops, sorry,” she says sweetly. I’ll make her pay for that later.

I trace lazy abstract patterns on the inside of her thigh while we wait for the food to be delivered. Every so often I move my fingers higher, tantalisingly close to her core. To begin with, she tenses under my touch, but before long she’s responding to me, bucking her hips forward trying to force my fingers to make contact with her centre.

She gives a low growl of frustration when I remove my hand, having spied the waiter approaching with our plates, but perks up a little when she sees the food.

“This looks delicious,” she beams.

“You do.”

“Stop it.” She shakes her head like I’m teasing, but I’m really not. No way is she having dessert, I just want to get her home and in my bed. Fuck. We might only make it as far as the car at this rate. I’m pretty sure we’ll be asked to leave if I *do* lay her out on the table, and I’ll be damned if some fucker is going to stop me once I get started.

“How’s your steak?” I ask once she’s had time to taste everything on her plate.

“Amazing. Yours?”

“Yeah, it’s great. Filling though. I don’t think I’ll manage a dessert,” I hint.

“Oh I think I could,” she replies with a smirk, knowing damn well what I was getting at. I decide right there and then

that I'm going to make her wait for her orgasms. "In fact, I might be so stuffed I'm too uncomfortable for anything but sleep!"

And she's going to have to beg for them, the minx. She's such a temptress it's impossible for me to get the upper hand with her. Yet at the same time, teasing aside, she seems completely oblivious to the spell she has me under. The spell she's cast upon all of us.

By the time she's finished her meal, she is too full for dessert thank god. We ask for the bill and she disappears to the bathroom while I take care of it. The waiter must sense my impatience because he has me sorted and cleared before Raven returns.

I cross the restaurant with the intention of visiting the bathroom myself, but at the last moment I sneak into the women's and lock the door.

Thankfully only Raven is in there, reapplying her lipstick in front of the mirror. Fuck her lips still drive me wild. They're so pouty and goddamn perfect. I want them wrapped around my cock, that perfect lipstick smeared everywhere.

"Rebel? What are you doing? You can't be in here!"

"And yet here I am." I grin.

"Well, we should get going before we get caught."

"If we're going to get caught it had better be for a much more exciting reason than me accidentally choosing the wrong door."

"Accident, my ass." She laughs.

"Hmm, yeah, let me get a look at your ass," I say, slinking up behind her and pinning her to the vanity unit with the press of my hips.

I skim my hands down her back to the hem of her dress and slowly raise it up past the tops of her stockings, following the lines of the suspenders, until the material is bunched around her waist.

“Fucking beautiful,” I murmur, palming her silky soft skin. She leans back into my touch, arching her back so that she’s pressing more firmly into my hands and I fucking love the way her body responds to me, even as her brain is protesting that we shouldn’t be doing this here.

I kiss her neck, gently sucking the sensitive skin, and feel the exact moment her body yields to me. She turns to putty in my hands, and I know that I could do whatever I wanted to her right now.

With my left hand I cup her breasts, while my right skims down her stomach, past the rucked-up dress and onto her bare mound. Fuck, I can feel her burning heat already.

“Rebel,” she begs on a pant.

I don’t respond, I just keep kissing her neck and teasing her erect nipples. My right hand circles her clit until her hips are twitching in response to my attention.

Fuck, is it just my imagination or does the scent of her arousal fill the entire room? I feel like I’ll die if I don’t get a taste of her soon. I want to drag her from the room so that I have the freedom to make her scream, but at the same time I don’t want to move from this place and break the magic between us.

I slide my fingers lower, finding her soaked and ready for me.

“Fuck, little bird. So ready.”

“Take me home, Reb.”

“I can’t wait to taste you. You’re going to be the sweetest damn dessert I’ve ever had and I’ll never get sick of it.”

“Please—” she mewls as I speed up my pace and she begins to tremble in my arms. I can feel how close she is to the edge.

“Sssh, they’ll hear,” I warn. I’m only teasing though. I don’t give a fuck if they hear. I *want* them to hear.

I continue until she’s shaking so hard that the counter and me are the only things keeping her on her feet.

“Reb! Please! I need to come!”

I love the desperation in her voice. I can't wait to spend the rest of the night making her dreams come true.

But later.

I stop, step back, smooth her dress back into place. Catching her eye in the mirror I give her a wicked grin.

“Tit for tat, little bird,” I say with a grin. “I warned you.”

She growls in frustration at me, a full bearing of her teeth, and I chuckle. She'll be wild in the sack later, and I love her riled up and passionate.

“The valet has the car waiting, we should go.” I hold out my hand for her. “Come.”

“I was *fucking* trying,” she complains.

Yeah, tonight is going to be good.

Baxter: I need access to hospital records.

Amelie: Not a problem. Whose?

Baxter: Phoenix.

Amelie: Leave it with me.

Amelie: There's nothing.

Baxter: What do you mean?

Amelie: Nothing on record for Phoenix Elizabeth Deighton since she and mum were discharged from the hospital after her birth.

Baxter: I know for a fact that's bullshit. I took Nix into hospital myself when she had suspected sepsis as a baby.

Amelie: So someone's wiped her medical history. Why?

Baxter: To hide something.

Amelie: You think Raven did this?

Baxter: No. The grandmother. Nix's arm is in a cast.

Amelie: Leave it with me. Don't kill anyone just yet.

Baxter: You should probably know that I told Cordelia Phoenix is mine...

Amelie: I saw the updated birth certificate. Congratulations, Daddy.

Baxter: Funny. I also picked Nix up and walked the fuck out of there. I'm taking her home. Fuck the law.

Amelie: You really are causing me a lot of trouble, Batman.

Baxter: I didn't ask for help on this.

Amelie: I've got you in front of a judge at 7 am on Monday.

Amelie: You're welcome.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Raven

I'm fuming when we get into the car, storming ahead out of the bathroom, refusing to wait for Rebel. When he unlocks the car, I get in before he can open my door for me, shutting it a little harder than necessary.

When Rebel climbs in beside me I don't say anything, staring straight ahead in stubborn silence. He reaches over me, palms grazing my thigh and setting my already sensitive skin on fire once more. I think he's going to pick up what he started in the bathroom but – absolute bastard that he is – he simply reaches over me to grasp my seatbelt and plug it in.

“Safety first,” he says with a wicked grin.

“Where's my underwear?” I ask him, frowning.

“I left it for the waiter as a tip,” he deadpans.

“You better not have!” I punch his arm.

“As if I'd share your scent with anyone outside of the family.” He shakes his head. “You're like a damn drug.”

As he starts the engine and pulls away from the restaurant, inspiration strikes.

I push my chair right back and recline the backrest a little.

“What are you doing, little bird?” Rebel asks, glancing at me from the corner of his eye.

I don't answer, parting my legs and running my hands down my dress. I raise the hem of my dress in a similar way to how Rebel did in the bathroom.

“Little bird—” he warns.

I ignore him and, closing my eyes, lightly tap my clit with my finger.

“Princess—”

I dip two fingers into my wetness and circle it around my core.

“Raven—” he uses that same dangerous tone.

A moan escapes my lips and the car swerves suddenly.

“Fuck!” Rebel barks. My eyes fly open in alarm, my heart in my throat. He rights the car but my pulse is racing, all thoughts of pleasure forgotten. “That was too damn close! Will you leave yourself the fuck alone until we get home! I’ll take care of you, okay. We just need to live long enough, and I can’t drive safely with you distracting the fuck out of me like that.”

I gulp and nod my head, my hands gripping the edge of my seat with white knuckles. I don’t move until he pulls up outside the house and opens my door for me.

“Aww, come on, princess. You’re okay. It was just a little swerve.”

He reaches over me once more, this time to unclip my belt, and helps me from the vehicle. I’m okay but I let him wrap an arm around me and guide me to the house anyway. I love Rebel’s size, he always makes me feel delicate and tiny, and tonight is no exception. I snuggle in under his arm as he opens the door and leads us inside.

Instead of heading upstairs or even into the lounge though, he surprises me by pulling me into the dining room.

“Wha—” I don’t get the chance to ask my question because Rebel slams me against the wall and kicks the door shut behind him. The room is dark, only illuminated by the strips of light coming through the slatted blind from the street lamp outside.

Rebel pins my arms above my head in one of his huge hands, stretching them so that even in my heels I have to go up on tiptoes. He kisses me passionately and without restraint until I almost can’t remember what it feels like to breathe, and I certainly can’t muster up any energy to be mad at him.

When he pulls away he fixes me with a fierce stare.

“Don’t ever pull a stunt like that again. I god damn near crashed the car when I heard that sexy little moan.”

“Why are we in here? Too impatient to climb the stairs to bed?” I attempt to tease him but my breathlessness gives away how shaken he has me.

“You know why we’re in here. We’re in here because all damn night I’ve been imagining you splayed out on that damn dinner table like the finest fucking buffet fit for a king, and I damn well plan to enjoy it now.”

Everything inside of me clenches at his words, even as he pulls me over to the almost empty table and lifts me up onto it.

“Don’t disturb the flowers,” he warns, pushing me back so that my ass is fully on the wooden top. He pulls my dress up over my head and discards it onto the floor, staring at me with admiration and approval.

“Man, I fucking love it when you don’t wear a bra. Your nipples have been teasing me all night,” he says, taking one between his teeth.

He bites and sucks until I’m writhing and then releases it with a pop. With a delicious grin, he pushes my shoulders back until I’m lying on the table. Slowly, one at a time, he reaches for my ankles dangling over the edge and helps to raise them up so that my stiletto-clad feet are braced on the tabletop.

“Fuck. That’s a sexy view.”

There’s a flash and I try to scramble up but he holds me down.

“What the fuck Rebel?! Did you just take a picture of me?”

“Calm down. It’s just for me...although I am tempted to send it to the group chat so that they know what they’re missing.”

“Don’t you dare!” I snap in warning.

“Relax, princess. I won’t. Only because I know they’d be so fucking jealous they’d break the damn door down to join in.”

Holy shit that sounds hot.

“Ah, you like that do you little bird?” He smirks at me. “Is it the idea of being watched or having all of us at once that has you clenching?”

I choose silence as my best form of defence to that question, but he just chuckles and spreads my legs even further apart. It’s indecent, being spread open where we sit as a family to eat our meals, but there’s something decadent and enticing about it too.

Once he has me where he wants me, dressed in nothing but my stockings, suspenders and heels, he pulls up a chair between my legs. It makes me blush the way he calmly takes a seat as if he’s having a meal, but when he kisses his way up the inside of my thigh, stroking my calves as he goes, all embarrassment fades away. I want the stupid damn stockings gone so that I can feel his lips on my bare flesh without any barriers, but when I make a move to unclip them, Rebel stops me.

“Arms above your head, little bird. Extend them real nice like you’re stretching for that second cock just out of reach.”

I groan and do as he says, the action causing my back to arch up off the table a little, my tits thrust up like they’re begging for attention.

“Fuck yeah, like that.”

There’s another flash but this time I don’t move. I trust Rebel implicitly and there’s no denying that the arousal in his voice is making me feel like a million dollars.

He grips my hips, his thumbs stroking the bones as he slides me closer to him. His breath heats my already burning core but he doesn’t make contact. I fidget a little. He does nothing.

I’m contemplating getting up onto my elbows to see what the hell he’s doing when he leans forward and licks the entire length of my slit, causing me to yelp in surprise.

“Shh, little bird, or they’ll all come running wanting a taste.”

I groan as he continues to tease me with long rhythmic licks that always seem to avoid the sweet spot.

“Fuck, you taste so good,” he murmurs against me, the vibrations shooting sparks inside me. I want to growl out that he should damn well taste me properly then, but I hold my tongue. “Every fucking guy in that restaurant tonight wanted a taste of you. There wasn’t a single one who wasn’t staring, wishing he were me, imagining how he’d fuck you once he got you home.”

His dirty words have their desired effect on me as I squirm and wriggle beneath him, skin overheated and over sensitive. Was he always like this? This...chatty in the bedroom? His words embarrass and excite me. I know he’s exaggerating of course, but it does make me feel desired and sexy.

Rebel finally stops talking as he plunges his tongue into me, using his fingers to spread me wide and flick at my clit at the same time. While he works, I can’t help but imagine what it would be like if one of the others *was* in here with us.

My muscles clench.

Yeah, I like that idea a lot.

He swaps positions, slipping two fingers into me with ease, his tongue moving to my clit. He circles it a few times but doesn’t give me what I need as he pumps his fingers in and out slowly.

“You’re so damn tight. I can’t wait to feel your tight little pussy squeezing around my cock like a vice...I could just watch one of my brothers sliding his dick down that pretty little throat of yours.”

I whimper and clamp down hard around his fingers, my thigh muscles aching now from how tightly I’m wound.

“It would be those sexy little choking noises you make on his cock that flip me over the edge.”

I fucking cry out as I come all over his fingers, the strength of my release fighting to expel him from my pussy, but he just grunts and fights me, continuing to pump and circle until I’m thrashing on the table under him. I’m jelly. A boneless,

sobbing, panting mess, yet still Rebel laps at my juices like he can't bear to leave a drop on his plate. He has me so worked up I could easily come again but thankfully, mercifully, disappointingly he stops.

“Get your sexy fucking ass upstairs and into my bed right now, before I send those pictures and invite whoever responds first to join us.”

Holy fucking shit is that a threat or a promise? If I refuse to move, will he do it? Do I want him to?

I can count on one hand the number of times I've had sex since leaving school, and here I am thinking I can take on multiple cocks like a goddamn porn star or something. Such is the power of Rebel's tongue. He makes me feel invincible.

But as amazing as the fantasy is, I'm definitely not ready for that. And actually, right now, all I want is him.

I manage to pull myself up into a sitting position, taking Rebel's face between my hands and kissing him deeply. I don't care that he's covered in my juices or that I can taste myself on his tongue. I *like* it.

“I don't want to go upstairs,” I tell him when I break the kiss.

“Huh? Why not?”

“Because if you *did* just do that to me in a restaurant, I highly doubt you'd stop to squirrel me away to the car.”

“Too fucking right I wouldn't. I'd bend you over the table and fuck you from behind, knowing that you could make eye contact with everyone in the room.” His fantasy makes me bolder.

“What are you waiting for then?” I challenge with a cocky grin.

I don't have to ask twice. It's like something inside of him snaps – his control I'd guess – and he roughly grabs the top of my arms and yanks me to my feet. I don't have time to steady myself as he spins me on my feet and slams me back down onto the table, my breasts pressing against the wood almost

painfully. He rakes his nails down my back in a move so unexpected that I cry out, only to be silenced by the gasp that leaves me when he spansks my ass. He's so rough I feel like he could break a bone with the force of his blows alone, but it just turns me on even more. I melt into the table with a groan turning my head to the side so that my cheek rests on the smooth cold wood and I can glance back at him.

He's hastily undoing his belt and pulling down his jeans, and just as the tip of his cock appears, I quickly shut my eyes, terrified of the reminder of just how freaking huge he is. There's no way I'm going to be able to take him like this, not when he's so wild right now.

I expect him to slam right into me, but once again he surprises me. He slowly rubs the tip of his cock against my clit, teasing up and down my slit, using my juices to coat himself. He sighs happily, repeating the action over and over until I relax.

"Good girl," he whispers, the praise making me flush. "Imagine all those eyes on you. You'd make me so proud wouldn't you?"

I nod. I can't help it. With my eyes closed I'm *there*. Transported back to the decadent eatery from tonight, but this time it's my guys in the crowd, staring hungrily at me.

"You're so wet. It's coating your thighs, little bird. It's fucking amazing, like you've already been pumped full of cum by someone else."

He lines up at my entrance and slowly pushes just the tip in. Even that small movement makes me hiss at the intrusion. Fuck, he's so big. I wait for more pain to come but Rebel holds still, waiting for me to relax again. When I do, he pushes a little further and reaches round to caress my clit.

"That's it, princess. Let me in." He slaps my ass and somehow the motion does let him sink in a little further.

He groans when he's fully sheathed inside me and I do the same. I feel so *full*. Maybe having sex is like riding a bike, but

having sex with Rebel...yeah, I definitely forgot what this was like. Delicious pleasure on the point of pain.

“When we share you, properly, I’m going to be the last damn one inside of you, every damn time. This is too good.”

“Reb, stop talking and fuck me,” I complain. He doesn’t need to know that his words alone have me back on the edge.

He presses down on my back with one hand, keeping me locked in place, and with the other he grips my hip and doesn’t disappoint. His thrusts are long and confident, and even though he soon picks up speed, he’s in complete control.

“Open that pretty little mouth of yours nice and wide, little bird. I want to imagine you deep throating a cock while I fuck you.”

Holy fucking fuckety fuck. It’s not even hard to picture, just shadowy body parts with blurred out identities so that I don’t have to choose. I clamp down around him as his dirty words trigger my release and I cry out, shamelessly begging him to fuck me harder, faster.

“You want more?”

I’ll admit, I want to be that snarky girl who snaps at such a lame fucking question. It screams big dick (head) energy at me, and normally I’d cringe. But Rebel has me cock dumbstruck and all I can do is beg for more like a fucking pathetic damsel in an *Oliver* remake.

There’s something so fucking special about Rebel’s tree trunk cock that he has me pushing back and screaming “Harder! Faster! More!” like a deranged toddler at a play park. He fucking obliges, and even though his cock is *shredding me*, I’m apparently so high on endorphins that my pussy has told my brain I want it to hurt so bad I bleed for a week.

Fuck, I want them all. I want to wake the whole house and bring them running, lining up to take their turn or impatiently fighting over me until the only thing for it is to have them all at once.

Evidently, my cock drunk mouth must spew some of this random shit because Rebel groans like I just said the sexiest

thing alive, and stills his movements a moment later. I feel him pulsing hard as he empties himself inside of me and I'm actually kinda pissed that it's over.

Although when he pulls free and I wince, my pussy tells my hormone drugged brain to shut the fuck up because we need a breather.

I just about manage to flop over onto my back, all ladylike and sexy and shit. My eyelids droop and a yawn escapes me. I honestly have no idea what time it is. It could be nine at night or five in the morning, and I wouldn't have a clue. All I know is that I need my bed.

“Oh little bird, you're cute. But we are far from done here. Now get in my bed.” He pulls me up off the table onto my wobbly legs and gives my ass a stinging, playful slap. It'll probably leave a bruise. And even though I'm exhausted, my skin sings. Even my poor sore pussy is basking in the sunlight of his attention and ready for more. There's no way I could sleep with all this electricity coursing through my veins. Besides, the look on his face is not to be messed with. I gulp and slip out into the hallway to do as he demands.

Unknown number: Remember when you said I probably shouldn't spill blood?

Baxter: I never said that. I said don't spill blood.

Unknown number: Whoops? I mean, I personally think she looks better now. She's certainly quieter.

Baxter: No more accidents.

Unknown number: It wasn't an accident.

Baxter: I won't pay you.

Unknown number: Fine. But my fee just tripled. I've seen the news. There's people looking for this bitch. And you really do spoil all my fun. What the hell happened to you man?



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jax

It's seriously a good thing that Nix sleeps like the dead, otherwise Raven's screams last night would have woken her and the whole surprise could have been ruined. Luckily, she just woke the rest of us.

I have no idea what Rebel was doing to her – besides fucking, obviously – but I sure as fuck wasn't the only one awake, harder than hell, and horny last night. The guys' chat was active, everyone hurling abuse at Rebel, who was obviously too busy to notice, but he'll be a smug bastard today, sure as shit.

Thankfully he'll have to spare us the details in Nix's presence. I just hope Raven's not too tired to enjoy Nix's return. What am I saying? She could be on her deathbed, one foot in the grave already and she'd celebrate Nix's arrival back home. I have nothing to worry about.

Except the authorities breaking down our door because Baxter fucking kidnapped a child.

Fuck.

I'm trying to tell myself that it's okay, because his name is on Nix's birth certificate it'll all be fine, but I'm nervous as fuck. Maybe if Baxter had just confided in us, told us his plans, we could have done...something. But this rash and impulsive move seems so out of character for him. It's the only reason I've not given him hell; he must have a damn good reason for taking her.

But fuck was it difficult to bite my tongue when he walked through the door yesterday evening with Nix asleep in his arms, curled up under his jacket. A thousand questions burned my tongue and from the evil smile he gave me as he carefully pressed one finger to his lips, he damn well knew it too. I had to wait until he had put her into bed before I could question him but he slipped out of the house without me noticing. I've

been up all night waiting for his return. I haven't slept and I have no answers.

A gentle rap on my door disturbs my thoughts, and when I open it I discover Ace grinning at me like a loon. Of course he's excited. The repercussions of Baxter taking Nix wouldn't even occur to him.

"What's up mate?"

"Special day. Special breakfast."

"Yeah, alright. I'm coming. Let me get dressed first." Good thing I'm an early riser and have already worked out and showered.

I push my worry to the side, not wanting to spoil the big reveal or put a downer on today. So long as we make it through without being arrested, there will be time for answers later.

I pull on my clothes for the day and make my way downstairs to join Ace in the kitchen. Ace is busy flipping pancakes and Thorn is getting drinks ready, pouring juice while the hot chocolate blends.

"What do you need me to do? Did anyone wake Rebel up?"

"I'm here." He calls sleepily from the doorway behind me. He's yawning and looks thoroughly fucked. Bastard. "Jeez it's early, can't a man get some sleep?"

"No sympathy," Ace snaps good naturedly.

"What? Why?" Rebel pouts.

"You obviously didn't check your phone this morning," I say.

"What? No. I think I dropped it somewhere. Maybe the dining room or I left it in the car." He looks like he couldn't give two fucks where his phone is and we all know why.

"Well, in that case allow me to enlighten you. The reason for the lack of sympathy is because we were all treated to your little concert last night."

“I wasn’t playing music last night?” He scratches his head and I want to smack him. Instead I stare pointedly at him until the penny drops.

“Oh! Oh, right, yeah. Erm...sorry about that?” He laughs, not sorry at all.

“So everyone’s had about the same amount of sleep as you, we just didn’t have such a good time.”

“Damn. Next time I need to pay for better soundproofing I guess.”

“Help breakfast,” Ace snaps and starts loading items onto a tray. I have no idea if that’s what he wants me to do, but when he doesn’t snap at me I figure it’s okay. Thorn loads the drinks onto a separate tray and orders Rebel to carry it upstairs.

“Where’s Baxter?” I ask when everything’s ready and we’re good to go. It’s a really shitty thing to forget about him until the last minute, and I instantly feel guilty. I know it’s not my fault that he didn’t grow up with us, but little things like being excluded from this are bound to make him feel like even more of an outsider. If he cares. With Baxter it’s always hard to tell.

“Watching. Guard dog.” Ace chuckles and I take it to mean he’s the lookout to stop and distract Raven if she wakes and tries to come downstairs.

“Okay let’s go.”

We carry everything up to the landing outside Raven and Phoenix’s rooms where we find Baxter waiting, leaning against the wall and dressed like he’s going to a wedding or some shit. Doesn’t that guy ever dress down? Even when he was torturing Charlie he still wore tweed.

“I’ll grab Phoenix. You guys better go in without me because she’ll probably try to kill you for waking her up,” he says, disappearing into Nix’s room.

I knock gently on the door and when there’s no answer I let myself in. Crossing to the bed, I sit down beside her and gently brush the hair from her forehead.

“Wake up, princess,” I say. Her brow creases and she mutters under her breath, burrowing down under the covers a little. Thorn and Rebel place the breakfast trays on the dresser at the end of the bed, and Ace opens the curtains a little to let some natural light in.

I try again to wake her, carefully giving her shoulder a shake this time. Her eyes fly open and she looks about ready to attack me until her brain registers who I am and she relaxes. Then she frowns.

“You’re not who I fell asleep with.”

“Well I’m glad you can tell us apart.” I chuckle. “Morning, princess. We’ve brought you breakfast.”

“Who’s we?”

She blinks, sits up and stretches as she yawns.

“All of us,” Thorn says from the bottom of the bed. She looks at the others and smiles.

“That’s amazing. And a really nice gesture, but if it’s all the same, I’d really love a few more hours of sleep. I had a late night...”

“We know.” I smirk. “I think the whole street heard. I’d probably consider it an early morning too.”

“Sorry,” she mumbles, blushing. It’s really cute.

“Don’t be.” I kiss her cheek and pass her the hot chocolate Thorn has just handed me. She eyes it thankfully, takes a sip and lets out a blissful sigh.

“Where’s Baxter?”

“I’m here,” he calls from the doorway.

“Come in. You can tell me all about yesterday. I hope you’ve got loads of photos to show me.”

“Actually we have a surprise for you,” he replies. I quickly take the hot chocolate back out of her hands.

He steps to the side to reveal Phoenix standing behind him, clad in her PJs, a bright purple plaster cast on her arm. What

the fuck?

“Mummy!” Nix screams, running full pelt at the bed. I stand out of the way to avoid covering them both in hot chocolate as she dives onto the bed into Raven’s stunned arms.

“Baby?” is all she manages to choke out before bursting into tears and hugging her back tightly.

“Why are you crying, Mummy?” Phoenix asks, sounding affronted.

“I’m just so happy to see you, baby!” she sobs, pulling Nix even closer. She glances over Nix’s head at Baxter. “How?”

“Later. Just enjoy.”

Fear flashes across her face but she closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and when she opens them again all traces are gone, a perfect happy mask for Nix fixed firmly in place.

“Oh my baby! This is the best surprise ever! Tell me all about your time away.” She beams at Phoenix but her face falls when she sees the cast on her arm. “Baby, what happened?”

“I hurt my arm,” Nix replies.

Baxter shoots me a significant look and I place the drink on the bedside table so that I can pull out my phone to record.

“Okay, baby. I can see that. How did you hurt your arm?”

“I’m not supposed to say,” Nix whispers. Raven’s face whitens and I grip the phone too hard in my hand. The others shift restlessly.

“That’s okay,” Raven smiles reassuringly at Nix but I can tell it’s forced. “Did you go to hospital to get a cast?”

“Yeah! I went a few times. I had to have a photo taken but it doesn’t take normal pictures, it can zoom inside your body and take a picture of your bones.”

“Wow! You had to have an x-ray?”

“Yeah. I forgot the name. My bone was all cracked and looked funny, so the doctor said this will magic it back

together again.”

“That’s really good. I’m glad he gave you it.”

“Yeah. And I got to pick the colour! They had pink and purple and it was really hard to choose. I couldn’t pick and grandma shouted at me to hurry up so I just closed my eyes and pointed. I like purple though so it’s okay.”

I grind my teeth at the idea of Cordelia shouting at Nix over something so trivial as taking time to make a decision. I don’t think I’ve ever heard Raven raise her voice at Nix. I mean, obviously she must have, but we have only been around for a few months. It’s funny because she seems to have the patience of a saint with Nix, whereas she’s the one more like an impatient toddler when dealing with Rebel’s tantrums. But I do know for certain that she definitely wouldn’t shout at Nix over something so trivial.

“I love the purple,” Raven says, kissing her. “It’s a bit like Ace’s eyes, look.”

She beckons Ace over to the bed so that Nix can look at his unusual violet eyes. Nix giggles.

“I like purple a lot more now. Can I have pancakes?”

Of course we’ve forgotten all about the breakfast going cold on the side. I don’t want to eat, I want to know why our fucking daughter has her arm in a cast and thinks she isn’t allowed to talk about it. I twitch impatiently.

“Of course. Get into bed beside me baby, and let the others sit down, and we’ll all tuck in.”

Nix does as Raven says, climbing under the covers and patting the spot beside her for me to take. I do, and the smile they both give me relieves a little of the tension locking up my body.

Thorn passes out plates and cutlery while Ace hands out pancakes. It’s the most inappropriate breakfast in bed food, but no one seems to mind at all. Once everyone has a plateful, the others all perch on the end of bed.

“You need a bigger bed,” Baxter complains. Rebel looks smug as fuck, obviously thinking of his secret shag pad on the top floor that he thinks we don’t know about. Idiot. I know more about this house than he does, including his ‘secret’ plans for the garden for Nix’s Christmas present.

“What was your favourite breakfast you had at Grandma’s then Nix?” Thorn asks.

“I had gra-u-ola a lot.”

“Granola? Yuk.” Thorn pulls a face and Nix giggles.

“I liked yoghurt and fruit. I had that sometimes.”

“That sounds so much better!”

“It was. Grandma likes all the healthy food.”

“What was your favourite dinner then?”

“McDonald’s!” she yells.

“Your grandma got you McDonald’s?”

“Yes, for not telling the doctors about my arm.”

Raised eyebrows and significant glances are fired around the bed but no one says anything. I continue to film the exchange, my breakfast untouched.

“Did you go to any nice places when you were away?” Rebel asks.

“Yeah! Baxter took me out yesterday.”

“Did he now?” He smiles at her. “Where did you go?”

“To the beach, and I had candy floss and ice cream and a toffee apple! And fish and chips. We made sandcastles and played the flashy light games and had fish and chips.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of eating,” Rebel says, sounding impressed. “You said fish and chips twice.”

“It was so nice we had it twice! It was a really fun day.”

“It sounds it.” Rebel smiles. “What did you do with your grandma? Did she take you to any more gardens?”

“No. We just stayed in a lot. I played in my room and had to be quiet. Especially after I hurt my arm.”

“Did you want to tell me about that day Nix? What did you have for breakfast that day?”

“I had yoghurt and fruit that day so I knew it was going to be good. Grandma said we were going out so I had to have a bath in the morning.” She giggles like this is absurd. “But I couldn’t wash my hair on my own. Grandma helped but the water was so hot I screamed and splashed her on accident.”

She pauses and sobs.

“It’s okay, baby. Grandma would know it was an accident.”

“S-she got re-really mad. She held me u-under the water to get the shampoo out and I didn’t like that.”

Raven says nothing, just wraps her arm around Nix and holds her close. No one is eating now and Baxter isn’t the only one in the room that looks ready to kill.

“So where did you go? Did you wear a pretty dress?”

“Y-yeah.” Nix hiccups. “It was itchy and fidgety. Grandma put a yellow bow in my hair. I wanted the pink one but it didn’t go.”

“I’m sure you looked really pretty, baby. I love you in every colour.”

“Thank you Mummy. I love you in all the colours too.” She giggles. “Baxter looks funny in pink.”

“Now when did you see Baxter in pink?” Raven asks on a laugh.

“Yesterday. We went in the water and got wet and Baxter had to get a towel. It was massive and it went around and around and around me. They only had pink so he had to wrap up in a pink towel too and it was really funny! He took a picture, Mummy. Baxter! Show her the picture!”

Baxter grins easily at Nix, even though his eyes are still blazing with fierce intent to kill, and he hands Nix his phone.

“You do it. You know how to work it better than I do.”

Nix grins at him, slides the phone open and navigates her way straight to the camera roll, selecting the picture she wants and then flicking through. She gives a running commentary on her day with Baxter, all tears and upset forgotten, while the rest of us wait on tenterhooks to hear more.

“It was the best day Mummy!” Nix grins, obviously having finished her story and photos.

“Even better than your day out with grandma wearing the yellow ribbon?”

“Yeah. We were meant to see Mr Branson...” I raise my brows at Baxter. Did he know Cordelia had taken Nix to see his grandfather? Did Richard know she was hurt? How damn long ago was this? Why didn’t anyone tell us. “But we couldn’t go because we had to go to the hospital and I had to say I fell down the stairs because I was running.”

“Hmm, you know better than to run near stairs Phoenix,” Raven says with a frown.

“I know Mummy. I would never do that.”

“Then why did you tell the doctors that?”

“Because Grandma said if I told what really happened they would take me away and I wouldn’t see any of you again.” She bursts into tears again and Raven scoops Nix up into her lap, cradling her to her chest and rocking her back and forth.

“Shhh, it’s okay darling. Clearly that wasn’t true because we’re here right now.” She takes a deep breath and when Nix calms she speaks again. “I want you to tell me what really happened please, Phoenix Elizabeth. I promise you, nothing bad will happen and you won’t be in any trouble if you tell the truth.”

Nix nods, her bottom lip wobbling, but she takes a deep breath and starts to talk.

“After the bath, Grandma did my hair and got me dressed. I wanted to wear my necklace but Grandma wouldn’t let me and I wasn’t allowed to take any toys. When we were at the

top of the stairs I tried to run and get it but she grabbed me and pulled me back. Then she shouted to go downstairs and when I didn't she pushed me."

There's a stunned, horrified silence for what feels like a full minute before Raven asks very carefully, "What do you mean she pushed you?"

"She pulled my arm to stop me going back to my room and then when I was at the top of the stairs she pushed me like this...and I fell down."

"Down where?"

"The stairs."

"You fell down a few steps or..."

"All the way to the bottom, Mummy." Nix sobs. "I'm sorry I didn't do what I was told! I just wanted my necklace to match you. I missed you so much Mummy and I kept squeezing it so that you'd know I love you."

I'm fucking done in. I don't know whether to wrap them both in my arms or leave the room to punch the shit out of something.

Fuck!

When was this? How long has Nix been in that woman's 'care'? What do we do now? No wonder Baxter took one look at Nix and got her the hell out of there.

"You're not in any trouble, I promise baby. Can you tell me what happened after?"

"I cried a lot because my arm hurt so we went to the hospital and I was really scared because Grandma drove herself and she never drives." Raven gives her a tight smile. "And when we got there before we went in, grandma said it was an accident and I had to say I was running and slipped or I couldn't see you again. And when I said it to the doctor she said I was very brave and that I could have a McDonald's for being so good. And when we went back and I didn't say the truth I always got McDonald's and a treat."

“Grandma said you were playing with a new toy yesterday,” Baxter says suddenly.

“Yes. We saw the doctor. He said I’m doing really good at healing my bones!”

“Guys, there’s no record of Nix going to the hospital,” Baxter says in a low voice. “All of her medical records after her birth have been wiped.”

“Let’s discuss it later,” I say tightly, while wondering what the hell is going on. “In fact, we should let you guys catch up. If you’ve finished your breakfast we’ll go down and wash up.”

Taking the hint, the others gather up discarded breakfast supplies, only Nix’s plate empty, and wordlessly we leave the room. I cut the recording before anyone speaks and immediately send it to our team of lawyers with a note saying that Phoenix’s biological father has removed her from Cordelia’s care based on this new evidence coming to light.

I hope it’ll be enough to keep the authorities off our backs long enough to think straight.

Once we get to the kitchen, Ace dumps everything in the sink, swearing loudly in Slovenian.

“Well I guess no explanation is necessary,” I say to Baxter.

“Yeah, sorry. Cordelia got me riled up anyway. I snapped and told her about the finances and the paternity test, so she’s bound to have spent the rest of the day chasing that up with her lawyers.”

“And how did Phoenix end up back here?” Rebel asks.

“Did you not see her arm?” Baxter snaps. “I took one look at it and said I was taking her home. She tried to threaten me but I told her she was lucky to be breathing.”

I nod my head in agreement. Given the circumstances I would have done exactly the same.

“So what now?” Thorn asks.

“I spoke to...a friend, they’ve managed to get us in front of a judge first thing tomorrow morning,” Baxter says. “Hopefully a sympathetic one.”

“Okay, that’s good.” I nod. “If you go with Raven you can hopefully get temporary custody as the biological father.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Baxter agrees.

“So today let’s just focus on giving Nix the best return home that we can,” I decide.

“Absolutely!” Thorn agrees.

“Hell yeah!” Rebel crows.

“Agree,” Ace murmurs.

“Sure,” Baxter says. “But you should probably also know that I promised Cordelia that if she had anything to do with Nix’s injury, I would kill her and bathe in her blood with a fucking smile on my face.”

I swallow my protests because she fucking deserves it but I can’t help but worry if we have enough pull to get away with that. I also know that there’s no changing Baxter’s mind when he’s made himself a blood oath like that.

What I’m not expecting is Ace’s grunt of agreement.

Raven's Diary

Raven's Diary

I don't even know where to begin. My emotions are all over the place right now.

I'm writing this as I watch Phoenix play in her bedroom, clearly she's missed all her toys. I'm too scared to move more than a few feet away from her. Too afraid to blink even. I'm terrified she's going to be taken away again. For good this time.

And yet, she's home and that makes me happy. Or it would if the fear of the unknown wasn't hanging over our heads.

Am I dreaming? I've pinched myself a few times to check, but in what dream would my baby girl be hurt? It's more like a nightmare, and yet here she is, home. Safe in my arms. Safer than she ever was with that vile woman. Which is a dream.

It's all so confusing.

And then there's the anger. No rage. My blood is on fire in my veins, boiling with the need to cause pain.

I want to kill Cordelia.

There is no excuse whatsoever for what she's done to Phoenix. Even if it had been some really unfortunate horrible series of accidents, the lies and blackmail and threats on top make the whole thing unforgivable.

Every time I hear Phoenix laugh, a little of the tension leaves me. But as soon as I lay eyes on that purple cast, I'm back to pacing like a caged animal.

Of course I don't blame Baxter for bringing her home. When I first saw her I was so angry at him for jeopardising our chances at winning the court case like that, but once Nix started to tell her story, I knew he'd done the right thing. I'm impressed he actually walked out of there with Nix and left Cordelia breathing to be honest.

I never expected him to show that level of restraint.

*So often I've thought I owed Baxter my life for all the ways
and times he's saved me, but now I know it's a debt I'll never
be able to repay. I owe him Phoenix's too.*

My love in return seems paltry, doesn't it?



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Raven

Leaving Phoenix with Jax and the others to come to the courtrooms this morning is the hardest thing I've had to do in a while. I didn't sleep last night, I kept getting up to check on Phoenix. She was fretful and restless in her sleep, and I worry she's having nightmares.

I'm mostly here to support Baxter and to tell the judge I have no objections to him taking temporary custody of Phoenix. Even if it means they both have to move out of our home for now because of the case, it's a price I'll pay to know Phoenix is nowhere near Cordelia.

"Are you okay?" Baxter asks me, giving me a sideways look.

"Yeah." No! "Why?"

"You're muttering under your breath and shaking your head like a loon."

"Am I? Sorry."

"Don't be. It's sexy when you look insane." He grins to show he's joking – I hope – and I laugh at him but am spared from having to answer by the door to the judge's chambers opening.

A balding guy that looks to be in his sixties wearing smart trousers and a shirt invites us in. Baxter motions for me to go ahead and we both take seats at the large wooden desk. The judge – Bob Blackborow according to the gold nameplate on his desk – closes the door before rounding his desk and joining us.

"Good morning, thank you for coming in so early to see me. I have a full schedule of hearings today but our mutual friend made it very clear you needed to meet with me urgently."

"Yes, thank you for agreeing to see us," I say. "I'm sorry if you've had to come in early especially."

He chuckles.

“My dear, on court days I’m in at five. Though I try not to make that common knowledge, otherwise I’ll be interrupted all morning.”

He has a relaxed, easy going nature about him. Almost grandfatherly. There’s something about him that invites confidence and total honesty. He’s definitely trustworthy and most importantly, he seems fair.

“I’m here to apply for a temporary custody arrangement for my daughter,” Baxter says.

“I see. As I understand it the child in question is already under a temporary order, in the care of her great-grandmother, while there’s ongoing proceedings.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you are on the child’s list of visitors?”

“I am, sir.”

I know this is serious, but it’s hard to bite back a smile at Baxter sounding so polite and respectful. I want to giggle because I can only imagine how hard he’s finding it to play nice.

“Then I’m not sure why we need to change the order.”

“On Saturday I went to visit my daughter—”

“The daughter who, up until a couple of months ago, had no paternal lineage listed on her birth certificate?”

“We had a paternity test done and the birth certificate updated immediately.”

“I see. Do continue.”

“When I got to the home of her great-grandmother I found my daughter had a cast on her arm. She was reluctant to tell me how she got hurt and it rang alarm bells.”

“I see. Children do get hurt very easily though. I don’t—”

“I took her from her great-grandmother’s care and returned to the family home with her.” The judge’s brows rise. “I know

I shouldn't have, but once home Phoenix opened up to her mum and told her what really happened. We have it on camera. Please will you watch it before making a judgement?"

"Very well." The judge sighs, and I feel the apprehension snake its way round my chest and squeeze. It's hard to breathe. This doesn't feel like it's going well at all.

Baxter nods to the judge's laptop on the desk.

"It's in your email, sent over by our lawyers."

The judge turns to his laptop and searches for the email. When he finds it, he presses play and Nix's small voice fills the room. My heart clenches. I can't listen to her pain and suffering again. Baxter reaches out to take my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze that's meant to reassure and comfort, but doesn't. How can I feel comfort, being made to listen to Nix's tale all over again?

When it's over and the room is quiet once more the judge looks at the two of us, his face sombre.

"How old is the child?"

"Almost four, sir."

"While I'm well aware that children – and adults too for that matter – of all ages lie, I am inclined to believe this child's testimony."

Relief floods me and the constricting bands around my chest loosen a little.

"Thank you," I say in a rush.

"Normally I would want to question the child myself but I think she has been through enough and it would be unkind to make her relive that again." Baxter nods. "For that reason, I am willing to grant you, the biological father, temporary custody of the child while the court case is ongoing."

"Thank you. Do you need us to move out of the family home because of the case?"

"Normally, yes. However, as I said before, I think the child has been through enough. Keep her at home, cuddle her,

soothe the nightmares she's bound to have from this trauma. Be a family."

"What about her great-grandmother?"

Your next step will be to officially register a complaint with the police if you haven't already done so..."

"I did that yesterday," Baxter surprises me by saying. "They have the footage too and the lawyers have raised objections."

"Then I'm happy to grant a temporary restraining order against Ms Deighton to prevent her having access to the child until all of this nasty business is over."

"Thank you," I say, my eyes watering with unshed tears of gratitude. "How will this impact the case?"

"I can't speak of specifics because it's not my assigned case. If it were, I would have the case thrown out. It's reprehensible to consider placing a child in the care of a known abuser... however, this isn't my case."

"What—"

"I will speak to the judge assigned to it and bring this new information and evidence to light. The judge may choose the same course of action as I would take, or they may wish to complete the hearing as serious allegations have also been raised against yourself, Miss Deighton."

I nod even though I'm disappointed. Of course everything wouldn't magically disappear with a better bank balance and a name on a birth certificate. Cordelia has been gathering 'evidence' against me for years. Thank goodness the judge believes Phoenix and didn't think it was some elaborate 'he said/she said' retaliation plan.

"Thank you very much for seeing us," Baxter says, getting to his feet and shaking the judge's hand. "We won't take up any more of your time."

"Yes, thank you," I manage to say stiffly.

We exit the office and the court building and make our way back to Baxter's car. The whole thing didn't even take an

hour and Nix can stay at home with us. I should be dancing right now, but I can't.

“What’s wrong?” Baxter asks.

“I hoped—”

“I know. But we’ve got this. Small steps. Nix is home and that’s all that matters for now.”

“I know you’re right,”

“I understand how you’re feeling and you’re entitled to feel that way.” He doesn’t say anything else, simply holds his arms wide for me to step in to, and wraps me in a warm hug. The tension finally leaves me as I relax in his arms.

“Let’s go home. It’s still early and I have a surprise for you.”

“Is it food?” I ask. He chuckles.

“You’ll see.”

I pull away slightly, just enough that I can stare up at him while remaining in his arms. I love looking at Baxter Branson. He’s sharp angles and steely stares on the surface but has a goeey marshmallowy heart of gold underneath. Well, for those he loves he does, anyway.

“What?” he asks when I fail to quit staring long past the social norms of being polite.

“I love your face.”

He gives me a look that says I’m crazy.

“Thank you?”

“It’s a compliment, yes,” I say. “And you know that I love you, but I just wanted to say I really really love your face too.”

I have no idea what I’m saying, or if he can read the meaning or the intent behind my words. I’ve never been backwards in coming forwards but there’s something so fragile and new in my relationship with Baxter that makes me hesitate. For four years he’s been my anchor, best friend, saviour. And now he’s my...what? We’re clearly mad for each

other but we've still not...sealed the deal so to speak. And I want to. I really *really* want to experience everything the enigma that is Baxter Branson has to offer.

"You're still staring."

"You're still gorgeous," I say with a smirk. Inside I'm screaming 'just kiss me already! Rip my goddamn clothes off and do it!'...although perhaps standing in the courtroom car park is not the best place to finally get it on.

Instead I settle for a kiss, reaching up on my tiptoes to cup his chiselled jawline in my hand. I kiss him softly, sweetly, but I linger hoping that he'll take the hint and come back for more.

"We should get back," he says reluctantly. How ridiculous that I'm equally disappointed by his rejection as the result of our trip out today. My hurt obviously registers on my face because he grabs my ass and pulls me into him roughly with a growl.

"I am not risking Nix's future for a fuck in a car park, but I swear to god if you kiss me like that again, I will snap and we'll both be going to hell. Or prison."

I give him a small smile and climb into the car. The kiss wasn't even anything special so his words make no sense.

"You kissed me like you love me," he says, reading my confusion. "I've never been kissed like that before."

I reach over and take his hand in mine, glad that he drives an automatic.

"I didn't kiss you *like* I love you. I kissed you with love because my heart is bursting with everything I feel for you. I told you: I love your face."

A slow genuine smile stretches across his face. He says nothing, starting the engine and beginning the short drive home, but that smile stays on his face the entire way and my chest feels warm.

When we get back to the house it's quiet. I find it hard to believe that everyone would still be in bed but when I check the lounge they're all in there watching a film under blankets in their PJs still. Well, Nix is wearing PJs, the guys are all wearing sweats and T-shirts. They realised pretty early on that walking around in just their boxers wasn't really an option with Nix's curiosity. I'm not complaining though, the view still looks great.

"Mummy! You're back!" Phoenix grins at me but doesn't move from her spot on the sofa. I don't blame her, I can spy a glass of juice and a plate of cookies nearby, and an honest to god tiara on her head. She has these guys wrapped so far around her little finger they probably can't even see straight.

"Hey baby, yes we're back. What are you watching?" I ask, even though I can very clearly see that she's watching her favourite film for the millionth time since Rebel got Disney+.

"Frozen! The new one!"

"Is it good?"

"Yeah!" She yells at the same time as Jax and Rebel complain "no".

"Thorn likes it!" she insists, like that somehow makes it better. He has horribly awesome taste in films.

"Ace?" I check with the impartial member of the good.

"Not bad. First better. Song horrible."

"Do you want to watch with us mummy?"

I look at the tangled pile of limbs on and around the sofa. She looks like she's surrounded by an entourage and the scene makes me smile. *Like mother, like daughter maybe?* I hope so. I want Nix to know love is love and there's no limits or restrictions on how that is expressed.

"I'd love to, baby. But there doesn't seem to be room for me, and I don't have a tiara." I pretend to pout.

"Here you can have mine," Rebel calls, picking up a second tiara from the arm of the sofa and frisbeeing it my way.

I catch it and pop it on my head and Nix squeals and claps her hands.

“Now where shall I sit?”

“Right here,” Rebel calls again, patting his lap this time. Tempting, but I definitely don’t trust him to keep his hands to himself.

“Next to me, here Mummy,” Nix says, patting a non-existent space somewhere between her and Jax that’s half on his lap. He gives me a lazy, sexy smile and I shiver, I trust him to behave more in front of Nix than Rebel so I take a seat, perching on his knee. It’s uncomfortable as fuck.

He shifts so I’m sitting across his lap, my shoulder against his chest and my legs up towards Nix. She rests her hands on my toes but thankfully is so engrossed in the film that she doesn’t think to tickle me.

“Everything okay, princess?” Jax asks low in my ear. I nod. “Where’s Baxter?”

“Kitchen. He said something about a surprise. I hope it’s food. Did you guys eat yet?”

“Nix had some cereal but no, we’ve not eaten, because the big softie over there refused to cook until he saw the end of the film.”

I smile and settle back against Jax. It’s surprisingly nice. I can’t believe that it’s a Monday, it feels more like a weekend with none of us having to do any work. I’m so glad it’s the Christmas holidays at long last. I was dreading it but now that Nix is home I’m woefully aware of how bare the house looks and how last minute everything is going to be.

“What do you want to do today?” I ask Nix.

“Don’t know. Maybe just play with you?” she replies.

“Sure thing baby,” I tell her. It must have been lonely being at Cordelia’s and made to play quietly on her own all the time. I’ll try and get the guys to join in too. Not that I think I’ll have any trouble convincing them. They seem to live for playing with and entertaining Nix.

“Tomorrow do you want to go and get a Christmas tree, baby?”

“YEAH! Can we go today? Please! Can we?”

“I thought you wanted to play?” I laugh.

“No! I want a tree. I’m so happy you didn’t put one up without me. Grandma doesn’t have a tree. She said the needles make a mess.”

“Well we’re going to have a real tree with real messy needles and the mess be damned!” Rebel declares.

“Bad word,” Nix giggles.

“Ooops,” Rebel winks at me and pulls out his wallet. I shake my head and turn away to ignore however much he’s giving Nix right now. That girl has more cash in her purse than I do.

“Now you can buy the tree as well as choose it,” Rebel says. “And we’ll have one in every room!”

“Okay, Santa, calm down,” I say, shaking my head.

“Oh ho ho, where’s your Christmas spirit?” he teases.

Down at the courthouse waiting to take my daughter away.

I force a smile.

“Whatever. But you’re cleaning up the mess and responsible for their safe removal and disposal after the event.”

“That’s wasteful. I’m going to buy potted ones. They can go down the bottom of the garden and Nix can dig them all up again next year.”

“Can I?”

“Yep.”

“Mummy! This is going to be the best Christmas ever!”

I smile and sit back to watch the film. Maybe Nix is right, I’ll certainly try my hardest to make it the best Christmas ever for her.

Guys' Chat

Rebel: Have you all seen the news?

Thorn: Yeah, it's mental isn't it? Like someone's targeting West Prep alumni.

Rebel: Are you fucking stupid?

Thorn: What? What did I miss?

Rebel: We have something to do with this, don't we?

Thorn: What do you mean 'we'?

Jax: Baxter, do you want to tell them?

Baxter: No.

Thorn: Tell us what? What's going on?

Jax: Baxter had Tilly taken care of.

Thorn: Holy shit! Is she dead too?

Rebel: What do you mean 'too'? Who else is dead? Why does no one tell us anything?

Thorn: Well, I don't know, but I'm assuming they 'took care of' Charlie too.

Rebel: Oh. Good. Fucking cunt deserved it.

Jax: Charlie and Tilly are both alive. Right, Baxter?

Baxter: Sort of...

Jax: What the hell? Explain.

Baxter: When Ace and I left him, Charlie was alive. But the clean-up crew ran into some difficulties apparently. Ace gave zero fucks about spreading his DNA all over the place, so they had to have an accident which resulted in a fire.

Rebel: Why wasn't that on the news?

Jax: Because it's a piece of shit poor area, where crap like that happens all the time.

Jax: Right, so Charlie's dead. Nothing to be done about that now. What about Tilly?

Thorn: Hold on. He might have been staying in a shithole, but Charlie came from money. Why the fuck hasn't his family kicked up a stink about this?

Baxter: Because they know their son was a fucking monster and would rather keep that quiet. The university transcripts say he transferred out to study abroad. I'm sure in 6 months or so he'll be involved in a tragic skiing accident or some shit.

Jax: Right. So Tilly?

Baxter: I don't check in daily but my associate knows not to kill her. She's in a safe place, for now. Not promising she's in one piece though.

Rebel: But everyone's looking for her!

Baxter: It's fine. She'll make contact soon enough with some sob story about needing space or whatever. She'll declare she wants a divorce, isn't coming back, and then she'll disappear.

Thorn: Holy fuck are we killing her too? This is some proper mafia shit.

Rebel: Shut up you absolute tool.

Baxter: The mafia is the fucking Boy Scouts compared to me. And no, "we" aren't killing her. Ace and I have a plan. Tilly's always wanted to travel, and he has some friends back home who will be most welcoming to her when she goes there for an extended, permanent kind of visit.

Ace: Pretty face. Good price.

Thorn: Who the fuck are you people?!?

Rebel: Lol. Do we need to wipe this chat?

Baxter: No. I have everything secured.

Thorn: Are you Batman?



CHAPTER TWENTY

Rebel

“Brunch is ready,” Baxter says, appearing in the doorway to the lounge just as the film credits roll. Nix is standing on my lap belting out ‘Into the Unknown’ and she’s not half bad. I’ll have to play her the original. It’s way cooler than some Disney princess screeching it.

“C’mon guys,” Raven says. “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse!”

“Mummy!”

“What, baby?”

“You can’t eat a horse!” She sounds horrified. I smile.

“It’s just an expression, baby. I don’t even like horses.” She laughs and I freeze, the grin falling from my face.

“You don’t like horses?”

“Fu—hell no. They’re the devil’s henchmen.”

Panic sets in and I stare at her to see if she’s messing around.

“You’re joking, right?”

“No. Why? I hate them. Riding something that big with a mind of its own? I’d rather staple my tits to a beehive and cover them in pollen.”

The others laugh but I remain frozen to the spot.

“So if Nix wanted to take lessons...”

“Nope. Absolutely not. Horses are a hard limit for me. Nix knows this, don’t you baby?”

“Yeah! Mummy said if I don’t like horses she’ll let me swim with sharks when I’m older.”

“You like sharks?” I ask.

“Yeah! They’re amazing!” Nix pulls me towards the kitchen, rattling off a load of interesting shark facts that I’m

only half listening to.

There go my fucking Christmas plans.

Now what?

I guess I did have my original plan of a treehouse for the garden that I can fall back on, but with Christmas so close I don't know if I can get it made in time. Shit. I had a deposit on the cutest little mother and foal duo for Nix and Raven for Christmas. I can't believe I'm not going to get to see my daughter on a pony.

I don't care about the money lost, or even not having another present in place. I'm more upset that I got it so horribly hideously wrong.

"What's this?" Raven asks when we step into the dining room. The table is laden with breakfast foods: a full fry up, stacks of pancakes, an assortment of fresh juices and the telltale smell of—

"Are those hash browns?"

Yep. Not just any hash browns either.

"How the fu-fudge did you get IHOP here in Edinburgh?" I demand, turning to Baxter. He grins at me. Raven looks as impressed as me and I quickly take my seat and load up my plate. The others all look bemused, but you haven't *lived* until you've had an IHOP breakfast in my mind. "This is freaking amazing!"

"Glad you like it." Baxter grins, taking a seat. The others follow suit and Raven immediately starts preparing a plate for Phoenix. Shit, I should've done that. I know when you have kids they come first, but I didn't really realise that meant in every single tiny little thing until now.

"Here, you get yours, I'll finish that," I say, taking the plate from Raven and cutting up Nix's sausage for her. She may be nearly four but that shit's still hard sometimes. When I'm done I pass her the plate and watch as she tucks in. She's gonna look like a pancake if we're not careful. I'm not about to put her on a bloody granola diet but maybe we can find a

balance with the sweet stuff. Weekends and special occasions maybe. Although, it *is* Christmas.

“Seriously, explain how you got this here,” I say to Baxter as I resume eating.

“I didn’t get it, I made it.”

“But it tastes exactly like IHOP.”

“I used their recipe and their ingredients.”

My jaw hangs open and he laughs. “One summer when I was a kid, my grandfather hired a world-renowned chef who came from humble beginnings. One day he took pity on me and made me an IHOP breakfast. I fell in love with it and spent the whole summer pestering him to make me more. Eventually he agreed to teach me so that I’d leave him alone and it’s been my speciality ever since.”

“Hold the fu-fudge up a minute!” I say around a mouthful of pancake. “We’ve been friends forever. You know how much I love IHOP and how much I’ve missed it since coming here. You’ve never made it for me before.”

Baxter laughs.

“Well, I only ever made it for myself until now.”

“Sacrilege.” I shake my head. “I’d marry you for this alone.”

“Well with respect, I didn’t make *you* your favourite breakfast because I want to put my d—”

“Sausage!” Raven cries desperately.

“Sausage in your pu—”

“Taco!”

“Mummy can we have sausage tacos for tea?”

I burst out laughing along with the rest of the table while Ace promises to make Nix whatever she wants for dinner and Raven gives Baxter the evils. She looks a little flushed though. Maybe she wants his sausage taco speciality. I can’t believe

those two haven't fucked yet. What the hell are they waiting for?

When breakfast is over and the other heathens finally admit that it's the best damn breakfast they ever had, we clear the plates and get ready. If Nix wants to choose a tree, we'll all go and get one. I know Thorn was planning on getting some delivered anyway but one more won't hurt.

The problem starts when we all head outside. I stare at the car. I look at us. We don't have enough damn seats.

"Shit," I say.

"Bad word!" I don't even look, I just hand Nix the whole wallet while debating what to do.

"It's fine. We can take two cars," Jax says.

"Is this seriously the first time we've all tried to go out as a family?" I ask scratching my head. It can't be...can it?

"Don't worry about it. I've got some tie downs, we can strap the tree to the roof."

"If we have two cars can we get two trees?" Nix asks. I grin at her.

"You're so clever! Let's do that. But only if you and Mummy come in my car."

"Deal!"

"You can all slum it in Baxter's car." I shoot a triumphant grin at the others. Baxter laughs because his car is posh as fuck without being ostentatious, but I don't care because I get the girls in with me.

We jump into the car and I google directions to the nearest Christmas tree farm.

"We've never had a real tree before," Raven says quietly. "But I always took Nix to see them."

It's unbelievably tragic but I don't say anything.

"Do you want a big tree or a small tree Nix?"

"Big!"

“Up to the ceiling?”

“Higher!”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

We drive to the Christmas tree farm and park up, quickly realising that we are not at all dressed right for this place. Everyone else is in wellies and country looking clothes which seem dead casual but probably cost more than a small car. I’m in jeans, trainers and a T-shirt. I forgot my jacket. The other guys park up and climb out, dressed similarly to me, except Baxter of course. Raven smirks at me as she gets her bag out of the boot and pulls out wellies for her and Nix.

“You could have told us,” I moan.

“Where’s the fun in that?” She laughs. “I happen to like it when you get a little dirty. It’s good for the soul.”

I know she’s teasing but it still makes my dick twitch. I’d happily get dirty with her.

“Let’s do this,” Jax says, stepping forward and taking charge. The rest of us fall into line but I swipe Nix up and plonk her on my shoulders. She squeals in delight and pulls on my ears to ‘steer’ me. I pretend I don’t know my left and right and cause chaos deliberately going the wrong way and crashing into things. The others grumble at me and we get a few raised brows from members of the public but Phoenix is so happy that I don’t care. Only downside is that because I’m holding on to Nix, I can’t hold Raven’s hand and Ace slides in, tucking her arm into his like a proper gentleman out of a romance novel or some shit.

Together we trudge along the rows and rows of trees looking for the perfect one. They all look the same to me but apparently there’s a breed or type or variety or some shit that Jax just has to have. I have to admit, it does smell pretty nice though and it does make me feel festive.

The further we traipse, the muddier it gets. My trainers are ruined. And as they’re a lightweight mesh probably more suited to summer, I’m guessing my socks are trash too. At least six inches of mud cakes the bottom of my jeans, but

when Nix spies a muddy puddle and begs me to jump in it, I can't say no.

I end up splashing Thorn who kicks mud right back at me and if it weren't for Nix on my shoulders, I'm pretty sure we would have started wrestling in it.

Jax tells us off and we sulk like schoolboys, making Nix giggle even more. Raven just shakes her head at us but I can tell she loves seeing Nix happy. I seem to live for putting smiles on their faces now.

"Mate, will you take Nix for a bit? There's something I need to do."

"Sure," Thorn says, helping me to lift her down from my shoulders and onto his. When we're done I roll my head and shake out my arms before taking out my phone and doing a quick google search. If we're going to be a family of seven, we damn well need to be able to go places as a family of seven. In one vehicle. I keep my fingers crossed that I'm not going to have to end up driving some sort of soccer mom minivan and punch the air when I see that Mercedes do a very nice seven-seater GLS. I click on to the website, scroll straight to the top of the range model, digitally configure it with all the bells and whistles on it and hit order.

I mean, I know it's not that simple, but someone is going to call me to check if I really am dropping over 100k on a car, and when they do, I can pay extra for rush delivery. I want it here in time for Christmas. It's my gift to the family. I make sure the volume is on loud, waiting for the call to come through, and stow it in my pocket for the time being.

"That one!" Nix shouts, and I quickly catch up to them. They're standing staring at another damn green tree and I'm cold.

"Wow Nix, great choice! It's perfect!" I beam at her. Who would have thought choosing a tree would be so...boring? Trust Jax to suck the joy out of everything with his planning.

"Really? I'm not so sure..." Thorn frowns.

"Yes," I say emphatically. "That's the one."

“Okay.”

“Great.” I clap my hands together. “So now we can go and ___”

“Choose the other tree!”

Ah fuck. I did promise her two, didn't I?

“This tree is perfect for the lounge. Why don't I take it back and start strapping it to the roof with...”

“Me,” Baxter chimes in.

“With Baxter, while you and the others go and choose a tree for...”

“Your bedroom,” Baxter supplies.

“Yeah. Your bedroom.”

“Really? Mummy can I really have a real tree in my bedroom? With lights on?”

“Yes baby, but we need to look at trees that are a little bit smaller because the ceiling isn't as high in your room as it is downstairs.”

We tag the tree to indicate it's the one we want, then Baxter and I go to find someone to dig it up for us. Thankfully, it's all part of the service and we don't have to lift a finger beyond handing over the roof straps, as the workers do it all for us. I go to tip them and realise Nix still has my wallet. Baxter takes care of it for me.

“You have to stop giving Nix money,” he says, shaking his head.

“Why?”

“She had over £600 in her jar at my last count!”

“So?”

“So she's not even four. She has no concept of money.”

“Does she need one?”

“She will eventually.”

“Pah. Lighten up, you sound like Jax.”

“What’s she going to do with that money?”

“She can save up for something that she wants.”

“Like a pony?” I groan. “Did you know Raven hates horses?”

“Yep. Suggested taking her riding once and she nearly stabbed me.” He chuckles.

“Thanks for the head’s up,” I grumble.

“Well, if you will be secretive and do shit on your own, what do you expect? I’m assuming you have a backup plan.”

“Sort of. Know any good carpenters?” I joke.

“Yes.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Yeah, I’m a real practical joker,” he deadpans. “You should know by now I know *everyone*.”

I shake my head.

“You should let me join your little club.”

“Hard pass.”

“Well you should at least mention it to the others. Jax and Ace have desirable skills, surely?”

I’ve known about Baxter’s involvement in his secret little boy’s club for years. Probably since he got that stupid tattoo like some wannabe gang member. I’ve teased him whenever our paths have crossed but he’s always been tight-lipped about it, regardless of our past. I’d consider him a friend. I always did, but I’m not sure he’d do the same. Hopefully that’s changing now.

“They do. Which is precisely why I’ll keep everyone away from it. It’s not a place for you. For any of you. For now Raven knows it exists and what my role within it is, and that’s enough for me. I don’t want any of you guys getting interested and thinking of joining. It’s a shit life and I wouldn’t wish it upon anyone. Not to mention the danger it would put our girls in. You don’t want that.”

I have to admit he has a point, though he certainly seems to have enough resources at his disposal that makes me think he can protect the girls. Our girls. I like that. I let it go for now.

My phone rings and I step away from Baxter to answer the call. It's the garage. I arrange to visit tomorrow to pay by bank transfer and sign all the paperwork. It's amazing how fast things can move when you're rich.

By the time I hang up, the others are back, Nix proudly leading the way with a posse of tree carriers behind her. The tree she's chosen for her room doesn't look *that* much smaller than the downstairs one but the grin on her face is priceless. Who gives a shit if it doesn't fit? I can just cut a hole in her ceiling if I have to.

Once the trees are taken care of, and Nix returns my wallet, I pay for the trees on my card and ask what the plan is.

"I'm going to take Baxter's car—" Thorn begins.

"Over my dead body," Baxter growls.

"I'm going to take your car," he corrects. "With Nix and Ace, and we're going to choose some decorations and shi-stuff."

More shopping? Fuck no.

I gladly toss him my car keys and cross over to Baxter's Tesla.

"Shotgun," I call.

"You're so immature." Jax shakes his head.

"Whatever. Snooze ya lose." Not to mention there's no way I'll fit in the back. It's pokey as fuck.

"Like I care, I get Raven in the back all to myself."

Fuck. Fucked that one up again.

"You want to fool around in the back of Baxter's car? It's your funeral. He loves that thing more than blood."

Jax frowns at me like he thinks I'm saying he loves it more than his blood, meaning relatives, but I happen to know Baxter

loves bloodshed more than anything. Except that car.

“Did you know they do a seven-seater version?” I ask Baxter innocently.

“Fuck off,” he snaps. “Get in or I’m leaving without you.”

We do as he says, waving off the others, and wait for him to start the engine. Before he pulls off he turns round and glares at Jax.

“If you fool around in my car I’ll cut your dick off.”

“Hey!” Raven complains. “I happen to be quite attached to his dick.”

“I know how to embalm and carry out taxidermy. I’ll immortalise it as a dildo for you.”

And with that beautiful image burned into my head, we set off for home.

Guys' Chat

Baxter: I have a question.

Rebel: Mine is bigger.

Baxter: You're a dick.

Rebel: You mean I have a big dick.

Baxter: I meant what I said in the car about removing dicks and being able to preserve them...

Rebel: Jesus, keep your hair on! No need to make threats. What's up?

Baxter: What's with the tattoos?

Rebel: Which?

Baxter: You know. The feathers. It's weird. You all have them. Is it a girl gang or a Boy Scout thing?

Rebel: Black feather for Raven. Red feather for Nix.

Baxter: And the white?

Rebel: Lizzie.

Baxter: Like a memorial?

Rebel: I guess.

Baxter: You think I should get one?

Rebel: A Lizzie tattoo? Why would you?

Baxter: I swear you have shit for brains. No, a tattoo for Nix and Raven.

Rebel: Harsh. I dunno. Do you want to?

Baxter: I only get meaningful shit tattooed on me.

Rebel: Aww you shouldn't have. It's too sweet that you have me tattooed on your ass.

Baxter: Yeah your mouth is right around my asshole for all the shit you spew and so that you can kiss it.

Rebel: What other ink do you have? Besides the not a Boy Scout one?

Baxter: I have one for Beth and Casey, and a Batman symbol.

Rebel: Batman? Wow, that's real deep and meaningful.

Baxter: Fuck off. Forget I said anything.



CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE

Thorn

“Ugh, small people suck!” I complain, flopping down on the sofa and cracking my neck.

“Excuse me?!” Raven starts to puff up like a mother hen.

“Oh relax, I love her really. But seriously, as a helper, she sucks.”

Raven deflates with a laugh.

“I told you so. But you insisted that the two of you could do it all without any help.”

It’s true, I did insist that Nix and I had all the decorations sorted. I thought it would be a super cute bonding exercise to trim the tree and deck the halls and all that shit together. Like a fabulous, heartwarming Hallmark film.

It wasn’t.

“What went wrong?”

“What didn’t?” I moan. Raven pushes me off the sofa with her feet and I’m about to snap at her when she sits with her legs on either side of me and rubs my shoulders. “Oh god, that feels amazing.”

“Tell me about it.”

“First...She’s three. Which means several important things. She has the attention span of a gnat. And she has no taste. We bought colour schemes for each room but suddenly she wants to mix and match. It’s hideous! And there’s so much pink! Plus she’s only about three foot tall so only the bottom half of each tree is decorated. She couldn’t help me do any of the lights or ceiling decorations, and don’t even get me started on holding the ladder!”

“Is that why you’re so tense?” Raven laughs.

“It was just so stressful! Every time I got to the top of the ladder and was about to do something, she would get distracted. I spent most of the day chasing after her from room

to room. Nowhere is finished and everything we have done looks shit. And best of all, she said it was fun to begin with but she wants to do something different tomorrow!”

“Don’t worry about it. She’s a kid. It’s what they do.”

“But I wanted to bond with her.”

“If you guys bonded anymore we’d need solvents to part you both. You’re trouble together, and Nix adores you.”

“I was just trying to create the perfect Christmas.” I sigh.

“You can’t create it. The perfect Christmas just happens. Nix is home, the rest will fall into place. So long as we’re all together, it *is* perfect.”

“Ugh. You’re right.”

“Of course. But maybe you could finish the decorations in here. Everyone else can do their own rooms if they want. I’ll help Nix finish her tree tomorrow.”

“I called a decorating company. They’ll be here in the morning to finish and fix everything.”

“You’re ridiculous.” She laughs again, leans forward and kisses me on the cheek. “But if it makes you happy...”

“You make me happy. This weird little family thing we have going on...it works.”

“I think so too but I’m glad you agree.”

I pull away from her massage so that I can turn to look at her.

“We did finish the decorations in your room. Want to see?”

“Sure. Do I need sunglasses to shield myself from pink vomit?”

“We did your room first. It’s very tastefully done because Nix wasn’t bored back then.”

“Ah, I see. Then yes please. I can’t wait.”

I get to my feet and roll my shoulders, Impressed how much tension Raven has managed to remove in the short few minutes she’s been rubbing them. I take her by the hand and

lead her upstairs. When we get to her bedroom, I let her open the door, standing back to observe her reaction.

She gasps, her face illuminated by the thousands of soft white glowing fairy lights strung from the ceiling. The tree in the corner of the room reaches the ceiling and is decorated with more soft white lights and pale blue baubles that match the new ice-blue comforter on her bed.

“It’s beautiful,” she says, turning on the spot to survey the room in its entirety. “The bedding is beautiful.”

“Nix wanted to get you a ‘Frozen’ duvet, but I convinced her it was better to just go with Elsa colours.” We both laugh. “I thought this was better.”

“It is. So much better. Thank you.”

She turns and kisses me, a slow, lingering press of her lips that invites me to return the action.

I do, starting slowly but building the intensity and depth. She wraps her arms around my neck and I grab her thighs to lift her up. With one hand I shut the bedroom door, then I walk us over to the bed, laying her down gently without breaking the kiss.

I have a sharp flash of déjà vu and I vow that I won’t let her fall asleep on me this time. I break away from her hypnotic lips and stare down at her.

“How are you feeling?”

“Wide awake,” she replies with a grin, obviously having the same thought as me.

“In that case, let’s see how soft these sheets are.”

I pull my T-shirt over my head and help Raven to do the same with hers.

She’s wearing an ice-blue lace bra. “Beautiful,” I say. She pulls a face.

“I’m a bit matchy-matchy,” she complains.

“I like it.”

“You would.”

“It does get a little lost on the comforter though,” I say. “Maybe it’ll look better on the floor.”

She laughs but doesn’t stop me sliding my hands behind her back to unclip her bra. Once it’s loose, I slide the straps down her shoulders and slowly peel it away. It’s better than unwrapping any present on Christmas Day.

Her pink nipples are standing to attention, begging for it in fact. I lower my mouth to one, sucking the little bud gently, while my hand goes to the other and twists and tugs with a little more force. Her hips twitch below me, and I decide it’s time to see more of her skin.

I break away from her breasts and flick open the button on her jeans, sliding them down her legs to reveal matching panties. I grin.

“I know, I know, don’t tell me...these will look better on the floor too?”

“Well, we *do* need something for the top of the tree and they do match,” I tease, removing the offending item and throwing it over my shoulder in the general direction of the Christmas tree. Raven squeals and squirms under me but doesn’t make any effort to actually move to rescue them.

Before she can accuse me of having too many clothes on, I slide off my jeans and boxers in one go so that we’re both as naked as each other. Her eyes darken appreciatively as she greedily drinks me in. My already semi-hard cock hardens fully under her scrutiny.

“You’re not going to fall asleep on me, are you?” I tease with a groan.

“Absolutely not,” she says emphatically. “In fact, switch places and I’ll prove it to you.”

Now *that’s* an offer too good to ignore.

I happily do as she asks, and she immediately straddles my knees and gives me a heated look before bending at the waist and taking my cock in her small hands. They’re still so dainty

and graceful like they were before, and they do wonders for my cock, making it look even bigger. She pumps my length slowly, and the gleam in her eyes tells me that she's quickly forgotten that she's meant to be making it up to me for falling asleep before, and now plans to torture me because the power has gone to her head.

Fine by me.

I lie back, put my arms behind my head and let her have her wicked way with me.

She presses feather-light kisses up the inside of my thighs, alternating sides. When she reaches the apex, she surprises me by gently blowing across my balls. I raise a brow at her but I actually like it. She gives me a coquettish little grin before taking a ball in her mouth and gently swirling it around with her tongue. The second gets the same treatment which makes my dick bob around, demanding attention in her hands. She releases me with a soft pop and then with the delicate tip of her tongue she licks me from the base all the way to the tip. She winks and draws the underside of her tongue all the way down again. She's a goddamn tease alright.

I groan as she repeats the action – but this time she pauses at the tip to curl her tongue around the head. Fuck. A little precum leaks from the tip and she pounces on that shit like an addict. Her restraint snaps like a rubber band and suddenly she's slurping on my dick like it's a melting lollipop and she needs to catch the drips. She's enthusiastic, but still works me over with skill. So much so that I can't lie back and take it with forced nonchalance anymore. I fist my hands into her hair, encouraging her to bob a little deeper with every pass.

I hit the back of her throat, and a long low groan escapes me. It's fucking heaven, and I'm perfectly content right where I am. But Raven has other ideas.

She pushes deeper. I slip past her resistance and holy fucking shit I have to start reciting the French alphabet song to stop from emptying my load down her throat. Fuck, fuck, fuck. It's insane.

And then she makes this crazy little noise and I just about explode.

My knees jerk and my hips twitch. I don't know what to do with my hands. Do I pull her up for air? How the hell is she breathing? Do I push her even lower until she gags? Fuck. I groan. I'd love that. My balls are so tight, the telltale tingle starting up. I need to move or she's going to be drowning in my cum.

Before I can actually get my brain to communicate with my limbs, she eases off, bringing me out of her throat and back to her mouth, where she slurps at my precum, which is probably more actual fucking cum than pre anything, like she's gagging for it.

She releases me with a wicked grin, and I don't know how the hell I keep my mouth shut. I'm pretty sure I'd be begging her to marry me if I opened my mouth right now.

"You okay?" she teases.

"Marry me."

Ah fuck it. I have no control. Well, it was that or fucking shower her in cum so this is probably the better option.

She laughs.

"Yeah, yeah, you and Ace can fight over me."

"Y-you want us to fight?" How the hell am I the one sounding so breathless when she just held her breath for christ knows how long. It felt like hours. My cock looks enormous now that I've seen her lips kiss the base. Ah fuck. I'm so horny.

"Yeah. Like in jelly or ice cream or melted chocolate or something." She laughs. Fuck. I want her to laugh around my dick. I bet that's mind-blowing.

What am I on about? My mind is already blown. Any more and it'll dribble out of my ear.

"S-so you want us to wrestle, not fight."

She shrugs and goes back to licking the tip of my dick. It's fucking torture. Light little flicks on the frenulum that have me teetering on the edge. All my muscles tighten.

"Stop!" I protest when she moves to take me whole in her mouth once again. She ignores me.

I don't fight it. For a full minute I just enjoy the fucking magic of her mouth, shamelessly not giving a shit about reciprocating, until I'm seriously about to lose it.

"Stop! Or I'm gonna come!"

I struggle up into a seated position and pull Raven's vacuum mouth off my cock with a pop.

"That's kind of the idea," she replies with a flirty grin.

"No. The idea, princess, is that we finally get to fuck until our brains turn to mush."

"Well, as you put it so enticingly..." She cocks her head to the side and pretends to ponder my offer. Straddling my thighs like that she's so close to my cock it's unreal.

"Hop on, blowjob queen," I say with a cheeky wink, grabbing her hips to lift her fully onto my lap, and slapping her ass as I put her down. "Your throne awaits you."

"Ooooo-kaaaaayyyyy," she says, sighing like it's the worst thing she's ever been made to do.

With her hands on my chest for balance, she leans forward and shifts her hips until I'm notched at her entrance. She teases me for a moment and just as I'm losing patience, a growl working its way up my throat, she impales herself on me in one.

"Fuck!" We both hiss, though mine's a little more blissful than her pained sound. It still makes me throb though. I have no idea how I'm going to last. She's so tight. And when she rolls her hips, I know I'm fucking done for.

I switch to the French days of the week song, mentally belting it out with attitude as my hips rise to meet hers of their own accord. My dick is pulsing like it's at a fucking rave and

my cum is more ready than a pumped and primed super soaker.

I uselessly fumble between Raven's spread thighs, hopelessly searching for her clit. I'll never live it down if I blow my load before making her come. But I'm obviously doing a horrible job because she grabs my wrist and gently guides my hand to where she wants it. She slows her movements to allow me some time to get her there and when I manage to make contact with her clit my brain climbs out of my dick and back into my head. I get my shit together and focus on pleasuring this girl, this woman who's blown my damn mind.

She leans back, bracing her arms on my knees and spreading her legs even wider, opening herself up for me. Holy fuck it's a magnificent sight to see her lips stretched around my cock, her whole pussy gleaming with her arousal.

It doesn't take long before she's gasping and writhing on my dick, and I take all of my pleasure from the noises I draw from her. Every expression of pleasure that dances across her face makes me flush with pride. Watching her come undone by my hand, while impaled on my cock, it's almost better than what she was giving me.

"Stop!" she cries. This time it's my turn to ignore her and up the ante.

"Why? Are you feeling sleepy?"

"Thorn, please!" she gasps. I grin evilly at her.

"Sorry, princess, what?"

"Stop! I'm coming!" I love her desperate little pleas but the way she throws her head back and groans long and low means I wouldn't stop even if the house were on fire right now. She shudders from head to toe, her pussy clenching so hard it feels like she's gonna break my dick.

"Fuck you!" she pants, scowling at me. I chuckle.

"Have at it then, my little bj queenie," I tease.

She leans in, her breasts brushing against my chest, and sinks her teeth into my shoulder. She doesn't let go either as she starts to move her hips, grinding on me and sucking my skin like her life depends on it.

She does that insane thing with her ass, a flicking sort of motion that rubs the tip of my cock on her inside walls and I fucking see stars. I grab her hips to steady her but she fights me to keep moving. I growl. She huffs out a breathless laugh. I shift and she gasps, jaw slackening.

We fight each other to our climax, coming together with a grunt and a shout. Minx that she is, she keeps rubbing my cock against her walls, even after I'm spent. It's sensitive and maddening and it makes my dick want more.

"Behave," I snap with a gentle smile.

"You behave," she retorts. She climbs off me and a massive grin splits across her face. I pull her into my arms and kiss her tenderly. She snuggles in beside me just as a massive yawn escapes me. Fuck yeah, this feels good.

"So yeah," she says. "The sheets are pretty soft, right?"

Ace's Christmas Cookies

Shopping List

1 cup all-purpose flour

½ tsp baking soda

½ tsp ground cinnamon

¼ tsp allspice

¼ tsp salt

½ cup unsalted, softened butter

½ cup light brown sugar

¼ cup granulated sugar

1 large egg

1 tsp vanilla extract

1 ½ cups rolled oats

¾ cup sweetened dried cranberries

¾ cup white chocolate chips

Grated orange zest to finish



CHAPTER TWENTY - TWO

Ace

“Prekleta sranje¹!” I bark, kicking the piece of shit Christmas decoration I’ve just knocked over and sent flying. Baubles scatter everywhere, many of them shattering on impact with the cupboards and baseboards, because of course Thorn got glass decorations. Asshole. Who puts decorations up in the kitchen anyway?

It’s a fucking nightmare trying to work around all the gaudy shit he’s put up everywhere, and I’m behind on my baking schedule. If I don’t catch up soon, Christmas will be ruined. And it’ll all be on me. I need to make this the most perfect damn Christmas we’ve ever had. I want to bring our group’s traditions together with what Raven and Nix do, and include Baxter. I thought it would be nice if we gave Nix a little taste of our own Christmas childhood traditions too so that she feels like she has a bigger, more extended family.

I don’t know. Maybe it’s a shit idea. Rebel’s always rubbing me for being too sentimental.

Take Raven’s ring for example. I put way too much thought and effort into its design and meaning. I took on extra fights to pay for it so that the commission cost wasn’t deducted from the money I sent home. And now she’s wearing it again.

On the ring finger of her left hand.

Are we engaged?

I mean, I asked and she said yes, but we’ve not spoken about it since. She seemed pissed off that I tricked her at the time but now she’s wearing the ring. What does it mean? Has she come around to the idea of being my wife? Will the others let us wed? I mean, I did ask first *both times*. Surely that gives me rights or perks or something?

Should I ask her about it, or should I just call home and get them to start planning a traditional Slovenian wedding? It

would make my mama's day. Hell, it would make her entire life.

And mine.

Maybe I could ask for a wedding as my Christmas present from Raven? If she asks what I want I could definitely say that.

“What's wrong?”

I spin around. Raven has walked into the kitchen. She's wearing workout gear and her skin has a healthy sheen to it where she's worked up a sweat. She's breathing a little hard, making her breasts heave enticingly. It's completely distracting.

“Pazi²!” I shout, desperately holding up a hand to stop her from coming any closer. She frowns but obviously understands the panic in my voice.

“Aljaž?”

I point to the floor, jewel toned bits of glass sparkling under the bright lights. Raven nods when she sees and I move to the cupboard under the sink to get the dustpan and brush to clean up the mess.

When I'm done she still picks her way over to me tentatively.

“I Hoover,” I grunt, still in a mood about everything.

“It can wait. What's wrong?”

I shake my head. I can't explain it. It's hard enough to get my words out when I'm calm. I know I don't stand a chance with the way I'm feeling right now.

In frustration I look around for the phone and when I spy it on the countertop I snatch it up and hit the new voice to translation app I'm trying out.

In a rush, my words come tumbling out of my mouth in a garbled mess. It takes a moment for the software to do its thing, but once it's loaded I hit play.

A stupidly slow mechanical voice that sounds freakishly like Stephen Hawking fills the room, the tone and pace oddly jarring with my feverish rant.

“No I’m not fucking okay! I’m fucking stressed! There’s so much to do and Christmas is right around the corner. I have to do all of the baking and prep work, which is behind schedule by the way, and the new oven I ordered didn’t get delivered in time! Now the bastard company is telling me that it’s out of stock and on backorder until March. Fucking March! Who needs a new oven in March? And don’t even get me started on all these fucking baubles! Who even decorates the kitchen? I need space to work! I fucking hate everything in here!”

A stunned silence fills the room for a beat and then Raven bursts out laughing.

“I’m sorry,” she says between gasps. “I promise I’m not laughing at you. But that app is hilarious.”

I crack a smile because she’s right. Then a small chuckle slips past my lips. And next thing I know, I’m laughing as hard as Raven is.

“Is that the one you’re trying out for your friend?” Raven asks when she finally manages to get her giggles under control.

“Yeah.”

“You need to get him to work on the delivery. It’s too robotic.”

I don’t tell her that the app I’m testing is almost entirely my own work, that I prefer to work in codes and numbers where language barriers make little difference, or that Rebel helped me with the initial startup. I simply nod and agree with her. It’s another piece of shit thing I thought I could do but it turns out I can’t.

“Want an angry voice?” Raven laughs.

“Your friend should record me and Rebel. We’re the best screamers. Or maybe Baxter for that quiet fury. It would be cool to have different voices you could use – like Siri.”

I frown at her and she pulls out her phone. Within a few short taps her phone is speaking to her – the same stuck up posh male guy that’s on all iPhones I think. I never use Siri. The fucker can’t understand a word I say.

She taps again and the standard welcome phrase is repeated, this time by an American guy, she presses again and again, showing me the different options. There’s both male and female, and although slightly computer generated, they’re nothing like my constipated robot voice. Hmmm. Her idea has merits.

“I like the Australian guy because he sounds super sexy.”

I grunt.

“Not sexy. You have sexy enough.”

She laughs.

“I have enough sexy guys to look at, but I’m definitely not getting enough sex.” She winks at me. I chuckle because I know for a fact that she and Thorn had sex last week because he couldn’t help bragging about it.

“Offering?” I ask, raising a brow and trying to bite back a smile.

“Am I offering you sex or are you offering me sex?”

“Same.” I shrug. Suddenly, cookies and kitchens seem completely uninteresting.

Raven smiles and looks around the kitchen.

“Perhaps not here. But you still look like you have a lot of tension to work out. Want to spar with me?”

“Yes.”

“Come and get me then.”

She grins and walks backwards out of the kitchen and I don’t need telling twice. I take off after her watching her ass as she races away and heads for the basement, completely forgetting I have two dozen cookies in the oven.

By the time I catch up with Raven she's already punching the shit out of the bag, bouncing on the balls of her feet, with her guard up.

I cross over to her and stand behind her, my hands on her ass. I squeeze and she grunts.

“Višje³. Higher. On toes.”

She obeys, her ass rubbing against my crotch.

“Težje⁴. Harder.”

“Aren't you supposed to be working your tension out, not me?”

“Works,” I chuckle, squeezing her ass again. It's better than any stress ball.

Impulsively, I lift her up so that she has to stop punishing the hanging bag and has no choice but to wrap her arms and legs around it to cling on.

Already my bad mood is slipping away. I want to play.

“Hold on,” I tell her. I give the bag a push and it swings back and forth. Raven laughs. I grab her hips to steady her and keep the bag still, and then slide my right hand round to her front. She sucks in a breath as I slide my palm down her bare abdomen and into her yoga pants.

“Aljaž,” she warns. Normally I'd do anything she says when she breathes my name like that, but I want to play and distract myself from my massive to do list. So I push my hand a little deeper.

“Hold on.”

She groans as my fingers slip down to her wetness. I grin. No panties. I circle her clit slowly, gradually gaining speed until her hands slip down the bag. Reluctantly, I remove my hand, but when I get wind of her scent, I can't help but suck her pleasure from my fingers. I do so noisily so that, even though she can't see me, she knows exactly what I'm doing.

She slides down the bag until her feet touch the floor. The moment she's standing, I tackle her to the floor and straddle

her hips. She grins playfully at me and I return it. I lean in like I'm going to kiss her, studying her intently as I do. Her nipples push against her sports bra like they're trying to escape, her pupils dilate and her breathing catches.

My lips graze her neck, I suck on her earlobe and whisper, "Fight me."

She huffs in frustration and tries to buck me off but I press my weight into her, knowing the soft mat beneath her will prevent her being hurt. She relaxes her limbs, melting into the floor.

"Aljaž, please," she whispers breathlessly. "Kiss me."

"Princesa⁵," I reply in a teasing tone. My chest feels lighter, my stress gone. I love this woman so damn much. "No."

I pull away again as she groans. I love every little sound she makes. My vocabulary is too limited to describe them all, but I'm willing to work my ass off to make her a one-woman orchestral symphony.

I pull her top over her head and her pants down her legs until she's bare before me. She squirms as I stare at her. I want to devour her but I'm going to need her to stay still.

"Stay." I jump up and race over to the rack of weights, selecting one I know she can manage for a long time. I take it back and give it to her. "Hold."

She takes the weight from me and holds it in her hands.

"No. Up."

She stretches her arms up in the air, the weight between her hands. She grins at me but she won't be smiling for long.

I kneel back down between her legs and push her thighs as wide as they'll go. Then I lower my head between her legs and flutter my tongue over her clit, barely making contact.

"Aljaž," she groans. I grin against her skin and kiss the sensitive skin of her silky soft thighs. "Please, don't even think of doing that freaky little finger shit—"

I chuckle, a low rumbling sound that vibrates on my lips and transfers to her flesh, cutting off her speech.

Ignoring her demand, I do the freaky little finger shit anyway. The trick is to never give them what they think they want, and to instead show them that what they need is what you're giving.

Raven thinks she wants to be stretched and fucked hard and fast, so she's going to get shallow and slow. Like I have all the time in the world. Because suddenly, I feel like I do.

Just as my head descends between her thighs again, a loud, obnoxious sound splits the air.

“Hudiča⁶!”

“What the hell is that?”

“Alarm.”

“The smoke alarm?” She sits up in a panic.

“Yes. Relax. Stay.”

“Ace, I can't relax and stay if the house is on fire!”

“Smoke alarm. No fire.”

“You don't know that.”

“Yes. Two alarms. Smoke not fire.”

“But what the hell is it?”

“Cookies.”

“Shit! I'm sorry!”

“No matter.” I shrug. I push her back onto the mat. “Boys fix. Carry on.”

“Ace—oh!”

Yeah, that stops her trying to escape. I slide a finger deep into her pussy. “Mmmm.”

The shrill noise stops and I hear Rebel cursing from upstairs, clearly pissed that the baked goods are ruined. I don't give a fuck. I'll make a small batch for Nix to enjoy and the rest of us can feast on Raven for the entire holiday period.

Fuck this shit, they're definitely going to come looking for us soon to find out what on earth could have happened to me to abandon my baking.

Time to change tack.

I add a second finger and curl it deep inside her. She bucks, and I seal my lips around her clit. I suck hard and she cries out, a wriggling, thrashing mess on the floor, the weight discarded and forgotten.

“Aljaž!” she cries, but it just spurs me on.

I pump my fingers faster, squeezing in a third and grazing my teeth on her sensitive nub.

“Ace! FUCK!” She convulses around my fingers. I groan, imagining what it would feel like around my dick. “Fuck me, Aljaž.”

I withdraw my fingers and try to pull my T-shirt off over my head one handed. Only, I forgot I'm wearing my flower and campervan apron. The neck loop comes over my head with the shirt but everything gets tangled together and I almost fall on Raven.

She laughs until tears stream down her face as I desperately try to fight my way out of the mess of material I've created. The more I struggle, the messier it gets. And the more frustrated I become, the harder she laughs.

“Fuck it!” I bark, shredding the apron down the middle, balling it up and tossing it across the room in a fit. Raven's whole body shakes with laughter.

I quickly unbuckle my belt and pull it from the loops on my jeans with a woosh. It whistles through the air and cracks loudly against the inside of Raven's thigh.

She screams at the contact but I'm pretty sure it's mostly from the shock and I smirk coldly at her.

“Smejte se⁷.”

She shakes her head and I raise the belt again, bringing it down on the other side this time. She gasps and groans.

“Še naprej se smej⁸.”

The third fall is much gentler, but right on her exposed mound this time and she cries out as an unexpected orgasm rips through her. I'm naked before she's finished sobbing, pushing into her sore pussy while her muscles are still spasming.

“You. Kinky. Fucker!” She grinds out between gritted teeth. Her eyes are sparkling though. “I had no idea you had a dark side.”

Oh if only she knew.

I grin at her.

“Stop talk now,” I say, laying one of my large hands across her tiny mouth. Her nostrils flare and I shift slightly to make sure she can breathe okay.

And then I move with urgency, giving long full strokes at a pace which makes even me breathless, and I consider myself to be in pretty good shape. I never fuck like this, like the world is ending and we've only got seconds to save it, but fuck if it doesn't feel good.

Raven makes a cacophony of muffled noises beneath my palm and it turns me on so much that I feel my control slipping.

“Hudiča⁹! Počutiš se tako dobro¹⁰! Tako prekleto si tesen¹¹. Tako prekleto seksi¹². Ti si boginja mojega tiča¹³. Moja zaročenka, moj petelin ljubeč malo kurba¹⁴. Pridi po mene¹⁵. Daj no moj petelin¹⁶!”

I remove my hand just in time to hear Raven scream my name as she milks my cock hard. I pump my hips and grind into her, making sure every last drop fills her to the brim. I want to put a baby in her. I want to see her belly swollen with the love we share.

“Fucking amazing fucking.” I kiss her.

“Ace? Mate, are you okay?” Rebel calls out, his footsteps sounding on the stairs down to the basement. I'm too fucking...spent to give a shit about moving. Raven and I both

lie on our backs desperately trying to catch our breath. “What happened to you? The cookies are fucking ruined, mate, and—oh! Shit sorry!”

Amelie: I think you could really use a holiday

Baxter: Kind of busy right now.

Amelie: That's a shame. I hear a little rest and relaxation can really be rewarding...

Amelie: It can turn up answers to questions you weren't even thinking of.

Baxter: Goddamnit! Stop with the cryptic bullshit and just tell me if you have something to say.

Amelie: The interesting thing about the company that we have mutual interests in, is that all kinds of official records can be falsified and changed. But the originals are always kept on file.

Baxter: Do you have something?

Amelie: I'm going to need a favour in exchange for this one, Batman.

Baxter: Name it.

Amelie: Soon.



CHAPTER TWENTY - THREE

Raven

Christmas dawns bright and early, excitement palpable in the air. And it's not even Nix.

"Please let me wake her," Thorn begs for the hundredth time.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"It's...almost eight." His bright blue eyes sparkle with mischief. I call bullshit.

"Thorn," I warn.

Fucker snuck into my room and woke me already, after hiding my phone, watch and alarm clock so that I couldn't check the time. Turned out it was four in the morning! I punched him in the dick for that. But then I felt bad so I had to kiss it better. We've not slept since but I do feel good.

"Okay, it's seven. Please let me wake Nix up now. The day'll almost be over by the time she gets up."

I sigh.

"Fine—"

"Yay!"

"But—"

"Boo!"

"You wake the others, go down and make everyone hot chocolate and then come up so we can all wake Nix together, *nicely*."

"I don't have to wake the others nicely?"

"That's up to you but be warned, Baxter's always armed, even when he sleeps naked."

"You kinky bitch," he teases. "I bet you love that."

I give him a tight smile. Do they really just assume I'm sleeping with all of them without talking about it between

themselves? I don't know whether to be annoyed or impressed.

He slaps my ass as he climbs out of bed and charges off to wreak havoc throughout the house. I lie back and enjoy a few minutes of quiet before footsteps thunder through the house and it sounds like the ceiling is going to come crashing down.

“Morning, Princess.” Jax pokes his head round the door and then disappears.

“Happy Christmas,” Rebel calls as he passes, Thorn barking breakfast orders in his ear.

“Vesel božič¹,” Ace says, pausing in the doorway to smile at me with warm violet eyes. I actually know this one. Happy Christmas. Nix and I have been practicing.

“Vesel božič², Aljaž,” I say softly. He gives me the happiest, brightest smile like I just made all his Christmases come at once, blows me a kiss and heads downstairs.

There's a moment of peace before another face appears in the doorway.

“Thank fuck they've gone.” Baxter shakes his head.

“Aren't you joining them?”

“Boy Scout shit. I'll pass.” He pulls a face that makes me chuckle. “Besides, I'd rather have this moment alone with you...you know the cover's slipped right?”

I glance down in alarm and see that the duvet has indeed slipped down and I'm flashing an almost indecent amount of flesh at him. I quickly pull it back up.

“Spoil all my fun.” He teases darkly before climbing into bed beside me. I freeze in shock as his hands skim my sides. “Love the pyjamas.”

It's a joke because I'm still naked from my time in this bed with Thorn. Which makes me feel like a bit of a hussy but it's not as though Baxter and I have time to *do* anything.

Apparently he doesn't get the memo though, because he glides his hands lower to the juncture between my thighs and

lightly strokes the sensitive flesh there.

“Bax—”

“Happy Christmas, princess.”

“Oh god, don’t stop,” I groan.

Thankfully he’s not in the mood to tease me because his lips descend on mine and he keeps rhythm between his tongue and fingers until I’m quivering under him.

And then we’re interrupted by the arrival of the hot chocolate. I swear if it weren’t *Thorn’s* hot chocolate and Christmas Day, I would have stabbed someone.

Baxter pulls away with blazing eyes and a salacious grin.

“Better grab some PJs,” he says. I don’t fancy climbing out of this bed naked in front of everyone.

“Can you get them? Top drawer.”

“Here you go, princess,” Rebel says, doing it for me and tossing a...man’s T-shirt over to me. It’s one of his, I can tell by the size. I’m always stealing their stuff to sleep in. I grin and pull it over my head.

“Ready?” Jax asks. Even his dark espresso eyes are alight with excitement. “I can’t believe we’re having to wake her up.”

“She has to be the only kid in history,” Thorn shakes his head as I climb out of bed and pull on my dressing gown.

I lead the way into Nix’s room with the others following.

“Nix, baby? Good morning sweetie,” I say softly, crossing to her bed and gently swiping the hair away from her forehead. She looks like an angel when she sleeps, just like Lizzie used to. As kids, when people couldn’t tell us apart, my dad used to say he still knew who was who even when we were sleeping, because Lizzie looked angelic and I would still have a cheeky look on my face. Up to mischief, even in my sleep. I smile at the memory as Nix stirs and blinks up at me.

“Mama?”

“Yes baby?”

“Is it Christmas?”

“Yes darling.”

I expect her to cheer or throw the covers back or even ask if Santa has been.

“Vesel božič³, Ace,” she says, yawning and smiling at the same time. My heart melts. She yawns again and then beams when she sees all of the other guys in her room too.

“Can we open presents now?” That question comes from Rebel, not Nix.

“Yeah, Nix,” Thorn joins in, pretend-complaining. “We’ve been waiting ages for you to wake up!”

Nix laughs and climbs out of bed. I wrap her in her dressing gown and put her slippers on her feet.

“Mummy? Do you think Santa came?”

“Of course baby!”

“I was worried he wouldn’t?”

“Why baby?”

“I forgot to tell him we live in a castle now.”

I laugh. “Oh baby, Santa knows everything, don’t you worry.”

“Does he know who my daddy is?”

I freeze and shoot panicked looks at the others. No. No. Not today, please.

“Nix. Do you think Santa delivered my presents here? Or am I on the naughty list?” Baxter asks, coming to my rescue.

“You’re on the nice list,” Nix giggles. “You don’t say bad words like Rebel.”

“Let’s go check shall we?” He holds out his hand for her.

“Yeah!” She races over to take it and I can breathe again.

Shaking my head, I follow everyone out of the room, praying Nix is distracted enough to get through the day without any more awkward questions.

The lounge looks like a treasure trove of jewelled colours. It's so beautiful, even if Rebel has gone *completely* over the top with the gifts. There's emerald, purple, magenta, turquoise, burnt orange, royal blue and crimson.

"These are just our gifts." He catches me staring and grins. "Yours are all pink. Nix's are purple to match her cast."

I already feel overwhelmed.

"But Nix's presents are also in the conservatory. And her main present from me is outside. Your present is also outside."

My head's spinning.

"Too much..." I mumble as he drags me outside even though I'm in a shirt and robe with nothing on my feet.

Parked outside the house is a brand-new shiny Mercedes monstrosity.

"It has seven seats," Rebel tells me proudly.

The all-black beast is stylish and sexy, and looks like it could take on a double decker bus and win. It's gorgeous.

"Rebel, this is too much! I already have a car. We have more cars between us than a forecourt."

"Just say—

"Thank you, yes. But it's too much."

"The front seats massage."

"Give me the damn keys!"

"I'll let you ride me in it later." He laughs, winks, and kisses me. Then he tugs me back inside to unveil Nix's presents.

"Mummy!" Nix cries when she sees me. "Did you see this?"

The doorway has been taped up with wrapping paper which is a really nice touch.

“Wow baby! No I didn’t! Do you think Santa did it?”

“Yeah! Can I open it?”

“Why don’t you just run through it, Nix,” Rebel suggests. She screams in delight and charges full pelt at the door. I pray it’s open behind the paper, not that I think Rebel would intentionally smash my kid’s face in on Christmas Day.

She bursts through the paper and screams with excitement. I rush forward to see what has her so worked up but it’s ‘just’ a mountain of gifts.

“This is amazing Mummy!”

“It is baby. I think these presents are from the guys.”

“No Mummy, they’re from Santa.”

I open my mouth to correct her, but Rebel squeezes my hand gently.

“Don’t spoil the magic. Not today. If she asks later on you can tell her the truth.”

That’s a happy medium I think, so I nod my agreement.

“Can I open some?”

“Of course baby. Shall we pick a few and go back into the lounge so everyone can see?”

“No need,” Baxter says from behind me. “We’re all here.”

I watch as my men file into the cramped conservatory, gingerly picking their way through piles of gifts and carefully sitting down cross legged on the floor, and I smile to myself.

Jax snaps pictures on the camera that I got him all those years ago and Ace passes out cookies that he must have stayed up all night baking, while Rebel and Thorn pretend to fight over Nix’s gifts and Baxter smiles warmly as he watches everything. My heart is absolutely full to bursting and everything is perfect right now.

The rest of the day passes in a haze of gift wrap, pink and food. So much food. Ace has outdone himself.

While Jax and Thorn pelt each other with Nerf guns and Baxter patiently shows Nix the best way to handle a gun, I sit on the sofa and slip my arm through Ace's while resting my head on Rebel's shoulder.

"Thank you." I sigh contentedly. "Today was perfect. I love you both."

They turn and kiss my cheeks in unison, making me flush with the possibility. Ace is the first to notice and he chuckles.

"Umazano dekle⁴."

"He just called you a dirty bitch, you know."

"No bitch. Dekle⁵. Girl."

"She *is* a dirty girl, but she's also a very very good girl, aren't you, little bird? I bet you'd love a little Christmas treat."

"You've given me so much," I say, choosing to try and ignore his suggestive words and the hands sliding up my thighs.

"Too bad Nix still has one last present to open."

I honestly don't know how they did it. I thought we'd be opening presents until July but Thorn whipped Nix up into some sort of unwrapping frenzy and the place was organised chaos before I knew it.

"You said something about it being outside?" I say, remembering our conversation this morning, even though it feels like it was about a week ago.

"Let's go see," Rebel says, pulling me to my feet. "Put some shoes on and grab some for Nix. You'll need them."

He walks off to interrupt the gun fight which I think is mighty brave of him. I've been on the receiving end of a few rogue shots already today and those fuckers can hurt. I watch as bullets bounce off him like he's invincible and smile.

Quickly grabbing the shoes, I follow him and meet everyone at the conservatory doors that lead out into the

garden. Thorn has his hands over Nix's eyes and Baxter takes her shoes from me to slide them on her feet. Ever so carefully, Ace and Baxter help guide Nix out of the door while Thorn keeps his hands in place and Jax snaps shot after shot on his camera. I follow with nervous anticipation because honestly, Rebel could have got her *anything*.

He leads us all like the Pied Piper, through the garden to the two massive old oak trees at the very bottom. He nods to Thorn who drops his hands away with a flourish and yells "ta-dah!"

High up in the trees, nestled between the two, is an enormous two storey treehouse, complete with sun deck, glazed windows and a spiral slide down to earth again. Three swings are spaced evenly from the bottom of the sun deck, hanging down before us. Freaking *lights* shine inside the windows, and twinkling fairy lights are entwined all around the bannisters.

"Holy crap," I say.

"Bad word, Mummy!" Nix giggles.

"Wow." I shake my head. It's the stuff of dreams. "I want one."

The guys laugh.

"You can share with me Mummy. Can we go up?" There's a proper staircase with handrails to one side.

"Absolutely baby. Let's."

The guys all move to follow us as we start the climb and I stare at them in a panic.

"Can it hold all of us?"

"Princess, you could have an orgy with a herd of rhinos up here and a single leaf wouldn't even fall from a branch. It's solid, I promise."

"Mummy...what's an or-gy?"

"Nothing baby, just a bad word that Rebel knows."

"Bad word!" She cries triumphantly.

I help Nix up the stairs and let her race ahead to explore. There's safety rails all the way round and even a gate at the top of the stairs so I'm not worried. Rebel seems to have thought of everything. Almost.

“What's wrong? Do you hate it? It was this or a horse... well, I had two horses picked out actually, a really cute little mum and baby combo for the two of you but then you dropped that little horse hating bombshell of yours and I freaked out and this was plan B. Well, actually this was plan A, the horses were plan B, so I really went back to plan A but—”

“Rebel! Stop talking!” I say. His nervous chatter is making my head spin. Horses? Oh hell no.

“What's wrong then?”

“Nothing. This is literally a dream come true. It's just, well, we'll never be able to move out now.”

He laughs. “I'll build you a bigger and better house, with a bigger and better tree house, wherever you want to go. I'll build you and Nix your own damn treehouses. And if you're too attached to this place, I'll even have it dismantled brick by brick and reassembled wherever we end up. No matter how many times you want to move, I can do it every single time. And if you want to stay right here, in shitty, cold, rainy, midge-infested Scotland, then that's fine by me too.”

I throw my arms around him and kiss him.

“I have one last gift for you and Nix.”

I groan.

“Nix, c'mere a minute.”

Her head pops up at the window and she races out to join us on the sun deck. It will be beautiful up here on summer evenings. With a few citronella candles of course.

My attention is jolted back to the present as Rebel drops to one knee and takes Nix's hand in his. My eyes turn to saucers.

“Phoenix Elizabeth, will you please do me the honour of allowing me to stay in your family forever?”

She giggles and nods at him, and he lets go of her hand just long enough to pull a tiny ring box from his pocket, which he flicks open and presents to Nix like a prince in a Disney film. Holy crap it's the cutest thing ever as he slides it onto her finger.

“This ring is for you, to show that we're a family. And just like a circle can't be broken, our family never will be either.”

I'm pretty sure the significance of his words is lost on her because she squeals that she has “a princess ring!” and launches her arms around him for the cutest hug ever. My cheeks hurt from smiling and behind them the others are all watching and grinning from the doorway.

Nix breaks the hug and races into the treehouse to show off her new “treasure” and Rebel reaches for my hand, still down on one knee, a second ring box appearing from nowhere like magic. If my eyes were saucers before, they feel like serving platters now.

“I know you can't marry all of us, but I still want to ask. Will you be my fiancée and have me as a member of your family forever?”

It's so unbelievably sweet of him to ask for family and not a wedding, that I find myself nodding as a sob escapes my throat. My eyes are so blurry with tears of happiness I can't even see the ring. I don't care about the ring.

“Y-yes!” I bawl, so unbelievably happy I could burst.

The others clap and cheer, reminding me that they're there and I probably should have asked them how they felt about it all before giving my answer...but then it *really* registers that they're happy for us and I realise that it's okay. They must have known about this plan. Which hopefully means they're okay with it.

I really hope so because by my calculations I'm now engaged to three guys. Fuck.

Rebel slides the ring onto the ring finger of my left hand, alongside the other, original ring. It's a perfect fit, because of course it is, Rebel has designed everything down to a T.

We kiss and the moment is as perfect as any can be, before Nix picks up her nerf gun and fires a rubber tipped bullet at Rebel's crotch. He groans and collapses onto the decking while she screams at him, "Die, mother fucker! Die!"

Baxter cackles loudly in the background.

Raven's Diary

Present Day

Fuck. I don't even know what day it is – how ironic is that? Most people can pinpoint exactly when their whole world came crashing down, and here I am in a post-Christmas sugar and sex haze not knowing what the hell is going on.

Only, I do know what's going on. My life is imploding. The letter in my hand is another ticking time bomb that's set to detonate on January 8th. I always hated Mondays.

I kept rereading the letter but the words kept swimming before my eyes. Who the fuck sends a court summons over Christmas? Happy New Year we're taking your child away.

Bastards.

No. I can't think like that. I have to be positive. This is it. The end. We're going to win and send Cuntdelia packing once and for all. There's no judge in the whole country that would place Nix in her care now they know she's abusive. They can't.

Fuck you, Cordelia. We're coming for you and we're swinging.



CHAPTER TWENTY - FOUR

Raven

“I thought you were going to make all of this go away,” I say to Baxter. Then I cringe at how accusatory I sound. I don’t mean to be defensive, but this feels like judgement day and it truly could go either way. I pinned everything on him and the guys to get me out of this and I should have been trying to save myself.

Since the moment that letter arrived I’ve been in free fall. Plastering a smile on my face whenever Nix is around, falling to pieces as soon as she’s out of sight. I tried to be strong, to be positive, to remind myself that Cordelia is a monster who will never win.

But demons don’t listen to logic.

“I am,” is all he replies.

“How? I thought you could use The Or—” I stall at the look he gives me and lower my voice. “Your *connections* to stop this from happening.”

“I have.”

“Then why the hell are we in court?!”

“We’re in court because it’s the only way to stop her once and for all. If the case was thrown out, you know she’d never accept it and would keep coming for you both. This way, she gets her day in court, but not the outcome she’s expecting.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I can and I do. Listen, they’re going to call us in in a moment. Have you seen on TV when they ask you to swear to tell the truth, blah blah blah?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not exactly like that, but similar. Listen to me.” He pauses and stares intently at me. “You need to tell the *whole* truth. All of it. Right back to Lizzie going to West Prep, maybe even earlier, and don’t leave anything out.”

“I can’t do that!” Panic rises like a tsunami in me at what he’s suggesting. “I’ll lose Phoenix for sure and they’ll lock me up!”

“Trust me. I’ve got our family’s back,” he insists. “Tell the whole truth, spill *every* secret and don’t leave any stone unturned. You won’t regret it.”

I shake my head. I can’t. I can’t do that. What he’s suggesting is crazy.

He reaches out and gently grasps my chin to stop the frantic shaking of my head. He holds me still until I meet his gaze and focus on him.

“Trust. Me.” His low, commanding tone is not to be argued with. I sigh and the fight leaves my body. When he feels me relax he lets my face go but only to scoop me into his arms for a tight embrace. His heart beats slow and steady in my ear, a reassuring drum to calm and soothe.

We’re called into the small courtroom, sworn in, and shown to our seats. I keep my eyes straight ahead, refusing to even look around for Cordelia. I know she’s in the room, she’s like a poisonous gas leaching through the air. With every breath I take, I feel my lungs constricting with the kind of panic that only strikes me when she’s nearby.

No sooner have I sat down when someone calls “all rise”. We do, and the judge walks in.

My jaw drops. It’s Bob Blackborow, the judge that gave Baxter custody of Phoenix. But...he said he wasn’t on this case?

“You may be seated. Thank you, and sorry for the delay. As you can see, I am very clearly *not* Miranda Payton. My colleague has had a family emergency come up and I was the only judge available at such short notice. But please rest assured, I am up to speed on all that this case entails.”

I glance at Baxter out of the corner of my eye but he’s a closed book.

“I have reviewed the statement put forward by Ms Cordelia Deighton and accept her wishes to be represented by

proxy this morning, and she will join us for the verdict this afternoon.” Huh? “I understand that this is very unusual, but apparently being a ‘Deighton’ affords one many privileges in life, this being one of them.”

I finally look around the courtroom to the table where Cordelia’s lawyers are sitting. *Her lawyers, but not her.* Oh my god. I let out a ragged breath.

“In light of the statement Miss Charlotte Deighton wishes to give, I rather feel this is for the best and will make things easier for her.”

He knows that I ‘wish’ to give a statement that I knew nothing about until two minutes ago?

I gape at Baxter.

He’s stone.

He could be a marble statue chiselled by a master craftsman.

“Miss Deighton?” Bob calls gently. I shake my head and turn my attention back to the front of the room. “I’m going to help you through this by asking you some questions okay. Don’t worry about anyone else, just tell me your story. Can you do that for me?”

I nod.

“Good. I want you to begin by telling me about Lizzie...”

I take a deep breath and begin.

“Being Lizzie’s twin was amazing. She was pure light and sunshine, able to light up any room just by being in it...”

It’s emotionally draining, rehashing our childhood and the discovery of an estranged grandmother we knew nothing about. Of course I immediately wanted to reach out to this woman, but Lizzie was more cautious. She wanted our parents’ story first. I tell the judge all about the first meeting, the slow relationship building, the offer of a lifetime for Lizzie in the form of an education at West Prep.

And then it gets so much harder to continue. With shaking hands I reach for my glass of water, wishing it were a Coke or something stronger. I explain about the diary, our letters, our code writing. About how Lizzie changed. What I witnessed at the winter concert and how distant she was over the Christmas break. How everything seemed to fray and break.

Baxter stares at me the entire time and it's through his steady gaze that I find the strength to explain her death, the diary, going to my grandmother for help, and the plan she hatched afterwards. I realise now that I was a pawn in a much bigger game.

I'm almost sick when I have to say Michael's name for the first time. My stomach churns with bile as I tell of his duplicity towards both me and Lizzie. It burns the back of my throat when I reveal what he did.

What I did.

When I break down in tears, the judge calls for a break and I rush into Baxter's arms the moment we clear the room.

"You're doing amazing. You're perfect."

"Baxter, I just confessed to murdering my sister's rapist."

"Don't worry about it."

I laugh humourlessly. I feel slightly hysterical. Oh, to have the confidence of Baxter Branson. Wouldn't life be great?

"Are you sure this is necessary?"

"Absolutely. I promise I would never make you relive this if it wasn't absolutely crucial. You're so brave...Are you ready to go back in?"

I shake my head no even as I sigh "yes". I just want this over and done with now.

Once we continue it's easier to talk about myself. I can handle the shit Cordelia put me through if Lizzie isn't involved. But as I talk about how Cordelia became increasingly controlling and demanding throughout my pregnancy, it dawns on me that it was *abuse*. I never looked at it that way before, always trying to convince myself that she

was acting with my best interests at heart, but just missing the mark.

With hindsight I wonder if my mother's experience was actually similar to mine, only they would have been fighting over an 'inappropriate' boyfriend and not the life of a child. She would have been a nightmare if my mother had stayed and raised us there. Things would have been so different.

Speaking about the first time Cordelia got the courts involved is hard. I have to talk about depression and the dark places it took me, but I'm able to emphasise how much better Nix made me feel and how the stress of Cordelia's demands made it worse. I explain how difficult those early meetings were, how much harder it was to give her up for weekends and later holidays.

I speak about how devastated and traumatic it was to have Nix taken from the house, screaming for me, and being unable to even say goodbye to her.

Tears stream down my face as I relive every moment in the bright technicolour high definition of my memories.

By the time I have to explain how Baxter brought Nix back to the house with a broken arm, I'm hoarse. It's the holding her under the water that breaks me.

"I'm s-sorry," I sob.

"It's okay," the judge says kindly. "I think we're about done. Are you happy for me to play Phoenix's testimony for the lawyers to hear?"

I nod, and once again Nix's small voice fills the room with the help of the built-in speakers. I grip the edge of the chair and let the tears silently stream down my face until it stops and the judge allows me to return to my seat. Baxter wraps his arms around me and passes me a handkerchief.

"If the lawyers don't have anything to add, we'll adjourn for lunch. When we return Cordelia will be here, so please prepare yourself for that Miss Deighton. The verdict will be delivered."

We rise. The judge leaves. And then we wait.

It's the longest lunch hour of my life. I'm a sweating, trembling mess when we get called back in. I stick to the same strategy as before: stare straight ahead and don't acknowledge anyone in the room. It's a struggle to get my legs to work when we have to stand for the judge.

Baxter helps me.

I cling to the edge of the table to remain upright, and when we're allowed to take our seats, I virtually collapse into mine.

"Thank you for joining us, Ms Deighton," the judge says. Is it just my imagination or does he not sound as warm and welcoming to her? "It's been a very enlightening morning. As you missed it, I will leave your lawyers to fill you in, but needless to say, I have reached my decision."

My heart beats so hard I feel like it's been plugged into the surround sound and everyone can hear it.

"Ms Deighton, your petition for full custody of Phoenix Elizabeth Deighton is denied."

Cordelia gasps and my head turns to her on instinct. She's clutching her pearls.

"Furthermore, in light of the ongoing investigation into reports of child abuse brought against you, I have no choice but to remove all prior shared custody arrangements for the child in question, and to uphold the current restraining order —"

The judge doesn't get any further than that because Cordelia unleashes an unholy scream that would rival a banshee and launches herself at me.

Baxter intervenes, moving swiftly to stand between us and blocking me protectively with his body. Security race over to restrain Cordelia and somewhere in the background the judge is banging his hammer and calling for "Order! Order!" like they do in the movies.

“Control yourself!” The judge snaps, finally losing his patience. “Ms Cordelia Deighton, you are in contempt of court. Bailiffs, take her into custody.”

She howls like a wounded wild animal, screaming curses and threats of revenge at me as they drag her away.

“I am sorry about that,” the judge says once she’s gone and calm returns. Well, the room is calmer but my heart is still racing. I’m thoroughly shaken. Even Baxter looks like a murderous slab of stone, no longer quite so calm and collected. “Miss Deighton?”

“Yes?”

“You’re free to go and enjoy being a family.”

“Thank you.”

Even though the judge said we can go, I’m still at a loss, unable to make my limbs move. Baxter takes my arm and guides me, and he doesn’t let go of it until we’re outside, swapping to wrap me in his arms as I weep on him. Tears of relief, gratitude and joy.

“Come on, princess, don’t cry. This is good news.”

“But you heard her, she’s going to fight. She’s going to keep coming. She won’t stop!”

“You think for a second I’d let her get anywhere near you or Nix or the rest of our family?” I shake my head. “Exactly. I promised I would take care of things and that means beyond today as well.”

He kisses me, slow and dirty with lots of tongue, even though we’re standing in the street. Which completely distracts me until my phone rings. I look down at the caller display and see that it’s the guys calling for the verdict. I take a deep breath and smile as I answer.

“Hey guys.”

“Miss Deighton?”

“I’ll call you back,” I say to the guys, hanging up quickly and turning at the sound of my name.

The judge from the court room is standing there.

“Your honour?”

“Please, call me Bob.”

This is too weird. I just nod. “I just wanted to say congratulations on winning the case.”

“T-thanks?”

“No worries at all Miss Deighton, it’s always nice to have a favour up one’s sleeve.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, is that the time? I’m sorry, I must go.” Bob makes an elaborate pantomime of checking the watch on his left wrist for the time, practically waving it right under my nose. Wh—

Oh!

Under the glinting metal strap of his Rolex, I can just decipher the edges of a tattoo peeking out.

“Goodbye, dear. Mr Branson, sir, please give my best wishes to your grandfather.”

He walks back towards the courthouse.

“Baxter, what the hell was that about?”

“That was your reassurance from Bob. No one will be coming to investigate your role in your courtroom confessions today.”

“But—”

“I told you to trust me.”

“I do. But—”

“When Bob let slip at the temporary custody meeting that he wasn’t on your case, I knew I had to act and pull a few strings to get him swapped in, but it had to be at the last minute to avoid suspicion.”

“But the original judge had a family emergency? Oh my god, please don’t say anything bad happened to her!”

“Just a case of suspected appendicitis in her little one. All is fine.”

“But what about Cordelia’s lawyers? They were in there! They heard what I said!”

“All on my payroll.”

My head is reeling even more than it was before. I confessed to murder and have just been told by a judge that I’m going to get away with it. And the level of respect Bob just showed to Baxter...who the hell is my boyfriend?! And what else can this organisation of his do?

The phone rings again, the boys obviously growing impatient. I slide to answer.

“It’s good news...”

Guys' Chat

Thorn: Can we go on holiday now?

Ace: Please.

Rebel: Fuck yeah! That's such a good idea. I need some sun. I'll never get used to the climate here. I thought England sucked balls but Scotland takes the fucking piss. I hope the summer is better,

Baxter: It's worse. Fucking midges everywhere.

Ace: Midgets? Small people?

Thorn: Lol!

Jax: No. Midges. They're little bugs that bite.

Thorn: Like motherfuckers!

Rebel: Well in that case, I vote we leave this shithole as soon as Raven graduates.

Jax: I think we would have to include Raven in that discussion. For now, maybe we can sort out this holiday?

Thorn: Does that mean we can go?!

Jax: Yes. But where and when?

Rebel: As soon as fucking possible.

Ace: Agree.

Baxter: Leave it with me. I'll sort everything.



CHAPTER TWENTY - FIVE

Baxter

Normally I hate the fucking beach. Fucking sand gets everywhere. The last time I had any fun at the beach was when I showed Raven the secret cove on my grandfather's island and she kissed me.

I still think about that day, hell that whole summer really. I'm not about to say it hits me with the feels or that I go all warm and tingly or any such shit, but it does make me smile. We became pretty good friends, I guess. I mean, I only had Amelie as a friend before that and she was great because she knew some of my secrets, which obviously Raven didn't, but we never hung out like I did that summer with Raven. And it was nice not to have to protect Raven's ass every five minutes.

I enjoyed joining her for breakfast and taking her to different spots on the island. Sharing that childhood secret cove with her was no exception. The day was great, if a little awkward after she kissed me. Well, it wasn't the kiss that made things awkward. Not when my dick was throbbing and I wanted to lay her out on the sand and bury myself into her until she screamed. No, it was my reaction that made shit weird between us.

I suppose that was the turning point for me, when she kissed me and I pulled away. I'd definitely never turned down a woman before that, so my call to return to the U.K. on Order business was perfect timing. I could mull it over. What was really going on? What was I really feeling?

I suspected of course. That she was on the run from something. Seeing Rebel and learning how frantic they all were to find her cemented it for me, but it was only when I returned and caught a glimpse of a curve to her stomach that the pieces started slotting together faster than a stack of falling dominoes.

So I asked her.

And she confessed.

Then something even stranger happened. I felt a need to protect her, to help and support her, take root almost immediately. Maybe it had been there before – why else would I have spent the summer entertaining a chick that wasn't putting out? – but it was magnified tenfold when I realised she was creating a life inside her. It was the perfect way to atone for my sins and failures with Casey and Beth.

Since then, any beach trips I've been subjected to have been back in Blighty at those torrid 'kiss me quick' tacky seaside resorts that I can't abide. But it was all Raven could afford after months of saving and scraping together tips, and as she was too damn stubborn to willingly accept help from me, I was subjected to torturous tacky days out on wild, wet and windy beaches. Literally my idea of hell.

I'll begrudgingly admit that it's not so awful this time though.

The sun and foreign climes help. As does the lavish price tag of course. I suppose the additional company isn't too arduous either. Phoenix is great, but it is nice to have the others around to distract her a little.

Like now for example. Nix, Ace and Rebel are making some sort of giant sandcastle...fort? I'm not too sure but it's kept all of them out of trouble for hours. Thorn's surfing, in his element, and Jax is doing something on his phone, scowling and not talking to anyone. And I'm staring at Raven from behind my aviators as she skimboards in the shallows, a smile on her face.

There's a small group of guys watching her a bit too closely for my liking, but I'm keeping an eye on them. The others haven't seemed to notice, or maybe they just don't care. I'm not about to be a possessive asshole that gouges out a man's eyes just for looking – although it is tempting – but if they touch her, all bets are off.

I palm my knife absentmindedly while I watch the dickweasels get closer to her. My eyes narrow. Maybe I could spill a little blood in warning? Stay away from what's mine.

Not that I'm worried or anything, I just like to send a message. A clear as blood message.

They're standing around her now, laughing and joking by the looks of it. I slip an AirPods from my ear but I can't hear anything from this distance. Not over Rebel and Nix screaming anyway. I can hardly see Raven, just a flash of red bikini between gaps of flesh.

I'm on my feet the second a guy hits the sand, clutching his crown jewels. Raven.

"Don't touch me you piece of shit!" I hear her seethe as I get close.

"Like you're not fucking all five of those guys!" One sneers. "What's wrong with a few more?"

Realising I dropped my knife in the sand in my haste to get over here, I pull a second one out. Not my favourite, but it'll do.

I push my way through the tight circle, throwing some well-aimed punches as I go. Fuckers didn't even see me coming. I grab the guy on the ground by his neck and jerk him up to face me. My knife presses to his throat and all bravado falls from his face. He gulps nervously, the action causing my blade to gently nick his neck. A trickle of blood runs down his flesh, and for a moment I don't speak, transfixed by that deep red drip.

"Baxter! What the fuck?!" Raven hisses. "You can't stab people on a public beach."

"I'll buy the beach," I reply dismissively, pressing my blade a teeny tiny bit deeper.

"That's not what I meant. There are witnesses."

"I'll buy them off too."

"Not everyone can be bought."

"But everyone can be killed."

"Stop it!"

I sigh and shoot the cunt in my arms a filthy, murderous look before letting him go and pocketing my knife. Not my choice but Raven so rarely asks me for anything that I can't deny her this one simple request. Even if my blood is pounding in my ears and the voices are roaring for vengeance.

"Thank you," she sighs, sounding relieved.

Taking my hand in hers, she pulls me away from the angry group. Angry, but cowed. At the last second I pull free, turn around and punch that fucker in the jaw with every ounce of rage that I have. He goes down like the sack of shit that he is, and his cronies immediately race to his side. I fully expect Raven to go ape shit at me but all she does is shake her head a little and give me a smile.

This time when she takes my hand and leads me away I let her. We don't make it far before I grind to a halt. She tugs on my hand but I refuse to move. Eventually she looks back at me, a question in her eyes.

A question I don't answer with words.

Instead, I pull her into me and crush her lips beneath mine. I kiss her like I did that night in her bedroom: full of the promise of what's to come. And I will not let her push me away this time.

"God, I wish I could fuck you right now," I groan, exasperated.

"Go on then," she teases. She probably thinks I wouldn't dare on a public beach but she should know by now that I don't give a fuck about anything. Well, almost anything. I very clearly give more than a fuck about her and Phoenix. And maybe the band of merry men Boy Scout assholes on the beach that are taking care of my daughter right now.

"Fucking...sand..." I complain between kisses. She laughs.

"Who'd have thought that big bad Baxter Branson is scared of a little sand."

"Scared?" I scoff, still devouring her lips.

“Terrified.”

“I’ll show you terrified,” I threaten.

She grins at me. “Come on then.”

I’m surprised when she doesn’t head back to the others, pulling me up the beach towards the little hut that we rented instead.

“Where’re we going?”

“Need to clean that up before you get all that scary sand in it.”

“I thought we were going to fuck. Finally.”

“Oh we are.” She winks at me then points to my hand. “But let’s deal with that first.”

I glance down at my knuckles. They’re bloody but I don’t feel a thing.

“I always thought there’d be more blood the first time we fuck,” I murmur to myself.

“What?”

“Huh?” I blink, shake my head, look at Raven. She has the strangest look on her face.

“Nothing.”

We continue up the beach until we get to the wooden shelter we hired for the duration of the holiday. It’s just a little cabin with a mezzanine bed, a small kitchenette, sitting area and basic bathroom. But it’s great for storing all Thorn’s water sports shit, and I’ll admit it’s pretty handy right now too.

As soon as we step through the door, I push Raven up against it, kissing her mouth once more.

“Easy tiger,” she says a minute later, pushing me away. “Let’s get the first aid kit out.”

I sigh and take a seat, pulling out the knife I used on the beach and tossing it into the sink. Then I remove all the other knives and set them on the table. Raven returns and eyes my stash with a smirk.

“Really? You brought five knives to the beach?”

“Seven. One’s in the sink and I dropped one.” Which reminds me to pull out my phone and text Jax to pick it up for me.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“How so?”

“Baxter, we’re on holiday. It’s a hundred degrees out—”

“Exaggeration.”

“And you’re dressed like that and bringing weapons everywhere. You don’t need them.”

“I disagree. If I didn’t need them, one wouldn’t be dirty right now. And what’s wrong with my clothes?”

“It’s hot and you’re wearing...” She waves her hands around at my clothes. “That.”

I frown at my outfit. It’s more or less what I always wear. Combat boots, tailored trousers, a white shirt and braces. The jacket felt too formal for the beach, and it is pretty warm, so I left it at the hotel.

“I rolled up the trousers and my sleeves.” I frown. “Send a message to the group chat.”

“What for?”

“Ask them to watch Phoenix.”

“They will anyway. This won’t take long.”

I stare at her until she flushes and realises my intent. Wordlessly she does as I say. When she swallows it reminds me of my blade pressed against the weasel’s throat and my dick twitches. I stare forlornly at my blades.

Raven notices and follows my gaze, giving the knives her own look of longing.

“Do you miss it?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

“But you used to enjoy it.”

“I didn’t enjoy what I did to Michael. It wasn’t what I had planned. I wanted to enjoy it, to savour it when I finally figured out who killed Lizzie...”

I look away, something strange settling in my gut at those words. “But it didn’t play out like that. I was too busy fighting for my life.”

“You don’t just have to use knives to kill someone though.”

“I know.” She smiles. “The first time I met Thorn I threw a knife at him. Lopped a lock of his hair off.”

I laugh.

“Show me,” I say, getting to my feet and pressing a knife into her palm.

“What?”

“Show me what you can do with them.” My dick jerks to life at the blade in her hand. Fuck she looks good.

“What? No!”

“Come on.” I move to stand against the wooden wall and I hold out my hand against the smooth painted boards. “Between the fingers.”

“No way! I’ve not thrown a knife in years. I could hurt you!”

“Nah. Muscle memory will kick in. It’s like riding a bike.” She’s still frantically shaking her head but I can see her eyes are sparkling and she’s not put the knife down. “I trust you.”

“I don’t trust myself.”

“Well, I have more than enough trust for both of us.” I realise how true those words are, I feel their weight. Can she? Does she realise what it cost me to say them, to feel them?

“Okay.” She takes a ragged breath and steels herself. My dick hardens. She takes up her stance, palming the blade back and forth between her hands getting a feel for its weight. “Okay. I can do this.”

Without warning she lets the blade fly and it sinks into the wood between my thumb and first finger. She lets out a relieved breath.

“There. Happy? Can I clean you up now?”

“No.” I love the blood trickling down the back of my hand and onto my wrist. I shake my head. “Again. Use another knife.”

She huffs in frustration but follows orders, picking up my small double-bladed dagger. I fucking love that blade, it’s pierced more temples than I can count. With a soft exhale she throws it at me and it lands right on target between the next two fingers.

My dick is steel, straining against my trousers but she’s too focused on my hand to notice.

Without being asked she selects a third and immediately transfers the blade into her fingers, aiming the handle at me. I’m impressed. So far she’s expertly handled three different styles of weapon. Is it possible to love her even more? Because I fucking do right now. Not many people would know that this particular knife needs to be thrown handle first.

It lands perfectly, right near the knuckle. She’s getting braver, more confident.

“Make this one kiss the skin.”

Again, she shakes her head in amusement but picks up my SOG anyway. Fuck if she’s into this we could really have some fun. That SOG is one mean son of a bitch. I swallow thickly, not nervous but aroused. I never dared to hope I’d find anyone to love me, and yet Raven and Phoenix both do. You don’t get two miracles in life, so the idea of Raven sharing the same tastes as me is too much to fathom.

I shake my head to clear it. I’ll take what I can get. Even if it means this moment in time becomes the thing I fantasise about until my dying breath.

“I can stop.”

“Don’t you dare.”

The words aren't even out of my mouth before the blade is between my pinkie and ring finger, the cool metal just brushing the skin between them. Not a nick or drop of blood in sight there.

I'm so hard it hurts.

"The last one."

"Where should I aim this one?" She smirks, palming the blade from hand to hand playfully. I wish she'd play with me like that.

"I don't care. Close your eyes."

"What? No! Absolutely not." She shakes her head emphatically but I just give her my best slow psycho grin.

"Please?"

"You're crazy."

I nod. No response necessary.

"Fine. But don't blame me if you bleed out or something."

"You have a first aid kit, I'm sure you'll save me," I tease.

The final blade is quite large. My Lightning Bolt. I know it's going to hurt, but I welcome the pain. Especially if this is a onetime deal.

"I don't know. I've never thrown one like this before..."

"It's an adventure." I shrug. "Close your eyes."

She does and it's like time slows down. She raises the blade, breathes in, releases the Bolt with her breath. It arcs through the air and I watch its trajectory, adjusting my stance slightly at the last minute so that it sinks silently into my palm.

When the soft thump of the blade striking the wood doesn't come, Raven's eyes fly open and she stares at me in horror.

"Baxter! Oh my god, I'm so sorry!" She rushes towards me and yanks the blade free. Now that makes me wince a little but the sight of the blood flowing freely now, more than makes up for it. Fuck, what I wouldn't give to paint her skin red with my blood. Is there truly a better way to mark someone?

“It’s a trip down memory lane,” I smirk.

With my good hand I lace my fingers into her hair, pulling her soft body flush against mine and kissing her deeply. The Lightning Bolt falls to the floor with a heavy thunk, and a moment later her arms are around my neck, her legs around my waist as she climbs me frantically. She dominates the kiss, kissing me without control. And I fucking love it.

Not breaking our kiss, I pull a knife from the wall beside me and make short work of removing her bikini with a few cuts.

“Baxter!” She hisses when the cool air of the hut caresses her now bare skin. “That was expensive.”

“I’ll buy you another.”

“It took ages to find one that I looked good in.”

“I find that hard to believe. I’ll buy you all the fucking bikinis in the world. You look stunning in everything. You’re perfect.” I kiss her again, meaning every word. “Better yet, I’ll make you go naked until you accept that you don’t need a scrap of material to make you look good.”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

I do as I’m told with a smirk on my face. My grin widens as she takes the blade from my hand and uses it to slice through my braces. After that, she cuts through my shirt. Okay, so the blade is fucked now, but I don’t give a damn. I’m normally very particular about my knives. Like how you’re never meant to cut paper with dressmaking scissors, my blades are designed for flesh and bone. It’ll never be the same after cutting through fabric, but if I can get Raven to cut me up a little with that knife while my dick is in her, I’ll leave it bloodstained and mount it on my wall as a trophy.

She strips my shirt from me and smirks as she takes in my chest. Reaching out with a mischievous grin, she flicks my nipple ring.

“Didn’t take you as having a fun side,” she teases.

“Fucking Kalen,” I mutter. She chuckles.

“That’s a story you have to tell me. Who’s Kalen?”

“Another time.”

“I never pictured you with piercings. You’re not the impulsive type.”

I’m wondering how the hell I’m going to shut her up but she surprises me by leaning forward and taking my piercing into her mouth. She gently sucks on it before taking it between her teeth and tugging. Fuck that feels good.

“So, are we gonna have sex now? Finally,” she asks a moment later, releasing my nipple and ring with a pop and a siren’s smile.

“You can’t handle having sex with me.”

“I fuck Rebel. You’re friends. You know what he’s packing.”

“I didn’t mean like that.”

“Well Jax is one kinky son of a bitch too and I survive him.”

“Nope. Not that either.”

“Why don’t you show me then?” she challenges, huffing and putting her hands on her hips. She’s completely unconcerned by her nakedness which is a massive turn on and a far cry from the way she shied away from the landing light and my gaze last time. I don’t want to fuck up like that again, but...

My gaze heats just looking at her. It’s the defiance in her eyes that finally does it. I bend down and swipe the Lightning Bolt from the floor. This is it. The part where she’ll run scared, or scream at me and call me all the names I deserve. Before leaving.

I expect names. Swearing. Cursing. Insults. At the very least, questions. But of course she surprises me by saying nothing. Instead, her hands drop from her hips and her gaze locks on mine. She closes the gap between us, her hips swaying sexily.

When our bodies touch, the knife pressed between us, she reaches up and wraps her delicate fingers around the handle. The kiss she gives me is pure seduction and I'm sure I've died and gone to hell.

And then she goes and stabs me.

Unknown number: Your package is in the mail, en route to final location.

Baxter: Pleasure doing business with you. Thank you for holding on to it until we found it a home.

Unknown number: It grew on me towards the end.

Baxter: You should have said. If I let you keep it, it would have caused me a lot less trouble.

Unknown number: I couldn't afford your prices.

Baxter: Speaking of, your cheque is in the mail.

Unknown number: Let's hope it arrives in better condition than your parcel is going to.



CHAPTER TWENTY - SIX

Raven

I take the knife and ram it in his thigh with considerable force. I don't even think about it, I just do it. I don't look, I use my instinct. I'm trained well enough to know how to stab someone in a way that won't kill them. I'm not about to hit anything major.

One minute he's teasing me and the next it sounds like he's pushing me away. I panicked. So I kissed him. And his dick was so hard, bobbing around every time I touched one of his precious blades that inspiration just sort of struck...and so did I.

His guttural groan into my mouth makes my nerve endings light up like a circuit board. I made the right decision. He's harder than a fucking great hunk of diamond against me. I can feel his blood running down his leg, down mine, and it's way sexier than I ever anticipated.

With a sudden urge to taste him, I drop to my knees and wrap my hand around the base of his shaft. As I slowly start to stroke him, my wrist bumps the knife that's still protruding from his leg. He hisses when I go to take it out.

“Leave it.”

He's probably right, removing it will make way more mess than I want to clean up right now, but there's still a part of me that longs to yank that blade out with a flourish. Instead, I focus on his cock...and my eyes widen. Whoa. Yeah. Erm. There's no way that's fitting in my mouth.

Baxter's fingers tangle in my hair and I decide that for him, I want to try. But I barely get my lips around his tip when he's yanking me to my feet and claiming my mouth once more.

His kiss is filthy and raw, which I expected, but lacking the control I've come to expect from him. It's seriously hot, how wildly he possesses me.

Eventually he breaks away and I can breathe.

“Phew for a minute there I was worried,” I say once I’ve caught my breath.

“What? That I wanted to stab you?”

“No. That my stabbing you was gonna cause limp dick.”

“Does that look limp to you?”

“Nope...do you want to stab me?” I ask carefully.

“I don’t know...” He hesitates.

“What?”

“I would have said yes before, without even thinking about it.”

“But?”

“But now...I don’t know. I still want to, but I feel more like it would be a privilege rather than a compulsion.”

I’m not quite sure what to say to that.

“Raven, my whole life has been about taking. Taking orders.” I pull a face at that and he smiles ruefully. “I know, but I was good at it once. Taking what I wanted or needed... people taking things from me. And yes, even taking lives. No one has ever given me anything. Not voluntarily anyway or without wanting something in return. Which is why anything you’re willing to give me is an absolute honour.”

My insides do this squishy melty thing where I basically feel like a soppy marshmallow. For Baxter Branson, that was downright romantic.

“Let’s go,” I say and disappointed acceptance flares in his eyes. I place my hand on his chest where I can barely feel his heartbeat at all and stare into his eyes earnestly.

“Me and you need to go find a bed where I can show you just how much I’m willing to give you. No expectations of reciprocation. You already have my heart and soul, let me give you the rest.”

I mean, obviously I want to scream at him ‘let’s go fuck until neither of us can walk’ but that flash of vulnerability

makes me think he needs a gentler approach right now. Not that I think for a second that when we do get down to it, it'll be soft or gentle.

I take his hand and tug him towards the door.

“Wait. What about the mess?” he asks.

“Zero fucks given right now, Baxter. I need to find a bed, stat.”

“There's a bed up there.” He points to the small mezzanine and I pull a face.

“For what I have in mind, it won't be big enough.”

“Okay. I hate to be the sane one in this relationship, but we can't walk into the hotel with you naked and me bleeding all over the marble floors.”

Ah fuck. He's right. How the hell did I forget I was naked? Luckily he saves the day by grabbing a hoodie from the couch and chucking it at me. Obviously it absolutely dwarfs me, so it must be Rebel's.

“Is there anything for you?” Not that I want to cover up his sexy chest and surprising party piercing, but I guess he does have a point.

He rummages through Thorn's wet bag and pulls out a rashie. Holding it like it's a live grenade, he scowls and pulls it over his head.

A laugh breaks free. He just looks so ridiculous. So, un-Baxter-like.

“You should change your pants. It wouldn't look so bad then.”

He growls at me but does as I suggest, pulling some board shorts from the bag too. But then we seem to both remember the knife protruding from his thigh. He sighs.

“I really didn't want to remove it,” he says forlornly.

“Allow me.” I smirk and wrench the blade from his thigh, relishing the string of curses that fall from his lips. He grabs his tattered shirt from the floor to press to the wound and

bandages it. Several minutes later when it's calmed down a little he changes into the board shorts.

Baxter Branson in boardies and a rashie is something I never thought I'd see. He still has his trademark scowl and boots in place though, which just makes it seem funnier.

"I'm going to make you pay for that," he promises darkly. I shiver in anticipation, unsure if he means I'll be paying for the knife, the outfit, or laughing at him. Either way, I want whatever he's promising to give.

"At least now we can pretend the blood is a surfing injury." I try really hard to keep a straight face.

He smirks and allows me to drag him from the hut, locking the door behind him. Then, like a pair of naughty teenagers, we race towards the hotel. I get a case of the giggles as we go, and although Baxter Branson would never do anything so uncouth as giggling, he does seem to share my amusement.

The second the elevator doors close, he pins me to the mirrored wall and has his hands up and under the oversized hoodie. He skims the flesh of my thighs, gripping my hips and kissing my neck. My eyes flutter closed as worries about being caught wash away with every pass of his lips.

I can't tell if the ride takes seconds or hours, but by the time it pings our arrival, I'm a molten mess of need and want. All he's done is kiss my neck and hold my hips and I feel like it's my first time all over again. The anticipation is making my skin tingle and my heart is racing so fast it's stuttering.

"This isn't our suite," I say when my eyes, brain and mouth manage to start working together and I notice that the elevator hasn't stopped on our floor. I'm not looking at the plush corridor that houses our suite and only one other, I'm staring at a sumptuous sitting room which can only mean we're in the penthouse.

"What are we doing here?" I whisper-hiss, scared that we're breaking and entering and going to be caught by its occupants any minute.

“Relax.” Baxter sniggers, tugging me from the lift and into the massive open space. “It’s mine.”

“You rented the penthouse even though we have a suite downstairs?” That makes no sense.

“Not exactly.”

It hits me.

“Oh god, you own it don’t you? This suite.” He smirks. “The whole damn hotel?” His grin gets wider. “Why in the name of all that’s holy, if you own a freaking hotel with a penthouse, do you have us slumming it downstairs in a regular suite?”

A rare laugh slips from his lips, genuine, dark and sexily unexpected as hell. We are absolutely not slumming it in our suite downstairs. It’s the most luxurious place I’ve ever laid eyes on – his grandfather’s island included. Or it was, until I saw this place.

“Do you want to stand around admiring the marble, or the quarter of a million pound a night view, or do you want to see the damn bedroom?”

“There’s only one bedroom?” I tease.

“Get. In. There,” he growls, pointing to a door on his right. I smirk and attempt to saunter over to it seductively, but it’s tricky as shit to be sexy in a knee length hoodie.

I pull it over my head and discard it on the floor, putting an extra little sway in my step as I continue.

“Cute,” Baxter calls out after me. Not a word I thought I’d ever hear fall from his lips. I push open the door and frown when I see he’s directed me to a bathroom. Okay, not what I was expecting.

“You didn’t think I’d fuck you smelling like another man did you?” His low voice in my ear takes me by surprise. “Wash.”

I stumble into the huge walk-in shower and turn on the dial. Hot water instantly pours down on me from the huge rainforest showerhead set in the ceiling. I close my eyes, tilt

back my head and let it spill over me, washing away the traces of salt and sand and sweat and blood. A moment later, soothing classical music begins to pour from the built in speakers.

I open my eyes as Baxter joins me, the bandage removed from his thigh, a new blade in his hand. The heat from the shower has opened up the wound and it's slowly seeping again.

"You're going to bleed everywhere," I warn him.

"Good." He kisses me and presses the small dagger into my hand. "Do it again."

I don't even know why his demanding plea gets me hot, but I drag the blade lightly along his skin while we make out in the shower.

"Tease," he murmurs. "I liked that thing you did with my nipple."

"Sucking it?" My brow wrinkles in confusion.

"Sucking, biting, licking, flicking...it got me wondering if it just felt good because of the ring of metal through it, or if it feels good normally too." I open my mouth to reply but he cuts me off. "Let's see, shall we?"

His head descends to my nipple and the second his teeth – his freaking teeth! – clamp around it, my knees buckle. His heated gaze and scorching smirk don't help matters.

"Oh, shut up," I mutter.

He doesn't let up though, alternating between both breasts, sucking and biting on my nipples until my fists are clenched and my knuckles have turned white where I'm gripping the knife so hard. I'm panting, my legs like jelly, and I'm ready for more. "Baxter—"

"Fuck. Say it again." He grins at me wickedly.

"What?"

"My name."

"Baxter?"

“No not like that.”

“Like what then?”

“The way you say it when I do this.” He bites me again and I cry out his name. “Yeah like that. It’s fucking heaven.”

Suddenly the soothing track fades and is replaced by the loud, brash, opening bars of ‘Something in Your Mouth’. Baxter jerks away with a curse.

“What the fuck is this?!” he growls.

“It’s Nickleback. Surely you know that, it’s your playlist isn’t it?”

“No. This is not something I’d listen to.” He frowns, cocking his head to one side as he listens to the lyrics. I laugh.

“Well, I like it.”

“You do?”

“I do.” I pull him towards me and kiss him, scraping the blade against his bicep with a little more force than before. His dick jumps to attention, knocking into my thigh and I smile against his lips. Using my free hand, I wrap it around the base of his cock and slowly work him up and down in time to our kiss.

The song soon changes to ‘Believer’ by Imagine Dragons and Baxter breaks away with a growl once again.

“Shh, listen. You’ll like this one,” I tell him.

Before he can protest or stop me, I push him back against the tiles and drop to my knees. The brunt of the water hits my arched back as I take him between my lips and work him with my hand. He hisses out a breath and when I look up at him through my lashes, he’s watching me intently. I maintain eye contact and take him a little deeper, the weeping wound on his thigh filling my head with the scent of blood.

Inpatient fingers tangle in my hair and I prepare myself to be yanked to my feet, but he surprises me by pushing me deeper, which really puts a strain on my jaw. He hits the back of my mouth. I cough.

“Fuck, that’s a sexy sound.”

Heat flares through me. I take my hand from the base of his shaft and grip his thighs instead, my blade free fingers digging into the cut on his leg. His dick swells and precum oozes from the tip.

“Umm, that hurts real good.”

I dig a little harder and push myself a little deeper, swallowing as much of him as I can.

“You have such a pretty little mouth. I’ve wanted to fuck it for so long.”

He swipes his hand through the blood that’s now flowing freely down his leg before dragging it across my face.

“Fuck. This is how I’ve imagined you so many times. Painted red with blood. But this is better than any fantasy because it’s not your blood, it’s mine, and I didn’t have to hurt you to get it.”

He pulls me to my feet and kisses me deeply, spinning me around until my back is pressed against the cold tiles. I yelp, and he chuckles.

Pulling away from my lips, he dips his fingers into his wound once more before painting patterns all over my flesh. His touch is electric and sensuous, awakening and arousing. I’m a panting mess, trembling at the lightest brush of his fingers, and he hasn’t even touched me there yet. He takes the knife from my hand and presses it against his palm until a deep well of blood appears. Smiling, he cups my face, my breasts, my pussy. Holy fuck it shouldn’t turn me on but it does.

“Bax—”

He drops to his knees, silencing whatever plea I was about to give, then takes a moment to dance his finger across my lower abdomen. When I glance down I see he’s written ‘mine’ in blood.

“It’s the best kind of claiming. Written in blood. There’s no take backs now.”

This time he doesn't play with his prey. He leans right in, running his nose up my seam and inhales. Fuck. My eyes widen in shock but flutter closed the second his tongue snakes out to lick the entire length of my opening. He repeats the motion, two, three, four times using the flat of his tongue.

"You taste like the worst kind of sin." He pulls back to grin at me. I'm pretty sure that's Baxter's way of complimenting me but I'm distracted by the gleam in his eyes and the blood around his mouth that paints him like the psycho he thinks he is.

He's never looked hotter.

'Radioactive' begins to play. I don't know how many songs I've missed but the beat of this one just works. I groan and tilt my head back under the shower spray while Baxter eats me like I'm his final meal on earth, savouring every mouthful until I'm struggling to stand.

There's something I have to do.

"Baxter," I pant. "The knife, please."

He passes it to me, obviously expecting me to cut him again. Instead I move the blade to the inside of my thigh, where the scars I don't like to think about are.

"Make them yours." I don't know if I'm begging or commanding, but he takes the knife from my grip and presses it against the biggest scar.

"Just this one," he promises, kissing the ugly jagged flesh.

"All of them." I'm definitely begging now, a sudden compulsion taking over me, needing to remove every mark on my body caused by dissent and replace it with consensual pain, a permanent mark that will brand me as his.

"I will. Each time I touch you, it will be my honour to remove your suffering and replace it with pain. One mark, one scar, one cut at a time. Until your body is a canvas of our love."

He presses the blade against my skin and the pressure builds until it breaks. The release is cathartic and arousing.

Baxter lets the knife clatter to the tiles and laps at the new cut he's branding me with before turning his attention back to my pussy.

My own release is just out of reach. He's way too good at what he does. If he's torturing me with pleasure, I can only imagine what he's capable of with pain. It is his forte after all.

"Please—"

"You're not coming until I'm deep inside you."

"Then get inside me!" I snap impatiently.

"I thought you'd never ask."

He gets to his feet and grins maniacally at me. Maybe it's not crazed, but with the blood and excitement in his eyes, it seems that way to me. He's a painted devil and I love it. I love him.

He hooks my uninjured leg over his hip and grinds against my bloody leg. Pain radiates out from the cut in waves, making me hiss but that doesn't stop Baxter. He lines himself up at my entrance and enters me fully with one sharp thrust that emanates the way he wields his blades.

'Sucker for Pain' plays in the background. Maybe this could be Baxter's anthem. Maybe it's mine.

I glance down and see that he's painted his dick with my blood. Seems fair, as I'm covered in his, but it still makes me laugh.

"Sorry!" I gasp but Baxter just grins at me, not breaking his rhythm.

"If you're not laughing, sobbing or screaming during sex, are you even doing it right?"

I don't know what to say to that, but I guess he has a point. He wraps his arm under my other leg and lifts me so that I have no choice but to wrap both legs around his waist. My back burns against the rough tiles but I love it: From this angle he hits that perfect spot inside me and all my muscles clamp down around him. I sink my teeth into his shoulder and watch the pink tinged water pooling around the drain.

“Fuck!” I yell when he bites me back, the sharp sting making my pussy clench. I rake my nails down his back in retaliation but he gives me a psychopath smile and dares me to be rougher. If only I could. This position gives me limited movement but I don’t want to move, not when, with every bounce on his dick, he hits my G spot and I grit my teeth against the orgasm that threatens.

Damn, he’s good. A moment ago he had me begging to come, and now I don’t want to. I don’t want it to end. But the water’s getting cold. I guess even a quarter of a million pounds a night doesn’t buy you never ending hot water.

“Knife,” I gasp, suspecting what he might need to reach his climax.

Instead of pulling out to pick it up, he lowers me down onto the floor of the shower and reaches for it without breaking stride...thrust? Whatever. Guy’s got strength and stamina.

He passes me the knife and I raise it, blade upward, pointing to his chest. He leans into me, sandwiching it between us, and the distance closes as the blade sinks into his skin. With a cry my orgasm triggers, and I feel him lose control a moment later.

With a curse he pulls the blade free and throws it away, kissing me passionately while his cock still throbs inside me. I feel boneless, liquified, unable to move. Panting, we remain where we are until we can catch our breath, but eventually he pulls free. I wince.

I’m kind of sore all over now but there’s no way I’m complaining. Instead, I carefully get to my feet and grab a towel while Baxter shuts off the water. He also kills the music which was playing a rather awesome Kaleo track that I love. I turn to him and grin.

“If you liked blood play all you had to do was say so,” I tease. “But I think I’ve just proven that I can handle sex with you.”

“Oh Raven, we’re just getting started.”

Did they ever #TrackDownTilly?

Yes and no, it would seem dear readers. It's no secret that there's a list of qualities preferred in a missing victim in order for them to be found. Being wealthy, a woman, and attractive certainly helps. I'm sure you all know the other criteria on the list, but we won't get into that today.

No, today's blog is all about Tilly Who. I say this because, to be honest, no one even remembers her name, but for a short period last year the #TrackDownTilly hashtag was trending hard. Admittedly, the media frenzy for the blonde chick lasted a little longer than the average reader's attention span, but even being wealthy and pretty only buys you screen time for so long. The hashtag lives on though, with many a meme spurned from an apathetic society whose only interest is making Tilly hashtags hotter than #ByeFelicia or #Fetch.

So where did Tilly what's-her-face disappear to, and did she ever turn up? Do we even care? Apparently someone does because they paid me an obscene amount of money to investigate.

Here's the facts:

- *Tilly allegedly disappears/vanishes, cutting all contact with friends*
- *Concerned friend raises the alarm and an investigation is launched when Tilly's husband – super wealthy, super successful, super high profile, super boring financial guy – confirms that he hasn't spoken to her in a while. (Which is pretty vague if you ask me!)*
- *Also, if you ask me, the husband is always guilty too but I'm not claiming she's dead or anything crazy like*

that so hold your horses, readers.

- *Media whips the world into a frenzy, and suddenly Tilly finds herself slap bang in the middle of the world's biggest game of Where's Wally (or Where's Waldo for all my across the pond subscribers – hi, we love you, corn dogs rule!) Unfortunately, the game dies out faster than fidget spinners (remember those? No? Well let's just say her popularity declined quicker than that of a certain disgraced Royal).*

Now here's the bit that wasn't reported in the mainstream media: reports show that Tilly made contact with her husband several times while she was purported to be 'missing'. She was allegedly staying at a 'spa' though there have been claims that she was actually at a private mental health facility. Which is an excellent defence against her husband's claims that he was filing for divorce due to the abuse his son suffered while in Tilly's care.

Now obviously if that had made mainstream media, the outcome of this blog would have been very different. No one would be trying to #TrackDownTilly because they gave a flying fuck about her. But she might just have the entire world hunting for her, baying for her blood. After all, there's nothing we love more than a witch hunt, right?

And so the 'sorry' tale ends with Tilly allegedly agreeing to walk away from the marriage with nothing, in exchange for a one-way plane ticket to a new life and her soon-to-be ex-husband agreeing to drop the charges of child abuse against her.

Instead, he should probably focus on getting his son some much needed therapy.

Dude, next time you look for a wife, choose better.



CHAPTER TWENTY - SEVEN

Thorn

I'm weirdly enjoying this holiday. I mean, obviously it's great because I get to see Raven in a bikini and a hell of a lot less clothes than I would have back home in Edinburgh...Ugh. I can't believe I'm thinking of that place as home now.

I've decided that I love Baxter fucking Branson. The guy's a goddamn legend. Not only because he's clearly fucking Ironman or Batman or shit, but because he's literally richer than God. He's got us all a suite at the most prestigious hotel in the world. It's so prestigious it doesn't officially exist. Mind. Blown.

I get a massive super king size bed to myself and I swear I need to get one at home. It's practically orgy sized. Not that I've been having any orgies, or even any sex in this bed. Not for want of trying, but Phoenix is exhausting. Our days are filled with sightseeing, or day trips to water parks. Even our quiet days at the beach or by the pool are action packed and full of laughter. I'm not complaining, I just feel like I need a holiday to recover from this one. Phoenix is great fun, I'd just like to have enough energy at the end of the day to have fun with her mum too.

The weird thing is that I really don't mind spending time with Phoenix or that Raven splits her time between the five of us. Six, if you count Nix. I thought I'd be more jealous – I certainly would have been in the past – but I just feel...happy. Like this is where I'm meant to be.

I guess we need to sit down and have a talk about what the plan is when all the drama is over and Raven graduates. I'd prefer somewhere a lot less rainy and much warmer. I miss the sea and the unique blend of peace and exhilaration that I get when I ride the waves.

Actually, it's pretty early so I might make the most of that and go out now for an early surf. No one is awake yet anyway if the quiet apartment is anything to go by.

I climb out of bed and pull on yesterday's shirt and shorts. Not much point showering before I get wet, I'll need to rinse the salt water off afterwards anyway. I grab a pastry as I walk past the kitchenette and then shoulder my wet bag by the front door. I'm just debating leaving a note in case the others do wake up when I'm interrupted.

"Thor? Did you see mummy?"

"Hey Nix." I turn and give her a warm smile I don't have to fake. Seeing her genuinely makes me happy. "You're up early, trouble, what's up?"

"I had a bad dream and I can't find Mummy."

Shit. I guess Raven and Baxter didn't make it home last night then. Or they did, but only as far as his bedroom, not hers.

"I think she's..." I have no idea what to say, so I opt for distraction as the best tactic. "Want to hang out with me?"

"Yeah!" Her grin is infectious, her bad dream forgotten. Should I mention it? Ask her about it? Or is it better to let it go if she's moved on? Parenting is hard. Even with four other guys to help me, I constantly feel like I'm fucking it up.

"Do you want some breakfast?" I offer.

"Pancakes?" she asks hopefully. I pull a face.

"Ace makes the best pancakes. I don't really cook all that much."

"Okay."

"I make a mean cereal cocktail though, wanna try that?"

"Yeah!" She grins at me and skips into the kitchen to grab a bowl. I follow and empty the cupboard of all the different cereals I can find.

"Right, it's dead simple, just stick your hand in the box—"

Nix gasps.

"What?"

"I'm not allowed."

“You are today,” I tell her firmly. “Stick your hand in, grab a small handful of the cereal and add it to your bowl. Then move on to the next one and don’t stop until you have a little bit of each one you fancy.” I demonstrate to her with my own bowl of cereal and after watching me for a moment, she joins in. Soon we’re sitting together on the sofa, quietly munching our cereal.

“Were you going somewhere?” Nix asks me.

“I was going to go to the beach for a surf,” I tell her.

“Can we?!” She bounces in excitement, spilling a little milk on the chair. “Ooops.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just a drop of milk. You really love the beach, huh?” She nods. I smile. Just like her mum. Just like me. “Okay. I guess we could go, but I’m not taking you surfing without your mum’s permission.”

“Oh!” she pouts and I chuckle.

“But—”

“Yay!”

I laugh. “We can try skimboarding.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll see. If you’ve finished your breakfast go and get ready.”

“Okay!” She dumps her almost empty bowl in my lap, spilling even more milk, and races off to her room. I scribble a note for the others to say what I’m doing. A few moments later, she reappears. “Ready!”

“Nix? You’re still in your PJs.”

“No. These are shorts.”

“But you wore them to bed. You have milk dribbles on them,” I point out, even though I’m hardly one to talk as my crotch area now looks like I had an accident myself. “Hang on. I’ll just change and then I’ll help you.”

Ugh. Parenting is really hard. I have to get her dressed? At what age can she start doing that stuff for herself? Thank god I've not had to wipe her arse yet. I don't think I could do it.

I pull off my dirty shirt and shorts, rummaging through the case I didn't bother to unpack for replacements. I select some dark blue board shorts and a light blue tee that's not too creased, along with a hoodie, then head to Nix's room.

Of course all of her clothes are neatly folded in her drawers, no doubt by Raven or Ace. He's always fussing over Nix, a natural father figure. I'm way more awkward about the whole thing. But the beach I can do.

"Here put these on," I tell her, chucking a swimming costume, a light pink tee and some darker pink shorts down on the bed. There's so much damn pink I don't know if it'll go or clash or whatever, but I figure we're only going to be messing in the sand and shallows anyway so it doesn't matter.

At the last minute I spy a tiny little hoodie that matches mine hanging on the back of her bedroom door and I snag that up too, oddly pleased that our styles match today, though I can't say why.

It's not so early that the beach is deserted, but it's certainly quieter than any other time we've visited. We quickly stop at the beach hut we've rented to stash our stuff, and to allow me to grab a skimboard. I'm glad Jax suggested the little hut now. It seemed stupid at first because we're not staying too far from the beach, but it's nice not to have to lug all the surfing gear home every night.

When I open the door I quickly slam it again.

"What's wrong?" Nix asks.

"Nothing." Shit shit shit. It looks like a fucking massacre in there. There's no way I can let Nix see. "Why don't you sit there and take your shoes off?"

She smiles happily and complies, so I quickly slip through the door to stash our things and grab the board. It honestly looks like a murder's taken place in here, only I'm pretty sure that both Raven and Baxter would kill someone with far less mess. Which can only mean...kinky son of a bitch.

I pull out my mobile and text Jax, asking him to send a cleanup crew down here before we get back. He'll deal with it. No doubt Baxter normally would but I guess he's otherwise distracted right now. My eyes quickly flit to the mezzanine, worried that they might be up there, but it's undisturbed. I wonder where they went.

"Thorn?" The door handle begins to turn and I dive for it, slamming my weight against it to prevent Nix from being scarred for life.

"Coming!"

I slip through the door once more, grateful that Phoenix is already distracted, and we head off down the beach together.

Phoenix seems to love the beach quieter like this as much as I do, racing ahead and zig zagging through the sand like it's her own personal playground. I snap a couple of pictures on my phone, knowing Raven will love seeing them later, and I follow her to the water, glad that the tide isn't too far out yet so her little legs don't get tired. Though of course, I'd carry her if they did. When we reach the water's edge I show the skim board to Phoenix.

"It's like a tiny surfboard, but we just ride this shallow water here," I tell her. "I'll show you."

I run a few paces with the board at my hip, dropping it down into the sand just in front of me and hopping on after one step. The board slides easily on the sand carrying me forward from the rhythm of my run. Phoenix squeals with delight.

"Do you wanna try?"

"Yeah!" she cries, clapping her hands together.

"Okay, come here."

I lift her into my arms and hold the board one handed this time. I repeat the action, running with Nix and jumping onto the board smoothly. She squeals with pure joy and begs me to do it again. After half a dozen runs, I tell her we can try it in the water now.

That's even more fun because the ocean lets the board travel even further than the sand. Phoenix laughs every step of the way.

I complete another one step move with Nix in my arms, but this time when my feet hit the board I drop her down to stand between my legs so that she's skimming herself.

"Again!" she begs. Like I could refuse her anything with her cheeks flushed, her hair windswept and her eyes alight with joy.

"Wanna go on your own?" I ask with a wink after a few more goes.

She's so keen that we move onto that, me jogging beside her with the board and throwing it down for her to hop on. I run beside her the entire time, holding her hand and helping her balance. Eventually Phoenix works up the courage to try it on her own, but I still run alongside her just in case. She's wobbly jumping onto the board, and falls onto her bum a couple of times, but she always laughs, and gets back up wanting another go. I snap pictures the whole time and even get a little video of her doing it on her own before she falls.

It's like the damn thing happens in slow motion. Thankfully my phone is stashed in the pocket of my board shorts and not in my damn hand so I'm able to catch her. Sort of. The board catches my ankle and we both tumble into the sea, Phoenix landing with a painful cry that strikes true fear into my heart.

I've only ever felt like this twice before. When I went back into the fire for Raven, and when we thought her sister's body had washed ashore.

"Nix, are you okay?"

I go to pick her up and she screams in pain, making my hands drop to my sides. And then I run them through my hair. Shit what do I do?

“I want my mummy!” She sobs.

“Yeah, right, okay, yeah...”

I pull out my phone and ring Raven. It goes to voicemail. I try Baxter. They’re obviously still together. Voicemail.

In a panic I start to dial Jax but Nix shifts and cries again.

“Fuck!”

“Bad word!”

I dial for an ambulance making an absolute mess of the call. Somehow they understand what I’m trying to say and tell me that they’re on their way.

Unsure what to do, I decide to lift Nix into my arms. I hadn’t noticed while we were playing but the tide has slipped a lot further out and now the slipway down onto the beach seems miles away. The sand is too soft to get an ambulance down so I need to take her to them.

As gently as I can I lift Nix into my arms. She cradles her arm – the one she hurt in Cordelia’s care – to her chest. Big wet tears roll down her face.

“I’m so sorry, little one. Let’s get that arm looked at okay?”

She nods at me, her bottom lip wobbling still as she tries to quiet her tears.

“If it hurts, you go ahead and cry. Scream if you have to. I won’t even fine you if you say bad words.”

She gives me a watery smile at that.

To distract her, I tell her stories of stupid shit I did when I was younger, and although she stills gives the occasional hiccupping sob, she does manage a few weak giggles.

In no time at all we’re passing the beach hut so I grab our hoodies and the beach bag on the way past. It’s barely two

strides out of my way and I doubt it causes any delay. With intense care I wrap my hoodie around Nix to keep her warm and toss her pink mini version in the bag over my shoulder.

“Is Mummy coming?” she asks in a small voice.

“I’ll call her in the ambulance. She’ll meet us there.”

We arrive at the same time as the ambulance and it makes me glad I carried her to the car park. We climb into the back and I do my best to answer their questions. As soon the doors close and we pull away, I take out my phone, rattling off a message on the group chat and hitting dial on another call to Raven.

As it rings this time I silently pray that she doesn’t hate me – or kick my ass – for hurting her baby.

Unknown number: Prejeti paket¹.

Ace: Dobro². Uživajte³.



CHAPTER TWENTY - EIGHT

Raven

The hospital is tiny. It's so unlike what I'm used to in Edinburgh that I sort of do a double take. I mean, there's not even a separate entrance for Accident and Emergency.

I race to the main reception desk, hurriedly giving my details and asking to see Phoenix. The receptionist is lovely, clearly reading my panic and takes me through Triage and back to the A & E beds. In the end bay, lying on a trolley so big that she looks to be drowning in white sheets, is my baby. A sob breaks free from my throat and I race towards her as my knees threaten to give way.

Guilt consumes me. How the hell could I let something happen to my baby? Especially considering I'd abandoned her for a hook up. I shouldn't have left her overnight. The afternoon and even the evening were more than enough. But being with Baxter turned out to be the most intoxicating drug. One hit and I was addicted.

"Phoenix!" I cry, throwing my arms around her. She screams in pain and I leap back like I've been shot. "What's wrong baby?"

"My arm," she sobs, huge glistening tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry baby, what happened?"

"We were skim boarding and she fell. I don't think it's broken but it's her bad arm so I brought her in to get it checked," Thorn says from the chair in the corner. I didn't even see him.

Dread creeps up my spine, and fear wraps its fingers around my throat and squeezes. They could take her away from me for this.

I push those feelings down. Phoenix being okay is my priority right now. Everything else can wait and we can fight that battle when it comes to it.

“Th-thank you,” I stammer out. It’s okay. She will be okay. I will not lose my daughter over an accident. I keep repeating it until I almost believe it.

“You shouldn’t be thanking me. You should be screaming at me. You left her with me and she got hurt.”

“She’s a kid. They do this crazy sh— stuff all the time. Nix always keeps me on my toes.”

When I got the call to say she was in the hospital, I felt so sick with worry. And yes, I was angry at Thorn too. Though it was misplaced anger at myself for not being there.

Seeing that she’s okay, all of my anger leaves me and all that’s left is crippling, crushing guilt.

I shower Nix with kisses, fussing over and plumping up her pillows. She’s okay and that’s all that matters.

“You should hate me,” he says dejectedly. I turn and stare at Thorn, noticing the way he looks ragged and exhausted.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my brow crinkling with concern. He doesn’t look too good himself.

“Yep. Tried to catch her and we both went down.” He grimaces. “Landed funny. It’s fine.”

“Have you been checked out?”

“Hell no. I wasn’t leaving Nix’s side.”

“Well, I’m here now. I think we should get you checked out.”

“I’ll get seen to when I know she’s okay.”

I shake my head at how stubborn he’s being, but I like the way he’s protective of Nix. The two of them have become so close. I can’t blame him for not wanting to leave her side. I’d be the same. He leaves to go to the toilet and stretch his legs, offering to bring back drinks. Some sugar wouldn’t be a bad shout right now actually. I feel a little woozy.

I turn my attention back to Phoenix, back to fussing over her. I get her a drink, plump up her pillows again, pull up the blanket, carefully cuddle her. I know she must be hurting

because she lets me do it all without complaint. She's a little subdued but chats about what a wonderful day she was having at the beach before the accident. It makes me smile in spite of her pain and I'm glad that getting hurt hasn't ruined her memories of a good day.

The nurse comes in and I move to Thorn's empty seat to give her space to work. Phoenix smiles at her.

"Mummy?"

"Yes baby?"

"She looks like you!"

I laugh because the nurse in question has her back to me, but I can see that she has white-blonde hair, pinned up in a neat chignon, and couldn't possibly look like me.

"I think she looks more like you, baby," I reply with a smile at my golden beauty.

"Like Aunty Lizzie."

My smile turns tight as pain lances through my chest. It used to be like that for me too; always seeing her face wherever I went, picking out flashes in a crowd. Phoenix has always been obsessed with the idea of family, probably because it was just the two of us for so long, and so I don't blame her for looking for Lizzie in unlikely places. She's besotted with the photos of Lizzie we kept in the house. But in those pictures Lizzie was a teenager and this nurse must be in her twenties now at least. There's no way there's any resemblance beside white-blonde hair.

Besides, how much does a child really understand about death and heaven? No matter how intelligent and advanced they appear to be. I shake my head sadly, unsure what to say.

Instead, I watch as the nurse interacts with Phoenix, taking her blood pressure and temperature, and Nix beams at her the entire time. The nurse is really good with her, which settles my racing heart a little. When she turns her head a little towards me, my heart catches because she does look like Lizzie. Or at least, how I would imagine Lizzie to look now if she were

alive. A little like me, only paler. It's the bright green eyes that do it. And maybe the curve of her lips. I shake my head.

"T-thank you," I stammer, doing a double take and ordering my racing heart to calm down. She's just another face in the crowd. A coincidence. A doppelgänger at best. "I didn't catch your name."

"It's Beth." She gives me a warm and friendly smile which lights up her entire face. Just like Lizzie's used to. She's completely oblivious to the way my body has tensed at the sight of her. I know the colour has drained from my face, even as I tell myself her name's Beth, not Lizzie. But Lizzie was short for Elizabeth. It's just the shock and emotion of the day messing with my head. Possibly blood loss and exhaustion. Baxter does like to play with blades a lot, and there wasn't much sleep.

"I'll be back soon to take Phoenix for her x-ray. I'm really sorry but because the hospital is so small, we can't really allow chaperones to go with her, but I promise I'll take good care of her. Is that okay, Phoenix?"

"Yep!" Nix beams at the nurse, clearly very taken with her. And I can understand why. She exudes an air of calm and a warmth that's as inviting as a hug on a cold day. I want to spend more time in her presence, even as her uncanny appearance throws me into turmoil.

I can't help but stare as she leaves before turning back to Nix.

"I'm bored Mummy," she says on a yawn.

"Do you want to have a little sleep?" I offer.

"Okay," she agrees, yawning again. I tuck her in and kiss her forehead, pulling the chair over to her bedside so that I can stroke her hair while she drifts off.

"Whoa did you see that nurse?" Thorn asks loudly, coming back to our booth not long after Nix has dropped off to sleep.

"Shh. Yes I did," I whisper, nodding at the sleeping beauty in the bed.

“Shit! Sorry!” He drops his voice to a whisper to match mine. “Nix has been going on and on about her since we got here. She thinks she looks like you.”

“I know. She just told me. But now she thinks she looks like Lizzie because of the hair colour.”

Thorn blanches.

“I know. Crazy, right?”

I force out a chuckle despite my tight chest as he passes me a bottle of Coke. Grateful, I take it and pop the lid before taking a big glut.

“She has a point,” Thorn says, contemplatively, sipping his own bottle of Coke.

“Hush. Lizzie’s dead. Don’t go getting her hopes up. I used to see her face everywhere too.”

“Like us with you.” He smiles sadly.

“What do you mean?”

“When you vanished, Rebel wasn’t the only one seeing your face in a crowd. We all did. I just gave up looking sooner than he did.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I’m glad Rebel was too stubborn to give up.”

“Me too.” I smile softly. “It’s hard, isn’t it? But I think it’s worth fighting for.”

“Absolutely. I’m all in. If I didn’t say it already.” He grins at me.

“You might have mentioned it once or twice.” I smile back and he hugs me. I allow myself thirty seconds to relax in his arms before pulling away. Any longer and I might crumble.

My phone buzzes and I see it’s a message from the others to say they’re waiting outside. There’s no way they’ll all be allowed back here though.

“Thorn, can you go and see the others?”

“Of course, princess,” he agrees.

“Get yourself looked at too while you’re out there please.”

“As you asked so nicely.”

He kisses the top of my head and wanders off, leaving me to guess who will be first through the doors to check on Phoenix. I can just imagine Rebel and Ace fighting but it’s Baxter who shocks me by coming through first.

“Is she okay?” he asks quietly, standing beside me and squeezing my shoulder gently.

“Yeah. We’re just waiting for an x-ray.”

“Are you okay?” He turns my gaze away from Nix’s sleeping form so that I’m forced to look at him. His dark eyes bore into mine and my walls crumble. A sob escapes me.

Pulling me to my feet, Baxter wraps me in his arms and I breathe in his intoxicating scent. It never ceases to amaze me that he gave up smoking when I was pregnant with Phoenix, and even though he never restarted it, the smell still lingers after all this time. It’s a nostalgic smell, and I secretly love it, even though I hate smoking.

“I’m just worried...” I whisper.

“Shh, I know. I promise it’ll be fine. Nothing bad will happen because of this. I’ll kill her first, if I have to.”

“I feel so guilty! I should have been there!”

“Even if you were, she would still have been skimboarding with Thorn, and she’d still have fallen and hurt herself. Don’t beat yourself up.”

There’s something so soothing about his voice that I find myself melting into him and nodding along. He could promise me anything and I think I would believe him at this point. He’s never let me down.

“Oh sorry,” a voice says, interrupting our embrace. “I’ve come to take Phoenix for her x-ray.”

Baxter’s arms tighten around me and he turns to stone. I glance up and see his face is taut, his eyes icy daggers upon

the nurse. I giggle and dig him in the ribs a little to get him to loosen up. It's not that big a deal that she interrupted us.

“Oh no, she's asleep. Do you want me to come back later? Or I can still take her down if you'd like?”

“Sorry, it's fine,” I say with a warm smile. “She sleeps like the dead so she probably won't even wake while you do it.”

“Brilliant. Let's do this then, and get you guys home sooner.”

She removes the brakes on Nix's trolley and pulls the bed out into the corridor where a porter is waiting to help her wheel Nix away. My heart catches as I watch them go, but I know that she's in safe hands.

“Do I need to tell Cordelia about this?” I shake with fear at the thought.

“Fuck Cordelia. She doesn't need to know shit right now,” Baxter growls angrily, still staring after Phoenix. “Excuse me, I'm just going to speak to someone.”

Before I can question him, he strides off and I'm left alone once more. There's no point staying here, so I decide to go and find the others. A drink sounds good right about now.

Jožef: Yo, yo, yo, cuz, what's up! Are all the girls in England that fucking hot? Cause if they are you have to convince my mati to let me come 'study' over there with you.

Ace: That one not special.

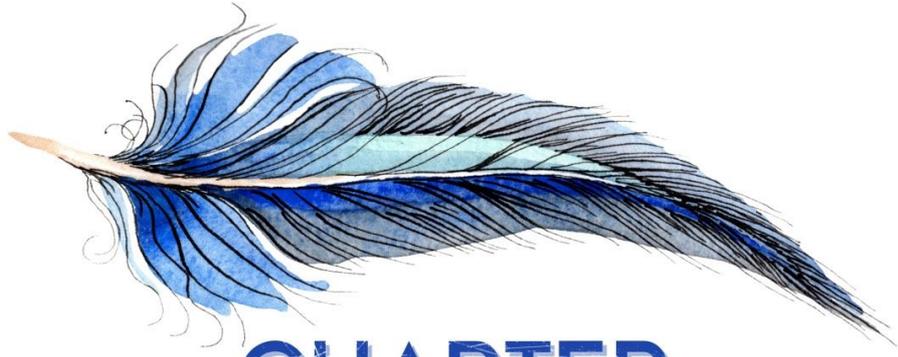
Jožef: Dude, can't you use like a translate app or something? Uncle said your English was still as fucking backward as your brain but I didn't believe him.

Ace: Odjebi¹.

Jožef: I was joking! Jeez, chill out. Anyway, uncle is super impressed with the girl you sent him (me too!) he almost didn't want to sell her because he likes her so much. Maybe even more than Valentina. But he thinks she'll make too much money at auction to justify keeping her as a pet. I'm heartbroken.

Ace: Don't care.

Jožef: He said he'll quadruple the finder's fee if you keep sending them regularly...



CHAPTER TWENTY - NINE

Jax

Raised voices sound from the hallway outside the family room we've been escorted to. We've been here a while now but haven't seen Phoenix yet. They're being assholes about how many people can see her and allegedly we're not family. It's bullshit. Baxter went to join Raven after Thorn popped his head in briefly to say she's okay, before disappearing to get himself checked over. Idiot. I'll kill him if anything serious has happened to Phoenix. I'm almost out of my mind with worry already, so I can't even begin to imagine what Raven's feeling as her mum.

It's astonishing how fast they've both gotten under my skin. I swore I wouldn't go there, that Raven's betrayal was too much to forgive, but it hasn't mattered at all to me since Phoenix was taken away. And right now? I truly couldn't care less. I just need Phoenix to be okay. I need to hold Raven and make sure she's okay too. I want to be the one in there with her, comforting her. Not Baxter.

The voices get louder and I recognise Baxter's dangerous rage. I can't believe he would shout at Raven with everything she's going through right now. Crossing the room, I peek through the slatted blinds to see what's happening, ready to go out and defend her while telling him what I think of his behaviour.

But Baxter isn't shouting at Raven. He's yelling at a nurse who has her back to me. The anger and confusion on Baxter's face is what prompts me to step out into the corridor to join them.

"What's going on, Baxter?" I ask calmly.

"Nothing," he snaps.

"Is Phoenix okay?"

"She's fine. Go wait inside."

"I'll stay, thanks." I raise my brow in challenge. There's no way I'm going to let him boss me around. I'm intrigued now.

Why the hell is he yelling at the nurse? Did she do something wrong? Has she slipped up somehow in Phoenix's care? Anger begins to build in my slowly heating blood.

"Please, you've got it wrong," the nurse begs. She sounds close to tears. I frown. What the hell is going on here? "My name's not Lizzie."

The name makes my head snap towards her. I step past her and turn so that I can see her face more clearly.

Fuck.

My eyes widen.

It's not fucking possible.

No.

I shake my head.

No way.

Pale skin, an angelic white halo of hair, huge bright green doe eyes, currently glistening with tears. She's older, sure, but there's no mistaking who I'm staring at.

"Lizzie?" I blink in disbelief, staring at the ghost girl in front of me.

"No!" She whirls on me with a desperate kind of exasperation. "My name's Beth! I've already told him this. Please, just let me go. I have a job to do. I'm sorry, I can't help you."

She takes a step backwards and without thinking my hand snaps out to grab hers. I turn her palm up to my gaze and look at the jagged scar that runs along her life line.

"This scar." I shake my head. It's her. It's really her.

"A climbing accident," she replies, tugging her hand free.

"Yeah. When you were thirteen."

"No. It's recent." She frowns, running her finger across the silvery scar.

"No. You went climbing with your sister and your father," I say, recalling the story Raven had once told me. It was their

birthday treat and both girls had been looking forward to it. Only, Lizzie had slipped on a wet rock and had cut her left palm, needing stitches. I tell her all of this but the whole time I'm speaking she's denying it.

"No. I'm sorry. I don't have a sister. I don't have any family at all." The nurse shakes her head and steps backwards once more.

"Wait! What did you say your name was?" I cry desperately.

"Beth."

"Elizabeth?"

"Just Beth. It's not short for anything." She shakes her head again, her hands moving to her throat where a small pendant sits just peeking out from her uniform. She clutches it desperately. "Please. I'm really sorry, but I don't know who this person is that you're looking for. But I do know I'm not her."

She squeezes the pendant and then turns and bolts.

"What the fuck?!" I turn to Baxter. He's running his hands through his hair.

"Fuck! I need a smoke."

"I thought you didn't do that anymore?" I frown.

"I don't. And I won't. But that doesn't mean I'm not craving one right now. Fuck!"

"What the hell was all that about?"

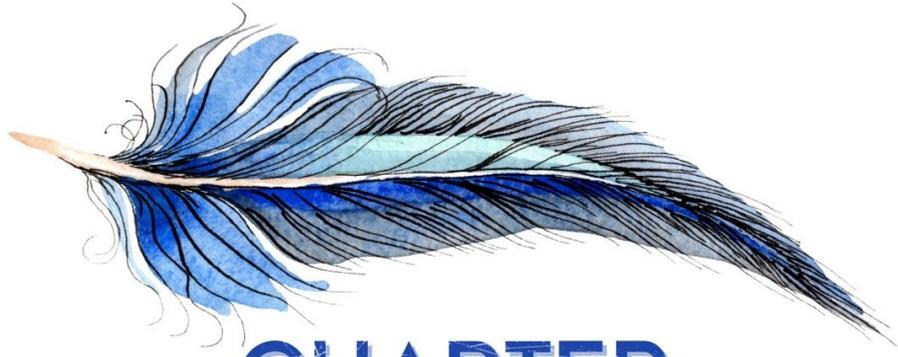
"You saw her, didn't you? I'm not crazy?" He stares at me with desperate eyes. "She looks like Lizzie."

"She doesn't look like Lizzie," I reply, shaking my head. I'm absolutely certain. "She damn well is Lizzie."

Stanislav: My boy tells me you don't care for my very generous offer.

Ace: No. Not interested. One time deal only.

Stanislav: Watch your tone, duncce. Do you forget who cares for your family? There's an auction coming up at the end of the month and one of my girls has had to drop out, with so many sisters to feed you could afford to lose one.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Raven

“I told you she—oh!” It’s a different nurse that returns. My cheeks flush with embarrassment. “Sorry. It was a different nurse who took her away.”

“No worries.” The new nurse with dark hair smiles at me. I feel a little foolish but that ebbs away as I gaze down at my sleeping angel. She’s so perfect and beautiful, I don’t know what I’d do if anything ever happened to her. “We’re actually going to move Phoenix up to the children’s ward now. We have a side room for her. We just called by to collect you.”

“Why? Is she okay? Did the x-ray show something?” Panic floods me once more.

“Nothing to worry about,” the nurse reassures me. “We’re quite quiet today and thought it would be nice if...erm all of Phoenix’s...visitors outside could see her. With your own side room we can bend the rules a little on the number of visitors per bed.” She smiles and winks at me. “We need to wait for the doctor to check the x-ray but I’m sure everything’s fine and you’ll be out of here in no time.”

“Thank you.” I look around the space and see Thorn’s beach bag slung down by his chair, along with his and Nix’s hoodies. I grab them, the bags, and the drinks, then declare we’re good to go. With another bright smile, the nurse beckons me out of the bay and I follow along as they wheel Nix’s bed along the corridor. The hospital is so small that we don’t have to travel far, and within a couple of minutes Nix is being set up in a lovely side room.

“I’ll tell your guests where you are and send them up.”

I thank her again and she leaves. With Nix sleeping so peacefully in her bed, it gives me a minute to think about what happened downstairs with the blonde-haired nurse. It’s crazy how much she looks like the picture I have in my head of Lizzie now. Thorn’s reaction makes me believe that I’m not

going crazy but still, it's shaken me. I guess I haven't seen her ghost for a long time now.

I'm shaken from shadows of the past by a commotion in the corridor, so I slip out of the room and gently close Nix's door behind me. I don't want to wake her.

Of course it's my guys making the noise. They appear to be having an animated discussion.

"What's going on, guys?" I ask calmly. "If this is about Nix, the nurse said we can all go in because it's a side room and the ward's pretty quiet right now."

"It's not that," Thorn replies while Baxter and Jax remain nose to nose in heated debate. "They're arguing over that nurse."

Of course I don't have to ask which nurse he means.

"They see the resemblance too?"

"Resemblance?" Jax snaps, looking away from Baxter and zeroing his dark espresso gaze in on me. I used to think his eyes looked almost black, but next to Baxter's ebony glare, I can see the difference. Still has the power to make me nervous though. Not that I'd let on. "No. There's no resemblance there. That *is* Lizzie."

"You're being absurd," I say gently. "Lizzie's dead."

"They never found the body though, did they?" Rebel says quietly.

It's true. They didn't.

The memory of Michael's taunt haunts me once more, his scathing words cutting open old wounds more painful than anything Baxter could do to me with a knife.

I heard Jax could barely identify her broken body by the time they fished it out of the sea. I guess you had a closed coffin funeral. I watched her you know, from this very spot as the waves bashed her brains out on the rocks down there. It was too dark to see the water turn red with her blood, but I have a good imagination. It got me hard all over again.

I'm racing to the nearest toilet and throwing up before I even register my feet moving. Gentle hands hold my hair back and a strong sense of déjà vu hits me.

"Princesa¹," Ace murmurs gently.

"I'm sorry." For a moment I allow the tears to fall, completely overwhelmed. Ace wraps me in his arms and soothes me wordlessly. "I can't even hear his voice in my head without vomiting."

"Voice?"

"Michael." I hiccup as I try to get my emotions under control. "He taunted me, about Lizzie. I don't know if he knew that her coffin was empty or if he was just trying to mess with my head. My parents had weights put in the coffin so that people wouldn't be able to tell there was no body. They were so ashamed to have a daughter who 'committed suicide'."

"No body?" I shake my head as he asks tentatively. "So... maybe alive?"

"It can't be, Ace. It's just not possible."

"Actually, it is."

Baxter's voice in the doorway makes me leap out of my skin.

"Fuck! Don't sneak around like that!" I snap.

"We need to talk." He sighs. "This is going to suck."

"I go," Ace offers but Baxter shakes his head.

"Come out. It's probably best everyone hears this in one go."

Ace releases me and I quickly rinse my mouth out under the tap. It's not ideal, but it's the best I can do. Then we follow Baxter out of the bathroom to the corridor where the others are waiting in tense silence.

"Are you okay?" Thorn asks when he sees me. I nod.

"Are you?" I ask, blinking. I didn't expect him to be back so soon.

“Absolutely fine. Just a little bruised. Little miss has sharp elbows.” I smile at that, but I’m not entirely sure I believe that he’s been checked out *that* quickly.

Oh well, there’s nothing I can do about it if he doesn’t want to. Thorn may be laid back and easy going most of the time but he has a wicked stubborn streak and I know he won’t be moved on this.

Instead, I turn my attention back to Baxter and raise an expectant brow.

“Do you remember when I went to visit Phoenix?” Baxter asks.

“How could I forget? You brought her home.” I smile tightly. It was the second best day of my life, the best being the day we *legally* gave the finger to Cordelia.

“That day, when I got to the house, Nix and Cordelia weren’t there.”

“Okay?” That’s no big deal. I frown.

“I did some snooping. Silly bitch never moved the spare key after you moved out. I found the safe you told me about and easily opened it. Inside there was a copy of Cordelia’s will.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“In her will, she mentions leaving things to Lizzie.”

“So? Maybe it’s old.” I shrug but my gut is churning.

“It was updated *after* she started the court case with you and it lists Phoenix.”

“I don’t understand...” That makes no sense. The cogs of my brain turn sluggishly.

“Why would Cordelia update her will to include Phoenix and *not* remove her dead granddaughter at that point, unless —”

“Unless she knew Lizzie was still alive!” Rebel busts out excitedly.

“Or at least *suspected* that she might be,” Baxter clarifies. “And you have to have a reason for thinking that.”

“But that could just be wishful thinking. It doesn’t prove anything.” I frown.

“I agree,” Baxter says. “Which is why I called in some favours and some contacts, trying to hunt Lizzie down.”

“And?”

“And they couldn’t find her.”

Disappointment lances through me but I try to shrug it off. I didn’t believe she was still alive. I don’t. I’m *not* getting my hopes up.

So why does it hurt so much?

“But then, I got a cryptic message saying that a holiday can turn up answers to questions or some shit.”

“You—”

“We came here to find something. It’s not a coincidence. We were sent here to discover Lizzie.”

“Why would she lie though?” I ask. A million questions swirl in my brain but that’s the first one out of my mouth.

“I don’t think she is. She was pushed from a cliff and it’s a damn miracle it didn’t kill her,” Jax says, stepping forward to take my hand. “She could have amnesia. She didn’t look like she was lying. I believe her when she says she doesn’t recognise us.”

“But...but...”

I don’t even know what to say. My mind flits to the knowledge that Lizzie was pregnant when she was pushed. If she survived, did the baby? Do I have a little niece or nephew out there somewhere, growing too fast? How much have I missed?

“We have to prove it,” Rebel says.

“But how?” Thorn replies.

“It will be really hard if she has amnesia, especially as Baxter has spooked her already.”

“Like you didn’t help with that?” He snaps back at Jax.

“Ustavi se²!” Ace shouts. It’s so unexpected that we all fall silent and stare at him. He looks...in turmoil. He has the biggest heart and he hates it when we fight.

“We have to find a way to prove that she’s Lizzie. And when we know, we’ll have to convince her.”

“What about a DNA test?” Thorn suggests.

“We can’t exactly walk up to her and say ‘hey, sorry we accused you of being a dead girl but we think you’re mistaken, can we have some of your bodily fluids to prove it, please?’ Can we?” Rebel sniggers.

“Well no,” Thorn counters. “But we could take it by stealth.”

“I’m not stealing her pee. And I don’t even know how you’d get a cheek swab without her noticing.”

“Well, there’s always hair.”

“You wanna go yank her hair out *by stealth*? By my guest.”

“Stop it, the pair of you,” Baxter snaps. “There has to be another way.”

I stare at Baxter as his news slowly sinks in.

“What’s wrong?” he asks me.

“You...knew. You knew and you didn’t tell me.”

“I didn’t *know*.”

“But you suspected. For months. And you didn’t tell me.”

“I—” He pauses in whatever he was going to say, a frown appearing on his face. He seems confused but that just annoys me even more. What is there to be confused about? He lied to me and withheld important information. Important? Ha! Try life changing!

“I thought there weren’t going to be any more secrets or lies.” I glower at him.

“I haven’t lied.”

“You haven’t been honest. You know when you should have told me?”

“As soon as I got back.”

“No.” As my anger builds, so does my voice. “As soon as you opened that document in the safe you should have pulled out your phone and got me on speed dial!”

Just then we’re interrupted by the nurse – the new nurse – returning to us.

“Is she still asleep?” she asks and for a second I’m so wrapped up in everything I know unravelling, that I have no idea who or what she’s talking about. “The wee baby. Is she still resting? I can come back.”

“Oh, sorry. Yes, she is,” I say.

“No worries, I’ll just check in on her real quick and be on my way.”

“Where’s the blonde nurse?” Rebel calls out.

“Beth? She’s on her break but she’ll be back soon,” she says with a smile. “She was smitten with this little girl, saying how charming and sweet she is. I’m a bit disappointed that she’s not been awake for me to meet her.”

I follow the nurse into the room and watch as she checks Nix over. My baby doesn’t even stir with the blood pressure cuff or the thermometer in her ear. She truly sleeps like the dead. Which is probably for the best given the nightmares I used to have. It’s funny how they’ve plagued me a lot less since the guys showed back up in my life.

Finished, the nurse writes on Nix’s chart, coming to stand beside me. I glance over at it and pull a face.

“I don’t know how you understand any of that. It’s like a code or another language.”

“The hardest code to decipher is the doctor’s handwriting!”
The nurse laughs.

Inspiration strikes.

“Do you have some paper and a pen I could use please?”

“Of course. But I’ll wait and have the pen back if you don’t mind. Those things are rarer than gold dust around here.”

I chuckle and accept the items she holds out to me. I quickly scribble a note in the most basic, common cypher that Lizzie and I always used to use. It’s a long shot, but I have to try.

“Thanks,” I say, handing back the precious pen and holding out the note to the nurse. “Would you mind passing this on to the other nurse. Beth, was it?”

“Yes. Of course. Though I’m sure you’ll see her before I do. This place, even when it’s quiet, keeps us on our toes.”

“I’ll bet.”

The nurse glances down at the note in her hand and frowns. She must think I’m crazy, it’s probably just gibberish to her. I just hope she passes it on anyway and doesn’t drop it in the bin.

Phoenix stirs and my attention immediately flies to her, but she settles quickly, still sleeping with a tiny frown between her brows.

The nurse leaves the room with my note still in her hand and I nibble my bottom lip nervously. I wonder how soon she’ll see it. It might not even work. But a feeling in my gut says it *could*.

Ace: Sorry uncle.

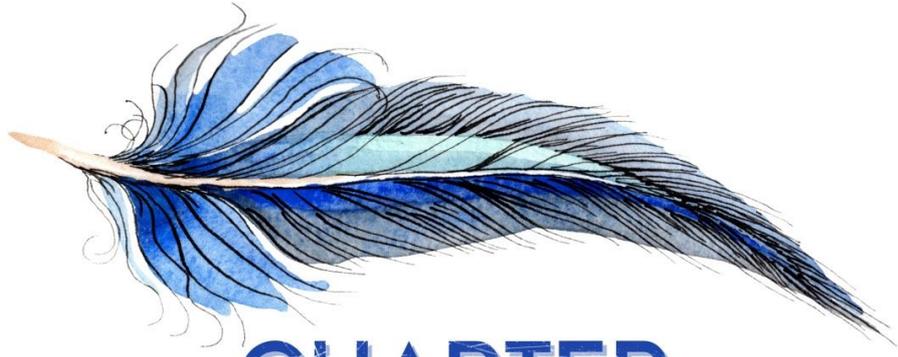
Stanislav: That's more like it. Would you like me to send photos of your sisters to see how well I am taking care of them? Valentina in particular. She's grown so much since you saw her last.

Ace: Not necessary, uncle.

Stanislav: I see being exiled to England hasn't grown you any balls.

Stanislav: I want you to think about my proposal. The girls here, they're boring. It's always the same. My clientele is expanding and they want... something different. If you could keep supplying ones like that girl, I could be persuaded to keep your sisters out of the auction a little while longer.

Stanislav: Even though they're keen to learn.



CHAPTER THIRTY - ONE

Rebel

Jax catches my eye and nods pointedly in the direction that the nurse coming out of Nix's room just went in. Wordlessly we follow, rounding the corner to the nurse's station. We stall a short way from it, Jax pulling us into a shadowy corner out of sight, pretending to have a low, muttered conversation. Obviously Jax wants information, but he needs me to be a conversational ruse. Fine by me. I quietly mumble about my plans for the rest of the holiday, dinner, the weather, any nonsense really and Jax nods along absentmindedly while cocking his head and keeping one ear open for whatever he's looking for.

A couple of moments later his eyes catch on something or someone just over my shoulder and I know that his target has just walked onto the ward. I lower my voice and slow my nonsensical bullshit so that he can concentrate.

Behind me I hear the nurse that was just attending to Phoenix speaking to someone.

"I have this for you, doesn't make any sense to me but I promised to pass it on."

"Oh. Okay," a voice replies. I'm itching to turn round and watch, but Jax glares at me so I keep 'talking'.

"What does it say?"

"It says 'my name is Lizzie and I love my sister'...oh." She sounds dumbfounded.

My eyes fly so wide they're in danger of falling out and I jerk half around before Jax stops me with a hand on my arm. Damn him! Of course he gets the best view for this.

"Does that make sense to you?" The nurse asks.

"No. It doesn't," the Lizzie doppelgänger replies.

"But you can read it. That's not English. I don't even think it's a *language*."

“It’s code. A cypher.” My heart lurches when I hear this. It’s her! It’s really Lizzie. It has to be.

“I didn’t know you were into that sort of thing.”

“I’m not.” More confusion clouds her voice.

“Okay, weird.” The nurse laughs. “I better go and start the drug rounds. I checked on that kid you asked me to, she’s sound asleep but her vitals are fine. She’ll be out of here in no time.”

“Good. Hopefully I won’t have to go in there again.”

“Did they give you trouble?”

“Not really...I’m just a little uncomfortable, I guess.”

“Freaky relationship, right? I wonder what the deal is with them. Ain’t right if you ask me.”

“Mmm...” She laughs nervously.

“Do you think they—”

“Drug rounds?” Lizzie cuts in.

“Okay, okay, spoil all my fun. We can talk about this later.”

Footsteps sound and a moment later the blonde-haired nurse comes into view with a shocked gasp when she sees us. Raven’s clever note is grasped in her fingers still. Clever, clever girl. Of course she’d find a way to test this nurse to figure out if she’s Lizzie without us tackling her to the floor and stealing her DNA.

Lizzie or whatever the fuck her name is squeaks and tries to turn tail and run, but Jax is too quick for her, his arm shooting out to stop her.

“Oh no you don’t,” he hisses.

He’s so angry, and the way he’s looking at her...well, it’s hard to believe he’s the same guy who used to date this girl... oh crap, we all did. And she’s Raven’s sister. This is too weird. Why didn’t I think about how weird this was before now?

Thank fuck we were kids and didn't do shit, I don't think I could get over it.

"Let me go. Please," she begs.

I stare between them. I mean, Jax has a pretty firm grip on her arm but what's he planning to do, in her place of work no less?

"You and I need to have a little chat, *Elizabeth*."

"I told you, my name's Beth. Just Beth, not short for anything!"

I feel like I should step in and say something, but what? And whose side would I even be on? Obviously Jax isn't going to hurt her, but she looks pretty shaken up and if she calls for security and gets us thrown out... I shake my head. I can't let that happen.

"What's going on?" Baxter asks, rounding the corner with Ace and Thorn in tow.

"Where's Raven?" I counter.

"She's in with Phoenix. She's waking up." All of them stare at Lizzie and Jax, who still hasn't let go of her.

"What's going on?"

"Raven wrote a coded note. 'Beth' here can read it," Jax spits. "Care to explain why?"

All eyes fly to her.

"I don't know! Honestly, I've never seen anything like that before in my life. I don't know how I did it, it's freaking me out."

"Where were you born? What's your birthday? Where did you grow up and go to school? What was your first pet called?" Jax fires questions at her relentlessly and she begins to sob.

"I don't know! I'm sorry! I-I-I...excuse me."

Once again she tries to flee but even though Jax lets go of her arm, the others block her way, boxing her in.

She spins round and round on the spot, looking for a way out before her eyes light desperately on me.

“Please—” she begs.

“You better answer our questions,” I shake my head. “Sorry, angel.”

The old term of endearment slips from my lips before it registers and I feel like my feather tattoos are burning a hole right through my chest. She gasps and jerks back away from me. There’s a flash of recognition in her bright green eyes and damn, if I didn’t notice the similarities between the two sisters before.

What the hell was wrong with me?

All of our faces are hard and unreadable but as she studies each of them she must realise that we’re not going to let this go. She begins to tremble and sob even harder, her shoulders hunching as she collapses in on herself. I feel like a sack of shit but I have to stand by my brothers on this.

“Beth?” a male voice calls from nearby. It could be a doctor but the sense of urgency makes me think this is a personal call. “Beth, what’s wrong? I came as soon as I could. You’ve never used the panic button before.”

A man rounds the corner and comes into sight. He’s wearing a long-sleeved black shirt, black slacks and black dress shoes. He would look perfectly respectable – like a consultant or a registrar or something – if it weren’t for the bird of prey tattoo with spread wings spanning his neck and the dangerous gleam in his eye. He also has a gun holstered at his hip and his gaze becomes murderous when he sees the five of us surrounding the sobbing, broken nurse.

“What the hell?” he growls. “What are you doing? Who the fuck are you? Get away from her!”

Giving zero fucks who he’s facing down or the fact that he’s clearly outnumbered and outmuscled, he barges through our box and pulls her into his arms. She bawls and collapses into him, so upset she can’t even speak.

Fuck. I feel like the lowest of the low. I never wanted to upset her like that. I catch Thorn's eye and see the same level of guilt staring back at me. Ace too. Only Jax and Baxter seem remorseless. I shake my head. Of course they are. They're so alike they're either going to be best friends or they'll kill each other.

Baxter turns and glares at the guy, but he just glares right back. He's got bigger balls than me – or a death wish – that's for sure. Baxter leans forward and murmurs something in his ear and the guy flinches infinitesimally. It's almost unnoticeable. Almost.

He turns and strides away with Lizzie still sobbing in his arms.

“Wait here,” Baxter instructs. I expect Jax to argue with him but he doesn't. Which is odd, but not unexpected. Jax is shit at taking orders but I'm pretty sure Baxter would kill anyone who dared to even try to command him. Except maybe Raven. And Nix. He's not exactly soft as shite around them but he's definitely...less stabby.

Although, this clearly concerns Raven right now and Baxter is looking downright demonic as he follows the newcomer down the ward and leaves the rest of us staring in his wake.

Ace: How many?

Stannislav: Good boy. I knew you'd come around to my way of thinking. Let's say...one for each of your sisters.

Stannislav: A week.

Ace: Impossible! You know not possible!

Stanislav: A month then.



CHAPTER THIRTY - TWO

Baxter

“You better explain what the hell is going on,” I growl at the guy in front of me as soon as the office door is closed behind us. He deposited Lizzie in the break room and told her to wait there, before snagging the ward manager’s office for himself.

There’s no mistaking the Celtic knot tattoo on the left side of his neck. The mother fucking Order get everywhere. I grind my teeth to distract me from wanting to gut this guy. Amelie has a lot to fucking answer for if Lizzie has been connected to The Order this entire time and she’s not told me. I don’t believe for a second that she isn’t aware of every single thing that goes down within her organisation. So what’s her game?

“You have the explaining to do.” His voice is low and dangerous. Like I give a fuck. Bring it on. “Why the hell have you upset my girl?”

“Because that girl is a ghost! She’s meant to be dead.” I glower at the guy covered in tattoos. He surprises me by flinching slightly. It’s minute and anyone else might have missed it, but my Order training is still ingrained in me and I’m still one of the best.

“You knew,” I hiss. “Explain right now.”

“Look, that’s my girl out there. All I care about is making sure she’s okay. She pushed her panic button, so I came running. She’s never done that before and she’s been through a lot. So whatever you and your guys out there did, you’ve fucked her up real bad...You’re lucky it was me, if the others had been close by they would have shot first and asked questions later.”

Like I give a fuck about some trigger happy, low on the rung, criminal Order recruits. I briefly wonder about showing him my tattoo, just for the shits and giggles of watching the fear flash through his eyes as he realises who I am, but decide against it. This isn’t an Order power pissing contest, it’s about Raven. And, I guess, it’s about Lizzie too.

Fuck.

Lizzie's alive.

“Well, your ghost girl out there is the dead twin sister of my girl, so excuse us all for being a little shocked and not knowing the best etiquette for dealing with that.” I sigh and scrub a hand over my face. Jesus. What a clusterfuck. He's right of course. Shock aside, our behaviour has been reprehensible. We owe Lizzie an apology at the very least.

What should we do now?

I'm saved from having to make a decision as Raven bursts into the small office room and slams the door shut behind her.

“You better explain what the hell is going on right now!”

Ah, there she is. The girl that stabbed me on the island all those years ago. I don't get to see her very often, but every once in a while I catch a glimpse. Right now, she's magnificent in her rage. Fucking resplendent. It's not aimed at me, and even though I know she's using it as a coping mechanism to mask her surprise, confusion and fear, it's still a blinding thing to witness. My cock stirs to life. I don't give a fuck if the timing is all wrong. She's sexy as hell when she's mad and I'm all kinds of turned on. I wonder if she'd fuck me if I were covered in this asshole's blood.

Given the way she likes to fuck, I'd say probably.

“You need to watch the way you're speaking to me, little lady.”

“Do I fuck!” she barks back. “You need to start explaining. What the fuck is going on?!”

I wouldn't mess with her right now.

“That's my girl out there and you've upset her. I don't give a fuck who you think she was, all that matters is who she is now.”

“She's my sister. My *dead* twin. How the hell is she alive right now?”

“She doesn't know who you are.”

“Yes, I gathered that,” Raven snaps.

“She was suffering from severe amnesia when we found her.”

“And when, exactly, was that?”

“My guess? Around the time she took a tumble off a cliff and washed up on a beach far from home. Years ago.”

“And you found her?”

“Yeah. Welcomed her into the fold and took care of her, once we realised she had no memories. You should be grateful; we don’t usually take on charity cases.”

“That’s my sister you’re talking about, show some respect!”

“Watch. Your. Tone. I won’t tell you again.” His hand rests on his hip, right by the gun holster and I grind my teeth at the not so subtle threat. I palm my knife, confident that I can have it in his temple before he even gets the thing unclipped. “We have nothing but respect for Beth, she’s an incredible woman.”

“Lizzie. Her name is Elizabeth.”

“It *was*. Beth is who she is now and you’re going to have to accept that. My girl out there? She’s a stranger to you and you to her. If you want that to change you’re going to have to accept who she is.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“That’s the first time I’ve *not* threatened you.” He chuckles, shaking his head in amusement.

“You keep saying ‘we’. Who is this ‘we’?” I cut in impatiently.

“My brothers and I.”

“Biological brothers?” Raven asks.

“Does it matter?”

“And what is your relationship with...Beth?” Raven demands.

“What’s yours with him? It’s none of your business.”

“When Liz—when Beth...what do you know of her story?”

“Nothing. She has no memory of before but...she was in a pretty bad state when we found her...” He hesitates.

“What?”

“It became obvious pretty quickly that there was some trauma there.” Raven nods sadly.

“She was bullied and raped, then thrown off a cliff by her attacker, who pretended to be her only friend. She was pregnant,” Raven quickly explains.

“Shit.” I watch as his hand tightens on his gun, completely understanding his reaction. I never knew Lizzie but I still want to cause unimaginable pain to the scum who hurt her. “I’ll kill him.”

“She already did,” I say, nodding to Raven.

“You?” He turns to look at her, staring in disbelief.

She shrugs casually and lets the small knife I gave her slip from her fingers effortlessly. Before he even sees it coming it slides into the cork noticeboard right behind his head. He doesn’t jump, which I’ll give him credit for, but he does raise a single eyebrow. I think he’s impressed. He pulls the blade free from the noticeboard and spins it in his hands contemplatively.

“Damn, you should show your sister those moves.”

“I will be,” Raven promises.

“Meet Raven, I’m Baxter.” I decide now that no one seems inclined to kill anyone, for now, I may as well make introductions.

“Macerio. S’up.” He tilts his head back in greeting.

“So what happens now?” I ask.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m gonna go look after my girl and make sure my family’s alright. Pretty sure you’re not here for no reason, so I suggest you go check on yours.”

He walks towards the door, handing Raven her knife back as he passes, and has his fingers on the handle before she calls out to him.

“Wait! I can’t lose her again...please don’t disappear,” she pleads. The heartbreak in her tone makes my stomach twist. This would be so much easier if I could just kill him and kidnap Lizzie until she sees sense.

“He won’t,” I tell her before she can reply. They both turn to stare at me and I reach up to flick open the top button of my shirt, pulling it down to reveal my Order tattoo.

For the first time, some of the guy’s cocky swagger leaves him.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Baxter. Branson.” He gulps, his Adam’s Apple bobbing and making his bird of prey wings shift uncomfortably. Message received. Shame it didn’t need to be delivered in blood. “Be seeing you, Macerio.”

He nods once and turns back to the door, but pauses once more.

“You should know,” he says softly, not looking at us. “The baby didn’t make it, and the damage of the fall left Beth unable to have children. It’s a real heartbreak for her so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t say anything, you know, when you meet again.”

He’s gone before either of us can reply, and Raven is left staring after him, close to tears, with a ‘what the fuck’ look on her face.

“Go back and see Phoenix,” I tell her softly. “I bet she could use a cuddle right now and we’ve left the guys unattended long enough that Rebel and Thorn have probably got her all riled up and into all sorts of mischief.”

“Am I going to lose my sister again? I heard some of what happened. You guys were pretty awful to her. I wouldn’t blame her for running away.”

“Absolutely not. We know who they are now, they won’t ever be able to hide from us again.” She nods, sniffs, wipes her face.

“Are you coming?” she asks.

“You go. I have a quick phone call to make.”

She leaves, closing the door behind her and I pull out my phone straight away. It rings through to voicemail. I hang up.

I try again. And again. And again. When she still doesn’t answer I curse and bang my phone down on the table.

A second later the phone rings and I snatch it up.

“What?” I bark.

“S-sorry,” a timid female voice stammers. “I must have the wrong number. I was trying to call the children’s ward.”

I stare down at the phone in my hands and realise I’ve snatched up the office phone which was ringing and not my mobile.

“Yes. Wrong number,” I lie stiffly. I’m just about to put the phone down when the woman on the phone breaks out into a peal of laughter. Amelie.

“Ha! You should have heard yourself. Didn’t expect the great and mighty Baxter Baudelaire Bojangles Branson to shit himself at a little old lady.”

“I told you never to utter my full name,” I growl, more pissed off about that than being tricked.

“How’re you doing, Batman?”

“How did you know to call me on a landline?”

“Gotta keep an eye on my best asset now, don’t I?”

“I’m not ‘your’ anything.”

“Ouch, I thought you were my friend.”

“Friends don’t hide persons of interest from one another.”

“I didn’t. We honestly couldn’t find her. The tip off was a total fluke and I didn’t even know if it would pay off. It’s why

I kept it vague, at least that way if it was a bust, you still got a nice holiday out of it.”

“They’re Order. I’ve seen the tattoo for myself.”

“Any chance it’s a fake or a copycat?”

“No. He’s had training for sure.”

“Fuck. Then I have a problem.”

“Sounds like it might be time to clean house.”

“They’ll be dealt with for this.”

“That could cause me some problems.”

“How so?”

“They’re the family of my girl’s sister. I don’t know how their relationship is going to play out yet but I do know that Raven will not be happy if you kill off the people that her sister cares about.”

“Are you asking for a favour? Another one? For this girl.”

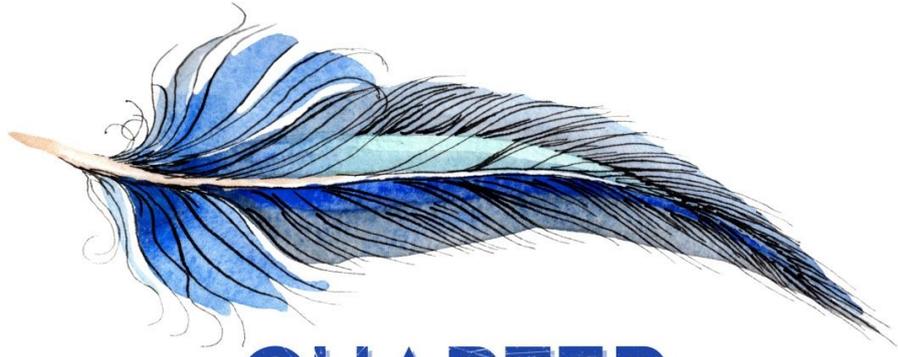
“She’s worth every one, and more. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her,” I reply hotly.

“I’ll remember that.”

“You do that,” I tell her before hanging up.

Stanislav: Do we have a deal?

Stanislav: Do not ignore me boy!



CHAPTER THIRTY - THREE

Raven

“Sorry,” I whisper to Thorn who has somehow ended up with Nix on his lap for the entire flight. She’s fast asleep in his arms and must be one hell of a dead weight. I don’t miss her sleeping on me at all.

“It’s fine. I love it,” he whispers back and I know he means it. He smiles easily at me, more relaxed than I’ve seen him in ages. This holiday has been good for all of us, Lizzie drama aside.

I didn’t see Lizzie again at the hospital, even though I went back every day. Eventually I asked the other nurse that had looked after Phoenix and she explained that ‘Beth’ was an agency nurse and her run of shifts at their particular hospital had just finished. And no, they didn’t know if or when she’d be back.

I was devastated. We dealt with things so badly at the hospital and I wanted the opportunity to put things right, to explain. I wouldn’t push for a relationship with her if she didn’t want one, but I did want the chance to apologise. I made the guys tell me exactly what happened once we got back to the hotel, and I read them the riot act over their behaviour. Not that I’m overly proud of my own either.

It has left me feeling like I’ve lost her all over again. I don’t feel like I can reach out to our parents to tell them either. We haven’t spoken in years, more or less since I decided to enrol at West Prep – although things were rocky before that – and I feel it would be too weird to call them up out of the blue. I mean, what would I say? ‘Hi, it’s your living daughter here. The one with the child. The granddaughter you never met. Well I have some news! You know your other daughter, the one that you’ve been grieving over for more than half a decade? Well, she’s actually alive but has no idea who any of us are. Surprise!’

Yeah, I don’t think so.

I guess if I could get in touch with Lizzie myself I could tell her she has family out there. Maybe even give her their contact details and then put the ball in her court if she wants to reach out to them. But I don't know. This helpless, hopeless feeling in my chest makes me think I'll never see her again. I had *one* shot – one I didn't even know about – and I blew it.

“Can you take her for a minute?” Thorn whispers, shifting in his seat. “I really need the loo but I can put her in her seat if she's too heavy.”

“Of course I'll have her,” I reply, holding out my arms. The guys are always offering to carry Nix around, put her to bed, take her places. And while it's super sweet, I think they forget that I managed on my own before they came along.

He passes me my baby and she grumbles in her sleep, clearly aware even in her sleep that Thorn is no longer nearby, and clearly unhappy about it. I smile and kiss the top of her head.

Since the hospital visit, Thorn and Phoenix have been inseparable. She worships him and thinks he's the ‘bravest boy ever’ because he dived to save her. It's really sweet. They're trouble together though. Thorn has decided that now she's approaching her birthday, she's old enough to learn all about jokes and pranks.

So the last few days of our holiday were fraught with the rest of us never knowing what was waiting for us just around the corner. Rebel was super mad last night. He got straight into bed without checking for pranks and found his bed and pillow filled with crushed cornflakes. His bellows of rage woke Phoenix, who collapsed into a fit of giggles and a tickle war ensued. It took me ages to get her back to bed, even though we had to be up super early for the flight home today.

“Hey,” Rebel says, flopping down into the seat Thorn just vacated. “Want me to take her?”

“No, I'm fine.” I shake my head and hold back a smile. “I don't trust you not to prank her in retaliation for last night.”

He laughs.

“Actually I’ve been thinking about that, and I think I actually want revenge on Thorn. I have an idea...”

He launches into some elaborate plan that I’m only half listening to – okay, total lie, I’m not listening at all. I have my AirPods in and I’m watching a film on my iPad but he’s oblivious and happy so it’s all good. Also, if he’s planning to wage war on Thorn with Nix’s help, it’s probably best I don’t know. At least Ace, Jax and Baxter are responsible parents. Although, with the amount of sugar Ace lets her have, maybe I need to move him to the naughty list.

Thorn returns, kicks Reb out of his seat, and takes Phoenix from my arms without a word. He cradles her to his chest and she snuggles in. I wonder if, even in sleep, she can recognise his summer sunshine beachy scent. I check my watch and see I’ve got just enough time left to finish the film before we land, so I sit back and relax.

“Wanna sleep in my room tonight?” A seductive voice murmurs low in my ear the second we walk through the door. It’s funny how quickly I’ve come to think of this place as home but with Nix and the guys here, there’s nothing more I could want.

“Not really, no,” I say apologetically to Rebel. He pouts.

“Awww, why not?”

“Because we’re home and the only thing I want to do, besides get started on the mountain of ironing, is sleep in my own bed.”

He opens his mouth to suggest something so I quickly add, “Alone.”

He pouts even more.

“That’s no fun.”

“Maybe not, but it’s what I’ve been dreaming of since the moment we left.”

“Didn’t you like the holiday?”

“I loved it. It was almost perfect.” I smile. “But, as they say, there really is no place like home.”

He harrumphs and stalks off, no doubt going somewhere to sulk but I don’t have to go massage his ego, and I’m not sorry for being honest with him either. With five guys to juggle and Phoenix, I need some time to myself every once in a while and the first night back in my own bed is definitely one of those times.

Walking into the kitchen, I discover Ace has wasted no time getting to work. He must have missed this place like I missed my duvet.

“What are you making?” I ask, expecting him to say cookies. He moaned the whole time we were away that the hotel biscuits were horrible. I just missed proper chocolate.

“Dinner.”

“Oh. I thought we’d get a takeaway.”

He frowns.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Hotel food. Two weeks.” He pulls a face.

“Yeah? It was amazing. But I’m craving a proper curry. Aren’t you?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Craving home food. Self cook.”

“I guess I could be persuaded to break with tradition and have a home cooked meal if I have to,” I say, eyes twinkling to show I’m teasing. “Do you need any help?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’ll just grab a pop and go start the laundry then.”

Ace grunts in response, already turning back to his prep work. I watch him for a moment, admiring the way his muscles ripple as he works, before my gaze falls on the knife. He wields it like an expert chef and a lethal assassin. The

realisation makes a tingling start between my thighs and for a second I'm tempted to tell one of the guys they can join me tonight after all. I wonder if Ace plays with blades the same way Baxter does...

It's fast becoming an addiction for me.

I shake my head, quickly grab my drink and then make my way out of the kitchen and downstairs. At the bottom of the steps I hear quiet classical music playing in the background and the sound of someone using the punch bag in the gym on my right. Baxter. I smile but don't disturb him, and turn to the laundry room on the left instead.

"Oh!" I cry when I bang into someone, and I've got cold Coke spilling all down my front. "Shit! What are you doing down here?"

"Laundry?" Jax raises a brow at me like I'm crazy for asking.

"That's what I'm here to do."

"I can see that." He stares pointedly at my drink-stained chest. "Allow me to help."

Before I can respond, Jax takes the half empty glass from my hand and puts it on top of the side counter, then he carefully peels my no longer white T-shirt over my head, revealing my red lace bra underneath.

"That looks wet too." He smirks, reaches round to unclasp the back, then slides the straps down my arms and discards it on top of the ruined shirt.

It's not cold in the small laundry room at all, but my nipples harden as soon as they make contact with the air. As Jax reaches out to flick one, I'm reminded of Baxter and his piercing. I wonder what it would feel like, if I should get it done.

"I think you spilled some on your jeans," Jax says thickly. I look down and frown. My jeans are dry. Jax grabs the glass and quickly pours the remainder of the cold liquid over me. Normally I'd lament the waste of good Coke but under Jax's heated gaze I can't bring myself to care.

I swallow and flick the top button open.

“Better get you out of these wet things too.” Jax slips his fingers under the waistband of my jeans while I lower the zip. As soon as I’m done he’s pulling the material down my legs, along with my thong, and when he reaches my ankles I step out.

If I thought his stare was heated when he removed my top, it’s nothing compared to how it blazes as he looks at me now. Goosebumps erupt all along my flesh wherever his gaze burns me.

“You have too many clothes on,” I tell him.

“I’m not the one who got dirty,” he teases.

“It can be arranged.”

I fist the front of his shirt and pull him towards me to close the gap between us, kissing his lips hungrily as soon as we touch. It’s an aggressive move and I know Jax won’t like it.

Sure enough he growls into my kiss and grabs my hips, taking over the kiss and dominating my mouth with his tongue. He surprises me by lifting me and depositing me on top of the cold washing machine and I yelp.

“Oi! Cold!” I complain.

“I’ll warm you up.” He grins and kisses me again, sliding his warm palms all over my exposed skin. It does help but I don’t admit that. I don’t want to stop kissing him.

His hands skim down to my knees, parting them gently but wide so that he can step between my legs and pull me closer. I brace my feet against the front of the machine to keep from falling off but when Jax’s hand slides between my legs I break off our kiss with a gasp. It doesn’t stop him.

He pushes a finger inside me and circles my clit with his thumb in powerful but leisurely, almost lazy, movements. He’s too damn confident, he knows exactly how to play my body and it doesn’t take much work to have me squirming.

From my higher vantage point he has me at a disadvantage. I can’t retaliate and tease him back. All I can do

is hold on to his shoulders and dig my nails into his skin as he builds my orgasm and draws it closer and closer.

I'm right on the edge, trembling on the precipice when he withdraws his fingers and steps back. I release an angry snarl.

"Patience, princess," he says with a teasing smirk. "Isn't that what you're always telling Nix?"

The bastard chuckles at me and bends down between my legs. For a second I think he's going to continue with his tongue – hallelujah! – but instead he starts messing around the washing machine.

"You should know that I'm almost always armed now, thanks to Baxter," I growl out.

"Well, I think it's safe to say you don't have any concealed weapons on you right now," Jax replies with a smile in his voice. "Unless you need me to check that final cavity?"

Everything tightens deliciously at his suggestive threat but a slight movement out of the corner of my eye has me looking to the doorway, distracted. *Speak of the devil and he shall appear*. Baxter stands at the door with an amused look on his face.

He lifts his finger to his lips and then palms a knife, and raises his brow in question. I nod, understanding his offer and catch the blade as it sails through the air toward me. Pride flashes in his eyes.

Jax presses the button to start the machine and the room fills with the sound of the spin cycle starting. He stands back up grinning wickedly at me but his face falls when he sees the blade in my hand that I'm twirling back and forth with nonchalance.

"Are you *sure* you checked for weapons?"

"Where the hell did that come from?"

I don't reply, just smirk at him but I can't help the laugh that bursts free at the astonished look on his face. I press the blade to his throat and he swallows noticeably. Is that nervousness in his gaze? Or something else?

“You’re a savage,” he whispers, but it doesn’t sound like an insult. Well, not to my ears anyway.

From the doorway Baxter chuckles and Jax whirls around in surprise.

“Yes she is,” Baxter replies proudly, stepping into the small room and kissing me deeply. It makes me groan with need. I was so damn close and now to have two guys in this close proximity...it’s the world’s worst tease.

“Stay?” I plead lightly. I feel a stab of disappointment when he shakes his head.

“Jax doesn’t have the stomach for it, love.”

I open my mouth to protest even though Jax says nothing, but Baxter cuts me off. “If I join in, you won’t see daylight for another twenty-four-hours. Didn’t you want to sleep in your own bed, alone, tonight?”

Damn, he’s got me there. The empty bed with fresh sheets is literally the only thing I can think of right now that would even come close to stopping me taking up Baxter’s promise. Damn, it’s tempting though.

I say nothing, but pout a little, and with an easy chuckle, Baxter kisses the back of my hand like a proper gentleman then leaves the room.

“Can you put that damn knife away now?” Jax moans.

“Scared?”

“Absolutely. I know what you can do.” He smiles to take the potential sting out of his words but my face still falls a little. Out of everyone, Jax has always been the least accepting of who I am.

I’m about to get down off the machine when Jax stops me with hands on my waist.

“And I love you for it,” he says earnestly, kissing me once more. “I promise. To know that you can protect our family as well as Baxter, Rebel, Ace or I can...it’s amazing.”

I laugh at the way he doesn't mention Thorn. We all know he's too pretty to get his hands dirty. He wouldn't want to risk his face.

I relax back into his kiss, and the machine below me picks up speed.

“Ready?” Jax grins at me. “We’re going to play a game.”

“Oh god, what kind of game?”

“This spin cycle lasts ten minutes. If you can come...let’s say...three times...before it finishes, you can sleep in your own bed tonight.”

“I’m doing that anyway. I’d like to see you try and stop me.”

“Oh, you can bet on it, princess.”

“And if I don’t come?”

“Then you have to sleep with me tonight. And Thorn, Baxter, Rebel and Ace. All at the same time.”

My eyes flash with excitement. Fucking damn him! Do I want to win or lose now? Gah! I don’t know.

“Challenge accepted?”

I nod.

“Let’s begin then.”

With one hand, Jax grabs the back of my head and plunges his tongue into my mouth, suddenly kissing me with a lot more urgency. Not that I mind at all. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer and meeting his passion, as his other hand returns between my legs and matches the pace of his tongue.

I’m not counting time, but I do know that it’s a matter of minutes before I’m teetering on the edge again. When Jax sinks his teeth into the sensitive dip where my neck meets my shoulder, I come undone with a cry.

“One.” He grins, not stopping. With no breathing space to ride out my climax, my muscles soon tighten again. But

everything feels too sensitive, too much.

“Please,” I beg for a breather, a break, but Jax doesn’t take it that way. His espresso eyes glint mischievously with challenge and I know he’s not going to let up. Sighing silently inside, I try to force my wound-up body to relax but it’s pointless. Jax reads me like an open book and shifts his stance, pulling me right to the very edge of the machine and placing my hands on the top for balance.

“Don’t move.” He fixes me with his ‘no nonsense’ stare and unzips his pants. His cock is hard as he lines it up at my entrance. I expect him to thrust inside me but he doesn’t. He surprises me by slowly pumping his long length up and down with his left hand, while his right still circles my clit rhythmically.

He speeds up, pleasuring himself against my entrance, and completely overwhelming me with sensation: the harsh bump of his fist against my sensitive skin; the soft tip teasing my wet folds, my overstimulated clit begging for mercy, the bone-shaking vibrations of the spin cycle...it all combines together to make incoherent pleas and sobs fall from my lips. My second orgasm crashes over me like a cresting wave, and I curse Jax every step of the way.

Then he enters me with a powerful thrust, making me cry out and cling on to him. Luckily he doesn’t tell me off for moving when he said to stay put. As he fucks me, I dig my nails into the tops of his arms, partly for grip but also partly because I know he loves it and I want to fuck with him a little like he’s doing to me. I need to claw back some power. But Jax doesn’t fuck me for me. He takes. It’s fast, rough and raw, and I’m just being dragged along for the ride. Despite this, or maybe because of this, my muscles still squeeze and clamp around him, refusing to let go and trying to tempt him even deeper.

He hooks my legs over his elbows which tilts me backwards and makes the thrust even deeper, hitting that sweet spot relentlessly with each pounding stroke.

“Tick, tock, tick, tock,” he teases. I shake my head. I’m way too over sensitive to come again, no matter how good it feels. His gaze hardens. “Yes.”

And even as I frantically shake my head again in denial, I feel it coming. Sneaking up on me unexpectedly like a thief in the night. Shock must register on my face because Jax grins triumphantly at me.

He wraps one hand around my throat and squeezes, just hard enough to restrict my breathing in a way which thrills and excites me. I don’t know if it’s my breathless gasp or the way I bite my lip, but something I do has Jax cursing. His cock swells inside of me and suddenly we’re coming together, him with a string of hymn-like curses, me with strangled pants.

He rides our orgasms out until I literally can’t hold myself upright anymore and I fall back on top of the shaking, rumbling machine.

“Fuck,” I eventually manage to wheeze out after taking in great lungfuls of air.

“Yeah.”

He kisses me, surprisingly tender and gentle, and then withdraws.

“Enjoy having the bed to yourself tonight,” he says, tucking himself away and zipping up his pants. He winks at me, turns on his heels and saunters away. All I can do is pant and watch him go.

The machine beeps to announce the cycle has finished.

Why do I feel like I just lost?

Bastard.

Jožef: Yo, cuz. What the fuck did you do to piss him off so much? He just carved a girl up so good she fit into a tin of dog food.

Ace: Who?

Jožef: Just some auction slut. It doesn't matter. What did you do?



CHAPTER THIRTY - FOUR

“Grandfather? What’s with the security? This isn’t the usual way you contact me, even when you need a secure line.” I pace around one of my safe houses, agitated. I came here to prepare for a job, a simple extermination of a traitor within The Order. No need to torture information out of the guy, the board already has everything they need, and although they could easily send someone else to do it, I was closest and available.

Which would have been fine, until my grandfather text me a link to a secure server and then called me. Which means something is up. And it’s serious.

“Listen, son, I don’t have much time,” he says urgently, immediately putting me on edge. “You need to know that I’ve been working undercover for decades within The Order. Cordelia was my mark.”

“I don’t understand...”

“When I was first inducted to The Order, they were monitoring several wealthy, high profile families. Once Cordelia’s husband died, under very suspicious circumstances, I was sent there to watch over her. Part of my cover was to strike up a relationship with her in order to get close and gain her trust.”

“So you didn’t cheat on my grandmother?”

“Your grandmother knew what my work entailed.”

“Eventually, a plot to kill off the Deighton family line was uncovered. I was told to keep it hidden from Cordelia and to help her daughter escape. She was dating a nice young lad back then and I didn’t have a lot of time or options. I helped them run away together and get married, helping the boyfriend set up a business and survive. I had to stay close to Cordelia, but when they had twins, I kept the grandchildren hidden and tried to ensure everyone within the family stayed estranged for their protection.”

“Okay, where is this going?”

“I didn’t know why they were so important, just that I had to protect them but not tip off Cordelia. I was younger and more naïve back then, happy to just do as I was told. I didn’t ask questions until much later, when board members started disappearing and turning up dead. I started to wonder if the two things could be connected somehow, but I had no way of finding out. The Order guards its secrets like nothing you’ve ever seen before.”

“Over the decades, Cordelia’s behaviours became more erratic and nonsensical. I started to suspect that she was actually the one trying to kill off the Deighton line and that she may have married into the family as a ruse.”

“It was confirmed recently. I think Cordelia became suspicious of me once you told me Nix was my granddaughter. She probably suspected my loyalties might shift, so she bugged my house. I had no idea until recently. I met with an Order colleague who accidentally mentioned Lizzie, which I think tipped off Cordelia all those months ago into believing she was still alive. I think she launched the lawsuits against Raven to keep her busy while she hunted for Lizzie herself.”

“I don’t think she found her, but she must have found enough to confirm she was alive because she changed her will shortly after. I don’t know why she’d do that if she was planning to kill them all, or why she would wait so long. I kept the mother well hidden but once the girls made contact with Cordelia off their own back, she could have struck then. I

don't know why she'd wait, or why she'd suddenly be unravelling now."

"I can't work out why The Order would be involved, but I have a feeling that my cover is well and truly about to be blown. She's so suspicious of me already, and I'm still refusing to give her what she wants – the Branson name. Yesterday she took a call I was unable to trace and disappeared shortly after. She won't take my calls and I can't get a handle on her location. I think she's found Lizzie and is planning to strike. Hence me contacting you. You're going to have to speak to Amelie directly on this one. I've done all I can, and I think the threat is too high now to keep her alive. You need to act quickly on this."

"Stay safe son, if she has Lizzie she's coming after your family next."

The call cuts before I can ask the million questions burning my tongue. I have a feeling why The Order might want to get involved in protecting the Deighton line, but I refuse to acknowledge it.

I pull out the burner phone I've had on me since the night we found Lizzie. I quickly type the number of the emergency line I have committed to memory and hit dial. The person at the other end of the line answers on the first ring.

"The Grim Reaper is looking to collect," I say, then immediately hang up. I crush the phone under the heel of my boot, removing the traceable pieces and dropping the whole lot into a vat of acid I was going to put my victim's body in. Oh well, there's plenty of room and it's not like he'll be complaining about it.

"Amelie?" I say as soon as the call connects on my regular mobile phone. I know I should wait and confirm it's her, make sure the line is secure, probably go through a load of security checks, but I can't. The hurried conversation I just had with my grandfather has me far too rattled. "I need help."

The person on the end of the line – please let it be Amelie – sucks in a sharp breath.

“Help? Or a favour, Batman?”

I breathe a sigh of relief that it *is* her on the line.

“Whatever it takes.”

“Really? Must be bad.”

“It’s not. Yet. But it will be.”

“What do you need, Baxter? Are you in trouble?” I don’t know if it’s her use of my name or the concern in her tone but I feel the sudden urge to tell *someone* what’s happening.

“I don’t know what to do. Well, I have an idea, but even I can’t get away with it, and—”

“Start at the beginning. This isn’t like you,” she says, her voice laced with concern.

I take a deep breath because I know she’s right. I am so *not* the guy who gets flustered and emotional and...scared. Not usually. But I’m certainly rattled right now.

I take a deep breath and huff it out noisily.

“I don’t even know where to begin...Is Lizzie safe?” I don’t know what makes me ask that, maybe because the threat to my family hasn’t gone away, and now my family extends beyond my grandfather and me to include Raven, Phoenix and the guys. But also Lizzie too, because she’s Raven’s sister and Nix’s Aunt whether she chooses to accept the role or not. Raven would never forgive me if something happened to Lizzie.

“She’s—” Amelie hesitates.

“What? Tell me,” I growl.

“We can’t find them at the moment.”

“What?! What the hell do you mean you can’t find them?”

“Don’t freak out—”

“Has saying that *ever* worked?” I snap.

“But,” she carries on like I never even spoke, “they disappeared right after you ‘discovered’ Lizzie at the hospital. They’ve completely vanished and they’re surprisingly good because I’ve thrown all my best resources at finding them and we can’t.”

“Fuck!”

“Baxter, what’s wrong? Why does it matter?”

“I’m going to have to kill her, Amelie. And I’m going to need protection for it.”

“Who? Lizzie? Why?”

“No. Cordelia.”

“What? You’re not making any sense. What’s that got to do with Lizzie?”

“She’s family!” I pinch the bridge of my nose in a futile attempt to stave off the imminent headache. “My grandfather just messaged me a link to a secure server where he told me that despite being beaten in court, Cordelia still plans to come after Raven. And not just to take Phoenix away, but to eradicate the Deighton line. Which means she’ll be going after Lizzie as well and I need to know where she is so that I can protect her too.”

“What the hell is going on?” Amelie gasps.

“I don’t know. Do you think it’s connected, their disappearance and whatever Cordelia is up to? Do you think she has them already?”

“I don’t know, but if she’s as much of a threat as you and your grandfather seem to think, she needs to be neutralised.”

“That’s why I called.”

“You’re the best one for the job.”

“I know. But she’s high profile. We can’t sweep this one under the carpet.”

“That’s the favour. You need protection when it comes to light,” she says with understanding.

“Exactly. Can you deliver?”

“I can and I will...”

“Why do I sense a ‘but’?”

“Because it’s going to cost you. And I mean for *real* this time. I can’t keep saying ‘it’ll cost’ and not call in all the favours you owe. There’s some strange things happening here and I’m going to need backup.”

“Isn’t that what your little harem is for?”

“You’re one to talk,” she scoffs before turning serious once more. “No. This will be the biggest favour ever. You won’t be able to say no to me when I call it in.”

“You need me to kill a diplomat or a royal or something?”

“Something like that. Do you still want protection?”

“Yes. Whatever the cost, I have to. I don’t have any choice. Apparently once you find your family, they suddenly come first.”

“Oh, such an inconvenience,” she teases.

“I blame you for everything,” I deadpan. I feel much calmer now I know I’ve got the go ahead to protect my family by any means necessary. “Stupid beating stone in my chest.”

“Ha! Okay, so give me a couple of days to get things in order and to pay off the right people.”

“One day. I can’t wait any longer.”

“Okay.” She sighs.

“And you need to find them. I have to protect Lizzie whether she wants it or not, and I guess that means her family too...what do you know about them?”

“They’re a team of three. All came into The Order together from overseas. Showed a lot of promise but are too wild and unpredictable. Generally they deal with the less savoury branches of the business.”

“Names? Ages? I’m going to need to know everything.”

“That’s gonna take more time than I can currently give you, Batman. Leave it with me and I’ll send you a file. Sound good?”

“That’s...acceptable. I suppose.”

She laughs.

“Great. I’ll leave you to...sharpen your knives or whatever it is you do in preparation. And I’ll get to work on that information for you.”

“And a location.”

“That too. Expect the file and my call soon. Bye.”

“Bye...oh and Amelie?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

I hang up and pace, replaying the conversation over in my mind. I have the protection I need to take care of Cordelia – finally – but Lizzie’s unknown disappearance throws up some problems I wasn’t expecting. However, once Amelie delivers their information to me, I think I stand a better chance than most of tracking them down.

I hope.

The last thing I want is to have to tell Raven we lost her sister again when she only just found her.

Stanislav: I want an answer by nightfall or I'm going to visit your sisters



CHAPTER THIRTY - FIVE

Raven

“Want to go on an adventure?”

I look up from the book I’m reading and cock my head at Baxter standing in the doorway. We’ve been back from the holiday for a couple of weeks now and everything has been great. Well, aside from the continued prank wars that are constantly causing chaos in the house. I swear if I find peanut packaging in my bed one more time, I’m going to lose it.

“What kind of adventure?” I ask warily, suspicious that this is yet another one of Nix’s set ups.

“The stabby, fun kind.” His dark eyes gleam with an excitement that sets my pulse racing.

“Absolutely,” I say, discarding the ‘The Death Club’ with a small pang. Sorry gorgeous Irish Niall, my own sexy psycho needs me right now. “Shall I get changed?”

I look down at the black yoga pants I’m wearing, which will be fine for whatever Baxter has in mind, but my white T-shirt might not fare so well.

“Absolutely not. You’re perfect. I love it when you wear white.” Baxter grins.

It’s a good thing he knows how to do laundry, otherwise I’d seriously be running low on whites with the amount of blood he likes to spill. There’s definitely something about me covered in blood – sometimes my own, but mostly his – that turns him on and into overdrive. I’m not complaining, though I probably would if he weren’t so good at getting the stains out.

“I’ll just say goodbye to Phoenix.”

I slip from the room and head towards the garden where she’s playing with Rebel and Thorn. They have water pistols and are having a massive water fight, even though it’s far too cold for that. It may be sunny and uncharacteristically warm for this time of year, but I still think the paddling pool they’ve set up is overkill, especially this late in the afternoon.

“Get your mum!” Thorn shouts, swinging his pistol round at me. I scream and dive behind the slide just in time to escape a blast in the face. Phoenix squeals with joy and runs towards me, trying to pump her super soaker as she goes. I back away slowly, but I’m so focused on Nix and Thorn approaching me that I don’t notice Rebel creeping up behind me until his strong tattooed arm wraps across my chest, pinning me helplessly against his hard body.

“Teamwork!” Thorn and Phoenix cheer and whoop before high fiving like pros. Rebel is soaked, the cold water from his drenched shirt immediately soaking into mine. I shiver.

“I don’t know how you do it. It’s freezing.” I shake my head.

“Want to know a secret?” Rebel whispers in my ear. His breath tickles my neck and suddenly I’ve forgotten why I’m even out here as all I can focus on is the hard lines of his body pressing against me. I nod, lick my lips, swallow.

“I offer to refill the guns. I fill Thorn’s and Nix’s with warm water from the tap, but fill my own with water from the pool.” He spins me round to face him and kisses me deeply.

“Oh?” I breathe when he finally lets me free.

“Phoenix wanted to be a penguin so we filled the paddling pool with ice.” I laugh. “Don’t worry, we didn’t let her swim in there.”

“Mummy! You should go in the paddling pool, it’s really nice and warm,” Phoenix crows. Yeah, no. Even if Rebel hadn’t just told me his secret, there’s no way I’d ever trust Phoenix when she’s grinning at me like that. I quickly look at Thorn and his face is a picture of innocence. Too innocent.

“I’m sorry baby, I don’t want to get wet.”

“You’re already wet, mummy. I can see your bra.” She whispers this last bit like it’s a secret she doesn’t want the boys to hear and when I look down, sure enough the front of my white shirt is see-through.

“So you may as well!”

I try to think of a way out of this but I'm coming up short.

"Thanks baby, maybe some other time. I actually came out here to—argh!"

Thorn lunges at me and grabs me around my thighs, hoisting me up over his shoulder to Nix's delighted screams and claps. In a few short strides he's crossed to the small paddling pool and—

"Don't you dare!"

"Did you hear that Nix? She dared me."

"Yay!" she cheers.

"No I didn't! I said don't you dare!"

"Sorry, it's for your own good," Thorn replies, not sounding sorry in the least. He takes a deep breath and yells, "Everything but the paddling pool is lava!"

And then he dumps me on my ass in the ice-cold water, as him, Nix and Rebel all race to jump into the pool and not be the last man standing.

"I-I th-thought y-you s-said it was w-warm," I complain to Phoenix through chattering teeth. She laughs evilly at me and grins. I shake my head and splash her. Oh well, I'm wet anyway. She laughs and splashes me back.

"Actually baby, I came out here to say goodbye because I have to go out somewhere with Baxter."

"Danger Daddy."

I blink. Phoenix has never, ever called any of the guys Daddy before and my heart seizes. She's never even asked about her dad before, besides that tricky moment on Christmas Day.

"What do you mean, baby?" I ask, crouching down in front of her despite the ice cold water.

"We've been working on superhero secret code names and we decided Baxter is danger daddy."

“I see...” I say slowly. “And who helped you with the names? Does everyone have names?”

“Yeah! Thorn is fun daddy...” I give Thorn an unamused, unsurprised look and he snorts. “Jax is strict daddy, and Rebel is...bad word daddy.”

“Is that because he’s always swearing?” I laugh.

“No. I don’t want to say a bad word and get into trouble.”

“Okay. It’s probably best you don’t.” I shoot daggers at Thorn who’s laughing his ass off, no doubt to blame for this. “What about Ace and you and me?”

“You’re Mummy,” she replies like it’s so damn obvious. “Rebel wanted to call you hot mummy but you look cold. Erm, I’m firebird or princess in training...and Ace is sugar daddy because he lets me have cookies.”

I burst out laughing.

“Those are great names baby, but maybe Ace can be cookie daddy or something.” Thorn winks at me. “Okay, so I really do have to go, because now I have to go and get changed too and I don’t want to keep Baxter waiting.”

“Mummy! You have to call him danger daddy.”

“Okay, I’ll try and remember next time. I have to go Nix. I’m leaving Ja— strict daddy in charge.”

“Okay! Love you Mummy, bye!” She gives me a kiss and races off with her water pistol to continue the fight.

“Have fun on your date,” Thorn says, giving me a quick peck and taking off after Nix.

Rebel pulls me into his arms.

“You shouldn’t change.”

“But I’m all wet.”

“I happen to love you wet. And I think Baxter will too.”

“Don’t you mean ‘danger daddy?’” I snort. Rebel’s gaze heats.

“Shit, that shouldn’t sound so damn hot coming from your lips, but fuck it does.”

I laugh and push him away, shaking my head at how incorrigible he is.

“Are you damn daddy?”

“Asshole daddy, but if you’re the one saying it I’ll take ‘fuck me harder daddy’.”

“SSH!” I smack my hand over his mouth to silence him but he just laughs.

“Enjoy yourself tonight.” He still looks at me like he wants to devour me but there’s a twinkle in his eyes too that suggests he knows a lot more about my imminent adventure with Baxter than I do.

I squelch my way back into the house, stripping my yoga pants and shirt at the back door and making a dash upstairs in just my underwear.

I’ve almost made it to my room when I bang into a hard chest right in the doorway.

“I wondered where you’d got to,” Baxter says, eyeing me up and down leisurely. “But now I understand.”

“Sorry. I’ll be really quick!”

“It’s okay.” He moves to sit on the edge of my bed. “Take your time. There’s no rush and I quite like the view.”

I throw my wet things at him and dash for my wardrobe, throwing the doors wide and blindly grabbing the first thing I can get my hands on, which turns out to be a white lace dress.

“Wear that,” Baxter instructs and when I glance over my shoulder at him I see him eyeing the dress with interest.

Keeping my back to him, I reach up and I unclip my bra, peeling it off and dropping it into the laundry bin nearby. I do the same again, shimmying out of my panties, before pulling the dress on over my head. It feels deliciously sinful to be bare underneath.

I slip my feet into some sandals, pull on a soft pale grey cardigan and quickly run a brush through my hair.

“Damn. You look respectable as fuck,” Baxter says when I turn to face him. “It’s perfect for where we’re going.”

“Are you taking me somewhere nice?” I frown. Posh dates aren’t really Baxter’s thing.

“Something like that. Grab your knife, let’s go.”

Almost as soon as we got back from the holiday and Baxter witnessed the laundry room fun with Jax, he set me up with my own set of knives. So far they’ve been unused for anything other than training, and a thrill runs through me at the idea of taking them out for ‘real’ today.

I return to my closet and quickly enter in the code to the safe Baxter installed in there to keep everything from harm’s reach.

“That’s the day you kissed me,” Baxter says.

“Excuse me?” I jump, startled at having him suddenly so close. I didn’t hear him move from the bed at all, but now I can feel his heat close against my back.

“Your safe code. You used the date you kissed me for the first time.”

My cheeks heat. I did not expect him to remember that day at the secret beach, let alone know the date and link it to my safe.

Surprising me with a tender kiss to my temple he says, “That day means a lot to me too.”

Before I can reply, he reaches over my shoulder, and selects my favourite blade from training and a holster for it.

“No pockets,” he complains, shutting the safe back up and turning to strap the holster to my thigh. My nerve endings spark at the tickle of his touch on the tender skin. As he pulls away I feel the phantom brush of his fingers dance cross my pussy, but it’s so light I swear I’m imagining it.

“Fucking perfect,” he says, smoothing my dress down and getting to his feet. “I wish you had a string of pearls, it would really complete the look.”

I snort. I’m not a string of pearls sort of girl at all. Although after learning how they can be used in the bedroom in a romance book I once read, maybe it’s time to invest.

I follow Baxter out to the car, noticing that he grabs a black duffel bag at the front door and slings it in the boot.

“Are we overnighting?” I ask. “Should I have packed a bag?”

“Nope. You have your blade, I have mine.”

“You need a bag that big for one knife?”

“You’ll see.” He grins and I have to squeeze my thighs together. Damn, I really wish I’d worn panties now.

“Will it take long to get there?”

“A few hours. Wanna take a nap?”

“Erm, why?”

“Because there won’t be any sleeping when we get there. Not for the foreseeable future at least.”

“How long is that?”

“At least twelve hours. Maybe more. Depends on you and your stamina, I guess.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about but decide to listen to his advice. I recline my chair a little and close my eyes. Pretty soon the rhythm of the road draws me under.

“Time to wake up, princess.”

I yawn and stretch, surprised that I seem to have slept the entire way. I smooth down my dress which has ridden up in my sleep and glance at Baxter who’s watching me intently.

“What?” I ask, crinkling my brow.

“Spoil sport. I’ve been enjoying the view for the last hundred miles.”

“It’s rude to fondle someone in their sleep.” I smirk, knowing he did no such thing.

“I wish. Even I’m not that good. There’s no way I can drive and not be completely distracted by your body. Though you seemed to be having...interesting dreams. Almost crashed the car once or twice with the things coming out of your mouth.” He grins, and my cheeks heat at his insinuation. Oh god, I hope he’s teasing. I’m pretty sure I wasn’t having sex dreams.

Baxter jumps out of the car, grabs his bag from the boot and then opens my door for me like some chivalrous knight or something.

“Are we here?” I ask, blinking out into the darkness. It’s pitch-black tonight, and although it’s a clear night with a billion stars in the sky, there’s no moon to cast light on where we are. “Wow it took longer to get here than I thought.”

“It did. I had to take the scenic route. And I didn’t want to wake you, so I may have driven around a little extra... Your dark palace awaits you, princess.”

Hmm cryptic, but still exciting.

I let him take me by the hand and lead me along the path. I use my phone in my free hand to light the way, but Baxter seems confident without the guiding light. The path leads off into some trees and after a few minutes walking through a forest, we come out in a clearing with a small cabin sitting beside a lake, the surface like pure black glass.

“Wow, that’s beautiful.”

“You should see it in the daylight.”

“Is it big?”

“The important question isn’t how big it is, it’s how deep.”

“And how deep is it?”

“Incredibly.” Baxter grins at me, and I instantly know that this is where his bodies – some of them at least – are buried. Although, is buried the right word when they’re dumped in a loch or a lake?

“Want to see what’s waiting for us inside?”

I feel nervous suddenly. The bag of tools, the long drive, the remote location, his promise of a long night...wanting me to wear white. We’re not here for a romantic night away or even raw, bloody sex. This is one of Baxter’s kill houses, his workspaces, and he has a job to do. I just know it.

“Why did you bring me here?” I ask with trepidation.

Although I’m a murderer, I’m not a killer. Or is it the other way around? I’m not sure. But I don’t do what Baxter does. I couldn’t. And I certainly wouldn’t take pleasure in it, the way he seems to.

“Wait and see,” he grins at me but it’s not reassuring. It’s not a teasing smile, but a full dark psychotic grin that makes me shiver in nervous anticipation. Yet I still want to walk into the cabin by his side and face whatever surprise awaits me.

“Let’s do this,” I say with determination that’s entirely faked.

“Good girl.” His praise makes me flush, and I vow to be brave as I follow him from the water’s edge to the cabin.

He opens the door and steps back to allow me in first. My jaw drops.

The cabin is cosy and warm, a real log fire burning in the grate and lamps casting a soft glow around the small lounge area. Beyond the lounge is a small kitchen, and to the left, there’s a corridor with three doors. There’s a hide rug on the floor and woollen blankets draped over the soft brown leather sofas. I blink in surprise.

“Were you expecting a dungeon or torture chamber or something?” Baxter asks, walking in behind me and smirking when he sees my expression.

“Well...yeah,” I say, confused. Maybe I got this wrong and he has brought me here for a romantic night of stabby sex.

“It’s downstairs,” he deadpans back. I laugh.

“Bedroom, bathroom, stairs to dungeon.” He points to each of the three doors in turn before dropping his bag on the floor in the corner of the room with a loud thunk. “Don’t get them confused or you could end up in trouble.”

I take a seat on the sofa and watch the fire crackle and pop.

“How come the fire’s already on when it’s taken us so long to get here?”

“I had a friend pop in and start it for us. Dinner should be ready in five minutes too.”

“You have friends?” I tease.

“An associate,” he corrects. “I’ll dish up. It’s just pasta but I know it’ll be good, and I have some wine that’ll go nicely with it.”

“How do you know it’ll be good?”

“Because my associate knows I’d kill him if it wasn’t.”

I’m pretty sure he’s joking but with Baxter I never truly know. He heads into the small kitchen area to sort dinner, so I take the opportunity to freshen up in the bathroom. It’s rustically opulent and inviting, all wood panels, lush plants and slate tiles. I stick my head into the bedroom and take in the giant wooden bed that dominates the space with little else in the room beside two side tables with lamps, another hide rug on the wooden floor, and a small log burner in the corner which is emitting a soft glow.

Then I hesitate at the final door, my hand resting on the knob. I shake my head at how silly I’m being. It’s probably just a closet or something. A log store maybe...Even if it *does* lead to a basement, it’s probably just used for storage.

I decide to leave it be and head back to the sitting area to enjoy my time with Baxter.

Ace: Big problem. Need help. Family. Not know who to asking.

Baxter: Tell me.

Ace: Forwarded message.

Baxter: Ace, how long have you been dealing with this?

Ace: Always. Whole life. Bad family. Bad men. Before uncle, father.

Baxter: Tell him he has a deal. Leave the rest with me. I will have your entire family out of there and safe by morning.

Ace: No good. Run before. Uncle powerful. Find. Spies everywhere.

Baxter: Your uncle will be dead before he even knows they're gone. Send me a list of every rotten apple in your family tree. It's time to clean house.



CHAPTER THIRTY - SIX

Baxter

“Sorry there’s only the coffee table. I never thought about putting a small dining area in before.” I frown. I’ve never had company here before. Well, not the kind that I feed and socialise with, and definitely not the kind that leave the premises still breathing.

“It’s perfect. And it smells delicious.” Raven smiles, eyeing the two steaming plates of pasta and two large glasses of red wine that I’ve laid out on the low rough wooden coffee table, along with cutlery. We take our seats and dig in.

“God, this is gorgeous.” Raven groans seductively, the sound shooting straight to my groin and stirring my cock to life. “You should get your friendly associate to cook for me more often.”

I frown again.

“You like him. Because he cooks?” I vow to kill him at the first opportunity I have. Right after I learn to cook so that I can elicit those sounds from her outside of the bedroom.

“God yeah, this is heaven. Don’t you dare tell Ace!”

I smile at the panic on her face when she realises that she just foodgasm cheated on her favourite chef.

“I guess we all have our roles,” I say, thinking of how easily I seem to have fitted into this new life with a girlfriend, a kid and four...brother husbands? Fuck, that’s fucking weird. I’ve never fit in anywhere and suddenly *this* is my calling in life?

Raven laughs.

“Funny you should say that. Nix has given you all nicknames. Though I strongly suspect she was heavily influenced by Thorn.”

“Hit me. What are they?”

“Well, Jax is strict daddy.”

“Obviously.” I smile. He’s even more uptight than me, and I didn’t think that was possible.

“Rebel’s bad word daddy. Thorn’s fun daddy...”

“Of course.” I raise my brows and shake my head. He’s such an asshole. Like a damn kid pouting all the time. Though of course, Rebel’s not much better.

“Ace is apparently sugar daddy because he gives her cookies.” A surprised laugh slips free and Raven grins at me. “I know. I’m trying to get her to change it to cookie daddy or something.”

“I can just imagine her lost in a supermarket and asking customer service for her sugar daddy.”

“We’d be arrested,” she says with a laugh.

We finish up our meal in silence and when we’re done we move on to the wine.

“Who am I then?” I ask, noticing that she neglected to mention *my* nickname from Nix earlier.

“Oh! You’re danger daddy.” She giggles.

“Like Danger Mouse?”

“She’s not old enough to know who that is.” She shakes her head. I think about it for a moment. Why would she call me that then unless...

“Do I scare her?” I ask, horrified.

“What?! No! Of course not. This is all Thorn. It’s probably because you deal with all the dangers we face. He’s just being a smart ass.”

I hope so. I would hate for Nix to see the real me. The one that isn’t worthy of a love so pure and given so freely by her and Raven.

“Hey, stop that.” She slips her hand into mine and squeezes, knowing exactly what I’m thinking. Suddenly, I worry that this was all a horrible idea.

But it’s too late now.

My prey is in the basement, which really *is* a torture dungeon. And it's my gift to Raven.

"We should get started," I say, finishing my wine and placing the empty glass on the table.

"Okay," Raven smiles at me and I see that excitement has replaced the fear from earlier. Maybe she thinks this is a sex thing.

It's not.

I take her hand and pull her to her feet.

"Ready to enter the dungeon?" I ask and she laughs nervously. "Want to lead the way?"

"Sure, sure," she replies sarcastically, obviously not believing me.

Oh boy, she's in for a shock when we get downstairs.

I grab my bag and follow her along the corridor until she comes to stand in front of the closed door.

"Going down?" I tease. I pull out my phone which has automatically connected to the cabin's system and hit my favourite playlist: Murder Music. You can't hear it upstairs but down in the kill room, the mood will already be set for me.

Raven opens the door and I flick on the light to illuminate the stairs.

"It really is a basement," she says with confusion.

"Dungeon," I correct.

I shake my head in amusement and give her a gentle nudge forwards. With a shaky hand she takes the rail and descends. I follow. At the bottom of the steps there's another door which I reach past Raven to open this time. The door swings open, and once again I nudge her forward and into the space that's filled with my favourite tunes.

The room's shadowed, and when I shut the door behind me we're plunged into total darkness for a second until I switch on the lights. I blink rapidly to ensure I catch her reaction, and the second she spots my gift she turns to me, white as a sheet.

“What’s *she* doing here?” she hisses.

“I won’t allow any more threats against my family,” I tell her seriously. “She’ll keep trying. She’ll keep coming. She’ll find a court that will listen to her...or she won’t. Maybe she’ll take matters into her own hands. She’s not without connections after all. This way, my way, we can stop her once and for all.”

She stares at me, and I’m sure she’s horrified. It terrifies me, her reaction, but I know I can’t back down.

“Even if I lose you over this and you walk away right now...even if I have to live the rest of my life without you and Phoenix in it...even if I have to spend all eternity in hell, alone...I’m doing this. For our family.”

She swallows thickly and I’m sure I see tears glistening in her eyes, but I don’t understand why. If she ran across the room to free her grandmother right now, what would I do? I’d have to stop her but how far could I go? I couldn’t hurt her. But I have to do this.

“What is *this*?” She gestures to my kill room, even though it’s pretty obvious what happens down here.

“She can’t walk out of here alive.” I tell her emphatically. “No one ever does. You’ll be my one and only exception if you want to leave right now.”

“Do you want me to go?”

“Never. I want you by my side. My partner in all things.”

“You want me to help? With this?”

“If you want to,” I reply carefully. I don’t dare to get my hopes up but that would be the dream come true.

“I want to—” She hesitates and my heart soars and plummets faster than any thrill ride.

“Don’t worry.” I shrug like it’s no big deal, but inside my walls are fracturing. This could be the beginning of the end.

She stares at her grandmother, who’s strapped to the stainless-steel table in the centre of the room, her pearls

gleaming in the harsh fluorescent light.

My kill room is a work of art, absolute perfection designed by my own hand. I based much of the design off plans for a modern abattoir, but obviously on a much more...personal scale. At the far end of the room I even have a deboning table, an acid bath, and a cold room. There's nothing I can't do in here, I have it all: hanging devices and stretching racks; ceiling harnesses and pulley hoists; saws, hammers and cleavers; even a wide selection of poisons. I have cleaning stations, ventilation and extraction, a sprinkler system for easy wash down when I'm done, even a sloped drainage system with infills to prevent solid waste blockage. It's soundproofed, has its own bathroom, air conditioning and my beloved speaker system. My favourite is the refrigerated minibar stocked with snacks and tipples for when I'm really in the zone and don't want to be bothered with traipsing all the way upstairs just to grab a drink or some food.

It's my happy place.

And this is the first time I've ever shared it with someone not on my payroll.

"You know," Raven says, giving me a sideways look as she slowly turns and takes in everything else in the room besides her tied-up, unconscious granny. "Some of this stuff looks kinky as fuck. I bet we could have a lot of fun in here."

"It would be my pleasure and an honour to bleed for you in here, goddess."

"Goddess? I like that." She smirks. "So how are we doing this? Wanna play or get dirty first?"

The grin that stretches across my face at her words probably looks deranged as hell but I don't care. I think I just found Nirvana and my fucking goddess to enjoy it with.

"Well, it would be a shame not to ruin that dress..."

"Now I know the reason you wanted pearls," she says, nodding at Cordelia.

"She'll freak when I wake her up and tell her you're not wearing any underwear."

“You don’t think the t-o-r-t-u-r-e will freak her out more?”

“More than breaking decorum? No way,” I scoff and she laughs. I’m not used to laughter in this room and I have to say, I love it. Raven watches Cordelia carefully. She looks to be sleeping peacefully, but I know how heavily sedated she is.

“You sure about this?” I ask her. “You can go. My good cooking associate is on standby to take you home if you like.”

“You’re not afraid I’ll run away with him and die of foodgasms?”

“Well, you could just sit upstairs until I’m done. The tub is pretty good and there’s a hot tub on the back porch overlooking the loch.”

“I’ve died and gone to heaven. But no, I want to...do this.” She hesitates again. “It’s just...I don’t know how.”

“What do you mean?” I cock my head to the side as I stare at her, not comprehending.

“I don’t know how to...make it hurt enough. She’s vile. Just standing here now, looking at her asleep on that cold metal slab...I wish I were looking down at her dead body. But I also want her to hurt, to really suffer, for everything she’s done. I’ve never known anyone as despicable as her. And while I want her to suffer – to *really* suffer – I don’t know how to make it hurt *enough* like she truly deserves.”

“Allow me,” I reply, moving over to stand in front of her and taking her hands in mine. “Call it my early wedding present to you.”

She gasps and I let go of her right hand to pull out my favourite blade. It’s the one she stabbed me in the thigh with and the one we only use in the bedroom. I’d never let anyone’s blood or flesh taint it after what we shared. I drop to one knee and hold the blade up in offering to her.

“Oh my god, are you seriously proposing right now? Here? Like this?” she gasps.

“I’ve thought about nothing but. This is my happy place and I want to share it with you. Isn’t it perfect?”

She considers my words then nods.

“Most people propose with a ring.”

“You have two rings and a fiancé by stealth already. We don’t exactly do things the normal way. But if you’ll let me, I want to give you a ring with this.” My eyes drop to the blade and the rings she already wears on the ring finger of her left hand.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes, I’ll marry you.”

I almost think I’m dreaming. The only giveaway that I’m not, is that my dreams are always bathed in blood and we’re yet to spill any here.

I kiss the back of her hand and slowly remove the rings that mark her as theirs, ready to add my own, more permanent, brand. With a steady hand and more delicate precision than I’ve ever used in my life, I draw the tip of the blade around her finger, creating a perfect band of blood. She hisses at the sting but we both know she loves it and has endured worse.

I pocket the actual engagement rings. The new one from Rebel and the one given to her when they were just kids still. I know she’ll go back to wearing them, but tonight is mine and the only thing she’ll wear is my mark.

I get to my feet and kiss her deeply, full of promises I intend to keep or will die trying to. She kisses me back with equal passion, and we’re only disturbed from ripping each other’s clothes off by the sound of Cuntdelia coming around.

“Later, goddess. Don’t distract me from my work.” I kiss her once more and leave her standing where she is as I move over to the workbench to empty my bag. This room is equipped with every gadget and toy I could imagine, but I still carry my favourites with me everywhere I go.

Once the bag is unpacked, my tools laid out in perfect rows in the order I prefer to use them, I turn up the music and tell Raven to make herself comfortable. I hear her move across

the room and lift herself up onto my deboning bench, which I know will give her an excellent view of my work.

Smiling, I take a deep breath and get into the zone. I promised Raven an early wedding present, and I damn well plan to make it the most spectacular work of art anyone has ever seen.

Ace: Deal uncle.

Stanislav: Well done. See, that wasn't so hard, was it? And your father – god rest his soul – said you were retarded. And yet here you are proving that you're smarter than him by keeping the rest of your family alive.

Stanislav: Well, they'll be kept alive if the first shipment of girls arrives in time. Otherwise I'll have to fill those slots...

Stanislav: Pleasure doing business with you, nephew.



CHAPTER THIRTY - SEVEN

Raven

I can't take my eyes off Baxter while he works. I sit on one of his smooth stainless-steel benches – the one that affords me the best view without messing up his equipment – I vow to watch it all. When he started, I was worried that I'd have to force myself to sit through it, to like it, for him. But when he got to work and Cordelia's screams of pain mingled with the crescendos of his powerful classical music, I found myself loving every minute of it.

For hours he's been carving up Cordelia's flesh. I've seen him remove fingers and toes, use pliers and blades. Even a meat cleaver. He's removed teeth and nails. Even used a blowtorch numerous times. I would have loved that if it weren't for the smell.

My favourite was when he used a paintbrush to spatter acid over her skin. The sizzling could be heard over the delicate choral track playing at the time. I realised that his playlist and his method are intrinsically tied, the tool he uses always perfectly matching the symphony playing.

Watching him work, I see him for the artist that he is. Precise, exacting, a perfectionist. It doesn't matter that his tools are blades, his canvas is flesh, and his paint is blood. He's every bit as talented and worthy of praise as the overpaid works of toffs that people stick on their walls. At least Baxter works with *feeling*.

Not to mention how damn sexy he looks doing it. I expected him to strip off or wear a boiler suit or something. At the very least to remove his pristine white shirt. But of course he doesn't. How silly of me to expect anything so pedestrian of him. He *has* rolled his sleeves up, but that's his only allowance to acknowledge how hard he's working. Obviously he's a little dirty, but nothing even close to what I was expecting. I think it's nothing short of miraculous. We get dirtier in the bedroom.

Although there is something about tweed pants, rolled shirt sleeves and braces that makes me weak at the knees. My nipples are pebbled thanks in part to the cool air from the AC, but largely from watching Baxter wield his blade with ruthless efficiency and precision. It's fucking hot.

And it probably shouldn't be. But after everything I've been through, I'm absolutely done with thinking, feeling and behaving how I 'ought'. I'm done with it all. Especially expectations. Baxter fucking Branson carving up Cuntdelia as a wedding gift to me, to our entire family, is the most romantic thing I've ever witnessed, not to mention the fucking sexiest. So if I want to sit on an ice cold slab of metal and drip my arousal all over it, I damn well will, and no one is going to make me feel bad about it.

"You okay, goddess?" Baxter asks, wiping sweat from his brow and glancing up at me. I have no idea how he manages to stay so clean, especially when he likes to make such a mess in the bedroom.

I decide he needs dirtying up a little.

I jump down off the bench and stalk towards him, my gaze heated and full of intent.

"I told you it would be a long night," he says unapologetically. There's a real gleam of excitement and joy in his eyes. He loves this. His work. Torturing and killing people. It suits him. He looks happier than I've ever seen him — including when I plunged a knife into his thigh.

"It's perfect," I say, kissing him. "You're perfect."

"I'm dirty." He pulls away, trying to keep his bloodstained hands off me, but I don't let him go far.

"That's funny, I was just thinking about how clean you look."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I came over to see if I could tempt you to dirty up a bit."

His gaze darkens to a blazing black and I shiver in anticipation, excited this time.

“You’ve been tempting me since the day we met, goddess.”

He wraps me in his arms and I feel the warm blood seep through my dress. After hours of sitting on a cold metal slab, the warmth is actually welcome.

I ignore the sobbing, pleading wench of a woman on the bench behind me, and focus solely on Baxter. Looping my arms around his neck, I jump and wrap my legs around his waist, giving him no choice but to catch me. His hands palm my ass under my dress and I swear I’m so turned on that my scent even overpowers the perfume of blood and imminent death on the air.

“You’re fucking divine,” he murmurs reverently, and I can’t hold back a moment longer. My control snaps and I launch myself at him, kissing him with everything I have, pouring everything I feel, all that I owe him, all that I am, into my kiss. He takes everything I give him and gives it right back until I’m a panting, trembling mess in his arms.

“Please,” I beg, breaking away just to breathe.

“I’m not done here.”

“Just take a little break. I can’t wait. I love watching you work.”

He grins at me, truly happy that I’ve said that, and I can tell he knows how much I mean it.

“I don’t have all night,” he warns.

“Trust me, I won’t take long,” I promise.

In two short strides he’s crossed back to the table where Cordelia is strapped. At this point, given the feeble state of her, I think the restraints are pointless. He perches me on the edge of the metal table, next to her legs, and gets me to lean back. I have to grip the other side of the table’s edge, meaning my arms cross over her legs, but I don’t care. At this point she isn’t even human to me. If she ever was.

She makes a strangled, angry, sort of sound. Somewhere between outraged and indignant and I have to laugh at how right Baxter was. Does she give a fuck that she's hours if not minutes away from death? No. The only thing she cares about is the fact we're about to fuck like rabbits in her vicinity. *Sans condom too*. Oh the horror!

I spread my legs wide, my not so white dress bunched up around my waist, and Baxter stares at me like I'm an ice lolly on the hottest day on record.

"Wait!" I cry out as he reaches for me.

"What?"

"Cut out her tongue. I don't want to hear her."

"She'll still be able to make noise," Baxter chuckles. "It's something of a myth. But she won't."

"Why not?"

"Well one, because it hurts like hell. And two, because I'll kill her if she dares make a sound." He glares at her and she actually looks cowed for once. "Anyway, I can't cut her tongue out yet, but I will. I still need to have a little chat with her."

"Okay, carry on then."

He grabs his blade, the one that I suspect has become his favourite since I stabbed him with it, and he kisses it to the inside of my thigh.

Our ritual.

The pressure builds until the skin yields and the relief of Baxter claiming another of my scars as his own almost makes me come undone.

He lowers his head to kiss the cut he's made but I stop him.

"No time," I hiss. "I need you, now."

He shrugs, drops the blade safely away from Cordelia and unzips his pants. He pulls out his cock, already rock hard and glistening with arousal, and lines himself up at my entrance.

The bench is the perfect height for fucking people up *and* for fucking me. He really does think of everything.

He enters me in one thrust and I cry out at the relief he brings me, my greedy muscles already clamping down around him, begging for a quick release. He doesn't disappoint. With his thumb on my clit, he pistons his hips back and forth, rubbing the nub in time to his frantic movements. I have to cling on for dear life, back arched and animalistic grunts falling from my lips. I can't help it, I don't want to control it. It feels damn good and it sounds like exactly what it is. Baxter Branson fucks like a wild fucking animal and I wouldn't have him any other way.

He pinches my thigh, right where he cut me and I scream my release louder than any tortured shriek he elicited from Cordelia. He grins and watches me thrash through my orgasm, not letting up on the pace or the pinch, and I quickly feel my orgasm roll into two. I'm a sweaty, panting mess as I beg him to fill me.

He bites my earlobe as he curses his own release, his cock pumping and twitching until he's spent. Forehead to forehead we rest for a moment to recover, and before he even pulls out of me, he grabs a knife and plunges it into Cordelia's abdomen. She screams.

"Ah shit, I better cauterise that. Don't want her bleeding out before we've had all our fun with her, do we?" He sighs and shakes his head, giving me the impression that this particular move wasn't planned. I feel a flush of pride; I made Baxter Branson lose control.

"Sorry, babe," he says, withdrawing. I wince. "There's a bathroom through there if you wanna get cleaned up."

I hop down from the table and remove my dress where I stand, letting it fall to the floor. That dress might be beyond all help when it comes to laundry. Baxter's gaze heats all over again.

"Down boy, you have a job to do. Rewards come after."

"What was that then?"

“Incentive to finish the job.”

“Fuck! If that was an incentive, I can’t wait for my reward.”

“Focus.” I laugh and head for the shower, quickly cleaning up. The facilities down here are practical and functional, a far cry from the lovely bathroom upstairs. I don’t waste any time; I don’t want to miss anything good.

Done, I head back into the kill room where Baxter’s already back at it, working hard to earn his reward. I catch his eye and smile. He blows me a bloody kiss.

A yawn escapes me – I can’t help it, I’m always sleepy after orgasms that good – and Baxter instantly downs tools to come over to me. Well, when I say puts down his tools, I mean he leaves the burning blow torch on the bench, touching Cordelia’s palm, and he places the knife he was just heating up back *in* her abdomen for safe keeping.

I laugh. I love it. This. Him.

“Go to bed. I won’t be long now. Just need to have that little chat.”

“And the tongue,” I remind him. Maybe if she loses her ability to speak, she won’t be able to haunt me once she’s dead. I should have cut out Michael’s tongue. Maybe then I’d have some peace.

“As if I’d forget. What my lady wants, my lady gets.”

“Hmm, I’ve obviously fallen off the pedestal if I’ve gone from goddess to lady just from one quick fuck.”

“There’s no noun in the world good enough to describe what you are to me, enchantress.” He kisses me. “I want you to deliver the final blow. She should die by your hand, not mine.”

I don’t reply to that, but the idea does hold an appeal. There’s no denying I want to hurt her. Or that I like what Baxter’s been doing.

“Take my blade, here.” He presses a new, unused knife into my hand. “Cut her right here...” He points to an unmarred

patch of skin. “And she’ll bleed out slow enough to sing like a canary.”

I don’t hesitate: I do exactly what he says and I fucking enjoy it. I don’t even take my time to savour it, far too eager to just *do it*. It makes Baxter laugh but he’s delighted by my enthusiasm I think.

He kisses me once more as he takes the knife from me.

“Good girl. You’re phenomenal at that.”

I flush from his praise, kiss him, stifle another yawn, and leave him to it. Sleep calls, and for once it’s peacefully, perfectly dreamless.

Baxter: You have a huge fucking problem.

Amelie: Hello to you too, Batman. Have you heard of time zones where you come from? Some of us do sleep you know.

Baxter: You don't sleep. You take over the world and fuck your little harem of sycophants.

Amelie: Careful...

Amelie: What is so important that you felt the need to interrupt a damn good fuck for?

Baxter: Was it the teacher? I bet you still call him Sir.

Amelie: Goodnight Baxter. Fuck with me again and I'll block your goddamn number.

Baxter: Like I said. You have a huge fucking problem so quit sucking dick and call me from a secure line. Immediately.



CHAPTER THIRTY - EIGHT

Baxter

As soon as my beautiful bloodstained goddess has gone, I get to work quickly. I don't have a lot of time, and this bitch beneath me is too stubborn to confess her sins without a little encouragement.

Dumping all of my used equipment into the sink, I quickly wash the worst off and cross to where I keep my poisons and other little helping hands. I take a syringe from the glass jar on the shelf and select a small glass medical vial from my collection. Nothing is labelled, but I know what and where everything is. I'm always meticulous like that. I pierce the top with the needle, turn upside down and draw the clear liquid into the syringe, filling it past what I really need. Can't be too careful with these things.

When the syringe is fully loaded, I remove it from the bottle and return the vial to its rightful place on the shelf.

I cross back to Cordelia.

I refuse to give this woman any feeling but my loathing, but I have to admit that she has held up better than I expected. Not because she's strong or anything admirable like that, simply because she's a stubborn fucking stuck up bitch.

But that's the beauty of it. The higher she sits, the further she falls. And I'm about to witness her fall from grace.

I take out my phone and hit record, before plunging the needle into her flesh and emptying it in one. I give it the requisite few minutes to enter her bloodstream and really start working, and then I wake her with a bucket of ice water over her head.

She splutters and groans, obviously really feeling what I've put her body through for the last however many hours it's been. I don't know, I can't keep track. Having Raven in the room was such a distraction. But the best kind.

I turn my attention back to the almost-corpse on the table in front of me.

“Ready to confess?”

She glowers at me, stubborn to the very end, but I know that’ll soon wear off. Maybe the serum needs another minute. I bide my time fiddling with the music volume so that my recording doesn’t miss a thing she says.

“Let’s begin,” I say when the current song comes to an end and another begins. Ah, *Façades*, is there a more perfect confessional tune?

“Were you behind Lizzie’s death?”

“Of course,” she replies remorselessly. Usually, I would know that it’s the truth serum working, but I think this bitch is just *that* cold.

“Why?”

“I needed her gone. I need them all gone.”

“Who?”

“Charlotte. Her mother. Phoenix. The Deightons. Every last one of them.”

“Aren’t you a Deighton?”

“By marriage. I take my work very seriously.” She confirms my grandfather’s suspicions.

“You’ve been undercover this whole time.”

“Bravo. And they said those in The Order were smart. Took you all long enough.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you but Raven’s parents are alive,” I say. “And so’re Lizzie, Raven, and Nix so it looks like you’ve failed. Spectacularly.”

“Are they? Are you sure about that? When was the last time you saw or spoke to them?” She laughs, a cold, cruel sound which has me wanting to plunge every blade I own into her flesh. She splutters and chokes on the end of it, agony rippling through every line on her face. It does nothing to cool the fiery rage racing through my blood.

“And Lizzie? You knew she was alive.”

“She’s alive for now. Not for long. I never suspected until your grandfather let something slip. But it’s okay, I have people working on that. They’ll have her soon enough.”

I feel relief at the knowledge that Lizzie is okay. She’s out there somewhere, hiding from everyone, but at least she’s alive. My emergency message to Macerio must have been just in time. I’m infinitely grateful that I followed them from the hospital and struck a deal with him to keep Lizzie and his family safe from the repercussions of The Order, in exchange for maintaining contact with them. The single use burner phones were a touch of genius on his part, even though I hated lying to Raven, I knew I had to.

I trust Amelie with my life, but she’s bound more tightly by the rules of The Order than anyone, and so I can’t trust her with my *family’s* lives. Faking rage and confusion over their ‘disappearance’ was essential. Lying to Raven about it was heartbreaking though.

“Why would you leave everything to them in your will if you want them dead?” It doesn’t make sense to me.

“Appearances! You damn fool! Appearances are everything. The world needed to know how much I *appeared* to love my tragic, damaged little family.”

“How does it feel to know it’s all backfired? Those girls are going to get everything and we’ll make sure your name, your legacy, every lie you’ve ever told is exposed and trashed in the process.”

“I’m one small cog in a large machine. They won’t stop coming for them.”

“Why not just kill them decades ago? Why even have children with their grandfather? It makes no sense!”

She laughs, a deep rasp as she struggles to breathe. A sudden panic fills me that she might die too quickly, that I’m not going to get all the answers I need. Fuck!

“Ap-pear-anc-es. Aren’t you supposed to be bright?”

“Why did you have Michael rape and knock Lizzie up?”

Anger flashes across her face.

“That was *not* part of the plan!” she snaps. “But he was punished for his digression.”

“You mean you used Raven to clean up your mess? Of course. Michael was a loose cannon, a psychopath you couldn’t control, so you played on Raven’s grief at losing her sister and concocted an elaborate revenge plan, knowing she’d take him out for you.”

“Everyone always does my dirty work for me.”

“Even Tilly?”

“On my payroll.”

“Why?”

“Money. Wealth. Status. I may have promised her hand in marriage to one of the boys. A boost from a more obscure corner of the family tree to the main branch. That part of the family’s pretty desperate to cling on to their status despite their dwindling wealth, don’t you know?”

“Michael...and Charlie. Charlie wasn’t acting out of some revenge plan for his family, was he? He was acting on *your orders*, to kill Raven.”

“I should have known he was as unreliable and unstable as his damn cousin. The pair of them couldn’t keep it in their pants long enough to get the damn job finished properly. But it’s okay, there are others. That’s the thing you should have realised, you work for *The Order* so you should know... records, deaths, family trees...*everything* can be falsified.”

Fuck. How deep do the roots on her rotten tree go? And how the hell does she know this much about The Order? Has my grandfather double crossed us? No. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t. But someone has.

She laughs wickedly when my confused emotions play out across my face. I’m close to losing it. Think! I need to think, what questions do I still have? So many, and every answer she gives seems to throw up more. I don’t have much time. I need to prioritise.

“Who do you work for?”

“I am a Deighton! I don’t work!” Even as she’s dying, she manages to sound affronted and self-righteous.

“You said you were a small cog in a large machine. Who’s coming after my family?”

“Family.”

I shake my head. What does she mean? Family is coming after family? But whose, hers, mine, ours? Or does she mean *Family* like the way she said *The Order*?

“With you dead, are the girls safe?”

“Never.”

“You’re wrong. I *will* get to the bottom of this. I will protect them with my life.”

“There are some people even you cannot kill.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that if I were you.”

“Tick Tock, Baxter. Tick Tock.”

“Tell me who the mole is!” I demand in frustration. I can see the light fading from her eyes. Fuck! I need actual answers. This isn’t enough to take back to Raven.

“Mole, Rat, Badger, Toad of Toad Hall,” she sing-songs in response automatically.

Fuck. She’s had some sort of training.

We have it in *The Order*. Well, the higher ups do. We have to go through all sorts of resistance training so that we don’t spill secrets under torture, but learning to resist ‘truth serums’ is the worst. *The Order* don’t give a fuck if you spill your deepest darkest secrets, so long as you don’t breathe a word about theirs. You get trained to trigger an automatic nonsensical response upon hearing certain words under stress. Just like Cuntdelia has.

I try again with a forced calm I am absolutely not feeling.

“Who is the leak?”

“Leeks and spuds and pumpkin pie, squash and rye, now stab my eye,” she sings.

“That might just be the best idea to ever come from your mouth,” I growl. “Don’t mind if I do.”

I snatch whichever blade is closest to me – which turns out to be an ice pick – and drive it straight into her eyeball. It makes a deliciously satisfying pop, followed by a squelching sound which I only just manage to catch over the Cunt’s screams.

In my anger I break another bone.

Then right on time my Teas made beeps to announce it’s finished. I fucking love this machine. The perfect brew, made just how I like it, on a timer. I call it my death brew.

I cross to retrieve my all-time favourite mug – a gift from Amelie, a white ceramic thing with the words “Stabbers gonna stab” emblazoned across it in a sexy stabby sort of font – and pull out the metal folding chair that I keep for this ceremony. The Death. It’s always spectacular to watch, and it’s exactly why control is so important.

I’d love something a little more comfy for this ritual, but practicality takes precedent. Luckily for me, I do such a good job in the prep work that I don’t ever have to wait long.

I take my seat and sip my tea, waiting and watching as the life slips out of her. I wonder if I did enough, made her hurt enough to be worthy of Raven’s love and hand in marriage? I can only hope so.

She gives a strangled sob. A garbled scream. And then I hear it, the death rattle in her chest, the sign that her evil spirit is departing.

Music to my fucking ears.

Damn, this tea is good.

Raven's Diary

Present Day

I guess I could wax lyrical about the sunrise and how everything seems brighter now there's one less evil in the world...but poetry aside, it's true.

I can breathe in a way I haven't been able to in years. I feel peace like never before. So many of my demons have been released, and the ones that remain I'm happy to co-exist with.

I've never experienced anything so cathartic as sliding that blade in.

The best bit was Baxter joining me in bed afterwards and making love for the rest of the night...morning? Whatever. I mean, obviously it was still fucking – not to mention fucking hot – but not a drop of blood was spilled between us. I think we'd both had our fill downstairs and were content to worship each other in celebration of Cordelia finally being gone.

Speaking of which, he's stirring which means round...oh god I've lost count, but he never disappoints. Maybe in the cold light of day I can convince him to get a little stabby with me.



CHAPTER THIRTY - NINE

Jax

It's late afternoon the next day when Baxter and Raven finally turn up. Phoenix is out with the others, and I'm pretty sure she's conned them into taking her to soft play, McDonald's, and for an ice cream afterwards. She won't hear any complaints from Thorn, Ace and Rebel. I decided to stay home. I want to know how they got on and I need to make sure that Raven's okay before Phoenix gets back.

I'm in the kitchen fixing a snack when I hear the telltale click of the entry system announcing their arrival. Part of me wants to go out into the hall to greet them, but I force myself to remain in the kitchen and let them come to me.

Baxter appears first, saying nothing, just giving a small nod of his head to say it's done. We'll have to have a conversation later about the body. I think we should burn it but it'll make reporting her death more difficult without a body. It's easy enough to pay off the coroner. I'm sure Baxter has one on speed dial.

The trouble is, even though my head says that makes the most sense, my heart says that bitch deserves an empty casket like 'Lizzie' had.

I guess I'll take it to the family and we can vote on it.

Raven enters the kitchen and I feel like all the air is sucked from my body. She looks...radiant. More relaxed than I've ever seen her. She has a look about her of total peace. My heart beats faster as she smiles serenely at me. She looks tired, but the good kind.

"Hey, welcome back," I say, holding out my arms a little in welcome. She surprises me even further by crossing the room and falling into me, hugging me fiercely.

"I missed you. All of you. Where is everyone?"

"Nix conned the guys into taking her out for the day so no doubt she'll have been spoilt rotten."

She smiles and relaxes into my embrace, content to just rest and be for a moment. I relish it. We're not the cuddliest, cutest couple, and we often don't manage to carve out much time together so it's nice to have this moment. Baxter slips from the room leaving us to it.

"How are you doing?" I ask quietly, not really wanting to break the spell.

"I'm okay," she whispers back, not moving in my arms. "This is nice. You're so damn good at hugs. How didn't I know that?"

I chuckle. "Are you sure? Do you want to talk about it? You seem...at peace."

"Weirdly, I am. I think that makes me a horrible person but I'm too exhausted to care. Baxter said she confessed a lot but I asked him not to tell me. I'm not ready. I just needed to know we were justified in what we did and Baxter reassured me that even the devil would give me a free pass to waltz right into hell to kill her all over again, so I'm going to trust him and not feel any guilt."

I squeeze her even tighter and don't bother with words. Trust Baxter to know the perfect thing to say to ensure Raven's demons don't come back to haunt her with this one.

"Was it okay?"

"Baxter was...wonderful. Like an artist or a musician or something."

I smile. I know from watching him work on Charlie of course.

"It was amazing to watch."

"Ah, that explains it."

"What?"

"The tired but so content smile on your face. You got horny as hell watching him and spent today fucking, didn't you?"

"We may have celebrated a little..."

“Good.” I kiss her, feeling nothing but happiness for her.
“You deserve a celebration or two.”

She smirks.

“Or three,” I huff.

“Try seven. Eight if you count when she was still alive and I was in the...room with him.”

“Jesus.”

“I guess I woke the beast on holiday.”

“I’ll say! But he has been waiting a long time for you.”

“I don’t know how I missed it.” She shakes her head.
“Fancy a soak in the hot tub with me? Baxter made me exercise muscles I didn’t even know existed.”

“Of course. Go get in and I’ll bring us some drinks. Have you eaten?”

“Not since we had pasta last night. Baxter had some guy prep the cabin and cook for us but I guess he didn’t come back this morning to make breakfast. Just as well really.” She laughs and it’s lighter than ever.

“Okay, I’ll bring drinks and snacks. I’m no chef, but I think I can open a bag of crisps or something.”

She kisses me and I swat her on the ass playfully as she leaves, noticing for the first time that she’s wearing a shirt of Baxter’s and not a lot else. Damn, she looks good. And in a minute, when she’s wearing even less, she’ll look even better.

I quickly grab two cans of Coke from the fridge and a packet of crisps from the snack cupboard, which is considerably depleted considering Phoenix and the others all had a film last night with a ‘midnight’ feast. It was actually 8:30 p.m. but she didn’t know that. And she had a wonderful time.

Actually, as I walk out to the garden to join Raven in the hot tub and think about last night and today, I really should have made sure Phoenix had some proper food. I’ll ask Ace to cook us all something nutritious tomorrow.

“This is lovely, hurry up!” Raven calls when I step outside. I put the drinks and snacks on the table next to the tub and quickly strip off. I grab some towels from the warming box Rebel had installed, and when I turn back to climb into the tub, I find Raven checking me out.

“Aren’t you tired?” I pretend to grumble. “I’m not just here for you to ogle me, you know.”

“No. You’re here to wait on me hand, foot and finger too,” she replies with a throaty laugh that makes my dick throb and a playful splash.

“Watch it,” I warn.

“Or...else?” She tries to splash me again, lifting her foot this time but I’m too fast for her and I grab it. She shrieks as I start to tickle her foot.

“I forgot how ticklish you are.” I shake my head in amusement and she squeals and writhes and tries to escape me. Instead of breaking free she just thrashes around, and I use the moment of her distraction to pull her into my lap so that she’s straddling me.

“Dang that’s quite a view,” I say, admiring the way that being on my lap has elevated her nipples out of the warm water. I lean forward and take one into my mouth, sucking until she groans and grinds against me.

I pull back and grin at her.

“Too bad they’ll be home soon.”

“Gah! I never thought I’d miss those sleepovers at the childminder’s,” she complains.

“Well, there’s always once she’s in bed.”

She opens her mouth to reply but we’re interrupted by Nix’s scream of excitement ricocheting through the entire house.

“Baxter! Is Mummy home!?”

“Oh that’s lovely! I missed you too little miss!”

“I missed you Daddy, but I missed Mummy too.”

“You mean more.”

“Maybe.”

“Let’s go find her. I think she’s in the garden with Jax.”

As soon as he mentions the garden we jump out of the tub and frantically scrabble to wrap ourselves up in towels, only just managing to make ourselves decent before Nix is out the door and flying towards her mum, who catches her mid-jump like a ninja.

“Mummy! I had the best day ever! And yesterday. We had movies and popcorn and chocolate and sweets and I stayed up past midnight! And today we went to McDonald’s and soft play and we had ice cream! It was the best ever!”

Raven laughs and cradles Nix as she squirms in excitement and rattles off all the secrets she was supposed to keep. I smile when she catches my eye and wave them inside, bringing the drinks and snacks back in with me. Oh well, it was nice while it lasted.

“I’m going to take Nix up to give her a bath and get her into bed. It might take a while judging by this sugar high,” Raven calls with a laugh. I wave them off knowing that they need some time together. Besides, it will give me a chance to plan what we need to discuss in the family meeting once Nix is in bed.

First and foremost, I want to know the story behind the thin scabbed cut that circles her ring finger. And where the hell our ring went.

“Is Nix in bed?” I ask Raven when she reappears downstairs a few hours later. “You’ve been up there ages.”

“Yeah, she’s fast asleep. The guys tired her out.”

“Ha! I think she broke them.”

“Well she had a nice bath and we played for a while in her room. We talked about her day and the nicknames she has for

you. She's been asking which of you guys is her daddy, and I didn't really know how to answer her."

"What did you say?"

"I completely chickened out. I asked her who she wanted to be her daddy. She said all of you."

"There you go, even she gets it. It can be as simple as you need it to be. Are you ready?"

"Sure...for what?"

"Family meeting. Ace made paella for the occasion."

She laughs.

"Actually I'm starving. Let's do this."

We walk into the dining room where all the others are waiting, the food steaming hot in the centre of the table. Everyone greets us as we take our seats, and Ace plays hostess by dishing out generous platefuls of dinner. It smells amazing and the room's pretty quiet while we all dig in.

Thorn, Rebel and Raven bicker over the crispy bits at the bottom of the pan. When we're done, Ace serves up churros with dulce de leche and Raven just about dies and goes to food heaven.

I clear the plates, stack the dishwasher and top up everyone's drinks before taking my seat again. I place an unopened envelope in front of me and look expectantly around the table for everyone to fall quiet.

"Thank you for a lovely meal, Ace," I say. "And welcome home Raven and Baxter."

I feel awkward, nervous, oddly stiff and formal. It's stupid.

"So, we're having this family meeting to discuss the events and revelations of the last few days—"

"Ding, dong, the bitch is dead!" Thorn sings loudly and off key.

“Bitch is too good a word for her,” Rebel growls. I agree, but could really live without the interruption.

“Hang on, is she dead? She *is* dead, isn’t she? Oh my god, please don’t tell me you wimped out,” Thorn groans.

“She’s dead,” Raven whispers. I look at her in alarm but there’s no regret on her face, just a serene joy that’s radiant to behold.

God, I love her.

“Yeah!” Thorn crows, high fiving Rebel animatedly.

“Give us all the juicy details,” Rebel says. I huff in annoyance and he looks at Baxter and whispers “later.”

“We killed her,” Baxter says on a sigh.

“We?” My surprise is evident as the others’, who all stare in shock at Raven.

“Guilty?” She shrugs a little and smiles nervously.

“She was fucking magnificent,” Baxter adds.

“Fuuuuuuck, is anyone else fucking hard as fucking rock right now?” Rebel groans, adjusting himself under the table. Raven laughs, sounding relieved.

“Damn, I do wish I could have been there,” Thorn says.

Ace just smiles.

“Right, yeah, okay. So Baxter *and* Raven have taken care of Cordelia.”

“Cuntdelia,” Thorn corrects me.

“Yes. But now we have to discuss what we’re going to do with...erm...”

“The body?” Baxter supplies helpfully.

“Well, yes,” I say.

“You have lots of options,” Baxter offers. “It depends what you’re after.”

“Well she can’t just disappear. She’s too high profile for that.”

“Shame,” Ace mutters under his breath.

“Okay so we need the body to go through my coroner. I already suspected as much and had him on standby. He’ll rule the cause of death whatever I tell him, so what’ll it be? What do you want to tell the masses?”

“Something scandalous!” Thorn exclaims.

“No.” I shake my head. “I don’t want anything that could be cast back on Raven. I don’t want any gossip about how her wayward granddaughter put her in an early grave.”

“I don’t care,” Raven says, shrugging.

“I know, but humour me on this.”

“Can we at least say she had a heart attack after there was a home invasion?” Rebel suggests.

“I still think a sex scandal would be awesome,” Thorn adds.

“Just say she had a heart attack in her sleep or something, I don’t care,” Raven says again.

“Okay, the funeral. It’s going to be a big deal.”

“She doesn’t deserve a funeral,” Rebel mutters. Raven nods.

“I agree, but I think we have to have one.”

“Outside. No church.” Raven shudders. “No wake. No celebration of life. I want the absolute minimum we can get away with.”

“Okay. Leave it with me,” I promise her. “It’ll be fine.”

“And Nix isn’t going.”

“Of course,” I agree. “How are we going to tell Nix?”

“Once the media announces her death, I’ll talk to her.”

“Okay, princess. Let us know if you want to do it together.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Let’s talk about the next item on the list…” I say.

“You really did write a list didn’t you?” Thorn teases. Rebel snorts as I glower at him, and even Baxter is smirking a little.

Well, I’m about to wipe that smirk off his face.

“I want to know where your rings are, Raven.”

All eyes swivel to Raven’s left hand, and sure enough, the smirk leaves Baxter’s face and is replaced by a scowl.

Raven quickly covers her left hand with her right but it’s too late, we’ve all seen the thin red ring around her finger where her sapphire heart ring and Rebel’s usually sit.

“They’re here,” Baxter says on a sigh, pulling the rings from his pocket. “She didn’t want to get them bloody when we were busy.”

“Don’t, Baxter,” Raven warns with a shake of her head. “Don’t lie to them. It’s not a secret. I’m not ashamed.”

She removes her right hand and holds up her left for all of us to see more clearly. A very distinct red line circles her finger like a ring.

“What the hell is that?” Rebel snarls.

“Baxter proposed to me...and I said yes?”

“What the fuck?!” Rebel yells.

“Asshole! We had a plan!” Thorn adds.

Ace chuckles and I shake my head. I fucking *knew* it.

“I thought you were engaged to Ace?” I say scathingly. I can’t help it. I’m fucking pissed...I’m...jealous?

“Guys, I started wearing that ring for *all* of you. I wanted to show you I’m committed but it seemed, I don’t know, unfair or something. That ring represents us, before, and Baxter didn’t feel part of it,” Raven explains.

I get that, I do, but Baxter knows we had a plan to propose to Raven together on holiday. We agreed to wait when the whole Lizzie debacle happened, but I feel like he went back on that and jumped the gun to get in ahead of the rest of us.

“Look guys, this doesn’t change how I feel about you,” Raven insists. “I was struggling. I wanted to help with Cordelia but I was overwhelmed and didn’t know how. Baxter offered to help me, to do it for me, as a wedding present and it just made sense to say yes...and I wanted to. I want to belong to all of you, equally. I know we can’t all marry, but for now, this is enough.”

I soften at her words but I’m still annoyed. Did he really have to carve up her skin like that? I saw the fresh cuts on the inside of her thighs when we came back from the holiday. I don’t agree with it, and I haven’t asked her about it, but I’m sure there’s a reason why they do it. I’m not stupid enough to think it would be against her will or anything like that. But still...I hate the idea of her suffering even more than she already has.

“I think good. Happy blessings.” Ace beams at them and Raven smiles back. He shakes Baxter’s hand and claps him on the back.

“I guess it’s fair,” Rebel mumbles begrudgingly, even though he’s already engaged to her.

“But dude, we had a plan!” Thorn whines. Baxter shrugs.

“I’m not sorry.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean you had a plan?”

“You know what Thorn’s like. He got some romantic bullshit notion in his head for all five of us to propose to you together,” I say dismissively like it was no big thing and we didn’t spend weeks planning it.

“When was this?” she asks, looking puzzled.

“We were going to do it at the end of the holiday but...” Thorn trails off.

“Lizzie.” She sighs and looks down at the table.

“Yeah.”

“Guys—” she begins, looking up.

“It’s fine,” I say quickly. I don’t want to upset her. She’s happily engaged to Baxter so that’s a conversation for a different day. “We just want you to be happy. Don’t we?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course.”

“Absolutely.”

“I am,” she says. “Always will be, if I have all of you by my side.”

“Just put your rings back on,” Thorn grumbles.

“I will,” Raven promises, holding out her hand for them. Baxter slides them across the table and she quickly places them back in their rightful place.

I glance down at the envelope on the table. Maybe I shouldn’t say anything. Now’s not the right time to rock the boat, but I feel the contents burning a hole through the envelope, urging me to say something.

“Does anyone have anything else to talk about?” I ask.

“Actually yes. I want to talk about Nix,” Raven says.

“Okay.”

“Well, thanks to Thorn she’s started calling you all daddy something or other.” Thorn laughs.

“Sugar daddy,” Ace says happily. Rebel sniggers. “What?”

“Mate, that means something completely different to what you think it does.”

“Don’t care.”

“Oh trust me, you will when you get arrested.”

Baxter leans over and quickly explains to Ace what it means. His smile falls and is replaced with a look of horror and revulsion. He punches Thorn in the arm.

“Baraba¹! Kurac²! Podlo³...pizda⁴!” he curses and everyone around the table laughs.

“Well, aside from that, I’m worried Nix is getting confused,” Raven continues. “And I don’t really like the idea of one of you being labelled as fun while another is serious or strict or something. It’s not fair on any of you or Nix.”

“I’m okay, I’m fun dad,” Thorn brags.

“And I’m not?” I snap. I hate the stupid nicknames, though of course I’ll take any ‘dad’ title Nix wants to give me – if it comes from her and not Thorn and his damn pranks.

“I need to know that I can rely on you all to parent Nix fairly and properly. I don’t want any threats of ‘wait til your mum gets home’ if she needs discipline. I need you all to fulfil all roles. Be her friend and playmate, her confidante, her safe space. But also set boundaries, uphold rules, lead by example. I feel like there’s room enough for all of you to have a balanced relationship with Nix.”

“I agree,” Baxter says quietly.

“Yeah, me too,” I add, playing with the envelope on the table before me.

“You want to open it, don’t you?” Raven asks nodding at it.

“I think it’s time. It doesn’t change anything but—”

“But if Nix is starting to ask questions, we shouldn’t lie.”

“Yeah.”

“I really hope you guys believe me now when I say there’s no way in hell that Nix could be Baxter’s...”

“Of course we do! I’m so sorry about before—” she cuts me off with a raised palm.

“It’s okay. I just meant, if you trust us, he should be the one to open the envelope.”

“Okay.” I look at him. “Are you good with that?”

“Sure.”

I slide the envelope across the table like it’s loaded and Baxter takes it. My chest feels tight with anticipation even

though I know that the chances of Nix actually being mine are slim. She's so pale – more so than Raven – and even though my skin isn't that dark, I am mixed race. I just...can't see myself in any of her features at all.

“Before I do this, I have to ask, does anyone object?”

No one speaks, but Ace opens his mouth like he wants to say something, but then closes it again.

“Aljaž?” Raven asks nervously.

“Yes...No...Hudiča⁵!” he barks. “No want.”

“You don't want to know who the father is? Or you don't want to be the father?” I can hear the wobble in her voice even though it's crazy. Obviously it's not the latter—

“Both.”

My jaw drops and everyone around the table stares at Ace like his head's exploded. I feel like mine has. Only Baxter looks...understanding? What the hell is going on.

“Can you explain? Please?” Tears glisten in Raven's eyes but she doesn't let them fall. I want to sweep her into my arms and simultaneously punch Ace. What the hell is he thinking?!

“No matter who. But me?” Ace shakes his head. “Bad father.”

“Ace! You'd make a wonderful father. You all would. You all *do*.” Raven insists desperately. “The paper doesn't change anything, you're all great dads to Nix already.”

Ace shakes his head sadly.

“Bad genes. Bad family. Bad people.”

“That doesn't define you, mate,” I say.

“Bad brain,” he replies, tapping his temple. “Stupid. Can't learn. Don't...pass on bad.”

“Dude,” Thorn jumps in. “Literally no one here gives a fuck about your learning disabilities.”

“Family say stupid. Can't learn. Kill or be killed.”

“They are not your family, Aljaž!” Raven cries angrily, the tears flowing down her face now. “WE are your family. Not them. Phoenix would be damn lucky to inherit any of your amazing traits. You’re the kindest, softest, most loving and patient person I know. Everyone around this table has amazing qualities they can pass on to Phoenix, through nurture, not DNA.”

“Yeah, mate,” Rebel chimes in. “Besides, if we use your logic, Nix would already be fucked. She comes from one hell of a fucked-up family.”

While totally inappropriate, it does break the tension, and Raven gives a snort-laugh. Baxter passes her a silk handkerchief to use, because of course he has a damn handkerchief. It’s probably monogrammed. Raven cleans herself up and rounds the table to fall into Ace’s arms. He looks a little placated but still nervous as hell, and I get it. He’s had such a traumatic past, worse than the shitty ‘poor little rich boy’ parental issues of the rest of us – though of course Rebel suffered his fair share of trauma too – that the fear is ingrained in him. But it’s stupid, misplaced, brainwashed bullshit from the people he shares DNA with. I refuse to think of them as his family. As Raven said, we’re his family. And we’re going to need to show him that he’s worthy of being a father to Nix whatever the results inside that envelope say.

“Shall I open it?” Baxter asks. “We can do it another day.”

“Just do it. Right, Aljaž?”

“Ja⁶. Naredi⁷.”

“Okay.” Baxter takes a deep breath and carefully opens the envelope. He removes the stack of papers and slowly reads through the top sheet. I want to snap at him to hurry up, or better yet, snatch the papers from his hands myself, but I force myself to stay calm. It’s not me. It can’t be me. So it’s Thorn, Ace or Rebel. It doesn’t matter. It changes nothing...

But what if it changes everything? If there’s zero possibility that I’m Nix’s father, will Raven still want me around?

“It’s you,” Baxter’s voice cuts through my thoughts. “Ace. You’re Nix’s father. Congratulations.”

“Hudiča^s!” He lurches to his feet, almost toppling his chair over in the process, and shoving Raven off his lap.

Then he turns on his heel and leaves the room. A second later the front door slams and a stunned silence settles on the room.

Raven bursts into noisy sobs.

Thorn and Rebel look shell-shocked. I *feel* shell-shocked.

“Are you guys okay?” Baxter asks.

“Should I go after him?” Raven asks at the same time.

“No. Let him work through his demons. He’s just scared, I promise. He’ll come around,” I say, while crossing my fingers that it’s true.

“I-I-I’m going to go to bed,” Raven stammers. Her face is tear stained and even though they’re red-rimmed, the green of her eyes looks so bright. “Alone,” she quickly adds, as if any of us would consider trying to encroach on her space tonight

“Okay, do you want me to let you know when he gets home?” I offer.

“No.” She shakes her head sadly. “He can come to us when he’s ready.”

And then she leaves the room and an astonished silence falls on the rest of us once more.

Amelie: The tree is felled. And I don't say this often, but I owe you one. Thank you.

Baxter: And the family?

Amelie: Taken care of. For life.

Baxter: Thank you. I'll incur the costs.

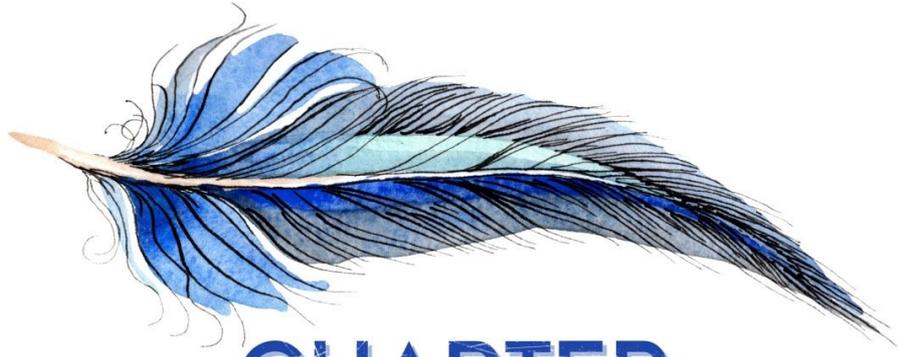
Amelie: No need. This one's on me, personally.

Baxter: Thank you.

Amelie: No need to thank me. We took care of the rotten apples too. I enjoy a nice little spring cleaning session, does wonders for the complexion. I do however, suspect the roots on this tree may go even deeper than we first thought. I won't have skin infiltrating The Order when we worked so hard to remove it.

Baxter: Have fun weeding them out.

Amelie: I always do.



CHAPTER FORTY

Ace

As I run, I can't stop thinking about that day at the airport. My feet pound the pavement and all I can picture is the moment when I caught sight of Raven's baby bump. I assumed Baxter was responsible and I wanted to kill him. Then I stupidly agreed to keep her secrets, the whole time not even realising that my wilful silence was taking me away from my own daughter.

Fuck.

I have a daughter.

And not just any daughter. I have the brightest, funniest, sassiest, most beautiful daughter that I'm already head over heels in love with. One that I've missed out on seeing grow and develop for almost four years. It hurts. Every first, every milestone, every memory I should have been there for. Times and experiences I'll never get back.

I love that girl as much as I love her mum, and together they were already my whole world before a piece of paper made it official.

I feel like, now I know Phoenix is mine, I'm supposed to love her more or feel a stronger bond or something, but the truth is I don't. It isn't possible to love her more than I did yesterday. And shared DNA doesn't forge a bond. The hours spent reading her stories, bathing her, baking with her, rolling around on the floor playing and making memories are the things that have strengthened our bond.

But that piece of paper suddenly highlights how much I've missed, and how much responsibility now rests on my shoulders.

I'm scared I'll fuck it up.

Before, when I didn't know, it was okay. There was no pressure. If one of us made a mistake, there were four more of us there to help and pick up the pieces. Now I worry that when I mess up, my brothers will be watching me, judging, thinking

they could have done it better. They'll be looking to me to make decisions and lead by example, and when I fail, Raven will wish Nix were one of theirs instead.

I don't want that child to grow up. I don't believe children grow up hating their parents, but I do believe the rose tinted glasses fall off and children learn to feel betrayed and let down by the stark reality of their heroes being less than heroic. Nix loves me right now, worships me. How will I cope when she grows up enough to realise that I'm just one big cluster fuck of failures after another, surrounded by good people who kept me on the straight and narrow?

Her *and* Raven will hate me.

My heart already breaks thinking about it.

When I finally stop running, I'm drenched in sweat and anguish. I don't want to pass my shitty fucked-up genes on to Phoenix. I want a better life for her. Maybe with the help of the others we can do that. Maybe.

But nature vs nurture is a strong debate with no clear winner after all these centuries. What if we're not enough? What if love isn't enough? It wasn't for my mother. She couldn't save my father. Her love couldn't redeem him. What if I'm irredeemable like him? It's part of the reason I'll never go home.

Guilt gnaws at my stomach and I collapse onto a nearby park bench, pulling out my phone and hitting call. The international dial tone sounds and the phone rings for ages. So long in fact, that I almost hang up.

“Ja¹? Zdravo²?” An out of breath female voice pants down the line. I have no idea who I'm talking to, but it must be one of my sisters.

“Is Mama there?” I ask, switching to my native tongue.

“Aljaž?”

“Ja³.”

My sister shrieks down the line with excitement, nearly bursting my eardrum, and starts calling for the entire family to

come. I sigh and get comfy, knowing this conversation is long overdue and that I'll be here a while. I should call home more often. There are less demons and monsters in the household now.

“Aljaž?” My mother’s voice, older but still clear and strong, comes down the line.

“Yes Mama. It’s me.”

“Oh my baby, my baby boy, I have missed you! Don’t you dare leave it so long before calling me again! How are you? Do you have a girlfriend? When are you coming home?”

She doesn’t let me get a word in edgeways with the barrage of questions she fires at me in Slovenian. It’s been so long that I can barely catch them all, and I wait silently for her to run out of steam or breath.

“I love you, Mama,” I tell her, because it’s true. Then she starts sobbing. In the background I can hear all of my sisters clamouring to know what I’ve said to make Mama cry, and I’m pretty sure Letty – the feistiest of them all – is threatening to hunt me down and gut me for upsetting her.

“Hush girls, your brother is talking,” Mama snaps at them, and they fall silent.

“Put me on speakerphone Mama, let them all say hello.”

She fumbles with the buttons, drops the phone, curses and Letty snatches the device from her hand impatiently.

“Let me. Here. Hello? Can you hear us?”

“There’s no need to shout Letty.”

“I’m not Letty!” She cries indignantly. “I’m Cora.”

“You sound just like Letty.” I shake my head in wonder at how much these girls have grown. I’m surprised they even remember me, some of them were so little when I left.

“How are you all? How’s Mama really? Do you need anything?”

“Mama won’t let me come to England!” Cora whines.

“Over my dead body!” My mother snaps in the background. “I’ve already lost one child to that godforsaken country. I refuse to lose another.”

“Mama, you haven’t lost me.” I sigh.

“Oh really? Are you calling to say when you’ll be home then...no. I didn’t think so.”

“Mama, I can’t come back. This is my home now,” I hesitate and then drop the bombshell that will send my family insane. “I have a girl. And...a daughter.”

Sure enough, chaos erupts on the end of the line and I don’t even need the speakerphone to hear their excited chatter. I place the phone on my lap and stretch, waiting for them to calm down. As I listen in, I start to be able to tell them apart more and more. Valentina is so quiet. I worry about the damage my uncle may have already inflicted on her. It’s never easy being anyone’s favourite in our family.

“You better be getting on the next flight back here and bringing them to meet your family or so help me god, Aljaž...”

“Mama, calm down. I’ve only just found out.”

“Jezus mi pomagaj⁴! What does that mean?”

“It means that I didn’t know I had a daughter until about an hour ago.”

“How is that even possible?”

“It’s a long story, Mama.”

“You can tell me all about it when you bring them both for a nice long visit. You should come for summer.”

“Mama—”

“Don’t Mama me, Aljaž! You bring that family to see me or I’ll be on the first flight over, with your sisters, and won’t be leaving until we’ve seen in the new year!”

“Mama, that’s months away.”

“You’re a nice, rich boy. You work hard and send good money home. Don’t tell me you don’t live in a fancy house. We can all come live with you.”

“You mean stay, for a visit?”

“No, I mean live. I want to see my first and only grandchild grow up.”

“Mama! Okay. When I have things sorted here, we will come for a visit—”

“Najlepša hvala⁵!”

“A *short* visit, Mama.”

She harrumphs.

“And I’ll call you next week. You can video call and meet her, okay?”

“No. Tomorrow.”

“At the weekend, Mama. I have to sort things out.”

“The only thing you have to sort out is visiting your family and getting a ring on that girl’s finger!”

“I’m trying Mama, I’m trying,” I promise. “I have to go. I’ll send you a picture as soon as I hang up. I promise. I love you. Give my love to the girls too.”

“Don’t go!”

“I’m sorry Mama, I have to. I love you.”

“I love you too my dear, dear boy! I’m so proud of you. You will make a wonderful father and husband. You’ve made me so proud. Such a good boy! Thank you, thank you.”

I hang up just as she starts weeping again, tears of joy sure, but still annoying. I shake my head at my mother’s simple outlook on life. I have a daughter, so of course I should marry her mother. If only it were that simple.

I scroll through the camera roll on my phone and select some images of me and Nix to send to her. At the last minute I send one of Raven too and then turn my phone off before the

family starts blowing it up with messages about how out of my league they are.

I do feel better for speaking to them though. Happier, I put my phone away and begin a much slower jog back home. My head is clearer and my heart is calmer. I can do this. Speaking to my mother and hearing my sisters' happy chatter in the background, I know that my father's poison no longer seeps through the walls of that house. If they're free, I can be too. And I'm not on my own. There's Raven and the rest of the guys, my brothers, who I know will be there to help me every step of the way. Yes, I'll fuck up. But I won't fuck *Phoenix* up. If I can rise above my father's nature *and* 'nurture', I can damn well ensure that my daughter is raised to be the best version of herself she can be. After all, she has a mother who literally walked through fire for her, and she has five amazing dads who already dote on her.

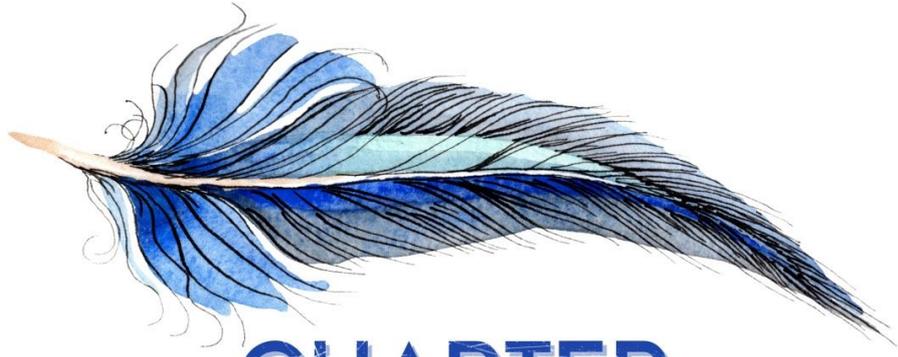
We got this.

Baxter: Tomorrow. You ready?

Raven: Yeah.

Baxter: Are you sure?

Raven: Is there any other choice? It's fine. I just want this all over and done with now.



CHAPTER FORTY - ONE

Raven

“Is that the story breaking?” Rebel asks, coming into the lounge where the news is on.

“Yeah.” I read the scrolling banner across the bottom of the screen.

Socialite and avid charity worker, Cordelia Deighton, found dead in her home of a suspected heart attack.

“Kinda boring.”

“But safer for everyone this way,” I point out, even though I agree with him.

“Baxter’s guys work fast. It’s only been two days.”

“I know,” I say. “I guess I have to tell Phoenix now.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know. I’m kind of dreading it. She was her great-grandmother after all, and Nix doesn’t know the evil she’s responsible for.”

“But Cordelia did hurt her and I don’t think Nix will forget that so easily.”

“True.”

“Don’t forget, they read our cues too. So if we’re all upset then she’s going to feel confused and distressed and get upset herself. If we calmly tell her the facts...” I raise my brow at him. “Well, the version of the truth that we’ve decided to roll with anyway, then I think she’ll accept it and move on.”

“When did you get so wise? You sound like a parenting handbook.”

“I may have read one or two.”

“You can read?” I tease. He chucks a cushion at me and I laugh. “Come sit?”

I pat the seat next to me, and in typical Rebel fashion, the second he takes it he pulls me into his lap. I snuggle against his chest and let him wrap his strong arms around me.

“Hey,” I say softly.

“Erm, hey?”

“How are you doing?”

“I’m absolutely fine, princess,” he replies, kissing the top of my head.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I sigh. “Ace came to see me when he got home. He apologised for freaking out, and I told him not to worry about it.”

“Yeah. I sort of understand why he was scared – I mean he’s not exactly an open book – but he really has nothing to worry about. I honestly don’t feel like anything has changed.”

“I feel like Thorn’s more distant. Jax too,” I confess.

“Or maybe they’re trying to give you some space...to process everything. Maybe they’re backing off a little to give Ace more of a chance to bond with Nix. And maybe, it’s all in your head. It’s gonna be hard to split your time between the five of us and Nix and still carve time for yourself. Chances are you just feel like you’ve not seen them as much.”

“I guess...”

“I think we’re all old enough and almost mature enough now to communicate our problems. So if they’re not coming to you and demanding more blowjobs or back rubs or whatever it is you do with them, leave it be and take some peace while you can have it.”

“Okay. That definitely didn’t come out of a parenting handbook. How’d you get so wise?”

“Always have been. You’re always just too busy drooling over my body to notice my mind.”

I laugh and twist in his lap so that I'm straddling him, and then I kiss him.

"I love you. You know that?"

"Yeah, I know," he says with a smile. "And I love you."

"You're more...constant than I expected. Happy to wait in the background but as dependable as a rock."

"I'm trying."

"So what do you want from me?"

"Right now? Absolutely nothing. This is perfect just having you in my arms."

"Have you always been this nice?" I smile. "I thought you'd be the most demanding, you know, because you were so desperate to find me and wouldn't give up the hunt."

"But now I have you, and I know you're not going anywhere, I have my whole life to enjoy you."

"You really don't mind sharing?"

"I wouldn't want it any other way. Can you imagine if I had to choose between you and my brothers? And then at every family event you'd be there, my wife, interacting with four of your exes...no it's too awkward. Much better to share and live happily ever after times five."

"Do you mean that?"

"I do."

"Wife, hey?"

"I can't blame Ace and Baxter for trying to lock you down. I would. Wanted to for ages."

"You want to marry me?"

"I knew you'd be the girl I married the second you flashed me when we first met."

"Oh that's great grounds to choose a wife on." I laugh.

"Okay, but it was it cemented once you let us in and showed us how amazing you are and we got to know you a

little...both times around.”

We snuggle while the local news continues quietly in the background, but I tune out Cordelia’s story. Actually, I should probably turn it off but I can’t bring myself to move from the comfort of Reb’s lap.

“Mummy! Is that grandma on the telly?” Nix asks, shooting into the room and crashing to a halt to stare at the screen – which is somehow still focusing on Cordelia.

“Yes, baby,” I say, getting up to turn it off when I can’t find the damn remote.

“Why is she on TV?”

To lie or not to lie, that is the question? I really try super hard not to lie to my kid. Obviously, small white lies slip out from time to time like “later” and “maybe tomorrow”. But not about the big stuff.

I guess I don’t intend to start now. Rebel shoots me a significant look and scoops Nix up into his arms.

“Want to grab the others?” he asks.

“No. This is fine. You don’t have to stay.”

“Do you want me to go?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll stay.”

“Okay, thanks.”

We sit on the sofa with Nix in Rebel’s arms and me facing them. I take one of Nix’s hands in mine.

“Baby, the reason why Cordelia was on the TV is because the newsman was just telling people that she’s died.”

Nix goes very quiet and very still.

“Do you know what that means, baby?”

“She’s with Lizzie now in heaven?”

Erm...fuck. What do I say to that? How will I ever explain to Nix that Aunt Lizzie is back from the dead but that Cordelia

won't be.

“She’s in heaven, clever girl,” Rebel says, saving me. “When did you get so smart to know all about heaven and things?”

“We learnt about it at the childminder’s. Miranda was upset when her grandad died and Lacey explained it all to us.”

Rebel mouths “Lacey?” at me and I whisper back “childminder”. He nods.

“Well, you’re very smart. I bet you’ll be whizzed all through school by August.”

She giggles.

“Silly! I don’t go until September.”

“Oh! Well you’ll be graduating by Christmas then.”

“Mummy?”

“Yes, baby?”

“Our family is getting really small. What will happen if you die?”

“Our family is growing, baby. We may have lost grandma, but we’ve gained Baxter, Ace, Thorn, Jax and Rebel. They’re here to stay if you want them.”

She smiles at me.

“I want them to stay. Can they all be my daddy?”

“Yep!” Rebel grins. “But I’m the best one.”

She giggles.

“Do you have any questions, Nix baby?”

“Erm...” she tilts her head to one side considering my offer and then her face falls. “Does this mean I can’t go to Miranda’s sleepover tonight at Lacey’s house?”

“Do you still want to go to the sleepover?”

“Yes!” Her lip trembles like she’s about to have a meltdown so I step in quickly.

“Then of course you can go.”

“Yay! Thank you Mummy! You’re the best!” She beams, instantly brightening. “I’m going to ask Ace to help me make some cookies for the party.”

“Okay darling, I’ll see you in a minute.”

Nix races from the room and Rebel grins at me, holding out his arms for me once more. I collapse into them with a laugh.

“That was...surprisingly easy.”

“I told you, they take their cues from us. She’ll be fine because we’re fine.”

“I still don’t want her at the funeral.”

“Of course. Well it sounds like they’re going to be distracted for a while. Want to watch a film?”

“Actually that sounds perfect.”

But of course, with Rebel’s heat and cuddles, I soon fall asleep and miss most of the film.

By the time I wake it’s dusky outside, which sends me into a total panic. Phoenix is going to be late for her party! I need to pack her bag, wrap the present...I lurch to my feet, noticing Rebel has gone but has taken the time to cover me with a blanket. Sweet.

“Whoa, where’s the fire?” Thorn asks when I crash into him in the hallway.

“Where’s Nix? I’m late getting her to the childminder’s house for a party and a sleepover.”

“Like we’d forget.” Thorn grins at me. It’s been a while since we had a child free night and I get the feeling they plan to make the most of it. “Baxter has driven her over.”

“But I didn’t pack her bag yet!”

“Rebel did it.”

“The present’s not wrapped.”

“I took care of it, and Jax helped Nix write the card, and Ace packaged up the cookies and sent those too. Everything is taken care of, princess. Don’t sweat it.”

“I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

“You can always call her later. But she’s fine. She knows you love her and will be there to pick her up in the morning.”

I sag in relief. Even after all these months of having the guys around, I’m not used to relying on other people. It’s amazing how they all rallied to help Nix, just so that I could have a nap. I definitely need to thank them.

“Why don’t you go and have a nice bath. Ace is cooking something special for tea and he keeps shouting whenever anyone goes in the kitchen.” I raise a brow in disbelief. “Okay, he shouted when I went into the kitchen and tried to steal a cookie, but still, I wouldn’t go in there if I were you.”

“Okay.” I laugh. “I’ll go for a bath. Do I have to get dressed for dinner?”

“I don’t give a damn what you wear. It’ll only end up on the floor later anyway,” Thorn says with a wink. “Go relax, I’ll even brave the kitchen monster to get you a drink. I’ll bring it up.”

“Thanks.” I kiss his cheek and decide that I will make an effort for dinner. It’s not often Nix is gone for the night now between Cordelia being out of the picture and me not needing to work late at the bar and ask Lacey to have Nix overnight, and it’ll be nice to dress up even if it’s only to stay home. If the guys are going to all this effort to make it a special evening for us, I should too.

“Well that was lovely,” I tell Ace when the table’s cleared. We’ve had a gorgeous light meal rather than a blow out three course affair, and I thoroughly enjoyed every mouthful, even if I do feel a little overdressed in my blue velvet wrap dress. All the guys are in jeans and T-shirts. Well, except Baxter of

course, who's in his usual semi-formal get up. They all look mouth-wateringly sexy though.

It's hard to believe they're mine.

"Are you ready for your surprise?" Rebel asks with a sly grin.

"Please tell me it's a dip in the hot tub and an early night," I tease.

"Close. But no," Thorn says with a laugh.

"Fine." I pretend to sigh but my eyes are twinkling with excitement I'm sure.

"Let's go then," Thorn says excitedly.

I'm honestly not sure what to expect, but being led upstairs to the very top floor of the house is not it.

"We thought it was time to share this with you," Rebel says when we reach the locked door. A small silver key is sitting in the lock.

"I forgot all about this room," I admit. "Because I never have to come up here."

"We know," Ace laughs.

"It's hard enough to get you up to our floor, let alone one more."

"Hey, I miss my ground floor flat!" I joke. I definitely, definitely don't. I just don't feel the need to run up and down a million flights of stairs every day. One will do. I'm glad Nix and I have the first floor.

"Do we need to wait for the others?" I ask as Rebel reaches forward for the handle.

"Nope."

"Oh. Okay." I feel a little stab of disappointment that whatever's going on, Baxter and Jax won't be joining us, but I refuse to let it spoil whatever the others have planned.

Rebel flings the door open with a flourish and I step into the room. My jaw drops as I take in...everything. I don't know

where to look first. The room takes up almost the entire blueprint of the house, and is covered in gorgeous, varnished floorboards with soft looking rugs scattered all about the place. At the edges of the room there are chairs and sofas, lamps, and a sideboard or two. There's a closed door at one end of the room, and another at the opposite which is slightly ajar, looking like it leads to some sort of closet.

Half of the sloped ceiling is made of glass, the low lighting in the room allowing the night sky to shine through so brightly, it almost seems like I can reach out and touch the stars.

And the most ginormous bed I've ever seen completely dominates the space. That bed is easily big enough for...oh...all of us.

With huge, astonished eyes I turn to Rebel.

"What is this?" I whisper.

"This is our space. Where we can be together. Any time you want, but we thought you might like to use it when Nix is away. This is a space for us adults," he explains. "And Thorn."

"Hey!" Thorn punches Rebel in the side and I laugh.

"Do you like it?" he asks. I can't tear my eyes away from the bed. It's obscene how huge it is, covered in the softest looking grey comforter and what has to be two dozen cushions.

"It's amazing." There's a lovely peaceful vibe to the room, but I can't help but think that the size of the bed alone means this room was built for fun and sin.

"Want to test it out?" Thorn nods at the bed.

I cross the floor and skim my hand along the bedding. It's so soft. The mattress feels just right beneath my hand too. Not too squidgy but still comfortable and inviting.

"What's in there?" I ask nodding to the closed door which is now on my right.

"Bathroom."

Oh I didn't think of that. It's definitely a good idea to have one up here. I can't imagine sleeping here and having to creep down two flights of stairs to get the main bathroom in the middle of the night.

I'm distracted by Thorn removing his shirt. He's super tanned from the holiday – I mean, we all have a nice colour apart from Baxter – but he looks like a golden god in comparison. Probably from the amount of time he spent surfing. He must miss the ocean so much being stuck in Scotland. He's lean, but toned, with an impressive surfer's six pack that I always want to lick.

Rebel copies Thorn and suddenly my drool is the filling in their perfect man-chest sandwich. Holy crap. They're so different but equally enticing. Rebel's build is so over-the-top, like everything about him. I can't help but be glad that he has a softness to him, if he had a personality like Baxter's to go with that body he'd truly be terrifying. I greedily drink in Rebel's ink, constantly looking for new pieces or little additions that he likes to get done. He never tells me and it's become something of a game to try to spot them.

“See something you like, little bird?” he teases in his low gravelly tone that makes me clench and shiver.

Ace unzips his favourite red hoodie to reveal his bare chest underneath. His skin is almost as golden as the others and his hair has gotten much lighter in the sun. It really makes his eyes pop. There's no denying the power in Ace's body, even though he's not stacked like Rebel. I know from experience that his body veils his power well.

“Several somethings,” I say, swallowing and fanning myself as the heat in the room – real or imagined? – skyrockets. I need to claim back a little power. I lean back a little on the mattress, which is insanely comfortable, and raise a brow at them.

“Well, this is a nice set up and the view is mighty fine in all directions, but are we supposed to just look at it? It's super comfortable so you're missing out. I say we test it out and see if it will actually hold all four of us.”

“Five,” Jax says, stepping out of the closet, topless, with a long length of rope in his hand.

Jax: Are you ready?

Baxter: Almost. Hold the fort for me.

Baxter: By the way, I was thinking...

Jax: Yeah???

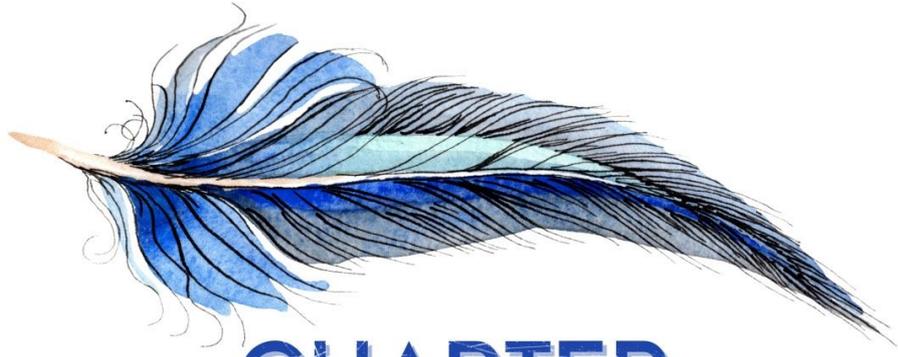
Baxter: Well, aren't you the only one who hasn't proposed to Raven one way or another now?

Jax: What's your point?

Baxter: Just wondered if you were ever going to or if you're too chicken shit.

Jax: Just hurry the fuck up or I won't let you play.

Baxter: Funny.



CHAPTER FORTY - TWO

Raven

My mouth is dry as I drink Jax in. He smirks knowingly at me as he slowly crosses the room, every step measured, steady, controlled. I can't take my eyes off his hands. Or rather, the rope he's coiling around his hands the way a Dom would wind a bullwhip.

It thrills and excites me but there's no way I'm letting *him* know that.

"I don't know what you think you're going to do with that rope, but I suggest you keep it the fuck away from me," I snap.

His eyes twinkle in amusement.

"Boys."

That's it, all he has to say for Rebel and Thorn to take one of my arms each and spread them wide.

"Hey! Get off me!" I struggle in their grip a little but they have a pretty firm hold on me. Ace smirks. He knows I could get out of a hold like this blindfolded. But maybe I don't want to.

Jax approaches the end of the bed where I'm sitting and kneels on the floor. He takes one of my ankles in his hands and I quickly kick him with the other foot. He grunts but doesn't retaliate.

"Wait!" Ace barks suddenly. Everyone freezes. "Check first. Weapons."

I shake my head because he knows all too well that I'm armed all of the time now. There's something about having knives and daggers strapped to my body that makes me feel sexy as fuck.

"Allow me?" I offer.

Jax nods and the other two release my arms. I get to my feet and move away from the bed before turning to face them.

Ace has taken my place, and Jax is sitting on the floor facing me, his back leaning against the footboard. Four sets of expectant eyes are on me and I don't feel nervous at all.

“Just the weapons. You can leave your clothes on,” Jax says. I nod and reach down to remove my stilettos.

“Leave the shoes on,” Rebel groans. I smirk knowing just how much he loves me in heels.

“But Jax said remove the weapons.”

“The shoes?”

“Dude, do you not see those heels? Fucking dangerous, I tell you,” Thorn chimes in.

I grin at him and press the pressure point that releases the needle-like blades from the heels. They clatter noisily to the wooden floor.

“Holy fuck,” Rebel breathes out.

Next I bend at the waist and run my hands up one leg, stopping to remove the dagger from the top of my stockings. I repeat the action on the other side, unclipping my thigh holster which holds a mid-length hunting knife with impeccable balance. I sigh forlornly when that one hits the floor.

“Are we done?” Jax asks in a tight voice. I shake my head no. He groans.

I'll admit, I don't usually have *this* many blades on me in one go, but Baxter had texted me earlier to see if I wanted to play tonight and I may have got a little over-excited. I slip my hands into my wrap dress and unfasten the belt sheath from around my waist. Bye bye slip knife.

“Prekleta seksi¹,” Ace murmurs.

A throwing star comes out of the concealed arm wrap under my long sleeves. I carefully lift my necklace containing several spikes over my head, take off my earrings, a new ring on my right hand, and with some clever contortion I'm even able to unstrap my shoulder sheath which contains Baxter's favourite knife.

I look down at the floor. There's a nice little pile of badassery down there. Baxter would be proud. Shame he's missing out.

"Fuck a duck. That's impressive," Rebel whistles. Jax nods.

"Agree," Ace adds.

"Impressive? Are you fucking crazy?! That shit's insane!"

I shake my head at how over the top Thorn's being. Of course he'd be the one to freak out. Ace loves women with weapons – he's told me before in training – and Jax would just love the challenge of dominating an armed woman. Rebel's aroused and curious. But Thorn probably still has PTSD from when I cut his hair off. Oops.

"Whatever. I'm practically PG now. Happy?"

"Little bird, that body could *never* be considered PG."

"Get on the bed," Jax orders. I huff at how bossy he is even as I squeeze my thighs together a little and do as he says. Ace vacates my seat but grabs me and kisses me passionately as he goes. As soon as I'm on the bed, Rebel pulls me down and pins me with his bulk. He kisses me too, thrusting his tongue into my mouth with a promise of how he'll fuck me later.

The rope wrapping around my ankle distracts me from his tongue fucking, and Thorn takes the opportunity to claim my mouth too. Is it possible to feel like a sexy piece of meat? Like the last prime rib on the grill that three hungry men are willing to fight for?

Jax ties the other ankle like a twisted human gift-wrapping service, and a second later he tugs the rope sharply. My legs splay in opposite directions, bearing me wide before them. Thank fuck I wore underwear tonight.

"Boo, you wore underwear," Rebel complains, sliding his hand under the gap where my dress has fallen open on my thigh.

He doesn't let that barrier stop him though, slipping his fingers under the elastic of my panties and brushing against my clit.

He distracts me so well that I don't even notice the rope around my wrist until it's too late. When I see I only have one free limb left, I hide it behind my back like that'll save me. Ace chuckles. Thorn tickles me until I'm writhing and gasping, easily stealing my hand and pulling it out while I'm begging for mercy. Traitor that he is, he holds my wrist in place while Jax trusses it and loops it around the headboard. Another sharp tug and I'm spread eagled in the centre of the enormous bed and vulnerable.

Or am I?

As their heated gazes roam my body, I dare to believe I might still hold some power. Ace reaches over, and with deft fingers undoes the tasselled belt that holds my dress closed. He peels it open as slowly and carefully as a treasured possession.

When my skin is bared to him he grins and leans in to feather kisses all across my stomach. It tickles but in a way which makes me breathless and tingly. And I can't get away. Eventually he moves up to my lips and I kiss him as dirty as I can, all tongue and a promise of what I'll do to him if he puts his cock between my lips.

He groans, and Jax snaps, "Ace! That's enough."

Reluctantly he pulls away. I sigh and glower at Jax. Damn boy is going to spoil all my fun tonight, I can just tell.

"Touch her," he orders, walking back towards the closet. I'm not super intrigued as to what's in there, not believing for a second that it holds just clothes. I crane my neck to try and see, but Thorn steps into my line of vision and blocks me.

"Dick," I snap.

"Not until you beg," he retorts.

Then suddenly there's three pairs of hands running over my clothes, my stockings, the lace of my underwear, my bare skin. My eyelids flutter closed as the sensations overtake me.

It's soothing and arousing at the same time, like gentle brushings bring my hot blood to the surface, awakening my senses.

I'm nice and warmed up when the door clicks. I glance over to where Jax disappeared but I can't see him.

"Eyes this way, princess."

I almost expire at the sound of Baxter's dark voice, my head whipping around to feast my eyes on him. He's coming out of the bathroom, his gaze fixed intently on me with the promise of delicious menace on his face. I squirm in my bonds and he smirks when he sees my pile of weapons on the floor.

"Aww, goddess, did you dress up for me?"

The gentle warming sensation that the others created with their teasing strokes ignites into a blaze of anticipation when I take in his grin.

I expect him to come over to me, to join us, but he doesn't. He takes a seat in the armchair in the corner of the room that I barely spared a glance at earlier. Disappointment lances through me but he leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees, steepling his hands and resting his chin upon his fingers, and he stares.

Wordlessly, the others get back to work, replacing their fingertips with soft lips and drawing me back into their bubble until I'm distracted once more by Jax reappearing.

A nervous giggle escapes my lips when I see what he's holding.

"Something to share with the rest of us, princess?" he asks, raising a brow.

"You keep coming out of the closet," I snigger.

"Oh laugh it up, princess," he says cracking the whip so that it snaps in the air and makes me shiver. He repeats the action again, this time bringing the tapered tip down on my abdomen with a surprisingly soft kiss against my skin.

I let out a surprised breath. Jax smirks.

“Why is she dressed?” Baxter calls out.

“Because Jax tied her up before we got to the good bit,” Thorn complains.

“Well untie her.”

“No,” Jax says.

“Erm, hello? I am here, you know.”

“Shh, little bird. It’s better if you don’t talk,” Rebel

“Excuse me?!” I growl at Rebel.

“Keep that pretty little mouth of yours closed or we’ll find a way to fill it.”

I open my mouth to argue back with Rebel when Jax barks out, “Enough.”

“We’re not untying her yet so you’ll just have to work around it,” he adds.

Baxter sighs, but it’s more danger than disappointment. I don’t know how this is going to work. Jax really loves giving orders and Baxter really doesn’t like taking them. I’m worried they might come to blows and then the others will jump to Jax’s defence, so Baxter will kill them too...it’ll be a bloodbath.

Although, he’s not killed them yet, and both Thorn and Rebel can be irritating as fuck. So we might be alright.

“Only one thing for it then,” Baxter says. He gets to his feet and crosses to the bed, stopping between my widespread legs. He gives me a dark grin and pulls out a knife.

“Whoa! Dude! What are you doing?” Thorn cries.

“Baxter, don’t,” I warn when he lowers the blade to my dress. “It’s new.”

“What the fuck?! He’s coming at you with a knife and you care about a damn dress?” Thorn continues to freak out. I sigh.

“I’ll buy you a new dress.”

Before I can reply, he slices through the velvet, shredding it into pretty little ribbons. My bra and panties get the same treatment, as do my stockings and suspenders.

“Those were removable,” I hiss.

“Blame Jax. He was the one who tied you up.”

“I blame you, asshole! *You’re* the one who cut them off.”

In retaliation for my attitude Baxter draws the tip of his blade along the soles of my feet. It tickles but it doesn’t hurt, although the threat of it *is* enough to silence me.

“Dude! What are you doing? You’re going to cut her.”

“I’m not.”

“You are! You have a knife and you’re dragging it all over her skin!” Thorn’s not showing any signs of calming down.

“Thorn, that’s kind of the point,” I say calmly, sighing.

“What? You actually like this...this...shit?”

“Careful,” I growl at the exact same time as Baxter and Jax. Ace laughs. “That sounds an awful lot like kink shaming to me.”

“I won’t let you hurt her,” Thorn declares to Baxter.

“I’ll stab *you* in a minute if you don’t shut up,” Baxter threatens.

I groan.

“No one is stabbing anyone...without consent. Baxter has mine and I have his. If you don’t like that, you know where the door is.”

Thorn doesn’t move. He doesn’t look *happy*, but he doesn’t leave.

“Right. Now that’s sorted, can we have some fun?” I ask.

“Almost,” Jax replies. “Thorn stop sulking or you won’t get to come.”

Thorn huffs and pouts even harder and a giggle slips past my lips. Jax brings the whip down again, this time hitting my

bare thigh with a little more bite. At the same time, Baxter presses the tip of his blade against the arch of my foot and I cry out, even though he doesn't break the skin.

It seems to be the green light for the others who descend on me. Thorn kisses me deeply, stroking my hair gently as if he's attempting to balance the violence of Baxter's attention. Rebel's mouth captures one nipple and Ace takes care of the other, their heads blocking my view of what Baxter and Jax are up to, but their mouths strangely working in tandem with one another.

Jax continues to rain soft little licks across every inch of my skin his bullwhip can reach, and Baxter competes for his inch of flesh and my gasps of pleasure with his blade.

The sensations are...indescribable. Too much, not enough, terrifying and intoxicating. How could regular sex with just one person ever be as exciting as this? They're ruining me.

And I'm helpless to return the favour.

I squirm and strain against my bonds which makes Jax tut and hit me a little harder. I flinch from the sting and nick myself on Baxter's blade. He jerks away with a hiss but soothes the sting a second later with his lips. His tongue snakes out between his lips and circles the small cut on the inside of my thigh. It's not until he starts to suck that I realise it's bleeding. And holy fucking jesus christ on a bike save my soul lord, it feels good.

His lips are a hotline to my clit which pulses with every suck. I kiss Thorn even harder, needing him to fuck my mouth with his tongue.

"Ungh," I plead, not breaking the kiss.

Ace and Rebel both slide their hands down to my mound, Rebel circling my clit and Ace lightly teasing my entrance.

I break the kiss with Thorn to threaten, "If that little finger goes anywhere near my pussy, Ace, I swear to god I will cut it off!"

The others laugh but Ace ignores me, teasing, almost tickling, my opening with his smallest digit. I can't even begin

to imagine the frustration women with pencil dick partners have to put up with. I huff and pull against my bonds to try and force his finger deeper, but he just pulls away.

“For fuck’s sake!” I bite out. What happened to my nice, kind, gentle, would do anything for me, Ace?

“Rebel, please...” I say, aiming for sweet but probably missing the mark. “You know you’re my favourite...”

“Go on...” He laughs and grins at me.

“Please show Ace how you *really* finger a girl. Show him how good those nice thick fingers of yours are...”

“Well, as you asked so nicely....”

Rebel knocks Ace’s hand aside and pushes two fingers into me. I’m fucking soaked already so it doesn’t hurt at all, but it does stretch me.

There are too many men in this bed to keep track of. Too many sinful lips and dirty tongues and wandering hands.

Too many cocks to take at once. And yet, I’m currently enjoying the pleasure of none.

“God I want cock,” I sigh to myself.

“Thorn, feed her your cock,” Jax instructs. “She only had a little dinner, I bet she’s feeling hungry.”

I mewl, helplessly turned on by his words and more than ready to give a little pleasure. Thorn removes the rest of his clothes and cups my cheek to turn my face toward him. With one hand he holds the base of his cock, half-hard already and pointing towards me in offering. I don’t need to be told. With no hesitation, I open wide and take him deep into my throat. I swirl my tongue around his tip as I feel him stir to life and swell in my mouth. When he’s fully erect, I take him all the way, loving the feel of my face buried into his crotch – pressed right up tight against his skin so that the light-blond hair of his happy trail tickles my nose and restricts my breathing a little bit.

Thorn groans and flexes his hips, pulsing hard on my tongue. I heed Jax’s warning, not wanting either of us to get

into trouble and reluctantly withdraw, letting him slip from my lips. I can't resist teasing the drops of precum from his tip though.

“Fuck.” Thorn sighs.

It's only once I move my head away from the temptation of swallowing him whole again and not stopping until he's filling my mouth with cum, that I become aware of how close my own orgasm is.

With nothing to distract me now, I pay attention to what's being done to my body. Rebel is slowly pumping his fingers in and out of my pussy while Ace circles my clit in perfect rhythm with him. Jax has discarded his whip in favour of tormenting my nipples with his demanding fingers and Baxter is poised between my thighs, blade in hand, the tip pressing against one of my scars in anticipation.

I cry out and buck my hips as the orgasm crashes into me, Baxter pressing against my skin until it yields under his blade. It just triggers an even more violent orgasm in me and I scream out my pleasure even as Thorn's hand hastily slaps down over my mouth. There's no silencing me as I thrash and scream out shockwave after shockwave coursing through my body.

When I finally calm, Rebel withdraws his fingers. I expect him to plunge his cock into me, but he withdraws entirely to suck my pleasure from his fingers. When he's done, he comes to kiss my lips so that I can taste myself on him and I greedily deepen the kiss wanting more. He pulls away and chuckles.

“I knew you'd love it. I can't wait to fuck you.”

“Please, do it.”

He chuckles. “Have you forgotten what I said so quickly, little bird? I want to push into your tight used pussy when it's full to the brim with all of their cum. My cock is gonna make all their juices leak out of you and you'll be a puddle of mess on the bed.” I groan and he kisses me sweetly before whispering in my ear, “I'll fuck you like a broken rag doll when everyone else has finished playing with you.”

“Someone fuck me,” I beg, impatiently.

“I will,” Thorn says, elbowing Baxter out of the way and lining himself up eagerly at my entrance.

“Fine. But remember you’re not allowed to come,” Jax points out.

“What? Still? That’s not fair!” he whines.

“What do you think, Raven? Does Thorn deserve to come in that gorgeous tight pussy of yours after he was so rude to us earlier?”

“Maybe...if he makes me come first,” I tease. I mean, I’m pretty much a done deal. My skin is crackling with electricity and I’m sure the slightest touch is going to sizzle and shock and send me over the edge again.

He pushes in and I gasp at how different it feels being unable to move. There’s no slack in the ropes, if anything they feel tighter, and it means I have to take everything he gives. There’s no shying away or fighting back. It’s a helplessly erotic feeling.

“Do you need another cock, little bird? A distraction for that pretty little mouth so that you’re stuffed at both ends?” Rebel’s hot breath at my ear makes my pulse soar. I frantically nod my head and he chuckles. “Ace?”

Ace is more than happy to oblige, stripping off and climbing onto the bed to kneel at my head. Rebel plays the role of a perfect gentleman, lifting and supporting my head so that I can take Ace in my mouth and give him the same treatment Thorn got.

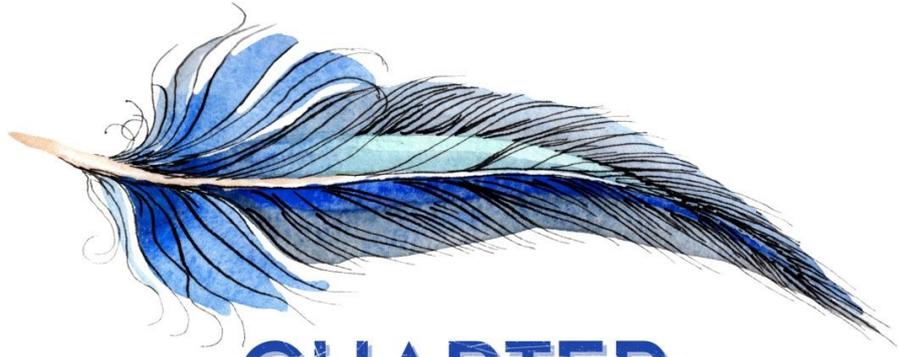
“That’s so fucking sexy,” Rebel murmurs.

Thorn fucks me harder, flicking my clit in a frenzied motion that makes the soles of my feet tingle and burn. The orgasm builds from there, travels along my legs and detonates like a firework at my core. I cry around Ace’s cock, which causes him to come with a groan, load after load of hot salty cum pumping down my throat. My pussy spasms and clamps around Thorn, desperately trying to still his movements,

gripping on for dear life until he too comes with a groan and collapses onto me.

Raven's Diary

I have no words. I've died and gone to heaven.



CHAPTER FORTY - THREE

Raven

My heart races so hard I feel it throbbing under every inch of my skin.

“Good girl,” Jax says, making me flush. Thorn withdraws, kisses my mound and heads to the bathroom to clean up. I’m afforded no such luxury but I can’t bring myself to care. Rebel is still crooning words of encouragement in my ear as Ace withdraws from my throat and kisses me deeply.

I turn my head away.

“Don’t—” I say, conscious that he’s just filled my mouth.

“Don’t care,” he replies, capturing my chin and kissing me deeply until I relax.

“Who’s next?” Jax asks, which makes me feel something like a fairground ride. Weirdly, it doesn’t piss me off to feel used. It’s empowering because I know how loved and respected I really am. “Ace?”

“Too soon. Tight throat. Deep. Pridna punčka¹.”

He seems happy to continue kissing me.

“I guess it’s my turn then, as I’d like to fuck you before Baxter fucks *with* you,” Jax says. I shiver. Jax sounds just as menacing as I know Baxter can be. I didn’t even notice when he got naked. Everything has become a blur of flesh.

He steps between my thighs and strokes his hands along the length of my legs. His fingers dance over my cuts with interest, lightly at first and then pressing into the flesh to elicit a reaction from me. He gets it. I groan and tremble, pussy clenching in a way which makes juices trickle out.

Jax reaches out and runs his finger through the mess, massaging it to my mound and around my ass. He teases my entrances with his fingers, applying a little pressure to see if I’ll yield.

“I’d love to fuck your ass right now,” he confesses. “But the position is all wrong. And the others will get impatient if I take too long. Ace is already getting hard for you again. Maybe later.”

He enters me suddenly in one powerful thrust and Rebel and Ace back away from the bed. Jax stares intently at me, locking my attention onto him as he locks his fingers around my throat.

“You don’t look anywhere near as spent and as exhausted as I’d like.” He flexes his fingers to restrict my breathing, pulling his hips back before slamming into me again. I gasp and Jax squeezes my throat, cutting off my air supply and holding me in limbo. He holds his position, still like a statue, and waits me out in the ultimate power play. Seconds pass and I try to stay calm, keep cool, but I’m soon twitching under him, frantically needing to breathe as my vision darkens around the edges.

He releases me.

As I gulp in breaths he fucks me, completely disregarding the state that I’m in in favour of pounding my pussy for his own pleasure. He doesn’t touch me bar where our bodies are joined, doesn’t attempt to pleasure me. He doesn’t even *look* at me, just fucks me like...I’m nothing. Less than nothing. Just a hole to fuck.

And it makes me fucking melt.

I come so hard, screaming until he suddenly slams a hand out to silence me by roughly cutting off my airway. It doesn’t help. I may stop screaming but my pussy is clenching so hard it milks his cock relentlessly.

He curses, withdraws, and pumps the remains of his load over my mound. It’s filthy and I love it. His black eyes burn into mine, promising revenge for stealing the control and the power from him.

“Brave, princess. Very brave,” he warns.

I shiver but I’m melting into the mattress now, not sure I can take much more.

Jax stalks away towards the bathroom and as I watch him go, I see Thorn sitting in Baxter's seat, watching us intently. He looks aroused, but confused too.

Ace approaches me gently and kneels between my legs.

"Aljaž," I protest.

"Shh, don't care."

His lips seal around my clit and he sucks gently while massaging my oversensitive bud with his tongue. He inserts that damn little finger into my pussy again but I don't have the energy to chew him out for it. Because it's fucking magic and he already has me crying out his name, begging for his cock.

When he's satisfied, he pulls away, grinning at me like he just won the lottery. I think *I* did, how fucking lucky am I?

He kisses me tenderly, sliding in with ease and slowly rocking us both to orgasm. He murmurs all sorts of nonsense in my ear, a garbled jumble of broken English love songs and what sounds like filthy Slovenian promises to me. What do I know, he could be telling me how to make a casserole, but he still makes it sound sexy as hell.

I desperately want to hold him, to feel him, to return the pleasure. I feel my emotions rising in me, threatening to overwhelm and tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

"Please, Aljaž," I sob. "Untie me, let me touch you."

"Soon, princesa², hold on more."

He kisses me and I cry my release into his mouth. I'm absolutely spent and broken, the tears rolling down my cheeks now. He kisses each and every one of them away, and rocks his release into me. When he withdraws my sore pussy protests. He reluctantly steps away and Baxter takes his place.

I don't think I can do it.

But then he reaches down and cuts the ropes around my ankles, then moves to free my arms. I'm too tired to move, absolutely liquid, and as the feeling returns to my limbs, painful pins and needles wrack my body. I shiver and shake while Baxter gently massages the feeling back into them and

holds me close. He brushes my damp hair from my forehead and kisses me.

“You did amazing,” he says in awe. I shake my head. I didn’t. There’s five men in the room all watching and I didn’t manage to bring pleasure to two of them. Pathetic.

“I’ve never been so aroused in my life. I never minded sharing you with them, so long as I didn’t have to *share* share. I thought I’d hate it. But fuck...that was...I lost count of the times I almost came in my pants. I had to stab myself a couple of times just to distract myself from coming at the sight of you thrashing around under them.”

“You stabbed yourself?” I blink at him.

“A few times...just a little,” he replies with a dark, rueful smile. “Can I touch you? Taste you?” I nod. Now that my limbs are free and feeling is returning, I feel much more grounded.

“Want me to be gentle?” I shake my head no.

“Just do you, Baxter. I love it.”

“Can they all join in?”

“Y-yes?” I don’t know what he’s asking. I certainly don’t trust any of them with a blade the way I trust Baxter.

“Just relax and trust me.” He kisses me and adds, “You’re a vision, goddess.”

And he treats me like one too, getting the others to come and lie beside me on the bed but without restricting my movements. I lie on my side and kiss Thorn. It feels like he’s been gone for ages and I missed him.

They all touch me, gently, reverently, and Baxter stands back and lets me enjoy every minute of it.

Rebel sits back against the headboard and pats his lap. I straddle his legs without giving it a second thought. He runs his hands up my thighs and grins at me.

“Happy, little bird?”

“I have no words.” He grips my hips and rubs me back and forth along his impressive length. “Ummm, yeah.”

My brain is between my thighs, greedy and panting and already wanting more. My tiredness is forgotten, my skin singing as Ace and Thorn run their hands down my back. I glance back over my shoulder at Baxter but he looks perfectly content, happy even. He nods at me, twirling a blade against one finger tip. I groan and turn back to Rebel for a deep kiss.

I lift my hips and sheath him inside me, carefully sinking down on him inch by inch. He breaks away and groans, giving me the chance to turn my head to kiss Thorn and then Ace.

“Fucking heaven,” Rebel moans. “I knew it would be. I love sinking into your pussy full of cum.” His words make me groan, my head dropping back and eyes closing in bliss.

“Turn around and straddle me again,” he says.

I climb off and do as he says, the new position stimulating different areas inside of me. It’s more intense, less comfortable, but...yeah. Mouth-wateringly good.

“Fuuuuuck, little bird. I didn’t think you could get any tighter,” Rebel hisses. “Lean forward. Grab my ankles.”

I do and...I think a little drool dribbles down my chin. Fuck. My god. Fuck.

Baxter kneels before me and guides my head down onto his cock. I can’t move very much in this position but the guys seem happy with what little I can do, namely rocking back and forth on Rebel’s cock and shallow bobs on Baxter’s.

In my peripheral vision I can see Ace stroking his cock, and when I turn my head slightly I see Thorn doing the same. I reach out to take them both in my hands and Baxter helps by supporting my weight on his hands. Knowing that I’m pleasuring four of them at once builds the strongest orgasm yet within me. I wish there was a way I could take Jax too, but I’m definitely not ready to be airtight.

Besides, Jax definitely likes to watch.

My shallow movements become frenzied, my hands working their cocks in time to my hips and mouth. I'm so close and I know this is it, I have nothing else to give.

I'm teetering on the edge, desperately clinging on, just needing a little something to take me over the edge.

Jax approaches the bed and reaches out to stroke my hair away from my face. He passes Baxter a blade and slides his hands under my chest to support me, freeing Baxter's hands. Jax fists my hair, gathering up all the stray pieces in his hand and holding it high out of my way.

Baxter runs his blade down the back of my neck, teasing the tip against my skin.

"Come for me, goddess," Baxter breathes. "Make us all come together."

He pierces the skin on the back of my neck and I choke on his dick as I shudder and scream my release, swallowing Baxter's cum, milking Rebel's dick, and showering myself in Thorn and Ace's seed.

This time when I collapse on the bed, I'm well and truly spent.

Raven's Diary

Present Day

I just want today over with. Bury the bitch in an extra deep hole to make sure she can't climb back out of it, then relax. Enjoy my family. Start living.

When the coffin gets lowered into that hole, I'm throwing my demons down there with it. She's done fucking with my family, interfering in my life, trying to control everything.

After today I never have to hear her name again.

I also need to speak to the guys about changing my name. I don't want to be a Deighton, I never really was. But I don't belong to the McLintock family either. I know who I am now, and I want to stay as Raven, but neither surname fits.

Maybe I'll surprise them all and become a Jackson. As Jax is the only one who doesn't seem to want to marry me, it's bound to come as a surprise. I don't suppose it matters really. I just know that I'm ready to move on and put the past behind me. That means burying Raven Deighton and Charlotte McLintock with Cordelia today.

I guess once I do that, I have the whole of my life to figure out the rest.



CHAPTER FORTY - FOUR

Raven

“Are you okay?”

Rebel is standing in the doorway. He looks handsome in his black suit. Okay, that’s a lie. I was trying to be respectful but fuck that.

He looks utterly fuckable.

There’s something about guys in suits anyway, but Rebel...built for days, shirt looks like it’s about to shred, *fucking* Rebel...I’m done.

I lick my lips as I stare at him. Pretty sure I’m drooling. Fuck his pants are tight.

“My eyes are up here, little bird. I’m not just a piece of meat for you to salivate over.”

“Can I eat you then?” The words slip from my lips without thought.

Yeah. Fuck funerals. Where’s the fun in that? I’d much rather stay here with him.

“Baxter’s grandfather is here.”

I know those words should be a bucket of cold ice on my libido but they’re not. I couldn’t care less if the Queen were here. Right now, the only thing that would stop me jumping Rebel’s bones is if Cordelia’s corpse somehow reanimated itself and climbed out of the coffin in the next room. And even then, I’d only stop to put the bitch back in her box.

“Raven, don’t look at me like that. It’s a funeral—”

“Not yet it isn’t.”

“It’s the day of the funeral.”

“So let’s put the *fun* back in funeral.”

“Later, I promise. I’ll give you all the fun in the world. We can even invite the others to join us.”

My eyes sparkle at his suggestion.

“I like that.”

“But first, we have to hand Phoenix over to the childminder so that we can get this shit show on the road.”

I sigh. He’s right. It just sucks. A little funeral – sorry *prefuneral* – sex is just what I need right now. But apparently what a girl wants, what a girl needs, is not what a girl gets.

“Fine.” I huff and follow him out to the foyer to, as he said, get this shit show on the road.

It doesn’t take too long for the limo to arrive at the graveyard and for the funeral to take place. I’m grateful once again for Baxter’s connections and the strings he’s pulled in getting the whole event to take place graveside. I couldn’t stomach the thought of sitting in a church for a traditional funeral. Ever since the fire in the chapel, I avoid those buildings – they’re too full of my demons.

Hundreds of people with limos, town cars and all sorts of vile status symbol vehicles line the entire drive along the graveside. All of them here today are no doubt showing up for each other more than because of Cordelia’s passing. As if I care either way. Everyone who’s anyone in society is here today, reminding me how much I hate this life. I want nothing to do with it, even though my guys have gifted me enough of a fortune to be able to compete with the richest of them all.

“I’m so sorry for your loss.”

I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve heard the empty platitude, how many limp hands I’ve shaken, how many socialites I’ve plastered a false sad grimace on my face for. Why do I have to greet everyone in a receiving line like I’m at a damn wedding reception. It’s messed up. I want to dance on this bitch’s grave, and I can’t because I’m stuck in a pantomime playing the role of grieving granddaughter when nothing could be further from the truth.

“I’m not.” The truth slips from my lips before I think. The old bat in front of me gives a scandalised gasp, clutching her pearls and leaning on her ancient husband for support.

“She’s grieving Genevieve, she doesn’t mean it,” he consoles her as he pulls her away while levelling a glare over her head at me. I bite my tongue to keep more verbal diarrhoea from flooding out of my mouth. I’m in danger of telling all these two-faced sycophants exactly what Cordelia was really like.

With Baxter’s hand in mine, I stand and ignore the plethora of false praise and platitudes that the priest spins off about Cordelia. I thought I could be numb today, but I’m raging. The largest bouquets of white lilies and white roses I’ve ever seen adorn the pure white casket that is currently being lowered into the ground. Everything should have been black like her soul. The charade of purity is an absolute joke.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from saying anything more and cradle my secret to my chest instead to give me joy: I know how she *really* died, and she deserved every last second of it. My only regret is being unable to bring her back and to kill her all over again in payment for the atrocities she’s caused.

The mourners, dressed up like some chic morbid fashion parade, are respectfully murmuring hymns, singing the praises of a woman they’ve never really known. And all for what? To pay respects? No. To show what a pillar of the community she was? That’s laughable. No. It’s to show themselves in the best light. They survived death. They’re still here. They’re winning. They think their wealth and status alone is enough to buy them more time.

I long to sneak into every single one of their bedrooms late at night to prove them wrong.

Baxter has awoken a beast inside of me and I welcome it with open arms.

Even though heads are bowed reverently, I feel every single person in the crowd’s eyes upon me. They’re all wondering, speculating. Probably hating me for the fortune they think I’m set to inherit. As if I’d want anything from that witch. I scan every face, trying to commit them all to memory.

I know Jax will have set surveillance up today, but I need to watch them with my own eyes.

Someone here knows the *real* Cordelia.

She didn't work alone.

Someone here has a heart as black as she did.

Someone here might still be coming after my family. For what reason, I have no idea. But I'll be damned if I let even one more hair on my family's head become damaged in connection to that vile bitch.

Whoever she was working with better watch out. Because I won't stop until *all* threats against my family are eradicated. And even though she wants nothing to do with me, that protection still extends to Lizzie and whatever family she's made for herself too.

When it's finally over, I wait for everyone to leave, my guys dealing with the confused guests who want to know where the wake will be held. There isn't going to be one. There will be no more celebration of her life. I've done what's expected and given her a proper burial. It's more than she deserves. But I won't do anything else.

They slowly leave, looking most put out, but I truly don't care. One by one they dwindle away when they realise that I'm not going to invite them back to the house or even speak to them at all. Dirty looks that could kill are thrown my way but I'm impervious to them all.

Eventually it's just me and my guys standing by the grave.

"Do you want us to leave you alone?" Thorn asks.

"Fuck no. I'm done here," I reply.

"Okay, well it's carnage out there with all the limos, the traffic is deadlocked. I have a taxi waiting and we're going to jump in it to get to Nix. We could squeeze you in or you could take it and I'll wait for the car to be free?"

"No it's fine. You guys go. I'll wait with Baxter for the limo. Give Nix a kiss and a cuddle for me."

“Always, princess.”

Thorn, Rebel, Ace and Jax kiss me one by one and then leave the graveyard.

Once we're alone I step forward and toss the letter I'm clutching in my hand down on top of the casket. Something for the bitch to read in hell. I have no regrets now. My demons are getting buried with her. A weight lifts from my shoulders and even though it's gross and immature, it's cathartic too: I lean forward and spit on her grave.

Baxter and I stand in silence staring at the hole. I wonder which of us despises her more. I have to admire he did a beautiful job of carving her up and I think it came from a place of love for me, but also hatred on his part.

I don't know how long we stand there, over the remains of my blood relative. Funny how family is what you make it, not where you come from.

I still have questions, of course. Where is Lizzie? Will she ever want to see me again? What has Cuntdelia left as her legacy?

But I know whatever the outcome, I'll face it with my family by my side. I reach for Baxter's hand and entwine our fingers, and we watch the world go by in silence together.



EPILOGUE

Raven

“Oh good, you’re still here, Batman. I was worried that I might have missed you.”

I spin and blink at the small curvy dark-haired beauty that has just approached us. She has a strange accent, maybe an Australian twang? I can’t quite place it. She looks to have Italian heritage. She’s beautiful for sure.

I shake my head as questions flood me. Who is she? Who the hell is Batman? And hasn’t she noticed that we’re standing graveside at a barely finished funeral? It’s hardly time for jokes.

The crowd of limos have only just departed, but Baxter and I are still standing by the hollowed pit they lowered the coffin into. It’ll never be a hole deep enough if you ask me. I’m not sorry she’s dead. I wish the coffin could be lowered down into the pits of hell where she belongs.

“Amelie?” Baxter’s shock and disbelief are palpable. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s good to see you.” The grin she gives him is so warm that my insides heat with jealousy. Who is she? “Can we talk?”

“Erm, sure...of course...I didn’t expect to see you.” Baxter is so visibly flustered that dread pools in my stomach. Whoever this woman is, she isn’t here for anything good. I’ve never seen Baxter ruffled. I watch in wary silence as he runs his fingers through his dark hair, clearly agitated. I’m debating whether to ask who she is or just introduce myself when he suddenly seems to remember my existence.

“Oh.” He frowns, turning to look at me. “Can I meet you back at the limo? I won’t be long. Or you can take it back to the house and I’ll meet you there with the others later.”

Before I can reply, unimpressed at the dismissal, the newcomer jumps in.

“Actually, I’d love to speak to Raven too. This concerns her after all.”

I shoot Baxter a quizzical look, which is more like ‘what the actual fuck?! Start explaining! How the hell does she know my name? And why the fuck would she want to talk to me?’.

These two clearly have some kind of history, judging from the look in Baxter’s eyes which has given way from shock to admiration. Whoever this woman is, he clearly respects and cares for her. So leave me out of it, thank you very much.

She steps forward and wraps her arms around Baxter’s waist, drawing him in for a quick hug. Not quick enough. A hiss escapes my lips and she drops her embrace and steps away. Not before giving me a strange look.

“She doesn’t know who I am.” The woman – Amelie was it? – says. She doesn’t sound upset, just accepting. *Who the fuck are you?* is really burning on my tongue now. But before Baxter or I can say anything, she spins and begins to walk away.

There’s no missing the delicate Celtic knot tattooed on the back of her neck with her dark hair wrapped up in an elegant chignon. I shoot daggers at Baxter. He has that tattoo. Lizzie’s guy had that tattoo. His grandfather has that tattoo. And *she* has that damn tattoo too! Which means she’s something to do with this organisation, this secret life he leads. The Order.

I don’t like this at all.

We walk in silence out of the graveyard and across the road to a deserted cafe. The woman walks like she knows exactly where she’s going and I realise that the cafe being empty probably isn’t a coincidence. We all take seats at a small square table, me opposite Amelie, with Baxter adjacent to the pair of us. Awkward.

No one comes to take our order so I guess this isn’t a coffee and cake and catch up kind of chat.

“Amelie, meet Raven...” Baxter says stiltedly when he realises that we’re both awaiting some sort of formal

introduction. “Raven, this is Amelie. We went to school together. She’s a...friend.”

Amelie snorts.

“A friend? I was your only friend. I’d be willing to bet I still am.”

“Not true. I have friends now.”

“Like who?” she teases with a grin.

“Jax. Rebel. Ace—”

“Your girlfriend’s boyfriends aren’t friends. Or should I say your fiancée? Anyway, they’re family. So try again.” I startle at how much she seems to know about me. Who *is* this bitch?

“Look, I’m sure you didn’t come all this way, today of all days, to argue about my friendship issues,” Baxter points out.

“True.” She looks sheepish before turning to me and adding, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t be. I’m not sorry she’s dead. I’m fucking ecstatic about it actually.”

“I like her.” Amelie chuckles. “Can I keep her?”

“No,” Baxter growls, tensing.

“Boo. You’re no fun anymore.” She pouts but her dark eyes are sparkling with merriment. If I weren’t so on edge about why she’s here, I’d probably like her. I can’t imagine Baxter having someone so vivacious in his life. I wonder *how much* history is between them. Is it only friendship? My stomach churns.

I think she’s close to my age, she’s definitely younger and more playful than Baxter, and she has that carefree lightness of my peers that I’ve never been able to pull off. How can I, raising Nix as a single mum and living with my consequences and guilt?

“Why are you here, Amelie?” For the first time, Baxter sounds wary of her presence. She shoots me a look I can’t read before answering him in a rush.

“I found some shit out about The Order. I’m in trouble and I need help. I won’t bore you with the details right now but—”

“No.”

“No?”

My head bounces back and forth between the two of them.

“I’m not coming back.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t ever leave? What do you mean back?” I whisper to him. Amelie suddenly sits up straight and all merriment falls from her face.

“I see you’ve been spilling our secrets.”

“So?” Baxter scoffs, but I don’t miss the way his leg tenses against mine. Shit! What have I done? I shouldn’t have said anything.

“Like I wouldn’t tell her. There’s no secrets between us... Besides, you’re one to talk. Didn’t you blab everything to Elsie once upon a time?”

Pain flashes across her face briefly, but in an instant it’s gone. Her gaze hardens and I realise that, joking and friendship aside, this woman is formidable. Important. And right now, she’s holding all the cards. Whereas I don’t even know what game we’re playing.

“I’m not asking you to come back, or to take a more active role...”

“Then what do you want?” he hisses, his anger palpable.

“You promised me,” she says, avoiding his question. He frowns for a second but she gives him a hard look and the penny must drop or something because suddenly it somehow makes Baxter tense even more.

“What?” His voice is as tight as his muscles.

“Don’t play dumb, it doesn’t suit you. You needed protection for your little family death out there and I told you it was going to cost.”

“*What?*” He repeats with emphasis. I can hear how angry he is, but he sounds...scared too? It’s not possible. Baxter Branson isn’t afraid of anything.

“Her.” Her eyes flick to me as she shrugs her shoulders.

“No. No way. Absolutely not.”

“Excuse me?” I say, not really sure who I’m talking to. Why the hell does she want me? What does that even mean? And who the fuck does Baxter think he is, answering for me?

“You *can’t* say no,” she reminds him.

“I can and I have.”

“Look, I need another board member. There have been some...complications and some hidden truths have come to light.”

“So choose Onyx. He’s from a founding family,” Baxter snaps.

“His family seat is taken by Slate. Some new information has come to light. I need a Deighton.”

I gasp at the mention of my grandmother’s name. I hoped that after today I would never have to hear her name again, but here she is, creeping up on me in the most unlikely scenario. And I don’t like it one bit.

“What?” The blood drains from Baxter’s face. “That’s not possible.”

“Like I said, I don’t have a huge amount of time, so I won’t go into detail right now—”

“Yes you fucking will! Explain!” Baxter explodes, slamming his fist down on the table with such force that I jump. I’ve never seen him this rattled before. He’s definitely scared. But why?

“It doesn’t really concern you, Baxter,” Amelie says on a sigh. “It’s up to Raven.”

“But you said you wanted to speak to me,” he points out.

“Well, yes, but only because I knew you wouldn’t let me take her off alone.”

“You tricked me,” he says. It isn’t a question. She shrugs unapologetically.

Suddenly Baxter gets to his feet, his chair scraping noisily across the tiled floor. Even though we’re alone, I still cringe at the sound and the scene he’s making.

“Come on, Raven. We’re leaving.”

He grabs my arm and pulls me out of my seat before I can figure out what’s happening.

“Hold on,” I say, pulling my arm free. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. We’re going.”

“You owe me, Baxter,” she threatens.

“I thought you wanted me to kill someone! A fucking prince or something. Not this! Not her! You can’t take the only thing I care about! Don’t come after us, Amelie,” he warns her. She pulls a face. “I mean it. You know what I can do and you don’t command all the resources in the world. We can disappear.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Baxter,” Amelie scoffs. “Sit down.”

“No.”

He reaches out for my arm again and tugs me towards the door. This time he doesn’t let me pull free so easily.

“Baxter, stop! You’re being ridiculous,” I complain, but he doesn’t listen.

“Baxter! Listen to her. She’s *legacy*.”

Something in those words makes him freeze and turn back to face Amelie.

“Impossible.”

“I promise you, it’s not. Why do you think your grandfather was stationed to watch over Cordelia for all those years?”

I shudder at the mention of my grandmother, lying in a barely cold casket just across the road. How is she still fucking things up from beyond the grave?

“What does she have to do with anything?” I ask.

“Everything,” Amelie replies. She fixes her gaze on Baxter. “I can’t prove it yet, but I think she’s...important too.”

“No. It’s not possible, Amelie.” Baxter shakes his head in denial. What the hell are they on about, legacies?

“It is. I think...I think...she’s family. She might be.”

A nervous laugh slips through my lips at that. I can’t be related to this girl. For one, we don’t look anything alike. And, I don’t have any family...

Only, that’s not true is it?

My grandmother was a twin who had children, who also had children. I have cousins. Even my twin sister isn’t dead like I thought. Why wouldn’t there be more secrets and lies coming out of the woodwork, even with Cordelia dead?

“I—” I have no idea what I’m going to say. Surely there’s no harm in hearing this woman out? In hearing what she has to say? I get the final choice, right? So where’s the harm?

“Raven, I need you on the board by my side. Everything we’ve built will crumble and The Order will pass to the hands of bad people if I can’t complete the board by the end of next week...” She sounds panicked. Distraught even. “We always thought there were seven founding families, but there were more, and whoever found this out is threatening to overturn The Order without a full board in place to support my rule.”

“I don’t know what that means.” I can hear the confusion in my voice but also my regret too. If Baxter’s reaction weren’t so vehement, I’d be tempted to help this woman. I certainly feel sympathetic to her plight, whatever it is.

“No. I said no, Amelie. You’re not dragging Raven into this piece of shit life the rest of us have to suffer through. I’m done.”

“Blood in, blood out, Baxter,” Amelie says quietly.

“I don’t give a fuck!” He kicks a chair across the room where it clatters noisily to the floor and splinters. “Send your team! I’ll be ready for them and I’ll take a few out with me. I will fucking die before Raven is dragged into that shit! She has a kid.”

“Phoenix. Yeah, I know. Why do you think I’m so desperately trying to keep her safe?”

My head snaps back to Amelie at the mention of my daughter’s name. How does she know so much about me when I apparently know so little? Anger courses through my veins. How dare she use Nix to try and blackmail me!

“Fuck off, Amelie,” Baxter hisses. This time when he takes my hand, I thread my fingers through his. I’m with him. He’s always had my back and if he doesn’t think this is a good idea, I’m with him.

We reach the door, hand on the handle and ready to leave when a new voice enters the fray.

“I’ll do it.”

We all spin round to stare at the woman standing behind the serving counter. Her white-blond hair is pulled back from her face but is hanging loose down her back in a straight waterfall. Her bright green eyes blaze with a fierce determination even though her hands appear to tremble by her sides. I gasp. I didn’t think I’d see her again. I want to race over and squeeze her, to apologise, to cry and laugh and beg forgiveness. But I’m rooted to the spot.

“Who the fuck are you? This is a private conversation and this premises is supposed to be empty,” Amelie snarls.

“I’m Beth. I thought you’d know that, as you seem to have all the answers already,” she replies quietly. She’s softly spoken, but not demure. I can hear the steel in her tone. I just can’t comprehend what I’m seeing. My not so dead, but definitely estranged, twin sister is suddenly standing before me. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Raven’s sister. You might know me as Lizzie but I prefer Beth.”

Amelie gasps.

“We couldn’t find you. We searched and searched for you but you kept slipping through our fingers.”

I frown and almost say something but Baxter squeezes me hard enough to deliver the message that I need to keep my mouth shut. This woman talks like she’s high up in The Order, almost like she runs it, but that can’t be possible. If they’re as mighty and powerful as Baxter and she claim to be, how could they not find Lizzie?

“I have very well connected friends. They’ve kept me safe for a long time now,” Lizzie replies. I see murder flash in Amelie’s eyes and realise that these friends of Lizzie’s must be connected to The Order somehow, and she doesn’t like that one bit. Baxter’s tension makes me think heads will roll for hiding her.

“I’ll do it. I’ll take the Deighton seat on the board. You only need one of us, right?”

There’s a hard glint in her eyes that I’ve never seen before. I...it sounds awful but...I don’t trust her. What is she doing here? And why is she suddenly willing to accept that she is Lizzie, my sister, after all? Her timing is too suspect.

“Perfect.” Amelie smiles, rubbing her hands together. She throws a dismissive look our way. “Looks like I won’t be needing you after all.”

“Come on, Raven,” Baxter says softly, giving me a sad, regretful look. “We don’t belong here.”

In a state of shock, I don’t protest as he tugs me out of the cafe and across the street to where the black town car is waiting for us. He opens the back door for me and I wordlessly slide in, settling back onto the soft leather seat. Baxter joins me, taking my hand into his once more. He doesn’t say a word.

“Bax?”

“I’m so sorry, Raven.” He sounds devastated, which just adds to my confusion. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“I don’t understand.”

He sighs.

“I had to strike several deals with Amelie.”

“Who is she?”

“She’s my friend. Or she was. She’s a girl I used to know at school and I tried everything I could to keep her safe, to keep her out of this life...”

“The Order?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want her to join but she...well, she comes from the most powerful bloodline and it was her birthright to take over The Order and rule it.”

“I see,” I say, even though I don’t. Not really.

“The Order’s...strong. Powerful. Ruthless.”

“Like you,” I tease. He smiles tightly.

“They have a saying. ‘Blood in, blood out’ which basically means when you join, the only way to leave is if you’re dead.”

“But you don’t seem to work for them?”

“The first deal I struck with Amelie. To sit on the board as a silent member. To attend meetings and vote by proxy. I agreed to always vote in her favour and support her if I didn’t have to play an active role within the organisation.”

“Okay? So when did things change?”

“When I needed favours. The Order runs on a favours system so those words aren’t used lightly, like you’d say ‘do me a favour and grab me a drink’ you know?” I nod. “My skill set means that my favours are worth more than others. I don’t trade them lightly but I’d sell my soul back to them to keep my family safe.”

He goes quiet and stares out of the window. I slip my hand into his and give a gentle squeeze of encouragement. He takes a deep breath.

“I was never going to be able to get away with killing someone as high profile as Cordelia without help.”

“Amelie.”

“Yeah. She said it would cost me but I just assumed she wanted me to kill a royal or something.” He chuckles darkly. “I didn’t know it would cost me everything.”

“But.” I feel so guilty. I want to help. “If you sit on this board as like...a ghost member or something, couldn’t I do the same? To protect you?”

He shakes his head.

“Once they have their claws in, they never let go.”

“But she seemed...nice,” I finish rather weakly.

“Amelie?” He turns to look at me and blinks, a warm but sad smile on his face. “She’s amazing. You’d like her a lot. She has the love of four brothers, and I know you’d get on with them like a house on fire. She was the one who made me realise I have a heart. She teased me for falling for you. I got to watch her grow and become strong, much like you are. I respect and admire her, and I’d do anything for her. Or I thought I would. I’d do *almost* anything for her. But I won’t give her you. I can’t give up my heart, my pulse, my *raison d’etre*.”

I squeeze his hand again.

“We’ll work something out,” I promise before confessing, “I don’t trust Lizzie.”

“Me either,” he replies, shaking his head sadly. “Me either.”

Beth

“I better go,” I say as I watch the total stranger who claims to be my sister – and my twin no less – walk out the door with her fierce guard dog.

My own protectors are close by, but I still feel nervous not having them right by my side. Still, this part of the plan couldn't be carried out any other way, so I had to suck it up and come in here alone. I trust them, even if I don't fully understand what we've just set in motion.

They've had my back from the day they found me and I trust them completely to tell me what I need to know, when I need to know it. It's always been that way between us. Anything withheld has always been for my own good and I believe them to work with my best interests at heart.

“What? You can't go. I need to talk to you about—”

“The Order? Yeah yeah yeah, I know.”

“What do you know?” The dark-haired girl asks sharply.

“More than you think. More than I should, probably.” I shrug. “I don't have time for this. I have an appointment. You know where to find me.”

And she does – if she's as important as my men tell me she is, she'll know all about them and will contact me through them. People may have been looking for me for years, but my guys are the best at what they do and have protected me well. I guess it's finally time to stop hiding.

I leave the young dark-haired girl spluttering behind me as I follow the path my sister took...yeah that still feels weird to even think.

It's been a strange month since she and her guys railroaded their way into my life. Obviously, I was in denial when they turned up and started insisting I had this whole other life I knew nothing about.

It was only after Macerio rescued me from the hospital and got me out of there, that we all started to have some very frank and honest conversations.

So much of my life ‘before’ is unknown, but Mace promised me that if I wanted answers – and I do – that getting to know these people was my best chance. And that meant accepting that this Raven woman really is my sister.

Which still blows my mind.

My three guys have been my whole world since day one and I’m not ready to accept that I might have a family out there somewhere. But for them, I can do this. I will do this. Even if it means playing happy families.

I blink when a sleek black limo pulls up in front of me and the back window slides down. Reagan grins at me like a loon.

“Get in, sunshine,” he drawls in his thick Irish accent that still makes me weak at the knees after all these years.

“What’s with the wheels?” I say, frowning.

“Where we’re going this shit is expected. You should see your sister. She’s fucking posher than the queen. We gotta keep up appearances. We’re playing in the big leagues now.”

I don’t say a word but climb into the back of the car. Once I’m situated the limo pulls away and I fall into a contemplative silence. Macerio and Emiliano are both on their phones, and Reagan seems content to stare out the window with his hand on my thigh, so I think about his words.

My sister – will I *ever* get used to that? – didn’t seem posh. I’ve always felt that posh, rich, loaded, was synonymous with being a stuck up asshole. That doesn’t seem like Raven or her men at all.

Her men.

It’s funny how we’ve both ended up in poly relationships, though I have no idea how she manages to juggle so many guys. I have my hands full with just three. If anything, it’s that small detail which makes me believe we might actually share

DNA. Which is crazy, but there is something in my gut saying there's truth to her claim.

What's even funnier is that even though my guys are the craziest, most psycho killers I've ever come across – even in books – it was my sister's guys who terrified me so badly in the hospital that day. I'm not really ready to face them, even though I kind of want to slap them for coming on so strong and forcing their way into my space.

I liked that job. I was sad to have to leave it, pack up and move *again*. I long to stay somewhere long enough to put down some roots.

My mind begins to replay that day in the hospital and the fallout afterwards, as it has so many times since, but before I can get sucked into a downward spiral of confusion and questions, the limo pulls up to ornate gates. They open automatically which surprises me. What's the point in having gates if you're just going to let anyone in without checking ID?

We continue along the drive, pulling up outside a ridiculous mansion. It's ornate, ostentatious, and completely hideous. There's no way that the girl with the jet black hair and 'fuck you' stare that I watched from a distance at the graveside lives here.

Mace told me they were burying my grandmother but she didn't seem upset. I watched her spit on the grave. *That* opened up a whole new world of questions.

I sigh. At this rate I'm going to need to start jotting them down in a little notebook.

“What is this place?” I ask as we climb out and I crane my neck to get a better view of the place.

“Your new home,” Mace replies. “Well, half of it, I'm guessing.”

“What?”

“This was your grandmother's house. We're here for the reading of the Will.”

I stall to a standstill and stare at Mace in dismay.

“We shouldn’t be here,” I say, shaking my head. “This doesn’t concern us.”

“It does. She was your grandmother and you’ve missed out on so much. We were contacted by her solicitor and they requested that you be here today. It means she believed that you were still alive. She never gave up hope. She kept loving you.”

Emil always knows the right thing to say. Hope flutters in my chest at the thought of someone from my mysterious past life still believing I’m out there somewhere. Maybe she even tried to find me. She certainly would have had the resources at her disposal if this house is anything to go by. The fact that she didn’t manage to hunt me down despite her considerable wealth is a testament to how good my guys are.

“Listen, I know you missed out on a whole life, a family. This is a way to connect with your grandmother even though she’s gone.”

Emil’s words tug on my heartstrings. With a pang I look up at the house and wonder if I had a happy childhood here. Did I know my grandfather? Did I visit often with my sister and our parents? Did we all celebrate the holidays here like one big happy family? I wonder about the guy in the hospital, insisting that the scar on my hand was from a climbing accident with my father. Was it true? Was he right? Do I dare to believe that I might finally find answers to my past?

I’ve never wondered that much about my life ‘before’. Obviously I did a little, especially in the early days when confusion and fear ruled me. But the guys have always been so wonderful that I learnt to let it go and focus on the family I have now: the ones who chose me.

Then that freak encounter at the hospital with Raven and I feel like my whole life has been unravelling ever since. The guys used their connections to unveil some mysteries for me, but it isn’t enough. I need more.

With that thought in mind, I walk through the open front door.

I need answers.

My guys walk right beside me as I step into the over the top, opulent house. All conversation stops and all eyes fall on us. Raven is standing in the foyer with the five guys she had at the hospital with her, and her child is playing on the stairs. There's an older guy standing with his back to me near the kid, and Raven is speaking to some woman that I don't know. Well, it's not like I really *know* any of them.

"What the fuck?" The biggest guy mutters but he's not quiet,

"Bad word!" The girl, who I think was called Phoenix, yells. The huge guy who looks like he's about to burst out of his suit like the hulk sighs and pulls out his wallet, passing the child a fifty. My eyes bug out of my head but no one bats an eyelid. He just gave a small child fifty pounds! For swearing!

"Ah, you're here," the old guy on the stairs says, turning to face me. My jaw hits the floor as I recognise one of the world's most famous entrepreneurial businessmen looking at me expectantly with a warm, welcoming smile on his face. "That's everyone we need. Maybe Raven, you could ask the childminder to take Phoenix upstairs to play?"

Raven does as the old man suggests, and the other woman immediately heads up the stairs with Phoenix, who complains loudly the whole way about not wanting to miss the 'party'.

I very much doubt I'm here for a party.

"Shall we go through to the study? It'll be more comfortable," the old man suggests.

Wordlessly we all do as he says, everyone too shell-shocked I think to ask what the hell is going on or why I'm here. Beats me, but my guys seem to know the score and I trust them. As we follow Raven and her men into the study, which turns out to be a freaking library, Reagan slips his hand into mine. I take comfort in his warm palm and vow to make them proud, whatever happens.

“Take a seat, ladies,” the man says, sitting himself behind the oversized wooden desk that dominates the centre of the room and indicating two green leather armchairs for Raven and me.

I do as he asks and feel Reagan, Emiliano and Macerio immediately fall into formation behind me, fanning out to create a protective shield. They always have my back. Raven takes the other chair but her guys spread out more throughout the room, leaning on the desk, against shelves, or lounging in other seats. Only the terrifying one stays close to her. The one with black eyes who looks like a murderer.

I don't know why he scares me so much. He can't be any worse than my guys. Between Mace's icy domination of all scenarios, Emil's thirst for blood and violence, or Reagan's total psychopathic tendencies, I probably shouldn't fear anyone. But my guys *love*. They're not dead like this one appears to be.

I shudder and quickly turn my attention back to the man behind the desk.

“What is she doing here?” Raven asks tightly. I don't blame her. I just waltzed into her home – is it her home? – unannounced after gatecrashing her meeting and stealing her spot on the board of The Order. She must hate me.

“We're here for the reading of the will, and everyone named within it needs to be present, except for Phoenix who is exempt of course because she is underage. It's up to the two of you if the others stay.”

“Please,” I say quietly while Reagan loudly proclaims that he isn't ‘fucking leaving’. It's okay though, Raven doesn't want her guys to go either. Everyone's sort of staring at each other warily with distrust and unease.

“Okay, let's begin,” he says, turning to me. “I'm Richard Bra—”

“I know who you are,” I say.

“I was your grandmother's...partner and I'm the named executor of her will. We're here today for the reading.”

“Didn’t she just get buried?” I ask. “It seems insensitive to do this the same day.”

Next to me Raven hisses under her breath and I cringe. I didn’t mean to upset anyone, the question just slipped out.

“The instructions are all here, Beth. If you want to read them then you’re welcome to, but it’s all been outlined by your grandmother. She was very specific about her instructions and wishes, and she wanted it done this way.”

“It’s okay,” I say quickly, embarrassed. I didn’t mean to rock the boat. “Sorry. Carry on. I won’t interrupt again.”

“You’re more than welcome to, as I know you must have many questions, but if I could read the document in its entirety first, you can ask all the questions you want afterwards and we can revisit any points you need.”

“Okay,” I agree.

“Fine,” Raven says tersely.

“Okay, so I want to begin by saying that I had nothing to do with the will, and that, medically at least, Cordelia was of sound mind when she wrote it and later updated it.”

I frown. I’ve been to precisely zero will readings – as far as I know – but that sounds a little strange to my ears. *Medically* she was sane? What does that mean? His tone implies he maybe doesn’t agree with that judgement. Is that why Raven isn’t upset about her death?

“I have no power to change what’s written here, and I honestly wish I could.”

Okay, that sounds ominous. Tension ratchets up throughout the room, most noticeably in Raven and her guys. What is going on here?

“I’ll begin.” He clears his throat and reads. “*I, Ms. Cordelia Eliza Deighton, being of sound mind and body, do decree that my entire estate, fortune and possessions are split equally between my two granddaughters, Elizabeth McLintock and Charlotte McLintock, and my great-granddaughter,*

Phoenix Elizabeth McLintock, under the completion of the following stipulations...”

As he reads, all I can hope is that my men are listening because my head is already reeling. My name really is Elizabeth. But Raven’s name is Charlotte?! That’s too strange. Raven suits her so much more than Charlotte.

And she named Phoenix after me...wow. Warmth floods me. I really do have a whole...life I know nothing about. A family.

What happens next?

Sudden shouting snaps me back to the present and I see that all of Raven’s guys are on their feet, most of them shouting and waving their arms angrily. Only the murderous looking one is silent, but even that looks deadly on him. I stare at Raven.

She looks like she’s seen a ghost.

“What? What did I miss?” I ask, turning to look at Mace. He shrugs. I don’t know if it’s because he doesn’t know, or if that’s just his laid back, couldn’t care less demeanour. Mace rarely concerns himself with other people’s problems, and certainly not *rich people drama* as he likes to say.

“In order for the three beneficiaries of the will to inherit, your grandmother has stipulated that certain conditions are met first.”

“Why?” Raven suddenly whispers. “It’s like she’s reaching out from beyond the grave to taunt me. To say that she still calls the shots. That there’s no escaping her.”

“I’m so sorry Raven. Of course we can fight it,” he says, turning to her. “We will fight it. But I can’t see a judge ruling her request as unreasonable.”

Raven looks like she’s about to burst into tears.

“I don’t understand,” I say.

“Cordelia is insisting that in order for all three of you to gain access to your inheritance, Phoenix must complete a

minimum of her final two exam years at Westchester Preparatory Academy.”

My face must still say that I don't get it because Raven turns to me with tears actually streaming down her face. She looks way too badass to be crying, and it shakes me.

“It's where you went to school. Where you were bullied and raped a-a-and murdered.”

I don't point out the very obvious fact that I have not been murdered, not when she's so upset. After the hospital, Mace told me a little of my background so I knew about the bullying and the...attack. But it still smarts to have it thrown at me so coldly.

“It's also where I went to avenge your bullies after the school covered up your death and told everyone it was a suicide. It was where your attacker tried to do the same to me...and where I killed him, after trapping most of my class in a chapel and setting it on fire.”

My eyes must be like saucers because Raven gives a harsh sort of hysterical laugh.

“Yeah. Welcome to the family, sis,” she says dryly, not realising that it's actually music to my ears. *A family*. And a damn fiercely protective one at that.

I wish I could ask her more, have some time alone with her to talk, but she turns back to the old man before I can say anything.

“She's not going,” Raven says. I have to say I agree with her completely.

“If you want the inheritance—”

“I don't give a fuck about it! I don't want anything from that bitch!” I'm shocked by her outburst.

“I completely understand that. But what about Phoenix?” The old man says quietly.

“She doesn't need it either.”

“And have you stopped to think about your sister in all of this?” His voice is barely a whisper right now. “I’m not here to convince you to do anything but it is my job to read the stipulations out. In order for any of you to inherit, this is what must be done. That woman sitting beside you is a stranger. You know a fraction of her story and you’d be the first to admit how traumatic it was. You don’t know what else she’s been through or how desperately she might need this. She’s just as entitled to it as you are.”

I just sit there, taking it all in and reeling from all the revelations of today. I desperately want to tell the old man he’s wrong, that I’m fine, that I don’t need the money...but I can’t. Because he’s right. And because my men have a plan. A plan that requires resources we just don’t have access to.

They’re going to be pissed if we have to wait another twelve years or so before we get our share. Maybe there’s another way?

“Look, it’s been a long day and emotions are running high,” Branson says reasonably after taking a deep breath, even though almost everyone in the room looks ready to spill blood. “Let’s let this lie for now. If nothing else, we have time to sort this. Phoenix has a place at the school from September and even if you don’t send her, that place will always be held for her because it’s been paid for in advance for the full duration of Nix’s entire education. If you wish to fight the will and *all* of the beneficiaries are in agreement, then we have time. But ultimately, when she’s old enough, it will be Nix’s decision if she wants to go.”

“Over my dead body,” Raven growls, getting to her feet as if to leave. “I said no. We’re done here.”

I stare back and forth between the two of them, taking in the agitation of Raven’s guys in my peripheral vision.

Part of me desperately wants to agree with Raven – whatever it takes to make her happy – but my guys had warned me beforehand not to say or do anything rash. I’m pretty sure offering to give up my share of the inheritance on a

whim in order to make my sister like me would be considered as rash in their minds.

I look at them. All three of them sit statue still, their faces impassive and giving nothing away. They don't even make eye contact with me. I know it has to be this way, but I wish they would give me *some* indication of what I should do or say right now.

I nibble the corner of my lip nervously, unsure. Raven's hands are fisted by her sides but she's worrying her lip the exact same way as me. In profile, I can see similarities between us. The shape of our noses. Our matching Cupid's bows. The thick lashes.

I swallow.

I have more questions than ever. I just hope that the plan doesn't get in the way of me getting answers.

The End

Retribution

BONUS CONTENT



DELETED SCENE:
REBEL

After Ace is revealed as Nix's father

"Fuck," I hiss once the door closes and Raven's gone.

"You okay, dude?" Thorn asks, his equally shell-shocked expression morphing into one of concern.

I shrug.

Am I okay? I'm not Nix's father. Ace is. I was so sure it was me. There were so many similarities. I was already halfway in love with her. And now I'm...no one.

"I guess. How do you feel about the news?" I ask him carefully. I'm trying to guard my feelings, but I suspect everything I'm thinking is written on my face.

"I'm a bit gutted actually. I know I said I didn't want this, you know, initially, but Nix won me round. I actually started to think that she might have been mine. She's funny and cheeky, loves the beach...I don't know. We both have blonde hair. That sounds superficial, but there were a few things. I *felt* like she was mine, you know?"

"I thought the same. She's so stubborn, like me." I sigh. "And now I feel..."

"Lost."

"Useless. Unnecessary."

"Like we're not needed."

"You're both being ridiculous," Baxter scoffs. We turn to stare at him.

"Shut up. It's alright for you, mate," Thorn seethes. "You knew you weren't Nix's father from the beginning."

"Yeah, you've just been playing the role for the last however many years," I add, not meaning for it to sound as callous as it does. I don't mean he's been *playing* the role. He's been a wonderful father figure to Nix. I just mean that he knew what he was signing up for, and stepped up anyway.

It's so alien. The thought of Baxter *willingly* choosing to take on a child. It reminds me of my sister and niece all over again, and my heart bleeds for him that this time around the consequences might be just as disastrous.

"You don't think that's going to change now that Nix has an actual dad?" Thorn asks, waspishly.

"I don't," Baxter replies emphatically.

"How can it not? We'll all be redundant."

"You're both being so dramatic. It's pathetic. If Raven could hear you now she'd be so pissed off. Am I right, Jax?"

"He's right," Jax agrees. I frown at him too. Whose side is he on anyway?

"Don't you care? Aren't you even a little disappointed?" I demand.

"No. I'm not disappointed because I never thought Nix was mine to begin with." He keeps insisting this, but I swear it's bullshit. White kids being born from one mixed race parent is not that unheard of. There was a chance Nix was his. He just refused to entertain the idea because he's stubborn as fuck and living in denial. Nix being his would force him to care, and he wasn't willing to do that.

"Then why did you hang around?" Thorn challenges.

"Because I'm in love with Raven, and despite everything, I want to make things work with her. I want to be part of her life, and Nix's too."

I'm stunned by his honesty. I wasn't sure he'd ever admit to how he really feels. Some days he and Raven seem to be making progress, then others it's like he's gone back to square one, full of anger and insisting that he hates her again. They seem to have a tentative kind of truce, but I don't think there's trust and forgiveness there.

"I don't need a DNA test to tell me to step up and be a father figure to Nix. I knew she wasn't mine, and I came round to the idea of doing it anyway. That's not about to change."

“Exactly. You two need to stop being such drama queens,” Baxter says snidely. “So what, you’re not Nix’s biological fathers. Are you going to let that stop you from being a dad to her? No!”

“What if Ace wants us to step back?” I ask.

“He might, but only so he can get to know Nix better. I doubt he would anyway, but if he wants us to, we have to respect that,” Jax replies calmly.

I see red. “Like hell we do! I’m not going to let him use Nix as an excuse to push us out of Raven’s life so that he can move in on her!”

“This is Ace we’re talking about,” Jax reminds me. “Do you really think he would do that? Do you really think Raven would let him?”

“Well, no, but—”

“No buts. You’re being overly dramatic, as usual. And right now, this isn’t about *either* of you. It’s about Ace. We need to understand why he’s freaking out and we need to be there for him, as his brothers, to reassure him.”

The fight leaves me and my shoulders sag. Damn it, he’s right. Ace’s reaction is what we should be worrying about. Maybe Raven was wrong; maybe we should have gone after him.

“You’re right.”

“I know I am. So quit the pity party, suck it up and be happy for Ace. If you both act like this is a funeral, he’s going to feel even worse about the result.”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah...sorry. I’m just disappointed, I guess,” Thorn mumbles.

“There’s nothing to be disappointed about. You can still be dads to Nix, and partners to Raven if that’s what all parties want. So far, Raven has never given any indication that she’s only keeping us around for Nix’s sake, and I don’t think that’s about to change.”

“You’re right,” I admit, taking a deep breath and calming myself down.

“Get your heads out of your arses then,” Baxter snaps, leaving the room.

“Shall we go and look for Ace?” I ask.

“No. I think we need to give him space to process. He’s going through a lot. There’s a lot of misplaced guilt that stems from his childhood trauma that will be bubbling on the surface right now. When he works through it and comes back, we’ll be here to remind him that he’s *not* his father or his uncle, and that he has a choice moving forward.”

“What choice? You’re not suggesting he walk away?”

“No. Never. He can choose to parent Nix the way he was raised—”

“Over my dead body!”

“Or he can choose to be the kind of dad he wishes he’d had.”

“He’ll want that.”

“I know. But he just needs to realise it’s his choice. He isn’t destined to repeat their sins just because they share DNA.”

“He’ll make a really good dad,” Thorn points out. I nod.

“He already is. He’s been amazing with Nix. You all have,” Jax agrees.

Jax has been reluctant to bond with Nix, but he’s been unable to help himself. She’s wormed her way into his heart just as much as she has the rest of us. I don’t think he could walk away from Raven and Nix now, anymore than the rest of us could. He’s fallen for them both.

“*We* all have,” I correct him firmly. “And we’ll continue.”

“She’s going to be the most loved and spoiled little girl ever. How can she not be with five doting dads?” Jax replies with a wry smile.

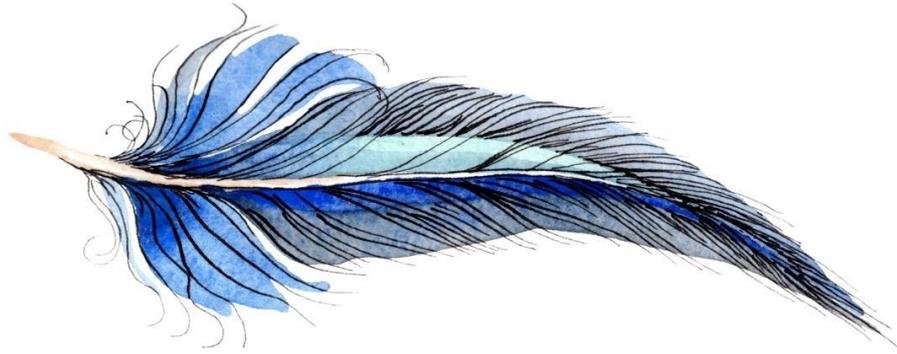
“God help her when she wants to date,” Thorn jokes.

“Over my dead body!” Jax growls. I laugh, but I don’t think he’s joking.

Not Phoenix’s my dad, my ass.

Retribution

EXTENDED EPILOGUE



IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE WILL READING: RAVEN

“Someone has a lot of fucking explaining to do,” I snarl as soon as everyone leaves.

What the fuck was that? How could Baxter’s grandfather drop a bomb like that? How *dare* he not mention that he invited Lizzie – damn it, *Beth* – to the house for the reading of the will! How did he even *find* her?

She’d been in the wind since the guys confronted her at the hospital, until she mysteriously turned up in the closed cafe after the funeral. Who *is* she? And who the hell were those men she turned up with? In a limo no less! They looked like full blown criminals, and yet she was clearly comfortable around them.

I get that Baxter is intimidating to a lot of people, but those three men, they were *terrifying*. It’s not just that they were covered in tattoos and piercings, they had that hardened look, the glint in their eyes that says *don’t fuck with us*. I could practically see the threat of deadly violence rolling off them in waves.

What has my sister been doing during her missing years and what has she got herself mixed up in?

And Phoenix. Cordelia. Fuck! My head’s spinning.

“How is she still doing this?” I whisper, sinking forward onto the desk and resting my head in my hands. “Even from Hell, she’s still calling all the shots.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Baxter reassures me. “You don’t want anything she’s offering. You don’t need that inheritance.”

“But Phoenix—”

“Definitely doesn’t need it either.”

“What about Liz—*Beth*?”

“Not to sound like a heartless bastard here, but who gives a fuck about her?” Baxter snaps.

“That’s harsh,” I huff, even though I understand why he’s saying that.

“She’s a stranger. One whose reappearance right now is circumspect at best. I don’t trust her. None of us should,” he reminds me.

“But what if your grandfather was right? We don’t know what she’s been through, or what she needs. She might—”

“You saw for yourself who she’s involved with. I don’t know her story, and nor do you, but she turned up in a nice car, with men associated with The Order. Amelie is trying to recruit one of you, so I know she’ll be well looked after if she chooses to join. She doesn’t need your grandmother’s legacy any more than you do.”

“But—”

“Are you willing to put your daughter’s life on the line for a stranger? Will you sacrifice a potential relationship with a girl who’s *claiming* to be your sister – without any evidence I might add – in order to keep Phoenix alive?”

“No! I just want answers!” I cry, exasperated. I know Baxter is exaggerating the worst-case scenario, playing on my worst fears and the demons that haunt me. I know why he’s doing it. But *still*...

“And we’ll get them for you, I promise. Without having to send Phoenix to West Prep. Okay?”

“Fine. Yes. You’re right. Sorry. It’s just been a huge day, and I wasn’t expecting...well, any of that.”

I sigh and rub my temples again, trying to ward off the headache that’s building.

“It’s okay. We were all blindsided. I’ll reach out to Amelie or my grandfather, see if we can track Beth down and arrange a meeting...when you’re ready.”

“Thanks. I need time. I want to be prepared when I see her next. That’s twice she’s blindsided me, and I don’t like it.”

“You’ve got it,” Baxter promises, stepping up to drop a kiss on my head. His hands rest on my shoulders and I groan, grateful, when he starts to massage the tension away.

“Fuck this day. I’m ready for it all to be done,” I grumble.

“Amen to that,” Rebel agrees.

“Want me to see if the sitter will stay on and we’ll go out?” Jax offers.

“Thanks, but no. I think Phoenix just needs some normality right now.” I sigh. As nice as drinking all my problems into oblivion sounds, I know it’s not the answer.

“If you’re sure. I can always stay once she’s in bed and you can go out with the others.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I think I just want to chill tonight. I’ve never been a party animal.”

“Takeaway and a film?” Thorn offers.

“Can we get—”

“Thai? Yes,” Ace agrees, causing the others to groan good naturedly. They know I’m obsessed. Some things never change.

“Can we grab Phoenix and go? I hate this place. I don’t ever want to step foot in here again if I can help it,” I say, meaning every word. This house, Cordelia’s house, holds nothing but bad memories for me. Even now, Nix’s childhood is tainted by her great-grandmother hurting her within these walls. There’s nothing for us here.

I'm actually wondering if I can ask Baxter to burn it to the ground. Maybe it's too soon and would look suspicious, but perhaps in a couple of months.

It's another part of my life I need to draw a line under and move on. My parents, Lizzie, West Prep, Cordelia, Charlie...it all leaves me questioning when I might get to just...be me. Breathe. Live.



TWO WEEKS AFTER THE FUNERAL: RAVEN

“Hi. Thanks for agreeing to meet with me,” Beth says nervously as I take a seat opposite my sister.

My sister. It’s ridiculous. Ridiculous that I’m nervous around my twin. That the other half of me is now a stranger.

I give her an equally wobbly grin in return as I say, “No worries. I’m glad you reached out. Are you here alone?”

She shakes her head. “No. The guys are nearby. They wanted to give us some privacy, but they don’t like to go far.”

“They seem very protective of you,” I observe carefully.

“They are. They’ve had to be.” She doesn’t elaborate, so I don’t ask. They freak me out if I’m honest. This whole situation makes me uncomfortable. “I’m guessing you’re not alone either.”

“No. They’re nearby.” My tone is guarded. I’m going to treat this woman like a stranger until I *know* she’s my sister. And even then, it won’t necessarily mean all is right between us. Filling in the details of our missing years will not be an easy conversation.

“All of them?”

“Yes.” I watch as she shivers. “Problem?”

She hesitates. “No. It’s just...nothing.”

“Go on.”

“The dark-eyed one scares me.” She shivers again, and I bite back a smirk.

“All your guys look like they can kill a man bare handed, and you’re scared of *Baxter*?”

She gives me a thin smile. “It was actually what made me think we really could be sisters, you know.”

“Oh?”

“When I came to the house and saw that you had a poly relationship too, I thought it was funny. Maybe we were related after all.”

I return her smile. I guess she does have a point.

“Do you want to order a coffee or anything?” I offer.

“I hate coffee. And tea. I already ordered—” The stilted, awkward conversation is interrupted – or perhaps saved – by the arrival of the barista.

“Your hot chocolate, miss.”

“Thank you.” She inhales the scent like she needs it to breathe and then grins. Like, really smiles. Her whole face lights up, and I *see* my sister for the first time.

“Can I get you anything?” The barista asks, turning to me.

“I’ll have the same as her, thanks.” There’s no way it’ll be as good as Thorn’s but it does look and smell damn good, so I’ll give it a go. The barista nods and leaves.

“So…” we both say at the same time. I laugh nervously.

“This is so weird.”

“Isn’t it?” she agrees.

“I have so many questions but I don’t know where to start,” I confess.

“Me too.”

“You probably have more questions than I do, but I have to know, what made you come around? When we saw you in that

hospital, you were adamant that you weren't Lizzie, and then you showed up at my grandmother's funeral, suddenly claiming to be my twin right when that woman—"

"Amelie."

"Yeah, right when she was claiming to need a Deighton or whatever. I still don't fully understand it all."

"You don't trust me." She states it simply, not as a question, and her matter of fact, flat tone twists something in my gut.

"You can understand that it looks suspicious as hell, right?"

"You don't know what happened between those events."

"Then enlighten me." I sit back and fold my arms defensively across my chest. I cannot go caring about this stranger until I *know*. I can't let her in.

She looks at me like she's going to refuse, a stubborn glint in her eyes that was never there before, but then she sighs and her shoulders slump.

"After I left the hospital I spoke to Macerio."

"Which one's that?"

"The scary looking one."

I flash her a wan smile. "They're all pretty scary looking."

"The one you threw a knife at."

My grin stretches.

"He filled in a few more blanks about my life before."

"Before what?"

"Before they found me. They don't know much, and we agreed years ago to draw a line under the mysteries surrounding me, before we drove ourselves crazy playing what if games."

"Okay. So?"

“So they admitted it was *possible* you were telling the truth and agreed to look into it for me.”

“Is that it? What did they find?”

“They dug into *you*. Found out that, even if I wasn’t this missing sister of yours—”

“She wasn’t missing. She was dead.” I silently add, *you were dead*, in my head, unwilling to admit it out loud and hating how even thinking those words makes my eyes burn and my heart feel heavy.

“But we didn’t know I was her until that woman’s death was on the news.”

“Cordelia?”

She nods. “She was our...*your* grandmother, wasn’t she?”

I respond with a terse nod of my own, waiting for the meaningless condolences to follow. None come.

“I saw you, you know. At the graveside. I saw you spit on her grave.”

I harden my gaze and square my shoulders. “So?”

“When I found out that I might be this Lizzie person, that you might be family, I wondered if there were more of us. It was terrifying, to know that my already mysterious life was potentially about to be flipped upside down again, but I thought, if I got a family – not even answers – but some other people to love, it would be worth it.”

“That woman wasn’t capable of love.”

“I believe you.”

“So how did Cordelia dying make you realise you’re my sister? Did you, like, recognise her or something?”

Beth shakes her head. “No. It was when Mr Branson reached out. He tracked us down via Macerio, and said that he had reason to believe you were right, and that I would need to attend the reading of the Will if I was.”

“Just like that,” I say flatly.

“I had to have a DNA test done first. Mr Branson wasn’t taking any chances. I’m your sister.”

I shake my head. “It’s impossible.”

“Improbable maybe. But not impossible.”

“You were thrown from a cliff.”

“And found washed up on a beach. In a coma for months. And then I woke up with no memory.”

“It sounds crazy.”

“Living it was crazy. But I got on with my life. My new life. The guys were there with me every step of the way and they helped me get to where I wanted to be.”

“A nurse?”

“Yes. I wanted to give back, and help others the way Macerio, Emiliano and Reagan helped me.”

“My sister wanted to be a doctor,” I whisper. I take a sip of my drink in an attempt to swallow the lump in my throat before I continue. “Her name was Elizabeth, but everyone called her Lizzie. Her favourite flowers were—”

“Busy Lizzies.”

“You remember?” I blink.

Beth shakes her head. “No. But they’re *my* favourite flower.”

Suddenly I’m overwhelmed by emotion and my eyes are burning and I need to get out.

I glance at Beth. She looks as shell-shocked as I feel.

“Will you...” I clear my throat. “Can I...see the result?”

“You can. I brought it with me.” She rummages in her bag and then slides the piece of paper over to me. I barely glance at it, unable to read the words swimming through my unshed tears. “But I can do another if you want. With both of us. I understand from the conversations I’ve had with Mr Branson since the will was read that...our grandmother was an incredibly manipulative woman. I know that people with

money can have these tests falsified. I don't want you to think that I did because Mr Branson used a sample of her DNA."

"I don't think that. But I guess a second test wouldn't hurt."

"I'll get Mace to set it up. You can come with me."

"Okay."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"In the hospital, you wrote me a note. And I was able to read it without thinking. But when I looked at it again, I couldn't understand it, and neither can the guys. They said it was coded."

"It was. Lizzie and I used to love making up codes and sending secret messages to one another. Our own secret twin language." I smile at the memory. "I just wrote a message using our basic code to see if you could read it."

"And I could."

"No one else would have been able to."

"But then I couldn't."

"You were thinking about it too much. Lizzie used to keep a diary, and hers was sent to me after her death. The whole thing was encoded, but I was able to work out the key words needed to unlock it all. It was a more complex system than the one I wrote to you with."

Beth's eyes light up, and she leans forward eagerly.

"Do you still have it, the diary? Did you bring it with you?"

"No." I shake my head and she flops back in her seat, clearly disappointed. "I mean, no, I didn't bring it with me. I do still have it."

"Can I read it? After the DNA test comes back." When I hesitate, she adds, "Please?"

"It's not that I don't trust you," I begin.

“But you don’t trust me,” she finishes flatly.

“No. It’s just...yes, that diary will give you answers, but believe me when I say it’s no light bedtime story or fairytale with a happily ever after. It’s a whole can of worms you might not want to open.”

“I understand that. But meeting you, the funeral, Amelie. It changes everything. And if that diary is able to unlock even a fraction of the mysteries of my past, I have to do it.”

“Very well. But...I don’t know how to warn you. It’s harrowing.”

“More harrowing than waking up, not knowing who or where you are or what happened to you, only to be told you lost a baby you didn’t know you were carrying and the ability to have any more children in the future?”

Fuck, what do I say to that?

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Just give me the keys to unlock my past. Please.”

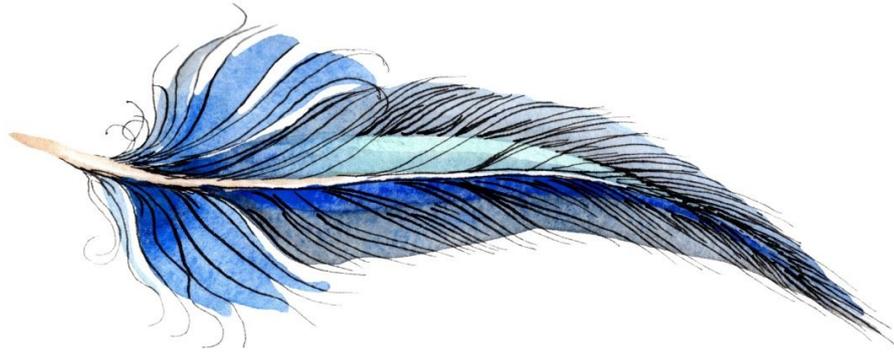
“I will,” I promise.

Beth slides a piece of paper across the table to me. “It’s my number. Call me when you’re ready, and we can start from there. I have to go.”

She drains her cup, gets to her feet and heads for the door. Her three men materialise from the shadows and flank her in a protective formation.

She doesn’t look back, and they don’t either.

I sit with my cup of rapidly cooling hot chocolate and contemplate today’s meeting. It didn’t go as I expected, and I still have so many questions. The main one being: *do I believe that woman really is my twin sister back from beyond the grave?*



THE FOLLOWING WEEK: RAVEN

“Happy birthday, baby!” I cry with a flourish, setting the ginormous box down in front of Phoenix. She grins at me and claps her hands in excitement.

I can’t believe it’s her birthday already. Time is flying by and it needs to slow the fuck down. I’m not ready for this, or everything that’s going to follow, but there you go...too late to back out now.

Nix gives an excited squeal and lifts the lid off the box, releasing a helium balloon bobbing on its string. Nix grins at the balloon, recognising the birthday candles but not the writing.

She pulls out a small card and a shirt.

“What does this say?”

“It says ‘world’s best big sister’.”

She gapes at me. I laugh and look at her dads. They seem equally shell-shocked.

“Look at the card, baby.”

She opens the card and the black-and-white scan image flutters out. She grabs it and stares at it in wonder for a full minute before jumping up and down.

“You got me a baby for my birthday?! I’m going to be a big sister?! Am I?!”

“Yes, baby. You’re going to be a big sister. Congratulations.”

She screams with excitement, throwing herself at me and kissing my face all over in between thank yous.

I laugh, squeeze her tight and put her back on her feet.

Standing, I turn to her dads and worry my bottom lip nervously, waiting for their reactions.

“Is this for real?” Rebel blinks at me, looking up from the scan picture he’s holding in his hand.

“This isn’t an April Fool’s joke?” Thorn asks, dazed.

“February, dumbass,” Ace snaps, smacking Thorn around the head. I bite back a smile at Aljaž’s blinding grin. I knew he’d be happy for me...for us.

“You know what I mean!” Thorn whines. “I don’t want to get my hopes up if this is a prank.”

“You’re...happy about this?” I check.

“So happy! Congratulations!” Thorn beams at me and gives me a sloppy kiss on the cheek, squeezing my tight.

Rebel copies him. “This is the best news ever.”

“Thank fuck.”

“Fuck indeed.”

My heart sinks as I turn to Baxter and Jax. They’re both wearing matching looks of disbelief and...horror? God, I hope it’s not horror.

“Surprise?” I grimace.

“Is this real?” Baxter whispers.

“Erm, yeah. I think so. I mean, I’m like two months late and I took a bunch of tests and that really is my sonogram, with a real little blob inside—”

My rambling explanation is cut off by Baxter crushing his lips to mine. He lifts me into his arms and swings me around.

“Wow!”

“Good wow?” I check, still nervous.

“The best wow ever.”

“You sure? I know kids weren’t ever on the table for you and—”

“I’m ecstatic for you.” He kisses me again.

“I know it won’t be yours—”

“Darling, Nix is mine. This one will be too. Blood doesn’t matter. And if you ever decide you want to have a baby with me, I’ll get the procedure reversed.”

“You would? You’d do that for me?” I gaze at him with total adoration. This man. He’s unbelievable. He still manages to amaze me every single day. I can’t believe I ever questioned my love for him compared to the others.

“For *us*. Of course I would.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “You should definitely get it reversed...you know, when you’re ready. If you want to.”

He kisses me deeply. “No thank *you*, for giving me more people to love. And I will.”

My insides turn to squidgy marshmallows at the look he gives me, and then I turn to Jax.

His expression is unreadable for a moment and then flicks to anger. He grabs my wrist and pulls me from the lounge out into the hallway, pressing me against the wall and caging me in on both sides with his arms.

“Jax?”

“You’re pregnant?”

I nod, unable to find my voice. His eyes flash.

“Say it. I want to hear the words from your mouth this time,” he demands.

“I-I’m pregnant...sorry,” I whisper, looking at the floor and swallowing the lump in my throat.

“Don’t you dare apologise,” he snaps. “This is amazing news.”

“It is?” I dare to glance up at him, only to find him smirking. “You’re happy?”

“How can you doubt my love for you, still?”

“I don’t, I just— you seemed angry.”

“I was annoyed, not angry.”

“Because I’m pregnant?”

“No. Because you still hesitate to tell me things. Because you *still* tread on eggshells when you think I’m not going to like what you have to say. Because you still doubt me.”

“I don’t—” I protest but he silences me with a chaste kiss.

“You do. But I’m going to spend the rest of our lives proving to you that there’s nothing you can do to drive me away. You’re *it* for me. I’m all in. Not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me for life.”

“And this baby?”

“Is the best news I’ve had all year,” he promises, sealing his words with another kiss. “How far along are you?”

“About nine weeks. I had an early scan done so I could surprise you all today.”

“I wish you had told one of us. You shouldn’t be going to appointments on your own.”

“It was just this one.”

He gives me a hard, flat stare, and I quickly correct myself. “Okay, it was three. The doctors, the scan and the midwife. But I promise I won’t go alone from now on.”

“Good.”

“Jax...” I hesitate.

“Yeah?”

I find the strength to voice my fear. “What if this baby isn’t yours?”

“I don’t care.”

I’d hoped he would say that, but I guess I just needed to hear him say it.

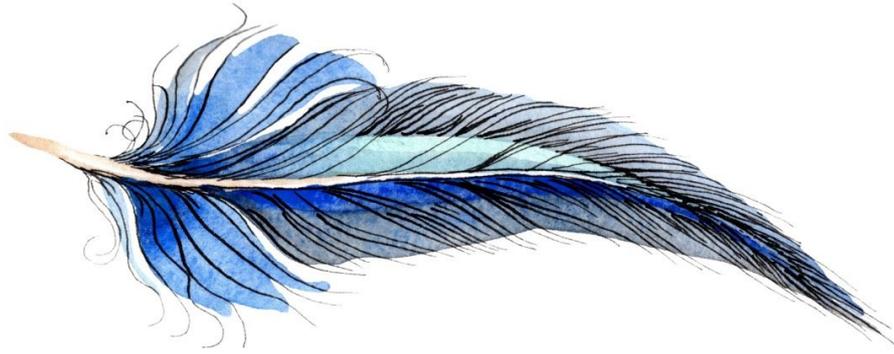
I thread my arms around his neck and pull him closer, inviting him to kiss me deeper, which he does.

By the time he pulls away, I’m panting with need.

“Besides, we can just keep going until I do manage to put a baby in you,” he says with a smirk.

Damn pregnancy hormones make me light up like a Christmas tree at his words, and he chuckles at my eager expression.

“Down, girl.” He winks. “We’ve a birthday party to get through first, but if you’re good, I’ll give you a little taster of what forever feels like later.”



2 MONTHS AFTER THE FUNERAL: RAVEN

“Are you ready, princesa¹?”

“No,” I reply honestly, shoving my phone into my pocket as soon as I hit send on my text to Beth.

She messaged me to say have a good trip, I thanked her and let her know we’d landed at Ljubljana airport.

Things are still a little strained between us, but we’re both trying. We’ve been messaging pretty much nonstop since a second DNA test confirmed she *is* my twin sister, and I handed over Lizzie’s journal to her.

So many questions and answers have been shared between us, but so far neither of us has broached the topic of that diary or *any* of its contents.

I feel like I’m getting to know *Beth*, the new woman my sister has become, but *Lizzie* remains the giant elephant in the room that no one wants to address.

“Raven?” Ace gently prompts. I shake myself back into the present and give him a nervous grimace.

“What if they hate me?”

“Bi mogoče². Te imajo že radi³. Ker te ljubim⁴. Zaradi Phoenixa⁵. In ker si me pripeljal domov⁶.”

“Ace, I didn’t understand a word of that.” I shake my head, half exasperated and half amused.

“He’s being a sappy shit,” Rebel tells me, sniggering.

“How do you know? Can you understand him now all of a sudden?” I demand, with a quirked eyebrow.

Rebel laughs and shakes his head. “No. He gets this sappy look on his face whenever he’s getting mushy about you. Which happens a lot by the way.”

“Aljaž?” I ask, turning back to Ace who’s now scowling at Rebel.

“Not possible. Everyone love you.”

I feel like he gives me a much more simplified version of whatever he just said, and that he either can’t, or won’t, translate. Probably because of Rebel’s goading.

“We’ve got the bags,” Jax announces, coming over to join us. Thorn follows behind him with an over excited Phoenix on his shoulders. “Where’s Baxter?”

“Sorting taxis,” I reply. “It’s going to take two.”

“That’s fine. You and Phoenix should probably go with Ace straight to the house, and we’ll take the other taxi and the luggage to the hotel.”

“Št⁷. Ne bo delovalo⁸. Mama pričakuje da ostaneva doma⁹.”

I catch the word ‘no’ and ‘mama’ along with his serious expression and the shaking of his head, and understand he’s saying his mum won’t be happy for us to stay in a hotel.

“Ace, we talked about this—” Jax says calmly, but with an edge of warning to his tone.

That’s a diplomatic understatement. We’ve hardly spoken about anything but this visit for weeks now. We were given a small grace period with everything that happened, but when Ace’s mum phoned last month threatening to book one-way flights to England for her and all his sisters if we didn’t visit

them, we realised that her agreement to give us some leeway had reached an end.

The logistics of trying to arrange a trip for the seven of us while trying to work out how we would keep our complicated relationship secret without putting pressure on Phoenix to lie, has caused a lot of friction between us.

When an impasse was reached, Jax took charge as usual and declared that we would all stay in a suite at the hotel so that we didn't have to put Ace's family out, or sneak around. Secretly I was quite pleased with this outcome, but I know Ace wasn't too keen.

Hence my usually easy-going, laid back, keep the peace, dependable rock of a boyfriend now digging his heels in.

I sigh.

I forgot how stubborn he can be about some things. I guess he gets it from his *mama*.

"It's fine, Ace. We'll send our things to the hotel, and you can tell your mum I insisted because I didn't want to impose. At least that way, even if she demands that we *do* stay with her, we can escape for a few hours to pick up our things."

This placates him a little; he gives me a stiff nod of assent.

"Right, Nix baby, time to say goodbye. We'll see the others later. We're going to go and meet—"

"My new babica¹⁰!" she cries excitedly.

I raise a brow at Ace. He grins indulgently at Phoenix before giving me a sheepish shrug.

"What? Mama will teach her anyway. Headstart good. Make babica¹¹ happy."

I shake my head and let it go. If Ace wants to teach her, so long as Phoenix wants to learn, I have no objections to her learning his language.

"Bye, *not* fun daddy!" Nix squeals as Thorn removes her from his shoulders and tickles her on the way down. "Stop! Stop! I'll wee! You *are* fun!"

When he ignores her, she punches him in his junk and although it isn't hard, it still causes him to wince, and his eyes water a little.

“Odličén strel, mala princeska¹²!” Ace tells her, full of pride. They high-five.

“Thanks! Danger daddy taught me.” She beams back.

“Shh, Nix, that was meant to be our secret!”

“Oopsie,” she giggles, running over to Baxter to give him a big hug. “I thought just the knives were the secret.”

“Baxter!” I warn.

“She’s kidding!” He gives Nix a stern look and she cackles. “Tell your mother you’re joking, brat, before she kills me.”

“We’re joking mummy. He said I have to start school first – well, at least before I’m allowed the *really* sharp ones.”

“Nix!” I admonish and she cackles wildly again, a habit she’s picked up from Thorn and Rebel, which makes it hard to stay mad at her. She’s just so full of joy and mischief. Exactly like her dads. I shake my head, but a smile tugs at my lips. I’m pretty sure she’s joking. She’d *better* be.

Nix hugs Baxter, and Jax and does some funky handshake thing with Rebel before crossing over to Ace and slipping her hand into his. Her total acceptance of our family makes my heart swell until it feels like it will burst from my chest. She’s so resilient; I’m always in awe of how she takes everything in her stride.

Ace leads Nix over to the taxi, giving me time to say my own goodbyes to the guys. It’s silly, because I know I’ll see them in a few hours, tomorrow at worst, but we’ve spent so much time together the past few months, happily living in our little bubble, that it feels strange to be parted from them now.

I say my goodbyes, holding each of them longer than is necessary, all the while feeling silly but being unable to explain why I can’t seem to let them go. Nothing good ever

came from having a bad feeling, and that's exactly what's churning in my gut.

The guys seem to understand, and wordlessly, they hold me too.

Eventually, I pull away from their group hug and give them a strained smile.

"I guess I should get going."

"We'll see you later, princess," Jax promises. I hope he's right.

Outside, Ace is standing by the taxi waiting for me. The rest of the guys head to the cab that's waiting behind.

"Thanks," I tell Ace as he helps me into the back seat. Inside the cab, Phoenix is already belted into a car seat which surprises me.

"Baxter arrange," Ace explains, getting in beside me. He rattles off the address and some instructions in Slovenian to the driver, and then we're away.

"Will it take long to get there?" I ask.

"Maybe just over an hour."

Nix is looking out the window, pointing everything out with gusto. She's very excited about the snow-capped mountains in particular as we leave the airport behind but soon falls asleep.

The drive towards the small village where Ace's family lives is beautiful but uneventful.

By the time we pull up outside Ace's family home, I'm completely awed by our surroundings. The village, Štanjel, is a gorgeous Roman settlement, high above sea level and boasting the most stunning views. I'm torn between admiring the imposing castle, the white stone and terracotta roofed houses, or looking out over the forests to the hills and mountains filling the horizon.

"Here," Ace says simply. Scanning his face for clues, I find none. For someone who usually wears his heart on his

sleeve, Ace is clammed up tight and wearing an unreadable mask. I wait for the driver to exit the cab and grab Nix's small bag from the boot before turning to Ace and placing my hand on his arm.

“Aljaž, what's wrong?”

He sighs softly. “Nothing, princesa.”

“Are you happy to be here?”

“Yes...and no.” He hesitates before continuing. “Bad memories. Sad house. Never a home.”

I understand that all too well. I give his hand a squeeze. “Nothing in there can hurt you anymore and it's time we replaced the bad memories with some good.”

“Všeč mi je zvok tega¹³,” Ace smiles at me. “Good idea. We start now.”

He pecks me on the cheek and climbs out of the car, leaving me to follow as he walks around to the other side to unbelt Phoenix. She stirs and slowly blinks awake.

“Are we nearly there yet?” she asks sleepily.

“Yes baby, we're here,” I tell her as the driver passes me the bag. “Hvala vam,” I say, making a horrible mess of attempting to thank him, but he grins at me and replies, “ni za kaj” before climbing back into his car and driving off.

“Are the others far away? Is the Air B&B close?”

“Yes close, very small village.”

“Okay. Which is your house?” I ask, looking at the three closest white stone farmhouses.

“That one.” Ace points to the house on the left, the smallest, most ramshackle looking property, but the only one with lights blazing in the windows, warm and inviting.

“Lead the way.”

He switches Phoenix to his other arm so that his hand is free to take mine. Our fingers lace together, and he absentmindedly plays with my ring. For this trip, I'm only

wearing the sapphire ring he chose for me back when we were in school, and although it feels strange to only wear one ring, I know that Baxter's eternal promise lies hidden beneath it, and I take comfort in that secret.

Ace leads us away from the front door and over to a wooden gate set into the crumbling wall that's seen better days. He lifts the latch, and the door opens on rusty hinges with a squeal. I wince.

He carefully picks his way through the garden, which is beautiful in the evening light, and approaches the wooden stable door at the back of the house. The view through the top pane of glass is shrouded by a lace curtain, but the smells coming from inside make my stomach grumble and my mouth water.

Ace hears it and chuckles.

“Appetite good. Mama rada hrani ljudi¹⁴.”

He gives me another kiss, on the cheek this time, and squeezes my hand once more before letting me go to raise his arm to knock.

Butterflies dance in my stomach, and I wish I had a knife to quiet them with. I'm so nervous it's ridiculous, but Aljaž's tension is feeding mine.

A loud bang sounds from inside followed by a string of – what I assume is – Slovenian curses, before the door is thrown wide.

“Kaj hočeš¹⁵?”



I'm not sulking, but I definitely miss Phoenix and Raven already. The whole idea of us splitting up sucks. I was dead against it, but I know that Ace's mom will expect them to stay at the house, and that there isn't enough room for all of us.

Hence renting this Air B&B on a vineyard. We chose somewhere large enough for all of us, with an indoor pool to entertain Phoenix. Yes, it wasn't that long ago that we went on holiday after all the custody battle shit, but then we had all the funeral, Cuntdelia and Lizzie-Beth shit to contend with too.

When Ace's mom started throwing her weight around and threatening to come live with us, we figured we could all use *another* break.

I knew I'd hate being separated from Raven, but I didn't think I'd hate it this much, or this quickly. And don't even get me started on how I'll cope watching Ace play Daddy to Phoenix while the rest of us have to sit back and pretend to be...what? *Uncles* at best.

Grumbling, I toss my bag onto my bed and close the door. I can deal with that later.

"Anyone hungry?" Thorn calls from the kitchen.

"Yeah! Starving!" I holler back. Actually, without Ace around to feed us, I have to wonder if we're going to starve. I

can just about manage cheese on toast. So long as there's a toaster and you don't mind the cheese not being melted.

I make my way to the large, modern kitchen. Ace would love cooking in this slave.

"Who's gonna cook?" Thorn asks.

"Beats me. I can make cheese on toast."

"There's no toaster and I can't figure out how to light the grill."

"Oh, scratch that then."

"Maybe Baxter can cook?"

I scoff. "Please. He's got so many staff I doubt he even knows how to wipe his own ass."

"It's arse, you uncultured swine, and I happened to just use your pillow to do it," Baxter snaps, walking in behind me.

"You're calling me uncultured when you're the one wiping your *arse* on pillowcases?"

"They're silk at least," he quips.

I shake my head. He'd better be joking. Pretty sure he is. Thorn's more the practical joke man around here. One time, he slipped a chocolate between my ass cheeks while I was sleeping and I woke up thinking I'd shit myself in the night. Dickhead.

"I've arranged a local woman to drop off dinner tonight. The fridge should be fully stocked, but we can figure things out tomorrow," Jax explains. The bell rings, and he smiles. "That'll be her now."

I grin at Thorn, happy that once again Jax has thought of everything *and* I won't have to starve.

I help Thorn set the table while Baxter grabs some beers from the fridge. They're local, not a brand I recognise, but when I take a swig of mine, I really like it.

Jax returns with a covered casserole dish and a wide smile, placing the dish in the middle of the table and removing a tea

towel wrapped parcel from the top.

He pulls back the lid to reveal one of Ace's favourite dishes that we've all had before.

"What is it?" Baxter asks, curious.

Oh, okay, *most* of us have had it before.

"It's beef soup and dumplings."

"Soup?"

"Well, it's more like a stew, but they call it soup. It's usually served on a Sunday with noodles or dumplings as a first course," Jax explains.

"Yeah, Ace used to cook it all the time, but we've not had it in years," I tell him as Thorn ladles our bowls full. "We had to make him just cook it as our main course because it was so rich and filling."

"We couldn't manage a roast afterwards," Thorn laughs.

I grab the tea towel parcel and carefully unwrap it to reveal a still warm loaf of freshly baked bread. Jax grabs the butter and a knife, and within a few moments, the only sounds around the table are of the four of us enjoying our meal.

"How's everyone feeling about the trip?" Baxter eventually asks.

"It's weird, right?" Thorn pipes up. "Us, sitting together eating, without the others here."

"It's not that strange," Baxter replies with a shrug. "We've all had nights out with Raven and been left behind."

"This feels different though," I point out.

"Yeah," Thorn adds, nodding at me. "It feels weird."

"Probably because we know we're going to have to keep up the ruse of just being Ace's friend when we meet the family. It would be fine for a visit but Ace is going to – rightfully – want to spend time with everyone, which puts pressure on us to keep our distance from Raven."

I sigh. It sucks.

“I hope we can have some alone time with Raven and Nix though.”

“I’m sure we can make that happen. Ace’s sisters will have school, work and other commitments, and I’m sure his mother will be working sometimes.”

We all murmur our agreement and return to eating. After all the shit we’ve had to face recently, we’re due some good luck. I’m probably stupid for worrying about a simple visit to a parent’s house. But I can’t shake the feeling that everything is going to go tits-up as Raven would say.

We finish up the meal, and I wash the dishes while Thorn clears down the table. Baxter and Jax slope off to work somewhere in the house, and when we’re done I find myself at a loss.

“What’s up?” Thorn asks.

“Dunno. Bored I guess.”

“Wanna test the pool?”

I shake my head. “Nah. I’m saving it for Nix.”

“I saw a games room in the basement with a pool table and stuff. Want to check that out?”

“Sure.”

The games room is actually pretty well equipped with its own mini movie theatre, as well as a full-size pool table, a foosball table, and several retro arcade games. Thor and I spend several hours testing everything out, and I pretty much kick his ass at everything, making him pout like the sore loser that he is.

Deciding to call it a night, we go in search of the others, finding them in the at home office, heads bent together over two laptop screens.

“What’s going on?” I ask, making them look up.

“We’re working.”

“On what?” I say, just as Thorn grumbles, “thought this was meant to be a holiday.”

“We’re looking into Beth’s background. Baxter knows a little about the men she’s aligned herself with, and he’s using his contacts within The Order to try to trace their movements back to when Lizzie supposedly died.”

“Have you found anything?”

“Why are you doing that?” Thorn scrunches up his face in confusion.

“Because we don’t trust her.”

“Oh. Why not?”

“Because the timing is suspect, the change of heart is strange, and Amelie’s sudden desperate need for a Deighton on her board of directors is downright suspicious.”

“You think her guys have something to do with it,” I state flatly, my heart sinking that there’s yet more drama and secrets to unfold.

“Undoubtedly.”

“But she *is* Lizzie,” Thorn points out.

“Duh,” I snap, smacking the side of his head for good measure. He’s slow on the uptake at the best of times.

“So, it’s like, not her fault then, is it?”

“She didn’t ask to have those horrors thrown at her no, but I suspect once we turned up and blew her world wide open, she couldn’t go back to pretending we didn’t. When my grandfather reached out regarding the will and the first DNA test, she probably felt she deserved answers. Which she does. But she didn’t need to take Amelie up on her offer of joining The Order, nor did she need to hang around,” Baxter explains.

“Aren’t you glad she joined The Order though?”

“I might not have much to do with The Order any more, but no, I’m not glad that someone we don’t know and who’s potentially a threat to my friends and my family has access to that much power.”

“But if it had to be one of them,” Thorn pushes. “Beth or Raven...I thought you’d be happy.”

Baxter shakes his head and bares his teeth at Thorn in a menacing grimace.

“You have to understand that Raven was never going to be joining The Order, under any circumstances. Even if she were the sole heir to the organisation itself, she wouldn’t even initiate over my dead body.”

I can tell from the way he says it that every single word is true. Baxter might be a semi-domesticated family man these days, but there’s no denying he still has killer instincts and that he’s not someone you want to mess with.

If Beth’s reasons for staying in Raven’s life aren’t as innocent as she’s making out, I’d almost feel sorry for her. Because Baxter will find out. And when he does, he’ll make her pay.



“Kaj hočeš¹?” My mama growls before actually seeing us.

The moment she realises it’s me, her face splits into the most radiant, beaming smile I’ve ever seen.

“Aljaž! Hvala gospodu! Moj fant se je vrnil! Vstopi, vstopi! Dekleta, pridi sem dol, tvoj brat je tukaj!”

Aljaž! Thank the lord! My boy is back! Come in, come in! Girls, come down here, your brother is here!

“Breathe, Mama,” I say with a gentle smile, stepping over the threshold and stepping back in time.

My smile becomes a little strained as unpleasant memories assault me, but Raven’s warm hand on the small of my back brings me the comfort I need to relax.

The kitchen, the whole house in fact, is nothing like it was the last time I was here all those years ago.

The space is now warm, inviting and happy. My mother too, is a changed woman. She looks ten years younger, plumper, healthier, and so much happier. The beauty of her youth shines through her lined face and her eyes glow with a warmth I’ve missed.

“Mama,” I croak before falling into her embrace, a young boy once more. I have to fight back the wave of emotion

threatening to drown me.

“Babica!” *Grandmother*, Nix squeals, throwing her arms around my mother’s neck.

My mama coos with happiness and plucks Nix from my arms, babbling away and showering my daughter with praise.

“Mama, to je moja hči², Phoenix.”

My daughter.

I couldn’t be prouder to utter those words. Yes, I was initially terrified upon discovering Phoenix was mine, but it took hardly any time at all to come around to the idea and for me to realise what a blessing she is.

I watch the two of them together for a moment, my mama fussing over Nix like she’s a baby, and Nix not understanding a word she says but accepting the situation for what it is: an outpouring of unconditional love.

“Mama, to je moja zaročenka³, Raven.”

My mother hands my daughter back to me and pulls Raven into a hug, kissing her cheeks, eyes gleaming with tears of happiness.

“Hvala vam, najlepša hvala, moje drago dekle, ker sem svojega fanta vrnil domov⁴,” my mama gushes.

“Ace?” Raven looks to me for help.

“She is thanking you for coming,” I simplify.

I know this visit will be difficult for everyone. Mama speaks very little English, and Raven and Nix speak no Slovenian. And they’re both being taken away from the others. It will definitely put a strain on us all, but it was better than the alternative.

Mama hollers for my sisters to come once more, and suddenly the ceiling is shaking with the thundering of excited feet. I grin at Raven, who looks nervous as hell.

“Do not worry.”

“Aljaž!” Their screams are ear-splitting, making me wince as all five of my sisters launch themselves at me and I disappear under a cloud of perfume and blond hair.

“Pusti me da diham, bratci⁵,” I grumble, though I’m secretly absolutely loving the attention. “Naj te vidim⁶.”

It’s been so long since I was here, since I saw my sisters in the flesh. They’re all grown up. Pride floods me as I take in each one of them. Cora, the youngest, clamours to the front, demanding to be seen. I’m so glad what happened with my uncle hasn’t made her want to hide away. She was just a small thing when I left, and she’s grown so much, she’s a proper little lady now. As beautiful as all her sisters, as our mama. Next to her, Letty is elbowing her out of the way to come in for another hug. My second oldest sister and I always got into mischief together. I’ve probably missed her the most, not that I’d show favouritism with my siblings.

“I’ve missed you!”

“I’ve missed you too, Letts. I’ve missed all of you.”

“Well don’t disappear for so long, next time!”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Girls, this is Raven and Phoenix,” I introduce my fiancée to my sisters with pride colouring my voice.

They fall upon Raven and Nix with even more excitement than they showed me, Cora demanding to see Raven’s engagement ring and Letty swinging Nix into the air. Neither Raven nor Phoenix bat an eyelid at the scarring on Cora’s face, and I love them even more for it. Alina, Klementina and Valentina smile and chat animatedly to Raven, and my mother takes advantage of the distraction to sidle up to me.

“Welcome home, my dear boy.”

“Thank you, mama. It’s been too long.”

“The house is very changed, no?”

“Unrecognisable.”

“Thank you. It warms my heart to have a home full of laughter again.”

“I know.”

“And babies! Well, one baby, but it’s a start. When are you marrying and giving me a house full of babies?”

I chuckle. *“Tomorrow, if I could, Mama.”*

“I’ll arrange everything.”

I laugh loudly. *“If only it were that easy.”*

Mama gives me a reassuring squeeze and turns back to the stove.

“Lahko pomagam⁷?”

“Ne, počivaj⁸. Tvoje sestre zmorejo⁹,” she calls over her shoulder, giving me a *shooing* motion to stay away from her oven. Some things never change. “Alina, pripravi mizo¹⁰. Klementina, prosim za pijačo¹¹.”

We enjoy a beautiful meal together, full of home comforts that I’d long since forgotten and didn’t know I was missing. The banter and teasing around the table with my sisters reminds me of time spent with my brothers, and I feel a pang that they’re missing out.

Tomorrow I will rectify that. But let me just have tonight.

“Mama, we should get going,” I say gently some time after the meal. Abruptly the conversation stops and everyone turns to gape at us.

Everyone begins speaking all at once – mostly in Slovenian but I can detect some protests in English too – and Nix starts to complain that she doesn’t want to go. Raven attempts to placate her, but my sisters are telling Nix that she doesn’t need to leave and everything is getting a bit...tense.

“Thank you, Mrs...” Raven turns to me with a ‘help me’ grimace. “Ace, what should I call your mum?”

“Mama,” I reply with a grin.

“I can’t do that.” Raven frowns and I want to kiss it away. She’s almost as adorable as Phoenix when she frowns.

“Moraš me klicati mama. Zdaj si moja hči.”

“She said you have to call her mama, because you are her daughter now.”

“Oh...okay...thank you...Mama.”

Mama beams at Raven, and her easy acceptance of my family makes all my dreams come true.

And then Mama insists that we stay. I give Raven a tight smile; we knew this was coming. Cora has thrown her arms around Nix and is refusing to let her go.

“Raven?” I ask her hopefully. I know she doesn’t want to stay here, and I know my mama won’t hear a word said against us leaving, but I didn’t factor *my* feelings into account. Now that I’m here, I don’t want to leave.

“Yes, Aljaž, we can stay. So long as we’re not putting anyone out.”

I pull her to me for a grateful kiss, and she melts into my embrace. A whole night with Raven to myself in my childhood bedroom? Dreams that come true don’t get better than this.



“Good morning, Raven. Sleep good?” Mama carefully asks the next morning. She looks at me with worried eyes and I smile back at her, full of encouragement.

“Perfect. Popolna, Mama,” Ace praises her.

“I slept very well, thank you,” I tell his mother kindly, avoiding Aljaž’s gaze. I bite back a grin. I mean, I *did* sleep well once Ace let me, but we were up until the early hours christening his childhood bedroom.

“Kakšni so tvoji načrti za danes¹?”

“Mama is asking what are our plans for today?” Ace clarifies for my benefit.

“We thought we would spend the day with you if you’re not busy,” I reply and Ace quickly translates for Mama. She beams at us both.

“She’s free,” Ace tells me with a smile. “And I expect she wants to get to know you and Phoenix better.”

“Kje je moja draga vnukinja?” his mother demands.

“Probably upstairs, being spoilt by her aunties,” Ace retorts happily in English, which I expect is for my benefit.

The girls are all besotted with Phoenix, as she appears to be with them. They fought over whose room she would sleep

in last night, with Cora winning, unsurprisingly. I get the feeling Ace's baby sister is used to getting what she wants, the rest of the family seeming to go easy on her. But Phoenix asked if she could take it in turns to have a 'sleepover' with each of her new aunties. I think she is loving the attention.

It's nice for her to have this new, extended family. Especially aunties. I've still not introduced Beth into her life. Our relationship – and the trust – just isn't there yet.

I sigh, remembering the tense phone call last night to the others, explaining that we wouldn't be coming back to the house after all. I should have known, and now I have no clothes to change into. Not that it matters, Ace's sisters are all about my size and have already offered to lend me some things. No, that's not what's bothering me.

It's Jax.

When I broke the news to him last night, he seemed tense. Stressed. The others were disappointed of course, but they were all really reassuring and kind. Jax was...distant. Cool, even.

I think there's something going on, and I really want to see him so that I can reassure myself that everything is fine.

Before the room is full, Ace takes the opportunity to explain to his mama that we didn't come on this trip alone. He tells her that his friends from school accompanied us, and the minute he does, his mama insists that they come for dinner tonight.

Ace hesitates. I get the feeling he was using it as an excuse for us to slip away and have some time with the guys – and get our cases back – but I give him a reassuring smile. If his mama is able to cater for everyone, it would be lovely to get together all under one roof.

Plus, I can already tell that she's a force to be reckoned with. I can't imagine any of her children get away with telling her 'no' that often.

"Thank you, Mama," I say, earning a massive smile from the woman. Ace chuckles.

“She loves you more than me.”

“Ja, moja vnukinja tudi,” his mama says with a laugh. I look to Ace for a translation.

“Yes, and she loves her granddaughter more than me too.”

“Well, that one I can understand,” I tease.

We all enjoy a gorgeous breakfast together, with Ace’s mum refusing to let me help cook, so I sneak in quickly to clear the dishes and wash up. It earns me a cheeky swat on the bum with a tea towel, and my yelp of surprise causes everyone to laugh.

It’s just easy and light and everything that spending time with family should be. All the things I never had.

After breakfast we spend the morning helping *Mama* in the garden, which is clearly her second pride and joy after her children. I’m absolutely useless without a single green finger to help, but Nix gets stuck in, and Ace’s mama enjoys our company.

The afternoon passes quickly with Ace’s sisters insisting on giving us a tour of the village. Phoenix stays behind to bake with her grandmother, much to both of their delight.

Štanjel is beautiful. Ace has arranged for us all to have a tour of the castle tomorrow, so we only pass by on our walk, but I’m excited to find out more of the history of the area. We pass churches and historic tombs, dip in and out of his sisters’ favourite galleries and museums, and enjoy a leisurely stroll around the Ferrari garden, which I know Nix would love.

It’s such a stunning but humble place, every local we bump into welcomes me with heartwarming messages which Ace relays for me. It’s easy to fall in love with the friendly, laid-back lifestyle and the simple way of living, and it’s nice to spend time with Ace and his sisters, getting to know them all better. It’s definitely easier that they speak such good English. I just wish I could communicate with his mother a little more easily.

I can’t shake the feeling that there’s more to this village – and this family – than they’re letting on though. Take Ace’s

sisters for example. Valentina is haunted. She's so quiet, withdrawing into herself and slipping into the shadows whenever she's not directly spoken to. Letty is feisty, but fiercely protective of her sisters, to the point of aggression at times. Klementina is constantly looking over her shoulder wherever we go, and Alina is fine until a villager mentions someone called Stanislav, where she blanches and looks like she's going to be sick. The only one seemingly oblivious is Cora, and I guess that comes with the sheltered naïvety of being the baby of the family. Or maybe she just didn't hear. It's hard to say. But it's clear to see that this family has experienced more than its fair share of trauma, and I know Ace sees it too. My heart bleeds for him. For all of them. I wish there was a way to ease their suffering and to lay to rest the demons of their past.

It's getting dark by the time we head home, and the smells coming from the house are so amazing that my stomach rumbles loudly. Ace's sisters tease me about it, but Ace smiles.

“Mama is the best cook, no?”

“I didn't think anyone could beat you, but she absolutely does...sorry,” I reply with a grin.

“Where's Phoenix?” The girls holler as soon as we enter the cosy lounge.

Ace's mama shouts down from upstairs, and the girls squeal in excitement before charging off.

“What was that?” I ask, feeling like a broken record asking for everything on repeat and translate.

“Nix is in the bath, the girls want to wash her hair and braid it.”

“Oh.” I smile. I'm rubbish at hair. The best Nix gets from me is a wonky ponytail. I remember being surprised when Ace first did Nix's hair, until he reminded me that he had five sisters.

“Welcome, Raven,” Ace's mama says, appearing at the top of the stairs. I think she means to welcome me back, but her

limited English is still way better than my shoddy Slovenian.
“Time good?”

“Yes thank you, we had a lovely time. Your village is beautiful. Very tranquil. I hope Nix has been good?”

“Moja vnukinja je popoln angel.”

Ace acts as our translator. “She said, ‘my granddaughter has been a perfect angel’.”

“I can hear the pride and love in her voice when she talks about Nix.”

“You too. You’re her sixth daughter now,” Ace assures me. His words make me feel as warm inside as the welcome his family has given us.

Ace’s sisters appear at the top of the stairs with Nix cradled in Letty’s arms and wrapped in so many oversized towels.

“She looks like princess,” Ace says, his face full of wonder and awe at the sight of his daughter being doted on. “Fairy princess with court of servants.”

I laugh and tell him I think she looks like a squishy marshmallow.

“Yes, that also. Delicious.”

“Hi, Mummy,” Nix calls with a happy wave. “We’re going into Klementina’s room so they can braid my hair.”

“Okay baby, have fun. Be good,” I call back.

We follow Ace’s mum to the kitchen to help set the table for tea. There’s extra chairs squeezed in around the small space, and although it’s going to be cramped with everyone here for dinner, it’s homely and welcoming.

I’m excited to have my guys back together again, even if we have to maintain the façade of friendship between us.

Eventually Ace’s sisters come down, minus Cora and Nix.

“Nail polish was involved,” Alina explains with a laugh.

There's a knock at the door, and Ace pulls me through to the lounge to open it. My heart soars when I take in Jax, Revel, Thorn and Baxter standing on the front step. I want to throw myself into their arms and kiss each of them, but I know I'll have to settle for something more *friendly*.

"Welcome, come in," Ace tells them, slapping their backs in weird man-hugs as they enter.

The guys make a beeline for me, scooping me up into big hugs and spinning me around. I get lingering kisses on the cheek, a cheeky peck on the lips, and a sneaky bum squeeze. And I love it all.

Once they put me down, Ace clears his throat to make introductions.

"Mama, these are my friends—" Ace doesn't get any further because Valentina, the oldest sister, cries "Baxter!" before bursting into tears and throwing herself at him.

Looking shell-shocked but quick thinking, Baxter grabs her and holds her as she throws her arms around his neck and sobs into his chest. She keeps repeating, "Hvala vam," which I know means *thank you*.

What is she thanking him for? How does she know him?

"Valentina!" Ace's mother calls sharply. "Kaj delaš²? Kaj je pomen tega³? Kdo je ta moški⁴? Izstopiti⁵!"

Valentina doesn't let him go, but she does turn her head towards her mother and rattle off something far too quickly for me to comprehend. Whatever it is, it has a dramatic effect on the room: Aljaž's sisters gasp, and his mother also dissolved into floods of tears. She rushes at Baxter, throwing her arms around him and kissing his face all over.

"Hvala vam, moj angel, naš odrešenik," she cries.

Ace snorts.

"What?" I ask him.

"She just called him her angel, our saviour."

My lips quirk. There's no way Baxter could even be mistaken for a fallen angel or a dark saviour, but I do love the thought of it.

Baxter looks immensely uncomfortable, immovable marble under the attention. When Ace's mama moves away, his other sisters take her place, lavishing praise and thanks on Baxter.

This is so freaking weird.

Eventually Ace's mum calls them off, and the girls reluctantly leave Baxter alone. Ace finishes the introductions and Phoenix comes bounding down the stairs with Cora behind her, excited to see her daddies.

"Nix!" Rebel beams, scooping her up into a big hug. "I missed you!"

They all say their hellos as Baxter sidles over to me.

"What the hell was all that about?" I demand out of the corner of my mouth, my smile firmly fixed in place and my eyes on the scene before us.

"I'll tell you later."

"You'll tell me now," I insist.

Baxter sighs then catches Ace's eye. "Can we have a minute?"

Ace gives him an unreadable look before replying, "Yes." He then addresses the rest of the room, "Come. Dinner is ready."

It's the green light I need to get out of there, so I thread my fingers through Baxter's and pull him out of the room. Finger's crossed, no one will notice that we've gone, but we won't be back until I have answers, so I just hope Baxter's in a sharing mood so that we can get this over with quickly.



“Umm, what was that about, please?” Raven asks the second we’re alone. She’s dragged me upstairs to one of the bedrooms, and guessing by the dark blue paintwork and dated posters on the wall, I’d say it was Ace’s room.

The room hasn’t been updated since he left for the U.K., save for the double bed that’s been squeezed into the small space. The whole thing makes me smile, but I turn that amusement on Raven with a sharp smirk.

“What’s the matter, princess, jealous?”

She scowls at me, snapping, “No.”

“Oh, I think you are,” I tease, stepping forward and crowding her space. She steps back to avoid me, the backs of her legs hitting the bed. She has two choices, step closer to me or fall back onto the mattress.

Neither are safe for her.

She plants her feet and folds her arms, glaring at me.

“Explain to me how Ace’s sister knows you. Why she’s crying and kissing you like you gave her mama a damn kidney or something, and why the rest of the family are now treating you like you’re some kind of god!”

I sigh, visions of a quickie on Ace’s bed vanishing.

“Okay. Sit down.” I nod to the bed and when she eventually does as I ask, I take a seat beside her and slip her hand into mine. “This isn’t my story to tell, but I’m going to simply because of the language barrier between Ace’s family and the rest of us, okay?”

“Does Aljaž mind?”

“No. He understands.”

“Tell me then.”

“I don’t know how much of Ace’s background you know —”

“Not a lot. He’s alluded to things being difficult and people being intolerant to his learning difficulties. And there being some bad people within his family...”

“Yes.” I sigh, wondering where to start, how much detail to go into. “Ace’s father and uncle were abusive. When Ace’s father died, his uncle stepped in to fill the head of the family spot. Ace had a rough childhood until his mother was able to scrape together enough money to send him to the U.K. The Order, in a roundabout way, helped bring him over and got him into West Prep.”

“Why not Knox?”

“He wasn’t technically a criminal, and he was given *immunity* if you will, from joining The Order, even though his knowledge could have meant stopping his uncle.”

“What does his uncle do?”

“He ran a skin ring.” Raven blanches. “You know what that is?”

“Of course.”

“He was always threatening the family, Ace in particular, to send money home or to get involved with the family business in other ways.”

“But Ace didn’t.”

“He sent money. He refused to get involved in other ways, but Ace’s uncle was a greedy, sadistic son of a bitch and

threatened to throw Ace's sisters into his auctions."

Raven gasps, her eyes filling with horror. I nod.

"It wasn't an empty threat either. The eldest, Valentina—"

"The one who hugged you."

"Yeah, she was their uncle's favourite and from what Ace told me, nothing good ever came from being the favourite."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. Ace didn't go into details, and Valentina won't speak about it but I took care of it."

"What do you mean, *you took care of it*? Care of what?"

"Their uncle."

"How?"

"He can't hurt or threaten the family anymore."

"Is he dead?"

"Yes."

"Good," she spits, her hands clenched into tight fists. I chuckle. "What?"

"I love how bloodthirsty you are when it comes to vengeance."

"Why did you take care of it for Ace, though? He's strong, he's had training. He could easily be lethal."

"His father and uncle tried to hone Ace into a weapon from a very young age. I can't even begin to imagine what his childhood games were like. When Ace became strong enough to fight back, his mother sent him away to keep him safe. When he grew up and could easily beat his uncle, he couldn't retaliate because his uncle always held Ace's sisters over his head. They'd be dead or worse, before he could even book the first flight home."

"How did you discover all this?"

"A few months back, about the time everything was crazy in our lives, Ace came to me in a panic. His uncle's threats had

stepped up a notch and Ace had real reason to believe the girls were in danger. I took care of everything.”

“But...why?”

“Because it was to keep his family safe. They’re his family, they’re yours and Phoenix’s family, and therefore they’re *my* family. What did Ace used to say about Phoenix?”

“The blood of my love is my life,” she whispers.

“Yeah. Exactly that.”

“But...I don’t understand Valentina’s reaction. How does she know what you did? You’re a master of working in the shadows, right?”

“Did Rebel say that? He’s so dramatic.” I shake my head and bite back a grin, before dropping the smile from my face.

“We used his uncle to wrap up another threat that was hanging over our heads.”

Raven stares at me blankly. “Oh?”

“Yeah. And when I came to neutralise his uncle, I was too late. He had Valentina. She was there when...you know.”

“Shit. Was she okay?”

“Physically, she’ll heal. But you know how deep scars truly run.”

She nods, quiet for a moment and lost in her own wounds. I put my arm around her and pull her in for a hug, which she readily returns.

“Wanna christen Ace’s bed?” I whisper, pushing Raven back on the sheets. Her cheeks tint pink and she looks away. “You have already, haven’t you? Dirty girl.”

She groans as I roll my hips into hers. Doesn’t matter if her and Ace spent the night fucking. I still want her, here, now, in his bed, with his whole family downstairs, ready to hear and catch us at any minute.

“Baxter—” Raven protests, but I cut her off with a savage kiss. I don’t demand her attention and affection like some of

the others do, but there's only so many times I'll take a back seat before I snap. This opportunity is too good to miss.

I grind my hips into hers, my hardening cock pressing between her thighs, making her gasp into my mouth. I bite down on her lip until I taste blood and her nails frantically claw at my back. *Make me bleed, baby. Make me yours.*

"Baxter," she groans. "We can't!"

"Watch us."

"No. Everyone will be waiting to start dinner. They say Grace!" she gasps as I slide her top up and begin to feast on her breasts.

"I'll eat you, you can pray to God."

I slowly begin to trail kisses down her stomach until I reach the waistband of her jeans.

"They'll come looking for us...oh god...yeah...no...you have to stop."

"Say it like you mean it, baby."

I flick the button open and lift her hips, dragging the denim down her soft thighs.

"We'll get caught."

"So what?"

I bury my head between her thighs and inhale her scent. Running my nose up her seam, I slip my fingers under the lace of her underwear. She's soaking wet and ready for me.

"Baxter," she pleads.

Does she want me to stop or continue? Hard to tell now with the way her fingers are pulling on my hair. I grin wickedly and swipe a finger through her folds and circle her clit until her hips are bucking, then pull away abruptly.

"You're right," I say with a wicked grin. "We should head downstairs. It's rude to keep everyone waiting."

"What? No!" she wails. I chuckle.

"Patience is a virtue, princess," I tease.

“Fuck your virtues, give me my sin.”

My eyes darken as I pull her off the bed and into my chest.
“Don’t tempt me,” I warn her.

Then I gather all of my self-control, turn on my heels and exit Ace’s bedroom, leaving Raven behind, wanting.



Dinner last night was a surprisingly pleasant affair, despite me not being able to keep Raven by my side...or touch or kiss her.

Okay, so in that respect, it was my own personal brand of hell: seeing her but not being able to have her. Being forced to watch her play happy families with Ace.

My best friend's girl. It sounds like a dodgy romance novel. But once I reminded myself that it's just a game we are playing, I was able to tamp down my burning desire to hurt my best friend, or drown in a vat of liquor.

I refrained from drinking, of course, but my teeth hurt from grinding them together so much. I couldn't even use Nix as a distraction because she was so engrossed with Ace's sisters and her new grandma. The sooner this 'holiday' is over and done with, the better, if you ask me.

Today we're all taking a tour of the castle, Ace's sisters and mothers included. I was hoping I could sneak away with Raven for some alone time in a dark corner somewhere, but with so many people around I know it's going to be impossible now.

I sigh over my breakfast.

"What's eating you?" Rebel asks.

"Not looking forward to today, I guess."

“I know. History’s not really our thing, is it?”

I give him a tight smile, knowing that he’s missed the point.

“Think it’ll be okay if I invite everyone over here tomorrow? I’ve been dying to show Nix the pool, and maybe Ace’s sisters would enjoy it. We can do a tour of the vineyard.”

“Whatever.” I shrug. I don’t care. With everyone at the house, I *still* won’t get any alone time with Raven.

God, this sucks hairy yak balls.

“You don’t have to be so grumpy. Okay, so you’re not getting your dick wet anytime this week. It’s not the end of the world. It won’t fall off from inactivity, you know!”

Ugh, I hate it when Rebel gets like this – namely, when he’s right – but thankfully it doesn’t happen often. Unfortunately, when he *is* right, he’s bloody insufferable.

I scowl at him. “You’re missing the point. It’s not about getting my dick wet. It’s about...the connection. I just miss being with her. And Nix. I hate having to check my actions and second guess how every move might look to an outsider.”

“Makes sense. I get it. So what did you think of last night?”

“It wasn’t too bad,” I hedge. “The food was great.”

“Yeah, but that argument between Ace and his mum got pretty heated after tea, didn’t it?”

That’s an understatement. What started as a passing comment by his mama soon turned into a full-blown shouting match with Ace eventually storming off to put Nix to bed. When he returned, he wouldn’t speak a word about it.

“Do you think Raven knew what it was about?” I ask Rebel.

“No. She doesn’t speak Slovenian, and even Jax would have struggled to follow that.”

“I struggled with what?” Jax asks, coming into the kitchen with a towel sling over his shoulders.

“Dude, why are you soaking wet?” I complain.

“I’ve been swimming for the past—” he checks his watch “—two hours. Couldn’t sleep. I’m going to grab a drink, then take a shower.”

“Oh. We were just talking about that argument last night.”

Jax freezes, shutters coming down on his expression.

“What about it?” Even his tone is guarded, which immediately makes me suspicious.

“We were just saying, it was so fast, we bet even you struggled to understand it.”

“I caught some of it,” he mutters.

“Well? Care to share with the rest of the class?” Rebel prompts.

Jax sighs. “It was about weddings.” I frown, and Jax continues. “Specifically, Ace and Raven’s wedding.”

“But they’re not...” Rebel begins before trailing off with an ‘oh’.

“Yeah. Ace’s mother is adamant that Raven and Ace should get married. You know the family is religious, and even though his mum clearly adores Raven and Phoenix, she wants things official. Done properly.”

“But, she thinks they’re engaged. Isn’t that enough to convince her for now?”

Jax shakes his head. “She wants them to get married before they leave. She wants to use today’s trip to check out the castle as a potential wedding venue. She’s threatening not to let them leave until they’ve tied the knot.”

Fuck.

“Over my dead body!” Rebel roars, making me flinch.

“What do you think?” I ask Jax carefully.

He shakes his head. “It’s not up to me. It’s their decision to make.”

“But do you think they *will* make it?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. Ace would have married her four years ago, I think. It would be a dream come true for him and there’s no denying that it would be the best thing for Phoenix. But—”

“But?” I ask hopefully despite my heart sinking with his every word.

“But ultimately, it’s not our choice, is it?”

My hope deflates faster than a popped balloon. Jesus, this sucks. I *knew* we should never have come here.

“If Ace or his mum present the idea to Raven, she’ll be torn,” Rebel points out. Jax agrees with a solemn nod.

“Yeah. She’ll want to make them both happy, but will be worried about upsetting us.”

“I am upset!” Rebel cries. I mean, he’s not wrong. I’m not exactly sprinkling confetti everywhere myself.

“Yeah, which means Raven will tie herself in knots trying to do the right thing. Which is why if she asks what we want, we will support her decision one hundred percent and keep our own feelings out of it, okay?”

“Fine.” I sigh. I know he’s sort of right. But the thought of giving them my blessing to wed leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

“Got it, Rebel?” Jax asks sharply.

“Fine.”

“I don’t like it any more than you two do, but it is what it is.”

Ugh, is there a more hated saying? I guess *I do* isn’t so fucking great right now either.



Ace refused to tell me what his heated discussion with his mother was about last night, but his sisters must know because they've been giving me significant, but unreadable, looks all morning.

I hope it's nothing bad.

Though Ace certainly took his frustrations out on me in the bedroom last night, so I guess I'm not entirely complaining about whatever it is.

He's still tense now though, and that bothers me.

"Are you okay?" I ask him quietly as we follow our tour guide around the castle. He's showing us the grand banquetting hall, and although it's lovely, I feel the need to whisper and be discreet. These stone floors and walls echo something terrible.

Ace grunts.

Before I can press him for a proper answer, Cora, his youngest sister, comes bounding up to us.

"Raven!" she squeals. "What do you think? Can't you just imagine everyone dancing in here?"

"Sure I can," I reply with a laugh, easily transported back in time to pretty dresses and proper etiquette. "I bet there were some impressive balls back in the day."

She giggles. “We should have a big party.”

“Ni tvoj rojstni dan,” Ace says sharply.

“What was that?” I ask when Cora pouts and her shoulders sag.

“He said *it’s not my birthday* but I don’t think you need a *birthday* as an excuse to have a big fancy dance. I want to wear a nice dress!”

“You’d look lovely in a fancy dress, but you don’t need a ball in a castle to get dressed up,” I tell her with a wink.

I squeeze Ace’s hand, hoping to reassure him, but he’s like marble next to me. Solid and unmoving.

Cora runs off to talk dresses with her sister, and I try again with Ace.

“What was all that about?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on, Aljaž, don’t be like that,” I cajole. He scowls but won’t meet my gaze, turning all his focus to the floor where he’s scuffing his shoe back and forth. It’s so unlike him, that worry starts to bloom in my chest.

I reach out and lay my hand over his heart. “Hey, it’s okay. You can tell me anything.”

“Sisters have hard life. Want excuse to celebrate.”

“We can throw them a party if you like. We should have one for your homecoming anyway. We have a few more days here, I’m sure we could pull something together at short notice. Though it might not be in a fancy castle like this,” I tease with a smile.

“Ohmygod what did you just say?” Cora demands, making me jump. I didn’t know she snuck back up on us. I spin and give her a smile.

“I was just telling Ace, you’re right. We should celebrate before we leave.”

“MAMA!” Cora screams, racing off and hugging the woman with such enthusiasm she almost knocks her down. “Raven said yes!”

“Kaj¹?”

“Neumen,” Ace mutters under his breath.

I actually know this one. He’s called the others it enough times that it immediately gets my back up.

“Did you just call me stupid?” I demand hotly.

“No.”

“Rekla je da²!” Cora cries.

“Res³?” All the sisters exclaim.

“Ja⁴!” Cora jumps up and down, clapping her hands, and the rest of his sisters join in.

“But you said stupid,” I insist. I didn’t hear wrong. I *know* that phrase.

“Yes.”

“But you’re saying it wasn’t about me?”

“Yes. No. Fuck!”

“Ace! What *is* going on?” I demand.

Before he can answer, I’m swept into his mother’s arms and she’s showering me with kisses and thanking me.

Jeez, does a party really mean this much to them all? Why isn’t Ace happy? He can see how excited they all are. It’s no hardship to have a little gathering if it brings them all this much joy.

Ace looks pained when I turn to him once more. I don’t understand the contrast of emotions between him and his family. They’re so happy, and he looks like he’s going to a funeral. With a hernia.

“Aljaž? You’re scaring me now.”

He sighs. “You just agreed to a wedding.”

“A wedding? I thought they wanted a party.” I frown.

“They do. After the ceremony.”

“What ceremony?” I don’t understand. “Who’s getting married? Someone in the village?”

“Yes. No. Well, sort of.”

“Were your family worried about missing it because we’re here? I don’t mind. I’d be happy for an excuse to go hang out with the guys for a few days actually, if they already have plans. I don’t want to put anyone out.”

“No. Not it.”

“Then what? Can someone please fill me in?”

Just then Phoenix comes running over and launches herself at me. I grab her and hoist her into my arms as she hugs me.

“Mummy! Letty just told me I can be a bridesmaid!”

“Umm, Phoenix, baby, I’m not sure that’s possible.” I worry my lip, wondering how I’m going to break it to her.

“It is! She said. We’re all going to be bridesmaids!”

“Nix, darling, you can’t just invite yourself to someone’s wedding.” Especially someone we don’t know.

Nix giggles. “Silly Mummy.”

“What?” I ask her. “Why am I silly?”

“It’s our wedding! You have to be there.”

“Our wedding?” I frown again, completely lost. Is this a game she’s playing? Usually it’s Mums and Dads she likes to play, but I have to say weddings are a new one for her to come up with.

“Yeah! You, me and Daddy.”

“Oh I see, and when exactly are we playing this game?”

“It’s not a game,” a cool, distant voice comes from behind me. I turn and meet Jax’s ice cold, espresso black stare.

“Nix, go plan your game with Ace’s sisters for a minute,” I tell her distractedly, putting her down. The second she runs

off, I fold my arms defensively across my chest. “What’s going on?”

“You just agreed to give his mother and sisters a wedding.”

“What wedding?” I snap, exasperated.

“Yours. To Ace. His mother has her heart set on the two of you tying the knot before we leave.”

I gape at him.

“What? No. That’s impossible,” I insist, shaking my head.

“It’s not. Ask Ace. What do you think he and his mum were fighting about last night?”

All I can do is stare in disbelief at Jax, but he’s deadly serious. This has to be a mistake. Crossed wires or a language barrier thing or...something. A simple misunderstanding that we can easily explain away and laugh over in years to come.

I can’t marry Ace.

I snap my head to the right looking for Ace, but he’s disappeared into the next room, along with everyone else.

“No.” I shake my head again, clearly in denial. “I can’t marry Ace.”

“You can, and you’ve just told his family that you *will*.”

“But I didn’t know what I was agreeing to!” I cry, panicking.

“Yeah, well, it sucks to be you,” he snaps, snidely, making me blanch.

“W-what?”

“Or maybe it sucks to be the rest of us. Looks like Ace is about to get every dream he ever had come true.”

Jax walks off, leaving me reeling.

It takes several minutes to get my breathing under control, and even then I'm shaking like a leaf. What the fuck have I managed to get myself into now?

More to the point, how exactly am I going to get out of it? And without everyone hating me.

Jeez. No wonder Ace was tense. I guess I know where he gets it from now: he's tried to propose to me by stealth a couple of times now, but that's small fish compared to his mum and sisters planning a surprise wedding!

"Raven? Are you okay?"

I jump at the sound of Rebel's voice and spin to see he's reappeared around the corner everyone took to continue on the tour.

"I'm fine," I say with a bright, tight, fake smile.

"You sound like Ross from Friends," he quips. "*I'm fine.*"

"Ha. Ha. What are you doing here?"

"The tour is moving on to the chapel, I didn't want you to get lost. This place is crazy."

"Tell me about it," I reply, thinking of an actual freaking wedding taking place within these walls.

"What's got you panting like you've just had a two-day orgy?"

"I wish." I shake my head with a smile. "I'm just a bit freaked out."

"About..." he prompts.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter."

Rebel pulls me into a hug and then spins me so that my back is to his front. His huge hands land on my shoulders and he gently massages the knots away.

"You're so tense."

"Sorry."

"Hey, it wasn't a complaint. Just an observation."

“This is harder than I thought it would be,” I confess, even as I melt into his touch.

“You’ve got this, princess. Only a few more days.”

“It’s like a week,” I laugh.

“Shhh, I’m making things seem better by diminishing the timeline.”

“Such a big word, Mr Lennox, do the boys know you have such an extensive vocabulary?” I tease as a soft smile tugs at my lips.

“Such a joker, princess. Do you know what I want to do with that smart mouth of yours?”

A shiver runs through me.

“No, what?” I whisper.

He kisses the side of my neck, and I tremble. Despite all the late night sexcapades with Ace, I miss the others. Seeing them isn’t enough, I need the physical connection. It’s killing me acting like they’re just my fiancé’s friends. It’s only been two days but it’s too much.

“I’d show you, but we’re in a very public place, and you’re a good girl.”

“I can be bad,” I say, my voice coming out lower and huskier than expected. *Needier*.

“Soon. Good things come to those who wait.”

“I don’t wanna wait!” I complain. Rebel chuckles, the action pushing him closer to me.

Inspiration strikes and I push back against his straining cock, rubbing my ass into his crotch a little. “It feels like you don’t want to wait either.”

“Touché.”

Spinning to face him, I wrap my arms around his neck and crash my lips against his. It’s all I can do not to wrap my legs around him too, but he’s right, this is a public place and what

we're doing – even just a kiss – is risky. If one of Ace's sisters come looking for us.

I groan and deepen the kiss, using lots of tongue and showing Rebel how badly I want him. His hands grab my ass, squeezing the flesh hard enough to bruise, and I can feel his restraint slipping...

“Mummy!”

We jump apart, guiltily, my heart racing a mile a minute. Fuck that was close. Too close.

Stupid, Raven!

“Yes, baby?” I pant, turning to Phoenix.

“Why are you breathing all funny? Have you been running?”

“I was looking for you guys,” I say brightly. “But I only found Rebel. What are you doing?”

“I'm looking for Baxter. Do you know which way he went?”

I shake my head. “Sorry baby, I don't.”

Actually, come to think of it, when was the last time I saw Baxter? He made a joke about exploring the bedrooms when we first entered the foyer, but I don't recall seeing him since.

“Okay. You should come see the chapel. It's really pretty!”

“Lead the way then.” I slip my hand into hers and let her pull me along the winding stone corridors. A shiver runs through me again, but this time it isn't one of desire. It's one of dread.

I can't shake the feeling of being watched.



The rest of the tour is fucking bullshit. Raven stays close to me, but she's quiet and clearly stressed and shaken. Something is going on. The happier Ace's mom and his sisters are, the more withdrawn Ace and Raven get. I hope they've not had a fight.

Shouting draws my attention to the front of the chapel where Ace's mom is fighting with our tour guide over something. Ace and his sisters are trying to placate her and next to me, Raven is visibly cringing.

"Care to explain what that's about?"

"Not a clue," she lies, unable to meet my gaze.

"Sure thing, princess," I snort.

"Raven! Raven! Come here!" One of the sisters calls. I don't know which one, they all seem to be called something-*ina* or other. Raven shoots me a grimace and hurries over to join the fray.

I'm not one to eavesdrop usually – okay, that's a lie, but I *do* prefer to stay out of family drama – yet I find myself following after her, curious to know what's going down.

"What's wrong, Aljaž?" Raven asks him softly, slipping her hand into his.

“Mama won’t listen. You tell her. Explain. There will be no wedding!”

Holy shit. Jax was right then.

“You already agreed, Aljaž!” One of the sisters complains, before turning to Raven to explain. “This fight is just about where.”

“Mother is adamant that you have to get married in the village church, but the wedding package here includes the ceremony in the chapel.”

“Preko mojega trupla!” Ace’s mom shouts, making us all wince.

“Erm, what did she say?” Raven asks.

“Over her dead body.” His sisters shake their heads. “She’s being so dramatic.”

The guide mumbles something to Ace and then slinks away.

“Where did that guy go?” I demand.

“He’s leaving us to it,” Ace mutters, scrubbing his hands through his hair.

It’s not often I see him stressed out, but I can tell he’s at breaking point.

I whistle shrilly through my fingers to get everyone’s attention.

“Let’s go. We can discuss this at home over dinner.”

“Tomorrow,” Raven quickly adds. I raise a brow at her in question.

“They can all come to the vineyard tomorrow, and we can discuss all of this over dinner then. I have a migraine, I need to rest.”

I briefly wonder if she’s lying just to get everyone to shut up, but then I realise it doesn’t matter either way. My girl is asking for some peace, and I’m going to damn well make sure she gets it.

“Raven, you and Ace should come to the vineyard with us tonight. Nix too.”

“I want to stay with my aunties!” Nix cries. “Tonight I’m sleeping over with Valentina.”

The oldest sister smiles at Nix. “Of course you can. But you guys should still go. Nix will be fine with us.”

I can tell Raven is torn between leaving Nix and really needing a break.

I clap my hands together. “Perfect. It’s settled then. We’ll see you all tomorrow at the vineyard. We’ll send a car to collect you. Two cars,” I quickly add, thinking that we won’t get them all in one.

Raven shoots me a grateful look, says goodbye to Nix, and thanks Ace’s sisters. She even hugs his mom. They quickly leave after that, and the rest of us are standing staring at one another.

“Home?” Jax asks.

“God, yes please.” Raven sighs.

“I meant to the vineyard, but if you really want to go back home, just say the word and I’ll arrange a flight.”

“No, it’s fine. I wouldn’t do that to Ace. He deserves this time with his family.”

“Don’t care.”

“Now, were you serious about that migraine? Do you want a nap?”

“It’s definitely the beginning of one. I think maybe I just need to eat?”

“You’re overdoing it. You need to think about the baby—”

“Shush!”

“Raven, baby, they’ve gone. Your secret is safe.”

“I’m just not ready for them to know I’m pregnant. You’ve seen how they are with Phoenix and this stupid wedding idea.

If they know I'm already knocked up again, they'll never let us leave!"

"I'd like to see anyone try and stop us," Jax mutters darkly.

This whole trip is turning into a nightmare. I didn't want to come, but I know Ace needed this. I disagree with Raven about cutting the trip short though.

"Come on, let's go. If you're feeling up to it, I'll give you a foot rub once we've fed you," I offer.

Raven groans, the sound shooting right to my dick. "That sounds like heaven."

No, heaven would be having her making those noises while my cock is buried inside her, but I keep my mouth shut.

After lunch, a foot rub, and a long nap for Raven, we spend the afternoon swimming in the pool. Raven is barely even starting to show but she's still absolutely adorable. I bet she was glorious when she was pregnant with Nix.

I can't keep my hands off her. Every time she swims past me, I grab her and slide my hands across her belly. She laughs every time but doesn't push me away.

I think I'm going to be one of those guys who's obsessed with seeing his woman pregnant. Is that a fetish? A kink? Or maybe it's just the Raven effect. I'm seriously into this woman, baby bump or not. God, what I wouldn't give for her to be carrying *my* child.

"Dinner's ready," Ace calls.

Thank fuck. I'm starving. I climb out of the pool and then offer a hand to help Raven. She bats me away. I scowl at her.

"I'm not ill!" she protests.

"No. But you're mine—"

"Ours!" someone calls from the poolside.

“You’re ours, and we take care of what’s ours. So take my hand, let me get you out of the pool and dry, and stop complaining.”

“Or?” She smirks at me in a challenge.

“Or, I’ll have Jax tan your hide until you can’t sit down tomorrow.”

“I’m pregnant!” she gasps as I pull her out of the water. I toss a towel over her shoulders and wink at her.

“Exactly, *not ill*. Let’s get you fed, princess. You’re eating for two now.”

“I want the spanking,” she mutters, making me chuckle.

“That can be arranged for dessert.”



I can't stop touching her. It's not even sexual, I just can't bear to be away from her for more than a couple of minutes. I spent the afternoon curled up beside her while she napped, chasing her around in the pool trying to make her laugh, and sitting beside her at dinner with my hand on her knee. I didn't even slide it under her dress, the warmth of her skin through the thin material was enough to satisfy me.

Even now, on the sofa, I have my arm around her shoulders. It's like an addiction. Having gone the best part of three days pretending she's *only* a friend, I can't stop making up for lost time. Little touches, hugs, kisses. I want it all.

What I wouldn't give to have her in my bed tonight, if only I could be so lucky.

"We should talk about what happened earlier," Jax eventually says, bursting my *ignorance is bliss* little bubble.

Everyone sighs.

"I know. Ace, what's happening?"

"Mama wants us to marry before we leave. Raven agreed."

"By accident!" she cries.

"Yes." Ace nods. "Toda kar je storjeno, ni mogoče razveljaviti¹."

“And now she’s not taking no for an answer?” Jax clarifies.

“Ja. Yes. She wants marry at church. Sisters want castle, princess marriage.”

Raven groans.

I rub her shoulders in an attempt to comfort her. I have nothing useful to add to this conversation, so I keep quiet and listen.

“How do you feel about this, Raven?” Baxter asks quietly.

“I don’t know. It would mean so much to Aljaž’s family, but—”

“But?” Rebel prompts.

“And it would be good for Nix, undoubtedly—”

“But?”

“But, it’s too much like choosing,” she finishes sadly. I pull her against my chest.

“Don’t choose.”

“I won’t, ever,” she promises me. “But it would be easiest.”

“You don’t choose to get married to make others happy,” Rebel points out.

“I know. But being married to Ace wouldn’t be a bad thing, if it weren’t for...”

“For?”

“The rest of you.”

“Don’t worry about us. We’re going nowhere,” Jax promises. “You have our total support whatever you decide to do.”

“What do *you* want, Raven?” Baxter presses gently.

“I don’t know! I’m sorry. I just can’t see a way out of this. If it makes Ace’s mama and sisters happy, I feel like we should just go along with it.”

There's a tense silence that lasts a beat too long.

"As you wish, princess," Jax says before getting to his feet and leaving the room.

"He hates me," she whispers.

"Not at all. He's just processing," I promise her. "He's probably gone off to order you a wedding dress already so that you don't end up wearing whatever monstrosity Ace's mama has planned for you."

There's a roar and the dull thud of a fist hitting a stone wall.

Raven looks at me, eyes wide in alarm.

I force a smile. "See? He's just seen how much expedited shipping is going to cost."

She shakes her head, pushing me away so she can get to her feet. "I should go check on him."

"Probably best to leave him tonight, princess."

"I know," she says sadly, falling back into my arms like the weight of the world is on her shoulders. "I don't want to hurt anyone."

"We're big strong manly men," Baxter reassures her.

"And Thorn," Rebel quips. I flick him the bird.

"We can handle a little disappointment. We agreed to share you and we knew that would mean some of us being dads, some of us not, maybe one of us being a husband one day... there are loads of experiences we'll all get to have together, and inevitably some we will have to miss out on. It doesn't change anything," Baxter promises.

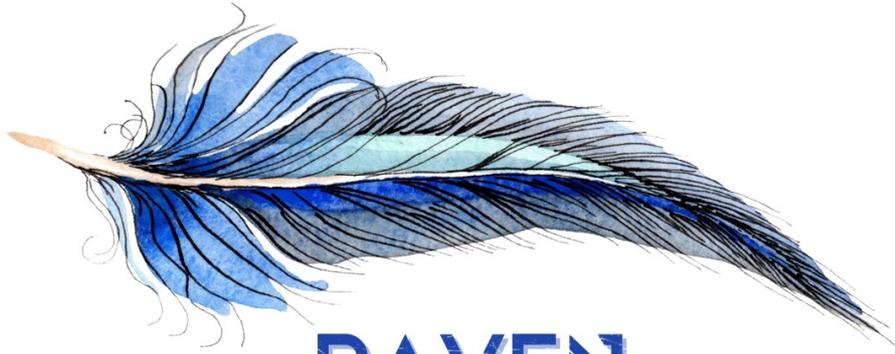
Raven gives him a wobbly smile.

"Hey! I'm a manly man," I protest.

"Really?" Ace scoffs. "Watch film. You choose."

"Love Actually, mate. Every single time," I reply without hesitation. It works; everyone laughs and the tension is broken.

I pull Raven back into my arms and drag a blanket over us. I don't care what film they stick on, so long as I can hold her a while longer.



RAVEN

Raven

I can't sleep. I thought I'd be out like a light, reunited with my guys, but no. I'm tossing and turning, unable to settle.

I can't stop thinking about the wedding. Or, more specifically, the guys' reaction to it. Jax stormed out not long after – I'm assuming – he punched the wall. And he still wasn't back by the time Thorn carried me to bed.

Even a damn good shag couldn't get my mind to quiet.

“Raven, baby,” Thorn complains. “You're killing me.”

“Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you.”

“Waking me would imply I've been to sleep,” he gripes.

Total bullshit. He's been snoring his head off for hours.

“I'm sorry, I just can't settle.”

“Go see Baxter. He never sleeps.”

“You sure? You don't mind?”

“I just want to sleep. Just go.”

I giggle at how grouchy he's being, understanding exactly what Rebel means when he says Thorn whines more than Nix, and I drop a kiss on his bare shoulder.

He groans. “On second thoughts, I'm awake. Stay here.”

“Sleep,” I chide him, slipping from the sheets. He's right; Baxter doesn't sleep much. I'll go annoy him instead.

Opening the door to Thorn's room, I'm struck by the open door on the other side of the corridor. Jax's room. The bed is empty and hasn't been slept in. It's like a slap to the face and sob threatens to break free.

I slam it back down and tiptoe along the corridor until I reach Baxter's room, Thorn having pointed everyone's beds out to me earlier when we came to bed.

Tapping lightly on the wood, I don't wait for a response before letting myself in. The room is pitch black and deathly silent. I know Baxter's awake because I can't hear him breathing. He lets his guard down in slumber. Right now he's on high alert, but he must know it's me because I doubt anyone could step even a single foot inside his room without him attacking.

"Bax? I can't sleep," I whisper.

He doesn't reply but the quiet room is punctuated by the sound of the covers being drawn back. I cross the cold, tiled floor and slip into bed, regretting my choice to sleep in just one of Thorn's shirts. Baxter tucks the covers around us, pulls me back into his chest and wraps an arm around me. I snuggle back against him, my ass brushing against his cock.

"Jesus, are you always hard?" I whisper to the dark.

"I was hard the second I heard you coming."

"How did you know it was me?"

"No one else would dare enter my room."

"I knocked," I protest softly.

"Barely." I can hear the amusement in his tone.

"Why aren't you asleep?"

"I never sleep when I'm not with you."

He doesn't even say it to be manipulative, it's just matter-of-fact, but it makes me feel bad.

"We hardly ever sleep together."

"It's a good thing I don't need a lot of sleep then," he quips. "Otherwise I'd be a total psychopath."

"My psychopath."

"The original, baby." I chuckle but stiffen when I sense Baxter's playful mood change. "Why can't you sleep?"

I release a long, pained sigh. "Bax...everything's a mess. Do you know where Jax is?"

"In bed?"

“His room is empty.”

“Oh, tried him first, did you?”

“His door is open. The bed’s empty.”

“I’m sorry, princess.”

“He didn’t come home last night and it’s my fault.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s the situation. He’s just trying to deal with it in his own way.”

“By leaving?” I scoff. “How do you deal with tough situations?”

“Generally? I kill them.”

It’s so unexpectedly honest that I snort.

And then Baxter *fucking* Branson knocks me on my ass by flipping me under him and *tickling* me.

“Bax!” I gasp.

“Baxter!” I squeal. “Stop!”

He keeps going until I’m laughing so hard I feel like I can’t breathe and I’m a wriggling, squirming mess beneath him.

“Are you done?” He growls in my ear, rolling his hips into me, making me pant for a different reason. I nod eagerly. “Good. Now, I know something that’s good for helping you sleep.”

“Oh? What’s that then?”

“This.”

He slams into me with zero resistance, my shirt having ridden up in our tussle, giving him easy access. I’m wet and willing to take whatever he wants to give me.

“Hold tight, princess. You’re going to sleep like the dead when I’m done with you,” he promises, before screwing me into oblivion.

“Morning, goddess.” Baxter grins at me and pulls me in for a long, slow kiss. I break away and grimace at him.

“I have morning breath. And you’re minty fresh. How?” I frown at him.

He chuckles. “I’ve been up a while. I think I have a solution to your problem.”

“You do?” I sit up quickly and the sheet falls down, exposing my breasts to him. His gaze darkens. “Oi! None of that. Tell me how you’re going to fix this mess?”

“What do I get as my prize if I do?”

“Anything you want,” I promise him with a wink.

“I’ll provide the minister.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The wedding will be fake. Everything, from the minister marrying you, down to the certificates, will be for show.”

“Ace’s mother will never go for it. She’ll want the village priest to wed us.”

“Parish priest, not village.”

“Whatever, you know what I mean.”

“Exactly, so I’ll leave it to the last minute to intervene.”

“Like Bob in the courthouse?”

“Exactly.”

“You can’t kill a priest.”

“I have and I can,” Baxter relies stubbornly. I don’t think he’s joking but when he sees my panic he smiles. “But I won’t this time.”

“And you expect everyone to somehow accept that we have a spare minister on standby?”

“We’ll fly him out, along with your sister and her men, and say he’s a wedding guest. An uncle or whatever. It doesn’t matter. Everyone will be so relieved that the wedding can go on, they won’t question it.”

“I’m not convinced it’ll work.”

“Trust me. I think this is for the best.”

“Do we tell the others it’s not real?”

“Not for now. Leave everything with me, I’ll sort it, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Now, about my prize...”

He gives me a devilish grin and disappears beneath the sheets, quickly proving that orgasms are the breakfast of champions.

By the time we’re decent enough to head downstairs and join everyone, we’ve missed breakfast and everyone has left for the tour of the vineyard. I have no idea if Jax went with them.

Aside from my worry about Jax, I feel much calmer about everything now, thanks to Baxter. I have no idea if his plan will work, but I’m willing to give it a shot. I just wish I could tell the others that the wedding, the marriage, is all for show. The sooner we can let them in on the secret, the better. All hurt feelings and resentments can be put aside then.

“Do you want me to make you something?” Baxter offers, starting to make tea. Knew he was a psychopath. *My* psychopath.

“Is that something you can do?” I tease.

“Cheeky bitch.”

“You’re in good spirits today.”

“Slept well.”

I grin at him. “Me too...eventually.”

“Like the dead, baby.”

“Coming from you, that scares me.”

His answering grin matches my own.

This is nice. Cute. Real couple-y. No drama, no stress, no heartache. Just easy banter and flirting. And casual jokes about killing.

“I love you,” I blurt out. His grin gets even wider.

“I know.”

“Dick.”

He barks a laugh before putting a cup of tea in front of me. I pull a face and push it away. He shrugs, picks it up, and takes a sip, his black as night eyes watching me over the rim of the cup the entire time.

What I wouldn't give to be that cup.

Down girl. You got screwed by two guys last night, and had sex again this morning. You should be ready for a damn nap!

He smirks, knowing exactly where my thoughts just went, before slowly, deliberately placing the cup back down.

“Raven, I adore you. I worship you. If I were ever lucky enough to wed you, I'd never utter the words *'til death us do part* because Death has got nothing on me, baby. I'll defy him to part us. I'll traverse all future incarnations with a restless spirit until my soul finds yours once more, and I have peace. And when our time is finally up, the dust of our bones will be impossible to distinguish because we'll be so intrinsically linked, in the earth, forever.”

Inside, I'm a pile of goo at his words. For Baxter, that was downright romantic, and I want to squeal a little at his declarations of forever. What I end up saying, like an idiot, is “To infinity and beyond?”. At the glower he levels with me though I backtrack and add, “That's a lot of, frankly, daunting information to process all at once, and without food...but thank you?”

He chuckles and shakes his head at me, kissing my temple as he walks away with his teacup in hand once more.

“You don’t get it yet, princess. But one day you will.”



So far the afternoon has gone well. Ace and his mum made a delicious lunch for everyone after the tour of the vineyard. I think Ace had wanted to cook for everyone himself, but his mama wasn't taking no for an answer. It was amazing though, an absolute feast, and I ate until my stomach hurt, ravenous after last night's sexcapades.

There was a tense moment where Klementina jokingly asked if I was eating for two, but I was able to laugh it off while Ace distracted Nix enough that she didn't blurt out my secret.

A couple of times she's slipped up a little, calling the guys *fun daddy* and *danger daddy*, but no one seems to have noticed. Ace's sisters are pretty loud, and they keep the conversation and laughter flowing. Everyone is having a good time, except Jax who eats his lunch wordlessly and then excuses himself.

I'm anxious to go after him but Ace gives me a subtle shake of his head from across the table and I jump to my feet to clear the dishes instead. I need to keep busy.

After lunch has gone down enough, Nix cajoles everyone into taking a swim. I sit on the sidelines and watch as Rebel, Thorn and Baxter basically play piggy in the middle with my

daughter, tossing her high into the air and over Cora's head, as she and the other girls try to catch her.

"Save me, Aunty!" Nix cries to anyone that will listen. "Babica! Help!"

Letty swims over to me, lifts herself out of the pool and comes to sit on the lounge beside me.

"They adore her," she comments, nodding at the party in the pool.

I smile. "They do. It's lovely to have a bigger family now, when it was just me and Phoenix for so long."

Letty raises a brow at me but I shake my head. If she wants to know, she can speak to her brother.

"You're all so close, like a real family."

"Well, the guys were there for Ace, from what I understand, right from the beginning when he came to England. They're like brothers."

"And you?"

Unease stirs in my stomach and I glance at Letty from the corner of my eye. She's watching the game in the pool, a smile plastered on her face. Bullshit. I'm not buying this carefree *chit chat*.

"You'd have to ask them. Maybe the annoying sister they never wanted."

"I've read a lot of romance books."

"Me too."

"My best friend's girl is a popular trope."

"It's one I've read," I reply carefully. We agreed we wouldn't lie if anyone asked, but what do I do in this situation when no one is outright *asking*?

"Why does Phoenix call all the guys Daddy? Surely she should only be calling Ace that."

"Me what?" Ace asks, coming to my rescue and sitting down behind me. I shift forward on the lounge a little to make

room for him, but he wraps his arms around me, kisses my cheek and pulls me back into his chest. It's like he knew I needed him, his steadfast strength and unwavering support.

I wonder if Letty will back down. I remain silent to see.

"I want to know why Nix is running around calling every man in her life daddy," Letty says bluntly, going right for the jugular. I tense and Ace squeezes me.

My eyes flick to the pool where everyone is now playing some sort of game of Tag. Everyone except Jax.

"I should go—"

"Stay," Ace commands gently. "Nix calls all daddy because we are all."

"That doesn't make any sense." Letty frowns.

"Nix is mine. My blood."

"But?"

"But we live together. Everyone."

"As housemates?" she asks, brows still drawn together in confusion.

"As partners."

It sinks in for a minute and then Letty gasps. "Are you *gay*?"

Ace laughs. "No. Have you seen my woman? Impossible."

"Bi then?"

Ace shakes his head. "I am in relationship with Raven. Only Raven."

"Then what?"

I sigh and decide to jump in. "You've read romance, Letty. Surely you've heard of reverse harem, why choose, poly relationships?"

Her eyes widen. "Is that what this is?"

I nod.

“And for a while, we didn’t know who Nix’s daddy was, so when she came up with cute nicknames for all of them, we didn’t stop it.”

“My god.”

“Yeah. Listen Letty, we’d really appreciate it if you didn’t say anything to anyone.”

“Why not?” she asks sharply.

“Letts, you know Mama,” Ace pleads. “She would not be understanding.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Love is love,” he replies simply. I love this man so much.

“Look,” I say quickly. “We’re not asking you to lie if anyone asks, but maybe just don’t go broadcasting it. Ace will tell his mama and the rest of his sisters when he’s ready.”

“I…”

“Please, Letts.”

“…fine. But you owe me.”

“Anything.”

“When you go, I want you to tell Mama you want me to have your old room. I’m guessing you’re not coming home, so she can stop keeping it like a shrine. I’m sick of sharing with Valentina. Her night terrors are getting worse.”

Ace tenses at the mention of his sister’s pain, but agrees to Letty’s demands.

“Excuse me,” I say, pulling free of his embrace and standing on wobbly legs. “I need a minute. Ace, did you tell your sisters about meeting Mary Berry yet?”

“What?!” Letty screeches, drawing all attention to us. “No fucking way!”

“Jezik¹!” His mama chides from the pool.

Letty shouts her apology and then rattles something off in rapid Slovenian.

Suddenly his mama and sisters are clamouring to get out of the pool, demanding to know all about his time cooking with her at her house.

I use the distraction to slip away and go in search of Jax. He's had his time to process, sulk or lick his wounds or whatever the hell it is he's been doing.

His time is up.

Now I want answers.



I'm startled awake by my bedroom door crashing against the wall.

“What the—oh it’s you.”

My heart sinks when I see Raven standing in the doorway to my room.

My dick perks up at the sight of her blazing anger though. I’ve always loved feisty Raven. Not sure I’m in the mood to play though.

I don’t bother getting up. In fact, I look away from her, rolling onto my back and gazing up at the cracked ceiling.

“What the fuck is your problem Jax Jackson?” She spits. I sense her moving across the room towards me, but I don’t anticipate her next move.

She climbs onto the bed and straddles me, pinning my arms above my head and glaring down at me with fierce intensity.

There’s no getting out of this fight, even though I could easily push her off me if I wanted to.

I wouldn’t. I’d never risk her or the baby like that.

Fuck. The fucking baby. She’s carrying one man’s child inside her right now while planning to marry another guy. In a

perfect world, she'd be having Ace's baby *again* and they could ride off into the perfectly wedded sunset together.

Knowing my luck, that baby will be mine but the outcome will be the same, and I'll lose everything.

It takes every effort possible to control my temper. If I let it get the better of me, I'll lash out – verbally, not physically – and the last thing I want is to hurt Raven.

Taking a deep breath, I grit my teeth and grind out, "I'm sorry I've been distant."

"Bullshit," she cries, calling me out on my crap like always. "You haven't been distant, you've been *absent*. There's a big difference, Jax."

"So what? I went out. Whoop-de-doo I missed an evening of watching you snuggle up to your *fiancé*," I spit.

"And last night? What about today?" she challenges.

"I was hungover," I lie. "What of it?"

As if I'd go out drinking away my sorrows. I don't relinquish control so easily.

"Why? Why are you storming out and leaving us? Leaving me. Why are you staying out all night, god knows where, doing god knows what? Why are you running?"

"I'm not."

"Bullshit."

She grinds down on me and I freeze. I don't even know if she realises what she's doing, but my dick is rock hard. If she weren't so angry with me, it would be impossible to ignore.

"Why are you still treading on eggshells around me?" I demand.

"Because you react like this! It's not healthy, Jax."

The fight leaves her and she releases my hands, sitting back up but still straddling me. It would be even easier to push her away now, but I can't bring myself to do it.

I shake my head.

“Raven, I can’t stand it. It’s been eating me up inside since I first heard Ace’s mother broach the subject with Ace. My gut’s been churning, just waiting for you to agree to this. Everything will magically fall into place for you. You, Ace and Phoenix will get your happily ever after, and I’ll be left...” I shake my head, refusing to voice my fears out loud. “It doesn’t matter. I’m like this, I’m *behaving* like this, because the thought of watching you walk up that aisle to *him*, even for show, tears me up. I can’t stand it.”

“It’s not real, Jax,” she whispers, her eyes filling with tears. I can see she’s torn, that she pities me, and I hate it.

“You can tell yourself it’s not real, that nothing will change. But you’re wrong. Everything will change,” I spit. I don’t want her pity.

“It won’t,” she insists. I scoff.

“It will. To his mother, to his sisters, you’ll be married. In the eyes of the law, and under God himself, *you’ll be married.*” I enunciate each word slowly, trying to get it to sink in. There’s no faking this. “You think Ace won’t love being married to you? The reasons for the wedding might be a farce, but believe me, matrimony itself is not something Ace takes lightly. To him, this is it. It’s real.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“How?”

“Because I know Ace. Because I’d be the same if it were me!”

I sit up abruptly, reaching out to grab her so she doesn’t topple over, and pulling her into me. Our lips crash together as I claim her with a searing kiss.

I’ve been going out of my mind keeping my hands off her, standing by watching her play happy families with a guy who is essentially my brother. The only family I ever chose. The only one I wanted.

Enough. It's time to remind her who she belongs to. I may deign to share her, but she's *mine*. A fact she could do with remembering.

Unleashing my frustrations in a growl, I flip us over so that her back hits the mattress and I'm back on top where I belong.

"Jax—" she warns.

I ignore her, silencing her with a kiss. If this is the last time I get to have her alone before she marries him, I'm damn well not wasting my time talking.

Her wrap dress is easy to undo, exposing her delectable body to me like a delicately unwrapped gift. Her tits are spilling out of the top of her bra, her pregnancy already noticeable under close scrutiny.

She's radiant. Utter perfection. I'm not missing out on her pregnancy this time around. Married or not, I won't walk away from her. I'll stand on the sidelines and accept whatever scraps I can get.

But right now, she's mine to feast on.

Lowering my head between her breasts, I trail kisses down her soft skin and over the tiny swell of her stomach. I loop my fingers under the elastic of her dainty thong and tear it off. She gasps.

I discard the ruined lace and focus on my prize. I shower her thighs with kisses and run my nose down her seam, breathing in her rich perfume. It's a heady scent, one which makes me dizzy with the need to be inside her, but I don't give in so easily.

Gently, I part her lips with my thumbs and lick up the length of her, from hole to clit, as she squirms under me. I tease her opening with my tongue until I have to stop and give her a stern warning to keep still.

"Don't make me punish you."

"Jax, *please*."

"Please, *what*, kitten?"

“Please make me come.” I give her a flat look, unimpressed by her request. A beat passes and then she adds, “please, Sir.”

“Your wish is my command, princess.”

It’s the green light I needed to devour her, plunging my tongue deep into her tight channel until her thighs are squeezing my head and she’s trembling.

“You better not be holding back on me,” I growl. “Let me fucking have it.”

“Jax!” she cries, falling apart and coming all over my face.

“Good girl,” I murmur, lapping at her juices and drawing her orgasm out.

“Jezus kristus!”

The shocked gasp has me leaping from the bed and spinning to protect Raven from the intruder, but not before I catch the look of horror on Raven’s face as she scrambles to cover herself with her dress.

I pray that it’s one of Ace’s sisters, but of course, nothing is that easy.

Standing in the doorway to my bedroom, literally clutching her rosary beads and praying to the lord almighty, is Ace’s mother.

Well, fuck.



I'm enjoying having my entire family together all in one place, basking in my sisters' giggles and Nix's screams of delight.

Mama comes storming out of the main house like it's on fire, but there's no panic on her face. Only fury as she stomps across the garden to the pool house.

It's been a while since I've seen her looking like that, and even though I know something terrible has happened, I'm proud to see she's not the same woman my father and uncle cowed her into.

"Girls! Come! We're leaving!" she barks at them, rushing around the pool to the lounge where she left her bag.

"Hold on, Mama. What's the problem?" I ask as Cora whines that she doesn't want to go. *"Cora, shush, please!"*

Letty gives me a concerned look and passes Nix over to Thorn. "Where's Raven?" she whispers.

Shit. Raven and Jax are both missing. This isn't good.

"Mama, hold on. Girls, wait," I beg. *"Talk to me. What's going on?"*

"I just found...I just saw...oh Ace! Darling. We have to go. You should come with us. Don't stay here."

"What? No. Why, Mama?"

“Bring Nix too. I’m not leaving her here with...with these people.”

“What? What do you mean, mama? What people? This is my family.”

“Ace! These people are...bad.”

“Mama,” I groan. She’s not making any sense, but I *know*. I know, or can at least imagine, what she walked in on. *Shit*.

“Ace!” Raven calls, rushing out the house closely followed by Jax. Her clothes are crumpled and the bow on her dress is sloppily tied, as if done in a hurry. I give her a tight smile as my concern grows.

I know she’s okay, not hurt or anything, but she looks so panicked by whatever’s just gone down with my mother.

“Get away, Jezebel!” my mother screams at Raven. She doesn’t understand, but the pitch and tone are enough to make Raven wince and take a slight step back.

Nix begins to cry. “Why is everybody shouting? Babica? Why are you going?”

“Guys? Take Nix inside the main house please,” Raven asks, looking pained.

“You’ll do no such thing! My granddaughter is coming with us. With her family. Her father. She’s not staying here while her mother acts like a...like a whore in the next room.”

I thank god that my sisters and Jax are the only ones able to understand my mother right now, otherwise all hell would break loose. As it stands, Jax is barely holding his tongue, and I can’t blame him. I know my mother is upset, but she should *not* be speaking about Raven in that way.

“I’m sorry, Aljaž,” Raven pleads, eyes full of unshed tears. “She walked in on us.”

I nod in understanding and turn to my mother. My gaze hardens and my shoulders tense. My sisters are flapping around Mama like flies and Letty has this horrified, *I told you so* look on her face.

“Mama, take the girls and go home,” I tell her firmly. When she points towards my daughter, I shake my head. *“No, not Phoenix. Nix is staying here where she belongs, with her mother. I will come to the house with you, and I’ll explain everything.”*

“What is there to explain, my dear boy? She’s a whore!”

Behind me, Jax growls a warning. I hold my hand up to him to say, I’ve got this, but I’m having to bite my tongue too.

“Raven is my fiancée and the mother of my child. You will not talk about her like that.”

“But—”

“No, Mama.”

“Aljaž!”

“If you want to see me or Nix again, you’ll stop talking right now. We’re leaving, and once we get home I will explain everything, which I should have done from the start.”

With wordless grumbling, my mother and sisters gather up their things and head for the exit through the garden. I cross over to Raven and contemplate pulling her into a hug.

I don’t though.

“I’m so sorry, Aljaž,” she whispers.

“Not your fault,” I try to reassure her softly. There’s nothing I’d like more than to pull her into my arms so that I can comfort her properly, but I can’t with my family watching. It would finish my mama off, and I’m not that cruel.

This is a shit show, but she’s not to blame. I’m not even mad at Jax. We should have all been upfront and honest right from the start. Probably before we even came out here.

“There’s two taxis waiting. I called them as soon as she started praying,” Jax tells me solemnly.

I nod. “Thanks.”

“Sorry, mate.” He grimaces. An apology from Jax is rare, and he has nothing to apologise for. Making love to the

woman he loves isn't a crime. Keeping Raven away from them was.

"It's fine," I sigh. "Should be honest. Always."

"Yeah, I see that now. Do you want one of us to come with you?" he offers.

I shake my head. "No. It's best. Explain alone. I will return."

"Okay, mate."

"I will call. Look after her. Both of my girls."

"Always."

Reluctantly, I step away from Raven and follow my mama and sisters out of the pool house and across the garden to the gate.

One of the taxis has already gone.

I climb into the back of the other. Valentina and Letty are waiting for me, their expressions tense.

"Ace—" Letty begins, but I hold up my hand to stop her.

"Let's just get home. I only want to go through this once... please."

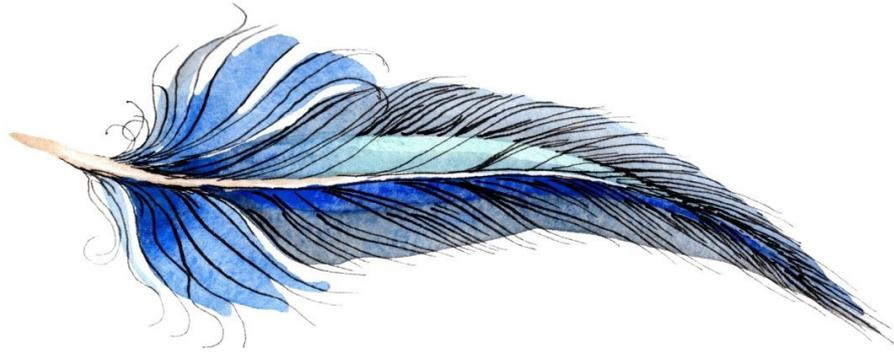
My heart sinks. I know I've got a hell of a lot of explaining to do. No amount of explaining will make Mama understand. She's so religious, so traditional. Even when my father was an absolute bastard to her, she stayed. She believes marriage is forever, is sacred. Matrimony should only ever be between one man, one woman, and God. No deviations in her mind. She'll never accept my relationship with Raven for what it really is, and she'll be heartbroken that Nix will remain out of wedlock. She's incapable of comprehending that love is love.

And she'll never accept that Raven's baby might not be mine, but I love her anyway and will love my unborn child as fiercely as I love Phoenix.

I pray my sisters can accept it though. I'm not ready to go back to having such a small family. I've missed them, and I

want them to be a part of my, Raven, and Nix's life. But at what cost?

What an absolute clusterfuck, as Rebel would say.



2 DAYS LATER: RAVEN

“Raven, baby, please. You have to stop stressing, it’s bad for you and the baby,” Rebel pleads with me as I pace the airport departures lounge.

I can’t sit still. I can’t rest. And I certainly can’t stop stressing. I’ve been worried sick, barely able to eat, unable to keep anything down, and don’t even get me started on the lack of sleep.

I look like shit. I feel like shit. Everything is shit.

It’s been two days since our world imploded, and I’ve not seen or heard from Ace since.

He briefly phoned Jax the night he left to say he was staying there for a few days, and that we should go ahead and book early flights home. Then he said goodnight to Nix and was gone before I could even ask to speak to him.

Obviously the wedding isn’t going ahead, and I’m relieved and devastated about that. Then I’m confused about my devastation. Am I upset that I’m not getting to marry Ace after all? Or am I just desperately clinging on to a fantasy that could never be anyway. It doesn’t matter that Baxter was going to arrange for us to fake it; no one else knew that.

I just feel like I’m losing him.

“I can’t stop. It’s been two days, I’ve not seen Ace, and we’re due to board the plane in—” I check my watch and my breathing hitches as my anxiety ricochets “—thirty minutes! Where *is* he? Is he even coming?”

“He said he’d be here. Keep the faith,” Baxter tells me.

I can’t lose Ace. I can’t lose *any* of the guys. One thing I know with absolute certainty; if one of them walks, everything will fall apart. I know it as surely as I know I need air to live.

“Mama,” Nix says, coming over to squeeze my hand. “Are you okay?”

“Yes baby,” I reply, distracted.

“Don’t lie to her, Raven,” Jax admonishes me softly.

He’s right. I hate lying to Nix. I always tell the others not to, and here I am, the fib tripping off my tongue with thoughtless ease.

I sigh and bend down to meet her worried gaze.

“Baby, I *am* fine. I’m just a little worried that Ace is going to miss the plane.”

Maybe that was the wrong thing to say. Her eyes widen and fill with tears, and her bottom lip begins to wobble.

“But will he get stuck here forever?”

“No, baby, no! He’ll just have to get a later flight and meet us at home.”

“But I don’t want him to!”

“I know baby, neither do I.”

“He might be scared to fly on his own.”

“He won’t be, baby. He’s super brave, like you.”

“He is?”

“Yeah. Where do you think you get your bravery from? Your daddy, of course.”

“But...” she frowns, an adorable little crinkle appearing between her brows. I smooth it out absentmindedly as she

continues. “But I didn’t get to say goodbye to my Babica! And my aunts! I don’t want to go.”

She starts to cry in earnest now, and I have no words. How do I explain to a four-year-old that her shiny, new amazing family are mad at her mummy for a reason she wouldn’t understand.

“I know, baby. It’s okay to cry.”

I don’t dare make empty promises that they might visit. Things aren’t looking good with Aljaž’s absence. I don’t want to promise the world now to quieten her, when later down the line it could cause her even more pain. No, it’s better to sit and hold her in her heartbreak right now.

It’s easy enough to do; I feel the same.

The final call for our flight is announced over the tannoy and my stomach sinks into my shoes. No! I don’t want to go. I can’t bear to leave him behind.

With a sorry look, Thorn takes Nix from my arms and carries her through the gate. Rebel and Baxter follow, while Jax remains behind with me. He wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me close.

“I’m sorry, Raven. I really thought he’d be here.”

I refuse to cry. I won’t upset Nix more by falling apart, but inside I’m devastated. What does his absence mean? What message is he sending me? Are we done? Is it over? What if this baby is his?

“Come on.” Jax guides me through the gate and onto the plane. We take our seats and belt up, the last ones on the plane.

The crew are running through their last minute safety checks and the stewardess is just closing the door when a voice calls out “Wait!”

My heart leaps into my mouth and I’m fumbling with my belt, desperate to get out of my seat and see. I have to know: is it him?

“Excuse me, miss. We’re cleared for take-off, you need to remain in your seat with your belt on.”

I push past the snippy steward and race down the aisle. Drawing level with the half-closed door I skid to a halt, my heart racing.

“Aljaž?” I whisper, hopefully.

“Princesa!” he cries, stepping through the doorway and crushing me in his embrace.

“Daddy!” Nix calls from her seat, waving her arms maniacally to get his attention.

“I thought you were leaving us.”

“Never.”

“Well, now that *everyone* is on board, can you please take your seats so that we can take off?” Bitchy steward sniffs.

“Sorry,” Ace apologises while I just give the guy the stink eye. That reunion was totally a holiday movie moment, and he didn’t appreciate a second of it.

Ace chuckles and pulls me along the aisle back to my seat. He slips in next to me and we do up our belts.

“Ace, what happened? I’m so sorry.”

“Is okay.”

“But your mama! And sisters...did you talk to them?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“They know.”

“Do they...accept it?” I ask apprehensively.

He shakes his head, and my heart sinks. “They need time. My sisters are good, I think. But Mama...time will help.”

“I’m so so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Don’t care. Mama will come round. Or she won’t.”

“But Ace, I know how much they mean to you. How much you loved having them back in your life this week, until I went and ruined—”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. You not ruin anything. They are absent for so long, I can wait longer. They will come.”

“How can you be sure?”

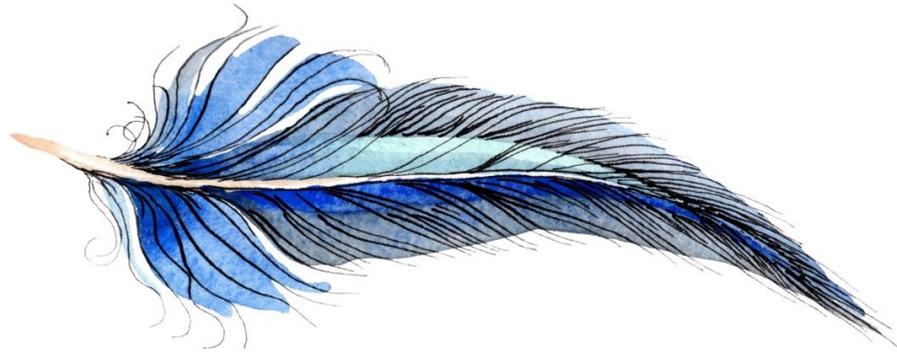
“They love Phoenix. Not so easy to let go. Won’t say goodbye.”

“Ace—” I hiccup, and that bastard sob I’ve been holding in escapes. Ace cradles me awkwardly to his chest.

“Shush,” he murmurs, stroking my hair. “Let’s go home. You and Nix are my home. Guys too. Nothing else matters.”

“I love you, Aljaž.”

“I love you. Always.”



5 MONTHS LATER: JAX

“Oh you fucking bastard!” Raven cries, panting hard. I smirk as the others flap around her, trying to comfort and encourage her. *It won't end well for them.*

“Don't fucking touch me!” she snaps, and I bite back a silent chuckle. I saw that one coming.

“If any of you ever touch me again, I swear to god I will castrate each and every one of you!”

She huffs through another contraction. They're coming thick and fast now and I know it's almost time for her to push.

How do I know? Because when Raven got pregnant – hell, *before* she was even pregnant – I read every single pregnancy, labour and parenting book I could get my hands on. We missed out on so much with Phoenix, I wanted to be prepared this time around. *Overprepared*, if anything.

But it turns out nothing could prepare me for this. For seeing the woman I love in pain. For the outpouring of love I feel for the brand new member of our family who *still* hasn't made an appearance yet.

I have to laugh at Raven cussing us all out, otherwise I'd hunt down every damn doctor in this place in an effort to relieve her suffering. I hate this. It's all I can do to stand still and not pace a hole in the floor.

“I’m going to mix all your testicles up in a jar and make you guess whose is whose! I’ll feed them to the dog...Fuck!”

“Babe, we don’t have a dog,” Rebel points out.

“I’m aware, dickwad. But I’m getting one just to feed it your body parts.”

“Hey! What did I do?”

“You touched me! You put your dick in me. There’s a twenty-five percent chance this spawn of Satan is yours and so you need to die!”

“Seriously, should it be taking this long?” Thorn whines. “I’m so tired.”

“Baxter! Pass me my knife. I’m starting with Thorn because *he’s* so damn tired! I don’t see him trying to push a watermelon out of a hole the size of his tiny pea-brain for... how many hours has it been?”

“Thirty-seven.”

Her head flops back on the pillow and she groans, long and low.

“Fuck my life. I could have binge-watched an entire season of Friends in that time and still had time for some Harry Potter,” she complains. I feel nothing but love and admiration for this woman. Absolute respect for anyone who can be in that much pain and still cuss us all out and put us in our places.

“You’re doing amazing, princess,” Ace coos.

“Do you want some ice?” Rebel offers.

“Shove your ice up your ass and get Thorn to drink it when it melts and dribbles out. I hate you! I hate all of you.”

“Aww you don’t mean that baby,” Rebel cajoles and then yelps when she grabs his balls.

I’m much happier at the far end of the bed with Baxter, out of the firing range for physical harm, but not exempt from the verbal abuse.

“Make it stop,” she begs, turning to Baxter with huge, pleading eyes. “I don’t remember it being this bad the last time.”

“You were pretty out of it last time,” Baxter reminds her.

“I want to be out of it *this* time. Get me the drugs. Please.”

“It’s too late for drugs,” Thorn reminds her. “You wanted this. You said—”

“Bull. Shit!” she growls. “Oh my god, it’s a boy, I just know it is.”

“What makes you think that, princess?” Rebel asks, trying to distract her.

“Because only boys fuck you up like this. He’s tearing up my insides—”

“That’s my boy!” Rebel jokes.

Raven glowers at him. “I am never doing this again. I hate you all. I don’t care who’s the dad, you’re not having one each. I’m not some broodmare you can keep impregnating for shits and giggles. I don’t even want to have sex for another year. At least. Oh god, is it too late to be a lesbian? Is it too late for contraception?”

“Yes, yes it is,” Baxter sniggers.

The door opens and a doctor bustles in, rubbing his hands together like a sleazy car salesman.

“Excellent, excellent,” he mutters, reading Raven’s chart. “How are we doing, dear?”

“Get out!” I bark before I can stop myself.

“Jax!” Raven admonishes me.

“She wants a different doctor.”

“E-excuse me?”

“You heard. Get out.”

There’s no way I’m letting this fucking blithering idiot of a child *doctor* touch my woman.

“Get me the on-duty consultant, immediately,” I demand.

He all but pisses himself as he runs out the door.

“What did you do that for?” Raven snarls, turning her ire on me. “It will take even longer to get this demon out of me now!”

“Careful, princess,” I warn. “You may be in labour now, but it won’t last forever and your ass will be mine for the taking when we’re through.”

Her pupils dilate and she actually relaxes for a second. That’s what she needs; a good heavy dose of oxytocin to get this baby moving. She’s stressing, so the baby’s stressing, and everything is stalling.

“What’s this about the patient refusing treatment?” a stern voice asks.

I turn to greet the new consultant with a sneer.

“She didn’t refuse anything. I did.”

“Well that’s not your choice to make.”

“And yet, I made it. I want a different doctor for Raven.”

“Well I’m here now, so let’s assess how she’s doing shall we?”

The consultant doesn’t wait for my reply, crossing over to Raven’s bedside where the guys are all huddled. They part for him and step back, giving Raven and the doctor some space.

He asks Raven some questions, requests permission to examine her, and removes his gloves when he’s done. He drops them into the bin and washes his hands, before pressing the call button.

“You’ve done amazingly well, Raven. But I think this little one needs a little help to come out.”

“What does that mean?” she pants.

“It means you’re tired. Your labour has slowed, and baby is too comfy in there, but because it’s been so long since your waters broke, the risk of infection is high. I’d like to get you

prepared for surgery and get your baby to you as soon as possible. You want to meet him or her now, don't you?"

"Yes," she begs.

"Good. Let's get going then—"

"Hold on a minute!" I step forward quickly and put my hands on the end of the bed where the doctor has released the brakes. "What are the risks involved? You can't just wheel her off to surgery!"

"Jax—"

"Raven!" I snap, not meaning to take my anxiety out on her, but somehow unable to help myself.

"Jax, please," she begs. "I'm so tired. I just want to meet him now."

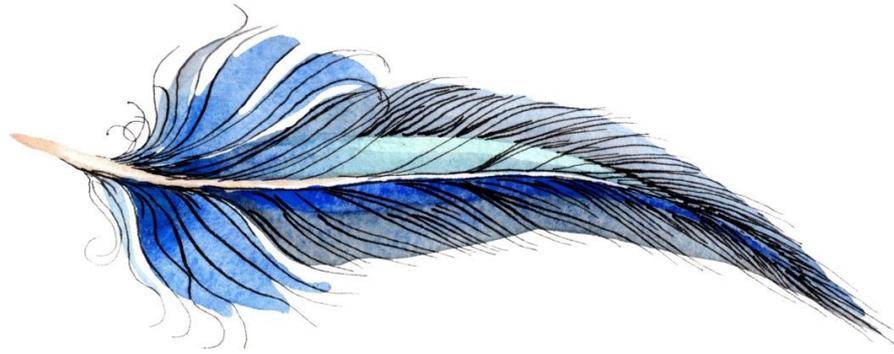
I look at her. *Really* look at her. She's fucked. Absolutely wiped out, but still trying her best with a strained smile on her face.

My walls crumble.

"Be safe," I tell her with a kiss. "Come back to me."

She squeezes my hand.

"Always."



3 HOURS LATER: ACE

“He’s beautiful, princesa,” I tell Raven softly as I stare down at the tiny bundle in my arms.

He’s more towels and blankets than anything else, but I can just make out his light caramel colouring between all the layers he’s wrapped in. He’s yet to stir and open his eyes, but I’m sure when he does they’ll be as black as night.

Just like his father.

“Let me see,” Rebel demands, taking the baby from my arms far more gently than his words. “Oh wow, I guess we don’t need a paternity test for this one.”

I chuckle because he’s absolutely right.

“What? I think he looks like me,” Thorn insists. We all stare at him in amazement. He has to be joking...right?

“What? My skin goes pretty tan in the sun!”

Raven shakes her head and gives a small, exhausted smile.

“What?! I do!”

“Give it up mate,” Rebel says, passing Thorn the baby and clapping him on the shoulder. “It’s clear that this one’s Jax’s.”

“Well, I call dibs on the next one,” he sulks.

“I don’t think it works like that,” Baxter scoffs.

“Agree,” I add, poking Thorn to hand over the baby to Baxter. He does and I take the opportunity to slip in next to Raven. “Bravo princeska, bil si neverjeten. On je popolnoma popoln. Tako sem ponosen nate.”

“Sorry, Ace. I didn’t catch a word of that. I’m just so tired.” She gives me an apologetic smile and I kiss the back of her hand – the one without a cannula in.

“He said well done, princess, you were amazing. He’s absolutely perfect and he’s so proud of you,” Jax translates.

She smiles at me and squeezes my hand. “Thank you. I love you.”

“Kri moje ljubezni je moje življenje.”

“Always.”

“Čestitke očka. Ne bi mogla biti bolj srečna zate. Dobrodošel v najboljšem klubu na svetu.”

I shake hands with my brother and tears fill his eyes. He coughs and looks away.

“Jax? What did he say to you?”

“He said congratulations, Daddy, he couldn’t be happier for me. Welcome to the best club in the world.”

“Oh. That’s so nice.” Raven beams at me, but it lacks her usual brightness. It’s time for us to go. She’s clearly exhausted.

“Who wants the little man?” Baxter asks, coming over to us. Jax immediately stands to take the baby from him.

“Give him here. I’ll hold him while you get some rest, Raven.”

“Yeah, we’re going to take off and let you guys get some sleep,” Rebel says. I nod. Thorn whines. Baxter hits him. I smile.

“We’ll be back when visiting officially opens.”

“What time is that?” Raven asks around a yawn.

“Twelve o’clock.”

“What time is it now?”

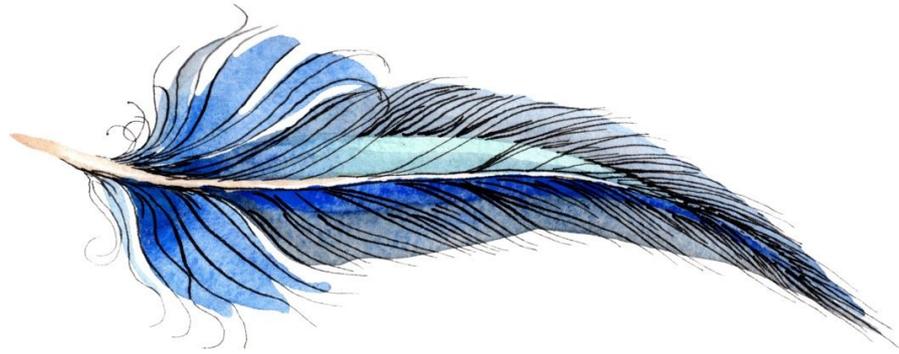
“It’s after eight.”

“Rest,” I tell her, kissing her forehead. “Call if needed. I call family, send many congrats.”

“Will do, thanks mate,” Jax promises.

We all say our goodbyes and leave the recovery room. I’m relieved that everything went okay, even with the surgery taking longer than expected and Raven needing a blood transfusion at the last minute.

My family is safe. Raven is strong. Her and Jax’s baby boy is healthy, despite being early. We will all be home together again soon.



1 YEAR LATER: RAVEN

Some people talk about brides being nervous, the morning of the ‘big day’ but that couldn’t be further from the truth for me.

I’m ready. Calm and composed, and excited by the *rightness* of it all. It’s not every day you get to marry your soulmates. *All five of them*. But here I am. Our relationship may be unorthodox, but our love isn’t.

I’m dressed, prepped, and good to go. I can’t wait to officially be a *Mrs* to each of my men and to wear one ring that will symbolise each of them. All of us. Even Nix and JJ. Because that’s what today is about. Becoming an official family. The day we all take our new family name.

I wasn’t about to have any arguments over whose surname I took. And Ace was adamant that he didn’t want Nix to have his name, because despite the leaps and bounds that his family have come along, he’s still haunted by the demons of his childhood and he doesn’t want to taint Nix with the same brush. I understand and respect his decision because I too wanted to leave behind both my *Mclintock* and *Deighton* aliases.

It’s time for something new. Something that can represent and unite all of us, equally and fairly.

So in less than an hour, I will be *Mrs Ohana*, wife to five *Mr Ohanas* and mother to Phoenix Ohana and JJ Ohana. The

name was chosen by Phoenix because it means family. Yes, she chose it after watching Lilo and Stitch. No, I don't care.

Nor did the others.

I honestly can't wait, but this will be the last identity I take. It's finally time to be me.

"Are you ready?" Beth asks, sticking her head around the door. I turn and meet her gaze, and she gives me a once over and smiles.

"You look beautiful."

"Thanks. So do you."

She chuckles. "Well, we *are* identical," she teases and I laugh with her. "Shall we do this?"

I'm overjoyed to have Beth here today for our real wedding. We've become close in the past year. We've bonded over who we are and the things we have in common now, not just who we were and our blood. I wouldn't want anyone else by my side as I walk up the aisle today. Or is it down the aisle?

I don't care. So long as my sister is by my side and my men are at the altar, nothing else matters.

"Who's got JJ?" I ask.

"Macerio." She smiles at me but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "He's so besotted with that boy. He's convinced he's going to be walking and talking any day now."

"God help us all when he does. That boy is a born leader, just like his dad and his favourite uncle. He'll have everyone racing to complete his orders like a drill sergeant."

Beth laughs. "Nix is with Reagan."

"Should I be worried?" I grimace. I should definitely be worried. Reagan and Nix together are even more trouble than Nix and Thorn, with the added lethality of Baxter stirred in for good measure.

I swear if it weren't for me and the other guys keeping Nix human, I'd be raising a little psychopath.

“I mean, if he’s not teaching her to pick pockets, he’ll have her throwing knives by the end of the day.” We both laugh, but I’m not convinced she’s joking.

“Ah, that’s my favourite sound,” Emiliano says, stepping round the door and beaming at the pair of us. Beth blooms in his presence. “Both my favourite sets of twins all in one place.”

“Shush!” I scold him. “Someone might hear you!”

Only Beth and her guys know that I’m pregnant again – despite swearing I’d never let any of my men touch me again – and this time I’m carrying twins. I have no idea who the dad is, or if twins run in any of their families.

Beth loves being an aunty, and so far, all three of her men have been surprisingly doting uncles.

Our family just keeps growing, and I couldn’t be happier about it.

“It’s time to get this show on the road, mama,” Emil tells me with a rare but dazzling, cheeky grin.

“Don’t be starting anything with me,” I warn him. “My sister’s always armed now, and I wouldn’t want to get on her bad side.”

“It just makes her even sexier.” He blows Beth a kiss. She giggles like a schoolgirl and blushes. It’s so cute. All of her relationships are seriously cute; the three guys clearly worship my sister, which is why I allow them to continue breathing – which I’ve told them many times.

I pick up my bouquet of mixed wildflowers and nod to Beth.

I’m ready.

“Do you, Raven, take these five men to be your husbands, to have and to hold...”

We decided it would be easier to do it all in one go, rather than having me say my vows five times over. We may not have many guests here today, but I still wanted to save them the pain of sitting through five lots of vows, five first dances, five lots of cutting the cake...damn, actually, five cakes sounds like a really good idea. Why didn't I insist on that?

The ceremony passes in a daze. Or maybe I'm the one in a daze? I can't stop thinking about when the right time to tell the guys will be. Beth convinced me it should be today, and I agree, but *when*?

"Are you okay, Mrs Ohana?" Jax asks, coming up behind me and sliding his arms around my waist.

"Mmm, I like the sound of that," I say, leaning back into his chest for comfort.

"Good. Because you're stuck with it. No more names, please."

"Well..." I take a deep breath, spotting my opening. "Maybe two more?" I turn around and give him a hopeful look.

"You want to change your name another two times?" Thorn asks, coming up beside us.

"No. Idiot." Ace shakes his head. Baxter gives me a knowing grin over his shoulder.

"I don't get it," Thorn complains.

"I think our darling wife has some explaining to do," Rebel growls.

"I love that. *Wife*." I smile at them.

Rebel scowls. "Don't change the topic. Why are we changing our name another two times?"

"Not changing our name," I insist. "But adding two names."

I let the penny drop, resting my hand on my stomach which is mercifully concealed by excellent boning and corsetry.

“You’re pregnant? Again?”

I grin at them as I nod.

Rebel whoops and spins me around, making me laugh. His joy is infectious and the cherry on top of a perfect day.

“My god, you’re amazing! Marry me?”

“I already did, doofus.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Wow. Twins?” Ace asks in awe. I nod.

“Who do you think the dad is?” Thorn wonders.

Baxter smirks even wider. He’s so certain it’s him. I wish I could call his bluff, but he’s so controlling and calculating about everything, I’ve no doubt he engineered our romantic weekend away alone together when he knew I’d be ovulating.

I’ll never be able to prove it though.

“No idea. We’ll have to wait and see. Do twins run in any of your families?” I ask.

This time Rebel and Baxter both smirk.

“Both of you?” I gape at them. “How don’t I know this?”

“May the best sperm win,” Rebel says, saluting Baxter with a mocking grin.

“We’ll see.”

“Ugh, you guys are the worst. It’s not a competition!” I complain.

“If you say so, dear,” Rebel replies patronisingly. “Now who wants to rock, paper, scissors me for the first dance?”

“Have your first dance,” Jax scoffs. “I’d rather take her to bed first.”

“No fair! You and Ace got the first children, let someone else have a first for a change!” Thorn protests.

I laugh as they fall to bickering good naturedly about all the firsts they each want with me. I’m so absorbed in them all

just being themselves that I don't notice Rebel until he places his hands on my hips, making me jump.

"They can fight all they want over you, princess. We all know that I'm going to be last, every single time."

"Umm," I shiver. "And why's that?"

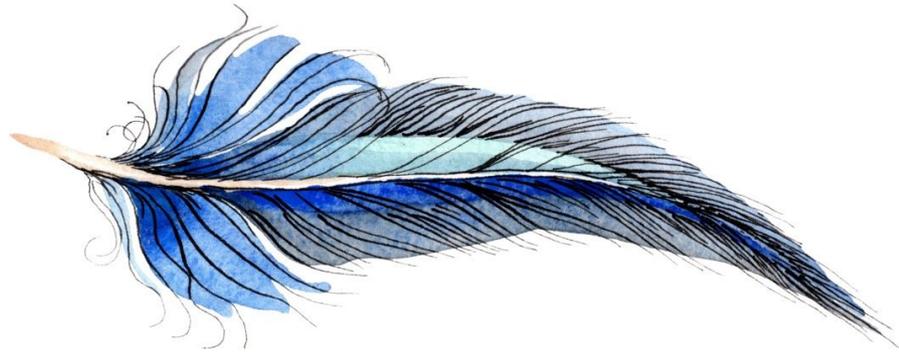
"Because fucking you when you're a broken rag doll everyone else has finished playing with, is my favourite thing to do. Nothing beats pushing into your tight, full pussy and feeling their cum leaking out to make way for mine. If these babies in your belly aren't mine, you can bet the next set will be."

My head falls back and I groan at how wanton his words make me feel. I'm only just getting my head around having this set of twins and Rebel is promising me more, in such a way I'm desperate for it.

It's official. I'm crazy. Pregnancy hormones have completely addled my brain, and I'm just a walking bundle of over sensitive neediness.

"Rebel, take me upstairs and fuck me now," I beg.

"No can do, princess," he replies, grinding his erection against my ass and sliding his hands down the front of my strapless dress to tweak my hardened nipples. "I meant every word of what I said. Go enjoy your other four husbands before you come looking for me, because when I take you to bed, Mrs *Rebel* Ohana, you'll forget that you belong to anyone but me."



1 YEAR AFTER THAT: RAVEN

“You have got to be kidding me.” I gape at the doctor in utter disbelief. This isn’t happening.

“I’m afraid not,” he replies with a smile that’s more a smirk than anything.

“It’s really twins *again*?” No. It’s not possible. I may have missed my twelve week scan due to circumstances out of my control, but there’s no way there can be two babies *again*.

“Two heartbeats. Loud and clear.”

“You’re sure one of them isn’t mine?” I frown. Maybe I should ask to see his qualifications again, just to be sure.

After the disaster that was JJ’s birth, Jax went even more crazy possessive asshole on my ass and insisted on hiring the best doctor in the country for my aftercare and future pregnancies. Pregnancies I absolutely did not agree to at the time.

“Pretty sure,” the doctor replies with a snigger. I raise my brow and give him an icy glare.

“Do I need a second opinion?”

“Do you want someone to come and count their penises?” he counters with more sass than I’d expect from a working professional.

“Penises?!”

“Congratulations, you’re carrying two healthy boys.” He finishes this statement with jazz hands. Actual freaking jazz hands.

Of course Jax would only hire me a *gay* male doctor. He didn’t even trust a female not to be competition. He kept uttering something about having enough people to compete with, which would be sweet if he wasn’t so damn infuriating.

“By healthy you mean…”

“Well endowed. They could be mistaken for extra legs. We’re not allowed to say *one hundred percent*, but, well, if I’m wrong, I’ll give them my penis to share.”

“This isn’t happening,” I groan, flopping back on the bed and covering my eyes. Maybe if I lie here long enough, it will all go away.

“I can assure you, Raven, it is.” I can practically hear the glee in Doctor Reynold’s voice. Would it be wrong to hit him? He’s literally delighting in my pain right now.

“But…the twins – the original set, Ronnie and Reggie – are only a couple of months old. I can’t be pregnant again, already!”

“Well, you can, and you are. Cute names by the way.”

“They’re Baxter’s kids,” I reply dryly. “It was gangsters or serial killers.”

“Says it all really.” Another snigger.

“I think I need a new doctor,” I grumble. “There’s like, zero professionalism here.”

“I think you need a more effective method of birth control than pulling out if you really don’t want any more pregnancies,” he retorts waspishly.

Touché, motherfucker.

I glower at the doctor. My stare can wilt the most steadfast of erections in seconds, but does zero to control my unruly children, or apparently, my blasé doctor.

“First, you’ve met my husbands. Does anything about them give you the impression they like to pull out? And second, I didn’t say this was an unwanted pregnancy. It’s just a massive shock. I’m going to have four children in the same school year.”

“Ooooh! Irish twins. How exciting! Congratulations.”

“I think this is going to be more like Irish quadruplets... Rebel did this.”

“Oh, you know who the father is this time around?”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m easy. I know who fathered all of my children so far.”

“Yeah, after the fact. How do you know this one’s Rebel?”

“Because only he can fuck my plans up this royally.”

“Oh what plans did you have? Are you going on a cruise?”

“My plan was not to get pregnant!”

“That ship has sailed. And if I were you, I’d come round to the idea that they’re all going to want to knock you up, so if these twins *are* Rebel’s, you’ve got at least two more pregnancies to go.”

“One. Just Thorn.”

The doctor snorts again. “Right. Like Ace won’t want to try for a boy too.”

“Oh shut up. You’re making things worse.”

“Maybe you should get a hobby.”

“I have a hobby.”

“Spreading your legs isn’t—”

“I swear to god, finish that sentence and you’re fired.”

“You can’t fire me. Jax hired me as your personal physician until the day you die.”

“Or the day *you* die. Which could be a lot sooner than you were expecting.”

The doctor laughs uproariously. “I like you.”

“The feeling’s not mutual.”

“Yeah yeah, I bet you say that to all your boys. I suggest you put some clothes on, you hussy, and I’ll see you at dinner tonight.”

“You will?”

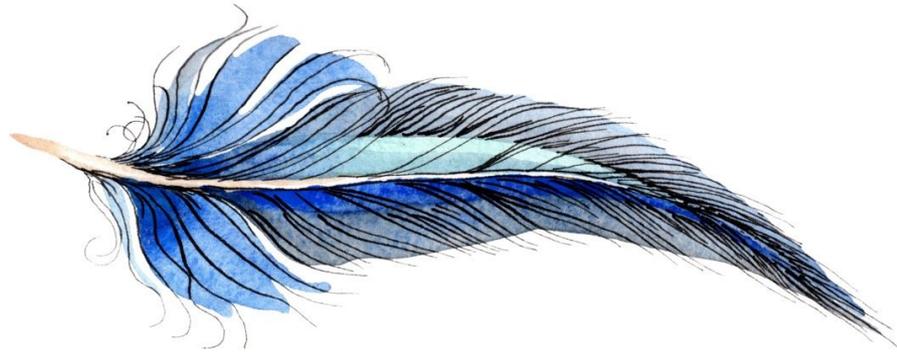
“Oh yes, I’m not missing a front row seat to this announcement.”

“Maybe I won’t tell them. I’ll keep it as a surprise.”

“Good luck trying! You already look like you ate all the pies.”

“I hate you.”

He exits the room to afford me the illusion of privacy to get dressed – makes a change – cackling wildly as he goes.



3 YEARS LATER: RAVEN

“You have got to be shitting me,” Thorn complains. There’s no heat in his words but the disappointment on his face lances me through the heart.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. Where’s Ace? I’m going to kill him!”

I give him a soft smile knowing that he doesn’t mean it, he just doesn’t handle disappointment well.

We just got the final paternity test back for our seventh – and *supposed* to be final – child. Thorn was meant to complete the set, thus closing down my uterus for good.

One child each. Or two in the case of Baxter and Rebel – but that’s just semantics. One *pregnancy* each. It was a hard negotiation. I argued that if they were happy to share me, they should be happy to share JJ and I’d be one and done, amen, thank you very much, goodnight.

But they wore me down. Ganged up on me. Even recruited Phoenix, the traitor, to their cause.

I lost. Big time.

But as my family grows and my capacity to love continues to expand and astound me, it actually feels a lot like winning.

The others have been so good about the arrangement, and Thorn has been so patient, waiting for the hell that was the Irish quadruplets' teething phase to pass. To say we were all beyond exhausted was an understatement. Ten out of ten do not recommend having five children under the age of five... ever.

But just as the fog of sleep deprivation was lifting and everyone was finally sleeping through the night and I was *finally* starting to feel like myself again, I let Thorn sweet talk me into trying again.

The others backed off, but there was that one night after Beth's birthday when I had one too many cocktails and Ace put me to bed...I'm not proud to admit that I jumped him. But I'd barely been off my birth control a week, so I thought we'd be fine.

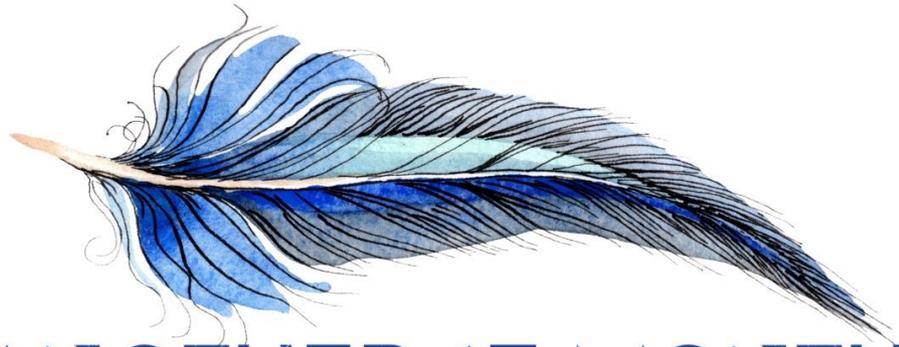
Apparently not.

We almost didn't bother with a paternity test for River; we were all that convinced he was Thorn's. But once his eyes settled and they were neither green like mine or blue like his dad's, the truth became impossible to ignore: my bright, violet-eyed baby belongs to Aljaž.

The piece of paper in my hand just confirms it.

And Ace is over the moon about it. Thorn? Not so much. He'll come around.

No doubt I'll be pregnant again within a year, and Thorn will lock everyone else's dicks down until I am.



ANOTHER 15 MONTHS LATER: RAVEN

“I hate you,” I groan at Thorn, watching him cradle his baby in his arms.

Another son. *Hayden*.

Rebel keeps arguing that the law of averages means that we should have had another daughter by now, but I know that’s a load of crap. Nix and I are doomed to forever be outnumbered by boys.

Eight children: one girl, seven boys, including two sets of twins. Some days I have to chant their names in my head before I get out of bed, for fear that I’ll forget them. *Phoenix, JJ, Ronnie, Reggie, Noah, Seb, River, Hayden*.

They’re asking if we can get a dog.

Fuck no.

But we *do* need a bigger house. Never thought I’d be saying that. Luckily, Rebel’s working on it and our forever home should be ready before Christmas.

Not that I know when that is, the days, weeks, months, years all kind of blur into one when you have a wild brood wreaking havoc.

We only pretend to have the illusion of control when we go out in public, which doesn’t happen very often because it’s all

just too damn hard. We have to take *two* seven-seater cars every time. The boys go through shoes like there's no tomorrow. The food bill is a nightmare – Tesco basically delivers to my house every day. Ace practically lives in the kitchen morning, noon and night, and don't even get me started on the washing.

If I didn't love our privacy so much, I'd be begging the guys to hire an army of household staff. Starting with a masseuse for me.

I feel twenty years older than whatever age I'm meant to be. I'm pretty sure I look it, too.

But most of the lines on my face are from laughing, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

“Shall we let them all in?” Thorn asks softly, barely able to tear his eyes away from his son. He's smitten. Already wrapped around Hayden's little finger, fallen for him hook, line and sinker. It's adorable to watch.

Totally worth the wait.

“Let them in.”

Giving birth at home is so much easier. The doctor's always bloody here anyway. He's practically one of the family now, and godfather to Noah and Seb. It just made so much sense after Baxter's boys were born, to have home births. Jax took a lot of convincing but he came round eventually, and since then I've been able to have all my babies in the comfort of my own home, with minimal medical intervention.

Perfect.

“Mummy!” one of the twins squeals, running straight for me. I'm not going to lie, call me a bad mother all you like, I cannot tell Reggie and Ronnie apart for love nor money. If it weren't for their darker eyes, I'd get them mixed up with Noah and Seb too. They're *truly* like quadruplets at times. It makes it easy to see how much trouble Baxter and Rebel probably got into together as kids.

Luckily Baxter can tell them apart, and he grabs his son before he can launch himself onto the bed.

“Oh, no you don’t, Regster.”

Ah, I should have known it was Reggie. He’s generally the more affectionate of the two. I give him a soft smile.

“I want lots of cuddles, little man, just climb up carefully.”

Within seconds all of my family are surrounding me, and life is perfect once more.

“Guys, let me introduce you to your baby brother, Hayden.”

The kids all clamour to look at the little bundle of white-blond hair and pink squidgy skin as Thorn passes him to me.

Baxter takes over, organising the rabble so that they can all have a hold and diffusing arguments about who’s going to go first.

“How many orgasms did it take this time?” Jax asks Thorn, a smirk in his voice. I cringe even as my cheeks heat.

“Seven,” Thorn brags proudly.

Baxter scoffs.

“What?”

“Only took four with the twins. Two each.”

I’m ready for the mattress to swallow me whole.

“You’re bragging about giving our woman less orgasms than I did?” Thorn asks, incredulous.

“Fewer,” Rebel points out.

“Bite me, wanker.”

“Naughty word!” Our children scream in unison.

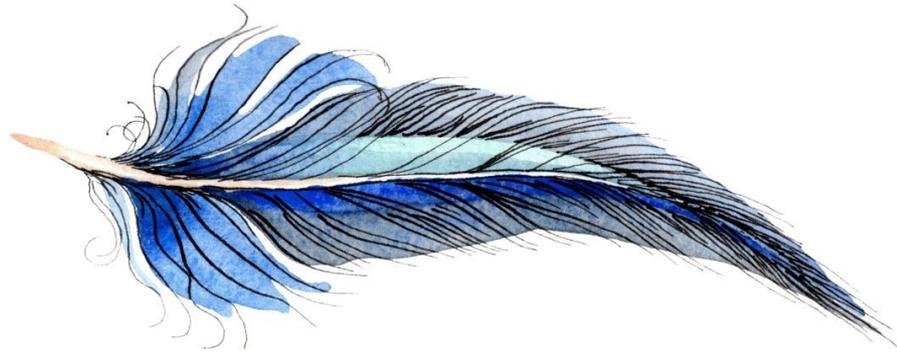
“It’s supposed to shorten labour, the stronger the orgasms, the fewer it’ll take,” Jax explains.

“Yeah, mate. You get an F. Your orgasm game is weak,” Rebel teases.

They continue bickering good naturedly as I sit back and let it all wash over me, in my content little bubble. Ace slips his hand into mine and gazes at us all with total adoration. I

know it's the oxytocin talking, but I fucking love these guys so much.

We're a family of...I quickly count in my head...*fourteen* now, and I think that may just be my new favourite number.



2 YEARS LATER: BAXTER

“Do not tell your mother about this or she’ll have my balls in a vise,” I groan as we work together to tie our latest victim to a chair.

“Isn’t that, like, a kink thing?” she asks me, scrunching her cute little button nose up in disgust and making me splutter. There’s not many people on this earth who can get the better of me, but Nix has me wrapped around her finger so thoroughly that I’m often left speechless.

I shake my head. “I don’t even want to know where you learn this shit.”

“The walls of our house are pretty thin, you know. It’s a wonder Mum ever gets anything done with the five of you constantly panting after her. After all these years, I would have thought it would die out a little but nooooooooo...plus KinkTok has a lot to answer for.”

Kink what? I shake my head. Nope. Not going there. There’s no way in hell I’m asking my thirteen-year-old daughter about kink anything.

“I really don’t want to discuss this with you, Nix.”

“So can we talk about torture instead?” she asks brightly and with way too much enthusiasm. Who’s to say that nature is stronger than nurture? She may not biologically be mine, but

she's a savage little thing through and through, and I'm more than happy to nurture that side of her – on the down low so her mum doesn't cut my balls off – because at least then I know she's safe.

“Data extraction,” I clarify.

“Huh?”

“It's called data, or information, extraction. Not torture.” I'm firm on this. You never know who's listening in.

“So you mean, there's a reason for doing it? It's not just for shits and giggles?”

I stare at her wide, innocent eyes a beat too long but her face cracks into a mischievous grin that's all *Thorn* as she cries, “Gotcha! You thought I was a straight up psychopath then, didn't you?”

“No,” I lie smoothly.

“You totally did, Dad. I can see it on your face.”

“Are you telling me you *aren't* a psychopath?” I counter with a smirk.

She tilts her head to the side, considering. She looks so much like her mum when she does that, it's unreal.

“I mean, I could be. But unless you let me actually kill someone, we'll never know, will we?”

“Not all psychopaths are killers,” I point out.

“And not all killers are psychopaths. I know. Come on, just let me hurt him already!”

I smirk at her impatience and then wave my hand in a *have at it* motion. She bounces up and down in excitement.

“Really?!”

“Yes. Get on with it already if this is what you want.”

“I'm taking the lead on this?” she asks, too damn eager. I might regret this, but it's too late now.

Reluctantly, I nod.

“Finally! Whoop!”

Her excitement should concern me, but it doesn't. If she truly were a psychopath she'd be emotionless. And she'd have already found a way to kill things, maybe even people, without waiting for the guidance of her dear old dad.

“So, what are you leading with today?” I ask her, ever the teacher guiding my young protege. I can't wait until the boys are old enough to learn this shit, and more physical ways to stay safe, but I don't think they'll have such a knack for it as Nix does.

She's truly gifted. Her mind is a wonderful and warped place to be.

“So I've been thinking I want to experiment with using marine venom for tor—information extraction. I've read online that the stonefish is absolutely lethal.”

“Too lethal,” I tell her with a shake of my head. “Enough toxin will kill a fully-grown adult within an hour.”

“Boo, that's no fun.”

“You can try the lionfish.”

“It's not potent enough for what I have in mind.”

“Go with the scorpion fish then. It's in the middle. They're all cousins anyway.”

“Great idea! Why didn't I think of that?”

“Because you're the student and I'm the master.”

Nix sniggers. “Yeah until you start losing your marbles and you need me to wipe your ass for you!”

“I've told you before, around me, you'll use the proper terminology.”

“Arse, sorry.”

“Better.” I smirk. “Are we doing this today?”

“Sure, sure, Grandad.”

“Ugh, you're so sassy. You get it off your mum. At least I can put her in her place by—”

“NO! Do *not* talk about sex with Mum around me. I’ll throw up.”

“Well, don’t talk about kinks around me. The feeling is mutual, kiddo.”

“Can we stick to killing?”

“Data extraction. Of course. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Okay, so I’m guessing as you suggested it, you have a scorpion fish in the tank downstairs.”

“Yep. And our victim is ready to go.”

“Dad—” Nix wavers. I gaze at her and see the uncertainty in her eyes.

“Hey, kiddo. You don’t have to do anything. You don’t even have to watch. But there is no way in hell this will come back on you, because he’s not living to tell the story.”

She takes a deep breath, fortifying herself and I swell with pride.

Nix has been interested in my work for years, even though I’m semi-retired from The Order. It’s the one secret I keep from the rest of the family – they think I’m fully retired. But occasionally Amelie calls on me for a favour, and I can’t say no to the bloody woman when she pulls the best friend card. Besides, a guy has to have something for himself, a hobby. This is mine.

All was fine until last year, Nix caught me sneaking out, followed me to my little hobby house, and discovered what I *really* do when I’m alone in my man cave.

She’s been chomping at the bit to learn ever since and has been assisting me on occasional jobs. This is the first time she *knows* the mark though.

I may not have been *entirely* transparent with Raven when I asked permission to teach Nix to defend herself, but everyone agreed it was a good idea. Jax teaches her all sorts of tactical shit, Ace has her training in Krav Maga whilst baking soufflés or whatever magic he whips up in his kitchen, and I

know for a fact that Rebel has been teaching her about hacking. Of course I do my bit too.

Starting with eliminating any and every threat to my family.

“Okay, I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

“Proud of you, kiddo. Always.”

And it’s true. She amazes me in everything she does, but especially this. She has a natural affinity for thinking up new and inventive ways to *extract information* from people. I would never have thought of using marine, reptile or insect venom to cause unspeakable agony in my victims. After a few doses and several hours of agonising side effects, they’re ready to spill all their secrets. I rarely need to play with my toys anymore, though I do still, *just for fun*.

And when she’s finished downstairs, I’ll be demonstrating to that scum that nothing in this universe is more painful than a dad protecting his daughter. There will be blood. Lots of it.

It was her idea to go to an all-girls secondary school, and her mum – *and* dads – were all too keen to agree. Nix wanted a space where she could grow up without her brothers winding her up every day, and it was this or boarding school. Everyone else was on board, thinking it would keep boys out of her life a little longer. Nix has declared, many times, that she’ll never be able to date with seven younger brothers sabotaging her efforts, to which I pointed out she should be glad they’re not older, fiercely protective brothers, banning her from dating at all.

She complains she has five dads that do that already. *Touché*. She can date when she’s thirty. Maybe.

Going to a girls-only school doesn’t stop boys from circling around her like vultures whenever we go out though. It’s to be expected; she’s a clone of her mum, and men still flock to *her* like bees to honey.

Honestly, I have my work cut out protecting them both. It’s a full-time job.

Take today's mark, for example. Do I think that all-girls schools should only employ female staff? No, I do not. Do I think they should vet their employees more thoroughly to ensure that paedophiles aren't anywhere near children? Absolutely.

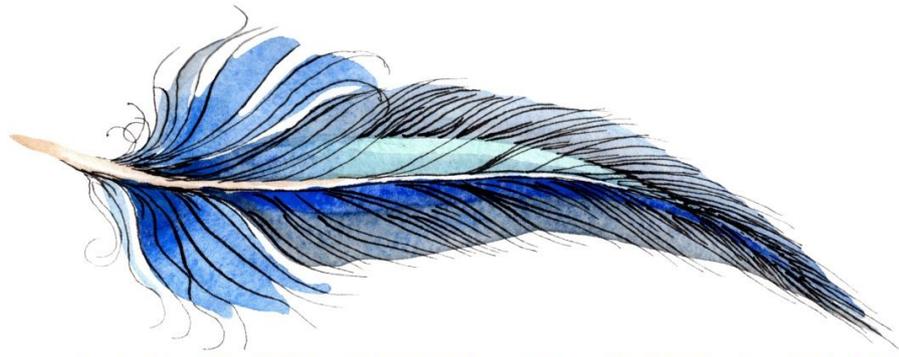
Nix's gym teacher is a paedophile, no question about it. She came to me last week in floods of tears when she was suspended for breaking a teacher's fingers and I knew there was more to the story than that.

Needless to say, he's been in my basement ever since and Nix's suspension was immediately overturned before her mum even knew a thing about it.

I grin at Nix, and she returns it readily. I'm itching to get my hands on this guy, but I did promise Nix first dibs. It's time to see what my daughter is made of.

And *then* I'll finish him.

“Let's go play.”



ANOTHER 3 YEARS AFTER THAT: RAVEN

My daughter is a mean, lean, killing machine. She thinks I don't know – they *all* think that I don't know – but not much gets past me, even in this chaotic house.

No one has said a word to me, so I haven't said anything back. My consent is my silence. I want my daughter armed and ready to face everything life throws at her. I wish Lizzie and I had been better prepared. Hell, if they'd let me in, I'd train her myself. I'm still the most lethal one with a knife in this family, Baxter included.

“Mum? Dads? Can I talk to you?” Phoenix asks hesitantly, stepping into the lounge where we're all collapsed on the sofa having just battled our way through the bedtime routine. I can't help but think if mums were sent *over the top* during the First World War, things would have been finished a lot sooner. Dodging missiles and apprehending captives is our bedtime speciality, afterall.

As amazing as my husbands are, they suck at bedtimes. They're too soft, and too slow.

I suspect I know what Nix wants to talk to us about, she's been worrying about something for a while now, but her sixteenth birthday is in a couple of weeks and I think she wants to ask for her set of knives, but we'll see.

“Of course, darling. What is it?” I ask, with a reassuring smile on my face. This smile says *I won't say no*. Thorn shuts off the TV and they all turn their attention to Nix.

She takes a deep breath and begins to pace.

“Nix, baby, whatever it is...”

“Okay, so, my exams start in a few months' time...”

“Yeah.” I frown slightly, wondering where she's going with this. She stops pacing and looks at me imploringly.

“And the garage is great, it really is, but—”

Rebel had one of the garages converted into a self-contained flat for Nix last year. He said she needed somewhere quiet to study as she was starting her GCSEs, but I argued that she didn't need a bed over there. I was overruled, unsurprisingly.

Where my daughter is concerned, I rarely get the final say, but with the boys, my word is law.

“Okay?” I prompt her when she returns to pacing back and forth.

“Nix. Stand still and spit it out,” Jax commands gently. She stops.

“I want to go away to boarding school for my A-levels.”

What?!

“Okay, why?” Jax asks calmly, while inside I'm screaming that there's *no way* I'm letting my baby, my first born, leave.

“Well, I really will need to concentrate and study hard, and the twa—*twins* keep breaking into the garage when I'm trying to work.”

“I see. And are there any other reasons?”

“The local colleges don't offer the subjects I want to take.”

“Right. And have you found a place that does?”

“I have. And they've offered me a full scholarship, so it wouldn't cost you guys anything.”

“Money isn’t an issue,” Rebel scoffs.

“You already applied without telling us?” I ask with forced calm.

“Mum, don’t freak out...”

“I’m not freaking out,” I lie. “I’m calm. Totally fine.”

“She’s fine,” Rebel quips, sarcastically.

Nix grins at him. “Did you eat her sandwich?”

“Now is not...” I force myself to lower my voice when I realise I’m shouting. “The time for a *Friends* joke.”

“It’s always time for a *Friends* joke, Mum.” Nix giggles.

“And where, darling daughter, have you decided to go away to boarding school?”

“I’ve been accepted at Westchester Preparatory.”

I see red. My entire house of cards comes crashing down around me as Cordelia’s voice sounds in my head: *Checkmate*.

“Absolutely not! Boarding school, I can *maybe* get behind. But you’re not going *there*! Never. Over my dead body!”

“Actually Mum, I am. And you can’t stop me.”

She turns away from us but doesn’t walk away. Slowly, she lifts her shirt and pulls down the waistband of her yoga pants. On the lower left side of her back is a black tattoo.

“Phoenix Elizabeth Ohana, what the hell is that?” I growl.

My daughter got a freaking tattoo! Without me knowing! I definitely preferred it when she was killing people with her dad.

Baxter swears beside me and I know, just know, that I don’t want a closer look at the ink.

“Mum, dads, I joined The Order. And for my first mission, they want me to go to West Prep.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Wait, what?

You didn't really think that was like, the END end, did you? Oh you did? How sweet.

Nah.

This queen of Cliffhangers isn't done with you yet. Lizzie is alive. Which means there's a whole new story to tell - 6 years of murky history to fill in. I'm sure you're salivating to meet her men properly too.

What about poor Phoenix? Will she be forced to attend West Prep to relive her doomed family's fate?

And I know you're dying for Baxter and Rebel's backstory. Casey? Beth? Mystery, much? I'll give you a teeny tiny spoiler: that one doesn't have a happy ending, but it's worth it to uncover all their secrets.

Luckily it's all linked, and now these twins have been tied to The Order it means you'll be seeing more of Amelie too.

One big happy dysfunctional family.

Welcome to The Order of the Snaidhm Saga: where there's no such thing as too many twists or turns; where their reach and power is absolute; and where things are about to get a whole lot darker.

Be sure to stalk all my socials (links on the next page) so that you don't miss a thing. I'll be seeing you soon, and remember, be good at being bad...

Crystal

xoxo

NOTES

Chapter 11

1 Weasel

Chapter 13

- 1 Clumsy
- 2 Clumsy
- 3 Beautiful
- 4 Gorgeous
- 5 Magical
- 6 Seductive girl
- 7 Shit
- 8 Fuck
- 9 Dangerous game
- 10 Little girl
- 11 Beautiful distracting girl

Chapter 14

- 1 Good girl
- 2 Damn delicious
- 3 Wake up
- 4 Little princess
- 5 Perfection
- 6 You are perfect
- 7 I know
- 8 Come
- 9 Perfect

Chapter 15

- 1 What the hell
- 2 For Christs's sake
- 3 Shit
- 4 Three hundred devils
- 5 Three hundred hairy bears
- 6 For God's sake
- 7 No

Chapter 22

1 Unconditional love

2 Commitment

3 Sapphire

When Thorn Met Raven

1 Bullshit

2 No idea

Deleted Scene: Ace & Raven's Date Prep

1 Fuck

2 Yes

3 Too personal

4 Good morning

5 I would love to have every facet of your personality if you were mine

Deleted Scene: After Rebel Declares His Love

- 1 It's a lot of fuss about nothing
- 2 You are a fool
- 3 You need to make amends
- 4 Fix this or I will never forgive you
- 5 Stop fighting

Deleted Scene: Raven's Sex on the Beach

- 1 I love you
- 2 We are not letting you go
- 3 You can't run from us
- 4 We will make you scream, princess
- 5 Good girl
- 6 I don't care
- 7 It doesn't bother me
- 8 Yes princess
- 9 Tell me what you need
- 10 Let me give you the world

Epilogue Part One: The Fire

- 1** Yes, of course
- 2** Shit
- 3** Fuck
- 4** Fucking understatement
- 5** Twat
- 6** The Devil has come to collect my sins in flesh
- 7** Child
- 8** Respect your elders
- 9** Weak
- 10** PAthetic
- 11** Embarrassment
- 12** Futile

Prologue

1 Now what

2 Jerk

Chapter 4

1 Jerk

2 Dick

3 I don't like it

Chapter 11

1 Shit

Chapter 26

1 Lucky bastard

Chapter 27

1 Scary

2 Fine

Chapter 33

1 Fuck

2 I'm sorry

Chapter 41

1 Little princess

2 Bullshit

Chapter 45

1 Thank you very much

Character Interviews

- 1 Jerk
- 2 Stupid idiots
- 3 Savage

Individual Interviews: ACE

- 1 Strict
- 2 Sink or swim
- 3 Dear (expensive)
- 4 Bakery
- 5 Of course
- 6 Childhood
- 7 Demons
- 8 Sadness
- 9 I do not like
- 10 The blood of my love is my life

Chapter 3

1 The blood of my love is my life

2 Robbery

3 Concentration

4 Focus

Chapter 4

1 Rearrange

2 Princess

Chapter 5

1 Princess

2 The blood of my love is my life

Chapter 6

- 1 What is wrong?
- 2 Baxter needs to shed blood
- 3 Perfect
- 4 Shit hole
- 5 Breathe
- 6 Shit

Chapter 8

1 Bastard

Chapter 10

- 1 A crime of passion
- 2 Simple
- 3 Clean
- 4 One... Two... Three

Chapter 11

- 1** Focus
- 2** Princess
- 3** Stop
- 4** You are perfect
- 5** Let me love you
- 6** Let me give you what you need
- 7** Let me chase the pain
- 8** Let me dispel your doubt
- 9** Let me prove it
- 10** I won't leave
- 11** This love is forever
- 12** Constantly
- 13** Come get me baby
- 14** Give it up
- 15** Give in
- 16** You are mine
- 17** Marry me

Chapter 12

- 1 Fiancée
- 2 Fiancée
- 3 Yes
- 4 I asked
- 5 She said yes
- 6 Fiancée

Chapter 22

- 1** Damn shit
- 2** Watch out
- 3** Higher
- 4** More difficult
- 5** Princess
- 6** The devil
- 7** Laugh
- 8** Keep smiling
- 9** The devil
- 10** You feel so good
- 11** You are so damn tight
- 12** So damn sexy
- 13** You are the goddess of my cock
- 14** My fiancée, my cock loving little whore
- 15** Come for me
- 16** Come on my cock

Chapter 23

- 1 Happy Christmas
- 2 Happy Christmas
- 3 Happy Christmas
- 4 Dirty girl
- 5 Girl

Unknown Number

- 1 Package recieved
- 2 Good
- 3 Enjoy

Unknown Number

1 Fuck off

Chapter 30

1 Princess

2 Stop

Chapter 39

- 1 Bastard
- 2 Dick
- 3 Vile
- 4 Cunt
- 5 The devil
- 6 Yes
- 7 Do it
- 8 The devil

Chapter 40

1 Yes

2 Hello

3 Yes

4 Jesus help me

5 Thank you very much

Chapter 42

1 Damn sexy

Chapter 43

1 Good girl

2 Princess

2 months after the funeral

- 1 Princess
- 2 Not possible
- 3 They already love you
- 4 Because I love you
- 5 Because of Phoenix
- 6 And for bringing me home
- 7 No
- 8 It won't work
- 9 Mama will us to stay at the house
- 10 Grandma
- 11 Grandma
- 12 Great shot, little princess
- 13 I love the sound of that
- 14 Mama likes to feed people
- 15 What do you want

Ace

- 1 What do you want?
- 2 This is my daughter
- 3 This is my fiancée
- 4 Thank you, thank you so much, my dear girl, for bringing my boy home
- 5 Let me breathe, brats
- 6 Let me see you
- 7 Can I help?
- 8 No, rest
- 9 Your sisters can do it
- 10 Set the table
- 11 Get drinks please

Raven

- 1 Where is my darling granddaughter
- 2 What are you doing?
- 3 What is the meaning of this
- 4 Who is this man?
- 5 Get off!

Raven

- 1 What
- 2 She said yes
- 3 Really
- 4 Yes

Thorn

1 But what is done, cannot be undone

Raven

1 Language!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Massive thanks as always to everyone on my team, especially Hannah and my amazing alpha/beta readers, and my editor Charlotte who has lost count of the number of times she's had to read these books.

Special thanks to my Patreon supporters, especially *MICHELLE MURPHY*. Thank you guys for believing in me and helping to support me so that I can keep doing what I love, which is finding cliffhangers to throw you all off!

Finally, if you enjoyed the *Vengeance* trilogy please consider leaving a review - even just a few words or a simple 'it was good'. It makes all the difference to authors like me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Crystal North is now a full time romance author, after finally leaving education for good. As well as writing, she's looking after her savage preschooler, her man-child husband, their needy fur baby and her many houseplants, pet rocks and shiny crystals. She likes to read dark, twisty, stabby, steamy books, and dream up wicked new cliffhangers to torture her readers with. And if she ever finds herself with free time, she spends it reading her never ending TBR pile.

<https://www.crystalnorthauthor.com>



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