

NIKITA PARMENTER

Warped

REVELATIONS

FINDING MY HOME SERIES

BOOK FOUR

Warped Revelations (Finding My Home)

Book 4

Nikita Parmenter

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Thank you Hubs for being amazing, supportive and holding down the fort when the characters demand attention. I love you!

Also to Harley and her Joker, you guys are awesome thank you!!

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Chapter One

“How could he know that, though?” Rage points out.

“Maybe it’s just a coincidence?” Jensen suggests, his tone unsure.

“Are we really going to take anything as a coincidence at the moment?” I ask them, with a raised eyebrow, so much has happened that it seems highly unlikely that anything is a coincidence anymore.

“I remember it now,” Trick mutters, “Your mom always used to call you Butterfly; she hardly ever used your real name. We decided it didn’t suit you; you were fierce, so we thought Dragonfly suited you better because it had a dragon in it. From then on, it stuck, and that’s what we called you.”

“Shit, I’d completely forgotten about that,” Cash says, running a large palm over his beard.

“She had cancer.” I point out, unnecessarily, they all know what was wrong with her. “She died; we all went to her funeral. This is a fucking cruel thing to do, to make out like this note is from her when it so obviously can’t be.” I seethe, getting angry now the shock has worn off.

“The question is, how did they know that she called you that?” Atlas growls. “Fuck, has anyone heard from Peter?”

“No, I lost track of him in the chaos,” I answer Atlas before continuing. “That’s the thing, no one could know.” I frown. “Something else to add to the ever-growing list of shit we don’t fucking know.”

“We’ll figure it out, Puddin’.” Rage reassures me.

“I just, I don’t think I can deal with this right now.”

“That’s okay; we don’t need to. Just let us know when you’re ready, and we’ll start looking into it.” Trick replies.

I nod my thanks, grateful to have them all. I can't wrap my brain around it; I still really miss my mom even though I'm starting to forget things, like how she smelled and what it felt like when she hugged me. She was the only light in our dark household. For someone to be deliberately trying to convince me that she's still alive is just fucking low. It goes to show the reach that Phoenix has, though. They've somehow managed to dig up a nickname that my dead mother used to call me ten years ago.

"I'll ring Peter," Atty says, pulling out his phone and dialling, automatically putting it on speaker because we're all nosey fuckers, and he knows we'll just ask a million questions otherwise.

"Hey, thank fuck, I was just about to call you." Peter answers after the first ring.

"You alright, man?" Jensen asks.

"Yeah, I got separated from you all when some fucknut bumped into us. Then I saw you leave, but I needed to find my dad and make sure he was okay."

"He good?" Rafe asks, sounding concerned, his arms wrapped around me.

"Yeah, well, he's really shaken thanks to all of the Phoenix tapestries that are now decorating the cafeteria. They did it fucking well; it was completely disorientating!"

"Are you sure you still want to be involved?" Trick asks, seriously.

"They somehow know that we're getting close to finding things out that they don't want us to know," Atty adds. "That's clear from the show they put on today."

"Oh yeah, I am definitely still in. We need to get Ever on a horse A.S.A.P so that we can go and check out the equine teacher." He suggests.

"That's a really good point. Depending on how her ribs are doing tomorrow, she could go then, and Rage could give her a lesson. You said it would take a week to get sorted?" Cash

asks, eyeing me sternly like he knows that my rib is giving me trouble right now.

“Yeah, they’ll need to get you horses. Everyone brings their own; it’s a requirement to take the course. They will have a couple that you can ride tomorrow, though.”

“Seriously?” I ask; the kids here are from all over the country. That’s potentially a really long way that they’re sending them.

“I can get mine brought from home, and I’ve got a perfect one for Ever too.” Rage interrupts. “What?” He asks when he catches me staring at him.

“You’re just full of surprises.” I grin.

“You have no idea.” He winks at me, and my blood heats.

Damn it; he totally won that round.

“Is that going to cause a problem with your mom?” Trick asks seriously.

“No, she never goes to the stables; she’s not interested in them at all and never has been. She tried to take them away from me when I was really little; it’s the last memory I have of my dad. He put his foot down, all I remember is yelling, and after that she never spoke about the horses again.”

“That’s good. Hopefully, it means that when you want to take your mom out of your life like we talked about, your dad is going to stand behind you. Especially when he learns how she treated you.” Riot replies.

“It would stand to reason that she treated him like absolute shit too.” Cash adds carefully.

Rage nods thoughtfully; he had thought that his dad didn’t give a shit; after all, he hasn’t seen him in years. Now, it might just be that his mom was as cruel to his dad as she is to him.

“There’s something else I need to tell you guys,” Peter says from the other end of the phone. “When we were coming out of the cafeteria, Lucy and her husband were behind us. I heard her say, *they’re back*; she sounded really panicked. She knows something.”

“That would make sense; from what she said, she knew Amelia and was probably friends with her, and Amelia had a strong link with Phoenix,” I say.

“We need to see if she will talk to us about Amelia,” Luc suggests.

“I’d leave it for a few days and wait for the shock to wear off. She sounded terrified.” Peter tells us. “Sorry, guys, I need to go.”

“Okay, man, don’t forget that you’re coming over tomorrow so that we can fill you in on the security threat that Ever faces. We won’t be able to come to the ball unless the security is good enough.” Atlas warns him.

“Sounds good; we’ll make it safe enough. See you tomorrow.”

We all fall silent after he’s gone; there’s quite a lot of information that we’ve been given over the last few hours. Everything is getting quite complicated, trying to juggle the stuff going on with Liam, taking apart his business, the fuckers who tried to run me over, which may or may not have been Phoenix, Amelia and why two people now think I look like her, the equine teacher and what his role in everything is, and the letter.

“Come on, you need to get some rest,” Cash says, raising his eyebrow at me and daring me to argue.

“I’m fine.”

“I know for a fact that you got knocked in the chaos at the cafeteria, and I know that it most likely jostled your rib.” He replies.

“Fine, but I’m only resting because I want to go riding with Rage tomorrow.” I huff, moving onto the couch while the guy’s smirk at me.

“We’ll get an early start tomorrow morning. Do you know how to take care of a horse, or did you just go on lessons?” Rage asks.

“I learned how to take care of them too. But like I said, it’s been a really long time, so I’m rusty.”

“That’s okay; we can go over the basics tomorrow before we ride. It’s important that you know how to care for the horses.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I reply.

“I’m going to see if I can get through some more of those blueprints, we’ve only got ten or so left, so I should be able to do something. Peter’s already messaged saying that we can finish them off tomorrow, so hopefully, we’ll be able to see the full picture and find a connection between them all.” Cash says, getting up off the couch and moving to the kitchen table, which has become a sort of base of operations for us.

“Guys!” I say excitedly, suddenly sitting up and dislodging Jensen from my lap; considering it’s Jensen, he doesn’t just move a bit and sit up as well, oh no, his arms start to flail, and he ends up on the floor, his face in the carpet.

“Ow.” He groans.

I stare at him for a second, “How do you manage to do that? Seriously your clumsy just completely takes over.”

“I know.” He groans, and I can’t help but grin. “Don’t laugh at me.” He tries to say seriously as he gets up and settles himself back down, his head on my lap.

“I’m sorry.” I grin, bending down and kissing his forehead, causing my ribs to twinge but only slightly.

“What were you so excited about?” Riot asks.

“Huh?”

“Before Jensen’s clumsy took over, you yelled, guys.” Atty chuckles, eyebrow raised.

“Oh, shit yeah!” I exclaim.

Jensen tries to sit up quickly and, in doing so, manages to twist his legs somehow, so he once again ends up sprawled on the floor.

“What the hell, man?” Cash asks, laughter in his voice.

“I thought she was going to sit up and throw me off again suddenly, so I tried to sit up so I wouldn’t land on the floor again.” He explains. “I’m just going to stay down here now.” He says with finality, stretching out and crossing his ankles, putting his arms behind his head, and looking up at me.

“I think that might be the safest option.” I chuckle.

He sticks his tongue out at me in retribution, making my grin widen.

“Anyway, aren’t we allowed to call the parents now?” I grin.

Smiles cross everyone’s faces.

“How the fuck could I forget that?” Rafe grins.

“A lot has happened over the last couple of hours.” Atty points out, stepping over Jensen’s prone form, and settles on the couch next to me.

He swings his arm around my shoulder, and I place my head on his chest, snuggling down.

“I’m going to go and call my mom,” Rafe says, walking out of the room, his phone already in his hand.

“I better call mine in here. She’s going to want to check in on everyone, and I feel like I need the backup.” Trick grins, wearily.

“Why don’t we do a group call with mine?” Cash suggests. “They might be together anyway.”

“Good call,” Trick says.

They use Trick’s phone; Cash comes to sit on the other side of me as Trick sits in front of me on the floor.

“Trick!” Jenny cries immediately. “Kat, get your ass in here our babies are calling!”

“Babies, mom, really?”

“I have not seen or heard from you in over a month. You are my babies. Get over it!” She exclaims.

“Cash, mio bellissimo bambino, mi sei mancato, stai bene? Stai mangiando? Hai fatto amicizia? Stai studiando bene?” Kat says in Italian, barely taking any breath between what I’m assuming are questions.

“Mamma respire! Si, sto bene e Rafe sta cucinando, quindi sto mangiando bene. Abbiamo un nuovo amico chiamato Rage, lo amerai e I miei studi stanno andando bene. Anche tu mi sei mancato.” Cash replies, speaking almost as quickly as his mother, in order to answer all of her questions before she can answer more.

“Good, now where’s my Ever?” Kat asks.

“Hi, guys. I miss you.” I say, emotion trying to claw up my throat.

“We miss you too!” Jenny says, her eyes becoming watery. “You’re in the safest place for now, though. We heard about what happened to Rylie, how they got to her.” Jenny says, her eyes flashing with anger.

“We have taken her and her dad under our wing,” Kat starts. “Family dinners and check-ins.”

“Thank you, guys, so much. I know they’ll appreciate that.”

“The men are all getting on well together, so it’s no hardship,” Jenny replies.

“Show me Rage?” Kat asks, grinning, changing the subject, and Jenny looks at her in question. “They made a new friend!”

Rage’s eyes are wide and, if I’m not mistaken, slightly worried. Cash chuckles and spins the camera so that they can see Rage.

“Hi, Rage.” They say together.

“Hello, Ma’am er Ma’am’s.” He replies, nervously and I press my lips together to hide my smile.

“None of that now. If you’re friends with our boys, I’m assuming you’ve been accepted into the family?” Jenny asks.

“Yep!” Jensen calls out, still on the floor.

“In that case, welcome to the family Rage. I’m Kat, and this is Jenny.”

“Erm, thank you?” He replies, sounding unsure.

“Hey, guys, I think I can get you on the Tv so you can see everyone’s at the same time.” Cash says, “One second.”

Cash fiddles with some buttons, and they suddenly both appear on the screen.

“Ah, that’s so much better. I can see you all now.” Kat grins. “Atlas?”

“Hi, Kat,” Atlas replies, shifting nervously.

“I am so glad you’re okay; we were so worried about you,” Jenny replies.

“What an interesting coincidence that you’ve ended up at the same school as each other.” Kat grins, a twinkle in her eye.

“Do we get to talk to the kids?” I hear Rob say in the background.

“Fine, but you’ll have to squeeze in; I’m not missing any chance to see them!” Kat replies.

We watch in amusement as Rich lifts Kat out of her chair and settles her on his lap while Marc moves behind them both and puts his face next to Kat’s. Her eyes shine with happiness, and I guess that answers the question about how they’re getting on as a throuple.

“Hey, Dad,” Jensen says happily, waving from the floor.

“Clumsiness?” Rich asks.

“Yep, decided it was safer down here.”

“Good call, son.” He chuckles.

Rob pulls Jenny onto his lap, and they all look over us as if checking we’re alright.

“Atlas, it’s good to see you.” Rich smiles. “Are you all okay?”

“We’re okay.” Trick answers him.

“Are you safe, though?” Rob answers.

“As safe as we can be at the moment.”

“I guess that’s the most we can hope for right now,” Marc mutters.

“How’s the school?” Jenny asks, changing the subject.

“It’s great, very exclusive.” Riot replies.

Rafe comes back into the room and sits down next to Riot, their relationship is quite chilled. They hold hands as often as they each hold mine, and they’re quick to show each other affection. It’s just a lot more subtle than it is between them and me. It’s clearly working for them, though, because they’re still going strong.

The parents keep chatting for a while, and it’s great to hear from them all and what they’ve been up to. It makes me miss them even more. None of them have had any issues, although Kat and Jenny are apparently getting bored enough with the constant security now that they’ve started to wind the security detail up. Rob said they’ve had to apologise for their antics several times now with beers, which is just hilarious.

Eventually, the conversation comes to an end.

“Do you know when you’ll be able to give us a call again?” Marc asks.

“I have no idea, sorry. We’re just going on what the detective is telling us that we can do.” Cash replies.

“Before you go, did you hear from my,” Luc pauses and swallows thickly. “From Elena?”

“Yes, we did,” Kat growls. “I cannot believe your parents, disgusting people. We haven’t spoken to them since. We’re trying to work out with that detective of yours if it would be safe to go and see them. I want cuddles with your beautiful nieces.”

“Has she told you any more about what happened, was she put into care?”

“She hasn’t said much, wanting to tell you first, I think. But she didn’t go into care; she said some family members took her in.”

“What family? It’s just us, we have no aunts, uncles, or grandparents.” Luc asks, sounding confused.

“I’m not sure, Darling, that’s something you’re going to have to ask her. She definitely said she was sent to stay with family.” Jenny chimes in.

“Okay, I’m hoping that it’s going to be safe enough to see her soon,” Luc replies, running a hand through his long hair and looking confused.

“It’ll all work out.” Kat tries to reassure him.

“Something else you should know, Luc, before we found out about all of this and stopped seeing your dad, his behaviour was really erratic. He kept muttering about a deal that would make him millions. When I asked about it, he said not to worry about it. Something seems fishy.” Marc warns.

“Got it,” Luc says, his expression darkening.

His fathers clearly got himself into some dodgy shit, if he wasn’t already always in it.

After that, we all say goodbye and hang up.

“You, okay?” I ask Luc.

“Not really; I want to know what happened with my sister. I still can’t believe that she’s my sister, not my aunt. It feels weird to say, but at the same time, it fits better, if that makes sense? Like aunt never quite sat right with me.”

“Yeah, that makes perfect sense,” I reply.

“Do you want us to do anything about your dad?” Atlas asks, sitting forward in his chair.

“Not yet. I want him to fully bury himself before we expose him.”

“Sounds good. It might be a good idea to see exactly who he’s got this deal with, so we’re prepared when the time comes to take him down.” Jensen adds in.

“Alright, add it to the to-do list,” Luc smirks.

“That damn list is getting pretty long, and we keep just adding more shit to it.” I chuckle.

“I think the blueprints and finding the link should be our top priority for now. Now that Phoenix is aware of us, it’s just going to get more dangerous. We need to end this quickly.” Atty says.

“I want to go and see the guards on the gates still. I want to find out which ones were working the night of your hit and run and see if they’ve got any information that can help us.” Rage suggests.

“I know that it’s fairly clear that Phoenix is behind it, but I don’t want to take any chances that we’re missing an enemy.” Trick replies.

“That’s what I was thinking, plus any information is better than nothing at this point.” Rage replies.

Chapter Two

I actually got a sleep in for what feels like the first time in ages, and what's more, the guys have too. Rafe and Riot are both snuggled up next to me. I briefly recall that Rage wanted to get an early start today, but since he hasn't come to get me yet, I think it's safe to say that he's slept in too. I consider going to wake him, but a set of hands slowly caressing up my side and a different set moving up my thighs has my mind going in an entirely different direction.

Riot starts to kiss up my neck as Rafe kisses down my body. He moves, settling his face millimetres away from my pulsing core. He places delicate kisses up the inside of my thigh as Riot's lips move away from my neck and towards my nipple, gripping it in his teeth before soothing the slight sting of pain with his tongue. My hand grabs his hair holding him in place as my other hand moves down my body, gripping Rafe's hair as he swipes his tongue over my clit. My back arches as I moan. Rafe swirls his tongue around my clit as his fingers pump inside me. A scream rips through me as he latches on to my clit and hums.

Fucking hell.

My orgasm explodes, sending shock waves through me as he sucks my clit at the same time that Riot sucks my nipple and pinches my other one. Rafe's tongue starts to slow as my orgasm peters off, and he makes his way back up my body stopping and sharing a searing kiss with Riot that has my body heating.

"You taste fucking amazing." Riot growls, his eyes colliding with mine as he tastes my pussy on Rafe's mouth.

Rafe flips me so I'm on top of him and plunges inside me in one smooth thrust as Riot moves behind me. His large hands palm my ass, his finger running around my puckered asshole. I tremble in anticipation.

"I think she likes that," Rafe growls, watching me closely.

“Fuck yes,” I reply breathily, my pussy clenching around Rafe’s dick as Riot plunges a single finger inside my ass.

They pump simultaneously for a minute. I want more. He slowly slides in a second finger, deliciously stretching me again they pump in unison, allowing me to get used to the pressure of having them both inside, my body trembling with anticipation.

Just as I get to the edge of a mind-numbing orgasm, Riot removes his fingers, and I groan, moving my ass back and making them both chuckle.

“Just getting some lube, Sunshine.” Riot says huskily.

He better be getting lube so he can replace his fingers with his dick because fingers are great and everything, but I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to feel both of their dicks inside me at the same time so fucking badly before. If Riot’s fingers and Rafe’s dick can bring to the edge so fucking quickly! I am literally shaking with anticipation at what having both of their dicks inside me will feel like.

Rafe slowly moves inside me as I grind down against him, setting a torturously slow pace. Finally, Riot comes back and positions himself behind me again, his thick cock rubbing against my ass and making me tremble with need. Rafe stills as Riot slowly pushes inside me. We all groan in ecstasy when he’s finally fully sheathed. Riot bends forward and kisses my back.

“Are you okay?”

“Fuck yes.”

They both move slowly at first, allowing me to get used to them both filling me up. I have never felt so full.

“More.” I moan.

They pick up the pace, Riot gripping my hips as Rafe’s big hand palms my breast, pinching my nipple. I cry out as their pace increases, both of them plunging inside me with a rhythm that’s telling of the intimate moments they’ve shared together. My orgasm builds quickly, despite having just had one, their

pace increases, their growls of pleasure joining my own moans.

Almost simultaneously, my orgasm blasts through me, my clenching pussy and ass bringing Rafe and Riot to their own orgasms as we all cry out together. Finally, collapsing into a sweaty, exhausted heap on top of Rafe.

I'd be worrying about all of our weight on him, but Riot has himself propped up slightly, and Rafe doesn't seem to mind as he runs one of his hands down my back and one of them down Riot's. Riot peppers kisses across my shoulders as Rafe gently kisses my forehead.

We lie there for a while, just basking in the afterglow of our orgasms.

"I better go and start breakfast, or Trick might and god knows what we'd end up with then." Rafe chuckles.

"It would be unique, that's for sure." Riot grins.

We all get up, each one of them kissing me thoroughly before they grab some sweatpants out of one of my drawers. I've started keeping clothes for all of them in here just in case.

I take my time in the shower. My mind is still stuck on the amazing sex we just had; we are definitely going to do that more often. A Rafe and Riot sandwich surpassed all of my expectations, and I had pretty high expectations for it. I've just finished rinsing the soap out of my hair when I remember that I'm supposed to be meeting Rage to go to the stables. I rush through the rest of my shower, drying off and then making my way to my dresser to see what I have that would be suitable.

I'm still avoiding skinny jeans, thank you very much. Which reminds me, I still want a ritualistic burning of them and Rage's incubator's films. I'll have to talk to Jensen; he seemed the most enthusiastic about the bonfire I want to have. I pull out some thick black leggings that are lined with fleece. They should work, and it's still cold enough that I won't overheat. I pull on a long-sleeved grey Henley, grabbing a hoodie as well. As I make my way downstairs, I'll have to

wear my boots as I've got nothing else that will remotely work.

“Good morning, Princess.” Atty grins, handing me a coffee when I walk into the kitchen.

Dark rings hang under his eyes, and he looks tired.

“Are you okay?” I ask worriedly as I gently place my hand on his cheek, running my thumb under his eye.

“I'm okay. I didn't get much sleep last night; I'm worried about what Liam wants with you, especially since he doesn't seem to want you dead.”

“I am, too,” I admit. “But think of it this way; at least he doesn't want to harm me. He appears to have backed off since that phone call in the hospital. I'm not naïve enough to think that he's backed off permanently, but at least it gives us an opportunity to focus on other things at the moment, and I won't ever have to face him on my own. I've got you guys.”

“Too fucking right, you have, Angel,” Jensen says, walking past us on the way to the kitchen and kissing me on the cheek.

“I hear you, Princess. It's just playing on my mind. I, more than anyone, know how fucked up he is, and I can't mesh the Liam that I know with the one that looked out for you and worried that you were in the hospital.” He explains, his eyes troubled.

“It'll all make sense, eventually.” Trick tries to reassure him.

“Come and eat, Dragonfly,” Rafe says. “You've got a busy day planned.”

“Do you need any painkillers?” Cash asks.

Ignoring Cash's question for the moment, I move up on tiptoes, and Atlas dips his head so that I can kiss him.

“It'll be okay, Atty. We're in this together.”

He nods and goes to sit back down at the table, I take the seat next to him.

“No, I’m okay right now, thanks, Cash. I only get a slight twinge of pain every now and then. So, it’s not really worth taking any painkillers at the moment, but I know I’m going to be doing quite a lot of physical work today, more than I have done for a while, so I’d like to take some with me, just in case.”

“Good idea.” He replies, handing me a small bottle of pills.

“Are we still going? I know you wanted to get up early, and that sort of hasn’t worked out.” I ask Rage.

“I slept in.” He grins. “I think we all needed a bit more rest after yesterday. If you still want to go, then I want to take you.”

“Absolutely, I’m really looking forward to it.” I smile.

I quickly stuff the rest of my pancakes in my mouth, eager to get going. I’ve always loved horses, and I’ve missed being able to ride them. It’s one of the few memories I have of my mom before she got sick.

Thinking about my mom just brings up that note that I was given yesterday, and my emotions start to churn. I push all thoughts of it away; I don’t want to deal with it right now. That might make me a coward, but frankly, I couldn’t give a shit. I know my limits, and that isn’t a line I can cross right now. Rage stands up, and I get my first view of him in his tight jeans. Damn, his ass looks good. He usually wears his jeans slightly on the looser side, but the ones he’s wearing now hug his ass and thick thighs.

Yes, please, cowboy. I swear if he put a hat on right now, I’d probably combust and climb him like a freaking tree. What’s the saying?

Save a horse, ride a cowboy?

I’d definitely ride this cowboy, fuck me.

“See something you like, Puddin’?” He smirks, catching me staring.

“Hell yes.” I admit immediately shocking him, “Quick question, where are you from?”

“Erm, odd change of subject but Montana.” He replies, a slight crease between his eyebrows.

“Please tell me you’ve got a cowboy hat and boots.”

“I feel like this is a trick question, but yeah. Boots are easiest to ride in, and it gets hot, so of course, I’d need the hat.”

“Hot damn,” I mutter out loud. His eyebrows hit his hairline before he smirks.

“Got a thing for cowboys, Sweetheart?” Trick smirks.

“I’ve got a thing for that cowboy,” I reply without thinking and then clear my throat, whoops. I blame my brain for putting the image of Rage in full cowboy gear in my head and making my brain to mouth filter disconnect. “Shall we go?” I ask, hopping up and making my way towards the door to put my boots on.

A few chuckles follow me, and I can’t help but feel amused, I’m putting my foot in it more and more with Rage, but I guess that’s probably because I’m used to speaking my mind with the other guys. I don’t think he minds that much, thank god.

“Come on, Puddin’, I want to stop off at the gates to see if the guards saw anything on the night of your hit and run. The same guys that were working the gate that night should be there now.”

“Alright, sounds good. Bye guys, I love you.” I yell, turning back to face the guys and then freezing when I realise what I’ve just said.

I have no idea where that came from, obviously, I love them all, but I hadn’t planned to say it right then. My inward spiral of panic abruptly stops.

“I love you too.” They all yell back, their voices slightly staggered.

I grin, happiness flooding me, as they all look at me with soft eyes.

Holy shit, they love me; I give them a dorky little wave which has Jensen snorting and the others sharing an amused

grin. Then, not wanting to embarrass myself any further, I open the front door and walk to Rage's car, hearing it shut a couple of minutes later as he follows me, and I settle myself in his car.

We drive in silence for a few minutes before Rage breaks.

"Are you okay? Was that the first time you told them you loved them?"

"Yes, and yes, I'm just a bit shocked they all said it back. They love me." I grin, my heart practically overflowing with happiness. How the hell did I get so lucky.

Rage grins as he concentrates on finding a spot safe for us to park near the guard posts. "Of course, they do, Puddin'. They'd be crazy not to."

I stay sitting in the car, slightly stunned as he gets out. Did he, in a roundabout way, just admit he likes me, or was he just being nice. I shake it off for now and get out of the car closing the door behind me and looking over the guard station just by the gates. One of the guys looks at me out of the window and smiles before his eyes land on Rage, and fill with fear, he slams open the door and takes off running, out to the other side of the gates and into the forest.

"Shit." Rage growls, taking off after him, and I follow.

Damn, they can both run fast. My poor little legs struggle to keep up with them both; I'm not too far behind, though, so I see when Rage takes a running leap and tackles the guard to the floor.

I can't help but wince; damn, that had to have hurt, Rage is by no means a small guy, and he took the guard down hard. I come to a stop beside them. Rage has the guards' hands behind his back and is in the process of securing cable ties around the guy's hands. Once he's secure, Rage pulls him up and slams him back against a tree. I cross my arms over my chest, leaning back against my own tree and enjoy the show.

"Why did you run, Barry?" He asks, a knowing smile on his lips.

"I had no idea he was after your girl." Barry whimpers.

“Who?” Rage barks.

“A guy came to me and asked that I keep the gates open, and the camera’s off for an hour the other night. He paid me really well, and I thought nothing of it. I figured some kids were sneaking off campus or something.”

“What did he look like?”

“Dark hair, shoulder-length, quite greasy, and brown eyes, covered in tattoos.”

Rage pauses, his eyes slightly unfocused as he realises something. “Did he have a bear on the back of one of his hands?”

“I-I-I think so?” The guy says, sounding unsure.

“Fuck.” Rage curses. “Any other communication?”

“No, none. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“This is your first warning, Barry, you’ve been good until now, and you’re lucky she’s alive, or this conversation wouldn’t have happened.” Rage threatens, and Barry gulps nervously, his eyes wide with fear.

“Th-thank you.” He stutters.

“Any more mistakes or taking bribes, and we’ll be skipping the talking part, understand?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good, warn the other guards.” Rage orders, flicking his knife open and making the guy flinch.

He turns him around and cuts the cable ties.

“Remember, Barry, you only get one warning, this isn’t a three strikes, and you’re out sort of thing.”

“Y-yes, sir.” He replies before turning on his heel and running towards the guard station.

“Well, that was fun. Who names their kid Barry though?” I ask, a perplexed look scrunching up my features.

“His name isn’t Barry. It begins with a ‘b’, but I couldn’t remember it. Barry seemed like a good fit.” Rage shrugs and I

burst out laughing.

When he only produces a slight grin in return, his eyes troubled, I start to worry.

“What’s wrong? It seemed like you recognised the description of the guy that paid Barry off?”

“I did. It’s Atlas’s brother. I’m sorry, Puddin’, but we’re going to have to go back and tell the guys. We can do our lesson after school tomorrow. This has thrown us a big curveball.” He says seriously, ushering me into the car before moving around to his side and getting in.

“His brother?” I finally say once my shock has worn off slightly, that was not what I thought he was going to say. “The one that we absolutely do not want to take over Liam’s organisation?”

“That’s the one. I’ll let Atlas tell you more when we get home.” He replies grimly.

Judging from the speed we’re driving, he’s worried, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen him worried about anything, cautious maybe but not worried. The tires screech as we pull to a stop outside of the house. Rage wastes no time hopping out of the car. Despite the situation, my heart melts a bit when he comes around to my side and opens my door for me before we both rush inside.

“You guys are back early?” Trick says, his face filling with concern when he sees the worried look on Rage’s. “Everything okay?”

“No, we need everyone in the dining room, now.” Rage says.

“Family meeting!” I yell at the top of my lungs, causing Trick and Rage to look at me with their eyebrows raised.

“You’ve got a hell of a set of lungs on you.” Rage comments and I just grin.

“What’s going on?” Atlas asks, appearing from down the hallway of doors.

The other guys all rush down the stairs and from various parts of the house before following us into the dining room.

Once we're all seated, Rage turns to Atlas. "I spoke to the guy at the gate, and he said someone paid him off. He described Blake."

"What?" Atlas growls.

"Blake is the one that sent the cars after Ever." Rage sums up.

"Who is Blake?" Luc asks, looking between them.

"My brother."

"What the fuck? Why would your brother be after Ever?" Jensen growls.

"How does he even know she exists?" Cash asks.

"Fuck knows. As for why he is after Ever, I can only think of two reasons," Atty starts, staring off into space worriedly. "The first being that Blake loves to hurt me in any way he can, and if he's found out about you, then he'll know how much you mean to me, and he's going to want to take you away from me, that's just how he works. How he knew about Phoenix is completely throwing me, although he might just know the history about the school, and it's a coincidence."

"That's fucked up." I point out, "What's the second reason?"

"He knows why Liam wants you and has decided you're a big enough threat that he wants you taken out or that you mean enough to Liam that if he took you out, it would make him taking over Liam's organisation easier."

"So, no great reasons for him to be involved then," Rafe says grimly.

"No." Rage growls. "It is only bad news whenever Blake gets involved; he is the scum of the earth, as disgusting and depraved as they come. He has no emotions and no qualms about hurting men, women, children, and innocents. It doesn't matter to him; he simply likes blood and death."

Chapter Three

“Princess, I am so so sorry that he’s the one behind your accident.” Atty apologises.

“You don’t need to apologise. It’s not you who orchestrated it. So how do we deal with your brother? Is there a chance that Liam put him up to it and his worry in the hospital was all fake?” I ask him.

“Speak of the fucking devil,” Atlas growls as his ringtone blares throughout the room.

He answers and puts it on speakerphone.

“Atlas, any leads on who was responsible for Ever’s accident?” He asks, getting straight to the point. “How is she?” He adds, making me frown. He sounds far more concerned than he should.

“I’m fine now,” I reply simply.

“Good, I’m glad.”

“Funny you should call Father. We actually just got a lead.” Atlas replies.

“And? Who am I burying? Unless, of course, you’d like the honour?”

Atlas’s eyes are wide and confused. From the first phone call we listened in on, Liam spoke to Atlas absolutely appallingly, but there’s almost a level of respect in his tone now that certainly wasn’t there before.

“That’s where I think you might change your tune. Blake is the one that organised it.”

Silence fills the other side of the phone, and Atlas picks it up from where he laid it on the table to make sure that it’s still connected; he shrugs and puts it back down.

“I’ll deal with it,” Liam growls before he hangs up.

“Every single fucking conversation that I have with him at the moment just fucking confuses me even more.” Atlas groans, running his hands through his hair.

“Fill us in, man,” Luc says.

“He has never gone up against Blake when he does something wrong. That’s part of the problem. It’s why we’re working hard to dismantle the whole thing. Liam never keeps Blake in check.” Rage explains for Atty.

“Well, fuck.” Trick grumbles.

“He definitely has a soft spot for you, Ever, but we’re still in the dark as to why.” Cash frowns heavily.

“I fucking hope he decides to fill us in soon because not knowing is driving me slightly fucking crazy,” Atty admits.

“I think it’s driving us all crazy,” I add.

“There’s also the possibility that if he bribed the guard, others were bribed too. So we need to be even more vigilant than we have been already. Even these fuckers can be bought for the right price.” Trick warns us, a worried lilt to his voice.

“I hadn’t thought of that, fuck.” Rage curses.

“He might not do anything about Blake.” Riot starts, “You said yourself that he has never gone up against him before. I’m guessing he knows you would, though, especially for Ever. So, isn’t it possible that he’s just said he will deal with it, so you don’t?”

“That would make a lot more sense.” Atty agrees. “I guess we won’t know how he handles it without actually being there. I’ve got people who work with me in his inner circle but not close enough to him that he’d allow them to witness that conversation. The way Blake speaks to Liam is full of disrespect, and Liam won’t allow other people to witness that.”

“Why don’t you call Jynx and see if the guys and her can keep an eye on him for us?” I suggest.

“It might be the only way that we’ll know if something is being done or not.” Trick points.

“I’ll call her now.” Atty agrees, dialling and putting his phone on speaker.

“Hey Atlas,” Jynx answers cheerily. “Everything okay?”

“Hey, Jynx,” I call out.

“Hey! You never called me. I need the dirty details on you and your men! I gave you all the details about mine.”

“You did what?” I hear one of her men ask in the background.

“Hush, Mason, I’m on the phone.” She calls back, and all I can hear is unintelligible mumbling.

I chuckle, “I promise I will call you soon.”

Raised eyebrows meet my answer, and I just shrug, smirking.

“Jynx, I have a job for you if you’re up to it, it isn’t your usual job, but I’m not sure I trust anyone else to do it right now.” Atty interrupts.

“Guys, Atlas has a job for us. Stop bitching and come here.” She yells. “Alright, you’re on speaker. What’s up?”

“Hey, Squirt.” Rip says down the phone.

“Hey dickhead, I told you not to call me that. It’s not like I’m a kid anymore, not that I really was the last time we all saw each other.” I grouse, smiling.

“No, but you were fourteen and tiny. I am always going to call you Squirt. Get over it.” He chuckles.

The guys look at me questioningly, and I shrug. “I’ll tell you some other time.” The last time I saw Jynx’s guys was bloody, really fucking bloody. I’m not sure they’re going to like that story and my part in it.

“Guys, job, focus.” Jynx chides.

“I need you guys to keep an eye on Blake.”

“Your brother, why?” Jynx asks.

“He sent a couple of guys to campus, and they ran Ever off the road. She’s lucky that she’s alive.”

“He fucking did what? And you just want us to monitor him? So, I can’t take him out?” She growls, a hidden thread of glee in her tone.

“Remind me never to mess with her,” Jensen mumbles.

“It’ll be the last thing you do,” I say seriously.

“I have no doubt about that.” He adds.

“Don’t worry. I like you.” Jynx tries to reassure them, which works until she adds. “If you hurt Ever though ...” She leaves it hanging ominously.

“Understood.” Trick answers for all of them as I smirk.

“We can’t take him out because we don’t know why he tried to take Ever out. Also, that’s not going to help our end game right now. We’re not ready to take over yet.” Rage explains, getting us back on track.

“Okay, that makes sense. We’ll see what we can find out. How frequently do you want check-ins?”

“Once a week,” Atlas replies. “Thanks, Jynx, guys.”

“No problem. I’ll talk to you in a week. Ever I still want that update.”

“Of course, be safe. Bye.”

“Bye, guys.”

We’re all silent for a moment before I decide to interrupt the seriousness.

“Alright, this conversation is going nowhere, and there’s nothing we can do about any of it at the moment. Jynx is doing her job, and we just have to wait for updates. My day of riding has been well and truly ruined, so I propose a ritualistic burning of my skinny jeans and Rage’s mom’s movies. Jensen, are you in?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely, Angel. I thought you’d never ask.”

“Why don’t we set the bonfire up in the backyard, light the fire pit too and have a winter cookout?” Rafe suggests.

“Sounds perfect. Hot chocolates too?” I ask Rafe hopefully.

“Sure, Dragonfly. If Atlas has got Irish cream liquor, then I can even make you one’s like I made at the cabin.” He grins. “And I’m pretty sure we’ve already got everything that we’re going to need to grill out.”

“Double check. I can get an order here within the hour.” Cash mutters.

“Awesome.” Rafe grins, getting up and going to the kitchen, Cash following him.

“Maybe Peter has stuff to burn!” I say excitedly.

“Should we be worried about how excited you are to burn shit,” Trick asks, amusement dancing in his eyes and one eyebrow raised.

“She did get ridiculously excited about burning all the wrapping paper at Christmas.” Luc points out.

“I mean, maybe,” I smirk, pulling out my phone and dialling Peter.

“Hey, Sugar!” He greets. “How’s the lesson going with tall, red-haired and definitely wants to jump your bones?”

I burst out laughing.

“Didn’t get the lesson, something came up, and I’ll explain when you get here, but,” I grin at Rage, who’s sitting opposite me, “I did find out that he owns a cowboy hat and boots. Sexy as fuck.”

Rage’s eyebrows shoot up in shock as the guys all laugh. Peter’s so loud that I have to hold the phone away from my ear.

“Did you call just to tell me about it?” He asks when he’s finally calmed down.

“Nope, I’m burning all of my skinny jeans and Rage’s mom’s movies. I was wondering if you had anything you’d like to burn?”

“That is probably up there in the top ten weirdest questions I’ve been asked. But I strangely want to find something to burn now. It seems cleansing.”

“Oh, it definitely is. We’re lighting the fire pit and having a winter cookout too.” I add.

“I’m definitely up for that.”

“Awesome, find some shit to burn and come over.”

“Alright, Sugar, I’ll be there in twenty.” He chuckles before hanging up.

“Let’s build this bonfire then,” Jensen exclaims, jumping up.

I follow him out of the double doors and into the backyard that I’ve honestly never so much as glanced at. It’s too cold to be wandering around outside right now. I regret that decision immediately. Not only is the backyard huge and surrounded by trees, but there’s also an outdoor pool covered for the winter and an area specifically set up for cookouts. It’s freaking amazing.

“Where can we set up the bonfire?” I call back to Atty.

“So long as it’s as far away from anything that we don’t want to burn as possible, you should be good.” He grins, and I stick my tongue out at him. “There should be some logs in the shed behind the pool house.”

“I’ll grab them now and start building the bonfire. Ever go and get the stuff you want to burn.” Jensen suggests.

“On it.” I grin, walking back inside. Thanks to my excitement at burning stuff, I forgot to bring my skinny jeans out here. “Rage, do you know where any of your mom’s movies are.”

“Yeah,” he grins. “I’ll go and get them and meet you out there.”

I nod and take the stairs two at a time, rummaging through my drawers. It’s a bit crazy how many pairs of skinny jeans that I actually own, and once I’ve got them all out, my drawers are practically empty. I might have to rethink my plan a bit. I put a pair of black and a pair of light blue ones back in my drawers. It’s probably a good idea to keep a couple of pairs, anyway. I gather my pile and head back downstairs. No one’s

in the kitchen, and when I step through the doors, the bonfire is already roaring away. I love watching the flames dance. Rage is standing off to the side with a pile of DVDs in his arms, his eyes staring off into the flames.

“Let’s start burning shit!” Peter calls from behind me, and I turn back to see Cash following behind him.

“What did you bring?” I ask Peter curiously, eyeing the box in his hand.

“Stuff from the guy that broke my heart.” He says, a sadness entering his eyes that I don’t like.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask him. Jensen’s still by the fire, and Cash has wandered off to sit with the other guys near the fire pit. So, no one can hear our conversation.

“It was the age-old story, two guys fall in love, all goes well until they finish high school and go to different colleges, they vow to keep in touch and make long distance work, but the calls become texts, and the texts become further apart until one day there’s just no more of either.”

“I’m sorry, that really sucks. I know it’s cliché, but if it’s meant to be, you guys will find each other again.”

He smiles sadly at me, “Thanks, Sugar.”

“Are you sure you want to burn his stuff?”

“I think it’s time to move on. Holding on to the past does nobody any good.” He replies with finality.

“Well, alright then. Do you want a drink?”

“Absolutely. A strong one.”

“On it. Let me just dump these near the fire, and then I’ll get something. What do you fancy?”

“Whiskey.” He says decisively.

“I was hoping you were going to say that.” I grin.

He follows me down the fire and starts chatting to Rage and Jensen as I dump my stuff and go back to the house. I grab the whiskey out of the cupboard and briefly consider grabbing

glasses before coming to the conclusion that there's no point. Glancing out the window, I see that the guys all have beers, so there's no need for me to grab them something to drink.

"Here you go," I say to Peter, holding out the bottle.

He eyes it for a second before shrugging and taking a swig, handing it back to me. I take my own swig.

"Alright, so how do I do this?" He asks as Rage and Jensen join us, taking their own swigs out of the bottle.

"Well, I'm just going to throw the pants on and dance a bit in glee that I'll never have to try to put them on while injured again." I grin, and he chuckles.

"You sure as shit know how to hold a grudge, don't you?" He points out, and my grin widens.

"You know it. Anyway, for you, since it's more emotional, I suggest that you do it slowly. With each item you put on the fire, you think about letting your ex go and letting go of the hurt. Same for you, Rage. I don't know which book I read that in, but it seemed to work for the characters." I shrug.

"Well, at this point, I'm willing to try anything." He shrugs, taking another swig.

"I don't really get the point of this, but whatever you say, Puddin'." Rage agrees, throwing the first DVD in and widely grinning as he watches it melt.

I smile and start haphazardly throwing my pants on it, enjoying every fucking second. I hand a pair to Jensen so he can enjoy burning shit too.

"Thanks, Angel. I don't have anything to burn." He kisses me slowly, the heat of the fire warming the side of my face, my hand's bunch in his shirt as he slowly moves his up and down my back.

I smile up at him softly when I pull back; I hadn't forgotten that I told them all I loved them before I left earlier, and they yelled it back. It just got put to the back of my brain with finding out about Blake.

Jensen's thumb gently strokes my cheek. As his eyes peer into mine, I take a deep breath.

"I love you."

"I love you too, Angel."

My heart explodes with happiness as a breath-taking smile tilts his lips, and he kisses me again.

"Alright, you two, let's burn shit." Peter grins.

"Let's do it," Jensen smirks, grabbing one of Rage's mom's DVDs and gleefully throwing it on the fire.

After Rage and Peter have thrown a few items on the fire, their smiles widen.

"You know what; this is actually working. It doesn't feel as heavy anymore, if that makes sense?" Rage asks.

"Yeah, I'm starting to feel the same," Peter replies.

"Good, that's the plan."

"Come on, guys, foods ready!" Rafe calls down to us.

We all throw the last of the stuff on the fire quickly and make our way back up to the guys surrounding the fire pit. They've got massive blankets around their shoulders, and Atty lifts up the corner of his for me. I smile as I slide in, settling against his side and stealing some of his warmth. Rafe hands me a plate.

"There's more if you're still hungry, Dragonfly."

"Thanks, Rafe, it looks delicious."

He grins as he hands me a spiked hot chocolate, and I groan in pleasure as the flavour hits my tongue.

I love that we are still managing to find these moments of calm in between the absolute chaos of our lives. Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't change the chaos. I like the excitement, I like the mystery, and I especially like the danger. My mind, of course, turns to the letter that the masked Phoenix fucker gave me. I didn't want to deal with it today, but it looks like my brain isn't going to give me the luxury of putting it in a box

and burying it in the recesses of my mind. It occurs to me that I have a way to prove it's not from my mom.

I know it's not. It can't be, she's very much dead. I remember watching her casket going into the ground and all the people mourning her. I also remember thinking that there were a lot of people there that I had never met before. The parents all seemed to know them, but we haven't seen them since. My mind is never going to be at ease, though, not until I can undeniably prove that she didn't send it.

I pop the last bite of food in my mouth and then hop up.

"You okay, Sweetheart?" Trick asks.

"Yeah, I just want to get something. I'll be back in a second." I reply.

Now that the idea is in my head, it's slowly gaining traction, and I have to do it now. My curiosity won't let me wait. As soon as I get to my room, I go over to my desk and pull out the envelope that the masked Phoenix member gave me, fishing the sheet of paper out from inside. I place it on my bed and then get down on my stomach and shimmy my way underneath the bed. It's so large that I can't simply reach underneath it. When we first got here, I put my box of memories under the bed like I did at Trick's house. There was no way that I was leaving it behind, just in case we couldn't go back there for whatever reason. It's got memories from when I was little, things the guys wrote to me or gave me, and it's even got a couple of drawings that Trick did for me. Even when we were eight, he was an amazing artist, and I say that from my perspective now, not looking at it through eight-year-old eyes.

I want to ask him why his art puts sadness and hesitation in his eyes now but like with so many things at the moment; I haven't found the opportunity; I make the decision to find time to ask him; he had serious talent, and I want to know why he doesn't do it anymore.

Chapter Four

The other thing this box contains is a note from my mom. It's one of the last things she gave me; it just says that she loves me and she's sorry. I never understood why exactly she was apologising, and I still don't, but I figure it was because she was dying and leaving me, not that she could help that. It was entirely out of her control. I grab it, put the lid back on the box and slide it back into place at the top of the bed. Then, shimmying back out, I grab the other note and hold them tightly in my hands.

I don't think I'm brave enough to look at them by myself. Which makes me feel silly, but I can't pry my hands away from them, so I quickly make my way back downstairs and into the garden, retaking my seat next to Atty.

"What have you got there, Firecracker?" Luc asks from across the fire pit.

"The letter the masked Phoenix guy gave me and a letter from my mom. I figured that I could compare the handwriting and see if it matched."

"That's a good idea. At least you'll know for sure that she didn't write it, and someone's fucking with you." Peter replies.

"Do they match?" Riot asks, watching me intently.

"I don't know. I haven't checked it yet." I shrug. "I'm nervous."

"That's understandable, Angel."

"Do it like a bandaid. Get over with quickly. The more you think about it, the more you're building it up in your head." Rage points out.

"Good point. Okay." I take a deep breath and open them both up next to each other.

I just stare at them, side by side, unbelievably.

“Dragonfly?” Rafe asks gently.

I don’t say anything, I just hand them to Atty, who looks at them and frowns before handing them on.

“The ‘b’ on the butterfly is the same in both notes.” He says.

“Some of the other letters are shaped the same in both as well.” Trick adds, studying it closely.

“How is that possible, though?” I ask, my voice hushed.

“It’s possible that someone could mimic it, but I’m not entirely sure why they’d go to all that effort.” Cash frowns, looking it over too.

“Instead of putting my mind at rest, I’m now just filled with a thousand more questions.” I sigh.

“I’m not sure how we can confirm whether or not this is fake. Not unless we take down Phoenix.” Jensen adds.

“Okay, so that’s what we focus on then. First, we take down Phoenix, and then we see if anyone who we can get our hands on can give us some more information on this note.” Atty suggests, looking at me. “Does that sound okay, Princess?”

“Yeah, that works. There’s nothing else we can do.”

“Is it possible that it was written before she died?” Peter asks me gently, clearly not wanting to upset me.

“I don’t think so. It’s too relevant to what’s happening now. The only person who might be able to shed some light on this is my dad, but he’s dead and wouldn’t fucking tell me, regardless.” I sigh, rubbing my hands over my face in frustration.

“Alright, well, we’ve pretty much got a free afternoon, why don’t we go through the last of the blueprints and find a connection?” Luc suggests.

“We can tell Peter about the security issues at the same time?” Trick asks me.

“Yeah, that sounds good. It’s starting to get cold out here, anyway.” I reply, getting up.

We all make our way back inside, Luc and Cash going upstairs to get their laptops while Peter sets his up at the table and Atty brings over the piles of blueprints. The others all go off to do their own thing, but I decide to stay at the table with Peter and Atty.

“How many have you guys got left to go through?” I ask as Peter sets up the piles, and the other two come back downstairs and open their laptops.

“Probably only about ten. We made great headway the other day. So, it shouldn’t take too long.” He replies.

“The thing that might take the longest, though, is finding a link between them all.” Cash mutters.

“Anything I can do?” I ask.

“Not for the moment, Sugar,” Peter replies.

I nod and decide to leave them to it. I take the two notes back upstairs to my room, and instead of putting the letter from my mom back in the box under my bed, I decide to put it with the recent note in my desk. Just in case we need it. Stepping back, I look around my room; we’ve been so busy lately that it has definitely been neglected, and since I have little else that I can do now while I wait for the guys to finish sorting through the blueprints, I decide to clear up a bit and get a load of washing ready to put on.

“Ever! We found a link!” Cash yells up the stairs when I’ve just finished making my washing pile.

“Coming!” I call back, gathering the pile and taking it downstairs with me.

I dump the washing in the adjoining utility room and rush back to the kitchen table, where everyone else is gathered. I’ll put it on in a minute.

“We explained the issues with Liam to Peter while you were upstairs,” Trick says as I take my seat next to him.

“Thanks, I completely forgot that we were going to do that. I got distracted tidying up.”

“Anytime, Sweetheart.”

“My dad’s security should be enough at the ball. Like I said before, we always hire extras, but I’m going to get you all pictures, and Atlas says he’s got a guy who he can give the names and photographs, that can run a thorough background check on them all.” Peter smiles reassuringly.

“Sounds good to me.” I reply, “Now, what did you find?”

“As we suspected, none of these businesses are owned by the people on the list anymore. All of them have either been forcibly taken over, have scandals that ended them, or various other things that don’t quite make sense.” Cash says.

“I dug far enough back in a couple of the first businesses that got taken over, and the same name kept popping up. Chris Tilling,” Peter says.

“The billionaire businessman?” Rage asks.

“Oh yeah, that one,” Peter says seriously.

“Fuck, what are the chances that he’s a member of Phoenix?” Riot asks.

“Pretty fucking high; he’s one of the alumni for the school. There’s a sports building named after him.” Atlas’s lips turn down into a grimace.

“There’s something else,” Luc warns.

“What?” I reply cautiously.

“Peter finished before we did and while he was waiting decided to look up all the other names on the list in the book. Unfortunately, they’re all dead or missing.” Cash explains, looking to Peter to take over.

“I managed to dig a little further in places that I probably shouldn’t be and found two things, one there’s a woman who lives on the very outskirts of town, up in the woods. She’s the only one I could find, and it was pure fluke thanks to an accident she had a few years ago that was bad enough that she ended up in hospital.”

“A woman? How can she have been in Phoenix?” I ask.

“I don’t know, but Chris took her company down just like the others, and she’s listed in the book. So, it might just be that she went up against Phoenix, and they wanted to take her down.”

“That’s a good point. The only way we’re going to know for sure if she had any involvement or knows anything is if we talk to her. She’s presumably coherent, unlike Clint, so we might be able to get some actual answers out of her if she was involved.” Rage mutters.

“Absolutely.” I agree.

“The second thing?” Rafe asks.

“Whoever killed the others liked to brag. I found a couple of message boards on the dark web that led me to videos. He filmed their murders. I could trace the IPs back to see where the videos were uploaded. I might even be able to get an ID on who uploaded it, even if they’ve got top-notch security in place. It’s a sort of speciality of mine. The problem is, though, I can’t do it on these laptops. I’ve got good security on mine, but it would take me months to build the level of security up that I’d need to be confident that whoever I hack won’t know I’m there or be able to follow me back and gain our information.”

“What sort of level of security are we talking, government?” Atlas asks, his face scrunched in concentration.

“Well yeah, not the local police department. Anything higher than that will have the basics in place, which would mean it would only take me a couple of days to build up the security since most of it is already done.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’ll also give the name to my contact and see how he thinks we should proceed; we’ve moved into risky territory. Everyone not only knows who Chris is, but they love him and know how fucking powerful he is.”

“It’s going to be next to impossible to take him down.” Trick mutters and then continues, “Give all the information to your guy Atlas and see about the laptop. Then, while we wait

for him to get back to us, we can go and see that woman and see if she can at least confirm that Chris is behind it.”

“That sounds good to me,” Atlas replies, his hand gently running up and down my back.

“We could go tomorrow?” I suggest.

“I don’t have anything planned.” Trick replies.

“We haven’t gotten any jobs for a few days, so I’ll see what’s going on with that as well,” Atlas adds, texting.

“If we do it for the afternoon, then I can take you riding in the morning. We can get an early start?” Rage suggests looking at me.

“That works. When are your horses arriving?”

“They should be here on Wednesday.”

“Hopefully, they’ll get it all arranged so that you can be in the lesson on Friday,” Peter says.

“Blake is behind my accident, right?” I ask, the wheels turning and trying to piece things together in my mind.

“Yeah,” Jensen replies, his eyebrow lifted with curiosity.

“But he used Phoenix as the excuse for it. So, either he knows they exist and decided to use it to cover up that it was him. Or he’s a part of the society?”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that,” Rafe mutters.

“Did he attend this school?” Riot suddenly asks. “You said that you’re safe here from your dad, but you never really explained why?”

“Yeah, actually, Liam came here as well. That’s why this is the safest place. He desperately wanted me to attend and agreed to stay away if I did.”

“So that could explain how Blake knows about them then. He’s not a part of the group that had the missing students and Amelia. He’s too young?” Cash asks, looking to Atlas for confirmation.

Atlas nods his agreement.

“This has all got to connect somehow,” I mutter, my eyebrows drawn together as I frown.

“Right, this is getting confusing. The plan is for Atlas to talk to his contact. Then, we need to go and see the last remaining woman alive from the blueprints list. Rage, Ever, and Peter then need to see if the equestrian teacher is the guy in the mask that has been helping us or is working for Blake.” Trick sums up.

“It’s a good starting point.” Jensen agrees. “We can’t do anything about the letters until we take down Phoenix.”

“That’s agreed then,” Trick says with finality.

“Why don’t we go and watch a movie?” Rage suggests.

“Sure,” I reply.

“Hopefully, my guy gets back to us soon, and then we can at least put a plan in place to take down Phoenix,” Atlas adds.

We all nod, and everyone gets up, making their way into the sitting room.

“Ever, can I talk to you for a second?” Atlas asks.

“Of course.”

I hang back as everyone else goes to settle down in the sitting room, and Atty takes my hand, leading me through the house and up the stairs to my room. I study him as we walk; he’s really tense and hasn’t looked at me since he asked to speak to me. I’m starting to worry about what this conversation could be about. He hasn’t been this tense around me since we first met at the cabin, and he thought that I’d be afraid of him.

When we get to my room, I take a seat on my bed and watch as he grabs the desk chair and pulls it over to where I’m sitting. I wait for him to speak, but his eyes just trace my features, like he’s committing them to memory. The longer he goes without saying anything, the more nervous I become until I can’t take it anymore.

“Are you okay? What’s going on?” I ask, clasping my hands together in my lap to stop them from fidgeting and giving

away my nervousness.

He stares for a moment longer before he clears his throat, “I owe you an explanation.”

“You do?” I ask, confused about what he means.

“About the ring I gave you.” He explains, nodding to where it hangs around my neck.

My hand automatically reaches up and pulls it out, my fingers playing with it.

“Oh,” I say simply.

“Let me finish explaining before you say anything, okay?”

I nod.

“I know I should’ve told you about the significance behind it when I first gave it to you, and I’m sorry that I didn’t.” He starts, “We have quite a few traditions in my family. Most of them are outdated and barbaric, but there is one that we all still honour. When we’re born, all the males in the family get given a ring. Each ring is unique to each man, and we never take them off. Only changing the size of it as our fingers grow or get smaller. There is one exception to this rule, though.” He swallows nervously, his hands rubbing up and down his jean-clad legs as his eyes dart away from me.

“Because each ring is unique to each man, it can offer a layer of protection. Everyone knows which family you belong to and what kind of power you have at your back because one of the stones in your ring is the family stone.” He points to the blood-red stone in the middle of the ring, and I rub my finger across it.

“It can also put you in harm’s way. The competing families can use it against you. If they can get to you, then they know, just from your ring, what kind of leverage they can use you for. We’re not the only family that uses this tradition, so it works both ways.” He pauses.

“You said that you only take them off for one reason?” I ask, worried about what the reason could be and why he’s taken it off now.

Does it mean there's a hit on him or something?

Fuck.

“Right, well, this is why I should've asked you before I gave it to you. The only time that we take our rings off is to give it to the woman who owns us completely, the woman we plan to spend the rest of our lives with and protect until our dying breath.” He says with such conviction that it knocks the breath out of me. “The ring offers them the same level of protection that it offers us, but it also puts them in danger. Some rival families would use you against me if they got a hold of you. By giving you that ring, they know that I would watch the world fucking burn for you. That's why you have to keep it hidden.” He watches me cautiously as I try to digest the information he's just given me.

Holy fucking shit. I am in complete and utter disbelief that he's honoured me with this. I don't think I'm worthy in the slightest. Maybe I should be mad that he didn't tell me all of this before he gave me the ring, but I'm really not. It makes sense in a way. My silence stretches as I think through everything that he's told me, and Atlas starts to fidget, clearly thinking that it's an angry silence on my part.

“You don't have to accept the ring in that way and reciprocate. You can just accept it as protection. For me, it means that I'm yours, you own me and always will, no matter what, and I will always protect you. Even if you hate me after this and I needed to do it from afar. You will never have to live in fear, Ever. I swear that to you.” He vows.

He'd be willing to do all that for me. He'd protect me from afar if I wanted nothing to do with him anymore because that's how much I mean to him. Even though just saying the words made pain darken his eyes. I get up, and he hangs his head, thinking I'm leaving and that it's the end of him and me. I step closer to him and gently place my hand on his scarred cheek. His head snaps up as heart-breaking hope pierces me from the icy blue depths of his eyes. I climb onto his lap, straddling him. His giant arms wrap around me in an almost bruising grip.

“Princess?” He rasps, his voice full of emotion.

I clasp his face between both of my palms and lean forward; I pour all of my emotion into the kiss, and he kisses me back like it’s the last one we’ll share. I reluctantly pull back, his eyes are sad, his lips drawn down into a frown.

He thinks this was a goodbye kiss.

He couldn’t be further from the truth.

“I love you,” I tell him, making sure that he can see the truth of what I’m saying in my eyes.

His breath stalls in his chest as his eyes widen.

“What?” He breathes out.

“I said I love you, Atty. Thank you for giving me your ring.” I repeat myself.

His whole face lights up with a breath-taking grin as he pulls me impossibly closer. Just before his lips touch mine, he whispers, “I love you too, Princess. So fucking much.”

Chapter Five

“You’re not mad?” He asks as he finally pulls back.

“No, I understand why you didn’t tell me at the time,” I admit. “There is one thing I don’t agree with, though.”

He tenses, his arms tightening around me, “What?”

“I’m not going to hide it anymore, I’ll keep it under my shirt when I normally would, like when I exercise or some shit, but other than that, I refuse to hide it. I am so fucking proud that you’ve chosen me to wear it and hell help any fucker who tries to leverage me against you. I have no fucking problem taking lives to protect what’s mine.” I growl, being brutally honest.

It’s the first time I’ve admitted exactly how far my darkness goes to any of them. Atlas’s eyes widen at the realisation before darkening with a feral heat. His lips slam against mine as he lifts me effortlessly, standing up before he walks towards the bed. My hands claw into his back as we land, and I waste no time pushing his sweats down with my feet. He stands back up and finishes the job, ripping off his shirt at the same time. I quickly shed my own clothes, and as I lay naked before him on the bed, his eyes greedily take in my form as my own devour his.

The gorgeous tattoos that he’s decorated himself with stretch down his thick thighs, too, and I vow to explore them properly later; right now, my lust for him is riding me hard, my core dripping with need. He stalks towards where I’m lying on the edge of the bed, bending at the last minute and delving his tongue into my core. The suddenness makes me cry out, my hands snapping to his head and weaving through his hair as my nails scrape against his scalp. He growls against my clit, the vibrations tantalising and driving me closer to the edge as he swirls his tongue around my clit before sucking once. He crawls up my body, placing kisses and bites as he goes and setting my nerve endings on fire, making me writhe beneath him with need.

As soon as he's within reaching distance, I pull his lips down to mine. Our kiss is brutal, tongues fighting and teeth biting as he easily asserts dominance over me. His hand skims up my side as mine grab hold of his broad shoulders, using the leverage to lift my hips, a silent plea for him to be inside me. He quietly chuckles as he rolls my nipple in his fingers, riding the pain, pleasure line expertly and causing my hips to buck as I throw my head back in ecstasy, a loud moan spilling from my lips. His tattooed hand reaches up and closes around my throat with just enough pressure.

I can't help the smirk that crosses my lips as my eyes pop open and collide with Atlas's molten blue ones. His answering grin is full of promise as he realises how much I love it. He lines up with my entrance and sheathes himself inside me with one powerful thrust. My walls clench around him as I cry out in pleasure, his hand flexing around my throat as he growls his pleasure. I raise my hips as my nails dig into his shoulders. He growls as he picks up his speed, slamming into me at just the right angle. My nails drag down his back, no doubt leaving marks as his hand moves from my throat, his mouth claiming mine and swallowing my moan as his hand palms my breast, his fingers pinching my nipple.

My hips move with his as his thrusts increase until I'm sent flying over the edge and into the oblivion of a mind-numbing orgasm, Atlas quickly following and growling out his own.

"You're amazing," he mutters once he's caught his breath, lifting himself so he can stare into my eyes.

My grin is so broad it feels like it's going to overtake my face completely, and he smiles softly in return. His lips move to mine, kissing me gently as his big hand comes up and strokes my cheek. He moves off me, lying down beside me and holding his arm up so I can settle my head on his chest. Once I'm settled, he soothingly strokes up and down my back.

My mind is drifting already, and before I know it, I'm falling into a dreamless sleep. My last thought before my mind finally succumbs is that I hope I don't drool on him again.

Trick

Pulling on my shirt as I finish getting dressed, I take a seat at my desk, staring out of the window at the grey morning as I get lost in thought. We've got to see the only woman that Peter's been able to find off the list of names from the book that we found in the bunker today. I hope it's not going to turn out like it did when we went to see Clint at the asylum. I keep getting the sinking feeling that we led Chris to Clint. The only thing that makes me hope that it wasn't us is that Chris has a lot of power and money behind him. If he wanted to find Clint before now, he easily could have.

That's if it is Chris that's killing off all the members from the years, he was at school here, anyway. It hasn't escaped my notice that it's only his generation of members that have been killed, run out of business, or disappeared. We don't know who the other members of the previous generations were, but Chris hasn't been linked to any more murders, at least not yet.

It makes me nervous having Ever involved with this. I know she can handle it; that's not the problem. I just don't like the thought of her being in danger, and now that we have to worry about Atlas's brother, too, it just feels like she's got too many enemies coming for her. When it comes down to the absolute truth of it, I'm worried that with so many people out to get her and us, someone is going to slip through our defences and succeed.

I can't let that happen.

While I've been stuck in my head, I realise that I've unconsciously been drawing in the back of one of my notebooks, something that I never consciously allow myself to do anymore. I stare down at the precise lines, for the first time in a long time, I don't hate what I've drawn. Yet, it still makes my stomach churn and memories of my past work flash through my mind, and with that reminder, my heart fills with dread.

I can't do it.

I tear out the drawing with more force than necessary, screwing it up into a tight ball and tossing it into the trash can, vowing to put it out of mind.

“What did you draw this time?” Cash asks.

I spin in my chair; I was so lost in thought that I didn’t even hear him come in. Scrubbing my hand over my face, I lean back in my chair and eye him as he leans against the door frame, his observant gaze locked on me.

“Ever.”

“And?” He grimaces, already expecting me to describe something like what I used to draw when I got lost in my head.

“That’s it. It was just Ever.”

He pauses for a second. “No blood, gore, or fear of what might happen to her?”

“No, Just Ever, smiling.”

“That’s great!” He smiles before studying my expression, and his smile drops. “Isn’t it?”

“I don’t know, man. I still got the stomach-churning dread as soon as I realised, I drew something. I couldn’t handle it if I drew a ‘what if’ situation.”

“I get that, but at the same time, we’ve got so much fucking shit going on at the moment, and drawing always used to be like your therapy. You’d get it all out onto the paper and be able to handle everything better.”

“I know, but it wasn’t like I was drawing pretty pictures. So, when I got called out on what I was drawing or painting, I just felt too exposed, you know?”

“I remember, we all remember. Just think about it, okay? We’re in a different place than we were, we have Ever, Atlas is back with us, we’ve gained a brother and a bigger purpose than just sorting shit out with Tomlinson.”

I watch him for a minute. It’s easy to tell that it means a lot to him, and if I’m being completely honest with myself, I miss

drawing and painting. I didn't mind so much when my art could only be interpreted by me, apart from the more obvious what if paintings, and I didn't show anyone those apart from the guys. I only showed them because they insisted. I lost myself when I stopped. I'm just not sure I can handle picking up the pencil intentionally. I used to dream of being an artist and having my work shown in galleries. How Rafe feels about his cooking is how I feel about my art.

Those tickets that Mom and Dad got me for Christmas were a double-edged sword. I was supposed to have a couple of pieces there; they'd commissioned them eight months ago, but just after that was when someone saw my artwork for precisely what it was, and I couldn't risk exposing myself like that to everyone, so I pulled out.

"I'll think about it, okay?"

"That's better than any answer I've gotten out of you before, so I'll take it." He smiles. "Rafe's made breakfast, and Ever's just made it downstairs."

"Alright. I need a cuddle from our girl." I grin as I get up and stretch.

When we get to the kitchen, I hang back and just take in the scene. Everyone is sitting around the table like usual, smiling and talking. We never used to eat together like this, and for Atlas, I know that it's a new concept, eating at the table together and just enjoying each other's company. From Rage's reaction when Ever insisted that we all eat together before any jobs, I'd say that it's new to him too. It's family, and I hope that we never stop doing this together. That we always take time to eat as a family, no matter how busy our lives get.

Ever looks up from her plate, mostly filled with bacon, of course, and smiles when she sees me. Her smile makes my own pull at my lips, and I make my way over to her. It fascinates me how she can smile at me and make me feel like I'm her entire world, yet I know for a fact that she loves the rest of them too and is even edging towards it with Rage. That's the amazing thing about her, though; she has never

made one of us feel like she cares about us less than the others. Instead, she treats us equally, and it seems effortless for her.

Picking her up, her smile widens as my lips land on hers. I kiss her thoroughly, enjoying every damn second of it before I sit down at the table in her spot and put her on my lap.

Glancing back at me, she mutters, “Are you okay?”

“I’m better now,” I reassure her, my arms tightening around her.

She watches me for a second before she leans forward and kisses me softly, the angle slightly awkward since she’s sat on my lap, facing the table and is twisted so she can look back at me.

She turns back around and starts eating again.

“Don’t even think about it.” She warns, smacking my hand away when I try to pinch a piece of her bacon.

“Here you go, dude. I think you might lose a hand if you try to steal her bacon again.” Riot chuckles as he hands me a plate.

Ever helps me load it up, smirking with amusement the whole time. It’s quiet for a while, as everyone finishes their breakfast and starts to wake up in Jensen’s case.

“We’re going to see that woman today, right?” Luc asks, leaning back in his chair and sipping his coffee.

“Yeah, we need to pick up Peter on the way. He said it wasn’t too far out, so hopefully, it won’t take us too long to get the information we need and get back.” I reply.

“Good, as excited as I am to unravel more of the mystery surrounding Phoenix, I also need to do normal shit like finish a paper for politics.” Rage groans.

“Fuck, I completely forgot about that with everything that was going on.” Ever, mutters.

“I’ve got the same one. We can do it together.” Cash suggests, and she nods gratefully.

“Everyone ready?” I ask.

They all make sounds of agreement and get up, taking their dishes to the kitchen. It's become a habit now just to clear the table after we're done with eating. Ever starts to get off my lap to remove her plate, but I tighten my arms around her and pull her closer, bending so my lips gently kiss up her neck. Her hands grip my arms, and she tilts her head to the side, giving me better access.

I grin against her neck as I finally let her up, and she's reluctant to move.

"Let's go and see what this woman can tell us, Sweetheart."

"I'm not convinced that she'll be able to tell us anything or even be willing to. That seems to be how it's gone so far." She gripes as she gets up, and we meet the others by the door.

"We'll probably end up with more questions than answers, like usual." Jensen agrees, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

"Everyone armed?" I ask as we go out of the door.

"Yep," Jensen confirms over his shoulder.

"Always." Rage grins as the rest of them all confirm that they've got weapons just in case this goes south.

I'm not sure that we'll ever leave the house unarmed again. Especially if we carry on doing the jobs for Alaric, something that I'm reasonably sure we all want to continue doing, even after we've successfully taken down Atlas's dad. I'm not entirely sure how that will work since Atlas will have taken over his father's businesses. Even though he plans to legitimise as much as possible, there'll still be a few things that he carries on doing, at least for a short amount of time, while we help him clean house from the inside. His father's businesses are too far-reaching to risk someone escaping and carrying on his father's more unsavoury business dealings elsewhere.

That's not even considering that we need to deal with his brother. We need more information about him. I know Atlas hates him, and he didn't seem too surprised that Blake had something to do with Ever's accident, which says a lot about

who Blake is as a person. That's all we know, though, and it's not enough—something to ask him another time. Hopefully, Jynx will get back in contact soon. Atlas seems convinced that Liam won't discipline Blake for what he's done, but as much as I hate to admit it, he clearly has a soft spot for Ever. When she's involved, he behaves in unexpected ways.

I bring myself out of my thoughts as we separate into different cars again. This time, Cash and Luc choose to take their cars as well; not having driven them for a while, I know they've missed them. I take the others in the SUV with me, Ever climbing in with Luc.

We convoy to Peter's place, which is smaller than ours but no less extravagant, and he comes out, carrying his laptop bag and makes a beeline for Cash's car, a broad grin on his face. He clearly appreciates good cars. Cash pulls out first to take the lead since Peter is the only one of us who knows where we're going. It rubs me just slightly the wrong way not to know where we're going or what we're headed into. Most people would assume that it's controlling, which I guess to a certain extent it is, but it mainly extends from my need to make sure that we are all safe that my family are safe. I can't keep them safe if I don't have all the information. It never used to be this bad, but it's gradually gotten worse after each life-changing and fucked up thing that's happened to one of the guys and every single thing I imagined happening to Ever while she was gone.

It started with Jensen when his Mom and sister got murdered while he was in the house. I was a child; we all were, but even at that age, I was their protector of sorts, and I hated that he was in so much pain, and I couldn't do anything about it.

Logically, I know that I couldn't have prevented the things that have happened to them, but I hate that they've been hurt, and I will try my damn hardest to make sure that none of them gets hurt again.

Ever

We're about an hour into the drive, Luc and I have been rocking out the whole way, and it's been the break from the seriousness that I needed. We must be getting close now, though, so I start to pay better attention to our surroundings and where we're headed. I'd wrongly assumed that we'd be headed somewhere relatively upscale, or at least somewhere that's in a reasonably well-off neighbourhood. However, that's definitely not the case, not unless you have to go through the rougher areas to get the upscale part. I can't even call this place a town. It's so small; the dwellings we're going past now are run down, clearly needing repairs. Some are still well looked after despite this, but it's clear that a lack of money is what's preventing them from doing anything else. Damaged cars and kid's toys litter the front yards, but there's no abundance of trash or graffiti, unlike in the cities.

The further we travel through the little town, the further apart the houses get, turning into farms. Eventually, we start travelling up a fairly steep, winding road lined with woods on either side. It's stunning, even with the bare branches of the trees. It looks like my guess of the large houses being past the farms was correct after all.

Chapter Six

Ever

We all slow down as a convoy when Cash does in the lead car. My phone starts ringing, and I answer it, linking it up to Luc's Bluetooth when I see that it's a group call from the guys.

"Hey, how come we've slowed down?" Trick asks, clearly speaking to Cash and Peter.

"The aerial image that I found last night said that it was right around here somewhere," Peter replies somewhat distractedly, and I share a sceptical look with Luc.

"Dude, all I can see are trees," Jensen points out.

"I know, it's up a small track. It's designed to be hard to find. At least that's what I can guess from the aerial image. I don't know why you'd live this secluded otherwise."

"There!" Cash suddenly exclaims, interrupting whatever Trick was about to say.

As we turn up the track following Cash and Peter, the phones suddenly cut out, and when I check the screen, it says that there's no cell service when mere minutes ago there were nearly full bars.

"Cell service has gone," I tell Luc when he looks at me curiously.

"That's odd." He frowns.

The cars all move together, so they're practically bumper to bumper as we slowly creep up the bumpy driveway that has seen better days and doesn't get much traffic if the overgrown bushes lining it are any indication. When we finally get to the end of the long driveway, we reach a large clearing. I was expecting to find a grand house, but instead, there's a tiny, single-story, wood-clad home with a wrap-around porch. It

looks in good condition, and the surrounding yard is full of winter flowers and trees, clearly well-loved and taken care of.

Not what I was expecting at all.

“It looks deserted.” Luc comments as we pull up next to the others and all get out of the cars.

“Isn’t she a billionaire heiress?” Trick questions, a deep frown on his face.

All the guys look ready for battle, their postures tense and their eyes scanning the surrounding area like my own are. Atlas and Rage even have their hands resting on their guns, ready to pull them out at a moment’s notice. I can’t say I blame them; this place is making me uneasy as hell.

“Get down!” Trick suddenly yells, and without question, we all hit the deck as bullets start flying.

What the fuck.

“Don’t fire back!” I call out to the others. They’re all armed with guns, even Jensen.

I should probably start carrying one too. There’s not much that a knife can do in this situation. They’re just my comfort weapon.

Trick shoots me an incredulous look, and I yell over the gunfire to explain, either this woman is a shit shot, or she’s not actually aiming for us and just trying to scare us off. I’d bet money that it’s the latter.

“She obviously thinks that we’re someone else! So if we shoot back, it’s just going to cement her belief that we’re here to hurt her, and she’ll never talk to us.”

“Fuck.” Atty curses.

“Wait until there’s a break in fire. She should have to reload soon; she’s using a Beretta 92. She already shot eighteen rounds; she should only have two left, possibly ten. I didn’t get a good look at it.” Rage explains.

My eyebrows hit my hairline, that was damn impressive. He only saw it for a few seconds before we hit the ground to take

cover near the cars. There are two more shots before everything finally falls silent.

“You’re not taking me out without losing a few of your own men, that I can fucking promise you, Chris!” She yells, her voice strong and lacking the fear that should be there. This woman is tough as nails, and it’s clear she knows something, especially since she’s just called out thinking we’re with Chris.

“We’re not here to hurt you.” Trick yells back, holding his hands in the air.

“We come in peace,” Jensen yells.

“Dude, that’s not going to fucking help.” Riot admonishes. “We don’t work for Chris or have any affiliation with the bastard.”

“Prove it! Why are you here otherwise? How did you find me?”

“We came to talk to you about Phoenix, the five missing students and who the he is that Clint was so afraid of.” Trick starts to explain again, and from my vantage point, I can just make out the tip of her gun lowering slightly.

Thank fuck she’s willing to listen and not just fucking shoot.

“We go to Blackbreak academy. We found the meeting room.” Rage calls out.

I realise with surprise that it’s the first time I’ve really thought about the name of the academy; we were given the fake name to tell our parents and guardians, but I haven’t really considered the real name. Sure, it’s plastered everywhere, but I have paid little attention to it. There have been too many other things going on.

There’s a beat of silence as she takes in the information.

“Alright, stand up. Let me get a good look at you, one wrong move, and I will shoot.” She warns.

“Stay down until we know she’s not going to shoot, anyway,” Luc orders me.

If it weren't for the pleading light in his eyes, I would've argued, but instead, I concede and nod. I watch as the guys all slowly stand, raising their arms above their heads. When she doesn't start shooting, I slowly stand up myself. Her shrewd gaze studies each of the others closely. I'm impressed that they all manage to stand there so casually while being studied and having a gun aimed at them. Her gaze widens slightly when it lands on me. She sighs heavily, holstering her weapon and placing her hands on her hips, her eyes still locked on me.

"You better come in." She sighs heavily.

The guys all look at me, frowns drawing down their features. When we go to walk in, they all manoeuvre me so that I'm in the middle and surrounded by all of them. I'd question why she decided to let us in after she looked at me, but I'm starting to realise that this Amelia woman and I must really look alike. Everyone who knew her seemed to think so. I just wish I had a picture of her. Lucy said that she went to school with an Amelia and that she looks just like me; from that alone, we can assume that it was the same Amelia that Clint was talking about, so she might have pictures from when they were at school together. I'll bring it up to the guys later and see if we can get hold of her and ask.

We follow the woman into her home cautiously, all of us ready to draw our weapons in a second if need be. The inside of her home is nothing like I expected, but so far, nothing has been. It's simple in design and small, but it has a distinctive, cosy feel. The door opens up into a wide-open space, with no walls separating any of the areas and a staircase on the far right leading to, I'm assuming, a bedroom and bathroom. What is surprising about the inside is that to the left of the entryway, where there'd typically be space for a dining area, are several computers and other equipment that looks like it's used to monitor the surrounding area.

"That explains why all our cell phones stopped working." Peter, mutters and I look at him curiously. "She's got a piece of equipment that blocks the cell service. It's quite high tech."

"I have. Take a seat and explain to me why you're here."

“Thank you for listening to us, ma’am.” Trick starts.

“Isabelle.”

“Okay. As I said, we go to Blackbreak academy, we stumbled across a meeting room in the school, and when we explored further, we found the blood-soaked room.” Trick explains.

“Thanks to some connections, we found out about the five missing students. We started to investigate and ended up visiting Clint.” Rafe takes over.

“How did you know about Clint?” Isabelle asks, her eyes wary and full of suspicion.

“We found a safe and the combination, in there was a book with a list of names. The five students were listed, and we started researching the other names.”

“That’s impossible. There was a rule; no one was to write down the code to the safe so that someone who shouldn’t know what was in there couldn’t open it, and that book you’ve mentioned shouldn’t exist.” She frowns.

“We think someone was helping us; we don’t know why. The circumstances that we found the room under were unusual.” Riot explains.

“It’s unlikely that a Phoenix member is helping you; none of us are willing to deal with the consequences. As it is, I’m lucky that I just lost my company. It could’ve been so much worse; it was for the others.” She says vaguely, staring off into the distance as she gets lost in thought. “Before I tell you anything, I’d like to know what makes you all think that you’re qualified to investigate this?”

“We’re not normal teenagers. We come from, shall I say, interesting backgrounds.” Rage tells her.

She studies us for a second. “You know, for some reason, I believe that. You’re all heavily armed, and it didn’t faze you that I was shooting at you. None of you carry yourselves like normal teenagers.”

“I take that as a compliment.” Jensen grins.

“How do you know about Phoenix? As far as we were aware, it was only in Blackbreak and therefore only had male members.” I ask. It’s been bugging me ever since her name came up as the only one that we could find that had a connection to Chris.

“That one’s fairly easy to explain. If you’re the spouse of a high-ranking member, you get initiated and join. It makes it a lot easier with the secret meetings and cuts down on having to explain unaccounted time. There’s lots of legal stuff involved, and I shouldn’t be telling you since there’s a non-disclosure agreement in place. Amongst other things. I honestly couldn’t give a fuck anymore.”

“So, although Phoenix is very much a boy’s club at Blackbreak, it’s not when everyone gets set free into the wider world.” Cash summarises.

“Exactly. Before I explain more to you, I need to know what you know so far?”

“Not much is the short answer to that,” Luc answers before continuing. “Clint wasn’t exactly of sound mind when we went to see him. But he mentioned all the blood and that no one messed with him. Unfortunately, we couldn’t get him to tell us who the him was.”

“He also freaked out when he saw me. He thought I was someone else.”

“Amelia,” Isabelle says immediately, and I sigh, nodding.

“You mentioned Chris before, and we need to know more before we can even begin to try to take him down.” Trick interrupts, getting us back on track.

She immediately sneers at the mention of his name, “Yes, Chris is responsible for taking down a lot of the Phoenix owned companies. He’s also responsible for the murders of several of them. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s worked his way through them all by now. Only from our generation of Phoenix. As far as I understand it, they all fucked up when they wouldn’t blindly follow.”

I share a look with the guys; finally, we're getting somewhere.

"Chris was the one in charge? The one that murdered the five kids then?" Rage asks, leaning forward in his seat in anticipation.

"Oh no, you misunderstand. Chris wasn't the leader or whatever they fucking called it; he was his righthand man. Chris was loyal to a fault and did whatever he asked. He ordered Chris to take out the members that were there that night by any means necessary. Like most killers, though, he'd already gotten a taste for it and carried it on. He won't stop until we're all dead, or he is."

"Who is he, though?" I ask. Talking around in circles is driving me nuts.

"How do you know all this? Do you know what happened to the five missing students?" Trick asks.

"From what I've been told, they were all brutally murdered. I don't know a lot, I do know that it had something to do with Amelia, she got involved with him and as you can guess he wasn't a very nice man. He was fucking evil, dressed in Armani and dripping with charm until he snared her. She was trapped, and his mask dropped. I don't know where they're buried, and I don't know if Amelia is among them." She pauses, "As for how I know, I was married to Chris."

"What the fuck?" Riot asks, as shocked as the rest of us.

"It took years of planning to escape him, I lost my company, and I can never return to my family. I'm lucky that he liked them enough to not murder them. He has connections everywhere, so before you ask, no, I couldn't go to the police it was a sure-fire way to end up dead. But, of course, you've found me now, so I need to pack up and move on before he does."

"That was not our intention." I apologise. "We just want to end this and get justice for the missing kids."

"Admirable, I was getting itchy feet, anyway. I should've moved on years ago." She smiles softly, changing her features

from hardened and worn to beautiful.

“There’s no point in us taking Chris down and making him pay for these crimes if whoever is pulling the strings is still out there to carry it on.” Atlas points out, “Who was the leader of Phoenix, who is behind all of this?”

“Marvin.”

“I’m sorry, what did you just say?” I demand, rising to my feet.

“The leader of Phoenix at the time the kids went missing, and the man controlling Chris is Marvin Black.”

Fuck, that’s my fucking father. How the ever-loving hell is my fucking father the mastermind behind all of this?

The guy’s attention snaps to me, shock and worry mixing on their features as they worry about my reaction. I keep my mouth shut tightly; despite the barrage of questions I want to ask, I know I should probably keep the fact that I’m his daughter to myself. Isabelle studies us closely but doesn’t say anything. The guys all quickly school their expressions.

“Is there anything else that you can tell us that might help us take him down?” Trick asks, once again steering the conversation back on track.

“He used to keep all of his important files in the safe in his office. He never trusted me to be alone in the house with such sensitive information to do with his business. He is also a sadistic mother fucker, so I’d be willing to bet that he has files or something similar on the members he’s killed.”

“Why would he risk that, though?” Luc asks.

“Pride, he thinks that no one will be able to catch or realise what he’s done. He believes it to such an extent that he would keep anything that could be classed as evidence against him. I’m sorry I can’t help more.”

“Thank you. You’ve been a great help.” Trick answers as we stand to leave.

“Ever?” She says as I turn to follow the guys to the door.

“Yeah?”

“Amelia was a good person. I met her a couple of times at Phoenix functions. She was sweet and kind and always made you smile, but she was tough as nails. She was an amazing woman, much like me though she fell for the beautiful lie, and by the time she realised what a monster Marvin truly was, it was too late, and there was no turning back for her.”

“I thought you said you didn’t know if Amelia was buried with the five. So, how could you have met her at Phoenix functions after they left school?” Cash asks suspiciously.

“I didn’t say she was killed at the same time as them. I don’t even know if she’s dead. I do know that Chris and Marvin had a favourite spot to bury those that they killed.” She grimaces and then holds her hand up as Peter starts to ask a question. “No, I don’t know where that was, and frankly, I didn’t fucking want to know. I just wanted you to know that although Amelia was the catalyst for that night, it wasn’t her fault. She was as much a victim as the rest of us.”

My head is reeling. Maybe the giant mansion that my father owned back in Fresno wasn’t paid for, thanks to his business dealings. He had to have had his own money if he attended Blackbreak. I don’t ever remember him talking about anyone from his family. Silver lining to this whole fucked up thing, though, at least he’s dead, so instead of making our job more challenging and having to take out someone else, we’ve only got to take down Chris, which will be difficult enough as it is.

The blare of an alarm pulls me out of my thoughts, and I look around at the guys. Isabelle’s relaxed stance stiffens immediately as she quickly strides over to her monitors and presses a couple of buttons. A view of the driveway pops up on the screen, along with three SUVs bouncing quickly down it.

“They with you?” She asks.

“No, ma’am,” Jensen replies immediately.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to fight your way out of here, kids.” She says, worry clouding her eyes as she studies

us.

“Fuck yes!” Jensen grins excitedly, bouncing on the balls of his feet, and she raises her eyebrow, glancing at all of our excited and determined faces.

“Told you we weren’t normal.” Rage shrugs.

“I’ll fucking say, we’ve got about two minutes before they get up here.” She starts, pulling out weapons from a gun cabinet by the front door.

Chapter Seven

“All of those SUVs are going to be filled with heavily armed men. Are any of you comfortable using a sniper rifle?” She asks, running a critical eye over all of us as she holds a long case.

Surprisingly, Jensen and Rage immediately turn their gaze to Atlas. He nods his head, his face a stoic mask except for a gleam of excitement lighting his eyes. I share a look with the others. I wonder if that’s how he took Jeremy out. He’s never confirmed that it was him, and I haven’t asked, but the guys seemed so sure that it was him.

“Prove it, quickly,” Isabelle demands, thrusting the case at him. “The rest of you, arm up and pick a vantage point, try to stay in the house.”

“As you said, we’re all armed, but we definitely won’t say no to a second one.” Jensen grins.

They all go to pick from Isabelle’s array of weapons, expertly checking chambers and grabbing bullets. I hang back for a second, watching Atlas as he pops the clips on the case and quickly assembles the sniper rifle within it. I am relatively comfortable identifying quite a few guns, but I have no idea what kind this is, just that it’s a sniper rifle.

“Good, choose an advantage point from upstairs, take out as many as you can by whatever means you are comfortable with. That goes for the rest of you too. If you’re not able to take them out, take them down, and I’ll finish them off.”

Everyone nods, and I move towards the guys and the weapons as Isabelle rushes off to get something else, and Atlas makes his way upstairs, taking them two at a time, a tiny grin on his lips.

“Open the windows ready for us. There’s no point potentially harming ourselves shooting out fucking windows.”

Trick orders, giving Jensen a look as Riot, Luc and Rafe do as he's asked.

"That was one fucking time. It's not like I died."

I raise my eyebrow.

"No, but you did get a giant piece of fucking glass stuck in your thigh." Cash throws back, and Jensen just bites his lip, smirking and choosing not to say anything back.

"I want to hear this story, but not right now," I warn him, and he nods, his grin widening.

I don't know how I ever thought these men were normal and fucking harmless. They are the furthest thing from it, and I have never felt more safe or cherished. My gaze lingers on Rage as he checks his weapons. Yeah, something's happening there too. Something that I refuse to deal with until later.

If ever.

"Please, tell me that you've done well in your weapons training?" Trick asks Peter, worriedly interrupting my thoughts and making my attention snap to Peter, anxiety spearing me.

We need to fully bring him in A.S.A.P, if he doesn't have the training we can give it to him, he's become truly irreplaceable and needed.

"I can handle my own." He replies with a confident grin.

"Are you sure, dude, because this is life and death, and you're one of us now. So, none of us want to lose you." Cash asks.

Peter's self-assured grin turns into something softer, "I'm top of my class, and I also graduated out of the first and second-year classes. I'm now in advanced."

"Oh, thank fuck." I mutter, my worry leaving me instantly. In all honesty, he probably knows more about weapons than I do if he's that far into it. I know how to show, and I know the names of some guns, how to take them apart and clean them, all of that, but I am sure that there are gaps in my knowledge.

Knives have always been my favourite.

“Hell yeah, man!” Jensen grins, his eyes filling with relief.

I think it’s safe to say that we’re all in agreement that Peter is now a part of this family.

There’s no more time for anything else as Isabelle storms back in, a sawn-off shotgun in one hand and a handgun in the other, the sounds of screeching tires and slamming doors spurs us into action as we all stay low and head towards the windows so that we can see what’s happening and aim. It’s a damn good job that Trick had us open the windows because they would’ve definitely seen the movement if we had tried to open them while they’re out there, and shooting through them would’ve given away our positions quite dramatically.

I catch Rafe watching me worriedly and quickly sign to him that I’ve got this, and this isn’t an entirely new situation for me; I know what I’m doing, anger fills his gaze at that, but he seems a bit more reassured, so I’m counting that as a win. Isabelle was right, there are at least fifteen heavily armed men and women outside. One man steps forward as we watch cautiously, not wanting to give away our positions.

“We know you’re in there, Isabelle!” He yells. “Chris requests his wife’s presence. He’s known that you’ve been hiding out here for a while now but has decided that he’s let you play for long enough.”

“Well, at least now we know, you guys didn’t lead them here. It would be terrible if he were keeping close tabs on you all.” She mutters.

I hadn’t even thought about that and what it would mean if he had followed us. It would’ve meant that he knows far more than we’re comfortable with and would make taking him down a hell of a lot harder. She doesn’t bother replying, instead taking aim and taking him out, with no hesitation. As a woman on the left cries out, with rage and pain at seeing him shot and raises her gun, aiming for where she thinks the shot has come from, she falls to the ground, the shot that took her out coming from the floor above us.

The sound of bullets hitting the house is almost deafening, but we waste no time firing back. They aren’t keeping their

cool as well as I'm sure Chris would've liked them to. Clearly, they weren't expecting Isabelle to fight back or have backup. I duck as someone aims their gun at my window and pull Luc down as well, just as bullets spray through the window, lodging themselves in the wall and furniture behind us. As soon as there's a break in fire, I pop back up and aim, taking out two more as Luc does the same. The fight seems to go on for hours, but finally, everything falls silent, the ring of gunfire still reverberates in my ears, and I take a breath, scanning the area like the others seem to be in case we've missed someone.

"Sound off!" Trick orders loudly as soon as it's clear that we've got them all.

"Fine!" Cash replies.

"All good." Rage says next, sounding disappointed it's already over.

"Yeah, I'm good too," Jensen adds with a freaking pout.

"Luc and I are good!" I reply, looking straight at Trick, sticking my tongue out at him.

"We're good too." Rafe and Riot say together.

"I'm fine," Atlas adds, smirking as he walks down the stairs with the gun slung over his shoulder. "I didn't see anyone escape with the scope."

"I'm great. There were fifteen that exited the SUVs, each one can only fit five people, and there are fifteen people on the ground. They're all accounted for." Peter, says already analysing.

"Are you okay?" I ask Isabelle.

"Yes, I'm fine. Very impressive. We need to make a move, though. There's a chance that he either has another team already on the way, in case the first didn't do their jobs, or one of them called him." She starts towards the door, all of us following.

We got lucky this time, but who knows how many more people he could send in the next wave, and if they're more skilled than this lot, we risk someone getting hurt. So it's

better to bail now. We also don't want anyone to escape, and our description to make it back to Chris, we need to stay off of his radar as much as possible.

"I'll make a call and get someone out here to clean up." Atlas offers, already pulling his phone out.

"Don't bother; I think it leaves a certain message to Chris that I definitely want to give him. And since I'm assuming you kids don't want anyone knowing of your involvement in this, for obvious reasons, I'm not going to say shit if he catches me. I think it's a good idea to let him think that I took out fifteen of his men by myself." She grins, "Plus, he made this mess indirectly. He can clear it up."

"I like the way you think. It'll definitely make him warier of you." I smirk.

"Do you want me to clear your computer systems?" Peter asks, eyeing the equipment. "It'll have a lot of data about you, what happened here, and us."

"Can you?" She asks.

"Absolutely, I can wipe them so well that even the best analysts and hackers won't be able to recover any of it." He grins.

"Impressive, although I don't know why I'm surprised. You lot do not behave like normal teenagers and certainly have a skill set that few people will ever require. Let me just take out this hard drive. The rest can be fried."

Peter nods and watches her closely as she takes out one of the hard drives for one of the computers. As soon as she's done, he sits down and gets to work.

"We'll help you to the car with your bags." Cash, ever the gentleman, offers.

"Thank you. Keep the weapons you've used; I need to travel as light as possible."

"Thank you," Atty replies, immediately staring at the sniper rifle lovingly.

We help load her bags into an entirely inconspicuous and basic car that will easily blend in no matter where she goes. It's an intelligent choice and speaks volumes of the thought she's put into this. As the guys are loading the last bag, Peter comes out of the bullet-riddled house.

"It's all done. Nothing will be found if someone goes through them." He tells her, smiling kindly.

"Thank you for all the information you've given us on Chris." Trick tells her, holding out his hand to shake hers.

"You're welcome. Thanks for helping take care of his men. I wouldn't have survived that without you guys." She grins, completely unconcerned.

"You're welcome. It was fun." Riot grins.

She just shakes her head and jumps in her car. "You guys need to get gone too."

"We're going now. We have no desire to hang around for any longer." Luc replies.

We all step back as she puts the car in gear and prepares to pull away. She only gets a few feet before she stops.

"Ever, I need to give you something." She calls out of the window, her face serious and her eyebrows dipped like she's conflicted.

I walk up to her window; my curiosity peaked as she rummages around in her glove box for something. The guys are tense behind me. Not trusting her despite the fact that we just fought together. I'm not dumb, so I have my hand resting on one of my hidden knives just in case I need to pull it. I instantly relax when she pulls out a notepad and pen. She scribbles something on it, studying me closely and hesitating before finally handing it to me, although she keeps hold of one corner.

"This is a strange request, but I hope that what we've just been through has earned me a little trust." She pauses, "Unless the initials and three dates on this piece of paper make sense, do not call the number. I've only got a hunch, and I could be completely wrong, so I need you to promise me that unless

those two things make sense to you eventually, do not call the number.”

“Okay, I can do that.”

“If they do make sense, then it’s as equally important that you call it. I know I’m not making any sense; I promise you that it has nothing to do with Phoenix and will not affect your investigation of Chris.”

“Alright, as curious as I am, I can do what you’ve asked.” I glance down at the paper noting the three dates and initials, none of which I recognise except one of them, which is vaguely familiar, but I can’t quite place it.

She smiles once more before driving off. I hope she makes it, and I hope we can get to Chris before he gets to her, and she can live her life a bit easier, not constantly looking over her shoulder and waiting for someone to attack. He’s very powerful, so although we may be able to put him away for a very long time, there’s a high chance that he could still have people looking for her.

“Come on; we’ve got to get going.” Trick urges, turning towards the cars with long strides.

We all follow, getting into the same cars we arrived in, a sense of urgency chasing us. It’s strange to realise that my eyes never really strayed to the bodies littering the floor through that entire conversation. As Luc reverses and turns around, my eyes fall on them, I’m responsible for taking a couple of them out. As always, though, it was either them or us. There’s no mistaking that these men and women had blood on their hands.

Like you? A dark voice whispers in my mind, and I’m reminded that not everyone has a choice. Sometimes someone pulls their strings and forces them to do things that they would never normally do if they had a choice.

“Are you okay, Firecracker?” Luc asks as we start the long drive down the mountain.

“Yes, I’m fine. Are you?” I ask, taking my eyes off of the surrounding trees.

“I’m good. Can you get that?” He replies, nodding to his buzzing cell phone.

I answer it and put it on speakerphone so that we can both hear it. “Everything alright?”

“Yes, Sweetheart, Peter just wanted to tell us something, and I figured it was easier to loop everyone in than having to explain it several times.” Trick reassures me.

“Before I got rid of everything on Isabelle’s computers, I copied all the information on them onto a USB. I figured it would be better to be safe than sorry, and she could’ve withheld a lot of information from us.”

“I hadn’t even thought of doing that. Good job.” Luc praises.

“Do you always carry a USB stick on you?” Jensen asks, a curious lilt to his voice that I can hear even through the phone.

“Well, yeah.” He replies, “Just in case.”

I grin, “Have you ever needed it before?”

“There were a couple of occasions where some of the teachers at school weren’t treating the kids how they should be. In those instances, I’ve helped procure the evidence to neutralise them using the information on their laptops, etcetera.”

“Wow, that’s pretty awesome.”

“Thanks, I always had to keep one on me in case an opportunity arose that I could get the information off of their laptops. After that, it just became a habit.”

“A damn useful one; it wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if she kept information from us. After all, she only just met us, and we’re not normal teenagers. I’m not sure I’d give us all the information we were asking for.” Rafe adds in.

“We’ll also be able to see if she had any visitors, anyone associated with Chris or Phoenix. She kept the cameras recording all the time, and there’s a lot of footage.” Peter explains.

“Okay, well, we have other things that we need to prioritise above that at the moment, but I do agree that it’s important that we sift through all the information to see if there’s anything that can help us in there. We’ll put it on the to-do list, and we can all help sift through the footage; the files are probably best left for you to go through.”

“Sounds good to me.” Riot replies.

“Yeah, that’ll work,” Peter adds in.

“Anyone spotted anything so far?” Rage asks.

“Nope, no one’s following us, and I didn’t even see any other vehicles go up the mountain road while we were coming down,” Atlas replies.

“Good, we’re not too far from the Academy now, debrief when we get back, and then we can just chill before school tomorrow.”

“Do you think we’re going to manage to get an entire week at school with no drama?” I ask.

“I doubt there’ll be no drama, but hopefully, there’ll be no massive things we have to deal with.” Cash replies, sounding slightly amused.

“I don’t think our lives will ever be drama free.” Riot chuckles.

“This week should just be research and waiting to hear back from my contact,” Atlas says.

The conversation peters out after that, and we finally arrive back at the house. I haven’t let my mind drift to what Isabelle told us. There’s no doubt in my mind that my father was involved, but I don’t understand how. I also don’t know how he had the money to attend Blackbreak in the first place. When we were growing up, our house was nice, but it wasn’t the kind of home that would suggest that we had a lot of money.

Of course, there’s a good chance that it was all done so that he could stay under the radar. From what Isabelle was saying, Chris was still taking orders from Marvin recently. It makes me wonder what his end game was. In Fresno, he dealt in

drugs and guns, and he was entirely unforgiving when people crossed him, or he wanted something from a rival gang. I just wish I knew his plan and what he was hoping to achieve.

I don't think we'll ever know what his plan was or more about his past; it doesn't sound like he was really close with anyone but Chris. I highly doubt he'd be willing to fill me in on the details.

Chapter Eight

Rafe

That trip certainly didn't go the way that we thought it was going to today. I honestly thought it would be a quiet chat with someone fairly unassuming, and I definitely didn't think that we'd actually gain any helpful information from it. That couldn't be further from what happened. I am so fucking grateful that Ever can hold her own when it comes to situations like that; I am worried about the effects that the recent violent events could have on everyone. I'm keeping an eye on them in case anyone starts to struggle.

My eyes search for Ever as soon as I step foot out of the car, she seems to be handling the news that her father is the man behind all of this, even if indirectly in the most recent murders, reasonably well. She looks lost in thought but not distraught or disbelieving. What scares me, though, is that it didn't seem to surprise her that he was capable of that sort of thing. It again leaves me questioning what her life was like before she came home. Needing to hold her, I lengthen my stride to catch up with her, threading my fingers through hers. She grips my hand tightly and tilts her head up to look at me as we follow the others into the house.

I pause, placing my hand on her cheek as she rises up on her toes, my lips dipping to hers. I savour the sensation and pull her tightly against my chest as her arms wrap around my neck. I will never tire of kissing her or having her in my arms.

“Hey, is this yours?” Jensen asks.

Ever and I pull apart and to look at Jensen and see him holding up a USB stick.

“That's not one of mine. Where did you find it?” Peter asks, taking it off him to get a closer look.

“On the floor outside the door.” Jensen frowns.

“Does it belong to anyone else?” Trick asks.

Everyone answers that they don't recognise it.

I frown as we walk into the house. “It's not mine. Maybe someone left it here for us?”

“Possibly, there's one way to find out.” Riot points out.

“Don't put it in a laptop that has sensitive information on it, just in case it's not what it appears. Someone could end up with a lot of information we don't want them to have.” Peter warns.

“I've got one that I haven't used for anything but schoolwork, I haven't even signed into my Netflix or email accounts, so there's no incriminating information there,” Atlas answers him before turning on his heel and taking the stairs two at a time.

The rest of us take off our shoes and jackets and make our way into the kitchen. It seems to have become a habit now that we sit at the table to discuss any information.

“Does anyone want a drink?” I ask.

I regret the question as soon as everyone puts their orders in for what they want.

“I'll help, Big Guy.” Ever smiles softly as she heads to the kitchen to help me get drinks for everyone.

It doesn't take long for Atlas to come back with his laptop. Ever and I hand out the drinks to everyone and then take a seat at the table as Atlas hands the laptop straight to Peter.

“You're up.” He grins, and Peter chuckles.

We all take a second just to enjoy being home as he boots it up and then plugs the USB drive in. I expect him to take a while to get into it. I don't know if there are any passwords on there, but I assume that there would be, even if it were deliberately left for us.

“Oh, wow, okay,” Peter says, his eyebrows meeting his hairline in surprise before they dip down into a frown.

“What is it?” Rage asks cautiously.

“It’s a video. I’ve paused it, but well, hang on, let me get it up on the screen in the sitting room, and you’ll see.” He explains, standing up and moving through to the sitting room.

We all follow curiosity peaked as I wonder what the video could possibly be of. But, it becomes apparent as soon as the paused video comes up on the screen. The screen is paused on a woman, knelt in the grass, her face is side on to the camera, and she’s playing with a large dog. However, what is shocking is that she looks like an older version of Ever. My gaze snaps to where she’s sat on Jensen’s lap, and her expression falls as her eyes land on the screen.

“That looks like an older version of my mom.” She whispers, her voice hushed, and her eyes glued to the screen.

“Maybe it’s just the angle. Let’s watch it and see why someone left this for us?” Trick suggests, waiting for her to nod her consent before he gives Peter the go-ahead to play it.

As the video plays, the woman turns to face the camera more, and the likeness between Ever and the woman is striking. They have the same dark hair, and even their eyes are similar shades of grey. Unfortunately, I don’t remember Ever’s mom well enough to say if it looks like her or not.

“You can hire actresses to do an awful lot these days, and makeup can change a lot.” Rage tries to reassure Ever who’s eyes are still glued to the screen. A sheen of tears covers her eyes.

“Maybe.” She mutters.

“It doesn’t look like she knew she was being filmed. Leaves and branches keep covering parts of the lens, like whoever is filming is in a bush or something. They’re crouched low as well like they’re hiding.” Riot offers, moving closer to the screen to get a better look.

“But again, that could just be acting. They could all be in on it. Phoenix or Atlas’s brother is clearly trying to mess with Ever. If it’s Phoenix, then it would be fair to assume that they’re doing this to distract us from getting too close;

however, that would mean that Chris has someone at the academy working for him.” Trick starts before I take over.

“If it’s Blake, though, what’s the motive?” I ask.

“Purely because he knows Ever means something to me, and he might even know why Liam has an interest in her.” Atlas sighs heavily.

“He’d go after me just because you like me?” Ever asks, somewhat incredulously.

“I wouldn’t even have to like you, just show a mild interest in you, and that would be enough for him.”

“But why?” She asks.

“I’m not entirely sure. He’s always been distant. Ever since we were kids, and he was always cruel. We grew up surrounded by death and crime. Our father is the leader of one of the biggest crime businesses in this country, so we saw a lot of things that we shouldn’t have, and he was not a pleasant man. It was not easy to be around him on his good days, although I have to admit in recent years he’s become less of the problem, Blake and his pure depraved insanity taking over for him.” Atlas explains, giving us more information about his childhood and family than he ever has before.

“So, he’s a giant dick but with the added issues of a giant cruel streak, and he’s a sadistic psychopath?” Jensen questions, seemingly unbothered like usual.

“Yeah, that sums it up.” Atlas grins, no amusement in his expression, though.

“You forget, he’s also got several members of your dad’s business that follow him and think he should take over from Liam.”

“He’d be dangerous enough by himself but add that there are people crazy enough to follow him, and he’s even more dangerous.” Trick points out.

“Why do I feel like it’s going to be harder to take him down than it is to take Chris down?” Ever asks.

“Because it is, Princess. Whereas Chris is only going after Phoenix members, Blake doesn’t discriminate if you’ve caught him in a bad mood or even just look at him funny, he’ll torture and kill you. He doesn’t discriminate, but he’s also incredibly smart. He’s done a lot for Liam’s business to make it work better and more efficiently. As you can imagine, he’s very good at getting people to do what he wants.”

“Well, fuck.” She replies, a curious glint in her eye that can only mean trouble.

Of course, instead of feeling frightened or at the very least wary, she’s taken it as a challenge, one that she is clearly looking forward to taking on.

“Do you guys want to watch the rest of this, in case there’s anything else left on it?” Peter asks, having paused the video when we all started talking.

I hadn’t thought about him being here and if we were talking about things that he shouldn’t know. I know we can trust him, and I think the decision will be unanimous when we finally talk about officially bringing him in. He’s a part of this family, and although I’m still slightly worried about how he can handle himself in a fight, I am not concerned about his weapons handling in the slightest.

“Yeah, sure, we may as well.” Ever answers before anyone else can.

Peter presses play and lets it roll. The woman is dressed impeccably, and although I can’t see much of the house from what I can see, I’d have to assume that it’s large and definitely upper class.

“Amelia, are you ready to go, darling?” A distant voice off-camera calls out, barely discernible on the camera.

I glance around at the others to see if they caught it and see Atlas frowning like he’s confused; I raise my eyebrow in question, but he just shrugs and shakes his head.

“Amelia?” Jensen asks.

“That would mean that she is very much alive and definitely not your mother, which would’ve been impossible, anyway. I

can see why people think you look alike, though.” Peter frowns, leaning closer to the screen.

“It could still all be a ruse. I’m not sure we should just take it at face value that this is the Amelia that we’ve been reading about.” Trick mutters, scrubbing a hand over the scruff on his chin. “I think we need to be cautious.”

I don’t miss the concerned look that Cash sends him and wonder if he’s been drawing again.

“Well, hopefully, it will be easy enough to figure out. We were going to contact Lucy and see if she had any more information or photos of Amelia. If she does, we’ll be able to confirm whether or not this is her easily enough.” I shrug.

“I can call her tomorrow. It’s getting a bit late now, and I’m starving.” Ever grins.

“Fair enough, Pizza?” Riot asks everyone and then takes their orders. “I’ll order it now.” He finishes once everyone has told him what they want and gets up, going into the kitchen to make the call.

“Peter, can you see about tracing those videos you found of the murders on the dark web? We need to know without a doubt that it’s him behind it. We can’t have him getting out on a loophole. We have Isabelle’s word on it, but without her to testify, that won’t do much good.” Trick asks him.

“Of course, I just need a more secure laptop before I can go that deep into it. I don’t want to risk anyone being able to trace it back to us.” Peter replies, his gaze moving to Atlas.

“My guy hasn’t gotten back to me yet, but he should do by tomorrow,” Atlas replies.

“Sorry, man. I completely forgot you needed a more secure one.” Trick apologises, “Would you be able to go through the information that you got from Isabelle’s computers. If you leave the surveillance footage, we can all help you go through it. Is there a way that you could just search for a keyword in a document? That way, we can just see if there’s any information on Phoenix in there? We can go through everything else at another time.”

“Yeah, I can do that, it’ll cut down on time, and I can look through the rest of the information as soon as we’ve sorted everything else out with Chris.” He agrees easily.

“Great, thanks, man. We need to talk about what Isabelle said,” He pauses, looking at Ever in concern. She shrugs and leans further back into Jensen.

“Pizzas all ordered.” Riot announces, coming back into the room and taking a seat next to me.

“Thank god, I’m starving.” Jensen groans dramatically, making Ever smile.

Her smile falls as she becomes serious and says bluntly, “So, my dad is the guy behind it all.”

“You don’t seem too surprised, Puddin’.” Rage points out.

“I’m not surprised that he was capable of it. I am surprised that he had the wealth behind him to attend Blackbreak in the first place. Not only that, but he had must have had the power behind him as well to have been considered to become a Phoenix member.” She explains.

“I was going to ask if you knew anything about his past.”

“As far as I was aware, he had no family, and the mansion that he lived in was paid for by his drug and weapons empire.”

“The mansion he lived in? Don’t you mean the one that you lived in?” Rage asks, his mouth pulling down into a deep frown.

“No, I lived in a trailer across town where he did all of his business dealings from. The only time I was allowed in the house was when CPS got involved, I was there long enough for the checks, and then he moved me straight back.”

“What the fuck.” He growls.

My own anger grows. That man was clearly a piece of fucking shit and didn’t deserve to be anywhere near Ever. I can’t help but wonder if it all went downhill after Ever’s mom died. I can’t remember enough about them from when we were

kids, and actually, I can't really recall Ever's mom. The man is fucking lucky he didn't survive the raid.

"I'm glad I shot the fucker; I just wish I could've taken my time." Rage mutters, and Ever's gaze snaps to him.

He looks worried for a second like he's upset her, which would be a fair assumption since he is talking about her father. But, as always, Ever's reaction shocks the rest of us as she gets off Jensen's lap and walks towards Rage, who surprisingly stays seated despite not knowing what her intentions are and having a bad past with women in general. He trusts her, and it's clear. She smiles as her eyes connect with his and moves slowly as she leans forward, kissing his cheek and letting her lips linger for a second. He tries to repress his reaction, but we all see it, and it's pretty entertaining to watch.

"Thank you. You saved me in more ways than one."

He immediately pulls her down onto his lap and wraps his arms around her as she places her hands on his arms and leans back, a proud grin on her face.

"If it gets too much and you need me to move, let me know, okay?"

"I promise, but I really doubt that will be the case. It's easy with you." He admits, casting a worried glance our way.

All of us can see what's slowly happening between them, and I just grin in response as Atlas smirks.

"What's the plan, boss?" He asks, diverting the attention away from himself.

"See if we can get information from Lucy tomorrow. Then, hopefully, get the Laptop from Atlas's contact so Peter can trace the videos from the dark web. As soon as we have that confirmation, then we can work on how we're going to take him down."

"Sounds good. I'm going to go and clean the weapons, hand them over." Atlas mutters, standing up. We all start handing over our guns.

Peter gets up as well and starts grabbing weapons too. “I’ll help.”

We share a look, giving Atlas the go-ahead to see how he’s coping with this and how he feels about being more involved. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter if we all want to bring him in if he decides that it’s not for him. Today was a good taster run for him, I guess, of what it’s like to be involved. It’s not right for everyone, and we’d all entirely understand if he decides it wasn’t for him. I think that if that happens, we need to make sure that he realises that we won’t abandon him. Even if he wasn’t fully involved, he’s still one of us, and our friendship doesn’t come with conditions.

It would get a bit more complicated because we wouldn’t be able to tell him where we’re going or what’s going on. We wouldn’t even be able to tell him how we got any injuries that we’re bound to get. We’d also have to make sure that if he wanted to stay friends with us but didn’t want to be involved fully, he’d still be in danger. Similar to what happened with Rylie, she decided that the risk was not something that she could deal with and has separated herself from us altogether.

I don’t blame her at all, but I do think that there’s something else going on with her that she wasn’t ready to share. I hope that she’s willing to accept our help and gets back in contact one day. I know it’s still affecting Ever.

All of these things Peter needs to be aware of. First, we need to see how he’s feeling about everything that happened today.

Chapter Nine

Peter

I take the last gun from Trick and follow Atlas out of the room and down the hall into the room dedicated to weapons and everything to do with them. He lays the guns on a table before getting everything we'll need to clean them. We take seats opposite each other and get to work; the silence is comforting, and I find that odd considering I'm usually the person who feels the need to fill any silence.

As always, when I clean my weapons, my racing mind calms, and the methodical work of cleaning them helps to soothe. I glance at Atlas to see that it does the same thing for him. I've seen Atlas and Rage around the school for a while now, and they've always intimidated me, to put it mildly. They each have such a dangerous aura, and it's no secret who Atlas's father is or the hold that Atlas himself has over the school, both students and teachers alike. I never would've thought that I would be comfortable in his presence, yet here we are.

I feel more like myself than I ever have, it's like I've been drifting aimless for years, and now I've found my place. I'm happier than I have been since it all ended with Elijah. When it ended with him, I was in a really dark place. We'd been in each other's lives' for as long as I can remember, and I still get a pang of pain every now and then that comes seemingly from nowhere. Ever's words by the bonfire have given me a spark of hope that we'll find each other again if we are meant to be together.

Of course, that might throw a whole new set of complications at us now; since I'm now involved with Ever and the guys, what we're doing isn't exactly safe or legitimate. I wouldn't change it for the world, though. Even when I was with Elijah, I always felt like I was searching for something, like there was something more I could be doing than just

hacking into places where I shouldn't have been. It's one of the reasons that I started putting my skills to good use, finding dirt on people that needed to know there were consequences to their actions, that sort of thing. It still never felt like enough though, now I finally feel like I'm no longer searching.

It's an amazing feeling and absolutely unexpected. I just hope that the Ever and the guys feel the same connection with me that I do with them. I know that there are things they are still keeping to themselves, and I understand the reasoning behind it. But I will prove to them I'm worth trusting and that I am capable of fighting beside them.

"You alright, man? That was quite something that we just went through with Isabelle."

"Yeah, I'm good," I reply honestly.

"Are you sure? This lifestyle isn't for everyone? No one would blame you if you didn't want to be involved anymore. You're one of us, that's not going to change now, regardless if you want to be involved or not." He glances up at me, the gun still apart in his hands as he pauses.

"Thanks, that means a lot. It's been a long time since I've felt like I belong somewhere. I want to be still involved with as much as you'll allow me to be, though. I like that we're making a difference and helping people even if the methods aren't exactly conventional." I grin, "I've never been exactly conventional, anyway."

"That's good to know. You can certainly keep up with the rest of us when it comes to your weapons handling, and you've been an amazing help with all the research we've had to do recently. We never would've gotten this far without you." He replies, going back to cleaning his weapon.

I get the sense that's all I'm going to get out of him, and he's officially closed the conversation. That's fine with me. I hope that they decide to bring me into their world entirely soon. I go back to cleaning the weapons, letting the familiar job calm my mind and organise my thoughts. I need to go through the USB drive that I got from Isabelle's; I just want to make sure that we're not missing anything important. This is

one of the fundamental ways that I can help protect them all, and I will not fail.

Between us both, it doesn't take long for us to finish the weapons and put them back where they belong.

"Guys!" Luc yells, "Pizzas here!"

"Thank god, I feel like my stomach is eating itself," I announce, relieved as we make our way back into the sitting room.

They've all put a movie on, something light-hearted, which I'm grateful for. I'm not a fan of sad movies. The pizza is delicious, and the conversation is light and easy. You'd never guess that only a few hours ago, we were all in a gunfight where one of us could've potentially been killed. I stay for a bit longer after we've finished eating before deciding to make my way home so I can get on with going over the USB.

I must admit I am curious about this contact of Atlas's that can get me a secure laptop. I can't wait to see if he actually manages to get me one and what level of security it has if he does. I vow to myself that despite how curious I am to see exactly where it's come from, I won't delve into the history of it when I get my hands on the laptop. That wouldn't be the way to go about getting them to trust me.

Ever

This morning's lessons have gone surprisingly smoothly. Not only are the teachers actually starting to teach us now, but none of them gave us any shit for the time that we've missed. I think that probably has something to do with the influence that Atlas and Rage have here. The rest of the students have surprised me the most, though. I figured that after what happened with the coach and then consequently how Rage reacted, I'd be getting a lot more hostility from them for getting their coach suspended. That's not been the case, though, there have been a couple of glares aimed in my direction, but mostly I'm getting those guy head nods of respect.

It's a definite improvement and one I'm grateful for. But, again, it most likely helps that Rage reacted how he did. He has a reputation here, and going up against me in this instance would be going up against him.

I'm sure everyone has heard just how severe his reaction was by now. I don't think anyone is brave enough to call him out on it.

With everything that's happened, it's been easy to forget that I'm here because I'm in hiding and need to testify against the men caught in the raid that killed my father. Of course, the guy I'm on the run from already knows I'm here. Although he won't touch me on school grounds and seems to have a weird kind of protective thing going on when it comes to me, I'm by no means safe. I'll still eventually have to testify, although the last update from Alaric was that it's going to be a while before it goes to court, and they need me. He also said that there's a chance that I could testify by either video or written statement, for which I'm damn hopeful.

Instead of calling Lucy this morning, I decided to send her an email, simply asking if she had any pictures of Amelia because I was curious since several people have said I look like her. I wanted to keep it reasonably vague. Even though I'm only contacting her through email, Phoenix has proved the reach that they have time and time again. The last thing I want is for anyone to think she knows something that she doesn't. She's yet to reply, but I know she's a busy woman with her two companies. Hopefully, she will get back to us soon.

"Is the coach back yet?" As we all make our way to weapons class, I ask, our second to last one today.

"No, he's still under investigation apparently, a couple of the guys here and a female teacher has come forward with allegations of inappropriate behaviour," Atlas growls, his face harsh.

"I should've broken his fucking arm." I growl.

"I'll look into it and see if I can get anything off of his laptop. I should be able to access it remotely since it's on the school network." Peter adds, and I look at him impressed.

“I am so damn glad you’re on our side, dude.” Jensen grins.

“I was doing this sort of thing before you guys showed up.” He admits. “I’ll have to do it after school, but it shouldn’t take me long. I’ll get it all sent off to the right people.”

“Good thinking.” Trick praises.

“Are we in the beginner class for weapons?” Jensen groans.

“No, you’re in the same class as Rage and me.” Atlas reassures him with a grin.

“Thank fuck.” Cash answers before Jensen can, sounding relieved.

“I’ll see you guys in combat. I’m just down the hall.” Peter says as he walks off.

As soon as we enter the large hall, curious gazes immediately land on us. They start to turn away uninterested until their eyes find me. A couple of them turn away, not caring that I’m here, but the majority of them are glaring at me as if I don’t belong here.

“What the fuck is she doing in here?” One guy asks angrily, aiming the question at the teacher.

At least, I’m assuming he’s the teacher. He’s not dressed like any of our teachers have so far, he’s much more casually dressed in jeans and a shirt, whereas all our other teachers, apart from the coach, dress in suits or some sort of semi-formal attire.

I open my mouth to retort when he interrupts me.

“She has a name and wouldn’t be in my class unless she was skilled enough to be so.” He surprises me as he shoots the guy down immediately.

Someone scoffs, and his eyes narrow in on him.

“Have something to say, Parker?” He demands, arms folded across his chest and his face dark.

“With all due respect Demetri, she’s only in the class because she’s fucking all of them. There’s no way she can handle a knife, let alone one of the guns.”

I spin on my heel to face my guys, each one of them clenching their jaws at the idiot's words.

"Leave it," I warn quietly.

"Bad move Parker," Demetri smirks, and Parker looks at him confused. "If your allegations are correct, then you've just insulted their girl. Do you think that's a smart fucking idea?"

I look back over at the guy and smirk as he visibly gulps and takes a step back before catching himself and standing up straighter. The teacher's eyes go over my head, and my eyebrows dip in confusion as he and Atlas seem to have a silent conversation. Atlas nods subtly, and the teacher's eyes land on me.

"I wouldn't normally suggest this, but since there are several boys," he enunciates, "In here that seem to doubt your skill level, I was wondering if you'd like to show them your skillset."

"Sure, I don't need to prove myself to these fuckers, but if it gets them off my back, then why the fuck not. Besides, weapons are my favourite." I grin, knowing that it's a little unnerving.

Demetri's eyes widen slightly before he chuckles, understanding lighting his eyes.

"Knives or one of the guns?" He asks, gesturing to the wall of weapons at one end of the room and then tilting his head in the direction of the door that leads to the indoor range and a row of targets, visible through the wall of windows.

"Ever." Trick's voice holds a warning which I promptly ignore.

I love proving people wrong. One of my guy's chuckles quietly.

"Knives," I smirk, once again making Demetri's eyes widen in surprise as the other students in the room start to murmur.

I was going to use my own knives, but it's probably not a bright idea to let the teacher and kids in here that I'm armed. Trick is right in this case, I turn and stick my tongue out at

him, and he just grins, knowing he's won, his arms crossed over his chest. As I walk towards the weapons wall, I catch the confused looks of the other guys in the room as their eyes bounce between Trick and me. I run my eyes over my choices, picking up a couple and testing their balance. I finally find a set of three that will work for me and make my way back over to the guys, standing further away from the target than would be expected.

“You don't get a second chance if you miss.”

“You're going to have to stand a lot closer to the target if you've got any chance of hitting it.” Someone else calls out, and everyone snickers like damn children.

“When you're read ...” Demetri starts.

Before he can finish, I've already launched one of the knives, it hits the bullseye, and everyone falls deathly silent.

“Lucky throw.” Someone mutters into the silence.

I roll my eyes and throw the other two in quick succession, each one landing in the bullseye.

“That's my girl,” Atty mutters close to my ear as he steps up behind me, making me grin.

I pull out the gun I grabbed when I got the knives, and no one fucking noticed. It's obvious it's a school weapon since it has the emblem on the side for some unknown fucking reason.

“When the hell did you pick that up?” Parker asks, sounding equal parts incredulous and angry.

“Did anyone see when she picked up the gun? It's clearly one of the school ones.” Demetri asks.

No one speaks up, and although I thought no one saw me pick up the gun, I am surprised. A school that makes sure that all its students can handle weapons should also teach them to be more aware of their surroundings and any potential threat.

“She picked it up when she got her knives. I see we need to work on making sure that you're all aware of your

surroundings!” Demetri announces, disappointment evident in his tone.

“But we’re at school.” One of them protests as if it’s a good enough reason.

Demetri’s face darkens. “You all have high-profile parents or are high-profile in your own damn right, don’t be naïve enough to think that just because you’re at school, you are safe.”

His words obviously impact everyone as they realise that they are very much in danger.

Demetri studies everyone closely. Once he’s satisfied that they are taking his warning seriously, he turns back to me, “That was impressive. I think you have proved your point. All of you can go and practice in the gun range. I’ve read your files and know that you are all capable.”

He dismisses us, and my men make their way over to the weapons wall choosing their own guns as I make my way over to the indoor gun range. It doesn’t escape my notice that through the long wall of windows, the teacher will be able to keep an eye on us, and the students will be able to see what’s going on too. I have a feeling that we might end up with an audience. When I enter the range, an instructor approaches me from a booth at the end. I was starting to doubt the safety and credibility of the school for not having enough teachers available when students are armed.

“Hello, I’m Kyle, and I’m here if you need a hand with anything. Judging from your file, you shouldn’t need my help, though.” He smiles and then turns to introduce himself to the guys who have just entered behind me.

I’m starting to wonder what the hell this file says about me because, as far as I was aware other than my school records, there are no more records on me, especially not ones that detail my proficiency with weapons. It’s more than likely something that Alaric provided. Clearly, he knows what each of our backgrounds is. I’m still curious to see exactly what it says, and if the weapons teachers have files on us, then it

wouldn't be a stretch to assume that the combat coach did and really was being a misogynistic asshole.

I listen with half an ear as the guys talk to Kyle, making my way to the end cubicle, placing the gun down and picking up the ear defenders.

“Are there always only two of you?” I hear Trick ask, disapproval evident in his tone, and I pause in putting my ear defenders on and getting started.

“No, this is a small class, and they all have a good few years of weapons handling under their belts. I know they didn't give you the best first impression, but they quite often forget the threat is very much real even though we have such good security at Blackbreak. It's been a long time since we've dealt with a major threat. Long enough that all the students that experienced it have left now.” He explains, and I perk up. I wonder if he's talking about the missing students that Chris and Marv killed.

I will never refer to that man as my father again.

“In the less experienced classes, we have at least four well-trained members of staff as well as several other safety measures in place.” He adds. “You best get on with it. We're running out of time thanks to their behaviour earlier. I will be in the booth if you need me for anything.”

Satisfied that I'm not going to hear anything else worth listening to and eager to at least shoot something, I quickly don my ear defenders, check my gun and take aim. I'm vaguely aware of the others doing the same in the booths next to me, but I focus on the target ahead. It's been a while, longer than it should've been since I went to the gun range, and I'm worried that I've gotten rusty. Instead, my focus was more on trying to work out how to stop my father from prostituting me or using me in the darker, bloodier side of his business.

As soon as those thoughts try to rise, I viciously push them back; now is not the time to get sucked into any kind of memory.

Taking a deep breath to calm myself from the vague notion of those memories, I fire several rounds, emptying the gun before I press the little button to bring the target closer so I can see how I've done. I'm damn happy that I made a shot dead centre, the others went slightly wide, but at least there were no misses. I'm definitely rusty but not as bad as I could've been, so I'm classing that as a win.

Chapter Ten

“Alright, guys, time to get ready for your next lesson. Leave your weapons where they are, and we’ll clean and put them away.” Kyle says, coming out of the booth.

We all do as he’s asked and make our way out of the range.

“This is for you.” Jensen grins, handing me his target sheet rolled up.

My eyebrows dip in confusion as I smile and take it from him. When I open it up, I can’t help but chuckle. He’s somehow managed to line up his shots in such a way that it makes a heart. That’s some damn good shooting.

“Thank you.” I grin, placing my hand on his chest and moving onto my tiptoes so I can capture his lips with my own.

He slips his hand up under my hair, grabbing the back of my neck and pulling me closer. When we move apart, his smile is soft and full of emotion.

“I love you, Angel.” He mutters, resting his forehead against mine.

“I love you too,” I reply through the knot of emotion sitting on my chest.

His grin widens as he kisses my forehead gently and threads his fingers through mine.

“You smarmy bastard.” Atlas grins as we all walk out of the indoor gun range and back into the main part of the classroom.

Jensen just winks and smirks.

“Who’s teaching combat now?” Trick asks.

“I think it’s one of the older students. He’s been a teaching assistant for a while. Good guy.” Rage explains.

“Speaking of good guys, what was going on between you and the weapons instructor?” Trick asks Atlas, his tone firm.

“Hey guys, bye guys!” Peter interrupts, rushing past. “Meet you back at yours after school!”

I chuckle as he rushes through the crowd, and they all part, unlike when the guys walk the halls and pure intimidation and a healthy amount of fear makes the crowd split. They move out of the way now just to avoid Peter’s utter chaotic energy.

“He works for me. That’s why he knows so much about what experience you guys have with weapons.” Atlas explains easily.

“Got it.” Trick replies, his shoulders releasing the tension that was pulling them up.

“Could he be the one that let your brother on campus?”

“No chance, my brother killed his pregnant wife. There’s not a chance in fucking hell that he would help him. Would he torture and kill him, abso-fucking-lutely but help him? Not a fucking chance.” He replies darkly.

My stomach churns with disgust, “She was pregnant?”

“Yeah, Princess.” Atlas’s eyes connect with mine, sadness and shame swimming in their icy blue depths.

Judging from his reaction, he feels responsible in part because Blake is his brother. It would be useless for me to try to convince him otherwise right now, so instead, I reach out and clasp hands with him, tightly squeezing as he threads his fingers through mine.

“Where am I changing?” I ask, changing the subject.

“I don’t know. They haven’t set up a changing area for you yet. I would say that you could get changed in the coach’s office, but I wouldn’t put it past him to have cameras in there.”

“Absolutely fucking not!” Cash growls.

The rest of them all vehemently agree as well.

“I can’t even use girl’s toilets because there aren’t fucking any.” Then, I suddenly realise, “How have I gone this long at this damn school and not need the toilet during the day?”

“I’ll get Alaric to talk to the head, he’s got a connection with him, but he hasn’t disclosed the nature of it.” Atlas offers.

“Can you fight in what you’re wearing?” Luc asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Sure, but I’ll need to go straight home to shower afterwards. Did we have anything planned?”

We pause outside of the gym doors.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to have that riding lesson after school? My horses will arrive on Wednesday, but we need to get all the practice in that we can.” Rage asks.

“Yeah, I’d love that. We can go from home. I can shower and change then, anyway.”

“Sounds good, Puddin’.” He grins, excitement lighting up his eyes.

“Are you going to be okay out here, Sunshine?” Riot asks, concern making his eyebrows furrow as Rafe crosses his arms over his broad chest.

“I’ll be fine,” I grin, “If I can take care of the coach with bad ribs, then I will be fine now that I’m only getting mild twinges of pain.”

“I know that, but I just needed to hear it.” As the others make their way into the gym, he moves towards me and kisses me softly. “Let’s get this lesson over with.”

I chuckle and follow him through the doors, moving over to the bleachers lining the side of the gym to dump my stuff.

“Hello, you must be Ever.” A guy, only a couple of years older than me, approaches me with an easy smile on his face.

“Yep, that’s me.” I smile.

“I’m Declan. I know you haven’t had a great experience here so far, so I wanted to reassure you that I will not tolerate any of that behaviour in here. I also wanted to check how much experience you have with combat? I know you took

down coach pretty damn easily, so I'm guessing quite a bit." He grins.

I study him closely for any signs of deception, but he seems genuine enough. "It pissed a lot of the guys off when I did that," I reply.

"As far as I'm concerned, he got what he deserved. I've worked as his assistant for a while now and always thought something was off about him. I think you might be surprised at the number of guys who are actually behind you when it comes to the coach." He says seriously.

I nod my head, I'll keep an open mind when it comes to the other students, but I'm not hopeful. "In answer to your other question, I have quite extensive experience with combat, although none of it is formal training," I say carefully.

"Got you. Why don't you go and warm up on the bags? We're just taking it easy today. I want to get a feel for where everyone is at before I start proper lessons."

I nod and make my way over to the heavy bags set up in the corner of the gym while the other students start to file in and start their own workouts. I tune out the noise around me and start in on my warm-up, wishing that I had the foresight to bring my music. Once I'm done with my warm-up, I realise that I've come unprepared, and before I start on my proper workout, I need to wrap my hands, or they're going to get damaged. With everything that we've got going on now, I need my hands in top condition.

I look around the room, trying to find one of the guys to see if they've got spare wraps. It's nice to see that I'm mostly being ignored, and anyone who is paying me attention is doing it more out of curiosity than anything else. My good mood fades slightly as my eyes land on a group of around six guys that are watching me closely. As soon as my eyes land on them, they start to make their way towards me, and I ready myself.

"Hey," one of them greets.

“Hi,” I reply cautiously, crossing my arms and raising my eyebrow.

“Look, we just wanted to say that what coach did was not fucking okay. A couple of us saw the tail end of what happened, and if you need anyone to give any evidence or back you up, just let us know.” A different one explains.

I instantly relax my posture, uncrossing my arms and letting my lips tilt up slightly into a smile. “Thanks, guys. I appreciate that.”

“Everything okay, Baby?” Rafe asks from behind me. I look back over my shoulder at him and smile reassuringly.

“Yeah, they were just letting me know they’ve got my back when it comes to the coach.”

“We’ll leave you to it. I just wanted you to know.”

“Thanks, guys,” I reply, and Rafe gives them the guy head nod thing. I turn to him, “Have you got any spare wraps? I didn’t bring mine.”

He holds up his hand, already clasping a set of wraps, “Way ahead of you.” He grins proudly.

“Thanks, Big Guy.” I take them off him and wrap my hands, the familiar action comforting.

I’m not sure what it says about me that something that leads to violence brings me comfort.

“Want some company?” Rafe asks.

“Sure.” I grin.

He steps up behind the bag, and I start my proper workout, taking it easy at first and testing the range of motion for my ribs. The last thing that I need right now is to injure myself. If we can get proof of where Chris is keeping the evidence that we need, then we will be going after him, and I’m going to need to be at my best.

The longer I go with no twinges of pain, the harder I push myself. I honestly didn’t realise how much tension I was

carrying around. I'm dripping with sweat and feeling so much lighter by the time that Declan calls the end of the lesson.

"Feel better?" Jensen asks, handing me a water bottle.

"When did you get here?" I ask, greedily gulping down the water.

"I'm hurt!" He exclaims, clutching his chest and falling to the floor, wailing, "How could you not notice me?"

"Dork." I chuckle, stepping over him and making my way over to my stuff.

I grab everything, feeling gross and sweaty and wishing they had changing facilities here. Although I probably wouldn't be able to use them unless I knew one of my guys was outside the door guarding it, the only reason I'm comfortable showering at home is that I know they're there and I'm safe.

While I wait for the guys to shower and change, I pull out my phone and check to see if I've had a reply from Lucy yet. To my surprise, I have an email from her.

Lucy: Hi Ever, it's nice to hear from you. This is the only picture I can find of Amelia, and it's from our yearbook. I know I have some more somewhere, so I'll dig them out and send them to you as soon as I find them. Speak soon, Lucy.

I enlarge the photo and study it closely.

"What you looking at Puddin'?" Rage asks, making me jump.

I was so focused on the screen that I didn't even hear him approach. "Lucy sent a picture of Amelia, look."

I hand him my phone, not saying anything else. I want to see if he makes the same connection that I have.

He looks up at me as his eyes become cautious. "She looks like the younger version of the woman in the video we got sent."

"Yep, that's what I thought too."

“What’s going on?” Trick asks. As the guys all appear, Rage hands him my phone, and they all take a closer look.

“That’s the woman in the video,” Luc says, his concerned gaze landing on me.

“The one that looks like the older version of your mom,” Rafe says gently, wrapping his arm around me and leading me towards the exit.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, I’m all sweaty.” I warn him before continuing, “I think maybe I was seeing something in that video that I wanted to see. We know that it logically can’t be my mom. She’s dead.” I’m surprised that my voice catches, and I don’t miss the concerned looks that the guys give me and Rafe’s arm tightening around me.

We all get to the car, and as Trick drives home, I continue, “At least we know that Amelia’s alive and why everyone says she looks like me. If we can find her, we have a better chance of finding out what happened that night. She’s the only one still alive, apart from Chris, who really knows what happened.”

“That’s very true, but I think we should wait to try to find her until after we’ve dealt with Chris. I don’t want to risk him finding her,” Atlas suggests.

“Good idea.” Trick replies, pulling into the driveway and Peter pulling in behind us.

I was so focused on the conversation that I hadn’t even realised that he pulled up behind us.

“Add it to the list of shit we’ve got to do.” I grin, hopping out of the car.

“It is getting pretty damn long.” Cash chuckles.

“I’ll meet you by the front door in fifteen,” I yell back to Rage as I take the stairs two at a time. I feel ridiculously gross, the sweat drying now and just yuk.

Cash

“Do you think she’s okay?” I ask, watching Ever rush up the stairs.

“I’m not sure. Even though she knew that the woman in the video couldn’t be her mom, there must’ve been a small part of her that hoped.” Riot replies, concern etched into his features.

“When I find whoever wrote that note and put that thought in her head in the first place, I’m going to gut them,” Jensen says, in a very matter-of-fact way, as he sips a soda, darkness flashes in his eyes though and instantly lets me know that he’s dead fucking serious. I share a look with Trick and Atlas. We need to keep an eye on him. We’re trying to do everything somewhat above board, and if Jensen finds out who is playing with our girl’s feelings, all fucking bets are off.

If I’m being honest with myself, though, I don’t think any of us could keep it above board for fucking long. Ever is our weakness, and we will protect her until our dying breath. I don’t need to ask the others to know that they would say the same.

“What’s happened?” Peter asks, his gaze switching between me, Trick, Atlas, and Jensen.

I’m starting to realise that he is incredibly observant. “Lucy sent a picture of Amelia, and there’s no doubt that it’s the same woman that’s in the video that we got sent.”

“Oh, I get it, poor Ever.” He immediately replies, understanding filling his eyes.

“Yeah, I thought you were staying behind to see if you could get any info off of the coach’s laptop?” Trick asks, changing the subject.

“I did. I don’t know what you guys were doing, but you were late out, and it didn’t take me long at all to get onto his laptop and find things. The guy was a fucking idiot.” Peter replies.

“Fucking awesome, man. Did you send it to the cops?” Luc asks.

“Absolutely, I found out who the cops are that are dealing with the claims against him and emailed all the evidence to them.” His grin is decidedly smug.

“Good job.” Atlas compliments, looking impressed.

“As I said, I used to do this sort of thing before.” He shrugs. “So, Amelia’s alive then.”

“Yep, we’re not looking into her until we’ve got Chris, and there’s no chance he could harm her.” Trick explains.

“Got it.”

“You ready?” Ever asks Rage, tying her hair up into a bun as she comes into the kitchen. She bends down to grab a soda out of the fridge, and my eyes drift to her perfect ass, encased in tight black leggings.

“Damn.” Rage mutters, and she instantly stands up and looks at him, a devilish smirk tilting her lips.

I hide my smirk behind my drink as I bring the cup to my lips.

“See something you like, Rageykins?” She teases, her grin widening.

“Fuck yes, I did,” He returns without hesitation, and her eyebrows hit her hairline. Clearly, she was expecting him to stumble. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Have fun, Sweetheart, and be safe.” Trick adds, kissing her softly.

“I will, bye guys.”

Ever

I follow Rage out of the door and to his car; I have to admit the fact that he owned that he was clearly staring at my ass, was seriously fucking hot and staring at his ass in his tight jeans as I follow him to his car is not helping calm my horny as fuck self at all.

“You alright?” He smirks as well pull out of the driveway.

“All good here. So exactly what’s the plan?”

“Well, since you’ve ridden before, it’s mostly going to be reminding you what you’re doing. It’s your first time on a horse in a while, so we’ll take it easy. I don’t know these horses as well as I know my own, but we need to get a head start. If you want to wait until my horses come, we can?” He asks, his eyes cutting towards me.

“No, you’re right. I need to get as much practice as I can if I don’t want to fall off the damn thing.” I chuckle.

“Alright, sounds good.” He pulls into the parking lot by the indoor arena and the stables. As we both hop out of the car and continue towards the building, he continues, “Because we’re short on time today, I’ve had the stable hands tack your horse up, so he’s ready to go, and we can maximise the time in the saddle.”

“You’re not riding too?” I ask as he opens the door for me and ushers me inside. The smell of horse and straw instantly brings back memories, making me smile.

“Not today. I want to see where you’re at first. Then, if I think you’re confident enough, there are a few trails around here that we can take my horses out on, on Wednesday.”

“Why did you wear your tight pants then?” I ask suspiciously, and to my absolute shock, his ears turn red in embarrassment as he rubs his hand nervously on the back of his neck.

“Hey, Rage! Good to see you, man!” A guy calls out to him, clearly the stable hand judging from his attire and saving Rage from answering my question.

I chuckle quietly to myself.

“Hey, you alright, Grant?”

“Yeah, I’m good. I’m surprised to see you in here. It’s been a while.” Grant replies, his eyebrow raised in question.

“Yeah, I’ve been super busy lately. Is Tank ready to go?”

“Yep, he’s tied up in the second arena. So, you won’t be disturbed by anyone. I’ve made sure everyone knows it’s hired out for the evening and to use the bigger one if they absolutely have to.”

“Thanks, dude.” Rage replies, striding past Grant, and I follow quickly, trying to keep up.

Chapter Eleven

“So, the horse is called Tank?” I ask as I quicken my pace to catch up to him.

“Yeah, but don’t let the name fool you; I’ve been reassured that he’s an absolute softie.”

“Oh good, I was slightly worried,” I mutter, nervous excitement coursing through me.

My boots sink into the sand of the arena, and my eyes immediately land on a beautiful paint quarter horse. My feet move of their own accord, and I soon find myself standing in front of him. I reach out my hand and gently stroke his nose.

“Hey Tank, you’re gorgeous, you know that?” I grin as he pushes his nose firmer into my hand. “Oh, you like the compliments, huh?”

I spend a while giving the big horse some love and thoroughly enjoying myself; I forget the sense of peace that always overcomes me whenever I’m around horses. I really do love them. Realising I haven’t been paying any attention to Rage, and he’s gone quiet, I finally pull my gaze from Tank and search for him. I find him leaning against the side of the arena, his eyes soft as they watch me and the most genuine smile I have seen from him.

“What?” I ask quietly, my voice hushed, not wanting to break the moment.

“Nothing, it just feels like this is the first time I’ve truly seen you relax ever since I’ve met you.” He moves closer, his fingers reaching up and sweeping across my cheek. “It’s a good look on you, Puddin’.”

He moves even closer, and I tilt my head up so I can still see him, my heart beating like a fucking drum in my chest. His lips inch closer as his other hand rests on my waist, his thumb running along my cheekbone and making my eyes flutter closed. His lips whisper against mine, but before he can kiss

me properly, Tank decides to make himself known and snorts loudly, making us both jump apart.

“Erm, if you jump on, I’ll start to work on what we need to do to get you ready for lessons.” He mutters, striding into the middle of the arena and pulling out his phone.

My fingers drift to my lips, and I swear I can still feel the barely there impression of his. What the fuck just happened, and why am I pissed that Tank interrupted us? It’s probably a good thing that he did. It would’ve added a complication that we don’t need right now.

At least that’s what I’m telling myself. The disappointment swirling in my gut says something else entirely, though. Tank nudges my hand, and I grasp at the distraction.

“You know, I don’t know whether to thank you or curse you?” I tell him quietly, stroking his nose. He snorts, and I grin, my inner turmoil settling. “Now, take it easy on me. I haven’t been on horseback for a really long time.”

I move around him and put my foot in the stirrups, hoping that I remember how to do this. I hoist myself up into the saddle and internally congratulate myself that I’m on the horse and facing the right damn way. There was a real risk that I would end up facing his butt. I gather the reins in my hands and give Tank a pat on the neck, silently thanking him for staying still while I struggled to get on and making a mental note to bring him treats next time we come here.

I glance over at Rage and see his face still buried in his phone, figuring I’ll just get on with it until he gets over whatever is stuck up his ass. So, what if we almost kissed? It’s not a big deal.

It really is, though, a small voice in my head mutters, and I push it away. I urge Tank forward, starting with a walk and getting used to how I’m sitting and all of that jazz, familiarising myself with all the things I used to know so well. It doesn’t take long until I’m confident enough to kick it up and notch, and I soon find myself galloping around the arena with a giant smile on my face.

Holy fuck, I've missed this.

Although I remember what the hell I'm doing, my body is not used to being on horseback anymore, and I know for damn sure that I'm going to be sore as hell tomorrow. Thankfully, we don't have combat or weapons training, so I can sit down for most of it. I switch up paces a couple of times, grateful that Tank seems to know what he's doing. I don't know what I was so worried about. I almost wish that we could've gone out on some of those trails that Rage mentioned earlier. I glance over at him as I complete another circle and breathe a sigh of relief when he's smiling and watching. The first couple of times I looked at him, he glanced up at me from under his eyelashes but still pretended that he was doing something on his phone.

"We need to get going Ever, or Tank is going to miss his dinner. It's getting late." Rage calls to me, and I pout in disappointment, not missing his quiet chuckle.

I bring Tank to stop, I've worked him pretty hard, and we're both breathing a bit heavier than we were.

"You're pretty good, Puddin'. How're you feeling?"

"Free, I forgot how much I loved riding." I grin.

"You look free when you ride. Need a hand down?"

"Nah, I've got it," I reply.

He smirks knowingly, crossing his arms over his chest as amusement dances in his eyes. As soon as my feet hit the ground, I realise why my knees wobble and almost collapse underneath as I grip the saddle for support, Rage bursts out laughing, and I shoot him a glare over my shoulder. Tank, bless his heart, stays still but moves his head so he can nudge my shoulder.

"I'm alright, just not used to using the muscles I've used tonight," I tell him. "I didn't realise I was that out of shape," I grumble.

"You're not," Rage says, stepping up behind me, "You've been riding for a couple of hours. Anyone would be slightly sore."

“Oh man, really? It’s going to be so much worse tomorrow.” I groan, my head resting on the saddle.

He chuckles and wraps his arm around my waist, supporting most of my weight as he grabs hold of Tanks reins and leads us both towards the exit.

“Let’s get Tank to Grant and then get you home. I suggest a warm bath to help your muscles relax.”

“Thank you, Rage. Can we go out on the trails on Wednesday?”

“Yeah, I’d love that.”

“And we have to come back tomorrow. I promised Tank I’d bring him treats for looking after me today.”

“Too damn cute, Puddin’. Of course, we can do that.”

I decide to ignore the cute comment and carry on limping beside him, I am really not looking forward to the repercussions of this tomorrow, but I am damn glad that I finally got on a horse again. I get the impression that Rage is going to pretend that our near kiss never happened, and I’m more than happy to go along with that for now. We have enough to deal with right now.

The ride home is quiet, and I insist on limping in myself, much to Rage’s amusement when we get there.

“What happened? Are you okay?” Cash asks as soon as I limp my way into the kitchen.

“You’ve been gone for ages,” Luc adds, looking at me with his eyebrow raised as I gently ease myself into one of the chairs at the table.

“Something smells good.” I praise, trying to change the subject.

Rafe looks over his shoulder, still stirring something on the stove, and smirks, “Nice try, Baby. What’s wrong with you?”

“She was on horseback for hours, and she’s not used to anymore. She’s going to be sore as hell tomorrow.” Rage grins.

“Right, got you.” Riot grins.

“Rookie mistake, Ever.” Peter teases, taking a seat next to me, and I stick my tongue out at him.

“Moving swiftly on, what are we having for dinner?” I ask.

“Spaghetti and cheese stuffed meatballs.” Rafe answers immediately, and my mouth waters.

“My favourite!” I grin.

“How did your lesson go? Other than making you hate yourself tomorrow?” Peter grins, sipping his coffee with a raised eyebrow, amusement dancing across his features.

“I was surprised at how much I remembered if I’m honest, and I’d forgotten how at peace horses make me feel.”

“They’re good at doing that, resetting you and making you just breathe,” Peter replies, with complete understanding.

“Exactly.” I grin.

“Is she ready to join the class?” Trick asks as he and Rafe start to bring the food over to the table.

I start to stand up to help, “Oh no you don’t, sit that cute butt of yours down, we’ve got this.” Trick orders gently, dropping a kiss on the top of my head as he places a plate of food down in front of me.

“Thanks, Trick.” I tilt my head up, and his lips meet mine in a soft kiss. Once everyone is sitting down with their food, we all tuck in. “This is delicious, Rafe.”

“Thanks, Baby.”

“I want to take her out on Wednesday when my horses arrive. She’ll be riding them in the lessons, and I want to make sure she’s okay with trail riding. We should hear by Friday if we’re able to start lessons and they’ll start up on Monday. Peter, you’re in the same class as us, right?”

“Yep, we’ll be able to keep an eye on the instructor and Ever in case the guy is a member of Phoenix that has a problem with us investigating,” Peter replies, catching my frown. He grins and continues, “I know you don’t need

protecting, but we've already established that Phoenix is a misogynistic boy's club, and because of that, they will come after you because they perceive you as the weakest link."

"Fair enough, I was ready to poke you in the eye, but that does make sense." I grin.

"Thank fuck my eyes are safe for another day." He retorts, and the guys chuckle.

The ringing of a cell has us all turning our attention to Atlas, we're waiting on information from Alaric, and hopefully, Jynx will be in touch with an update on Liam and Blake.

"It's my contact." He explains, rolling his eyes at our blatant curiosity and answering the phone. "Hey man, everything okay?"

Everyone carries on eating and talking while he takes the call. Usually, he'd put it on speaker so that we could all hear, and then it cuts down the time explaining too, but with Peter here, he can't do that. We need to bring him in soon. It's starting to get complicated keeping him out of certain things while also needing his help with others.

"Alright, so good news, he's got a secure laptop for you to use to trace the origin of the videos you found on the dark web. It should be here by tomorrow morning." Atlas starts to explain.

I watch Peter as his eyebrows rise in surprise and the wheels start to turn in his head. He's not stupid, and I'm pretty sure that if he wanted to find out exactly where the laptop has come from, he could easily do so as soon as he gets his hands on it.

"He confirmed what Isabelle told us as well. Apparently, there is a team already watching Chris. They haven't been able to get close to him. He's paranoid and has tight security surrounding him and his businesses. The only thing they have been able to determine is that he keeps all of his important files at his office building. It's got the best safe that money can buy, around the clock security and several other features that would make it practically impossible to get into without Chris himself."

“Great, so where does that leave us if there’s another team watching?” Jensen frowns.

“Did he say what safe it was?” Peter asks.

“Yeah, it’s the Fort Rome safe.” Atlas replies, sounding unsure of the name.

“Only thirty of those were made. I can do some research and see if I can get us in.” Peter replies. “That’s if we’re still taking him down?”

“That’s where it gets slightly complicated. My contact has said that his boss told him that if our team can get a hold of the documents and whatever else might be kept in there, then he’ll pull the other team. He said that it’s clear from the other jobs we’ve done,” Atlas’s eyes cut to Peter, who looks slightly shocked, “That we can do things and get to people, that seem impossible.”

“Okay, well, good news, the boss doesn’t want to bring us in yet, and if we can pull this off, then that’s got to work in our favour.” Cash points out.

“The next step is for Peter to make sure that he can connect those videos from the dark web to Chris. Then we can work on the plan to get us into the building undetected and get the files. With our skill set, I have no doubt that we can pull it off.” Trick starts to plan.

“Agreed, it is going to be the most difficult thing we’ve ever tried to pull off, though.” Riot points out.

“We just need to look at it from every angle. If they’ve had a team on him and gotten nowhere, then we’re pretty much the last hope for bringing him down.” Rage adds.

“Good point. We can’t leave him to be free. We have no idea how many more of that generation of Phoenix members are left, and if he does manage to get through all of them, nothing is stopping him from carrying on the killings with other Phoenix members or anyone he can get his hands on. He’s clearly got a thirst for it.” Luc replies.

“He hasn’t got anyone controlling him now either, my father was unhinged, but Chris is clearly batshit crazy. Without

someone telling him what to do, he could go on a killing rampage.” I frown heavily.

I still don’t understand how my father is connected to this world. But then again, I know nothing about his past or his family. I’m still hoping that someone, somewhere, will have the answers to make all of this make sense. My mind drifts to the piece of paper that Isabelle gave me. The dates and letters on it still make no sense to me, so I’m going to try to put it out of my mind for now. Usually, I would’ve rung the number already, I’ve never been very patient, and curiosity is one of my closest allies. The only reason I’ve managed to hold out this long is simply that we have enough to deal with at the moment, and I have a feeling that the phone call will open a giant can of worms. I couldn’t tell you why I feel like that. I guess gut instinct. It can stay buried in my room for now.

“Right, I’ve got research to do into that safe, and if I’m going to trace those videos tomorrow, I need to get some sleep, so I’m off,” Peter says, standing up and taking his plate to the kitchen.

“Thanks, man, I appreciate it,” Atlas replies.

“No problem, see you guys later.” He calls back, heading towards the door.

We all yell our goodbyes, and I slowly get up to take my plate to the kitchen. I sat down for too long, and now I’m starting to get stiff. Damn it.

“Alright, what aren’t you telling us?” Jensen suddenly says, and I look back to find his gaze locked on Atlas.

Everyone else pauses in clearing their own plates and turns back to him. I finish putting my plate in the dishwasher and then sit at the table again.

“I couldn’t say anything while Peter was here. We need to discuss it first.” He starts, “Alaric thinks that we should bring Peter in fully. We clearly trust him, and he’s got an amazing skill set that will prove invaluable to us.”

“Okay, we were planning to do that anyway; we just need to decide when.” Cash points out, leaning back in his chair and

watching Atlas closely, “What is it?”

“We need to do it sooner rather than later. Alaric ran a check on him as soon as he realised that there was a possibility that we’d want to bring him in.”

“And?” Rage asks, his eyebrow raised and his tattooed arms crossed against his chest.

“And he’s on several watch lists, both for what he’s hacked and to see if they can use him in the future. The usual, we won’t send you to jail for the rest of your life if you work for us sort of thing. With some of the agencies looking at him, that wouldn’t be so bad, but most of them he’d end up a lot worse off.” Atlas explains.

“That’s beside the point he’s family. We protect family.” I say fiercely.

“That’s exactly Alaric’s point of view on it, Princess. He said that if we brought him in, it would protect him not only from the other agencies but from him being charged.”

“Good,” I reply, instantly deflating as relief floods me. I will not allow him or any of us to be used.

“Holy fuck, I knew he was good, and he’s told us he can get into places he shouldn’t, but he’s got to be one of the best in the country if they’ve got eyes on him.” Rage mutters.

“We need to bring him in tomorrow. It’s still his choice; we’ll lay it all out for him and let him decide if he wants in.” Trick says with finality.

“Perfect, let’s get him over before school. That way, we can give him the laptop and fill him in properly on what’s going on behind the scenes with the Chris job.” Atlas agrees.

Chapter Twelve

Rage

Lying in bed and staring up at the ceiling, waiting for my alarm to go off and tell me that it's time to get up, my mind wanders back to yesterday. It's been a long time since I've ventured into the stables. Although horses are my happy place, they do bring back a lot of heavy memories and make me miss my own horses, so I only venture to the stables here when I'm feeling entirely overwhelmed and need to breathe. It doesn't often happen since violence works just as well and before Ever and the guys got here, we had a job almost every night.

The jobs have taken a back seat for the moment because of Chris and the missing students.

Of course, I can't think about yesterday for long before I inevitably start thinking about the almost kiss. I can't believe I got that fucking close to kissing her. It could've ruined everything. I want to kick myself for almost letting it happen, but at the same time, the devil in me reminds me that she leaned into me too.

She was going to kiss me back.

My lips tingled at the almost touch, and butterflies swarmed in my stomach. She has thrown me completely off-kilter, and I have no idea how to handle it.

This was clear yesterday when instead of talking about the near kiss and why it can't happen or nearly happen again, I freaked the fuck out and practically ignored her. I'm damn fucking lucky that she's talking to me at all. My alarm finally pulls me out of my thoughts, and I'm grateful. Nothing good will come from my mind following that thought path. What I feel for Ever and how I know I can't have her makes my stomach churn, but I push it all away, burying it deep, and start to get ready for the day.

We're telling Peter everything this morning before school, hence the need for me to set my alarm for before the damn suns come up. To be fair, I hardly get any sleep anyway, so it's not like I wasn't already awake. I know the others are worried that he might decide it's not for him. Especially Ever, she is more nervous than any of them. She cares about Peter, and after what happened with Rylie, she doesn't want to lose another friend. Which is more than understandable, but I don't think she needs to worry. Peter got the same look in his eyes when we got a new lead and when we were taking down Chris's men at the cabin that we did.

He was also helping people in unconventional and not necessarily legal ways for a while before he got involved with us. So he's going to jump at the chance to be involved.

Once I'm dressed, I pull open my door, and I'm instantly greeted by delicious aromas wafting the kitchen. Rafe must already be up and cooking. The doorbell rings as I walk past it, and I change course to open it.

"I've got it!" I yell into the house, opening the door to let Peter in. "Hey man, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good, slightly worried about why I'm here so damn early?" He grumbles.

"Not a morning person then." Cash chuckles, handing him a coffee as we walk into the kitchen.

"Nope, although a breakfast like this every morning might convince me otherwise." He answers, yawning and thanking Cash for his coffee and slumping in one of the dining chairs.

Everyone's already seated and are waiting for Peter and me to take our seats while Rafe brings the last couple of plates to the table. I make the way around the table to my seat, stopping at Ever's and dropping a kiss on the top of her head, she freezes before slowly looking up at me, and I freeze for a split second before quickly making my way to my seat and risking glancing at the guys. Jensen has a shit eating grin on his face, and Atlas is smirking at me with a smug look in his eyes, the fuckers. My tension slightly releases as I realise that none of the others seem to be bothered that I just, for some unknown

fucking reason, kissed their girlfriend. That is apart from Peter, who is watching me with a raised eyebrow, clearly seeing more than I want him to.

My eyes move to my food as I focus on eating. I don't dare to look in Ever's direction. I don't know what I was fucking thinking, it was just natural, and that's a problem. I'm going to have to watch my actions around her closely since apparently my body has a mind of its fucking own and is doing things without consulting the rest of me.

"So, what's with the early wake-up call?" Peter thankfully asks, distracting everyone from what just happened.

"Well, we wanted to know if you wanted to be brought in fully, to what we do and what's going on?" Atlas asks.

"Before you decide, we need you to know that it is dangerous, not mildly concerning, or you could get beaten up at some point but dangerous enough that there is a risk that you or any of us could die. What we're doing is not for the faint of heart." Trick adds.

I watch Peter's reaction closely, and I'm glad that he seems to consider what Trick is saying before he answers. It reassures me that he's actually thought about it and considered the risks. It means that he's not going to want to change his mind later on when it may be too late to do so.

Taking a sip of coffee, he answers, "I've picked up enough to know that it's dangerous, but I have to be honest with you, I have never felt more at home or like I'm a part of a family than I do now. Not only that, but even with what you have let me know about and what I've picked up on, I know that I want to be a part of it. You're helping people, and the only way you can do that is through the less than legal means your doing it. So if you guys will have me, then I'm in."

"That's great, man!" Jensen exclaims, how the guy is always so cheery I don't fucking know.

"One last thing before we start to fill you in properly, there's something else you need to know." Atlas starts.

"Yeah, should I be worried?" Peter asks, frowning slightly.

“Yes, and no.” Riot chimes in.

“That’s reassuring.” Peter retorts sarcastically.

“My contact is actually my Uncle Alaric,” Atlas starts to explain, only to have Peter interrupt.

“Uncle on your mom or dad’s side?”

“Dad’s. He works for the feds and specifically in trying to take down my father and, by association, my brother too. We help him with those jobs. His boss knows Alaric has a team that seems to be able to get the things done and catch people that other teams haven’t been able to. For now, he’s happy to let us carry on, but there is going to come a point where he wants to meet us, and that could go one of two ways, either he brings us in officially, or we get thrown into jail.” Atlas explains.

“Wow, okay, not what I was expecting you to say. If that’s what you needed to tell me, then I’m still willing to be involved. I think the good you’re all doing outweighs the risk.”

“That’s great but not what I needed you to know. As soon as Alaric realised that we were thinking about bringing you in, he checked in on you. It turns out that you are on several watch lists for your skillset.”

I watch as Peter goes pale. “Well fuck. That has to be from when I was first starting out. My security and hacking have gotten a lot better since then, and I can get into places undetected.”

“Several of the agencies interested in you are not the kind of people you want to work for. They will give you the ultimatum, work with them or go to jail and treat you like shit the entire time. That’s the bad news. The good news is that if you’re all in with us, we can protect you from all of that. We would do our best to protect you, either way, you’re family, but it would be easier if Alaric can say you’re a part of his team if it ever gets brought up.”

“Thanks, guys. I wanted to be involved before I knew this, and that hasn’t changed. It just comes with an extra bonus.”

He grins. “So, what do I need to know?”

As Atlas explains all about his dad and brother, I zone out. He describes the vague plan we have to take them both down, although our focus has changed slightly to focus more on Blake since he is a direct threat to Ever and is running some of the worse parts of the businesses. Essentially, Liam is starting to lose control, and that’s dangerous as fuck. Blake cannot be put in control, but an empire as big as Liam’s cannot just be disbanded that presents its own risks. That’s what we will be aiming for eventually, but until we’ve weeded out the fuckers, we can’t end it completely, hence why Atlas needs to take over for the time being. That way, we can destroy it from the inside out.

The guys all explain the jobs we do, their own pasts, and Ever tells her story too, or at least as much of it as she shared with us all. I know that she hasn’t shared everything, and I’m pretty sure that she’s still got some pretty massive skeletons in her closet, but I think we all have. I know I do. I try to pay attention, but since it’s all information I know, it’s hard to stay interested when thoughts of Ever’s body pressed up against mine and her lips millimetres away from my own keep forcing their way into my mind. It’s like fucking torture, and I can feel my mood sour.

“I think that’s everything that you need to know for now. We need to get going, or we’re going to be late for school.” Trick finishes.

“Wow, that’s a lot to take in, but I think I’ve got it,” Peter murmurs, standing up and stretching.

To his credit, he looks calm and collected, not like he’s looking for the nearest exit and wondering how to get the hell out of this situation. Not that I’d blame him if he were. This life isn’t for everyone.

“We know it’s a lot to take in. If you change your mind, that’s fine. You’ll still be one of us. We’d just have to keep quite a lot from you.” Ever says to him, Peter’s tension relaxes slightly at the reassurance that he’s a part of the family even if he chooses not to be a part of what we’ve got going on.

“Thanks, I still want in. Let’s get going.” He replies.

We all grab our jackets and shoes and make our way out to the cars. I end up in Trick’s SUV with Ever, Trick, Jensen, Cash, and Luc. The rest of them split up between the other vehicles. My phone vibrates as we move through the gate, and I pull it out. I have to be honest the only people I want to talk to are in the SUV with me or the cars following. This is most likely someone telling me that there’s an issue somewhere that I need to deal with and make Atlas aware of.

I freeze, and ice fills my veins as my mother’s name flashes on the screen. I contemplate leaving it unread, but if I do that, it’s just going to nag at me for the rest of the day and has the potential to bring on a panic attack. Of course, reading it has the potential to bring on a panic attack, too, but I think I’d rather get it over and done with. I glance around at the others in the car, ensuring that no one is paying me any attention. The chances of me being able to school my facial expression when I read whatever venom she’s written is highly unlikely.

They’re all carrying on a conversation, utterly oblivious to my inner turmoil, thank fuck. I brace myself and read the text, grateful that she didn’t try to fucking ring me at least.

She Devil: Why are you getting the horses brought to you? I thought you’d finally given up that worthless and childish pursuit? Have you found yourself a man? Is that why? Are you trying to impress him? You know that nothing you ever do will make you anything but ugly and worthless. A waste of life, I should’ve had you aborted when I had the fucking chance, but your father threatened to leave me and take his money with him. Your aunts send their best and can’t wait to see you SOON.

My heart beats fast in my chest, pounding out a rhythm that is so strong that I’m almost certain everyone in the car with me must be able to hear it. It’s nothing I haven’t heard before but the effect of her cruel and demeaning words still threatening to derail me and send me spiralling into a panic attack. I fight the urge to throw my phone and struggle to keep my reaction from exploding out of me. I’m in the confines of a car and could hurt people I care about. I repeat this to myself

as a warning. I want to tear and destroy everything I can get my hands on but underneath it all; I'm terrified that my mother is going to turn up here with my aunts. I don't want Ever to be exposed to any of them. She's been through enough in her life. She doesn't need to be exposed to my mother's venom.

You're terrified of her, too, terrified of her hurting you. Desperate to know the reason why you're not good enough, and she doesn't love you. Why she has never loved you.

Dark thoughts start to swallow me, and the car stops at just the right moment. I fling myself from the SUV, aware that eyes are on me as I slam the car door behind me. Atlas takes one look at me, and his expression instantly darkens. He's known me long enough now that he knows when my mother texts me. He makes his way over to me as I feel the curious gaze of the others watching us, which is making me more antsy. I don't want Ever to see me like this.

Atlas nods his head to the side, pulling me away from the others and out of their earshot.

"Your mom get in contact?" He asks although he knows the answer already.

I nod curtly.

"Scale of one to ten, man? I need to know the best job to send you on?"

"Seven," I growl.

"Got it, one second."

My hands clench at my sides as I fidget. The dark thoughts will not fucking leave me alone, swirling and digging their claws in with no remorse. Atlas pulls out his phone, putting it to his ear.

"Hey, I need a job for Rage, a seven." He says, with no other explanation needed.

Alaric knows this situation, just as well as Atlas does. I can hear the others muttering, and it's sending my anxiety even higher. Although I know they're not saying anything bad about

me, logically, I know that; however, my mother's voice in my head is saying otherwise.

"He's sending the details to you now. Get back to the house and gear up. Stay fucking safe. That's an order." Atlas says firmly, throwing me the keys to his motorbike, and I nod.

I stomp over to it.

"Ever, he's fine. It's probably best to leave him be." I hear Atlas say behind me.

Yes, please leave me be, I am teetering on the edge of my control right now, and I don't want to lose it around her. I don't want her to see me like this.

"I just need to make sure." She replies fire in her voice that turns me on and pisses me off at the same time. I know Atlas will cave.

My steps speed up, just short of running, hoping I can get to the bike before Ever can get to me. The guys hang back, and I'm far enough away from them that I can't hear anything being said anymore. I don't want to look back in case she takes that as an encouragement to approach me. I breathe a sigh of relief as I finally make it to the bike and swing my leg over. However, that relief is quickly squashed as a small hand touches my shoulder, and I flinch hard. Immediately I go on the defensive. I hate feeling vulnerable and weak, and Ever has just seen me flinch at her touch.

My expression darkens as I turn a glare on her.

Her eyes widen at my expression as she watches me. I feel like she's seeing more than I want her to, which makes my defences rise even further.

"Are you okay?" She asks gently, with no fear, only kindness. Somehow that makes it worse.

"I'm fucking fine. Why don't you worry about your fucking boyfriends and leave me the fuck out of it." I growl. I turn the key in the ignition as the bike roars to life beneath me.

Unfortunately, I don't leave quickly enough, and I see her face fall as hurt swirls in the depths of her grey eyes,

darkening them. Pain pierces my heart, and I pull away, trying desperately to get away from the fucked up situation I just caused, guilt and regret joining the fear, anger, and hate swirling in my gut.

I glance back in my wing mirror and see her watching me drive off for a second before she turns and stomps back towards the guys, brushing past them as they look confused between her and me.

Fuck.

I knew I'd fuck it up with her. I can't believe I spoke to her like that. She must hate me. I know I fucking do. The worst part is that it's not true. The last thing I want is for her to stop caring about me. She makes me feel like maybe I am worthy of being happy. There's no point denying that she's wormed her way into my cold dead heart, but she deserves someone so much better than me, someone who won't hurt her when he's hurting.

Mom's right; I'm worthless.

Chapter Thirteen

Ever

“Whoa, what’s the rush, Sunshine?” Riot asks, jogging up beside me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just want to get to class.” I reply, trying not to be short with him but struggling slightly and wincing when it comes out harsher than I intended.

Rage’s words cut a little too deep. Deeper than they would’ve if my feelings for him were just platonic. I thought we were finally making some headway; I thought he was beginning to trust me, maybe even like me but clearly not.

It hurts more than I care to admit.

“If he said anything, Princess, take it with a pinch of salt. His mom messaged him, and it always pushes him over the edge.” Atlas explains as we walk to our first lesson.

While that helps me understand why Rage lashed out a little better, it doesn’t make it okay.

“What did he say to you?” Jensen asks, his voice tainted with just a small amount of darkness.

“Nothing I can’t handle, don’t worry; we’ll sort it out between us.”

“So, there is something to sort out then?” He asks.

“Jensen, leave it. If I need any assistance, you know I’ll ask. When I have a falling out with one of you, it needs to stay between me and whoever I’ve fallen out with. The rest of you can’t get pissed at whoever I’ve fallen out with on my behalf. That won’t work. I know he’s not a part of our relationship, but it’s a good rule to have in place.”

“I think that’s a good rule to have, Baby.” Rafe agrees, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me close.

The hurt is still swirling, but it lessens slightly with him holding me close. It's probably a good job that Rage isn't here because it means that I have a chance to calm down and think about it logically without going straight for his fucking throat. Fuck knows where he's gone. I try to tell myself that I don't care, but the reality of it is I'm still worried about him. One thing I know for sure, I'm not going with him to see Tank later. I know I can't go by myself at the moment, Atlas's brother could have more people on campus working for him, and I may be pissed, but I'm not stupid.

"Hey, Peter?" I ask, just before he separates from us to go to his own classes.

"Yeah?"

"I promised Tank that I'd go and give him some treats later, to say thank you for looking after me yesterday. Do you want to come?"

"I'd love to. We can go straight after school and take my car back to the house?" He suggests.

"Sounds good to me." I grin.

We actually have a couple of normal lessons before lunch, both math. Don't get me wrong, they're at a level that I have never studied before, and I'm going to need to study hard to catch up, but at least it's relatively familiar. It's been nice to throw myself into the lesson. With the amount of information they were throwing at us and with me only understanding a tiny amount of it, I had no time to stew about Rage, the ass.

Blackbreak clearly thinks that math is one of the more important subjects as they make it a double lesson. They also cover things like accounts, taxes, and the best sorts of investment opportunities. All of it flew straight over my head but judging from the number of eye rolls that Jensen made; I'm guessing the investment advice wasn't that great, anyway. I mean, I understand, everyone here has substantial amounts of money and will take over businesses or run their own one day, and although we have a class for that after lunch. I don't really understand how they're going to differ; I guess it is important information to have.

However, math and I have never gotten on, and I've made peace with the fact that we never will, so two lessons of it back to back is hell.

"Ergh, my brain feels like mush." I groan as I rub my temples and follow the guys to the cafeteria.

"Not a fan of math then?" Peter chuckles.

"I think she refers to it as the embodiment of hell on earth." Cash chuckles, and I grin.

"You know it," I smirk.

"What was that investment advice the guy was trying to give, anyway?" Jensen grumbles, frowning as we all take a seat at one of the tables and wait for the waiters to take our order.

I am never going to get used to this.

"What do you mean?" Peter asks, unaware of Jensen's skill with investing.

"It's all a load of shit, sure it might turn you a profit for a couple of years, but it's not suitable as the long-term investment that he was describing it as. Not only that, but the guy kept getting the terms mixed up and was explaining it completely ass fucking backwards. If any of those kids actually follow his advice, they're going to lose a lot of fucking money." He explains, getting more frustrated as he talks.

Before Peter can reply, the waiters come, and we all give our orders.

"I had no idea you knew so much about it. I've got a better understanding than most of the guys here, but my teacher is pretty good about it. I've advised my father on a couple of investments he was looking into in the past, and they've all worked out quite well." Peter replies as soon as the waiters have gone.

Jensen looks nervous for a second his gaze lands on me, and I smile encouragingly.

“Erm yeah, I’ve handled the guy’s money for a while now. We’ve all got multiple investments that turn a good profit, amongst other things.” He replies.

Peter, bless him, easily reads that this conversation is making Jensen uncomfortable and quickly changes the subject.

“I heard in first period today that the coach was arrested early this morning. Apparently, an abundance of new information came to light, and they had enough to take him in.” Peter grins.

“Good job.” Trick praises, looking impressed.

“What is the likelihood that the charges will actually stick, though?” Luc asks, grim knowledge crossing his features.

“Not likely, like the students here, he has money. Not only that, but he’s been at the school for a long time, and some of the alumni will vouch for him. He will most likely have to quit his job, but there will be no prison or official punishment.” Atlas answers him.

“It’s so fucking corrupt.” I almost snarl.

“It is, but it won’t change any time soon. Money opens a lot of doors and keeps a lot of mouths shut. It’s shitty, but it’s the way it has always worked.” Luc chimes in, reminding me of his father.

“Do you think your dad is still up to something, now you’re not around?” I ask curiously.

“Oh, for sure, he’s likely to be even worse than he was. The last time I managed to get a look at some of his files, he not only had made a few shady investments, but he had gone into business with several people that I know are working way outside of the law. That was a while ago, he upped his security after that, and I couldn’t be bothered to try to get access to any more of his files. It would’ve meant spending more time in that fucking mausoleum, and to be honest, I just didn’t care enough. If he wants to go down like that fucking let him.” He growls, stabbing his food forcefully.

“Thanks for warning me about him. I’m glad my dad didn’t get mixed up in that mess.”

“No one deserves to get mixed up in the mess that my dad is making.”

After that, the conversation turns to lighter topics, and lunch passes quickly. I still don’t know where Rage is and if he’s okay. Not that I care. I force thoughts of Rage away and try to think of something else. I’m not as sore as I thought I’d be today, but I am incredibly grateful that none of the lessons I have left today are physical ones and are just ones that I can sit down in, and they pass quickly.

The last lesson of the day is art, unlike most of our other lessons there’s only me, Trick, Cash and Rafe in here, the others in a different lesson down the hall. As soon as we step foot in the room, I notice the change that comes over Trick; he tenses as his eyes shift around nervously. Cash must know what’s going on with him since he leans in close and says something too quiet for me to hear. Trick nods curtly in reply, and we all take our seats, Trick sitting down next to me.

“Are you okay?” I ask quietly as the teacher starts to talk.

“Not really.” He replies simply.

I reach under the table and thread my fingers through his. “I’m here if you want to talk about it.”

“Thanks, Sweetheart.”

The teacher explains what we’re doing and has us choose from an array of objects draw; I have no idea what the best thing would be to choose, and I feel like Trick is barely stopping himself from running out of here like the place is on fucking fire. So, I chose a vase that looks like it would hold absolutely nothing and twists in on itself. When I bring it back to the table, I realise that I’ve probably chosen one of the most challenging things to draw.

I set to work, not having any idea what I’m doing and knowing for a fact that it will never look like the vase. If the teacher asks, I’m going to tell him that it’s an abstract view of it. That’s a thing in art, right?

About halfway through the lesson, I look over to see how Trick's doing. He's sat back in his chair, arms crossed against his chest and very definitely not doing any work, his paper still blank and a fierce frown on his face. I see the teacher glance at him and start to make his way over.

"The teachers headed this way. You need to draw something." I warn him.

"I can't." He replies.

"Well, it can't be any worse than mine. It looks like a mix between an elephant, a cup, and somehow rain. I'm not even sure how I fucking managed it," I grumble, and he glances at my page, a slight smirk appearing. "You used to be amazing at drawing. I've still got a couple of pictures that you drew me when we were kids."

His gaze snaps to my face, "You have?"

"Of course, I would've kept them all, but we left in such a rush that those were the only ones I could grab. I can't imagine talent like that just disappears."

"That's not why I can't draw, Sweetheart." He admits quietly.

"Is there a problem?" The teacher asks, stopping by Trick's desk and folding his arms over his chest.

"No, sir." Trick replies.

"Then why aren't you doing the work?"

Trick just shrugs, his expression blank.

"I'm sure in whatever low-grade school you have come from, art was considered an easy grade, but, in this school, you actually need to do the work in order to pass. Even if you aren't any good, you can still get a passing grade for effort."

"Thank fuck for that," I mumble, and his eyes move to me and then down to my page as his eyes crinkle at the edges trying not to smile.

"So long as I can see that you are making an effort, you can still pass this class." He reassures me, "Besides, drawing may

not be your strong suit, but another medium may be.”

“Thank you,” I reply, glad for the reassurances and because his attention has moved from Trick.

His gaze moves back to Trick, “I can’t, however, give you a passing grade if I don’t see that some effort has been made. I’m sure that you’ve read the handbook by now and are aware that if you fail one class, you are immediately expelled, no exceptions.”

Trick’s eyes widen. “If I don’t get a passing grade in this class, I get expelled.”

“Yes. I suggest that you get drawing in the last half of the class and put more effort in next time. Remember, I just need to see you’ve made an adequate effort.” He watches as Trick slowly picks up the pencil, and satisfied that he’s going to do some work, the teacher turns back around and walks to the front of the class, helping other students along the way.

The pencil in Trick’s hand shakes slightly, and I glance back at Cash and Jensen sitting behind us, worriedly.

Cash leans forward so that only we can hear him. “Just draw the vase. You’re not doing your own thing; it’s not interpretive. It’s literally just copying what you can see.”

“You can do this, man,” Jensen adds.

I glance between them all, confused and sensing that there’s quite a bit more to this than I assumed. Trick takes a deep breath, preparing himself, and then sets to work, a steely determination and focus painting his handsome features. I watch in awe as he effortlessly draws the distorted vase, making it come alive, look beautiful, and so realistic that it could almost be a photograph—my jaw drops.

“Holy fuck, that’s amazing,” I mutter, aware that it’s now nearly the end of the lesson, and I haven’t even attempted to make my scribble look like the vase or anything for that matter, too busy watching Trick work. As he drew, all the tension started to leave him. I know there is an issue somewhere, but clearly, drawing the vase was easier for him than he thought.

“Thank you, Sweetheart.” He smiles softly, running a critical eye over his work.

I decide I should probably try to do something to make mine look recognisable in the last couple of minutes of the class. So, I turn my attention back to my page.

“Wow, this is amazing. The detail and texture you’ve managed to add to it in such a short amount of time is truly remarkable.” I hear the teacher say and glance up to see him looking over Trick’s shoulder.

Trick doesn’t say anything, and the teacher watches him closely.

“If you can draw like this, why were you willing to risk failing this class?” He asks shrewdly.

“It’s complicated.” Trick replies shortly as the bell rings, signalling the end of class, and everyone stands up.

The teacher stands back but watches Trick curiously as we leave.

“You alright, man?” Cash asks as we leave the room.

“It wasn’t as bad as I thought. I need to see if I can get transferred out of the class before we move on from still life to something that’s more interpretational.” He mutters.

“We can ask Rage or Atlas if it’s possible,” Jensen says, trying to reassure him. I desperately want to ask, but I’m not going to. He knows I’m here if he needs to talk.

Which is what I would’ve done with Rage if he hadn’t snapped at me. I wasn’t being nosy or insisting he talked to me. I just wanted to know he was okay. Atlas said his mom messaged him, and that’s a pretty fucking telling reaction that he had. He flinched when I touched him, the more my mind mulls it over as we walk to the front of the school to meet Peter, the more I become convinced that he went into defensive mode, it doesn’t change that it hurt me, but it does help me to understand a little bit better what happened.

If that’s not what happened, though, then it means he was just being a giant asshole because he can. I’m not going to

know for sure which one it is until I talk to him, and I'm still feeling a little frosty towards him. I'm going to need to keep my distance from him, not for long, but I at least need to sleep on it.

"Hey, guys. Are you ready to go Ever?" Peter greets us by the parking lot.

"Yep, I can't wait to see Tank. See you guys at home in a bit." I say, starting to follow Peter to his car.

I'm suddenly snatched up and spun around in Jensen's arms; he grins wickedly for a split second before his lips crash down on mine, my hands weave into his hair as I sink into the kiss. I feel like I haven't kissed him for far too long. Our tongues tangle, and my body craves more as his hands travel down my back and grip my ass, pulling me closer to him, his hard dick prominent and tempting as our hips align.

Finally, he pulls back, running his knuckles against my cheek and looking at me like I hung the fucking moon. I stare dazedly back at him, wanting more than anything to go back to the house and carry on what we've started.

"I was feeling a bit jealous of Tank." He shrugs, trying to keep a straight face.

I immediately burst out laughing. Of all the things I thought he'd say, that was not it.

"Go home, dork. I'll be back soon. I promised him treats." I grin, placing my hand on his cheek and kissing him softly. "I think we should all go and do something fun this weekend, we've had a lot of heavy stuff happen recently, and I want to have fun that doesn't include vegging out and watching movies, not that I don't love that," I suggest looking at the others too.

"I think that's an awesome idea. What do you want to do, Firecracker?"

"I don't know. What about bowling? It has been ages since I've done that."

"There's a bowling alley in town. It does pretty good food too." Atlas adds.

“It’s a plan. Now go and treat your horse.” Trick smirks.

“He’s not mine, but I’m going. See you guys soon.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Rage hasn’t checked in for a couple of hours, and I need to call him when we get back.” I hear Atlas say to the guys as they walk towards, their cars and I pause.

“Why would he need to check-in?” I ask.

“He went on a job to blow off steam,” Atlas replies, tapping out a message on his phone.

“By himself?” I ask sternly, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Uh oh, bad move,” Jensen smirks, his comment finally making Atlas look up from his phone and at me.

He blinks at me before understanding dawns across his features. “He’ll be okay, Princess. He’s used to going on jobs alone.”

“That may be the case, but we’d agreed that no one does anything alone at the moment. If you haven’t heard from him by the time we get back, we’re contacting Alaric and going after him.” I reply, leaving absolutely no room for argument.

“Absolutely, Princess.” He agrees, his eyes heated. He likes it when my fire comes out to play.

I nod my agreement and walk towards Peter, who’s smiling with amusement.

“What?” I ask as I get into his car, and we start the short drive to the stables.

“It never ceases to amaze me how easily you handle them all. Atlas is one of the most terrifying people I’ve ever met, clearly capable of some dark things, but you stand toe to toe with him, and he fucking lets you.” He shakes his head in disbelief.

“I’ve never been scared of him or any of them. My world was a dark place before I came back. I’ve stared death in the

face more times than I'd like to remember, but the guys have always been safe to me. When I met Atty and Rage, they easily fell into the same category. They've never felt like a threat to me. There's been a connection with them from the moment I meant them." I try to explain.

"Them, huh?" He asks, a smirk on his face.

"No, I meant Atty. Rage is a different thing altogether, although whatever progress I thought I was making has clearly gone down the fucking drain now." I finish on a growl as we pull up outside of the stables.

"Sure, that's what you meant." He smirks before continuing, neither of us getting out of the car. "What happened with you two this morning?"

And just like that, it all comes flooding out of me. "I don't even know, I just wanted to make sure he was okay, but he snapped at me and said, why don't I worry about my fucking boyfriends and leave him the fuck out of it. He said it with such disdain, and it hurt. Probably more than it should've. I've been stewing about it all day, and when I touched his shoulder, he flinched hard, which means his reaction was probably a defence mechanism, which I can understand, but it doesn't mean it hurt any less, and I don't know if he really meant what he said or if it was the defence mechanism. Add in the almost-kiss, and I don't know what the fuck I feel and ..."

"Whoa, Whoa, Whoa." Peter interrupts, holding his hands up and staring at me wide-eyed. "Take a breath, sugar, or you're going to pass out."

I grin sheepishly, "Sorry, I guess it's just been building all day, and you're the poor bastard that asked me about it."

"No need to apologise. I'm happy to listen and advise." He reassures me before his look turns cheeky, "So what, almost kiss?"

My eyes widen, "Oh shit."

"Oh no, you're not getting out of it now. Spill, Sugar."

"Fine, yesterday while we were here, he almost kissed me. If it weren't for Tank being impatient, he would've. Once we

got interrupted, though, he panicked and then practically ignored me for the rest of the evening. Hence why I ended up riding for so long. He's so hot and cold I really have no idea how he feels or if he even likes me at all."

"Oh, he likes you, Sugar, that's clear to tell from the way he watches you, and I'm not the only one that's noticed. Let's not forget that this morning he kissed you in front of everyone. You and he were the only ones who looked shocked at that. I was watching the reaction of the others, and they just shared and knowing look. Jensen and Atlas even had shit-eating grins on their faces." He says simply, shocking the hell out of me.

"Really?" I ask, an array of warring emotions swirling inside me. I can't really get frustrated with him for not knowing how he feels when I don't know myself.

"Really, the question is, how are you going to handle it?"

"I honestly don't know. We've got so much going on at the moment, so many things that need our attention, and I just don't want to add another complication to it all." I sigh heavily.

"Then don't."

I turn my head, still resting on the headrest and shoot him a quizzical look.

"It's quite simple. Just leave it be. Stop worrying about it and let fate take its course."

"You make a good point." I muse.

"I know I do. Come on, let's go give this horse of yours a treat."

"Thanks, Peter. You know he's not mine." I reiterate as we both get out of the car.

"He's not anybody's."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when his owner left the school, he didn't want to take Tank with him. He claimed that Tank was too much to handle, and he couldn't be bothered with it."

“He’s a sweetheart!” I say indignantly.

“For you, but Tank really didn’t like him. I saw them training once, he was too harsh, and Tank did not appreciate it. I called him out several times, but it made no difference. Tank’s not going to be here for much longer. They’re trying to find a buyer for him. The problem is that because his previous owner is prominent in the horse world and has publicly painted him as dangerous, they’re having trouble selling him, and I’m worried where he’s going to end up.” He frowns sadly.

My heart sinks to my shoes. Not Tank, he’s not dangerous at all, not for me, he’s a sweetheart and a perfect gentleman. I know what Peter’s hinting at, and I can’t let him go to slaughter. I am curious, though.

“How did I end up riding him if he’s supposedly so dangerous? Did Rage know?”

“No, Sugar, he would never risk your life like that. Rage only occasionally goes to the stables and never hangs out around anyone, so he doesn’t know the gossip. My guess is someone was trying to mess with you, using him. I meant to mention it yesterday, but it completely slipped my mind. We need to stay even more vigilant.”

“We can mention it to the guys when we get back later. You know I’m not going to let him go to slaughter, right?” I ask.

“I had a feeling you wouldn’t.” He grins.

I easily find Tank’s stable, and our conversation pauses as he seems to recognise my voice already, his head popping over his stall door as he whinnies softly in greeting.

“Hi, gorgeous boy. How’re you doing today?” I ask.

“He clearly loves you.”

“Who do I need to talk to about buying him?”

“I can get all the paperwork for you, and then it just needs to be processed through the office with the payment. We’ll grab the paperwork from the office after you finished lovin’ on

your horse. Before you even suggest it, I am not leaving you alone.”

“Awesome, thank you. Do you think we can get it all done and dusted today?” I ask, a sense of urgency riding me.

“Yeah, sure, it’s pretty straightforward. Do you know your bank details and all of that sort of stuff?”

“Yep, I had them memorised, within a week of knowing I actually had money, and then I destroyed the evidence, as it were.” I grin, pulling a carrot out of my bag and giving it to him.

“Where the fuck did you get a carrot?” He asks, his eyebrows raised.

“From home this morning.” I chuckle.

Tank gently takes it from my hand and then nuzzles my shoulder.

“Shit, how much is he?” I ask, starting to panic that I might not have enough in my account. My brain pings with the memory that Alaric said he’d had all of my trust fund released to me in preparation for attending the academy, so I don’t need to worry about it after all. So much has happened since then that it completely slipped my mind.

“He was worth a couple of hundred thousand, but thanks to Mikey’s slandering, he’s now one thousand five hundred.”

“Mikey? What the fuck kind of name is Mikey.” I sneer, making Peter chuckle. I feed Tank the last of my carrots and then stroke his soft nose. “I’ve got to go now; I’m going to make sure that you never have to worry about having a home again. What do you think? Want to be mine?”

He nuzzles my hand, and I smile.

“Come on, let’s get this done and then get home. I know the guys are going to start nagging me in a minute, and we need to see if Rage is okay.”

“Alright, let’s get this done. I’ll be back tomorrow; we’ll go out on the trails.” I tell Tank and catch Peter’s smile.

Rage

I finished the job about an hour ago; it was reasonably straightforward and, because of that, it didn't burn off as much of my self-loathing as I would've liked. I don't think the guilt that's eating me will go away until I make things right with Ever, but I'm a coward, and I don't want to face her. I know she's probably going to refuse to talk to me ever again and to be honest, I don't fucking blame her. Of course, I fucking live with her now, so instead, I find myself in the oversized garage behind the house that I know she doesn't realise is here, blasting music and taking my anger out on the poor 1969 chevy impala that I've been restoring.

Several of the parts have flown across the garage as a surge of anger overtakes me now and then, and I get ready to launch a spanner when the door opens, and my heart skips a beat, thinking it might be her. But it falls back to its normal rhythm when a mad as fuck Atlas walks through the door instead.

"What the fuck do you think you're playing at, man? No check-in, not even to let me know you got home safe?"

More guilt joins the rest of it already churning in my gut, "Shit, I'm sorry, man, I wasn't thinking."

He deflates slightly and looks at me worriedly, "That bad?"

I sigh and plonk my ass down on my toolbox, taking a long sip of beer, "It's not even her. Sure, she kicked started it all off, but I burnt that off on the job." I stop, unsure how much Ever told them about what I said to her this morning.

"You hurt Ever this morning, you know?"

"I know. I didn't mean to. Not that it makes it any better, she's going to hate me now, and that's what I can't cope with." I admit.

"That's what I figured. Listen, she may be pissed with you for whatever the fuck you said to her, but she doesn't hate you. She chewed my ass out for letting you go on a job by yourself.

Said that if we hadn't heard from you by the time she got back from the stables, we were going after you." He smirks.

"Seriously?" I ask incredulously, "Didn't she tell you all what I said?"

"Nope, she said that when she has a falling out with one of us, the rest of us have to stay out of it."

"Wait, did she go to the stables alone?" I ask, jumping up and ready to go after her.

"Of course fucking not. Peter's with her. They should be back soon."

"Oh," I say simply, feeling a bit ridiculous for thinking they'd leave her by herself at a time like this.

"Look, man, do you want my advice?"

"Fuck yes." I groan.

"Apologise and explain. From what I could see, you went into fight-or-flight mode, Ever understands that. She won't hold it against you, but you do need to apologise."

"That's it?" I ask, unsure.

"That's it like I said, Ever doesn't hold grudges. She's not going to drag this out just because she can."

"Okay, it's worth a shot, I guess," I reply.

"Come on, Trick just messaged, foods ready, and Ever and Peter just got back apparently, Ever's bouncing off the fucking walls with news that she wants to share." He grins a soft expression, crossing his features just like it always does when he talks about Ever.

I reluctantly get up and follow him out of the garage, leaving the lights on and the mess behind. I doubt I'll be able to sleep tonight and will probably end up back in here, anyway.

Just before we get to the back door, Atlas pauses, "I'll give you a pass this time but don't forget to check in again, man. It would kill me and all of them if something happened to you. Got it?"

Emotions clog my throat. Having this many people genuinely care if I live or die is a new concept to me. I spent my childhood being told that I should never have been born and maybe I should just kill myself. If it weren't for Atlas and Jynx finding me when they did, I wouldn't be here. I literally owe them my life.

"I promise, man. I won't let you down again." I vow.

"You haven't let me down yet. I know you won't."

I follow him into the house, my eyes instantly falling on Ever before they even look for anyone else. She smiles when she sees me, relief filling her eyes before hurt quickly follows, and she looks away. Pain clenches my heart, and I silently take my seat at the table. The guys all give me their usual greeting, not seeming to hold the fact that me and Ever have fallen out against me, just like Atlas said.

"So, Sunshine, what's the news?" Riot asks, grinning as she starts to bounce in her chair.

"I bought Tank!" She exclaims excitedly, and my gaze snaps to her.

"Didn't he have an owner?" Trick says, asking the question that I was wondering. I think the last thing I heard was that he belonged to an upperclassman called Mikey. I was surprised that Grant had brought him out as the horse for Ever. I'd asked him to find one that was an easy, and a bombproof ride, and Mikey is not known for his generous nature.

"He did, but he was a dick. He no longer goes here and treated Tank like shit. Then when Tank reacted, he told everyone that he was dangerous."

"He's what?" I ask, anger evident in my voice. Her eyes finally meet mine.

"Tank threw him off and wouldn't let Mikey mount him or anywhere near him. Mikey bad-mouthed him to the entire horse community, and Tank got labelled as a dangerous horse. They've been trying to sell him for a while, but no one will take him, and you know what that means. Although clearly,

he's not as dangerous as Mikey made out because he was so good with Ever." Peter explains, eyeing me warily.

"Excuse me," I say, my anger boiling over as I push away from the table and stomp my way to the door, checking my weapons as I go. Someone is going to fucking bleed tonight for putting Ever's life at risk. It's pure luck that Tank is actually a good horse, and I will be giving him all the fucking treats I can for looking after her after I've beaten the fucking shit out of Grant.

"Where are you going?" Ever asks, following me to the door, the others watching us.

"I'm going to pay Grant a visit. He knows the history of all the horses in that fucking stable, and he deliberately gave you a horse he thought was dangerous. I'm going to find out why." I pause as she looks up at that veil of hurt still in her eyes. I step closer to her and taking the risk that she will reject me, I gently cup her cheek. "I am so fucking sorry for how I spoke to you earlier. I didn't mean to, my defences went up, and I took it out on you. I'm so sorry." I rest my forehead against hers as her eyes meet mine.

"I understand. It hurt me. But I get where you're coming from. If there's any way I can make it easier for you next time it happens, just tell me, I want to help."

"You're amazing," I say quietly, truly unbelieving that she's forgiven me just like that. "Don't leave me out of it, Puddin'. Don't stop caring." I whisper.

"I won't." She replies.

I move back, clearing my throat and making my way towards the door. Emotions make me feel vulnerable and itchy. Ever makes me feel more emotions than I think I ever have.

"Wait!" Ever calls after me, and I pause, turning back to her and feeling a confused and slightly worried frown crease my forehead.

"Yeah?"

"No one is going on any jobs alone, even if they're on fucking campus." She says, fire lighting her eyes and turning

me the fuck on.

“It’s alright, Princess, me and Jensen will go with him. I think we’re both getting a bit twitchy since it’s been a few days since we’ve been able to fight out some excess energy, and someone tried to seriously hurt you. We want blood.” Atlas grins, his dangerous and cold grin.

Ever’s answering grin is just as deadly and hot as fuck.

With that decided and Ever’s blessing, we all leave.

Chapter Fifteen

Jensen

“You know we wouldn’t mind if you and Ever decided to give it a shot?” I say into the silence of the car and enjoy the swerve it makes as my words register with Rage.

Atlas shoots me an amused warning look, and I shrug. Sure, Ever told us not to get involved, and I’m not. I’m not pissed at him, and I’m not beating him to a bloody pulp for hurting Ever. I am, however, going to mess with him and make him uncomfortable and it’s not like what I said isn’t true. We wouldn’t mind. He’s just not ready to hear it yet. The only two people who don’t seem to be able to see what’s happening between them are Ever and Rage themselves.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure, you don’t.” I grin.

“Alright, that’s enough. What’s the plan?” Atlas interrupts.

“I spoke to Grant and asked him to find me the safest horse for a novice. He knows the history of all the horses in that stable. He works there because his father insisted and wanted him to have hands-on experience. He knew what he was doing by giving Tank to Ever, but he’s not smart enough to plan it by himself, and I don’t know what his motivation would be.” Rage explains as we drive through the streetlamp lit streets.

“So we’re asking him who put him up to it then?” Atlas asks.

“Something like that.” Rage grins and anticipation thrums through my veins.

Regardless of whether someone put him up to it, he still willingly put Ever’s life at risk, and no one gets away with doing that unscathed.

Finally, we pull up outside of a predictably large house on the edge of campus. Unlike our home, this one has no security gate, which works to our advantage, not that a security gate would've stopped us. We get out of the car, slamming the doors and not even trying to stay silent. Atlas stalks up to the front door and, with one hard kick, boots it open with a deafening crack.

“What the fuck!” Someone yells from inside.

I follow Atlas and Rage inside, my hands in my pockets. Looking like I'm bored with the situation and hardly paying attention. However, that's far from the truth. I'm making a note of all the people in the room and the nearest exits.

The guys that were chilling in the lounge jump to their feet, anger etched across their faces and looking ready to defend their home until they register who just broke down their door.

“Oh fuck no. I'm out.” One of the smarter ones exclaims, hopping the back of the couch and scurrying upstairs.

The rest of them soon start to follow his lead.

“Where the fuck do you think you're going, Grant?” Rage growls. “We need to have a little chat.”

The room clears out, a couple of the guys looking back worriedly.

“You fucking idiot.” One of them admonishes as he leaves the room shaking his head.

Grant looks like a deer caught in fucking headlights as he stares at us, frozen for a second, his eyes darting around the room, looking for an exit. I ready myself knowing that he's going to bolt any second. His eyes land on the door to the left of him, and before he can make it a few steps, I've moved in front of him. I raise my fist, relishing in the sound of it connecting with his nose. I don't put my full power behind it. We need him conscious to talk, unfortunately.

The darkness in me wants me to play, but there will be plenty of time for that later, and right now, the important thing is to find out who's trying to hurt Ever, whether it's a new threat or one that we already know about. I'm kind of hoping

the latter we already have plans in place for the enemies we know. An unknown enemy is just something we don't need right now. We've got enough unknowns.

"Ow fuck." He groans as he clutches his nose, and I grab hold of him, making sure he doesn't try to escape again.

"Are we questioning him here?" I ask.

"Nope, we'll take him somewhere where there's no one else in hearing range." Atlas grins.

I shrug and pull Grant out of the house; he tries to struggle but doesn't make a real effort to escape. I think he realises that struggling is going to make it so much worse, and we are literally itching to make him hurt, and we'll accept any excuse to do it.

Rage pops open the trunk of his car, and I grin as I shove Grant inside and slam the trunk. We hop back into the car, and I answer a text from Trick asking how it's going.

"Where are we taking him?" I ask curiously.

"There's a cabin a couple of miles out in the woods. It's used for parties sometimes. We'll get whatever information we can out of him and then leave him to find his own way back." Atlas replies.

"He's not going to give up a name straight away. He easily could've stopped this at the house. It's obvious what we wanted to know." I point out.

"More fun for us then." Rage growls.

"Good point." I grin.

It takes no time at all to get to the cabin, which is a generous description. It's run down and honestly looks like something out of a horror movie. Atlas grabs Grant from the car's trunk as Rage and I head into the cabin, Rage switches on a light that casts a dim glow around the dilapidated insides and creates an eerie atmosphere. He drags a chair from the corner of the room and sets it up under the light. Atlas forcibly puts Grant in the chair and secures him before he and I then step back, standing in the shadows and letting Rage take the lead.

It's interesting to watch Rage work, he's eerily calm, but there's a palpable edge that surrounds him and gives the impression that he could snap at any moment. Grant watches him, his mouth shut, but his eyes are filled with fear.

Rage casually reaches into his pocket, grinning when Grant flinches at the movement and pulls out a set of knuckle dusters, putting them on and flexing his fingers.

"I know you're not stupid enough to go up against us by yourself, Grant. So, who put you up to risking Ever's life?" He asks calmly.

"I-I don't know what you mean?" Grant replies shakily.

The sound of Rage's fist colliding with Grant's face echoes in the cabin, and blood starts to drip down his cheek where the knuckle dusters have cut him. He groans in pain, but his lips remain sealed shut.

"Make no mistake; I have no problem in fucking ending you." Rage warns, cold anger permeating his tone.

"We have all night and are well versed in several torture techniques that we're more than willing to use," Atlas adds.

"There's actually a new one I wanted to try, involving a knife and a very delicate area of the body, maximum pain but a slow death." I grin darkly, and Atlas shoots me an interested look.

Grant starts to shake as he realises the dire situation he's in and how fucked up we really are. The funny thing is we haven't even begun to scratch the surface of what we're really capable of.

"Who was it, Grant?" Rage asks again, already gearing up for another strike, assuming that he's going to continue holding out.

"Okay." Grant concedes, surprisingly quickly. "What he said made no fucking sense. He told me not to say anything if I got found out or he'd kill me, then gave me a message to give to you. I wanted to stick to the first thing he said since he's clearly fucking batshit crazy, but now I think there's more risk of you guys killing me than him." He rambles.

I roll my eyes, seriously? This guy lasted less than ten minutes before he fucking caved, and now he's got verbal diarrhoea.

"What's the message, Grant?" Rage asks, a sigh in his voice. I think we were all hoping that he'd last a bit longer.

"Tick, tock little Butterfly, it won't be long until your wings are mounted on my walls. Along with the heads of your men. He's got a special spot for you, apparently, Atlas." Grant turns pale as he relays the message.

Darkness tries to overtake me at the threat to Ever and my family.

"Blake," Atlas growls, his voice deadly.

Rage growls and strikes Grant knocking him out cold, so he can't hear what else is being said.

"Butterfly?" I ask, suspicion in my tone. "Could he be the one that sent the note, supposedly from Ever's very dead mom?"

"What is it with your fucking family and their obsession with Ever? Liam's interest is at least more protective than anything else but Blake's..." Rage trails off.

"My father's protectiveness over her could be the sole reason why Blake is after her, though. Grant didn't get that wrong, he's fucking crazy in the most dangerous kind of way, and my father gave him far too much free rein when he was hiding just how deep his fucked up intentions went." Atlas replies.

"Come on, let's get out of here." Rage mutters, moving behind Grant and splitting the cable ties attaching him to the chair.

We leave him slumped over and make our way back to the car.

"I'll message Trick and get him to fill the others in," I say, slumping into the back seat of the car and a bit pissed I didn't get to hit him a few more times.

“Your brother is becoming an issue that needs to be sorted sooner rather than later.” Rage points out to Atlas.

“I know. We should be getting an update from Jynx tomorrow. So hopefully, we’ll know more then.”

“There’s probably going to be a bit of a gap between Peter tracing those videos and us going after Chris. We might be able to fit in a hit then.” I suggest.

“I doubt it. Taking out Blake is going to be a bigger job than taking down Chris, and that already seems almost impossible. We need to be entirely sure in a meticulous plan. I am not losing any of you.”

“That won’t happen, man, but I think you’re right. We need to know where your dad stands with all of this, and if he’s supporting Blake, then we’re going to have to factor him in.” Rage replies as we pull up to the house.

“I don’t think he is. As you said, he is protective over Ever and has been for years. We don’t really know what his motivations are, but I can’t imagine him being okay with Blake’s vendetta for her.”

“Alright, enough shop talk. We can discuss it more tomorrow with everyone and hopefully with a helpful update from Jynx.” I say, hopping out of the car.

The house is quiet when we come in, but I know that Ever won’t be asleep yet. I watch as Rage skips his hallway and makes his way to the backdoor. I raise my eyebrow at Atlas in question.

“He won’t sleep after everything that’s happened today with his mom messaging and the mess he made with Ever.” He explains, grabbing a drink from the fridge.

“Ah, I get you. He knows that Ever has forgiven him, though, right? She wouldn’t have said it otherwise.”

“I think so. He’s not used to women like Ever.”

“God help his mom if Ever gets her hands on her,” I smirk.

“I sort of hope it happens, that woman is one of the vilest humans I’ve ever met, and that’s coming from me. I’ve known

my fair share of vile fucking humans.” He growls.

“Fucking hell, man, we need to work on a plan to get him completely out of her clutches. We need to find his dad and figure out what she’s got over him.” I say.

“We will. For now, we can carry on running interference, so she doesn’t end up here, and he doesn’t have to go home. Unfortunately, we can’t do anything to stop her from contacting him. If we got him to block her or anything like that, she would definitely show up, and her venom would get worse.” He pauses as he leans back on the counter and spins the soda can between his palms. “The problem is that he always needs to let off steam whenever she messages. We have a number system in place for how bad it is, so Alaric and I know exactly what sort of jobs to send him on.”

“Alright, I agree with Ever though from now on you send one of us with him. You know our strengths and who would be best to accompany him. He’s family. We drop everything for him.” I remind him.

“I know. Thanks, man. I’m sure she’ll get in contact again soon. He didn’t reply this time, so she’s going to try again to get a reaction from him. I’ll make sure one of us goes with him and explain the number system we have in place.”

“Good, I’m going to bed. Need a cuddle from our girl.” I grin, and he salutes me with his can.

“See you tomorrow.”

I take the stairs two at a time, my mind trying to work out a way that we can help Rage get out of the clutches of his mom but not get him caught in the crossfire. It’s definitely something that’s going to need all of us to fix. I still think the best thing we can do is to get in contact with his dad and find out exactly where he stands on everything. For all we know, he could really not give a shit about Rage but judging from what Rage told us about the horses, that may not be the case.

That reminds me, I need to bring up at some point Luc’s dad. After the whole thing with his aunt, that is actually his sister. I started to look into all the financials of his companies.

I may not know how to hack like Peter, but Luc's dad hasn't changed any of his passwords since we were kids, and gaining access to his accounts is pretty fucking easy. I've had my laptop scanning for inconsistencies and keywords for a while, and it pinged with some pretty interesting information. I was meant to bring it up at dinner, but we got side-tracked—something else that needs talking about tomorrow.

I quietly open Ever's bedroom door. I doubt that she fell asleep knowing we were out there. Her eyes meet mine as soon as I pop my head around the door, and she shuts her book, a beautiful smile lighting up her eyes. My blood heats, as her eyes track my every movement, I slowly start to strip off my clothes as I make my way to her.

“Everything go okay?” She asks, her voice husky and sending a spear of desire straight to my dick.

“Yeah, all good.” I rasp back.

Reaching the edge of the bed, she lifts the covers up to reveal her deliciously naked form underneath. I take a second to admire her as I drop my boxers.

“What're you waiting for?” She asks, a cheeky grin on her features.

“You don't have to ask me twice, Angel,” I reply, literally jumping on her, so my knees land on either side of her and make us bounce on the bed as she laughs.

“Jensen!” She giggles.

“Yes, Angel?” I ask, peppering her with kisses.

Her giggle turns to a moan as I suck one of her nipples into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it and growling as she arches her back, pushing her perfect breast firmly against my mouth. Her soft hands start to run all over me, her nails switching between firm scratches that make me growl and feather-light touches. The sensation is maddening in the best kind of fucking way. I switch sides giving her other nipple some attention so that it doesn't feel left out and moving so that I can settle between her thighs.

My fingers softly trace down her stomach, stopping short of where she wants them and moving down her leg before switching to the other one. When it reaches the top of her thigh, my fingers part her soaked folds. I circle her clit twice, grinning when she moans as I move away before I lightly run my finger up and down her entrance. She bucks her hips, her hands clamping tightly in my hair and making me shudder with need.

Instead of doing what she wants, I repeat the action, moving my fingers back up to her clit circling it a couple of times before moving back down to her entrance, my fingers pushing the barest amount inside before I pull out again, I do it until she's quivering with need beneath me. Using my hair, she pulls me up her body, making me release her nipple with a pop. Once we're at eye level, her heated eyes meet mine.

"If you're not inside me within the next few seconds, Jensen, I swear to god..." She threatens before crying out in pleasure as I plunge inside her.

Her walls clench around me, and I groan, my lips meeting hers in a feverish kiss. Her nails scrape my back as I plunge inside her at an unrelenting pace, she meets me thrust for thrust, and I place my hand under her back and lift her hips, making the angle that much more delicious and her moan loudly, calling out my name. A few more punishing thrusts, and she's coming apart in my arms, her back arched and her beautiful features contorted with pleasure as my own release quickly follows.

"I love you, Angel."

"I love you, too." She smiles back up at me, pulling me close.

I never thought I could find happiness like this.

Chapter Sixteen

Ever

The guys explained this morning everything that happened last night, and that Blake is behind it. They told us what he said and that he called me Butterfly, which means the note that was supposedly from my mom was really from him. It still leaves the question as to how he knows that my mom called me Butterfly because he was most definitely trying to mess with my head, and he fucking succeeded. Also, how did he manage to write it in what looked like her handwriting? I compared the two notes, and they both looked eerily similar.

Something's not quite adding up. I feel like we're missing a vital piece of information that everyone else seems to have.

It makes me wonder what it was like for Atlas growing up with him; I get the feeling that most of his trauma is thanks to Blake and not Liam like I first thought, although I'm sure Liam's responsible for his fair share of it.

Unfortunately, this morning we've got combat right up until lunch. I've dressed in workout clothes, so I don't have to change at school, but I'm going to have to come back here to shower afterwards. It's a pain, but there's no way I'm staying sweaty all day and equally no way that I'm going to not get in a good workout, I need to keep my skills sharp, and I'm starting to get antsy thanks to my lack of action. I've decided I don't like this part of an investigation, the planning and preparing part. I like the doing part a hell of a lot more.

Rage's horses arrive after school, and I'm still hoping that he will want to go out on the trails with me, although I want to ride Tank now. I can't believe I brought a horse. It's the most significant purchase I've made, and I couldn't be happier about it. I am slightly worried about where I'm going to keep him when we're not at school, but since it's unlikely that we will be leaving campus thanks to the threat on my life, that's

not a problem I have to deal with yet. I do need to get Jensen to invest some of my money, though. So that when the time comes, I can afford to buy a place that has the space for Tank too.

“Do you still want to take the horses on the trails after school?” Rage asks me as we walk through the main doors of the school.

“Yeah, I’d love to. Can I ride Tank?”

“Of course, he’s your horse.” He grins, “I’m so happy you’ve brought him. No horse deserves to go to slaughter, and he’s a damn good horse. I want you to be careful, though. I know he was perfectly well behaved with you, but there is a chance that he may have a couple of triggers thanks to the idiot that owned him before, so we need to be careful.”

“Yeah, that’s probably best. Peter said he intervened a couple of times, so I’ll ask him what he thinks could trigger Tank. At least if we’ve got a vague idea of what could trigger him, it will lessen the risk.”

“That’s a good idea. See you in there.” He replies, heading into the changing rooms.

I nod and walk into the gym, dumping my bag and fishing around in it for my hand wraps. I wrap my hands as I wait for everyone else to get changed. Declan just gives me a head nod in greeting and then goes back to studying his clipboard. Once everyone is out of the changing room, Declan calls the class to order and has us all stand in front of him.

“Right, I’m fairly certain that thanks to Coach’s interest in doing other things, you guys have a few holes in your training. The best way for me to figure out where those holes are and where each of your skill levels are at, is to have you spar against each other. Before we do that, though, I want five warm-up laps of the gym and then make sure you stretch. I don’t want anyone pulling anything because they didn’t stretch properly, we have the competition coming up with Redmere Academy in a few months, and I want at least a couple of you in it.”

I share a look with the guys. That could be fun. I kind of want to do it.

“We’ve never even come close to winning that damn competition.” One of the guy’s grumbles.

“The winning school gets bragging rights and an all-expenses paid ski holiday just before we break up for Christmas break,” Atlas mutters to the rest of us.

“Sweet,” Luc replies.

“We will this year. I know that some of you liked the coach,” Declan says, a disgusted look on his face, “But at the end of the day, he didn’t train you properly, and this course isn’t an option. It’s necessary to keep you safe. When you leave the school grounds, you’re in danger, thanks to the positions of power your families hold.”

Everyone looks around at each other. It seems like these kids need the reminder that these lessons aren’t just for shits and giggles regularly. For me, I don’t think I’ve ever not been in danger, apart from the first few years of my life, and other than the guys and brief memories of my mom, I barely remember anything else from that time.

“Get to it.” He barks.

Everyone starts running, quickly thinning out, so there’s enough space between us all to run comfortably. I have to give it to the academy, there may be a lot of students here, but they’ve managed to keep the class sizes reasonably small.

“He’s fairly good. If his actual teaching skills match up with his drive, then he’s going to make a great coach.” Trick muses as we start off at a gentle jog.

I fucking hate running.

“It’s a shame he won’t be able to carry on. It seems like we need a good coach after that shit stain that the last one was.” Riot adds.

“We could always see what we can do. He might not want to be a coach full time.” Atty points out.

“Fair enough.” I breathe, “I am so fucking unfit. I might have to start adding a run into my workout.”

“You look entirely disgusted by that, Sunshine.” Riot grins, not even breathing heavily, and we’re on our second lap.

I kind of hate him for that.

“I am. Running is the devil.”

They all chuckle at me, and I glare, bastards the lot of them.

They stick with me as I start to lag behind, and although by the end of our warm-up laps, they’re breathing slightly heavier, none of them are as bad as I am. I am definitely going to have to add a run into my workout. If I do it for long enough, I may become one of those people that love running. I mean, there’s a better chance of me sprouting wings and flying to the moon but never say never and all that shit.

“You okay?” Jensen asks, looking slightly amused as I chug a bottle of water. The others all go to grab their own drinks or start to stretch out, ready for their sparring matches.

I like Declan. I really hope he doesn’t decide I can’t spar because there are no other girls in here. That would piss me the fuck off.

“How is it that you hate running as much as I fucking do or any exercise, and yet you’ve barely broken a sweat?” I grumble.

“I hate it, but I still do it. A fighter without endurance is at a pretty big disadvantage.” He explains.

“Ergh, you just had to get logical.” I pout, making him chuckle.

Atlas hears the tail end of my sentence as he approaches and grins, “You know we have a gym at the house, right?”

“What, where?”

“In the basement, it’s fully kitted out. So if you really want to start adding running into your workout, it’s probably better

to use the machines down there. It's safer than running around the school grounds, especially at the moment."

"And now you've made it, so I don't even have the excuse that it's not fucking safe to run! Damn it, guys, now I've got to do it." I groan.

Jensen and Atlas share a look and smirk.

"Alright, stretch out. I'll come around and tell you who you're sparring with. No knockouts, first to the floor or to yield loses, and then we'll rotate." Declan explains.

I start stretching out. My rib is giving me no trouble at all anymore, thank god, but I am still a bit tense, my muscles not having been stretched for a while.

"Alright, Ever, you're with Will," Declan says, coming up to us and gaining more respect from me since he hasn't told me to sit this one out.

I glance over to where he's pointing, seeing Will already standing on the mat waiting for me, and make my way over. It doesn't escape my notice that he's one of the smaller guys here. He gives me a friendly smile as I approach, and I'm glad that I don't have to deal with any macho bullshit. It's starting to wear thin now. But, unfortunately, I seem to be constantly surrounded by it.

"Hey, I'm Will." He greets me.

"Ever."

"I know, take it easy on me, alright, I saw what you did to the punching bag, and I don't feel like being turned to mush today." He grins, and I burst out laughing at the unexpected admission.

"You've got it," I reply.

"First round starts now," Declan yells.

I didn't get a chance to see who the guys are paired with, but I sort of feel sorry for them. I know that Jensen especially is getting tense. Will and I circle each other for a minute feeling each other out. I'm glad that he's taking this seriously and isn't going to try to take it easy on me. He drops his guard

slightly on his left before striking out with his right, which I easily dodge before jabbing him in the ribs. He winces slightly but keeps his cool as he comes back at me with a fast combination. He's damn quick. I duck his punches and drop, sweeping my leg out and knocking him to the floor. He lands with an ompff and stays there catching his breath.

I hold my hand out to him, unsure if he will do the male hurt pride thing and knock it away. But, instead, he grins up at me and grasps my hand, letting me pull him up.

"You're damn quick," I compliment, "But you project moves either by dropping your guard on one side or looking at where you intend to strike. If you stopped doing that, you'd be a force to be reckoned with."

He watches me curiously as if he's unsure why I'm helping him. "Thanks, I'll work on that. You're damn good. I didn't even land a hit. You must've been training for years." He questions, curiosity in tone.

"Nope, I've had no formal training," I reply honestly.

"Will, stay on the mat. I'll send your next partner over, and Ever you're up against Darryl next." Declan comes over, still looking at his clipboard.

I make my way over to the other mat. Darryl is significantly bigger than Will but will be slower because of it. He nods but doesn't smile. Not as welcoming as Will was, but at least he's not hostile.

Declan calls it, and we start. This fight is more challenging than the last one. Darryl has clearly got some experience and is more calculated in his attacks. It feels good to fight a bit harder. Taking him down is going to be a challenge just because of his sheer size, and I can't use any of the dirty fighting techniques that I would usually use against an opponent this size since I'm pretty sure that it would be frowned upon. I decide my best bet is to use my size in my favour. I can move quicker than he can. I dodge the meaty fist coming my way and move around him, jabbing him in the side and kicking the back of his leg, hoping he'll go down. He stumbles but manages to keep his balance as he turns, and with

speed, I didn't think he possessed, strikes me. I manage to move at the last second, but it still glances off my shoulder, and it's clear that he's not pulling his punches.

I dodge the kick coming my way as I shake off the pain in my shoulder, making sure that I stay moving. If he gets his hands on me, he will easily take me down, and I will not let that happen. Darryl looks pleased that he's managed to make a hit, but he's also starting to slow down. Learning from the other time I tried it, I know that if I'm going to take him down by kicking out the back of his knees, I need to put more force behind it.

Jensen

I'm bored. I was really hoping for a good fight today. With everything that's been going on and tension rising as we try to figure out how to get to Chris and close the missing student's case, my darkness is trying to take over more and more. I much prefer the doing of the cases rather than this part where we're sat around twiddling our fucking thumbs. Once again, I've already taken my opponent out, so I stand off to the side and look around at the other fights. The guys have either already taken their opponents out or are about to. Declan was right when he said that there were holes in their training. Although, to be fair, we all have a lot of experience behind us. Ever took her last opponent out pretty damn quickly, so I'm slightly surprised when my eyes land on her still fighting a big ass motherfucker.

I know for a fact that some of the guys in here will use going up against her to their advantage, but so far, her opponents get to keep their heads attached to their bodies. She moves fast as she dodges a punch and spins around him, aiming a kick to the back of his knee. I can already tell from here that she's holding back, and it won't be strong enough to take him down. The guy moves with surprising speed for his size and manages to land a glancing hit on Ever's shoulder. I take a step forward but force myself to stop. I know this is the

whole point of the lesson, and of course, she's going to get hit at some point, but I don't fucking like it, and my protective instincts are practically screaming at me to rush in and protect her, despite the logical side of me knowing that she can handle this.

It's hard for all of us to watch Ever in a fight, but for some of us, it's more complicated thanks to past trauma. Fuck. I glance around the room, trying to find Luc; I know he finished his fight, and like me, he'll be watching, Ever, if any of us are likely to charge over there and take the guy down without mercy, it will be him. He's been doing a lot better recently, but I know he still struggles. I finally find him, his body tense, his arms crossed tightly across his chest, and his eyes rivetted to Ever. It's obvious that he's trying to stay in control, and if Ever doesn't end the fight quickly or the guy lands another hit, then I'm going to have to intervene. I just hope I'm quick enough to get to him before he gets to the guy Ever's fighting.

My eyes connect with Atlas's. If Luc loses his control, it's going to take both of us to stop him and distract him enough that he gains it back. It looks like I might up end up getting a good fight, after all. I just wish it was under better circumstances.

My attention switches between watching Ever's fight and watching Luc. As Atlas does the same, suddenly his eyes widen in surprise, and I follow his gaze towards a very on edge Cash. The guy just managed to land another hit, hard enough that it made Ever grimace slightly in pain, but other than that, she shows no other outward signs as she doesn't even let it slow her down, and she lands three of her own hits.

Once I know that Ever's got this handled, my attention immediately goes back to Cash. Anger darkens his features, and his fists are clenched at his side with such force that his knuckles are white. It's an unusual reaction for Cash. He usually manages to keep his cool better than all of us. When Cash loses his control, he's fucking terrifying, but it takes an awful fucking lot to get him to that point. Something else has to be going on, he's seen Ever in fights before, and he knows what she's capable of.

I glance at Atlas, motioning that I'm closer to Cash, so I'll go for him if he makes a move towards the fight, and he can deal with Luc. By this point, the others have realised what's going on and are looking between the two of them worriedly. I don't dare take my eyes off of Cash as he tilts forward onto the balls of his feet. I see it the second he decides to intervene. I don't know what's just happened in Ever's fight, but I trust that if that needs to be handled, one of the others can deal with it because right now Cash needs me to stop him from doing something he will definitely regret later, I'm not sure that the Academy will take kindly to murder on campus, although it has happened before and they covered it up, so you never know.

Chapter Seventeen

Jensen

By the time he takes a second step, I'm already sprinting across the gym, my mind alert and watching for any sign of what he plans to do next. Cash's opponent, who is watching him warily, sees me coming and wisely moves out of the way, clearing off the mat. I get a few curious looks from the rest of the kids here, but most of them are still involved with their own fights and too worried about losing to pay me much attention.

Just before Cash starts to take off sprinting, I tackle him to the ground. The speed that I was going means that I hit him hard; fortunately, we land on the mat behind him. I'm hoping the hard strike will knock some sense into him, but instead, it has the opposite effect. He pops up on his feet as I do the same. When his eyes land on me, there's a tiny spark of relief. He knows as well as I do that he can wear himself out fighting me until he gets his control back. I have to admit I'm fucking glad he's unarmed right now. Don't get me wrong, he wouldn't deliberately hurt me, but we do train with weapons as often as we can, and with him holding onto his calm by a thread, we'd both come out of that pretty sliced up.

His eyes start to stray back to Ever's fight, and I strike out, catching him in the jaw. His head snaps back to mine as the cold mask falls over his features. Damn it; I hate it when he does that. He swings for me, and I duck, striking back. I haven't seen him this bad for a while. While I'm aware of everything going on around me, in case anyone else decides to get involved, the majority of my attention is focused on Cash. He is not the kind of opponent you can let your guard drop with.

Because of this, I hear when Declan realises what's going on and tries to intervene. Fortunately, Rage manages to get to

him before he can get to us. That would not have ended well for him.

“They’re fine.” Atlas says firmly, “Why don’t you call the end of the lesson.”

“There’s still half an hour left.” Declan protests.

“Yes, but this will go on for a while, and we need the gym.” Rage replies, his tone suggesting that there’s no point in arguing with him.

Cash lands a hit on my jaw, snapping my head to the side, and I grin, aware that my darkness is swimming to the surface, this is the kind of fight I needed today and clearly the fight he needed too. His eyes are starting to clear, and instead of the raw anger that was clouding them before, I can see the frustration and stark fear in them instead. I hope like hell he feels like he’s in a talking mood after this because I want to know what the fuck is going on.

“Clear out!” Atlas orders loudly, and it doesn’t take long for me to start hearing the gym doors slam closed.

As soon as it’s emptied, Ever speaks, “What’s going on? That is not one of their normal fights.”

When Cash hears Ever’s voice, it’s like all the fight suddenly drains out of him. I barely manage to pull my punch at the last second as he just drops his guard. He turns away from where Ever and the guys are watching and drops to the floor. Both of us are breathing heavily from the brief fight, having pushed each other hard. He clasps his arms around his knees, and his head drops as he heaves, trying to catch his breath.

I share a look with the guys.

“Come on, let Jensen talk to him. We need to get home and shower, anyway.” Trick suggests.

“Alright.” Ever replies hesitantly.

I meet her worried gaze, “Don’t worry, Angel, I’ve got this. We’ll catch up.”

She nods once casting her gaze back to Cash, Luc stays with her as she grabs her stuff and the others go to get theirs. As soon as they've gone, I take a seat next to Cash and just wait him out. We should be undisturbed for a while. There's not another lesson is here until after lunch. I know from experience that there's no point in pressuring him.

It's at least ten minutes until he speaks, "Sorry I came at you like that, man."

"Don't worry about it. I needed a good fight. That coach definitely left some holes in their training." I assure him. The number of times that they've had to spar with me when my darkness takes over. It's the least I can do for them when they lose their shit. However, it is unusual that Cash needed me to spar with him. "What's going on?" I ask gently when he continues to stay silent.

He sighs heavily, "I'm not entirely sure. I'm so fucking fed up of Ever being in the line of fire or being threatened, and I get it; this is our life; it's not going to change anytime soon. Though I do hope that the direct threats to her stop, she's getting hurt. I know she can handle herself, but seeing her fight today and when he actually managed to take her down, I just panicked and then snapped. I can't fucking lose her, man, and I am fucking tired of her being in danger. I love her, I'm supposed to protect her, but even with all of us loving her and looking out for her, she's still getting fucking hurt and threatened."

"I get it, man, I really fucking do. Our dangerous way of living may be a lifelong thing, and I'm sure at some point we will all have threats on our lives, but the immediate threats to Ever's are temporary. We will take care of them."

"I know, man, logically I get it, but my logic flew out of the fucking window then. I don't know how to explain it. I also know that Ever is more than capable of taking care of herself, but she's gone through so much in her life. I want her not to have to worry about her safety anymore. I also get the feeling that we don't even know the half of it. How she knows Jynx is clearly not a sunshine and roses story. I don't think either of

them are capable of that. There are so many unknowns at the moment, and I think it's just gotten a bit overwhelming."

"I know better than anyone what happens when logic flies out the window." I point out.

"That's how you feel every time?" He asks, finally turning to meet my gaze.

I nod. "Yeah."

"That's shit, man."

I chuckle, "Pretty much. Ever will tell us the story behind her and Jynx when she's ready. As for everything else, she may be getting threatened a lot, but she is also protected by us, and we are some of the deadliest and well trained men out there. Nobody will get through us to get to her. The fact that we all love her and would die for her just means she's even more protected. That's not even taking into account her own skills and Jynx and her men, who clearly have a soft spot for her. She's got a lot of people in her corner. I'm struggling with the inaction at the moment." I admit.

"You are?"

"Oh yeah, we know Chris is behind the murders, but we can't get to him until we have a plan, and we know that Blake has it out for Ever, and we don't even know what his motives are. Add in the Phoenix and Amelia stuff, and I'm surprised I haven't fucking snapped. We're in this together, though, and it'll all get sorted. So are you ready to go back to the house? Ever is worried about you." I tell him, raising my eyebrow in question and then wincing when it pulls at my now bruised face. "Damn man, you got me good." I chuckle, gingerly poking my bruised face.

"Right back at you." Cash replies, rubbing his jaw. "Alright, let's get back. I need to shower."

When we get to the house, lunch is laid out on the table, and everyone's already showered. Ever walks straight up to Cash to make sure that he's okay. He holds onto her like she's his lifeline. Once they both leave the kitchen to go upstairs, all attention turns to me.

“Is he okay? It’s not like him to lose it like that.” Trick asks, concern evident in his tone.

“I think he’s better than he was. He’s struggling with Ever being at the centre of all the threats at the moment. Her being in constant danger and then that guy actually making hits pushed him over the edge.” I explain.

“We’re all struggling with that.” Rage replies, and I raise my eyebrow. He included himself in that, and this time hasn’t backed down like he usually would. It looks like he’s finally starting to admit it to himself, at least.

“We need to get rid of these direct threats to her as quickly as possible so that we can all breathe a bit easier,” Trick says, his eyebrows dipped as he thinks through all the possibilities and how to keep us all safe.

The conversation pauses as Cash and Ever come back into the room, both of them still wet from the shower with big grins adorning their faces. Cash looks decidedly less tense.

I smirk, lucky bastard.

“What are we talking about?” Ever asks, taking a seat at the table with the rest of us.

“The threat level each of our current enemies possesses and how we’re going to deal with each one,” Luc explains from next to her, threading his fingers through hers. She turns to look at him, and he captures her lips kissing her thoroughly before pulling away and grinning at the dazed look on her face.

“Taking down my brother is going to be a long game kind of thing. We need so much more intel before we can even consider it.” Atlas warns, a dark frown descending his features as he gets us back on track.

“I finished tracing those videos I found on the dark web last night.” Peter interrupts.

“Shit, hey man, sorry I didn’t see you there.” I apologise, completely missing that he was in the room.

“Hey.” He grins. “So, Chris uploaded those videos at his office, and the hard copies are most likely kept there along with any other incriminating information. It didn’t take me as long as I thought it would to improve the security on that laptop. It was already pretty damn secure.”

“That’s great. We need to get in contact with Alaric and tell him that you’ve traced them back. Then we can work out a way to get in.” Luc grins.

I think we’re all excited to get to the doing part of this job. None of us are very good at sitting fucking still.

“When I get in touch with him, I’ll see if the other team that was working it did any surveillance or even has the blueprints to the building or the location of the safe. Even one of those things will cut down the time it’s going to take to pull off this job.” Atlas suggests.

“Let’s hope they do. I want this one over and done with now. Chris is a powerful man; Phoenix clearly know that someone is getting close to figuring out what happened that night. Hence the threats on Ever’s life.” Riot adds.

“Is it Phoenix, though?” Rafe asks, and I look at him curiously. “We thought that Ever’s accident was Phoenix, but it turned out to be Blake.”

“True, but it wasn’t Blake who led us to the meeting room. That was helpful. There is definitely someone who either is a member of Phoenix or knows things that they shouldn’t who is helping us.” Cash points out.

“Hence why we need to talk to that equine instructor. He was a student here when the kids were. We can’t just ask him outright, though, just in case we’re wrong and he’s actually working with Blake.” Ever adds in. “Plus, I really want to do the lessons now.”

Rage grins at her. “My horses will be here later. You can come and help me unload them and get them settled if you want to. You’ll be able to see Tank too.”

Ever nods enthusiastically, and we all smile. She makes it so fucking easy to love her.

“Speaking of Blake, weren’t you supposed to have heard from Jynx by now?” Rage asks Atlas.

“Yeah, I’ll call her now.” He replies, already pulling out his phone and dialling, putting it on the table and on the loudspeaker so we can all hear.

“I need to go and shower. Fill me in when I get back.” I announce, fully aware that if I can smell myself, everyone else can too, and it is pungent.

“Alright, dude.”

Ever

I chuckle as I watch Jensen sniff his armpit and pull a face before he turns and leaves the room. He never fails to make me smile. Cash seems a lot more relaxed now, he explained what happened in the gym, and I tried to see it from his point of view. I know that if the roles were reversed and one of the guys was constantly under threat, I would probably react the same way.

It’s hard to watch someone you love be a target and in danger. I reminded him that I was perfectly capable of taking care of myself and that, more importantly, I had all of them to watch my back too, just like I’m watching theirs too. Then I proceeded to show him exactly how okay I was. I think I’m getting the hang of shower sex now. Safe to say, we were both less tense after that.

“Hey Atlas, hey, guys.” Jynx’s voice brings me out of my thoughts.

“Hey, have you got an update?” Atlas replies, getting straight to the point.

“Yeah, I have.” She replies, a layer of tension in her tone, and I share an apprehensive look with the others.

“Judging from your tone, it’s not good.” Riot points out.

“I’m not really sure what to class it as.” She replies before continuing. “Blake is definitely up to something and not something your father knows about. There’s a lot of tension between him and Liam, enough that they’re letting it show around people that they shouldn’t. We tailed Blake, and he’s striking business deals that I know for a fact that Liam would disagree with. Rowese being one of them.”

“The child trafficker?” Rage interrupts, shock evident in his tone.

“That’s the one. Now Liam is a lot of things, but that’s a line that he’s never crossed, and I know for a fact that he would disapprove of it.”

“You’re right; he wouldn’t.” Atlas agrees darkly. “Blake would, though, if it makes him more money, he couldn’t give a flying fuck where it’s coming from.”

The more I hear about Blake, the more confident I am that he needs to be wiped from this planet; he’s a fucking psychopath.

“Even more worrying than that, he seems to have gathered quite a large following. Men who used to be loyal to Liam are now switching sides. You should know that we managed to talk to a few people who are fairly high up. It turns out if you get someone drunk enough, they easily spill things they really fucking shouldn’t.” She chuckles, and I grin.

We’ve used that technique before.

“Anyway, it seems like Liam’s been trying to get rid of some of his worse business associates, some of the ones that he knows hires underage girls for the clubs and are drugging them. As well as the ones that use pretty promises to lure them in and then giving them no way to escape, he’s having little success, and we’re unsure what his motivations are.”

“He’s trying to legitimise?” Atlas asks, his eyebrows hitting his hairline in shock.

“I wouldn’t say legitimise. He’s done nothing about the weapons, drugs, and the clubs he thinks are okay. He’s also

still in contact with all the high-profile contacts that use him for everything from prostitutes to drugs and guns.”

“What the fuck? That makes no sense. But if he’s trying to do that, it’s probably why Blake has gone so far off the fucking rails. He’s never understood why Liam won’t go into business in sex trafficking and children. It’s where a lot of money is.” Atlas frowns, scrubbing his hand over the stubble on his chin as he stares down at the phone.

“That’s what we thought too.” Ace’s voice comes from the other end of the line. “There was a blazing row between them that several of the people who work for them heard and then gossiped about over beers. Liam told Blake that he had to stop coming after Ever, or Liam would deal with him personally. He said Ever always was and always will be off-limits, and that Blake knows why.”

“So that’s why he’s after her then, he’s jealous, and he knows why Liam is so interested in her.” Trick frowns, looking at me with concern etched in his features.

Jensen comes back into the room, rubbing a towel on his head and assessing us all closely before frowning heavily and picking me up, placing me on his lap as he sits back down.

“I’m not worried. I’ve faced bigger threats than this.” I assure him.

As much as I’d hate to do it, having promised myself that I’d retire that side of me the second my father was dead if I really have to, I have a specific skill set that makes me a formidable opponent.

“I wouldn’t worry, guys,” Mason starts, “We’ve seen Ever’s work. She can handle anything that they can throw at her.”

The guys all turn to me, their eyebrows raised and curiosity burning in the depths of their eyes. I am not going to share this story if I can fucking help it, not now and not fucking ever.

Chapter Eighteen

“Her work?” Rage asks, his eyes locked on me as I hold his gaze steadily.

Jynx, god bless her, must realise that I haven’t shared that information with them yet and intervenes.

“He means we’ve seen her fight.” She replies simply, putting an end to the conversation. “There’s one last thing that you should know, and you’re not going to like it.”

“Because I’ve loved everything so far?” Atlas replies sarcastically.

“Haha, dickhead. Just listen.”

“Alright, I am.”

“Liam isn’t wearing his ring.”

Atlas’s eyes collide with mine as silence falls over everyone. “What?”

“He’s not wearing his ring, man. He hasn’t been for a few years now.” Rome adds in with a familiarity that lets me know that he and Atlas have met at least a few times. Neither of them are the easiest people to get to warm up to you.

“That’s not true, I saw him eighteen months ago, and he was wearing it then,” Atlas replies.

“I don’t know what to tell you, man. Everyone we’ve spoken to has told us that he hasn’t worn it for years. So maybe he just put it on so you wouldn’t be suspicious.” Ace reasons.

“You’ve got no idea who he’s given it to?” Rage asks, watching Atlas’s reaction carefully and thankfully forgetting about Mason’s comment earlier.

Atlas has clearly told the others the ring’s significance because no one seems to be lost or wondering what the big deal is. Instead, each of them wears the same grim expression.

“No, no one does, which is weird in itself,” Jynx replies. “I’ve got to go. D found out we’re up here and has given us a job. So I’ve got to go meet a contact.”

“Got it. Keep the updates coming as and when you have them?” He replies, his voice taut with tension.

“Of course, we’ll try to find out who he’s given it to, as well.” She replies.

“And we’ll let you know if we hear any whisperings of Blake sending men your way,” Mason adds.

“Great, thanks guys. I need to make a phone call.” Atlas replies before hanging up.

“Your dad never gave your mom his ring, did he?” Trick asks softly.

“No, he didn’t. I didn’t think the selfish fucker would ever give it up. He treated my mom like she was a means to an end and talked to her like she was trash. He never loved her. She despised him as well. It wasn’t one way; they treated each other like shit. I think they married to keep their parents happy, but I never stopped to ask. I was too worried about keeping myself alive. I’m going to call him.”

As the phone rings on the table, we all share a look. Atlas’s family dynamics are clearly fucked up, but I know he loved his mom, and I know she’s dead, purely from how he talks about her. I assume that Liam wasn’t responsible for it, or he’d be dead by now. It’s not the right time to ask what happened. The phone continues to ring with no answer, and as soon as it goes to the answerphone, he hangs up and dials again. On the fourth ring, Trick intervenes.

“I don’t think he’s going to answer. Give it a while, and we can try again tomorrow. We should be getting back to school, anyway. Message Alaric, tell him that Peter’s traced the videos and ask if the other team had any of the surveillance stuff we need.” He orders.

Atlas takes a deep breath, running his hands through his hair before nodding and picking his phone back up, sending the text.

We all look at Rage when his phone rings. He rolls his eyes at us and picks up, saying a few brief replies.

“The horses are here early; I’m going to go and get them settled now since they’re being difficult and won’t unload for the stable hands here.” He grins.

“Can I still come and help?” I ask, excited to see Rage’s horses.

“Of course, Peter, since you’ve got some experience, would you mind coming to help unload and exercise them? We’re going to take them out on the trails but Ever wants to ride Tank.”

“Yeah, I’d love to.” He replies.

I get up, ready to get going, “Wait, what about school?”

“It’s fine. I’ll call in and say I need the extra help with my horses.” Rage replies, completely unconcerned.

“Well, alright then, let’s go,” I say, full of enthusiasm and glad that I got changed into something that will be easy to ride in after I had my shower.

I practically skip to the front door, Rage, and Peter following me with amused grins on their faces as somewhere in the room behind Jensen snorts.

“Be careful and look out for the instructor. I want regular check-ins!” Trick yells after us.

I spin on my heel to face him, saluting and sticking my tongue out. “Got it, boss.”

His eyes heat and I spin on my heel, sprinting out the front door.

“I warned you about that tongue of yours, Ever!” He calls after me, sounding much closer than he should be.

Arms wrap around me from behind, and he turns me, pushing me up against the SUV; as I giggle, it turns out I enjoy being chased. But I enjoy being caught even more. He grins down at me, his eyes still heated. He liked the chase as much as I did. He grabs my wrists in his hands, slowly moving them

above my head and pinning them in place with one of his hands wrapped around my wrists, keeping them in place. My laughter dies as my blood heats. Damn, I love that. He smirks as he dips his chin, his lips tracing up my jaw and making my eyes flutter closed. I strain against the restraints his hands have on my wrists as his lips trail down my neck instead of moving to my lips. His breath huffs out against my neck as he chuckles when I make a frustrated noise. He nips my neck, soothing the slight sting with a swirl of his tongue, the piercing adding another level to the sensation.

Finally, his mouth crashes down on mine, my back arches as I try to get closer to him, he releases my wrists, and one of my hands delves into his hair as my other one moves down his back and under his shirt, my nails gently running up his back.

“Guys.” Peter calls, “We really should get going. They need us to unload the horses.”

We reluctantly pull apart when I step back from Trick and look around, wondering where Rage is and why Peter was the one to interrupt us. I spot him sitting in his car, his hands white knuckling the steering wheel, his eyes meet mine in the rear-view mirror. I catch the fleeting look of longing in them before he turns away, breaking the eye contact.

I wonder what that was about.

“Have fun.” Trick mutters.

I grin and wave as I go to get in the car. As soon as Peter and I are seated, Rage tears out of the driveway going at a speed that easily tells me something is wrong. I look at Peter to see if he can give me any clue about what’s up with Rage. Something must’ve happened while I was distracted with Trick.

He glances at Rage and then pulls out his phone, tapping out a message; seconds later, my phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out, reading the message that Peter just sent me.

Peter: I think he likes you, a lot, and seeing what he can’t have is hard for him. Tensions are running high with everyone

at the moment, and we need to get this missing student's case closed A.S.A.P.

Me: I think you're right about the Chris thing. I'll send a message to Trick and suggest that we start making a plan after we've been to the stables. Hopefully, Alaric will have gotten back to Atlas by then. I don't know what to think about Rage; he is so difficult to read.

Peter: Sounds like a plan, Sugar. From where I'm sitting, it's pretty damn obvious but okay.

I decide to ignore that last message and send one to Trick instead. He messages me back just as we get to the stables.

Trick: I was going to suggest we do that, anyway. Alaric has already messaged Atlas back and should have everything we need by this evening. I think he's going to drop it around himself.

I send a quick text back and then get out of the car, Rage still hasn't said one word to me, and I'm not sure how to fix it. When in doubt, go for the direct approach that may or may not make things worse.

"Rage, wait up!" I call out, jogging to catch up with him just before he walks around the edge of the building.

Peter hangs back, stopping to talk to someone he's just seen.

"What's up? We really need to get the horses unloaded." He says, stopping and facing me, but his eyes focus on a point somewhere over my head.

I get it. I'm short, but I'm sure it doesn't strain his eyes that much to look to my level.

"Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me?" I ask. I'm fed up with questioning where I stand with him and if I've done something that makes him mad.

His eyes snap down to mine as he searches them, and regret flashes across them before he tugs me into his arms. I slowly wrap my arms around him, not wanting to trigger him.

“I’m sorry, Puddin’, I’m not mad at you, and you most certainly have done nothing wrong. I’m just struggling with something at the moment. I’ll do better.” He says softly, placing a light kiss on the top of my head that makes emotion surge within me, and I practically melt into him.

“I’m here if you need to talk.” I offer.

He hums, “Thanks, Puddin’, let’s go and get my horses. I’ve missed them.”

I step back, “I’m so excited to meet them. What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing for the minute, me and Peter can unload them, and then we’ll get them all sorted and set them out in the pasture for a bit. I don’t think it’s a good idea to ride them on the trails this afternoon. I didn’t think it through properly. I got too excited to take you out. We can do it tomorrow, though, if you want to?”

“Yeah, that sounds great. It’s probably better to wait. I think Trick wanted to work on the plan for getting the information from Chris’s office. Alaric’s coming over with the information that we need.” I reply as we carry on around the building and come to a large lot where several trailers are parked, and I’m guessing one of them has his horses in. “So, you were excited to spend time with me, huh?”

My grin widens as his eyes dart to my face and away quickly as an adorable smirk kicks up one side of his mouth. He chooses not to answer, and I let it go.

“Which trailer is yours?” Peter asks, jogging up beside us.

Rage points out a giant trailer, it’s more practical than the others, and you can tell that it’s more for function than show, unlike most of the other ones in the lot.

“Hey guys, how was the journey?” Rage greets two guys as they hop out of the truck.

He holds his hand out to each of them, and they shake familiarly, big grins on all of their faces.

“We miss you around the stables, man, Starbright is getting close to giving birth, and no one can calm her quite like you can.”

“Thanks, Robbie, I miss it too. How long do you think she’s got left? I might be able to make it back in time?”

“A few weeks. As much as we want you back, though, I wouldn’t suggest it. According to the other staff, your mother has been on the warpath. Something about your dad.”

“What?” Rage asks, clearly shocked. “Dads at home?”

“No, he’s not, but something’s going on.”

“Well fuck. Alright, I’ll deal with that later. Let’s get Demon and Chase out.”

“One of your horses is called Demon?” Peter asks.

“Yeah, he was a demon when we first got him, then Rage worked his magic, and now, he’s a dream to ride. Although, he still tries it on every now and again just because he can.” The other guy chimes in, a fond smirk on his face.

“He likes to keep me on my toes, Jim, you know that.” Rage replies, moving to the back of the trailer and opening the doors.

The closer he gets to the doors, the more excited the horses inside get, like they can recognise his voice. It doesn’t take long to unload the two gorgeous horses inside; I don’t know horses well enough to know exactly what their colouring is, but I do know they’re beautiful. Demon lives up to his name and is almost entirely black with only a tiny amount of white on his back left leg. Chase is the opposite in colouring and is a dapple grey, absolutely beautiful. She’s also quite a bit smaller than the giant that is Demon, and I’m guessing she’s the horse, Rage had picked for me.

Chase gets unloaded first, and Jim ties her up as they unload Demon, who, true to what Rage said earlier, is getting a bit too excited. Once Rage is sure that Chase is adequately secured, he goes back into the trailer and starts gently chastising Demon, who snorts happily at him, without staying still at all. Rage doesn’t seem worried at all with a giant grin on his face,

and he seems to have it under control. So, I leave them to it and decide to go and introduce myself to Chase.

“Hey, pretty girl,” I say softly as I approach.

She nuzzles me and sniffs me thoroughly as if trying to determine whether I’m friend or foe. I just keep stroking her and telling her how pretty she is. She doesn’t seem to mind. The guys finally manage to calm Demon down enough to get him out of the trailer.

“Ever, can you grab Chase and follow us? I was right earlier Demon is definitely too amped to be ridden today. So we’ll let them out in the field and ride them tomorrow.” Rage asks me.

“Sure thing,” I reply, untying Chase and starting to follow them both.

Watching both of the horses run and buck happily in the field makes the smile on my face widen. There’s just something about horses, my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I fish out.

“Everything okay?” Rage asks curiously.

“Yeah, Trick’s just messaged me. Alaric has confirmed that he’s coming over later. So we need to get back. I want to go and say hello to Tank before I leave.”

“Okay, let’s go and say hi to your horse.”

“No, you stay here and make sure your horses are going to be alright and get them all set up. I’ll take Peter with me.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“I’ve got her, don’t worry, man.” Peter chimes.

“You armed?” Rage asks him seriously.

“Always,” Peter replies seriously, patting his hip.

“You’re not going to ask me?” I grin.

“I know you’re always armed.” He chuckles, pulling me close and dipping his head. Then, at the last second, his lips divert and land on my cheek.

If he keeps doing that, I'm going to fucking scream; as it is, I'm already reaching the end of my rope, so instead, I reach up, thread my fingers through his auburn curls, and tug. His eyes darken with heat as his hands clench on my hips.

"Careful Puddin', don't start something you're not prepared to finish." He growls, his voice rough with heat.

I take a step back, releasing his hair and smirking as I look up at him.

"Who said I'm not prepared to finish it."

I get a thrill at his wide-eyed expression before I turn on my heel, thread my arm through Peter's, and walk back towards the stables. Peter has a shit-eating grin on his face, and he glances over his shoulder and back towards Rage.

"He's staring at your ass, with the dirtiest fucking grin on his face. You just rocked his world and shocked the shit out of him. Well, played, Sugar."

"Thanks." I grin, my heart pounding in my chest. I sort of can't believe that I said that, but I meant it, and I'm getting fed up with walking on eggshells around the situation, even in my own mind.

I think it's time to admit that I have feelings for Rage. Of course, whether anything comes of it is an entirely different thing, but I'm finally admitting it to myself.

"Hey, you're Ever, right?" An older, slightly nervous looking man approaches me. I have no idea who he is, but I instantly become wary when Peter's smile disappears off his face, and his free hand drops to near his gun.

"Yeah, sorry, I don't know you?" I say casually as I unwind my arm from Peter's, so I'm ready to draw my knives, just in case I need them.

"I'm the instructor for equine studies here, Mr. Remy." He introduces with a nervous smile.

"Oh yeah, of course, sorry."

"You've signed up for my class. I have to admit I was surprised to see Rage on my class list. He's vehemently

refused for years.” He says, a suspicious glint in his eye.

“Yeah, I’m hoping to get some practice in. Especially now I’ve brought Tank.” I reply, ignoring what he’s said about Rage.

“Ah yes, I heard about that.” He pauses. “Just be careful. Not everyone around here has your best interest at heart.” He warns before walking off, with no further comment.

Chapter Nineteen

“That was weird,” Peter says quietly, watching him leave.

“Absolutely. I can’t get a read on him. He’s definitely nervous about something, and that cryptic comment at the end sounded like a warning.”

“Yeah, it was, but was he warning you against himself? Or does he know something that we don’t?”

“Fuck knows.” I reply, “One thing is for certain, he’s odd as hell.”

“Agreed. Let’s go and see your horse.”

“I still can’t believe I bought a freaking horse.” I grin.

Sharp pain in my shoulder has me instantly dropping, my knives drawn, and my eyes studying our surroundings.

“What is it?” Peter asks, crouching down beside me.

A flash of green catches my eye, and I chase after them, ignoring the pain in my shoulder for now.

“Ever Wait!” Peter calls after me, but I’m done with this fucking shit. I can feel the other side of me start to stir as anger flares through my veins. What is it with all these fuckers thinking that they can come after me and I’m going to just fucking take it?

It’s about time I reminded myself what I’m fucking capable of. Just because I don’t want to use my darker skillset under anyone else’s orders again doesn’t mean that I can’t use them when I deem it is necessary. Of course, it may come with some triggers now—something to consider later.

I race out of the stables, knives still in hand and come to a stop, my eyes scanning the parking lot for the green jacket but not seeing him anywhere. I’m assuming it’s a him since a woman would definitely stand out on campus.

“What’s going on?” Rage asks, running up to us, his features hard as he readies himself.

I ignore him and stomp my way to the car. Why am I always the fucking target? Don’t get me wrong, I don’t want any of the guys to be targets. I don’t want any of us to be fucking targets, but the misogynistic assholes are explicitly going after me because they think I’m the fucking weakest.

And that’s what pisses me the fuck off.

“Ever, what happened.” Rage asks again as I yank open the car door and throw myself in the front seat. I see Peter and Rage share a look but ignore it as my shoulder twinges when I move it to put my knives away. Son of a bitch, they’re damn fucking lucky they got my left shoulder. Rage and Peter get in the car just as I pull my jacket off, revealing my now blood-stained white shirt. It looks like the fucking knife that asshole threw at me sliced the top of my shoulder. Right beside my bra strap.

“God fucking damn it, I loved this fucking shirt,” I growl.

“What the fuck, Ever?” Rage growls, panic evident in his tone as Peter hisses behind me.

“That fucking cunt threw a goddamned knife at me.” I reply, “Can we get home? I need to stitch this.”

Rage pulls out of the parking lot like I’m fucking dying, shooting me concerned looks every few seconds.

“Dude, eyes on the road, I’m fine. It only needs a few stitches.”

“I don’t understand what just happened or how you’re bleeding,” Peter exclaims from the back seat.

“Someone threw a knife at me in the stables. All I caught was a green jacket, which is why I took off running. By the time I got out to the parking lot, he was gone.” I say, jumping out of the car as soon as it pulls up to the house and stomping my way inside.

“You chased after him!?” Rage calls as I slam my way through the front door, gaining the attention of everyone in the

house. “Do you know how fucking dangerous that is?”

I spin to face him.

“What’s going on?” Trick asks, “Holy fuck, what happened to your shoulder? Cash, get the first aid kit.”

I ignore him, focusing on Rage. “Do you know how fucking sick and tired I am of these mother fucking assholes coming after me? Just because I’m a woman and these misogynistic fucks think that I am the fucking weakest link?” I yell back at him, earning wide-eyed looks from all the guys. I make an effort to calm my voice as I take a breath. I’m aware that the darkness that usually appears in Jensen’s eyes descends over mine. “I swear to all that is fucking holy, when I find the fucker that ruined my white shirt, which I love by the fucking way, I’m going to gut him. I’m going to take my knife and slice him from navel to fucking throat.” I growl.

The room is silent as I set my darkness entirely free for the first time.

“Fuck.” I curse, stomping my way to the kitchen. “I need a fucking drink.”

“Angel,” Jensen growls. I turn around. His hand closes around my throat as he backs me up against the wall, his lips devouring mine. My arms reach up, clawing at his back and weaving into his hair, pulling hard as his grip tightens.

“Jensen!” Trick yells, “She needs her arm stitched, although it clearly can’t be that deep.”

“I fucking love your darkness, Angel,” Jensen mutters, and I grin.

I push away from the wall as he takes a step back and make my way to the kitchen, less stomp in my step this time—Jensen’s damn good at getting some of those frustrations out.

“Il Mio Cuore,” Cash calls out, still standing in the hallway, his gaze heated. “If you want any help in gutting the fucker, let me know.”

“With the way that my enemies are fucking piling up, I’m sure there’ll be enough for fucking everyone,” I reply, winking

at him and blowing him a kiss for good measure.

I'm pretty fucking glad that none of my guys freaked the fuck out at my words. It could've gone either way.

"Alright, let's get you stitched up." He says, following me into the kitchen and fishing out a first aid kit from one of the cupboards, "I figured it was a good idea to keep one in here."

While he grabs it, I pull my arms out of my top and slide my bra strap off my shoulder, leaving my boobs covered with my soiled shirt.

"I can do it myself." I offer.

"Don't be ridiculous, Dragonfly. Let me help you." Cash replies sternly.

"Ooo, I love it when you get all firm with me." I tease.

"Ever behave." Trick grins.

"Yes, Sir," I smirk.

"Alright, how are you sitting there flirting with them while you have a slice on your shoulder that's deep enough that you need stitches?" Peter asks, throwing his arms up in the air in exasperation.

The guys all either grin or chuckle as they take seats around the table. Each of them stops next to me and drops a kiss on my head or cheek, even Rage.

"I'm sorry if it seemed like I was having a go at you earlier, Puddin'. It freaked me out." He says softly.

"It's alright. I get it." I smile up at him, and his eyes dip to my lips before he clears his throat and goes to sit down.

"We still don't have any numbing cream, Sweetheart." Trick apologises.

"It's fine, not the first time I've been stitched up without it. I'm more used to it than having the numbing stuff, if I'm honest."

"Seriously?" Peter exclaims again.

“When Ever gets hurt, she gets pissed, which is hot.” Jensen starts to explain. “You know about her past; she has an extremely high pain threshold.”

“Got it.” He replies. “You’re okay, though, right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s not that bad.” I reassure him.

“Alright, first stitch.” Cash warns, his eyes watching me closely.

Atlas grabs my hand, holding it. I’m still not used to being comforted while this happens, and it brings conflicted emotions to the surface. On the one hand, it’s incredibly comforting and something that I need. On the other, it makes the steel wall that I usually put up around my pain not work as effectively. My pain threshold is still pretty damn high, but it’s an interesting development.

“What happened?” Trick asks, trying to distract me from the needle piercing my flesh.

I retell the story quickly, telling them everything I can remember about the guy, which is nothing apart from the green jacket.

“It seems to keep happening at the stables. I hate to say it, but maybe you need to steer clear of the stables for a bit. At least until we’ve sorted out Chris, which shouldn’t be too long. Alaric should be here soon.” Atlas says.

“As much as I don’t want to agree, I think that might be best.” I reply, “What about Tank, though?”

“I’ll look after him.” Rage reassures me. “I don’t want you anywhere near the stables for the time being. I think it’s too easily accessible.”

“Agreed,” Luc adds, watching my face closely. I blow him a kiss.

“All done,” Cash says, snipping the string. “How’s the movement in your arm?”

“Not bad. Fortunately, it’s my left and least dominant side, so I’ll still be able to kick some ass.”

“Take it easy for a day or so.” He orders, and I grin, not agreeing to anything.

“I’m going to clean up before Alaric gets here,” I say, hopping up and only just catching my shirt before it exposes my boobs. All the guys apart from Rage and Peter have seen them, and I’m not sure Peter would give a shit since he’s gay, but still.

“I’m ordering in tonight. What do you fancy?” Rafe asks before I exit the kitchen.

“Can we have Indian? I haven’t had it for ages?” I reply.

“Sure, what do you want?”

“Get me whatever you guys are having,” I say.

“Got it.”

I smile in thanks and then make my way upstairs to get change. My shoulder hurts a little, and I’ll probably have a scar to add to the collection, but it’s not bad at all. I am still going to gut the bastard, though. I get changed into some comfy sweats and a loose shirt that drapes off of one shoulder, pulling on some fluffy socks to boot. I need the extra comfort.

“Food will be here soon.” Riot tells me as soon as I come back downstairs, “We ordered enough for Alaric too since he should be here soon.”

I sit down on the couch next to him, and he lifts an arm so I can snuggle into his chest. I miss him; I feel like I’ve hardly seen him recently. I’ve hardly seen any of them properly; there’s been so much going on.

I stroke my hand up his chest, listening to his heartbeat. His arms wrap around me tightly.

“Are you okay, Sunshine?”

“Yeah, I miss you. Stay in my room tonight?”

“Of course, I’d love to.” He answers, kissing my forehead. “We haven’t really managed to spend some individual time with each other much recently, have we?”

“We haven’t spent time together without some sort of drama going on. Let alone individual time.”

“It’ll calm down soon, and then maybe we can go on dates like we did for prom?” He suggests.

“I love that idea.” I smile.

“Me too. I want in on that. We can each take you out.” Cash says from the other side of Riot.

It’s not long before all the guys are agreeing to the individual dates. My heart is so full that I feel emotion rising.

“You guys are so freaking awesome.” I smile softly.

“Don’t forget we’ve got my dad’s ball next weekend; we need to get outfits and stuff,” Peter adds in, and I sit up straight, jostling Riot.

“How did I forget about that! Is there a dress code a theme? Come on, man, I need details?” I rush out, and Peter starts laughing as the guy’s eyebrows hit their hairlines at my little rant.

“It’s a masked ball.” He replies with an excited glint in his eye.

“No fucking way,” I say excitedly. “I have nothing to wear. We’re going shopping, right?”

“Of course.” He replies like it was a foregone conclusion.

Before I can descend into another barrage of questions, there’s a chime signalling that someone is at the gate.

“That must be the food,” Rafe says, getting up and making his way to the door to buzz them in.

“Double check the cameras and make sure that it is. We can’t take anything for granted at the moment, especially since the guy that threw the knife at Ever is still out there.” Trick warns, getting up.

“On it, boss,” Rafe replies easily.

“I’ll go and get some plates,” I say, kissing Riots jaw before getting up. I point at Peter. “This conversation is not over.”

He just chuckles. Everyone gets up to help set the table.

“Alaric pulled up behind the food delivery guy, so he’s bringing it in. That way, the guy doesn’t need to come on the property.” Rafe calls from by the front door before he opens it and lets Alaric in.

“Hey guys, you must be Peter.” He greets everyone.

“Yeah, nice to meet you. Thanks for that laptop. It cut down the time it took to trace the videos by a lot.” Peter replies.

“No worries, you’ve managed to do what even our best hackers haven’t been able to. I think it’s us that owes you our thanks.”

“Did you get the information we needed?” Trick asks as he grabs the food off Alaric and helps Cash pull out the containers, placing them on the table so we can all help ourselves.

“Yeah, I did. I’ve got to say it’s not going to be easy.” He replies as we all start dishing up. “He’s got security guards around the clock, high-level locking systems, and the safe is not the easiest one to break into.”

“I’ve done the research on the safe, and I’m pretty sure that I can get into it or coach someone else through it. We just need to get into the building.” Peter replies.

“Impressive. I have a multitude of equipment that I can use to help you. The boss has officially given us the case and pulled the other team back.”

“That’s good. We don’t need to be worrying about stumbling across another team while we are there and end up getting arrested ourselves.” Trick mutters.

“Here, move the food out of the middle of the table, and I’ll show you the map of the building,” Alaric suggests, and we all move the empty containers, pulling our plates back, so there’s enough space. He lays the big sheet out and then continues. “Okay, so the front doors are out. Obviously, the best time to enter the building is at night because of the lack of witnesses. I would normally suggest that we try to get in during the day and blend in, but there are two issues with that. The first one is

that we are unsure whether Chris or anyone who works for him is aware of your identities or keeping tabs on you. Both of those would put an immediate wrench in the works, and then we risk him going to ground and locking shit down even tighter. The second problem is that we don't want anyone to know your identities or, more specifically, your ages. There's always a chance that someone will recognise Atlas thanks to his father."

"It works better for us doing it under cover of darkness, anyway." Trick shrugs in agreement.

"Great. If you guys trip any of the alarms or alert the guards, then the entire building will go into lockdown, and it will be impossible to get out."

"Right, so don't get caught." Jensen grins, pointing a samosa at Alaric, who just smiles.

"Right."

"So, how do you suggest we get in, then?" Rage asks.

"That's the problem, the first of many. We can't go through the front or any of the side doors, as each one is heavily guarded. There is a possibility that we could go in from under the building, but the safe is on the top floor, and that's a lot of guards we've got to avoid, plus we want to be in and out as quick as possible to minimise the chance of being caught. As soon as we have the information out safely, I can get everything put in place to make an arrest. With the amount of evidence that we should find in there, even with the best lawyers, we should be able to keep him locked up for a while."

"Okay, hear me out." Jensen starts, and I immediately raise my eyebrow, knowing that whatever comes out of his mouth next is going to be interesting, to say the least. "You said you can get all sorts of equipment, right?"

"Yes," Alaric says cautiously, "Within reason, I can't get you a helicopter, and I'm not authorising any big explosions."

Jensen's face falls momentarily. "I hadn't thought about explosions. That's not what I was thinking, though."

“I can get us a helicopter if we need one, but I’m not sure we’ll be able to fly under the radar and not cause a scene if we use it.” Rage interrupts. “Pun intended.”

I grin.

“No helicopters,” Alaric says firmly, a twinkle of amusement in his eye.

“What was your idea, Jensen?” Trick asks, rolling his eyes at the others.

“Again, hear me out before you think I’m crazy.”

“Why do I get the feeling this idea is going to be crazy?” Luc smirks.

“Because it is Jensen.” Cash chuckles.

“Fair point but, there are good reasons for it, and if Alaric can get hold of the right equipment, it will work.” Jensen defends.

“Alright, what’s your big idea then?”

“What if we went in from the roof of a neighbouring building?”

Chapter Twenty

“What?” Riot asks incredulously as the rest of us just stare at him.

“Okay, Jensen. Explain your reasoning because right now, it sounds crazy.” Trick orders.

“We went to minimise the time we have in the building, and the safe is on the top floor. They’re likely to have less security on the roof because of access problems. We could be in and out much quicker. It’s the city, so all the buildings are close together. If we can set up a line between the buildings, get harnesses and things, a couple of us can go over while Peter watches the security feed. I’m assuming you can hack that?” He asks Peter, who nods, “Great, so Peter watches the security feeds. You guys watch the windows with scopes and help coordinate while a couple of us wait in a vehicle ready to escape and monitoring the street in case Chris decides to make a late-night visit. Luc has experience doing the slack line things.”

Silence greets Jensen’s idea. Not because we think it’s ridiculous, at least not in my case, but because I’m thinking over the logistics of it, it actually could work. Peter pulls a laptop out of the bag by his feet and starts tapping away.

“It sounds very spy movie.” Riot points out.

“It doesn’t mean it won’t work, though,” Jensen argues back.

“I could get you the equipment for that. The only issue we’ve had with them before is that if things go south and the alarm gets triggered, it’s not exactly easy to get a large team back across the wire since the wire can only hold two at a time, at a push. The techs are working on making a stronger one, but it’s not available yet.”

“Okay, so two of us go across. That way, if we absolutely have to, we can have two on the line. Peter can be down in the

van to keep an eye on the surveillance and talk to whoever is inside through opening the safe. Two more of us can be down in the van with him. The rest of us up on the roof in case something goes wrong, and we need to cover whoever is in the building.” Trick summarises.

“We could always call Jynx and her men in if we need to.” Atlas offers.

“I think we should be good for now, but maybe keep them on standby just in case. We need them where they are for the moment. We don’t want Blake making a move while we’ve got this going on.”

“Alright, I’ll message her now and let her know what’s going on.”

“Sounds good. Who’s going where?” I ask.

“I’ll leave that up to you, Trick. You know your team the best.” Alaric says.

“Well, Luc is the one who has the experience with safes, and he is comfortable on a slackline, so a wire should be no issue for him. So, he should be one of the ones to go across.” He starts.

Alaric interrupts him. “I think it would probably be a good idea to get someone small to go with him. Just in case they both have to be on the line at the same time.”

“I’ll do it.” I offer. “I’m the smallest here, the next one being Jensen, who’s not exactly small, and with his level of clumsy, do we really want him on the line?”

“I’d take offence, but I think you’re right,” Jensen mutters, his eyes concerned.

“I’m good at sneaking into places I shouldn’t be, and I have the experience of taking down any guards without killing them,” I add.

“Okay, Sweetheart,” Trick says, somewhat reluctantly but knowing I can do this.

“Great, me and Riot will be down in the van with Peter.” Rafe says, “You need Atlas on the roof. He’s the best sniper

we've got."

"He'd be the second best if we called Jynx in. She taught him." Rage interrupts.

"Seriously, I didn't know that." I grin. I've seen first-hand what an excellent shot Jynx is, but I had no idea that she taught Atlas.

"I've said it before, and I'll say it again, but remind me never to mess with Jynx." Jensen shudders.

"I wouldn't recommend that. She has a damn terrifying reputation, and she earned that while she was still in high school, sort of like you guys are doing." Alaric grins.

"The rest of us are all good with weapons, so we can be up on the roof. Hopefully, everything goes smoothly." Cash adds.

"Everyone happy with the plan?" Trick asks.

Everyone nods their heads in agreement. It seems simple yet complicated at the same time.

"Guys, I've pulled up the aerial view of the surrounding buildings," Peter says, turning the laptop around so that we can all see. "This building here is probably our best bet. It's the closest one and should be easy to get into."

"How do you know that it's easy to get into?" Rafe asks curiously.

"My dad owns it." Peter grins.

"Well, that's fucking convenient." I chuckle.

"There appear to be a few security cameras set up on Chris's roof. I can get into them and set them up on a loop, so it looks normal up there." Peter explains.

"Great work. Thanks, man," Trick grins.

"So, when are we doing this?" Alaric asks.

"How quickly can you get a hold of the equipment that we need?" Rage asks.

"As soon as you need it."

“Great, we’ll go on Friday. Let’s get this over with.” Trick suggests.

“I’m ready to be done with it. I know we have the videos and can trace them back to Chris’s computer, but is that enough?” Rafe asks.

“The videos have been edited; I was going over them again last night to see if there was anything I missed, and I’d be willing to bet that he’s in the original copies,” Peter says.

“Even if he isn’t, we still have enough to go on. The other team is almost certain that he has sensitive files in there. He doesn’t let any of his employees in the room when he opens it, and like anywhere, there are a lot of rumours flying around the building. We’re fairly certain he keeps files on the companies he’s taken over under suspicious circumstances in there as well. That will be enough to put him away.” Alaric explains.

“Good, we’ll grab everything we can.” Trick replies thoughtfully.

“Is your shoulder going to be alright using the wire?” Cash asks.

“Yeah, it’s barely giving me any grief now, so it should be fine by Friday. Besides, we’re going to be strapped into harnesses, right?” I ask, needing clarification.

I’m fine shimmying across a wire at stupid heights so long as I’m strapped into something, but doing it without a harness is not high on my to-do list.

“Yeah, they’re lightweight and attach to these pulleys so that you can move yourself across quickly and keep the harness on while you’re inside, and it won’t get in the way. It would take up precious time if you had to get in and out of the harness each time.”

“Great. Do we know where on the floor his office is?” Trick asks.

“It’s the one with the double doors directly in front of the stairwell to the roof. The safe is located behind the desk. He’s got a couple of movable shelves in front of it.” Alaric explains, rolling his eyes.

“That’s actually standard for those safes.” Peter grins.

“Sounds like they were made for every drama queen villain out there.” Jensen chuckles.

“Pretty much.” Peter grins. “My dad will have no problem in letting us use the building. He won’t ask questions either.”

“That’s pretty trusting of him.” Alaric points out.

“I don’t keep shit from my parents. He knows I’ve hacked into places I shouldn’t have, but he knows I’ve done it to help people. Obviously, I’m not going to tell him anything about what we’re doing, but he trusts me.”

“Fair enough.”

“Is there anything else that we need to go over?” Trick asks, looking around the table.

“I think that’s everything for now.” Alaric answers, “We’ll meet here at eight pm on Friday. It might be a good idea to take two vehicles just in case. Is there one that none of you have driven around here, or shall I supply one?”

“Might be best to bring one. All our cars are fairly unique.” Cash grins.

“Sounds good. It’ll take us around three hours to get to the city. Everyone should’ve gone home by then, but we can double-check before setting anything up. The last thing we need is to run into some late-night workers.” He explains and then continues, “As always, we need to make sure that we come out of this with as few casualties as possible and no deaths unless it’s unavoidable. We want to get in and out without being seen. He’ll hunker down and disappear if he catches wind of what we’re up to.”

“He has enough money to disappear for good, and we’ll never find him.” Cash points out.

“Exactly,” Alaric replies. “Thanks for the grub, kids, but I better get going. I need to make some calls if we’re going to pull this off on Friday. I want a team on standby outside of Chris’s house, so as soon as we’ve got the information in our hands, we can go in.”

“That’s a good idea. The less chance he has to flee, the better.” Atlas agrees.

“See you later!” I say.

The guys all say various versions of goodbye. Just as Alaric gets to the door, he stops and comes back.

“I almost forgot; I have a couple of things to tell you. I got distracted by the case. Ever, you can definitely make a written statement for the trial when the time comes. It’s going to be a while yet, but it is something you can do. You just need to put as much detail in it as possible. I will help you with it when it’s needed.”

“That’s great. I’m not good at speaking in front of people, and judges make me nervous as hell.” I admit, and he grins.

“Me too.” He replies before carrying on. “Luc, your dad is up to something, and we’re not entirely sure what it is yet. As you know, we’ve got teams watching all of your parents’ houses, just in case Liam or Blake decide to make a move against them. I’d put more money on Blake now. It’s becoming apparent that Blake is the real threat to Ever at least.” He points out.

“I think that’s a fair assumption. As far as we know, Liam hasn’t made a single move against Ever or us, apart from kidnapping Rylie.” Trick replies.

“Yeah, and he backed up real fucking quick when Ever chewed him out.” Rage points out.

A pang goes through me at the mention of Rylie. I really fucking miss her.

“He has every reason to want to go after Ever. After all, she’s going to testify against several of her dad’s men, which is by association is his men.” Riot adds.

“There’s definitely something else going on there, but I highly doubt that my brother will fill us in anytime soon.” Alaric grimaces. “Anyway, Luc, your dad has been going out of his way to try to get them to tell him where you all are. He’s also slipped his security three times now. I think you can agree that you don’t ditch security unless you’re up to no good.”

“No, you don’t. As you know, my dad’s been doing some dodgy shit for a few years now. I don’t know why he’d be interested where we are.” Luc frowns.

“We’ll keep an eye on him and start to monitor him a bit more closely and see what we can find out,” Alaric replies.

“Can I ask a favour?”

“Sure. I can’t promise I’ll grant it, but I’ll do my best.”

“If it turns out that he needs to be put away, or is into something that we deal with, which I’m almost certain he is, then can our team take him down. For my sister and for the shit that he’s put me through. If he deserves it, then I want to be the one that puts him away.” Determination hardens his features, and I find it hot as hell.

“I’m pretty sure I can make that happen. Are you sure? If he’s doing things that you guys are qualified to investigate, that means he’s in some pretty heavy shit. Are you sure you want to know everything that he’s up to? It’s difficult when it’s your family member that’s doing the despicable things even if you’ve always known that they’re not worth your time and twisted in ways that make you shudder.” Alaric asks Luc seriously, speaking from his own experience.

“He’s right, man. It’s not easy.” Atlas agrees.

“I need to. You guys have to get that, right?” Luc asks.

“Yeah, we do.” Alaric replies for both of them, “I just wanted to make sure you knew what you were getting into.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

“Last thing, since it’s obvious Liam knows where you are anyway, the ban on calling your families is now lifted. I still want you to be careful about telling them anything that could give away your location. Just in case another fucking enemy makes their way out of the woodwork.” Alaric grumbles, rubbing a hand over his head and looking tired. “I swear you kids pick up enemies like most people pick up friends.”

“Now come on, don’t paint us all with the same brush. We all know they’re mostly my enemies.” I grin.

He shakes his head at me in exasperation. “Right, I’m off for real this time. Have a good night, guys, and I’ll see you Friday.”

We all say our goodbyes again, and then once the front door shuts, we just sit there in silence for a minute.

“Does anyone want a beer?” Trick asks.

“I’ll help carry,” Riot says as we all want one.

“Here you go, Sweetheart, Jack, and coke.”

“Thanks.” I grin up at him, and he kisses me softly.

It wasn’t that long ago when I was telling myself that there would be no way that any of them would like me and that I needed to remain just friends with them. I am so glad that I was so incredibly wrong. I can’t imagine my life without them, and I hope that I never have to find out. I think it helps that I’m not trying to think too far into the future. I’m living in the here and now. However, there have been moments when my mind has wandered into the future, like when Luc held his nieces. My mind literally exploded with what-if scenarios, and they still make me smile now.

“What do you make of your dad?” Peter asks.

“It doesn’t surprise me. I sort of hope that we do get to handle it, though. I owe him for so much shit, and he should be behind fucking bars.” Luc growls. His arms tightening around me.

“I haven’t looked into him like I said.” Jensen starts, “There’s been so much going on recently I didn’t get around to it. I can now if you want me to?”

“I can hack his accounts and get Jensen to look over his financials. That should be able to tell us a lot.” Peter offers.

“Thanks, guys. We’ll leave it for now and get this Chris job out of the way first, and then we can look into my father and what the fuck he’s up to.” Luc frowns.

“Okay, if that’s what you want to do, we’ll do it that way.” Trick replies easily.

We fall silent for a second, thinking over everything that we've gone over in this meeting.

"So, do you think we can pull this off?" Luc asks, sipping his beer and derailing my train of thought.

My thoughts have left me feeling particularly mushy towards him, though, and I don't resist the urge to get up and make my way over to him, taking my drink with me, he raises his eyebrow as I approach, and I lean forward, kissing him gently before I sit down on his lap, his arms wrap around my waist as his head rests on my shoulder and I sigh happily.

"If anyone can, I think it's us." Jensen grins.

"We just need to make sure we're in and out with no witnesses, no evidence of us left behind," Trick says, worry clouding his eyes as he rolls his beer between his hands.

"We'll all be okay, Trick." I try to reassure him.

"I know we're all more than capable. I'm just worried about it all. I don't know what I'd do if I lost any of you."

"It won't happen, man. We've got this, and if anything, even remotely starts to go sideways. We'll pull out immediately and re-evaluate." Cash tries to reassure him.

"Nothing is worth risking family for." Rage says.

My heart warms. It's the first time that Rage has outwardly admitted that we're family. I feel like we've broken through a massive barrier with him, and instead of letting it slide subtly, I grin at him and raise my eyebrows.

"That's it; we're family. You admitted it. I knew you liked me, really." I gloat, making the guy's chuckle.

"I like you, Puddin'." He replies, his eyes staying connected with mine as heat darkens them.

Well, hot damn, yes, please.

"Moving on," Jensen smirks, his eyes switching between us. "We're in this together. Cash and Rage are right, and if we need to, we can always call in Jynx. I'd quite like to meet her men."

“They’re fucking awesome,” I reply, memories making me grin.

“Are you ever going to tell us about how you guys met?” Rafe asks, and they all turn to me, curiosity evident on all of their faces.

I try to keep my smile in place. “I’m sure you’ll find out one day.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The guys all share a look, but no one presses it any further. Which I'm grateful for, I know they're going to find out about it at some point, but I'd like to put it off for as long as possible.

"I'm glad we can talk to our parents freely again." Jensen smiles, changing the subject in the most blatant way he can.

"Yeah. How many calls a day do you think we're going to get once Mom and Kat realise that ban has been removed?" Trick asks.

"Oh god." Cash mutters. "I hadn't even thought about that."

I can't help but giggle.

"I don't know what you're laughing at, Sweetheart. They're going to call you just as much as they call us." Trick points out, smirking.

I just grin. I really don't mind how many times they call me. I miss them like crazy, and they could help me with ideas for the masked ball, too.

"Alright, guys, I'm going to go to bed," I say, standing up. I go around and kiss them all goodnight, stopping to kiss Rage on the cheek, too.

He looks slightly shocked, but he's given me plenty of kisses on my forehead or cheek now; it's my turn to return the favour. Once upstairs, I take a quick shower and then snuggle down in bed. I must've been more tired than I thought because I'm out before anyone else comes in.

"Is it me, or is he more amped than usual?" I ask Riot as we walk through the halls to our next class.

I can't help the giggle that escapes me as I watch Jensen tap Rage on the shoulder and then dart around to the other side of him and pretend that he didn't do it, despite the fact that it was more than obvious that it was him.

"Dude," I call out to him. "Are you okay?"

"Peachy keen drama queen." He grins, spinning and walking backward.

"What the fuck was that?" Trick chuckles.

"A perfectly normal response to a question," Jensen answers smartly, still walking backward and tripping over his feet.

He somehow manages to keep himself upright and then carries on walking backward like nothing happened.

"You might want to face forward, man. You're clumsy enough; we don't want to test the fates." Luc points out.

"Nah, I've got this," Jensen replies, full of confidence.

In the next second, his arms are flailing, his bag going flying across the hall and smacking some guy in the back of the head, as Jensen collides with a group of three more guys just minding their own business. I stand there in shock, staring around at the pure carnage that Jensen's caused. He pushes himself off the floor and starts to apologise, but before he can get the words out, one of the guys that he knocked to the floor gets up and swings for him.

Jensen ducks at the last second, causing the guy that swung at him to hit a guy that was coming up behind Jensen. It's like something out of a cartoon. Of course, once that's happened, those two start going at it, and someone else comes out of nowhere to tackle Jensen, who has the biggest grin on his face. He's thoroughly enjoying the carnage he's caused.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Trick mutters, rolling his eyes, dropping his bag, and wading into the fight that's now at least twelve strong.

He starts pulling people away from each other, and for a second, it works until more people decide to join in. Clearly, not many of the guys can pass up the opportunity for a fight.

My guys share a look and a grin before diving into the fight themselves. I'm entirely unsure whether they're trying to split it up or just joining in for the hell of it. I lean back against the lockers and just watch the show, I know I probably shouldn't find it as hot as I do, watching them dominate the fight, but I really do.

I don't get to enjoy it for very long, though, as some fuckers clearly think that since the guys are distracted, they'll take the opportunity to swing at me. I grin, which makes them pause slightly, and I use the distraction and take the first one out with a swift kick to his nuts; this isn't a sparring match. Which means I can use the dirty tricks that fighting on the streets taught me.

What I don't expect is for the second guy to come at me with a knife and pure, undiluted hate in his eyes, I have no idea what the fuck I've done to him, but this seems a whole lot more personal than just wanting a pop at me because I'm a girl in an all-guys school.

He jabs the knife towards me, and I dodge it easily. I refuse to draw my own blades. Knowing my luck, I'd be the one who got caught with them, and I'm not sure if even Alaric could save me from being expelled then. I dance around him, aiming a jab for kidneys. I make the hit, and he groans in pain but swings around, slashing out with his knife. He misses again, not very good at handling it.

That doesn't mean that I should underestimate him though. The hate in his eyes makes him a dangerous opponent regardless of his skill level. I make sure that I'm still aware of my surroundings in case anyone decides to jump in to help this guy. It's been a while since I've fought off two people at the same time that are hell-bent on stabbing me. He comes at me again, and I dodge under his arm as he swings for my face, and I uppercut him, spinning out of the way as he tries to grab me. His head snaps back, and I jab him in the side again. While he's distracted, I grab the hand that's holding the knife and smack it against the lockers hard, and he instantly lets go—the knife clatters to the floor. I need to end this quickly before

someone else picks it up, and I have to deal with it all over again.

He lets out a battle cry and comes barrelling towards me; before he can get to me, though, he trips over someone's discarded bag, and I step to the side; as he starts to fall forward, I bring my knee up and push the back of his head down, knocking him out.

That was convenient.

Looking around at the fight, I see it's mostly over now, with many students decorating the floor.

"What's going on?" Someone yells from the end of the hallway, and I glance their way, realising it's a teacher.

Uh oh, time to go. I whistle loudly, gaining the guy's attention. They look from me to the guy at my feet, and I roll my eyes at the grins they all give me. They've seen me fight plenty of times before, but they still react the same way each time.

"Time to go," I say, pointing down the hall to the quickly approaching teacher.

Jensen literally drops the guy he had around the throat, and I snort as he grins and steps over him casually. We all quickly grab our bags and rush in the opposite direction.

"What the fuck just happened?" Rage asks, seemingly confused.

"Jensen's clumsy struck, and the guy he knocked over, took the opportunity to start a fight." Cash replies, rolling his eyes like this has happened before.

"How we ended up in the middle of it, I don't fucking know." Rafe grins, not sounding in the least upset that they joined in.

"It was fun, though, right?" I add, grinning and glancing over my shoulder to see if the teacher decided to follow us. Thankfully, he seems to be too preoccupied with the other students.

Trick just rolls his eyes at all of us.

“Hey, don’t pretend like you didn’t enjoy that. I see your smile!” I point out, and he smirks.

“Is there any point in us going to class? We’ve missed half of it.” Jensen asks.

“Not really; let’s go and find somewhere to hang out. Then we’ll go to our last lesson.” Luc replies.

“Does that happen often?” Rage asks.

“What? Jensen’s clumsy taking over and causing trouble for the rest of us, too?” Riot grins.

“Yeah, that?”

“Yes.” They all reply together; even Jensen and I burst out laughing.

“That was actually less drama than it normally is when his clumsy strikes.” Atlas points out.

“Seriously?” Rage asks incredulously.

“Yep.” Jensen replies, popping the ‘p’ and looking pleased with himself.

My phone pings with a notification. “That’s probably Peter. I bet he’s already heard about the fight.” I grin.

When I check my phone, it’s not Peter, but another email from Lucy. “Hey, it’s Lucy.” We all stop just outside of the school doors. I have no idea where we were going; we just started walking. The guys all gather around me to have a look at the screen. I chuckle as they all push in close and click on the message.

Lucy: I found another photo of Amelia with her friends. I thought you might like to see it. I hope you’re okay and staying safe. Lucy.

I click on the attachment at the top and almost drop my phone in shock.

“Holy fuck, is that my mom?” Trick asks, shock dripping from his tone.

“And mine, our dads too!” Cash says, “Your dad is there too, Jensen and Riot’s parents.”

“What the fuck.” I ask.

“How?” Atlas asks.

“That’s all of our parents as teenagers with Amelia, and that’s definitely her,” Jensen explains unnecessarily.

“Why haven’t any of them mentioned being friends with an Amelia? They all talk about their school days all the fucking time. It doesn’t look like she’s just a passing acquaintance either. She’s right in the middle of the group; Kat and Jenny have their arms linked with hers.” Rafe says, leaning closer to get a better look.

“It’s definitely your parents?” Rage asks.

“Oh yeah, they haven’t changed that much, and they’ve got pictures from their teenage years up everywhere; not once have I seen one of Amelia, though,” Trick says.

“Guys, Alaric said we could call the parents whenever we want now.” I point out.

“Let’s get back to the house and call them there,” Trick says, already making his way to the cars.

We all follow in silence, and my mind spins as we drive home. I don’t understand how they knew Amelia, why they’ve never mentioned her, or why there’re no pictures of her anywhere.

As soon as we get home, Cash links his phone up to the screen and starts the call.

“Kids!” Kat exclaims, “What are you all doing calling in the middle of the day? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.” Cash replies, “I don’t suppose you’re with everyone else?”

“Actually, I am. We decided to have a long lunch together. Well, Jenny, Rob, Marc, and Rich are. Your mom and dad couldn’t get out of work, Rafe, and your aunt is busy Riot.”

“Great, could you get them all, please?” Cash asks, and Kat narrows her eyes in suspicion but calls the others.

“Hey kids, you alright?” Rich asks, checking his watch.

“Yeah, I just wanted to ask you something. I’ve sent you a photo. Is this you guys?”

The parents all share a confused look as their phones ping and then grins cover their faces.

“Yeah, that’s us. Wow, I haven’t seen this photo for ages. Where did you get it from?” Mark asks.

“A parent at school sent it over. They thought we looked alike.”

Mark frowns, “Who?”

“Lucy Ableton.” Rage replies when we all realise we don’t know her last name.

“I remember Lucy. We’ve kept in touch over the years.” Jenny grins, and then her face falls. “Wait, if she was at your school, please, for the love of God, tell me you kids aren’t at Blackbreak?” She asks, looking slightly panicked.

“They can’t be. It’s an all-boys school, right?” Rob says, looking to us for reassurance; when he sees our faces, his eyes widen. “Fuck.”

“If I had known that damn detective was going to send you to Blackbreak, I would never have let you go. You’re in more danger there than you would be here.” Kat replies, starting to panic.

We all share a wide-eyed look.

“Wait, so you know about Blackbreak?” Trick asks.

“We went to school a couple of miles away. They used to do joint events and things.” Mark explains, worry clouding his eyes as he frowns.

“Why is it so dangerous?” Rage asks.

Rich gives him a raised eyebrow look. “Now, I know for a fact that you kids have done some digging since you’ve been

there. I will be shocked if you don't know everything there is to know about the missing students and Phoenix."

I swear you could hear a pin fucking drop. It seems impossible that they not only went to Blackbreak but know about Phoenix too.

"Who is the girl standing with you?" I ask. "The one that Kat and Jenny have their arms around."

The guys look at me, slightly confused. We know that's Amelia, but I just want to hear it from them. I don't know why.

"That's your mom." Jenny smiles softly.

My heart drops through my feet, and I stop breathing all to-fucking-gether.

"She went by Amelia back then, but after what happened with her parents and other things," Jenny pauses and frowns, "She started going by Leah."

"I don't understand," I whisper.

"What's wrong?" Rob asks, his eyes concerned.

"She's listed as one of the missing students? And why aren't there any pictures of you guys together when you were younger?" Trick asks.

Rage reaches over and grips my hand tightly as I bury my head in Rafe's chest. I don't fucking understand.

"Yes, well, it was decided that she'd change her name after that. Marv pulled some strings. We're not sure what he did, but it pretty much made it so she could disappear. Her parents disapproved of her relationship with Marv and had already disowned her by that point. They wanted nothing to do with her." Jenny explains.

"That money that you got was a small portion of inheritance that your great grandmother insisted that your mother got, despite how the rest of the family felt about her," Kat explains further, looking at me worriedly.

“Marv went to Blackbreak, and we always thought that he had something else going on. He was charming as hell, and obviously, we stayed friends with him, well we were friends with Leah, and we didn’t want to lose her. It had always been us.” Marc adds in.

“He had a fucking mean streak a mile wide, though. He once heard she was talking to another guy, just talking, and he lost his shit. She changed after that.” Jenny says, her eyes distant as memories assault her.

I’m still stuck on the fact that it’s my mom. Of course, everyone said that I look like her; I’m her daughter. My mind spins as it starts to connect the dots, and my breathing speeds up again. Isabelle knew, or she at least suspected, she made sure to tell me that Amelia was a good person. Fucking hell.

“Alright, guys, thank you for telling us we’ve got to get back to class. Talk soon.” Trick says, quickly not giving his parents a chance to reply before he hangs up.

I sit up, pulling my hand away from Rage as I scoot forward in my seat and put my head in my hands.

“Are you okay, Sweetheart?” Trick asks gently as he crouches down in front of me.

“Amelia is my mom,” I say, my voice timid.

“Yes, Angel,” Jensen replies close to my left.

“Isabelle guessed.”

“Yes, it appears she did, Princess,” Atlas replies.

“Fuck.” I exclaim as something occurs to me. I jump out of my seat and start to pace.

“Firecracker?” Luc asks, and I look up to see them all watching me worriedly.

Each one of them looks like they’re ready to come to me the second that I falter.

“If the girl in that photo is Amelia and the woman in the video is the older version of Amelia, but the girl in the photo is my mom, then that means that the woman in the video is my

mom,” I say, convolutedly, my words in as much a mess as my head is.

Jensen looks confused as hell. So do Luc and Riot, but the others seem to understand what the fuck I’m talking about because their faces become grave.

“That means my mom’s alive.” I finish as I slump to the floor. “I don’t understand any of this. I don’t understand how she’s alive. The parents think she’s dead; they would never keep that from us. We went to her funeral. I remember it. My dad told me she was dead.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of this, Princess. It seems like all of this is connected; we’ll figure it out. Someone knows the same person who sent that note and sent the video. They know, and they clearly want you to know.” Atlas says passionately, coming to sit next to me and wrapping his arms around me.

The rest of the guys all surround me, sitting on the floor with me and surrounding me with their strength, which is exactly what I need right now.

“How is she alive?” I mutter again. “And why hasn’t she come to look for me. The more we find out about my father when he was younger, the more obvious it becomes that she knew exactly what he was like, better than anyone else. So, if she’s alive, why would she leave me with him?”

“She may not have had a choice. There’s something a lot more complicated going on here. As you said, there was a funeral for her. Your father, our parents, they all think she’s dead.” Cash points out gently. “Don’t forget mom said that she promised your mom that she’d look after you.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

I look at Cash as I try to fight through the barrage of thoughts currently trying to drown me. Then, finally, I find the memory of talking to his mom. She did say that.

“If my mom had asked yours to take care of me, then that would mean that this whole thing was premeditated somehow,” I reply.

“Before I offer, do you want to find her?” Trick asks seriously.

“Yes, I have to know what really happened, where she’s been, why she left me, and how she faked her death, and why,” I reply.

Her apology in her last letter to me suddenly makes so much more sense.

“Are you okay?” Riot asks gently.

“I think I’m numb. Amelia is my mom, and she’s alive somewhere.” I reply honestly. The turmoil of emotions that were going through me has settled into a dull buzz in the background.

“I wonder if Marv finding out about Amelia talking to that guy is the catalyst for everything that happened that night in the blood-soaked room.” Rage mutters.

The others shoot him warning looks, but I’m sort of grateful. It’s nice to have some answers, at last. I have a thousand more questions, but it is somewhat relieving that we finally have a few more answers as far as the case goes.

“It would make sense. Clearly, he was as unhinged back then as he was when I knew him.” I reply thoughtfully, “It would mean that logically one of the kids that he murdered was the guy that she was talking to.”

“Not necessarily. I mean, why murder all four of them if that was the case?” Atlas adds, realising that I’m using the

case to distract myself even though this case now thoroughly involves my parents.

“So he could’ve just taken it out on them. Do you really think she was just talking to another guy? If that was the case, though, that’s a pretty extreme reaction.” Jensen frowns.

“Our parents seem to think that’s all that was going on, but then Amelia clearly kept quite a lot from them.” Luc summarises, not using the name that I know to be my mom’s or calling her my mom. Which I am incredibly grateful for.

“I think it was probably a lot more than that. Isabelle said that Amelia was trapped. We have no idea what Marv was doing to her or what hold he had over her, and with her parents abandoning her, she had no one she could turn to. She wouldn’t have wanted to involve her friends, from what the parents have said, they were friends since they were a lot younger.” I try to get my thoughts more in order as I think aloud. “I think she found an opportunity to be treated right by someone and leaped at it. But she still couldn’t end things with Marv because of whatever hold he had over her, and she was probably too scared to leave him.”

“I think you’re probably right, Baby.” Rafe says, “When we find her, we can ask her exactly what happened, and hopefully, she will be willing to tell us.”

“We still need to deal with Chris first. I don’t think it would be good for him to find out that she’s still alive. He would’ve known everything that went on back then, especially if he was Marv’s righthand man.” Trick points out.

“We don’t want to lead him to her,” Jensen adds, stroking his hand up and down my back soothingly.

“We might not be able to find her, anyway. She’s stayed hidden for this long, so she’s clearly doing something right.” Luc frowns as he watches me.

“But everyone thinks she’s dead, so no one has been looking for her.” I retort.

“That’s a very good point. She would’ve needed help to pull it off in the first place. It wouldn’t have been a one-person job

to fake her death so thoroughly. I highly doubt that the person who was filming was the same person who helped her fake her death, so at least two people know where she is.” Riot adds, his eyebrows furrowed as he starts to think about it.

“We’re going to need to tell Alaric about this. It’s relevant to the case.” Atlas says apologetically.

“Of course,” I reply.

We all fall silent, thinking over everything, or at least I am. We weren’t going to look into Amelia until after we’d sorted everything with Chris, anyway. So, nothing’s changed in that respect; the only thing that has is that Amelia is actually my mom. It’s too much for me to deal with; like many things at the moment, I push it away into that little box in my mind where I’m keeping everything that I can’t deal with. The box is bursting at the seams, and when it finally gives way, I have the feeling, no; I know all hell is going to break fucking loose.

It reminds me of the last time it happened, and just like then, I decide to call in reinforcements.

“Atty, can I borrow your phone to call Jynx?” I ask.

He looks at me, slightly confused at the sudden change in conversation, but shuffles around so he can fish his phone out of his back pocket. He hands it to me. “Of course, the password is two-nine-three-seven.”

“Thank you.” I smile.

I don’t bother getting up as I dial, knowing they’re all nosey enough that they’d want to know what I’m calling her about, anyway.

“Hey Atlas, I was actually just about to call you. Nothing much seems to be happening here. I was wondering If you wanted us to come closer to you in case you need us for backup tomorrow?” Jynx asks, going straight into a conversation.

“It’s me.” I smile.

“Ever, you okay?” She asks.

“Harley Quinn,” I reply simply.

The guys look at me oddly, especially Rage, but we made up this distress signal after the first time it happened. It's the sign that I'm about to lose my shit Harley Quinn style, that everything has gotten too much, and the box is about to break. I would tell the guys, but usually when this happens, I need to beat the shit out of something and take a few hits myself. I know for a fact that they wouldn't be too keen on that idea, although if they really stopped to think about they'd realise that at least a couple of them do the same.

Obviously, the last few times it has happened, Jynx hasn't been around. After I helped her dispose of the people that captured her when we first met, we lost contact. My father destroyed my phone and all the numbers I had on there, and I hadn't given her mine.

"On my way. We'll try the easy way first, talking, drinking, and a spliff. Then, if that doesn't work, we'll go to plan 'B'. Do you think that you can hold out for that until after tomorrow though? Depending on how hard you go, you might not be in the best position to do the job otherwise."

"Yeah, I can do that. But honestly, I think the easy way will work this time. I don't want to go to plan 'B' until I absolutely have to. Besides, I've learned some things since we last fought; I could beat you this time." I grin.

Atlas's gaze snaps to me when I say that before he and Rage share a raised eyebrow and slightly shocked look. Those questions I'm going to enjoy answering.

"In your dreams, Ev. We've got this, and you sound better than you have in the past when we've pulled you out of it the easy way. We might still have to have that fight, though; I want to see how good you've gotten." I can hear the smile in her voice. "See you in a couple of hours."

"See you in a few, thanks, Jynx."

"Anytime, little sis, you know that."

She took to calling me little sis after the last time that we hung out. I say hung out, but I don't think everyone's catch up times get as bloody as ours do. I love it, if I'm honest. She

never really had family around her, not until she let her guys in, and she really is like a sister to me.

“Jynx is coming; she should be here in a few hours. She said there isn’t really much more she can do up there and they’re staying put for the moment, so she wanted to come and be close in case we needed their help tomorrow.”

“Okay, is everything alright?” Jensen asks, his eyes narrowing on my face like he can see something I can’t.

“Yeah, I’m just starting to get overwhelmed. Jynx is fucking awesome at helping me sort through the mess.” I explain.

“You’ve fought Jynx before?” Atlas asks, curiosity dripping from his tone.

“Oh yeah, a couple of times, actually. She obviously always wins, but I swear I got close last time. You can ask Ace; he’ll vouch for me.” I grin.

“Jynx is a fucking demon when she fights.” Rage replies.

“Don’t I fucking know it.” I chuckle.

“Is she bringing the guys?” Atlas asks.

“I’m not sure. They’ll probably stay in one of the safe houses. But I guess they’ll all come and introduce themselves. It’s not as late as I thought. I don’t know why, but this day seems so long that it feels like it should be ten at night. School’s not even finished yet.” I frown.

“They’ll definitely want to come and say hi with Jynx. I haven’t seen the guys for a few months. So it will be good to catch up.” Atlas grins.

“I can’t wait to meet them,” Jensen says, a broad grin on his face. “And it’s understandable that the day feels long to you, Angel. A hell of a lot has happened today.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” I reply, feeling the need to do something to distract myself, I add, “I’m going to go make lunch and bake.”

I don’t miss the concerned look they share as they watch me get up and make my way to the kitchen.

Riot

“That’s not a good sign,” I say quietly, watching Ever start to get out ingredients and pans in the kitchen.

There are some significant advantages to the open-plan design this house has, mainly that we can stay in here but still keep a watchful eye on Ever in case she starts to crack.

“No, it’s not. She’s had so much to deal with recently, what with first finding out that her dad is the one that killed four of the missing five students and then instructed Chris to make his way through the rest of that year of Phoenix members. Now she’s found out her mom was not only involved but is still alive, and there’s a massive mystery surrounding it.” Luc summarises.

“I’m worried that instead of dealing with it, she’s pushing it away.” Cash mutters.

“Me too. I think that might be why she called Jynx. I know a code word when I hear one, and I’m pretty sure that Harley Quinn was Ever’s code word.” Atlas says thoughtfully.

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Rafe replies. “That suggests that she and Ever have quite a long history. Even if they lost contact, they must’ve been pretty damn close. If they had distress words.”

“I can’t believe that they’ve fought before,” Rage starts looking impressed. “Jynx is a fucking demon. She doesn’t fight fair and would never pull her punches. She beat Atlas and me.”

“No fucking way, seriously?” Jensen asks, sitting up and looking more excited than wary.

“Oh yeah, it was a few years ago now, but I still think we’d be hard-pressed to beat her now.” Atlas grins. “She’s also the one that taught me how to use a sniper rifle. They’re her go to weapon, and she’s fucking legendary with the thing.”

“Wow,” Jensen replies simply, an impressed look on his face.

It is pretty damn impressive; she seems like a force to be reckoned with, and she can't be that much older than we are.

“So, how do you guys know each other?” I ask.

“Her Uncle D does something similar to what we do. It's actually where I got the idea from, but thanks to Alaric, we can do it slightly more legitimately. D cleans house. Basically, he's in control of his own vast organisation, but it's not the usual criminals that he oversees. Instead, he oversees assassins, thieves, and people with unique abilities to get things done. Then he hires them out for jobs that suit their skill set. Usually, he hires them out to other criminal organisations around the country that find themselves with a rogue member or under threat from someone they can't take out themselves. Occasionally he's worked for the government. They turn a blind eye to his other business dealings because he's got shit done so effectively in the past. He only does those every few years, though. When they start circling him again.”

“Wow, that's pretty fucking cool. So you've taken his idea and with Alaric legitimised it as much as you can feasibly.” Trick asks.

“Exactly, D is very unique. Not everyone could get away with doing it how he does.” Rage adds this time.

“That's how we met,” Atlas continues. “Liam had a problem with a rogue operative when we were kids. The guy went on a killing spree targeting women in particular. D was called in, and he brought Jynx. Even at fourteen, she was someone that grown men wouldn't want to go up against, and she'd been in the business a while by then. I thought she was fucking awesome, bearing in mind I was eleven at the time. I followed her around until she decided to train me instead of telling me to fuck off. She saw how my brother and father treated me and wanted to help. We became fast friends after that, and Liam was so impressed with D that they got invited back for all the functions that my dad puts on throughout the year, for the sole reason of boasting about his power and contacts.”

“I think I probably would’ve done the same,” Jensen mutters.

“How come Liam hasn’t called them in to deal with Blake?” I ask.

“Well, I can take a guess at one reason,” Ever says, from the kitchen, making it clear that she’s been listening.

“Yeah, what’s that?” Trick replies curiously.

“If Jynx gets called in, her target ends up dead. She doesn’t mess around, and you only employ her if you want them dead.”

We just sit there in silence, staring at her in shock. Her grin is dark and proud. It makes my blood race. Why do I find it so fucking hot when she does that? It does make me incredibly curious about how they met, though. How did their paths cross in the first place? I’m not going to ask; I know she will tell us when she’s ready, and she’s made it abundantly clear that she’s not ready to tell us yet. Judging from the stark curiosity in the other’s eyes, they’re all just as curious as I am.

“She’s right.” Atlas replies, “She has started doing other jobs recently; her team has a wide range of skills that they’ve been utilising for other jobs.”

“Impressive. What’s the other reason?” Rafe asks curiously.

“I want to deal with him myself. Blake is mine to deal with, and my father too, Jynx, is prepared to help me if I need it, and her entire team will help when it comes to cleaning house from the inside out.” Atlas replies.

“I get that. I want to be the one that takes down my father if the time comes.” Luc agrees, “Out of curiosity, are you talking about sending your father to jail or taking him down in the more permanent sense. I’m fairly certain I know which one you’re choosing when it comes to Blake.”

“Jail, and if I can, then jail for Blake, too. I think death is the easy way out for them both. There are a lot of people in prison that would love to take the opportunity to get even with them. With my father, I think it’s possible to take him in, but with Blake, we may have no other choice but to take him

down. He's too dangerous, especially with him hell-bent on going after Ever." Atlas explains, and I see his point. I also see the dark anger that overcomes his features. He's not handling his family going after Ever very well at all.

I don't think any of us would if one of our family members were after Ever.

"That makes sense. After tomorrow we can hopefully start to focus back on taking them out as well as finding Amelia and the entire issue with Luc's dad." Trick replies.

"That's quite a lot of shit we need to sort." Jensen grins.

"True, but as far as Liam and Blake are concerned, that's going to be a long game kind of thing. We will carry on doing the jobs that Alaric sends us on that have something to do with Liam's many business ventures until we get to a point where I can step in. Unfortunately, despite my reputation, no one will take me seriously right now, especially not any of the older members." Atlas admits.

"Agreed, so the first thing we'll look into is Amelia while working on Liam and Luc's dad." Trick summarise.

"Sounds good to me." Atlas agrees.

"Don't forget," Ever chimes in, still in the kitchen and with a dab of flour on the end of her nose, which makes her look absolutely adorable. "We still need to find the missing kids. We know what happened to them, but we don't know where they're buried."

"Good point. There's a high chance that Chris won't tell anyone just as a final fuck you." Rage agrees.

"We can just add that to the rest of it. We'll find them, Sweetheart." Trick reassures her, and she smiles.

"Right, I'm going to shower and change before the others get here," I say, pushing myself up off the floor.

The others all get up to do the same or go and help Ever in the kitchen, and when I say help, I mean watch and yell encouragement. Other than Rafe, none of us are particularly great in the kitchen.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ever

So far, in my stress induced baking spree, I've made brownies and cookies because I couldn't decide which one, I wanted more. I also made some pork chops in apple and cider sauce, with crushed potatoes for lunch. That was actually somewhat strategic on my part, with Jynx and the guys coming over later, no doubt we are going to be drinking, and we need to line our stomachs before we do that. Especially since we've got quite a big day tomorrow, you know, breaking into a high-security building, finding top-secret documents, and then bringing down a famous billionaire.

Just slightly busy.

Which reminds me, "Are we going to school tomorrow or preparing for the job all day?"

"It's probably a good idea to chill out and prepare, make sure we've got everything we need, and go over the plan a couple more times." Trick replies thoughtfully.

"Good."

"Are you okay?" Luc asks.

He, Trick, Atlas, and Jensen are all sitting around the table and have been for the last hour or so just watching me and pretending that they're talking amongst themselves. I know they're worried about me, and if the roles were reversed, I'd be concerned about them too. I get it.

"I don't think so, but I will be," I reply honestly; there's no point in pretending I'm fine; they all know I'm not.

Lunch is over pretty quickly, with a lot of compliments from the guys that make my pride swell just a little bit; I enjoy knowing that I can give them a good meal.

“Hey, bitches, we’re home!” Jynx yells as the front door slams open.

“Should I ask how she managed to get herself on school grounds, past our gate, and into the front door without setting off any alarms?” Trick asks, a grin on his face.

“I wouldn’t,” I reply, drying my hands and then rushing to find her.

“Hey, squirt!” Ace says, and I roll my eyes.

“Hey yourself, asshole!” I grumble, still amused. “Damn, you guys got even fucking bigger.”

“Thanks,” Malachi grins, flexing his tattoo covered arms like he’s in some sort of bodybuilding contest.

He and Mason are twins, with their dark hair kept longer on the top, piercing green eyes, dimples, and multiple tattoos, in which all the visible one’s match. They did it deliberately so that it would be hard to tell them apart if they had to go undercover. They are pretty easy on the eyes, but then again, all of Jynx’s men are. All of them are exceptionally well built, with muscles that Jynx has described to me in detail; each of them has an array of tattoos and a dangerous aura surrounding them. They turn heads no matter where they go.

“Atlas, introduce my guys to Ever’s. We’re going for a girly chat.” Jynx grins with no other greeting.

I watch in amusement as she hops up onto the counter; she’s short as hell and rummages around in the cupboard pulling out a bottle of whiskey.

“Fine, but Jynx no smoking in the house; it takes forever to get the smell of weed out of the fucking furniture.” He replies.

“Yes, Mom.” She replies sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

I chuckle. “I’ll go grab some blankets. Then, we can set up the firepit.”

“Sounds good.” She replies. She walks up to Rome and kisses the surly scowl off his face. “Be nice. We like these people. You like Ever, and these are Ever’s men. I know you like Atlas and Rage.”

“I am always nice,” he practically growls.

Jensen snorts, “Whatever you say, dude, if the girls are drinking, then I am too. Want a drink?”

Rome eyes him suspiciously. I don’t think many people laugh at the six-foot-seven beast of a man whose only facial expression is a scowl. “Sure, I could drink.”

I share a grin with Jynx; it looks like Jensen is getting Rome to warm up to him already, a difficult feat for sure. I leave them to it and head upstairs, taking them two at a time. Just having Jynx here has made me feel lighter. The guys are great to talk to, but sometimes I need an outside point of view from someone who knows me and our situation, someone that I don’t have to edit what I say for.

On my way back through the kitchen, Jensen, Atlas, and Riot all grab me for kisses on my way past them, and they all tell me to have fun. They’ve already all got beers out and seem to be getting on well. Rip is doing his usual silent and intimidating thing. He only speaks when he deems it necessary. That’s not to say he doesn’t talk regularly, he does; he just chooses his words carefully. Out of all of them, Rip is the one I’d be the most cautious around, and I was at first. It took me quite a while to warm up to him. He’s got the boy next door, blonde hair that he keeps up in a bun and piercing baby blue eyes, but he’s covered in tattoos, and there’s a manic gleam in his eye that makes him more dangerous than most.

If he’s on your side, though, he’s there for life, and he’s the kind of person who you want backing you up. I think if Rip decides to let his guard down, he and Jensen are going to get on like a house on fire, probably literally.

I take a seat next to Jynx; she’s already lit the fire, but there’s still a chill in the air, so I wrap the blanket around our shoulders, and she immediately hands me the bottle of vodka before sparking up a joint. I very rarely indulge in smoking weed, but I think this is probably one of the times that it’s okay that I do.

“So, what’s going on, Little Sis?” She asks, and just like that, I tell her everything.

She sits and listens through the whole rant as we pass the vodka and the joint back and forth between us. I even tell her about everything that's happened with Rage, hoping that I'm speaking quietly enough that he can't hear what I'm saying. By the time I finally stop talking, I feel a thousand times better. It looks like we won't need plan 'B' after all.

"Well fuck, I thought maybe you were worried about juggling all your men and starting jobs. Damn, your dad and your mom are involved in this shit, fucking hell." She replies sympathetically. "You know me and the guys are here for you; whatever you need, just let us know."

"Thank you," I reply, staring into the fire and beginning to feel a pleasant buzz, thanks to the vodka and weed. "It's just a mind fuck, you know."

"I can't even begin to imagine." She turns her head, not lifting it from the back of the seat, and looks at me. "Need plan 'B'?"

"Nope, I'm good, now. I need a good night with lots of laughs."

"That I can do, here drink up. Then watch this." She gets a wicked glint in her eye, and my smile widens; I love it when she gets that look in her eye. Something fun and usually dangerous always follows.

Atlas

The guys all seem to be getting on well, but then again, they've all come from similar backgrounds. It's hardly surprising. A sudden flash outside of the kitchen window draws my attention, and when it flares up again, Malachi curses.

"For fuck sake." He groans as we all make our way to the back door to see what the hell the girls are up to.

"I'm not entirely sure what I'm seeing." Jensen mutters, grinning regardless as my eyes finally land on Ever and Jynx. I

can't help the broad smile that crosses my own face.

"Jynx recently learned how to breathe fire, and it appears she's taught Ever." Ace grins before bounding over to them.

"My turn!" He shouts. We are a good few drinks in now and starting to feel the effects.

"Hey, I want a go too!" Jensen yells, as equally excited as Ace.

"Yeah, cause nothing's going to go wrong if he has a go," I mutter.

The guys closest to me chuckle as Rome and Rip raise their eyebrows in question.

"He's clumsy as hell but an incredible fucking fighter. We don't know how he manages it." Cash explains, and Rip's lip tips up slightly at the corner while Rome just nods.

"You have a fire extinguisher, right?" Trick asks hopefully.

"We actually do. They equip all the houses with them." I reply, trying to think where it is. We're going to need it to put out something; there's no question about that.

"I know where it is. I'll go and grab it." Rage offers.

"Thanks, man." Trick replies.

We both share a look as we make our way over to the fire pit. The girls are now standing up, and they've found sticks, at least I fucking hope they're sticks and not a part of the garden furniture because they've lit the ends on fire and are taking it in turns to take giant swigs of vodka and then spitting it at the flames making them roar.

The grin on Ever's face is by far worth any furniture they may have damaged to make their makeshift fire sticks.

"She's beautiful." Trick mutters from beside me, his eyes never leaving her as she laughs with Jynx.

"She really is, inside and out. We're lucky fuckers." I reply, my eyes landing on my ring on the chain around her neck. In clear view for everyone to see, that makes me fucking proud as hell. Not only is she wearing it knowing full well what it

means and the weight it carries, but she isn't hiding to protect herself. I wouldn't have blamed her if she did. In fact, I expected her to. That's what I've known all the other partners do when they get the ring. Not my girl, though, she not only wants to fight by my side, but she is fully capable of doing so. I couldn't be any more in love with her. I love how fierce she is, that she's not afraid to stand up to me or any of the others, and I love that she takes everything in her stride, and if something knocks her down, like what we found out tonight, she gets straight back up again.

I just hope she realises that she doesn't always have to be strong for our sake. I'll sit with her while she crumbles and hold all her broken pieces together until she's able to do it herself.

I sip my beer as I watch the girls, Jensen and Ace, all play with the fire and let my mind wander. Something about that video of Amelia is bothering me, and I can't put my finger on why. It's been playing on my mind ever since we watched it. I might ask Peter if I can have a copy so I can watch it again and see if I can figure out what it is. Seeing Ever and Jynx interact is very telling; they've clearly got a pretty intense shared past. I know that neither of them trusts very easily, and it's evident from how they behave with each other that they trust each one another completely.

It makes me uneasy, not because I don't trust Jynx. Other than the guys, there isn't anyone else I would trust more with her. But I've known Jynx for years, and I know the shit she's been through and the kinds of jobs she does. As Ever pointed out earlier, they're dead if Jynx is sent after someone. So there are only a couple of logical ways Jynx and Ever could know each other. Either Jynx was sent to kill Ever or Ever helped Jynx on a job. Now I know they've known each other for years, which means Ever can't have been very old when they first met, and I hate the life that she's had and the parallels it holds with my own.

When she finally tells us, I'm either going to be breathing a sigh of relief or adding people to my murder list.

“Come on, let me have a go?” Jensen groans, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I realise that while trapped in my head, I’ve finished my beer, but Trick hands me one before I can get up to get a fresh one.

“Looked like you were thinking pretty hard then, everything alright?” He asks.

“Yeah, just the usual. Got a lot on my mind.” I reply.

“Tell me about it. I’m here if you want to talk.”

I raise my beer and nod in acknowledgement that I’ve heard him. I’m about to reply that the same goes for him but stop as I see Jynx and Ever hugging and ending up perilously close to the edge of the large pond. It’s pretty damn deep.

“Guys!” I yell, gaining their attention and stopping their weird backward hug walk. “If you don’t want to get wet, I’d suggest you move forward.” I grin.

“Well, holy shit, has there always been a big ass pond there?” Ever asks, as she peers down into it, still closer to the edge than I’d like.

“Yes, Princess, there has. Please move further way; I’m not nearly drunk enough for a freezing dip in the pool.” I reply, Rome chuckles quietly next to me, and I catch a slight smirk from Rip. That guy hardly ever smiles, and the only time I’ve seen him show much emotion is around Jynx; he’s a great guy, though. He’s had my back more times than I can count. I’d go to battle with them and for them.

She steps further away and blows me a kiss.

“How’s it going, your relationship with her?” Malachi asks curiously.

“Pretty smooth sailing so far,” I reply, frowning as Rage gets up and moves away from us and, or more likely the conversation, if he doesn’t sort his shit out soon and tell Ever how he feels, I’m going to have to have words, it’s getting pretty fucking ridiculous.

“I thought we would’ve had at least a couple of disagreements by now, but I think because we always knew we wanted it to be like this, it’s made it easier.” Rafe adds in from across the fire.

“That’s good. We never had any massive disagreements, but one of us was a bit more hesitant to try than the others.” Mason says pointedly at Rip.

“You know full fucking well that wasn’t because I didn’t want to.” He replies, no heat in his tone but an underlying warning to drop it.

Malachi smacks Mason on the back of the head in warning, making Trick and the guy’s chuckle.

“Don’t get us wrong, it hasn’t been completely smooth sailing, but it’s been fucking worth it, and I wouldn’t change any of it for the world,” Rome replies, in a surprisingly emotional response for him.

“That’s partly because if you tell Jynx, she can’t or shouldn’t do something, she’ll do it just prove you wrong even if it’s to her own detriment.” Ace calls out, just before he successfully spits vodka and makes the flames grow.

“You know it, baby.” Jynx grins, wholly unrepentant and owning her faults.

“It’s caused many an interesting situation.” Rip growls, a fond half-smirk tilting his lips as he watches Jynx.

She catches him looking and winks, blowing him a kiss and making Ever grin in response.

Ever

I focus back on Jensen. Even slightly drunk me thinks that it’s not such a great idea to let Jensen breathe fire but what the hell.

“Okay, so what you do is light your stick, take a swig of vodka but don’t swallow obviously and then spit it at the

flames, make sure there's nothing in the fire's way that you can set alight," Jynx explains.

"Got it," Jensen replies, getting these cute little lines on his forehead as he concentrates.

I yell and applaud as he pulls it off without setting himself, someone, or something else on fire. We each take it in turns to have a go, and it's surprisingly entertaining. The others sit around the fire and chat. They all seem to be getting on pretty well, which is good because even if Jynx doesn't help with the job tomorrow, I'm sure our paths will still cross every now and then.

"What the fuck, dude!" Ace suddenly yells, and my eyes snap back from checking my men out to focus on Jensen and Ace.

"Holy fuck, shit, you're on fire!" Jensen yells, a spear of panic in his voice.

"Yeah, no shit, dude! You fucking lit me on fire!" Ace yells back, flapping his arm manically and trying to put the flames out.

He doesn't seem to be having much luck but watching him flap is pretty amusing, and Jynx and I share a look, promptly bursting into laughter.

"Seriously, I'm on fucking fire here!" He yells.

I watch as Jensen looks around for a solution, shrugs and then runs at Ace full pelt. Ace's eyes go wide, and he holds his hands up in a 'whoa, wait a minute' gesture while his arm is still on fire. Jensen ignores it and tackles him, making them fly backward and straight into the pond behind them.

They both come up spluttering as we all stare in shock. Rage takes that moment to spray them both with the fire extinguisher, a giant grin on his face. We all burst out laughing at their shocked looks, Jensen and Ace joining in. When we've all finally calmed down, Ace turns to Jensen.

"I think this makes us best friends now, right?" He jokes.

“Well, I mean, I did set you on fire and then put you out.” Jensen replies thoughtfully, “That’s how all great friendships start, right?”

“That’s what I always thought.” He shrugs. “Beer?”

“Beer!” Jensen grins as they both climb out of the pond. “Fuck, that’s cold, maybe clothes and then beer.”

“On that note, I think maybe it’s time for us to go inside. Before someone gets seriously set on fire.” Trick smirks, raising his eyebrow.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Oh my god, pizza!” I say, entirely out of the blue, and follow it up with a little dance. It’s been a while since I’ve mixed alcohol and weed; it’s clearly messing with me.

“Erm, what is she doing?” Malachi asks, curiously tilting his head to one side so his dark curls flop across his eyes.

“Happy food dance!” My guys all answer at the same time, and everyone else’s eyebrows meet their hairlines.

“I’m guessing she wants pizza.” Rage grins.

He pays just as much attention as the others, and he answered why I was dancing with them. I grin smugly at him, and instead of just looking away or giving me the finger, he winks at me, and it is the sexiest thing ever. Usually, I wouldn’t say I like it when a guy winks at me. I find it cringy as hell, but for some reason, when he does it, it’s just sexy.

Maybe I’m drunker than I thought.

“Yes, please to pizza!” I grin.

“Ooo, me too!” Jynx adds. “You guys have got to fuel up for tomorrow!”

“Yeah, maybe we should slow down on the drinking?” Cash mutters, staring down at his half-finished beer, shrugging, and then downing it in one and opening another.

“Or not,” Mason smirks.

“Why are you staring at me like that, Angel?” Jensen asks, and I reluctantly drag my eyes away from his taut chest and abs, encased in a still, very wet t-shirt.

“Who knew a wet t-shirt contest would be just as fucking hot on guys,” I reply, sauntering over to him. His eyes heat, and I stand on my tiptoes, licking a droplet of water that’s making its way down his neck from his wet hair.

“That’s probably not sanitary.” Jynx points out drily, swinging her legs on the counter behind us.

“Didn’t think of that,” I frown. “Eh, I’m sure it’ll be fine. Kiss me!” I demand, my attention turning back to a soaking wet Jensen.

He grins wickedly, his eyes connecting with something over my shoulder. I glance over my shoulder as a firm body presses against my back. Before I can identify who it is, a tattooed hand reaches around and grips my throat.

Atlas.

Jensen grips my hips, his eyes burning into mine as Atlas’s grip flexes on my throat before he uses it to tilt my head to the side so he can kiss my neck. Jensen’s lips land on mine. As our tongues dance and fight, I lose myself in the moment, with Jensen occupying my mouth and Atlas making me shiver with anticipation as he kisses and nibbles up my neck. I moan and hear echoing growls from them.

“You might want to stop before we all get a before dinner show that we never intended to see,” Jynx calls from the background before cackling.

“I am going to get you back for that,” I warn her, pulling away from Jensen and Atlas, who both groan, burying their heads in opposite sides of my neck.

“I know, worth it, though.” She smirks.

“Dick.”

“Bitch.” She replies, and we both burst out laughing.

“Girls are weird,” Luc mutters, his eyes ping-ponging between us both.

“Ain’t that the truth, dude,” Malachi answers, holding his beer up, and they chink bottles.

“Pizzas ordered. It shouldn’t be too long.” Trick announces, coming back into the kitchen.

I have no idea when he even left.

“Movie?” Mason asks.

“Yeah, I could go for a movie,” I reply.

The others all agree, and I watch curiously as Jensen, Cash, and Riot all wander off upstairs. Finally, we all settle down on the couches, and I end up with my feet in Rafe’s lap and my head in Atlas’s. Jynx is in a similar position, with her head in Rip’s lap, as he plays with her hair, looking more relaxed than he has all night and her feet in Ace’s.

The others come back down, bringing with them armfuls of blankets. They go around the room, handing them out. When Riot hands me mine, he stops to give me a slow and languid kiss, too, making me smile softly.

The rest of the evening we spend eating pizza, talking and watching the movie. We get so carried away that we end up not saying goodbye to Jynx and her men until gone one in the morning. I think we all needed a decent night off, though, and before we go to sleep, I make all the guys drink at least one glass of water. The last thing we need is to wake up hungover tomorrow.

When I wake up in the morning, I am eternally grateful that I turned my alarm off last night and that Trick decided that we’d need the day at home today to prepare for tonight. A buzz of excitement goes through me at the thought of the job tonight and finally getting justice for the missing kids. Well, four of them at least and put Chris away for good, hopefully. I roll over, laying my head on Trick’s chest. He starts to stroke my bare back before drifting back to sleep. My mind wanders back to the spectacular things he did with his tongue last night; his tongue bar may be my new favourite thing in the world.

Damn.

I gently move away from Trick to check my phone and see if we have time to wake up and play. But, unfortunately, we don’t, it’s already mid-day, and we really do need to get going if we’re going to make sure that we’re ready by tonight.

I want to go over the plan again, and we need to familiarise ourselves with the equipment that Alaric is bringing over too. I

don't want to be multiple stories high dangling in the air and not know what the fuck I'm doing. That would definitely make me panic. I slowly get out of bed, so I don't wake Trick and make my way to my dresser to choose some clothes. I don't want to have to change again later, so I pull out the only pair of black skinny jeans that I didn't burn, a black long-sleeved shirt and a black hoodie. All items that will easily blend into the night.

I shower quickly, surprised that when I come back into the room fully dressed to see Trick still asleep. I think he has been worrying a lot recently about everything. He puts so much pressure on himself to protect everyone that I think he sometimes needs to just turn off for a bit and reset. I think that's what he managed to do yesterday.

I quietly leave the room and make my way downstairs. Most of the guys are already up and in the kitchen, including Peter, when I get down there.

"Hey, Sugar." He grins. Clearly, he's been up for a while. "Heard about the fight you guys got into yesterday."

"Did you also hear how Jensen accidentally started it?" I chuckle.

"Oh yeah." He grins before becoming serious. "Atlas also filled me in on your ... on Amelia. As soon as you're ready, say the word, and I'll start putting some feelers out."

"Thank you. I really appreciate that. We need to get Chris sorted first and then find the missing kids, so the families get proper closure, but maybe after that." I reply, genuinely grateful even if it still sends a stab of shock through me and, if I'm honest, hurt too.

I lived in hell with my father, and my mother has been alive this whole time? I used to dream that she'd come back and save me until I grew up and realised that would never happen because she was dead.

I take a breath and calm down. I don't know the circumstances, but I know that she was definitely sick. I remember that much. There is no way she could've faked that.

Like Cash said yesterday, my mom asked his mom to look after me, but my dad disappeared with me before she could. So for all I know, she could think that I've been safe and happy with her most trusted friends all this time. Or there's been some other reason why she couldn't come for me, and my dad was clearly a massive threat to her. I wouldn't want her dying just to come and get me, but she could've sent someone, surely?

I feel like I'm talking myself around in circles and decide to push it away for now. The only way that I'm going to get answers to all of these questions is if I ask her, and we need to deal with other things first. Talking it out with Jynx yesterday helped because instead of feeling like I'm going to go off the rails when I talk about it, I can think about it calmly without losing my shit. I still push it away but progress.

"Here you go, Firecracker," Luc says, handing me a coffee and not releasing it until I kiss him.

He's dressed in dark clothes just like me, in fact, they all are, but he still has his hair down. I run my fingers through it, and he grins, kissing my nose.

"So, what's the plan?" I ask, taking a seat at the table between Riot and Rafe, one of my favourite places to be.

"Alaric should be here in twenty, we're going to go over the plan, and he's going to show us how the wire works, how your harnesses work, and he said he had some earpieces for us too, so that we can communicate the whole time," Atlas answers me.

"Awesome," I reply, glad that we're getting a full rundown of the equipment. I turn in my chair as I hear shuffling behind me to find a sleepy Trick making his way into the room. "Good morning."

"Morning, Sweetheart," he smiles, dropping a kiss on the top of my head as he makes his way to the coffee pot.

The guys quickly catch him up on the plan for today, and he nods along, agreeing with all of it.

“It might be a good idea to get Jynx and her team to be in the other van with a few of us. That way, they’re close by in case we need them, and we can split up easier if we need to because they’re already waiting in the car. They can have it up and running, and all we need to do is jump in.” He suggests.

“I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll message her now.” Atlas says, pulling out his phone. Within seconds, he has a message back. “She says that fine. D has the twins doing a job while they’re up here, and Ace is feeling worse for wear after last night’s activities, so it’ll just be her Rome and Rip.”

“Perfect. We probably didn’t need the entire team, anyway.” Trick replies.

“Just in case we need someone to bail us out if we get kidnapped or lost or trapped.” Jensen grins, sipping his coffee with his feet up on the table.

“Very helpful, dude. Thanks for mentioning some of the worse things that could go wrong.” Riot mutters as Cash smacks Jensen on the back of the head.

“Hey!” He yells, rubbing the back of it.

“You deserved that,” I say, raising my eyebrows and daring him to argue with me.

He pouts, “Alright, fine.”

I smile triumphantly as the doorbell rings, and Alaric lets himself in.

“Hey, guys.” He greets, his smile warm, but there is a slight hint of trepidation in his voice.

I don’t blame him. This is a pretty big thing that we’re trying to pull off.

“Hey, man. You alright?” Rage asks him.

“Yeah, thanks. Let’s go over the plans first, and then I’ll go through the equipment.”

“Sounds good,” Rafe answers for everyone. “Do you want a coffee?”

“Sure, thanks.” He smiles.

“We’ve got Jynx, Rip, and Rome coming over so that they can go in the second vehicle and be on hand in case we need them.”

“That’s a good idea. I don’t suppose she mentioned how that best friend of hers, mom is?” He asks, his cheeks tinting, and I raise my eyebrows. Well, well, it seems Alaric has a crush. I have to remember to ask Jynx about it.

“You mean Waverly’s mom?” Rage smirks.

“Yeah.” He mutters in reply.

“No, she didn’t, but I can ask?” Atlas grins, a teasing glint in his eye.

Alaric rubs his hand on the back of his neck nervously. “Erm, no, that’s okay, it can wait. Anyway, back on track. Peter, has your dad okayed us to use his building?”

“Yes, he said it’s fine. I’ve got all the codes and keys and all that.” Peter replies. “There’s an underground parking lot that belongs to the building where we can park the cars, and there are two separate entrances, so we won’t arrive together just on the off chance that someone is watching.”

“That’s perfect, good job. So, we’ll arrive in separate vans. I brought another one with me, and it’s a different make and model, so no one who is really paying attention will think that we’re together. We’ll enter the parking lot under Peter’s building through the separate entrances and reconvene inside. Rafe and Riot will stay in the van with the surveillance equipment and Peter. Jynx, Rip, and Rome will stay in the other vehicle on standby.”

We all nod; so far, it seems straightforward enough.

“While Peter is getting into their security cameras, we’ll make our way up to the roof and start to set up the equipment. As soon as he gives us the go-ahead that he’s in, Luc and Ever will go across to the roof of Chris’s building.” He looks around at us to make sure that we’re following along before continuing, “I’ll show you how it works in a minute. We’re not sure what the security on the roof door is, but I’ve brought all

sorts of things that either work silently or make as little noise as possible while still getting the job done.”

“As soon as we’re in, we make our way to Chris’s office, which is opposite the stairwell door, as quietly and inconspicuously as possible, avoiding guards instead of engaging with them.” Luc interrupts.

“Exactly. We want to be in and out as if we were never there, no witnesses and no trace of our presence.” Alaric replies.

“Got it.” I agree. I can do that. I’m surprisingly good at being stealthy when I need to be.

“The safe is behind the bookcase behind his desk. It should be fairly easy to pull open. Now, once you get to the safe, that’s where Peter comes back in.” Alaric says, looking to Peter.

“So there are two ways that we can open the safe. One is using the fingerprint, which we should be able to pick up easily in his office and apply, along with two different long sequence codes which I have. The problem with this way is that it’s time consuming and we might have limited time in the office. We want to be done quickly.”

“Okay, so what’s the second option?” Rage asks.

“Well, that depends on what sort of equipment Alaric brought. I’ve done enough research on these safes now that I’ve found an alternative way to get into them. There is a weak spot in the framework, a very small and controlled detonation will blow it wide open. The risk with that is that it does make a noise. Since it’s small, it’s not a massive noise, but it will be loud enough to draw attention.”

“You want us to blow it up?” Luc asks, an unmistakable excited gleam in his eye.

“Well, that’s the quickest option, yes. I can even set off an alarm somewhere on the ground floor, so all the guards attend that and are away from the top floor, where you’ll be. So they won’t be able to hear the explosion from there.” Peter adds, watching Luc warily.

“I actually have some small detonators with me that we use for this sort of thing. Would these work?” Alaric asks, holding up a small device that looks innocent enough. It’s round, with a flat bottom and a small button on the rounded top.

“Yeah, that should do,” Peter replies as he takes one from Alaric and looks it over.

“Great, so that’s how we’ll get into the safe, but just in case Peter can’t distract the guards with an alarm, we’ll call the fingerprint and code plan ‘B’,” Alaric suggests. “Once you’ve got everything you need from the safe, we’re not entirely sure what’s in there, so you’ll have to see what you find when you’ve opened it and make the decision on whether or not things are worth taking. As soon as you’ve got it all, you need to put the office back exactly how you found it, just in case we can’t get Chris tonight. The team has been briefed, and they will be waiting around all of his known residences, despite us having good intel about which one he is in.”

“And then we get out of there.” I grin.

“Yep, then you hotfoot it out of there, and we’ll get back to the vehicles and split up and take separate routes back here. Peter, if they find USBs or disks or anything techie, could you please look at it all on the drive back so that we can get the proof to my boss as quickly as possible, and they can move against Chris?”

“Yeah, I can do that; it shouldn’t take me that long,” Peter replies quickly.

“Excellent. Here’s to smooth sailing.” Alaric grins.

“Should we be worried about how excited Luc is about blowing something up?” Peter asks, grinning.

“Oh, come on, man, tell me you haven’t wanted to blow something up?” Luc asks. “Even if it is a small explosion.”

“No comment.” Peter chuckles.

Luc grins, “I fucking knew it.”

I burst out laughing, “I have to admit I’m pretty excited to blow something up.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Alright, let’s get back on track.” Alaric grins, “Can some of you help me bring the equipment in from the van?”

“Yeah, sure.” Trick replies as he, Rafe, Atlas, and Jensen all get up and follow Alaric out of the room.

It doesn’t take them long to bring in the bags of equipment, and we quickly clear everything off the table so that they can put the bags on it.

“First, we have the wire.” Alaric starts, pulling out something that looks like a massive gun with a three-pronged grappling hook on the end, but the hooks are closed together, not spread out. It looks like it attaches to something else as well. “So, you shoot this at whatever it is that you’re trying to get to, in this case, it will be the wall of the building as that’s going to be the most stable, and no one is likely to notice the marks left behind. It pierces a hole, and then the three prongs drill outwards, securing it into the wall. When we need to bring it back, we simply press the button, the prongs retract, and the gun reels it back in. It attaches to a stand that we’ll secure against the wall at the edge of Peter’s building. It’s got a backup security line which I’m sure we’ll be able to attach to something on the roof, just in case.”

“I don’t know whether that’s reassuring or whether I should be worried it needs a backup line,” I say drily.

Alaric grins, “It’s merely a precaution. We haven’t had to use it yet.”

“Okay, that is reassuring.” I nod.

“Then we have your harnesses, have either of you been rock climbing before?”

“Yeah, there was a funded school trip that I went on once,” I reply.

“I have quite a bit,” Luc adds.

“He climbs all the time, but he likes free climbing.” Trick explains.

“Excellent, well, these are just like those harnesses. You just step in and tighten the straps. They’re less bulky than the normal harnesses, and you’ll be able to leave them on while you’re in the building. That way, it cuts down on the time that it’ll take you to get back across if you’re unfortunately being followed. If that happens, you two just focus on getting back across, and those of us on the roof will cover you.”

“Got it,” Luc replies, seriously.

“The harness clips onto the pulleys, so you can get across quicker, you use your hands to pull yourself along the wire. Then I’ve got the detonator devices, and spare c4, extra weapons, medical stuff, everything you’ll need if you do need to get Chris’s fingerprints, some backpacks for you to carry the stuff in. Then I have earpieces for all of you, they’re practically invisible, and we’ll be able to stay in contact with everyone throughout the job. I will ask that we try to keep the line as clear as possible so that Peter can warn us of any approaching danger. Also, so Ever and Luc can focus. Fortunately, I brought extras, so I have enough for Jynx, Rome, and Rip.”

“How do the detonator devices work?” I ask.

“It’s got a magnet on the bottom; you just stick it to the safe, in the spot that Peter tells you to, then you press the button on the top and stand back,” Alaric explains.

“Seems simple enough.” I shrug.

“I think that’s everything. Does anyone have any questions?”

“Are all of the teams out of the area now? We don’t need to worry about anyone else watching the building and getting arrested ourselves?” Trick asks, once again thinking about it from every angle.

“Yes, all the teams that were on surveillance have been pulled back. There’s no risk of you being arrested.” Alaric assures us.

“Good.”

“Anyone else?”

We all shake our heads. I can't think of anything that he hasn't covered already. He was pretty thorough, and if I think of anything, I'll just ask. The explanation took longer than I thought it would, and we've only got an hour or so before we've got to go.

“Honey, I'm home!” Jynx yells, once again letting herself in.

I'm not sure how they all keep getting past the guards and our gates, but I'm thinking that we should probably ask her because if they can get in, then someone else can, although that's unlikely it's still a possibility.

“Hey, Jynx.” Alaric smiles, hugging her.

“Hey, Alaric, Maria's been asking when you're going to back up New Orleans way with Ryan. D's been asking too.”

A massive grin overtakes Alaric's face as soon as Jynx mentions Maria, and now I definitely need to know what's going on with him and Waverly's mom Maria. Atlas obviously has no idea because he shoots his uncle a questioning look.

“Soon, hopefully, we need to sort this stuff out with Chris first.” He replies. “Anyway, we've got the usual earpieces and things. I'll let the guys talk you through the plan. I just need to make a call.”

“Got it,” Jynx says, turning to face the rest of us, a mischievous grin on her face.

She wound him up on purpose.

“Hey guys, you alright?” Jensen asks.

“Yeah, better than Ace anyway.” Rome grins.

“I tried to make him drink water before he fell asleep last night, but he kept knocking it over, and I gave up.” Jynx chuckles. “So, what's the plan?”

The guys all start to explain the plan, and I leave them to it, getting up to make everyone a quick lunch. We've got quite a

few leftovers, so I set about reheating it all and then putting it into serving dishes so people can help themselves to what they want.

“Need some help?” Rafe asks, in my ear, his arms wrapping around me as he rests his head on my shoulder and then kisses my neck.

I lean back into him and just enjoy being held by him for a moment before turning in his arms and wrapping my arms around his neck. He smiles down at me and dips his head until his lips meet mine. He kisses me slowly, taking his time and stoking the embers of desire for him.

“I love you.” He mutters as he pulls back.

“I love you too,” I reply, smiling softly as my heart practically explodes.

Ever since I accidentally said it to all of them when I was leaving, and they all yelled it back, a few of them have started saying it to me individually, and I love it. I can’t believe I got so fucking lucky.

“Let’s get these fuckers fed before they start a riot, pun intended.” Rafe chuckles, taking a step back.

We start taking the food over to the table, Trick just coming to the end of his explanation. I grab, serving spoons, cutlery, and plates, figuring that people can help themselves to drinks.

“Thank you, Sweetheart.” Trick grins.

“No problem, eat up. We haven’t got long until we’ve got to go.”

The food is gone quickly, Alaric coming back in and helping himself to the food as well. Once we’re all done, we clear up and then make our way to Atlas’s weapons room, gearing up and double checking all the equipment.

“I forgot to say earlier, I have bulletproof vests for all of you, but because they’re quite bulky, Luc and Ever won’t be able to wear one,” Alaric says just before we walk out of the door to separate into the two vans.

“I’m not comfortable with that.” Jensen frowns, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You guys will be covering us. You’re all damn good shooters, and because of that, whoever is shooting at us will be shooting at you.” Luc points out.

“Fine, you make a good point, but I still don’t fucking like it,” Jensen growls.

“Understood,” Alaric replies. “Split up into the vehicles. Trick and Rome, you have both got the directions for your routes to Peter’s building and the entrances that you’re going to use. We’ll meet in the underground parking lot. No detours, from this point forward, we’re on the clock, and we need to be as quick and safe as possible.”

Everyone nods their understating as Peter, Rafe, and Riot all hop into the van with Jynx and her guys since that’s the van that’s got the surveillance equipment in the back of it. The rest of us get into the other van. Before I can hop into mine, Cash pulls me to one side.

“How’s your shoulder? I’ve been meaning to ask all day, but we’ve had a pretty full-on day, and I haven’t gotten around to it.”

“It’s okay, it twinges every now and then, but for the most part, it’s fine. They really didn’t get me that badly. It shouldn’t interfere with the job. I’ve got full range.”

“Good, I just wanted to check.” He replies, concerns still swimming in his eyes.

I give him a gentle kiss, “I’ll be fine, it’ll be okay.”

The drive to Peter’s building is quiet and tense, all of us focusing on our part in the upcoming job. I tilt my head back against the side of the van, closing my eyes and going over the plan again, trying to figure out any eventuality and how I could fix it. We’re sure that Chris isn’t there today, so that’s one less worry. Peter will be operating the cameras and watching the guards, and there’s no one that I would trust more to have my back in that sense. We’ve got contingencies in place, and it should go fairly smoothly. Of course, nothing

ever goes entirely according to plan, but so long as there are no significant incidents, I'll be happy.

I'd really like to get through this job without having to take anyone out. These guards aren't like the ordinary people I fight; they're innocent just doing their jobs. I will not kill any of them; regardless of the situation, I can't bring myself to do that without knowing for sure if they're innocent or not. I'm not taking the risk.

"We're here." Trick announces as we pull into the underground parking lot at Peter's father's building.

That journey went faster than I thought I would. We park up next to Jynx's van and jump out.

"Alright, Rafe, you keep the keys for our van. If we tell you we're being followed, start the van and get ready to drive, Jynx the same goes for you and yours." Alaric orders.

They both nod.

"Peter, you start hacking the cameras, and the rest of us will go and start setting up on the roof. As soon as your in, let me know, and I'll set up the wire."

"On it," Peter replies, climbing into the back of the van, his fingers flying over the keyboard as he gets to work.

The rest of us grab bags of equipment, Atlas, Jensen, and Rage picking up the boxes with their sniper rifles in. Alaric goes over to talk to Peter and get the codes for the doors and all that sort of stuff from him so that we can actually get up to the roof.

While he's gone, Rafe and Riot come over to where we're grabbing stuff out of the van, and one by one, they each give me searing kisses.

"If this is going to be the norm when we go on jobs together, then we're going to have to do it more often. I love it." I grin, trying to relieve some of the tension.

I know that they're all worried about pulling the job off without a hitch, and I know that they each have a good deal of worry that I'm the one going in. I don't know how to reassure

them without telling them things that I'm not quite ready to tell them. It turns out I don't need to worry because Jynx has it handled.

"You don't need to worry, guys. Ever can pull this shit off in her sleep. Apart from maybe the zip wire thing, but she's come close enough." Jynx tries reassuring them.

They all turn to me, eyebrows raised in question, this story I can tell.

"Thanks for that, Jynx," I say sarcastically, sending a glare in her direction. She just grins and salutes me, making me roll my eyes. "We don't really have time for this story." I hedge.

"Sure, we do, Princess, we've got to get up to the top floor yet, and it's a damn tall building!" Atlas grins, pleased with himself for finding a way around my excuse.

"Come on, guys, let's go," Alaric orders, picking up a couple of bags and striding towards the elevator that hopefully goes to the top floor. "Here, put your earbud in; you should be able to hear Peter." He hands us all these flesh coloured things that look like earplugs, and I cautiously put mine in my ear.

"Testing, can you hear me?" I hear Peter ask.

"Loud and clear," Alaric replies for all of us before looking at us to confirm that we can hear him too.

We all nod and carry on to the elevator.

As soon as we're all in the elevator, Jensen turns to me, "Well, come on, Angel, storytime!"

"Fine, so I didn't just do drug drops for my dad, I did other things for him too, and one of those things was retrieval of sorts. Jynx helped me out on a job; when she was in town, a rival of my dad's had some evidence on him and was threatening to blackmail him. My dad wanted me to go in and retrieve the files. He lived in this massive mansion, and it was easier to go in from the roof than the ground floor."

"Wow, I didn't expect that," Luc mutters.

"Yeah, I may not be like you when it comes to your athletic abilities, but I can still pull some shit off when I have to."

“That explains the whole beam thing at the cabin. I wondered why you thought you could make it in the first place. I certainly wouldn’t try even if I were drunk.” Riot adds thoughtfully.

The elevator dings, interrupting the conversation, signalling that we’ve arrived at our floor, and effectively bringing the conversation to an end. We all refocus as we make our way past the multiple double doors on this floor and to the end of the hall, where the entrance to the roof is. As soon as we’re on the roof, I’m grateful that it’s starting to warm up now because the wind up here is biting, tearing through my clothes and straight to my bones. If the temperature were any colder, I’d be shivering way too hard to make it across the wire.

I stand out of the way as Luc helps Alaric set up the wire on this side and watch Jensen, Atty and Rage set up their sniper rifles as the others all check their guns and secure the roof, just in case we have any late-night workers up here having a smoke and enjoying the view of the city. I wouldn’t blame them; the view is amazing, and I’d much rather be in the country than the city.

“Alright, guys, I’m into the network. I won’t be able to put all of the cameras on the loop at the same time, or it might become suspicious. The chances are that the guards in the control room know the shifts of all the other guards and what floors they’re supposed to be on. I’ll put the roof one on the loop first and then switch them out as you move through the building.” Peter says through the earpiece.

“Got it, thanks, man.” Trick replies.

My eyes drift back to the guys building their rifles and setting them up, so they’ve got a good view of the building, the street, and anything else they need to keep their eyes on. What is it about a guy assembling a weapon that is so god damn hot?

“Let’s see how you’ve improved, Atlas,” Jynx says through the earpiece with a clear challenge in her tone.

“Hopefully, we won’t need to.” Alaric immediately intervenes. You can tell he’s spent a lot of time with both of

them.

“We’ll go to the range at school, and I’ll show you just how good I’ve gotten.” Atlas retorts.

“They let you take sniper rifles on the school range?” She asks, sounding equal parts shocked and impressed.

“They do if I make sure it’s only us using it.”

“Gotcha,” she replies, the grin evident in her tone.

“Alright, you two quit it. Luc and Ever, come here, and we’ll strap you in.”

I take a deep calming breath and make my way over to where he and Luc already are. He connects Luc to the wire first and then turns to me.

“Are you okay?” He asks quietly as he clips me in.

“Yeah, I’m good. Let’s do this.” I grin.

Sure, I’m slightly nervous, but more than anything, I’m excited actually to be doing something for the case instead of researching; that shit is boring as hell. Alaric returns my smile and clips me in, ensuring that it’s all secure he double checks both of our harnesses.

“Make sure that your backpacks are secure; we don’t want them to fall off or distract you when you cross.” Trick warns, looking concerned.

“Got it, Sir.” I grin cheekily as his eyes heat.

“Just wait until we get home, Sweetheart.” He growls, and my body instantly reacts to his promise.

“Both of you put on these.” He says, handing each of us a thin pair of black leather gloves. “We don’t want to leave any fingerprints behind, and they’ll help you grip the wire too. Luc, you go first, Ever you go as soon as Luc is across, from this point forward, we’re on a time limit, so focus.” Alaric orders.

We all nod, taking it seriously, and I watch as Luc moves off the edge of the building with absolutely no hesitation.

Chapter Twenty-Six

He makes it look easy as he pulls himself across the wire. He's on the other side within a minute, and then it's my turn; as soon as his feet hit the floor on the other roof, I push myself over the edge and make my own way across. I'm not as quick as Luc, but I get across fast enough. We stay silent as I quickly unclip myself from the wire.

"Moving into the stairwell," Luc murmurs quietly as we round the corner and approach the door.

As soon as it comes into sight, we immediately move behind the massive air ducts that are all over the roof.

"The door is propped open, but there's no sign of anyone up here," I whisper, hoping they can hear me over the sound of the wind.

"Hang on, we'll check through the scoops." Rage replies, his voice tense. "I can't see anyone."

"Neither can I."

"I've got no one from this angle." Atty starts, "But we can't see the whole roof."

"Okay, approach with caution. Any sign you're going to get made, get out of there. We can always try again." Alaric orders.

Neither of us replies, wanting to stay as quiet as possible, just in case there really is someone up here. The coast seems clear as we get to the door, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Someone must've propped it open to smoke and forgotten to close it again.

"In the stairwell," Luc murmurs.

"Camera's already on a loop." Peter replies.

So far, so good, I think as we reach the bottom of the stairs and the door that leads out into the hallway, directly opposite,

is the entrance to Chris's office. Bad positioning on his part, but Isabelle did say he was arrogant and prideful. He probably thought that no one would dare to break into his office; plus, it gives him quicker access to the roof and his helipad.

Seriously, he has a helipad, and I bet you that he arrives by helicopter more often than he comes by car just because he can, and he's got more money than he knows what to do with.

"At the second door," I whisper.

"One second, a guard is coming down the hallway. Get ready to move if I say so. He's on his phone. The guards are paid a fucking fortune; you'd think they'd at least pay attention. Alright, he's coming past the stairwell door now and making no move to enter; stay still." He says, seriousness bleeding into his tone.

I have to say I'm impressed; he is clearly in his element and is fucking good at it.

"Alright, he's gone. I'm just setting up the loop and done."

We slowly make our way out of the stairwell door, and I spot an immediate problem as we approach Chris's door.

"There's a keypad by his door," I mutter quietly, checking up and down the long hallway to make sure that we're not about to be ambushed.

"Fuck." Alaric curses, "My bad, it's one-six-five-four-four-three. It was in the information we got from the other team."

"Cameras are off. They appear to watch his office more closely. You'll only have ten minutes before they realise that something is amiss, and I have to turn the cameras back on if you don't want company." Peter warns us.

"Got it," I reply quietly.

Luc quickly punches in the code, and we slip inside the office. I don't take the time to admire the office that is bigger than most people's apartments. We're on a time crunch. We make our way over to the desk and the giant bookcase that covers the entirety of the wall behind it.

"Erm, how do we open the bookcase?" I ask.

“There are several options online, but my guess is that he has a button somewhere hidden on his desk that will open it.” Peter replies somewhat apologetically, “Sorry, I can’t help any more than that. There was no information online about the specific one that he has. It was a smart move.”

“That’s alright. We’ll figure it out.” Luc replies.

We share a look as we start rummaging through the desk.

“Don’t forget to make sure everything is back exactly as you find it.” Trick reminds us.

“Got it, boss,” Luc replies.

I go to the obvious places, first checking under the top of the desk and on the top of the inside of the drawers. I’m surprised there are no locks on the drawers, but when I open them, it’s obvious why. They’re all empty. Luc is checking the nameplate and awards that he has on the desk and not having any luck. Finally, running out of options, I drop to my knees and check all around the bottom of the desk, in the gap where his feet would go, and all under the edge of the desk.

Coming up empty and aware that we’re running out of time, I sit in his desk chair and try to put myself in his shoes and try to think how he would, where would I put the button for my safe if it was me? Glancing around the whole desk, I come up empty, but as my hands grip the armrests to push myself back up to standing, I feel something on the underside of the curved wooden arm; of course, he has a fancy, highly polished, wooden desk chair that looks custom made.

Huh, custom made, I wonder. I feel around for whatever I felt before and then drop my head to look underneath. Sure enough, there’s a small button. I grin triumphantly as I press it.

“Way to go, Firecracker.” Luc grins, coming to stand behind me as we watch the bookcase slide open with a whoosh, revealing a giant safe.

“It’s bigger than I thought it would be. Peter, where’s the weak spot?” I ask.

“Top left corner, ten inches in.”

“That’s very specific,” I mutter, watching as Luc pulls out the detonator from his bag and secures it to the safe.

“Stand back.” He warns me as he moves to press the button.

“Wait!” Peter yells, seconds before Luc presses it.

“What?” He asks.

“Let me set the alarms off in the basement, so the guards are as far away from you as possible.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that.”

“Okay, one second.”

I hear the tapping of keys through the earpiece before he comes back on.

“All done. Just checking the hallways.” He says, sounding distracted. “Alright, you’re good. Everyone’s far enough away now. You can set it off.”

Luc wastes no time at all in pressing the button and rushing back to where I’m standing. The explosion is only small. The blast is not very loud at all, which means that the guards in the basement won’t have heard it. We move forward quickly, Luc pulling open the door to the safe. Inside are several filing cabinets and some jewellery, which I find odd; that’s usually the sort of thing that you put in your safe at home. There are also some stacks of cash, which you would expect to find. We ignore the jewellery and money and go straight to the filing cabinets. I pull off my bag and open it, ready to put what we find inside.

Luc is already filling his bag with files. When I pull open the top drawer, it’s got several USB sticks inside; they’re all different colours, which probably means that they’re coded, but since we don’t have the code for what each one means, I just grab them all, dumping them in the bag. There’s also a laptop in one of the drawers that I put in the bag just in case it’s got something important on it. Unfortunately, that’s all I can find that looks worth taking so, I shut the drawers and zip up my bag as Luc does the same next to me.

We quickly make our way out of the safe, and Luc pushes the door closed again; it won't lock now that it's got a hole in the corner, but it does shut flush still, which should hopefully mean that the bookcase closes properly and no one will be the wiser for a while. Once it's closed, I press the button on the chair, and the bookcase slides shut seamlessly.

I look around the office to ensure that everything is as it was when we entered and nothing's out of place; it all looks good to me.

"Leaving the office," Luc says quietly.

"Got it. Hall cameras are now on a loop, and so are the stairwell ones."

We open the door slowly, double checking that the coast is clear before we move swiftly across the hall and into the stairwell. We take the stairs two at a time. When we get to the top, the door to the roof is still propped open as we left it, and Peter would've warned us if he saw anyone coming up here, so we rush through it and back over to the zip line.

"Over you go, Firecracker," Luc says.

"You go first. Remember what Alaric said about the weight? There's no time to argue." I reply as soon as he opens his mouth to do just that.

"Luc, Ever's right; you go first." Alaric orders.

Luc reluctantly does as he's told and clips in, dropping himself over the edge of the building and then pulling himself across quickly. The guys on the roof keep their eyes on the scopes and their fingers on the triggers of their guns, ready to cover either one of us if need be. As soon as he's across, I drop off the edge of the building and start to make my way across as quickly as I can. I nearly get to the other side when the pulley suddenly jams and won't move any closer. I am literally within touching distance of the building, but I'm not close enough to get over the edge.

"It's jammed," I say unnecessarily since they can all see that it is.

“Okay, Sweetheart.” Trick mutters as he looks at the wire with a calculating look on his face.

“We can’t leave her there,” Jensen says, a thread of panic in his tone.

“Of course, we can’t breathe, man. She’s fine.” Atlas tells him sternly.

“Okay. Have you got a rope?” Trick asks Alaric.

“Yeah.” He replies, fishing it out of one of the bags.

“This is what we’re going to do. We’ll attach this rope around your waist and then to your harness. Then we’re going to reach forward and grab you, hold on fucking tight.” Trick orders. “Next, you’re going to have to unclip your harness from the pulley...”

“What! No fucking way.” Jensen growls.

“It’s the only way to get her back up here. We’ll have hold of her, and like hell will we drop her. She’s also going to have the rope as a failsafe.” Cash explains, trying to reassure him, and it’s working to comfort me too.

Jensen’s eyes connect with mine, and the stark fear he’s not even trying to hide guts me. I know that he needs to be one of those holding on to me. So I reach out my hand to him.

“Jensen, hold on to me?” I ask, showing him my own fear and my complete trust in him.

He immediately takes hold of my wrist, and I wrap my hand around his, in the securest hold that I know.

“Alright, Jensen. You’ve got her, but you are going to have to let go for a second while she ties the rope, and then you can grab her again. I want Rage holding her other wrist. Luc and I will be holding on to Jensen and Rage to anchor them just in case, and Cash, Atlas, and Alaric, you hold on to the rope, keep it taut.” Trick orders.

He hands me the rope, and I wrap it around my waist, then around the top of one thigh, around my waist again, then around my other thigh, and finally around my waist a final time before threading it through the climbing hook thing that’s

attached to the pulley and throwing the end back to the guys who are all looking at me quizzically.

“What? I told you I did something similar to this before.” I reply, “Now get me up. I feel freaking vulnerable just dangling here.”

“Peter, are you monitoring the cameras?” I hear Alaric ask.

“Yes, there’s no movement at the moment. I’ll let you know as soon as anything changes.” He replies and then adds. “You’ve got this, Sugar.”

“Thanks, Peter.”

As soon as Atlas, Cash, and Alaric have the end of the rope securely in their grips, Jensen, and Rage both reach for my hands.

“Jensen, make sure that your grip is secure. Guys, keep the rope taut. She’s going to have to undo the clip, which means we’ve only got Jensen gripping her.” Trick says, fully taking over as Alaric takes a back seat.

“I’ve got you, Angel,” Jensen vows, and I nod.

I take a deep breath to gather my courage and then reach up to undo the clip. As soon as it comes off, I let out a squeak as I drop. Jensen’s grip tightens around my wrist, and my nails dig into his arm as I hang on for dear life. He doesn’t even flinch. I swing my arm up, and Rage catches it with a firm grip, his eyes holding a wealth of emotions.

They instantly pull me up and over the edge, and for half a second, I’m tempted to kiss the ground, but since I landed on Rage and Jensen, instead I kiss Jensen and then turn to Rage, the only excuse I have is that my adrenalin is through the roof right now, but I think fuck it.

My lips land on his, and I kiss him hard and fast; his grip tightens on me, his lips moulding to mine. Before, I can get completely distracted and aware that we are still on a time crunch, even more so now that we’ve had the delay with me getting stuck hanging in mid-air, I hop up off of both of them and see if I can help the others pack away. I can kiss them all later, once we’re home.

I can also deal with the fact that I kissed Rage, and I want to do it again. Alaric is already sorting the wire out, and the others are all packing away their weapons and making sure that we've left no trace of our presence behind.

All of them except Rage, who's still lying on the floor.

Luc

I chuckle quietly to myself and nudge Jensen when I see that Rage is still lying on the floor, a dazed look on his face.

"Poor fucker had no chance." Jensen chuckle.

"Nope, but then again, none of us did." I grin.

I leave him packing away his gun and make my way back over to Rage, I offer him my hand, and he stares at me blankly for a second.

"We're still on a time crunch." I grin.

He blinks and then grabs my hand, accepting my help to pull him up.

"I-I er," he fumbles over his words, and I catch the grins on the others' faces as they carry on clearing up, Ever's too far away to hear.

"Yeah, she has that effect on people. I'd tell you that you'll get used to it, but honestly, she makes me lose my damn mind every single time she kisses me." I tell him, clapping him on the back.

His shocked gaze snaps to me, searching for anger or deceit. His lip kicks up on one side as he finds nothing but happiness in my gaze, and his eyes move to Ever.

"She's something else." He mutters.

I follow him over to his weapon and watch as he starts to pack it away. My face falls into a frown when I see the tension in his shoulders.

"What's wrong?"

He considers me for a second before going back to packing his gun away, and I think he's not going to answer me and start to turn to walk away. I stop when he speaks, his voice quiet enough that I have to move closer to hear him.

He pulls out his earpiece and motions for me to do the same. So I do and turn it off just like he did.

“She deserves so much better than I can ever even hope to be for her. I'm broken and in more ways than anyone knows. I'm not sure I'm even capable of loving her. I'd only let her down and hurt her, and I don't ever want to do that. I couldn't live with myself if that happened.”

I crouch so I can look at him closely. He genuinely believes what he's saying. Someone in his life has done a real number on him, and it pisses me the fuck off.

“Okay, I hear you, but there are two things wrong with what you're saying.” I say firmly, “One, a guy who isn't good enough for her wouldn't be so fucking terrified of hurting her,” I point out. “I trust you with her; the guy's trust you with her.”

He frowns as he closes the clips on his gun case, and we follow the others at a distance so I can still talk to him. I get the feeling that I'm going to have to have this conversation with him a few times before he really gets it, but he's become a brother, and I will say it to him as many times as it fucking takes, just like I'd do for any of my brothers.

“Also, don't you think you should let Ever decide for herself?” I ask, “If she thinks you're worth it and trust me, I think she does, then prove her right. If you don't take the chance, you're going to miss out on something amazing. If you're not ready to face it head-on yet, that's fine, but we're all rooting for you, man.” I clap him on the back again as we catch up to everyone as they get on the elevator.

“Thanks, man.” He mutters.

I get a curious look from Ever and shake my head to leave it; she just smiles with understanding and starts a conversation with Atlas and Jensen.

“You're welcome.”

“I don’t know if I believe you yet, but I promise to try.”

I nod. That’s the best I can hope for at the moment, and that’s fine.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Luc

“Straight to the vehicles, everyone in the same one that they came in.” Alaric orders as the elevator opens up into the underground parking lot. “Ever and Luc, if you could give your bags to Peter so he can check over the intel on the way back to the house.”

“On it.” Ever grins.

Considering she was just perilously dangling off a zip wire, she’s surprisingly upbeat and okay. So long as she doesn’t suddenly crash later, it will all be good. Every new thing I find out about her past makes me more curious. Like how exactly she met Jynx. It also didn’t escape my notice that when she explained why she was comfortable doing this sort of thing, she said she did other things for her father. As in plural, what else did she do for him, and why does it make me uneasy?

Not because she could’ve done anything that would change my opinion of her, but more because I know that she most likely wasn’t exactly willing to do everything that the fucker could’ve asked her to do. I also know that he was fucked up, and it clearly still affects her since she’s not willing to tell us everything about her past yet.

I just worry about her.

We give the bags to Peter, who hugs Ever tightly along with Jynx in a group hug that has me grinning. Then we all split up into separate vans and take different routes home. I pull my earbud out of my pocket and put it back in my ear. Atlas sees me do it since he’s sitting right next to me and glances up front where Rage is seated.

“Is he okay?” Atlas starts to sign subtly, unable to talk because of the earpieces.

“He thinks he’s not good enough and worthless,” I explain, signing back.

“His mom did a fucking number on him.”

“I set him straight, but I’m not sure he’s ready to hear it yet.”

“Probably not, but he’s listened, which is more than he ever has before, so I’m counting that as a win.” Atlas signs, explaining.

“Well done, guys,” Alaric says from the front of the van. “You did an excellent job. I’m impressed. Don’t forget to write up the reports; it can wait a few days, though. You guys deserve some downtime after pulling that off.”

“Do we even know if we’ve pulled it off yet?” I ask.

“We do now,” Peter says through the earpieces. “I’ve only managed to get through one USB, but the files on here alone are enough to convict Chris. He filmed every murder, and he’s in each one.” Peter says, sounding disgusted and a bit shaky. “Alaric, you better warn whoever has to go through these. They are truly disturbing.”

“Okay, Peter, I will. We have a special team that deals with this sort of thing, and they have to receive counselling. Don’t look at more and if you need to talk to someone professional, please let me know, and I can arrange it.” Alaric says worriedly.

“Thanks, I should be okay, but I’ll keep it in mind. I checked a random five videos that were on the USB to make sure that he showed up in each of them.”

“That’s a great idea.” Ever compliments.

“Thanks, sugar.” He replies.

“Rip, and I are going through the files,” Jynx starts. “There are quite a few, and they’ve all got details about the person’s company, their movements, family members, vices, and weaknesses. They’re incredibly thorough.”

“Sounds like we have more than enough to bring him down.” Alaric grins.

“Thank fuck for that.” Ever grins, relief filling her tone and her expression.

Riot and Rafe wrap their arms around her, and she practically melts into them.

We finally arrive home, and all crash through the front door, heading straight for the kitchen. As much as I want to curl up in bed next to Ever, I know that I can’t just yet.

“Here you go, that’s everything,” Peter says, handing over both backpacks.

“Great, thank you. You’ve been invaluable tonight.” Alaric says warmly, and Peter’s eyes light up with happiness. “I don’t suppose you have that laptop? I want to get this information to my boss as soon as possible, but I need to encrypt the email.”

“Yeah, of course, one second.” He replies.

I grab a beer and hand them out to whoever wants one, pouring Ever and Jynx a whiskey and coke. I kiss Ever as I hand it to her, and my pulses races at the heated look she gives me.

“Do you want me to send it all over?” Peter asks Alaric, coming back into the room and setting his laptop on the table.

“That would probably be quicker. I know how to do it, but it takes me forever.”

Peter grins, “That’s cool; I’ve got it. If you give me the email address, I’ll set it all up, so the files are attached, and then you just need to write the email and click send.”

“Great, thanks.” He replies, sipping his beer.

It’s not long before he’s got everything sent off, and Alaric pulls out his phone as soon as it’s gone.

“Hello Sir, we got everything we need. I’ve sent what I can via encrypted email to you. I will bring the files and hard copies to you right away.” There’s a pause as his boss says something, “Yes Sir, my team got in and out, retrieved everything we needed without witnesses or casualties.” After another pause as he replies, Alaric grins and brings the phone

away from his ear, pressing the button so it's on speakerphone.

"You're good, Sir."

"Thank you. I just wanted to say that you should be very proud of the job you've done tonight. You've put most of my agents to shame. Keep up the good work, and I look forward to meeting you all when the time is right." The voice is stern and impressed, but I can just about hear a kind edge to it. He's a good man. "Alaric, send word to the teams to move in on Chris; let's get this bastard."

"Yes, Sir," Alaric replies before hanging up and immediately dialling another number.

"Move in." He says simply before hanging up again.

I know Alaric has a boss, but it's clear that he himself is pretty damn high up on the food chain. As a result, he gets to take a lot of liberties that I imagine most other agents, as the boss called them, don't get to take. It's interesting enough to make me curious.

"Alright, guys, I've got to get going. I need to get the hard copies back to headquarters as soon as possible. I will keep you updated on the situation with Chris. But, I suggest that you all take at least a few day's break now. You deserve it. You've managed to take down a serial killer that no one else could get even remotely close to, and I'm damn proud of you all." He says, a warm smile lighting up his features as he gathers the backpacks and makes his way to the door.

"Drive safe and call us if you run into any trouble on the way back," Alaric calls out after.

"Will do."

"We should probably get going, too. Ace is being a baby, and D has got in contact. Something is going down in New Orleans, and they might need us down there. We should be around for a few more days, though, if you need us for anything." Jynx says.

"Alright, guys, thanks for the backup today." Atlas replies, clasping hands with Rip and Rome, then hugging Jynx.

Ever pulls Jynx into a tight hug, and they promise to talk soon.

“The same goes for you guys; if you need a hand on your job, just give us a call, and we’ll come and help. I’ve always wanted to go to New Orleans.” Ever grins.

“We’d be happy to.” Trick adds, looking more relaxed now that we’re back and we’ve pulled it off successfully.

“Thanks, we should be okay. It’s a fairly simple one, but we’ll definitely give you a call if we get in a jam.” Rome nods.

A giant yawn overtakes Ever’s face as she says, “Alright, see you later.”

I wave as they all make their way to the door, closing it tightly behind them. Ever saunters her way over to me and sits down on my lap, snuggling in close, my arms wrap around her tightly. It was really fun doing the job together today. I think we make a good team, and I hope we get to do assignments together in the future. Just without the Ever dangling off a zip wire thing because that was fucking terrifying. I think I kept it together better than Jensen did. The poor guy completely freaked out. I think we all did, but the rest of us hid it better than he did. I can’t really blame the guy, any threat to Ever’s life, and we freak out. He takes it a bit harder than the rest of us, though; losing his mom and sister as he did makes his reactions now even stronger.

“I guess I should get going too, the suns starting to come up, and I’ll only get a couple of hours before my housemates are up and being as loud as they possibly can.” Peter chuckles.

“Stay here, man.” Riot offers. “We don’t have a spare bed, but you can sleep on the couch. At least that way, you’ll get some decent sleep.”

“Thanks, that would be great.”

“Right, I’m going to bed then.” Ever yawns, getting up and giving us all kisses goodnight, or I guess good morning before she makes her way upstairs.

I help clear the kitchen, so we don't have to do it when we get up, and then the guys and I all go to bed—chucking some blankets at Peter on the way past the front room.

Ever

I make my way sleepily to the kitchen. I need coffee, lots and lots of coffee. I slept fine last night. Great actually. But I think now that the stress of the case is over, everything is catching up to me. At least, I assume it's over, and they managed to get Chris. It would be really bad if he managed to escape them, especially since he would know that someone had been in his office in order to get that information in the first place. Alaric said he'd keep us updated, so I guess we'll hear something today. Although we were up until the early hours of the morning, it's only midday, and I feel pretty well rested, considering. I'm slightly surprised that everyone else seems to be awake too.

Jensen and Peter still have their grumpy faces on, their eyes half-closed still, hair sticking in every direction, and they are practically chugging coffee, so they, at least, can't have been awake for very long.

"Morning Princess," Atlas greets me, handing me a giant mug of coffee. I smile gratefully as I accept it, and he kisses me. "We all helped make breakfast this morning. I think we need to start helping Rafe out in the kitchen more; it's not fair that he seems to do all the cooking."

"I really don't mind. It's good practice." Rafe interrupts, adding a plate of pancakes to the table that's already laden with sausage, bacon, eggs, toast, and even waffles.

"Wow, you've gone all out." I compliment them as I take my seat, "How about this, though, one of us takes over cooking at least twice a week or whenever you feel like you need a break?"

"Yeah, okay. I guess that could work." He agrees thoughtfully.

“I actually want to try a couple of recipes out if you want to do it together?”

“I’d like that, Baby.”

“Deal,” I reply with a grin, tucking into the breakfast.

I was starving when we got back last night. It turns out that pulling off a break-in is hungry work. I guess I didn’t really notice when I’ve done them in the past because I was always hungry. I was too tired last night to get anything to eat, and my need to sleep quickly overtook my need to eat.

It means that this morning or afternoon now, I guess, I am so hungry I feel like I could eat everything on the table, so I pile my plate high and dig in.

“Wow, Angel, I haven’t seen you eat that much since that first meal that we ate together at Trick’s house,” Jensen smirks.

I laugh at the reminder of all my manners flying out of the window and eating my meal like it was going to be taken away from me any second, and I needed to fit as much in my mouth as I could before that happened. Although to be fair, that’s because it was usually, and eating was something that I wasn’t used to doing.

“Yeah, apparently breaking into places makes me hungry.” I laugh before changing the subject. “We still need to find the murdered five, well, four. I don’t think Chris will give up the location. He’s going to plead not guilty for as long as he can. Despite the undeniable evidence that we have on him. I don’t think that families will be truly at peace until we find them.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Trick says. “We’ll make that our top priority unless you want it to be something else?”

I appreciate that he’s not asked me outright, as even the thought of what else we’ve got to look into makes my stomach churn and the food taste not as good as it did a minute ago.

“No, I want to find the kids first,” I reply.

“Got it, Sweetheart.” He replies, sympathy shining in his eyes.

I'm not sure I want to see it right now, though, so I focus on my food.

"Alaric just messaged," Atlas interrupts, a grateful distraction from our previous conversation. "He said to turn on the TV. They wanted to get ahead of the media, so gave them a tip." He frowns.

We all get up, leaving the breakfast stuff for a minute, and Cash turns on the massive TV in the front room.

"Whoa," I mutter as the news channel comes on.

Showing on the screen is a shaky video of Chris being escorted from his enormous home in handcuffs and surrounded by armed police. He looks calm and collected, but there's a manic gleam in his eyes that makes a shiver travel down my spine. I really hope that the justice system does its job and doesn't let him out on some kind of made-up technicality. The headline reads, Chris Tilling, billionaire entrepreneur, arrested on several counts of murder.

You can tell that the headline shook the news anchors themselves, as they seem somewhat dubious, their voice not quite so confident as they usually are. I can understand where they're coming from. Chris is well known for his charity work, donating sizeable sums of money to causes and even heads his own charity, although I can't remember what it's in aid of. He's always smiling and supposedly kind, so the fact that he's been arrested and for murder, too, will come as an enormous shock to many people. I have no doubt that there will be people rallying for his innocence, absolutely convinced that he couldn't have possibly done the things that they have accused him of.

"Isn't it crazy that we're the ones that helped make that happen?" Peter mutters as we watch Chris being loaded into the back of a van.

The cops obviously decided that it was too risky to put him in a car. When they drive off, the camera follows them down the road; there are two cars in front and two behind the van. They really are taking no chances. Alaric said that they'd been trying to get something to stick to him for a while.

“So, what do we do now?” Cash asks.

“We go back to normal, or as normal as it gets for us. There are still a few more things for us to sort, like finding where the murdered four are buried, and I’m sure Alaric will have some more jobs for us soon. Although I think he intends to let us have a rest for a while.” Atlas answers him.

“Don’t forget, it’s break soon, and we’ve got the ball at my house.” Peter reminds us, “We break up on a Friday, and the ball is on the following Saturday. If you want to, you can all come home with me on Friday and stay for as long as you want. There’s plenty of space, and I know that neither of my dads will mind.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll just clear it with Alaric. We’re still supposed to be lying low because of Ever’s situation, but since it’s apparently Blake that’s after her, and he knows she’s here, I’m not sure what the point is anymore.” Atlas replies, sending out a text.

“I can’t wait to meet your other dad. He sounds awesome from what you’ve told us about him.” I tell Peter.

“Yeah, he’s looking forward to meeting you guys too. Apparently, dad has not stopped going on about you all since parents’ day. It seems you made an impression on him.” He grins sheepishly as he admits it.

“I think he’s awesome. I fully expect to have a dad dance-off with him at the ball.” I grin.

“I want in on that!” Jensen chuckles.

“Of course you do.” Rage grins. “Why do I get the feeling that you’re either going to win or cause every single guest to fall over at the same time?”

“Honestly, man, it could go either way.” Jensen shrugs, a grin on his face that makes Rage chuckle.

“We break up next Friday, right?” Riot asks.

He clearly pays better attention to school stuff than I do because I had no idea when the break was, just that it was soon.

“Yeah.” Trick confirms, and Riot nods.

“That doesn’t give us a lot of time to shop for outfits. Peter, do you want to go tomorrow?” I ask him.

His grin grows. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Well, I really need to go and exercise my horses. Do you guys want to come with me still?” Rage asks Peter and me.

“Definitely,” I reply immediately.

“Sure, I could use some decompression time after the last few days. I’ll just go home and get changed, and then I’ll meet you at the stables.” Peter replies, standing up and stretching.

“Sounds good. We’ll see you there.” Rage replies.

“I’ll just go and change.” I tell him, “Give me ten minutes.”

“Alright, Puddin’, I’ll call ahead and get the stable hands to get the horses ready so that we can get out on the trails quicker.”

“Awesome,” I reply, jumping up and making my way up the stairs.

I end up wearing the same thing that I did last time since it worked well enough. I’m done within ten minutes and pull on my boots as I wait for Rage by the front door.

“Have fun, Sunshine.” Riot grins, wrapping his arms around me.

I sink into his hug. I feel like out of all of them, I’ve seen him the least recently, and I make a note to change that. He leans down and kisses me goodbye as Rage comes to the front door, opening it and going out to his car.

“Sleep in my room tonight?” I ask Riot.

“I’d love to, Sunshine.” He smiles softly before his smile turns into a wicked grin. “Don’t fall off.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” I joke.

“Anytime, Sunshine, love you.” He yells as I’m walking out the door.

“Love you too.” I instantly reply.

He grins and waves as I get into Rage's car.

"Ready to go?"

"Yep, I can't wait. I've missed Tank." I reply and then add quietly. "It will be nice to quiet my mind for a bit too and focus entirely on something else."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." He replies.

I've noticed that he's been a bit quiet today, and although it's not awkward between us, there is still an underlying tension surrounding us. I would bet money that it's because I kissed him. I don't regret it in the slightest, though; in fact, I want to do it again. I'm not going to push the issue, if he's not ready yet, then obviously that's fine. I think kissing him has made my feelings for him perfectly clear. So as far as I'm concerned, the next move is his.

When we get to the stables, Peter's already waiting outside and grins when he sees us. I'm so glad that he decided that he wanted to be all in and that it wasn't too much for him. It still hurts that Rylie didn't even want to stay in contact with me. I mean, I understand it, but that doesn't mean that it hurts any less.

We both hop out of the car, and all three of us make our way into the stables.

"All the horses are ready, but I didn't know which one you wanted me to ride, so I thought I'd wait for you. Also, they refused to get Tank ready since he's so dangerous," he adds, rolling his eyes, "So I did it. He didn't seem to have any problem with it. I know you were worried about him having potential triggers. I think the only thing you need to worry about is riding crops. His old owner used to enjoy using them and was far too forceful with it."

"Got it, thanks, Peter."

"No problem."

"Can you ride Chase, and I'll ride Demon? He's a handful." Rage grins.

“I remember your stable hands saying that now.” Peter chuckles as we approach the horses.

“Hey baby,” I greet Tank, pulling a sugar cube out of pocket and feeding it to him. I give him a pat, rubbing his soft nose as he nudges my pocket for more. “Nope, sorry, buddy, but one is all you get. Too much is bad for you. You want to go on the trails?”

I’m taking his snort as a yes. Seeing that the guys are already on their horses and holy fuck, does Rage look damn hot on a horse, like wow. I stand and stare at him, I can’t fucking help it. It’s honestly made my brain go to mush.

“Are you okay, Puddin’?” Rage asks, looking confused.

“I think she likes seeing you on a horse,” Peter smirks.

I flip him the finger before turning to face Tank and jumping on. Damn, he’s tall.

“He’s right. I never knew that I’d find a man on a horse so fucking hot.” I say as soon as I’m seated, and we start moving the horses forward. “Actually, that’s not strictly true; I’ve always loved cowboys.” I grin.

“Me too, Sugar.” Peter hums in agreement, and I burst out laughing.

Rage just shakes his head with a lopsided smirk on his face as he moves his horse in front of ours to lead the way and because Demon is dancing beneath him, clearly wanting to run. As soon as we get to the head of trails, Rage turns to face us.

“We have to cross this pasture before we get to the trails that go through the woods. Are you ready to let them run?” He grins. I’m so excited that I just nod my head enthusiastically, making his grin widen.

“Let’s do it.” Peter agrees.

Rage needs no more agreement from us and loosens his grip on the reins; this must be a cue for Demon because he immediately starts speeding up across the pasture, and as soon

as he does, Tank and Chase follow with very little encouragement from Peter and me.

Just like that, all thoughts fly out of my head as I just enjoy the wind rushing past me as Tank speeds past Chase. He's damn fast, and I quickly catch up to Rage and Demon. I know I must be smiling like a damn crazy person, but I can't help it. I feel free and entirely at ease. I can literally feel the worries flying off of me with the wind.

It's addicting.

When we pull up to a stop at the trail to the woods, we're all grinning. I think we all needed this, and I'm looking forward to carrying on.

"He's pretty damn fast." Peter praises.

"He really is. I'm surprised that he kept up with Demon." Rage adds as we urge our horses forward and into the woods.

The rest of the ride is fantastic, and I think I'm going to struggle not to come here every day. I'm disappointed when the stables come back into view, but I feel a hell of a lot better. Lighter almost, which is weird because I didn't think I was that stressed, well, at least not as stressed as usual.

"That was great. It's nice to have some company on the rides." Peter grins as we get to the stables and dismount.

The stable hands immediately come to take the horses off us, and I frown.

"Don't worry, Puddin', as soon as you're in the lessons, you can learn how to do everything he needs and do it yourself then."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"How're you feeling after that? We rode pretty hard." Peter asks me.

"Not too bad, actually, not as bad as last time." I grin.

"Excuse me?" A deep voice says from behind us, and we all turn around to see the equine instructor striding towards us.

We all tense slightly, unsure what he wants. We still don't even know if he's a friend or foe.

"Could I please see you all in my office?" He asks, his eyes darting around nervously as he wrings his hands together.

I share a look with the guys.

"Sure." Rage replies easily, and we all follow the instructor through the stables and to a back room far away from the hustle and bustle of the central part of the stables.

Rage, to my surprise, starts signing. I didn't think he knew how to sign; maybe one of the guy's has been teaching him. "Are you armed?"

I nod, and seeing Peter's confused look, I tap my hip, and a look of understanding crosses his face as he taps his own hip, confirming that he's armed as well.

Note to self: we need to teach him sign language, Rafe may be talking now, but we use it quite a lot in situations where we need to be subtle and can't speak out loud.

"Can you shut the door, please?" Mr. Remy asks, still seeming unsure.

Rage does as he asks.

"So?" I prompt when he just watches us slightly cautiously.

"Right. I saw that Chris got arrested on the news. I guess you realise I was the one that led you to the meeting room?"

"We thought you might've been involved somehow." Rage replies vaguely, "Were you a member?"

"No, I wasn't, but my roommate and best friend was. Around the same time those five kids went missing, he started acting really weird. He was quiet, kept snapping at me and started drinking a lot." He frowns as he remembers, "One night, he got spectacularly drunk and ended up telling me about Phoenix, things that I know that he shouldn't have told me. I've been too scared to say anything, but something happened recently that made me think that it was about time I stopped being such a coward and told someone what he told me. Like all the teachers here, I know Atlas and Rage's

reputation, and I know that most of the local cops and probably some feds are on Phoenix's take, so I couldn't go to them. So I decided I would lead you guys to it. If anyone could figure it out, I thought you guys could."

We all share a look, "What if we hadn't figured it out?" Rage asks.

"Then I would've tried to find someone who wasn't involved with Phoenix to help. The problem was that I had no idea where to start. I figured I'd give it a shot with you guys. Especially since Atlas's dad was in Phoenix, I thought he might've given him some extra information, or you guys could ask him."

Rage's eyes widen slightly. He clearly didn't know that Atlas's dad was a member of Phoenix. I wonder if he was here at the same time as my dad was. Maybe that's how my dad came to work for him. I think he's a couple of years older than my dad, though, so maybe not. If Atlas knew that his dad was a part of Phoenix, he would've told us, so he can't know either.

"The only thing I haven't been able to work out is that just before he passed out that night, from drinking too much, he got stuck in a loop. He was sobbing. I'd never seen him shed a single tear before, but he was really beside himself, tears streaming down his face, and he kept repeating, they're under the angel, the angels guarding them. Over and over again, he said it until he finally passed out. I tried to ask him about it after that, but he'd just clam up, get really nervous and tell me to leave it. That's all I know."

At the last piece of information, my eyebrows hit my hairline before I school my features back into a blank expression, so I don't give anything away.

"Thanks. You've been really helpful with this whole thing. We would've never got to the point where Chris could be arrested without your help in the beginning." Rage tells him earnestly.

Mr. Remy looks incredibly relieved that he helped, and it's over. It must've been an incredible weight to carry around all

these years. He sits down heavily in his desk chair as if he has finally been released from the stress.

“Thanks again, let’s go.” Rage says.

We all turn to the door, but before we go through. I have to ask him one final thing, so I turn back to face him.

“What happened to your friend?”

He stiffens and studies all three of us, as if deciding whether or not to tell us something. “He went into hiding to escape Chris and Marvin. With Marvin still out there, I hope you understand why I won’t tell you where he is.”

“Marvin is dead,” I reply. “I saw his dead body myself. There isn’t any coming back from the bullet in his head. I understand why you don’t want to say, though.”

“He’s dead?” He stutters, his eyes wide. “So, my friend can come out of hiding?”

“I would remain cautious for now if I were you. Chris still has to go to trial.” Rage warns him, “But yes, Marvin is dead.”

Rage is the one that shot him, but for obvious reasons, he can’t tell Mr. Remy that. He may know of Rage and Atlas’s reputation, but I highly doubt that he realises exactly how dangerous they are.

“Wow.” He mutters, his eyes becoming unfocused as his mind mulls over the new information.

We leave him to it and walk out of the office, staying silent until we get in the car. We sit in the car for a minute, still silent.

“Do you think that’s a hint as to where they’re buried, under the angel?” I ask.

“Definitely.” Rage replies, clutching the steering wheel and staring off into the distance as he mulls over the information we’ve just gotten.

“Fucking hell,” Peter says excitedly from the back seat, moving forward and sticking his head through the gap in the

front seats.

“What?” I ask and then, before he can answer, add, “Hang on, what are you doing in our car? Didn’t you drive your own?”

“Oh, shit yeah, whoops.” He chuckles.

I burst out laughing.

“What did you just realise?” Rage asks, getting us back on track.

“Oh right, well, when we were studying the history of the school a while ago, and I think I remember the teacher saying something about a statue garden that used to be on the grounds when the school was first built. So we could check the library and see if there are any old maps of the school.”

“That’s a good palace to start. We don’t really have anything else to go on.” Rage replies.

“I’ll text Trick and let him know what’s going on, and then we can go and check it out now. Shall I add what Mr. Remy said about Atlas’s dad?” I ask.

“Yeah, I would. Tell him everything that he said; that way, they’re all caught up by the time we get back from the library. There’s no point in us all going.”

“Good point,” I say, texting Trick and trying to make sure that I get everything that Mr. Remy told us in it.

“Peter, are you going to get your own car, or do you want to come back for it later?” Rage asks.

“I better take it now; I’ll forget about it completely otherwise.” He admits, making us both grin as he hops out of the car and goes to find his one.

Rage starts the car, and we make the short drive to the front of the school so that we can go to the library. Trick messages me back, pretty much just telling us to be careful, and he’ll make sure that everyone is up to date on what’s happening. He also says that Atlas had no idea that his dad was in Phoenix and is trying to get a hold of him but still hasn’t been able to

get through since Jynx told him that Liam wasn't wearing his ring.

"Atlas can't get hold of Liam still," I tell Rage as we get out of the car, Peter walking up to meet us.

"I'm not surprised. If tensions are as high between him and Blake as Jynx said they were, he'll be focusing entirely on that and won't want to deal with Atlas, too."

"That's shitty." I point out as we walk through the doors to the school and down the wide, ornate hallway to find the library.

"It's Liam, Puddin'. He's not exactly known for being the father of the year."

"Fair point." I agree.

Conversation stops as we enter the library, and Peter takes the lead, walking us through the shelves until we get to a shelf clearly marked as the history of the school. He runs his finger along the spines, reading them as he goes and pulls out a large, leather-bound book.

"It should be in here. I wasn't exactly interested in the history of the school, and I stopped listening." He shrugs.

We follow him over to a table out of the way of the other students that are actually in here studying on a Saturday afternoon, and he opens the book up. Looking through the contents, he quickly finds what he wants and flips through the pages to find it. I look curiously at the different maps of the school building and the grounds. It's interesting to see what it was like and how some things haven't changed at all.

"There," Peter says, excitement bleeding into his tone as he points at the map.

There, in the middle of the woods, is a statue garden, I'm not even sure what a statue garden is apart from the obvious, and I have no idea why someone would want one. It also seems to be right in the middle of nowhere, even on this map. I frown as something occurs to me.

“Now I’m shit at directions, but isn’t the bunker somewhere over here?” I ask.

“I think you may be right. Hang on, I’ll take a photo of it, and then we can put it on the TV when we get home. We’ll be able to see it better then.” Peter suggests, taking out his phone.

“Good idea,” I reply.

“If it is, though, the bunker would be the closest thing to the gardens for miles, and even then, it has to be a couple of miles away from the garden.” Rage mutters, studying the map. “They would’ve had to move the bodies a long way.”

“Maybe that’s why Marvin and Chris decided that the other Phoenix members had to die. Maybe they forced them all to help them move the bodies.” I suggest, grimacing at them. Peter and Rage nod in agreement.

We put the book back where we found it and quickly make our way back to the cars, so we can get home and get a better look at this map.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Once in the car, my mind starts to churn with thoughts again. Although it doesn't surprise me that Marvin was involved with all of this. He was undoubtedly fucked up enough; I absolutely hate that he was. Now I know that my mom is alive and that she obviously knew what he was like from almost the get-go; it makes it even harder to process. I know that Isabelle said that she was a good person and just got caught up in something, and when she realised how fucked up he was, it was too late for her to escape; I get that, but it still doesn't change the fact that she knew how fucked up he was and still left eight-year-old me with him.

I'm trying really hard to remember that I don't know the whole story, but it's damn difficult. I can almost guarantee that my life would have been entirely different and safer if I had been with my mother and not my father.

"We're here. Are you okay?" Rage asks, concern flashing through his eyes.

"Erm yeah, sorry, I was just thinking about everything. Now that Chris is dealt with, it's left room for everything else to start to invade my mind, if that makes sense?"

"Yeah, I get that Puddin'. I'm not going to tell you that it will be alright in the end because I can't guarantee that, but I will promise you that we will get answers. They may not be the ones that you want, but you will know what's really going on and what happened in the past." He promises me.

I love that he never promises me anything he's not entirely sure he can keep. He doesn't make empty promises and doesn't say things just to keep me happy. He always tells me the truth, even if it's slightly harsher than some of the other guys would like.

"Thank you, Rage. For never sugar-coating the truth, I really fucking appreciate it." I tell him sincerely. The urge to

kiss him again overtakes me, and I get out of the car to stop myself.

It's his turn to make a move next.

"Hey." Peter greets as he gets out of his car, having just pulled into the drive behind us.

I smile in reply, "Hey." I greet him and then yell, "Guys, we're home!"

"Hey, Angel. Did you have a nice ride?"

"It was amazing. We're definitely going to have to do it more often. Can you get everyone to meet us in the sitting room?"

"We're right here," Trick says, grinning as he greets me with a kiss.

By the time they've all kissed me, I feel slightly light-headed, and Peter bursts out laughing at the look on my face.

I point at him, raising my eyebrow. "Hey! You try having seven hot as sin kiss you one after the other and see if you don't feel a little light-headed." I grin, making my way into the sitting room with the others.

"God, I wish." He winks before admitting, "I know I wouldn't do any better than you, though."

"Thank you," I say primly.

I look around the room, trying to find somewhere to sit, and notice Atlas sitting there with a dark look on his face. Trick must've told him that his dad was a part of Phoenix. I make my way over to him and sit on his lap, peppering kisses all over his face until I finally get a smile out of him.

"That's better." I grin, kissing his lips softly. "I guess you didn't get a hold of your dad?"

"No," he growls, a frown furrowing his brow. "He's avoiding my calls."

"Have you tried ringing Alaric? He's his brother, right? So surely he should know more?"

“Fuck, I hadn’t even thought of that.” He replies, pulling out his phone and dialling, putting it on speaker.

“Hey, are you okay?” Alaric asks as soon as he picks up, a hint of concern threading through his words.

“Yeah, we’re all fine. Did you know Liam was a part of Phoenix?”

There’s a pause on the other end of the phone, “No, I didn’t. I know that he went to Blackbreak, and he really wanted you to attend too, but I had no idea that he was in Phoenix, but then I was adopted a couple of years after he left, and we weren’t exactly close.” He points.

“Okay, I thought so, but I just wanted to ask and make sure. I can’t get hold of Liam.”

“Neither can I. He’s gone radio silent. Which is concerning because by now, he would’ve gotten in contact with me to criticise me for taking you away from him or to boast about something he’s gotten away with.” He says, and I can hear the eye-roll in his voice.

“He still does that?”

“Oh yeah, every time he gets one over on us. It’s like he thinks it’s all a game.”

“Why is it concerning that he hasn’t contacted you? I would’ve thought that you would be glad.” Trick asks.

“Because it either means that he’s planning something big which is worrying in itself, or Blake has done something that means all of his attention has to be on him. From the intel you’ve gotten from Jynx and her team, I’d be willing to bet that it’s the second one.” Alaric explains.

“Right, that makes sense.” Trick replies.

“While I’ve got you on the phone, we might have a location for the murdered four for you later.”

“Really? How?”

“The person who helped us find the room in the first place saw that Chris had been arrested and approached us. He

couldn't tell us much but said that his roommate got really drunk one night and started telling him things he shouldn't about Phoenix. He then kept mumbling they're under the angel; the angel is guarding them." Rage explains.

"We're working on where exactly that could be now. As soon as we've checked it out, we'll let you know where it is. Don't worry; we won't touch anything or do any digging. That jobs all for you." I tell him.

"Ha! Thanks Ever. That's great news. As expected, Chris refuses to talk, so it's doubtful that he'd tell us where they were. But, if you kids do find them, that would take away some of the leverage he thinks he has, and he might slip up."

"Got it. We'll call you as soon as we have anything!" Atlas replies before hanging up.

"So, did you guys manage to find a map?" Trick asks.

"Yeah, hang on. I'll just put it up on the big screen." Peter replies.

Once he has it up, the guys move closer to get a better look.

"So, it looks like there's a statue garden in the middle of nowhere." Trick mutters.

"And the closest thing to it is the bunker. So it stands to reason that they'd take them there, especially since this is an old map and most people wouldn't be aware that the place still exists. On the other hand, Phoenix has been around since the beginning of the school, so they'd know that it still exists." Cash says, studying the map closely and confirming our theory that it's the closest thing.

"That's true. I still think that we should go and check it out." I mutter.

"Yeah, me too. For all we know, they could've had it torn down, and it's just a coincidence." Riot adds, agreeing with me.

"Alright, I think that's the best course of action. We don't want to send Alaric and the forensic team on a wild goose

chase.” Trick replies, “Are you guys ready? We’ll go now before we lose light. That way, we can tell Alaric sooner.”

“Yeah, I’m ready,” I reply, standing up.

The others all get up too, moving to put their shoes on.

“We can park at the main school lot and then walk from there,” Rafe suggests.

“Oh, walking.” Jensen groans as we walk out of the door.

“You could always stay here.” I point out to him.

He pouts, “But then I’d miss all the fun!”

“Well, quit complaining then.” I grin.

“Fine, spoilsport.” He grins, pulling me into his side and kissing the top of my head before releasing me so we can get in the car.

It doesn’t take long for us to get to the lot, and as we start the walk to the bunker, Cash studying the map, we also keep an eye on the few students that are hanging around the school on a Saturday. Just in case one of them decides to get curious and follow us.

“How far away is the bunker?” Rafe asks.

“About a mile or so from here, and then it’s another two to the statue garden if it’s still there.”

“I should have worn different shoes,” Jensen mutters, looking down at his white hi-tops that are now more of a brown colour.

“Out of all your shoes, why pick the white ones?” Luc mutters, sounding amused.

“I got excited! I just picked up the first pair I saw.”

“We’re coming up to the bunker now.” Cash interrupts them before they can devolve into a full-blown argument.

“I kind of want to check it out again.” I say, “Just to see if there’s anything we missed the first time. I know the case is over, but Phoenix as a society still intrigues me.”

“I have to admit me too.” Luc agrees, Rafe and Riot nodding as well.

“Sure, we’ve got enough time to check it out quickly,” Atlas replies, just as we come up to the bushes that hide the entrance to the slope that leads to the bunker.

We push through the shrubs, and I follow the rest of the guys down the slope. When we get to the end, they all stop and don’t go any further.

“Why have we stopped?” I ask since I can’t see fuck all with the tall fuckers blocking the view.

“The door has been bricked up, Sunshine, look.” Riot explains, grabbing my hand and pulling me through the guys so I can see.

“That’s weird,” I reply.

“Yeah, it is. Come on, let’s get to the statue garden.” Rage says with a frown.

We start off again.

“It doesn’t make any sense. Why would someone brick off the entrance? And is the entrance in the classroom blocked up too?” I ask.

“I have no idea. There could be something in there that we didn’t find the first time, or someone is trying to hide the bloody room. I guess we won’t know.” Riot guesses.

“I suppose that makes sense,” I reply, ducking under a low branch and putting my foot down into a puddle at the same time. Fortunately, I’m wearing boots.

“Okay, I have waited for as long as I can,” Jensen starts as he lags behind the rest of us. “How much further?”

“You have to give him some credit. He lasted longer than he normally does.” Rage chuckles.

“That’s true. It should be just around this corner.” Cash answers Jensen.

“If it still exists,” Luc mutters.

I know this is a serious situation, but it's kind of exciting following a map to something that may or may not exist and that no one else has seen for years. I just wish that the treasure at the end of the map wasn't five murdered kids, well four, we know Amelia is still alive. The fact that we're looking for bodies and not treasure sours everything.

"Whoa," Cash exclaims, coming to a sudden stop.

We all stop and stare at the massive wrought iron gates, decorated with a coat of arms, vines, and swords. It's an interesting design for a garden. The fence extends around the whole of the garden, or what I can see of it anyway. Weeds are growing around the fence, but the gate is clear of them, which makes me believe that it's been used recently, which is worrying because it's been at least twenty years since Chris and Marv would've buried the kids here.

"The gate looks like it's been used recently. Are you all armed?" Atlas asks, seeing the same thing that I did.

"Yep," I reply.

"Always." Rafe grins.

The others all answer that they are too.

Atlas and Rage move towards the gate, and they both pull it open. It creaks ominously, and now the light is starting to fade slightly, and the temperature is dropping. It's creating a pretty spooky atmosphere.

Although we could just about see the statues through the pattern on the gate, the uninterrupted view is disconcerting, to say the least.

"I'm not going in there," Jensen says, crossing his arms over his chest and raising his eyebrows defiantly.

"What?" Trick asks, frowning as we all pause and turn back to face Jensen.

"I'm not doing it, it's creepy as hell, and all horror films start with something like this."

"Oh, come on!" Luc grins, "I told you to stop watching those horror movies when they freak you out so much."

“Do we really need to go in there? We know it’s here and not been destroyed, now.” He replies, ignoring Luc.

“Yes, we do. We have to make sure that the angel is in there.” Cash points out to him.

“Do you really want to wait here by yourself?” I ask.

“Yeah, you know it’s always the one that gets left by themselves that end up dead first.” Riot teases.

“Okay, fine. You make a good point. Ever hold my hand?” He says, holding his hand out to me. I chuckle and thread my fingers through his.

“Any excuse, hey dude.” Atlas chuckles, and Jensen flips him the finger.

With that settled, we all go through the enormous gates. I swear to god if those gates suddenly slam shut behind us, I’m going to be gone before someone can say ghost, and I bet that Jensen won’t be too far behind me.

I’m sort of glad he’s holding my hand right now.

Like the fencing surrounding the garden, the flower beds and tiny hedges that are supposed to create a border and go between each statue is overgrown, the vines and plants starting to encroach on the pathway. There are multiple pathways leading off the main one, and I get the feeling that this place is a lot bigger than it looks from the outside. I’m still at a loss as to why someone would want to build this place all the way out here in the first place.

All the statues are odd. I would’ve expected things like cherubs, half-naked women, Adonis like men, and although there are a couple of those dotted around, they’re outnumbered by mythical statues. So far, we’ve walked past medusa with her head of snakes, a dragon being speared by a warrior. There are men dressed in mythical armour with pointed ears, mermaids perched on rocks with bones scattered around them.

Don’t get me wrong; they’re absolutely fascinating. They just aren’t something that I would expect the school to have on its grounds. I’m starting to think that the original owner of the school had a fascination with the supernatural.

“Was that a vampire?” Rafe asks incredulously.

“Yep. These statues are not at all what I expected.” Peter confirms, with his eyes slightly wide as he glances around at all the crumbling statues.

The fact that they are old enough that they’ve started to crumble just adds to their creepy and otherworldly nature. If they don’t feature in my dreams at some point, then I will be incredibly surprised.

“I tell you what, if the school wanted to get the kids interested in the history of the place, they should really bring them here. I can guarantee they’d be more willing to listen then. This place is fascinating. You know if you take away the creepiness of it.” Peter adds, an interested lilt to his voice.

“Are we sure that this is a statue garden and not some sort of burial ground? Like for the teachers and students that couldn’t be buried anywhere else?” Riot asks curiously.

“It’s got the same kind of feel as a graveyard, but I guess that could be because we know that the four murdered kids are here. I doubt anyone else is officially buried here. The flower beds sort of contradict with that.” Peter replies to him.

“Yeah, that makes sense.” Riot agrees, casting a wary look around the garden.

“Hey, look up there.” Cash calls out, pointing just ahead of us.

Over the heads of the rest of the statues towers a fierce-looking angel. We were too far away to see him before, but as we round the corner and get a better view of him, I pause and look up in awe.

He doesn’t look peaceful like most depictions of angels do. On the contrary, he looks pained, his wings spread behind him, his giant arms grasping a truly huge sword above his head as if he’s about to end someone’s life. I’ve never really gotten it when people say that art can invoke emotions in you, but I can’t deny that I get it now. How the sculptor managed to capture the pain in his eyes is truly unique. I finally drag my attention away to look at the area around him. He’s surrounded

by a large area of grass—a small hedge border surrounding the large expanse.

I carefully step over the hedge and make my way closer to the statue, curiosity pulling me forward, the others already exploring it. I walk around the angel, staring up at him. The detail is crazy. He looks like he could spring to life at any second.

“Angel, look.” Jensen says urgently, pulling my attention away from the angel as he adds, “Guys! Over here!”

I look to where he’s pointing and try to swallow down the bile that immediately tries to rise at the sight before me.

“What’s up?” Rage says, jogging up beside us and then freezing as his eyes fall on the ground.

“What the fuck?” Atlas curses.

“Oh my god, are those freshly dug graves?” Peter exclaims, a slight squeak in his voice.

Chapter Thirty

“Yeah, it looks like it.” Trick answers.

There’s a section of earth that looks freshly dug right behind the angel. The soil is not covered with any new plants, like something or, more accurately, someone has recently been buried there, which is highly disturbing.

“Does that mean that Chris is still using this place to bury his victims, or is someone else now killing people and burying them here?” Riot asks.

“When Alaric and his team get here, they’ll examine all the bodies and determine who they are and when they were killed,” Atlas replies.

“How would Chris even get on the grounds now?”

“That’s easy enough to answer. The school does a lot of events for the school’s biggest donors as well as meetings and things for the members of the board.” Peter answers Cash.

“Let me guess; he’s a part of both?” Luc asks.

“Yep.”

“That would explain how he could get on the grounds without question.” Trick mutters.

I walk back around the statue, Jensen letting go of my hand to talk to the guys. Once I get back around the front, I step closer. Something about the angel’s sword has been bugging me since I first saw it. Sending silent apologies to the spirits in case I’m accidentally standing on anyone, I step up on the statue’s base so I can get a closer look at the sword.

“Guys,” I call out.

“What’s up?” Trick asks as they come back around to the front of the statue.

“There are marks on the sword that look man made. I thought at first that it was general wear, but they look too

deliberately made, and the last mark looks like it's just been done." I explain, gently running my finger through the grooves.

"Do you think it's like a tally of how many people they buried here?" Rage asks, thoughtfully.

"That would be my best guess," Atlas replies.

"If it is, then there are a lot more people buried here than the four murdered students and the mystery murder victim," I say hesitantly.

"How many marks are there, Baby?" Rafe asks.

"Erm, one, two, three, four, five..." I start counting out loud and then count the rest in my head. "There's twelve."

Bile starts to rise once again. If we're right, there are twelve people buried here. That's a lot more than we thought we were going to find. I make my way back down and carefully over to the guys.

"Fucking hell." Jensen curses, looking horrified.

I think the same horror is etched on all of our faces, we got more than we bargained for, but at least it means that more people can get closure and hopefully find a little bit of peace.

"Come on, let's get out of here and get back home. We need to contact Alaric and tell him what we've found." Trick suggests moving back to the path.

"And we're starting to lose light. I don't fancy wandering these woods all night trying to find our way out." Rafe mutters.

"I'll just grab a picture of the marks on the sword and the newly dug grave so we can send them across to Alaric," Peter says, climbing up on the ledge and taking a picture.

"Good call, man." Riot tells him.

Once that's done, we all start to leave the garden. I can't help but look back one last time at the angel with the pain in his eyes.

Thankfully, we don't forget the way back to the main school parking lot and now that we know where we're going, getting back seems to take a lot less time than getting to the garden did. We all load up into the cars, darkness falling entirely now. As soon as we get through the front door, we all make our way into the kitchen to grab drinks.

"Peter, can you send me the photos you took, and I'll forward them to Alaric now before I call him?"

"Yeah, of course, one second."

"Thanks, man." He replies as his phone pings, and he then dials Alaric's number, putting it on speakerphone.

"Hey, did you find it?" Alaric asks as soon as he picks up the phone.

"Yeah, we did. I've sent you the map and a couple of other things. There's a fresh grave there and also something that looks like manmade marks carved on the angels' sword. We think they might mark how many people someone buried there. Some of the marks look older than the others."

"Well fuck, a fresh one? So that means he's killed someone else recently, and we haven't gotten wind of it yet." Alaric replies.

"There's something else," Atlas says.

"Okay?"

"If the marks do correspond to the number of bodies there, then there are twelve, not just the four murdered kids and the new fresh grave."

"Fucking hell. Alright, good job, guys. I'll get this information to my boss immediately and then let you know what's happening. We'll probably be up on Monday. The boss will want the team to finish going over the information from the videos that we have to see if they can find anything from them and match up as many names as possible with missing person reports or people we know who have been murdered. That should make identifying the bodies in the ground a lot easier."

“Okay, well, keep us updated,” Atlas replies.

“One more thing, I’ll be there with the team. It’s probably best if we keep our distance from each other. We’re still keeping your identities quiet from my boss for the time being. Obviously, he is aware that Atlas is my nephew, so interaction between the two of us is fine.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. The rest of us will just keep our distance from the whole thing.” Trick replies.

“Good. Speak soon.”

“Bye,” Atlas replies, hanging up.

Atlas

“I’m going to make some dinner.” Ever says standing.

“Why don’t we order in? We’ve had a pretty full-on day, and I really fancy some chicken fried rice.” Jensen suggests.

“Sure, I could go for some Chinese.” Ever replies.

“I’ll call,” I offer, needing to focus on something else to stop my mind from churning with thoughts. I can’t believe that my dad was a member of Phoenix, although it does sort of explain why he wanted me to attend here so badly. He’s all about legacies, and since Blake attended here before me, it stands to reason that he’d want me to carry on the tradition.

I’m also angry as hell that he won’t answer any of my phone calls. I usually don’t have a problem with him answering my calls. In fact, I’m normally the one that’s avoiding answering him.

“Thanks, that’d be great.” Ever replies, wrapping her arms around me and putting my head on my chest.

It’s like she sensed that I was starting to spiral, and just like that, one hug from her and everything quiets again. I hold her close and kiss the top of her head. She lets go and smiles up at me, making my heart skip a beat, and then she moves away to sit down on Jensen. I take everyone’s orders and then call the

restaurant to get our food, which only keeps my mind occupied for a few minutes if that.

“Luc,” Jensen says, interrupting the casual conversation with an out of place serious look.

“Yeah, what’s up?” He asks around a spring roll stuffed in his mouth.

“Classy.” I grin, and he flips me the finger.

“When we first found out that your aunt was actually your sister, I did some digging into what I could find of your father’s financials. I could probably find out more with Peter’s help, but what I could find was just like I thought. He’s putting a lot of money into offshore accounts and has regular payments going to a couple of local people that we know are no good. That’s all stuff that we knew about before, but there are a new set of payments, one single payment equalling the same as all the smaller ones, and they weren’t exactly small in the first place.”

“Let me guess; they’re going to someone who’s into less than legal things too?” Luc asks, no surprise in his tone at all. He knows exactly what his dad is like.

“Yeah, a company called D- something,” Jensen says hesitantly. “I have it written down somewhere. I’ll find it. I was supposed to tell you sooner, but we got kind of busy, and I completely forgot about it.”

“That’s alright, man. Thank you for looking into it.”

“We can add it to our list of things that we need to sort out after this case is officially closed.” Trick offers and Luc nods in agreement.

“Isn’t this case already closed?” Riot asks.

“I don’t think we can call it officially closed until we know if they really buried the murdered five under the angel. Then I’ll be happy to say that the case is closed.” Trick explains, before adding, “Don’t forget we need to write up the reports from the break-in before we forget the details.”

“We have to write reports?” Peter asks.

“Oh yeah, proper ones with all the details. I’ll help you with yours if you want.” Cash offers.

“Thanks, man.”

The conversation turns back to lighter topics, and I wonder just how many things we’re going to end up adding to that list. But, unfortunately, it seems to be growing rather than shrinking.

After dinner, everyone splits off to do their own things. Some of the guys are playing on the games console in the front room. Ever’s sat in there with them reading, Rage is in the garage working on one of his cars and has surprisingly let Cash tag along to help, and Trick’s in his room doing whatever, most likely planning or worrying about keeping the rest of us safe.

The only person who’s not doing anything is Jensen.

“Hey, do you want to go and spar?” I ask. I need to distract myself, and the only way I know how to do that effectively is to spar.

When I fight, I’m only focusing on what I’m doing, especially against an opponent like Jensen. There’s no time to think about anything else. When Jensen and I go up against each other, we only hold back enough that we don’t seriously hurt or kill each other. We fight each other harder than we do when we spar against the others, for the simple fact that we need it more than they do.

“Yeah, sure. I could do with a good fight.” He replies, “Lead the way. I haven’t actually been to the gym yet. I’m not entirely sure that it exists.”

“Haha, hilarious,” I reply sarcastically as I lead him down Rage’s hall and right to the end, pushing open the door and leading him down a set of wide steps and into the large gym.

“Whoa, okay, I take it back. This place is awesome.”

“Thanks, I had it redone when I moved in here and got the boxing ring put in. Wrap your hands.” I say, getting antsy to

start.

He turns to me with a raised eyebrow, no doubt sensing something in my tone. “Alright, man, give me two seconds, and I’ll be ready.”

I quickly wrap my own hands and start stretching as I force my mind to think about something other than my father and brother. The statue garden comes to mind. Even I have to admit, to myself at least, that it was creepy as hell, all of those crumbling statues of mythical creatures. It was made more creepy because it exists in the first place. The first principal and founder of the school must’ve had it built. I just don’t understand the motivations behind it. Of course, knowing that there were people buried there didn’t help matters either.

“Alright, I’m ready. Let’s go.” Jensen interrupts my thoughts as he hops into the ring.

No more words are needed after that as we go at each other. We’re so evenly matched that we each take as many hits as we land. When we finally stop, we’re both breathing heavily, sweat dripping down us. We end up lying on the floor of the ring, just trying to catch our breath. After a while, Jensen gets up and wanders off before coming back to sit next to me and tossing me a water bottle.

I drink greedily, insanely thirsty. “How long were we going for? My mouth feels like a freaking desert.”

“Erm, I’m not sure. Hang on.” He butt shuffles to the edge of the ring, where he put his phone before we started sparring. “Fuck me; it’s gone one.”

“In the morning?” I ask, shocked.

“No, we somehow travelled back in time, yes, one in the morning.” He replies sarcastically.

“Alright, you sarcastic fuck.” I retort, grinning. “That means we’ve been going for a good few hours.”

“Yeah.” He side-eyes me as he sips his water, “So, what’s wrong?”

“What?”

“You don’t ever go that hard unless you’re trying to outrun your thoughts. So, what’s up?”

I sigh heavily. I should’ve known that he’d realise what was going on. “Everything with my dad is getting to me and confusing the hell out of me. Jynx said he’s been trying to legitimise or at least get rid of the worst of the business and dealings, but that makes little sense. He’s never taken an interest in that before. He’s also not wearing his ring, which is weird as fuck. And what is the deal with Ever? Why does he give a shit about her? I hate the fact that Ever’s been around him and regularly from what she’s told us. I also hate that Blake seems hell-bent on trying to kill her. Where he’s concerned, I am fairly sure that he’s just going after her because she means something to me.” I sigh, rubbing my hand through my hair in frustration. “I just needed to work it out and calm the thoughts for a bit. Besides, you were going just as hard as me.”

He grins, leaning back on his hands and staring up at the ceiling. “Yeah, I think I needed it more than I realised.” He admits before continuing with a smirk, “By the way, how the fuck have I ended up becoming the agony aunt of the group?”

I chuckle, “I don’t know, man, but you’re good at it.”

“Not really. I didn’t give you any advice; I just listened.”

“Sometimes that’s the way to help. Just to listen.” I reply.

“Then thanks, I guess.” He says, getting up, “I’m going to go shower and go to bed. I’m guessing that Peter and Ever are going to want to get an early start tomorrow. I know they plan to go off on their own to get Ever’s dress.”

I interrupt him, “Which I’m only comfortable with because he plans on taking us to some tiny exclusive town that apparently has the best shops.”

“Exactly. Like was saying, I know they’re going to do that, but we’re going to have to go with them anyway because we have to get our own outfits and fucking masks, apparently.” He frowns. “What sort of masks do we even need?”

I get up and follow him out of the gym, turning the lights off as we leave, “Fuck knows, man. Do you think Peter will give us an idea of what we’re looking for? Do we need to match Ever?”

Jensen raises his eyebrow, “I fucking hope so, or I get the feeling that we’re going to look like absolute idiots.”

“It’s funny. I have never given a flying fuck about dances and would’ve outright refused to attend a ball. They don’t bring back the best memories for me. My dad insisted that we attend a few. They were nothing like I imagine Peter’s is going to be.”

“Are you going to be alright, going to it? Do we need to be on the lookout for triggers?”

“I should be okay, but it might be a good idea to give everyone a heads up just in case. I think it’s going to be different enough that I should be okay.”

“Alright, man, just let me know if that changes.” He says, clapping me on the back. “You want a drink?”

“May as well; we’re not going to get a lot of sleep now, anyway.” I chuckle.

“Fair point.” He says, grabbing me a beer out of the fridge and handing it to me.

“Are you okay? You’ve said about being the agony aunt for us, but are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m good, man. That darkness, as Ever calls it, is starting to try to rise more often at the moment.” He admits quietly, taking a long swig of his beer.

“That’s probably because of a mix of things, everything we’ve got going on at the moment and isn’t the anniversary of their death coming up soon?”

“Yeah, it’s going to be the first year that I haven’t visited them on the anniversary.”

“I can see if Alaric can authorise us to go back?”

“No, it’s okay. I don’t want to risk any of you guys or our families by going back. Thank you, though.”

“If you’re sure.” I frown, “Why don’t we spend the day honouring them instead? We can do something you guys all loved doing together or eat their favourite foods or something?” I ask, trying to help, but families aren’t really my forte. Before I met the guys, I only had Rage and Jynx. Even then, I didn’t see them very often, and I only met Rage a couple of years before I met the guys. We never lost contact, despite me moving to the guy’s school.

“Yeah, that sounds great, actually.” He replies, “Thanks, man.”

“No worries. As you said, you’ve been the support for us recently, and we’re here to support you too.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Atlas

“He’s right, whatever you need.” Rage says, coming through the backdoor and making my hand land on my gun. Jensen already has a knife in his hand prepared to throw, and Rage holds his hands up. “Whoa, just me guys.”

“Shit, you’re like a damn ninja. What are you doing up so late?” Jensen asks, handing him a beer.

“Thanks, man.” He says, taking the beer off of him and bringing it to his lips before he answers. “Still not sleeping so great after mom messaged me.”

“Just say the word man, and we’ll deal with it.” Jensen offers.

“I think that maybe I am ready to see if we can find my dad.” Rage replies, shocking the hell out of me. “But I’d like to do it remotely for as long as possible if that makes sense. I already have one parent that hates the sight of me. I don’t think I could handle it if another one didn’t want anything to do with me.”

I share a look with Jensen. That’s the most honest he’s been with himself in a long time, and I’m pretty fucking proud that he’s admitted it out loud.

“Yeah, that’s understandable. We’ll find out as much as we can remotely. It should be fairly easy to work out how your dad feels.” Jensen replies, draining the last of his beer.

“We can get Peter to help too. He’ll be able to find out a lot more than we can, a lot quicker.” I point out.

“Thanks, guys. It can wait until we’ve got confirmation that the murdered kids are in the statue garden, and we’ve looked into where Ever’s mom is. There’s no rush.”

“Alright, man, I’m going to bed; there’s not long until Ever’s going to want us up to go shopping,” I reply, Jensen, nodding in agreement.

“Night, guys.” Rage replies, heading back out of the door and towards the garage.

Ever

I’m up and ready by nine the next morning, more than excited to do something nice and normal for a change. Plus, although I was never one for shopping before, ever since I went shopping with Rylie to get dresses for the winter formal and actually enjoyed the experience, I’m starting to warm to it. If I ever need a lot of stuff, I’ll still do it online for convenience more than anything, though I don’t like shopping that much.

“Morning guys, I’m surprised you’re up,” I say, awake enough this morning that I get my own coffee, which in itself is a testament to how excited I am to go to town.

Especially since Peter said that we were going to a cute small town that is pretty exclusive in its shopping options. Apparently, he won’t shop anywhere else for the ball and has been getting his outfits there for years now. I’d much rather go somewhere small to shop, not only because there’s likely to be fewer people and less noise, but also because I can keep a better eye on our surroundings in a smaller area.

“Yeah, we’re going to tag along. None of us thought to pack a suit when we moved here, so none of us have anything to wear either. Not only that, but we definitely don’t have masks.” Trick explains. The frown on his face when he mentions the masks makes me smile.

“Don’t worry though, Angel; we’ll leave you and Peter to it.” Jensen grins.

“I don’t mind, but I would kind of like to surprise you with what I’m wearing.”

“I can’t wait.” Cash grins, a heat in his eyes that makes my nerve endings tingle.

“Hey, guys!” Peter calls, letting himself in.

Now that he’s been fully accepted into the group and we’ve filled him in on everything, we’ve given him the codes to get into the gate and house. It makes sense since he’s here enough.

“Hey, you ready to go?” I ask, jumping up.

“I was hoping you’d be ready. I love shopping for my outfit for the ball, and I’m so glad that they went with my idea this year and decided to choose a masked ball as the theme. I’ve always wanted to go to a masked ball. It reminds me of those balls with the prince in the fae realms that I’ve read about in books.” He says excitedly and then goes slightly red when he realises what he just admitted to reading.

His eyes tighten slightly as if he’s preparing for the guys to make fun of him. I guess that’s happened to him before. I start to reassure him and mention a couple that I’ve read when Rafe interrupts me.

“Those are some of my favourites. Have you read a Court of Thorn and Roses?” Rafe asks.

“Yes!” Peter exclaims, surprised. “They’re some of my absolute favourites.”

“If you like that, I’ve got a few recommendations of others I think you’ll like. I can show you later if you want?”

“Yeah, that would be great. I’ve hit a bit of a rut, and I’m always looking for new things to read.” Peter replies, fully relaxed, now that he realises that his past experiences aren’t going to repeat themselves now.

“Awesome.” Rafe grins.

“Alright, let’s get going,” Trick says, grabbing his wallet off the table and standing up.

“Er, Peter, what sort of masks are we supposed to wear to this thing?” Rafe asks, looking incredibly confused.

I grin.

“There’s a shop in the town we’re going to that has loads of different kinds. So if you guys get your suits first, not ties and all wear black shirts, I’ll message you when Ever’s chosen her dress and let you know what kind of masks you should get.” Peter says thoughtfully, fully taking control of the situation. Which I’m grateful for because I would’ve had no idea how to answer Rage if he’d asked me that, which is probably why he didn’t ask me.

“Okay, we can do that,” Atlas replies, looking somewhat relieved that Peter’s just given them a shopping list of what to get, and it’s not that long. “Alaric has approved the shopping trip and coming to yours on the last day of school next Friday.”

“Great.” Peter grins.

“He said there wasn’t much point in imposing the rules on us anymore since it’s Blake that’s after us, and he’s now completely confident in our skills and that we can more than adequately take care of ourselves. He wants us to stay together if possible or at least in pairs and to stay armed. As far as he’s concerned, the only people who still need the protection are our families, in case Blake takes an interest in them. He’s fairly certain that Liam will leave them alone but would rather keep them all guarded.”

“That makes sense. I wouldn’t want them to take the protection off our families. That might be what Blake or some other enemy we seem to have picked up is waiting for.” Cash says.

“True, but if they had pulled back, we’d just hire our own for them anyway. So they’d still be safe.” Luc reminds him.

“Well, at least we’ve got more freedom now. Not that I really noticed it before, but then again, we’ve been going jobs.” Jensen says before smiling and adding, “Let’s go shopping. I want to get it over with.”

I get the feeling that he doesn’t like shopping. If I remember correctly, he’s like me and would much rather do his shopping

online than in person.

With all of us caught up on where Alaric stands, we all leave the house and separate into cars; I get into Peter's car since we're going to be splitting up when we get to the town anyway. We pull out first because no one else knows where they're going and start the journey.

It only takes us an hour and a half, but we do go up into the mountains, and the drive is really fucking pretty. When we arrive at the town, it's like something out of a book. It really is small, with only one long main road throughout, but just getting a quick glance at the shop fronts as we drive past to find somewhere to park is enough indication that this place is indeed exclusive. It just looks expensive. There are no signs of any chain stores or anything like that. They all seem to be privately run stores, and I really love that.

The town is so picturesque that it even has winter flower baskets hanging from the old-style street lamps. The people walking the town are immaculately dressed and just give off an air of money. It's pretty clear that this place is like a best kept secret for the rich and famous. We're far enough away from anything else that it would be pretty hard to stumble across.

"Wow, this place is beautiful," I say as we pull into a parking space along the main road.

"Yeah, it's one of my favourite places." He grins.

"We'll meet you guys back at the cars in a few hours." Cash says, having parked next to us.

"Yeah, that sounds good. I'll message you when she's chosen her dress and then tell you what kind of masks to get."

"Thanks, man."

"No problem."

"Call us if you run into any trouble." Trick orders and I nod, "Are you both armed?"

"Yep," Peter replies.

"Of course," I reassure him.

“Alright, have fun, Sweetheart.” Trick grins, giving me a quick kiss before catching up with the other guys.

“I am surprised they let you out of their sights with everything that’s going on at the moment,” Peter mutters as we turn in the opposite direction.

“Yeah, it’s because they know I can take care of myself. They also trust you to have my back.”

“That’s pretty fucking awesome that they trust me that much with you.” He grins, and I thread my arm through his.

“Yep. So, where are we headed first?”

“I thought we’d head to the mask shop first since the guys will be heading there last.” He suggests.

“That’s fine with me. I think it would be pretty cool to choose my dress based on the design of my mask.” I grin.

“Exactly, and that way we can see what they’ve got and tell the guys exactly what masks to buy.” He chuckles.

“Good idea, they’d either end up with entirely wrong ones or in the wrong designs.”

“That’s what I thought.” He nods and pulls open the door to a quaint looking shop. A bell jingles above the door as we enter, and I fall in love with the place for that alone. “After you?”

“Why, thank you, sir.” I joke once I’m inside.

The shop is pretty much entirely dedicated to masks, headdresses, and highly decorative scarves from what I can see so far. They’re in all different styles, ranging from African tribal masks to carnival masks and masks suitable for a ball as well as everything in between. There’s so much to look at and so many beautiful things that I know I could quickly lose hours in here just exploring.

I drag my eyes away from a beautiful peacock coloured headdress complete with feathers and intricate gold beading. It’s stunning, but it looks like it weighs a ton.

“That was my reaction when I came in here for the first time.” Peter chuckles.

“Just wow, everything is so beautiful,” I say in awe, my eyes drifting around the small shop again.

“Why, thank you, dear.” A voice startles me, and my gaze snaps to the previously empty counter.

The woman has pure white hair, flowing down her back with portions braided away from her face and is dressed in a dark navy crushed velvet blazer paired with leather pants, and her wrists are adorned with multiple bangles and around her neck hang several necklaces, all different lengths.

I love her style. I couldn't pull it off, but I love it.

“Hey, Marty.” Peter greets her.

“Hello Darling, I had a feeling I'd be seeing you soon. It's about the time of that ball of yours.” She grins, leaning on the counter. “So did you finally convince those dads of yours to have a masked ball, or are you here for a headdress again?”

“They agreed to the masked ball.” Peter grins, “This is Ever, and later there will be eight guys coming in who are going to look pretty damn lost. We're going to pick out their masks now, so if you could point them in the right direction, that would be amazing.”

“Of course. I'd be happy to. I'll leave you to it. You know where I am; if you need me, just holler.”

“Got you, thanks, Marty.”

“She's cool,” I say as soon as she disappears through a curtain and into the back.

“Yeah, she's awesome. She'll be at the ball, her outfits are always absolutely amazing, and she makes them all herself. I've been trying to convince her to sell her dresses and outfits, but she just wants to keep it for herself for now. She said that she loves making her outfits, and if she started doing it for other people, it would take the fun out of it.” He says as he starts to look through the cases of masks.

“You know what, I actually completely understand that, if she were designing dresses for other people as well, she’d have to deal with their pickiness, telling her she’s doing it wrong or they’d do it better another way. I’ve seen it happen before.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly it. I think the only way she’d do it for someone would be if they gave her complete freedom over the design and everything. Unfortunately, there aren’t many people in this circle that would allow that, and no one else would be able to afford one of her dresses.”

“I would. I haven’t even seen her outfits, but just looking at her masks, I’d be honoured to wear anything that she made me.”

“I’ll be sure to let her know next time we have a ball.”

“That would be awesome.” I grin, “It’s a ball, so I guess we’re talking proper ballgowns, not evening dresses or anything like that?”

“Nope, the invite specifically says ballgowns. So there won’t be a non-pouffy, that’s a word, dress in sight.” He grins.

I burst out laughing.

“Awesome. I have to admit I’ve always wanted to wear a proper ball gown. It’s a dream I’ve had ever since I was a kid. But, I never thought I’d get to do it.”

“I’m glad you get to now, Sugar. You deserve to.” He grins. I give him a side hug, “I do recommend not getting one that’s too big. I made that mistake once. I swear I couldn’t lift my head up the next day; my neck was that painful. I thought I was going to end up looking like one of those guys that’s all shoulders and no neck.” He shudders.

I chuckle, “Wouldn’t you end up like that if you worked out your back and shoulders, not your neck?”

“Oh yeah.” He replies with a contemplative look on his face before he shrugs. “Oh well.”

After that, we both get too distracted by the masks to make any more conversation. I’ve narrowed it down to an all black

one that has beads that loop off the bottom and will drape across my cheeks. The other one I keep coming back to. Its blood red with delicate points at the very edges that will come just under my cheekbones. Each curved blood red point is decorated in tiny sparkling black gems that catch the light and make them look almost like glitter. It comes with a matching tiara, or I guess it's more of a crown.

It's made out of a black metal of some kind, and like the crown has two small points on each side that almost look like small horns. Between the two are blood red gems that match the colour of the mask and the same black stones that line the mask, just bigger. Right in the middle is a large, roughly carved black gemstone. If I had to guess, I'd say it was black onyx.

The set is absolutely stunning.

"Peter," I call, wanting his opinion, "Is this set too much?"

I'd probably buy it anyway, even if it were. I love it that much. I'd just have nowhere to wear it and would still need to find something suitable for the ball.

"Oh wow, good choice, Sugar." Peter gushes as he looks at the mask and crown. "It won't be too much at all, and I'm sure we can find something in the same blood red as the base. Failing that, you could go for black, which would also match really well."

"I was hoping you'd say that. I absolutely love it." I grin. "Have you found one?"

He smiles as he holds up a dark hunter green mask. Feathers in different shades of green adorn one side, and similar to the black mask I first choose, it has loops of green and black beads that will lay on his cheeks.

"That's beautiful." I compliment. "It will make your eyes look stunning."

"Thanks, Sugar. Let's put ours on the counter and try and find something for the guys."

I smile, and we make our way to place our chosen masks carefully on the counter. Marty's eyes light up when she sees

our choices.

“Wonderful choices, dear.” She compliments and then gets a contemplative look on her face. “You said that you’ve got eight men coming in later. Are they all going to be matching?”

“That’s the plan,” Peter answers for me.

“I think I have the perfect masks for them. Just a second.” She grins, excitement practically radiating off her.

“Well, that makes our lives a bit easier.” I grin. “I was worried that she wouldn’t have matching masks since all the ones that are on display are one of a kind.”

“She displays one of the masks but keeps extras in the back for things like this. Apart from a select few which are one of a kind like your one.” Peter explains.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Here you go,” Marty says, coming back through the door that leads into the back room.

She holds up a black mask that turns a deep red depending on how the light hits it and will match my mask really well. It also has a set of black, ridged horns that curl back. When worn, they will reach as far back as the crown of the head. The horns are decorated with tiny black and red stones right at the tips.

“Wow, it’s perfect. It will match mine so well.” I say admiringly.

“They were designed to go as a set. However, the people that I usually get through here would find it too daring. The same for yours; I just couldn’t bear to keep that one in the back, it’s so beautiful, and I guess I hoped that I’d get someone come through the shop one day that would appreciate it and love it just as much as I do.” She says with a proud smile.

“I really do love it. If Peter had said that it wasn’t appropriate for the masked ball, I was still going to buy it. I have no idea where I was planning on wearing it, but I couldn’t just leave it here.” I admit, and her smile widens.

“They match perfectly, Marty, but do you have enough for all eight of the guys?” Peter asks.

“I have seven of them at the moment, but I can get the last one made in time for the ball and bring it to the ball with me. I’m arriving slightly early anyway as I’m dropping off a mask for one of your dads.” She offers.

“That would be amazing, thank you.” I smile.

“Do you want to take them now?”

“Actually, yes, we can show the guys their masks on the day of the ball then. It will give them less time to figure out what

you're wearing." Peter grins.

"I love that idea," I agree, "I'll text the guys and let them know that they don't need to come here."

"Tell them that they need blood red ties and send them a colour example of it too. Actually, tell them to ask one of the people working in there to find them blood red ties, skinny ones." Peter suggests.

"Do they really need the ties?" I ask, "I think they would cut striking figures in all black."

Peter thinks for a second, mulling over my idea. "You know what, actually I think you're right. The masks have a slight red tinge to them anyway, so they'll still match you. Not telling them will also mean that they don't even have a hint at what you're wearing." He grins.

"I hadn't thought of that. I'll text them and tell them they don't need to come here or get ties." I tap out the message, grinning the whole time.

We quickly pay Marty, watching as she lovingly wraps the masks and my crown in tissue paper before placing them into individual boxes that will keep them safe as we transport them. For once, the cost of something doesn't make me balk, not because it's not expensive, but because I know that it is well worth it and probably worth a hell of a lot more. The amount of time, effort, and skill that goes into crafting a mask like any of these is phenomenal, and I am more than happy to pay the price.

"That's one thing ticked off. Next is your dress." Peter grins.

"And your suit." I point out.

"I actually already have a suit that will match my mask perfectly. It was sort of like what almost happened with your mask. I absolutely loved it when I saw it, but I haven't had anywhere to wear it. So I was looking for a mask that would match it."

"That's awesome. I can't wait to see it." I say excitedly.

“The next shop is two doors down. If you can’t find the perfect dress there, then you’ve got no hope of finding one.” Peter says with a smile.

“I’m not sure whether that’s worrying or reassuring.” I grin.

He once again opens the door for me, and an immaculately dressed woman immediately greets us. I expect her to look down her nose at me; that’s what I’ve always experienced in high-end shops like this. Actually, that’s not true. I didn’t even have to enter the shop for them to look down at me like that.

However, this woman smiles a genuine smile that instantly puts me at ease.

“Hello, I’m Rachel. Welcome to Beauty Beyond. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Hey, yes, actually, we’re looking for a blood red ballgown,” Peter explains.

“Excellent. We have a few choices available. Do you have a particular style that you’d like?” She asks.

“No, I haven’t got anything in mind. I’m not really sure what style will suit me best.” I reply.

“That’s no problem. I’ll pull a few different styles in the blood red, and you can see which ones you like best.” She smiles, and I nod in agreement, “Great, if you follow me, I’ll show you to your changing room; there’s a seating area just outside the changing cubicle that you can sit at and a three-point view mirror.” She says to Peter, who just smiles and nods.

When she said changing room, I thought she meant the usual, odd patterned curtain across a tiny space, where I’d inevitably end up knocking my elbow on the wall and horrifying the other customers with my cursing. I couldn’t be more wrong, and I shouldn’t be surprised that I am wrong. We’re led into a room with a waiting area and soft looking couch for people to sit on. In front of the couch is a raised platform, with three full-length mirrors set up in front of it so that you can see yourself from different angles. The entire room is decorated in soft creams with accents of gold.

Opposite the couch is a large changing room with wooden doors and multiple mirrors inside.

“Can I get you anything while you wait?” She asks, and I look at Peter like a deer caught in the headlights.

I have no idea what’s acceptable in this situation.

“Yes, can I grab a latte, please?” Peter replies, smiling.

“I’ll have one too, please,” I add, glad that he chose something that I liked because, thanks to my anxiety, I would have ordered whatever he got anyway.

“Absolutely, I’ll be right back with your dresses, and someone will be in, in a second, with your drinks.”

“Thanks,” I reply with a smile.

“Wow, I have to admit, this is an entirely foreign shopping experience for me.”

“Yeah, the vendors in this town are pretty unique. The high-end shops in most cities are bitchy, exclusive, and just not worth it. All of these shops are independently owned. They may not have the designer label, but still, you are getting something of the same or better quality and helping out a local or small designer or business. It’s why I like shopping here.”

“That’s pretty amazing. Knowing that everything is independently owned makes me want to spend more, if I’m honest so that I can support them. I don’t have the same issue with spending large amounts of money on myself like I usually have when I go shopping.”

“While I can’t say that I’ve ever had that issue.” He grins, “I do know where you’re coming from.”

“Two lattes.” A lady says as she opens the door and hands them to us.

We both thank her, and I gape in awe as she holds the door open for Rachel and another assistant as they bring in an assortment of blood red dresses. They hang them up, one by one, on the hooks that adorn one of the walls that I hadn’t noticed before. They’re all beautiful, but my eyes are instantly drawn to one in particular.

The corseted bodice of the dress is a slightly darker red than the rest of the dress, having a very delicate black lace over the top. It dips in the front, far enough that I'll have to wear the dreaded tit tape again. There are two-inch wide straps that will drape across the top of my arm and are more there for decoration than function. Over the top over the glittering lace that covers the bodice is a delicate red filigree pattern that dips and swirls and edges its way onto the full princess skirt until there are only a few vines that are near to the bottom of the full skirt.

It is really stunning.

"That's the one," I say, not needing to try the others on.

"Good choice." Rachel grins, not even questioning my instant decision. "Would you like to try it on?"

I start to say yes, but the thought of getting changed here is making me nervous for some reason. I haven't had a panic attack about getting changed for a while now, and the only thing that I can think of that could've set off my nerves this time is that my father has been brought up a lot at the moment and it must be subconsciously messing with me.

"No, I'm okay, thank you," I say, smiling and clasping my hands together to hide their shaking.

"Are you sure?" Rachel asks, surprise evident in her tone.

"It's fine, Rachel. If you could package it up, we'll be right out." Peter says firmly, taking over.

"Very well." She smiles politely, taking the dress and leaving the room.

"Are you okay?" He immediately asks me. "Your hands are shaking."

"Erm yeah, I think so. My dad has been mentioned a lot recently, and I think it's unknowingly affected me. The thought of changing with strangers around almost triggered me."

"Oh, Sugar. Do you want me to call the guys?"

I shake my head.

“Okay,” he says, a worried note in his voice as we leave the room. “Why don’t we meet them for lunch at the little restaurant in town, it’ll be quite busy, but they serve delicious food.”

“Yeah, that sounds great.” I agree, “Thanks, Peter.”

I pay for my dress as Peter messages the guys, and then we go a few storefronts down the street until we get to the cutest little Italian restaurant I’ve seen. It does look pretty busy, but we grab a table easily enough and look over the menu as we wait for the guys to show up. I still feel a bit shaky, and I hate it.

“Hey, Il Mio Cuore,” Cash says, making me jump when he kisses the top of my head, and all the guys’ attention immediately lands on me.

Cash bends, so he’s at eye level with me, “What happened?”

“It’s okay. It’s nothing big.”

“She almost got triggered when the store clerk asked if she wanted to try her dress on,” Peter adds in.

“Oh, Sweetheart.” Trick mutters, “That hasn’t happened for a while.”

“No, I think it’s because we’ve been talking about my dad and all the horrific things he’s done, and it’s bringing up things I’d rather forget.”

“If there’s anything that we can do, Puddin’, just let us know.”

“Thanks, guys. I really appreciate that.” I smile. “Now, let’s eat; I’m starving.”

“Me too. I think my stomach is eating itself.” Jensen groans dramatically from across the table, making me laugh and then grins proudly, “There it is.”

My smile softens, and he winks at me. The guys all open their menus and look over their options. It doesn’t take long until the server comes back, looking nervous for some reason. He was super bubbly and relaxed when he sat Peter and me at

the table. Maybe the guys make him nervous. It's easy to forget that they all cast a pretty intimidating figure individually, and as a group, their presence can be overwhelming.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but the gentleman over there asked me to give you this," he says with a slight shake in his voice as he hands me a folded up piece of paper. Not the guys being intimidating then.

I take the note cautiously, and then my eyes dart over to where the server gestured. "What guy?"

"The one with the black hoodie on, right ... there. He's gone." He answers, sounding confused.

"There's no point," I say to the guys as several of them start to get up, I'm assuming to go after him.

"Don't worry about it," I smile reassuringly at the server, "Can we place our order, please?"

"O-o-oh sure, what would you like?"

We give him our orders quickly, and he rushes away from us like he can't get away quick enough. It wouldn't surprise me if we had a different server to give us our food.

"What does the note say?" Peter asks.

I open it up, almost dreading what's going to be written, "Not long now, butterfly, I'm getting close. Then it has a bunch of smiley faces."

"That's got to be from Blake." Riot says.

"Yeah, but I highly doubt that he was actually here. He wouldn't have been able to help himself, and he would've wanted you to know he was here. He would've introduced himself." Atlas says thoughtfully, a dark frown on his face.

"So, what was the purpose of the note?" Rafe asks.

"To intimidate or prove how easily he could get to her, I'd guess. He's clearly playing some sort of game." Rage replies.

"Yeah, but to what end?" Trick asks.

“We won’t know until he makes his first move. Which reminds me, Peter, have you run all the staff that’s going to be at the ball through the database that Alaric gave you access to?” Atlas asks.

“Yes, I have, as well as a couple of other databases that I gained access to myself.” He grins, “I traded out anyone that had a slightly spotty past, and I triple checked that none of them had fake backgrounds or backstopping.”

“Excellent, good job.”

The food comes out, delivered by a different server, and I make a note to leave a big tip for the one we had before. Whatever the guy delivering the note said to him clearly freaked him out.

After that drama, the rest of the day is smooth sailing. Despite the guys best efforts to get me to show them everything that I purchased today, including their masks, I decide that it’s probably best to keep everything at Peter’s house, so they aren’t tempted to peek, which he finds hilarious but agrees that it’s probably a good idea.

We ended up getting an early night last night, all of us worn out from our shopping trip and the other things we’ve done since Friday. Despite the early night, I still woke up late, which means I got ready in a rush and didn’t have time for coffee or breakfast. It’s making me a bit more stabby than usual. It’s also the only excuse I have for not remembering that the cops were turning up today. However, there is absolutely no mistaking their presence when we arrive at the main building. There are several police cars, a couple of forensic vans, and a coroner’s van all set up in the parking lot. There’s also a massive crowd of students that’s starting to be broken up by the teachers.

“Wow, they didn’t come in subtly, did they?” Jensen mutters.

“To be fair, they couldn’t really, with the information that they got, they had to bring everything in. They’ve only got one

van here that's capable of carrying bodies, though. So if there's as many there as we think there are, then they're going to have to bring another van in, and that will really cause a stir." Trick explains as we avoid the crowd, the teachers are still trying to split up and head straight for the doors.

Just before we move through them, my eyes catch on Mr. Remy stood off to the side, staring at the cops, his face pale, but he looks satisfied, almost at peace. This was possible because he decided to speak up. He catches me looking at him and smiles ever so slightly, and I return it with a smile of my own.

"It will be interesting to see what the students are saying about it," Peter says as we walk through the doors and make our way to our first lesson.

"Yeah, everyone will have seen the news by now and seen that Chris got arrested. He came to a lot of functions here; it won't be long until they remember that and the rumours start flying." Atlas reminds us.

"Well, today is going to be interesting then." I grin.

By lunch, it's fully circulated that Chris went here, and maybe he buried his victims somewhere on the grounds. There are a few out there theories like they found aliens, which I honestly don't know where that came from, but it is pretty damn amusing.

"So," Peter says as he sits down at the lunch table and places his order, "I heard from a reliable source that the principal has been fielding phone calls all day from concerned parents."

"And what reliable source is that?" Rage asks, amused.

"His secretary." He grins, and I chuckle. "Poor woman doesn't realise I'm gay, and I use that to my advantage."

"You dark horse." I chuckle, "I like the way you work."

He nods his head in a mock bow, "Why, thank you, Sugar."

"That's hardly surprising. Most of the parents send their kids here because of the privacy that they receive." Cash

answers, Peter.

“Very true, it’s in the brochure and everything. I wouldn’t want to be him.” Peter grimaces.

The conversation stops as the food arrives, and we all tuck in. I think Rafe has spoilt us because although it’s nice, great even, it’s nothing compared to his food.

I lean over to where he is sitting next to me and kiss him on the cheek. He turns to me, looking surprised.

I shrug, still close, “I just think you’re amazing, and I feel like I haven’t kissed you in far too long.”

“Well, in that case.” His grin is full of naughty promises, and I have a mere second to wonder what he’s planning when his large rough palm gently cups my cheek, and he brings his lips to mine, nipping my bottom lip when I don’t open quick enough. I smirk against his lips before allowing him entry, my tongue stroking against his as our lips move together, and my hand clenches in his shirt and pulls him closer.

“Erm, guys!” Riot says loud enough that I hear it through my haze of lust. “As much as I’m enjoying the show, so is everyone else in the cafeteria.”

We instantly pull apart, and I glance around to see everyone staring at us; well, at least they have something else to gossip about for a bit now.

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Hey!” Someone yells after us as we leave the school, the day finally over. I glance over at the police vans seeing that there’s no cop in sight; they must all be at the statue garden. A shudder goes through me; I don’t envy their job right now. Hearing the rumours was fun at first, but the stories got even more ridiculous and further from the truth as the day wore on. Whoever said that girls gossip more than guys clearly has never been in an all-boys school because I swear nobody can gossip like these fuckers can.

We all ignore the guy who yelled. I assume he was calling someone else; we don’t hang out with anyone else here, and it’s rare for someone else to talk to us. I fish my phone out of my pocket to check my messages, I know I shouldn’t, but I got the overwhelming urge to message Rylie and remind her that I was here for her if she needed any help with anything. I know it is going against what she asked of me, though, so instead, I message Jynx and ask her if she wants to see what I was wearing to the ball. I lag behind the guys as I read her reply.

Jynx: I am utterly insulted that you even felt the need to ask me that, Everleigh. Absolutely fucking appalled. I expect you to video call me, and I expect to see everything you bought so I can admire it and discuss the best places for you to hide weapons. Call me as soon as you get back, or I will turn up! I’m still in the area anyway.

I giggle, and because I’m apparently unable to walk and text, I slow down even more. Someone’s hand lands on my shoulder in a tight, almost bruising grip. I react on pure instinct; my phone clatters to the floor, gaining the attention of the guys before they get to me; I’ve flipped the fucker over my shoulder. He lands heavily on the floor, and I land with my knee on his sternum and my knives crossed against his throat, a snarl on my face.

“Holy fuck.” I hear Peter mutter.

“So fucking hot.” A couple of my guys say simultaneously, but I ignore them all, focusing on the idiot beneath me.

“It’s not wise to touch a woman without her permission.” I tut.

Jensen snorts at my dry tone.

“You got my father fired.” The idiot growls.

“The coach?” I ask, and he nods. “And what exactly were you going to do about it?”

“Make you pay.”

I chuckle, making him angry, he tries to buck me off, but my knives dig into his throat, creating a thin line of blood.

“I wouldn’t do that.” I warn him before replying to what he said before, “That’s very Disney villain of you to say. Have you really thought about what he got fired for?” I ask.

Some of the fire starts to go out of his eyes.

“It wasn’t just me; many students and teachers came forward, and he’d done worse things to them,” I say gently.

The fire in his eyes extinguishes entirely, and left behind is a broken little boy. The difference is so shocking that it startles me.

“You saved them.” He whispers brokenly, and the piece I was missing clicks into place.

“But we didn’t save you,” I mutter, utterly horrified.

He shakes his head, and tears start to stream down his face. I immediately withdraw my knives and pull him, so he’s sitting up, wrapping my arms around him tightly.

That fucking coach.

“I’m going to protect you. I fucking promise, quickly now. What’s your address? Does he live alone?” I ask.

He nods and then reels his address off shakily, and I make a mental note as the guys shift around angrily behind me.

“Listen to me; I need you to go back to your house on the school grounds, order some food and watch a good movie,

okay? We never had this conversation. That's really important, got it?" I ask, and he nods vigorously, "Good. I promise you he will never harm you again. Now go."

He nods, wiping his cheeks and looking heartbreakingly hopeful. As soon as he's gone, I grab my phone off the floor, ignoring the cracked screen and pressing dial. I turn to the guys who are looking at me curiously.

"Peter," I say, making him jump as I point at him, "I want you to use everything at your disposal and destroy his finances, make sure that he has a good wedge that is legitimate and will go to his son. Also, find out what his name is; I completely forgot to ask. You should be able to find that out from his address."

"Got it." He replies. "Where am I doing it?"

"Back at ours. Come on, let's go." I say, ordering them for a change, and they immediately do what I ask, my phone call is not answered, and I hang up, waiting until we get back to the house to call again. As soon as I'm through the door, I hit dial again. All the guys are watching me with various looks ranging from intrigued to what I'm up to, to hot. That last one is Jensen, and I'm guessing it's because I used my knives. He always loves that.

"Hey, sugar tits, I know I said ring me when you got home, but damn, give a girl a chance to pee." Jynx answers, and I grin.

"Hey, Jynx," I say with a sly note to my voice. "Do you want to go hunting?"

I get sharp looks from all the guys, and as Trick starts to open his mouth, no doubt to chastise me for something, I just hold up my hand in a stop gesture. Nothing he could say could stop me right now.

"Oh, fuck yeah!" She shrieks, "Wait, hold on, why are you asking me instead of one of your men?"

"Erm, because of reasons, I will explain later."

"Gotcha," she answers immediately and hear an engine start-up in the background.

“How far away are you?” I ask, taking the stairs two at a time, aware that the guys are following me.

I put the phone on speaker and on the bed as I rifle through my drawers, looking for an appropriate outfit. Finding black skinny jeans and a black Henley, I quickly pull them on, ignoring a pained sound from one of the guys, and throw my bike jacket on the bed.

“About twenty minutes or so.” Jynx replies, “Well, ten on my bike.”

“Awesome. I’ll meet you out front.”

“Who are we hunting?”

“Remember the coach?”

“Yeah?”

“Turns out he did a lot worse to his own kid. So we’re going to make sure that he never does again.”

“Ooo, my favourite kind of hunt. See you in five.” She hangs up, and I grin.

“Sweetheart,” Trick starts, and I interrupt.

“I am going to help this guy, and I am going to do it my way. This is the sort of thing I used to do. It’s not new for me to protect someone from an abusive family member. You saw him. Could you really deny him help?”

“No, Sweetheart, and I’m not asking you to deny him help. I’m just saying that there may be a better way to do it.”

“Trust me, my method works. Look, I’m going to go, regardless of if you tell me I can’t.” I take a deep breath to calm down, knowing that he’s only suggesting this because he cares. “I would really like it if we didn’t fall out before I go.”

“Why doesn’t one of us come with you?” Cash suggests, trying to keep the peace.

“No, that’s not going to work for me. I need to do this my way, Jynx is coming with me, and you all know that she is more than capable backup.”

“I don’t like it,” Jensen growls.

I walk over to him and hug him tightly, “I know, but I need you guys to trust me. You know I can handle this.”

It’s silent for a while as they all mull over my words. Maybe I should give in and let one of them come. The problem with that is that what I have planned for the fucker is using skills that I would rather that the guys didn’t know I had just yet. I know it’s inevitable that they will find out soon, but I want to put it off for as long as possible.

“Alright, fine.” Trick concedes just as a horn sounds from outside, signalling that Jynx has arrived.

“What!” Riot exclaims.

“You can’t be serious?” Luc growls.

Rage storms out of the room, his expression dark as the others stay suspiciously silent.

“She’s asked for our trust, and I’m giving it to her,” Trick says sternly, crossing his arms over his chest and levelling them with a look that allows no arguments.

I kiss him quickly in thanks, fully aware that at least one of them is going to follow me to the house. This fucker needs dealing with, though, and it’s a risk I’m going to have to take. I grab my bike jacket, making sure that I have two knives still secured in the sleeves of it, as well as the other knives I have armed myself with, and make my way back down the stairs to put my boots on.

“Everything should be done by the time you get back.” Peter says from the kitchen table, tapping away at the keyboard still, “Fuck him up for me.”

“Will do.” I grin viciously. I finish putting on my boots and grab my bike helmet.

It’s then that I realise that I don’t have a bike. Mine is still in pieces from when Blake had me run off the road. Just as I turn around to ask Atlas if I can borrow one of his, the front door opens, and Rage appears, his expression still dark. He throws me a set of keys, and I raise my eyebrow in question.

“The keys to my bike. Come back fucking safe, Everleigh,” he demands, striding up to me and grasping my chin in his fingers. His lips meet mine in a brutal and almost punishing kiss, and as I kiss him back, it feels like we’re fighting. I put all my frustration into that kiss. When he pulls back, his eyes are wild, “Do you hear me? Come back fucking safe.”

“I promise,” I reply, making my way out of the door. When I look back, all of them look worried.

I understand why, and if they knew how fucking good at this I am, they wouldn’t be, but I just can’t tell them. It would mean admitting to things that I am not fucking proud of.

“Hey, sugar tits,” Jynx yells excitedly from her bike.

“Hey, bubble butt.” I chuckle. “How did you manage to come alone?”

“The guys know I’m going hunting with you. They had no problem with it, although they are on standby in case we need them.” She rolls her eyes.

“Great, I doubt we will, though.” I grin, aware that the guys are still watching me from the front door, arms crossed over their chests and dark looks on all their faces.

Jynx’s eyes move over my shoulder and lock on them as I get on the gorgeous bike the Rage has leant me.

“Seems like your guys aren’t so sure in your skills.” She mutters, “First time going out on a job on your own?”

“Yep, first time without one of them,” I reply. “Hang on, and I’ll hook up the Bluetooth thing so that we can talk to each other. I think it’s probably a good idea that we leave before they try to stop me.”

“They really have no idea how lethal you are, do they?” She asks, and I grimace, “I have an idea.”

I watch curiously as she taps out a message on her phone. When she’s done, we start the bikes, and I wave at the guys as we go through the gates and down the road.

“What did you do?” I ask as soon as we’re off school grounds.

“I called my guys over to reassure yours that you’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure that’s wise? Your guys know things about me that I’m not ready for mine to know yet.” I reply worriedly.

“They won’t say anything. I threatened them with no group sex.” She chuckles.

“Suddenly, I’m not worried anymore,” I smirk.

“I wouldn’t be. They wouldn’t risk it. So, how far away are we from our target and what’s the plan?”

“About an hour and a half. I’ve got the GPS going on my phone, so we shouldn’t get lost. It shouldn’t be any harder to get into his house than anywhere else we’ve broken into. If he’s not there, we wait.”

“And then we play?” She asks.

“Then we play.” I agree.

We spend the rest of the journey singing along to music and racing each other. When we arrive, we park a few streets away and walk the rest of the way to the house; the street is upper class enough that I doubt they get many motorbikes cruising the roads at this time of night, which would definitely raise a red flag, we want to leave no trace of us being here apart from the damage we do to the coach. The house we pull up to is large, which means I was right in assuming that the coach was loaded. He wouldn’t have been able to afford to send his son to Blackbreak otherwise.

I share a grin with Jynx when a light on the top floor switches on. It looks like we’ll get to play sooner than I thought.

“Written and signed confession?” Jynx asks, already knowing how I like to do things.

“By any means necessary.” I confirm, “If he gives in too quickly ...”

She interrupts me, “We still make him pay.”

I grin and nod, the violence I usually suppress swims to the surface, and I let it. I'm going to need it. The familiar feeling makes excitement thrum through my veins. We both casually walk up the drive, the gate left open, and make our way around the side of the house to find a way onto the roof and into the room he's in. It doesn't take long until we're sliding open his window and stepping inside.

"What the fuck!" He exclaims.

I grin, twirling one of my knives, "Hello, coach."

Rage

"Rome, just texted. He said that Jynx said we were freaking out about Ever going on a job without us, so they're coming over and bringing beer." Atlas announces. All of us already have a beer in our hands.

"I'm going to go after her," I say, interrupting their grousing.

"Thank fuck I'll come with," Jensen says, hopping up.

Peter holds his hand up in the air with a piece of paper folded and clasped between his fingers as his other hand continues to tap away at his laptop.

"What's this?" I ask, taking it from him.

"The coach's address. I figured that at least one of you would want to follow her, so I wrote it down ready. I'm surprised it took you so long to decide to go." He smirks.

"Thanks, man."

"I think if we're going to follow her, only one of us should go. At least that way, she has less chance of spotting you." Cash mutters.

"It's Ever, she's going to spot you no matter how stealthy you think you are." Luc points out a dark frown on his face.

Don't get me wrong; I am more than confident in her skills. It just makes me nervous that she is going without one of us. That coach is a piece of work and has a particular hatred for her, especially since she was the catalyst for getting him fired.

"On that same note, though, she would be even more pissed if we sent someone alone." Rafe points out.

"Alright, Rage and Jensen, you go," Trick says. "I just want to know that the fucker isn't more capable than we think he is. He was the coach of the combat class, after all."

"On it." We say together, both of us walking to the front door and grabbing our bike jackets and helmets.

"Wait, you gave Ever your bike?" Jensen asks me.

"I've got more than one," I reply.

"Guys, I want updates. I want to know when she's on the way back and when you are."

"Yes, boss." We once again reply together.

Jynx's guys pull into the driveway as we open the front door. They all grin as they see us. Even Rip has a tiny grin, his eyes amused.

"Following her?" Rome grins, and we both cross our arms over our chests defensively.

"We followed Jynx once, never making that mistake again. Good luck, guys. She's going to be pissed as fuck when she gets back. Prepare to grovel." Ace grins.

"Are you telling me that you're not worried about Jynx?" Jensen asks.

"Nope, I know both of them are more than capable of taking care of it. This is like their version of girly bonding." Malachi smirks.

"But you won't be reassured until you see with your own eyes that she's safe. So trust me, we get it." Mason adds.

"Thanks, guys. We'll see you later." I reply.

They actually get where we're coming from and have done the same thing, which makes me feel a bit better but also worse because they've said it's a mistake. I can't stop myself from making sure she's okay, though, so we still head around the side of the house to grab the bikes.

"Do you know where we're headed?" Jensen asks me as we start the bikes.

"Yeah, I checked the address that Peter gave me. I know the vague area. The girls aren't that far ahead of us. We should get there before they leave again." I reply.

He nods, and we make our way off of the school grounds.

I have no idea what we're going to walk into. I know how Jynx works. I've tagged along on a few jobs with her, and we've spoken often enough that I know her well.

We find their bikes parked up a couple of streets away and park our ones next to them before making our way to the coach's house. When we get there, the only light on in the entirety of the house is upstairs.

"Let's go around the back and see if there's a door open," Jensen suggests.

I shrug. I just want to make sure that Ever is okay and then leave, hopefully before we get in trouble with her.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Rage

When we get around the back of the house, it's evident that we were wrong about the only light being on being the one around the front since the kitchen light is also dimly shining. We creep slowly towards it, not wanting to, one, distract Ever and cause her to make a mistake or two for her to see us.

"There's a good boy." I hear Ever say coldly, her tone nothing like I have ever heard from her before, and share a look with Jensen as we approach the window.

"Now sign it." Jynx hums.

I don't hear the coach say anything; he just makes whimpers of pain every now and then. I listen closely, and even his breathing seems laboured. Jensen and I peek through the windows at the same time, and I barely stop my curse at what I see.

The entire kitchen is splattered with blood, including Jynx and Ever, who don't seem to be bothered by it at all. There's an assortment of knives on the table, far more than I thought either of them could conceal on their bodies. Coach looks like he's gone a couple of rounds with the girls, one of his eyes swollen shut, and he has a gash on his forehead like he's banged it on something. Disturbingly his foot is also pointing the wrong way.

"Holy fuck," Jensen mutters, unable to help himself, and Ever's eyes immediately dart our way. "Shit."

She just rolls her eyes and walks our way, Jynx following and blowing the coach a kiss on the way past because she really is that much of a bitch. It's pretty awesome. It's also rather telling that the coach watches them both with horrified fear etched on his face, his eyes haunted. The true number of injuries the girls have inflicted on him becomes abundantly

clear as I count the slices that litter his body, studying him more closely.

“They tortured him,” I mutter, pretty fucking impressed, and Jensen nods, eyes wide.

There’s something about the way they’ve set him up and the precise nature of the wounds that strikes familiar. I feel the frown crease my forehead as I study it, but that would be impossible.

Ever

“Nice work, Angel,” Jensen says as soon as I step foot out of the house.

“Seriously?” I say, giving him a look and making my way back to our bikes.

“We were worried about you.” Rage replies, catching up to us, and I share a look with Jynx.

I didn’t miss the way that he was studying the coach and what I’d done to him. I also didn’t miss the looking of recognition and the frown that came over his face. If I’m not careful, he’s going to figure it out before I’m ready to tell them, and that would be bad.

“Are you still worried about me?” I ask as I stick to the shadows of the street. I am covered from head to toe in blood, and all we need now is some well-meaning neighbour to call the cops on us. It won’t show up that well on my outfit since it’s all black, but it does show up on my face. Hazard of the job, I stopped being bothered by it a long time ago. At least in this case, anyway.

“Not in the slightest.” Rage mutters, his lips lifting into a lopsided grin.

“Fuck no,” Jensen replies.

“Told you,” Jynx mutters to me, and I grin.

“Yeah, yeah. Here.” I say, pulling a few bills out of my bra and handing them to her just as we get to our bikes.

“What just happened?” Jensen asks, swinging his leg over his bike and looking hot as hell.

“She bet me that you’d come after me. I chose to have faith that you’d respect my wishes.”

“Wow, way to make us feel guilty.” Rage grimaces.

“That’s just the beginning,” I warn them, and they share a worried look that makes me smirk.

“Are we just going to leave him there?” Jensen asks.

“Yep, his housekeeper will find him in the morning. He won’t die by then. She’ll also find a signed confession and passwords to all his home computers where he kept videos of his abuse so he could watch them later. It seems that’s a theme at the moment.” I reply.

They share a horrified look.

“Yeah, he’s not going to be able to use a certain appendage ever again.” I grin savagely.

“Or his legs,” Jynx adds.

“You paralyzed him?” Rage asks in shock.

“I may have.”

“Wait, if you did what you’re suggesting, then he doesn’t have until the morning the blood loss will kill him off,” Jensen says.

“Not the way I’ve done it. He’ll last just long enough for the housekeeper to arrive unless she decides to take the day off or come in late.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Jynx suggests.

I nod, swinging my leg over my bike as the others do the same and starting my bike.

“The guy’s just text. They’ve left yours and are headed home. They said to tell you to give them hell.” Jynx calls, and I chuckle.

“Thanks for coming with me. You heading home?”

“Of course, we make a great team. Yeah, I need to make sure they don’t get any ideas about the case that we’re preparing for. We disagree on the way we should execute it.” She says, rolling her eyes.

“Alright, see you soon.” I wave, and then checking that the guys are ready to go, I start my bike, the engine rumbling to life beneath me, and start the journey home.

I deliberately go as fast as I can, knowing that the guys won’t be able to keep up with me as I weave in and out of traffic and wanting to mess with them for following me in the first place. I’m not surprised in the slightest, but they still shouldn’t have done it. So, I’m going to make them grovel for a little bit even though I’m not really mad. They didn’t see anything that would mean that I have to explain myself. At least I don’t think they did; I’m still iffy about whether Rage has connected the dots.

When we get home, I head straight up to the shower to clean up, giving all the guys a stern look on the way past, which they all meet with meek expressions. Jensen and Rage may have been the ones to follow me, but I’m not naïve enough to think that they were working alone. All of them were in on it. I’m guessing even Peter was since they had the address, and he’s conveniently missing. Once I’ve finished showering, I dress in some comfy sweats and then head back downstairs so I can brief the guys quickly and let them know that the coach won’t be a problem anymore.

I also tell them they are all in hot water but undermine the statement slightly when I kiss them all goodnight like I usually would and then head up to bed. Today has been a long day, and I’m once again going to bed super late. I’ll be surprised if I actually make it to school on time in the morning. Before I fall asleep, I message Jynx and thank her for coming with me again, saying that if she needs me to go with her at any point, just to let me know.

“Ever. We really need to get going.” Trick says close to my ear, kissing my cheek, and I grumble.

“What time is it?”

“We should’ve left about five minutes ago. This is the fourth time one of us has tried to wake you up.” He replies, and I can hear the amusement in his voice.

“Fuck,” I groan as I throw the covers off.

He chuckles and leans forward, distracting me with a heated kiss. “I’ll leave you to get dressed. I’ll be too tempted to distract you even more otherwise. For the record, I know we shouldn’t have followed you last night, but I’m glad that we did.”

“I knew you were going to anyway. It’s okay. It just means that I’ll follow you now. I mean, it’s only fair, right?” I smirk.

His eyes narrow slightly, and my smirk turns into a grin. He shakes his head and leans forward, kissing me once more before he gets up and leaves the room.

I was right last night, and despite setting early alarms and more of them, I’m still running fucking late this morning. I throw on the first clothes that I find and put my hair up in a messy bun before rushing downstairs.

Rafe thrusts a travel mug at me as I rush to the front door, “Coffee, Baby.”

“God, I love you,” I reply, giving him a quick kiss and then rushing out the door.

“I’m not sure if you’re talking to me or the coffee?” He calls after me, and I burst out laughing as I get into the SUV.

“I have to admit it could’ve gone either way, but this time I was talking to you.” I smile.

“I love you too, Baby.” He replies, a soft smile on his handsome features.

“What the fuck?” Trick mutters as we pull into the main school parking lot.

“Whoa, are those news vans?” Riot mutters.

“I guess someone didn’t keep their mouth shut about the police presence here.” Luc points out.

“Either that or they’ve turned up anyway because Chris didn’t keep it quiet that he went to Blackbreak. So someone probably put together that the missing kids were here the same time he was and deduced that they might be some of the murders that Chris is being charged with.” Cash suggests.

“That’s a good point. Come on, let’s wade our way through the masses and actually go to class.” I say, staring around at all the students, not even making a vague attempt to go to class even though the warning bell has just gone and that it might not be safe for some of them.

“We need to be careful; people aren’t supposed to know that we’re here. We need to try to avoid the camera line.” Atlas reminds us.

“I hadn’t even thought of that. They shouldn’t be interested in us anyway.” Jensen replies as we all get out of the car. We meet Peter around the front of the car since he pulled in next to us.

“This is insane,” Peter says as we look at the crowd of police, news crews, and students all crowding the parking lot.

“Yep, come on, let’s get inside,” I say.

We make our way into the school, sticking to the periphery of everything, and I hope that means that we weren’t caught on any of the cameras. Even if we were, hopefully, we’d be far enough away that no one would be able to recognise us, and it won’t end up causing issues for us. I’m relatively sure that the most dangerous people after me already know that I’m here. There are still some people from back in Fresno who I don’t want to know where I am.

We’ve just gotten through the doors, closing them behind us on the insanity that is the front of the school when the kid from yesterday comes rushing up to us and instantly wraps me in a hug. Gaining some strange looks from everyone else in the hallway, especially since my guys aren’t gutting him. When he

steps back, I realise he's wearing a football jacket and most likely one of the popular kids here.

"I don't know what you did," he mutters quietly, making sure that no one is close enough to hear us, "But he's confessed to everything. He got arrested early this morning. Once he's out of the hospital, he'll be going to prison for life. I never have to worry about him. They don't even need me to testify." He says, relief flooding his eyes. "They said he will never walk again. The cop who told me smiled when he said that." He adds, looking slightly confused.

"He left a very detailed confession; the cop is most likely glad he got what was coming to him." I grin wickedly, and his eyes widen. "You should also be inheriting all of his assets, so money won't be a problem."

He hugs me tightly again, and I grin.

"I'm guessing you're seventeen?" Luc asks, and the guy nods.

"Yeah."

"In that case, because of the circumstances you can apply for emancipation, you'll get it easily. He will not be able to have any control over you." He replies.

"Seriously?" He asks, his eyes starting to shine with tears.

"Really. Get a new lawyer, not one that your dad has used before, and speak to them about it." He says.

"Actually, I've got the perfect lawyers for you." Cash grins, interrupting.

I see where his mind is heading, Kat will go to bat for him, and the chances are he'll come out even better off.

Cash hands him a business card. "I'll let them know you're calling. What's your name, by the way? They've dealt with this sort of thing before."

He grins sheepishly, "I can't believe I didn't tell you. It's Matty." He smiles before adding, "It says here that their office is hours away."

“They’ll take your case, trust me.” Cash smiles.

“I can’t even begin to thank you guys enough,” he starts. “If you ever need some backup from the football team, for any reason, no questions asked, just let me know we’ve got your backs.”

“Thanks, man,” Trick replies, “We’ll definitely keep that in mind.”

Matty nods and then walks off back to his friends, who all look at him curiously. When we walk past, I overhear a snippet of the conversation.

“Nice man. Did you hit that?” One of them smirks, clearly thinking that because Matty hugged me, it means he slept with me.

I slow down slightly to see how he deals with it, curious more than anything. So it shocks me when he immediately smacks the guy on the back of the head.

“Have some respect, man. She’s a friend. She helped me out with some stuff, and I don’t want to hear any of you fucking talking about her like that again. Her men will have no problem showing you how you should’ve respected her.” He warns them sternly.

“Whoa, sorry, man. I meant no harm, friend status, so one of the guys. Got it.” The guy immediately replies, and I grin. It looks like Matty has a hell of a lot more respect for women than his father did and holds his teammates to the same standard.

“I like him,” Jensen says as we get further down the hall.

“Me too.” Rage adds. “He’s decent. Having the backup of the school football team could come in handy for any school related incidents too.”

“Plus, it means we’ve got extra eyes on the goings on around here.” Atlas adds, “I feel like we miss a lot, and I know we’ve got a lot going on and always do, but we’re here until we finish college. So it wouldn’t hurt to look after it better and make some connections while we’re here.”

“That’s true. You want to legitimise the businesses, and that means having legitimate connections.” Trick agrees, making a good point at the same time.

“Yeah, I think it’s time we’re more involved with everything at the school rather than just when shit hits the fan,” Atlas responds as we get to our classroom.

“Sounds like a plan and something that could benefit us in the future. I can check out any prospective business deals down the line from the financial point of view.” Jensen offers.

“Yeah, and I can look into their pasts and all of that sort of stuff. Make sure that they’re actually legitimate.”

“That would be great. Thanks, guys.” Atlas says.

By the time it hits lunch, the news crew’s presence has doubled.

“I thought it was bad this morning, but this is crazy. How are they even allowed on the school grounds?” I ask, thinking about all the high-profile students here.

“Apparently, there was an emergency board meeting at some point, and they decided that it would be better for the school to co-operate with them in case they were viewed as being involved. So I wouldn’t be surprised if it was one of them that called them in.” Peter answers me, stuffing his face with pasta.

“They won’t be allowed inside the actual school. That’s too much of a security risk.” Rage says, a frown on his face.

I forgot that his mom is a famous actress, and he’s probably one of the ones that the media is interested in. I just know her as the raging bitch that needs to leave Rage the fuck alone before I make her.

“What’s the evil little grin for, Puddin’?” He asks, drawing the other guy’s attention to me.

“Just imagining all the things I’d like to do to your mother.” I grin, and his eyebrows hit his hairline before he turns to Luc, sitting next to him.

“Why is it I find it so attractive when she says shit like that?”

My grin widens.

“It’s one of life’s many mysteries, man. I doubt we’ll ever know why.” Luc shrugs in reply, and I laugh.

It’s a damn good job that they find my violent side attractive. I’m not sure I could hide it for long. I have no idea how Jynx managed to hide hers for as long as she did.

“Guys, Alaric has just messaged me. He said he’s just had a call, and Ever was seen on the news. We need to get back to the house and hunker down. He’s spoken to the Principal, and he’s agreed that we can do our work from home. They’ll get it dropped off.”

“Well, that could cause issues,” I mutter.

“Hopefully, it won’t, though,” Trick says optimistically.

“Why are Atlas and Rage hunkering down with us? Wouldn’t it make more sense that they went to school?” Jensen asks curiously.

“Apparently, all the high-profile students here will be told to do the same thing. No news crews are allowed near the student houses, and there’s a stronger security presence to stop anyone from trying. Rage and Atlas are high profile, Peter, too.”

“Oh cool, that makes sense, I guess. I can’t imagine the parents being pleased about this, though.” Riot points out.

“Nope, it’s going to cause some shit for sure. I’m glad I don’t have to deal with it.” Peter chuckles.

“I kind of feel sorry for the Principal.” I grin.

“It was his choice. Alright, let’s go.” Trick orders, and we all get up, grabbing our stuff and leaving the cafeteria.

Chapter Thirty-Five

To say the least, it was interesting to get out of the school without ending up on camera again, and I'm not sure we would've managed it if it weren't for Matty, bless him. He clearly saw that we were trying to get out unseen, and with only a couple of words to his, teammates they managed to create a diversion that completely drew the attention away from us.

"I really like him," Peter says as we walk through our front door.

"Yeah, he seems decent, and he has a good eye. We didn't ask for help; he just knew what we were trying to do." Luc says, sounding impressed.

"That comes from living in an abusive household. He'd have to be on his toes every second of every day, fully aware of his surroundings and any slight noise. He most likely he has had to be from a young age." Rage says in a matter of fact way that can only come from having lived it, "He will have unintentionally gained acute observational skills, among other things."

"That makes sense. It sucks that it's like that, but I guess at least you get some handy skills out of it." Rafe replies.

"Yeah, I wouldn't be able to do what I do as well as I can if I didn't have those skills." Rage replies.

"Me neither," I add in.

Before anyone can comment, Atlas's phone starts to ring, and he frowns down at the screen before answering it and putting it on loudspeaker so we can all hear.

"Hey man, you okay?" Atlas asks.

"Yeah, I'm just calling to give you an update. Your suspicions about the marks on the sword were correct. There are twelve bodies buried under the angel. Most of them are old

enough that we need proper forensics to identify them and get any evidence off of them. The freshly dug grave though we could identify immediately, it was Isabelle Tillings, Chris's estranged wife."

"Oh my god," I mutter, horror rushing through me, the same horrified looks on all the guys' faces.

"He must've caught up to her," Jensen mutters, a dark frown on his face.

"I'm sorry, guys. I know you met her." Alaric apologises.

"Are you sure it's her?" I ask.

"Yeah, there's no doubt. Sorry Ever."

"Thanks for the update," Trick says when no one else speaks.

"Of course. I'll let you know if we get any evidence off the bodies." He lowers his voice before continuing, "Just so we're clear, we aren't expecting Amelia's body to be one of the remaining eleven, are we?"

"No," Atlas replies shortly, casting a worried look in my direction.

I shrug. I'm starting to get used to the idea that my mom is Amelia and alive. Okay, that was actually a downright lie, I'm not getting used to it at all, I don't know how to deal with it or even face it, but I know I'm going to have to if I want to get answers, and I desperately want to get answers.

"That's really shitty," Peter says into the silence after the call.

"Yeah, at least we've got him now, though. Hopefully, he will get the justice he deserves, and she can rest in peace." I reply thoughtfully.

"Well said, Firecracker."

"Right, well, since we're at home and we have no jobs or research to get on with right this second, I'm going to get some laundry done. I'm running dangerously low on underwear." I say, changing the subject.

“Yeah, I think I might get some homework done,” Cash says, sounding somewhat reluctant.

“I’m going to start dinner; I need to marinate the chicken,” Rafe says, standing up.

“Well, I’m not going to do anything nearly as responsible as that. I’m going to go see if I can finally pass that level on the game.” Jensen grins and makes his way into the front room.

I chuckle as I leave the room to go upstairs, leaving them all to their own devices. We’re leaving to go to Peter’s in three days, and I have no clean clothes to pack. I can’t wear my ballgown the whole weekend. I’m fairly sure that I’d get pretty fed up with it pretty damn quickly. Before I make it out of the room though my phone buzzes with a text, I pull it out curiously.

Liam: I just saw you on the news, Everleigh. You need to be careful.

“Erm, guys,” I say, walking back into the kitchen, “I just got a message from Liam.”

“What?” Atlas asks. “What did he say?”

“That he saw me on the news, and I need to be more careful, he full named me.” I frown, not liking the parental vibe that this message has got going on. I get that he looked out for me in his strange way in Fresno, but this is a whole new level and not one that I like.

“Why would he be telling you to be careful, we’re in hiding from him, and Blake and both of them know where we are.” Riot points out.

“I have no idea, but then again, do we ever know what Liam is up to?” I reply, watching Atlas as he pulls out his phone and starts tapping. I’m guessing he’s messaging his dad.

“He’s still not replying to me,” Atlas says with a frown.

“That’s because he knows that you have questions that he doesn’t want to answer and that I’m just going to ignore him.” I reason.

“Yeah, I guess.” He frowns, “He’s going to have to talk to me at some point.”

“He will eventually.” Trick answers him.

“Right, I’m going to go and do my laundry now, hopefully without any more unwanted interruptions.” I grin.

“Have fun, Princess.” Atlas teases, and I stick my tongue out at him before sprinting up the stairs as he starts to get up.

I laugh as his growl follows me up the stairs. When I open the door to my room, my smile drops off my face. There are piles of clothes everywhere, school stuff spread out on every available surface, and it just looks like an utter mess. I sigh, I know we’ve been busy recently, but I really shouldn’t have let it get this bad. I start by picking up and sorting all of my school stuff and putting it neatly on my desk. Then I do the same with the piles of clothes sorting which ones are dirty and which ones are clean. I dump the dirty ones by the door, ready to take downstairs, and the clean ones I put away.

I look down at my outfit and realise it could really do with a wash too. How I managed to get so many unknown stains on me, I’ll never know. I strip out of the clothes and dump them by the door as I make my way back over to my dresser to find something clean to wear.

“Hey, Firecracker. Elena just sent me a video of the twins. They’re rolling over or at least trying to. I thought you might like to ...” He trails off as he finally looks up from his phone and sees me standing there in nothing but navy-blue lace underwear. “Well damn.”

I grin as he stalks his way over to me.

“You look fucking stunning.” He growls.

“Why, thank you,” I say, standing on my tiptoes and wrapping my arms around his neck, his chest pressed tightly against mine.

My nipples pebble through the thin lace of my bra, and as they move against Luc’s chest, desire ripples through me. I trail my lips along his jaw, and his eyes close as his arms tighten around me. One of his hands reaches up to grasp my

chin, and he pulls my face to his; our lips collide as our tongues tangle, my hands move from around his neck to clench in his shirt, and I manoeuvre us back to the bed, it's closer than I thought, and the back of my knees hit it hard, making us both fall back onto the bed with an ompff.

We grin at each other, "Just call me super smooth." I smirk, and he bursts out laughing.

I soon get distracted by his hands, slowly caressing all the bare skin that I have on show. His lips trail down my neck, leaving a scorching path of heat as he kisses down between my boobs, he reaches behind me and unclips my bra easily, and I get rid of it as he continues to pepper my body with delicate kisses that are driving me wild. He slowly pulls my underwear off my legs before standing up and getting rid of his own clothes, his eyes are heated, and as he kisses up the inside of my thigh, he starts to add in little bites that drive me wild. He doesn't tease for much longer before he swirls his tongue around my clit, his fingers teasing my entrance. He sucks, and I am so close to the edge, but I want to go off the edge with him inside me.

My hands weave through his hair, and I tug. He gets the message and starts to kiss up my body; when he gets to my lips, his tongue delves inside as my legs wrap around him. I leverage my hips, flipping him over so that I'm straddling him, and he growls in pleasure. I smirk as I slowly start to kiss down his chest swirling my tongue around his nipple before continuing my journey. I reach my hand down, wrapping around his hard as steel dick and pumping; his eyes fall closed as he groans in pleasure. I keep licking and nipping my way down his taut abs. When I get to his dick, I keep pumping my hand as I take him in my mouth, sucking and swirling my tongue around his tip before taking him as far as I can and repeating, his breaths come out in harsh pants, his hips thrusting to meet me.

I hum as I suck, and he growls in pleasure before he pulls me up gently, making me release him with a pop; his lips crash against mine.

“I need to be inside you.” He growls, he lines up with my entrance, and we groan in unison as I slowly lower myself onto him.

I rock my hips, slowly at first but gradually increasing the pace. His hands clench on my hips as our mouths collide once again, his hips raise to meet my every thrust, his hands caressing my back before one weaves into my hair and grabs hold firmly, making me moan and bringing me closer to the edge. I sit up, giving him the perfect view of my boobs which he takes full advantage of as his hands slowly caress my stomach, grasping my boobs and tweaking my nipples with the perfect amount of pressure. My hips speed up, the feel of him moving inside me and hitting the perfect spot with each fucking thrust, combined with the deliciously tantalising way that he’s playing with my nipples, have my walls clenching around him as I careen over the edge and into a truly explosive orgasm. His thrusts increase as he rides out his own orgasm, the pace prolonging my own, dragging it out until I collapse on top of him in an exhausted heap.

Luc kisses my forehead softly. The only part of me he can reach our breathing in sync.

“I love you, Firecracker.” He murmurs softly once we’ve caught our breath, and I tilt my head so I can look up at him.

Placing my hand on his cheek and running my fingers through his beard, I reply, “I love you too.”

“That feels nice,” he hums, his eyes closing as my fingers continue to play through his beard.

I slide off him, curling up against his side with my head on his chest and my fingers still running through his beard. We’re silent for a while, just enjoying the peace.

“What did you want to show me?” I ask eventually, propping myself up so that I can see him.

“Oh, yeah. Hang on,” he says, getting up and I get distracted admiring his deliciously muscled back and ass.

He chuckles as he comes back to the bed with his phone in his hand. He must have dropped it when we got distracted. He

slides back into the bed, and I settle back down on his chest.

“Enjoy the view?” He mutters a proud lilt to his voice.

“Always,” I grin. “Now, what did you want to show me?”

“Elena sent me a video of the twins.” He replies, bringing the message up on his phone and then clicking on the video.

My smile turns soft as I watch the twins babbling away and listen to Dom and Elena talking to them, encouraging them when either of them tries to roll over, and cheering when they do, making the girls grin.

“Oh my goodness, they’re rolling! Look at them, and they’re still so tiny. Clever girls.” I gush, my eyes still on the screen.

“I hope we can see them soon. They’re growing up so quickly.”

“Yeah, babies have a habit of doing that.” I grin. “As soon as it’s safe, we’ll go and see them. They’re quite far away from here, aren’t they?”

“About an eight-hour drive.”

“Oh, so not too bad then, we could get it done in a day and stay somewhere close by.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. As soon as it’s safe, we can do that. I’m not risking leading anyone dangerous to them. Elena’s had her fair share of danger in her life.” Luc says with a frown.

“Of course not. When it’s safe, we can go.” I assure him.

I don’t say that I’m not entirely sure when that will be; it’s not like this is threat is a one-off. This is just the threat that we’re dealing with at the moment. If we carry on down this path, we will always have threats. I suppose that might change if we start officially working for Alaric’s boss. The cases would be less personal that way, but I’m not even sure if that’s possible, and even if it was, it probably won’t be any time soon, which means it could be a long time before we can see Elena and the twins. I guess that’s just how it’s got to be for the time being, and we’re just going to have to get used to it.

At least we don't have any cases planned for the rest of the week, and now that there's the massive media presence at the school and we've been confined to the house, it means that I'll get to spend some uninterrupted time with the guys which is way overdue. I'm looking forward to it.

The last few days have been incredible, and I feel like we finally got to breathe and just enjoy each other's company without some massive threat breathing down our necks. Of course, we still had to do classwork, but with us all working together, we got through it pretty quickly, and we usually got everything done just after lunch and had the rest of the day chill out. I even finally managed to get down to the gym and get a couple of workouts in. It felt good to be doing it without a load of strange guys staring at me. Don't get me wrong, I still got stared at, but it was by my guys, and they weren't the only ones doing the staring.

The guys like to work out shirtless, and I nearly ate treadmill or missed the punching bag multiple times, and each time they noticed. So, in payback, I wore the skimpiest workout clothes I could find, which turned out to be a pair of thigh-length cycling shorts that hugged every damn curve and a sports bra that did very little supporting but gave me a rocking cleavage.

I only did it once before I decided it was too dangerous when Jensen managed to take himself and everyone else out in one full swoop.

Peter decided to come and work with us rather than trying to work at home with his roommates, who decided it was an excuse to start break early.

By Friday, there's still no let-up in the news presence, and the police are still moving the bodies, looking for evidence and everything they need to do at a crime scene of this magnitude. I am incredibly glad that it's Friday, our school work is done, and all we have to do is load up the bags with our stuff, and then we're out of here and off to Peter's dads for the ball.

I can't wait to see what the guys are going to think of the masks and my dress. It's the most girly, extravagant, and over the top thing I have ever worn or owned, and I love it. I never sent Jynx those pictures, and I'm pretty sure I'll catch shit for it as soon as she remembers. She texted me yesterday saying that she was headed to the other side of the country; one of the casino bosses over there was having trouble with one of his employees. Instead of taking them out, D wanted her and the guys to take over completely so he could absorb it into his business. It was going to be a long job, but she'd try and keep in touch as much as was safe anyway.

I told her to let me know if she needed any help and wished her luck. I probably need to tell the guys that I've offered to help her, just in case she takes me up on the offer. At least then they won't be caught entirely off guard; I'm not sure they'd mind but still. I grab my bag and bring it downstairs, placing it by the front door and then going to find the guys to tell them.

Chapter Thirty-Six

“Guys?” I call, not finding them in the regular spots.

“In here!” Trick calls from down, Rage’s hallway, and I follow his voice into the weapons room. “All packed, Sweetheart?”

“Yeah, Peter’s bringing my dress and the masks; he should be here soon,” I reply.

“We thought we’d stock up on weapons just in case we run into any trouble at Peter’s. He’s thoroughly vetted all the employees, but that doesn’t mean that someone won’t follow us there.” Jensen explains as I raise a curious eyebrow, watching as they continue to load weapons into duffle bags.

It looks like they’re preparing for war, and I really hope we don’t get pulled over on the way to Peter’s because trying to explain that amount of weapons is not going to be easy, and I don’t want to end up in jail.

“Fair enough, you can never have too many weapons,” I smirk. I’ve already packed all of the knives that I’ve not already armed myself with. “Jynx messaged, she’s doing a takeover job at a casino for D. I told her to call if she needed back up at any point. She said it’s going to be a long job.”

“Okay, Princess,” Atty replies, still packing weapons.

“Hey, guys!” Peter yells from by the front door.

“In the weapons room!” Cash calls out to him.

“Whoa, are we packing for a war?” He asks as he sees the bags of weapons, echoing my previous thoughts.

“Just in case.” Jensen grins, spinning a knife in each hand.

“Fair enough, you guys ready to go?”

“Yeah, just waiting for the guys to finish arming everyone at the ball.” I laugh.

“Why don’t we take the motorbikes.” Atlas suggests, “I know how much you enjoyed riding the other night, and the weather looks clear.”

“That would be awesome. My mind was a little preoccupied last night to enjoy it properly.” I reply.

“Mind if I tag along?” Rage asks, “It’s been a while since I’ve been out on the bike.”

“Why don’t you all go, and I’ll drive the SUV with all our stuff?” Trick offers. “Peter, I can take your stuff too if you want to ride with them?”

“Oh no, I prefer vehicles with four wheels, thank you very much.” He grins.

“Do you want to come in the SUV with me instead then? There’s no point in us going in separate cars if we don’t have to?”

“Yeah, that sounds fun.” He replies with a smile.

“Are there enough bikes for all of us?” I ask.

“Yeah, Sweetheart, remember we had ours delivered with our cars on the day you got run off the road.”

“Oh, I must’ve forgotten.” I frown. I have no recollection of that, but I did hit my head in that crash, so maybe it just slipped my mind.

“You can ride the one I gave to you the other night, and I’ll use my other custom, Harley.” Rage says with a grin.

“Thank you. I love that bike; it’s beautiful and drives like a dream.”

“No problem.” Rage grins, tucking me under his arm.

He’s got touchier with me over the last few days, ever since he kissed me before I went to deal with the coach, and I’m glad. It really could’ve gone either way, and he could’ve ended up pulling away from me even more. I’m happy that he didn’t.

“Alright, guys, let’s help load the SUV up with all of our stuff, and then we can get going. Peter, do you want to give me

the address so that I can put it into my GPS just in case we get lost?” Atlas asks.

“You mean in case you guys go too fast and we can’t keep up?” Trick asks, crossing his arms over his chest and smirking, amusement dancing in the depths of his eyes.

“There is a slight possibility that may be true,” Atlas smirks.

“Speak for yourself,” I grin, “It’s definitely true for me. Do you think you guys can keep up?”

“Absolutely, Angel.” Jensen winks at me.

“Let’s get going. We need to get to Peter’s tonight even if it is late.” Trick says, trying to stop us from getting even more distracted.

We all grab a duffle bag of weapons each and then make our way to the front door to get the rest of the stuff that’s been piled up there ready to go.

“It’s a good job we’re going on the bikes. It would’ve been a hard squeeze to fit us all in.” Rafe points out as we look at the overstuffed SUV.

“Well, to be fair, that is mostly your fault for bringing so many bags of weapons,” I say, raising my eyebrow.

The guys just grin at me, completely unrepentant. We go back inside to get our helmets and gear, then go around to the garage that I didn’t even know existed and get the bikes.

“Whoa, what happened in here?” I ask, seeing the strewn car parts and several dents in the wall.

“Erm,” Rage starts, rubbing his hand on the back of his neck and looking around at the mess, “Guess I forgot to tidy up.”

“Got you,” I reply, wondering what pissed him off so bad that he caused this. It was probably after his mom messaged. That woman needs dealing with but rather than my usual strike first and make them tremble in fear, this one requires a bit more finesse, something that I am capable of but definitely not one of my stronger qualities. I’ll figure it out but not until Rage gives me the go ahead.

I didn't actually get to see the guy's bikes when they arrived; too excited to take my own out. I'm surprised that there are more bikes in here than there are people, and I'm assuming some of the guys have two, like Rage. There are a couple of sports bikes, a Kawasaki Ninja, and two beautiful Ducati's. The others are all Harley Davidsons, similar to the one that Rage let me borrow the other day and the one that I'll be riding today. All of them have been customised, and they are truly beautiful bikes.

"Who owns the Ducati's and Kawasaki?" I ask as I admire them.

"Jensen's is the Kawasaki, Luc has one Ducati, and Riot owns the other one," Rafe explains, a grin on his face as he watches me admire them.

"We'll ride the Harleys today, though, they're more comfortable on a long journey, and we have a quite way to go." Luc answers.

"Plus, we'll all match then; it'll be like we're a motorcycle club." Jensen grins, and I can't help the giggle that slips out of me.

He is too damn cute.

The other guys all roll their eyes at him, but they're all practically vibrating with excitement. Something in the corner catches my eye, distracting me as I make my way over to it.

"Oh, my poor baby," I mutter as I study the mangled remains of my bike. "Is it fixable?" I ask, my eyes drifting away from my motorcycle and towards the guys.

They all turn to Rage, "Well, there's good news and bad, I won't be able to fix your bike, but I can use some of the parts and build you a new one. So you've still got parts of it with you. The guys mentioned that it was special to you."

I gape at him, my heart hammering. "You'd do that for me?"

"Of course, I would, Puddin'. It's not entirely selfless. I love building custom bikes, and it will be a challenge to incorporate parts of your old bike in with the new one. Obviously, you can

help me design it and all of that if you'd like and tell me what artwork you want on it. I have a guy that did mine, and he's pretty awesome." He explains, pointing to his bike.

"Wow, that is stunning," I exclaim, studying the snarling skull on the side of his tank, different shades of blue flames flickering around it. "I'd love that, thank you, Rage. Can I help build it? I did all the maintenance on my bike myself; I didn't have the money to take it somewhere to get fixed when it crapped out on me, so I had to learn to do it myself. I don't know much, but I'd love to learn more."

"Absolutely, I'd love that. Maybe, when we get back from Peter's, we can make a start?"

"Yeah, that sounds good to me." I grin and then turn to look at all of the guys who are getting their bikes ready to leave the garage, "I want to go out on the dates with all of you when we get back from Peter's too."

"Sounds good, Sweetheart." Trick replies, from off to the side, "We should have the time. Alaric hasn't messaged with any warnings about new jobs coming up. I think he plans to give us a bit of time off after the Chris job."

"Yeah, that's what he said. He's going to be pretty busy making sure that everything lines up and that they have enough evidence to charge him properly." Atlas adds, wheeling his bike towards the garage doors.

"Alright, let's get going." Trick orders, striding towards the doors.

"I can't wait to get out on the road again. It's been far too long since I rode." Cash says, passing me with his bike, and I smile.

I get my bike and wheel it out behind the guys. Swinging my leg over the bike and then pulling the helmet on, I wait for the guys to start their bikes, Trick leaving in the SUV with Peter first.

"We're all linked up so we can hear each other. We won't be able to talk to the guys in the car, though." Atlas says with a slight warning in his tone.

As we pull out, Rage replies, “Why did that sound like a warning?”

“You clearly haven’t heard Jensen’s singing, which he loves to do when we go on long journeys with the bikes. A couple of summers ago, we actually had to mute him; it got so distracting.” Luc chuckles.

“Dude sounds like a cat being eaten by a bear,” Rafe grumbles. His deep baritone voice makes me shiver as it comes through the speakers; damn.

“Hey! My singing is beautiful.” Jensen defends, shooting Rafe a look as he rides next to him.

“Seriously? Do you want to sing, and we’ll put it to a vote?” Riot, says, and even from here, I can see the grin on his face.

“Fine, I won’t sing.” Jensen concedes, and I giggle.

“You realise that all of the news crews are still in the main parking lot, by the school gates.” I point out.

“Yeah?” Atty asks, sounding slightly confused.

“Well, there’s eight of us riding Harleys following a blacked-out SUV. It’s not really going to help us lay low.” I grin.

“Good point, but all of our faces are hidden, thanks to the helmets, and the news crews should be gone by the time that we get back from Peter’s.” Cash replies.

“Well, at least that’s reassuring,” I mutter.

We gather quite a lot of attention as we pass the parking lot to get to the school gate, which is thankfully open. It’s not only the news crews staring, but there are quite a few students getting ready to leave themselves or being picked up by their town cars or limos that are staring too. Of course, they all know who’s likely to be riding the Harleys, there’s fuck all we can do about it now, and as Cash said, they can’t see our faces, and they should be more interested in the bodies the police are pulling out of the ground.

As we get to the gate, having to stop behind a few other cars that are waiting to leave because the car in the very front

seems to have stalled, my gaze catches on Alaric, who looks like he's having a pretty intense conversation with a handsome dark-haired man who is muscled enough that he seems uncomfortable in a suit.

"Who's your uncle talking to, Atty?" I ask, nodding in their direction as we pass.

"That's the Principal, Alaric's always said he's got a connection with him, but that looks more familiar than a formal connection."

"That's the Principal?" I exclaim, "I always pictured him as old, receding hairline and maybe a moustache. Clearly, I was very wrong." I scoff. "How did he even get the job? Isn't he a bit young?"

"I'm not sure. That's probably something that you'd need to ask Peter; he seems to know everything about this place." Atlas replies as we finally pass through the gates and pick up speed.

"Can we conference him in?" I ask, I'm pretty damn curious, and I don't want to wait six or so hours until we get to his house, and I can ask him.

I suppose that we will be stopping for pee breaks and food at some point, but I'm feeling impatient.

"Sure, hang on." Rage mutters.

"Hey, guys, long time no speak." Peter's voice comes through the speakers in my helmet.

"Hey, we just saw Alaric talking to the Principal, who was not what I was picturing at all," I reply, making him chuckle.

"He's hot, right," Peter replies, a smile in his voice.

Several of the guys grunt at his observation, and I roll my eyes chuckling.

"He is," I reply, there's no point denying it. He's good looking. Not my type; I prefer the eight I already have.

Seven, I meant seven, not eight.

“So, you’re wondering how he got the job?” Peter asks, guessing why I called immediately.

Fortunately, that’s something that we have in common; we’re freaking curious as hell.

“Yep, isn’t he a bit young?”

“Technically, he is, but when the founder wrote up the deed and his will, he stated that only a descendent of his could be the Principal of the place. It’s a weird thing to insist upon, but you guys saw the statue garden clearly; the guy was a few marbles short of a run.”

“I’m fairly certain you mixed two sayings then, but I get what you mean.” I chuckle.

“Probably, but anyway, his father disappeared a few years ago. Apparently, he couldn’t hack being the Principal of this place any longer and just up and left. His son was forced to take over, hence why we have Mr young and sexy as a Principal.”

“Couldn’t he just turn the job down?” Cash asks, sounding as curious as I am.

“Not unless he was willing to lose all of his money, the founding Principal may have had a few eccentric tastes, but he was a smart fucking cookie. He tied it all together. The family is practically bound to this building and these grounds.”

“Wow, that’s extreme and a bit weird,” Luc adds in this time.

“You want to research it, don’t you, Sweetheart?” Trick’s amused voice comes through the speakers.

“I do. I’ve wanted to find out more about the original Principal since we found the statue garden. But we have enough mysteries to deal with at the moment, and knowing our luck, it would probably turn into an international incident or some shit.” I joke.

“You’re probably right, Angel.” Jensen agrees.

“We should look into it after we’ve dealt with the Amelia thing. I’d be interested to know more about him.” Atlas

suggests.

There's a resounding sound of agreement, and I grin. They're just as curious as I am. We hang up the phone to Trick and Peter and carry on the journey. Riding my bike gives me a similar freeing feeling to what I get when I ride horses; there's a difference, but riding my bike has always been my escape, and I don't think that will ever change sometimes you need to be able to go fast enough to outrun the demons chasing you and although you can do it while riding a horse, riding a bike will still be my go to choice, in those situations.

The journey to Peter's house is fun as hell. The guys and I take turns racing each other when there are open stretches of clear road, and surprisingly, we don't run into any trouble or cops. Which I was genuinely worried about, not because of being caught speeding but because of the sheer number of weapons in the SUV. I'm not sure how we could reasonably explain that.

It was pretty fun when a group of real bikers drove past us the other way, and the president gave us a nod. I felt like a little kid again, which I know is ridiculous because motorcycle clubs have dangerous reputations, but they also have reputations for always looking after their own, and that's appealed to me. I may also be being influenced by a few of my favourite books. We can't have been in their territory, or they must've known that we weren't a club ourselves because they didn't insist on having a chat or anything like that.

In that situation, I'm not entirely sure which group would come out on top, bikers are known to be ruthless, but we're not exactly sunshine and roses ourselves. It would've been another situation that needed finesse.

By the time we pull into Peter's gate, pausing behind the SUV for them to type in the code, I'm exhausted. The journey was fun, but we only made one stop, and it's been a while since I've been on the back of a bike for that length of time. My butt's started to go numb.

Thoughts of my numb butt immediately fly from my mind as we pull through the giant gates. The driveway is long and

winding. Old-style streetlamps line the driveway at regular intervals revealing, manicured bushes with huge trees set just behind them. I bet if you take a tape measure to them, they would be perfectly spaced.

Behind the trees, I can just about make out vast expanses of manicured lawns, partially lit by the lights, and I can't help but think that if the grounds are this beautiful and expansive, the house must be spectacular.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I slow my bike right down as we round the last bend and the truly magnificent colonial house comes partially into view, night fell a good few hours ago, and I can only just make out that it's colonial and huge because of the lights shining up at the house and dotted around the circular driveway, I bet it is truly stunning in the daylight, and I can't wait to see it. There's even a stone fountain with two fish spouting water out of their mouths, set in front so that cars can go around it and back down the driveway. I knew Peter had money, he had to in order to go to Blackbreak, but this is insane amounts of money.

"Whoa," Jensen mutters through the helmet.

We pull up outside and turn our engines off. I pull my helmet off and stay seated as I look up at the house, familiarising myself with my surroundings, partly for security reasons but mostly because my ass is thoroughly numb.

"This place is amazing." Cash mutters to Peter as he and Trick get out of the SUV.

"Thanks, my dads renovated it. It was falling into ruin, but they saw the potential here and transformed it." He replies with a fond grin.

"Pete!" An excited Shawn yells, throwing open the large front door and rushing down the wide stone case to hug Peter.

"Hey, dad," Peter grins, hugging him back tightly. "Where's pa?"

"I'm right here. I thought I'd let your dad get the first hug. I would've been elbowed if I tried anyway." A man with sandy blonde wavy hair, looking like the classic guy next door, with a twinkle in his eye, makes his way down the steps at a more sedate pace.

He hugs Peter tightly, "It's good to have you home. Introduce me to your friends? I've heard so much about them

from both you and Shawn that I feel like I already know them.” He grins as Peter and Shawn both blush.

I can’t help the quiet chuckle that escapes me. I really like Peter’s dad’s; they’ve both got a mischievous streak in them that makes them seem a lot younger than their forty-something years.

“You must be, Ever,” he says with a friendly smile as he moves towards me, holding his hand out. I climb off my bike and shake his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Sir,” I reply with a smile.

“Please, call me Zeke.” He replies, and I nod.

“Pa, this is Atlas, Rage, Trick, Jensen, Luc, Riot, Cash, and Rafe.” Peter introduces, pointing out everyone.

“Nice to meet you. Come on in. You guys must be exhausted.” He replies.

“Thank you, it was a long journey.” Trick replies.

We grab the stuff out of the SUV, leaving two bags of weapons in the back under Trick’s instruction. I’d guess that he’s left them in there just in case we have to make a quick getaway. However unlikely that may be, it just proves that he’s always thinking ahead. Once we’re all loaded up with bags, we follow Peter and both of his dad’s inside. The inside is grand, with high ceilings and one of those staircases that sweep up from either side of the room and join in the middle; it’s spectacular and already decorated with twinkling lights and dark blue and purple flower garlands. Even though we’re just in the front entryway, and it seems weird to call such a vast space an entryway, I have no idea what the proper terminology is. Anyway, I may not have seen a lot of the house, but just from this area, although large, it feels comforting and lived in. None of this pristine don’t touch anything bullshit that you’d expect from this kind of house.

“Wow.” I can’t help but mutter.

Shawn chuckles at my open-mouthed expression, “Thank you. We’ve started decorating, but there’s still a lot to do tomorrow before the ball.”

“If there is anything we can do to help, please let us know.” Atlas offers.

“Yeah, I’d love to help decorate,” I say with a giant grin, I caught the bug for decorating at Christmas, and I would love to help them decorate a place of this magnitude.

Shawn and Zeke share a look.

“You kids are certainly different than the ones we’ve met from the school. They seem to think that they don’t need put any work into anything or help anyone but themselves, and they’ll still be successful.” Zeke mutters.

“The sad thing is that they probably will be. Half the guys at that school have parents with fortunes that would be practically impossible to spend in a lifetime.” Luc replies.

“Very astute of you, young man,” Zeke says, sounding impressed.

“We’d love your help. We have people coming in tomorrow to help decorate, but we like to do as much as we can ourselves.” Shawn says.

“Awesome. Can’t wait.” I grin and then end it on a yawn.

“Have you kids eaten?” Zeke asks, wrapping his arm around Shawn’s shoulder, they make such a cute couple, and you can tell just by watching them how much they love each other.

“Yeah, we stopped at a drive-thru on the way here.” Cash replies.

“Great, we’ll let you guys get up to bed then. Peter can show you your rooms, and please let us know if you need anything.” Shawn smiles.

We all thank them and then follow Peter up the wide, winding staircase. He shows us to our rooms, all in the same hallway, and we all have our own. This house is vast, and I have a feeling I’m going to get lost before this trip is over. Each room is perfectly decorated in subtle tones and luxurious furnishings. After a brief discussion, it’s decided that instead of hanging out for a bit and watching a movie, we’re going to

go straight to bed, it is really late, we're all tired from the journey, and we're getting up early to help set up for the ball.

I end up snuggled in the giant bed between Riot and Rafe, all of us exhausted and falling asleep within minutes.

The next morning, I wake up super excited, not just because the ball is today and I can't wait to see what the guys think of my dress and the masks that I choose for them, but I'm also excited because we get to help decorate. The shower is freaking awesome, with multiple heads and settings. We're going to have to get one of these installed in the cabin. I've kind of fallen in love with it.

"Come on, come one, come onnnnn." I moan as Rafe and Riot raise their eyebrows at me, amusement dancing in their eyes.

"Hold on, Baby. I'm not sure anyone else would appreciate it if I was walking around without pants on." Rafe grins, pulling on his jeans.

"Oh, but we would." Riot smirks.

"You're not wrong," I say, bouncing on the balls of my feet.

"What's the rush, Sunshine. You're wired this morning."

"I'm excited," I say like it's obvious, and they both chuckle.

"Alright, I'm done," Rafe says finally, and I fling the door open, making Peter jump, his fist raised to knock on the door. He takes one look at me and bursts out laughing.

"Excited?" He smirks.

"Just a little bit." I shrug, making his grin widen.

"Sure, I thought I'd show you to the dining room. This place can be like a maze if you don't know where you're going." He explains, and I look behind him for the first time to see the others standing there looking amused.

"Hey, guys." I grin, waving like the dork I really am and making Jensen snort.

I ignore them and link my arm with Peter. He leads us back through the hallways and down the grand staircase. It's only just gone eight in the morning, and already there are people downstairs bustling between rooms carrying flower arrangements, chairs, reels of twinkle lights, and a multitude of other things that I don't recognise.

Peter leads us past several doors and into a dining room that, although is more extensive than the average house, is smaller than the other rooms that I've peeked in on the way here, more informal and cozy.

"Morning, kids." Shawn greets while Zeke just grunts. "Don't mind him. His first coffee hasn't kicked in yet."

"Morning, Jensen's usually the same," I reply as we take seats at the table that's only just big enough to seat us all.

The guys all start talking with Shawn, Zeke gradually joining in the conversation when his coffee kicks in, and I zone out, looking over all the options. There is an assortment of pastries, fresh fruit, bacon, sausage, eggs, toast, and so much more, some of which I don't even recognise.

I load my plate with a little bit of everything wanting to try it all while I have the opportunity. I also remind myself that we are around company and company that I respect and want to like me so, I make an enormous effort not to stuff everything in my mouth like the starved child I used to be. I actually enjoy it more, eating slower, I get to properly taste it. It is like breaking a habit, though, I keep having to remind myself to slow down.

When we finish, Shawn and Zeke hand out jobs, and we all get up to get started. It feels weird to leave the plates on the table, but Peter assures me that it's okay, so I leave it. I get given the job of stringing more lights with the help of Luc and then placing these giant pillar candles in the ballroom, this place has a freaking ballroom, and I want one when I eventually buy a house.

"Holy shit, this place is stunning!" I exclaim as Luc and I walk through the tall double doors that must be around fifteen feet tall. Each door is made from stained oak and intricately

carved with vines and flowers; they give a tiny hint to the grandeur that lays behind them.

The ballroom is a hive of activity, people bustling around placing flowers, stringing garlands, and setting up tables to one side of the room that I'm guessing a buffet of sorts will be served on. The space is vast enough that in one corner, they're setting up ten tables and the chairs to go with them, and they barely take up any room. The floor is that dark polished wood that's been shined to perfection, and there's an orchestral band starting to set up on a raised platform at the other end of the room.

Zeke told us to place the candles all around the multiple fireplaces in here as well as on any tables and in the holders around the stage too. We brought in two boxes, but there were several more stacked up by the front door ready to be brought in here. We place the boxes down by the nearest fireplace before Luc answers me.

"It really is. I can't wait to dance with you, Firecracker." He grins before grabbing my hand and pulling me to his chest. He dips me in his strong arms, and his lips caress mine in a toe-curling kiss which makes me want to blow this decorating thing off and go back up to my room, despite how excited I was to get it done a second ago.

His grin is proud as he pulls me back up to standing, and I smile at him dazedly.

"So, Firecracker, are you just going to stare at me, or shall we get these candles put up?" He smirks.

I smack the back of my hand against his chest and roll my eyes before muttering and turning around, bending over to get some candles out of the box behind me. When Luc doesn't bend down next to me to help, I look over my shoulder to see his eyes firmly on my ass, so of course, I shake it.

"Are you just going to stare at my ass, or shall we get these candles up?" I ask him with a wide grin.

His eyes don't move as he answers me, "Definitely stare at your ass, Firecracker. What candles?"

I burst out laughing at his reply and stand up, shoving the candles I gathered into his arms. “Come on. You can perv while we decorate.”

“Perfect.” He grins, making me giggle again.

I gather some more, and we set to work. The others are all in different parts of the house, so it’s not until much later, when the sun is starting to dip down behind the horizon, that I see them again. The ballroom looks truly beautiful, almost like it’s the scene of a fae ball. The navy, silver, and deep purple theme adds an air of mystery, coupled with the delicate twinkling lights and candles. The whole place looks magical. Excitement fills me as I think about the masks that Peter and I choose, they’re going to work incredibly well. I’m sure that no one else will have masks quite like ours. They’re a bit edgier than the traditional ones. I think that just makes it better.

“Hey, Baby,” Rafe grins when he sees me. He’s covered in dust as is, Rage, and I have no idea what they could have been doing. I sink into his chest as his arms wrap around me.

“I thoroughly enjoyed decorating, but I’m exhausted now,” I mutter, my voice muffled by Rafe’s chest.

“Me too. I can’t wait to see what masks you’ve chosen for us, though.” Rafe replies, kissing the top of my head and making me smile as warmth fills my chest.

“We can always leave early if you get too tired later on, Sweetheart.” Trick offers, and I finally turn my head so that I can smile at him.

“Deal,” I reply simply, moving my head.

“Can we start getting ready yet?” I ask Peter, “I want to show the guys their masks.”

“Yeah, actually, we need to hurry up. The guests will start arriving soon.” Peter grins in reply.

My smile widens, and I barely manage to hold in my squeal of excitement. “Is it all in your room?”

“Yeah, come on.” He replies, “I’m actually really looking forward to seeing their reactions.”

“Why does that make me slightly nervous?” Jensen mutters as we quickly make our way back up the grand staircase, dodging people as we go.

“You’re going to love them.” I promise, “At least I think you will.”

“Well, that’s reassuring, Princess.” Atty grins, and I stick my tongue out at him.

“Is the whole house open to the guests?” Rage suddenly asks, a frown on his face when I look back at him.

“No, the stairs will be roped off, and there will be two guards on the opposite staircases. No one will be able to go upstairs.” Peter reassures him as he opens the door to his room.

“Great.” Rage replies, his eyes exploring Peter’s bedroom in interest.

“Here you go, Sugar, I left them all in the boxes so you could give them to the guys,” Peter says, gesturing to the piles of boxes on his bed. “Marty already delivered the extra one.”

“That’s great. Thanks,” I smile gratefully, “Okay, don’t look until I’ve given everyone their boxes.” I instruct.

Trick grasps my waist as I make my way to the boxes, pulling me towards him; he nips my lips, his tongue taking advantage of my gasp and pushing past them to tangle with mine. I moan quietly as his hands clench on my hips, my fists pulling at his shirt. When he pulls back, I try to follow him, wanting more, and he grins, making me pout.

“What was that for?” I ask, slightly breathless.

“I love how happy you are.” He replies simply, his fingers brushing across my cheek and tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. My heart swells as love almost overwhelms me. “Come on, show us these masks.”

“Masks, right.” I reply, stepping back from him and going to the boxes.

I hand them out to everyone, a nervous smile breaking free. I really hope they like them. I nod that they can open them.

Giant grins cross all of their faces when they see the black masks with horns inside.

“Wow, this is so fucking cool.” Jensen grins, carefully pulling his out.

“Excellent choice, Princess.” Atty compliments.

“Thank you, Atty.”

“Alright, everyone, go get changed. The guests should be arriving soon.” Peter orders, shooing us out of the room.

Before he closes the door, he shoves the dress bag in my arms with a grin, “I think that masks went down well.”

“Thank god, I was getting really nervous towards the end,” I admit.

“I could tell,” he says with a smile, “If you need help with your hair or anything, give me a text, I know you want the guys to see the completed look.”

“Thanks, I should be okay, though. I’m just going to curl my hair and pin up the sides, it’s simple enough that even I can do it.” I grin.

“That will look stunning with the dress.” He calls after me as I make my way to my room with a grin.

I don’t need to take a shower since I took one this morning; my hair has been up all day, though and since I put it up wet and because it’s so long, it means that when I take the bun out, my hair is still wet. Fortunately, I’m starting to get used to this girly thing now, and I remembered to pack a hairdryer. I strip down to my underwear, just to save on time since my hair is going to take the longest, and I’m rather fond of walking around without any clothes on. Laying my mask and dress out on the bed and taking a brief moment to admire them, I then set to work on my now butt-length hair.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

My hair took longer than I expected, and by the time I'm finally done, I've not only threatened several times to get it cut off, but to get a pixie cut too. I know I'm running behind now, so I quickly put my makeup on, grabbing the mask and crown and placing them carefully on my head, making sure that they're sitting just right.

It only then occurs to me that I still have to put my dress on, and I can't pull it on over the top of the mask and crown without ruining the placement that took me ages to get right. I walk back over to the bed and study the dress, it comes with a massive black petticoat that I hadn't seen in the store, but it makes sense that it comes with one, I obviously don't need to put that on over my head, so at least that's some good news. I carefully pick up the dress to get a better look. The top part of the dress is corseted, which makes me think it's going to be pretty damn hard just to step into and do it up myself, but as I study the dress, I find a hidden zip at the side that means that I should be able to step into it, like I hoped. At least I really hope so because I didn't try it on at the store, so I have no idea if I can or not.

Keeping everything crossed, I pull my blood red strappy high-heeled sandals on, figuring that it's probably easier to put them on before I put the dress on, and then decide that it's perhaps easier to pull the dress on first and then put the petticoat thing on last. It's most likely the wrong way to do it, but if it works, then I'm counting it as a win. I breathe a sigh of relief when it slides on easily. Doing the zip up, I grin when it fits me perfectly. I want to take a moment to admire it, but I really am running out of time, so instead, I grab the petticoat. As soon as I have it in my hands, I realise just how big it is and briefly wonder how long it's going to take until I get fed up of wearing it.

It's more complicated than I thought to pull it on underneath the full skirts of the dress and settle it comfortably around my

waist. Note to self this sort of thing is a two-person job, when I've finally got it settled, I fling out the skirts, trying to settle them over the top, and then spin so that I can make sure the dress completely covers the petticoat.

I feel like a motherfucking princess.

Before I get a chance to look in the mirror, there's a knock at the door.

"Angel, we've got to get downstairs," Jensen calls through the door, and I quickly make my way over to it, pulling it open.

Walking in such a big dress is weird.

"I'm ready; sorry, my hair took longer than I thought it would," I say, looking down at the dress.

When no one replies, I look up and smirk at the dropped mouths and heated eyes that are staring back at me. My smirk drops as I get a good look at them. They look absolutely amazing; all of them are wearing matching suits, with black shirts, the top buttons undone, and their masks give them a mysterious and dark look that has me clenching my thighs in anticipation.

"Fuck." Riot groans, his eyes heated behind his mask and running up and down me, leaving a searing path in their wake.

"Couldn't have said it better myself." Atty agrees with him, "You look absolutely breathtakingly beautiful, Princess."

"Thank you. You look hot as fuck." I grin not nearly as eloquent in my compliment as he was, but it makes them all chuckle, "All of you do, and for once, I actually do feel like a Princess." I add.

Jensen stalks towards me, his eyes practically on fire, his lips caress up my bare shoulder and neck towards my ear, and my eyes flutter closed.

"All I can think about is ripping this dress off you and pinning you against the wall, kissing you all over, teasing until you're begging me for release, and then when you can't take it anymore, thrusting inside your tight pussy until you're

screaming my name.” His voice is hoarse with desire, and my panties flood at his words. Holy fucking shit, that is the hottest fucking thing he has ever said to me.

“Fucking hell Jensen, are you trying to torture us all.” Cash groans, his eyes glued to us. He takes a step forward.

“He’s fucking succeeding if he is.” Rage groans, and my eyes snap to his face, he just smiles one side of his mouth lifting up in an attractive grin as he shrugs. He’s not taking it back, and he’s not pretending he didn’t say it.

Progress.

“As amusing as this is, I’m not sure how I’ll explain to my fathers that you’re all up here fucking instead of attending the ball that you spent all morning helping to set up.” Peter interrupts the guy’s forward advance, amusement colouring his tone and a massive grin on his face.

Trick has managed to get the closest to me and buries his head in my neck. Thankfully because of the positioning of the horns on his mask, he can do it without jabbing me. He groans and nips me, making my knees buckle slightly. He steps back, straightening his jacket, Jensen doing the same on the other side of me.

“Alright, let’s do this,” Jensen says like he’s psyching himself up. “Next time, I think you should warn us, give us a chance to prepare.”

“Agreed,” Rafe growls.

“You guys are hilariously cute.” Peter chuckles, “I think you need help, though before you really do start something in the upstairs hallway, and I have to have an awkward conversation with my dad’s.”

He grins as he wades through the guys surrounding me, all of them having edged even closer, and threads his arm through mine, pulling me down the hallway and towards the stairs. As we get closer to the main staircase, the noise level increases, and I can hear the band playing an upbeat but classical song.

Most of the guests are already here, but there is still a few still arriving, which is reassuring because I would absolutely

hate for us to arrive late, and everyone turn to stare at us when we walked in. As it is, we still get quite a few looks because of the amount of us, and I'm guessing our masks.

A woman in a fire engine red, orange, and yellow dress, looking like dancing flames as it flows around her, heads in our direction. Her mask is stunning, feathers the same colours of the dress, the gems, and glitter glistening in the dim lighting of the ballroom.

"Ever, Peter. I see your mask arrived safely." Marty says, her gaze drifting behind Peter and me to look at the guys. "My, you have quite an entourage." She grins, winking at me.

"I do indeed." I chuckle before adding, "I love your dress. It's stunning."

"Thank you. It's a Marty's own." She winks before someone calls her name, "Must dash, people, are demanding my attention."

"See you," Peter says, but she's already spun in a whirlwind of fire coloured fabric and is disappearing through the throngs of dancers and people mulling around.

Now that she's gone, we move out of the way of the door and off to the side, Peter flags down one of the waiters carrying around trays of champagne, and we each take a flute. I keep a sharp eye on the ones carrying trays of canapes. I absolutely want to try one of those. As my eyes drift around the room, I get my first good look at the other guests.

I am pleased to see that I'm not overdressed; I was slightly nervous about that, despite Peter's reassurances. There's an eclectic mix of mask styles; some are full faced masks, some have huge headdresses attached, which look heavy as hell, and I'm sure will be taken off before long, but others can barely be classed as masks and those people I can recognise. This is obviously a high-class event because there are several high powered and famous people here. From a quick glance, I can see several actors and actresses, a couple of Politian's, musicians and even some people from our school.

“You know it makes me slightly nervous not seeing everyone’s faces,” I mutter.

“I know what you mean, but if it’s any consolation, they won’t be able to tell your identity either,” Peter replies, glancing around the room.

The waiter comes back and replaces our glasses of champagne with fresh ones. I’m not even surprised anymore that we’re being served alcohol despite not being old enough.

“Care to dance, Princess?” Atlas asks, his eyes dark behind his mask.

Rage shoots him a surprised look, and although it makes me curious, I place my hand in Atlas’s outstretched one, passing my drink to Peter, who smiles encouragingly.

“I hope you know how to dance to this type of music because I don’t have the faintest idea,” I mutter as he leads me out onto the dance floor and straight into the middle of the dancing crowd.

He winks, but there’s a nervous edge to his grin as he replies, “Just follow my lead, Princess.”

I nod, and he gently places my hands where they should be and then starts to move me effortlessly around the dance floor, my eyebrows hit my hairline, and my mouth drops as he gives me a cheeky grin. Spinning me around the room like he’s done this a thousand times before.

Holy fuck, Atlas can dance, like properly dance. Out of all the things I have learned about him, this has to be the most surprising.

My skirts swish around our legs as we move, and when the song finishes, he seamlessly leads me into the next. As we dance, his smile turns from a nervous smirk to a breathtakingly handsome smile, and I can’t keep my eyes off of him. When the second song comes to an end, he slowly dips me, following me down and placing a tender and soul-consuming kiss on my lips.

“I love you, Princess.”

“I love you too, Atty.”

He slowly pulls me up, and I turn beet red as applause sounds around us. We were so wrapped up in our own world we hadn't even noticed that we had gained an audience. We make a hasty exit off the dance floor as it begins to fill up again, and another song starts. Once the attention is off of us, I squeeze Atty's hand, making him look down at me.

“You're an amazing dancer. How do you know how to dance like that?”

“Remember I told you that my dad insisted on doing functions to show off his power and wealth?” He asks, and I nod, “Well, he especially liked hosting balls. He insisted that Blake and I knew how to dance properly. I never saw the point of it back then and vehemently hated the lessons, but I had no choice but to do them. My father is not someone you say no to. I think I get it now, though; I might even have to thank the bastard when he finally decides to talk to me. I loved having you in my arms; it's like the rest of the world ceased to exist at that moment.”

“It really was. Thank you for giving me my first proper dance. It was absolutely perfect.” I say sincerely, pausing so that I can kiss him, before adding, “I hope you realise that now I know you can dance like that. I'm going to want proper lessons.”

“I think I can live that, Princess.” He replies just as we get closer to the guys he lowers his voice, a conspiring grin on his face, “You know, Rage can dance that like that too.”

“He can?”

“Yep, after I met him, I made him come to lessons with me. I figured my torture should be his torture.” He admits, and I burst out laughing.

“Maybe I can convince him to dance with me,” I say quietly.

“I'm sure it won't take much convincing, Princess.”

“That was great, man, I had no idea you could dance like that.” Jensen grins, smacking Atlas on the back.

“A perk of living with a father who insists on showing off his power with themed ball dances.”

Over the next hour or so, we talk, drink and eat. I finally got my hands on the little canapés going around on the trays and I barely restrain myself from pinching the whole damn tray. They are that good. All of the guys take turns in dancing with me, and Atlas was right. It didn't take much convincing for Rage to dance with me; in fact he asked me. So far, this evening has been truly magical and easily a thousand times better than the last dance I attended.

We're all laughing and getting another drink; since I've been dancing non stop and feel like I could drink the freaking fountain and still be thirsty; when I see someone tall, dark, and definitely handsome approach us, I can't make out much of his face apart from his strong jaw line and piercing green eyes. Eyes that are focused on Peter's back, before I can mention it, the guy taps Peter on the shoulder and then moves around him, Peter's wide grin falls as soon as his eyes land on the stranger.

“Eli?” He asks, his voice strangled with emotion.

“Hey, Pete,” Eli replies, clearing his throat but doing nothing to hide the emotion it.

Peter just stares at him, and I gently touch his arm. His other hand comes up, laying on top of mine and grasping it tightly, panicked eyes meeting my own.

“Hey, I'm Ever.” I introduce with a wary smile. “These are the guys.”

“Hey, erm.” He never takes his eyes off Peter, and there's a longing in them that starts to clue me in on who he is, “I'm Elijah, Peter's ex.”

Well, fuck, the one that broke his heart and who hurt Peter bad enough that he burned memories of him when I had the bonfire burning of my skinny jeans.

“What are you doing here?” Peter asks, finding his voice and still gripping my hand tightly.

The guys are watching the exchange closely, ready to step in if anything goes sideways. Peter's one of us.

“We may not be ...” He trails off, starting again, “Our parents are still friends; your dad’s invited us like usual.”

“Yes, but you haven’t come for the last two years.”

“I wanted to see you.”

Peter gulps, “Why?”

Elijah studies his face closely, his eyes running over Peter’s face like he’s committing it to memory, my intuition pings, and I hope I’m wrong.

“I ...” He starts.

“Elijah, come on, we’ve got to go.” Another guy around our age comes up to us, there’s a sense of urgency in his tone, and it puts me on edge.

“Now? Seriously?” Elijah snaps, a hardness coming into his eyes that reminds me of, well us. “Fine. I’m sorry, Pete.”

He pulls a frowning Peter into his arms, holding him tightly for a few seconds before letting go abruptly and turning on his heel, walking away without a second glance.

“Are you okay?” I ask into the silence.

“No,” Peter replies honestly, and I pull him into my arms and squeeze him tightly.

“It will all work out,” I promise him. It’s clear that Elijah still has feelings for him, and Peter obviously still loves him.

“Thank you.” He replies, pulling back and clearing his throat. “There’s something wrong. I know I haven’t seen him for a couple of years, but I’ve known him for all of my life; something is going on.”

“Do you think he needs help?” Trick asks.

“He almost seemed like he was saying goodbye because he never expects to see me again, but that wouldn’t make sense because, as he said, our parents are friends, we will see each other,” Peter says, his frown prominent even behind his mask.

“Do you want to look into it?” Atlas asks, seriously.

“Maybe, I’ve just got a weird feeling. I’ve never seen that guy before, and they weren’t behaving like a couple or anything like that. He could be just a friend from school, but I don’t know. I can’t explain it; it’s just a feeling.”

“Always trust your gut.” Cash says seriously, “If it’s telling you that’s something is off, then something probably is.”

“We can put it on the list and look into it.” Trick tells him with a sympathetic smile, “But we will be doing it as a team, don’t go rogue for all you know he could be into something really dangerous, and if you go in blind, you could end up in danger. That’s an order.” He adds seriously.

“Got it. I wouldn’t anyway. It feels like something that he might need us all for.” Peter replies easily.

“Good, we’ll get it sorted. Don’t worry.” Trick nods, tension easing from his posture.

“Hopefully, it turns out to be something that we can easily help out with, and if it’s anything more serious, we’ve got the knowledge to deal with that too. Can he hack like you can?” Riot asks curiously, already trying to think of reasons that he could be in trouble.

“No, he can’t. He knows a bit but not much. That can’t have gotten him into trouble. I can’t really think of much,” he mutters as he stares at the floor, his mind clearly going a mile a minute, “I mean, he fights. Like MMA, he’s absolutely amazing and was being scouted, but his parents didn’t want him to go down that career path. They were happy for him to have it as a hobby but nothing more than that.”

“Maybe it’s got something to do with that?” Jensen asks.

“Yeah, maybe. Let’s leave it for now and enjoy the rest of the night. We can talk about it tomorrow.” He suggests, downing his champagne.

“Okay. We’ll get to the bottom of it.” I reassure him, and he smiles softly in thanks.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Guys, I just got a text from Alaric.” Atlas says, changing the subject, he looks around, making sure that no one is standing too close, and then continues, “He says that they’ve found evidence on the bodies and in a couple of the graves that links Chris to the bodies and links Marv to them as well. Chris will be going away for a long time.”

The guys look at me worriedly, and I shrug.

“We knew he was involved, and it’s not a shock. The only thing that it would affect is that everyone would know that I’m the daughter of a murderer, but thanks to having to go into hiding and changing my last name, hopefully, no one will easily link us anymore.” I tell them all.

“You’re right, it’s nothing we didn’t expect, and I doubt anyone will be able to make the link to you, but we just worry.” Rafe points out.

“I know,” I reply, wrapping my arm around his waist and laying my head on his shoulder. My feet are really starting to hurt in these heels now, thanks to all of the dancing.

“At least that’s sort ...” Atlas starts but stops halfway through his sentence as he looks down at his phone.

“Everything alright, man?” Trick asks.

“I don’t know. Liam’s just messaged, told me to call him immediately. It’s important.” He replies with a fierce frown.

“Come on. It’s too loud in here; we can use my dad’s office. It’s a few doors down the hallway, we’ll have more privacy in there.” Peter says, starting to move through the crowd, and we all follow.

“What the fuck could Liam want all of a sudden?” Rage asks as we move into the hallway.

“I don’t fucking know, he’s ignored all my fucking calls, and now he’s demanding that I call him. I’ve got half a mind

not to do it.” He replies, his expression dark. Now it’s quieter we all hear when his phone buzzes again, Atlas has barely clicked on the message before it buzzes again, and I raise my eyebrows, “On second thoughts, it looks like he really wants to get hold of me, those were all from him, and he’s writing another one.”

“Fuck, this can’t be good,” Jensen mutters as Peter lets us into the office. It shows how much trust his dad has in him that he knows the code. Of course, knowing Peter, he could probably just hack it somehow anyway.

Before Atlas can hit call, the phone starts buzzing in his hand. “It’s a video call.”

“Make sure you have something in the background that can’t give away our location.” Trick points out. “I know that we don’t think he’s a threat anymore, but we still don’t want him to know where we are.”

“Good idea,” Atlas replies, lining himself up so that there’s only a blank wall behind him and clicking accept.

“Fucking finally.” Liam’s voice comes over the speaker.

“You didn’t even give me a chance to call you.” Atlas points out drily.

“I don’t have time for this,” he replies, sounding agitated and I share a look with guys, “I assume that everyone is there with you?”

“Yes,” Atty replies shortly, his body taut with tension.

“Ever too?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” I reply when Atlas just looks at me.

“Good, I need all of you to listen closely. I’m going to have to go to ground. Blake has gone completely off the fucking rails; he’s become too dangerous even for me. Atlas, you cannot let him take over the business. I can’t do it again; I don’t have it in me to stop another psycho from taking over.”

It shocks that hell out of me and the others that Liam is asking for help from Atlas. He’s asking us to do what we

planned to do anyway, although I'm pretty certain he isn't factoring that we're going to legitimise and disband it.

"What do you mean, another psycho?" Atlas asks, a confused furrow between his eyebrows.

"Blake reminds me of my brother," Liam replies, and I can't help but scoff.

"Alaric is nothing like that psychopath." Atlas growls in his defence.

"Not Alaric, my other adopted brother."

"What?" Atlas asks, unable to hide the shock decorating his features, and I'm guessing he didn't know his dad had another adoptive brother.

A bad feeling starts to churn in my gut.

I hear the heavy sigh that comes from Liam, and the guy's faces become grave.

"This is a long and complicated story, but I guess if I have any hope of convincing you to help me despite the fucking shitty job I've done at being your father, you deserve to hear it for more reasons than one."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Atlas asks; it's thrown him having his dad admit to being a shitty father to him and making sure that I stay off camera. I thread my fingers through his, squeezing his hand tightly.

"Just listen," Liam orders, and Atlas nods, "Before my parents adopted Alaric, I had another adopted brother, only a few months separated us in age, my parents wanted us to be close to run the business together. His name was Marvin."

"No fucking way." I hiss, moving closer to the Atlas so that he can see me too.

"Yes, Ever." Liam confirms, his eyes meeting mine, "Alaric doesn't know about him, before you think that he's been hiding things from you as well. After Marvin distanced himself from the family, my parents got rid of all the photos, mementos and banned anyone from talking about him. He was dead to them and me. Which meant that by the time they

adopted Alaric, he was erased, it was only occasionally that he was mentioned in passing, but we called him Vin, never Marvin. In the year before they adopted Alaric, Marvin hadn't fully distanced himself, I spent a lot of time with him and Amelia; I assume that you know by now that Amelia is your mother?"

I nod, my throat clogged and unable to speak. His face changes from slightly bored, anger flashing in his eyes.

"Good, well, me and Amelia got closer, we had been talking anyway, but as soon as he left Blackbreak and started attending functions, I saw her a lot more. Your father is a jealous and dangerous man. He resented her for being close with me but refused to let her go. That was the catalyst for him abandoning the family. Before I could do anything, he had taken her, and using his own connections, effectively disappeared." Darkness and pain flash through his face as he grimaces, remembering what happened.

As much as I hate to admit it, you can see how much he cared for Amelia. The guy's eyes are wide with shock as we all listen to what he's telling us. I have a feeling that this isn't even the half of it.

"Years passed, and under the orders of my father, who you didn't go against unless you wanted to end up dead, I left them alone, and I didn't search. Although I hoped that he had turned to a normal life, I knew that he was too dangerous, craved blood and destruction too much to ever live a normal and mundane life." Once again, his eyes meet mine, and Atlas's hand clenches around mine tighter, "Ten years ago, things changed. My father had died, so had your mother Atlas, and I had been in charge for a year, as soon as I took over, I started putting feelers out on their whereabouts, I just couldn't let her go even after all that time. It wasn't long until I got word through some of my connections that Marvin had resurfaced and put someone into the human auctions. My connection said that he was bragging that she was extremely docile, he'd broken her in nicely, and that he was faking her death, poisoning her slowly so that she appeared to be getting sicker and sicker, to make sure that no one would ever come looking

for her, the poison would be out of her system within a month without the regular doses, and she would be back to normal. He was many things, but pride and his need to brag had always been his downfall. My connection handed me the catalog of humans up for auction. As soon as my eyes landed on the photo of my Amelia, beaten and gaunt, looking barely alive, I was consumed with a dark and all-consuming rage.”

“Fucking hell.” One of the guys mutters in the background as I just stare in shock, my stomach threatening to reintroduce me to all of those yummy canapés I’ve just eaten. They will not be pleasant coming back up.

Liam ignores the interruption and continues, his eyes staring off into the distance, “I knew that if I had any chance of saving her, I had to make sure that he was distracted. He was far too unpredictable and dangerous to risk him finding me talking to her. He’d kill everyone he could get his hands on, including her, and I just couldn’t fucking risk that. So, I called in a favour and set up a deal with someone I know he’d been trying to get in with for a while. Once I was sure he was gone and would be for a while, I went to the house.”

His eyes become haunted, and his face pales, “My god, what I found in that house still haunts me to this fucking day. He clearly had no idea what he was fucking doing because he was poisoning her, like I said, but you just had to look at her to know that it was actually killing her. He was doing it so that everyone around her thought that she was dying of cancer, and the only reasoning I could see behind him wanting to do it? Literally just because he wanted to make a few fucking bucks off of her.” He spits, his eyes narrowing in anger.

“Oh my fucking god,” I mutter brokenly.

“She begged me to help, and of course, I couldn’t refuse her. I love her, I always have, and I always fucking will.”

Atlas’s hand clenches around mine, and I press my side against his tightly, trying to offer him comfort. I can’t take my eyes off of Liam.

“We had time, so I made a plan with her there and then. I fucking hated it, but she insisted that I didn’t just take her right

then, Marvin would always come after her, and she didn't want to live life on the run. I finally agreed that it was probably better if Marvin thought that she was dead. I made some calls, and a doctor that I have on my payroll could get his hands on a drug that will lower a person's heartbeat so that it's barely detectable. It was set up that I'd come back in a few days with the doctor, and he'd inject her. We'd intercept the EMTs who picked her up and bring her back to one of my safe houses, where she'd have around the clock care to recover. We had a decoy body, and she'd written in her will originally that she wanted a closed casket.

"We had just finished, and I got up to start putting everything in place. There were a lot of favors I needed to pull, and I could only use my most trusted men, which left me with few options. Anyway, as I got up to leave, in you wandered, the cutest little thing I had ever seen, only a year or so younger than Atlas. You were absolutely adorable and silent as you studied me with a frown on your face. It took a good five minutes, but you eventually decided that I passed because you took my hand and pulled me back towards your mom. Looking up at me with those big eyes of yours, you said, 'You're going to save her.'" His eyes connect with mine again.

"I don't remember that," I whisper.

"I didn't think you would. There was no question in your words; it was a statement. Somehow you knew I was going to save your mom. I wanted to take you with us, it would make the plan more complicated, but my mind was already spinning with at least five ways that we could make it work. Your mother, though, knew the kind of life I lived. She knew how dangerous it was and that it was no place to raise a child." Liam's eyes drift to Atlas, a stark apology in them that makes Atlas swallow thickly, looking away and unable to meet his father's eyes.

"She refused to let you be a part of it. Instead, we made a plan to take Marvin out soon after your mother's death, when she first wrote her will when she started to get sick, she made sure to put in that in the event that both she and Marv died,

you were to go to any of her friends, she listed them all. It absolutely broke her to do it, but she knew that you would be safe and grow up normally, surrounded by people who would love and protect you as if you were their own; after all they already did that.”

“So how the fuck did I end up where I did then?” I growl, anger, fear, and sadness all warring for space inside me.

“He vanished with you. I couldn’t send people to kill your father when I had no idea what would happen to you. He also managed to pull the same disappearing act that he did before.” Liam explains, “It wasn’t until a few years later that I finally found him and you. It was too risky to remove you, he fought every legal attempt that we made, and I couldn’t work out why he was trying hard to keep you when it went against everything else that I knew about him. By this point, he was also extremely prominent in the criminal world in Fresno, and taking him out would’ve had consequences that we couldn’t risk. It would’ve started a war that no one would’ve gotten out of unscathed. I wasn’t going to give up, though and while we were trying to work on other things to get you out, I disguised myself so he wouldn’t recognise me, and neither would any of his men, and checked on you as often as I could. Your mother fought me every single time, but all it would take was one person to recognise her, and it would all be over. She absolutely hated it and still blames herself that she couldn’t get you out, that you had to live with that monster and what he must’ve put you through.”

“She doesn’t know?” Trick asks from the background, having picked up on the same thing I did.

“No, she doesn’t know the details. I haven’t told her. She knows that you didn’t have a great life, but I refused to tell her anything else.”

A knock on the door interrupts us.

“Stay quiet.” Atlas orders.

“You kids alright in there?” Shawn asks.

“Yeah, dad, just getting a breather. We’ll be out in a minute.”

“Okay, just a heads up, we’ve had some trouble with people sneaking around on the top floor. Security has dealt with them, though but it’s probably a good idea to check your rooms and make sure that nothing was taken.”

“Okay, thanks, dad. We will.” Peter replies, a frown on his face but his tone light and breezy for his dad.

“That can’t be good.” Cash mutters.

“One thing at a time,” Atlas says, nodding to Liam to continue.

“Where was I?” He mutters, “Right, the more I found out about you though Ever and the longer that I knew you, the more it became clear that you weren’t afraid of the monsters in the dark like you should be, you were surrounded by them, but you didn’t fear them. I’m sure at some point you must have but not anymore. You thrived in the dark, and you lived for it.”

I start to squirm before my mask falls into place, turning features cold and my eyes hard, he knows. But like a train headed for collision, there’s no way to stop this now.

“Which brings me to my final point and the reason for this call, I’m running out of time. I have to get your mother to safety before Blake tries to take her from me again and take me out at the same time. I know you have questions, and I will answer them but only when we have more time.” He takes a breath, his eyes meeting mine, and Atlas looks between us with a furrowed brow, the other guys all moving closer to me as they see the change in my face and my body tenses.

“Ever?” Trick asks cautiously, and I ignore him.

Liam does too as he continues, “Blake is not going to be an enemy that is easily defeated. We’re going to need your skills Ever; we’re going to need Shadow.

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About The Author

Nikita Parmenter

Nikita Parmenter lives in England, with her four children and two puppies. Coffee and cinnamon buns are what keep her going. Her characters all have a special place in her heart and quite often, enjoy throwing her curve balls that send the plot line in a completely different direction than she had originally planned, and she loves it! Not as crazy as it sounds, she promises. She writes Paranormal Reverse Harem, Contemporary Reverse Harem, and has a Reverse Harem Bully Romance in the works too. She loves writing strong, take no sh*t female characters, that have become that way through fighting tooth and nail to survive. She also loves writing damaged alpha males with hearts of gold buried underneath all their jagged edges. Connect with Nikita via her Facebook page Nikita Parmenter - Author or Instagram [nikitaparmenterauthor](#).

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