



WRECKED

CRASH & BURN BOOK 2

EMMA B. BROOKS

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Copy Editing by L&L Literary Services, LLC

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-957405-16-2

First Printing, 2022

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my family for all the love and support you give me.

To Lori Todd for always being there for my questions of *What do you think of this?* and slapping me back when my idea would upset my readers.

For L&L Literary Services for your great work.

And to all my readers. Without you, none of this would be happening.

TERMINOLOGY

- **Flashlight Start:** When the race is signaled by a flagger turning on a flashlight.
- **Burnout:** Performed to heat the tires up for better traction, by spinning the rear tires, often producing smoke and tire skids.
- **The Bump Box:** A device to assist in the staging process known as “bumping in”.
- **Bump In:** Staging the car before the start of the race.
- **Jump:** Leaving before the flashlight is turned on (false start), usually resulting in an instant loss.
- **Crossing the center line:** Going into the other racer’s lane, usually resulting in an instant loss.
- **Bang[ed] the light:** The act of turning the flashlight on to signal the start of the race
- **Trans-brake:** A mechanism that selectively places the transmission in first and reverse gears simultaneously, effectively holding the race car stationary until the switch is released, allowing the driver to start the race with the engine already in the higher power band and the transmission already in low gear.
- **Tree’d:** Getting off the starting line first without jumping.

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CHAPTER ONE

The sun shines down on me, the wind whipping past, as I ride Serenity back home. It feels good to be back on my bike after so long.

With the vibration of the engine beneath me and the open road ahead, I can finally embrace my new life, something I wasn't sure I'd be able to do seventy-two hours ago, when Dom, Mav, Nick and I set out on a mission to rescue my cousin Cin. She's my best friend and the only family who's stuck by me in life, so when none of the adults around me would listen when I said she was in trouble, we took it into our own hands to make sure she was safe.

And damn, am I glad we did.

After forcing our way into my uncle Brett's house, we confronted my horrible step-family and discovered my worst fears were right. My step-aunt, Brenda, knocked Cin down the stairs to the damn basement, where she laid, delirious and in pain. Cin's lucky she didn't break her neck.

When Nick brought her out of the darkness and placed her on the couch, the look on his face matched how I felt. We both wanted to kill Brenda for what she did. I wasn't too happy with my uncle, either.

He spent so much time at his garage he was blind to what was happening under his own roof. He trusted every lie Brenda told him, and it almost cost Cin her life.

I know Brenda had a hand in forcing him out of the house for such long hours every day. She wanted things he couldn't

afford without working his fingers to the bones. We finally forced him to see Brenda and her kids for the evil they were, though, and it left him riddled with guilt about not seeing the signs that were right in front of his face.

I went there willing to take Uncle Brett's garage away from him, if that's what was needed for him to finally come around, and the Knight brothers were there to enforce it. While I'm glad I didn't have to go through with the threat, I would have done anything to get Cin out of there.

Cin spent time in the hospital but is now back home with her dad, and they're making amends, while Nick, Dom, Mav, and I are on our way back home.

Home.

I've only thought of one place as home, and it's always been Uncle Brett's. But now, I'm slowly starting to think of Peter's place as home. I'm still not sure if I'm going to stay past graduation, but things are looking up.

The exit off the highway comes up, and I quickly glance back, making sure the guys' SUV is still following me.

Mav waves out the window, and warmth fills my chest. I don't know what I did to deserve the affection of the Knight brothers, but they're a big part of what's helping me to settle into my new home.

Excited, I open the throttle and shoot farther ahead of the guys, racing toward the house to beat them.

Soon the business buildings give way to mini-mansions, hidden among the trees on each side of the road. I turn into a neighborhood with a sign announcing *West Court* and pull into our driveway.

Even at a standstill, my body vibrates, and I rev Serenity a few times before I shut her off.

Still straddling the bike, I pull off my helmet and shake out my hair.

"Holy shit, Shelby?" a voice calls, and I glance over to see Luke jogging over from the house next door. "I thought you

were Cam! Didn't know you rode."

"I've been riding for years." I pat my bike affectionately. "Serenity's been sitting in a storage unit in Westridge. My crew brought her and Devil back to me."

Seeing Ricky, Mark, and Billy again was great. I've missed them almost as much as I did Cin. I can't wait until the pool party we planned, so I can spend some time with them.

Seeing Little Devil's crumbled remains made me realize how close I came to being seriously hurt. I spent my youth building Little Devil and lived in her for some time after I ran away from my foster home. It devastated me to see her looking like a pile of junk. I hope Cin can salvage some of her parts and add them to the new car.

"Crew? Devil?" Luke scratches his head. "What the hell did I miss?"

The rumble of an engine stops my answer as the guys pull up in their SUV.

Mav hops out. "That was hot as fuck watching you ride."

As he picks me up and twirls me, I wrap my legs around him, kissing him senseless.

Nick climbs out of the back of the SUV. "Hey, Luke."

"Hey, how did the trip go?" Luke asks, but I feel his eye on me the whole time.

"Mav, we have to go!" Dom yells from inside the SUV.

Mav lets out a growl and pulls his lips from mine, setting me on the ground. "Riding gets you all horny, does it?"

I wiggle my eyebrows and smirk.

He slumps and looks back at the SUV, where his brother waits impatiently. "Do we have to go?"

"Get in the damn car!" Dom commands.

Mav stomps off, muttering something about stupid parents.

I run around to the driver's side, throw open Dom's door, and climb into the cab to kiss him with the same level of

passion Mav got.

“Good, now you’ll be as hard as me,” Mav complains as he gets into the SUV.

I chuckle and shake my head. “Thank you for driving me down there. Text me later?”

Dom touches my cheek gently. “I’m glad things worked out the way it did. And my brother’s right, it’s hot as hell watching you on your bike. One day this week, we need to go for a ride.”

“Deal.” I kiss him again, then peer over at Mav. “Thanks for a fun weekend.”

He winks. “Anytime.”

I shut the door and walk over to where Nick and Luke are talking.

As I near, Nick says goodbye to Luke, waves at me, and heads inside.

Luke looks down at his feet, kicking the dirt. “You still mad at me?”

He blew up when Dom and Mav whisked me away on our rescue mission without telling the others. I missed Cam’s race, too, but Luke took it personally and let me have it. I apologized, since we had plans and I was in the wrong, but because he hasn’t let it go, I ended up hanging up on him.

I shove my hands into my pockets, doing a little dirt kicking of my own. “I wasn’t mad before. I understood what you were feeling, but continuing to yell at me wasn’t going to change anything. I now know that, if I leave town, I need to let you know. But you have to understand, too, Luke. I’ve been on my own for a long time. Even when my mom was around, I was still on my own. I’m not used to having to tell people where I am.”

He moves closer and brushes the hair away from the side of my face.

I place my hands on his hips, and I gaze up into his cocoa-colored eyes. “I did miss you, though.”

“I missed you, too.” He leans down, his lips claiming mine and showing me in his kiss how much he cares for me.

I’ve begun to realize I haven’t spent a lot of time with Luke. While I’ve been alone with both the twins and Cam, I haven’t had any one-on-one time with him.

When he pulls away, he gives me a sweet kiss on my forehead. “It sounded like things worked out.” He pulls me tight against his muscular body. “I’m glad.”

“So am I.” I hug him back. “There are two important things I need to tell you. One, we’re having a huge pool party this coming Saturday. You’re invited, of course. And two, I’d like to go on a date, just the two of us.”

“Pool party sounds fun.” He absently rubs his finger up and down my spine in a relaxing motion. “As for the date, I’d love to go on one with you. I also need to tell you that my mom wants to have you over for dinner.”

Instantly, my body goes rigid. Parents. Shit, they don’t usually like me.

Luke laughs. “Relax. It’s just my parents.”

“Yeah, okay.” I gulp. “No big deal.”

His nose scrunches, and he cocks his head to the side. “Can you tell me who the crew is? And this Devil thing?”

“Yeah.” I pull out of his arms and catch his hand. “Let’s go sit down on the wall while I explain. Afterward, I need to go inside. I still have some homework, and I’m sure my mom wants to talk to me.”

We stroll over to the stone wall that lines the house and sit on it, hand-in-hand, while I explain who my crew are and about what happened to Devil the night of the accident.

He gives a little gasp that sound like a laugh. “You’re the driver of Devil?” He scrubs a hand through his toffee-brown faux-hawk. “I bet Dom was shocked to find that out.”

“He was. I feel bad I don’t remember the time I raced against him, but I’ve been in so many.” Letting go of his hand,

I bend one leg and put it on the wall, turning to face Luke. “Why does it surprise you that I race? Is it because I’m a girl?”

“I’m not surprised that Little Devil’s driver is a girl. I already knew that. Besides, I’ve always been a firm believer that girls can do anything guys can.” Smiling proudly, he touches my knee. “It’s just a shock to discover I’m dating someone famous.”

I shake my head in dismay. “I’m not famous.”

“The Hell you’re not.” He grips my knee, shaking it. “You’re one of the top street racers! A year ago, they did an article about you in Burn Out.”

“I had no idea the magazine did an article on me.” My brows pinch together. “Don’t they need my permission to print something like that?”

Luke shrugs, unsure of the answer. “It was a small article, mostly about how you kept your identity a secret. It didn’t come out until you were in the top five in the state. It included your stats, and there was a picture of you sitting in the driver’s seat with a helmet on while your crew were leaning against the car.”

I freeze at hearing there was a picture of the guys and me, and my breathing picks up. Luke thinks I hid my identity because I’m a girl racing in a man’s world, but that’s not the case. I’ve been hiding from a psycho.

Was that him in the other car that hit me? Did he find me from that picture?

“Shelby?” Luke touches the side of my face.

I jump and knock his hand away, instinctively defending myself before reason catches up. I take a couple of deep breaths to calm myself. He doesn’t know where I am. I’m safe.

I glance over at Luke’s concerned face. “Sorry.”

“What was that?” His black lashes flutter against his cheeks, unsure of himself. “You turned white as a ghost.”

I’m not sure how to answer his question. I can’t come out and say I’m hiding from a crazy person.

“I just remembered a race I almost lost.” I swish my hand in the air. “Don’t worry about.”

I’m not a good liar. Please, just let it go.

I give him my best fake smile. “You’ll get to meet the guys and my cousin on Saturday at the pool party. They’re all coming down.”

He accepts the change in subject. “Do they know you’re dating four guys? Should I expect to defend myself?”

“Cin knows.” I scrunch my nose in consideration. “I *think* I told the guys? But don’t worry, they won’t do anything, or I’ll kick their asses.”

Luke laughs. “I’d like to see that. I’ll let you get your homework done.”

He helps me down from the wall and gives me a mind-blowing kiss that makes my insides all gooey before sending me into the house.

“Shelby, is that you?” Mom asks from the kitchen.

I close the front door. “Who else would it be?”

“I don’t know.” Exasperation fills her voice. “I haven’t heard a single thing from you since you called to say Cin was okay. I tried to call you, but it went to voicemail.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.” I step into the kitchen to find her leaning on the kitchen island, a tablet in front of her. “My phone died, and I didn’t have my charger.”

She rolls her eyes. “I guess the others didn’t have their cell phones?”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat. “Things went down quickly, and I just didn’t think of calling you.”

“Don’t do it again,” she huffs out as she straightens. “Now, tell me what happened.”

We move to the living room and sit down on the couch while I tell her everything that went down.

Dammit, I'm running late for school.

I didn't set my alarm, and Nick woke me up when he didn't see me in the kitchen. I tell him to go without me, now that I have my own wheels once more.

I rush around, getting dressed and skipping breakfast as I run out the door, leaping onto Serenity.

I make it to school in record time, and when I pull into the parking lot, I spot the guys standing around Nick's truck.

As I cruise closer, I see Cam pointing to the empty seat in Nick's truck, saying something to Nick.

There's a small spot beside Nick's truck, and I aim my bike for it.

Every eye turns toward me as I pull in. Everyone except Cam knows it's me, and he only has eyes for Serenity. I stop and put down my kickstand, he walks around my bike, intrigued.

Grinning, I take off my helmet and shake out my dirty-blond hair.

Cam's chin drops, and he stands there, staring at me, while Mav laughs hysterically.

Cam falls to his knees and stares up at me with his blue eyes. "Marry me, beautiful."

Face, neck, and ears heating with a blush, I swing my leg over my bike. "Get up, Cam."

"Holy Hell, you look hot on that bike," he states as he stands.

"You should ride behind her for an hour." Smiling, Mav adjusts himself. "Once wasn't enough."

Cam slides his arm around Mav's shoulders. "I can believe it, bro."

Secretly beaming on the inside that I can turn my guys on so much that coming once isn't enough, I hold my helmet out to my stepbrother. "Can you lock this in your truck?"

The next few days go smoothly, since most of the Barbie Squad's not around after most of them got suspended for cheating on their homework.

Mom keeps me busy getting ready for the pool party, so I don't get the chance to plan my date with Luke, but we reschedule dinner at his house for next week, so I can meet his parents.

Every time I think about it, I feel sick. They're used to seeing Luke date girls like Hannah. Thin, beautiful, and cheerleaders. Now, Luke will bring home a girl who's curvy, with mousy, two-toned hair who loves to race anything on wheels. They're going to hate me.

Every time I bring it up to Luke, though, he tells me I'm being overdramatic.

I push aside my worries for now. I can only deal with one thing at a time and, first, comes the pool party.

Peter bribes Hannah into helping Mom and me out by telling her she and her friends can come to the party, but she's still grounded after.

I don't want her friends to come, since they're the ones who helped her with all the shit she did, but I just kept my mouth shut. Most of the people there will be my friends, so I don't have the right to say anything. If the cheer squad causes a problem, then we'll talk.

On Wednesday, the guys leave halfway through the day for an away game. They planned to be back late that night.

My phone dinging pulls me from sleep, and I grab it off my nightstand. The clock on it says it's one in the morning, and I have a message from Dom.

Dom: Our bus broke down. Don't know when we'll make it home, so don't worry if we're not in class tomorrow.

Shelby: Everyone all right?

Dom: Yes.

Dom: A few heads smacked the windows, some people got tossed around, but we're fine.

Still groggy and half asleep, I send a thumbs up and put my phone down, falling back to sleep.

On Thursday morning, I'm not too concerned when I don't see Nick in the kitchen since I have my own ride now.

When I arrive at school, Paige tracks me down right away. "Have you talked to any of the guys?"

"I got a text from Dom saying their bus broke down," I tell her, only half remembering the conversation.

Paige's eyes widen. "It didn't break down. Someone hit it from behind. One player had to go to the hospital with a broken bone." She shudders. "Sam got a cut above his eye and bruising from the bus flipping."

"Wait, they flipped?" Grabbing my phone, I scroll through my texts.

Yep, nothing about flipping. Why didn't Dom tell me? I just thought the bus blew a tire, and they got jolted around. What happened to not keeping secrets from each other?

Instantly, guilt shoots through me. How can I be pissed that they didn't tell me all of the truth about the accident when I'm withholding a big, dangerous secret from them?

"Just onto its side," Paige hurries to add, shifting her backpack. "Sam said no one is seriously injured. The rumor mill is going crazy, though."

"Oh, I can just image." I roll my eyes. "Let me guess. They flipped because the cheer squad wasn't there."

Her mouth falls open. "How did you know?"

"Are you serious?" I demand. "I was joking."

“Another good one is that the Lancaster Wolves paid someone to hit them.”

“Where do people come up with these ideas?” I stuff my phone back into my pocket. “Are you still coming to the pool party? You’re bringing Sam, right?”

“Yes, but I’m not swimming.” She touches her flat stomach. “No one should see me in a swimsuit. You’ll all run away screaming.”

I spend the rest of the day trying to convince her that she’s not fat and needs to swim with everyone else, since it’s a pool party.

CHAPTER TWO

Mom and I thought it would be better for people to arrive in small groups, so we gave them all different times to show up.

Paige and Cin will be first, and I'm super excited to have my two best friends meet. Hopefully, Cin and I can talk Paige into a swimsuit because I still haven't convinced her.

When the doorbell rings, Mom yells from the kitchen, "Honey, can you get the door?"

I race to open it and find Paige standing on the other side, holding a large bowl with plastic wrap on it.

"Glad you could make it." I point to the bowl. "What's that?"

"It's my mom's homemade potato salad. Mom says *it's polite to bring something to a party*," she mimics in a motherly tone.

I shrug and motion for her to follow me.

We head into the kitchen, where Mom and another lady hired to help out are working on the food.

Mom glances up. "Paige, it's good to see you. You didn't have to bring anything, but thank you."

Paige sets the bowl on the counter. "It's my mom's potato salad. It's one of my favorites. She figures, since there are going to be hungry boys, they could eat you out of house and home."

“So true. It shocked me how much Nick ate. I was used to Shelby’s appetite.” Mom shakes her head. “Make sure to thank your mother for me.”

Paige smiles shyly. “I will, Mrs. Tate.”

We leave Mom and head down the hallway to my room, where I open my door and we step inside.

Paige surveys the room, her eyes falling on the big bay window with its brightly colored pillows that line a bench meant for hours of reading. “Wow, this is amazing.”

“I’m getting used to it. Mom did the decorating.” Some days, this all feels like a dream, and I’m going to wake up and be back in our small trailer.

The doorbell rings, snapping me out of my daydream...or nightmare.

“Come on, that has to be my cousin. I can’t wait for you to meet.” I jog down the hall and open the door.

Cin stands on the other side, her head tipped back as she takes in the small mansion. She still looks thin. The bruises haven’t quite faded, but she stands with her spine straight and her shoulders back. Uncle Brett hovers behind her, looking less worn down than he did when I left him a week ago. I hope that means he took time off to be with Cin during her recovery.

“Come on in, both of you. Uncle Brett, Mom’s in the kitchen.” I wave for him to go into the living room. “It’s just through the archway.”

As Brett wanders farther inside, Cin stops next to me and pulls me into a hug. “You said rich, but holy Hell, this house is huge.”

“Wait till you see my room.” I close the door and find Paige waiting behind it with her head down.

Why does this girl have her head down all the time? She needs a major boost of confidence, and Cin is the perfect person to help her out.

“Paige, this is my cousin Cindy, but we call her Cin,” I say in introduction. “Cin, this is my best friend, Paige.”

“Heard a lot about you in the last week.” Cin gives her a confident smile. “Thanks for befriending her.”

“She’s the one who befriended me,” Paige says in a low voice, her head still down.

“Girl, put your head up, and you don’t lower it for anyone.” Cin glances at me. “We need to work on her confidence.”

I nod and turn toward the kitchen. “Mom, Uncle Brett and Cin are here!”

“Brett, it’s so good to see you,” I hear Mom say, and I step over to peek into the living room.

Uncle Brett’s mouth drops open when he sees his sister for the first time in years. “You look great, Patty.”

He steps forward, his arms opening, and they hug.

When he pulls back, he stares at her in amazement. I can only imagine what he’s thinking. It took me a while to get used to her looking the way she does, too. She’s a far cry from the addict who ditched me at his house and vanished for years.

Then, Peter joins them, and Mom makes the introductions.

I back away from the living room and glance at my friends. “Let’s go to my room.”

I take them the long way back to my room so we don’t have to pass the adults.

“Where’s Nick’s room?” Cin asks, peering around.

Cin and Nick bonded after he carried her out of the basement and during her stay at the hospital. I’m happy to hear her asking about him because I’m pretty sure Nick has a crush.

Hannah yanks open her door to glare out at us. “Why the Hell do you want to know where my brother’s room is, trash?”

Well, nice, helpful Hannah didn’t last long. She’s back to her old self. I haven’t seen much of her today, but I figured she’d show her ugly face sometime.

Cin steps up to Hannah, staring her in the eyes. “Let me guess. You must be Hannah. I’ve heard a lot about you, none of it good.”

“Hannah, this is my cousin, Cin,” I say dryly.

“Great, another slut in the house,” she sneers. “Stay away from my brother, or I’ll make your life a living hell.”

Cin doesn’t back down; she won’t back down. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Come on, Cin.” I pull her into my room, Paige following, and I shut the door behind them.

“Nice person. She’s everything you said she was and more.” Cin looks around. “Damn, this is your room? It’s bigger than our whole apartment.”

“Mom decorated it from something I told her when I was four or five.” I take in the massive canopy bed and sitting area with a cream-colored couch and chair. “I’m getting used to it.”

I sit on the bed, and Cin and Paige sit on the couch.

Cin thumbs toward Paige. “Does she ever talk?”

“She’s shy.” I glance over at Paige, whose cheeks are tinted pink. “Hannah and the Barbie Squad were bullying her and making her do their homework until I showed up.”

Cin nods in understanding. She’s been bullied and seen her fair share of others being bullied. “You know, whatever they do to you, you’ll survive, and it will make you stronger. Did Shelby tell you she was as shy as you were once?”

Paige gasps, her eyes bounce between Cin and me as she shakes her head.

I tell her a bit, but not all the horrible shit that happened to me. To tell the truth, not even Cin knows all of it.

I tilt my head to the side, peering at Cin from under my lashes. “Paige’s tormentors might be here today, along with the guy she likes. She decided that she’s not going to swim with us because the Barbie Squad told her that her hips are too wide to be a cheerleader.”

“Whatever. They’re stupid bitches.” Cin waves her hand around. “You have a suit for her somewhere in this massive castle, right?”

“I already stashed one in my room for her,” I say as I go to grab the one-piece from my closet and bring it out.

Paige goes white, shaking her head.

It takes the next twenty minutes to convince her to put it on, and she looks good in it.

“Sam will be drooling when he sees you,” I tell her.

I give Cin another one of my suits and put on the only one I have left, which is a two-piece. I felt like being brave today.

We put on shorts to walk around in before heading out to the pool area.

To the left of the pool is the lounge area, where a beige, L-shaped sectional faces the water. On the other side are swivel chairs sitting around a glass table with a green umbrella shooting out of the center.

Uncle Brett and Peter talk over at the grill.

When Mom notices us, she heads over.

“Cindy, wow, you’re so grown up.” She touches her chest, then raises it to her mouth. “You look so much like your mother.”

Cin’s head jerks back when she first sees mom. Like Uncle Brett, she hasn’t seen my mom in years. The last time was when Mom came out of rehab and looked like death.

“Aunt Patty... Wow. Shelby told me how good you looked, but...” Cin stares at my mom in disbelief.

Mom chuckles. “Every day is a challenge, but I’m making it through.” The doorbell rings. “Shelby, why don’t you get that?”

When I get to the living room, Nick’s already at the door, opening it for guys.

Cam's the first one to see me, and his eyes widen as he bites his bottom lip.

"Damn, girl, you look hot," he says, strolling over and wrapping his arms around me, giving me a kiss.

When he lifts his head, I smile up at him. "Hey."

Mav joins us and pulls me out of Cam's arms. "Hey, sexy."

"Hi, Mav." I rise onto my toes to kiss him.

Then, I turn and kiss Dom and Luke, too, before I take Luke's hand and we all walk out to the pool area.

Paige and Cin are in the lounge area, talking, when we step through the glass doors.

Cin's head snaps up, and she smirks at Cam and Luke. "I guess this is the rest of the harem?"

"Stop it," I hiss. "Cin, this is Luke and Cam. You know the rest." I turn to Luke and Cam. "This major pain in the ass is my cousin, Cin."

Cam nudges Nick. "You got a live one there, buddy."

Nick's cheeks turn red. "Hi, Cin."

She winks at him. "Hey, gorgeous."

I fan myself. "I'm suddenly feeling hot. How about we hit the pool?"

The guys all agree, and they take off their shirts.

I stop mid-unbutton. Holy Hell, there are sculpted chests everywhere I look.

I stand there, drooling, until Cin heads over and bumps into me. "You got something there." Laughing, she points to the corner of my mouth.

I whisper, "Bitch."

She's not paying attention to me, though, as her eyes move to Nick as he takes his shirt off. She moans at the sight.

Paige hangs at the back of the group, looking self-conscious.

Cam strolls over and whispers something to her. She blushes and takes off her shorts, then he slips his hand into hers and walks with her to the pool.

Just then, Sam walks around the back of the house. When he sees Paige, he does a double take.

“Hey, Sam, perfect timing. We’re going to swim. Are you joining us?” Cam asks.

Eyes never leaving Paige, Sam drops his bag and takes off his shirt and shoes. Then, he walks over to her and kisses her cheek.

Well, if Paige needs a confidence boost after that, there’s something wrong with her.

We all jump into the pool, having a great time splashing and dunking each other.

A hand suddenly wraps around my waist and pulls me up against a strong body, and a mouth nibbles at my neck.

Mmm.

“I miss you,” Mav says as he bites my ear lobe.

Smiling, I twist to stare up into his onyx eyes. “You’re acting like I don’t get to see you every day.”

He smiles back, displaying dimples I never noticed before. “It’s never enough time, babe.”

Suddenly, we both go under the water, and I come back up, gasping for breath. I swallowed too much water on that one.

“Sorry, beautiful,” Cam laughs. “Didn’t mean to have you swallow half the pool.”

“Wright, you’re going to pay for that,” Mav says, pointing at Cam. “I challenge you to a game of Chicken.”

Chicken? What the hell are they talking about? What is Chicken?

Luke comes up behind me and holds me. “You looked like you were getting tired.”

“I was, thanks.” Being so short, I can’t touch the bottom, and treading water tires me quickly. “What’s Chicken?”

When Luke explains what the game entitles, it sounds interesting.

“How are we going to do this?” Mav asks. “There aren’t enough girls.”

“We’re more than glad to help,” Hannah purrs as she steps through the sliding glass door, followed by Carrie, Maddie, Liv, and Jenna.

I groan and rest my head on Luke’s chest. I was enjoying the party, and she had to ruin it. I hoped they wouldn’t show up. Everything was so perfect.

Peter narrows his eyes at his daughter. “Hannah, remember what we talked about.”

“Yes, Daddy, I remember,” she says sweetly, but the look in her eyes says something completely different. She turns and looks at us in the pool. “So, who’s teaming up with who?”

Luke rolls his eyes. “Oh, this is going to be fun.”

“Give us a few minutes to get organized, and we’ll let you know,” Nick says. “I’ll take Cin. Sam, are you taking Paige as your partner?”

Sam wraps his arm around her. “Yep.”

She shakes her head, whispering in his ear. She doesn’t want to do this, but Sam’s an alpha male and won’t back down from a challenge.

“Rock, paper, scissors to see who’s going to partner with Shelby,” Dom says shrugging. “It’s the only fair way to decide.”

“Hey, don’t forget us!” Ricky says, diving in and popping up beside me.

Mark walks into the backyard, his arm around a thin guy with bleach-blond hair who’s checking out all the beautiful male eye candy in the pool. His hand flies to his chest, his eyes bouncing from one hot bod to the next, not sure where to rest.

Billy joins them, a brown-haired girl beside him.

I hug Ricky and wave at the others. “Hey, guys!”

“Shelby, Cin, it’s so good to see you both again.” Amber smiles at us by the side of the pool.

“You, too, Amber. I see you’re still with big goof ball over here.” I push Ricky under the water.

Mav and Dom have already met my crew, so I introduce them and Amber to the rest of the guys.

“Are we going to do this or not?” Hannah interrupts, then turns to Carrie and says, “Great, more trash from West Ridge.”

“I think Kirk and I will stay out of this,” Mark says, taking a seat under the umbrella and hauling Kirk onto his lap.

“All right, back to rock, paper, scissors for Shelby?” Mav says.

“Oh, God. Really?” Carrie takes off her shirt and shorts, exposing a bikini that barely covers her.

Dom’s nose crinkles. “Carrie, put on a shirt or something. We don’t want to see that much of you.”

She turns to show off her body. “You used to like this suit when I wore it.”

“*Used to.*” He swivels back to the guys. “Let’s do this.”

They all stand in a circle, and Dom counts, “One, two, three!”

Mav shouts, “Bomb!”

“That’s cheating!” Dom argues. “Bomb isn’t part of rock, paper, scissors!”

“Don’t be a poor loser, Dom.” Mav tries not to laugh as he pulls me into his arms. “Come here, partner.”

“You’re going to pay for that, bro,” Dom growls through gritted teeth.

“Dad, are you and Patty going to join us?” Nick asks with a jovial smile.

“No, son. You and your friends have fun. Patty and I will be the judge and referee,” Peter says.

The look on Hannah’s face is priceless. She thought he wouldn’t be paying attention to us. That he’d be too busy. They’re up to something; I can feel it.

The rest of the people pair up. I knew some of the guys would end up with the Barbie Squad, but I still have to bite my lip to keep my mouth shut.

“Okay,” Peter calls out. “First challenge is Nick and Cin versus Paige and Sam.”

Everyone else jumps out of the pool to sit on the side.

Peter walks to the side of the pool. “Okay, here are the rules. Ladies are the only ones fighting. Men, you’re just the support and muscle. You must keep your hands on your teammate’s legs. Ladies, there will be no nail scratching or hair pulling. First one to fall into the water loses. Everything else is fair game. I’ll tell you when to go, so get your partners mounted.”

While Peter pulls up a chair by the pool and sits down, Cin climbs onto Nick’s shoulders and balances herself. As Paige gets on Sam’s shoulders, she blushes like crazy and wobbles a bit.

The Barbie Squad makes comments about her, and I turn, giving them an icy glare.

Cin smirks from her perch. “Okay, shy girl. Let’s see what you got.”

“You can do this, Paige!” I encourage her.

They put their hands together, and the game starts.

It’s not long before Paige goes under, and part of me thinks she fell on purpose.

Laughter and name-calling come from the Barbie Squad.

Peter tells them to be quiet before he announces, “Nick and Cin are the winners! Their next challenger is Shelby and Mav!”

CHAPTER THREE

As Mav gets ready to sink under the water for me to mount up, I lean forward and whisper in his ear.

An evil smile forms on his face before he ducks under.

I quickly straddle his shoulders, and he rises out of the water. It takes me a few seconds to gain my balance, and by then, Cin and Nick are ready.

“Are you two ready to lose?” Nick taunts.

“Bring it, bro!” I reply cockily.

“Go!” Peter shouts.

We go at it for a while as I try to find a way to knock Cin off without resorting to plan B. Cin and I used to be the same strength, and with my broken arm only just out of the cast and Cin still recovering from her fall down the stairs, we still are. Neither of us are budging.

If I want to win, I’ll have to do something devilish. I give Mav the signal that I’m going for plan B.

He moves closer to the other team, and I free my hand from Cin. As fast as possible, I lean over and run my finger down Nick’s side, where I know he’s extremely ticklish.

When he arches his side away from me, I grab Cin’s arm and pull her the same way Nick leans. She loses her balance, and they both topple into the water.

The crowd around the pool goes nuts.

Mav wades to the side of the pool with me still sitting on his shoulders, and we stride down the length of the pool, giving everyone high fives as we go.

Nick smiles as he pops back up. “That’s cheating, little sis.”

I hold my hands up. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Mav reaches up and grasps my waist, lifting me over his head to set me down in the water. “That was all her idea. All’s fair in the game of chicken.”

“Okay, the second round goes to Mav and Shelby. Who’s up next?” Peter looks around the edge of the pool where everyone sits.

“I’ll go! Who wants to be my partner?” Luke asks.

I roll my eyes at the dumb question. Who does he think will want to be his partner?

I grit my teeth as Hannah jumps up and down and shouts, “Me!”

Before he can protest, she slides into the pool. Luke curses, then lower himself into the water so Hannah can mount up.

As he rises out of the water, she leans down until her breasts press against the top of Luke’s head. “Just think of how it would feel if you were really between my legs.”

He shivers, his face clearly twisted with disgust, but Hannah can’t see his expression and takes it as a good sign.

It makes me want to go over and bash her face.

When I take a step forward, though, Mav stops and whispers, “Don’t. We’ll get them in the game.”

I turn my back on them and glance up at Mav. “I have a plan, but you might get hurt.”

When I tell him what I want him to do, he glares at me. “You want me to do *what?*”

“I want you to get close enough to kiss Luke,” I repeat. “That will distract him enough for me to push that bitch off.”

“You’re trying to get me killed.” He shakes his head. “Let’s go.”

Instead of ducking under water, he lifts me back onto his shoulder, and we head to the center of the pool. Luke grips Hannah’s legs as he walks over to join us, and she smirks at me. She total enjoys having her legs around my man, and it makes me sick.

As Hannah and I glare at each other, Peter goes over the rules again before he shouts, “Go!”

We grasp hands, but she barely tries to topple me. Luke uses his body to give Hannah leverage, but all she cares about is rubbing herself against him.

Doesn’t she care that her dad is right there? Who am I kidding? She doesn’t care about anyone but herself.

She’s going down.

I tap Mav to move ahead with my plan. I feel his head shake, but he gets as close as he can to Luke, then stretches out his neck, bringing his face close to Luke.

Once Luke realizes what Mav’s intention is, he arches away from him.

This is precisely what I want him to do, and I take advantage to shove Hannah. She flips right off, and Luke falls backward into the water because he’s already off balance trying to get away from Mav.

Hannah pops back up to the surface, screaming, “You ruined my hair!”

Luke ignores her as he surfaces and heads straight for Mav. “What the hell, man?”

Mav quickly puts me down and backs away, his hands up in the air. “It was her idea.” Mav points to me, then jumps behind my back to use me as a shield.

“You cheated!” Luke snaps.

I just shrug, smiling coyly. “Sorry, Luke. All’s fair in the game of Chicken.”

Everyone else laughs, and Mav kisses my cheek. “You’re unbelievable.”

“I hate losing,” I say with a big smile. “Plus, Hannah needed to go down.”

Hannah sneers at me as she comes closer. Her hair hangs in her face, and her make-up runs down her cheeks.

She shoves me. “How dare you push me into the water?”

“Hannah, the whole point of the game is to push your opponent into the water. If you didn’t want to get wet, then you shouldn’t have played,” Peters says from the side.

Hannah ignores him as she gets right up in my face, keeping her voice low so Peter can’t hear. “Everything is your fault. If you never showed up, things would be like they are supposed to be. Dom would have gotten back together with Carrie, Luke would finally realize he loves me, Jenna could have started dating my brother, and Liv could have dated Camden. But no, you came to town, and everyone’s trying to please you. Even my dad has changed! What makes you so fucking special that everyone falls in love with you? All I see is a low-class whore.”

“Ladies, is everything all right?” Peter asks, watching us closely.

“Everything’s fine, Daddy. I’m just congratulating Shelby.” She smiles sweetly at her dad.

Was that supposed to intimidate me? I lean closer to her. “You don’t scare me, Hannah. You mean nothing to me. And I didn’t make the guys leave your group. They didn’t want your skanky asses anymore, so go fuck yourself.” I shove on the top of her head, dunking her back into the water.

Mav, who still stands behind me, is the only one who hears the exchange, and his hand covers his face so no one can see that he’s laughing.

Hannah comes up sputtering, her eyes burning with hatred. She shoves me out of the way as she wades out of the pool.

“Okay.” Mav rubs his hands together. “So, who’s next?”

“I’ll go next.” Dom’s muscular body slides into the water.

Carrie slinks in right after him, cooing, “Then, I guess that means I’m up.”

I groan. I don’t know who I dislike more, Hannah or her. Carrie thinks she’s so superior to everyone else.

As Carrie glides through the water toward Dom, he ignores her and leans in to kiss me. For a few minutes, I forget about her and everyone else.

When he lifts his head, he says, “Don’t let her ruin your fun, Firefly.”

He swims to his side of the pool to meet up with Carrie, and she rubs her body against his. When he gets her up on his shoulders, she grinds her privates against his neck while, at the same time, running her perfectly manicured nails through his hair.

My vision turns red; I want to rip her head off.

“What do you have planned for this match?” Mav asks me, staring over at his brother. “I’m not doing that kissing thing to my brother.”

I lick his ear, making him shiver, and whisper, “I bet if it was Cam you would, huh?”

He scratches his head. “Cam told you, huh?”

“Yeah, I think it’s hot as Hell.” I wink at him. “No tricks this time. I want to beat this bitch.”

“Damn, you’re hot when you’re mad.” He lowers into the water so I can get up on his shoulder.

Across from us, I catch Carrie kissing Dom on the cheek.

I growl. Aww, Hell. That bitch is going down.

When we all stand in the middle of the pool, Peter asks, “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Carrie and I say in unison, not taking our eyes off each other.

“Go!” he shouts.

Instantly, she tries to bend back my left hand. She knows my broken arm only just healed, and she’s fighting dirty. It hurts, and any normal person would cry out in pain, but I bite the inside of my cheek and twist my arm out of it.

She sneers at me, and we lock hands again.

Now, it’s my turn to test her flexibility. I need to find out what I’m working with. Dom isn’t even trying to keep her on his shoulders. He barely holds onto her legs. I push her to see how far she’ll go back without his assistance to stay mounted.

She twists herself back up like I knew she would. “I’m a cheerleader, you dumb bitch.” She kicks Dom on his side. “Are you going to try here or what?”

This time, when we come together, we grab each other’s forearms. We’re reasonably evenly matched. She’s more flexible than me, but I’m stronger. A couple of times, I almost topple over before I catch my balance.

The crowd around us goes nuts.

She pulls me hard toward her. “You know, Hannah’s right. You’re trash, and you don’t belong here. You’ll never fit in. You’ll never keep up with their sexual appetite. Dom likes it daily, Mav’s even worse, and Cam likes variety.” Her eyes narrow, and a vicious smile forms on her lips. “Plus, once they know why you ran away from the group home in Ashdale, they’ll leave you for sure.”

I gasp leaves my mouth, and I freeze as the blood drains from my face.

She’s lying. There’s no way she can know what happened in Ashdale. There are only two people who know why I left that group home.

The corner of her mouth curls into a sneer.

What happens if she’s not lying? Does that mean Roger is back? I feel his clammy, rough hands squeezing the life out of

me, and my chest tightens to the point that I'm sure my heart can't beat anymore. I'll lose the guys if they find out.

The thought of never seeing them again makes me sick. My breathes come out in fast pants. No, no, not now. I haven't had a panic attack in years.

I tap Mav's shoulder, trying to get him to take me over to the side before I fall, but he doesn't understand. As my vision starts to fade, I grab my chest and gasp for breath.

Carrie notices my panic and takes the opening to use her foot and kick me.

As I fall into the water, everything goes black.

Someone pushes on my chest, and I suck in air. Disoriented, I feel forced onto my side, and I cough out all the water I swallowed.

Mom's worried voice reaches me. "Oh my God, Shelby, honey, are you all right?"

"Should we call an ambulance?" Cin questions.

"I'm a doctor. I think she just panicked and swallowed some water," Peter explains. "Let's get her comfortable, and let her rest for a bit."

I feel my body lifted from the cement next to the pool and a moment later, I settle onto a soft surface.

I crack my eyes open far enough to see that I'm now in the lounge area of the pool before I curl up and close my eyes once more, breathing hard.

I'm so embarrassed I had a panic attack in front of the guys. I can't believe I let that bitch get to me. I need to find out how she knows about Ashdale. Dammit, now I'll have to explain this to the guys. To top it off, the way I reacted revealed to Carrie that it's a weakness.

“Beautiful, can you hear me?” I hear Cam say as he removes my hair from my face. “Guys, back up and give her room to breathe.”

“She’s just faking it,” Carrie says nonchalantly. “She pissed that I won and looking for attention.”

“Carrie, don’t think for one second that we didn’t see that you were talking to her before she went pale. When she was obviously having a panic attack, you kicked her. You could have seriously hurt her. I think it would be for the best if you leave,” Nick calmly demands.

“You can’t throw my friends out just because Shelby’s a sore loser.” Hannah protests.

“Hannah, Nick’s right,” Peter says solemnly. “You need to ask your friends to leave.”

“Are you for real?” Hannah snaps at her dad. “You’re taking that bitch’s side?”

“That bit—” He clears his throat. “Shelby’s your step-sister, and she’s not going anywhere. I warned you that if I heard you being mean to her or Patty, I’d ground you for longer than a week. You’re not allowed to go anywhere for a month, and I want all your debit cards and your phone.”

Despite his stern tone, I catch the waver in his voice. He’s never grounded his kids before.

“You can’t do this to me! I hate all of you!” Hannah screams, and a door slams a moment later.

Peter huffs out, “Guy, why don’t you give Shelby some time to pull herself together? Patty, I think now would be a good time to start dinner.”

“I’m staying,” says Cam’s smooth voice.

“I’m not leaving,” Mav adds.

“Not moving,” Luke says.

“Didn’t think you four would,” Peter says before I hear his flip flops moving away.

“Did either of you hear what that bitch said to Shelby?” Luke questions.

“No, I couldn’t hear anything.” Mav says. “Shelby was crushing my head between her legs.”

That makes the corner of my mouth curve up. “You liked every minute of it.”

“You almost die, and now, you’re making jokes?” Dom mutters.

“Don’t be so dramatic, Griz, I didn’t almost die,” I huff, rolling my eyes under my closed lids.

“You stopped breathing, Firefly,” Dom says.

I can’t hide forever. I need to face this bullshit Carrie brought up. I blink my eyes open.

Groaning, I sit up, and Dom pulls me against him, situating himself against the corner of the lounge with one leg stretched along the back of the outdoor sofa and the other on the patio. He pulls me in between his legs, and my head rests on his bicep.

Cam sits by Dom, while Mav stands. On the other outdoor sofa, Nick and Cin sit holding hands, with Luke perched beside them. Ricky, Billy, and Mark hover nearby, looking concerned.

I glance at my crew. “I’m all right. I just need to sit for a bit.” I put on my best smile, but I don’t know if I fool them or not. “Go relax and have some fun. I’ll talk to you in a few.”

Ricky tilts his head and gives me a look I know well. I didn’t fool him.

I wave my hand. “Shoo. I’m okay, I promise.”

Ricky nods and heads toward the table where Amber and Mark’s friend sit. Mark blows me a kiss before he goes to join them. Billy’s eyebrows knit into a frown, but he stills follows the others.

Once they leave, Cam demands, “What did she say to you, beautiful?”

I close my eyes. I'm not ready to tell them what happened. I need to find out what Carrie knows first. We promised not to lie to each other but, shit, they still haven't said anything about the bus. I haven't had time to confront them about it. Why does life have to be so complicated?

"She told me that Hannah's right, I'm trash, and I'll never fit in." I let out a ragged breath. "She said I'd never be able to keep up with your sexual appetite. That Dom likes it daily, Mav's even worse, and Cam likes variety, so it will only be a matter of time before you all leave me." I squeeze my eyes shut. "And if you don't leave me because of that, then you will once you all find out why I ran away from the group home in Ashdale."

Dom pulls me closer. "That fuckin' bitch. I'm going to wring her neck."

Cam reaches over Dom to touch my cheek. "Beautiful, I can only tell you how I feel. From the first time I met you, there was a feeling that I've never felt with anyone else. I have no desire to be with anyone else." He shrugs his shoulders. "I'm sure that whatever you haven't told us about Ashdale won't change that."

"Is that why you asked me if I was the nude model?" I giggle.

Cam smiles as he scratches the back of his head.

Mav cackles. "I can't believe you said that to her."

Cam eyes sparkle with mischief. "Well, she was the one who stood up and started unbuttoning her jeans."

"That's my girl." Mav grins proudly.

I bury my face against Dom's chest.

His finger under my chin lifts my head, and he grins. "Did you really do that on your first day?"

I nod, grinning from ear to ear.

"Yeah, you belong in this group." Dom kisses my head. "I already told you how I feel. The day I saw you, no other girl mattered. As far as I'm concerned, you're it for me, Firefly."

“I know we haven’t spent as much time together as the others, but my feelings are the same. I don’t care what Carrie says. We aren’t going anywhere.” Luke sits back and crosses his massive arms.

Nick pushes up his glasses. “I’ve known these guys for years, Shelby, and I’ve seen them with girls before, but I’ve never seen them the way they are with you. You can relax. They aren’t going anywhere.”

I let out a deep breath. “Thanks. She just hit a memory that I buried. I don’t know how she found out. Only two people know what happened.”

All eyes go to Cin, but she holds up her hands. “Hey, don’t look at me. She only gave me the basics about some guy. She was freaked out for a while, had horrible nightmares, consistently peering over her shoulder. Every time I asked a question about it, she’d go into herself and not tell me a damn thing.”

“Baby, you know you can talk to us.” Dom runs his hands down my head. “Whatever you say will stay with us.”

Mav runs his hand up and down my leg. “It won’t change how we feel about you.”

I curl deeper into Dom’s arms, mumbling, “Now’s not the right time.”

Cin throws up her hands, huffing.

I glare at her. “I don’t want to think about it right now. This is supposed to be a happy pool party. I promise to tell you soon.”

Before anyone can argue, Peter yells, “Everything’s ready to eat, guys!”

CHAPTER FOUR

Compared to what happened early, the rest of the night is quiet. Once everyone gets their fill of food, we change out of our swimsuits.

When we get back, I take Cam and Luke over to introduce them to my uncle. “Uncle Brett, you met the twins the other day, so I wanted you to introduce you to my other two boyfriends.”

His posture goes rigid, but other than that, he doesn’t show any surprise that I’m not just dating the twins but two more guys.

“This is Luke Mason, and this is Camden Wright.” I bite my cheek, waiting for him to recognize Cam’s last name.

As Uncle Brett shakes their hands, he tries not to stare at Cam, but his eyes keep returning to him.

He taps his finger on his lip. “I’m sorry that I’m staring, but have we met before, Cam? You look familiar?”

“No, sir, but you might know my father.” Cam smiles, waiting for my uncle to catch on.

“Hmmm, Wright...” His eyes get big, and he sucks in a breath. “No, way! You’re George Wright’s son?”

Cam laughs. “Yes, sir.”

I told Cam before how much my uncle loves his dad, so he’s prepared when Brett goes total fan crazy.

Once Uncle Brett gets through the basic questions, he calls Cin over.

When he tells her who Cam is, Cin's head swivels to me with wide eyes. "How do you meet these famous people?"

I shrug. "School."

By the time Uncle Brett is ready to leave, Cam has promised him tickets to the next race when his father comes to town.

Nick catches Cin's hand. "If you want to stay, I can drive you home tomorrow."

Cin glance at her dad, who nods, and she runs over to hug him and kiss him goodbye.

As Peter lights the firepit, we find seats around it and spend the rest of the night chatting with each other.

"The Challenge is coming up, and Shelby's going to race. Since you three have been her pit crew for years, I don't see any reason to change that now, if you're game?" Dom asks.

"What car will she be driving?" Mark questions. "Devil is totaled."

"Well, if I can get Cin over to my garage to look at my car, I'm hoping to get that fixed." Dom raises his eyebrow at my cousin.

Cin chuckles. "I'll have to check my calendar, but I'm sure I can squeeze you in."

"So, what do you guys say?" Dom looks at each of the guys.

As they start talking cars, I tune them out and get up to grab a bottle of water.

Halfway to the house, Billy stops me. "Hey, can I talk to you?"

Nodding, I let him pull me around to the side of the house.

Instead of talking, though, he shoves his hands into his jeans pocket and starts kicking the grass.

I lean a shoulder against the house. “What’s up, Billy?”

“What’s wrong with me?” He won’t look at me as he keeps kicking the grass.

I frown. “Nothing. Why?”

“Then, why are you dating all of those douche bags?” He points toward the guys.

My head tips to the side. Is he trying to tell me that he thinks I should be dating him? No. He never showed an inkling of romantic interest toward me. But I remember thinking something changed with him, though I couldn’t put my finger on it. Did he start to have feelings for me, and I didn’t notice?

I had to be wrong about this.

When I stay silent, he shrugs. “I thought you would end up with...one of us.”

I squint at him. “One of you?”

He turns toward me. “Well, okay, I was hoping you’d end up with me. I’ve liked you since the first night we saw you at the races.” He starts pacing, his hands constantly moving as he talks. “Back then, you were closed off and jumped at everything. Plus, you were so young... I figured I’d be your friend, and when you got older, you’d see I was there for you. I thought I had a good chance because you didn’t care about dating anyone.” He paces away from me, throwing his hands up in frustration. “But then, when we got to Cin’s house, I found out you *do* care about dating, and not just one guy, but four rich assholes.”

Spinning back around, he quickly paces forward until he stops in front of me.

What’s gotten into him? I stand frozen in complete shock with no idea what to think.

He pushes me back against the house, then plants his hands on the house on either side of my head, pinning me in. “Are

they forcing you to be with them? That's the only way I can see you with those rich snobs."

"No, Billy," I say sternly. "I'm sorry I didn't realize you had these feelings, but you're like a brother to me."

"What do they have that I don't have?" He moves closer to me, his body right up against me. "Is it their money?"

"You know money means nothing to me." I put my hands on his chest to stop him from coming closer. "Please step back."

"I've waited for you for years. I think I deserve at least a kiss." He cups my cheek and slowly lowers his head toward me.

I freeze, my heart beating frantically. I didn't know what to do. I can use a karate move to get him away, but I don't want to hurt him.

"What you deserve is a punch in the face if you don't back up from my girlfriend." Cam steps out from the shadows.

Relief floods my body at his arrival, followed by panic. What happens if Billy tries to fight Cam? There's no way Cam can survive against him.

Shit! I hate drama.

"Why should I? I've been there for her for three years. I taught her how to protect herself!" Billy pounds his chest. "Why do you deserve her, and I don't?"

How could I not have seen that he felt this way? Has he really been waiting years for me? Shit, I'm about to crush him.

"Billy, I'm sorry if I've done something to let you believe I had some type of feeling for you other than as a brother." I stare into his hurt brown eyes. "You've been one of my best friends. You, Mark, and Ricky helped me heal, and I don't want our friendship to end like this."

"They're not who you think they are, Shelby." He lowers his head. "They're going to hurt you, and I'm not going to be around for you to fall back on." When he raises his head, his eyes are glossy.

“Billy, I promise you that somewhere out there is a person who will make you feel like you’re flying.” I look at Cam. “That person will make you feel complete, stronger, happier.” I peer back at Billy. “But I’m not that person for you. I’m so sorry.”

He backs up, looking devastated.

I take a step toward Cam.

“What’s going on?” Mark comes around the side of the house. “Billy, are you all right?” He glances between the three of us, then deflates. “You didn’t tell her how you feel, did you?”

“You knew?” I demand.

Was I completely blind about this?

“Yup.” Mark walks over and puts an arm around Billy’s hunched shoulders. “He told me one night while we were drinking, and I told him you didn’t feel that way about him or any of us. But you know how he is. He had to find out for himself.”

Billy keeps his head down, refusing to look at any of us.

Mark shakes his head. “I think it’s time we head back to Westridge. Come on, buddy.” As Mark leads him away, he says to Cam, “Thanks for not beating the shit out of him.”

“Oh, not me. He’s a black belt. He’d cream me.” Cam chuckles. “I was afraid Shelby would beat him up.”

Back at the pool, I say goodbye to Kirk, Amber, and Ricky, then tell Mark, “Watch over Billy. And call me if there’s anything I can do.”

Once they leave, I get a drink, and Cam walks me over to the fire to rejoin the others.

We stay out by the fire until the early morning.

The girls sleep in my room, Cin in bed with me while Paige sleeps on my couch.

When I wake up, though, I find myself between two bodies. I guess Paige wasn't comfortable on the couch, and she crawled into bed with us.

A big hand grabs me around the waist, pulling me up against a large, hard body, and something hard and substantial rubs against my ass.

Definitely not one of the girls.

My eyes fly open to find Mav lying in front of me, shirtless. The body behind me is too small to be Dom. Curious to see who it is, I flip over to find another shirtless hottie.

His eyes are still closed, and I run my hand through his messy, blond hair.

"Morning beautiful," Cam moans.

"Not that I'm unhappy to wake up to you, but what are you both doing in my bed?" I whisper. "If Patty or Peter find out, I'm in trouble. And where are Paige and Cin?"

"We wouldn't get you in trouble, babe." Mav shifts closer, moving the hair off my neck than laying an arm on my hip. "Your parents left early this morning," he says in between kisses on my neck. "Your sinful cousin, Cin, booted us out of Nick's room earlier and told us to come sleep with you. Sam and Paige are in the guest bedroom."

That sounds like Cin.

Cam's hands roam over my exposed skin, sending tingling sensations right to my center.

"Where are Luke and Dom?" I moan.

"Luke needed to go home for a family thing, and Dom had something to take care of," Mav informs me as he continues kissing my neck.

What family business did Luke have? I need to carve out time for him.

“Do you have all your questions answered? Can I kiss you now?” Cam’s blue eyes zero in on my lips.

I stop playing with his hair and wrap my arms around the back of his head, pulling him down to my lips.

Mav’s hand skims the lace on my panties, and not wanting him to feel left out, I reach back to rub his hard dick through his boxers. Mav hisses through his teeth.

Cam breaks the kiss to take the hem of my shirt and lift it off me, throwing it on the floor. His hand runs down the center of my chest.

“I noticed these yesterday.” He runs his hand over the discolored patch on my side. “I know what this is. I have a couple of road rash patches, too. How did you get these?” His finger runs down the cut on my hip then moves to my shoulder.

Those are memories I wish I could forget. I’m not ready to tell them yet.

“Can we talk about scars later, dude?” Mav moans out. “If she keeps rubbing me, I’m going to embarrass myself and come.”

Thank you, Mav, I owe you an extra orgasm.

Cam half shrugs, forgets about my scars, and goes back to fondling my left breast. When his tongue snakes out and swipes my nipple, I bite my bottom lip. Cam’s in the mood to tease, and with every swipe, I squeeze Mav’s dick.

By the time they get done with my top half, I’m a writhing mess. Mav rips off my panties, kneeing his way in between my legs. With his onyx eyes blazing, he feasts on me, and a moan leaves my mouth.

Cam straddles my chest. “Do you think you can take me like this, beautiful?”

“Oh, she can take it. She has no gag reflexes,” Mav growls against me before he dives back in.

“You like to keep secrets, don’t you?” Cam knee-walks up my body until his beautiful dick brushes my mouth.

I open, and he slides it in until he can't go any farther.

“Shit, you feel good.” He pulls out, then thrusts back in.

Mav is still going to town on me, and it's harder than I thought it would be to keep my mouth around Cam while Mav's tongue and lips are distracting me.

Cam grasps the headboard with one hand while the other clenches at his side as he watches Mav drive me insane. “How does she taste?”

His head pops up. “Heaven.” Then, he goes back and licks me making my body arch.

Cam shakes his head and glances back to me making sure I'm able to continue. I open my mouth, and Cam slides his dick slowly into my mouth as far back as he can go. I close my mouth around and swallow. Cam lets out a groan and pulls almost all the way out before he slams himself back in.

I watch his beautiful face as he enjoys my mouth.

It doesn't take long before the pressure builds, and I grab Mav's hair, grinding on his face as I try to keep my mouth tight around Cam.

“I'm going to come, beautiful,” Cam moans. “Aww... gunh...fuuck.”

His blue eyes roll back in his head as he shoots down my throat, and I swallow his load just in time as my release slams into me. I groan out both of their names.

Cam moves to the bed beside me, his semi-hard dick glistening with my saliva. He strokes it languidly as his attention moves to Mav.

The other man rises onto his knees between my spread legs, his dick still hard, but I'm so limp with coming that I can't move a muscle to help him right now.

Cam continues to stroke his dick, and it hardens once more. “On your back, Mav, I want your ass. I think our girl needs a break, and I know she wants to see this.”

With a grin on his face, Mav lies down.

I roll to my side so I can take everything in.

Cam grabs some lube and slicks up three of his fingers. He glances at Mav, who nods, and Cam moves to kneel between his legs.

He teases Mav with his fingers until he yells, “Stop playing and fuck me already!”

Grinning, Cam adds more lube to his dick before putting himself into position. As Cam thrusts into Mav, Mav’s eyes roll back, and he lets out a soft moan.

Cam stills, letting Mav adjust to him.

When Mav’s body starts moving, Cam pulls out, grabs Mav by the shoulder, and power drives into him.

For a moment, I worry he might hurt Mav with how hard he did that, but Mav moans out again.

Cam motions for me to come closer. “Kiss him and bite his nipples. He likes that.”

Nervous, I crawl over to Mav and kiss him softly before Mav grabs the back of my head and takes over. It’s like no other kiss we’ve ever exchanged. It has heat, but with a hard intensity that steals the air from my lungs.

We break apart, gasping for a breath.

As I run my hand down Mav’s chest and over his hard nipples, a moan escapes his mouth.

Watching the connection between Mav and Cam, I don’t know how I couldn’t see it before. I love that they feel comfortable enough to let me join in this. It’s beautiful.

“Oh, God, you feel good, Mav,” Cam moans out. “Princess, bite his nipples and make him come.”

I grab Mav’s dick with my hand, pumping it fast. It pulses in my hand. Then, I lean down and bite his nipple like Cam told me to.

Mav moans out, “Yes! Just like that... Yeah... I’m coming!”

His dick jerks in my hand, and I quickly move away from his shooting cum.

Cam slams into him two more times before he leans back and comes into Mav.

He falls down on Mav with a big grin on his face.

As the two men gasp for breath, I crawl off the bed and head to the bathroom, coming back with a warm cloth and offering it to them.

Mav shoves Cam off and cleans himself up, before wiping Cam down, too.

Smiling coyly, Mav tosses the damp cloth back toward the bathroom. "Did you enjoy the show, baby?"

"So hot." I scrawl back onto the bed and snuggle against them. "Wake me up in a bit so we can do that again."

Their soft chuckles fill the room as I fall back to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Knock, knock.

“Wake up bitch, I’m going to be leaving soon!” Cin yells from the other side of my door.

“Why is it every time I’m in your bed, sleeping, someone is pounding the door?” Cam groans.

Mav moans into my hair, “What time is it?”

“Three thirty,” Cam mumbles.

After our first round of mind-blowing sex, I lost track of how many times we woke up reaching for each other, but my entire body aches from the pounding Cam and Mav gave me.

I stretch between them, trying to ease the stiffness from my muscles, and smile as I remember watching Cam and Mav together. It was a beautiful sight.

A moan comes from behind me that snaps me out of my daydream. Cam’s rough hand runs down my naked body. “You’re too beautiful for your own good. If you want to see your cousin before she leaves, you better go, or I just might bury myself back in that tight, sensual pussy,” Cam whispers in my ear, sending a shiver through my body.

Mav turns, and his hard dick hits my stomach as he bends over me to kiss my chest. “What were you just thinking about? Your cheeks are all pink.”

“Um nothing.” I throw off the sheet.

Mav come closer and kisses my neck. “Were you thinking about when Cam fucked me?”

“Hmm.”

“I think she enjoyed watching us last night,” Cam says kissing my shoulder.

They’re right. If I don’t leave right now, I’m not going to. These two are way too tempting.

I run my hands down Mav’s tan, muscular chest. Hmm, I could spend hours memorizing every inch of his body, but now is not the time.

I stop my roaming hands and push him down on the bed before I move down to the end of the bed and crawl out.

As I grab my panties and slide them on, Mav let out a groan and peers at his right hand. “Well, Righty, it looks like it’s just you and me again. Sorry for using you so much, but you see, there’s this girl who’s hot as Hell, and she keeps making me hard as Hell.”

I snort and shake my head. By the time he finishes his apology to his hand, I’m dressed. I glance over at Cam, who lies on his side, chuckling at Mav’s antics.

His gaze moves off Mav and locks onto mine, his blue eyes dancing with love and mischief. Watching Mav and him last was one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen.

Cam smiles. “Go, beautiful, I’ll take care of Mav.”

As Cam bends over Mav to lick the tip of his dick, Mav moans, “Oh, Hell yeah.”

It’s hard to pull myself away from them, but I want to talk to my cousin.

I unlock my door, step out into the hall, and shut it behind me. Voices come from the kitchen, so I head there.

I pause in the archway when I spot Cin and Nick, entwined in each other’s arms. I’ve seen Cin date guys, but I’ve never seen her like this, so relaxed and smiling. She has real feelings

for my stepbrother, and from what I know of Nick, he wouldn't let things go this far unless he feels something real.

Then they start getting hot and heavy, and I straighten, ready to interrupt them, when Hannah pushes me to the side.

"Eww, please stop before I throw up. How can you kiss that?" Hannah says, stepping into the kitchen.

"Hannah," Nick pleads.

"Oh my God, Nick, is that your shirt?" She stops in front of Cin and grabs the shirt my cousin wears. "Don't tell me you fucked this trash?"

Nick runs his hand through his dark-brown hair. "It's none of your business."

"Yes, it's my business. You have lost your mind if you think I'm going to let you date someone like her." Her eye bore into him. "You think I was mean to Linda? Wait 'til you see what I do to this one. If you want a girlfriend, you can date Jenna. She's perfect for you. But I won't let you date trash."

Hannah still has Cin by the shirt while she berates Nick, and Cin's getting more pissed off by the second, her eyes narrowing and her jaw moving as she grinds her teeth.

I lean back against the archway, not planning to miss this. Hannah's never dealt with chicks like us. We're used to fighting for what we want. She has no idea the hornet's nest she just kicked.

Hannah's taller than Cin by a few inches, but that won't stop Cin as she raises her arm and brings it down hard on Hannah's arm.

"Ouch!" She drops the front of Cin's shirt. "You bitch!"

Cin steps up to her. "Don't touch me again, or you're going to regret it."

"You do *not* get to tell me what to do," Hannah snarls. "You're nothing. Nick doesn't even like you. The minute you leave, you'll be forgotten. You're only good for one thing, and that's being used. Now that he's done that, you'll be gone."

Nick's face turns red with fury as he steps around Cin, grabs Hannah's arm, and spins her away from my cousin. "How dare you say that! You don't know me at all, Hannah, or you'd see how much I care about Cin. If you do anything to her, what little bond we have will be over." He shakes her. "Do you understand me, Hannah?"

His eyes are ablaze with rage. I've never seen him like this before, and he's downright scary.

Wide eyed, Hannah takes a couple of steps away from Nick and glances between the three of us. She doesn't know how to handle the smackdown she just got from her brother. I never understand what she's thinking. Nick's the only one who still has hope she'll change, and she just showed him that it isn't going to happen.

"You make me sick!" she yells and storms off.

Nick deflates once she leaves. Damn that bitch. I can't imagine how hard it was for him to stand up to her. It's not in Nick's nature to be confrontational. If she comes between Cin and Nick, I'm going to go WWIII on her ass.

Cin wraps her arms around him, and I join them, placing my hand on his shoulder. "You did the right thing, Nick."

I give him a sad smile, then grab a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

He slumps over the counter. "I don't want to do this."

Cin's spine snaps straight, her expression hardening.

Uh-oh. This isn't going to be good.

"Hey, we just had sex last night, it's no big deal," she says in that tone of voice she perfected over the years to protect her feelings. "I'm leaving, anyway. You can tell your sister that she's right, and you made a huge mistake. You won't have to see me ever again."

She turns to walk away, but Nick spins her back around to face him. "What the Hell are you talking about? I just told my sister off for what she said about you. Now, you're talking like what we have is nothing, and I'll never see you again?"

And this is where I leave, stage right.

I can't go back to my room because I'll never come back out with Mav and Cam in there, so I head into the living room to give them some semblance of privacy. I sit in the chair farthest away from the kitchen, but I can still hear them.

"You're the one who just said you didn't want to do this, so I'm giving you an out," Cin says in a dispassionate voice.

"I wasn't talking about us. I was talking about not talking to my sister anymore..."

Misunderstandings can happen so quickly.

Their voices quiet as I pull my legs up onto the chair and wrap my arm around them, dropping my head onto my knees.

What am I going to do about Carrie finding out about Roger? She's like a dog with a bone. She won't let it go until she knows everything.

If the guys find out what happened during my time at the Ashland group home, I don't know if they'll understand or walk away. Everything was so confusing back then. Mom promised me the world, and sadly, I believed her.

When she got caught with heroin and went to jail, I went to Hell.

I remember my social worker calling Uncle Brett to see if he wanted me, then coming back and telling me my uncle said no. Now, I'm positive it was Jack pretending to be my uncle. I wouldn't put it past Brenda to do something like that.

But at the time, I thought my only family just gave up on me. After that, I went into a dark place, turning off my feelings and not caring about anything. I wanted the world to burn. I did stuff that I promised myself I'd never do.

Lost inside my head, I don't hear Mav come up beside me until he puts a hand on my shoulder, and I jump a mile.

"Sorry, babe, Cam and I need to leave. We just wanted to come to say goodbye." He crouches down in front of me. "You, okay? You look a little pale."

I run my hand through my hair. “Yeah, I’m all right. So, you’re leaving me alone with those two?” I point toward the kitchen, where Nick and Cin are clearly visible and once again tangled around each other.

“It’s weird seeing Nick so lovey-dovey. We heard the fight with Hannah. I’m proud of him for standing up to her.” Mav kisses me. “I’d stay if I could, but duty calls. See you tomorrow.”

I nod and stand, heading back into the kitchen.

Cam wraps his arm around me. “I need to go, beautiful, thanks for a fun day and even more fun morning.”

He dips me and gives me a mouthwatering kiss.

When he whips me back up, I grab the counter for support.

“Dammmn,” Cin says.

Nick just shakes his head at his friend. “Is Paige still in the guest room with Sam?”

Cin smirks. “No, they left while Shelby was getting down and dirty with those two.”

Okay, I guess everyone heard us. I’m not embarrassed; it was damn good. “How long before you leave?”

Nick glances at the clock. “We should leave in about two hours.”

His eyes move to Cin for confirmation, and she nods.

I walk around the counter, smile at Nick, and take Cin’s arm. “I’m stealing her for the next two hours. Sorry.”

“Meany.” Nick frowns but kisses her before he lets me pull her away.

We go to my room, and I shut the door.

When I head for my bed, Cin shakes her head. “I’m not sitting there with all the sexy you had last night.”

My cheeks heat up, and I steer her over to the couch instead.

As we get comfortable, I ask, “How’s your dad handling everything?”

“He tried to make us dinner, something easy like chicken with rice. The rice was a clumpy mess, and he burned the chicken.” Cin shakes her head, laughing. “It was one of the worst dinners I’ve ever had, but at least, he’s trying.”

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do?” I take a sip of my water.

She shrugs. “Go to school at Strathmore.”

“Why?” I protest. “You could come to school with me. There are a lot of opportunities here, Cin. You might get a scholarship to college, if you want.”

She frowns at that. “I don’t need to go to a four-year college for what I want to do, Shelby.”

Since she was six and asked for tools like her dad’s, she’s only wanted one thing.

“That’s true, but what happens when you take over your dad’s business? Don’t you want to be knowledgeable on how to run it better and expand it?” I counter. “Your dad’s a good mechanic, but he doesn’t have any business sense. If you get a business degree, you’ll have all the tools to create an empire.”

She picks at her bottom lip. “Damn, you’re good. I’ll think about it.”

Her eyes move past me, and big smile spreads over her face.

It must be Nick. Damn, she has it bad.

Nick walks around the couch and sits beside Cin, his arm around her shoulders. “We better get going. It’s going to take us a while to get you home with all the rush hour traffic. I also thought we could stop somewhere and get dinner.”

Cin’s hand flies to her chest, and gasps dramatically. “Are you asking me out on a date, Mr. Tate?”

“Why yes, Miss Winter, I *am* asking you out on a date.” Nick kisses her hair.

I roll my eyes. “You two are weird. Just remember what Mav always says. Wrap it before you tap it.”

Cin turns red, and Nick slaps his face.

I say goodbye to Cin and promise to call her.

After they leave, I spend the rest of the evening working on my homework.

It’s around midnight when I check my phone. It’s strange that Luke never texted me. He usually at least says hi. Dom didn’t send me anything, either.

What did he have to do earlier? Mav was so vague about it.

CHAPTER SIX

When I pull into the parking lot Monday morning, my guys are waiting for me.

I search for Luke and find him leaning against Nick's truck, his head down, his arms crossed, and his face set in a scowl. Something happened with his family, and by the look of him, it's not good.

I scan for Dom next, but he's nowhere to be seen.

Parking next to my stepbrother, I climb off my bike, put my helmet in Nick's truck, then head over to Luke.

I put my hand on his. "Hey, what can I do?"

One of the things I hate is when people can see that something is bothering me, and they ask twenty questions to try to figure out what it is. I know they're concerned and need to find out what's wrong, but let me speak when I'm ready.

Luke moves his hand out from under mine, my stomach sinks. He doesn't even want me to touch him?

But then he opens his arms, and I step into him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

As he hugs me tightly, I whisper, "Whatever it is, I'm here for you. Whenever you're ready to talk about it, I'll be here."

He nods and loosens his hold.

I peer up into his tormented face, noticing the redness around his mocha-colored eyes. Whatever this is, it's serious if he's been crying.

I lean in, giving him a sweet kiss to let him know I'm there for him. "You okay to go to school?"

"I'll make it, and thanks for not asking a lot of questions," he says. "I want to tell you, but not here. Mom wants you to come over for dinner on Wednesday."

My eyes widen. "Are you sure? I figured whatever's going on has to do with your family. We can wait."

He kisses my nose. "You're not going to get away that easy."

I give him a dazzling smile. "Damn, I thought I might."

"Nope. Wednesday." He quickly gives me another kiss.

The bell rings, and we pick up our bags and head into the school. "Mav, where's Dom?"

He rubs the back of his neck. "He's running late. He'll be here."

His eyes look at everything except me, giving me a bad feeling about Dom's absence.

Mav walks with me to English, and we take our normal seat, the one beside me still empty where Dom normally sits.

Right before the late bell, Dom strolls in with the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up and sits in the back instead of with us.

I glance over at Mav, silently asking him what's going on.

He shrugs and stares down at his desk.

This isn't good.

"Everyone, please settle down," says Mr. Jordan, the teacher who took over for Mr. Davis. "Mr. Knight, please lower your hood during my class."

Dom swears under his breath but lowers his hood, and I gasp when I see his face. His left eye is black and blue, and a butterfly bandage holds together a gash above his right eye. Road rash covers his right cheek, and his lips are cracked and swollen.

What the hell happen?

“Are you all right, Mr. Knight? Or do you need to see the nurse?” Mr. Jordan questions.

“I’m fine,” Dom mumbles. “I just wrecked my motorcycle over the weekend.”

Bullshit. Not all of those bruises came from crashing. I should know; I’ve had them before. He got into a fight. Why is Mav hiding this from me? My heart beats hard. I don’t like this one bit, but I’ll get to the bottom of what really happened.

“If you’re sure, Mr. Knight.” Mr. Jordan frowns but glances around at the rest of the class. “All right, let’s start then.”

When class ends, I shove my stuff into my bag slowly, waiting for Dom to leave, then follow behind him.

As he passes an empty room, I shove him inside.

Dom swears.

“Hey, take it easy,” Mav protests as he follows us. “He’s sore.”

“How am I to know? You two aren’t telling me anything.” My eyes bounce between the two men. “I don’t like to be kept in the dark. What happened to no more secrets?”

“It’s no big deal. I skidded on my bike,” Dom says, repeating the same line from earlier.

“Are you kidding me? That might work with Mr. Jordan, but it won’t work on me.” I plant my legs wide and cross my arms. “Or did you forget I know what a skid bruise looks like? Those are fighting bruises.”

Outside, the tardy bell rings, but I ignore it as I wait for an answer.

“Calm down, Shelby, he’s not lying to you,” Mav says. “He did wreck. But there’s more to the story.”

“Well?” I raise my hands in frustration. “What’s the more?”

“Not now,” Dom grumbles out. “Later, I promise. Go to your class. Please.”

I stand there, glaring at him, before I huff and storm off to my next class. Deep down, I have a feeling that whatever happened has to do with me.

I throw open the door to the classroom, forgetting I’m late.

Mrs. Murphy stands at the chalkboard, halfway through a problem, when I storm inside.

I mumble, “Sorry.”

She shakes her head and goes back to finishing the problem.

When I sit down beside Luke, he inclines his head in question.

I put my finger up, then rip a piece of paper from my notebooks and scribble out, *Do you know what happened to Dom?*

I fold the note and pass it to him.

He opens it to read and shakes his head.

I rip off another piece and describe Dom’s appearance. *He claims he was in a motorcycle accident, which is partly the truth. It also looked like he got into fighting.*

I fold the note and slide it to him.

He reads it, and his eyes widen. He quickly writes a note of his own and passes it to me. *I haven’t talked to or seen Dom since he left the pool party.*

So, either they didn’t tell Luke because he’s been dealing with a family problem, or they’re keeping it a secret.

I can’t concentrate on math problems right now. My mind is going in fifty different directions.

I’m concerned about whatever’s happening that has Luke so sad. And then there’s Carrie’s threat at the pool party. But I

can't do anything about Carrie until she returns to school on Thursday. Now, Dom's all beat up and not telling me what the Hell is going on with him.

I'm so in my head that I don't know the class is over until Luke touches my shoulder.

Shaking myself, I kiss him on the cheek and head to my next class.

As always, by the time Chemistry ends, my head is spinning. Thank God Nick's my lab partner and able to do the experiments without me.

Right as the bell rings, I get a text from Dom to meet him in room 204.

I lean over toward Nick. "Can you tell Paige I'm going to be late for lunch?"

"Sure." His brows pinch together. "Anything wrong?"

"That's what I'm going to find out." Grimly, I grab my bag and head out.

When I reach room 204, I open the door to find Dom leaning against the teacher's desk. His hoody is back up, and he looks like Hell.

I shut the door behind me and walk over to stand in front of him.

"Are you sure you should be here?" I wave my hand at his face. "You look bad."

He shrugs.

My hands ball into fists. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"I'm not sure." Anger twists his features, and he grips the side of the teacher's desk so hard his knuckles turn white. "Dad got on my ass about something, and I left to clear my head. I jumped on my bike to take a ride and was on one of the back roads I always ride on. Out of nowhere, a red car sped right toward me. I swerved and went down, getting a nasty road rash on my right leg and side. I was lying on my back on

the side of the road, trying to get my wits back, when two guys dressed in all black jumped me.”

I gently cup his face. “Oh my God, did you recognize anything? Their eye color or voices? Did they say anything?”

“I didn’t recognize them. The only thing they said was, ‘This is your only warning. Stay away from her.’” His onyx eyes peer down at me, his mouth still moving, but I can’t hear him anymore.

All the air in my lung whooshes out, and I get dizzy. I stumble, hitting my hip on the desk, spinning around, then tripping my way to the windows.

There’s no denying it. He found me. Why now, after all these years?

Dom touches my shoulder, and I scream, jumping back and throwing my hand over my erratically beating heart.

His eagle eyes take me in. “Are you all right? You suddenly went pale, and you’re acting funny.”

I need to keep it together, at least until I find out if it’s him or not. Roger would destroy them, and I can’t let that happen. I *won’t* let that happen.

I swallow. “I’m all right. I’m just worried about you. You should be in bed, resting.”

“I’ve had worse, and I can’t miss a day, or I can’t play in Friday’s game.” His black brows sweep together. “Do you think it could be your friend?”

“Huh? What friend?” I peer out the window, looking at anything but Dom.

If I look at him, he’ll know I’m lying through my teeth. I’m a terrible liar.

“The one from the party. The guy who confessed he likes you.” He taps his fingers on the desk. “What’s his name again?”

I back away from the windows. “Billy? Um, I guess it could be? I’ll find out for you.”

He tilts his head. “Are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

Shit, he’s inspecting me too closely. He knows something’s not right. I need to get out of here. “You know, my stomach’s a little upset. I’m going to run to the cafeteria and get something light to eat.” I quickly turn, heading toward the door, opening it, and calling back, “I’m glad you’re all right.”

Instead of going to the cafeteria, I head straight to the parking lot. I need to get out of here and ride.

When I get there, though, I realize I have a big problem. Shit, my helmet’s locked in Nick’s truck. I can’t ride without it. I run a hand through my hair.

Please tell me he hid the key like he did that one time at the game. I pull out my phone and text him.

Shelby: Nick, did you hide the key today?

Nick: No.

Shelby: I need my helmet. I need to get out of here. Please don’t tell the guys right now. You can tell them later.

Nick: Are you all right? Do you need my help?

Shelby: Sort of. I need to ride. Need to figure things out.

Nick: Dom just came in and said you’re acting weird. I’ll come and unlock my truck only if you promise to tell me what’s going on later.

Shit, I don’t want to bring Nick into this. If it’s Roger, then he already knows about my life, which includes Nick. And I need someone to find out if Roger is out or not.

Me: Deal.

The locks on his truck click open, and I scan the window on the first floor. I find him as he waves, then texts something.

Nick: Be careful.

I nod, placing my phone in my back pocket, then swapping out my backpack for my helmet.

As I finish strapping my helmet on, I climb on Serenity. A turn of the key brings Serenity to life, and I wait until she’s

ready before I take off.

My mind goes back to the last time I saw Roger.

He loomed above me, talking about carving the word *Mine* into my chest, so everyone would know I was his. He threatened that if I ever started dating, he'd kill whoever it was.

He's the main reason why I never dated anyone.

This could all be a coincidence, but I doubt it. After all these years, I finally start dating, and Dom gets a warning? It hits too close to home for comfort.

The last time I checked on Roger, he was in jail for larceny, and he should still have a year left. But it's possible he got out early for good behavior.

This is such bullshit. Things just got nice for me. Mom's clean and happy, and I'm living in a mansion without having to worry about anything. I have friends outside of Cin who I can trust, and four guys I genuinely like.

Now, I have to worry that some psycho's after me again?

I can't bring the guys into this. If Roger is out there, I need to end it with them. I can't put my guys in danger.

Tears fall down my face. It hurts so damn bad thinking about never touching them again.

Through the blur in my eyes, I catch motion in my mirror as a car gets a little too close to my backend for my comfort.

I turn left at the next intersection, and the car follows me.

As the residential area gives way to backcountry roads, I realize I made a huge mistake. Dom's accident runs through my mind. There are no other cars on this road it could easily overcome me.

With my heart in my throat, I take off faster than I should on roads I don't know. I'm so much in my head that I almost miss the sign that says, *Curve Ahead*.

Shit, I'm going to take the turn way too fast. I put my brakes on as much as I dare without risking flipping over my

handlebars and lean into the curve.

My knee skims the pavement, and *fuuuccckk* does that hurt.

Straightening my bike out of the curve, I peer in my mirror. The car is still behind me and gaining speed.

I need to get back to where there are more people.

Down the road, I see a sign that says Bridgeport is two miles ahead with an arrow pointing right.

Heart racing, I stay ahead of the car until the turn comes and take that one fast, too, heading toward civilization. More cars fill the streets the closer I get to Bridgeport. I do something I don't normally do; I weave in between cars to get away from the person tailing me.

When the car gets stuck behind a slow person, I make a right, then quickly make another right into an apartment parking lot.

Seeing an SUV and truck parked beside each other, I pull in between them and turn off my bike. The driver had to have seen me make the first right, but I'm hoping he didn't see me make another right into here.

I sit on my bike in the crystal clear, cold afternoon, shivering and wondering what I did to deserve this.

Then, a memory hits me, the feel of a handle forced into my grasp. Big, rough hands covering mine. I want to pull away, but I can't move. All I can do is stare at the sleeping guy on the bed. Sulfur hit my nose as tears run down my face.

With a gasp, I return to reality, grabbing my chest and trying to breathe. The one memory I buried so deep I hoped never to remember it.

Not now, I tell myself.

I need to get home. I take a few deep breaths and get myself under control before I leave my hiding spot.

Not seeing the car that was following me, I pull get back on the road and head home.

When I pull into the driveway, I thank God that Nick's truck is the only car there.

I limp through the garage door, my knee sending pain up my leg with every step from when I scraped the ground on that first curve.

Shit, that feels like it's bad.

I head to my room, toss my helmet onto the couch, and pull my phone from my back pocket.

I have ten missed messages from the guys, but I need to talk to Nick before I let them know I'm home.

Me: I'm home. Where are you?

Nick: Upstairs. Are you all right?

Me: Can I come up?

Nick: Yeah.

I set my phone on my desk and limp upstairs. I head down the hallway that leads to Nick's room, wondering how the guys will take me dumping them.

I knock on the door and wait for him to answer.

The doors open.

"Hi," I say lamely.

His eyes do a quick assessment, and they stop on my bleeding knee. "Dammit, Shelby, what the Hell happened to you?"

He pulls me into the room and down onto a worn-out, brown couch. "Stay here while I go get the first aid kit."

As he disappears into the back of his room, I glance around.

There are two rooms, the front one set up as a large living room. On the back wall are all the hookups needed for a kitchen, though he only has a small refrigerator a little bigger

than the one in my room. A large kitchen table fills the space where all the appliances would be. An open box of pizza sits on the table, smelling good and reminding me I skipped lunch.

Across from me sits a large entertainment center, with a huge flat-screen TV in the middle. In the corner, behind the couch, is a large desk, maybe two put together, that hold two computers.

I get up, walking over to the entertainment center to study the awards and pictures on the shelves. “Did you tell the guys I’m back?”

“No, but they’re texting about every twenty minutes.” Nick returns with a first aid box. “Sit your ass back down and tell me what happened to your knee.”

“I think someone was following me. I’m not a hundred percent sure, though.” I run my hands down the side of my leg. My jeans had torn pretty bad, but I was getting used to the pain. “Maybe what happened to Dom freaked me out.”

“Sit down,” Nick commands. “I’ll clean you up.”

“Before you do that, I need you to check on someone for me.” I pick up a picture of Cam and Mav jumping into a pile of leaves, and I tear rolls down my cheek. I quickly swipe it away. “Can you find out if Roger Dillard is still in jail?”

“Who’s Roger Dillard?” Nick sets the first aid kit down and heads to his computers.

My stomach growls. I haven’t eaten anything since breakfast. “I’ll tell you what I’m willing to if I can have some pizza. I’m starving.”

He bends over his computer, types something, then straightens. “Sit down, and I’ll get you some.”

I fall back onto the couch with my leg out. “I’ve never told anyone this, but when Mom took me away from Uncle Brett and started using again, I slowly shut myself off. When she got caught and sent away, my social worker told me Uncle Brett didn’t want me. Which I now think was Cin’s horrible step-family. At the time, though, I thought the one person who loved me unconditionally rejected me. It shattered me, and I

shut down, closing myself off emotionally. I didn't care what happened to me."

Nick hands me the pizza box and a pop.

"Thank you." I take a bite of cold pizza. Sometimes, I think cold pizza tastes better.

"You're welcome." Nick kneels in front of me to examine my knee. "Do you mind if I cut your jeans?"

"Naw. They're ruined, anyway," I say around another mouthful of pizza.

He rips the hole larger. "This is going to sting a bit. Continue with your story."

I suck in a breath as Nick uses antibiotic pads to clean my knee. "It wasn't the first time I was sent to a group home. Every home I've been in hasn't been...wholesome. There have always been counselors or guards who didn't care, but at Ashland, everyone had given up a long time ago."

Nick hums as he tapes a sterile pad on my knee and cleans up, then heads back to his computer.

I pick at my pizza. "Most of the other homes were houses that the state remodeled to fit kids. The bedrooms housed two or three kids per room. But Ashland was an old, converted warehouse. There weren't any bedrooms, just a large room with rows of bunk beds. When I arrived, it was late, and everyone was asleep. I dropped my bag on the floor by the bed they told me to take, crawled into the bottom bunk, and as soon as my head hit that pillow, I was out. I don't know how long I was asleep before I was jolted awake by a hand covering my mouth. When my eyes snapped open, there was a brute of a girl above me."

I take a big drink of pop and rub a hand down my jeans. "She was holding me down with her arm across my neck and the other over my mouth. Her knee was strategically place on my stomach. There was no way I could get myself out of the bed without smacking the top bunk. The rest of the girls were going through my stuff. My vision started to fade, and at that moment, I felt like the world had let me down. First my

mother, then Uncle Brett. Why should I stay where I wasn't wanted?

"Then, from the doorway, a deep voice told the bitch to get her arm off me, or she'd feel twice the amount of pain that I was feeling. When the girl told him to fuck off, he strolled over, yanked her off me, and threw her on the floor with his boot on her neck in the blink of an eye. That's how I met Roger Dillard."

"If Roger saved you, why do you sound so scared of him?" Nick questions with clenched fists.

I shift on the couch so I can see him. "At first, I don't think even Roger knew why he saved me. Once he saw how I was shut down and didn't care anymore, he came up with a plan to rebuild me into something he wanted. At the time, I thought he was my white knight. Ha! Roger was far from a white knight, more like the devil. The stuff I saw him do... Shit, the stuff *I* did under his guidance..." I shiver at the memory. "I still have nightmares about all of it."

Nick's typing stops. "Is this him?"

I stand and head to Nick's computer to look at the picture he pulled up.

It's a mug shot of Roger.

"That's him." I turn my head to look at Nick. "Where is he?"

"Dead."

"What?" My mouth falls open in shock. "No way. How?"

Dead. Roger is dead. I don't have to worry about him anymore.

Nick spins around in his chair to look up at me. "It says he got shanked in jail last year."

I stumble to the couch and fall back on it, letting out a laugh. "Holy shit, I'm free."

My heart leaps for joy. I don't have to break up with the guys. When my laugh turns into tears, Nick runs over, pulls

me into his arm, and lets me cry it out.

Suddenly, Nick's door flies open, and Luke stands in the opening, taking us in on the couch. "What the hell is going on here? Nick, why didn't you tell us she was back? The rest of the guys are out looking for her." His eyes drop to my torn jeans. "What happened to your knee?"

I wipe the tears off my cheeks. "Don't yell at Nick. He's doing what I asked him to."

"Shelby, what is going on?" Luke runs his hand through his hair. "I have all this bullshit at home, then I find out my girlfriend had another panic attack and took off on her motorcycle! I had no idea if you were in a ditch, hurt, or what. Then, I come here to find you hurt, and my best friend didn't even let me know."

Standing, I limp over to stop Luke's pacing. "I'm so sorry for making you worry more. It has to do with my past." I take his hand, pulling him to the couch. "Can I borrow your phone to call the guys?"

Luke sits down, then hands me his phone, and I dial Dom.

Dom's rattled voice answers. "Luke, tell me you found her?"

"I'm home, Dom," I say into the phone.

He breathes out, and I hear voices in the background. "Dammit, Firefly, we'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Wait, there's no reason to come over," I protest. "Are Mav and Cam with you?"

There's some rustling, then Cam's sexy voice fills the earpiece, "Yes, beautiful, we're here. You're on speakerphone."

"We were just heading in to get something to eat. We aren't too far from your place," Mav says.

They want to see me to make sure I'm all right, but that's the last thing on my mind right now. "Guys, I'm emotionally beat. I just want a long, hot bath and to get some sleep."

“I can help you with your hot bath,” Mav purrs.

More rustling comes over the line, followed by Mav saying, “Ow!”

I guess he got hit again.

“Are you going to tell us what the hell is going on?” Dom demands.

“I’ll tell you more tomorrow,” I tell them. “I promise, I’m home safe.”

“Fine, come to school early tomorrow,” says Dom’s deep voice.

“Beautiful, I’m glad you’re fine, but you’ve got to stop running. We’re here for you,” Cam adds.

Running is what I do best, but maybe, now that Roger’s gone, I can stop. “I’m trying. I’m sorry. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

“Bye. Sweet dreams.” Cam makes a kissing noise.

“She’ll be dreaming of me, dude,” Mav interrupt.

“Night.” Chuckling, I hang up.

I glance over to Nick. “Where are my mom and your dad? Did they come home?”

“No, they’re spending another night in town.” He gets more comfortable on the couch.

“Hannah?” Luke questions.

“Haven’t seen her.” Nick shrugs. “But I heard her downstairs a couple of times.”

I glance at Luke. “Do you want to spend the night?”

“Yeah, why don’t you go get your shower while I take one at home and tell Mom I’m staying at Nick’s.” He glances over at Nick. “You okay to cover for me?”

Nick shrugs. “Sure.”

We all get up from the couch, and I hug Nick. “Thank you for everything.”

He hugs me back. "I'm here for you."

I head down to my bedroom and start filling the tub, adding in some bubbles.

Once it's full, I slide in, the hot water feeling good on my tense muscles.

I can't believe Roger's gone. If it's not him, then who's threatening Dom? There's no way it's Billy. He's too kind-hearted. He might be hurt, but he wouldn't beat the shit out of Dom.

It's a small possibility this has nothing to do with me, but deep down, I know it does.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When I come out of the bathroom, Luke lies shirtless in my bed.

I stumble to a stop to take in the sight. Hot damn. If football makes muscles like that, then I really like it. “Didn’t keep you waiting too long, did I?”

Smiling sexily, he shakes his head. “Naw, I’ve been waiting my whole life for you. An hour wasn’t long.”

“That’s sweet, but I think you’ve been hanging out with Cam too much.” I crawl into bed beside Luke. “I guess you want me to tell you about Roger.”

He pulls me against him with my head resting on his chest and his arm around me, murmuring sleepily, “No, angel, tomorrow will be soon enough.”

I guess we both need a good night’s sleep. Grateful to put it off a little longer, I close my eyes and let his slow, even breaths lull me to sleep.

I find myself in an old, run-down house with only the full moon shining through the falling boards offering light.

My head swivels around. Where the hell am I? How did I get here? I don’t know this place. My breath comes in short bursts, and I wrap my arms around myself. I can’t stop shaking.

Floorboards creak in the distance.

My stomach churns.

He's here. I need to run. He's going to kill me.

Another creak alerts me that he's closer.

Why can't I move?

"Running is unless. I will always find you," croons the voice of my nightmares.

"You're dead!" I yell.

He cackles. "I'm too smart to die."

Roger saunters around the corner of the hall, dragging an unconscious Luke. His face has been beaten to the point of almost being unrecognizable. When Roger tosses Luke on the floor, he lands on a board with a nail sticking straight up, and blood pools under him.

I try to move toward Luke, but I'm frozen. Tears pour down my face, and I throw my hand out. "No!" I scream, "Luke!"

"You're mine." Roger sneers.

"Angel, wake up. It's just a dream." Luke's voice rings in my ear.

I sit straight up in bed, screaming Luke's name.

Glancing to my side, I see Luke's concerned face and toss myself at him, wrapping my hands around his neck.

"Please tell me you're real?" I sob.

His hand pushes back the hair that clings to my wet cheeks. "I'm right here, angel. I'm real."

My door flies open, and Nick stands there in boxer shorts and holding a 9mm.

Luke puts one hand out toward Nick while, at the same time, blocking me with his body. “Clear, Nick. She had a nightmare.”

I peek around Luke to make sure I saw what I thought I did. Where the hell did Nick get a gun? By the way he holds it, this isn't the first time he's handled one.

Nick lowers the gun, clicking on the safety. “I heard her scream, and with the threat that someone's following her, I had to be sure.”

Luke relaxes a bit. “We're safe.”

“Sorry. Goodnight.” Nick turns and shuts the door behind him.

“Um, did he just have a gun?” I point to the door where Nick just stood. “Why did Nick have a gun?”

“I'll tell you in a minute. But first, are you okay? You're still shaking. What did Nick mean when he said you thought someone was following you? Do you think it's about that dude?” He moves us to lie back down, covering us with the sheets.

“Roger, yeah, it's about him. The dream, at least.” I rub my cheek against his chest. “When I was riding my bike, it was dark, and when I turned, the person behind me turned, too. When I sped up, they did, too. But they could have just been going the same way. I think Dom's attack freaked me out.”

“Do you want to talk about Roger?”

“No, I just want to forget about it. Tell me about Nick. Why does he have a gun?”

“It's something I've been wanting to tell you.” Luke rubs my back. “Nick and I aren't just average kids. We're guards for Mav and Dom. When we were little, we were trained to protect them. In first grade, we all met and instantly clicked, becoming best friends. For as long as we knew them, Dom and Mav always had guards, and we were always slipping their security. We made a game out of it. It was fun, at the time, until we got kidnaped.”

“How young were you?” I lean up on my elbow so I can see his face.

He glances at the ceiling, scrunching his face up. “About ten, I think. Being friends with the twins came with risks. We were told repeatedly what to do if we were ever kidnapped.”

I just stare at him; I don’t know what to say.

He rubs my arm, smiling.

I’m beginning to think I’m still dreaming. “You’re joking, right?”

“No, Shelby, it’s no joke. Does that change the way you feel about me?”

Does it? It’s a whole new side of him. He’s still Luke. He’s just more of a badass.

“No, it doesn’t change anything.” I bite my bottom lip. “To tell the truth, it’s hot as hell.”

I lift the sheet and straddle him. All he wears are boxers, and I run my hand up his muscular chest. Being a guard explains why he’s so athletic. I always thought it was due to him being a quarterback.

His callused hands move up my thighs to the hem of my shirt. He slides it up and off.

“Damn, you’re perfect.” He hesitates, blushing. “Um, there’s one more thing I need to tell you.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. Oh, shit. What now? Do I want to hear this? I’m not sure how much shit I can handle tonight.

“I’ve never done this before.” The words rush out of Luke, and he bites his lip.

My mouth falls open, and my eyes widen. “You’ve never had sex before?”

He shakes his head. “Fooled around, but I’ve been waiting for someone special.”

I lean down and kiss him with everything I feel.

The kiss quickly turns heated, and I grind on him. His hand reaches up to my breasts, kneading them just the way I like.

I'm going to make this something he won't forget anytime soon.

I kiss his neck, sucking hard at the junction of neck and shoulder. He lets out a moan. When I move down his chest and flick my tongue over his nipple, his back arches. I spend time lavishing his nipples until he's a writhing mess.

Shifting down to my favorite part, the V, I lower his boxers and lick down both sides of the V. With his help, I remove his boxers and throw them on the floor. One of the biggest, vein-covered dicks flops out, hitting his belly.

My mouth waters. Fuck, he's big. This is going to feel so good.

Running the flat of my palm up his shaft, I squeeze the head. His hands fall off my hips, and he grips the sheets, letting out a moan. His mocha, half-lidded eyes watch as I lick around his head, slowly moving down. I take in as much of him as I can, but damn is he big.

He thrusts up, gagging me, and I hum around him, loving every second of this. The little noises he makes spur me on. He's getting close.

I pull off him and reach into the nightstand for a condom. I rip it open and roll it down his length. The fit is tight. I might need to get the next size up for him.

Crawling up his body, I slowly slide down his rock-hard dick. When I'm fully seated, we both groan. I roll my hips in slow circles, lifting, then slowly dropping back down. I keep doing that, building up speed, until his hands grip my hip, and he meets my thrusts.

"Angel, you feel so damn good." He lifts one hand to my nipple and pinches it.

"Oh..."

He starts to lose his rhythm, the hand on my nipple moving down to between my thighs. He wiggles his pointer finger,

flicking my clit as I come down on him.

My climax hits hard, and I cry out my release.

Luke quickly pulls me off him, flips me over onto my hands and knees, lines back up, and slams back into me.

“Fuck, yeah. Harder, Luke,” I groan, grabbing the sheets.

Damn, if that boy isn't going to make me come again.

Luke grips my hips as he picks up his pace. Shit, he can move.

“Come, Angel, I'm so close,” he grinds out.

He shifts position, hitting my G-spot and sending me to my second, amazing orgasm of the night.

Luke thrusts three more times and pours his seed into the condom.

Exhausted, I fall onto the bed, and he crashes down beside me.

“Damn, I'm glad I waited for you. Holy shit.” He holds me as we get our breathing under control.

I'm half asleep when he gets up to dispose of the condom. Returning to bed, he pulls me against him, and we fall asleep in each other's arms.

When the alarm goes off, I want to throw it against the wall.

We just went to sleep a few hours ago for the third time. Luke woke me one more time to have amazing sex.

Damn can that boy go.

I snuggle deeper into my bed before the smell of coffee hits my nose.

My eyes snap open to find a smiling, already-dressed Luke in front of me, holding a coffee cup.

I sit up, holding the sheet as I take the cup from him.

“You’re a morning person, aren’t you?” I ask, taking a sip.

He crawls onto the bed to sit behind me, rubbing my thighs under the sheet and kissing my neck. “Anytime I’m around you, I’m happy.”

“Well, you can keep Mr. Happy in your pants. I can barely move,” I say, laughing into my cup.

“I’m sorry, Angel. Was I too rough on you?” he questions as he kisses my neck.

I twist so he can see my face.

“No. I loved every minute of it. It’s how big Mr. Happy is.” I move my hand over his dick. “This is what I need to get used to.”

We both forget my door is still open until Hannah walks past.

She lets out a strangled cry. “Tell me you didn’t, Luke! You didn’t give that slut what’s mine!”

I hang my head. Here we go again. I’m so sick of her thinking everything is hers.

Luke kisses my shoulder before he stands up.

Tears run down Hannah’s face. “How could you, Luke? I thought you were waiting for the right person. At least, that’s what you told me. Or was that a lie?”

He grips the door with one hand and the frame with the other. “It wasn’t a lie, Hannah.”

“Then, why did you give your virginity to that slu—”

“Never let that word slip through your lips again. If you stopped being so jealous of Shelby, you’d see how strong and perfect she is. You need to get over me. I’m not coming back.” He keeps eye contact with her, so she knows he’s serious.

She makes a wounded animal sound, then glares at him. “We’ll see about that.”

Turning, she storms off.

Luke closes the door and comes to sit on my bed. “She’s had a crush on me since we were little. All the attention she gave me went to my head, and I thought I could fall in love with her given time.” He shakes his head. “It was a mistake. She became more obsessed. I didn’t feel the way I should for her, but every time I ended it, she somehow got me back.”

I understand being someone’s obsession more than anyone. “It’s going to take time. Even if things don’t work out for us, you need to make sure not to go back to her.” I run my hand through his hair. “Not if you can’t return her feelings.”

“Things *will* work with us. I understand she’s hurt, but she doesn’t have to take it out on you. I’m the one who broke her heart.” He points to his chest.

“I’m the reason you’re breaking her heart. But I can take her jabs. You’re worth it.” My hand runs up his jaw. “Thanks for a great night.

He kisses me. “The best night of my life. You better get a shower. Don’t forget you promised the guys to meet them early to explain about Roger.”

“How could I forget?” I roll my eyes before focusing on him once more. “Oh, don’t think I forgot about your little confession last night, by the way. I have questions.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything else.” He stands once more. “I need to go. I’ll see you at school.”

“Definitely.”

He strolls out of my room and shuts the door behind him.

I scrub my face with my hand, get up, and set my empty cup on my desk.

So much happened yesterday that I don’t know where to start unraveling it all. I take a quick shower and throw on clothes before heading out of my room.

When I reach the kitchen, only Nick is there. He stands deep in thought, staring out the window.

I set my cup in the sink. “You, okay?”

He blushes and shakes his head. “Yeah, just thinking about something.”

“Hmm. Could you be thinking about Cin?” I tap my lip, smiling at how red he gets.

He turns away from the window and leans against the counter. “Maybe. I’m scared I’ll screw it up somehow. We’re complete opposites of each other, but there’s just something there. I can’t explain it.”

Taking a step closer, I touch his shoulder. “You don’t have to explain, I understand. I feel the same way with the guys.”

“Don’t tell me you gave her your virginity, too, Nick,” Hannah sneers from the entrance to the kitchen.

I’m not shocked to hear that Nick’s a virgin. I kind of had a feeling he was. But I can’t believe she just blurted it out like that.

“You’re unbelievable, Hannah. Are you trying to alienate yourself even more? Because you are doing a good job.” I grab Nick’s hand and drag him away. “I need a ride today. Let’s go, Nick.”

I open the front door, and a cold breeze hits me. “Give me a minute. I need to grab a jacket.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you in the truck.” He shuts the door behind him.

I run down the hall to my room, where I catch Hannah searching through my stuff.

I stop in the doorway with my arms crossed. “Can I help you find something?”

She startles.

I walk into my closet and pull on my flannel jacket. “If I know what you’re looking for, I can just tell you where it is.”

She *tsks* and leaves my room.

I follow her out and shut my door before stopping beside her. “You need help, Hannah. At the rate you’re going, you’ll lose everyone.”

“No, I won’t.” She juts her chin out. “I’ll find something on you that will send everyone scurrying away from you. I promise you that.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “Whatever.”

Out in the driveway, I climb into Nick’s truck.

He takes one look at my face and sighs. “What did she do now?”

I turn to look at him. “How do you know she did something?”

He shrugs. “I’m good at reading people.”

“She was in my room looking for something.” I buckle myself in. “Now, let’s talk about this bodyguard thing. Why didn’t you tell me? I thought we told each other everything.”

I can’t keep the hurt from my voice.

“I planned on telling you, Shelby.” He turns to look over his shoulder as he backs out of the driveway. “Stuff kept getting in the way, though, and it’s not a simple conversation to have. Like, *oh, by the way, I’ve been trained to guard Dom and Mav*. That’s not a normal thing to just say.”

“I guess it just feels like you still didn’t trust me enough to tell me,” I say, glancing out the window.

His eyebrow rises. “Just like you didn’t tell me about Roger?”

Fuck, he has a point. I didn’t tell Nick about Roger, not because I don’t trust him, but because it’s difficult to talk about.

I turn to look at him. “Any more secrets I should know about?”

“None that I can think of. Are we good?” he asks as he pulls into the school, parking in his usual spot, right next to the guys.

“Perfect.” I lean over and kiss his cheek before jumping out of the truck. “Thanks for trying to save me.”

Everyone is there waiting except Luke.

I stroll over to Dom with a pouty face on. “Sorry I worried you. I needed to think, and I think the best riding.”

Glancing down at me, he touches my cheek. “I understand the need to think, but I didn’t like you telling Nick not to tell us. Did you think we’d stop you?”

I cock a brow. “Are you saying you wouldn’t?”

“Sometimes escaping’s not the best thing to do. You’ll have to face whatever is making you run at some point.” He runs his hand through the end of my hair. “I’d let you go, but I’d want a promise that you’ll tell one of us what’s troubling you. I don’t like being worried about you.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t say I won’t do it again, but I’ll try to remember to let you know,” I say. “You need to remember that I’ve been running for most of my life. It seems we have a lot to talk about.”

Nick pulls out a blanket and lays it down on the tailgate so that I won’t be so cold as Luke comes running up.

“I got the coach to let us use the prep room. It looks like it’s going to rain any minute,” he says peering up at the cloudy sky.

“Always gotta show me up, don’t you, Mason?” Nick folds the blanket back up and shuts the tailgate.

“Have to keep you on your toes.” Luke drapes his arm around me and pulls me in for a heated kiss. He rests his head on mine. “Would it be too weird to say I missed you?”

Blushing, I lean against him. “I missed you, too.”

“I don’t believe it,” says Cam’s excited voice.

Luke and I turn our heads to find Cam and Mav standing side by side, staring at us.

Mav looks at Cam. “Do you think?”

A blinding smile spreads over Cam’s face. “Oh, definitely.”

Luke's head lifts from mine. "What are you nuts talking about over there?"

"About how you lost your virginity last night." Mav chuckles.

Luke's mouth falls open. "Is nothing sacred with you?"

Cam glances at Mav, then they both look back at us.

"No," they say at the same time with a deadpan look.

"Do you not know us?" Mav demands.

"Unfortunately," Luke replies.

"You love us, and you know it." Cam jumps on Luke's back, giving him a noogie. "Congrats on finally getting it on. I'm sure our girl treated you right."

"Enough fooling around." Nick pushes them forward. "Let's get this done. None of us can miss school."

CHAPTER EIGHT

They lead me to a room off from the main gym.

The minute I step over the threshold, I cover my nose. It smells like body odor and dirty socks. Chairs sit in a semi-circle, a projector behind them that faces the whiteboard on the front wall. Different plays are scribbled all over it.

As we sit down, I rub my hands up and down my jeans. “I guess I’ll start this. There are still things I refuse to tell you, not because I’m keeping things from you, but because I just can’t bring myself to talk about it.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I let it out. How do you tell four boyfriends that a sociopath suckered you in?

“I’m not sure how much you know about my mother and her past. I’m sure you heard some of Hannah’s rumors. Some of them are true. I was a month away from turning fourteen when my mom got caught with heroin. It was her third strike, and she was sent to jail. A social worker called my uncle, and he told her he didn’t want me. Something about being a bad influence.”

“The uncle we met?” Mav questions.

I nod. “I know now that it was Jack pretending to be my uncle, but at the time, I’d never felt so alone, so full of hate, and so scared. It wasn’t my first time in a group home, but I was a scrawny, half-starved fourteen-year-old who got thrown into Ashdale group home, one of the toughest there is. No one cared about anything.” I close my eyes, remembering it like it was yesterday. “The security guard who was paid to protect us

stood over fights, making bets. The staff that was there to help us, to guide us, told us to figure it out ourselves.

“The girls went through everything I owned, which wasn’t much. When I made the mistake of pleading for them not to take a stuffed bear that Cin got me when I was little, one of the girls teased me, saying I was a baby who needed a teddy bear to sleep. Some girls grabbed me, and one got me in a chokehold, holding me still while the leader tore off the bear’s head and arms until there was nothing left. They burned pictures I had of Cin and me with a cigarette lighter.”

“Christ,” Luke swears. “How could the adults just let shit like that go down? Where are the people who check up on those places?”

I open my tear-fill eyes.

Luke sits on the edge of his seat, one leg bouncing a mile a minute. Dom leans against the wall with a scowl on his face. Nick, who’s heard some of this already, still looks pissed off. Cam leans back in his chair with his legs spread open, mashing his teeth together. Mav looks ready to beat the shit out of someone. They’re all angry, and they haven’t even heard the worst part.

I glance at Nick, silently asking if I should continue.

He nods.

I wrap my arms around my waist. “I stopped fighting the one who had her arm across my throat. I was so tired of everything. I didn’t care anymore if I died. It felt like there was nothing left for me in this world.”

“Christ,” Mav murmurs.

“Baby,” Luke coos.

“But then the world started fading out, and I realized I didn’t want to die. But I was so weak. There’s no way I could have fought them off.” I hug myself tighter. “Right as I was blacking out, a deep, menacing voice told her to let me go, or he’d hurt her double. The girl started shaking, and she dropped me right away. Roger scared her shitless. He scared all of them.”

“So, Roger’s a good guy?” Cam asks, confused.

I shake my head. “Far from it. Roger once told me that, when he saw me arrive at Ashdale, my dark soul talked to his. When he saw me give up on fighting those girls, he knew I was broken enough for him to rebuild me into something he wanted. He was my savior, and I followed his lead.” I slump forward in my chair. “To this day, I still have nightmares from some of the things he got me to do.

“It was a month before we snuck out at night. We did what I’d call normal kid’s stuff. Spray painting buildings. Bashing mailboxes with baseball bats. Doing stuff like that, things I’d normally never do, made me feel invincible. I started picking fights and stealing things from the other girls. I couldn’t go into a store without shoplifting.

“After a while, though, I realized I didn’t like who I was becoming, so I tried to pull away from Roger. But every time I did, I’d get sick. I’d start sweating, shaking, and I’d become nauseous. I couldn’t understand why, but I hated feeling like that. It reminded me of my mom when she didn’t have money for her drugs. Then Roger would come to the rescue, and I’d feel better again.”

“He was drugging you,” Nick sounded astonished.

“I think so, but I’ve never figured out how. Things got worse, Roger became more obsessed with me. If someone talked or even looked at me, he’d go crazy. He made it clear to everyone that I was his.

“One night, we broke into a house when no one was home. I was out of it, and looking back, I’m positive he dosed me with Rohypnol. We had sex in the master bedroom, and I couldn’t have stopped him if I wanted to.” I lower my head in shame. “He was my first.”

“Son of a bitch!” Mav throws a chair across the room.

Dom punches the wall, and Luke stands to pace, raking his hand through his hair.

Cam pulls me onto his lap, hugging me tightly.

I raise my voice to be heard. “Let me get through this, then you all can freak out.”

They settle back down, though Luke continues to pace.

“At the time,” I continue, “I never felt that Roger raped me. The drugs might have pushed things, but I had feelings for him. After we had sex, though, things went downhill. He threatened me many times over the following six months. I wasn’t conforming to how he wanted me to be. I didn’t like his possessiveness, but when I tried to break things off, he told me he’d kill anyone I dated. I was scared of him and how I acted when I was with him. It felt like I was looking out of someone else’s body. I didn’t have control over my actions.”

Cam rubs my back, offering me comfort.

“One day, I stayed late at school to talk to a teacher about an assignment. When I got back to the group home, Roger cornered me. He said he was going to carve his name onto my chest so that everyone would know who I belong to. His eyes were so cold that I knew he meant it.”

Luke freezes, his wide eyes fixed on me.

Mav’s mouth opens, but he clamps his lips shut without speaking.

“The next day, while we were in school, I ran away. That was the only time Roger wasn’t at my side, and I knew I had to escape. I didn’t think about what I was doing, because I knew I’d talk myself out of it. Leaving Roger always hurt so much.”

Cam wraps his arms around me, and I lean into him.

“The first week was hell,” I whisper. “I was going through detox and sleeping on the streets, begging for food. I thought I would die, so I called Cin for help. It took another week before Cin showed up with the car. We didn’t have any money for an apartment, but we worked when we could find jobs. We slept in that car for a good six months before I won a race with a prize big enough to pay for an apartment. And despite everything Roger said, he didn’t come for me. I thought I escaped.”

I look up at Dom. “But when you told me about those guys beating you up and what they said, I panicked. That was exactly what Roger used to say. He’s crazy, and a damn genius to boot.” I glance around at all of them. “I couldn’t let anything happen to any of you. I had every intention of breaking up with you today.”

“You were what? You didn’t say any of that last night!” Luke fumes.

I slide off Cam’s lap to sit back down in my chair, picking my nails. “I had Nick run a search for Roger. The last time I checked on him, he was in jail, and he should have still been in jail. Nick found out he’s dead. He was stabbed about a year ago.”

“You thought he was the one that beat up Dom.” Nick takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes.

“Yeah, I did,” I confirm. “I also thought he was the one following me last night. But it can’t be him if he’s dead.”

Standing, Dom takes two steps closer to me. “Someone chased you last night on your bike?”

“As you can see, I made it back fine.” I rub my leg. “Just banged my knee up again. Nick patched me up.”

As Dom fumes and turns away, I drop my head.

Mav moves to kneel on the floor in front of me. “Baby, look at me.”

I raise my head and stare into his dark, caring eyes.

“You need to stop running and just talk to us.” Mav takes my hands. “You also need to stop making decisions for us. We’re big boys. We can make up our own minds about whether we want to take someone on. I understand that things happened in your past that you’re afraid to tell us about, but everything you’ve been through has made you who you are. And I happen to like who you are a lot. Nothing you said today changes how I feel about you.”

“He’s right, angel.” Luke joins us and runs his hand through my hair. “I’ve never met someone who can handle all

of us. We all have issues, and that's why you fit in so well with us. You don't let what happened to you define you."

Cam nods in agreement, and Luke gives me a supportive nod, letting me know they're both still on my side.

My gaze moves to Dom.

He leans against the wall with his leg crossed at the ankles, his head down and his arm crossed over his massive body as he stares at the floor. "If he weren't dead, I'd find him and kill him. The fucker took advantage of your innocence, and he got what he deserved." He lifts his head. "And I agree with Luke and Mav. Nothing has changed how I feel about you. But, Firefly, no more damn secrets."

I stand and walk toward him. "I agree, no more secrets. But that goes for both sides of the line. When were you going to tell me about the bus flipping the other day? *It was just a little bump.*" I do my best Dom impersonation. "Or, better yet, what about Nick busting into my room last night with a gun? And now I find out he's your guard? I think we're even on the secret-keeping."

Dom uncrosses his arms and straightens away from the wall. "I wish we had more time, but I'd never stop you from thinking for yourself. I'd just make sure you're thinking clearly enough to be safe. At the time of the bus accident, we decided not to tell you because we didn't want you to worry. We won't do it again. Are we good?"

I wrap my arms around his waist and hug him. "We're good."

As we separate, the bell rings.

"That's not fair!" I stomp my foot. "I didn't get to find out about Nick and Luke being guards, or why you *need* guards."

"Nick can fill you in at home. We can't miss any more classes, or we'll be benched from football." Mav walks over to us and kisses my head. "I'll walk you to class."

Cam catches Mav's eye. "Can you give me a minute?"

The others leave the room, heading to class, and Mav moves out into the hall to wait for me.

Cam steps closer to me, putting one hand on my waist and the other on my face. I stare into his gorgeous blue eyes that are electric today. “When we first met, and I kissed your hand, a feeling ran through me, one I hadn’t felt before. I couldn’t get you out of my head. I wanted to get to know you. That was new for me, and I didn’t understand it. When you came into art class that day and started to strip, I knew I met my match. The more time I spend with you, the more I crave you. You understand me on a level that no one ever has. The day you rode up on that motorcycle is the day I fell for you hard. I know it’s quick, but I always believed, when love hits you, you’ll know.” He cups my cheek, and I nuzzle into it. “Your soul has a way of speaking to me in a good way. I don’t expect you to say anything back, especially after what you just told us. I just want to let you know how I feel, how I will always feel.”

His speech touches something deep inside me, and my heart skips a beat. No one has ever said something like that to me before. Too many emotions run through me, and I do the only thing I can think of. Putting every emotion I feel into it, I kiss him.

He smiles against my lips. “Wow, if you kiss me like that, I’ll have to tell you how I feel more often.”

Mav pops his head into the room. “Guys, I can’t be late.”

Cam turns and looks at Mav. “Go, I got beautiful.”

Mav salutes as he leaves.

My hand on Cam’s cheek pulls his focus back to me. “When I met each of you, I felt an instant connection, and it freaked me out. I always thought I was too screwed up to feel love. When people talked about soulmates, I always thought they were full of shit. But now I don’t know.” Letting out a huff, I run my hand through my hair. “I’m screwing this up.”

Cam chuckles. “You’re doing just fine. I know you have feelings for the others. It doesn’t bother me.”

“With you and Mav, there was an instant connection, but it was different, I almost want to say *stronger*. I don’t know why. What I’m trying to tell you is that I love you. I’ve never said that to anyone other than Cin.”

“I’m ecstatic to be the first one you told that to. It means the world to me.” His hand slides against my neck, his thumb caressing my cheek. “Now, we better get to class. Don’t want to get into too much trouble.”

He takes my hand, and we jog to my first class. There’s still a half-hour left of class, which means I didn’t technically miss it.

Cam gives me a quick kiss before he races off to his class.

When I open the door, every eye goes to me.

Mr. Jordon, who took over for Mr. Davis, frowns at my tardy arrival. “Ms. Winters, do you have a note?”

“No, I got stuck in the bathroom.” I give him a shrug. “You know, that time of the month.”

Anytime periods are brought up to a guy, they’ll do anything not to discuss it.

Right on cue, he scrunches up his nose. “Next time, get a note. Please find your seat.” He mumbles something about women as he turns away.

When the bell rings, Mav and Dom come over.

“Nice excuse, babe.” Mav kisses my cheek.

“It worked, didn’t it? Now I just have to pray that nothing happens when it shows up for real.” I wave to Paige as she leaves with Sam.

They’re getting along great, and I’m happy for her.

The twins walk me to my next class, where we find Hannah standing at the door.

“Shit, there goes my day,” I grumble. “I forgot the cheer squad is back.”

Hannah and a handful of other cheerleaders were suspended for cheating in classes, but I barely had a chance to enjoy school life without those bitches being around.

“Don’t let them ruin your day,” Dom says. “See you at lunch.”

“Bye.” I kiss Dom and Mav before taking my seat beside Luke.

When Hannah comes strolling in, she gives Luke a sweet smile, “Hi, Luke.”

Is she for real? She’s unbelievable. She’s not going to give up trying to get him.

When he doesn’t acknowledge her, she storms off. Class starts, but I can’t focus on what the teacher is saying. With the cheer squad back, that means I can find Carrie and make her tell me what she knows about my time at Ashdale.

A voice penetrates my thoughts. “Ms. Winters.”

“Huh?” I glance around. Shit, I got caught daydreaming. I look at the teacher. “What?”

She frowns at me. “I asked you to solve the problem on the board.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Murphy.” I glance up at the board and solve the problem.

For the rest of the class, I make sure to pay attention.

When the bell rings, Luke leans over, laughing. “Busted. Were you daydreaming of me?”

I take my notebook and smack him in his arm. “No, I wasn’t dreaming about you. I was thinking about Carrie.” When Luke’s eyebrow pops up, I realize how that sound. “Not like *that*. Oh, forget it. See you at lunch.”

I hurry to my next class and sit down beside Nick.

He leans closer to whisper, “Did you remember the girls are back today?”

“No, completely forgot about it.” I rub my temples. “I have to talk to Carrie and find out how she knows I was at Ashland.”

He gives me a concerned look. “Do you need help?”

“No, I plan to corner her in the bathroom.” I hope I can get her alone that way. “It’s better if you guys stay out of it. I don’t want to get you in trouble. But if I don’t come to lunch, come find me.”

The teacher arrives. I try to pay attention, but my mind keeps wandering. What does Carrie know, and how the hell did she find out? What happens if she found out the whole story? What the hell am I going to do? I’m starting to have a normal life, starting to forget my past. I don’t want all that shit hanging over me again.

I start to hyperventilate. *Breathe. You’ve got this. One thing at a time.*

First, find out what she knows.

The bell rings, and I stand up, putting my stuff away.

Nick slings his bag over his shoulder. “Be careful, Shelby.”

“I will,” I promise. “Tell the guys what I’m up to.”

He quickly nods. “I’ll see you later.”

I head out to the hall, searching for Carrie, and spot her heading toward the bathroom with Liv and Maddie.

Just what I wanted.

When I follow them in, there are two other girls already inside. Carrie stands at the mirror, fixing her hair, while Liv puts on lipstick. Maddie must be in a stall.

“Everyone, get out!” I yell, throwing daggers at the other girls.

They glance at Carrie, who glares at me, before they run out the door. I was hoping her sidekicks would leave, too, but they don’t.

“Well, look who it is.” Carrie grins as she turns away from the mirror. “Trailer trash.”

I take a few steps closer. “Who told you about Ashland?”

She crosses her arm over her chest. “Wouldn’t you like to know, slut. I heard you’ve been busy since we’ve been gone.”

“Not your business.” I get in her face. “I don’t want to hurt you, Carrie. All I want to know is who told you about Ashland.”

She chuckles. “There are three of us and only one of you.”

Liv takes a swing at me, but I see it coming a mile away and step back, letting her run into the counter. The move puts me in front of the bathroom stall doors, and Maddie comes out, the door smacking me in the face.

She smiles. “Oops.”

Ouch, bitch. I back away from the stalls to give myself more room.

Maddie and Liv advance on me, and I grab Maddie’s hair in one hand. Her hands flail toward me, but I hold her at arm’s length. Liv comes at me, and I take a weak punch in the side as I grab a chunk of her hair, too, and use my hold to smash their faces together.

They stagger back, holding their noses. Looks like I didn’t break their noses. There’s no blood.

“Don’t make me hurt you more,” I warn.

Liv glances at Carrie, then back to me before she runs out the door.

Maddie brings up her fists.

Great, she wants to fight. “Remember I asked you to leave.”

“I dated Mav Knight. I know how to fight,” she says proudly.

Anger boil through me. “I warned you.”

Whoever taught her to fight needs to give her a refresher. The way she has her hands up leaves a big space in the middle. With lightning speed, I jab her in the nose. It's the same punch I used on that asshole, Evan, but I don't use all my power.

She falls to the floor, blood gushing out of her nose, and tears pouring down her face. "You broke my nose!"

I just shrug. "I warned ya."

I turn my head to Carrie. She still stands with her arms crossed, and in three steps, I invade her space.

A devilish smile spreads across her face, and the next thing I know, I'm defending myself against her.

Damn, she's fast. We're dealing blow for blow when I see my chance and do an undercut cut. She stumbles back. I use the opening to aim for her stomach, but arms grab me from behind.

Something sticky drips onto the back of my neck. Damn, Maddie, stop bleeding all over me. Blood is a bitch to wash out.

"Hurry, Carrie, I can't hold her much longer," Maddie says.

Carrie moves toward me and does a combo on me, driving the air from my lungs. With another hit, she splits my lip.

My tongue darts out, and I taste metal.

"You're good." She smiles. "But I'm better."

I stomp on Maddie's foot and elbow her hard in the stomach.

She lets me go, careens backward into the small wall by the sinks, and slides down the wall.

Good, she's down.

I kick out, hitting Carrie in the stomach and backing her up against the wall. Darting forward, I slam my arm across her throat, not too hard, but just enough to let her know I mean business.

I add more pressure. “Now, who told you about Ashland?”

Her hands claw at my arm, scratching me to hell.

I push tighter. “Who, Carrie?”

“It was Evan... Evan Ryan,” she croaks out. “He told me that you lived there. That’s all.”

Evan? What the hell? How does he know? I didn’t accept that, and an uneasy feeling settles in my stomach.

“Shelby!” The door bangs open, and Dom fills the opening, Nick behind him.

“They attacked me, and I had to defend myself.” I look at Carrie. “Right?”

When she nods, I drop my arm, and she sucks in a breath.

“Carrie, you’ll never beat me. I trained for years in karate. I went easy on you today. Don’t try fighting me again.” I stroll over to Dom. “Do you have a sweatshirt I can use? Maddie got some blood on me. She’s a bleeder.”

“Yeah, come on,” Dom says.

We head to his locker where he pulls out a sweatshirt and puts it over my head.

His eyes scan my body. “You all right?”

“She got some good shots, but as someone else told me, I’ve had worse.” I go to smile but wince as it tugs on the split in my lip.

Nick smiles. “Did you get the info you wanted?”

“She said Evan Ryan told her.” I situate the sweatshirt. “Why would he be looking into my past?”

“Well, you *did* punch him in his face,” Nick points out.

I shake my head. “I don’t think that’s it. I have a feeling it’s something more.”

“He’ll be at the fights this weekend,” Dom mentions.

“Fights?” My hand moves to my hip. “Why is this the first time I’m hearing about this?”

“I planned on telling you, but it’s not something I wanted you to see.” Dom scratches the back of his head.

“Why?” I demand.

“I don’t want my girlfriend to see me beating the shit out of someone,” he grumbles.

“Here’s a secret. I’m not like most girls. I actually *like* fights. They usually turn me on.” I walk away, saying over my shoulder, “Thanks for the sweatshirt.”

The rest of the day, rumors about the fight in the bathroom run rampant, and some of them were comical.

Before I leave school, Luke asks if I’m still planning to go over to his house for dinner.

Shit, I completely forgot. With a split lip and visible bruising, his parents are going to hate me.

CHAPTER NINE

“**S**top worrying, they’re going to love you,” Luke assures me, smacking my hand away from the cut on my lip. “What’s not to love?”

Wow, did Luke just say he loved me? I know he feels more than lust because he wouldn’t have given me his virginity otherwise. Right?

Luke takes my hand, and I float the rest of the way up the steps to the front door of a two-story house. I wish like hell I wasn’t all bruised. Why did I confront Carrie today?

Before Luke can open the door, his mom opens it. Her hair is the same mocha color as Luke’s, and she has it cut into a cute bob. Her hazel eyes sparkle as they sweep over me. Luke must have gotten his eyes from his dad.

“You must be Shelby. It’s so nice to meet you.” She smiles as she steps away from the door. “Please come in.”

We step into a small entryway. A set of stairs leads to the second story, and there’s a closed door to the left. We follow Mrs. Mason to the right into the living room. A red and off-white plaid couch with end tables on either side sits on the edge of the room. Cream lamps fill the cozy space with light. A stiff-looking chair sits off to the side with a knitting basket beside it, and a well-used recliner angles toward the TV, which is mounted above a gas fireplace.

Instantly, I can see the Mason family spending many nights here as a family. Something I’ve craved but never experienced.

“Thank you for inviting me to dinner, Mrs. Mason. I’ve heard wonderful things about you from the Tates.” I smile nervously, while a ball of worry churns in my stomach.

What happens if she hates me? Will she tell Luke not to date me?

“Thank you, dear. And, please, call me Clara. I’ve heard great things about you, too.” She smiles warmly. “Luke hasn’t stopped talking about you since you moved here.”

Luke blushes. “Mom.”

“What? It’s true.” She glances at my lip and *tsks*. “Luke told me some girls jumped you. Such a shame. Girls can be so catty, nowadays. Luke, maybe some of that cream you use will help Shelby? Dinner won’t be for about an hour, so why don’t you give Shelby a tour? I better get back before something burns.”

Now I know where Luke gets his calming effect from. They have a way of putting me at ease. I knew she couldn’t be that bad with how she helped Nick and Peter when his wife died. But it’s different when I’m the one dating her only son.

She heads toward a narrow walkway behind the couch that leads to the kitchen but pauses before she completely turns around. “Relax, dear. You’re years above the other girls he’s dated.”

Luke groans.

I cover my mouth as I chuckle, then I remember what little manners I was taught. “Is there something I can help you with, Clara?”

“No, dear, you’re a guest. You go enjoy yourself.” She scurries toward the kitchen.

Luke grabs my hand and pulls me back to the entryway.

He points to the closed door to the left of the stairs. “That’s my dad’s home office.”

He leads me toward the upstairs, but I slow down to look at all the portraits hanging on the wall. They seem to be from the time when he was a baby to recently.

I point to the baby picture, giggling. “Is this you?”

“Yes.” He tries to push me up the steps.

I slap his hands away. “I want to see. You were so chubby as a baby. Aww, look at those cheeks.” I pinch his cheeks, chuckling.

Luke blushes. “Are you done now?”

I ignore his pleas to move on and keep looking at his family pictures. Luke was a really chunky kid before he went into sports. As I slowly move up the stairs, I see a blond girl who looks to be Luke’s age at the time or maybe younger.

“I didn’t know you have a sister. You never talk about her.” I glance at him.

He pales, shoves his hand into his pockets, and gives me a half-shrug.

Way too many secrets. I thought we were over this shit this morning. Did she die? Is she the family shit he’s been dealing with? There has to be a reason he hasn’t brought her up.

As I move up the stairs, Luke’s sister goes from a sweet little girl to wearing all black, then there are no more pictures of her.

We reach the top of the stairs, and Luke says in a monotone voice, “My parents’ bedroom is on the right.”

He turns left, walks past a closed door, and heads to the next one. He opens the door and steps through.

I follow and glance around the room. It’s about the same size as mine. A dark wood bed sits in the middle of the room, the headboard up against the wall. Dark green sheets and a gray comforter are pushed to the bottom of the bed. A nightstand sits on the right. Against the far wall sits a tall dresser beneath a window. Next to it is a desk and a corner bookcase. Across from the bed is a flat-screen TV on a stand, all in the same rich wood as the bed.

There’s no doubt this is Luke’s room. Trophies are everywhere, and half-naked girls’ posters cover all the walls and the ceiling. I amble over to the trophies, reading plaques.

On one wall, there are pictures of him and the guys at different parties having a good time.

I can't help but smile. When I turn around, though, Luke sits on the edge of his bed with his head down.

Damn, that's not good. When I asked about his sister, his whole mood changed. I hope he'll open up to me.

I walk over to him, push my way in between his legs, then lift his head so he looks at me. "Did I say something that upset you?"

He lies down, scoots back to the middle of the bed, sits up, and picks me up like I weigh nothing. He places me so I straddle his hips. It takes everything in me not to grind down on him. He lies back down and lets out a sigh.

"I don't like talking about Lea. It hurts too much." He rubs his hand over his heart.

I put my hand on his stomach. "You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to."

"You told me just about everything in your life, so I think I can tell you about my sister." He grips my waist as he stares up at the ceiling. "After my mom had me, something went wrong, and the doctor told her that she wouldn't be able to have any other kids. My parents always wanted a lot of kids. They both come from large families, and they wanted a large family of their own, so they didn't let that hurdle stop them. When I was four, they said it was a perfect time for adoption. They waited every day for years, and they were just about to give up when they got a call. There was a girl who was dropped off by her mother. She was a year younger than me. Mom and Dad ran down and got her. The only thing I remember is her crying every night. It drove me nuts, but I tried to be the best big brother I could be."

He runs a hand through his hair. "Things changed when I met the guys. I started playing football and hung out with them a lot. I tried to include Lea, but she didn't want to hang out with a bunch of stupid boys. Hannah and Lea were friends for a while, but as with anything with Hannah, their friendship

didn't last. She had other friends she hung out with, and as she got older, the group changed.

"I didn't like them, but I didn't do anything about it. I got busy in my life. I thought things were fine until Mom asked if I took some money, or her jewelry, or the good silverware. Mom noticed a change in me when I started training. As you saw, I was a chunky kid. I think she thought I took the stuff for steroids or something. She had no idea that I'm a personal guard for Mav and Dom. She was worried all the time, and she'd been through enough. Once I convinced her I wasn't stealing stuff from the house, I started watching Lea closer. She was skipping school and sneaking home way past her curfew."

I lie down on top of Luke and hug him. I can't imagine what Luke went through. He was dealing with being a teenager, being friends with the Knights, and his sister's stuff all at the same time. It's too much to carry on one person's shoulders.

"One day, I came home, and Lea was already here. I don't remember where my parents were. She came out of the bathroom with black hair. I stood there shocked as hell. At first, I wasn't sure if it was her or not. She had such gorgeous blond hair before. But what disturbed me even more was the freshly rolled marijuana joint hanging from her lips. I smacked it from her mouth and flushed it down the toilet. Then, I dragged her into her room to rip her a new one and found a naked guy, high as a kite, lying on her bed. I lost it. I screamed at her about how she was throwing her life away." He closes his eyes. "I didn't understand why she was acting like that."

Wanting to calm him, I slip my hand under his shirt and run my hand in circles on his chest.

"She yelled back at me that this was who she always was, and she couldn't pretend anymore. She said she came from a crack whore, and it was in her system. She couldn't fight it anymore. We fought back and forth for what felt like hours, and the whole time, I prayed Mom and Dad would come home. Lea finally screamed that she had enough, and I wouldn't change her mind." A lone tear ran down his face.

“She got the guy up, and no matter how hard I tried, she wouldn’t stay.”

“How old was she?” I slide over to lie beside him and lift his shirt, so he takes it off. I go back to making circles on his chest.

He takes a deep breath and then lets it out. “She was thirteen. Way too young. I was so pissed off, mostly at myself. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to drag her back into the house and tie her down, but I couldn’t do that.”

I remember what it was like to be that age. When I went to the wild side, I was only a year older, but I didn’t have a loving family at home. I understand the call to be free, but how could she want to leave this family for the streets?

“It was so hard telling my parents what happen. I felt like I failed them by letting her go. Mom called the adoption people and asked them about Lea’s mom. My parents had no idea that Lea’s mom was using crack when she was pregnant with her. We don’t know how she uncovered that information when even my parents didn’t know. I think her father found her and told her, but I’m not sure. We should have known she was born an addict when we adopted her, but I’m not sure if it would have made a difference.

“Lea showed up a few days later, looking stoned out of her head. She would fall asleep, eat, steal something, then leave. That’s what happened for the next few years. One day, she showed up with the same guy I saw years before. They went up to her room, and I stormed in to talk some sense into her. I told her she was destroying Mom and Dad, but she didn’t care. They weren’t her mom and dad. She was packing up all her clothes as she was talking to me, and when I asked her what she was doing, she said she was leaving.

“I told her that Bull—that was her boyfriend’s name—should get sent to jail for statutory rape. I never felt such raw fury before. I yelled that he’d been fucking her since she was thirteen. She turned, and Angel, I’d never seen such hate in her eyes before. She screamed back that he was the only one who understood her and loved her for who she was.

“I told her she was full of shit, that I loved her, but I don’t like the drugs and the stealing. She just shrugs, though, like what I said meant nothing. When she turned to walk away from me, I grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around. I flat-out told her I wouldn’t let her go this time. I made that mistake once, and I wasn’t doing it again.

“She yelled at me, saying I was hurting her. Her boyfriend, Bull, yelled at me to leave her alone. Of course, I told him to fuck off, and he punched me. We got into a fistfight. My parents came home and stormed up to the room. Dad grabbed me off of Bull. I could have killed him with all of my training. Mom and Dad asked what was going on, and I told them.

“Lea continued to pack. She said there was nothing they could do to stop her. She was leaving. My father said like hell Lea was leaving, and he went to grab her. Her boyfriend punched him, and he fell back. I was standing right behind him, he fell on me, and we tumbled to the floor.” He opens his eyes, their normal cocoa-colored so dark they’re almost black. They hold so much sadness in them. “Lea and Bull took off, and we haven’t seen her since. She just disappeared off the face of the earth. My mom was depressed for months after that.”

“I’m sorry, Luke.” I move my hand from his chest to his face. “When I was that age, I was hanging out with Roger. I know how tempting that life can be. I always wondered what my life would have been like if I had a loving family at home. Have you heard from her at all since then?”

“I had people looking out for her. There were some sightings, but when I got there, she was gone.” He shrugs. “The other day, I got word about a body that showed up. I went down to see if it was her or not.”

“Oh my God. Did you tell your parents?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, I didn’t tell Mom and Dad. Anytime I ask Mom and Dad if they’ve heard from her, Dad won’t talk about it, and Mom says she hasn’t, but I think she’d do anything to cover for her.”

“You went by yourself?” I demand. “What the hell were you thinking?”

I can't wrap my head around having to walk in and identify a body that you believe is your sister. With no support, people fall apart.

“I had another guard with me,” he says. “I'm glad I didn't tell my parents. It wasn't Lea.”

“A guard? Are you serious? A guard won't comfort you if it is your sister. Stop trying to carry the world on your shoulders. If something like that pops up again, please let me come with you for moral support. I'm going to start calling you Atlas, cause you carry everything on your shoulders. You need to stop doing that. I'm here for you, whatever you need me to do.”

“I know, Angel.” He looks at me and raises his eyebrows. “Do you want to continue with the tour?”

“No. I'd rather make out for a while,” I say with a big smile.

“I could deal with that.” His eyes go soft, but his body is still all tense.

Thinking of one way to relax him, I lick my lips.

He shifts on his side, puts an arm under my head, then leans down so close that we share breaths. His lips barely touch me, and he nips my bottom lip. The whole time, his eyes are open, watching my reaction. My lips part in a grin, and his tongue slips into my mouth, exploring every inch of my mouth.

The kiss turns sensual, and I moan as he pulls me closer, rubbing his hard dick on my leg. My hand moves over his sculpted chest, loving the feel of him quivering under my hand. When I run my finger over his hardened nipple, he moans.

Hmm, how I love that sound.

My hand moves down his body, and my finger skims his waistband. I quickly unbutton and unzip him, then shove my

hand inside his boxers, running my hand over his silky-smooth dick. My mouth waters at the thought of putting my lips on him again.

He stops kissing me and falls onto his back.

I love making him lose control.

“Oh, God, Shelby,” he groans as he fists the sheets.

This is going to be quick. We don’t want his mom catching us.

I shimmy down his jeans and run my palm up his throbbing dick. Licking my lips, I grab him at the base with my right hand. I run my tongue around the top and his slit.

“Aurg,” he mewls.

I put my finger to my lips. “Shh. Your mom.”

“I don’t know if I can be quiet.”

I smirk proudly at making him lose his senses. “Then, grab the pillow.”

Opening my mouth, I take his tip into my mouth.

Luke hisses and grabs the pillow.

I hollow my cheeks out as I move up, then back down as far as I can go, before licking my way up. This time, when I go down, I open my throat as far as I can and take him in all the way. When I swallow around him, he swears into the pillow and thrusts his hips up. I move back up and hum. At the same time, I grab his balls and massage them, gently pulling on them.

He moans and swears his head off under the pillow. “Aw, shit. Aw, shit.”

With a thrust up, he comes down my throat. I keep sucking, making sure I get it all.

When he throws the pillow off his face, his eyes are closed, and he breathes through his mouth. “Damn, girl, you’re good at that.”

I snort and lay down beside him with my hand on his arm.

We stay like that for a while.

After a while, he stirs. “Dad will be home soon.”

He tugs up his boxer and jeans, pulls his shirt back on, then settles the pillow back at the headboard. He moves up the bed, and I follow him, laying my head back on his chest.

“Do you have any idea what you’re going to do after high school?” I ask.

The thought of college never entered my mind before. I always thought I would race and get an apartment with Cin.

“I know my dad wants me to get a scholarship for football, then go to the NFL. Recently, Nick and I have been throwing some ideas around about starting our own security company.”

“That would be different. I can see you doing that. Would you still go to school?”

He frowns. “We know how to shoot, fight, protect, but nothing about the business side.”

“Go to college on a football scholarship. You can get your business degree while doing something you like.”

He tickles my side. “I thought you could run the business while we do everything else.”

“Oh, okay. Why do I get the hard stuff?” I laugh, then become serious. “You know that means having a conversation with your parents.”

“Yeah, I know.” He scrubs a hand down his face. “It’s not a talk I want to have.”

“Do you know what the twins want to do?” I question.

“Dom’s easy. He wants to own a garage. He’ll probably go to a fancy trade school for that. Mav has been all over the place over the years, anything from firefighter to clown. What about you, Angel? What do you want?”

“I’ve never let myself dream about college,” I admit. “I have no idea.”

“Why? Your grades are as good as mine. You could get a full scholarship.”

“Too many variables that could go wrong. First, I would have needed a lot of information that I didn’t have. It was easy to get into a school in a bad area that had thousands of kids, but to go to a college? That was a different ballpark. Then, there was Roger. I knew it was possible that he’d find me.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about any of that now.” His hand glides down my back. “What’s the one thing you love to do?”

“Easy. Riding my bike and racing,” I say. “I love the adrenalin rush.”

He chuckles. “You could be Cam’s twin, I swear.”

I remember what Cam said earlier, about how my soul speaks to him, and smile. Yeah, we’re alike.

“If Cam gets sponsored, you guys are going in a different direction,” I sigh.

“It sucks,” Luke agrees. “We’ve been together since we were five, but we always knew it would end. We’ll still be friends and see each other, though.”

Where does that leave me? I nibble my bottom lip. Would they make me choose? *Could* I choose? If I don’t, I’d have boyfriends spread out all over the United States. There’s no way that would work. My stomach twists in knots.

“Kids, dinner’s ready!” Clara yells up the stairs.

“I’m going to use the bathroom,” I say, moving off him and dropping my legs over the side of the bed. I need to get my emotions under control. “Why don’t you head down? I’ll be right there.”

He tucks my hair behind my ear. “You, okay?”

I give him the best fake smile I can. “Of course.”

He shows me to his bathroom and gives me a quick kiss before he leaves.

I shut the door and grip the counter, taking deep breaths. In and out. In and out. *You have a year before you have to make that drastic of a decision. A lot can happen in a year.*

I splash water on my face and wipe it off before heading downstairs.

In the kitchen, a round table sits off to the side, with Luke and an older man already seated. That must be his dad. He wears a nice green shirt and jeans that show off an athletic build. Luke takes after him there. His hair is lighter than Luke's, with touches of grey running through it.

As Clara brings dishes over from the stove, she glances up and sees me. "There she is. Please have a seat." She points to the chair next to Luke. "Shelby, this is my husband, Henry."

I nod to him. "Mr. Mason, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Please, call me Henry. Mr. Mason makes me feel old." He stands and holds out his hand.

I shake it, his hand warm and rough against mine. I don't know what he does for a living, but it's easy to tell he uses his hands a lot.

He motions to my lip as he sits back down. "I hope the other person looks worse than you do."

"Oh, believe me, they do. Shelby knows karate." Luke gives his father a knowing grin.

Henry's eyebrow pops up. "They?"

"Yes. Three against one in the bathroom," Luke says proudly.

"I believe girls should know how to protect themselves. The world is a crazy place." Henry's eyes glaze over.

Is he thinking about Lea?

"Enough about fighting at the dinner table," Clara urges as she takes her seat across from Luke.

Henry winks at his wife and turns his attention to the food on the table. "Looks good, honey."

“Well, help yourself.” She picks up a bowl of potatoes, scooping some on her plate.

A bowl of corn rests in front of me. I take a spoonful, then pass it to Luke.

“Do you want a roll?” He holds out a basket.

I give him a nod, then take the bowl of potatoes from Clara. I put a spoonful on my plate, then pass them to Luke.

“Would you like a slice of meatloaf, Shelby?” Henry asks.

“Yes, please,” I tell him, my mouth watering. “Everything looks and smells really good, Clara.”

“Thank you, dear. I hope you like it.” A satisfied smile races across Clara’s face.

As everyone eats, the conversation stays light.

When I ask Henry what he does for a living, I find out he works for Knight Technology. He worked his way up from the assembly line and is now the manager of one of the warehouses.

Dinner is pleasant, and I’m glad they stay away from the topic of my past. I don’t know how much Luke has told them.

After dinner, I offer to do the dishes, but Clara won’t hear of it.

“I’ll help out after I do some work,” Henry tells his wife.

“You say that every night,” Clara teases him. “And by the time you come out, I’m done.” She turns to us. “Why don’t you two watch some TV in the living room?”

“As lovely as that sounds, I need to go home,” I say apologetically. “I have some homework that has to get done.”

She hugs me. “Come over anytime.”

“Thank you for dinner,” I say again.

“I’ll walk Shelby home,” Luke says, “then come back and help do the dishes.”

Luke holds my hand on the walk over to my place.

When we reach the door, he kisses me. “I had a great time.”

“Did I act appropriately?” I question.

He laughs. “Yes, they loved you. Stop worrying.”

“I never learned proper etiquette for dinner,” I explain. “Maria, Cin’s mom, did a bit when we were little. But when Mom was around, dinner was usually cold SpaghettiOs out of the can.”

He kissed my head. “You’re perfect, inside and out. Don’t change for anyone.”

CHAPTER TEN

When I stroll into the house, Peter and Mom are curled up on the couch, watching a movie.

Mom sits up as Peter pauses the movie. “Didn’t expect you home so soon. Everything all right?”

“Dinner was good. They’re the nicest people,” I reassure her. “I’m just going back home because I have homework that needs to be done.”

“When my late wife, Barb, passed away, I was a mess. If it wasn’t for Clara helping with everything, I don’t know what I would have done.” Peter takes off his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose, a gesture I’ve noticed Nick does, too. He’s like Peter’s mini twin.

Mom runs a soothing hand over Peter’s leg. The death of his first wife affected everyone so much. They all deserve some happiness. I’m glad he met my mom. They need each other.

“Have fun with the movie.” I head toward the kitchen archway. “I got Geometry, Spanish, and a test to study for in Economics.”

They call out, “Goodnight.”

From the kitchen, I take the hall that leads to all our rooms. As I reach my door, unease fills me when I see it’s already open. I always close it before I leave.

I open the door wider and step inside. Everything seems to be precisely the way it was when I left, but a nagging feeling

tells me someone was in here.

Frowning, I sit down at my desk and open the right drawer. I need music to do my homework. But my iPod isn't in the drawer where I keep it.

What the hell? I scan my room and spot it sitting on my nightstand.

Hmm, I could have sworn I put it in my desk the last time I used it.

I caught Hannah searching for something the other day. Did she borrow my iPod and forget where she got it from?

At least, she gave it back. I would have expected her to keep it. Standing, I grab my iPod, search my music for what I'm looking for, and get going on my homework.

Beep. Beep.

Why is my alarm going off? As I reach over to turn it off, my sheets tighten around me. I jack knife up, my wide eyes as I sweep my room.

How did I get in bed? The last thing I remember was doing homework. Trepidation fills me as I pull the sheets away.

Please let me have clothes on...

I wear a t-shirt, which means I changed... But I don't remember anything.

All right, all right. Let's calm down. What's the last thing I remember?

Rubbing my temples, I think back. I had dinner with Luke, then I came home and started homework... Then nothing until now.

Did I even finish my homework?

Jumping out of bed, I bolt to my desk to check. Yes, it's done. I guess I was so tired when I finished that I don't

remember changing and falling into bed.

My head feels so foggy, I need coffee.

I put my books back in my bag and head to the shower. The hot water feels good until I turn to the right and the water hit my thigh. It stings, making me flinch. When I glance down, a red, puffy line about two inches long cuts across my thigh.

What the hell?

I run my hand across it. When did this happen? I remember hitting the side of my desk the other day. Could it be from that? It must be, because I don't remember doing anything else that would cause it.

I'm losing my mind.

I finish my shower, dress for the day, then do my zombie walk for coffee.

"Here, I got your cup ready. You look like you need it." Nick holds it out with a smirk. "Rough night?"

"I came home early to do homework, smartass." I take a sip of coffee.

Nick's eyebrows come together. "And you didn't go anywhere later?"

"Nope. Slept the whole night. Why?" I question over the rim of the cup.

He shakes his head. "Don't worry about it. Are you riding with me or on your bike?"

"I want to ride Serenity before it gets too cold, but I'm feeling off today. I better not be getting sick." I take another sip of my coffee. Hmm, sweet nectar of the gods. "Can I ride with you?"

He puts his bowl in the sink. "Sure, but just so you know, Hannah needs a ride, too."

"Great. That's fine."

"Five minutes."

"It's not me you have to tell that to."

Taking the cup back to my room, I finish getting ready.

Despite my words, it takes me seven minutes to get ready. Hannah's bedroom door is shut when I walk past it, and I quicken my pace.

When I make it to Nick's truck, though, Hannah's nowhere to be found. I climb into the truck, and Nick puts the center console up to make room. I slide into the narrow part of the bench next to him.

It's not the most comfortable place to sit. This truck is made for two people, not three.

Nick gives me a concerned look. "You okay?"

"I'll make it." I hug my bag on my lap. "Where's your sister?"

He blows the truck horn. "I hate driving her. I like having a few minutes to get ready for the day, and she always makes me late." He blows the horn again.

Hannah comes running out and climbs into the truck next to me. "I don't understand why we have to go so early."

"It's not early, Hannah. I don't like to arrive three minutes before the bell." Nick slowly backs the truck up.

Can he see with me in the middle? I don't feel like crashing today.

Hannah adjusts her clothes. "Umm, how are you feeling, Shelby?"

What? That came out of nowhere. Why does she care how I feel?

My eyes narrow at her. "Why?"

She shrugs, staring out the window. "Just wondering. You're looking worse than you normally do."

I turn my head to peer at Nick, silently asking him what the fuck. Is she serious or being a bitch?

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

Being a bitch, I guess.

I don't answer her, and we spend the rest of the way to school in silence.

As soon as Nick parks, she jumps out, strutting right past everyone to stop in front of Luke, placing her hand on his chest.

A growl leaves my throat.

"She's just trying to get to you," Nick states plainly.

"Today isn't the day to screw with me." Mashing my teeth together, I jump out of the truck, storming over to them.

Luke glares down at her, his lips thinly pressed together.

Her shrill voice fills the air. "What do you mean you're not taking me to the Black and White Ball? You promised, Luke."

I grab her wrist and throw it off him. "Keep your paws off my boyfriend."

A smile breaks over Luke's face, and his arm snakes out, wrapping around my waist. He pulls me closer and kisses my cheek.

"You have three other guys to take you!" Hannah yells. "Why do you need Luke? He promised me at the end of the school year to take me. It's too late for me to find another date. Thanks for making me more of a laughingstock."

She storms off.

I look at the rest of the guys. "When the hell is this ball that she can't get another date for?"

"Next weekend," Cam says.

Mav sashays over. "So, babe, what are you wearing to the Black and White Ball?"

My eyes widen. "I'm going?"

Nick's eyebrow raises. "Did any of you ask her? Or did you just assume she's going?"

Cam glances around, pointing to the other guys. "I thought one of you asked her already."

Mav shrugs. "I figured you would, Cam."

Dom crosses his arms. “You know I don’t want to go.”

Luke rubs the back of his neck.

“So, none of us asked her?” Cam smacks his forehead.

Mav gets down on his knees in front of me. “We’re idiots, Princess. Will you please forgive us and go to the Black and White Ball with us?”

Cam joins him. “We promise to make it up to you, beautiful.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“Get up, you idiots.” I put my hand on my hip. “I guess I have to wear a dress?”

Damn, I hate dresses.

Cam’s head snaps toward Mav. “Well...”

Wrong thing to say to these two. Now they’re picturing me in a dress. I can tell.

“I don’t think grumpy over there would like it if you don’t wear a dress.” Mav hooks a thumb toward his brother.

“I’ve already asked Cin,” Nick adds. “She’ll be there. She wants you to call her tonight.”

That shocks me. Cin hates dances. She must have serious feelings for my stepbrother.

“I’ll go, but I have two conditions.” I hold up a finger. “One, Dom has to go.”

He lets out a groan.

“Hey, Griz, if I have to go, then so do you. Second, I can’t believe I’m saying this...” I breathe out. “Luke, since you promised Hannah, you should go with her.”

He pulls away from me. “What? Are you serious?”

“Yes. It’s only right. She already has a dress.” The corner of my mouth lifts. “And who else will take her?”

“Your heart is too big, babe.” Luke kicks a stone. “I don’t like this, but I’ll escort her. I refuse to dance with her, though, or even eat at her table.”

“I said take her. You don’t need to do anything other than that.” I hug him. “I knew you were a good guy.”

“You’re *too* good.” He kisses my head. “We need to go. The bell is going to ring.”

As we head to the front entrance of the school, Nick drops another bomb. “Did you at least tell Shelby about The Challenge?”

I stop dead, and Mav bumps into me. He wraps his arms around me so I don’t fall flat.

I turn to glare at the guys. “When the hell is that?”

“The weekend before the dance,” Luke says. “Sorry.”

I point at each of them. “You all need to learn to communicate better.”

Nick starts walking again. “Good luck with that. I’ve been saying that for years.”

Once we reach school, we go our separate ways.

“I’ll see you in class,” I tell the twins. “I need to stop at my locker.”

They go on ahead, and I walk to my locker.

When I open the door, a black piece of paper with red lettering dangles from the top shelf.

Pulse lurching, I rip it down.

In bold, red lettering, it reads, *You’re mine! Stay away from them or lose them.*

My heart leaps to my throat as I glance around. No one is paying attention to me.

Roger’s dead, I remind myself. *He can’t hurt you. Someone is playing a sick joke.*

Why can’t I have a normal life?

I slam my locker and head to class.

Dropping my bag on the floor, I throw myself into the chair and flick the note onto my desk.

Dom reaches over, takes it, then scowls. “Where did you find this?”

“In my locker. Someone is messing with me, and if I find out who it is, they’re going to wish they were never born.” I make sure I say it loud enough so everyone in class hears me.

“Don’t worry about it.” Dom tucks the note into his bag. “We’ll look into it, Firefly.”

This is turning into a shitty day. I should have just stayed home in my warm, comfy bed.

When the bell rings for the next class, it startles me.

I scrub a hand over my face. Shit, what’s going on with me? Time is passing, and I’m not remembering.

Paige comes running up to me with the biggest smile I’ve ever seen on her face. “Guess what?”

I put on a happy face. “What?”

She jumps up and down. “Sam asked me to the Black and White Ball.”

I stand to jump up and down with her, something I never thought I’d be doing. “I knew he would! Do you have a dress yet?”

“No.” She pulls back and searches my eyes, her excitement transforming into concern. “You’re going, right?”

“Yes. I just got told today about the dance.” I roll my eyes. “So, I guess we can go shopping. How about Saturday? I’m going to see if Cin can come up, and we can all go together.”

She smiles again. “Great! I’ll drive, because I’m not getting on that bike of yours.”

She runs off to her next class.

If I didn’t know her, I’d swear she’s an entirely different person than who I met at the beginning of the school year.

In the next two classes, I have a hard time staying awake.

Maybe something to eat will help.

In the lunchroom, I sit down beside Dom, putting my head down on the table. Paige has relaxed around Dom, so we've been sitting at their table. The Barbie Squad got kicked out by the guys, and they now sit where Paige and I used to.

"Firefly, are you all right?" Dom rubs his large hand up and down my spine. "Did something else happen?"

I turn my head and peek at him. "I don't know. Last night is so weird." I rub my head on my arm.

Dom straightens. "Weird how?"

I sit up. "I remember having dinner at Luke's house, then going home to do my homework. The next thing I remember is waking up this morning."

Dom laughs. "That sounds normal to me?"

I turn toward him. "No, I mean I don't remember doing my homework, changing for bed, or setting my alarm. And today, my head is so fuzzy. I'm so damn tired. I feel like I didn't get any sleep."

Dom presses the back of his hand against my forehead. "Are you getting sick?"

"Other than being tired, I'm fine." I pull his hand down. "I'm going to go get something to eat."

"Mav's up there. I'll have him grab you something." Dom pulls out his phone and sends his brother a text.

I nod and lay my head on his shoulder.

Mav, Cam, and Nick arrive a short time later and set their trays on the table.

Mav pushes one toward me. "Here, baby."

"Thanks, snookums." I smirk.

He pouts. "I thought I'm cuddle wuddly."

Cam and Nick laugh, and Dom just stares at his brother.

"Where's Luke?" I glance around.

He was in second period, wasn't he? I'm not losing it that bad.

“He got a text that he needs to get home right away. He just left.” Nick sits down.

“Shit, I hope it’s not about his sister. Do you know he went down to the morgue to verify a body by himself the other day? Thankfully, it wasn’t Lea.” I bite my lip.

A round of swearing follows my statement.

Nick moves his food around with his fork. “I’m surprised he told you about Lea. He doesn’t talk about her.”

A tall kid comes running into the cafeteria, skids to a stop in the middle, and yells, “Luke Mason just wrecked his Mustang out in front of the school!”

It takes a second for the words to reach my brain.

When I glance around the table, the guys are already up and running.

Jumping up, I follow everyone else outside.

As I shove my way to the front of the group, my heart beats out of my chest.

This is your fault, a voice says in my head.

I stumble, and Mav grabs me around my waist.

I take in the scene before me. The school has a four-way traffic light at the entrance of our parking lot. Luke’s Mustang is smashed into the light pole on the far right. All the damage seems to be on the driver’s side.

All your fault, the strange voice says in my head.

My breath quickens. *Is this my fault?*

I pull away from Mav’s arms and run toward the Mustang.

“*Luuukkkee!*” I scream at the top of my lungs, tears pouring down my face.

As I run across the street, I glance down at the road. From his tire marks, he swerved to miss something. He couldn’t have been going that fast. Mostly, the side panel is crunched in around the pole. The hood just crumbled right up.

I've been in and seen my fair share of accidents, but this one is the worst. Someone I love—

I push the thought aside. Can't think of that right now.

When I reach the driver's side window, I see that the airbags went off.

Luke's mouth moves, and he shakes his head from side to side.

With shaking hands, I try the handle, but it won't budge.

I slap my palm on the window. "Luke, can you hear me?"

I peer up at the sky. Please, don't let him be severely hurt.

"Move, Firefly. Let me get in there," says Dom's deep voice from behind me.

I move off to the side, and Cam wraps me in his arms. By now, the whole school has made their way to the accident.

"Is that Luke Mason's car?" asks a high-pitched voice we all know.

I roll my eyes. Just what we need right now. An outrageous Hannah.

"Someone do something!" she screams, shoving her way forward to stand right in front of the door.

"Hannah, back off. Let Dom get in the car." Nick tries to pull her away. "You're just in the way right now."

She shrugs out of her brother's hold, her eyes shooting over to me. "This is all your fault, slut!"

My whole body goes taut, and I turn to bury my head against Cam's neck.

He tightens his arms around. "It's not your fault, beautiful," he whispers into my ear. "You didn't hit him."

Everyone talking around us, and I feel like I'm about to scream.

"Did anyone call 911?" demands a shrill voice.

"Did anyone see what happened?" questions a flat voice.

“You should have seen it. The light was green when he got there, like it always is. He must not have seen the truck heading right for him. He swerved, hit the pole, and the truck took off. It was just like watching a live-action movie in real life. It was awesome,” someone said.

Cam and I turn and glare at the speaker.

“Dammit, Fred, that’s my best friend in there! Shut the hell up!” Mav explodes.

“Sorry, Knight.” The kid lowers his head, but he can’t keep the smile off his face.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Nick tells him. “You’ll need to tell the cops what you saw.”

My eyes return to the wreck. Dom can’t get the driver’s side door open, so he heads over to the passenger side and crawls in.

Hannah presses her face right up against Luke’s window. We stand off to the side, watching through the front windshield as Dom talks to Luke. Sirens blare in the distance.

Teachers are making their way to the accident, trying to get the students to go back inside. Mav argues with one teacher about keeping some of the students out to talk to the police.

After what feels like a year, the firefighters and EMT get Luke out of the car and onto the stretcher.

As he thrashes around on the stretcher, Hannah steps up to the EMT. “I’m his girlfriend. I want to go with them.”

Nick reaches out to grab his sister at the same time Luke groans, “No, Shelby. Shelby.”

Hannah gasps.

“Hannah, he’s told you many times that you’re no longer his girlfriend,” Nick says bluntly.

“We need to go. Which one of you is Shelby?” asks a blond EMT.

I wipe the tears off my face. “I am.”

He helps me up into the ambulance and tells me where to sit.

There are two EMTs working on Luke. He's partly awake, and they ask him some questions. I sit in the jump seat, my whole body shaking.

A redheaded female EMT wraps a blanket around me and helps me move closer to Luke. "It's okay to touch him."

I place my hand on his forearm. "Are you all right? Do you remember what happened?"

"I'm all right, baby," Luke groans. "Dad texted me to get home right away. I had a green light. There was a truck coming toward me, but I thought he'd stop at the red light. He didn't. When I swerved to miss him, I clipped the pole." He closed his eyes. "Did someone call Mom and Dad?"

I look at the blond EMT. "What injuries does he have?"

"He has some cuts, and his ribs are bruised, but that's all," he tells me. "At the hospital, they'll check for internal bleeding, but I don't think he has any. Since he blacked out, they'll keep him overnight for observation. His fast reflexes saved his life. It could have been a lot worse."

I let out a breath, the first real one since I saw Luke's mangled Mustang.

When we arrive at the hospital, everything moves fast. Since I'm not family, they shove me into a waiting room, but it's not too long before I hear Clara's voice.

"Shelby, oh your poor sweet thing." She hugs me. "Were you in the car with him?"

"No, I was in school when someone ran in and said Luke hit the pole."

"Do you know where he was going?" Henry asks.

I frown at Luke's father. "He said he got a text from you telling him to get home right away. A truck nearly hit him in front of the school."

Henry steps up behind Clara and touches her shoulder. “I didn’t text him.”

I don’t hear what else he says as my heart thumps in my ears.

He didn’t text Luke?

It’s your fault, that inner voice taunts.

Shut up! It’s not my fault! I stumble back to a chair.

If his father didn’t text Luke, then who did? Maybe it has something to do about the Knights? But why would he tell everyone it is his dad? Was he seeing someone else?

“Shelby, honey, are you all right?” Clara asks.

I shake my head to clear it. “Yeah, sorry. Went off in my head a bit.”

“They have a room for Luke. He’s still getting tests done, but we can head up there now,” Clair says sweetly.

They don’t want you up there. They’re only being nice.

What the hell is going on with this voice in my head? I dismiss it and follow the Masons up to Luke’s room.

Once he’s done with his test, a nurse wheels Luke into the room and settles him into the bed.

I let his mom and dad hover over him for a while, and he tells them what happened.

It’s almost word for word what Fred told us, except that it wasn’t just a truck. It was a box truck. The accident could have been so much worse.

Luke opens his arms. “Shelby, get your butt over here.”

I jog over and fall into his arms.

“Ump,” he grunts. “Easy, baby.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We’re going to go down to the cafeteria,” his father says. “We’ll be back in a bit.”

Luke scoots over on the bed, tapping the empty spot he just created.

“We’re in the hospital, not your bedroom.”

“I need you, and I think you need me. I’m just a bit bruised from the seat belt. They’re only keeping me because I blacked out. Everything’s fine, so come here and let me hold you.”

I kick off my shoes, crawl in with him, and we get comfortable.

“You had nothing to do with my accident.” He kisses my head. “Dom told us about the note you got in your locker this morning.”

Hearing him saying that brings tears to my eyes again. What is it with these guys and making me cry?

“I was so scared when that kid came running into the cafeteria and said you were in an accident,” I sob.

Luke chuckles. “I was scared, too, when I saw that box truck barreling toward me. Thank goodness I took all those evasive driving classes.”

As he plays with my hair, my tears stop, but I’m so sleepy.

I close my eyes for a second, or at least, that was the plan.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I’m sorry, Mr. Mason, but it’s time for visitors to leave for the night,” says an apologetic voice.

“We’ll leave soon, I promise,” Nick replies.

“Baby doll, you need to wake up.” Luke kisses my face. “Sadly, it’s time for you to go.”

“I heard.” Sitting up, I stretch, and Nick holds out my shoes. “Sorry I fell asleep on you.”

“I’m not. I like you lying on me.” Luke smirks. “And you looked like you needed it.”

“I did. The only problem is now I won’t sleep tonight.” I put on my shoes and slide off the bed, giving Luke room to shift back to the middle of the bed. “Did Mav and Dom show up?”

“They were here for a bit, but they had something they had to do,” Nick says, then shakes his head when I go to ask questions.

I give Luke a big kiss. “I’ll come over to your house after school tomorrow and check on you.”

“Will you be wearing a sexy nurse’s uniform?” he whispers in my ear.

I gasp. “I expect that from Mav or Cam, but not from you, Mr. Mason. I’m shocked.” I kiss his cheek. “Goodnight.”

As I head toward the door, Nick hugs Luke. “I’ll get your homework for you.”

We walk out of the hospital.

I hate hospitals. I spent too much time in them when I was younger, wondering if my mother would survive her latest overdose. Now, the antiseptic smell triggers those feelings in me.

“Hungry?” Nick inquires.

“Starving. Can we go to that fifty’s diner?”

“Sounds good.” He unlocks the truck, and I climb inside as he heads around to the driver’s side.

He climbs behind the wheel, and I relax against the seat. I still feel sleepy, and silence fills the cab as Nick drives toward the diner.

As we turn onto the street for the diner, I ask, “Did I miss anything while I was sleeping?”

Nick scratches the corner of his eye. “Just Hannah making more drama. Carla took her out in the hall and talked to her.”

“I thought she was going to kill Luke when he told her he didn’t want her in the ambulance with him.” I shake my head. “She’s never going to give Luke up.”

Nick turns into the diner’s parking lot and shuts off his truck. He runs his hand down his face. “I’ve been worried about her for a while now. With everything that’s happening to her, she might snap. She lost cheerleading and Luke, who she’s been in love with since she was little. That’s two things she’s loved for a long time.”

“She fought for cheerleading,” I say, “but nothing like how she’s hanging on to Luke.”

“I know. I’m afraid she’ll do something stupid and dangerous.” Nick sighs. “Let’s go eat.”

Inside the diner, we get a booth near the window, and I grab a menu. My stomach growls; I don’t remember the last time I ate.

A smiling waitress comes to our table. “What can I get you two?”

We give the waitress our orders.

“I’ll put that right in,” she tells us before walking away.

Nick leans back, putting his arm across the back of the booth. “Shelby, what can you tell me about the note you got this morning?”

I tell him how it was hanging in my locker, and no one was watching me.

“Do you have any idea who it might be?” he asks.

“That’s the problem. I don’t have a clue. Roger was the type of person who took action without giving a warning. Then again, he loved games.” I play with my napkin. “Until recently, I’ve stayed away from dating anyone. I was too afraid of something like this happening.” I carefully watch Nick’s face. “If you didn’t tell me Roger was dead, I’d say it’s him.”

Nick sits with a stony face, or so he thought. But when I say the last part, there’s a flash in his eyes.

I rest my arms on the table and lean in. “You have a good poker face. You’re well trained. But I lived on the streets, and I’m better. What do you know?”

He takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose. “I found a record that he paid for plastic surgery. But I can’t figure out if it was for him or someone else.”

I fall back against the booth. Damn. I didn’t see that coming.

“So, he could still be out there, looking like someone else.” My voice wavers. “Or he paid to have someone else look like him, and that’s who was stabbed in jail.”

Fuck, I didn’t think things could get any worse. It kills that one of the guys could get seriously hurt because of me.

Fighting back tears, I glance out the window.

The guys have enough on their plates. Maybe it’s time to disappear again. Mom will just have to understand why I broke my promise. I’ll be protecting her, too.

I let out a shaky breath.

Nick reaches his hand across the table. “Hey, don’t even think of disappearing. I don’t think it would make a damn bit of difference, anyway. If it’s Roger, he’s already seen how you feel about the guys. If he’s as crazy as we think, then he’s going to go after them even if you’re not here. If it’s him, Shelby, it’s time to take a stand and take your life back.”

“Great, just what I wanted to hear, Nick.” I cover my eyes. “No matter what I do, they’re fucked, all because I love them. What the hell am I to do?”

“We love you, too, babe. You’re going to stay and fight beside us.”

My eyes fly open, jumping a mile. Turning sideways, I find Mav and Dom sitting behind me.

My hand flies to my chest. “You scared the shit out of me!”

“Gene, we’ll have two of our usuals,” Mav yells toward the open window to the kitchen.

The guy at the grill waves his hand in acknowledgment.

“Move over, baby,” Mav says as he slides into the booth next to me and kisses my cheek.

Nick scoots over, and Dom sits beside him.

Dom pins me with his eyes. “What you need to do is trust that we can take care of ourselves.”

I wrap my arms around myself. “But look what happened to Luke today.”

“Exactly,” Mav says. “It could have been a lot worse, but he only has bruises.”

“If this is Roger, you have no idea what you’re dealing with.” A shiver runs through me. “This isn’t some kidnapper who wants your dad’s money. He’ll kill you just for the hell of it.”

“The people who kidnapped us were from a cartel,” Dom says. “They were pissed that Dad was buying up all the docks

in this area. He was cutting off their supply chain, and they wanted him to pay, so they took us. It wasn't a day at the spa. We're alive today because Nick and Luke watched everything and found a way out. This will not be the first psycho after us, and I'm sure it won't be the last."

Mav runs his hand up and down my back. "You want us to trust that you can take care of yourself in a dangerous situation. It's time for you to trust that we know how to take care of ourselves."

They're right. I need to trust that they can take care of themselves. That's the number one rule in fighting in a team. Trust your partners. "I'm sorry, you're right. All I can say is that I'll try."

"For now, we're getting Roger's body exhumed to make sure it's him," Nick says. "While we're waiting for the results, do you know anyone who could be his partner?"

"Me." I chuckle nervously. "No, I haven't seen or heard from him since I left Ashdale." Then, I straighten as a thought strikes. "Wait, Evan's the one who told Carrie about Ashdale."

Nick's eyes widen. "I completely forgot about that. I'll look into him."

Our food arrives, but after finding out about everything, I've lost my appetite and only pick at my food.

"Babe, you need to eat." Dom points at my plate. "You need your strength."

"Saturday morning, we're going to get you back into karate. How's that sound?" Nick says, taking a bite of his food.

"I'd love that. Are you going to be my teacher?" I scan his face before I take a bite of my biscuit.

He nods. "Luke's better, but for now, it will be me."

After that, we stick to lighter conversations while eating. They talk about their next game, which is tomorrow. Luke will miss it, and the backup quarterback will be in.

"He doesn't throw as well as Luke," Mav grumbles.

“Your mom and Dad are in town, so we’ll have the house to ourselves,” Nick informs me.

“Is it normal for them to live in the city?” I ask. They were home a lot when I first came here, but they’ve been gone more and more.

“Sadly, it is,” he says. “Dad’s in high demand at the hospital, and it’s just more accessible if they stay in town instead of coming back and forth.”

Mav pulls me against him. “We’re going to stay the night with you.”

After we finish eating, Nick pays the bill, and we head out to the parking lot. I get into the Jeep with the twins, and we follow Nick home.

Inside the house, we head for our rooms, and Mav and Dom say goodnight to Nick, while I wave.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” Nick says before he heads to his room.

Mav ushers me into my room. “Okay, this is what’s going to happen. You take a bath and call Cin. I don’t want her pissed at me. She can be scary. We’ll be out here waiting. And then, we’ll watch a movie, cuddle, and go to sleep.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

“Then move.” He smacks my ass.

I grab a clean shirt and underwear, then head into my bathroom, turning on the hot water and adding bath salts to the tub.

When it’s full, I turn the water off and climb in. A tray that spans the width of the tub with a place to put your phone or tablet, and I place my phone in it. Whoever came up with this is a genius.

While relaxing in the tub, I FaceTime Cin.

“About time, bitch,” she says as soon as she picks up.

I smile. “Sorry. Been busy.”

“How’s Luke?” she asks.

We talk about him for a bit before I ask how her dad’s doing.

“He’s been spending too much time at work,” she says. “He’s lost ten pounds already. I guess Brenda did some of the paperwork for the business, and with her gone, things fell apart. None of the guys know how to do the billing and orders, so I’ve stepped in to figure it out.”

I was afraid something like this would happen.

“I want to quit school to help at the garage, but Dad put his foot down and won’t hear of it.” She rolls her eyes. “He wants you and me to be the first Winters to get our high school degree and possibly go off to college.”

“Since you’re doing cyber school, do you want to come out here?” I ask. “A lot is going on in the next two weeks. We can go dress shopping with Paige, and you can figure out what’s wrong with Dom’s car.”

“That reminds me. Do you know if the guys have a car for the derby?” she asks.

“I have no idea, but hold on.” I look toward the door and scream, “Mav!”

He comes running, bursting into the bathroom. “What’s wrong?”

I laugh. “Cin wants to know if we have a car for the derby.”

He bends so Cin can see his face on the screen. “Hello, Nick’s sexy lady. We haven’t been lucky in finding a car for the derby.”

He looks away from the phone, his eyes roaming my body, and he groans, licking my neck.

“You have me hard once again,” he whispers in my ear.

Cin snaps her fingers. “Hey, none of that. I have a car for you. Where do you want it?”

That pulls Mav's attention back to the call. "Seriously?" He gives her the address to Dom's garage. "Thank you."

She narrows her eyes at him. "Just win the derby, and that's thanks enough."

"I better get out of the tub before I turn into a prune," I tell her.

We say goodbye and hang up.

Mav holds a towel out for me. "Ready to get out, Princess?"

"Thank you, my prince." I step out of the tub, watching his eyes flare with heat. "You've called me princess twice now. What's up with that."

"I'd think it's simple to understand." He wraps the towel around me. "Every knight should have a princess to rescue."

Heat floods my cheeks.

"Wait, are you blushing?" He grins. "Shit, I made you blush."

"That's the sweetest thing anyone's said to me, but you had to go and ruin it." I finish drying myself off and slip on my underwear and shirt.

Dropping my dirty clothes in the hamper, I stroll into my bedroom.

Dom sits in my bed with his back against the wall, watching TV.

Mav moves around me and jumps onto the bed, making Dom swear, and I laugh. I walk around the side and crawl in between the two.

"Cin found a car for Mav to drive in the derby," I tell Dom. "She's sending it to your garage. She's going to come up on Saturday and stay through the dance, so you two should have plenty of time to work on the car."

"Good. One less thing I have to worry about." He picks up the remote. "What do you feel like watching?"

I look at the list of movies. “I’ve never seen Jurassic Park. Is that okay?”

“Oldy but goody,” Mav says.

Halfway through the movie, my eyes keep closing. I try to stay awake, but I don’t make it to the credits before falling asleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next morning, while waiting for my coffee, Hannah comes into the kitchen, sneering at me like she always does.

She pushes me aside to reach for a glass. “I see you had another sleepover.”

“Your point?” I ask, wondering why I want to be nice to her again.

“You’re unbelievable.” She opens the refrigerator and grabs the juice container.

“I told Luke yesterday that he needs to take you to the Black and White Ball,” I say, wanting to be the one to tell her so she doesn’t get the wrong idea that he plans to date her again.

Watching for her reaction, I pour my coffee.

Hannah freezes before turning to face me with wide eyes. “What are you up to?”

I wish I had a camera; this is priceless. “Why do I have to be up to something? Can’t I just be nice to my stepsister? He told you he would take you, so I feel he should keep his promise. Plus, you’re right. I have three other men to take me.” I move closer to her. “But don’t think for one second he’s not still my boyfriend.” I walk toward the hall to my bedroom, stopping under the arch. “I wouldn’t expect too much, though. He was totally against this plan.”

When I open the door to my room, I find Mav and Dom getting dressed.

Damn, I missed the best part. But then again, if I saw them in just boxers, we might not make it to school. Hmm.

Mav moves over to stand in front of me. “You all right?”

“Yep, just the usual good morning from Hannah.” I sip my coffee. “I told her that Luke would take her to the ball, and she thought I was up to something.”

“That’s Hannah for you. I still think your heart is too big.” Dom kisses my hair. “Are you riding with us to school? Or are you riding your bike?”

“Bike. I want to come home before the game to get some homework done.” Setting my coffee down, I sit on my bed to put on my boots.

“Great, thinking about you on the bike is going to give me another day with a hard-on,” Mav breathes out.

“Don’t pretend you don’t love every moment,” I tease as I stand, ready to go.

He wraps his arms around me. “Damn straight. It’s sexy as all hell.”

Mav can always make me smile, the goofball.

He and Dom walk me to the garage, where they each kiss me and tell me they’ll catch up with me at school. Nick already left since he likes to get there early.

Revvng my engine, I shoot off on my bike and show off a bit, popping a wheelie.

As the front wheel touches back to the ground, I can’t help but smile. I love riding my bike. It’s the only time I feel free. I need to take Serenity out and really open her up.

When I pull into the parking lot, Cam and Nick are there waiting for me.

Cam licks his lips, watching me get off my bike. “I will never stop thinking that’s sexy!”

I take my helmet off. “Good morning.”

“Morning, beautiful. Why didn’t you tell me you were having a sleepover? I feel left out.” His bottom lip sticks out.

I stroll up to him and suck on it. “Hmm, next time I’ll make sure to invite you. Or maybe we can have one that will just be you and me?”

“Deal.” He kisses the breath out of me.

I don’t know what’s going on with me. I can’t seem to get my fill of the guys.

“Let’s go,” Dom growls. “Can’t be late.”

As we stroll toward the school, Mav walks on one side of me with Cam on the other, each holding a hand.

Once we get inside, we head our separate ways.

When I open my locker, I find another note taped to the shelf. Red letters jump out from the black paper.

I warned you!

Behind the red lettering are four stick figures, each with red Xs over them.

Ripping the note down, I scan the hallway for anyone paying attention to me. You’d think whoever’s putting these in my locker would want to see my reaction.

But no one seems to be looking in my direction.

Slamming my locker, I storm off toward first period.

Up ahead, I spot Carrie chatting with the Barbie Squad.

I stride past my classroom and right up to them, waving the note in Carrie’s face. “Are you the one putting these in my locker?”

“No, I don’t care what you do, anymore.” She flicks her hair off her shoulder. “I have someone better than the Knights.”

“She’s dating Aiden North, now,” Maddie says in a ha-ha tone.

Carrie grabs Maddie's shoulder and shakes her. "Shut up, Maddie."

Is it supposed to be a secret? Is North supposed to be better than Dom? What world does she live in?

"Good luck with that." Turning, I head to class.

I don't say anything to the guys about the new note. While I want to think there's no way this can be Roger, because he's more of an action guy, and these notes are warnings, my gut tells me it's him. Nick told me it will take a while to exhume his body and run the tests needed to find out if it's him.

Other than the note, nothing else out of the ordinary happens.

When I arrive home after school, a strange car sits in the driveway. Definitely not one of Hannah's friends. Plus, they're all practicing for the game.

Friends of Peter or Mom? But then why wouldn't their car be in the driveway, too?

I can't imagine someone would be stupid enough to rob the place by driving right up to the front door.

Nick's training goes through my head. It's better to be safe than sorry.

Not wanting to alert the intruder by opening the garage, I leave my bike in the driveway. As I walk toward the front door, I reach into my bag and pull out the taser gun Nick gave me.

Opening the door quietly, I tiptoe through the house, searching for anything out of place. When I enter the hall, I hear noises coming from my room.

Taking a deep breath to get my heart rate under control, I grip the taser tighter. Inching toward my room, I find the door is ajar.

I kick it all the way open, jumping in and yelling, “Freeze!”

Rolling around my bed, laughing hysterically, is Cin.

“Cin, what the hell? Why didn’t you text me you were here?” I lower the taser. “I could have shot you with fifty-thousand volts of electricity!”

She sits up, wiping away tears from laughing so hard. “I wanted to surprise you. What the hell is that? A taser?” Her amusement morphs into a scowl. “Why do you need one?”

I place the taser on my desk. “I’ve been getting notes in my locker.” Pulling the latest one out, I hand it to her.

Sitting down beside her on the bed, I tell her everything.

After I finish, she sits quietly. Then, she smacks me on the back of the head. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me this was going on? I thought we told each other everything.”

Shit, she’s mad. It’s never good when she’s mad.

“We did when we lived together. I’m sorry.” I give her a half-shrug. “With everything going on at home, I thought you had enough on your plate.”

“Just because we don’t live together anymore doesn’t mean I don’t want to know what’s happening in your life. It’s us against the world. Remember?”

I hug her tighter. “I missed you, Cin.”

“Your mom let me in before she left. She wanted me to tell you that they’ll be gone all weekend.” Cin straightens and raises one eyebrow. “They trust you guys that much? Even Hannah?”

“I don’t think they have much choice. Peter has surgery almost every day,” I explain. “And Hannah won’t listen to my mom. Nick keeps her in line. She just bitches that I have the guys sleepover.”

“She’s jealous.” Cin waves a hand to dismiss Hannah. “So, what’re tonight’s plans?”

“Well, I was going to do some homework, then head to the game to watch the guys play. After that, Dom has some kind of fight tonight.”

“I can watch TV while you do your homework.”

“Screw that.” I lie back in my bed. “What are you watching?”

“Judge Judy. You know how I love her.”

“How could I forget?” Chuckling, I remember all the hours we’ve laughed at these stupid people.

She lies back. “I’m taking this bed back home. It’s so soft.”

“No way, chick, I love this bed. Wherever I move, this baby is coming with me.”

We watch two episodes before it’s time to get ready for the night, and I show Cin to the guest room where she’ll be staying while she’s here.

Returning to my room, I search through my clothes. I want to be comfortable at the game and the fight, so I need something warm that I can move in. I pick my faded black camo pants. Mav asked me to wear his jersey tonight and gave me one of his practice shirts from last year.

I asked if he’d mind if I cut it, and since he said no, I cut it at my waist so it doesn’t overwhelm me and wear a tank under it.

While waiting for Cin to finish getting ready, I walk my bike into the garage, then survey Cin’s new car.

When she comes out, we look at each other and have a good laugh. It seems Nick asked her to wear his jersey. She tucked the front of the shirt in and let the rest hang.

We’re so far gone on these guys.

“Dad got an excellent deal on that car. It’s a twenty-seventeen Subaru Cross Trek. A Mustang would be better, but it gets me back and forth.” She twirls the keys on her finger. “You ready?”

We get in, and I give her directions to the school.

When we arrive, I'm surprised to see the parking lot is already packed, and we drive around searching for a spot to park. I spot Mav's Jeep and Nick's truck. There's an empty spot in between them, and I tell Cin to park there.

Cam's leaning against Mav's Jeep as we pull up, and he jumps up, waving his arms. "You can't park here!" Then, he bends to peer through the driver's side window, sees me, and grins. "Never mind! Come right in!"

He backs up, motioning us forward like he's landing an airplane.

"Is he ever serious?" Cin asks me.

I think of the one time he was, when he told me he loved me. "No, and that's why I love him."

She cocks her eyebrow and grins. I just confirmed what she already knew. I'm in love with these guys.

Cam opens my door. "Beautiful. I didn't know your cousin was coming tonight."

"She didn't, either, Romeo." Cin leans over to my side. "It's called a surprise."

"She surprised me, all right. Almost got herself tased." I chuckle dryly.

"That would be interesting to explain." Cam scratches his cheek.

I climb out of the car, scanning the lot. "Is Paige here yet?"

Cam shakes his head. "Haven't seen her."

"Let's head up to the ticket stand." I point toward the entrance to the stadium.

As we head toward it, Cam turns to Cin. "How has your dad been?"

I love how they all seem to care about my family.

As Cin murmurs a response, I get the feeling that someone is watching me. The hairs on the back of my neck start

twitching, and I reach up to rub them.

When we reach the ticket booth, we step off to the side to wait for Paige, and I scan the area. There are so many people around that I can't tell if someone is staring at me or not.

Cam slides a protective arm around me. "You okay, beautiful?"

I stare into his concerned, blue eyes. "Have you ever had a feeling that someone is watching you?"

"Yeah. Are you feeling it right now?" Cam skims the crowd. "Maybe it's just Paige."

I shake my head. "I don't think so."

It's hard to explain, but this feels evil. Whoever it is wants to harm me.

Cin glances around, too. "Your instinct has always been right, Shelby."

"Hey, guys, what are we searching for?" Paige asks as she bounces up to us.

I'm being silly.

"Nothing. I see Sam gave you his shirt, too. Aren't we such good girlfriends?" I mock.

"Yeah, but mine is a damn dress." She plucks at the front and the hem flutters around her thighs.

It does look like a dress.

Cin waves her over. "Come here. Let me teach you something."

"I'll going to go get our tickets," Cam says.

I kiss him, then watch as Cin shows Paige how to tie a knot in the back so the large shirt fits her better.

Cam returns with our tickets. "Does anyone want anything to eat?"

I give him a big smile.

“Yeah, yeah, I know what you want.” Smiling, he kisses my head.

“Can I get a hot dog?” Cin asks.

“Just a coke for me,” Paige says.

Cam salutes. “Coming right up.”

As he heads toward the food stands, we walk into the stadium, which is set up so that we enter in the middle. The guys are warming up on the field, and a mischievous smile spreads over Cin’s face.

Grabbing Paige’s hand, we run down the walkway in front of the bleachers to the one nearest the field.

I lean over the railing. “Nick!”

His head snaps toward us, along with some of his teammates, including Mav.

When Nick recognizes who stands beside me, he gives a big smile. He turns and runs toward us, Mav and Sam right on his heels.

Jumping up, Nick grabs the railing, pulling himself up in front of Cin. He kisses her, then pulls back. “What are you doing here?”

She smiles. “Shelby invited me up. I thought I’d see what all this hubbub is about.”

Mav jumps up in front of me. “Hey, princess.”

“Hey, Knight.” I kiss him and run my hand through his hair. “You ready to kick some ass?”

He grins. “Always.”

I bite my lip. “How’s Luke?”

“Pissed off that he can’t play.”

“Tate! Knight! Get your asses back on this field, or you won’t be playing!” a voice bellows from the field.

“We better go.” Mav drops back to the field. “See you after.”

“You know it.” I cup my hands around my mouth. “Kiss the others for me!”

Sam quickly kisses Paige, then he takes off.

Mav runs back to where his brother stands and kisses Dom’s cheek.

Dom swings, and Mav ducks, then points toward me.

I bust out laughing.

Mav heads toward Luke, who shakes his head and takes off running, Mav chasing after him.

I laugh so hard tears run down my face.

“What did you do, beautiful?” Cam joins us, food balanced in his hands. “Why is Mav chasing Luke?”

“She told him to kiss the others for her. Dom almost decked him, and Luke’s running from him,” Cin says, laughing.

Paige bends over, clutching her sides. “Ow, my stomach hurts.”

“Do you want to sit here?” Cam asks, shaking his head. He’s used to these antics.

I sniffle and wipe away the tears. “Yeah, I want to be able to see this time.”

The last game I came to, I couldn’t see most of the game.

We sit, and Cam hands out our food.

I grab my warm pretzel and take a bite. Yum.

As the guys stand in formation, I scrutinize Luke’s replacement. He falls back and snaps the ball toward Dom, but he misses by a mile.

“Your quarterback’s not bad. Kinda hot, too. A little green around the gills, though.” Cin bites into her hotdog.

“Luke’s our quarterback, but because of his accident, he can’t play, so Paul’s standing in,” Cam tells her.

“Who are we playing against? Are they any good?” I ask.

Paige snorts. “Spring Hill. They’re second in our division behind us. That’s what Sam said.”

“He’s right, they’re good.” Cam wraps his arm around my shoulders. “They also happen to be good friends of ours. One of their guys, Brady, recently passed away. They said it was an aneurysm.”

“Oh, that’s sad. So young.” My chest tightens at the idea of losing one of my guys like that.

Whoever’s after me is at least a person I have a chance of defeating. But to be taken out by something inside you is terrifying.

“Yeah,” Cam agrees. “It screwed them up. Not sure if they’ll ever be right again.”

We sit in silence for a bit. I can’t imagine losing someone our age.

Paige leans forward, peering at Cam. “You don’t live around where those break-ins have been happening, do you?”

“They’re not too far away. Our cook keeps reminding me to set the alarm every night.” He bites his hotdog.

“I haven’t heard about any robbery. And if they’re any good, alarms won’t matter.” At least, they didn’t when I was doing it.

“Two houses got robbed in the past few weeks. The cops are asking if anyone saw anything. The Smiths were home asleep upstairs and never heard a thing. It’s weird.” Paige points toward the field. “The game is starting.”

The game starts, and it’s a close one. Every time our team gets a touchdown, the other team gets one, too.

With two minutes left, we’re losing 27-21. We have the ball but miss the field goal. Everyone in the stands is on their feet. When it’s like this, I have no idea how the quarterback can hear down there. Paul has them in shotgun position, and the other team is going to blitz.

Paul calls for the ball, and the other team rushes him.

He throws it down the field toward Mav, who's open.

Everyone in the stands holds their breath.

The ball overshoots Mav, and the time runs out.

We lose.

Everyone on our side sighs and groans while, across the field, the people in the away team's bleachers go nuts.

"That's too bad," Paige says. "It was so close."

"It was still a good game," I say. "I think Paul got scared when they were rushing him and let the ball go a bit too soon. It's too bad. He did well."

Everyone agrees.

Cam intertwines our hands. "Let's go meet the guys."

We head onto the field where the guys come out.

"Paige, what are Sam and you doing tonight?" I ask.

Her cheeks turn scarlet. "He's coming over to my place."

"Whoo-hoo, Sam's going to get some." Cam starts dancing.

I clamp my hand over his mouth. "Shut up! Stop embarrassing her."

Cam laughs behind my hand, then licks me.

"Ew!" I rub my palm down my jeans. "Did you just lick my hand?"

"Yeah, you taste good." He smacks his lips.

Cin stands there, staring at him. "You're still a child, aren't you?"

"Yep, just like Peter Pan. I'm never going to grow up." Cam flings out his arms and pretends he's flying, making a *ca-ca* sound.

Cin pats my shoulder. "I feel bad for you."

Mav runs up to me, spins me around, then kisses my face.

I squeal. "Put me down!"

As Nick strolls over to Cin, she says, “Thank you for being normal.”

His eyebrow shoots up. “All right.” He bends and kisses her.

Dom joins us with three guys I don’t know.

I head over to him. “Hey, Grizz, good game.”

He kisses my cheek. “Thanks. Let me introduce you to some friends. This is Reid, Cade, and back there is Lex. This is our girl, Shelby.”

I lift my hand in greeting. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You’re dating all of them?” Cade says. “I feel sorry for you.”

“Not me,” Nick says. “She’s my step-sister. This is my girlfriend, her cousin Cin.”

“Hey, Cam, how you been, dude?” Lex asks, and they do some weird handshake.

“Good. I’m sorry about Brady. He was a good guy.”

“One of the best.” Lex looks down, kicking the grass.

Cam cups his hands around his eyes. “Is that Julie over there? I should go say hi to her.”

Lex glances back and nods. “Yeah, that’s her and Brie, Brady’s sister.”

Cam wags his eyebrows. “You dating Brie yet?”

A smile tugs at his lips. “Soon, dude.”

“Julie was Brady’s girlfriend.” He kisses me “I’ll be back.”

Cam runs toward them.

“You going to be at The Games this year? You know we’re going to kick your ass if you are,” Mav states, trying to lighten up the situation.

“Naw, dude, not this year. Maybe next.” He glances over his shoulder again at Brie. “Things are so fucked up right now.

But us not being there will give you a chance at winning it.”
He chuckles.

“Yeah okay. Whatever you say.” Mav shakes his head.

Lex scratches his head. “We better go. I hear someone is fighting in the Pit tonight.”

They slap Dom on the back, wishing him luck.

“Nice to meet you,” I tell them before they head over to where the girls and Cam wait. I curl my arm around Dom’s waist. “They seem like good guys. Cam told me a little about them. How one of the died. How did you meet them?”

“They are. They had a rough year. Brady was like a brother to them, but they’re getting back to normal. We met them during the summer we all went to football camp. At the end, there was always a game between the two best schools. It was always us versus them,” Dom says.

“Shit, yeah, those were the times. Spending summer in cabins and playing football.” Mav smiles.

“Where’s Luke?” I scan the field.

“His parents and coach made him go back home,” Nick says from behind me.

“Damn, I didn’t get to see him.”

“Come on, brother, we better go,” Mav says. “It’s almost fight time.”

“I’m going to follow Cin home and meet you guys there,” Nick states.

“I’ll take Cam and Princess with me.” Mav takes my hand, and we all walk out to the parking lot.

“Princess? You let him call you princess?” Cin questions.

“Well, yeah.” I grin. “I’m his princess, and he’s my knight.”

She points at Nick. “You ever call me princess, I’ll de-ball you.”

“Noted.” They walk ahead of us toward Nick’s truck while the rest of us laugh.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We pull up to The Pit, which is appropriately named. It used to be a working mountain-top mining operation.

“This area was cleared of trees, then miners used explosives to blast away earth to expose coal seams beneath,” Cam calls over the rush of wind, which floods past with the top of the Jeep off. “They used large excavators and pulled the coal out of the earth.”

It’s hard to believe all this gravel and dirt used to have grass and trees on it.

Mav pulls off the main road and onto a gravel road, driving down deeper into the hole. In the distance, I spot an abandoned, broken-down, rusty excavator that someone strung lights on.

Five cars form a semi-circle, their headlights shining on a carved-out hill. The rest of the cars are parked with their lights off.

Dom finds a spot and turns off the car.

“Firefly, I want you to stay near one of the guys.” Dom turns around and glares at me. “There are some bad people here tonight.”

I want to tell him I know how to take care of myself, but I just nod.

He then points to Mav, then to Cam. “Watch her. We’re one man down tonight.”

Mav slaps Dom's shoulder. "We know what to do, brother. Just go."

He nods and climbs out of the car, heading off into the dark.

"Luke and Nick are normally packing, but they won't pull their guns unless it gets nasty. I have my knife, as does Cam, and I brought an extra in case you want one." Mav grins at me. "I'm not as caveman like my brother. I know you can fight."

Smiling, I take the knife off him and flick it open. "Thanks. I'll keep it in my pocket."

Cam kisses me. "That's my girl. Let's wait for Nick to show up before we head in."

"I can handle that." Mav jumps from the passenger seat to the back seat.

Cam's blue eyes sparkle as he kisses me, and Mav moves my hair away from my neck, kissing it. These two sure know how to rev me up. Talk about zero to sixty. I don't know how long I sit there being kissed by one, then turning to kiss the other.

A tap sounds on the side of the Jeep, followed by Nick's voice. "Are you three done making out?"

We pull apart to find Nick and Cin standing outside the Jeep.

"Damn, Nick, it was just getting hot," Cam whines.

"I'd think, now that you have a girl, you wouldn't be such a cockblocker. Or maybe she's not given you any?" Mav waggles his brows.

Nick reaches over the side of the Jeep and smacks Mav hard in the back of the head.

"Ow." He rubs his head.

I cross my arms, shaking my head. "You deserved that."

Cin sighs. "Let's go."

We exit the Jeep with Nick and Cin in the lead, while Mav and I follow with Cam at our backs. Nick takes us off to the side of the cars, where we can stand with our backs against the rock.

A crowd of people stand around watching the current fight. One guy is beaten up badly. I don't know how he's still moving. His opponent turns his foot, about to strike. Part of me wants to warn the poor guy. He goes down with a right hook and doesn't move. He's out cold.

Mav leans closer. "Dom's fight should be next."

The hairs on the back of my neck rise, and I get that same feeling from the game that someone is watching me. Am I just being paranoid?

"Are there always this many people?" I question.

Mav glances around. "There are a few more than normal."

Dom enters the circle.

Cin leans towards me. "You feel it, too. Something's off."

I nod, mouthing, *Be ready*.

I move my knife from my side pocket to my upper one.

When Dom's opponent strolls in, Mav takes one look at him and screams, "Dom! Don't fight!"

He lunges toward the fight circle, and Nick and Cam hold him back.

The guy is a monster, twice Dom's size in height and weight.

Dom doesn't show any emotion on his face, but his body tenses.

I head over to Mav, trying to calm him down.

Mav shakes off Nick and Cam's hold and paces a small area, pulling his hair.

I stop him by hugging him. "Mav, talk to me. What's going on?"

He takes a deep breath. “That’s not the guy he’s supposed to fight tonight. That’s Killer.”

Cin gives Killer a once-over. “Okay, so there was a switch in fighters. Can Dom not take Killer?”

Mav runs his hand through his hair. “I don’t know.”

“Last time we heard, Killer was banned from these fights.” Cam’s jaw tightens. “He’s ruthless and a cheater.”

“So, we get Dom out of here. No big deal.” Cin shrugs.

Mav shakes his head. “That’s against the rules.” He points to the circle spray-painted on the sand. “Once you’re in that circle, you’re stuck.”

“What happens if he leaves?” I demand.

Mav gives me a bleak look. “They won’t let him, beautiful.”

“Fuck.”

I watch Dom and Killer circle each other. Killer advances and goes for a combo. Dom blocks the first hit but takes the second across his jaw.

Dom shakes it off, does a left jab, then follows up with a punch to the stomach. He goes to do a roundhouse kick, but Killer blocks.

Killer advances on Dom, bringing him almost to the crowd.

Killer makes a move I’ve never seen before, bringing Dom down.

We all scream for him to get up.

I’m paying so much attention to Dom’s fight that I don’t see the crowd converging around us. A massive tall guy steps in front of me, and I can’t see anything.

I glance to the side at the others. “I can’t see!”

We step to the side in time to catch Dom back up and attacking Killer.

Dom jabs Killer right in the head, and he stumbles back. Dom does a powerful uppercut, sending Killer to the ground.

Mav and I jump around screaming.

Dom jumps on Killer, landing blow after blow.

Then, I can't see anything as the same group blocking our view again.

Something's not right. I peer around. How did we end up in this corner? I nudge Nick and put up a finger, making a circle, and hoping he understands what I'm trying to say.

His eyes scan the area as I did, and he realizes the same thing.

The group is herding us.

I grab Cam's hand, who's still distracted and trying to see what's going on with the fight.

He takes one glance at me and stops bouncing.

I lean in close so the surrounding people can't hear. "Be on the watch. Something's going to go down."

I kiss him, and he nods.

I search for Mav and discover he's no longer with us. "Where's Mav?"

Nick shrugs.

A scream echoes off the mountain, and a chill runs down my spine.

"*Dom!*" Mav yells.

I shove people out of my way to reach the circle.

Dom's on the ground, holding his shoulder tightly to his body as someone kicks him. Killer's also on the ground, bloody.

A familiar body comes to my side. Cin.

A guy comes running at me, and the stupid idiot already has his right hand pulled back.

I duck, and when he flies past me, I elbow him in the back. He goes down. I'm out of practice, though, and don't see the other guy coming at me. His fist clocks me in the jaw.

"Dude, you just hit my girlfriend!" Cam decks the guy.

"We need to find Mav and get the hell out of here!" Cin yells.

We all scan the area while trying to defend ourselves. I keep hearing grunts from Dom. I'm about to go nuts on someone soon.

"Found him! Left corner, about six guys to one," Nick says.

"That's not fair. Nick, Cin, protect Dom! Get dirty if you have to," I command. "Cam, come on, baby, we need to go save Mav."

Wrapping my hand around my knife to add a little extra to my punch, I storm over to where they have Mav cornered against a dug-out wall.

As I near, a little shit sees me and comes at me.

I don't slow down as I punch him right in his face. He falls to the ground, and I stomp on his gut.

He thought I would be an easy target. Ha!

That leaves five guys beating the crap out of Mav. Cam gets two to follow him, which leaves me three. I zero in on the guy punching Mav in the gut and tap him on the shoulder.

I smile sweetly. "That's my boyfriend."

He swivels to face me, his eyes roaming my body before fixing on me with a stare. "So?"

"I want him back." I do an uppercut and hear his nose break.

Blood splatters all over the other guys, Mav, and me. The guy I hit grabs his nose, glances at the other guys, and takes off.

A tall, burly guy punches Mav in the stomach before turning toward me. “Bitch, you’re going down.”

I back up. This is going to be a significant fight. “You can try.”

“Princess, be careful,” Mav groans. “He’s dangerous.”

“Your girl should have thought of that before she hit my guy.” He cracks his neck.

“You’re gay?” Mav says.

The guy holding him punches him in the face.

Burly guy growls at Mav.

“Babe, shut up.” My voice goes up an octave. “You’re not helping.”

I wave the guy to me.

He growls and attacks. We’re evenly matched.

Trading blow for blow, we go at it for a while. I try to assess if he has a weakness and find it after I do a leg sweep. He favors his left leg.

When he throws a cross-jab, I duck and hit his knee with everything I have. A loud crack sounds.

He screams as he falls, grabbing his knee. “You broke my knee!”

What did he want me to say? I’m sorry, I’ll let you continue to beat me while I don’t touch you?

I roll my eyes and take in what’s happening.

It’s not good. Cam has one guy down and is still fighting the other guy, but Cam’s losing energy fast.

I quickly glance over at Mav. A guy has him in a choke hold with his arm across Mav’s throat, and Mav’s not even fighting anymore.

I run toward Cam, yelling when I get closer, “Cam, move!”

He moves at the last moment, and I do this flying kick that is awesome, nailing his opponent in the chest and sending him flying backward. His head hits the rock face, and he crumbles to the ground, out cold.

“Thanks, beautiful.” Cam exhales. “We need to get Mav. He doesn’t look good.”

“None of us are.” My knuckles are ripped raw, my jaw is thumping, and I’m going to be bruised to hell and back.

I stomp over to the guy holding Mav, and I flick my knife open. “Unless you want to get stabbed tonight, I suggest you remove your arm from my boyfriend and back the fuck off.”

The guy peers down at my knife, then back at me. He already has a busted lip and a black eye, and he raises his hands as he backs up. “We weren’t paid enough for this.”

Mav gasps for air, and Cam catches him before he faceplants.

“Who paid you?” Cam demand.

“Some white dude. He wore a hoody. He came into the bar and paid us to come here to beat you guys to hell. But he didn’t say you knew how to fight.”

“Fuck, Stan, can’t you keep your mouth shut?” says the guy on the ground.

“Back up slowly before I gut you for being stupid,” I say. “And take your friend with you.”

When they’re at a safe distance, I help Cam by getting under Mav’s other arm.

“Princess,” he murmurs.

“It’s me, Knight. Let’s get your brother and get out of here.”

“Sounds good,” he whispers.

We slowly head back to where the others are.

A gunshot goes off, and we all hunch. I guess things went to hell. “You all need to back the fuck up!”

The crowd that surrounds Dom scatters to reveal Nick straddling Dom, holding the gun, with Cin's at his back, her knife out.

As we make our way over, I notice a guy who didn't leave. He takes in each of us, then his eyes settle on me.

Shit, I don't know if I have it in me for another fight.

I move out from under Mav's arm. I still have my knife out.

Whoever this guy is, he has balls. He's coming for me even though Nick has a gun.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"I have a message for you," he says.

"Well, what is it?"

He takes a step toward me, then another. The smell of stale cigarettes wafts off him.

When he leans forward, I move my knife under his chin. I don't like this. I stare into his cold brown eyes. This guy freaks me out. By his eyes, I can tell he's on something. He also wasn't in the fight. There's not a scratch on him.

He growls, showing his rotten teeth, and I increase the pressure on the knife under his chin, drawing a dot of blood. "He wanted me to remind you not to forget you belong only to him."

What the hell? He's pissing me off.

I push the knife deep enough to draw a small river of blood. "Tell him I don't belong to anyone." I flick my knife down. "Now, leave."

He growls as he grabs his throat and leaves.

I let out the breath I'm holding. Who the fuck is this guy? He paid people to fight us. Now that the fight is over, I'm crashing from the adrenaline. We all need to get to a safe place.

I turn toward Nick. His cheek is bruising, and his knuckles are bleeding. I'm sure there's more damage underneath his clothes. Cin holds her upper right arm, and she favors her left leg, which is an old wound. Other than that, she appears good. Lucky shit.

"Can you get Dom up?" I question Nick.

"His shoulder needs to be set, and I'm sure he has bruised or broken ribs." Nick bends in front of Dom.

"Nick, help me up," Dom says. "I can walk."

It takes three of us to get him to his feet.

We shuffle our way to the Jeep, but none of us are in any shape to drive.

"We should call Frank," Mav suggested, then glances at me. "He's our dad's driver/bodyguard. He's the one who trained Nick and Cam."

"Give me your phone, Mav. I lost mine." Dom takes Mav's phone, and in ten minutes, the SUV that took us to see Cin pulls up.

A bald, pissed-off black guy gets out.

"What the hell did you get into now?" he asks as he helps Dom into the front seat.

"It was a setup, Frank," Dom says. "Get us out of here."

Nick and Cin climb into the far back, then Cam, Mav, and I take the middle.

"Where to, Dom?" Frank asked as he slides back behind the wheel.

"Home. Call Doc. Have him meet us there," he moans.

Shit, we're heading to Knight's fortress. I've only seen pictures of it in magazines. If I weren't hurting and worried about the guys, I'd be freaking out.

Frank calls the doc and directs them to their house, then Dom tells Frank what went down.

"Beautiful, are you all right?" Cam's eyes roam over me.

“Just black and blue, for the most part. And sore.” I flex my hand. “So sore. You?”

“The same. I think the only one who’s hurt badly is Dom.” He runs his hand through his hair. “We got lucky.”

“Knight, are you all right?” I move some of his black hair away from his face.

One of his eyes is swollen shut, and there’s a small cut above it.

“I’ll live. I’m more concerned about you, Princess. You took some hits.” He lifts his hand to gently touch my cheek.

I flinch when he grazes a bruise. “I’m sure I look just lovely right now.”

Leaning my head back, I close my eyes. I’m getting a migraine.

“You’re still beautiful. You were awesome out there, the way you took down those guys. I couldn’t believe it,” Cam says proudly.

“That flying kick was cool as shit,” Mav agrees.

“I don’t think I could do that again, even if I tried.” I laugh, then groan.

Damn, it hurts to even laugh.

“Cin, Nick, are you two all right back there?” I can’t move to glance over the seat.

When no response comes, I peek my eye open. “Um, guys?”

“They’re too busy making out right now.” Cam rests his back against the seat. “I think they’re fine.”

I lay my head on Mav’s shoulder. “Is this okay?”

“Yeah, Princess, you’re good.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A deep voice wakes me from sleep. “I’m sure you don’t want to go to your parent’s half of the house.”

“Hell, no, Frank. You know better than that,” Mav scoffs.

I lift my head off Mav’s shoulder. Shit, that hurts. My whole body hurts.

We pull up to a massive, wrought-iron gate, where Frank punches in a code, and the gate opens.

Trees and bushes line the driveway, and up ahead, I see the driveway splits into two. Sitting on top of a small hill is the Knight’s fortress.

“Holy hell, I knew it was big,” I say in awe.

“That’s what she said.” Mav snickers.

“Really, Mav?” Nick says.

“Couldn’t pass it up. It was too perfect.” He laughs, then says, “Ow.”

“How many bedrooms are there?” Cin questions.

“On our half, each of the guys has a room, plus our two bedrooms, and I don’t know how many bathrooms, a gym, a movie room, a game room, a sauna room, and a small kitchen.” Mav scratches his chin. “I think that’s it.”

My mouth hangs open. That’s just their half?

The closer we get, I see three distinct sections; a left-wing, a right-wing, and the main house. A fountain stands at the

main entrance, where massive stone stairs head up to the main door.

Frank drives right and heads around the hill. Floodlights turn on as we come to a parking area with a gray door in front of us. A basketball court sits off to the right, with a stone pathway leading to a tennis court farther back.

Frank turns the car around so that the passenger door is closer to the house and parks.

“Everyone out.” Frank gets out of the SUV.

I open my door, and light floods into the SUV. Swinging my legs out the door, I stiffly slide to the ground as I bite my tongue to stifle my pain.

From the back seat, concern fills Nick’s voice. “Cin, why’s there red on your arm?”

“It’s no big deal,” she tells him. “I might have gotten stabbed in the arm.”

“You what?” he demands. “And you’re just telling me this now? Let me see it!”

I help Mav out as Cin and Nick argue.

Frank wraps his arm around Dom and heads toward a door with no handle on it. He touches a brick, and a keypad pops out. He enters a code, and the door pops open.

“You don’t keep things from me,” Nick grumbles. “I told you that is a big thing with me, Cin.”

I learned that lesson the hard way. Nick didn’t talk to me for a whole day when I kept something from him. When I peer back into the SUV, Nick has his shirt off, pressing it to Cin’s arm.

Cam eyes them as he slides out of the SUV. “Is she all right?”

“Yeah,” Nick grunts. “She’s going to need a couple of stitches. I’ll clean it while Doc looks at Dom.”

We walk in the door, following Frank and Dom down a hallway that opens to a large living room. In the room, an

older woman in her mid-fifties, dressed in black slacks and a white top, stands with her hands in front of her. Beside her is an older guy with graying hair who wears a doctor's coat.

“Oh, dear, what happened this time?” the older woman frets. “I swear you're always getting into trouble. I'll get my cream and ice packs. Then I'll whip up some snacks.”

“Thanks, Ava,” Mav says.

Shaking her head, she disappears down the hallway.

“Doc, Dom needs you first, then Cin needs stitches. The rest of us just have bruising, but check them over,” Nick barks out as he leads Cin down another hallway.

Mav smiles at me. “He's taking her to his room.”

There are two doors on the right, and Frank takes Dom to the one on the left.

“My room is the one on the right,” Mav informs me. “As much as I want to sleep with you, I think it would be best if Cam stays with me and you stay with Dom. Are you okay with that?”

I run my hand down his shoulder to his hand, squeezing it. “You're a good guy, Mav. I'll check up on you two later.”

I walk through the same door where Frank took Dom.

Wow, I thought my bedroom was large. This is impressive. A black couch with two chairs faces a large, flat-screen TV that hangs on the wall over a fireplace. A king-size bed sits in the middle of the room, the headboard made of mahogany. Bookshelves made from the same wood display trophies, pictures, and car parts. Windows fill the far wall, which I'm sure has a panoramic view, but the slats are closed.

Dom arranges himself on the bed, groaning. The Doc already has Dom's shirt off, baring his chest, which is turning entirely black with bruises. Hoping Doc doesn't tell us we needed to get him to the ER, I head over to the bed.

Doc runs some machines over Dom.

“Portable x-ray comes in very handy with Dominick and Maverick,” he says, smiling.

I’m not sure if I should be worried that Doc felt the need to buy a portable x-ray machine.

“Hi, Doc. I’ve heard a lot about you. Thanks for coming over.” I wave at him.

His eyes scan my body. “Hello, Ms. Winters. You look like you escaped unscathed.”

“Shit, Doc, she took down more guys than Mav did. Thankfully, she has training.” Dom groans. “So, am I going to live?”

“Of course, Dominick. There’s no internal bleeding, and your ribs are severely bruised, but there’s no cracking. Now, I need to pop your shoulder back in.” He peers over at me, his brows drawing together. “Do you want to stay or leave? He won’t take any pain meds. I’ll numb the area, but it will still be painful.”

I look at Dom. “Do you want me to leave?”

He cringes. “It’s up to you, Firefly.”

“I’ll just stay.” It’s not the first time I’ve seen this done.

“Good, you can help me. Hold here and here.” Doc directs me on where to put my hands, and I brace myself.

“Ready?” Doc asks Dom.

Dom nods, and the Doc pulls his arm.

Dom lets out a growl.

Doc releases his arm, and Dom lies there, breathing hard. “Fuck, I hate that.”

“Try to not move it too much. Now, how about you, Ms. Winters?” His warm brown eyes peer at me.

“Please, call me Shelby. It’s mostly my knuckles and bruising.” I show him my knuckles.

“Let me get some antiseptic wipes from my bag.”

He stands and goes over to the couch where his bag sits.

I run my hand through Dom's hair. "You all right, Grizz?"

"Yeah. I really want a shower, but I'll wait." He gives me a wink.

Doc comes back and sits down beside me. "Let me see your hand, Shelby. This will sting."

When I nod, he touches the wipe to my knuckle. I suck in a breath, biting my cheek. I forgot how much that stings.

He makes sure my knuckles are taken care of, then asks, "Do you want me to check your ribs?"

About to decline the offer, Dom butts in. "Yes, she wants them checked."

I roll my eyes at him but take off my shirt.

Doc's cold hands on my skin make me jump. "Sorry about that. I don't want to use the x-ray unless I need to." After a little prodding, he hands my shirt back. "Everything feels fine. Do you want any pain medicine?"

"No," I tell him. "I don't like taking them, either."

He collects his bag. "Well, I guess I better go check on the other."

"Bye, Doc," Dom calls out. "Thanks."

Once he's gone, I walk to Dom's side. "All right, Grizz, let's go get a shower, then find some food."

"Sounds good. Ava makes this poultice that we'll put on our bruises once we're clean. I don't know what's in it. It's an old family recipe. It stinks, but you'll feel like new tomorrow."

I help him to his attached bathroom, where I once again shake my head at rich people.

He doesn't have a tub, but his shower is kick ass. A big square shower head hangs in the middle of the ceiling that rains down water, and two more hang on the wall, one with a handheld wand that can be used. One side of the shower holds a built-in bench.

Dom hits some buttons on the wall, and the water starts.

“Can you help me, baby?” He points to his lower half, which still has clothes on.

“Sure.” I unbuckle his jeans and push them down, along with his boxers.

Once he’s undressed, he walks into the shower and sits on the bench. He leans his head back and lets the hot water run over his body. I watch as the water runs down his bruised chest and muscular legs.

Damn, he’s a work of art.

I take off my clothes, step into the shower, and let the water run over my body.

Moving out from under the waterfall, I wipe the water off my face and grab the handheld wand. “Are you ready for me to wash your hair?”

His eyes slit open, and he nods.

I make sure I get it all wet before grabbing the shampoo.

As I lather the back of his head, he lets out a growl.

I jump back, thinking I hurt him.

“You’re killing me here, baby,” he groans.

I glance down, realize my boobs were right in front of his face, and laugh. “Sorry.”

He leans forward to lick my nipple.

“Dom,” I moan.

I don’t know how I get the soap out of his hair with his mouth all over me. He takes his body soap and runs his slippery hands over my body. His strong hands run down my thighs as far as they can, then move back up to in between my thighs. I spread my legs wider as he slips in two fingers.

Damn, do they feel good.

Soon, I thrust against his fingers, chasing my release.

“God, look at you,” Dom groans. “You’re going to make me come just by watching you.”

“Dom.” I throw my head back, moaning as my legs shake.

“That’s it, babe. Come for me.”

I ride my release until I fall into his arms.

“Do you feel better now?” He settles me on his lap. “Can you tell me what has you so upset?”

How does he know I’m upset? Am I that transparent? Cin’s never been able to read me this quickly.

Unable to look him in the eyes, I lower my head. “It’s my fault.”

He tips my head up. “How’s it your fault?”

I reach for his soap, then slide off his lap to wash his legs. “They were paid to beat us up.”

His head tilts. “Who told you that? Is that what that asshole said when he walked over to you?”

I let out a breath. “No, another guy, the one monitoring the fight. He said some guy paid them to beat us, but he couldn’t see the guy’s face. He wore a hoody and kept to the shadows.”

“What did that asshole say to you?” he demands. “Whatever it was pissed you off.”

Telling him will set Dom off, and I don’t want to do that. I kneel on the blue tile and move my hands up the insides of his thighs. “Doesn’t matter.”

His jaw twitches. “What did he say?”

I don’t answer. I go back to cleaning him.

He stops my hands, and his onyx eyes stare at me. “No secret, baby.”

“He was paid to remind me that I belong to him.” I stand and pace. “I don’t even know who *he* is. If what Nick says is true, and Roger died, I don’t know who he could be. I’ve been wracking my brain.”

I stop in front of Dom and put my hand on his chest. “Now, whoever he is, he’s hurting those I love. It’s getting to be too much.”

He takes my wrist and pulls me onto his lap. “Stop saying it’s your fault. You know damn well it’s not. Some psycho is after you, but you’re forgetting who we are. We deal with crazy all the time. This is nothing new to us, and I love you, too, Firefly.”

It might not bother him, but I don’t like that it’s my fault people are getting hurt.

Wait, did he just say he loves me?

Mouth dropping open, I look at him. “Huh?”

He chuckles. “You said that you don’t like him hurting people you love. Well, I love you, too. I never thought we could find someone like you. You fit each of our needs perfectly,” he says before setting me back on my feet. “Now, dry off. I’m getting hungry, and Ava should be coming with the food soon.”

“Um, what about...?” I motion to his hard dick.

“Na, not tonight, love.”

I help him dry off and put on clean boxers and a shirt, then notice an old pair of basketball shorts and a t-shirt laying on the bed.

“That’s Cam’s old PE uniform,” Dom explains. “He must have brought them in from Mav’s room. They should fit you if you tie them.”

I hurry to get dressed, then help him finish putting on clothes.

Dom crawls into bed, reaching behind him for the remote. Next thing I know, the TV moves from where it is over by the couch to in front of us. It’s on a track. How cool is that?

“Damn, rich kids. I’m going to check on the others. Save me some food when it arrives.” I kiss him before heading out the door.

Not sure where to find Nick’s bedroom, I stop in the main room as Ava comes in from I don’t know where. She carries a tray that holds a bowl of brown stuff and some plastic wrap.

She smiles warmly at me. “Who are you searching for, love?”

“Do you need help with that?” I gesture at the tray. “I’m Shelby, by the way.”

“Oh, no. But thank you, dear.” She shakes her head. “I’m used to feeding this group. It’s very nice to finally meet you. I’ve heard great things about you.”

My head jerks back. “Oh?”

“Yes, dear, they talk about you all the time. I’ve been worried about Dom. He’s so closed off. But I’ve seen him opening more lately, and Mav... I didn’t think he’d ever settle down. Now, I guess you’re looking for Nick and the other girl? Right down that hall, second door on the left.” She nods to the hallway behind her.

“Thanks, Ava. I’ll see you later.” I head down the hallway and stop at the second door.

Giggles come from inside, and when I knock, I hear a thump and rustling around.

Nick barely opens the door, blocking the gap with his body. He has on jeans and that all. “Oh! Um...” He scratches the back of his head.

I snicker. I think I caught them in the middle of something.

“Who is it, Nick?” Cin asks from inside.

“It’s me,” I call out.

“I’m fine!” Cin yells. “Talk to you later!”

“I called Dad and told him we’re staying with Mav and Dom,” Nick tells me. “Also, Luke found out about The Pit, and he’s not happy.” The corner of his mouth twists. “I’d let him cool off and talk to him tomorrow.”

“Shit, thanks. Don’t forget to remember what Mav always says. Wrap it before you tap it.” I slap his shoulder, laughing.

Nick’s face turns red before he shuts the door in my face.

Still laughing, I make my way to Mav's room and knock on the door.

When Cam opens it, he has plastic wrapped around his stomach.

"Hey, beautiful. Come on in." He steps aside.

I take a step into the room, and my mouth falls open. "Holy shit, Mav."

Mav lies in bed as Ava puts something on his ribs. Did I mention his bed is up on a platform? Four steps lead up to his bed.

"It takes a bit to get used to, but it's so Mav." Cam leads the way up the stairs to the bed.

Glass panels surround the edge of the platform. Right outside of the glass panels, a massive TV hangs from the ceiling with a track like Dom has. Down the steps are a brown couch and two chairs.

I sit down on the corner of the bed, and Cam goes back to lie beside Mav.

"What is that you're putting on them, Ava?" I scrunch up my nose as a scent I've never smelled before hits me.

"My special mixture I make for them to help with bruises. It has vitamin K cream, arnica cream, aloe vera, cayenne pepper, and a bunch of other herbs and oils." She spreads some on Mav.

"It's a miracle," Mav says in a rough voice.

Cam hits him. "Doc said no talking."

I laugh. "Him? Not talk?"

"I know. But his throat is bruised and needs to heal," Cam explains.

"There, you're all wrapped. Now, I'll go do Dom." Ava turns to me. "Shelby, would you like some of my mixture? Your legs are bruised badly. I'll also whip up a special pineapple and papaya mixture for your jaw."

“Sure, if it will help. I’ll be back in Dom’s room in a minute,” I say. “Thanks, Ava.”

She gives me a crooked smile and heads through a door that must connect to Dom’s room.

I look at Cam. “How are you doing?”

“I’m all right. Just bruised and tired. Doc wants to come in and wake me up every two hours, though. I have a knot in the back of my head from when I hit it against the rock,” Cam says, touching the back of his head. “Did you go see how Nick and Cin are?”

“Yeah, I wasn’t allowed in.” I giggle. “Cin told me to come back tomorrow. I think I interrupted them.”

“That’s a good one.” Cam’s eyes sparkle with mischief.

I put my finger up. “It gets better. I told Nick to wrap it before he taps it.”

We all lose it, then groan when we laugh too hard and hurt ourselves.

“I better head back over there and get wrapped up.” I hook a thumb toward the door.

Mav and Cam glance at each other and bust out laughing all over again.

My cheeks heat. “I’d smack both of you if I could find a space that wasn’t bruised. You both know what I meant.”

“Yeah, but it’s funny.” Mav snickers.

I give both a kiss. “Come get me if you need me.”

“I’ll always need you,” Mav growls.

Walking through the same door Ava did, I discover it leads into Dom’s room by the windows.

“How is everyone?” Dom asks once he spots me.

“Bruised, but okay. I didn’t get to see Cin. They were... um...” I glance at Ava and my cheeks get hotter. “Busy at the time.”

“Ava says you’re going to get her mixture. I told her to make sure to get your side.”

“Lay down on the bed, Shelby,” Ava instructs, pointing to the spot next to Dom. “This will start cold, then heat up a bit. I’ll wrap plastic around you to hold it in place and tone down the smell.”

I lie down beside Dom and lift my shirt so she can get to my side.

When the mixture touches my skin, it’s cold, but by the time she gets done with the plastic, it’s getting warm.

“I need to go mix the one for your face,” Ava says when she finished. “I’ll also bring some food.”

“Thanks, Ava.” Dom smiles.

I scoot up to recline next to Dom. “What are we watching?”

“*Street Outlaws: No Prep Kings.*”

“I’m not crazy about them racing on a track now,” I grumble. “Their earlier episodes are better. This show is what got me into racing in the first place. That and watching George Wright when I was a kid.”

We talk about *Street Outlaws* until Ava returns with the promised food and the second mixture for my face.

She rubs it into my cheek. “This one doesn’t need to be wrapped, so you’re fine to eat right away.”

I nod, grateful it doesn’t stink the way the other one does.

When she finishes, she looks at us. “Is there anything else you need?”

“No,” we both say.

“Go on to bed,” Dom adds.

After she leaves, he settles the tray of food between us. There are sandwiches, fruit, and some chips.

We eat everything while watching some movie I don’t know. When we finish, Dom removes the tray, and I get

comfortable on the bed.

I never see the end of the movie because I fall asleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I hear my phone going off, but I'm so warm I don't want to move from where I lie curled up against Dom with my head on his chest and his arm around me.

"Firefly, turn that damn thing off," he grumbles.

"Nu-uh. Too warm." I snuggle closer.

A door slams open, and feet pound the floor. My phone turns off, then the bed dips behind me.

"Thanks for waking me up so early, Princess." Mav kisses my neck.

Dom scratches his chest. "Are you still going out dress shopping?"

"Shit, I forgot about that. What a way to go dress shopping while I'm all bruised up." I stretch out as Mav's hands roam over my body.

"You know, we could bring someone here instead of you going out," Mav mutters.

"People are going to see me sooner or later. Plus, this is Paige's first ball. I don't want to ruin her fun," I huff.

If it weren't for her, I'd take Dom up on his offer.

Dom removes his arm and sits up.

"Aww, where are you going?" I moan.

"I need to piss and get this wrap off of me." He sits up and starts to peel off the plastic.

“Do you need my help?”

“Naw, I got it.”

I roll over, and Mav pulls me closer. “How are you feeling?”

I raise my head and move my jaw around. “Not too sore. How does my face look?”

He gives me a roguish grin. “Beautiful.”

“How bruised is it, flirt?”

“It’s light. You can cover it with makeup.” He glances down my body. “Your leg and side are another story.”

As he helps me get out of the wraps, I’m not as sore as I’d usually be after a fight, and the bruising isn’t as bad. Whatever is in Ava’s mixtures works.

It takes a bit to escape Mav’s hungry lips, but I finally break free to get another wonderful shower. I wonder if I can talk Peter into getting me this showerhead.

Once I’m clean and dried off, I pull on my jeans from the other night but borrow a top from Mav. I try to use makeup to cover the bruises on my face, but all it seems to do is make it worse, so I give up and let it go.

When I get out to the main area, everyone is sitting at the bar eating. I make my way over, take a glass, and pour some juice before grabbing an egg sandwich.

Dom slides over two white pills.

I cock an eyebrow.

“Aspirin,” he explains. “I thought you might need some.”

I go up on my tiptoes and kiss him. They’re always thinking about me.

I turn to my cousin. “Ready, Cin?”

She swallows. “Yeah. How are we getting there?”

“Frank will take you and stay with you until you go home,” Dom says as he takes a bite.

“Then, how are you going to get the Jeep and Nick’s truck?” I question.

“We have another car here. We also have to go get our tuxedos,” Mav says around his glass of juice.

“I’ll see you Monday in school, then?” I say, peering at them all.

Cam smiles. “Yep.”

I give them all a kiss before heading outside to where Frank waits for us.

He opens the door back passenger door. “Ladies.”

“Thank you, Frank.” I crawl across the seat.

Cin and I talk while Frank drives us to the outlet where we’re meeting Paige.

Cin lifts her sleeve, and I get a look at where she got stabbed. Doc did well on the stitching. When I ream her out for not telling us she was hurt, she just shrugs and points out the others were hurt, too.

Frank pulls up to the outlet mall.

I’ve never been to a place like this. We usually shop at a thrift store or Army Navy store, and when I moved here, Mom had clothes brought in. There’s about a mile of different shops and even a movie theater.

“We’re meeting Paige at a place called Victoria’s,” I tell Frank.

Cin cringes as she peers out the window. “We’re so out of our league. Why did I say yes to this?”

“Cause you love my step-brother. Come on, it won’t be too bad. I hope.” I sit back.

“I don’t love him,” she snaps back.

“Sure, you don’t.” I roll my eyes.

She huffs and crosses her arms.

“We’re here, ladies. I’ll find a spot and park close by. Just let me know when you’re done, and I’ll pull up to get you.” He

tells us. “Nod if you’re heading to another store.”

I lean in between the seats. “You don’t have to stay in the SUV, do you? Can you go browsing?”

Frank smiles at me. “I’m not one to browse. I have a good book to read, so don’t worry about me.”

We get out of the car and walk into Victoria’s. A few girls are trying on dresses.

A tall lady with her hair pulled up strolls over to us. “Can I help you?”

Her tone isn’t exactly pleasant, and Cin stares at me, then back to the lady. “We’re just going to look around.”

She huffs. “Let me know if you find anything.”

She moves to a rack only one away from where we stand and pushes the hanger back and forth.

We’re looking at the dresses when Paige came in. She skips over to us, then her mouth falls open.

“Oh my God. What happened to you guys?” Her voice wobbles.

“You remember how we went to The Pit for Dom’s fight? Well, it was a trap.” Cin pulls out a red sequenced dress, crunches up her nose, and puts it back.

Paige’s hand moves over her heart. “Is everyone all right?”

Cin smiles. “Yes, just bruised and sore.”

Paige wrings her hands together. “You didn’t have to do this today, you know?”

“We’re fine, but this place is too snooty for us.” I stick my nose up.

“I know a place.” Paige waves toward the door. “Follow me.”

We follow her to a place down a bit from the first store and around the corner. It’s called The Right Outfit.

“This is one of my favorite stores.” She beams as she steps through the door.

We follow her in.

“Good afternoon, you lovely ladies. How can I help you?” asks a model-looking guy with dark-brown, curly hair. He stands with his hands in the pockets of his white dress slacks.

Paige waves. “Hi, Gabriel.”

“Darling Paige, how are you?” He opens his arms and hugs her.

Her cheeks blush. “Good. We’re searching for dresses for the Black and White Ball.”

He claps his hands, jumping up and down. “Goody, I hoped you’d be in. I saw a dress and thought it would be lovely on you.”

He runs to the back of the store behind a red curtain.

Paige giggles. “Told you he’s great.”

Gabriel returns carrying a short, white halter dress. “Try this on.”

She eyes the dress hesitantly.

“Go.” I push her toward the dressing room.

As she disappears behind the curtain, Gabriel turns and stares at me. “Hmm.”

He circles me, tapping his bottom lip. Then, his whole face lights up, and he hurries to a rack off to the left.

“Where is it? I know it wasn’t sold.” He moves to another rack, holds up a dress, glances over at me, and shakes his head. His gaze shifts to Cin, and he looks at the dress, then back to Cin before shaking his head again and returning it to the rack.

“Be right back.” He runs back behind the red curtain.

When I glance over at Cin, she shoots her right eyebrow up.

I shrug. The guy is a bit weird, but nice.

While we wait, Paige comes out of the dressing room.

Wow, she looks good. Gabriel knows what he's doing.

"You have to get that." I flap my hand in front of my face. "You look hot, girl."

"You don't think it's too short?" She runs her hand down the skirt.

"No. It's so you," Cin says.

Gabriel comes back out holding two dresses. When he sees Paige twirling in front of the three-way mirror, he gasps. "I knew that dress would be beautiful on you."

He then struts over to Cin. "I figured you're not a dress girl. I think this will look great on you." He holds up a white jumper with wide legs and a sweetheart neckline. "What do you think?"

"You're right. I've never worn a dress in my life." She takes the jumper. "I'll try this on."

"Good." He turns to me. "For you, darling, I got this." He hands me a long dress that's both black and white. "Try this on."

The dress he chose for me is formfitting, something I'd usually never wear. The white side is a sweetheart neckline, while the black goes up and over my shoulder. Where the black and white meet at the center, a slit runs right up the middle of the skirt, ending in a bunch of black roses.

Cin finishes changing before me, and I hear Gabriel clapping.

I take a deep breath and step out.

All three of them gasp when they see me. I glance over at Cin.

Wow, she looks different all in white. "You need to get that, Cin. It's so you."

"If I get this, then you need to get that." She points to my dress.

We all turn and stare in the three-way mirror. "I guess we have our dresses."

Behind us, Gabriel claps and jumps up and down.

When Frank drops us off, I tell Cin I'm going to see Luke.

She plans to go do some homework.

When I knock on Luke's door, Clara answers and pulls me in for a hug. "Thank God you're here. He's been so off since he came home." She wrings her hands. "He's upstairs. Maybe you can calm the beast."

Nick said Luke was mad about what went down at The Pit, but it's not like him to be upset with his mom.

"I'll do my best." I head up the stairs and knock on Luke's door.

"Mom, I told you, I don't want any," replies an angry voice.

"It's me."

His door flies open, and his eyes roam my body. "Where have you been?"

"I just got back from dress shopping and came right over here." I take the time to look him over. He appears to be fine, but his body is tense, almost vibrating.

He storms over to sit on his bed and crosses his arms. "So, now you come to see me when you have nothing else to do?"

"What's your problem, Mason?" My hands move to my hips. "I'm sorry you got hurt and can't play football. You know we went to The Pit for Dom's fight after the game, had an altercation, and ended up staying at the twin's place."

"Altercation? What altercation?" He stands, takes two steps, and is in front of me. He reaches out and rubs my cheek where I tried to use makeup to cover my bruises.

When he rubs harder, I slap his hand away with a wince. "That hurts, asshole."

“Your cheek is black and blue. What else is? You shouldn’t have gone there without me,” he snarls.

“Didn’t Nick tell you what happened?” I ask in a calming voice, trying not to feed his anger.

“No, he said everything was fine and that you were just staying at the twin’s house.”

I blow out my cheeks. “Back up a bit, and I’ll tell him what happened.”

He stomps to his bed and sits back down.

I settle beside him and tell him everything that happened at The Pit.

By the time I finish, the vein in his neck is pulsing, and his knuckles are white from clenching his fists so tightly.

“You’re not allowed to go anywhere without me anymore!” he bellows. “If those assholes can’t keep you safe, then you can’t see them anymore!”

I rear back, my mouth hanging open. I figured he’d be angry that we were all hurt, but this is so not like him. Maybe he hit his head more than we thought? I tilt my head, studying him for signs of brain injury.

“Did you hear me, Shelby?” he demands. “If I can’t trust anyone else to keep you safe, then you can’t go anywhere without me. I don’t think you should see anyone but me.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “I heard you, Luke. I just can’t believe you said something like that. I don’t need any of the guys to take care of me, including you. Those assholes, as you called them, are your best friends. I didn’t come over to get yelled at by you.” I stand and take a step toward his door before turning back around. “And you don’t get to tell me who I can date. If you want out, fine. All you have to do is tell me.”

I storm out of his room and down the stairs.

“Maybe I’ll just start seeing Hannah again.”

I jerk forward on the steps, like he stabbed me in the back with those words. I grip the railing tightly and glance over my

shoulder. “Maybe you should.”

I walk straight out the front door and shut it behind me. As soon as I’m out of his house, I stop and gasp for breath, grabbing my chest.

When the door opens, I snap around, thinking Luke followed to apologize, but Clara stands there instead.

Her bottom lip wobbles a bit. “Oh, dear, I guess things didn’t go well?”

I shake my head, biting my lip as I try not to cry, but the tears well up.

She pulls me into her arms. “I don’t know what to do. He’s not sleeping well. He’s so angry one minute, then the next, he’s apologizing.”

I sniffle. “Did they check his head for any damage?”

She pulls away. “Yes. The doctor said it’s normal.” She wrings the towel she holds. “I can’t lose another child.”

I run my hand up and down her arm. This poor woman has been through so much. Part of me wants to head back up and hit Luke for making his mother feel like this. “You won’t lose him. I’ll get the guys to come over and straighten him out.”

She wipes her face with the towel. “Thank you, Shelby.”

“You’re welcome. Hang in there,” I tell her. “We’ll figure it out.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I spend Saturday night with Cin for a little girl time.

On Sunday, we go to Dom's garage.

It's tricked out with every tool imaginable plus more. There are two bays with jacks and pits. Off to the side is an old, worn-out leather couch with a beat-up coffee table.

While Dom and Cin work on Dom's car, Mav and I work on the other car for the derby. Mav and I take out everything we can. Once we get it emptied, we can add a roll cage. We'll also need to change the oil and check the other fluids. Once we get everything completed, we can paint it.

Cin's under the car with Dom when we hear, "Found it."

"Where?" Dom asks, voice sounding confused.

"Sounds like Cin found the problem," Mav says.

We move to the back of the derby car, taking out the back seats.

"Can you see this wire way up here?" Cin asks. "It isn't connected to anything. It should go right in here."

"I knew she'd figure it out. She's a car genius," I say, smiling at Mav.

Both Cin and Dom wheel out from under the car.

Dom pulls his knees up and rests his arms on his knees. "I can't thank you enough, Cin. I never would have found that. My hands are too big to fit up there."

“The only reason I thought about checking that wire is because that happened at my dad’s garage. I was helping one of my dad’s mechanics, and we took the whole car apart, put it back together, and still couldn’t find anything wrong with it. When he told my dad he couldn’t find anything wrong, my dad went under, checked a couple of things, then pulled us under and showed us the wire. Now you know something most mechanics don’t.” She gets to her feet.

“So, it’s like a mechanic trade secret.” Mav laughs.

Cin chuckles. “Yeah, I guess it is.” She slaps Dom back.

The next morning, Nick meets me in the kitchen before school to warn me he’s giving Luke a ride to school since he crashed his car.

I nod and finish my cup of coffee before heading out to Nick’s truck.

Luke’s tall frame leans against the side of it. “Hi, Angel.” He gives me a sad, lopsided grin. “I brought you some of Mom’s homemade banana nut bread.”

“Thanks.” Unsure how to deal with this sudden mood shift, I slide over to the middle of the bench.

“You better of brought me some, too, since I’m giving your sorry ass a ride,” Nick says, walking around his truck. “You know that’s my favorite.”

“Of course, I did. I knew you’d kill me if I didn’t.” Luke climbs in beside me and hands me a paper bag.

I open it, and the smell of warm bread, yeast, and bananas hits my nose. I pull out the slices. She even buttered them for us.

When I offer one to Luke, he shakes his head. “I’ve already had enough.”

The ride to school is quiet, with Nick and me too busy shoving slices of that delicious bread into our mouths to talk.

When Nick pulls into his usual parking spot, no one is there waiting. I guess they want to give Luke time to talk to me.

Nick hops out of the truck. "I'll see you in class, Shelby."

Luke and I get out of the truck, and I lean against the side.

Luke stands in front of me, staring down at his feet. "I asked the guys to give us some time this morning so I can tell you how sorry I am for yelling at you. I don't know what's going on with me. I don't feel right. When I go to sleep, I wake up feeling like I never went to sleep. I've been yelling at everyone. I'm so angry all the time." He runs his fingers through his hair.

I notice the dark circles under his eyes. "Maybe you should see a doctor, Luke. I'm concerned about you."

He keeps his head down. "Mom said she's making me go." When I put my hand on his chest, he covers it with his. "I don't want Hannah. From the moment I saw you, it's been only you. No one else matters. You're the only one I want."

"You hurt me when you said that," I tell him, feeling the cut of his threat all over again. "Words can hurt more than a punch."

He lifts my hand and kisses my wrist. "I can't tell you how much I wanted to take those words back as soon as they left my mouth. I don't know why I said them. I couldn't stop myself. I truly didn't mean it. Please, tell me you can forgive me." He breathes out in a huff.

He gives me puppy dog eyes. How can anyone say no to those eyes? "I forgive you, but don't do it again, Luke. I'll go with you to the doctor, if you want."

"No, that's okay. Mom's going with me." He pushes me up against Nick's truck and kisses the hell out of me.

When he pulls away, I'm dizzy. "Damn."

"We better get to class, but first." He gives me a smirk and intertwines our hands as we walk into school.

When we get to my locker, he smiles. “I’ll see you in class.”

I watch his ass as he strolls down the hall. Damn, he has a fine ass.

When I unlock my locker, there’s another note. This time, it just has two words.

Your MINE!

I rip it down, grab my books, and head to class.

Mav bats his eyelashes at me. “Did you and Lukey Poo make up?”

“Yeah, we did, but I found this in my locker.” I hold out the note. “This is getting out of control.”

Dom takes it, inspects the note, then tilts his head to peer up at me. “Maybe you should switch lockers. Who knows what else they might have done.”

I flop into my seat. He has a good point. I didn’t think of that. My body shivers at that, though. Who knows how far this freak is willing to go? I need to find out who this guy is.

“If it’s all right with you, I want Frank to search your locker, then we’ll get the school to swap out the lock for a new one,” Dom says as he rubs his chin.

I shrug. “I’m not hiding anything in there. Go for it.”

He nods. “It’ll be done by the end of the day.”

Dom keeps his word. By the end of the day, I have a new lock. Frank searched my locker, but he didn’t find anything unusual.

The rest of the week, no new notes show up in my locker, but my gut tells me that a new lock won’t stop this guy.

I spend most days after school at home doing homework or watching TV. We take the car out for some test drives to make sure everything is running properly. Cin spends most of her time with Nick.

I haven't been feeling right. I wake up every morning more tired than when I go to bed. I'm beginning to think it's some kind of flu, but when Luke goes to the doctor, they can't find anything wrong with him. They reiterate to him that he just had an accident, and his body needs time to heal.

It's complete bullshit. He tells me they're sending some of his blood work away to see if they can find anything that way, but the results will take a week to come back.

When Friday finally arrives, school passes in a blur.

I'm nervous about racing, and I'm also concerned about Dom. Tonight's the first of the Challenge, Fight Night, then there will be a bonfire after. The plan is to meet the guys at Murlay fields, where the challenge will be held.

I run to my room to change out of my school clothes and into what I plan to wear tonight.

I put on my favorite old jeans and a sweatshirt I cut so it ends just at my waist. I also grab my flannel for later in the night.

I finish putting my hair up in a ponytail as I walk into the kitchen.

Hannah leans against the counter, sneering at my cousin. "When are you going home, slut?"

"Who says I'm not home?" Cin questions, tilting her head.

Oh, I can't pass this up. I have to join in on the fun.

"Didn't your dad tell you, Hannah? He asked Cin to move in," I say, trying to keep a straight face, which is nearly impossible with the look that Hannah gives us.

"I decided to take him up on his offer. Which reminds me, Shelby." Cin smiles at me. "Can you help me redecorate my new room?"

Hannah's mouth opens and closes as her head bounces between the two of us.

"Sure, we can go buy paint this weekend."

"*Nooooo*," Hannah wails while storming off to her room.

I fall on the counter, laughing. "I think she might have shit herself on that one."

Nick walks around the corner, scratching the side of his face. "Um, Cin, did you forget to tell me you're moving in?"

Cin and I bust out laughing again as Cin explains to Nick what happened.

Nick wraps his arms around Cin, kissing her neck. "You know you can move into my bed anytime."

Cin hums.

"Ew, stop it. I don't want to see that." I swat Nick's back.

"Are you guys ready? If we don't leave, we're going to be late." Nick chuckles.

"I'm ready. Is Luke riding with us?" I ask over my shoulder as I head toward the front door.

"He can't get out both nights, and he wants to see you race, so he's staying home tonight." Nick's brows scrunch together. "Didn't he tell you?"

I shake my head. "No, he never mentioned it."

Nick pushes up his glasses. "Huh."

I understand Luke's decision to stay home tonight. Since the accident, his mom has been a little protective of him going out. But why didn't he say something to me? Maybe he forgot?

"Are you ready for the race tomorrow?" Nick asks as we reach the driveway. "I know you and your crew have been test-driving the car."

"Hell, yeah! The test runs have been great. I feel comfortable in the car. There's no reason I shouldn't win," I say as I let Cin get into the truck first.

“It’s no Devil, but it’s a good car.” Cin slides across the seat.

“The guys and I are all excited to see you race,” Nick says.

I climb in and shut the truck door. “Hopefully, I can see Cam race. It sucks his races start during mine.”

“You should see the end of it, unless your races go long,” Nick soothes as he backs out of the driveway.

“Tell us poor folk about where this race is being held,” Cin jokes.

“It’s at Murlay Fields. It used to be for the fairgrounds until someone bought it,” Nick explains. “Whatever they bought it for must have fallen through, because nothing was ever done with it. As I said before, The Challenge was thought up years ago by some bored rich kid who asked his dad if he could use Murlay Fields. The Challenge changed over the years to what it is today. There are two parking lots, the main one and the one we’ll park in on the other side, which was originally for the employees. That’s where the motocross track is. The car track is connected to the main parking lot. The fights tonight will be near the pavilions, which are on the right of the motocross tracks.”

Nick gets off the main road and pulls onto an uneven road. “Damn, I forget how bad this road is.”

“Good thing you’re dating a mechanic,” Cin teases. “I’ll look at your truck on Monday.”

Giant oak trees line both sides of the bumpy road, which ends in a parking lot. By the appearance of all the expensive cars already in the lot, we might be late.

I get out of the truck, and Cin climbs out on Nick’s side.

We trek across the parking lot, heading toward a set of bleachers.

Once we step off the pavement onto what appears to be trampled-down high grass, the tree line falls back, and it’s an open field. In front of the bleachers is a fence that surrounds the motocross track.

To the right of the track, I can see red roofs, which must be the pavilions Nick was talking about. That's where a crowd is forming. "The fights."

"Yep," Nick replies.

As he leads us past the motocross track, I stop to look at it.

I put my hands on the fence that circles the track. "Is this where Cam practices?"

"No, he's got one in his backyard that he practices on. They use this for junior racing." Nick points off to the left. "Over there is where you'll be racing tomorrow, Shelby."

"Can you walk us over there before it gets dark?" Cin asks, peering up at the sky. "I'd like to see the road conditions before tomorrow."

We have a few hours of sunlight left.

"Sure, let me text the guys that we're here so they don't worry, then I'll take you over." Nick quickly gets out his phone and types a message.

When we reach the road, we seem to be in the middle of it. One end is connected to the other parking lot, and the other widens and then stops.

"Did someone pay a paver to come out here to create this just for the Challenges?" I ask.

Nick nods. "Someone paid to add this for The Challenge, but they started holding meets here about four years ago, I think."

Cin walks the length of the road. "It's smooth. No ruts. The race should be interesting tomorrow."

I nod in agreement. No ruts means an even playing field.

Nick's phone goes off, and he pulls it out of his pocket. "We should get to the fights. They're about to start."

As we stroll across the open field, I see someone with blond hair running toward us.

“Where have you been? You’re going to miss the fights,” Cam says as he gets closer.

“They wanted to see where Shelby will be racing,” Nick explains. “Do we know who Dom is fighting in the first match?”

Cam puts his finger up, grabs me, and kisses the hell out of me.

When he pulls away, I’m a pile of goo and lean against him.

“No kissing tomorrow. Especially if she turns into this.” Cin waves her hand up and down.

“Aww. That’s a shame.” Cam gives me another kiss before turning to Nick. “Dom’s fighting John from Westview.”

Nick nods like he knows who that is.

“How many schools are here?” I ask.

“There are normally six, but this year, Spring Hill backed out, so we’re uneven.”

“Why don’t you just let some other school in to make it even?” I ask.

Cam shrugs. “This started with the six schools, Spring Hill, Lancaster, Ravenwood, East Brady, Westview, and Oak Grove. It’s become a rite of passage for us.”

“Mav’s over there. Come on.” Cam takes my hand and pulls me through the crowd.

As I follow Cam closely, I can see the crowd forming around a rope, but then I notice another rope.

I peer over my shoulder at Cam. “Why are there two ropes?”

“We used to only have one, but then people would stick their feet out, making the opponents fall. So, we added another inner one for the fighting ring.” Cam shrugs.

Mav sees us and waves us over.

When we're right up against the ropes, Mav pulls me up against him and kisses my cheek. "Hi, Princess. Did you see the racing track before you came here?"

"Yeah, Nick took us over. Is Dom ready to fight?"

A guy steps into the ring from the side. He wears a jacket, so he's not the one fighting. He puts his hands up, waving them down, telling us to be quiet.

When he turns, I let out a loud breath in recognition. Shit, what's he doing here?

I tap Mav on the shoulder. "That's Gary. He runs the races I used to compete in."

"Huh. He's been running these for years. He used to participate back when he went to Oak Grove," he says.

"Welcome to The Challenge!" Gary calls out. "As you all know, tonight is Fight Night. The rules are simple: no hitting below the belt and no cheating. If you're found cheating, your entire team will be kicked out. If you knock your opponent to the ground, back off. The winner will be determined by knockout or tap out. Because Spring Hill dropped out, we're uneven, so Aiden from Lancaster got the bye for this round. The first fight tonight will be John from Westview against Dom from Ravenwood. Then, it will be Todd from Oak Grove against Danny from East Brady. Whoever wins these rounds will pull from the bucket to find out who's fighting the next round."

He steps out of the ring as John struts in, and half of the crowd cheers.

I can tell John weight lifts. He's got guns for arms. Dom's going to have a hard fight ahead of him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dom steps into the ring, and people go nuts, screaming his name.

I'm not surprised Dom's popular here at the fights.

His eyes search the crowd, and when they reach me, he gives me a nod.

I blow him a kiss, then yell, "Kick his ass, Dom!"

Smirking, he turns toward his opponent and puts out his fists. John bumps them, and they start. John and Dom feel each other out with a little jab here and there.

Cin leans in, brows all mashed together. "I don't know why, but I thought these rich kids would wear gloves and headgear."

I don't take my eye off the fight. "Me, too."

Dom didn't tell me he'd be fighting with bare fists and no protective gear. Why do these rich kids need to prove how tough they are? It doesn't make sense. Someone could really get hurt.

My gut tells me John's not one to play around.

John does a combo, and his right hook catches Dom on the cheek. His head whips to the side, and spit flies out of his mouth.

Dom rubs the side of his face, smiling at John as he shuffles toward him.

Now, it's John's turn to smile. He thinks he has Dom's number.

John swings at Dom's face again, and Dom sidesteps, punching John hard on the side of his face.

John stumbles back, shaking his head. He's seeing stars with that hit.

The crowd *oohs*.

Dom doesn't give him a chance to recover. He does a right-left combo to his face, sending John to the ground with an *oof*.

The crowd goes into a frenzy, shouting Dom's name.

Dom doesn't pay them any attention as he stands stoically by John.

Gary comes out from the crowd and leans over the rope. "John, are you tapping out?"

Blood flows from a nice gash over John's eyebrow. He wipes the blood from his eye, along with his brown hair. "Hell, no."

Getting up, he stumbles before he gets into his stance. The crowd from Westview cheers John on.

Gary nods and backs away.

John advances fast and hits Dom in his kidneys twice.

I wince. That had to hurt.

Mav swears beside me.

Dom staggers back a step, trying to get his breath back.

John swings again. Dom ducks, but he's too slow. He takes a hit right in his side again, and this time, Dom screams in pain.

John comes at Dom, attacking with right and left jabs, throwing in an uppercut every once in a while. Dom can't get the upper hand, his own strikes not really connecting.

"Come on, Dom!" Mav yells.

Dom takes a hard hit to the head and falls to his hands and knees. He heaves in deep breaths, and blood falls to the grass from somewhere.

Everything in me wants to run into the ring to make sure he's okay and pound the shit out of the person who hurt him.

Dom pounds his fists into the grass, wipes his face, and stands up before Gary can ask if he's tapping.

He growls and advances on John.

They go blow for blow, then Dom shifts his stance.

Mav jumps up and down. "Here it comes."

The crowd becomes electric, almost like they are all waiting for something big to happen.

Cam elbows me. "Watch this."

Dom's arm pulls back for an uppercut.

The crowd goes nuts, screaming, "Knight Hammer!"

Dom let's go, connecting under John's chin. The force sends John flying, and he lands on his back, unmoving.

Gary jumps in, feels for a pulse, then counts him out. "The winner is Dom Knight!"

Dom strolls over to us, blood dripping down his face. "Pavilion," is all he says.

He's hurt and doesn't want any of the other fighters to know where. He grabs my hand in his as Mav, Cin, and Nick walk in front of us. Cam stays behind to watch the next fight.

One of the pavilions has a Ravenwood banner above it. It's basically empty since most of them are watching the next fight.

Once we're inside, Mav takes off Dom's shirt. Even with the wrap on, I can see new bruises forming.

"*Fuck,*" Dom grits through his teeth.

"I'm going to put some salve on it, then re-wrap it," Mav tells him.

“Shelby,” Dom grunts out.

“I guess my hands aren’t gentle enough.” Mav bats his eyes. “He wants yours, Princess.”

I take the jar from Mav, dip my hand in it, and rub it down Dom’s side. “You worried me there for a minute, Grizz.”

He winces. “Yeah, me, too. Couldn’t get the upper hand.”

I take his hand in mine, looking at his busted knuckles. “Do you want me to clean your knuckles or your face?”

“No use there. Just going to get bloodier.” He glances at my stepbrother. “Nick, wrap me back up tight.”

“Dom, I hate to say this, but are you sure you’re okay to fight?” I worry my bottom lip as I take in his injuries. “You’re still healing from the Pit fight.”

“I’ve fought in worse shape than this. These people are nothing.” He cups my face in his big hands. “Stop worrying, Firefly.”

Cam comes running into the pavilion. “Fights over. Todd creamed Danny. They’re calling you to the ring to pull for the next fight.”

Nick helps Dom get his shirt on, and we head back to the ring.

Dom stands in the circle with Todd from Oak Grove, who just finished his last fight. He’s bent over, catching his breath. Beside him is Aiden from Lancaster.

“All right, let’s see who’s fighting the next round.” Gary holds up the bucket, and Aiden steps forward to draw.

Dom waits to go last.

Gary peers around. “Who got the B?”

Dom raises his hand.

Thank you! Dom can have longer to recover before fighting again.

It sucks for Todd, who will have to fight Aiden, who’s fresh.

“Aiden, Todd, you’re up!” Gary steps out of the ring.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Dom ducks under the ropes to join us.

As we watch the fight, it’s obvious who will win.

“Todd’s good, but he doesn’t have a chance against Aiden,” I mentioned. “He’s already tired.”

“Uh-huh,” Dom grunts.

Mav glances at his twin. “You know Aiden’s going to play dirty.”

Dom raises his eyebrow.

“I’m just saying, don’t lose your cool.” Mav puts his arm around my waist.

The sun is almost set, and a couple of guys start building a fire. There are a few lights from the pavilion, but the last fight will be by fire.

The fight doesn’t last much longer after that.

As Gary declares Aiden as the winner, Dom leans down and kisses me.

“Go get him, Grizz.”

Dom steps into the circle with Aiden, and they circle each other. It’s clear they don’t like each other.

“Good luck, boys.” Gary steps out of the ring.

Dom puts his fists out, and Aiden slaps them.

“This is my year, Knight. You’re going down,” Aiden says triumphantly.

Dom answers with a flash jab to the chest.

Aiden swings at Dom, who blocks.

That continues for a bit until Aiden gets under Dom’s block, hitting him in his side.

Dom grabs his ribs, taking a step back.

Aiden takes notice and goes after him. Letting your opponent find your weak spot so quickly isn't a good way to start a fight.

"Come on, Dom!" I scream.

Smiling evilly, Aiden says something I can't hear over the crowd's yelling. He gets Dom against the rope, hitting Dom everywhere, and Dom just stands there, not defending himself.

I peer at Mav. "What the hell is he doing? Why isn't he defending himself? He's just letting Aiden hit him."

"I don't know." He cups his hand around his mouth. "Snap out of it, Dom!"

Aiden laughs and hits him right in the side of his head. Dom's head snaps to the side, blood and spit flinging out as he crumbles to the ground.

I push people out of the way and run around the ring to be near Dom.

"Come on, Dom! Get up! Don't let him win like this!" I turn and narrow my eyes at Aiden. "What did you say to him?"

"I see your slut of a girlfriend is here," Aiden sneers, standing in front of Dom with his arms crossed.

"Shut up, Aiden!" I scream at him.

"Don't call her that!" Dom growls.

"What? A slut? Or girlfriend?" Aiden smirks. "Evan told me some interesting things about her."

Dom jumps up and lets loose on Aiden.

I don't know how Aiden can stay up.

Aiden grabs Dom, whispering something that causes Dom's eyes to narrow. I swear steam comes out of his nose.

Oh, shit. This isn't good.

"Don't fall for it, Dom!" I yell, but it's too late.

With a growl, Dom breaks free of the hold and performs a hard right-left combo. Aiden crashes to the ground, and Dom

leaps on top of him to keep wailing down punches.

“Dom, stop! He’s done!” Nick yells.

Gary runs into the ring, trying to pull Dom off Aiden. Nick and Mav join, and the three of them finally pull him off.

“I’m sorry, Dom, you know the rules. If they’re down on the ground, you can’t touch them,” Gary says. “The winner is Aiden’s team. Lancaster gets the full points.”

Blood covers Aiden’s face, and he’s missing teeth as he grins.

Dom turns and storms away. He has to be hurting, and not just physically. He was so close to winning and threw it away because of his temper.

I point to the ring. “What the hell just happened? Why did we lose?”

“When an opponent is down, you have to wait until they get up.” Mav runs his hand through his hair. “Dom attacked him, so we came in second.”

“He provoked him. It was obvious he said something to piss him off,” Cin says.

“Rules are rules,” says a guy beside us.

He looks familiar. I think he’s a friend of Aiden’s.

Needing to check on Dom, I turn away from the ring.

“Thanks for helping me win the fight, Shelby,” Aiden laughs from the ground.

How the hell did I help him win? Oh no, don’t tell me. Aiden used me to get Dom to lose his cool.

I half turn back before Mav stops me. “Ignore him, babe. He knew the only way to beat my brother was to cheat. We can catch up on points tomorrow when you win the race.”

We jog back to the pavilion to find Dom beating the table.

“Stop it, Dom!” I grab his arm. “Your knuckles are split open. Sit down. Nick, get me the first aid kit, please.”

Scowling, Dom plops down, and Nick lays open the first aid kit.

I take out the alcohol pads, ripping one open before peeking at Dom. “Ready?”

He nods, and I quickly dab his knuckles as he winces.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” I ask.

“You wouldn’t believe me.” He peers around at the milling people.

Now that the fight is over, coolers of beer and pop appear on the tables. The guys keep away the people who want to tell Dom he’ll get them the next time.

He huffs out, “I couldn’t move.”

I lower my hands onto my lap. “All great fighters freeze sometimes. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“No, Shelby, you don’t understand. I didn’t freeze. I couldn’t move, even if I wanted to.” His voice rises as he speaks. “Do you think I wanted to stand there, letting that asshole pound on me?”

I shake my head. “I don’t understand.”

He runs his hand through his hair. “I knew you wouldn’t.”

Taking back his hand, I dab his knuckles. “I didn’t say I don’t believe you. I said I don’t understand. Explain what happened.”

“He mumbled something I didn’t understand, and suddenly, I couldn’t move a muscle. It was strange. I was yelling at myself to block or hit back, and I couldn’t do a damn thing.”

All eyes go to Nick. If anyone would understand what happened, it would be him.

He shrugs.

“Is that why you went after him at the end?” Cam questions.

“No, that was just me losing control, like you all told me not to.” His chest caves in.

“What did he say to you?” I ask.

He shakes his head, lowering it. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I couldn’t control my anger.”

“I have a good idea,” I say. “It’s been a long day, and I don’t think any of us feel like partying. How about we head to my house and take a bath to help you relax?”

He smiles warmly. “Sounds great, Firefly.”

Mav comes up behind me and sits down, pushing my hair away from my neck. “Do I get to join you?” he asks, kissing my neck.

Talk about it suddenly getting hot.

I turn my head. “We’ll see. But only if you can be a good boy.”

Mav’s dark eyes sparkle. “You know how good I can be.”

I laugh. “Let’s go.”

We pack everything up and head toward the cars.

It takes a while to reach the parking lot. People keep trying to stop us and asking us to come party with them.

Cam pulls me toward the Jeep. “You’re riding with us, beautiful.”

“See you at the house.” I wave at Cin and Nick.

Mav slides into the driver’s seat, Cam and I jump in the back, and Dom reclines in the front.

Cam lifts me up, placing me on his lap. I peer up into his blue eyes that flash between headlights. He lowers his head. His kiss is slow, and when his tongue touches mine, shivers of desire race through me.

We kiss the whole way home. By the time we turn onto my street, my lips are swollen.

“Uh-oh,” Mav says, slowing down.

I pull myself from Cam to turn and look out the windshield. Cars line both sides of the street, and people dance on our front lawn.

“She wouldn’t,” I say, sliding off Cam’s lap.

“Appears she did.”

Hannah’s having a party, and Nick is going to go nuclear.

We find a spot to park and walk to the house, Nick and Cin right behind us.

“I’m going to kill her,” Nick grits out. “She knows better.”

“I guess the party’s over,” Mav ribs.

Nick stares at Mav. “Way over.”

Cin smirks as she stares at the living room windows where the Barbie Squad is dancing. “All right, let’s clear everyone out.”

Nick leads, opening the door and heading right for the stereo to turn it off.

The room fills with *awws* and *come-ons*.

“Party’s over! Time to leave!” Nick yells.

Carrie and crew strut over to Nick.

“This is Hannah’s party. You can’t tell us to leave,” Carrie says with her hands on her hips.

Cin steps in front of Nick. “This is his house, he can do what he wants.”

“Get out of my face, slut.” Carrie waves her hand in front of Cin’s face. “What you think doesn’t matter.”

“Get your hand out of my face,” Cin warns.

Carrie steps closer, waving her finger in front of Cin. “What are you going to do about it?”

Cin grabs her finger, bending it back.

“Ow!” Carrie cries and looks at Dom for help. “Are you going to let her do this to me?”

He shrugs. “You were the one who called Nick’s girlfriend a slut and waved your hand in front of her face when she warned you not to.”

Cin takes a step forward. “We haven’t been properly introduced. My name is Cin Winters, and I’m Nick’s girlfriend. I know everything you’ve done to my cousin, and I don’t like you. Your reign of terror over Ravenwood is over.” Cin shoves Carrie’s hand away. “Now, get out before I really hurt you.”

Carrie cradles her hand and turns to the Barbie Squad. “Come on, girls.”

They stomp out of the house.

Rising onto my tiptoe, I kiss Dom’s cheek. “I’ll go start the water while you clear everyone else out.”

“I’ll come with you in case you run into trouble,” Mav offers.

Knowing what’s really going on, I take his hand. “You just don’t want to be left out.”

Mav throws his head back and laughs. “You know me so well, Princess.”

We shove our way through the kitchen and down the hall, where I find my door open.

“That bitch let people into my room. I’m going to beat the shit out of her,” I vow.

I push the door open and drop Mav’s hand to cover my mouth. In my bed is a semi-naked Hannah with her head thrown back, straddling a shirtless Luke.

“What the fuck is going on here?” I fume.

Hannah turns, showing Luke’s hands on her breast. She lets out a gasp, covering herself with her hands, and Luke’s hands drop limply to the bed.

“Ugh! I’ll never be able to get that out of my mind.” Mav rubs his eyes furiously. “Ack!”

“Get out! We’re busy, aren’t we, baby?” She rubs Luke’s chest with one hand.

“Well, you should have picked another room, then,” I seethe, putting my hand on my hip.

Something’s not right here. Why isn’t Luke saying anything or even moving? I step closer to the bed. Seeing them going at it makes me want to barf, but I need to see Luke.

Her words stop me dead in my tracks. “Luke wanted to come in here. It’s his way of saying it’s over.”

“If that’s true, then why doesn’t he tell me himself?” I take another step closer.

When she moves her body to block my view, I *know* something is wrong.

“Hannah, put a damn shirt on. I don’t want to see your damn tits again,” Mav rages, shielding himself from the view.

I finally get a look at Luke. He lies with his head to the side and his eyes closed. Either he drank too much and passed out, or she drugged him. “What did you do to him, Hannah?”

“I got the house clear,” Nick calls, walking down the hall to my room. “Did you find Hannah?” He walks into my room and covers his eyes. “Aw, Christ, Hannah, put a shirt on!”

I peer over my shoulder. “Something’s wrong with Luke. He’s not moving, and I don’t think he consented to this.”

“You’re just jealous that he wants me back.” Hannah rants as she pulls on a shirt.

“Hmm, Shelby,” Luke mumbles.

“Okay, that’s it!” I grab her bicep and yank her off him.

Nick leans over the bed to inspect Luke. “What did you give him, Hannah?”

She lifts her chin. “Nothing.”

I shake her arm, bringing her closer to me. “I don’t believe you.”

“Who cares what you believe?” She straightens her spine.
“He wants me back.”

She truly believes what she says.

“If that’s true, then why is he saying my name?” I speak through gritted teeth. “Get the hell out of my room. If I find out you drugged him, you and I will be having a talk.”

She yanks her arm out of my grasp and storms off to her room.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nick shakes Luke, who's not moving.

As I stand there frozen, my heart hammers loudly in my chest. All I can think about is how am I going to tell Mrs. Mason?

Nick scoops up Luke and takes him into my bathroom, where he puts him in the shower and turns on the cold water.

Before too long, Luke sputters, then lifts his hand to block the water from hitting his face.

"Turn the damn water off, assholes," he sputters out.

Dom turns off the water. "You with us now?"

Luke's hand drops to his stomach, and his eyes go to the toilet. "I don't feel so good."

He slips and slides over to the toilet and heaves.

"I'll go get him some dry clothes," Nick says.

Luke flushes the toilet and falls to his ass. "What's going on? Why do I feel like I'm hungover?"

"Well, we're not sure. Shelby and Mav found you in bed with a half-naked Hannah on top of you," Cam says calmly.

Luke's eyes go wide. "Tell me you're joking, Cam? And Shelby found me like this?"

Nick walks back into the room, tossing Luke some clothes. "Here, put these on. How are you feeling?"

Mav helps him stand, and Luke takes off his wet jeans to put on the sweatpants.

“Like a truck ran me over. Where’s Shelby? I need to tell her I... Shit, I don’t know what to tell her.” He runs his hand through his wet hair.

“How about you just tell me what you know,” I say from the doorway.

Luke’s head snaps up, and he stumbles over to me. “I’m sorry, the guys told me how you found me,” he huffs out. “I didn’t... I...”

“Let’s go sit down on the couch, and you can start from the beginning.” I take his hand, leading him over to the couch.

“There goes our sexy bath time, brother,” Mav interjects.

Mav and Dom kick off their shoes. Dom crawls onto the bed, but Mav stares at it. “I don’t know if I want to lie on this bed.”

“Mav.” I frown at him.

“Fine.” He lies down.

Cin and Nick sit on the floor. Nick reaches over, grabs a bottle of water out of my little refrigerator, and hands it to Luke.

“Thanks.” He takes the bottle. “Where should I start?”

“Why did you come over here?” I question.

Luke takes a drink. “I got a text about a party at the Tate’s house. You all were at the Challenge, so I knew it had to be Hannah. I came over to shut the party down.”

“So, how did you get from breaking up the party to passing out with crazy Hannah on top of you?” Cam questions.

Luke tilts his head. “That’s where things get fuzzy. I remember walking through the door and people greeting me. Someone, I can’t remember who, put a beer in my hand. Thinking I’d enjoy myself before I kicked everyone out and headed back to my prison, I drank the beer while talking to some football players. I’d only drunk about half of it when I

started feeling dizzy. The guys made fun of me for being a lightweight. I felt like I was going to pass out and wanted to get to your room before I did. Someone helped me walk down the hall. It must have been Hannah, because I vaguely remember her wanting me to go to her room, but I knew that was a mistake. I kept saying, 'No. Shelby's room.' The last thing I remember is falling on your bed."

"So, she drugged you," I say through my teeth.

"I didn't drug you, Luke," Hannah says from my doorway. "You wanted me. You said so yourself."

Luke stands, wobbling, and walks over to her. "If you didn't put something in my drink, who did?"

She reaches out and touches his chest. "No one. You wanted to be with me."

Luke takes her hand off his chest and drops it. "No, Hannah, I didn't. You took it too far this time. You drugged me, got me in Shelby's bed, took off my clothes, then touched me without my consent. That's sexual assault, Hannah, and I could send you to jail."

The whole time Luke is talking, Hannah's shaking her head. "No, you love me."

Luke throws his hand up in the air and moves to sit back down.

"Hannah, Luke's right, you could be in jail. You need to stop this obsession with Luke. You also need to clean up after your party. But, right now, you should go to sleep," Nick suggests.

Looking sadly at Luke, she nods and walks quietly to her room.

Cam points to where Hannah stood. "Did anyone else think that was strange?"

"This whole scenario is weird," Mav says. "What part are you specifically talking about?"

"The non-screeching Hannah. She was freakishly calm," Cam points out.

“She wholeheartedly believes what she’s saying.” I look down the empty hallway. “She was acting weird, but there’s nothing we can do about it at this hour. I say we head to bed and see how things are in the morning.”

Luke touches my leg. “We okay? I should get home. Mom’s going to be so pissed.”

“Yeah, we’re good. Do you think she’ll let you come to the race tomorrow?”

“She can’t stop me.” He kisses my nose.

Cam gets up. “I’ll walk you over. You still seem a little shaky.”

“Thanks.” Luke stands. “What time should I be over here tomorrow morning?”

“We have to leave at nine,” Nick says. “The race starts at eleven.”

“All right, goodnight, everyone.” With Cam close behind, Luke heads for the door.

“Night,” everyone replies.

Nick helps Cin up.

“See you bright and early,” she says to me before pointing at Mav. “And no fooling around. Shelby needs sleep.”

Mav glances at the others. “Why is she pointing to me?”

“‘Cause you’re the one that always causes problems,” Dom laughs.

“Night,” I say.

They shut the door behind them.

I kick off my shoes, unbutton my jeans, and shimmy out of them. Mav jumps up and reaches around me to unbutton my bra. I get it off without taking off my shirt, then crawl into bed.

Mav takes off his jeans, tossing them next to where Dom’s already lay on the floor.

Climbing into bed, we all get comfortable.

“Did someone set the alarm?” I mumble.

“No,” Dom and Mav both say.

“I’ll set mine,” Cam says as he comes back into the room and shuts the door. “Is there room for me in there?”

“Always,” I say.

When I wake up, it’s still early based on the light coming in through my window. Cam’s alarm hasn’t gone off yet.

Dom lies on his back, snoring. His chest was my pillow. Mav was at my back all night, and Cam’s curled up behind him.

I stretch my stiff body and wipe my mouth, hoping I didn’t drool all over Dom’s chest. When I roll over, I find Mav’s eyes open, peering at me.

“Good morning,” I whisper.

“Hm. It can be.” He lowers his head and kisses my neck, making his way down.

“Sorry, but that’s not happening today,” Cin’s voice says from the foot of the bed.

I bolt up into a sitting position, and Mav does the same, making Cam fall out of bed.

I clutch my chest. “Dammit, Cin, the alarm didn’t even go off yet.”

Beep. Beep.

Cin takes Cam’s phone and shuts off the alarm. “You’ve got twenty minutes before we need to leave.”

Mission accomplished, she walks out the door.

Mav falls back on the bed. “When did your cousin become such a cockblocker?”

I lean over Mav. “Cam, baby, are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?”

“Yeah, just got a rude awakening.” He climbs into bed. “Are you going to kiss me and make it all better?”

“You two are unbelievable.” Dom threw off the sheet. “I’m going to get a shower. You okay with that, Firefly?”

“Help yourself. Sorry we didn’t get a shower last night.”

Dom moves his way down the bed. “Shit happens. You two better be ready by the time I come out.”

Mav looks at Cam. “We have about ten minutes before he comes out. She can blow us in that amount of time.”

I gasp and punch Mav in the chest. “You heard the boss. No sexy stuff today.”

Mav pulls me down on top of him. “What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

“It’s a well-known fact that an orgasm can relax you.” Cam moves my shirt up and kisses my back.

“We don’t have time to all get off,” I moan.

Mav and Cam lock eyes, raise their hands at the same time, and shout, “Sixty-nine!”

“But who gets the hand?” Cam asks.

“I’ll take the hit. You have a race.” Mav breathes out.

As they move around, I shake my head in confusion. “Wait, what the hell are we doing?”

“Simple. You and Cam are doing a sixty-nine while giving me a hand job,” Mav explains.

“What the hell!” I’ve never done a sixty-nine before. “Let’s go for it.”

We all race to take our clothes off. Cam lays flat, and I turn around to lie on top of him. His gorgeous cock is right there in front of me. If I had time, I would worship it as it deserves. Unfortunately, we are short on time. I lick around the head, then down the length. Cam’s tongue plays with my clit, making me moan.

“Damn, you two going at it almost made me come on the spot.” Mav positions himself close to me so I can wrap my hand around his dick.

We all get a rhythm going. Cam’s mouth feels so damn good. I can’t do much with my mouth except keep it around his dick. He’s doing all the work, thrusting into my mouth, the same with Mav. I keep a tight hold while he moves his hips.

When Cam’s teeth graze my clit, I scream around his dick, and he shoots down my throat.

“Princess, give me your mouth or chest, unless you want it in your hair,” Mav moans.

I shift and drop my hand and wrap my mouth around Mav’s dick. He thrust once, twice, before his hot seed spills down my throat.

He falls back on the bed, and I roll off Cam.

“Damn, that felt good,” Mav pants.

Dom comes out of the shower, steam following behind him. He takes one look at us and shakes his head.

“Come on, you two, we got shit to do,” Dom says.

Once we’re dressed, we meet Cin and Nick in the garage.

Dom, Mav, Cam, and Cin take the Jeep and head off first. They’ll drop Cam off along the way, so he can get his bike, then go to Dom’s garage to load up Midnight, along with anything else they might need.

Nick and I wait in the truck for Luke to arrive.

I take a sip of the coffee that Cin made for me this morning, then lay my head back against the headrest. “What a screwed-up night.”

“Yeah, it was.” Nick lets out a sigh and rests his head against the window. “Do you think I should tell Dad?”

I rock my head from side-to-side. That’s a hard question to answer. Part of me screams, *Yes*. Hannah drugged my boyfriend and tried to rape him. She deserves to be punished.

But another part of me says there's more to it than what we saw.

I grunt, "I don't know what to tell you—"

Luke opens the door, then pauses at the serious looks on our faces. His eyes bounce between us. "Did I interrupt something? Should I come back?"

"No, get in, man." Nick straightens and turns on the truck. "You're fine."

Luke climbs in beside me. He doesn't look too good.

I lean over to kiss him. "How are you feeling, babe?"

"Is that coffee?" Luke eyes the cup in my hand. "Can I please have some? I feel like I have the worst hangover in the world. Nick, do we have time to stop and get more coffee, and maybe a bite to eat?"

"It's up to Shelby." He hooks a thumb toward me as he backs out of the driveway. "She's the one who has to get to the race grounds."

"We can stop somewhere. I can always use more coffee." I hand my thermos to Luke.

He takes a sip before looking at us. "So, what did I interrupt?"

"Nick was asking me what he should do about telling his dad." I frown while rubbing my hand up and down Luke's leg.

"That's a hard one. After thinking about it, I don't think Hannah was the one who drugged me. I can't tell you why, though. It's just a feeling I have. But she *did* take advantage of me being drugged. Whatever you decide, I'm there for you." Luke smiles at his best friend.

"You always are." Nick quickly turns to grin at his friend, then looks back at the road.

Deciding to get coffee and donuts for everyone, we stop at a Dunkin' Donuts.

A few minutes later, we have so many donuts that Nick has to put them in his truck bed.

When we get to Murlay fields, Nick drives to the other parking lot.

Rounding the corner, the parking lot comes into view, and I see it's lined with trailers. Nick pulls up beside an all-black trailer as I search the lot for any sign of Midnight.

Why aren't they here yet?

Then, my mouth falls open when Mav steps out of the side of the black trailer.

"About time you all got here." He struts up to me. "You better close your mouth, or I'll find something to put in it." He kisses my neck.

"I know exactly what I want to put in it," I purr.

Mav groans. "Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"A donut." I turn and head to the back of Nick's truck.

Ha, that's for not telling me we have a damn trailer!

Mav shrugs and joins me, picking a maple bar when I open the box.

I grab an apple fritter and a coffee, then walk inside the trailer.

In the back, Ricky and Mark are untying Midnight from the floor.

"Hey, guys, there's coffee on the tailgate of Nick's truck!" I yell to them.

Ricky waves his hand, and they finish what they're doing before heading outside.

I turn back around to Cin, handing her the coffee and donut. "Why didn't anyone tell me we had a trailer?"

"It came with the car." Smirking, she takes a bite as she leans against a black counter with silver cabinets above it. "This trailer is decked out. Everything we could ever want or need is here. I wish we had this during our last racing season."

"Cam's here," Mav yells from outside.

I peek out the door. Pulling in beside us is another trailer, but instead of all black, it's red and white. Cam opens the side door and jumps down, holding a bag in his hand. He heads over to the donuts and shoves one in his mouth.

Swallowing his mouthful, Cam says, "Let's get this done. I need to get ready if I want any chance of seeing Shelby's race."

"Shelby, can you come here for a moment?" Luke waves at me.

I walk down the stairs and over to them, Dom following me. Luke turns and says something to Ricky and Mark, who stand by Nick's truck.

They grab donuts and head back into the trailer.

Cam hands me the bag. "The guys and I got you something."

I take the bag off him. It isn't light, whatever it is. I shift it around, trying to figure out how to hold the bag and open it at the same time.

"Here, I'll hold the bag, and you open it," Cam suggests.

I grab what's inside and pull it out. A new helmet. A sexy little devil girl on the side twirls her tail with one hand and waves them on with the other while leaning against an all-black car.

Tears well up in my eyes. "Thank you. I love it."

I hug and kiss each guy and thank them again.

"We knew you needed one, so we chipped in and got a friend to put the little devil girl on it," Mav says when I reach him.

"I wish I could stay, beautiful," Cam says. "But if I want to see your first race, then I need to get dressed and check everything."

I sniffle and nod.

He runs and hops up into his trailer.

“You all done with mushy stuff?” Cin bellows from the trailer. “It’s time to get ready, then head toward the driver’s meeting.”

I use my sleeve to wipe my eyes and nose. “Oh, shut your pie hole, bitch! I’m coming!”

Cin chuckles. “There’s my girl.”

The guys also give me a new driver’s suit. It’s all black, of course, and on the back of it is the little devil girl in the same pose with the name Midnight Devil.

My head snaps up to Dom.

“I thought it might be a smart idea to combine our names,” he says.

Unable to contain myself, I jump up on him, wrap my legs around him, and kiss the hell out of him. “I love you.”

“No more of this shit. We need to get her head in the game. Those rich assholes are going to do everything they can to get in her head,” Cin warns.

“All right, boss, we’ll stop,” I grumble as Dom puts me back down on the ground.

“Good. Now, put on the suit,” Cin commands. “You, me, and Dom are heading up to the driver’s meeting. Ricky and Mark are checking the car over.”

Feeling sad, I walk back to where the car is and put on my suit. “I guess Billy didn’t want to come?”

After I rejected Billy’s confession, I was hoping it wouldn’t make things awkward between us.

Mark frowns. “No, sweetheart, he went back home for this semester.”

“I wish I wasn’t so blind. Maybe I could have stopped it before it got too far.” I tie the arms of my suit around my waist.

“Honey, it wasn’t your fault. We told him over and over that you didn’t have feelings for him, but he wouldn’t listen. He’ll be fine.”

“Come on, Shelby, it’s time,” Cin calls from the back of the car.

“Get a good pull,” Ricky says.

As I walk past Ricky, he slaps my back.

I head down the ramp to where Dom and Cin wait, and we head over to where the starting line will be.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A few people are milling around the start line when we arrive, and I spot Gary.

I make my way over to him. “Hey, old man, what are you doing here?”

He swivels around and a big smile spreads over his face. “Devil girl.” He wants to hug me, but he backs off. “Shelby, it’s so good to see you. I was so worried about you after your accident. Is Cin with you?” he asks, searching around.

“Right here.” She pops out of the crowd.

“Cin, the best mechanic around.” He gives her a big smile, too. “How are you, girls? Doing good? Oh, please tell me you’re racing today?”

“I am, but not in Little Devil. We couldn’t rebuild her.” I shake my head.

“Yeah, when they pulled you out of her, it didn’t look so good.” He crosses his arms. “Did I see you hanging around with the Knight crew last night?”

Dom comes up and wraps his arm around me. “Yep. She’s ours.”

Gary’s eyebrows shoot up.

I nod, smiling.

“Oh, hell no!” says one of the drivers. “I’m not racing against a stupid girl.”

Here we go again. Every time I want to race, I have to deal with this shit.

“That stupid girl is going to kick your ass.” Cin takes a step forward, but I stop her.

The driver rolls his eyes. “You wish.”

“Tom, have you ever heard of the racer called the Devil?” Gary asks.

He hates this kind of bullshit more than Cin and I do. He doesn’t tolerate it when other drivers think girls shouldn’t race.

“Hell, yeah,” the guy says eagerly, ignoring me completely. “Wasn’t he in the meets you held down in Westridge?”

He thought I was a guy? Boy is he in for a big letdown.

“Well, let me introduce you to the driver and head mechanic of The Little Devil.” Gary wraps his arms around my and Cin’s shoulders.

All the guys’ faces fall, and one says, “No way. I heard you wrecked badly.”

“Yeah, I did. I had a cast on my arm, and my leg sucked.”

Tom recovers first, and a grin forms on his face as he peers around. “Is the Devil here?”

“No, she got totaled,” Cin informs him. “Shelby will be racing in Dom’s car, Midnight Devil.”

“No way will I race against her!” Evan storms toward us. “No girl should be allowed in street racing. Period.”

“Too afraid you’ll lose against a girl?” Cin smirks.

“Against her?” He points at me and sneers. “Hell, no.”

“Evan, do you know who she is?” Tom demands. “You should be excited to race against someone who’s good.”

“You don’t know what’s good.” Evan snorts. “You come in last every year.”

“Well, that means the teams will be even, since you won’t race against a girl.” Gary stares at Evan with no warmth.

His teammates behind him are complaining and slapping Evan on the back.

“Fine,” he says, waving his hand.

“Thought so.” Gary sneers at Evan. “Since all the drivers are here, let’s go over the rules.”

It’s no different since the last time Gary flagged one of my races. The whole time Gary goes over the rules, Evan doesn’t take his eyes off me.

“I know that look,” Dom whispers in my ear. “Evan’s up to something. You need to be careful.”

Just what I need. This is the first time I’ll be racing since my accident. Now, I have to worry about an asshole trying to make me wreck again?

“Let’s find out who’s racing who.” Gary swirls the bucket around. “As with the fights, there’s a bye.”

“I’ll get your button,” Dom says, stepping forward. “I don’t trust Evan not to try to break your foot.”

He comes back and hands me the button.

When I peek at it, I hold a *One* in my hand.

Gary puts the bucket down on the ground. “All right, who has the number one?”

I don’t step forward immediately. Instead, I wait until the other person steps up, chucking his button back into the bucket. He’s an average-height guy with brown hair.

“Joe from East Brady against...” Gary glances around.

I step forward.

“Shelby from Ravenwood.” Gary smiles. “Who’s got the bye?”

Evan holds up his hand.

Gary nods. “So, that puts Tom from Oakgrove against Bruce from Westview. Joe and Shelby, you have twenty minutes to get your cars up to the line. Let’s have a good race.”

As we head back to the lot, I ask, “Is Joe any good?”

Dom shakes his head. “You shouldn’t have a problem.”

Everyone is waiting for us when Dom and I return to the car.

“Who are we racing against?” Mav questions.

“Joe from East Brady. Small tire, small block,” Dom says.

“Easy win. Did Evan give you any problems?” Nick asks.

“He just acted like an asshole, as usual.” I spot Cam off to the back of the car, dressed in his red racing suit.

He has it tied as I do, and the arms are white, matching a patch on his knee. Instead of wearing a t-shirt beneath, he wears a tank top that shows off his muscles, making me drool.

Cam’s eyes rake over me. “You look sinful in that suit.”

I step into his arms. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“We don’t have time for that!” Cin yells at me. “Let’s go, Shelby!”

“When is she going home again?” Cam questions.

I smack him on the shoulder, laughing. “Good luck, and if I don’t see you before your race, be safe.”

“You, too.” He grips my shoulders. “I know you’re freaking out inside. I was, too, after my first racing accident. But you’re made for the track. You can do this. Okay?”

I let out a breath I was holding in. Cam gets me.

Cin yells at me again as they push Midnight Devil to the starting line.

“I’m so damn excited to see you race. Now, go kick their ass,” Luke says, kissing my head.

I nod to him and rip off my t-shirt, so I only wear my sports bra. It gets damn hot under the suit. Unraveling my sleeves, I slip my arms in as I make my way to the car.

Cin waits there with my helmet and hands it to me. “You good?”

In that one look, I know she's asking me if I can do this. She hasn't said anything, but I know she's freaked out that I might have an anxiety attack in the middle of the track.

I quickly nod, pull on my helmet, and slide into the car to buckle on my harness, making sure it's tight.

Ricky puts down my pimp juice, a special blend he created to help with traction. He taps the car to say I can warm up my tires.

I press down on the brake and accelerator, doing my burnout and enjoying the smell of heating rubber. Like it always does, my belly cramps. I back myself up to the line to let Joe take his turn.

My heart thumps as everything in me tells me to get out of this car.

No! I can do this. It's just A to B, one-eighth of a mile. It's that simple. You are not a quitter; you're stronger than this. You were made for this, I tell myself.

Once Joe backs up to the start line, Gary steps into position between our cars. He waves me forward, then folds his fist. I stop, and he does the same for Joe.

My breathing turns into pants. If I don't calm down, I'll miss the light or steam my windows up so badly that I can't see.

Gary runs off the track, turns, and flashes the light.

For a split second, I just sit there, which is enough to give Joe the lead.

Everything comes back to me, and I slip into the zone as I slam on the gas.

I inch up on him, and by the halfway point, we're side by side. I shift one more time and cross the finish line a bumper ahead of him.

I did it. I won.

It wasn't the best race I've ever had, but I made it.

I turn my car around and return to the start line. People scream my name and pound my car as I pass them. When I get out of the car, I throw my helmet on the front seat. I can't wipe the smile off my face.

Cam arrives first and lifts me, twirling me around. "You did it beautifully! I knew you could!"

"For a while there, I wasn't sure I could," I say into his neck.

"Doesn't matter. What matters is you raced and won. I'm so proud of you." Cam squeezes me.

Mav takes me next. "That was awesome to watch."

"Thanks, Knight." I hug him tight. "It wasn't my best race."

Dom takes me from his brother. "You did it. You were on fire, Firefly."

"I don't know about that, but thanks."

"My heart was in my throat watching you, but at the same time, it was amazing seeing you in your element," Luke says.

"It was good seeing you behind that wheel again, Trouble." Ricky pats my back.

"I always said you belong behind the wheel, sweetheart. You have a natural instinct," Mark says, hugging me, then jumping into the car to take it back to the trailer.

As we follow the car back, Ricky asks what I think about how the car is running. As we discuss that, I unzip my suit and shrug out of the top half, tying the arms around my waist. All that adrenaline made me hot.

Cam wraps an arm around me. "I need to get over to the moto track."

I hug him. "I'll get over there to see you."

Mav, Dom, and Luke head off to watch the other races.

Once they leave, I let out a breath and lean against the car.

"Mark, go get her a cool bottle of water," Cin barks.

“I’m all right, I think.” Bending over, I take in deep breaths. “I just freaked out for a bit at the beginning, then everything fell into place. It was like coming home. Man, did I miss this.”

Mark hands me the water. “You had us worried for a bit there. You were white as a ghost.”

“I had *myself* worried. That was the problem.” I take a big gulp of water. “Okay, I think we need to do this, so we keep winning.”

Mark pulls out the computer and turns it on. By the time the guys come back, we have a solid plan.

“Princess, they’re asking for the drivers again. Damn, do you look sexy as hell like that. Hold on. I need a pic of you,” Mav says with excitement.

What the hell is he talking about? I look like shit. My hair is messy from my helmet, I have my suit halfway off, and I’m in a sports bra.

Mav searches for his phone and snaps a picture.

Shaking my head at him, I walk over to the drivers’ meeting. After my race, there’s me, Evan, and Bruce left.

Gary shakes his bucket. “Time to draw again.”

We all draw, and I pull the B button.

“Who has the golden ticket?” Gary asks.

I hold up my hand.

“So, it’s Evan versus Bruce, and whoever wins that race will go against Shelby,” Gary says. “Racers, you have twenty minutes to get to the starting line.”

I jog back to my car, announcing, “I got the bye. I’m going to run over and see Cam race for a bit. Can someone come to get me when it’s time for my race?”

Mav waves a walky-talky as he joins me. “I’ll come with you, Princess.”

Of course, they would have these. Damn rich kids.

Mav and I don't walk over to where the motorbike races are taking place and stand near the fence at the edge of the track. The riders are out and racing, and I search the track for Cam's red and white suit.

Mav points in front of us. "Here he comes. He's in the whoops."

"The what?"

"Girl, if you're going to be with us, then you need to learn some lingo. The small bumps are called whoops. In front of us is a sharp turn. We might get sprayed with mud, but it looks dry today," Mav explains. "After the turn is the rhythm section, then the sand section."

Holy shit, I thought they raced on a plain track. When we saw it last night, it was getting dark. I had no idea it had all the whoops, sand traps, and whatever else.

"If those are the whoops, what are those bigger bumps?" I point to the middle of the track.

"Those are called triples because there are three bumps. Some places have quads." Mav turns to look at me and starts laughing. "Too much info?"

"Just a bit," I admit. "Are they racing or practicing?"

"They should be racing, and if I'm correct, it looks like Cam's in the lead with Tim from Lancaster, Kevin from East Brady, Adam from Westview, and Doug from Oakgrove. And as always, Tim and Doug are being dicks. Doug is Tim's cousin, so they like to block/pass the other players. That's when a racer passes another racer in a corner, making them slow down or lose momentum. Contact can be made to make the rider fall over. It's a dick move, but it's legal." Mav shrugs.

As Cam rides past us, I cup my hand over my mouth, yelling, "Go, Cam!"

My time has to be coming to an end soon, and I have to make sure I'm at Cam's next race. "Is it me, or is Doug going really slow? Cam's close to lapping him."

“Could be something wrong with his bike, but yeah, it does seem weird.” Mav grips the fence.

As Cam inches closer, Doug puts his brake on, making Cam slow and giving Tim time to get up beside him.

What happens next plays out in slow motion. Tim kicks Cam’s leg off the peg and up, sending him off the back of the bike. Cam backflips off the motorcycle and tumbles down one of the triple landings in a heap at the bottom.

Before I think twice, I jump the fence and run toward Cam.

Mav’s behind me, yelling, “Watch out for the other riders!”

I don’t care about the other riders. I’m worried about Cam. It’s a good thing Tim and Doug are farther down the track, because if they rode past me now, I’d clothesline them.

I reach Cam and drop beside him, gently removing his helmet. His blond hair covers his eyes, and I brush it back. “Cam, can you hear me?”

“Yeah, Beautiful.” He grabs his side. “Fuck, that hurt.”

“Miss, can you let me in so I can check him out, please?” asks a guy behind me.

Mav tugs at my arm. “Shelby, let them check him over.”

I lean down and kiss Cam’s dirty face, then let Mav pull me up.

Another guy with a red flag stands beside the EMT. “Cam, we saw it all. Tim’s disqualified. We know Doug was part of it, but what he did wasn’t illegal. We’re holding the race to find out if you can continue.”

He’s not continuing; he just flipped off his bike on his back and tumbled down a hill.

In the distance, I hear my name being called.

I turn and search the fence.

Luke waves his arms around, then points to the walky-talky.

Shit, my race.

“Mav, give me the walky-talky.” I tap him.

He checks his belt, then pats his pockets. “I lost it. It must have fallen off when I jump the fence. But if Luke’s here, then it must be time.”

Unsure what to do, I look at Cam, then back at Luke.

“Beautiful, go. I’m fine.” Cam winks. “Go kick ass for me.”

“Go. I’ll stay with him,” Mav says.

“I love you both.” I take off at a run toward Luke, climbing over the fence.

As we run toward the racetrack, I pull up my suit. “How late am I? And who am I racing?”

“You’re racing Evan, and when I left, they were counting down. If you don’t make it, then you have to forfeit. Is Cam all right?” Luke questions.

“I don’t know.” I yank up the zipper on my suit. “Doug kicked him from his bike, and he backflipped off the back. He said he was hurt, it was okay for me to race.”

We reach the track, and Gary’s still counting down.

He’s at two when I yell, “I’m here!”

“Cutting it a little close, aren’t you, Winters?” Gary gives me a slow smile.

I narrow my eyes at Evan. “I would have been here on time if someone didn’t hurt my boyfriend at the motocross track.”

Evan smirks at me from inside his car. “I hope fairy-boy is all right.”

I make it three steps toward him before strong arms wrap around me.

As I’m turned away from Evan, warm breath brushes my neck. “Not now, Firefly.”

I take in a deep breath and slowly let it out, nodding at Dom to let me go.

“Get ready to have your ass kicked,” I say before putting on my helmet.

He responds by flicking me off.

“We did the burnout. Watch out for him,” Ricky says, cocking his head toward Evan’s car. “He has something up his sleeve.”

During the first race, I noticed the road curves a bit. With the trees, it’s a blind spot. If Evan is going to do something, it will be there.

Gary pulls me up, then Evan, before running forward and hitting the light.

Evan and I take off simultaneously, and I slowly inch ahead, watching for the blind spot.

Then my kit kicks in, and I jump ahead.

At the blind spot, Evan does exactly what I figured he would. He crosses into my lane, forcing me over. Since this is a created track, the ends are ruffed. Evan wants me to hit the end and careen into the trees.

Not going to happen.

I shift and manually hit the nitrous, the sudden momentum throwing me back in my seat. As I cross the finish line, I let out a whoop.

The Lancasters are cheating, and I’m sick of it.

Slamming on my breaks, I crank the wheel, doing a one-eighty before coming to a stop.

I unbuckle my harness and am out of the car in a flash, ripping off my helmet and placing it on the roof. Going to the side of the road, I pick up a rock and throw it at Evan’s window.

He gets out of his car in a flash. “What are you doing, you crazy bitch?”

“You just tried to drive me into the trees, you spineless asshole!” I shout. “Were you so afraid your image would be

ruined if you lost to a girl? Or are you so intimidated by the Knights that you have to cheat to win?”

His neck turns beat red, and his jaw works overtime as he looks away from me. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I run my hand over my mouth. “Oh, I think I hit the nail on the head. You and the rest of the Wolves can’t stand being second to the Knights. It irks you that everyone loves them, and you think it should be you.”

Evan takes a step closer. “You don’t know shit. Just like their father, they think they can take whatever they want. They’re nothing but thugs and don’t deserve to win anything,” he fervidly rants, stepping closer until he stands right in front of me. His arm lashes out with lightning speed, grabbing my forearm.

“Let go of me,” I grit out through my teeth.

His hold on my arm tightens. “What irks me beyond belief is *you*. You think you’re better than everyone, but I know better. You’re just a whore like your mother.”

“You’re wrong on so many levels, Evan. First off, I wouldn’t be proud to say you knew Roger. He was a sociopath. Second, get your facts straight. My mother isn’t a whore. Now, let me go before you regret it.” I try to yank my arm away, but he holds on tight.

Someone yells my name. We’ve been talking too long. Soon, everyone will be down here. I reach across my body and take his pinky finger between my thumb and forefinger. I press down on his pinky nail as I bend his whole finger back toward the top of his hand until a pop sounds.

Evan lets out a yell, dropping my arm.

I twist his hand, then shove him away.

He clutches his hand to his chest. “You bitch! You broke my pinky finger!”

“I warned you, but you didn’t listen.”

Dom runs up beside me. “What’s taking so long? Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine.” I rock back and forth on my heels. “Evan and I were just talking.”

Dom’s icy glare doesn’t leave Evan. “I’ll let it drop for now. They’re waiting for you at the start line.”

“Do you want a ride?” I question Dom, walking over to the car.

Dom doesn’t say anything. He just walks over to the passenger side and gets inside.

I jump into the driver’s seat and start it up.

“Did he hurt you?” Dom demands.

“No. He tried to, but I broke his pinky.” I white knuckle the wheel. “I can handle myself, Dom. Especially with someone like him.”

He breathes out. “I know.”

We pull up to the starting line and get out, everyone crowding around me.

Gary comes over, waving his hand to quiet everyone. “My guy at the end says Midnight Devil is the winner! Congratulations, Shelby! Here are the points as of right now, with three Challenges complete. Oakgrove has fourteen points. East Brady has ten points. Westview has twenty-two points. And tied for first place are Lancaster and Ravenwood, with twenty-five points each. See you all tomorrow at the Smash ’em Up!” Gary says with excitement.

“How is that possible?” I ask in confusion. “We should only have fifteen points if Dom was disqualified.”

“I told you I was just winded and maybe a bit bruised,” Cam says from behind me. “I finished and came in second.”

Wrapping my hands around his shoulders, I hug him. “Of course, you did.”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.” Mav’s stomach growls, adding its two cents. “Let’s go get something

to eat.”

Everyone agrees, and we pack everything up.

CHAPTER TWENTY

After we eat at the Diner, we head toward my place.

All I want is to take a hot shower, crawl into bed, and maybe watch TV.

Rounding the corner of the road to my home, I finally release the breath I was holding when I see the empty streets.

Nick's the first one inside the house, followed by Cin and me, and we find the place spotless. When we all trudge into the living room, we find Hannah sitting on the couch, waiting. Her head hangs low, and she clasps her hands in her lap.

What's she up to now?

"I better go." Luke eyes Hannah. "Mom wasn't too happy letting me go after what happened last night."

Hannah cringes but doesn't raise her head.

"You're not staying the night?" I frown, hugging him goodbye.

"No, I want to, but I promised Mom I'd come home." He kisses the side of my head. "I'll see you tomorrow for the derby."

"Luke, may I please speak to you before you leave?" Hannah asks softly.

Luke waves his hand, telling her to proceed.

She eyes the guys. "In private?"

“Hell, no. I will never go anywhere private with you again,” he angrily states, crossing his arms. “If you have something to say to me, you can say it in front of all of us.”

“I’ll be in your room, Firefly. I don’t care what she has to say.” Dom turns and leaves the room.

“I’m going to soak in the tub. I’ll keep it warm for you, beautiful.” Cam takes Mav’s hand and drags him after Dom.

“Why do I have to leave?” Mav protests as they head down the hall.

Nick and Cin take a seat on the couch. I sit in the chair, and Luke perches on the arm beside me.

“I didn’t drug you last night. I swear on my Prada purse that I have no idea who did. I’m sorry I took advantage of you. It was wrong.” Her head stays down as she talks. “I had too much to drink and got it in my head that I needed to remind you how much you loved me once and how good we were. I’ve been so angry since Shelby showed up. When you gave yourself to her, I lost it. But I’ll stop all this shit. I promise.”

She peeks at us through her lashes.

When Luke stays silent, she fiddles with her fingers. “You have every right to say no, but I would be grateful if you would still take me to the Black and White Ball, so I can save face. At least a little.”

Cin chuffs from the couch.

I can’t see Luke’s face. I’m not sure if I believe this kind and apologetic Hannah, but it’s up to Luke if he wants to take her or not.

“I’ll have to think about it. That’s all I can say for now.” He stands and leans down to kiss me. “See you tomorrow.”

Hannah smiles. “Thanks for listening, Luke.”

Once the door shuts behind him, I lean forward. “Was that all for his benefit? Or are you really sorry?”

Smirking, Hannah leans back and crosses her legs. “Can’t it be both?”

Nick shakes his head. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing. I realized I was wrong in taking advantage of Luke. If the roles were reversed, I would be flipping out. But I still believe Luke and I are soulmates and will be together again. Someone like her can’t keep a man like Luke happy. I just have to be patient and wait for him to get tired of the trash.” She stands and struts to her room.

I rub my temples. “Unbelievable.”

Cin pats Nick’s leg. “Your sister is something.”

Nick’s body slumps farther into the couch. “The sweet sister I knew is gone. I don’t know who that person is.”

Seeing Nick lose hope that the sweet Hannah will come back makes my heart ache.

Rising from my chair, I head to my room and find Dom sitting on the bed, watching TV.

He mutes the show as I enter. “By the look on your face, I guess it didn’t go well?”

“She apologized to Luke before he left, saying she’d back off, then told me she’d wait for him to get tired and take out the trash.” I do air quotes for the last part.

“Nice.” He shakes his head. “They’re waiting for you in there.” He points toward the bathroom.

“Are you coming in, too?”

He smirks. “Naw. No room. I’m going to use Cin’s shower.”

I frown. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” He gets up and kisses my head.

He swaggers out of the room. Since I left my racing suit in the trailer, I only have my T-shirt and yoga pants to strip off. I drop them in the hamper, then open the bathroom door.

Through the steam, I see Cam sitting with his back against the tub while Mav straddles his lap, kissing him. Cam must

hear me enter because his eyes pop open and rake my naked form. His mouth falls open, and he stops kissing Mav.

Wondering why he stopped, Mav follows Cam's eyes.

"Daaaaaaaammn, get your sexy ass in here." Mav moves back to the other side of the tub.

Walking over to them, I step into the tub and lie back against Cam's chest. Mav scrunches up on the other end, staring at us with a goofy look on his face.

"You all right, Mav?" I smile at him.

He shakes his head. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just daydreaming."

I open my arms. "Come here. There's room for you."

He smiles big, turns around, and sits between my legs, letting out a sigh.

I run my hands through his black hair. "What were you daydreaming about?"

"It's silly." The back of his neck turns red. "You don't want to know."

"Come on, dude, just spill it," Cam eggs him on.

"Fine," he huffs out. "I was thinking how much I love both of you, and I can't wait to marry you both."

I suck in a breath. Marry?

"Not now, of course." He covers his face with his big hands. "I told you it was silly."

"Naw, dude, it's not silly at all," Cam says. "I love you, too. But you know you can only marry one of us."

"I know," Mav sighs. "But I'll want a commitment ceremony for the other."

I kiss Mav's shoulder. "It sounds wonderful."

I rest my head on Cam's shoulder, and Mav's head nestles back to lie on mine. Contentment washes over me. I never thought I'd feel this and finally have a home.

We stay in the tub until the water turns cold.

“We better get out,” Cam says eventually. “Shelby is starting to shake.”

Mav pops up, stepping out of the tub and holding his hand out to me.

I place my hand in his, and he helps me rise. I walk over and grab two towels for us, handing one to Mav and keeping the other. Cam steps out of the tub as I unfold the towel.

Cam stares at me critically, wondering why I didn't get him a towel, too. But when I rub the towel I hold over his chest, he beams his approval.

I move the towel lower, sinking to my knees. His dick hardens as I run the towel up one leg, in between his thighs, and down the other.

Cam's hand rests on the side of my face, slightly urging my head forward. I stick my tongue out and look up. His blue eyes blaze into mine. No matter where I am, every time Cam's eyes meet mine, my heart flips over in response. He moves forward, sliding his hard dick into my open mouth.

Never taking our eyes off each other, he thrusts in and out. When I close my mouth around his head and suck it in, his eyes roll back, and he groans out his approval.

“Shit, you two will make me come just by watching you both,” Mav moans.

“Let's take this in the bedroom,” says Cam in a husky voice.

“Hell, yeah,” Mav breathes out.

Mav dries me quickly.

When he's done, he throws me over his shoulder, carrying me into my bedroom, where he tosses me onto my bed. He backs up a bit, then does a running jump, landing on top of me. I'm in the middle of a laugh when I look into his blown-black eyes, and an electrical buzz fills the room. I'm powerless to resist him.

Mav's lips hungrily cover mine, and his rock-hard erection searches for my entrance.

He pulls away from my lips, moving over to my neck. “Your body drives me crazy.”

Cam crawls up on the bed beside us, and Mav raises his head. His gaze roams over Cam’s body until they come to his eyes. They do this silent talk between themselves, then Mav turns his head back toward me, smiling devilishly.

“What are you two up to?” I question.

Mav’s focus shifts to his hard dick before shifting to Cam’s hard dick. “About eight inches each.”

When Mav laughs, I smack him. Always the joker.

“Beautiful, is the lube still in the top drawer?” Cam points to the side table drawer.

Mav shivers on top of me. “Yeah, it’s in there.”

“On your hands and knees, Beautiful.” Cam moves around the bed to the footboard.

My eyes are glued to Mav.

His eyebrows move up and down before he rolls off me.

I shift onto my hands and knees.

“Good girl,” Cam purrs. “Mav, whatever I do to you, you are going to do to Shelby.”

Mav moves behind me, and I feel a sharp sting on my ass.

“Ow!” I peer over my shoulder. “Did you just bite me?”

“I couldn’t help it.” He licks his lips. “It was right in my face, all plump and juicy.”

A smack sounds, followed by murmurs, before a hand lands hard on my ass.

I fall to my side, rubbing my ass. “What the hell, Mav?”

“He told me to do everything he does to me,” Mav reminds me. “Cam smacked my ass, so I smacked yours.”

“Mav, are you done now?” Cam asks sternly.

He hangs his head. “Yes.”

“Beautiful, please get back on your hands and knees,” Cam directs.

Unsure if I like this as much if I keep getting hurt, I get back up.

Who am I kidding? I love it.

I peer over my shoulder, catching Cam’s mischievous blue eyes.

He gives me a wink. He puts two hands on Mav’s ass, his head dipping.

“Oh, shit.” Mav’s head falls onto my ass as he moans like crazy.

He gains some control and moves his head closer to my ass. He keeps one hand on the bed, and the other spreads my cheeks apart.

What the hell...? Oh, fuck me.

As Mav licks my asshole, a sensation runs through my body like no other. A groan leaves my mouth. I can’t stop myself; I push my ass back against Mav’s face.

“F-fuucck, oh shit,” I mumble out.

“Like that, Beautiful?” Cam’s voice breaks through my haze.

“Ye... Oh... Yes.”

“That’s enough for now,” Cam announces. “Onto part two.”

Two? I barely survived part one.

The snap of the lube container fills the room.

Mav runs his hand down my spine and kisses my ass. “Relax, Princess, and enjoy this.”

“Mav, no coming until Beautiful does at least twice,” Cam commands.

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” I hiss.

Mav works one finger into my ass, moving it in and out, before adding another. I don't know who moans the loudest, me or Mav. I never knew fingers felt so good.

"Oh my God, Mav," I moan as he scissors his fingers inside me, stretching my tight ring of muscles.

The sensation burns, but it also feels amazing. When he adds in a third finger, I lose my mind, fucking myself on his fingers as intense waves of pleasure wash over me. I silently scream out the most all-consuming orgasm of my life as I fall flat on the bed.

Mav stares at his fingers. "Holy shit, I have magic fingers."

I pant against the covers as ripples of release still move through me.

"One orgasm down." Cam pulls his fingers from Mav's ass. "Good job holding back."

"It's not over yet, Princess." Mav opens my leg and crawls between them. "I'll give you a choice. Ass or pussy?"

I don't think I could go through another orgasm like the one I just had. "Pussy."

As I get back up on my knees, Mav's hands roam my back and ass. He lines his dick up, slams into me, then slowly pulls himself out before thrusting back in.

"My turn," Cam says from behind Mav.

Mav stills. "Come on, baby, fill me up."

I look over my shoulder as Cam slowly pushes himself into Mav. I can feel Mav's dick thumping inside me. My eyes move back over to Mav. His mouth forms an O, and his eyes are blown.

"Fuck, Knight, you always feel so damn good," Cam sighs.

When Cam pulls back and slides back in, Mav mirrors the move. Soon, Mav and Cam find a rhythm that leaves me in pure heaven.

From the corner of my eye, I see movement. The boys don't stop; they don't care. Dom, dressed in only a towel, closes my bedroom door and locks it. He stops to take in what's in front of him.

How does he feel about seeing his brother and Cam having sex?

"Dom, I need you." I hold out my hand to him.

He strolls over to the bed, dropping the towel around his waist. He's rock-hard. "What, Firefly? What can I do?"

"Fuck my face." I'm sure I could have said it differently, but I'm so far gone that those are the only words I can get out.

He hesitates for a minute before he throws the pillows on the floor and kneels in front of me.

"Open," Dom demands.

When I do, he slides his hard length into my mouth.

"Christ," Dom grunts.

"The rule is no one can come until Princess does again," Cam mentions breathlessly.

Dom replies with a grunt as he grabs my hair and pushes in deeper.

My eyes water as I love every minute of it. The only sound in the room is the sound of skin slapping and an occasional groan.

I've been close to coming for a while, but I've been fighting it off. I don't want this to end. Mav must not be able to take it anymore, either, because he reaches around and flicks my clit a few times.

Unable to hold it off anymore, I fly apart.

Mav's right behind me, shooting his cum deep inside me. Cam groans out his release, and Dom thrusts a couple more times before his cum shoots down my throat.

We all collapse on the bed in a heap. Dom falls in front of me, with Mav and Cam behind me.

“Fuck, that was intense,” Mav says from behind me, his hand running up and down my side.

Dom’s calloused hands cup my cheeks. “I didn’t hurt you, did I, Firefly? I lost control at the end.”

“It’s what I wanted.” Smiling, I shift so I can kiss him. “It was perfect.”

Yawning, I close my eyes.

“Wake up, you sex fiends. We’re going to be late for the derby!” Cin yells, pounding on the door.

“Would you stop yelling? Some of us are trying to sleep!” Hannah bitches at Cin.

“Sorry, Princess,” Cin bitches right back. “I didn’t mean to disturb your beauty sleep. But since no amount of sleep will help with that, it doesn’t matter that I woke you up.”

“Oh, snap, she didn’t,” Mav snickers beside me.

“How dare you?” Hannah shrieks.

Cin pounds on the door. “We’re leaving in twenty minutes!”

“Bitch!” Hannah yells before slamming her door.

Cam chuckles. “I love your cousin.”

“You heard her. It’s time to get up. It’s my time to shine.” Mav sits up, stretching his arms up.

“I thought you shone last night, Mr. Magic Fingers.” I sit up, kissing his shoulder.

He peers at his fingers, and his chest puffs up. “Yeah, I did.”

“Way to make his head even bigger, Firefly,” Dom mumbles from the far side of the bed.

I climb out of bed, do my morning routine, and head to the kitchen, where Cin waits for me with a cup of coffee.

“Thanks.” I take my first sip. “What are the plans?”

“Nick, Dom, and Mav will go get the car and haul it up for us while me, you, Cam, and Luke ride up in my car to the derby grounds, which are about a half-hour away.” She smiles and lifts her cup of coffee.

The fairgrounds don’t have room for the derby, so competitors have to travel to the nearest derby place.

“Sounds good,” I say around a yawn.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We leave right after the guys do.

Luke sits up front with Cin while Cam and I crash in the back.

“Hey, wake up. We’re here.” Luke shakes Cam’s legs.

I sit up, stretching and taking in the view. All I can see is the parking lot and bleachers.

Cin pulls as close as she can get to the entrance.

“The guys shouldn’t be too far behind us. Why don’t you three find us some seats?” Cin suggests. “I’ll wait for the others to get here in case they need me to do anything.”

We agree and navigate our way to the bleachers, which are empty except for a few groups here and there.

We decide to sit five rows from the front. Cam walks down the row first, followed by me, then Luke. The rest can sit in front of us or behind us when they get here.

“Not much to look at, is it?” Luke says.

It isn’t at all. It’s a rectangle of dug-out dirt. “No, not really.”

“This is a small arena. I’ve seen some that are twice as big as this,” Cam mentions.

Luke let out a big breath. “I’ve decided I’m still going to take Hannah to the dance.”

Cam leans forward to see Luke. “Are you joking? After everything she did, you’re still going with her?”

He tips his head back and peers up toward the sky. “I was never actually going with her. All I’m doing is driving her. I plan on sitting with you guys. I don’t think Nick’s going to say anything to his dad about the party. If I pull out, he’ll want to know why. It will cause more problems than it’s worth.”

“I’m fine with that.” I take his hand in mine. “As I said, it’s up to you.”

Around us, the stands fill with more people, and the excited conversation makes it hard to talk. The others still haven’t arrived.

“They better hurry if they want to see the derby! I think it’s about to start!” I yell.

A tapping comes over the speakers. “Welcome, everyone, to the Challenge Derby Day. Here are the points so far. Oakgrove has fourteen points, East Brady has ten points, Westview has twenty-two points, and tied for first place are Lancaster and Ravenwood, with twenty-five points each. Now, let’s introduce our drivers for today. In the tan car, number fourteen, we have Jay Acker from Westview.”

As he calls out Jay’s name, he drives onto the track and does a lap before parking at the edge.

“In the dark blue car, number two, is Matt Dent from Oakgrove. In the red car, number twenty-two, is Tan Ogle from East Brady.” As Gary introduces each racer, they do a lap and park. “In the green car, number one, is Nate Myers from Lancaster.”

Lancaster is the only one so far who painted their car. The roof sports a wolf eating what is supposed to be a knight. Very original.

“And in the black car, number eleven, we have Mav Knight.” When Gary says Mav’s name, we all cheer, but Mav doesn’t drive in.

All heads in the stands turn toward where the cars enter the track.

Cam stands up on the seat so he can see over everyone. “Something’s wrong. He should be out there by now.”

Shit, Mav and I went over that car. How could something be wrong with it? How long do they have to fix it before he’s disqualified?

Luke reaches into the back pocket of his jeans, pulling out his phone. “Nick texted that there was something wrong with the car. They just got it fixed, and they’re heading out now.”

Mav enters the arena, honking and waving until he reaches the Lancaster car. He flips them off.

Cam jumps off the seat. “What did you paint on the sides? I can make out the shield on the hood, but I’m not sure what’s on the sides.”

“He painted the shield so the motor will be protected.” I cover my face in complete embarrassment. “I painted the sides to be a knight’s lance.”

Cam nods. “Now, I see it.”

“You don’t have to say it,” I groan. “I know they suck.”

Luke chuckles. “They’re going to be smashed in about five minutes, anyway.”

Nick and Cin make their way to the bleachers and sit in front of us.

“What happened?” Cam asks as we all take our seats.

“I don’t know if it wiggled loose on the way or someone tampered with it, but a wire was loose, and the car wouldn’t start,” Cin says, sitting down.

Luke snorts. “It was tampered with. It happens every year.”

I search for Dom. “Where’s Dom?”

“He’s staying down there in case something happens, and he needs to get to his brother,” Nick says.

“All right, drivers, at the sound of the air horn, the derby starts,” Gary says over the speaker.

The air horns blast, and cars take off in every direction.

When I hear the first sound of metal crunching metal, I suck in a breath and squeeze my eyes shut.

The crowd *oohs*.

I quickly open my eyes to see what happened.

“Who’s the blue car again?” Cin peers behind her at Luke.

I know who she’s talking about. He was set up right across from Mav, and he left before the horn went off.

“The blue car is Matt,” Nick answers. “He’s not normally this aggressive.”

“Does he have a vendetta against Mav?” I bite my bottom lip.

Nick’s eyebrow shoots up. “No. Why?”

“He left before the air horn and went straight across, heading right for Mav. If that red car didn’t cross in front, he would have hit Mav,” I answer, not wanting to take my eyes off the arena.

Nick hums.

“That didn’t take long. The Red Car is dead. It will only take a couple more hits,” Cin states in a monotone voice.

Cin isn’t the only one who notices. The tan car and the dark blue car chase the red car around, and the tan car rams his side. As the tan car backs out, the dark blue one drives backward and rams it head-on. Smoke billows from the red car’s engine.

The crowd *oohs*, then cheers, and my eyes jump to what caused the reaction. There’s a small pile-up.

The tan car, number twenty-two, is in the middle of the pile-up with Mav and the green car. It happened right by us, and I can see Mav smiling. He’s having a ball.

Putting the car in drive, Mav makes a circle around the arena, jams his car in reverse, and guns it for the tan car. He

hits the car right on the corner panel, and smoke plumes up from the car. The driver slams his hand on the wheel.

The yellow flag appears, and they stop as a fireman puts out the engine fire.

While they're doing that, Mav finds us in the stands and waves.

I blow him a kiss and give him a thumbs-up.

Three cars are left: Matt in the dark blue car, Nate in the green car, and Mav.

I've been chewing on my bottom lip since the beginning of the race. Both Matt and Nate have been gunning for Mav. When they stopped for the fireman, both cars were close to Mav. I hope he realizes that they'll head right for him as soon as the derby restarts.

I take Cam's hand, squeezing it while we wait for the horn to go off.

When it does, I jump a mile.

Nate and Matt gun it for Mav.

He must have known they were going to be gunning for him. He takes off around the arena, playing a game of cat and mouse. A few times, he gets caught but keeps going.

Mav sees an opportunity and wallops Nate. I can hear Mav's cackle from the stands.

The corner of my mouth turns up in a smile. Mav's having such a good time down there that it makes the crunching noise much more bearable.

Whenever I hear metal on metal, I cringe, losing my breath for a minute. It takes me back to those cold eyes I saw right before my accident. The driver hit me on purpose, much like what's going on down in the arena. I thought driving would panic me, not hearing the sound of crunching cars. I've been okay with everything else about my accident, except that sound.

I hope I can make it through this derby without breaking down. With only three cars left, I get lucky for a while. There's less hitting and more chasing around.

"Something's wrong with the green car," Cin says, smiling.

"It looks fine to me," Nick protests.

"Of course, you'd say that." She smirks. "You're not a mechanic. Watch it. Every so often, it jerks, and a puff of black smoke comes out of the tailpipe."

"Huh. She's right." Luke points as a puff of smoke appears.

Cin grins from ear to ear.

Cam stands up, yelling, "Watch out, Mav!"

I scan the arena and find Mav trapped. He's trying to get around one of the stalled cars, and now, Matt and Nate have him in their sights, coming at him from both sides.

Mav sees it coming and guns it, but he isn't fast enough. He gets hit in the rear, losing his bumper.

Nate adjusts his car to go for another attack. Instead, his car slows and backfires, releasing more smoke, and slowly rolls to a stop.

Cin laughs. "Told you."

"Two left. I have to say, I'm surprised Matt's still left." Nick pushes up his glasses. "He's usually one of the first to go."

"He's not that bold, either." Luke rubs his chin. "But he's been gunning for Mav the whole race."

"Maybe he's tired of losing all the time?" I shrug.

They nod in agreement.

We focus back on the derby. Mav's no longer playing hide and seek. He's on the attack.

As they aim straight for each other, my heart jumps into my throat. I can't watch this anymore. The crunching sound is

getting to me. I grab Cam and shove my face against his chest. I'll hear it in my dreams for months.

Cam lets me go and jumps up, cheering. He hugs Nick and Cin as all three of them celebrate while I'm stuck in a fog.

Luke sits back down beside me. "Shelby, you're shaking." He pulls me onto his lap. "Are you all right?"

Tears run down my cheeks, and I press my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

He pulls me away from him to search my face. "Babe, talk to me."

"I tried to ignore the sound, but it got to be too much." I raise my hands to cover my ears.

Cam sits down, running his hand up and down my back. "It was the grating of the metal, wasn't it?"

I nod.

"Huh?" Luke says.

"The sound of metal crunching. That's all she remembers about her accident. It haunts her dreams." Cam looks at me. "Am I right?"

I slowly nod.

Luke pulls me tighter against him. "Well, it's over now. Mav won the derby, and Ravenwood won the Challenge. You helped with that, so let's go celebrate our win and forget about everything else."

Sucking in a ragged breath, I lift my shirt and wipe my tears, putting on a fake smile. "Let's go congratulate Mav."

Luke sets me on my feet and kisses me.

We walk down to the arena holding hands.

Dom stands stoically beside his brother like he always does.

I hip-bump him. "You know it's okay to smile every once in a while."

The corner of his lips moves. I guess that's as good as any.

Mav lifts me into a hug, and my world becomes a blur as he spins me around.

“Did you see me, Princess? I was awesome!” he says proudly.

“I couldn’t take my eyes off of you,” I lie.

Ravenwood students swam us, congratulating us on our win.

Gary makes his way through the crowd with a trophy. It’s not the Sprint Cup, but it’s a trophy. “Congratulations, Ravenwood Team. Here’s your trophy and the money.”

Mav takes the trophy. “You know we don’t want the money, Gary. You know what to do with it.”

Wait, we’re not taking the money? I thought that was the whole point.

“Wait, Gary.” Mav touches my shoulder. “We never keep the money. We donate it. Is there somewhere you’d like the money to go this year, Shelby?”

I should have known they wouldn’t want the money. “Any place that helps abandoned youths.”

Gary smiles. “I know of a place. It was good to see you racing again, Devil girl. You coming back to the meets?”

I peer over at Dom in question. It’s his car.

He gives me a nod.

My eyes fill with tears. I can’t believe he’s going to give up his car so I can race. No one has ever done something like that for me before.

“See you in the summer, Gary.” I run into Dom’s arms. “How can you give me your car like that?”

“After seeing you race, there’s no way I could ever compete like you do,” he says gruffly. “You were made for it, and I’ll be happy to be your sponsor.”

“Shit. I guess I have to like you now,” Cin huffs with a big smile on her face.

Dom laughs along with the rest of us.

I say goodbye to the boys at the derby, telling them I'll see them at school on Monday, and Cin takes us home.

She's planning on heading home today, so I'll spend some time with her before Nick comes and takes her way. She'll return on Thursday night, since she's going to the Black and White Ball with Nick on Friday.

Both Nick and I told her she should just spend the week, but she's worried about her dad. She wants to go home and check on him, make sure he's eating, and do the shit ton of laundry that will have piled up.

Once they leave, I spend the rest of the night relaxing and reading, gearing up for another week in hell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The week before the ball is surprisingly quiet. All anyone can talk about is the dance.

The Barbie Squad spends most of their time over at the hall decorating. I lose count of how many girls I find in the bathroom crying because so and so didn't ask them to go to the ball. They act like their lives are over, and it takes everything in me not to scream at them.

It's just a stupid dance. I don't understand these rich kids.

On Friday, we only have a half-day of school.

I guess it takes all afternoon to get ready for a dance. Who knew?

Mom pays for a hairdresser, nail tech, and a makeup artist to come to the house. Mom's more excited than I am about this damn ball. I didn't have the heart to tell her I'd be fine with Cin and Paige doing my hair and makeup.

Mom comes to my room. "The ladies are here."

Hannah is getting her nails done first, so I get the makeup tech while Cin has her hair done.

Looking over at my cousin, I mouth, *Help me*.

"You got us into this because you didn't want to hurt her feelings." Cin wrinkles her nose. "I mean, why do we need all that?"

I laugh. "I don't know. I couldn't tell her no."

"Well, start. I'm not doing this." Cin's voice is firm.

“Oh, no. If you don’t do it, you’ll burst her bubble. Let’s go.” I grab her arm and drag her out to the living room.

In the living room, the couch is pushed against the back wall with the coffee table on top of it. In the middle of the room stands two barber chairs and a table with every color of nail polish.

Hannah sits at the table, getting her nails done.

“Shelby, this is Nancy,” Mom introduced with a big smile. “She’ll be doing your makeup. And Cindy, this is Sara. She’ll be doing your hair. Paige will be here soon, so let’s jump to it. We don’t want to get behind.”

“Aunt Peggy, I don’t need all this.” Cin waves her hand around.

“Why, of course, you do. Come, take a seat. You’ll be glad you did.” Mom ushers her to one of the barber chairs.

Cin’s mouth opens and closes, but nothing comes out as she takes the seat.

I sit in the chair beside her, laughing. Even Cin can’t say no to my mom.

When Nancy notices my bruised face, she lets out a gasp. The bruises are fading, but they still have a yellow tinge.

“Isn’t it awful? Do you think you can cover it up? I almost killed her when she came home, and I saw it. She’s into kickboxing.” Mom holds her hands up and shrugs.

When I explained to Mom what happened, she flipped, asking how I could be so irresponsible as to get into a fight right before the ball. My response was to question if she even knew me. When have I ever backed down from a fight?

“I’ve covered up worse. When I’m done, you won’t even see them,” Nancy says, getting to work.

For the next three hours, I get my face painted, my hair pulled and teased, and my nails colored.

When we’re finally finished, I’m glad I went through with it. Even Cin is smiling. My cousin looks nothing like herself.

Her black hair hangs down with curls, her makeup is natural, and she even has a French manicure. I can't wait to see Nick's response. And I can't wait to see my guys' reactions to how I look.

Paige, Cin, and I return to my room to change into our dresses. With the hair and makeup, we look even better in our outfits than we did at the store.

Mom comes and knocks on my door. "Are you ready, girls? I want to get some pictures before you leave."

When I open the door, Mom gasps and covers her mouth, tears running down her face. "You look beautiful. You all do."

We follow behind her to the living room. The barber chairs and nail station are gone, and the furniture is back to normal. Peter and Nick stand next to the couch.

"Looking good, Nicky." I flash him a grin.

Nick's eyes go wide when he sees me, then Cin steps out from behind me. Nick's eyes go from sparkly to lust-filled.

He strolls over and kisses her cheek. "You're beautiful, Cin."

"You clean up nicely, too." Her eyes roam his body.

They stand staring at each other for a moment before Nick seems to remember they're not alone in the room.

"Um, this is for you." Nick lifts a clear box that holds a white carnation corsage. He takes it out of the package, putting it on her wrist.

"Picture time," Mom says.

I glance around the room. "Where's Hannah?"

"Believe it or not, she's still getting ready." Peter shakes his head in disbelief.

My eyebrow pops up. "All we had to do was put on our dresses!"

Paige rolls her eyes.

Hannah comes around the corner. “I’m right here. Some of us care how we look.”

She wears a white, lacey tank top that ends under her breasts. The black skirt beneath has a wide split all the way up to her waist to show off a pair of matching, white lace shorts.

Peter stares at her in shock. “What are you wearing, Hannah?”

“I know you don’t understand fashion, Dad, but this is called a dress.” She runs a hand down her front.

“Uh, no, it’s not,” Paige says.

She sneers at my friend. “Like you would know, Mitchell.”

“Hannah, that’s *not* a dress. It’s a two-piece.” Red creeps up Peter’s face. “And I don’t know if I want you leaving the house wearing that.”

While they argue, Mom pulls us aside and starts taking pictures.

Peter finally relents and lets Hannah wear her dress. Mom wants a shot of all of us, then one of Nick, Hannah, and me.

Hannah barely smiles in the pictures.

When the doorbell rings. Hannah squeals and runs to answer it. I glance toward the entry as she throws the door open, revealing Luke standing on the other side.

“Bye,” she says over her shoulder as she tries to push Luke out of the doorway.

“Hannah, stop shoving me.” Luke shoulders his way inside. “I want to see my girlfriend.”

She stomps her foot. “But you’re *my* date.”

He gets in her face. “No, that is where you’re wrong. I’m taking you, but I’m not your date.”

Her face twists with anger, but he turns away from her, his eyes searching the living room.

He whistles when he finds me. “Wow, Angel, you’re smoking hot.” His eyes move to Cin, then to Paige. “Holy shit,

Cin, you're living up to your name tonight. Pure sin. And little Paige. Sam will flip his lid when he gets a glimpse of you. He's sitting in his car outside. You might have to go get him." Luke chuckles.

I love how he has compliments for all of us. It makes me love him that much more.

He walks over to stand before me, licking his lips. "I want to hug you, but I don't want to rumple you up."

I wave my hand down my body. "You better not. This took three hours."

"Worth every second." He leans down and kisses my cheek before whispering in my ear, "Do I get to take this off of you later?"

"Maybe." My heart does a double thump. "We'll see how good you are."

Mom smiles. "How about some pictures?"

"Fine." Hannah stomps over, pulls Luke to her side, and hooks her arm through his.

"I think she meant Shelby and me." Luke removes her hand and wraps his arm around me.

"But you're *mine* tonight," she whines.

Luke groans, grinding his back teeth.

"Luke, take a picture with her," I plead.

"Fine. *One*. But then I want one with you." He points at me.

"Of course," I agree.

Luke stands ramrod straight beside Hannah with his arms crossed while Hannah desperately tries to wrap herself around him. She finally gives up and stands beside him.

After his obligatory picture, we take a few more with all of us.

Another knock sounds at the door.

Nick smiles over at me. "I'll get it."

When Nick opens the door, Mav slides across the foyer.

“We have arrived.” Mav glances over at us girls in the living room and shakes his hand in front of his face. “Hot mamas in the room.”

My heart races at the sight of him. He wears a black bow tie, vest, and shirt, but his pants and jacket are white. Holy shit. I think he’s hot in regular clothes, but in a tuxedo... It suddenly got hot in here.

He swaggers up to Paige and kisses her cheek. “Little one, you’re stunning.”

Her face turns red.

He slides in front of my cousin. “Cin, I wouldn’t believe it if it weren’t standing in front of me. You clean up good, gurrll.”

Cin’s head bobs as she looks him over. “You’re not too bad yourself, Knight.”

When he slides in front of me, his heated eyes roam my body. “Wow, baby, you take my breath away. I’m one lucky guy. Dom and I have something for you. We hope that you’ll wear it tonight.” He searches his pockets and starts panicking.

Dom strolls up behind him. “You’re breathtaking, Firefly. Hey, idiot, you gave the box to me.” He taps a long box on Mav’s shoulder.

Where Mav’s tux is white, Dom wears black. “Looking hot, Grizz.”

Mav takes the box from Dom. “Oh, yeah, I forgot I gave it to you. Please wear this tonight, Princess.”

I take the rectangular box from Mav and open it. Inside is an oval onyx stone with a diamond in the middle.

I gasp, taking it out of the box. It’s beautiful. “Put it on me, please.”

I hand it to Mav, and he walks behind me to slip it around my neck. It rests beautifully right above my breasts.

“I love it! Thank both of you.” I throw my arms around Dom’s neck and kiss him, then I turn and kiss Mav.

“Way to show us up, guys,” Nick says, smiling.

“Don’t worry, you can show me how you feel later.” Cin nudge Nick.

Nick’s face reddens.

I search the room. “Wait, where’s Cam?”

Mav shuffles his feet. “Didn’t you get his message? He had to go see his dad.”

“No, I didn’t. I’ve been getting ready all day.” I reach out to squeeze his hand to show I’m not mad. “He’s wanted to see his dad so badly. I’m glad he got to go.”

“Are we ready? I’m sure the limo driver is as bored as I am,” Hannah grumbles.

“I didn’t get a limo. We’re driving my dad’s BMW,” Luke clarifies.

Hannah’s mouth falls open. “Why?”

Luke shrugs. “Since you didn’t want to go with my friends, I didn’t want to spend the money. I’ll just drive us.”

Her hand tightens around her purse, her face turning red as she grinds her back teeth.

“I’ll find you at the ball,” Luke says with a wink at me before strolling out the door with Hannah stomping behind him.

Sam slinks in. “Sorry, I’m late.”

“You’re not late,” I assure him. “You look nice, Sam.”

Sam’s eyes get big when he sees Paige. “Wow, Paige, you look stunning.”

“Thanks, Sam.” She blushes. “You look great, too.”

“One more picture, then you can go. Now, get together.” Mom arranges us the way she wants. “Smile!”

After she snaps another dozen pictures, I chuckle. “Can we finally go now?”

Peter smiles, pulling Mom close to him. “Yes. Have fun and be careful.”

We head out to the driveway where a limo waits. When we climb inside, I notice a bottle of champagne chilling in a bucket built into the wall. As the limo pulls onto the road, Mav pulls glasses from a shelf and pours glasses, passing them around.

“To good friends, new and old.” Nick pushes up his glasses.

“May we dance until our feet fall off!” Paige sings.

Dom shakes his head. “I’m not dancing.”

“To having fun.” I raise my glass.

We tap our glasses together and take a drink.

The Black and White Ball is being held at a place called Stone’s Ballroom. It’s not far away, and we arrive quicker than I thought we would.

When we pull up to the ballroom, we’re all having such a good time that I don’t want to leave the limo.

Dom helps me out of the limo, and we head inside.

The place has gorgeous hardwood floors and a high, vaulted ceiling. Wall sconces give off a soft, white glow. A stage set up at the front holds a DJ booth playing music. In front of him is the makeshift dance floor. Round tables spread throughout the rest of the room. Each table has half-black and half-white tablecloths, and the seat coverings alternate between white and black.

We find a table to sit at, and Dom takes the chair on one side of me, with Mav on my other side. Disposable cameras on the table invite people to take pictures of the dance.

As more people arrive, they come up to the table to say hello to the guys.

I search the room for Luke. He said he'd sit with us. I find him in a corner of the room, talking to some guys. Our eyes meet, and he winks.

When the principal, Ms. Web, steps out on the stage to ask everyone to sit for dinner to be served, Luke walks over and takes a seat beside Nick.

Hannah glares at us throughout the entire meal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A waitress takes our dinner dishes away as the DJ turns up the volume and switches to dance music.

People move toward the dance floor. I recognize the first song and move with the beat, singing along with Paige. I dance in my room all the time, but I don't think I'm very good. When my favorite song comes on, I blame the champagne for not being able to sit still.

Luke holds his hand out.

I take it, and we head to the dance floor, where Luke pulls me against him and starts moving.

Holy shit, can he dance. I close my eyes and lose myself in the beat.

Another set of hands grip my waist, and Mav breathes against my neck, "Fuck, you look so hot dancing up here."

The three of us dance until a slow song comes on, and Luke pulls me into his arms. "Get lost, Mav."

"Next one is mine," Mav says before he slips away.

As Luke dances me around, I glance at Hannah's table. "Your date doesn't look too happy. Shame on you."

"I don't care." His arms tighten around me. "She bitched the entire way here. She asked me what I thought of her dress, and when I told her it's not a dress, it's shorts with a waist cape, she got pissed off. Please never ask me to do anything with her again. I don't know what I ever saw in her."

I snicker. “Sorry, I’ll never again make you do something like this. For some reason, I got it in my head that, if I was nice to her, maybe she’d be nice back.”

I narrow my eyes at the table again. Hannah has her regular group around her, and I recognize a few of the guys. “Are those the Lancaster wolves?”

“Yeah, that’s also why I refused to sit with her.” Luke spins me away. “Her friends brought the Wolves as dates. They moved to the next best thing when we stopped dating them.”

I remember Maddie saying something about that. I hope there won’t be any fighting.

For the next few hours, I’m on and off the dance with one of the guys. I even get Cin to come out and dance with Paige and me. It takes a lot of begging, but I even convince Dom to slow dance with me.

Ms. Web moves to the stage once more, stopping the music. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to this year’s senior Black & White Ball. As with every year, we’re going to name the King and Queen of the ball and their court. If you could please take your seats.”

Every girl sits up straighter in their chairs, and Cin whispers in my ear as we head back, “This is what I hate about these things.”

I nod with wholehearted agreement.

“Jenna Chase and Camden Wright are the fifth runners-up for Princess and Prince,” Ms. Web announces.

The Barbie Squad table lets out high-pitched squeals. Jenna fans herself as she walks up on stage. Everyone claps politely except for us. We just sit there, bored with this whole part of the dance.

The secretary runs out on stage, saying something to Ms. Web.

The principal returns to the microphone. “Oh, I’m sorry, Camden couldn’t come tonight.”

Liv and Jake win fourth runner-up, which means Maddie's next in line. She sits up straighter and puts on a big smile, poised to get up when her name is called.

"The third runners-up are Paige Mitchell and Sam Tucker!" Ms. Web says in a surprised voice.

All eyes fall on Paige.

"What?" The color drains out of her face.

"Go, Paige, you made the third runner-up." I smile, overjoyed that she got chosen.

Our table stands and claps as Sam pulls Paige's chair out and ushers her to the stage. She takes the flowers and the sash.

"The final runner-up is..." The DJ does a drum roll.

In my head, I hear Ms. Web say Hannah's name, but I feel all eyes on me. Everyone at our table stands again.

I glance up. Oh, no way. Nope, not going up there. My name wasn't even on the damn ballot. There has to be a mistake. Those girls have been campaigning for months, handing out shit almost daily. How the hell did I win first runner-up?

Luke smiles and claps. "Go, baby, they called your name."

I shake my head. "Which one of you idiots put my name on the ballot?"

"Is Shelby Winters out there?" Ms. Web covers her eyes, trying to stare through the stage lights out into the crowd.

Mav drags me up and points at me. "She's here!"

I smack him. "Traitor."

Smoke rolls off Hannah's head as I stroll to the stage. As I head up the steps, everything in me tells me to run. This better not be a Carrie movie moment.

When I stop next to Ms. Web, a younger girl puts a sash on me, places a small crown on my head, and hands me a bunch of roses.

Ms. Web waves to the microphone.

Oh, hell no. I'm not making a speech.

I shake my head and step back to stand beside Paige. If I find out who put my name on the ballot, I'll kill them. Putting a dress on is one thing. Standing on a stage for everyone to criticize is another.

"And her partner is Maverick Knight," Ms. Web reads from the envelope.

"Yeah!" Mav yells, running up to the stage.

He hugs and kisses me, then moves behind me, putting his hands on my hips.

"Now, for our Queen." Ms. Web smiles widely. "This year's Queen is Carrie Dockery."

Carrie jumps up, using both hands to fan herself. Making a big deal that she won, she gets hugs from the other girls at her table before she goes to walk up to the stage.

As she passes, Hannah grabs her and hands her a piece of paper.

Carrie glances suspiciously at her.

Hannah rises to whisper something into her ear.

An evil smile forms on Carrie's face as she gives Hannah a nod.

Raising her chin, Carrie strolls to the stage, receiving her sash and a much larger crown and flowers.

"And now for the King." Mr. Web opens the envelope. "Dominic Knight."

Dom mouths profanities as he makes his way to the stage, where they place a crown on his head.

Carrie glances up at him with a sweet smile, then moves to stand in front of the mic. "Wow, I can't thank you enough for voting for me as your Queen." She touches her chest. "It's so unexpected."

"It's fixed!" a voice yells from the back.

Carrie purses her lips and squints toward the back of the room.

I can't see who says that, but it's probably true.

Carrie slowly puts her smile back on. "I have dreamed of this since I was little. Standing up here with all my friends." She glances back at the five of us. "Although, my court looked a little different." She glares at me before turning to face the crowd, all smiles again. "With all the lies that were spread about me, I wasn't sure if I'd be here tonight, and this wouldn't have happened without my besties on the cheer squad. We had some ups and downs this year, but things will return to normal soon. I want to thank the teachers at Ravenwood, Mr. Sullivan, and Ms. Web. I only have one more thing to say. This is for someone special." She unfolds the piece of paper Hannah shoved into her hand. Shooting me a sinister glance, she stumbles out, "*Obliviscatur Haec est mea.*"

What is she up to now? Dinner churns in my stomach.

Everyone starts talking.

Mav stiffens, and his hands fall from my waist as he steps back.

I turn to find out what's wrong, only to find him glaring at me with a sneer on his face.

Before I can ask him what's wrong, Ms. Web starts talking again. "Umm, that's an interesting speech, Ms. Dockery. It's customary that the King and Queen, with their court, have a dance. Let's have a good rest of the year."

The DJ plays a slow song, and we make our way down to the dance floor.

Paige grabs my flowers and hands our bouquets off to Cin.

Mav stiffly puts his arms around me, and I stare up at him in confusion. A scowl twists his face, and he barely touches me. His body language tells me he wants to be anywhere else.

What's going on? He's acting so strange. Just a few hours ago, he was all over me. Now, it's like he doesn't want to touch me.

“What’s wrong with you?” I ask.

“Nothing. I just want to get this over with,” he barks.

Since he can be temperamental, I let it slide.

I glance around at the other people dancing. Paige and Sam are dancing close, and Jenna’s dancing with whoever she brought with her. Then, my eyes land on Dom and Carrie. She has her head on his chest, and his arms are wrapped tightly around her.

What the hell is going on? Did I just enter the Twilight Zone?

The minute the music’s over, Mav mumbles, “Thank God.”

He moves away like I have some kind of disease, heading toward the cheer squad’s table. Dom strolls hand-in-hand with Carrie back to her table, where the Knight brothers start arguing with the Lancaster Wolves.

“Get out of here, North. You’re not needed, anymore.” Dom pulls Carrie closer to him.

Oh, hell, no. That’s it.

I storm over to Dom and push Carrie away from him. “What the hell is going on?”

Dom’s onyx eye scans me as his nose scrunches up. “I think it’s pretty obvious what’s going on.” He laughs and high-fives some guys.

“Spell it out for me,” I bite out.

“Fine. I can’t take your skanky ass one more minute. It was fun while it lasted, but I could never be with someone like you,” he sneers.

“Here’s your money, brother. You were right about fucking all of us.” Mav slaps a buck on the table.

I gasp, taking a step back while everyone at the table laughs.

“Hey, North, you can have Shelby now. She’s a bit used, but you’ve always licked up our sloppy seconds,” Mav declares and high-fives his friends again.

I stumble back to our table and sit down.

“What the hell just happened?” Cin demands when I flop down into my chair.

“I don’t know.” I shake my head in bewilderment. “Something’s wrong. Do you know where Luke is?”

“He said something about heading to the bathroom,” Nick says as he eyes his friends at the other table.

I make myself look at the cheer squad table. Carrie sits on Dom’s lap, appearing like they never separated. Dinner churns in my stomach. I need to get out of here.

“What was up with Carrie’s speech?” Paige asks. “The end was bizarre. Does anyone know what she said?”

Nick turns back to our table. “It was Latin. She screwed up the pronunciation, but *Obliviscatur* means ‘to forget’, and *Haec est mea* is ‘she’s mine’.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve been getting on those notes in your locker?” Cin points out.

I don’t hear her. I’m too busy watching Mav on the dance floor with about five girls grinding up against him.

“Excuse me.” I push back my chair. “I’m going to use the bathroom. Excuse me.”

“Do you want me to come?” Cin asks.

I shake my head. I need time to process everything going on.

As I near the bathroom, I hear moans. Of course, someone’s having sex in there.

I start to step past the door until a feminine voice moans Luke’s name. That sounded like Hannah, but there’s no way Luke’s in there with her after everything he said to me.

Then again, Mav said he loved me and, now, look where he is.

I push open the door to find Hannah sitting on the counter. Luke stands in front of her, his hand traveling up her inner thigh to where her legs are spread open.

I gasp in shock.

His head turns to me, his eyes cold. "Get lost."

"Luke? Why?" I stammer out.

"Why not? I got bored with you." He waves me away. "Now, leave."

Hannah viciously smiles at me. "I told you he'd get bored with you and come back to me."

Anger overwhelms me, and I take a step forward. "So, when you told me that 'you didn't want Hannah, and from the moment you saw me, it was only me.' That was all bullshit?"

He stands straighter and jerks a bit, as if I slapped him, before glaring at me with cold, cocoa-colored eyes. "It got the desired results. Now, if you're done being clingy, I'm busy."

I stumble backward until I hit the wall outside the bathroom. Bile rises from my stomach, and I cover my mouth with the back of my hand. My other hand presses over my heart to ensure it's still beating. My mind can't compute what I just saw in there. It just doesn't make any sense.

None of it.

Hannah's voice drifts through the door. "Come on, Luke, ignore what just happened. Things were just getting good."

"I can't Hannah," Luke says. "She ruined the mood, and now, my head is killing me."

I feel a bit better knowing nothing happened, but his words still hurt like hell. With a hand on the wall, I make my way back toward the ballroom. Tears run down my face. It feels like I'm walking in some kind of dream. Or more like a nightmare.

Was it really all a sick joke that I fell for? A little voice in my head keeps telling me this is what happens when you open yourself up to someone. You get hurt.

I walk stiffly back into the ballroom.

On the dance floor, Mav makes out with Maddie.

Nick's at the cheer squad table, having a conversation with Dom.

"Calm down, Nick," Dom says. "It was just a prank."

I'm just a prank? I jerk like I just got hit. I spin away and almost crumble to the ground.

Cin and Paige run over to me, and Paige grabs my arm. "What happened?"

"Luke... Hannah... in the bathroom." I swallow the bile that rises in my throat and turn to Cin. "Please, get me out of here."

She nods, and they help me leave the ballroom.

Nick catches up to us in the foyer. "I don't know what the hell is going on with them." He pushes up his glasses. "They aren't acting like themselves."

Cin gets in Nick's face. "Your friends just destroyed my best friend. I'll tell you right now, Nick, if I find out you knew about this, we are over."

He holds up his hands. "I swear, I have no idea what's going on."

"We'll see. I'm taking her home." Cin wraps an arm around my waist.

"I'm not staying. I'll get your car." He disappears through the doors at the front of the hall.

Cin and Paige take me outside. "Nick and I brought my car here this morning, in case we wanted to leave early."

I peer over at Paige. "Go back, Paige. Enjoy the ball."

She frowns. "How can I enjoy it when my best friend is hurting?"

“You’ve been looking forward to this for years. Please don’t let this ruin it. Go, have fun for me.” I smile at her.

When I glance over my shoulder, Sam stands at the entrance with his hands in his pockets. I nod toward Paige, and Sam comes over, gently pulling her away.

“Go.” I smile gently at her. “I’ll text you later.”

Nick pulls up to the curb, and Cin helps me into the back, then follows me in. Her arms slide around my shoulders, and I rest my head on her shoulder.

The whole way home, I keep running over what happened. When we left, everything was perfect. Then, on a dime, it all changed. I can’t make sense of it. My mind is mush.

Nick’s deep in thought, rubbing his chin like he does when he’s thinking hard. As he pulls into the driveway, he says, “I’ll figure this out, Shelby. I promise.”

“There might not be anything to figure out, Nick.” Tears fill my eyes once more. “They played me.”

He shakes his head, turning off the car. “I don’t believe that. They love you.”

I snort as I get out and rush into the house, heading to my room with Cin close behind.

When I get to my door, I lower my head. “Cin, you know I love you, but...”

“You want to be alone. I understand. I’ll let you be alone tonight.” She touches my back. “You know where I’ll be.”

“Thanks. Before you go, can you unzip me?” I point behind my back.

She unzips my dress, kisses my cheek, and leaves, shutting my door.

I change into a T-shirt, grab my phone, and text Cam.

Me: Are you up?

I stare at the phone, waiting for the three dots to appear, but they never do.

Letting out a deep breath, I put my phone on my nightstand and crawl into bed, where I grab a pillow and cry myself to sleep for the first time in my life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Cin throws the covers back, making me shiver as the cold air hits my body. “Come on, you’re going to eat, then we’ll work out.”

I pull the cover back up. “Go away, Cin.” I close my eyes. “I don’t feel like working out.”

“This is not you, Shelby. You don’t lie around in bed and wallow. You’re a fighter, and you don’t let things get you down.” She yanks back the sheets. “Now, get the hell up. Nick’s making you breakfast, then he’ll do some martial arts with us.”

Instead of moving, I just lie there.

The bed dips. “Look at me, Shelby.”

I open my eyes.

Cin’s right in front of me. “I understand you’re hurting. I heard you crying all night, and even though I wanted to comfort you, I left you alone. But I won’t let you sink any more than you already have. That’s not what we do. This is me paying you back for when you stormed into my place and saved me from Brenda. Don’t make me force you out, ’cause I will.” She stands up. “Let’s go.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. Why does she have to be right? This isn’t me.

As hard as it is, I get up and put on workout clothes.

Shuffling into the kitchen with Cin right behind me, I sit at the counter, where a cup of coffee already waits for me.

“Hey.” Nick slides eggs onto a plate for me.

“Hi. Thanks.” I eat some eggs and take a drink of coffee. “Have you heard anything from Cam? I texted him last night, but he didn’t reply. I’m not sure if he’s with them or not.”

“No, I haven’t,” Nick says. “Let me try now. He should be up. His dad gets up early, but remember, he could be on the track.”

While I finish my eggs and drink my coffee, he texts Cam, but Cam doesn’t text Nick back, either.

I don’t want to think that Cam, out of all of them, would do this to me, but it’s hard not to.

“So, what are we doing?” I ask to distract myself.

“Well, I thought we’d begin by going upstairs to the workout room, then go outside and do some martial arts,” Nick says. “How does that sound?”

I shrug. “Whatever.”

“Shelby, can I borrow your iPod?” Cin asks. “I’m going to run on the treadmill.”

“Sure, it’s on my desk.” I sip the last of my coffee, walk around the counter, and put my dishes in the sink.

I head upstairs and open the door to the weight room.

We have a treadmill, elliptical, and training bench with barbells of different weights, and dumbbells line the back wall. A mirror covers the main wall, so people working out can make sure they’re lifting correctly. In front of the mirror is an open area for stretching.

“All right, what do you want me to do?” I ask Nick.

“Start with two sets of ten sit-ups, pushups, and burpees,” he instructs.

“Shit, you’re trying to kill me,” I groan. I hate burpees.

He chuckles. “That’s nothing.”

Cin pops the headphones to my iPod into her ears and heads to the treadmill, turning it on and setting the pace.

As I do my sit-ups, Nick right beside me, I keep going over the last few months in my head, trying to figure out what I missed.

How did they get me to fall in love with them so hard? I trusted them. Anger throbs through me like a heartbeat. I won't let them get to me. That's what they want, and it won't work. I'm stronger than that.

Cin stops on the treadmill and pulls out the earbuds. "Girl, there's something wrong with your iPod."

"Let me hear it," Nick says.

She walks over and offers him the small device. He puts one earpiece into his ear and listens.

A strange glance passes between Cin and Nick.

"Yeah, I think it's busted. I'll get you a new one." He wraps the headphones around the iPod and gives it back to Cin. "Are you ready to go outside?"

"I'm ready." I perform my last burpee. "You better have thick pads. I need to pound shit."

Cin pats Nick's back. "You're going to be black and blue, babe."

"Shit."

Outside, Nick runs me through my moves, and we do some sparring. I end up knocking him down twice before he shows Cin and me some moves we don't know.

By the time we finish, I feel more like myself.

We decide to head to the showers, then meet in the living room for movies and pizza.

Once we all settle in the living room, I ask, "Is Hannah here?"

"No, she's spending the weekend with Carrie." Nick shifts uncomfortably. "Um... I want to let you know I'm on your side. I can't believe this was all some sick joke. That's not them. Yeah, they can be cold-hearted sometimes, but my gut

tells me there's something more to this." He reaches under his glasses and scratches his nose.

"I know they're your best friends, and you're the twins' guard," I tell him. "I don't expect you to stop being their friends or working with them. But what they did is unforgivable. They won't get close to me ever again."

"I understand, but if they continue being assholes, I'll stop being their friend." Nick shakes his head. "I won't stand for that shit."

"Okay, no more of this shit. Let's watch this movie," Cin states.

Monday morning comes too fast, and I'm up before my alarm goes off.

I head into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. My stomach's too upset for food, but coffee is always a must.

"Hi, honey. How was the ball?" Mom asks excitedly as she hands me a cup over the counter. "Did you have a good time?"

"No, Mom, the complete opposite. The boys turned on me. I guess it was all some cruel joke for them." I take a sip of my coffee.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry, but are you sure?" The corner of her eyes crinkle. "They seemed really into you."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure." Stomach souring, I set my cup on the counter. "Dom kissed his ex, Carrie, and I found Luke going at it with Hannah in the bathroom."

"My Hannah?" Her voice raises.

"Yep. *Your* Hannah," I sneer.

I can't believe she's so shocked. Her *Hannah! What about me? I'm her daughter.*

She walks around the counter and hugs me. "Why didn't you call me? I would've come home."

Yeah, right, I snort to myself. That's why you're always staying in the city with Peter, instead of being here with me. You care so much.

“Cin took care of me, then Nick let me beat the shit out of him.” I smile, remembering knocking him down.

“And I still hurt from it,” Nick says, walking into the kitchen.

I chuckle. “You’re the one who came up with the idea. Not me.”

“Well, remind me not to have any more smart ideas.” He twists his upper body and groans.

I hop off my stool. “Quit groaning and let’s get to school.”

Mom smiles sadly. “Honey, if you need me to pick you up, just let me know, okay?”

“Thanks, Mom, but I’m stronger than you think.”

When Nick pulls into the school parking lot, not seeing the guys waiting for me hurts more than I expected. But seeing them leaning against the Jeep with the Barbie Squad feels like another knife in the back.

“Before you go, I want you to know those guys are not the guys I grew up with.” Nick touches my leg. “I don’t know what happened to them, but I know they cared for you. I know it’s hard right now, but think back to everything they said to you.”

“Their actions overrule that right now,” I say, peering over at them.

Nick and I get out of the truck and head into school, where we’re quickly stopped by Luke’s bellow.

“Hey, Tate, don’t you say ‘Hi’ to your friends anymore?” Luke takes a step toward him with his arms out.

Nick turns around. “It depends on whether or not my friends are still being assholes.”

As Dom, Mav, and Luke step closer, something about their eyes catches my attention. I can’t explain it, but their eyes look off. Something about their behavior kept nagging at me all weekend.

“This isn’t the first time we dumped some easy lay before, Nick. You never acted like this before.” Mav gives a bitter laugh.

Nick walks closer to the guys. “Shelby wasn’t some easy lay to you four. I know you better than anyone, and you all loved her. You gave up your virginity for her, Luke. Mav, you told her about your OD and were open with her about your relationship with Cam. And you, Dom, for the first time, you started opening up.”

Dom stares at me like he’s seeing me for the first time while Luke shakes slightly, and Mav grabs his head while moaning.

Mav’s in pain.

Shit, they all seem to be in pain.

I want to run to them and offer comfort, but they’re not mine anymore.

Nick steps closer. “What’s wrong with you guys? You’re not acting like yourself.”

The Barbie Squad comes running up, and Carrie wraps her arms around Dom’s arm, trying to pull him back toward the Jeep. Maddie’s doing the same with Mav, but he keeps smacking her away.

“Where’s my sister, Carrie?” Nick questions, glaring at Carrie.

“How should I know? I was a little busy over the weekend with this big guy.” She clings tighter to Dom, lust glittering in her eyes.

I gag. Dom screwed her. I’m going to be sick. I turn away and head into the school.

“How could you do that to Shelby, Dom?” Nick seethes. “You told me you loved her.”

“I didn’t,” Dom protests.

Carrie gasps. “Don’t lie, big guy. We did it all night long. Don’t you remember?”

Unable to listen to anymore, I shove through the front door into the crowded hall.

I guess the whole school now knows I’m no longer with the Knights. Students jeer and shove me the entire way to my locker.

I rest my forehead against the cool metal, taking a deep breath. If there’s a note in there, I’m going to lose it.

Stepping back, I open my locker and let out the breath I didn’t know I was holding.

Nothing, thank fuck!

I take what I need, then head to my first class, waving at Paige. I texted her a couple of times over the weekend, keeping her up to date.

She hurries over to me. “How are you? Can I do anything?”

“Hanging on. There’s nothing you can help with right now, but thanks for asking.” I give her my best smile.

I take my usual seat. How am I going to deal with Dom and Mav sitting beside me?

My phone buzzes. I pull it out, hoping it’s Cam, but it’s my cousin instead.

Cin: You got this!

I smile. I don’t know what I’d do without her.

Dom and Mav stroll in and sit where they usually do, Mav on my right and Dom behind me, and I can feel his eyes on me.

Dom leans in. “How did you get that phone? It’s not out yet.”

I swivel in my seat, my eyebrow raised. “How do you think, Dom?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you stole it. There’s been a lot of residential break-ins recently.” He leans back in his seat, spreading his leg out.

“No, you gave it to her, and the next day she slammed it against your chest, saying she wasn’t a charity case and something about attachments.” Mav looks confused while rubbing his temple, almost as if recalling a memory he forgot, even though we all know the truth. “Damn, my head hurts.”

I stare at him in confusion. It’s like he doesn’t remember it. *What the...?* We don’t get a chance to talk about it more because the teacher starts his lesson.

When the bell rings, I bolt out the door, heading as quickly as I can to my next class, forgetting until I get there that I’ll have the pleasure of being in Luke’s and Hannah’s presence.

Upon entering class, I scrub my face. This is harder than I thought.

Luke’s talking to some guys when I sit behind him. Hannah isn’t in class yet. Where is she? Shouldn’t she be hanging all over him?

Right before the bell rings, Luke turns around and tilts his head, his eyes roaming my face.

I sit back and cross my arms. “What do you want, Luke?”

“Was Nick lying?” he demands.

I lean back in the seat. “About you having sex for the first time with me?”

“Shh, not so loud.” He looks around, shocked I answered him so honestly.

I cock an eyebrow up. “Don’t you remember?”

“It’s fuzzy.” He scratches his face.

I lean in. “What’s the last memory that’s clear?”

He stiffens. “If you don’t want to answer the question, just say so. You don’t have to be such a bitch.” He turns back around.

My mouth falls open. What the hell just happened? And they say *girls* are moody.

When I get to chem class, Nick’s furiously typing away on his phone. He glances up when I sit down.

“Have you seen Hannah since the ball?” He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes.

“No, not that I’d want to. Why?”

He puts his glasses back on. “She’s not here today, and nobody seems to know where she is.”

I pat his back. “I wouldn’t worry too much, Nick. She could be off shopping somewhere.”

He frowns. “Without her friends?”

That *would* be weird. They do everything together. While Carrie said she was with Dom and not Hannah this weekend, that doesn’t mean Hannah wasn’t at her place.

“Does your dad know?” I ask.

Nick’s brows scrunch in concern. “He texted me when he got the call from school saying she’s not here.”

“I wouldn’t worry. I’m sure she’s fine.” I rub his back.

Chemistry passes too quickly for my liking.

Now, I just have to figure out what I’m going to do for lunch. I’ve been sitting with the guys, but there’s no way that’s still possible with how they’ve been acting.

When Nick and I walk into the cafeteria, the guys are already at the table, and the Barbie Squad is hanging all over them. I scan the room for Paige and Sam, finding them at our old table.

When we join them, I look at Sam and jerk my head toward where his teammates sit. “Why aren’t you sitting with them?”

“The girls wouldn’t let Paige sit there, and I came with her when the guys didn’t stop them. What’s up with them? They’re not acting like themselves,” Sam says, seeming truly confused.

Nick shakes his head. “We don’t know. I have a question for you two. After we left the ball, did anything happen?”

“You mean other than what already did?” Paige questions, tilting her head.

“Yes. Hannah’s MIA.” I rest my arms on the table.

“Do you know who she left with?” Nick studies them.

“No. Sorry, dude.” Sam drapes his arm over the back of Paige’s chair.

“Wait, I forgot she and Carrie had a tiff at the table. I don’t know what it was about, but it got pretty heated. Then, Hannah stormed out of the room.” Paige tilts her head. “Come to think of it, I don’t remember seeing her after that.”

“Well, it appears I need to talk to my friends.” Nick stands and straightens his shirt.

I exhale. “I’ll walk with you. I need to get something to eat.”

I walk beside Nick until he gets to the table, then I continue on.

When I return with a burger and fries, I refuse to look over at their table.

Taking my seat beside Paige, I see her and Sam staring intently at the boys’ table. Dipping a fry in ketchup, I check their table as I put it in my mouth.

Nick stands with both hands flat on the table, his face red.

“What’s going on?” I question.

“Not sure, but I don’t remember ever seeing Nick that red before,” Sam replies.

“Sam, you’ve known them longer. Have you ever seen them act like this before?” I ask before taking a bite of my burger.

“You mean what they did to you? No, never. The only one that ever got serious with a girl is Dom, and that was with Carrie. Then, she went and blew that out of the water. They’ve always been upfront with girls. I don’t know what happened at the ball, but those aren’t the guys I grew up with.” He thumbs toward the guys. “Yeah, they can be dicks sometimes, but something isn’t right.”

I swallow, my bite of burger turning to lead in my stomach. “I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe they were playing all of us, Sam.”

“If you’re going to continue being asses, then I don’t want to be friends with you anymore!” Nick yells as he storms back toward us.

“You better make sure, Nick. You know how much weight our name carries.” Mav leans back in the chair, folding his arms behind his head and looking smug.

Nick stops and swings back around. “Are you threatening me, Knight?”

Mav shrugs.

“Go. I always thought you were a pussy, anyway,” Dom says, leaning back and crossing his arm over his chest.

Nick clenches his fists at his sides, his lips thinning, and I can see his jaw working from here. When he squints at Dom, I swear and jump up. Nick’s going to hit Dom. I hear Sam moving right behind me.

I dart in front of Nick and put my hands on Nick’s arms, feeling him shaking from anger. “You don’t want to do this.”

Dom laughs. “Look, he even has a slut to come and save him.”

My spine stiffens at his words, and Nick lurches forward. I nod for Sam to get him out of here. As Sam wrestles him out of the cafeteria, I turn and shoot daggers at Dom.

“Are you for real?” I demand. “You five have been friends for years! He would die for you! You’re the one who suggested that Frank train him as your guard.”

Dom glances away, staring at the floor.

Rage surges through me. “What’s going on with you? Was anything real, or is it all a hoax, Grizzly? Which one is real?”

At the word Grizzly, his eyes flash up to me. If I weren’t staring so hard at him, I would have missed the way his pupils dilated before his eyes go back to their normal onyx color, not appearing so cold and mean now.

He starts to stand, but Carrie’s sitting on his lap.

She clings to him, desperately trying to get him to look at her, but his eyes are on me.

We stare at each other until Carrie kisses him, or at least tries to, but Dom turns his head away, pain in his eyes.

“Gee, Carrie, I’d think you’d be more concerned that your best friend is missing.” I shake my head. “Some friend you are.”

She turns toward me. “Oh, shut up, you slut. You’re just jealous that we got the guys back. We proved that you meant nothing to them.”

Pretending her statement doesn’t land so hard, I snort. “You can have them.”

I turn my back on the guys and leave to search for Nick.

I stop outside the closest men’s bathroom, thinking that might be where Sam took him.

A guy comes out, and I ask, “Hey, is Nick in there?”

“No,” he says.

I continue to search the school but can’t find them before the bell for the end of lunch rings.

The rest of the day continues on like the first half, with tons of people whispering and pointing at me, calling me every name in the book, and shoving me while I walk down the halls.

When the final bell rings, signaling the day, I've never been so happy.

Grabbing what I need from my locker, I shut it and head down the hall.

Out of nowhere, a shoulder shoves me into a locker, followed by a leg sweep.

I go down hard, hitting my head on the floor.

Someone quickly jumps on my stomach, pinning my arms with their knees.

Once the stars clear from my eye, I see Carrie straddling my chest, and from the feel of it, someone else pins my legs.

"Get off me, you bitch." Bucking my hips, I try to dislodge her, but she's not moving.

"Get her to stop moving so much, Carrie," Jenna says. "She's wiggly."

Carrie slaps me across the face, and sharp pain flares in my cheek. The bitch spun all her rings inward, so they do more damage than a bare hand.

Damn, that hurts.

She grips a clump of my hair, forcing me to look at her. "You need to shut up and listen. You lost. They don't want you anymore. Leave them alone, or I'll make your life hell."

"I'm already in hell, so why don't you go fuck yourself?" I hiss. "Why are you so adamant that I leave them alone? Now, you have me curious."

"So, we'll have to do this the hard way." An evil smile spreads across Carrie's face. "Do it, Jenna."

Jenna gets off my leg, stands up, and kicks my side, keeping at it, and pain bursts through me.

“Ugh, don’t kick me, you stupid idiot!” Carrie complains when Jenna accidentally kicks her.

Jenna’s kicks aren’t all that strong, but she’s getting a couple of shots in the same place.

“Enough,” Carrie says. “Stay away, or next time, it will be worse.”

She slams my head down on the floor, then gets off me while I’m dazed. They each kick me a couple more times before adjusting their clothes and hair and leaving.

Eyes closing, I stay on the cold floor as I struggle to get my breath back.

I’m starting to believe Nick. There’s something fishy here. They had no reason to jump me like that, unless they’re afraid of something.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I open my eyes to find Nick looking down at me where I still lay on the floor.

Huh. I guess I stayed down a little longer than I thought. Maybe I have a concussion.

He helps me up, looking at me with concern. “What the hell happened?”

A wave of dizziness rushes me. Okay, yeah, definitely a concussion.

I touch the back of my head and flinch. “Ow. Carrie and Jenna snuck up and attacked me.”

“How the hell did they manage that?” he demands in disbelief. “They wear high heels every damn day of the week.”

I know why he’s asking. I’m a damn brown belt! How could I let them sneak up on me?

Rubbing the back of my head, I sigh, “I wasn’t paying attention.”

As I tell him how she got the drop on me, I feel like a fool. He’s right; I should have heard them coming.

As his eyes skim over me, he quickly shakes his head. “Well, you’re mostly fine, just bruised once again. I swear, my dad is going to kill me one of these days. If you don’t give me a stroke first,” He murmurs the last part.

He’s right. I don’t think I even got rid of the last set of bruises. Walking out to his truck, he helps me up into the cab

before we head home.

“I still have some of Ava’s cream in my room,” he says as he parks in the driveway.

As we step through the door, Peter calls us into the living room.

Mom and Cin are sitting on the couch, but Mom bursts to her feet as soon as she sees me.

“Shelby, what happened now?” Mom huffs as she heads over to me.

When she goes to touch my cheek, I pull away. “Carrie jumped me.”

“I’ll go get you some ice,” Mom says in exasperation.

“What’s going on?” Nick looks at his dad. “Is this about Hannah?”

“Yes, Nick, we need you to call your friends to go out and search for her.” Peter runs his finger through his hair. It’s so messy it appears he’s been doing that all day.

Nick’s head falls. “I can’t do that, Dad. I’m sorry.”

“Why not? You help them enough. Why can’t they help us?” he scolds.

Mom returns, hands me an icepack, then touches Peter’s arm. “Calm down. I don’t think Nick meant he wouldn’t. Just that he can’t.” She turns and looks at me, quirking her eyebrow. “Shelby, does this have something to do with them breaking up with you?”

“Sort of. They went off on Nick when he defended me. And he told them he wants nothing to do with them until they stop acting like assholes.” I look down while shrugging.

Peter steps away from Mom while she just sighs. He puts his hand on Nick’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Son. We’ll figure it out.”

“Why aren’t the police jumping all over this?” I question, sitting beside Cin.

“We have to wait twenty-four hours for her to be officially missing,” Mom replies, seeming a little upset with me.

“That’s such bullshit!” I exclaim.

“All right, let’s think logically about this.” Nick sits on the floor near the coffee table, digging through his book bag until he finds a notebook. He opens it to a blank page.

Mom sits on the chair while Peter paces.

“The last place anyone saw her was the ball. You saw her in the bathroom with Luke,” Nick states while glancing at me.

I shift the ice pack, wincing both from the physical and emotional pain. “Yeah, thanks for reminding me.”

“Sorry.” He shrugs. “I have to. Do we know if anyone else saw her after that?”

“Yeah, Paige mentioned at lunch that, after we left, Luke came back to the dance, quickly followed by Hannah, then she and Carrie started arguing. She said Hannah stormed out, and she didn’t see her again after that.”

Nick points the pen at me. “Okay, so she had to get a ride from someone, since Luke was still there. Dad, did she call you?”

Peter goes through his phone. “No, she didn’t. Nor did she text.”

“She didn’t call me, either,” Mom says.

“She told me she’d be staying at Carrie’s house all weekend,” Peter states.

Nick just shakes his head. “When we asked Carrie, she said she didn’t know where Hannah was because she was, ‘Too busy with Dom’,” he mumbles.

I cringe at the reminder.

“Let me call Carrie’s parents.” Peter turns and walks toward the kitchen.

Sure her parents weren’t even home that night, I hold in my snort.

“Nick, can’t you hack her phone?” Cin asks. “Find a signal or something?”

“I already tried to ping her phone. Its last known location is at school. Not to mention it’s turned off,” Nick says.

“Maybe Peter could call the phone company and get her last number dialed?” I suggest.

Peter returns to the living room. “Mrs. Dockery didn’t get a call from her, and she says they weren’t even there that night, but in the city at a show.”

“Dad, call the phone company and get the last number she called,” Nick states.

Peter looks at him for a second before nodding, turning, and heading back to the kitchen.

When I give Nick a look, he shrugs. “It saves me time digging if he can get it.”

“Cameras!” Cin sits up straighter. “Nick, there were cameras at Stones! Can you get into them?”

“Shit! Why didn’t I think of that?” He gets up, goes over to Cin, and pulls her into a passionate kiss. “You’re a genius. I’ll be in my room.”

He bolts upstairs.

Mom and I stare at Cin, who blushes.

“What?” She leans back on the couch.

I chuckle. “You genius, you,” I tease her.

“Shelby, do you think Paige might help us search for her?” Mom suggests.

“Even though Hannah’s been a major bully to Paige, yeah, she will. I’ll call her.” I head to my room to make the call.

When I tell Paige what’s happening, she says that she and Sam will be over to help as soon as possible.

That’s what good friends are. They’ll do anything for you.

Returning to the living room, I ask, “Do either of you want something to drink?”

Mom and Cin both ask for water, and I head into the kitchen, where Peter is yelling at someone on the phone. He can be a force of nature when he wants to be.

I fill glasses with water and grab a pop from the fridge for myself. I also get some aspirin from the drawer in the island. My head and side are killing me.

Going back into the living room, I give mom and Cin their waters.

Sitting back down, I open my bottle of Dr. Pepper and throw the two small pills into my mouth, swallowing them with a sip of pop.

When I look up, I see Mom eyeing me.

“Really, Mom?” I demand. “It’s just aspirin.”

I’m the daughter of a drug addict. Does she really think I’d take anything stronger? Especially after... I shake myself out of that thought.

She just rolls her eyes.

Peter returns, running his hand through his hair before pushing up his glasses. “Where’s Nick?”

“Cin remembered there were cameras at Stone’s, so he’s looking into that,” I tell him.

I don’t want to say that he’s hacking Stone’s system. I’m not sure if Peter knows everything that Nick does.

“Oh, good thinking, Cindy. I got the number she last called. They said it’s to a rideshare company. I’m going to call them now.” He goes back into the kitchen.

“Paige and Sam said they’d help. They should be here shortly,” I call after him.

“I guess I better make something to eat.” Mom gets up and heads into the kitchen, too.

I stand, grab Nick’s notebook off the coffee table, and sit down beside Cin, so we can start working on the places to search for Hannah. We have a good list started when the doorbell rings.

Cin jumps up to let Paige and Sam in.

“Thanks for coming, guys. I know Hannah has never been very nice to you, but Nick and Peter are thankful you’re here. Please, take a seat anywhere. We’re just trying to think of places where she might be.” I put the ice pack back on my cheek.

“Yes, what Shelby said.” Peter comes back in from the kitchen. “It shows the kind of people you are. Thank you.”

“Anytime, Mr. Tate,” Sam says.

Paige looks at my face and frowns as she sits on the couch beside Cin. “Shelby, what happened now?”

“Carrie and Jenna jumped me after school. Told me to stay away from the guys.” I wave it away. “That’s not important.”

Sam sits on the floor beside Paige.

“What did the rideshare company say, Peter?” Mom asks, walking back into the room. “Hi, Paige, Sam. I just ordered a couple of large pizzas. They should be here soon.”

“They said Hannah ordered a car at 11:00 pm. The car arrived at 11:20 pm and waited five minutes before the driver sent her a text saying he was leaving.” Worry creases his brow. “She never showed.”

“I guess it’s good I have a picture of the car she got into,” Nick runs back downstairs, placing several photos on the table.

Peter points to the photos. “How did you get these?”

Nick shakes his head. “Don’t ask.”

I pick up the photo, glancing at it. The driver is obscured. All I can make out are dark clothes and a hat. But I can clearly see Hannah getting in the back seat.

“This one has the license plate.” Same points to a different picture. “That should help.”

Hope flares in Peter’s eyes, but Nick shakes his head sadly. “I had it run already. The car was reported stolen an hour after that was taken.”

Peter furrows his eyebrows in suspicion.

“Knight’s connections. They might be acting like assholes, but that doesn’t mean I can’t use my connections,” Nick explains.

Peter pats his son on the back.

“Okay, so we know she got in this... What kind of car is this?” Peter peers closer at one of the pictures while squinting his eyes.

“Chevy Impala,” Cin and I both say.

When everyone glances at us, I just shrug.

Really, why so surprised? We know cars.

The doorbell rings, and Peter goes to pay for the food while mom heads to the kitchen, coming back with plates and napkins.

As we munch down on pizza and breadsticks, we go over the list that Cin and I worked on.

Peter wants to talk to Carrie and her parents, since Hannah was supposed to spend the night there. I volunteer to talk to Luke. Nick wants to head over to Knights’ place to get some items there, so he says he’ll speak to them. We give Paige and Sam some of the places and divide up the rest.

“It shouldn’t take too long with six of us. I’m going to go. Please be safe, all of you, and keep in contact,” Peter says.

He gives Mom a kiss before leaving.

I look around. “Since I’m riding my bike, I’m going to change into something warmer.”

“You can take Hannah’s BMW,” Nick says.

“No, but thanks anyway.” I want the time to think over everything. Not to mention it feels intrusive driving her car around while she’s missing.

Plus, she threatened me if I ever drove it.

It’s turning colder out, but it’s not winter yet, so I put on yoga pants under my jeans before pulling on my sweater.

Nothing like layers to keep a girl warm.

Nick knocks on my door before walking in and giving me one of his Polar Seal heated zip-up tops. “If you hit the button on the arm, it will activate the two heaters, one on the upper back and one on the lower back.”

“Thank you.” I pull it over my head.

Man, whoever thought of this is a genius.

“Stay warm and be safe,” he says before leaving.

Pulling on my boots and grabbing the rest of my riding gear, I head down to the garage.

When I step inside, the tarp is off my bike, and Cin is working on it.

“I want to check it before you ride. With everything that’s happened, it’s better safe than sorry,” she explains. “Go talk to Luke. I should be done by then.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I run back inside and grab the photo with the car’s picture before walking outside and over to Luke’s house.

When I reach the driveway, I stop to stare up at Luke’s two-story house. My pulse races, and my palms sweat with nerves. Letting out a breath, I head up the stairs and knock loudly.

Clara opens the door with Henry behind her. “Shelby, please come in.” She hugs me.

“Hi, Clara and Henry.” I shift uncomfortably. “I’m sorry to interrupt your night, but I need to talk to Luke. Is he around?”

“Is everything all right?” Henry asks. His son looks so much like him.

“Unfortunately, no. Hannah’s missing.” I rock on my heels.

Clara gasps, her hand flying to her chest. “I didn’t really like that girl, always thought she was selfish, but I would never wish her harm.”

Henry looks at me with concern. “Do you think Luke has something to do with it?”

“Oh, no, not at all.” I show them the picture. “We know she called for a rideshare from one of those companies, but she got into this car.” I point out the photo. “We found out that this isn’t a rideshare car. This car was stolen an hour before picking her up. We’re asking if anyone saw this car around here.”

Henry takes the photo. “Don’t recognize it, sorry. Why didn’t Peter call the police?”

“He did, but you have to wait twenty-four hours to file a missing person report,” I explain. “We’re trying to get a jump on it.”

“I wish you luck, dear. Luke’s in his room listening to music. That’s all he does now.” Clara sniffles and starts crying. “I’m so worried I’m going to lose him, too.”

I feel so bad for her. The toll this is having on her shows in how pale she is. She’s lost weight and has bags under her eye.

I touch her shoulder. “Clara, you won’t lose him. Something weird is going on with those guys, but Nick and I will figure it out,” I say with conviction. “We just need to find Hannah first.”

She sniffs. “Yes, of course, head on up.”

I thank her before running up the steps, knock on Luke’s door, and open it before he can get up. He lies on his bed with earphones in.

When he sees me standing in his doorway, he takes one earbud out and swings his feet onto the floor. “What do you want? Did my mom let you in?”

The music coming from his iPod sounds strange, and I remember Cin saying my iPod was broken because the music that was playing sounded weird. Driven by instinct, I grab the other earbud out of his ear and turn off the iPod.

“What the hell are you doing?” He stands, advancing on me.

Shoving the iPod into my pocket, I press my hand on his chest. “Calm down. Something’s wrong with it.”

“Give it back to me now, Shelby,” he demands. “It’s not broken.”

When he tries to grab it out of my pocket, I back up out of his way, but he catches my upper arm, squeezing hard.

I fight him off. “Luke, I don’t want to hurt you. Let me go.”

He’s not listening to me, though, so I center myself, open my palm, and hit him squarely in the chest. He stumbles back far enough that his knees hit the bed, and he falls onto it.

I jump on him and straddle him, taking his wrist and bending it back. “Enough, Luke.”

He tries to get me off, but the more he tries, the more I bend his wrist. I know this has to hurt badly. I could very well snap his wrist with enough force.

“Luke, calm down, please. I just need to ask you something, then I’ll leave,” I say in a very calm voice.

He calms down, and his pupils quickly dilate before going back to normal.

“Hannah’s missing,” I rush out while he’s listening. “The last time anyone saw her was at the ball. She called a rideshare company to pick her up. The company said she was a no-show, but a tan Impala picked her up from in front of Stone’s. I’d like to show you a picture and see if you recognize it. I’m going to release your hand and get off you.”

When he stays still, I let go of his hand and jump off him.

He sits up, rubbing his wrist.

I pull the picture out of my pocket and hold it up. “Do you recognize this car?”

He glances at me, then at the photo, and he takes the picture. “No, never seen it before.” He hands it back to me. “Now, give me back my iPod.”

“I will, but I want Nick to look at it first. He said mine was acting the same way, and he could fix it.” I back up, not taking my eyes off Luke.

Reaching the stairs, I turn, running down them.

Clara and Henry aren't at the door, so I yell goodbye before heading back home.

When I get to the garage, I hand Cin the iPod and tell her what happened.

“I'll take care of it,” she says and nods at Serenity. “She's ready to ride.” Something in the way she says it sounds off, but before I can question it, she hugs me. “Be safe.”

“You, too,” I tell her.

She goes to her Crosstrek, and I start up Serenity.

I let Cin leave first, then take off.

We search until most places are closing.

Around ten, Nick tells Paige and Sam to go home. Nick, Cin, and I search until well past midnight, searching the streets for any sign of her.

When my legs are numb, I finally give up. At least my upper half is warm and toasty. I have to get myself one of these jackets.

Back home, Mom shocks me when she has a steamy bath ready for me.

“The police will be here at nine,” she tells me. “I already left the school a message that you'll be late tomorrow. Take a long soak, then try to get some sleep.”

I have a feeling sleep is going to be impossible. Too many things are running through my head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The police officers show up earlier than they're expected, reading us the riot act for going out searching for Hannah ourselves.

Peter sits there, sipping his coffee, and politely asks, "What did you expect me to do? Just sit here and wait? My daughter is missing, and if the police weren't going to do anything for twenty-four hours, I certainly wouldn't sit on my ass and do nothing."

Dang, Peter, you tell them!

They question Nick about how he got all the information he found. He hands them a card and tells them to contact the person listed there, and they'll explain everything.

He refuses to answer any question other than that.

For the next twenty minutes, the police grill us for any information.

Nick finally gets pissed. "Listen, for the last twenty minutes, you've kept asking the same four questions, ten different ways, and the answers haven't changed, nor will they. If you call that number, you will find out how I got the photo. I did everything legally. My sister is out there, with who the hell knows who, and you're wasting time."

A knock sounds on the door.

"I'll get it," Nick volunteers. "I need to cool off, anyway."

Nick gets up, practically stomping to the door.

Two large guys dressed in black camo pants and black Henleys stand at the door, along with Frank and a guy wearing a costly gray suit.

The guy with the suit strolls into the room like he owns the place. “Officer, my name is Mr. Zieglar. I believe you have all the information that you need to start this case. Also, Mr. Tate hired Mr. Acker and Mr. Brady to investigate the case. We thank you for all your time and hard work. I’m sure we’ll be in contact soon.”

Shocked, I stand frozen as Mr. Zieglar somehow directs the two officers out the door before he finishes his speech. He snags the card that Nick gave the officers.

Snickering, Nick shuts the door and heads over to Frank. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

Peter stands glaring at the newcomers. “Nick, please tell me what the hell is going on. Why did they shove the police out the door?”

“Mr. Tate, my name is Mr. Zieglar,” the suit man says. “I’m the personal attorney for Mr. Knight. Frank went to Mr. Knight and asked for his team to look into your daughter’s kidnapping.”

Peter takes off his glass and runs his hand down his face. “I’m confused.”

Frank stares at Nick. “You never told him?”

Wide-eyed, Nick shakes his head.

“Oh, boy,” Frank murmurs.

“Dad, this is Frank,” Nick introduces. “He works with the Knights as a personal guard. He’s a good friend of mine.”

Peter shakes his hand and introduces my mom.

“Since the guys are being difficult,” Nick continued, “I asked Frank for help.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Frank mummurs, although I don’t think anyone was supposed to hear him.

“Dad, why don’t you sit down?” Nick ushers Peter and Mom back to the couch.

“Sir, when Nick came to ask for my advice, I knew I needed to do more, so I asked Mr. Knight for two of our guys to help find your daughter. Those bumbling fools in the police department wouldn’t be able to find their noses if they tried.” Frank hooks a thumb toward the door that the officers just left through.

Frank walks to the blond guy. “This is Aaron. He’s our best tracker.” He touches the shoulder of the black-haired guy. “This is Beau. He’s our technical specialist. Between these two, we’ll find your daughter.”

Nick walks over to his father and sits on the coffee table in front of him. “Dad, I trust these guys. They’ll find Hannah. Please trust me.”

“All right, Nick.” He taps his son’s knee.

“There’s just the small thing of a non-disclosure agreement for Mr. Knight’s protection. I’m sure you understand.” Mr. Ziegler reaches inside his suit jacket and pulls out a piece of paper.

Peter takes the paper, reads it, then signs at the bottom.

Frank glances at the rest of us. “You all need to sign one, too.”

“Mr. Tate, these are our personal numbers. We’re going to go over everything and dig some more. We’ll be in touch soon.” Aaron hands them some numbers.

Once all that is done, Frank glances around at all of us. “Good to see you again, Shelby. And you, Cindy.” Frank smiles.

I smile back. I’ve only met Frank a couple of times, but he seems like a nice guy.

“Dad, I’m going to walk Frank out,” Nick says.

His dad just waves his hand distractedly.

“Hey, Frank, thanks.” Nicks slaps Frank’s back, walking them out the door.

“Anything for you, Nick. Have you found out anything about what the hell is going on with the boys?” Frank asks, seeming distressed.

Nick rubs the back of his neck. “I have a few ideas but haven’t had time to look into them.”

“I understand. If you need any more resources, let me know. We’ll keep in touch,” Frank says, smiling.

Peter sits back down on the couch, looking lost. He started out so confident.

He peers at Mom sadly. “Did I do the right thing by letting them take over?”

“I think you did,” I answer before she can. Mom glares over at me as I continue, “The police seemed to think Hannah’s just being difficult and not missing. These guys will use what we found and move on. Your son’s right.”

“Thank you, Shelby. It seems that the police did, indeed, feel that way. They were seriously pissing me off.” He reached over, taking Mom’s hand in his.

She relaxes at his touch.

Nick comes back in and glances at Peter. “We’ll find her, Dad. Those guys are the best. Shelby and I better get to school. It’s getting late.”

“Why don’t you take the day off?” Peter says.

“No, I need to go.” Nick brushes a strand of hair back from his furrowed forehead. “I can ask people if they noticed anything. There’s a better chance of kids answering us than a stranger.”

Peter stands and hugs him. “You’re a good son, and I love you. I don’t honestly think I tell you that enough. You do so much for your sister, even if she doesn’t appreciate it. You make me so proud. I’m also not stupid. I know there’s more to the story with that Frank guy, but now is not the time. Once we find your sister, I want to know what it is.”

“I love you, too, Dad. I’ll tell you when this is all over.” Nick pulls away and eyes me. “Are you ready?”

“Yep.”

“Cindy, how about some breakfast?” Mom asks.

“Sounds great, Aunt Patty.” She pats my back. “Hang in there. Don’t let them get to you.”

I smile at her now. Last night, I mentioned to Cin how hard school was yesterday, seeing them with the other girls.

As Nick and I get in his truck, I ask, “Have you been able to get in contact with Cam?”

He glances over at him. “No, I guess you haven’t, either?”

“I didn’t try after that one time,” I admit. “I figured that, if he didn’t answer me, that he turned off his phone. Is it normal not to hear from him?”

“No, he should have contacted us by now or sent us pics. To be honest, he slipped my mind with everything else going on.” Nick’s hand skims his mouth, and he looks guilty.

“It’s all right.” Nick slows, and I peer through the windshield at a large tree that blocks the road in front of us. “What’s all this?”

Police are directing traffic in a different direction, away from the school. A guy stands in the middle of the road, pointing people in the direction they need to go.

I roll my window down, and the guy tells us to follow the posted road signs.

Apparently, this isn’t the only tree down.

I wave and roll up my window. It’s cloudy, but it didn’t look like there was a storm. Not to mention, there wasn’t one last night that I could remember. The roads are bone dry.

An uneasy feeling fills me.

Nick follows the signs, taking us farther and farther from the roads we usually travel.

He shakes his head. “This can’t be right. This is way out of our way. They screwed up the signs.”

Pop!

The truck swerves suddenly.

“Hang on!” Nick shouts.

I grab the oh-shit bar while Nick quickly gets the truck under control and off to the side of the road, coming to a stop.

“Well, that was fun,” I say, dripping sarcasm. “Felt like we blew a tire.” I glance around. “Where are we?”

The detour took us down some back road, and now the woods surround us.

“We’re way off the beaten path. Something doesn’t feel right,” Nick echoes my earlier thought as he opens his door. “Let’s get this tire changed and get out of here.”

Getting out of the truck, I see right away that the passenger-side tire doesn’t have any air left in it.

“Damn.” Nick’s head swivels around, searching the area.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I scan the area. I agree with Nick; I don’t like this. There are no other cars on this road, only trees on either side of us.

Helping Nick to jack the truck up, he gets the blown tire off and hands it to me.

I move it off to the side before inspecting the hole. I’ve seen many blown tires during my racing days. This one is no slow leak.

“Nick, this was done on purpose.” I show him the hole. It’s too big for a nail or something small.

Crunching on the gravel signals a car pulling up behind us.

“I don’t have my gun,” Nick says. “Get behind me.”

“Yeah, right.” I stand up right next to him.

No way am I letting him face whoever the fuck this is while I cower behind him.

“Hello, Monkey,” says a cold dead voice.

My breath draws in sharply. No way. It can't be him. Eyes wide, I struggle to comprehend as I look at the man in front of me. He has the same rectangle shape face and bald head with bushy black eyebrows. He's put on some muscle since I last saw him, but otherwise, he looks the same as the man who haunts my nightmares.

Oh God, it's him. “No... You're dead.”

Nick moves closer to me.

“Close, but no cigar, Monkey. I'm Randell, his identical twin,” says the dark figure.

I can't fully see his face because he's in the shade, but there's no mistaking that voice.

My body tenses. “Roger didn't have a twin. He was an only child.”

There's no way there were two of them. I would have known. He would have told me.

“He did, too.” He turns his head to the right, mumbling, “I will tell her. Hold on.”

Nick and I glance at the surrounding woods to see who he's talking to. But there's no one on the road or in the trees near us.

Who the hell is he talking to?

I glance at Nick, cocking my eyebrow, but he looks as confused as I am.

Roger turns back to us. “I missed you, Monkey.”

God, do I hate that name. “Well, I didn't miss you, Roger.”

His hands ball into fists, and his face turns beet red. “I'm not Roger. I'm Randell!”

He turns his head right again, arguing with no one.

“He's crazy. I did a thorough investigation on him. I even checked the dark web. There's no record of a twin named Randell,” Nick whispers in my ear.

“I’ll tell her the way I want to. Now, shut up.” Roger takes a step closer. “I warned you that you’re mine. That I won’t let anyone else have you.”

“You left me the notes.” I try to sound confident even though I’m far from it.

“Of course, but you didn’t heed them, did you? So, tell me, how are your boyfriends?” He smirks, rocking back and forth on his heels.

He did something to them. I take a step forward, but Nick holds me back. “What did you do to them, asshole?”

“Such words, Monkey. I made things back to the way they should be. You’re all alone, and they’re with those other girls.” He puffs his chest out.

“What did you do to my friends?” Nick demands.

“You stump me, Nick. You wouldn’t fall under.” He glances skyward, his finger tapping his chin. “You wouldn’t turn on my Little Monkey.”

Letting out a calming breath, Nick tries again. “I can tell you’re intelligent, Rog— Sorry, Randell. You outfoxed us. Not many people can do that. So, how did you do it?”

Smart. Nick’s playing to his ego. God knows he has a huge one.

“Simple, Nick. It’s the same thing I did to Monkey. I hypnotized them.” He shrugs and laughs. “They never knew what hit them.”

The shock of discovery hits me full force. He hypnotized me. Pieces of the puzzle fit together now. He didn’t drug me all those years ago. He hypnotized me, so I would get sick when I left him. That’s how he got me to do all that horrible stuff.

“The music. That’s why there was weird music on Luke’s and Shelby’s iPods. Why didn’t you hypnotize me?” Nick asks.

“I tried to, believe me, but it wouldn’t take. You’re too smart for your own good, Nick. So, I had to go a different

route. How's your sister?" One big, black eyebrow pops up.

"Where is she, you fucker! I'll kill you if you hurt her." Now, it's my turn to hold Nick back from hurting Roger.

"Why would I hurt someone who's helping me?" Roger asks, smiling brightly.

"She wouldn't help you," Nick snarls.

Roger starts arguing with himself again.

Nick runs his hand through his hair and looks at me. "Would Hannah have helped him?"

"I don't know, Nick." I lift my hands helplessly. "She wanted Luke back pretty bad."

"Fine, I'll do it your way!" Roger yells before his focus fixes on me. "Monkey, I need you to come with me."

"Yeah, right. I'm not going anywhere with you." I scrunch up my nose.

"Oh, I think you will. Nick isn't the only one who couldn't be hypnotized. All the others had doubts about your relationship, which was my way in. One didn't think he was good enough, and another one was afraid he wouldn't get enough attention from you. The blond had no doubts, though, which was frustrating. So, I had to take him. He didn't go willingly, though. He fought. I suggest you come, or something might happen to him."

"Cam," I breathe.

He's not with his father. This psycho had him the whole time.

Roger reaches behind his back and pulls out a gun. Great, now the crazy man has a gun.

"Don't even think about it, Shelby. We can figure out another way," Nick says.

"Nick, he has a gun, and I have to go." I turn to look at Nick, who shakes his head. "He's got Cam and Hannah. Cam might be hurt. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to him."

I take two steps closer to Roger.

He throws zip ties at me. “Tie him up good in the truck. Leave your phone with him.”

Nick solemnly heads to his truck.

“Oh, and Monkey? Make sure you knock him out. I wouldn’t want to shoot him.” He waves the gun around.

“Shit,” I whisper.

Nick gets in his truck.

“Do you know how to get out of these?” I question, wrapping the zip ties around his wrist.

“Now, you ask? Are you sure about this?” he questions as I put the zip ties on loosely but tight enough in cases Roger checks.

“No, I’m not, but I don’t see any other way. I’ll try to get Cam and Hannah out,” I promise him. “I’m trusting you to find me. Fix the guys, and they’ll help.”

“Too much talking, Monkey! Hurry up!” Roger yells.

“For the record, this is a bad idea. Take my jacket with you. Keep it with you.” His eyes narrow at me. “Be careful.”

“I will. I’m sorry.” Before he can tense, I punch him across the jaw, and Nick falls to the side.

Throwing my phone beside him, I take his jacket before shutting the door.

Putting the jacket on, I head over to Roger.

When I get close, he puts the gun back in his jeans and pats me down. “I knew you wanted to be with me. Get in the car.”

I walk around to the passenger side and climb in.

Roger slides behind the wheel, shuts his door, then reaches for something in the door pocket. His hand quickly covers my mouth, and everything starts to go black.

“Don’t want you to know where we’re going,” he cackles.

Before I lose consciousness, I say a small prayer that Nick can fix the guys and that Cam and Hannah are all right.

The End...For Now.

While you wait for the final book in the Crash & Burn series, I'm really excited to tell you about, [The Abandoned](#). If you love female leads who are tough as nails and willing to fight for what they want, then you'll love [Lost & Found](#). Maddy grew up in foster homes and had to learn to look after herself, so when she finally makes it to college and meets four amazing men who want to take care of her, they'll have to convince her to open up and trust, something she's never done in her life.

[Lost & Found](#)

[The Abandoned Book 1](#)

Lost & Found

The Abandoned Book 1

Raised without a family, can Maddy trust the offer of four men she just met? Or are they playing her?

Growing up in the system left Maddy with an uneasy outlook on life. When she earns a scholarship to a university in Georgia, half the country away from where she grew up, she's determined to start new. Unfortunately for Maddy, her carefully laid plans take a nosedive as soon as she arrives.

But Maddy is determined to make it on her own, and she's well-versed in rolling with the punches. When she meets a handful of men eager to help her out, Maddy's suspicion kicks in. But they're determined to fight past her defenses and become the family she's never had.

Soon, though, Maddy discovers not everything is as it seems with them. They have secrets they can't share, and their hot kisses followed by cold shoulders leave Maddy reeling. Where does she really stand with this group of men? Can she believe their words when their actions say something different?

When Maddy's past rises to haunt her, will they be there to save her? Or will everything she worked so hard to build come crashing down?

*Read [Lost & Found](#), book 1 in *The Abandoned series*.*

ALSO BY EMMA B. BROOKS

The Abandoned Series

[Lost & Found](#)

[Illusions & Truths](#)

The Crash & Burn Series

[Drifting](#)

[Wrecked](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I have always had a deep love of reading since I was a child. My mother used to read to us every night before we went to sleep, and to this day, I still read every night.

My love of reading turned into ideas bouncing around in my head for years. In tenth grade we were asked to write a story or a poem for our English class. I wrote the first chapter of a story called *Swift Wing*. The rest of year, she encouraged me to finish the story and told me that one day she would see my work in print.

I filled many notebooks over the years but never finished them. I knew how hard it was to get a publisher to publish my stories.

When I turned forty—call it a midlife crisis, I don't know—I decided it was time. I was going to do this. I wanted to write a book.

So, here we are, with my book in your hands. I hope you enjoyed reading it.

