



GO AHEAD, PLAYBOY...

BREAK ME

IF YOU DARE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MEAGAN BRANDY

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Brandy

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Playlist

Small Doses – Bebe Rexha

Like That – Bea Miller

Paralyzed – NF

Sweet Little Lies – Bulow

Yes Girl – Bea Miller

Half a Man – Dean Lewis

You're Special – NF

Power Over Me – Dermot Kennedy

Back To The Start – SoMo

TiO – ZAYN

Consequences (orchestra) – Camila Cabello

Heaven – Julia Michaels

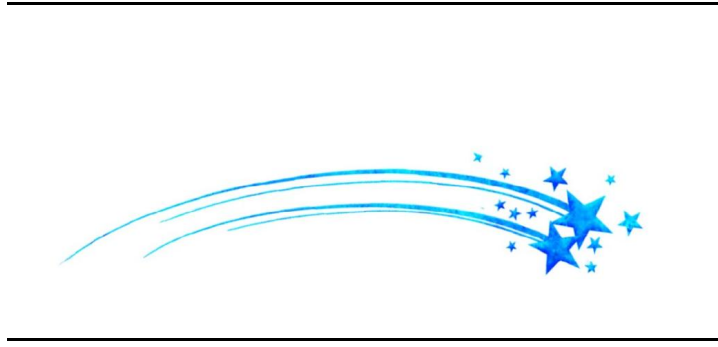
Addicted – Saving Abel

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Dedication

*To those walking in darkness, may you find your North Star,
and one day feel the light.*



Synopsis

I had a plan, and it was solid.
Track down what was hidden away and take pleasure in toying
with it.

Toying with *her*.

It worked like a charm.
Until it didn't.

Turned out, the feisty little thing I found was far from what I
hoped for.

She was different from all I knew and more than I expected.
She was light, and I'm the bastard who led her into darkness.

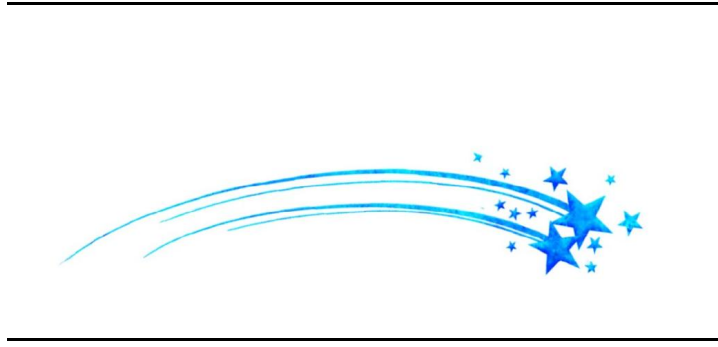
But this girl... she followed with a smile.

I told her I break pretty things.

She asked me to promise.

—

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Prologue

TENSION LINES MY FOREHEAD, A HEAVY THROBBING TAKING over not only my head, but my entire body. I try for a full, deep breath, but my lungs refuse my desperate plea.

The fiercely pumping blood and heavy pounding heart should clue me in to what's coming, but I ignore the warning, stuck in a nightmare of my own making.

Someone's scream roars around us, but I can't say who it comes from. It's a deep, cavernous sound that sends panic across the room and ice through my every vein.

I'm stuck, frozen, knowing the move to follow before it's even made.

It's the last-ditch effort, the one that leads to the end, right here in this very spot.

Everyone else understands it, too.

The body behind me grows rigid, the shadow to the right now creeping closer, a dark and haunting chill charging the air around us.

I'm suddenly spun, rushed toward the door and shoved through it.

I pretend to go easily, but slip away, sliding on my feet and darting around the far side of the room.

The eyes trailing me shoot wide, and I'm lunged at, but I'm already too far gone.

I intend to approach them from the side, to bring life back to the dead eyes bound to find mine, but as I get closer, no more than two spaces away, the inevitable sears my soul.

It hurts, stings, but only for a second and then ...

Nothing.

Chapter 1



BRIELLE

HE THINKS HE'S SLY, LAYING BACK IN THE SEAT OF A CAR THAT can't possibly be his, playing PI, and sucking at it.

I mean, come on. He sits in plain sight, laughing and chatting with the guy behind the wheel, smoking on something he definitely didn't buy here, while he waits for what, me?

For some sort of grand exit where I'll flip my hair over my shoulder and push my chest out, paint my lips bright and do my best dirty work to draw him right in, all the while he'll be laughing in his mind, planning the move he'll then make on his friends little sister.

No, that's not it.

He's parked directly in front of my aunt's house with the windows rolled down and doing nothing to hide the sound or smell coming from the vehicle.

He doesn't think he's sly.

He simply doesn't care, because he *knows* he's untouchable, it's written in the way he pushes the passenger door open and steps out into the murky air with the ease of a rogue rebel.

This guy, he comes from a place so far from this one it's not even funny.

Here, teenagers get drunk on tailgates on dirty riversides. They camp out and are welcomed home the morning after by loving mothers and fathers with smiles and biscuits and gravy. They fight over girls or guys or whose fault it was for the points scored by their rival teams from the night before's game. Simple, everyday stuff.

The world he comes from, teenagers are a thing of the past, the parties at mansions, parents irrelevant, and the fights far crueler. It's a town founded and ran by an ethically challenged power family, void of a justice system.

No, that's wrong, too.

There *is* a justice system, and it consists of three rough and ruthless eighteen-year-olds.

Three adopted siblings born for a purpose greater than those on the outside could ever understand.

The brothers of Brayshaw.

One of which is sitting outside my house this very instant, waiting.

It won't kill him to wait a little longer...

Royce

SCANNING THE FENCELESS HOUSES OF THE TATTERED BLOCK, I step into the large open grassy area, and bring myself closer to the one with the rickety back door and busted ass blinds.

There's a random bench dropped in the center of the yard, so I plant my ass onto the old, splintered wood.

"Why are you sitting in my back yard staring at my house?"

I hop right the fuck back up, spinning to glare at the mini-chick raising her brows at me.

I don't say shit as I eye her, and she crosses her arms, popping a hip out while she waits. The girl can't be more than, fuck, I don't know. Five-foot max. Maybe.

Fucking tiny.

Kinda mousy, sunglasses hiding her eyes from sight.

I hop over the bench, pushing toward her, and her chin lifts to the sky—the only way she's able to keep hers on mine—but she doesn't inch away.

“Why are there no fences around to keep people *like me* out? To stop me from staring at *your* house?” I counter.

“Because this place is as safe as safe can be.”

“No such thing, baby girl.”

“The worst that happens here is Tom Marvel down the street waters his yard on even days instead of odd.” Her mouth gapes as she mocks shock, tilting her head.

So she's a brat.

I glare. “Sounds like a good time.”

“Bunches.”

“You said *you* live here?”

She slips her thumb around the straps of her backpack. “I did.”

I flick my gaze over her form. “All five-foot of you?”

She straightens her spine, gaining a whole extra inch, but before anything else can be said, the heavy creak of old metal, followed by a quick slam of a screen has both our heads snapping toward the sound.

A slow smirk spreads across my lips as I take in the sight.

Thick, dark hair, long and lengthy with pasty-ass skin.

There she is.

The picture of payback.

A perfect knockoff of her punk-ass brother.

“Ah, *now* it makes sense,” the short chick says.

“What, how you’re cramping my style, wasting my time and your breath?” I ask, not taking my eyes off the target as she lights a cigarette, bringing it to her red painted lips.

Her head turns this way the second she pulls it from her mouth, and slowly she blows out a long line of smoke, zeroing in on me and the mouse.

She waits, but so do I.

Here kitty, kitty...

She pretends to be chill, but can’t handle it, and forces herself to take slow strides this way.

“You can go now,” I tell the girl at my side, but she doesn’t move, and quickly my mark is stepping in front of me.

“Cousin,” she drags out, but neither of us bother looking her way. “Who’s your friend?”

Her sexy smirk makes its appearance.

It’s a good one, too. Little too confident, but it’s all good.

I can kill that, easy. Besides, this would be a lot more difficult if she were unsure about herself—groundwork would have to be laid before the girl could be.

“Not my friend,” short girl shares, her tone all peppy and shit as she adds, “He’s here for you, actually.”

At that, a saucy grin grows as if she already figured so.

This shit will be too fucking easy.

I shouldn’t play with my food, but what am I to do when it so clearly wants to play back?

I push closer, coming almost eye level with her and her focus falls to the tattoos on my neck. “I got an hour before

reality comes crashing down, *Brielle*. What are you gonna do with it?"

She studies me a long moment and then turns to the cockblocker.

Her demeanor shifts, a small twist edging her lips. "Think you can keep yourself outside a little longer?"

The animosity isn't missed.

"Do I ever come in when you take over?" short chick replies.

Brielle grins, and just like that, leads me right where she wants me.

Toward her bedroom.

The house is neat, almost sterile, and a huge fuckin' contrast to her room, which is a damn mess. There's shit all over, and the bed's unmade.

I glare at the mattress sitting on the floor, about ready to walk out and drag her ass with me, but then the girl starts to strip.

So, I plant my ass, and I let her put on a little show.

I may be a guy, one who loves to fuck, gives as good as he gets and all that, but I don't do desperate, and it seems she's borderline just that.

I came here for a reason, though, so I lean back on my hands and let her do as she pleases, which happens to be me.

With her breasts hanging bare, tight-ass pants still on, she steps toward me, and drops to her knees. She frees my cock from my jeans and wastes no time pulling me deep into her throat.

It's not the way I like it, I need a little lead-up, like to build that heavy tension that gets my blood pumpin', cock twitchin', and mind racing. Need my girl wet and ready, desperate for the first touch of the night and ready for more, fuckin' needy. Greedy.

This girl allowed time for none of that, so all I can do is watch her work.

A minute or two ticks by and then she's moaning around my shaft. Finally, my hard-on grows just shy of a full salute.

I tether my hands in her hair to give her a bit more drive, and it works. She picks up some speed, tightens her lips around me more, and I tip my head back a bit, trying to fall into the moment more, but as my eyes glide by the window, I fucking freeze.

The cousin, as she called her, peeks through the torn blinds, her head dropping when she realizes she's been caught and suddenly she's gone.

A heavy crash and quiet yelp follows.

"The fuck?" I snap, freeing myself and jumping to my feet.

I'm soft in an instant, quickly shoving myself into my jeans, and rush out the door. "She better not have been recording."

Footsteps pound the linoleum floor at my back.

"Please," Brielle scoffs, hiding her naked chest with her hands as we push out onto the porch.

The girl is hopping from the ground as we step out, limping on her foot a little as she hurries around the house.

"You better chase after her," Brielle pipes up.

I cut my head over my shoulder, glaring at her. "And why the fuck would I do that?"

She smirks, walking backward into the house. "Because *that*... is Brielle. I'm her cousin, Ciara."

My muscles lock, and she laughs, shaking her head as she closes the door in my face.

Motherfucker!

I leap over the railing, running after the little sneak.

"Yo!" I shout.

The *real* Brielle picks up her pace, bouncing all around as she tries to keep weight off of her left foot, but it doesn't matter now. I'm already right behind her.

"Why'd you let me think she was you?"

She scoffs. "It's not my fault you assumed I was the taller, hotter, *easier* of the two of us."

I grip her by the arm, halting her movement and she tips her head back, eyes still hidden behind her big-ass shades.

I glare, opening my mouth to tell her, I don't know the fuck what, when she crosses her arms again, catching me off guard.

"I know who you are."

I shoot up straight. "Yeah, and who am I?"

"Royce Brayshaw, of the Brayshaw family." She doesn't miss a beat.

I run my tongue along the backs of my teeth. "And who are you, so we're clear?"

She reaches a hand out and I frown from it to her.

"Oh sorry, right. You're silver-spooned." She tips her head. "*This* is called a pleasantry; many people use them."

"Your name, smart-ass."

Her hip pops out. "Shake my hand."

I hold in a growl, slapping my palm against hers, and she gives it a good, solid, squeeze.

"It's good to finally meet one of you, in the flesh." She passes her tote over to her other shoulder with a slight shrug. "Anyway, you already know who I am." She pauses. "Well, *now* anyway."

"Your name, from *your* lips, not that... whoever the fuck that was."

My jaw tics as I wait for her to speak.

She doesn't, so I creep closer.

“Don't play games with me, girl.”

“Right...” She pulls her lips in, nodding. “Cause *Brayshaw*.”

My head tugs back, and even though I can't see 'em, I imagine this little shit rolls her damn eyes at me.

She looks to her watch and my annoyances are about at the *fuck shit up now, figure the rest of later* level.

“Whatever,” she huffs. “I'm Brielle Bishop, and I'm late.”

She turns around and walks away.

Leaves.

Yeah... I don't fuckin' think so.

I chase her ass.

Brielle

OH MY SHIT, ONE OF MY BROTHER'S PSYCHO BOSSES IS following me, and not just *any* of his bosses.

It's the hot, kind of scary, *I'm going to liquefy you with my dark and daring eyes and maybe even by accident*, playboy one I've heard so much about, but have never actually stood toe to toe with before today, is right freaking behind me, watching as I hobble around like I'm lame, probably picking me apart from his place at my back as he does.

So, okay.

To be fair, I look nothing like someone who met my brother first would expect, and considering he's been living in the group home on Royce's family's property for the last four-ish years, while working for them just as long, it makes sense this guy showed up with what he thought was a clear idea of what he'd find—the exact opposite of yours truly.

My brother, he's an easy six-foot, pasty looking rebel with ink-black hair and crystal colored eyes. He's tall and trim and has a natural edge to him, an aura people are drawn to despite his unapproachable, at first glance, appearance. He's sort of the best of both worlds, and can pull off his assigned persona with zero effort.

I, on the other hand, am legit barely scraping by at five-foot as Royce oh so typically teased, and my sunglasses hide my eye color so he couldn't look there for resemblance—not that he would find any even if he could see through the giant, reflective lenses. My hair is on the shorter side, and so platinum in color all I have to do is add in a little purple shampoo and bam, solid silver.

I have an actual ass, not one I'm sure he's used to, either. It's nothing like Ciara's high and tight one. Mine's more plump and peachy, full and round, but I happen to like how it gives shape to my waist, so if he is judging, I don't even care.

That doesn't mean I like him trailing me as he sums me up with a glance, though... if that's what he's doing.

Why is he still following me?!

A sudden sharp ache zings up my leg, forcing a wince from me, but I keep moving.

“Stop walking,” he commands, as if I'm supposed to listen.

I pick up the pace. “Can't. Like I said, I'm late.”

“For what, Bible study?”

“Funny,” I quirk, internally cursing the awful school uniforms we're forced to wear here. “A little disappointing, considering your reputation for quick wit, but maybe everything I heard about you is wrong. After all, you were unexpectedly... insufficient.”

I trip over a small hump of grass, but before I'm forced to catch myself with my injured foot, large palms wrap around

my upper ribs and I'm lifted off the ground, only to be lowered right back, my bag falling to the crook of my arm.

My head snaps up and to the side, allowing me to meet his aggravated eyes over my shoulder.

"Come on now, girl," he whispers, mockingly. "If you wanna spin stories, try one I can't prove wrong where we stand."

"Go for it, Slick Rick."

He gives a half shrug, and something tells me he totally will, so I retract, rushing out, "No, don't" before he can make a move.

Okay, so my bad. I lied.

As far as I could tell from the angle of my little peep show, he lacked in no facet of the word, but I would swear Ciara was just that to him—lackluster, unexciting.

Far from his type, should this prominent playboy have one.

Not to judge my cousin or anything, she has issues and it's her choice to use sex to make her feel better, but she jumps right to it like a dog in heat. I hear the tales time and time again, how she cuts the sensuality out of it, a self-proclaimed quickie queen.

Give them more than your body, B, and they'll shit all over it.

Words of wreckage from her.

With a guy like this one, though, I imagine that's the worst way to be.

I'd bet you've got to awaken the chef to be served the five-star delight from this too tall, too gorgeous, tattooed, brute of a boy.

You'd only be shorting yourself to not.

It's like cocoa without the whipped cream—lacking the full, glorious experience.

The corner of his mouth lifts, but his eyes seem to narrow more. “Far from a boy, short stuff.”

My nose scrunches, a small ripple running across my ribs. “I said that out loud?”

“You did.”

“Like... all of it? Or, you know, just the boy part...”

I swear he’s about to chuckle, but swallows it, and just like that, the hint of embarrassment warming my blood fades.

“How ‘bout,” Royce starts. “You repeat *all of it*, and I’ll tell you which part you already shared?”

“That sounds like a horrible idea.”

He raises a single brow and I’m instantly drawn to the tiny scar above the thick, dark curve.

Once I’ve allowed myself to focus on a part of him, I’m unable to stop, so from there, I search for more.

For proof of struggle and pain, for signs of a life lived and for the dark I’ve heard so much about but can’t seem to find staring back.

I spot another small marking on his cheekbone, and a ghost of one on his jaw, but my focus falls to the thick, full bottom lip he drags along his upper teeth.

He’s perfectly flawed... and still holding on to me.

“Why are you here?” I lift my gaze to his, though he can’t see beyond my frames.

A small wrinkle forms along his forehead, but his question doesn’t match the one his eyes provide.

He wants to know how I know who he is, and even more, if I do, why I’d ask with such a question, but those queries go unanswered as he decides another is more important. “Why’d you let me think your cousin was you?”

Because I’m tragic and eager to please.

“She seemed more your type.”

A shadow flashes across his face, a burn I recognize. One that ignites when met with judgment and personification, but did he not do the same to me?

He's the one who saw her and boom, his mind was made up.

It's only natural though, allowing what's on the surface to settle all.

It's humanity's biggest downfall—judgment. Expectation.

“My type, huh?” he bites with blatant aggravation. “How you figure?”

“I mean... you're basically wearing the same pants, so,” I joke. “Peas in a pod, Tweedledee and Tweedledum... Cheech and Chong?”

That does it, takes him off defense mode, and the corner of his mouth lifts with his sudden and unexpected laugh.

It's not brash and boisterous, but a laugh just loud enough to stir the birds in the trees surrounding us.

It's throat-deep and jagged, yet somehow still a lively and free sound, one that has me smiling, but the moment my lips curl to their fullest, his expression goes slack.

In a single inhale, the guy at my back morphs, now the bearer of the finest worn mask at the nonexistent masquerade he's forced himself into.

A fake in the flesh.

Or maybe fake isn't fair, but regardless, he chose to censor himself.

I don't need any more of the type around me, those closed off and prone to hiding.

All anyone ever does is hide things from me.

“You can let go of me now,” I tell him.

He cocks his head, bottomless, dark eyes piercing mine through a mass of black lashes.

Something in my gut stirs, and I want to look away, but don't.

So I try again to get him to be the one to step back, since it seems I'm glued in place.

"Pretty sure I'm no longer falling."

"Who said I grabbed you 'cause you were falling?" His grip tightens, his body shifting closer and closer, and leaving no room to twist, no air to breathe that isn't infused with his very scent—weed and wonder. Wind and water.

I frown, blocking out the refreshing aroma, not understanding what he's getting at, and that's when the squeal of old brakes rings in my ears.

My head jerks toward the street to find the little white car that left him behind, the driver launching himself out of it the second it's in park. He rushes around the vehicle, yanking the back door open as he canvases the area around us.

I don't have to do the same to know this block is quiet and empty this time of morning.

A sliver of panic zips through me, tingling my spine and lodging my breath deep in my throat.

Royce dips down, swiping my legs from beneath me, my body now cradled in his arms, so I quickly latch on in case he decides to try and toss me around.

Before I can wrap my head around what's happening, before I can process any of it, we're stepping from the grass onto the street and sliding into the back seat. The door's slammed behind us, and suddenly we're moving.

This is definitely when I should snap out of my shock and scream, kick and fight, and go full Karate Kid on his ass, but all I can think of is oh.

My.

Shit.

A Brayshaw just kidnapped me.

And I straight-up let him.

Chapter 2



ROYCE

WELL, THIS DIDN'T GO AS PLANNED.

I came here to find Brielle Bishop, but ended up letting her cousin stick my junk down her throat, and not well either.

Technically, that shit's not my fault—the girls played me, but I'm the dumbass who fell into it.

I showed up, mind dead set on a specific type, a girl hard enough to be the sister of the bastard who earned the top spot in my family's dirty deeds quicker than any before him. A girl with edge and grit, dirt under her nails and a chip on her shoulder.

So yeah, I thought Brielle was the rough, tough, jaded looking one of the two I found myself in front of, not the tiny, tired little thing who can't even prop against a window without twisting her fucking ankle.

I look to the girl, still sitting in my lap, not fighting me, not wide-eyed and worried, not pissed off and punching. She should be doing one of those things.

She's not.

She's calm and cool, and it's pissing me off.

Maybe she's not all there?

Right as I think it, her right hand lifts, and I'm pretty fuckin' convinced I'm right, 'cause that hand, it doesn't come down to scratch or hit me.

Nah, the freshly snatched mini thing slips it between the seats in a dumbass move to introduce herself to the getaway man.

"I'm Brielle," she says.

My boy Mac frowns from her to me, but when she nods her head, he lets out a low sigh.

With tight lips, he brings a hand around to shake hers. "Mac."

"I knew it. Not Maddoc or Captain. Interesting."

My eyes snap to hers at the mention of my brothers. "What's interesting?"

"That you're here and they aren't. I thought you guys were like, the Three Musketeers." She surges.

When my blank expression doesn't break, she nods back and forth like a broken ass bobblehead, her big-ass glasses and short silk-like hair only adding to it.

"You know," she leads. "All for one and one for all..."

The girl even adds the little fuckin' fist raise thing.

Mac chuckles but clears his throat to hide it.

I meet his eyes in the mirror, and it's clear as damn day he's amused. It's also clear what the dick's about to do next.

He adjusts the mirror so he can see Brielle better.

"So, uh, Brielle," he asks. "Got a last name?"

"Doesn't everyone?" She shrugs.

"Not in our world." He grins.

"Ah, yes, the infamous town with no legal system other than a couple cops on payroll to deflect outsiders. Nothing but the crack of a whip delivered by one of three wild boys." She

looks to me, and yeah, there's a note of mockery in her smoky tone, but I get the sense she's teasin'. "Tell me, playboy, is yours leather?"

Mac's shoulders shake with a laugh he holds in, but I'm stuck trying to figure this chick out.

"So," she begins as she relaxes back.

Relaxes.

In a car with two fuckin' strangers who just grabbed her ass up without a word of why.

Her head even falls onto the doorframe as she changes the subject from where I come from to what she's wondering. "Where we going?"

I glare at her.

Why's she so chill right now?

"You used to random fucks picking you up and throwing you in a plateless car or somethin'?"

"No." She scoffs a laugh. "Are *you* used to traveling ten hours to the house of the little sister of the guy you hired to play mobster for your lives?"

"The fuck?" I jerk back, sliding my body from under hers.

She falls onto the floorboard, but quickly lifts herself onto the seat at my side.

"Your brother's got a big fuckin' mouth."

"Don't talk about my brother!" she fires back instantly.

"Fuck your brother," I snap loudly, and her neck stretches slightly. "He's not allowed—"

"To talk, tell, share, anything about his life?" she cuts me off, a heavy frown taking over her forehead. "Trust me, I'm fully aware of the gag order everyone around me is under, thanks to you and your family."

I clench my teeth. "Fuck's that supposed to mean?"

She shrugs as she turns to look out the window. “You can throw something away, but that doesn’t mean it gets buried, you know.”

“Girl, I don’t know what you’re gettin’ at, but just... stop talkin’.”

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you?”

“Nah, I’d love to gag and bag your ass.”

She rolls her wrist.

Rolls her fucking wrist and my frown flies to Mac’s when he dares to laugh.

“How about, I stop talking when you start,” she bargains, sticking a palm out in some sort of truce shit.

I glare from it to her. “You don’t make the rules here.”

“Neither do you.” She laughs through her words. “You’re in a country ass town right now. The only rules here are never take the last cold beer from the fridge without replacing it, and no feeding the patrol’s horses.”

“Girl—”

“My name is Brielle,” she cuts me off, leaning into my space. “Not girl, not short stuff, or shorty, or any other equally lame nicknames you want to throw at me because you feel the need to remind me I’m nothing but a nobody. I get it. You’re the real-life *Aunt Bully*—you’re big, I’m small.”

I gape at her. “*What?*”

She tips her head. “Do you not watch TV? No movies as a kid? Too busy playing Avengers and saving your home one mission at a time?”

It’s fuckin’ official. This girl’s whacked out.

“Whatever, it’s probably not your fault that you’re movie-ly challenged,” she reasons as if I understand her bullshit. “All I’m trying to say is I might have been deemed worthless for

your world, but that gives you no right to come into mine and act like a pencil dick.”

I’m ready to tear her shitty attempt at making a point apart, but instead, I tip my chin. “Why you keep sayin’ shit like that?”

She drops against the seat. “Like what?”

“How you don’t belong or aren’t enough. Laying blame on my family.”

A frown pulls at her forehead. “*Why* are you here, Royce Brayshaw?”

I eye her a long moment, only to look away when the answer to my question’s obvious.

She’s been lied to, and she has no clue.

She thinks we sent her here, to live with her aunt and cousin, ripped her away from her brother, but that’s some shitty, false CliffsNotes version of the truth, if there’s any truth to it at all.

Back in our town, at the front of our property, we have two group homes—one for males, and one for females.

Our freshman year of high school, when our dad was still locked away at his own hand for some shit too deep to get into, he sent us a file, same as he does any and every time there’s a new prospect for our houses. This one was stamped with the last name Bishop.

The file was full of dozens of hospital and police reports detailing the violent-ass attacks on two kids at the hand of their own father—Brielle and her brother, Bass.

They were on the verge of being sent to foster care when my dad found out about them and vetted them for a solid fit in our group homes.

It’s the same shit, different backstory for everyone we take in. They’re all fucked-up teens, and our hope is to turn them straight, or our kind of straight, which is really a full fucking

curve, but an honest one. We bring them in, offer them a place with our people, in the town we run. In return, ask for their respect, loyalty, and that they earn our trust.

It doesn't always work out.

Some aren't built to step deep into our world, so as long as they follow the rules, we offer them one that keeps them safe until it's their time to leave, no harm, no foul. Others fuck up and get sent away, *put* "away" but the rest... they eat it up, fucking flourish in their element and sharpen the street smarts they were forced to learn before even stepping foot into our houses.

They come to work for us, and we give them all they could ever want and never had—a safe place to lay their heads, money, and purpose.

A life and a future, something they spent most of their lives believing they'd never have due to that first shit card the universe dealt them. With us, they have an ace in their pockets and that ace, it's where loyalty begins to grow, and the rest follows.

Bass, her older brother, was a scrappy motherfucker, strong and clever. We knew he'd be perfect for our world, so being the older of the two of them, me and my brothers went to him with our offer—live with us, go to our schools and act right, earn a place in our empire.

He agreed with a blink, but his clause quickly followed.

His baby sister, only thirteen months younger was to be sent away where she'd be free of the world of trouble he was about to jump headfirst into.

He wanted her safe and far away from any danger our world might bring, since she was finally safe from the one she was born into. He said she wouldn't survive, that her world would turn dark, and he couldn't live with that.

Since our family's purpose is to protect those who need it, offer more to those who seek it, and handle all the bullshit that gets in the way however the hell we see fit, what he was

selling for her sounded good. At the end of the day, we wanted what was best for the girl, too.

It was with *his* push, a decent monthly check from our very own accounts to make sure she was cared for properly, and off she went to live with their extended family. An aunt and cousin who were happy to have her, wanted her even.

Where she would thrive with them.

Based on Brielle's comments, she thinks this was our doing, that we only wanted him, and she was trash we threw away.

So big brother couldn't handle breaking little sister's heart.

It's cool, maybe I'll do it for him.

"Why am I here?" I repeat her question, my smirk slowly growing. "I'm here to learn more about the girl who's been hidden away."

I imagine it's unexpected and uncontrollable interest that has her sitting up and slipping her fingertips into her silver shaded hair.

Oh, yeah. Too easy.

I relax, draping my arm across the back of the seat. "So what do you say, little Bishop, you in?"

Brielle

I STARE AT HIM, WIDE-EYED, NOT THAT HE CAN SEE MINE, AND the cockiest of grins covers his lips.

I fight it as best I can, but it's to no avail, and my cheeks fill with air, a laugh spitting out of me in the next second.

His sheath of confidence falls as quick as it came and a heavy line forms between his brows.

“Oh my god, you’re serious.” I drop against the door. “Are you serious?”

He sits perfectly still in his seat for a long moment before finally leaning forward in full-on slow-mo mode, nothing but the sound of his hands dragging along the cheap leather filling the car.

Such a well-practiced playboy.

He pauses when he’s directly in front of my face. “If I was?”

“Then I’d probably say something like, I’m pretty sure you think I’m this little, guarded, overnight bumkin child of some kind who doesn’t recognize a wolf when she sees one, but I do.”

“Good.”

His instant and darkly delivered response is surprising and causes a hint of zing to run along the base of my neck.

Suddenly the door at my back opens.

I fall back with a yelp, but I’m caught against a crotch.

I look up to find the driver, Mac, he said his name was, standing there.

He grips me under the arms and tugs me to my feet as Royce climbs out, positioning himself in front of me in the same second.

I’m now sandwiched between two mounds of muscle and abs, the ones at my back flexed and firm, the ones at my front... tight and toned.

Cool, yeah. No big deal.

Neither is the perfect shape of a pistol Mac must have tucked into his waistband.

My pulse leaps, my awareness spiking, but it’s not uncommon around here for people to carry.

Not that they're from around here, but I imagine it's more than common where they come from.

I wonder how far down the tattoo on Royce's neck leads?

"Ask and I'll show you," he teases with a measured grin. "Got a habit of speakin' out loud?"

"One I wasn't really aware of until, you know... today."

"Keep it up, it's good for my ego."

"Mm," I tease, tilting my head. "I feel like your ego is *really* well-fed."

Humor lines the edges of his eyes, but no other part of his expression gives any sign of fun.

He rolls his tongue between his lips. "Give me your phone."

"Ask nicely."

His mouth forms a firm line, but I think it's to hide a smile.

Maybe.

I'm not sure because his stare is still that angry, annoyed squint he keeps giving me.

I frown when my phone is lifted over my shoulder, Mac having dug it from my bag.

Royce turns it to me, so I put in the password and after a few short seconds, his vibrates from within his pocket, the one pressed against my abdomen.

His pocket reaches *higher* than my pelvis.

I'm legit child-size compared to him.

I mean, the height difference could be super interesting, right?

A single, dark brow lifts before me, and I wince.

"My bad." I should have guessed not even my thoughts would be safe with the likes of him.

In my peripheral, I catch a flag blowing in the morning breeze, and realize he brought me to school.

“I’m late,” I remember.

Royce pushes his body firmer into mine, ignoring me, locking me tighter between him and his consigliere.

I tip my head back to get a better look into the eyes of the infamous playboy as he towers over me, all strong and confident like.

He stares a long moment before his gaze pops up, and Mac releases me, the soft clunk of a car door closing seconds later.

Royce draws himself in and whispers, “Can you keep a secret?”

“I could say yes and you would never know for sure.”

He rolls his tongue over his bottom lip, giving a slow nod.

Reaching behind him, he opens the front passenger door, slips in, and closes himself inside.

He leans through the open window, holding my phone out for me to grab.

I step closer, and as soon as my fingers wrap around the plastic case, his free hand shoots out to grip my wrist.

My eyes fly to his.

“Be smart,” he says as he slowly lets go.

I’m pretty sure he’s wanting a response of some sort, so I bend down, careful not to put weight on my foot, and glance past him to his buddy.

I answer his earlier asked question with a major overkill smile. “My last name is Bishop, by the way.”

I spin on my one good heel, hobbling away with Mac’s laughter following me, but as I get a few feet farther, closer to the entrance, something prompts me to stop and glance back.

I do, finding the little white car still sitting idle in the red-painted no parking zone *directly* in front of the steps of the

school's double doors.

Mac is leaning back, biting into a burger with his phone in his hand, while Royce remains exactly as I left him, half hanging from the window, eyes on mine.

“You can go now!” I shout loud enough for him to hear.

“I’m good.” He cocks his head, drumming his long, resilient fingers against the frame, the tattoos on his forearm shifting and coming alive with each small twitch of his muscles.

As if the gods realize one of their own is among them and his presence needs amplifying, the sun breaks through the clouds above, shining down on him. A heavy gleam flashes, exposing the hint of silver curled around the back of his neck, the chain hiding close to his chest.

As my gaze glides lower, seeking out the form beneath his T-shirt, his palm slaps against the doorframe, pulling my attention back to his face. “Go on, get to class *Brielle Bishop*, I’ll be right here when you get out.”

I grip my bag tighter. “Why?”

“Why not?”

I look at my phone and back to him. “It’s nine o’clock. You’ll be waiting hours.”

“Got time.”

“Do you, though?” The thought of him out here all day has unease clogging my throat. “Shouldn’t you be in school or something, or did you drop out? Or maybe, since your high school is named after your family, you don’t have to apply yourself at all at Brayshaw High, so here you are, bored and at mine.”

What in the... what’s wrong with me?!

I know what this well wrapped, rich Robin Hood is capable of.

“Maybe.” Royce licks his lips, spinning the matte black band on his right ring finger. “And *maybe*, smart-ass, you should turn around, show me that ass again as you walk it to class, unless you want me to play your shadow all day.”

I might blush if the thought of him following me around didn’t make me want to vomit, because hell no! That would make my life worse. This school and everyone in it, we have an understanding—I’m the odd outsider they refuse to accept, and I let them. It works perfectly, makes them feel empowered, and I’m not forced to share my story. Add this guy into that equation and into the gutter that goes.

The questions will once again be whispered, and my aunt will punish *me* for it—oh, what a scandal it would be for our family secrets to be spread among the town.

As if her reality isn’t enough of a reason to judge her.

I pretend I couldn’t care less, pop my hip out and go with, “My boyfriend wouldn’t like that.”

I wait, watching for a hint of *oh shit* or anything that indicates I’ve thrown him off or, you know, something.

The guy doesn’t even blink, so I try again.

“Are you really going to sit here all day?” I ask, but it seems he’s done talking.

Left with nothing else to say, I head into the school, doing my best not to overthink each step.

Only once I’m through the doors do I pause to take the first deep breath since approaching him in the back yard.

He’s hunted me down, asking I keep a secret when I know as well as he does, he has no trust I’d do it.

I have no doubt he threw out the little question with purpose, but he’s the fool if he believes my spending the last several years miles and miles away erases the fact I was born where he was. In a place where loyalty is vital, trust is as highly sought out as it is hard to come by, and family is the key to all.

I know full well how, to them, family has nothing to do with the one you're born into but centered around those you'd be willing to ride for, to hurt, and sometimes die for.

None of this means I've adapted to their ways, but I *am* aware of how their world works.

He thinks he's cunning, testing me without testing me.

He's wrong.

"Get to class, Ms. Bishop."

I glance to the right and offer a small smile to our campus security guard.

As I pass, he calls me to a stop. "Ms. Bishop?"

I already know what he's about to say, my muscles coiling as I glance over my shoulder. "I have a migraine."

"Those seem to be coming more often." His solemn expression gives him away—he doesn't buy my headache stories. "Your aunt take you to get that doctor's note we asked you for about these frequent... migraines?"

Got to love small towns, everyone knows who you belong to.

"Not yet." She'd have to care enough to realize the swelling is coming more often for that to happen, and I'm not about to tell her—not that it would make a difference if I did. The woman can hardly look at me, there's no way she could handle an entire forty-five-minute doctor's trip.

George gives a tight grin. I know he wishes he could pick and choose what school rules to reinforce and when. He's a good man like that. "Then I'm afraid the dress code stands, Ms. Bishop."

I nod, and for his sake, make sure to smile wide. "Sure thing, George."

I slip my glasses from my face, slide them in the front pocket and continue to class with a limp as heavy as my sigh.

Another day in is a day closer to the out.

Why is it getting harder and harder to remember this?

Chapter 3



ROYCE

I bite into my burrito, finally looking at Mac who has been waiting for my attention, and he doesn't miss his chance.

“Burrito cold?” he teases, food half-chewed in his mouth.

I laugh. “Fuck off. This bitch is hitting the spot, even at nine in the morning. Ask what you wanna ask, dick.”

He grins, digging his fries out of the bag. “What'd Bass Bishop do to push you into coming all the way out here to pay his baby sister a visit?”

“The motherfucker crossed a line when he forgot his place.” I shrug. “We hired him to keep the assholes in the group home in line at the school, run bets, and bring in fighters at the warehouses. He had no business mixing himself into deeper-rooted Brayshaw business.”

“You mean with Raven?” he asks about one of the newest members of my family.

The one and only person I'd give my all to, should she ask me for it, my brother's new wife, and the last remaining bloodline of the Brayshaw name.

Everyone knows my brothers and I were adopted into the reigning family of our town as infants, mine and Captain's fathers having died for the name not long before that, and Maddoc's the one left in control. Maddoc's dad became ours,

and since then, we've earned our place. Raven just happens to be a larger piece of the puzzle we didn't know was missing.

I nod. "When Raven showed up at our group home, we knew as much about her as we do the rest of them, little to nothing, but enough. She was in no way a part of us yet, so we gave no fucks about her friendship with Bishop, but once things changed, we told him to stay away. The fucker didn't. He had her fighting in our rings, helped her run from us when she felt she had to protect us, allowed her to get herself into trouble and didn't tell us. We could have lost her, and it would have been his head if we had."

"That's a lot to risk for a guy like him," Mac eases. "Came empty-handed, had nothing but what he earned under your name."

I know what he's trying to say, and I get it.

Bishop showed loyalty to Raven, same as he did us since the day he set foot on our grounds, and I'm supposed to respect him for that. For helping one of us when she needed it, for having her back when we weren't there to do it, no questions asked, no consequence too big.

But I can't.

To be real, I don't hate the fucker. I can't lie and say I didn't think he would keep my sister-in-law safe, because I did. But it wasn't his place, it was mine.

Maddoc was fucked-up, Cap was laid up, and all that was left was me.

And then he stepped in again, pissed me off and now I want to piss him off, and what better way to do that than play with the sister he thinks is out of reach?

No one is out of my reach.

Am I being a bitch? Don't know or care.

Sister for a sister makes sense to me.

Maybe that's twisted, maybe *I'm* twisted, but I never claimed to be the sane one, that's Captain.

Maddoc is the angry alpha, and me, I'm the fuckin' wild one.

The time bomb.

Unpredictable and admittedly, unhinged.

I see things a little different, through a haze of rage most of the time, and yeah, I hold a grudge like a champ.

But I'd like someone to come to me, tell me how the fuck I'm supposed to respect someone who would risk himself like that, for a girl he hardly knows, yet ditches his own fucking sister without a blink?

I know better than anyone blood doesn't count, me and my brothers share none, but Bass loves her. That's why he sent her away, to protect her from the big bad fucking wolves, right? From the darkness he said she'll fall into, and claims she's not meant for?

The punk didn't even have the balls to tell her straight-up *he* made that choice. That he's the one who felt it was better for her.

Fuck him.

He wants to step into my family, insert himself where he's not wanted. Touché, motherfucker.

Consider me inserted.

Brielle will know me and she'll know me fucking well.

"We're not waiting out here all day, are we?" He smirks.

"Nah, my man." My eyes slide to the red double doors Brielle disappeared through. "We're not."

Brielle

WITH A WATER BOTTLE IN HAND, I FOLLOW THE FLOW OF students out into the quad, only for my feet to cement themselves moments later.

Is it possible to have a nightmare during the day... when you're wide awake?

The view in front of me screams yes, yes, it is.

Royce stands in the center of the basketball court, passing a ball between his loosely planted feet with ease, shoulders strong, but in a careless kind of way, head tipped back and to the side the slightest bit—cocky and carefree. Assertive.

An unquestionable alpha.

I follow his line of sight to the group of five guys standing closer to the left side of the hoop, all with a different question written across their faces, and my stomach twists.

These guys, they aren't simply school randoms. They're the starting five on the team, and Royce must have straight-up walked into the middle of their game, claimed their ball as his own, and they're not happy about it.

I look back to Royce.

He's standing off against a foreign group of males, in a school he has no pull at, a school where nobody knows the repercussion that comes with simply looking at a Brayshaw wrong, let alone squaring off against one. Still, Royce shows not a hint of concern.

I slip my glasses on as the crowd shuffles me closer, whispers now floating through the manure-stenched air.

It's a bunch of "*Who is that?*", "*Is he new?*" and "*Look at those tattoos.*"

"Damn, he's hot," the girl at my side says, knocking an elbow into her friend. "Look at those lips."

I know, right?

A wolf in a god's body.

A god in his own sense.

An anomaly.

It must suck, to be that enigmatic and now that I've met him, *spoken* to him, I know the mystery isn't only on the outside, but woven within.

He could try his hardest, and if he's human like the rest of us, he may have a time or two, and still, he'd be incapable of getting lost in a crowd.

Like the North Star in a dark night's sky, he burns too bright to hide.

How exhausting that must be.

I, however, can blend with the best of 'em.

Or maybe it's the worst of them since the beautiful, boisterous ones never could.

My eyes glide across the old blacktop as Mac appears along the other side of it, doing his best to slip into the crowd. He gives a small, almost unnoticeable tip of his chin, and while Royce makes no move to look his way, my guess is he caught it.

He tilts his head, baiting, and the guys across from him, they bite hard, finally waking up.

"Give me the ball." This comes from Micah, a guy I've had in English class the last few years, who might be the only decent person in this school even if he does only speak to me when necessary in class, but I get the feeling he's not all bad under his armor of expectation.

Micah takes slow forward steps, and his friends decide to follow.

My heart hammers in my chest as I glance toward Royce, and what I find causes it to beat even harder.

Royce shows no sign of caution or any sort of acknowledgment of a change around him, though we all stood here and witnessed Micah make the first move.

I mean, the first after Royce's ball thievery and blatant belittlement.

He doesn't so much as blink at their two-step advance.

No, he holds his cocky boy mode strong, completely unfazed by the mounds of muscle creeping in on him.

I cut a quick glance toward Mac, who seems to have found me in the crowd, and I pointedly look from Royce and back.

Are you going to help him, or what?

The freaking guy grins, crosses his arms and focuses on his friend who clearly has no sense of self-preservation.

Suddenly, Royce stops crossing the ball, now spinning it between his pointer fingers, his palms flattening on it seconds later, elbows out wide.

"Come and get it, pretty boy," he antagonizes Micah. "I'll even go easy on you."

"Fuck you," the guy behind Micah spits. "We're district champs."

"Badass," Royce mocks, but it goes over their head.

They don't know the Brayshaw Wolves are reigning *state* champs. Actually, they might, but they don't know one is standing in front of them.

Royce's smirk is slow, and then his upper body goes lax. He bends at the waist, folding over slightly as he sways his hands, the ball loose within them, from right to left.

The guys understand his move, getting into their stances, and Royce nods.

He flies forward, dribbling, and cutting right, only to spin left, and hop up, making the basket with ease.

He chuckles, licking his lips as he adjusts his jeans.

One of the other guys grabs the ball, looking back to Micah, who stands with fists and furrowed brows.

“Les’ go.” Royce damn near pushes his chest into his. “First to three.”

At first, it seems Micah is ready to tell him to get lost, but then he looks to his friend, who passes him the ball.

“One on one?” Micah attempts to confirm.

“See how quick things flipped here?” Royce grins. “I get one by you and your weak ass five, in your school, and just like that, the torch is in my hand.”

“You better watch it, asshole. You know nothing about us.”

Royce laughs, and I hold my breath.

I’m pretty sure he’s getting a kick out of this.

Whispers start, growing louder and louder.

Royce and Mac notice, their eyes locking across the court as Mac gingerly slides closer, but when Royce gives an almost unnoticeable jerk of his chin, he pauses, his foot right at the edge of the white painted line on the blacktop. He’s close enough to make it over fast if needed, but not so close to draw attention to his presence.

Right then, the reason for the added attention steps through the crowd.

Franky Briggs, the two-sport athlete, son of the police chief, and the worst possible person to step up right now. And my cousin’s boyfriend who lives to take digs at me.

Royce senses him, and glances over his shoulder.

Micah chuckles, prepared for the new guy to tuck and run at the sight of the six-foot-two, most loved, star student, but they’d don’t know a king in the making stands in front of him, and not of the royal kind.

A six-foot-one savage leader with a knack for trouble, and while Franky has that single inch on him, Royce stands as tall

and confident as the clouds, full and uncontrolled, above us all.

Too bad for Franky, his head is up there with him, so he doesn't notice the ease in which Royce stands.

Franky pauses a few feet behind him and claps his hands.

Micah smirks next, and chucks the ball, intending to rainbow it nice and clean over Royce's head to Franky, but Royce jumps up with the ease of a pro, spiking it from the air.

The ball goes flying.

I know the second he clips it where it's headed, and I try to squeeze away, to get lost or hidden in the masses, but everyone's moved in so tight around me now I can't, and after a few low bounces, the ball rolls closer, pausing mere inches from my feet.

If Royce saw me before he didn't let on, but he definitely does now, Franky too.

Well, this sucks.

Royce turns his entire body, now facing me full-on, and a slow, mischievous smirk appears.

He holds his hands up lazily. "Ball me, baby girl."

My neck heats and I kind of want to punch him, but to avoid a potentially worse situation, I move for the ball. Of course before I can attempt to grab it, Franky is there kicking it away.

He steps up, blocking me from Royce completely, and stares down his nose with a heavy glare.

"*Baby girl?*" he hisses with disgust. "Did the trash bring in more trash to keep her company?"

"That would really bother you, wouldn't it?" The moment it leaves my mouth, I almost wish I could take it back.

Almost.

Franky's eyes harden more, but I'm not going to stand here while he plays broadcaster in an effort to tear me down. It won't work and he knows it, which is what drives him in the first place, but that won't stop him from trying.

Or cornering me when I'm alone and he knows nobody is watching.

I turn, ready to walk the hell away, but Franky shoots a hand out, gripping on to my upper arm, and tugs me toward him.

The slightest of jolts zips through my chest, and I whip around, ready to serve him in the nuts, but in the time it takes me to spin toward him, he's already buckling before me.

The hand that was attached to my arm quickly falls, Franky's knees hitting the ground with a hard crunch.

"Fuck!" he shouts with a low growl.

People begin shouting and gasping around us, and as the mob continues to grow larger and louder, Franky's head pops up.

In the same second, a new set of arms wrap around my middle, and I'm tugged away with a gentle force.

"Hey, what—"

"Girl, you better hope that's not the boyfriend you mentioned," is whispered in my ear, and when I glance behind me, it's Mac I find, but he's not looking at me. He stares straight ahead, a tense expression drawing lines along his forehead.

I focus forward as Royce plants his foot back on the ground, and when his gaze comes up to lock with mine, I pull in a lungful of air.

As black as a winter's night, his eyes spear mine, cold and dark with no sign of life in sight.

A monster in the light.

This is the Royce Brayshaw I was told about.

The one who transforms in the blink of an eye.

Gone is the cocky playboy, and in his place stands a daunting disaster waiting to happen.

There's no stopping what comes next.

Or at least that's what I hear.

Royce lets him stand, even moves away to give him the space to do so, and when Franky comes swinging, Royce plants his feet and takes the hit square in his jaw.

Royce's body doesn't waver on impact, but his head jolts slightly.

Franky laughs, fists up and ready to go in again, but when Royce's dark chuckle is what follows, they lower the smallest bit.

Royce looks to the side, spitting blood from the corner of his mouth, and when he turns back, it's with his full body, his right hand coming with it and in with a speed so quick there's no preparing.

He nails Franky square in the temple.

Franky stumbles and comes back swinging, but Royce dips.

He evades like a well-practiced maniac, and as he straightens again, he does so lifting Franky's two-hundred and thirty-pound body from the ground, all to slam him back against it.

His head hits with a hard whack, causing everyone around us to panic and my muscles to turn to stone.

Franky's eyes roll backward, and my temples start to throb.

A few attempt to rush forward, but one look from Royce and they freeze.

They're seeing it, his complete and total nonchalance.

He lifts his thumb, dabbing at his cut lip as his eyes snap my way.

Royce taps his shoe against Franky's ribs, his chest rising and falling angrily as he watches me through blank eyes. "This your man?"

He doesn't have to verbalize the threat, his gravelly tone is packed and laced with an *I dare you to lie* ribbon, one he might just wrap around my throat and strangle me with should I even try.

I shake my head no, focused on the vein in his neck as it throbs heavily beneath his bronzed skin, the tease of the tattoos there, and with each kick of his pulse, my own rises.

My brother constantly reminds me how I'm to fear all who hold the Brayshaw name, but standing here, staring into the shadowy eyes of one, I feel none.

Not even a hint.

The opposite in fact, as the throbbing at my temples seems to dwindle.

Does that make me a fool?

My muscles loosen, Mac's hold on me following suit.

I shake my head no again, and this time more confident than before.

Franky catches it and a harsh scoff leaves him.

"Brielle's man?" he taunts, purposely loud for his peers. "You *must* be new. No one here would touch that."

Franky begins pushing to his feet, but Royce's large hand lands on his shoulder, and with what appears as no effort, shoves him right back down.

Head after head snaps from me to them, and I know their minds are spinning.

I can guess the question at the tip of their tongues.

How do *I*, the out of place charity case, possibly know *him*, a filthy god in the flesh?

Royce doesn't pay them any mind, though, he uses the moment to put his skills to use.

He studies me, considering what I said about a boyfriend, my answer about the asshole on the ground, Franky's response and question, and somehow finds the truth within it all.

And not just my truth, but Franky's too.

I don't have a boyfriend, but Franky wants from me what a boyfriend might get, even if he would never admit it and likely take it only in secret. We both know I'll never give him what he wants, so he gets it from Ciara instead. It's sad, but it's true.

Royce brings a knee up, driving it into Franky's spine and his shoulders bow with a low growl.

Royce steps around him with ease, and with a confidence not many possess as he turns his back to the boy he just made a fool of, complete confidence his friend will watch it for him should his senses fail him.

He slips right in front of me.

As if he can see beyond the impenetrable lens of my glasses, his eyes lock on mine, screaming *play with me*, but I'm not dumb and he isn't the one stuck with these people on a day-to-day basis.

The fire in Franky's words a few minutes ago was an indication of what I already know—Royce won't be here forever, and soon I'll have to answer to the ringleader on the ground.

I must stand still too long because the decision is taken from me.

From behind me, Mac's arms fall, only for Royce's to replace them from the front.

Royce is standing at his full height, so his hands barely reach the belt loop on my pants, but that doesn't stop him from curling the middle fingers of his left hand through one as his right comes up to my neck.

I have no idea why I let him.

I should crush his windpipe, jab a finger between his ribs... something.

I don't.

I don't breathe either, officially a board piece in his little game of humiliation.

"That's right, my man. I'm new to her," he mocks Franky, making a point of tilting his head a bit, his attention locked on me. "But not for long, ain't that right, baby girl?"

He twists his wrists, dragging his knuckle along my collarbone, and doesn't stop until the pads of his fingers meet the reddened skin where Franky grabbed me.

That's when I snap out of it.

I jerk my arm away from him, leaning my body as far away as possible and he frowns, his teeth clenching.

Before he has a chance to do whatever the heck comes after all *that*, a really annoying and unpleasant voice is shouting from somewhere on my right.

"Are you serious?!"

Here we freaking go...

My shoulders fall, a heavy exhale escaping, and Royce releases me, shifting toward the obnoxious voice breaking through the crowd.

Ciara shoves people around until she's in the center of the mess Royce created.

Her jaw drops as she spots Franky on the floor. Guessing this has something to do with our odd little morning, she whips around until she finds me in the crowd.

She pushes forward, and with each step closer she grows, Royce takes one too, but not forward. He shifts to the side, shadowing my body with his own like a big bad bodyguard

would his weak little patron, but he's not needed nor wanted here, so I move as he does and then she's right in front of me.

"What the hell, Brielle?!" she yells, glaring at Royce when he flexes on Franky who finally makes it to his feet. "What, you brought him here to try to show off?"

"Because that's my style."

"Why the hell else?"

"Ciara, chill—"

"Don't tell me to chill! Tell your little *friend* to get out of here," she cuts me off.

"Why don't you, you know him better than me, right?"

Her eyes narrow, and she pushes against my chest. "Do it, Brielle."

"Get out of my face," I tell her calmly.

"What are you gonna do about it, cousin?" she taunts.

My jaw flexes and a sick gleam of satisfaction gleams in her eyes.

She knows I'm on a tight leash, one I clipped to my very own collar because not a soul in this place is worth falling into darkness over.

A mocking laugh follows her little taunt, and then her hands come up to knock my glasses clear off my face.

So I knock her on her ass, her eyes shooting wide and she stumbles into a group of people behind her.

As fast as she's out of my space, Mac's got her by the wrist.

People stare, wide-eyed and tripped out as this isn't something they've seen before.

I can pretty much hear their internal gasps.

Did little Brielle Bishop claw out of her casket?

Ciara growls, growing red with embarrassment, but gets one good look at my swollen eyes, and quickly finds her way to win.

“Aw, look at you.” She fake pouts with a vile gleam in her eye. “All swollen and red. Guess you cried yourself to sleep again last night, huh?” She smirks, doing her best to paint me weak and worthless when she knows the truth behind is far from her childish taunt.

She also knows I won’t rebut and instead let these people believe whatever the hell they want.

Bitch.

I bend, reaching for my glasses, but find Micah has already picked them up, and is bent at the knee a few feet away, holding them out for me. With a thankful twitch of my lips, I grab the cheap frames and straighten.

I give Ciara a small shrug, and force myself to her level, even if it is a crappy place to be. “You wouldn’t know, since you spent it in Greg’s bed.”

Low laughter spreads throughout the courtyard, and her eyes widen.

I instantly feel like dirt, but I need this over.

Franky pushes to his feet, his eyes meeting mine briefly before looking away.

“Let’s go,” he says to no one, yet everyone.

Ciara shakes her head, jerking in Mac’s hold and when he realizes she’s only trying to walk away, he lets her.

She pushes on Franky’s chest, and thankfully the bell rings, ending this midday nightmare.

While the crowd around us takes slow steps to make sure they don’t miss anything juicy, I do the opposite. I spin and hightail it as quick as my sore ankle allows in the opposite direction.

I make it a whole three feet before Royce falls in line beside me.

“Campus security or the principal will be out here any second, how they weren’t at the start of your little head honcho showdown, I don’t even know.”

“Fuck ‘em.” He slides in my path, halting my escape.

I stop walking.

“That’s easy for someone who doesn’t go here to say,” I tell him as I turn my head away, but he grips my chin, bringing it right back.

He takes in every inch of the puffy red skin surrounding my eyes.

He studies me for a long, unnerving moment, and slowly, small creases form along his forehead, but then he blinks.

With the single flick of his eyelids, his mood changes, and a slow grin pulls at his mouth. “I was bettin’ on brown.”

Despite being a little embarrassed and a lot irritated, a small chuckle escapes. I slip my glasses back on, but he quickly pushes them up on my head.

“Yeah, well.” I roll my eyes playfully. “I’m pretty good at disappointing people.”

“Who said I was disappointed?”

I cross my arms, fighting a grin as I shake my head. “Don’t you think you should go now, or did you not start enough trouble to feed your rebelled soul?”

“Baby girl.” He pushes closer. “You know nothin’ about my soul, and if you call that trouble, your little world here must be as lame as it looks.”

“If you’re not a fan of this *little world*.” I give a small shrug. “Go back to your own.”

He silently stares but there’s a question floating around in those dark eyes of his, one he refuses to ask.

He makes no move, so I add, “Seriously, you should go, at least off campus.”

“Rushin’ me, little Bishop?” he tsks. “Not a fan of quickies.”

I frown. “If one-liners like that are what the girls you spend your time with find cute or even a little bit appealing, then I feel bad for you.”

“Oh yeah, and why’s that?”

“Because that would mean you know nothing about actual effort, and that’s a shame. Someone with the world at their fingertips should be far more than a bag of jokes and heavy fists.”

The way he watches me is intense, it’s as if he’s trying to see inside my head, but what’s worse, it’s as if he can. As if he’s realizing all the things I wish he wouldn’t.

The things I don’t talk about or share.

Not that I have people lining up who care to know.

Not that I allow anyone close enough to.

His eyes narrow farther, and I go to step by him, but he slides with me.

A heavy sigh escapes me and I shake my head. “I need to go. I have class,” I stress, knowing the cost—literally—of being late, and the need to get away from him. Fast.

His glare is so heavy now, so calculating, I can hardly see the brown of his eyes. He doesn’t take his focus off of me as he pulls a rolled-up stack of twenties from his pocket and holds it up.

I glance from it to him. “What’s that for?”

He grips my hand, slaps it inside, and stalks off.

“Royce—”

“Take that to the teachers’ lounge,” he cuts me off in a tone void of emotion as he glances at me over his shoulder.

“Might wanna be quick about it.”

Teachers’ lounge?

“For what?!”

My question goes unanswered as he disappears.

Curiosity is the only reason I turn on my heels and make my way to the main hall, which is on the complete other side of the school from where my next class is.

Ibuprofen will be my foot’s best friend tonight.

I step inside and George spots me right away, rushing over.

My shoulders fall.

Great!

So the jerk set me up to get in trouble?

“George, I...”

I what?

What can I even say?

The guy who slipped onto campus and went all Damon Salvatore, started whooping on people because of me is a stranger to me?

I don’t get a chance to say anything, though. George beats me to it.

“Ms. Bishop.” He grins, his eyes falling to the money in my palm. “That for me?”

My gaze drops to the wad of Ben Franklins. “Uh—”

I cut off when loud bangs sound against the large metal door of the teachers’ lounge.

George reaches for the cash, so I hand it over, and he quickly shoves it in his pocket. Tugging his keys from his belt loop, he slips one in the lock and smiles. “You might want to start walking away now, Ms. Bishop. Staff meeting gone wrong.” He chuckles.

I nod, slowly doing as he says, and then the click of the lock sounds, teacher after teacher piling out, heavy complaints falling from their lips.

“Whoa now. How the heck did you folks get locked in there?” George asks, meeting my eyes one last time for a small wink.

What... he locked them inside?

I spin around, quickly moving toward my next class, but as I grow closer, I realize Royce had it all covered from the start, and not for his benefit.

For mine.

I mean, in a weird, messed-up kind of way that also allowed him to do his thing, draw attention and get a read on my reality.

A laugh makes its way up my throat.

A good, true laugh.

Not loud or bubbling, but one that allows a little bit of light inside.

I should fear the airy sensation that’s evaded me for so long now, but instead I hold on to it.

Because while the sun and the moon light our lives with a single glance, to *feel* that light is rare, and something that can’t be robbed from you before it should.

Because a feeling comes from the inside, not the out.

Chapter 4



ROYCE

BLUE.

No, not blue, teal.

Fuck, not teal...

A little deeper, a mix of both, but crisp and clear with an icy center.

Turquoise.

But what up with the swollen eyes and why'd her bitch cousin call her out like that?

She seemed like a tiny pushover, but then she straight *pushed* the cousin over.

Didn't expect that from the tiny one.

"You good over there?"

My head snaps toward Mac and he chuckles. "Day dreamin'?"

"Bro, fuck you."

He laughs harder, shaking his head. "For real, what's up?"

I lick my lips, facing forward.

I don't talk shit through with anyone but my brothers or Raven, but it's just us here, so fuck it, yeah?

"The chick who showed up out there?"

He nods.

"That's her cousin. Notice how she looks a helluva lot more like Bishop than the other one, pale as fuck, dark hair, problem with the world?"

"I did." He shifts his body to face me better, fully aware there's a lot more coming.

"Couple days before Bass moved into the group home, Brielle was sent out here, meaning she wasn't a part of our world anymore. A week after that, he came asking for her file, offering to work for free for the first two years in our world if we handed it over and let him get rid of it."

"Smart on his end." He nods. "Got her out, waited, then asked knowing it would make no difference to you guys at that point."

I lean back. "Exactly. And it didn't. As far as we were concerned, we did our part, the girl was set for a better life than the one she had, so we handed him what he wanted. We might have even respected the prick's loyalty to his sister for his willingness to have less if it meant doing what he thought was right for her, keep her safe and away, or what-the-fuck-ever."

"And you still paid the guy 'cause you wanted him to push himself." He nods.

Exactly.

Mac gets it, he's moving up in Brayshaw and learning the ins and outs, the strength of our pull in the circle around us.

I lay it all out since he'll be our main man soon, even if he doesn't know it yet.

"The thing about our files?" I shake my head. "They ain't copies. They're straight from the fucking county servers,

deleted from record the second they touch our hands. Hospital visits, police reports, school fuck-ups. Poof, shit doesn't exist, never happened."

He studies me, slowly dropping back against the door. "And when the Bishops' files came to you guys, you were only freshmen, so you took your dad's word after a quick look inside. You didn't read them."

I nod. "Only read one, a report on assault charges against Bass to get an idea of how good his hands were."

"You came here with no clue who this girl was or what she was about."

"Nothin' but a name and address, my man, and that shit cost a fuck-ton to get my hands on, so when I got here, saw the look-alike cousin, I told my ass *that's her, done fuckin' deal.*" I raise a brow. "I almost got got, bro. If the cousin didn't give her up, I would have."

"Nah, man." He shakes his head. "You'd have figured it out."

Maybe.

Not very Brayshaw of me to jump to conclusions without proof.

My brothers would whoop my ass.

Or they'd try.

Raven *definitely* would, and then maybe Brielle's for fuckin' with me, if she wasn't pregnant with my brothers' kid.

Maybe even then.

A small smile finds my lips at that, but even the thought of my family isn't erasing the shit swimming in my head.

Mac sees it.

"That's not what's hot on your mind." My friend knows me. "Lay it on me, man."

I lick my lips, glaring out the window.

“Bass asked us to send her here because he said it was what was best for her then, that her family here loved her. Wanted her. That she’d have more here, a life. A future to build off of, like we were offering him.” I turn to Mac. “That the vibe you got?”

Like I knew he would, Mac shakes his head no.

When I decided I was headed this way, my only clear thought was to get here and toy with the little sister of the fucker who ticked me off, to tease or test her out a bit. After that, I’d leave, and with a spicy story to share with the punk the next time I saw him.

But then what was supposed to be our dirty little meet and greet turned into a twisted ass grab and go, and fuck man.

I don’t know.

My instincts are teasing at the trigger, screaming something ain’t right.

Her cousin and all the bullshit she brings, the school...

The ease surrounding her while in a car with a stranger.

How it was nowhere to be found inside the school.

“You’re staying.” He eyes me, but he didn’t ask a question and a response isn’t needed.

I pull a joint from the glovebox and relax into the seat.

“Thirsty?” Mac asks.

I grin, lifting the joint. “Bout to be.”

Mac laughs, puts the car in drive, and off we go.

I flick on the lighter, pull it to the tip and puff until it’s hitting good, the smoke rolling from my lips.

Brielle Bishop.

Tiny.

Feisty.

In for a fuckin’ ride.

Brielle

RIGHT WHEN I THOUGHT THE NIGHTMARE WAS COMING TO AN end with the glorious sound of the final school bell piercing my ears, I remember the way every *Goosebumps* book I've ever read ended, with realization the problem isn't really gone, but still very much lurking, like the tattooed bad boy straight ahead, for instance.

He leans against the car with his arms crossed over his chest, staring straight at me.

I release a heavy sigh and continue to hobble forward.

With each step closer I grow, Royce's chin lifts.

I stop a few feet away from him. "You're still here."

"And you're damn excited about it."

A low laugh leaves me, and I cut a quick glance away, but I'm pulled right back when his arms drop.

"You lied to me," he says as he pushes off the curb, reaching out to blindly tug the back door open. "Now you owe me."

"I'm not sleeping with you." The refusal flies from me before I realize it's coming.

Royce's hand pauses on the frame, my words freezing him there for a split second. Once he snaps out of it, he stalks toward me, confidence dripping with his every step, and he doesn't stop until he's a shuffle of his feet away.

He licks his lips. "That a challenge?"

I smother a laugh, shaking my head as I put some space between us. "Definitely not, but absolutely worth the mention."

He scans me a moment. "Get in the car, baby Bishop."

“If I don’t?”

He laughs, but it’s mocking and short. “Funny. You’re funny.”

That little bit of distance I created?

He erases it, closing in on me with a cautionary glare. “See, my telling you to, was me being nice about it—”

“An order is your idea of polite, got it. Keep going.”

His face hardens more, and his eyes flash with something else, a mulled question he has no intention of sharing, but wants the answer to nonetheless. “You can refuse all you want, smart-ass, but know that either way your ass ends up in the car. *You climb in* or I pick you up and *put* you in, but you might wanna avoid that since your boy’s got his little runners watchin’.”

I tense despite myself, but don’t look, and answer honestly. “I don’t care about them.”

“Good.” He cocks his head. “Neither do I. Now get in.”

“Are you always this bossy?”

“Yes.”

My leg bounces as I consider what he said before. “What do you mean I owe you, owe you what?”

“Two truths for every lie.”

“I’ll just lie again.”

“Nah.” He flicks my hair, his eyes snapping to mine. “You won’t.”

The sureness in his rich and gravelly tone has unease growing in the pit of my stomach.

“You don’t know me.”

“You sure?”

Am I?

Maybe he's the person who's been parking at the end of my street, watching me the last couple weeks. My brother did say they're the only ones who sort of kind of knew where I ended up. I doubt he'd admit it if I asked, though.

I run my tongue along the backs of my teeth, a small frown pulling at my lips as I consider what to do, and in the end, I'm rolling my eyes, stepping around him and sliding inside the damn car.

And what do you know, Royce slips in beside me.

Neither he nor Mac talk much on the drive, so I sit as quietly as they do until I realize we're pulling up at one of the two hotels in this town.

A heavy strain tugs at my muscles and I push my hands into the worn seats. "Yeah, no. I'm not about to go inside there with you two."

They laugh but say nothing, both climbing out and meeting near the back of the car.

I start to sweat.

Are they planning my demise?

Confirming where to drop the body?

Taking it back to Brayshaw where no one would dare come looking for it?

Tension threatens to rise as I try to read their lips but fail. This could quickly turn into something really bad for me if I don't stay calm, but then Mac passes off the keys to Royce as he steps up to another small car parked beside us, and with that one move, I'm able to settle myself.

He opens the driver's door, so I decide it's safe for me to climb out and eavesdrop.

"So you'll go straight to the school, figure out what's going on?" Royce asks him, glancing my way quickly when I close the door. "None of us will be back on campus until I'm home. My brothers are on a hump-cation until I get back."

Mac chuckles. “As soon as I get home, I’m there. I’ll find out what has the school on edge, check in throughout the day.”

“Thanks, man, now go home to your girl, put her to bed.”

Mac grins. “She’ll just be waking up by the time I get there.”

“And she hasn’t been dicked down in a few days,” Royce jokes. “I believe in you.”

Mac laughs, his fist lifting to meet Royce’s. “Later, bro.” He tips his chin, glancing at me with a smirk and low salute. “Later, Bishop.”

I smash my lips together, offering a small wave, and then we watch him drive away.

As I look back, I find Royce’s attention on me, where it stays for several seconds.

Studying.

Measuring.

Curious?

He looks off, slipping right into the driver’s seat so I make my way into the passenger’s.

A few minutes up the road he pulls into a Cruiser’s station and unbuckles his seat belt, so I step out with him.

As we walk in, he follows behind, crowding my space the second I open the glass door to the cold drinks.

His pecs are pretty much equal with my shoulder blades, the buckle of his belt gently scraping at the high curve of my back as he presses me forward. He cages me there, shuffling closer until he’s so close, I have to bring my hand up to grip the cool plastic racks to keep me from falling against the shelving.

In contrast with the chilled air blowing against my front, his heated breath burns along the skin behind my ear, and I incline my chin just enough to meet his eyes.

“Are you trying to seduce me in the fridge of a mini-mart that smells like recycled mop water?”

“Come on now, little Bishop, you’re smarter than that.” He leans in, his smirk a mischievous one. “If I wanted to seduce you, you’d be in my hotel room already.”

Before I can blink, the chilled air wraps around my back, the heat of his body having disappeared, but you bet your ass he can hear my laughter wherever it is he ran off to.

I smile to myself.

Man, he’s seriously on that pro ho level.

It’s over the top and unnecessary, but it’s also a breath of fresh air, loosening it a bit.

With a shake of my head, I grab my drink, circling the back of the store in search of my go-to breakfast, and make my way toward the register.

As I round one corner, Royce does the other, both of us already biting into our item of choice—a chocolate-covered donut with sprinkles.

His eyes narrow, dropping to the Yoo-hoo in my left hand as I spot the one tucked beneath his arm.

“You don’t have to get the same shit I do,” he scolds me like a child. “I’ll buy you whatever you want.”

My eyes widen. “Oh, I copied *you*? Nice try. What, you afraid to show your food of choice?”

He glares. “This is my food of choice.”

I shrug, biting at a small piece of the chocolate glaze before it falls and set my drink on the counter. “Well, mine, too, and before you convince yourself otherwise, know I can pay for a three-dollar meal.”

He’s full of suspicion as he lowers his drink beside mine on the countertop, and with more force than necessary. He ignores what I said about paying, throws a twenty down, and walks out.

He doesn't speak once back in the car, and before I know it, we're pulling up at my aunt's house. He puts the car in park, grabs his phone, and starts pressing buttons.

I hesitate, taking my time looping my backpack through my arms as I wait for some sort of insight as to why today happened, but he doesn't take his face from his screen, so I step out and close the door behind me.

My feet have barely crossed the curb when he's pulling away.

I'm not sure why he bothered to be there after school and insisted I ride with him when all he did was silently bring me back here, but does it really matter?

I keep my head held high as I walk around to the back yard and set my bag down on the grass.

From the far side of the house, I grab the small milk crate basket, and bring it around, laying out the blanket stuffed inside it, and flip the thing upside down.

I allow myself five minutes to relax and enjoy my Yoo-hoo and the last bites of my donut, and then I get to work.

I pull out my books and start on my homework, feeling guilty for wishing the light away, but so ready to be able to climb into bed and stare at the stars.

Chapter 5



ROYCE

I DROP ONTO THE SPRINGY ASS BED IN THE SO-CALLED SUITE and prop my phone up on the Bible I found in the drawer. The second I've got it planted right, my phone rings.

I grin, answering the video call from my family.

Raven is the first face to pop up on the screen, her black hair tied up on her head, baggy-ass hoodie covering her entire body.

“Ponyboy!” She grins.

“RaeRae, I fuckin’ miss your ass already.”

She laughs, scooting back what must be the laptop back on the coffee table. “Same. Hang on, let me make more room.”

I nod, reaching over to grab my takeout bag and drop it in front of me.

A couple seconds pass, and then Captain’s dropping onto the couch, Victoria perching on the armrest beside him.

“VicVee,” I call to her, brushing my finger along my lip. “Got a little dried cum there,” I tease.

“Fuck off.” She laughs, swiping at it. “Zoey insisted on feeding me a bite of her pasta.”

“Where is my niece?”

Cap looks past the camera with a grin. “She’s comin’.”

“RaeRae, where’d you go? Where’s Maddoc?”

“I’m here!” She comes back on the screen, dropping beside Captain. “Maddoc’s grabbing a soda from the pool house ‘cause your dad has the good shit in there.”

“You mean Maddoc replaced everything with caffeine-free shit again hoping you’d go for it?”

“Exactly.” She laughs.

I grin. “Lemme see my baby.”

“Stop saying your baby, dick!” Maddoc shouts in the distance.

Both me and Cap laugh, our eyes glued to Raven as she stretches her arms out as much as she can, pulling the bottom of the hoodie up to show her perfectly round belly. Yeah, I was with her a few days ago, but I don’t want to miss any of this.

“How the fuck’s there a person in there, RaeRae?”

I stare at her belly.

A couple weeks ago I got a surprise in the form of an envelope, and inside it was the official sex of Maddoc and Raven’s baby. The sex that they themselves don’t even know.

It was a gift she gave me, that they gave me, one I could never repay or match.

I know it’s because she wanted me to have something to hold on to, and it was a damn good one. Now all I need to do is get a little present that’s fitting so I’m prepared for when that little baby meets mama and pops. And us.

Raven smirks, knowing I’m thinking about what she’s having but doesn’t dare ask. She drops back onto the cushion, Maddoc finally beside her.

“What up?” He nods his chin, the corner of his mouth lifting, his eyes trailing every inch of me he can see. “Shit’s

fuckin' weird.”

I nod, my smile small.

It is.

It's only been a few days, but that's a long ass fucking time for us. With the exception of the few fucked-up situations over the last year, we're always together this time of day, so not to be, fucking sucks.

It's not normal for us to be apart.

We live and breathe for each other, with each other.

We don't need words to speak, we don't need action to understand.

We're like triplets, connected way deeper than most. We talk without words, understand with action. We breathe for each other. We're three assholes who couldn't be any more different, yet somehow, we're still the same. We're a team with an empire ready and waiting for us.

I scoff, thinking of what Brielle called us—the Three Musketeers.

I guess that works in a way, even though our threesome has grown to five.

I'm the odd man out now.

The leftovers.

“Royce...” Raven eases.

My eyes snap to hers, and concern brings creases to her forehead.

She leans closer to the screen, frown growing. “You good?”

“Damn good, if I'm judging myself.”

There you go, deflect like a motherfucker.

She scoffs a laugh, but we all know what she's gettin' at.

“So, what up? How’s the hump-cation going now that you’re practically a fuckin’ continent away in the back wing of the house? I see you can still sit and stand as well as that belly allows, Madman must not be—”

“I’ll fuck you up, brother,” Maddoc cuts me off with a glare.

“But I’m so far away.” I grin.

He chuckles, flipping me off as he takes a drink from a water bottle.

“We’re good, Ponyboy.” Raven smirks. “Good mornings, afternoons... nights.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

She laughs, her eyes moving to Maddoc when he reaches out and I know what’s coming.

And there she fuckin’ is.

Bouncy blonde curls pulled up tight, little strands framing her face, and a megawatt smile pointed right at me. “Uncle Bro!” our princess screams, leaning as close as possible to the screen.

“Zoey Bear! I miss you!”

“I miss you!” She giggles. “Uncle D said you want me to watch cartoons with him tomorrow ‘cause you’re not home.”

“Uncle D is a li—”

“Okay,” Cap cuts me off with a glare and I fight a grin.

We might be fucked-up assholes, but we’re trying to teach our niece, Cap’s baby girl, our way of life, and one of the biggest pieces to keeping it as straight as we’ve managed is our no lie rule. No matter how big the issue, how fucked-up we imagine the aftermath of the truth, that’s what we give. Always.

Sure, this is tiny and nearly irrelevant as far as dishonesties go—my brother trying to compete for that top uncle spot with

me—but to a toddler, a lie is a lie.

So I smile for my niece, nodding my head, and damn, she gives back.

Maddoc chuckles to himself and I flip him off when Zoey looks to her dad as he stands up and disappears from sight.

“So what’s on the menu tonight?”

Light chuckles leave them, and they all look to Raven.

I try to push away the hint of seclusion it brings. I mean, fuck, I’m the one who came here without them when they’d have hopped in the car with me without a question asked had I asked them to.

Still, that nasty sense of fish out of fucking water creeps in.

Raven notices, her eyes narrowing, but I avoid eye contact.

“Well, we ordered Chinese at the pregnant lady’s request,” Victoria teases.

“But she said it tasted like shit,” Maddoc grumbles. “I swear to God, all she wants to eat is Doritos with hot sauce and sweets.”

I laugh, making a mental note to stock up on loads of bad-for-you shit for her when I get home.

Cap comes back, setting a plate in front of Zoey, and she climbs down to eat.

“What is that?”

“Fried chicken. And guess what he fried it in?” Victoria raises a playful brow. “Crushed up Doritos.”

I smile and Maddoc shakes his head at his girl, grabbing two plates from Captain and then they’re all on screen again, food in hand.

Maddoc nods his chin at my bag, so I tear it open and pull out a fat tri-tip sandwich.

“Not much to pick from around here, but they’ve got enough barbeque shit to last a lifetime.”

All three give light nods.

I know they want to ask where ‘here’ is, but they won’t. They know I’ll tell them the truth if they do, but the fact that I didn’t offer it up means I don’t feel like sharing yet, and they won’t push unless they feel the need to.

Instead, Cap asks, “Mac head out already?”

“Yup,” I say through a mouthful. “He’ll be there by morning.”

My brothers nod but not Raven.

“You’re fine without him?” She watches me closely.

“I’m a big-ass boy, RaeRae,” I tease.

She drops her fork with a click that echoes through the speaker. “That’s not what I’m talking about and you know it. You’re by yourself. Away from us.”

“I’m good.”

“Says the guy who hates riding in the back seat by his damn self.”

A choked cough disguised as a laugh fills the stale smelling room, and I shift on the bed.

“For real, I’m fine.”

Worry draws her brows together, but she looks away, knowing I’m here and they’re there and there’s nothing changing about that until I decide there is. I love her ass for pausing to voice her concern though—she understands me fully.

Captain shifts the mood to something lighter, and we bullshit our way through the rest of dinner, hanging up after we agree to hop on at the same time tomorrow, and every other night until we’re all back where we should be.

When we were seven, our father gave us tokens meant to link us physically, when emotionally we were since day one.

He gave Maddoc a key, Captain brass knuckles, and me a white gold chain donning the family crest.

Each had their own meaning linked directly to who he saw in our eyes, and mine is a presentation of our family's strength as a whole.

At seven, I was smaller than my brothers, skinnier, but not weaker. I was ten-foot-tall in my mind when I stood less than half of that. I remember our dad told me I walked spine straight and shoulders strong, head high and proud.

He gave me the chain that then hung low over my abdomen, and said the crest was mine to wear proudly, like a soldier with his tags, like a general does his medals. He said it represented the fight our family had. The fight he knew I would never walk away or cower from.

At seven, maybe even younger, our father saw strength we didn't yet know, but believed in.

But we know it now.

I pull the chain from beneath my shirt, reading over the inscription on the back, the same inspiration etched into each of our items.

A couple of years ago I tattooed the words on my body, so that if I ever lost this necklace, they'd still be with me, reminding me of what I could never forget.

Family runs deeper than blood.

A bold, brave statement that's the truest I've ever heard.

We understood the power of those words as kids, and we hold them even higher now.

The ones we love most, we share nothing less than our hearts, minds, and lives with.

Something like having dinner together might seem trivial to those on the outside, but it's far fucking more to us.

Eating together is a tradition we're not willing to break, and only did a few times as of recent when our world was

fucked and never want to do it again. It's something we promised each other as we grew, that no matter how fucked our world might be at times, no matter the wild, the trouble we're facing, be it town drama or our own, the last meal of the day we'd spend together. At the end of the day it's a good way to refresh our memories, in case we ever forget—if nothing else, we'll always have each other.

Family by choice.

A reminder we bleed like everyone else, even if our world sets us apart from others our age.

I guess Brielle's little mobster joke was semi on point.

I push my food aside, lying back on the shitty bed and flat pillows, staring up at the ceiling.

Mobster and musketeers.

The girl thinks she's educated when it comes to our world.

I'm thinking not.

But why the fuck am I thinking of the brat to begin with?

Maybe I do need to go home.

As I think it, a nauseating need for a crowd creeps in, screaming for me to make my way toward others, the suffocating sense of how I'm sittin' solo in this box of a room weighing next, but I force that bitch back.

I just said I was fine, and I am. I brought myself here. Told Mac to leave me here. I'm good.

I'm good.

I trace the crown molding on the ceiling, trying to focus on the overlapping paint and chipped corners, but my eyes pull toward the clock, and then to the silver key sitting beside it.

Fuck it.

I push to my feet, slip a black hoodie on and I'm out the door.

I don't know where I'm going, but I can't sit in a locked-up room full of shrieking silence, so I hop in the weak-ass car and off I go.

By the time I realize where I'm headed, I'm already there.

Parked right outside of Brielle's aunt's house.

The house is dark, so I'm ready to keep rolling, but then I spy a splash of silver.

What the fuck?

I hop out and stomp my ass across the yard, and sure as shit, there she is, slumped over one of those things stacked at the backs of every grocery store, still in her school uniform.

My muscles flex as I approach, but it doesn't take long to realize she's breathing, and frustration follows.

Irrational irritation flares in my gut. "Wake up."

Brielle's head pops up, her hair covering half her face as she manically whips her upper body from left to right.

In a fucking frenzy, she swipes the silver strands from her face, squeezing her eyes closed as tight as possible.

"Come on, come on, come on," she whispers, her hands coming up to shield her, her fingers gently tapping at her lids.

"Hate to break it to you, little Bishop, but if you're trying to wake yourself up... you ain't sleepin'."

Every muscle in her tiny body locks, her fingers spreading just enough to allow her to meet my gaze through the gap.

Her shoulders fall with her hands as if I wasn't the cause of her little trip out just now, a frown quickly following.

"*What* are you doing here?" she hisses.

"Fuck are you doing *out* here?" I crouch down beside her, my elbows on my knees.

Her fingers come up to cover her yawn. "What time is it?"

My jaw tics. “Why you outside, in the fuckin’ dark, alone?”

Now she glares. “Stop answering my questions with a question.”

“Stop askin’ questions and answer mine.”

“Oh my god.” She shakes her head with a huff.

“The hell are you doing sleeping on a fucking box outside at nine at night?”

There. I gave her the time.

Consider me fucking kind.

“I was...” She trails off, spotting her books sitting beside her, and it’s as if a little light bulb flicks on.

“I was doing homework.” She nods, trying to convince herself. “I guess I fell asleep.”

I focus on the stack of shit at her side.

“Right.” I lick my lips, my eyes flicking to hers. “You finished your work, put it all together like a good little student would, set it down all nice and fuckin’ neat, and forgot to stand up and go inside?”

A crease forms along her forehead. “I was looking for Ursa Minor?”

My head tugs back. “Ursa what?”

“Star gazing?”

Slowly, one of my brows kicks up. “That a question?”

She pinches her mouth to the side.

I glance at the house, not a light left on as far as I can tell.

I push to my feet. “Get up.”

“Royce.”

I grab her things off the grass, stuffing it in her bag, and stare down at her, still sitting Indian style on the ground.

“Up.”

“I’m good here, thanks,” she says, but her lips are pulled in tight.

“On five, I’m carrying you into that house.”

She scoffs, but the longer she looks at me, the more uneasy she grows.

I knew something was fucked-up here.

I’ll give her a chance to tell me what it is.

“Why are you out here?”

She focuses on her bag in my hand.

I fling it over my shoulder, bend, and scoop her ass up.

Her eyes are wide and on me, leaving her no choice but to hold on tight.

“One.”

“Royce—”

“Two.”

“Don’t—”

“Five.”

I’m up the steps, my hand planted on the handle when hers flies out to cover mine, the heat of her palm freezing me on the spot.

My eyes slice to hers.

The muscles in my stomach coil over, and my arms stiffen around her.

She stares up at me, eyes a darkened, tortured turquoise, silently begging me to let go, turn the fuck around and walk back down.

This girl, she doesn’t know me.

I don’t know her.

So how the fuck do I know what she wants?

And even more warped, how does she know that I do?

She proves it by drawing her hand away, the cool night air replacing it as the breeze rolls over my knuckles.

I let go of the damn doorknob, but not her eyes.

I hold them with a heavy frown as I make my way across the grass, bypassing the spot I grabbed her from, and not stopping until we reach the car. I let her legs drop, lowering her feet to the ground and reach by her to tug on the door.

Something's on the tip of her tongue, an attempt to argue maybe, but instead, she lets go, slides into the seat and stares straight ahead.

I close her in, taking slow as shit steps around the car too... I don't even fuckin' know why.

But it sure as hell seems necessary.

That alone should have me kicking her ass out of the car.

Instead, I slide inside it and take us to the first place I can find that's still open—a small townie diner.

We've been here for twenty minutes now and for the last fifteen, she's pretended not to be watching me from her corner of the booth while I've been purposely ignoring the fact that she is, straight focused on my fries and chocolate shake.

Her dramatic huff and hard smack of the spoon on the tabletop does what she wants, though.

I turn my head toward her. "What?"

"Aren't you going to ask me why I was outside?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Cause I already know."

"Okay..." She twists her body to face mine. "So why was I?"

“Nah.” I shake my head. “I’m not playin’ your bullshit, just waitin’ until I get to take your ass back and drop you on the curb.”

“If that’s the truth, why bother showing up in the first place?”

My brows snap together, realizing I don’t know the answer to that.

What I do know is I felt restless, the need to get out and breathe was fucking smothering, so that’s what I did.

Ain’t nothin’ to it.

When I don’t respond, her eyes drop to her straw.

After a few quiet seconds, she says, “You wouldn’t do that.”

“Wouldn’t do what?”

“Drop me on the curb.”

I wipe my face of all expression, my wall shooting higher, and with it comes a bit of a bite. “Don’t pretend to know me.”

“Don’t show your cards so quickly.”

“Girl—”

“Brielle.” She tips her chin.

Anger brims beneath my skin, heating me from the inside out.

I cock my head, but before I say a damn word, she raises her brows like a brat, leans into my space, and takes a fry from my plate, popping it into her mouth.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to make sure I’m safe,” she says.

“I don’t give a shit what you are or aren’t,” I spit.

She’s twisting my damn nerves.

Brielle rolls her eyes, reaching for her milkshake. “Okay, I’ll rephrase, so we can pretend you’re impassive and careless

when you're clearly kind of not, how's that sound?"

I glare. "Sounds like you want to be left here."

She laughs but keeps her little smart-ass shit up. "There's nothing wrong with you not liking the idea of a girl being in a dangerous situation. How was that... better?"

"If sleeping outside is a *dangerous situation* and you're aware of that, why do it?"

"If walking onto a campus where people don't know what a badass mama-jamma you are is dangerous, *why do it?*" she mocks.

I lick my lips, squashing the grin that's tempted to show itself. "Ain't nothin' dangerous about that."

"Picking a fight with a handful of guys and the dude who is basically their own little idol—or not little," she corrects herself. "Franky is actually pretty gigantic and muscly and stuff and—" She laughs suddenly, cutting herself off. "What?"

I glare. "I didn't say shit."

She pulls her lips in, amusement washing over her, and it pisses me off.

"You didn't say anything," she agrees. "But your face did the whole 'I'm annoyed', angry boy thing."

"I am annoyed. You talk too much."

"And you brought me to this diner, sat us away from absolutely everyone, to what?" she steals another fry, swiping it along her ice cream before biting into it. "Eat?"

"Don't get it twisted," I say slowly. "We're only here to kill time until you're allowed inside the house you live in, but if you prefer to sleep on the ground, say the fuckin' word and back we'll fucking go."

Her body stiffens, her focus falling to the cold treat in front of her.

She grabs her spoon, lightly stirring the thick malt. “I didn’t say I couldn’t go inside.”

“You panicked when I went for the door handle.”

She opens her mouth, but closes it, her gaze sliding to mine and chock-full of unease.

“Tell me why.”

She keeps her mouth clamped shut, but then lifts a single shoulder, her eyes bouncing between mine. “Because what other choice do we have, Royce Brayshaw, other than to do what we must to survive?”

“You have to sleep outside to survive?”

“I have to avoid bad situations to survive, but I’ll save us both the back and forth and reiterate, no crime, remember? The people are jerks, but words are words.” She shrugs. “It’s perfectly safe to sleep pretty much anywhere here. No crime, remember?”

My eyes narrow, and I want to ask her what she meant with the first part of her statement but go with something simpler. “There’s crime everywhere.”

She thinks on it a second and says, “That’s fair, but it’s not the kind you’re used to.”

“How would you know, little Bishop?” I lean forward. “If big brother hides as much of our world as the fucker’s supposed to, as you led on he does, then how do you know what kind of shit I see?”

She plants one arm on the table, and the other on the back of the booth, meeting my few inches forward with a few of her own. “You’d be surprised what you can find on the internet.”

“So you stalk us?”

“Not you.” Her eyes cloud with longing, but she blinks it away. “My home.”

Confusion swims in my head as I study her.

“Tell me,” she says, her tone tired but not with a need for sleep. “Do you hide things from your brothers?”

My muscles jolt at the mention of my family. “No.”

“So they know you’re here?”

My lips press together and a small smile finds her, but it’s not a triumphant, bitchy one.

The girl almost comes off wretched.

“That’s what I thought, you’re the black sheep. You didn’t lie to them, but you do bend the rules until they make sense in your favor, sort of ride the line to the very edge, forever jumping before you have a chance to fall.” She lays her head on her fist as she stares up at me. “I’m kind of like that, too. The black sheep, for sure, but the rules... I don’t exactly bend them. I do what I’m supposed to for the most part, with school and at the house and whatnot, but—” She cuts herself off with a scowl and looks away. “You’ll think I’m lame.”

“I already do.”

A quick laugh leaves her, the corner of her lips lifting and almost cracking mine, but I don’t allow it, instead, I let myself sink into the seat more.

I keep this shit as simple as it is.

“Why do you care what I think?”

Her gaze holds a hint of reserve, but she decides to keep going. “I like to spin things in my own mind, to believe the choices made for me are made in my favor. That way it sucks a little less than the truth.”

Lies fuck up everything. She has to know this.

Right?

I sit up straighter. “If you’re lyin’ to yourself, who can you trust?”

She faces forward, turning to look into the darkness outside the window beside her. “No one.” She pulls in a heavy

breath, slowly brings her eyes back to mine. “Not a soul.”

Something stirs beneath my ribs, but I’m not sure what to make of it.

No one.

She can trust no one.

Not even herself.

“People suck, but small towns suck even more,” she adds with a resigned smile. “All these people ever do is whisper about how lucky I am, and how I need to take advantage of the new opportunities I supposedly have here—work harder, do more, get involved.” She rolls her eyes. “But it’s such crap. They don’t really want that. They just want to feel better about themselves when they pass me on the street and look the other way.”

It will be better for her, I can hear Bass’ words loud and fucking clear.

But is it?

She sounds miserable, and worse, accepting of it.

“I’m not ungrateful, I appreciate having somewhere to go.” She decides to share more, and I’m locked in, waiting for her reasoning and irritated over my internal need to know. “And of course I want more out of life, but not here, and not the life people look at me and believe I should have. They see this young, misled girl with weird ties and quiet thoughts and bam, suddenly they all know exactly who I should be.” Her eyes hit mine. “Why should I have to be this saint others expect of me in order to have a future I can be proud of, happy with? What if I want to be different? And more than that, what if I’m supposed to be?”

Her last word leaves her in an unsure whisper.

The vein in my jaw begins to throb, forcing me to clench my teeth to stop it.

I lick my lips, my question a low rasp. “Different how?”

“Despite what I lived through, I’m not a cruel person,” she says, more to herself than me. “And I’m happy about that, but —”

But what?

Her head falls.

Come on, girl. But what...

“But was raised with a whole lot of bad.” Her eyes, they lift to mine. “So, can I even be me without at least a little bit?”

My pulse kicks as I focus on Brielle.

On the void of her gaze.

On the truth in her words.

On her.

In my peripheral, I watch as goose bumps raise along her arms, but she doesn’t break eye contact, and I can’t fuckin’ seem to either, so I fight for a way to cut through the fog building in my mind, the questions I suddenly want answers to and the possibility of what those answers might be, but she beats me to it.

“Oh look.” She swallows. “It’s Franky.”

I glare, whipping around in my seat, but the place is as dead as it was when we walked in, nothing but a few trucker-looking couples sitting on the opposite side.

I swing back, but as I do my frown flips.

She has my straw between her pink lips and is drinking my shake when hers sits half full right in front of her.

Brielle laughs, chocolate spilling onto her chin as she wipes it off with a smile. “You still had whipped cream. I already ate all mine.”

I don’t say shit, stuck staring at the little thing beside me.

She goes back to stealing my fries as if they’re hers and dips them into her glass.

I tell myself to grab our shit and get out of here, that the questions floating in my mind don't belong, but it doesn't happen.

Instead I scoot the fuckin' things in the middle of us and do the same damn thing.

Chapter 6



BRIELLE

I FLIP MY HANDS UNDER THE LITTLE AIR DRYER AND TURN TO look at myself in the mirror.

My uniform is wrinkled and has a few grass stains I'll need to soak out before I can climb into bed tonight, but at least the swelling around my eyes has gone down some. I lean over the counter to inspect the whites of my eyes. They're a little red, but better than they were when I woke up this morning.

That's a good sign.

My hair is a ratted mess from the breeze, so I quickly run my fingers through it and loosely tie it back, more than ready to fall into bed and aware it's going to be a while before I'm able.

I push out the restroom door, jumping when I nearly collide with Royce.

He leans against the wall only inches from the door with his arms crossed over his chest.

"What are you doing?" I laugh lightly.

He doesn't say anything and doesn't look away as the door to the men's room opens, a group of four guys step out.

The men's room that is located directly across from the woman's, both hidden down a short hallway and out of view from the dining area—out of view from where I left Royce sitting.

Each of the guys slow when they spot us, me still half in the doorway, Royce seemingly keeping me trapped there.

Travis, a guy from school, recognizes me, his light eyes moving to Royce as he stops walking altogether.

“You good, Brielle?” he asks, his gaze shifting to mine.

Royce is sliding in front of me before I can even blink, let alone answer.

He's slowly sliding forward, and I'm not sure Travis realizes it or not, but he's taking wary strides back, his friends already stepping behind him. I know for sure Royce is unaware the guy isn't asking because he cares. Travis is simply being nosy and hoping for something he can use to slam me with later.

“Is she *good*?” Royce gives a cocky chuckle.

Not a second later, my hand is swallowed by his large one. I'm tugged, spun, and placed before him, my back pressed into his front.

He walks us past the guys, waiting for the perfect moment to be an ass, and glances over his shoulder.

“Oh, she's good, pretty boy,” he says smugly. “Take my word for it.”

Oh my god!

I lock my feet in place, causing his chest to bump my shoulder blades slightly.

When I tip my head back to look up at him, an arrogant-ass grin is what I'm met with.

I tear from his grip, and he's either stuck on stupid, fully confused by my need for a quick escape, *or* he decides to let me get ahead as I somehow manage to stomp my way out the

exit. Of course, not before Travis and his buddies get a good laugh in.

Fantastic.

The loud whack of wood against wood lets me know I'm no longer alone, but I don't give him the satisfaction of turning around.

"Keep walkin' away from me, and Imma start to think you're looking for a reaction," Royce calls, officially following behind me now.

"That's because you're a narcissist!"

"Oh, mini's mad," he mocks. "This'll be good."

I roll my eyes, tearing at the door handle of the car, but it's locked.

With a huff, I spin on my heels and glare at him.

He simply stands there, five feet away, and waits.

After a solid twenty-second stare off, I throw my arms out. "What's wrong with you?"

"Fuck's wrong with you?" he throws right back.

"How about everything you just did."

"What, you wanted a vanilla shake?" He raises a brash brow.

"I don't like vanilla."

"Me either," he says loudly.

I flick my eyes to the sky. "I swear, you're like... a pizza pocket. Hot on the outside, so you start eating it, but if you don't get the timing just right, you find out it's cold in the middle."

His head tugs back and he gives a hard blink. "*What?*"

I growl and try again. "You make no sense!"

"Not seeing the problem here. I'm hot and you want a bite."

“Not what I was saying *at all*.”

He throws his arms out. “Okay, Tiny Tina, what are you saying?”

“It’s like you do things without knowing why you do them, but when you stop and realize your moves, you convince yourself the reason behind it is the worst possible one your warped mind can come up with, when I’m pretty sure decency is hidden under all that swag. Somewhere deep down. Like deep, *deep* down.”

He licks his lips through his doubling frown. “How deep?”

My arms slap against my thighs, and I can’t help the laugh that spurts out of me.

He literally can’t help himself, poor guy. And here I thought I was master at avoiding emotions.

As I look away from him, my amusement fades, getting lost in the night around us, so I find the brightest star I can and hold on to it as I let him in on my concern. “I don’t want to give people here another reason to whisper about me.”

“Fuck ‘em.”

“Because it’s that simple.”

“It is.”

“No. It’s not. Not for normal people in normal worlds.” I look to him. “The people in this town were born here, went to the same schools their entire lives, live on the same streets. Coming into a tight-knit place like this wasn’t exactly smooth, and I didn’t have anyone with me to go through it with. You’re stirring things up for me again.”

Royce’s features tighten. “Bishop should have put them in their place a long ass time ago and none of this would be a problem.”

“But he’s not here to do that, is he?” I raise a brow. “Now, tomorrow at school, as soon as those guys get the chance, they’ll talk smack and the rest will be coming at me with their

jeans around their ankles because you decide to play me as one of your BrayGirls.”

He grows tense.

I grow tense.

Oh my shit.

Royce holds still, then brings a hand up to drag it down his face as he glances off.

My eyes remain lasered on him and as his return, it's with a calculated tip of his head.

He stalks toward me with slow, deliberate steps until he's close enough to plant his hands on the window beside my shoulders.

His reach is long, so there's still some space between us, but at the new angle, his face is a bit more on my level, and suddenly I'm staring straight into his bottomless brown eyes as he asks what he wants to know.

“What do you know about being a *BrayGirl*?”

I open my mouth to respond, but he speaks again before I'm able.

“Be straight-up with me, little Bishop,” he warns. “No bullshit.”

Okay, fine.

I lay out what I've learned. “I know it's what people call the girls who spend their nights with you or your brothers, or anyone who has earned the Brayshaw name.”

“Morning, afternoons, we ain't picky on time of day, baby girl.” He's angry and hard focused. “Keep going.”

“It's a girl who is on lockdown. Untouchable to everyone, watched by all to keep her from doing things a Bray wouldn't like or things she shouldn't. Basically, she's bound in bubble wrap, only to be undone by her man.”

“Temporary man,” he fires off.

“Right.” I shake my head in disdain. “Because she’s good enough for his bed, but not his heart.”

His jaw clenches. “You the type?”

“You’ll never know,” I toss back, holding eye contact for a few seconds only to turn away the next. I stare out at the darkness surrounding us. “Can you unlock the door now?”

“Why should I?” His shoes slide along the gravel beneath our feet, his body growing nearer. “You act like you’ve got a place to go.”

“I do.” I turn to him with a straight face. “It’s past ten.”

He stares a moment, running his tongue along his upper lip. “So that’s the magic number, huh?” he asks, frustration slowing his words.

I shrug, tucking my loose hairs behind my ears. “Will you give me a ride or not?”

The muscles in his forearms flex near my face, but I don’t look. I keep my eyes on his and finally, one by one, his hands fall to his sides.

“Yeah, little Bishop.” He reaches out, opening the door he must have unlocked without my notice. “I will.”

He begins walking around the hood, and my body rotates with him, holding eye contact until he dips into the driver’s seat.

I wipe my hands on my bottoms and slip inside.

Royce stares straight ahead, a heavy frown etched along his forehead, his left leg bouncing. He puts the car in drive, rolls a half foot forward, only to come down hard on the brakes. He throws it right back into park and jumps out.

I can’t swing my head around fast enough to follow, only spotting a blur of a black T-shirt disappearing through the diner door.

I drop against my seat, scanning over the windows of the place, unable to see beyond my own reflection shining back.

A minute tops passes, and then he's storming out, sliding back in and peeling from the parking lot.

It's not until we're parked outside of my house that Royce's head shifts my way, but his glare is locked on my front door.

"Your cousin, she's gonna start shit for you, isn't she?"

I nod. "Probably, yeah."

"She's a bitch."

"Definitely." I laugh. "She's got her reasons, so it's whatever."

"Don't make excuses for shitty, stuck-up people who treat you like shit."

My head snaps toward him, and I'm taken aback by the gravity of his expression.

Frustration crowds my ribs, tightening them. "You don't know her. You have no right to judge her."

"And you have no reason to defend her." He flashes. "Nobody should come at you like that and think it's their right, bullshit reasons or fucking not."

"Imagine how you would feel if someone was dropped on your doorstep one day and your life changed overnight. Literally."

Something flashes in his eyes, but he looks away to hide it.

"I can handle her," I reassure when I'm not sure it's necessary.

"No such thing as handling jealousy."

"Ciara, jealous of me?" I laugh, readying myself to climb out. "That's a no."

"It wasn't a question."

Annoyance pricks at my throat, but I don't allow myself to clear it.

He has no clue what he's saying.

Ciara's not jealous of me, she has zero reason to be.

She's gorgeous, has friends who care about her, a home that's hers to love, a town she can make a future in. A life.

Purpose.

All the things I don't.

"Don't pretend you don't notice," he accuses. "Playin' dumb is unattractive."

"And assuming I care what you think is attractive is arrogant."

"Don't mean it's untrue." He shrugs unapologetically. "The dickbag from the court—"

"His name is Franky."

He studies me a long, quiet moment before saying, "The punk wants you, and she hates it. That shit was obvious."

"Oh yeah, she's all sorts of sad about it." I tilt my head like an asshole. "So sad, in fact, she pulled a random stranger's cock into her mouth a whole five minutes after waking up today." I glare. "Weird, right?"

Royce gapes at me, and then a loud laugh leaves him.

He leans against the door, fully shifting his body to face me.

"Well, fuck me, little Bishop." He wipes at his mouth with a smile. "Didn't expect the big C word to be your noun of choice."

"Didn't expect you to know what a noun was, so we're even."

He grins. "Say it again, she sucked my *cock*."

I open my mouth, but quickly close it on a low laugh, shaking my head.

I'd say she more like tried to suck your cock, but whatever.

Another deep laugh leaves him and I swear, this time my chest grows warm.

Royce takes a quick drink of his chocolate milk, his attention coming right back to me. “I’d have fuckin’ swore you were a ‘penis’ kind of girl.”

“Yeah, well, guess I’m full of surprises,” I joke.

When I look to him, he licks his lips, his gaze floating toward the school.

The playful banter disappears. The newfound silence is unnerving and lasts for several minutes.

“Why aren’t they afraid of your brother?” he asks suddenly.

I couldn’t stop the ache from showing itself as I tried, and Royce doesn’t miss it.

Realization has his face falling and unease swims in my stomach.

I shrug against the seat. “They’d have to know he existed in order to fear him.”

I look at my house, at the sliver of a light peeking from a broken blind. “I’m not allowed to talk about my life before this place, about why or how I ended up here. It’s been almost four years now and not once have I ever gotten to speak to anyone about him. Until today, with you.” I look back to Royce who faces away, but has his eyes locked with mine. “I can’t be me, and I can’t talk *about* me... how messed up is that?”

A heavy, unshared thought shadows his brown eyes, thick tension now written across his brow.

“I need you to remember what I said, Brielle.” His eyes meet mine, a weighty seriousness suddenly woven within them. “Let those assholes think what they want. Don’t fight it, try and change it, or hide from it. Do you. They’re gonna judge you either way.”

I search his face for a sign of rehearsed nonsense or hidden agenda, only to come up short.

Maybe I'm broken or messed up in the head, but I almost wish the devil within would show himself—I'm not so sure what to do with an honest, hotheaded flirt with a loose belt and unclear intentions.

I'm also not dumb enough to assume those intentions aren't driven by anything but destruction. Regardless, his words from last night come back, so I whisper them between us. Sort of.

“Screw ‘em.”

The corner of his lips twitch, but he faces forward.

A loud crash pulls our attention to the house, a sharp, screamed ‘fuck’ following, and my shoulders fall.

I don't want to get out, but I don't even belong in this car.

I turn to Royce.

“That your aunt?”

I sigh. “Yeah. I'm surprised she's up. She's always either gone when ten hits or good and passed out. I think that's why she makes me come in late, so she doesn't have to stare into the same eyes that haunt her own nightmares.”

I look to Royce and while his anger seems to have deepened, he doesn't have to ask what I mean, the answer's so obvious.

Before my dad became an evil dad, he was an evil brother.

“What do you do once inside?” he rasps.

“Cook, clean, fix what needs fixing, sometimes talk my cousin off a ledge, even if it's a day I want to throw her over it.”

“Why do you bother with her at all?”

“Because it's what's right.” I give a small smile. “What sign are you?”

“Sign?”

“Your zodiac sign.”

He frowns. “Pisces ”

A grin pulls at my lips and I look away. “Now it all makes sense.”

When I look back, he eyes me curiously, and with slow, almost reluctant movement, Royce reaches over to shove my door open.

Impulses of a boy, manners of a man.

I climb out, waiting for the sound of the soft engine to roar away behind me, but it sits idle until I’m on the porch pushing the front door open.

With my hand on the edge of the worn wood, my body tucked half inside, I trail the little white car as it inches away, squinting at the brake lights when it comes to a full stop in the exact spot Mac was parked when Royce lifted me off the ground and led us both into the back seat earlier this morning.

The car continues to sit there, leaving no doubt in my mind that the guy sitting in the driver’s seat has his eyes on me from a quarter of a mile down the road, waiting for me to close myself inside. Still, I stand there a few minutes longer.

I somehow know once I step into the house, he’ll be gone, and not just for the night, but from this town.

And I’m right.

It wasn’t so bad meeting you, Royce Brayshaw.

See you never.

Chapter 7



ROYCE

The solo drive home is a shitty, long one I never want to take again, but far too fucking necessary.

Straight-up, my little trip gave me zero satisfaction, but instead fucked with my head in ways I didn't see coming.

I should be fuckin' whistling along, but instead I'm cussing myself out, irritated over shit that maybe I shouldn't be.

My mind's playing games, my thoughts are a chaotic-ass mess, and every time I think I can drown them out, they give me the middle finger and float right back to the damn surface. Mocking me. Screaming for me to do something that I know is real damn dumb and bound to be a mistake. But I need a fucking minute.

I need to breathe with my brothers beside me because god *damn*.

What the fuck, man?

Thank fuck I'm home now, it'll be easy to escape myself here.

On that thought, I turn onto Brayshaw property with a heavy sigh of relief.

I cruise right by the girls and boys group homes at the entrance, slowing when I reach the backside and spot Maybell

pushing open the back patio door.

She's the old wise-ass woman who's been in the Brayshaw family since forever, long before we became a part of it. She started as a maid, but quickly earned the respect she's worth, and has been loyal to our family name since the day she stepped into it.

I, for one, fully believe she's some kind of psychic. The woman knows everything, senses even more, but leaves our minds to work where necessary. She speaks on issues or concerns only when she suspects a need for it.

She also was the one who raised my brothers and me, when my dad was here... and when he wasn't. We love her like I imagine a son would love his mother—with as much of ourselves as we can.

I knew she'd be watching for my safe return.

She's always watching.

I put the car in park and quickly run over to her before she reaches the steps.

“COME ON NOW, MISS MAYBELL,” I TEASE. “DON'T BREAK A hip.”

She gives a small scoff, but grins through it. “And don't go thinkin' you're too big for a whoopin' now.”

I chuckle, pausing a step beneath her and she lifts her wrinkled hands to pat my cheeks.

“Boy,” she says softly, her deep, dark eyes searching my own.

Not a second later, a small sigh leaves her, and she steps back.

“You found what you went searching for,” she says.

I told no one where I was going or why, but like I said... *psychic*.

“I did. It was... *short* of my expectation.” I grin at my own joke, and damn if she doesn’t laugh as if she understands it full well.

She probably does.

“You be careful, boy,” she warns with a gentle ease. “Expectations are for fools, and you are *far* from one of those.”

I reach out, giving her hand a light squeeze, and she offers a knowing smile, worry working its way into her eyes.

“Your mind is heavy, boy.” She tips her head. “Will you listen to it?”

My lips pinch together, and she nods, squeezing me back. “Do what you must. Now, go on. Get home.”

I kiss her forehead, jogging back to the car, and I’m almost positive she doesn’t walk inside until the bumper of this busted ride is out of sight.

I continue down the dirt road, through the tall trees our father planted when we were infants as an added form of armor—you can’t touch what you can’t see—and right as I pass through the final row, the Brayshaw mansion comes into view.

My home since I was only months old.

My home until the day I die.

It’s big and beautiful and sacred to our name.

The wide and winding driveway allows for full view of the pool and pool house, a small glimpse at the right, back side, and leads you straight up to the porch.

My phone rings the second I’m stopped, Mac’s name lighting up the screen.

“What up, bro?” I answer.

“You’re home quicker than expected.”

“Checkin’ me out on camera, fucker?”

“What can I say, I missed my bedmate,” he teases. “Saw you roll by the school.”

“Speaking of, how’s your girl, she need an extra hand?” I fuck with him, but my boy only laughs.

“Any stories to share?”

A scoffed laugh leaves me. “Bro. Don’t get me fuckin’ started.”

He laughs into the line but makes quick work of catching me up to speed on the drama at the school.

There’s a rumor about a fight that’s coming but no word on who or why yet, meaning we’ve got rich kids in panic mode.

You’d think spoiled assholes with money to burn would rebel with order, but not here. They crave the shit. Crave us, period.

They depend on our word, wait for us to tell them to worry or walk on like nothing.

Either way, whatever it is that has people whispering will show itself soon enough, and we’ll be there to handle it when it does.

Mac ends the call and in perfect fucking timing, too, ‘cause when I look up and out the windshield at my house, it’s a full porch I find.

Maddoc stands at the railing, Raven right beside him, Cap and Victoria on her left, and little Zoey already two steps down.

They’re smiling at me.

Waiting for me.

Damn if it’s not a settling-ass sight.

WE FINISH OUR LATE-NIGHT DINNER AND MAKE OUR WAY INTO the living room to bullshit. Cap and Maddoc are laughing at something Zoey says while Victoria pretends to talk to her on a toy phone.

I look to Raven and she knocks her elbow into mine, a small smile on her lips. A half a second passes, and her sigh comes next.

I'm right there with the comfort seeping in. The security.

The relief that comes with having someone in your corner, no matter fucking what.

We're lucky.

Not everyone has a safe place.

Pretty sure Brielle doesn't.

And there it is.

Fuck.

"Talk to me, Ponyboy." Raven turns to me, proving yet again she can sense when things are off.

Both of our eyes follow Maddoc when he stands, dropping to his knees a few feet away. He and Cap begin tossing a small ball back and forth, playing keep away from Zoey.

I smile at my niece, cutting a quick glance at Victoria when she joins us on the couch. "You ever wonder what happens to kids who don't get to come to our group homes? Or the ones who fuck up and are forced to leave it?"

When neither of them says a word, I look their way.

Raven watches me with steady eyes. "No. I haven't."

"Me either." Until now. "They all come from jacked homes, it's why they need a new place to begin with, yeah? Why their files end up here?" I pause. "What if some of them go from one pile of shit to another?"

She nods, both she and Victoria fully focused on me, each wearing curious expressions.

Shit here is risky and dangerous most of the time. We know this. There's always a new issue popping up after the last, a casualty of some kind, but our people are treated like equals until they fuck up, there's no abuse, and we don't allow senseless hate. When we find out about any of these types of things, the ones who gave it are met with a harder form of it.

At the end of the day, shit's pretty good around here, in a fucked-up, crossroads kind of way.

It can be good for anyone who wants it bad enough.

Can't it?

Raven tips her head, a perceptive glint in her light eyes. "Royce?"

I look from Victoria to Raven, two girls who came from ugly places, wanted more, and found it right fucking here.

"What if we fucked-up and got something wrong?"

The girls share a look, slowly bringing their focus back to me, but the conversation is squashed when Zoey's little hand finds mine.

"Hu-mon, Uncle Bro! Be on my team." She gives a hard jerk of her head and I follow as she tugs on me. "Let's beat these boys!"

We all laugh, and then we spend the next hour playing keep away, refusing to call it a night until Raven is passed out on Maddoc's lap, and Cap is lifting a sleeping Zoey off of a beanbag.

It wasn't that long ago that it used to be just the three of us staying up late together, especially since Maddoc hardly ever slept before Raven, and then when she came along, his nights were full.

Not that they weren't right there with us most evenings, but before they'd get too tired, they'd disappear—what couple doesn't want a few *non-sleeping* hours in bed alone?

Me and Cap would last a few longer, watching movies and whatnot, but that changed too, as it should.

I'm not and never will be mad about them spending time with their girls, and Cap has two to balance his time with.

Shit, I'll sometimes head to my room when it gets late so they don't feel bad and stick around for me. I know they do sometimes.

They would never, fucking ever, want me out of the mix and I love them for it, but they deserve their alone time.

Right now, though, sitting up in my room at two in the morning, the others passed out in theirs...

Not sure I'd admit it, but I'm itching beneath my skin.

Will this forever be my new normal?

My brothers with their girls, and me by my damn self?

Untrusting.

Unattached and uninterested.

A fly-by fuck at best, not that I keep things quick, but ties are cut when the door closes behind me.

That's how I like it.

Ain't it?

Nice and easy, thoughtless.

Careless.

Girl-less?

My phone beeps on the bed at my side and annoyance heats my skin.

This is when the calls and texts always roll in, after fuckin' dark when I'm useful.

With a sigh, I pick it up, and as I read the name on the screen, a frown takes over.

Little Bishop.

Suspicion forms in the pit of my stomach, and it feels a lot like disappointment, which annoys the shit out of me.

I scoff to myself.

I should have known.

I've got to admit, she almost fooled me, acting all ordinary and genuine and shit, or as ordinary as a kind of odd girl who was robbed of... everything can manage.

But a text in the middle of the night?

Fuckin' please.

I guess she's no different than any other girl after all, but looking to entice with some late-night pillow talk, probably hoping I didn't already cut out of her bunk ass town and will offer to bring her to my hotel for what she really wants but hid well.

She acted all unaffected, like I wasn't her type or something.

Yeah, okay.

I'm everyone's type and here she's proving it.

This is good shit, though. I nod to myself.

Real good.

Now that the curtain's dropped, I can forget about everything else.

I roll over, flipping my pillow in the process and close my eyes.

I toss and turn for another hour before curiosity eats me up inside and forces my hand.

I pick up my phone.

Let's see how quick, harmless little Bishop faded, allowing her true colors to ring through now that she realizes her opportunity to bag a Bray did to.

I open the text and read it.

My face falls, my phone right there with it.

Fuck.

I glare at the ceiling.

Shit.

I flip over, growling into my pillow as something that feels a lot like thrilling frustration stirs in my gut.

I ignore that shit, but I can't ignore the rest.

I jump up, reach for my phone and shoot a text out to Mac, my head falling back after it's good and sent.

I guess it's fuckin' settled.

Brielle

I RUSH INTO FIRST PERIOD WITH A MINUTE TO SPARE, A HALF-eaten yogurt hidden at my side, and throw myself into my seat, Micah already in his beside me.

Micah nods his chin in welcome, but focuses on his phone while I try to catch my breath.

The bell rings not a second later and the teacher wastes no time taking roll. As he does, my phone begins to vibrate in the front pocket of my backpack.

I set the yogurt down and pull it out, my eyes freezing on the screen once I see the name flashing across it.

What the hell?

I hold it in my palm, staring at it until it stops ringing, and then it rings again.

Micah chuckles at my side, but the sound is one of shocked amusement, the kind of laugh that leaves you when you've witnessed a bad decision and the person making it is unaware.

My eyes fly to him and narrow as I blindly set the thing on my desktop.

Micah grins. “Bad fuckin’ move, girl.”

“Excuse me—” I cut off when the door is thrown open with a loud bang.

All eyes fly to the front of the room and oh. My. God!

Shock, cold and quick, spreads through me at the rate of a falling star, stealing my thoughts.

My breath.

My ability to move.

All I can do is stare at the tattooed hellion... who, kill me now, is headed right for me.

Dressed in a stark black hoodie and fashion faded jeans, Royce commands attention with his slow and eerie steps, darkening the brightly lit room with his presence alone, and creating a chill in the air that has the teacher frozen as solid as the rest of us. And we’re all frozen. Stuck.

Staring.

He stops right in front of me, and not a peep escapes me when he yanks, spins, and repositions the cheap plastic chair I’m sitting in.

Royce holds my eyes, leisurely trailing his to the screen of my phone that sits face up on the desk beside us and back.

His large hands come down, gripping onto the edges of my chair near my upper thighs, and he bends until we’re eye level.

His brows are plunged so low, his eyelids lay against his lashes, and his thick brown hair, while faded nice and clean on the side, is a wild mess of untamed strands along the top, and nearly creeping into his vision.

His chin is tucked a bit, head tipped an inch to the right.

He’s every bit of dark and displeased.

“Little Bishop.” His voice is a firm mix of bored and brash.

“Royce.” I shake my head. “What—”

“I gave you one rule.”

I blanch. “Rule.”

Rule?

“I told you when I call, you answer, and guess what?” He dips a little closer. “You didn’t answer.”

I gape at him, and then a not so quiet laugh escapes, my hand coming up to cover it as I stare wide-eyed at the guy in front of me.

The crazy thing is he’s not joking, and my laughter is far from amusing to him.

And then I remember I’m in class.

The teacher is in class.

He is in my freaking class!

I chance a glance around the room, at the teacher in the front of it, and as if I woke him from his frozen state, Mr. Lin jerks forward.

“Young man, what do you think you’re doing?” he asks.

“Talking,” Royce snaps, and my cheek burns with his stare.

Mr. Lin pauses his advance. “Well, that will have to wait until later.”

When Royce doesn’t move or show any sign of listening, I face him again.

“Royce,” I hiss.

Mr. Lin heads toward the class phone. “You need to leave my class.”

Royce’s eyes burn into mine and he nods. “Yeah, you’re right. I do.”

He lets go of my chair and pushes to his full, overwhelming height.

I breathe a sigh of relief... that lasts a whole three seconds, on the fourth, Royce is behind me, bends and lifts my chair off the floor... with me still on it.

A light scream leaves me, but I quickly cut it off because there is absolutely nothing I can do about it... nothing but hold on for dear life.

Once we're in the hall and around the corner, he sets me down only to grab me by the hand, tug me up, and out the double doors.

I stumble to keep up with his quick steps but he makes sure I don't lose my footing, and then we're standing in front of a fancy town car, the back door wide open and waiting for someone to climb inside it.

He lets go and turns to me, but before he can say anything, Micah is beside us, handing him my backpack.

"That everything?" He takes it without looking.

Micah nods. "She doesn't have a locker."

I frown between the two, my face pulled tight with confusion.

Were they not about to fight two days ago?!

Royce nods, and Micah disappears as fast as he showed.

It's just the two of us again.

He shifts closer, grips my wrist and lifts it between us, inspecting the small strip of gauze wrapped tight around my palm.

"Me versus a broken vase," I feel the need to explain. "The vase sort of won."

His fingers flex against my skin, near the hints of super glue I couldn't get off, and those dark eyes flick to mine.

HE RELEASES ME, TOSSING MY BACKPACK ONTO THE BLACK leather seat. “Get in.”

I suck my stomach in, cutting a quick glance at the driver in the front seat. “Why?”

“Because you want to.”

My eyes fly to his, and his head falls back lazily, almost daring I challenge his statement, yet somehow confident I won't.

Because I want to.

Do I want to?

Questions knock heavily within my mind, but they're a jumbled mess of half spurred thought.

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

I look inside the dimly lit space and back to him. And then I slide inside.

It's not until we're pulling up at an airstrip where Mac stands outside of a small plane with the airstairs open and waiting, that I remember I'm the underdog, locked in a car with the *top dog*.

My head snaps to Royce, who watches me intently.

My mind races as I stare at the stranger in front of me, at a guy I was warned about, and for some reason, my head decides to nod when not a question was asked.

Satisfaction flashes across him, but it's gone as soon as he blinks and slowly, he steps out, helping me right behind him.

Royce's eyes move between mine. “Hope you're ready, little Bishop.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat. “Ready for what... exactly?”

He looks up at the plane that has his last name printed large and proud on the side with open eyes and an answer that steals my voice. “To come home.”

A harsh and fast breath slips past my lips and my palm flies to my stomach, in an attempt to settle the somersaults going strong inside it.

Home.

As in to Brayshaw.

I think I'm going to puke.

Chapter 8



ROYCE

I SPENT THE LAST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS GOING BACK AND forth with myself, but if I'm real, I knew before I even made it home I'd see her again and why—to bring her home with me.

Like I talked to the girls about, I don't know what happened to any of the people we didn't bring into our group homes, but I do know what happened to this one, so I'm going to fix what was fucked.

It was on the word of a punk who believed he knew what was best for her that we sent the girl away in the first place, but now I know that punk was wrong.

All this time she could have had a team behind her, a brother next door, a life to fucking live, but instead she's been alone in the dark when darkness is what he wanted to shield her from. A different form of darkness, sure, but still. The girl was stuck with an aunt who hated the mere sight of her. She was a personal little Ms. Fuckin Fix It, had a cousin who treated her like shit, in a town she wanted nothing from because she knew they'd never accept her.

He'd understand all that if he spent ten minutes there, which is exactly how I know he hasn't.

If he were smart, he'd realize he left her with nothing.

Nothing but a curious little mind.

Who better to open it up for her than me?

This worked out perfectly, really. I'm giving her a chance at a life that was taken from her and I get to use her to spite Bass while doing it, all in one move.

A smirk finds my lips.

I'm going to give the girl the opposite of everything Bass wanted for his baby sister, make her realize exactly why big bro wanted her far, far away... once she realizes it was he who made the call.

In the end, it'll all be Bishop's fault.

He chose to shelter her when he should have put some fuckin' time into her, teach her how to eat up and spit out assholes like me. And he could have with ease. She's got fire, that's easy to see, but nobody's fed it.

Lucky for me, he didn't, and now I get to have my cake and eat it too.

Mac pulls me from my thought when he takes the seat across from me, glancing down the small aisle where Brielle is taking a second to breathe.

"So she agreed." He keeps his voice low.

I pull a bottle of Crown from the center pocket between the seats, offering him a shot as I pour my own. "She didn't refuse."

He raises a brow, taking the small glass and bringing it to his lips. "If she had?"

I laugh, keeping my gaze on his as I reach inside the console again, lift and set down a third cup.

He grins, shakes his head and downs his in one long swig.

I sit back and swirl mine around, my focus glued to the amber liquid.

If I had to guess, I'd say she understood.

She was coming whether she wanted to or not.

But I'm not convinced she didn't want...

Brielle

HOLY CRAP, I SHOULDN'T BE HERE.

I should call my brother.

I definitely should not call my brother.

I mean, he'll figure it out soon enough—the plane ride is only an hour and a half long.

If Bass knew how living with my aunt really was, I have no doubt he'd have found a way to come back for me, but I have never said a word because I didn't want him to give up the chance he was given.

The Brays may not have wanted me, the puny little sister then, but they wanted him, and he deserved a chance in hell and more after freeing us from ours. I owe him my life, and I'll likely never be able to repay him for all he's done for me, but this might be my chance to earn my own.

I would be a fool not to take it.

If everything works out, Bass will get to keep the life he loves, save the money he earns, and I get my brother back.

That might be the only reason I even stepped onto this plane.

I run my fingertips along the cool, marble countertops and pluck a grape that hangs from a bundle draped perfectly over the edge of a crystal vase that I really hope is glued in place.

I spin around, leaning against the counter, my eyes landing on the plush, ribbed white seats.

I've never been on a plane, and now I'm on a fancy private one with a guy I was never meant to meet.

Who was supposed to leave my aunt's little town believing my cousin was me and never look back.

I sigh, running my hands over my face and into my hair, gripping it loosely only to let it fall back into place.

God, this is so far from how any of this was meant to go.

Royce showed up on Tuesday morning and come that night, he was gone.

I woke up Wednesday prepared to begin the whole 'forget the Bray' process.

But then I got to school, and who happened to be walking up at the same exact moment as me?

Travis.

I steeled myself for his insult, but it never came. In fact, when he noticed me, he forced his eyes to skate right by. His *black* eyes, and just like that, the night before made sense.

Royce had rushed back into the diner to make sure his little show wasn't one that would be shared, because he didn't want me to have to deal with what I told him would follow.

After that, I spent most of the day overanalyzing everything that happened when he was here. How he got upset when Franky put his hands on me, how my cousin acting like an ass bothered him, his little freak-out over me being outside at night alone and how he later played it down.

A smile finds my lips.

That might have been my favorite part, along with everything that followed.

I got to talk to someone that night, really talk, and about things that nobody cares to hear from me. Maybe I gave too much, but I don't care.

It felt good and Royce... I knew he heard me. Really heard me. It was all there, in his shadowy eyes.

I decided, like I pretend the bad in my life has a purpose, Royce pretends he's this cavalier Casanova, but in my short time with him, I recognized the truth.

Royce Brayshaw has a heart.

It might be coated in toxic candy, but it's there.

Later that night, after the darkness came, the fog followed, and stole the stars from sight, so all that was left was me. I was sitting in the grass with a running mind I tried to clear, but with each buried thought came another, all followed with a sense of compulsion.

I felt a need and acted on it by texting a guy I had no business texting.

Royce didn't reply, of course, but I didn't send it for a response. I sent it because I wanted to. Because it felt right.

I pull my phone from my pocket and pull up the message again.

ME: THANK YOU FOR WHAT YOU DID. TRAVIS DIDN'T SAY A word.

IT MIGHT SEEM SILLY, THANKING HIM WHEN THE ENTIRE situation was his fault for opening his own cocky mouth in the first place, but I don't care.

Cocky.

Mouth.

Aaand now I'm thinking about his cock down my cousin's throat.

"You good over there?"

I jump, my phone falling to the floor and Mac laughs, picks it up and hands it over, choosing to lean on the cabinet opposite of me.

“So.” He tips his head.

“So is this thing really going where he says, or are you throwing me out over the ocean somewhere?”

He grins. “It’s going where he says.”

I nod, and then it hits me. My eyes go wide. “Oh my god. What about all my stuff? My aunt?”

“Taken care of. Micah’s loading it as we speak. It’s about a ten-hour drive, so he’ll be in tonight sometime.”

My head tugs back. “Micah?”

Mac nods. “He was always nice to you, right? Never pulled no shit?”

“I mean... yeah. He was nice enough.”

Mac nods. “He’s gonna be staying at the boys’ home, you’ll be in the girls.”

Well, that’s unexpected.

Mac nods toward the table where a large silver platter, full-on with a matching lid, sits. It’s something you’d see in a gourmet kitchen... or a horror movie with a chopped off head tucked tight under it. “Grab something, come sit.”

And then he’s gone.

I lift the lid and a smile breaks over my face.

A dozen sprinkle donuts and a still wrapped pack of Yoo-hoos, but beside them, a small turquoise box.

I run my fingers along the outer edge, reading the note scribbled right on top.

Your cousin’s a bitch and your fix-it days are over. Time to fly.

A low chuckle leaves me, and I open it up to find a pair of sunglasses sitting inside.

I stare at them for a long moment, and then finally pull them from the box and slip them over my eyes.

“Perfect fit.”

I spin to find Royce leaning in the spot I just was, his arms crossed over his chest, eyes on me.

The perfect fit.

I take a deep breath.

Let's hope I am too.

Chapter 9



ROYCE

“A JET.” MADDOC PULLS HIMSELF UP ON THE LEDGE OF THE pool

“A badass jet.”

He licks his lips, gauging me. “You bought a jet... to get to a girl?”

I see what he’s trying to do, little fucker. “No.” I grin. “I bought a jet ‘cause I wanted it. We need a vacation *and* in case something happens when we take one, a way to get back quick.”

“And in case you needed to get to this girl *quick*.”

I glare and both my dickhead brothers grin.

“So Raven was right.” Maddoc looks from his wifey to me. “Your lonely ass drive *did* fuck you up.”

I splash his ass, but turn to my niece when her water shoes bump into me.

She’s lying flat on her back, little star-shaped shades on, her feet hanging over the edge of the donut-shaped raft—I bought that for her, thank you very much.

I shake the thing lightly and then steal her off of it to kiss her cheek.

“What do you think, Zoey Bear? Tell your daddy you wanna go on an airplane.”

“And fly way up in the sky?” She smiles, her hands thrown up on her head.

“Way the heck in the sky.”

She kicks to be let down and swims to Captain. “Daddy, I wanna fly!”

He laughs, lifting her. “Oh, you’ll fly all right, ready?”

She squeals, smiling as he launches her up and a foot out, quickly swimming to where she landed.

I trail Raven as she swims over to Maddoc. He sticks his legs out so she can latch on and float in front of him.

She tips her head, and I know she’s remembering our conversation from last night. “Who is this... far from random girl?”

Victoria looks from Raven to me. “And when do we meet her?”

“Nah, nah.” I find myself sliding backward. “Don’t get it twisted, assholes.” I chuckle. “This is business.”

“You realize when it comes to you, ‘business’ means something completely different?” Captain quirks a blond brow.

“Course I do.” I laugh. “And she’s mine.”

The girls hide smiles and I frown.

My face falls and I lift my palms. “I mean to handle.”

“Uh-huh.” Victoria laughs.

“What I want to know is who came with her.” Cap helps Zoey onto a raft, turning to us. “We know you, brother, and no way did you take off to wherever the hell she is, come back empty-handed, even if it was for less than a day, and leave the girl behind unsupervised.”

“Exactly,” Maddoc cuts in. “Tell us who he is and what he’s good for.”

I grin, lovin' the way we understand each other.

No animosity, no surprise, just lookin' for a quick brief to stay in the know.

My brothers trust my judgment. Always.

“His name's Micah. He's a tall, firm fucker who plays ball. Got a stepdad chompin' at the bit to ship him off the day he turns eighteen and a mom who only wants to please her new husband. He wasn't the top dog at his school, so he's used to being under someone. Little aggression in him, but that'll work in our favor at the warehouses and Wolves Den now that it's fully functioning.”

I knew Micah would be the one I'd hit up if needed the second I jacked him for his ball.

He was the first to step forward, but he was smooth enough and kept his distance, surveyed the area and was smart enough to pause and wait, aware he had no clue who the asshole in front of him was or what he would do.

He didn't go half-cocked to show off for his buddies.

He gave the stranger, *me*, respect because it's what a clever fucker does.

It's as the old Bray saying goes...

Don't underestimate what you don't know, and once you do, tear it to pieces or tip your fuckin' hat.

“He should be rollin' in around tonight.”

“Wait.” Raven is full of suspicion. “So he didn't fly with you guys?”

“Yup. He's driving all their shit in.”

A laugh spurts from her and she shakes her head playfully. “You cave-manned her, didn't you?”

“I might have lifted her off the ground, but I didn't toss her over my shoulder.” I scoff, but a grin breaks free. “She was sitting in a chair, so I took it, too.”

My family laughs.

“Oh man.” Victoria smiles. “To see the look on her face.”

Yeah, it was pretty fuckin’ fun.

“So she’s at the house now?” Raven climbs out of the pool, Maddoc at her back in case her belly knocks her over.

“Yup.”

“What happens if she name-drops you?” Raven watches me closely.

“If she walks up in there and announces I’m the reason behind it, she’ll never survive here.”

Raven’s hands find the towel Maddoc’s draped over her shoulders, and she nods slightly, a hidden smirk teasing at her lips. “I’m trying to figure out if you want her to or not.”

“Well, uh... you might want to figure that out pretty quickly.” Victoria’s squints past me. “Cause I spy the new girl breaking her very first rule.”

I whip around, instant tension toughening up my veins.

A streak of silver and black bottoms is really all you can make out, but it’s more than enough to know it’s her.

She’s walking up the driveway toward the mansion, maybe twenty feet from the porch and headed right for it.

“Royce,” Maddoc edges, but I’m already moving.

“I know, brother.”

That’s close enough.

Brielle

I STOMP MY ASS UP THE SHORT STEPS, ONLY TO FREEZE WHEN A familiar shout meets my ears.

“That’s far enough!” Royce calls out.

I whip around, searching, and spot him on the right.

I make my way back down and move toward him, but my feet only carry me a few extra inches before they pause altogether.

Guess they want a seat at the show too.

Royce stalks toward me in long, resilient strides, high, straight shoulders and an angry tip of his chin. He somehow comes across both unconcerned and unbalanced.

His muscles, trim and taut and visible without flexing, only tighten more with each step, the art decorated along the sharp edging of his body shifting with them and forcing my attention to the intricate designs.

They twist and curve and curl from one side of his arms to the next, color his upper chest and part of his neck, leaving you to wonder what they mean, where else they might lie.

How a body from the neck down is capable of coming off cross *and* controlled, let alone anything at all on its own, I don’t know, but his is equally both.

Royce Brayshaw, a wanton wild one.

A shirtless Brayshaw, the eighth wonder of the world.

A sight all should see at least once in a lifetime.

He stops a few feet away, his tone dull. “You lie to me, little Bishop?”

I pause my own advance. “What do you mean?”

“You said you followed the rules, like a good little robot, and here we are a second time.”

“Am I supposed to understand the hidden message in your insult, because I don’t.”

“First thing Maybell does when there’s a new arrival at the house is lay out the rules.”

“Well, then, yay her.” I lift a shoulder. “She did her job, give her a bonus.”

He narrows his gaze. “Then you know good and fuckin’ well nobody’s allowed back here. Maybell’s damn good at making you girls obey, and she won’t hesitate to toss you out when you don’t, day one or not.” He crosses his arms. “I’ll help if I have to.”

Nobody is allowed...

Ohhhh.

That’s right, I’d heard their home is their sanctuary.

It’s in part why the group homes are at the very entrance of the acreage, to keep them as far away as possible, but still close enough to control.

Wait, then why would she...

“Why would who what?”

My eyes snap back to his and the corner of his crease. “Finish your thought.”

I glide my fingers along my temple, slipping them farther into my hair and he follows the movement.

“Why, you won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

I don’t.

His glare flies to mine rapidly, and after a moment, grows heavier, but this time there’s a hint of skepticism he tries to hide. “She sent you down here.”

I shrug, answering without completely throwing her under the boots of a Brayshaw.

Wait.

Maybe she wants me to get kicked out?

Royce’s shoulders seem to loosen, and he runs his tongue along his lips.

He cuts a glance over his shoulder and I remember I came down here for a reason.

“So are you done, because it’s my turn.”

His head whips around quick, and knowing him, he’s about to pop off, so I speak before he can.

“Did you really insist I have my own room when literally every other person in that house shares with one to two other people?”

He blinks at me. And then he blinks again.

“Are you for real?” He widens his stance. “You’re complaining right now?”

“Well, I didn’t come back here to say hi.”

His eyes narrow, his chin tipping the slightest bit. “That right?”

“I mean, I figured I’d see you later or, you know, eventually, but no, and we’re off track.” I hook a finger over my shoulder, pointing somewhere behind me. “Those girls are my cousin on crack, I can sense it, and here I come, riding my brother’s coattail, and boom. Special treatment, just like that? I don’t want it.”

That seems to piss him off. He pushes closer. “If I was balancing you with your brother, it’d have been the shed out back for you, little Bishop, so don’t get bent.”

“Don’t pretend my brother isn’t everything your family’s asked him to be and more.”

His jaw flexes and shifts in more. “Let me clear something up for you, yeah?”

“Please do.”

Based on the way his eyes seem to flame up, he didn’t want a response, but he keeps talking anyway. “You’re in your own room, ‘cause that’s where I want you. ‘Cause there, in that room, I can get *to* you when the fuck I want.”

“*When* you want?”

“When.” He takes another step into my space, and my stomach twists low and fast. “You’re not a group home girl like they are. I didn’t come to your fuckin’ rescue, I hired you. You’re an employee. *My* employee, baby girl, so be ready to work, to jump, to fetch, when I tell you to, and before you ask me why, the answer is ‘cause you got in that car. You came to my town. Now here you stand, in my reach. That makes you mine to regulate.”

He’s practically huffing and puffing, all angry and annoyed and trying to intimidate. I do my best to allow him to believe his irate boy dramatization was effective, but I can’t hide the way it gets to me.

My smile is instant, my hand flying out to latch on to his arm. “Wait, seriously?”

Royce’s features pull, his focus quickly moving from my hand to my face. “Wait, what?”

I squeeze. “Am I really your employee? Like I work here now? You didn’t just move me in... you need me?”

Royce is stuck for a moment, unmoving.

His hand jerks from mine, flying forward before I see it coming, and he pushes my glasses up onto my head.

The glare is testing, gauging, and ever so slowly, his features smooth out.

I drop my hand to my side, and he licks his lips looking off, only to come right back.

He pushes my glasses back down and begins walking backward. His jaw shifts tight only to loosen as he says, “Go back. Wait for your shit. Sleep. Be ready when Maybell tells you to be ready.”

“Will I see you in the morning?”

His eyes narrow. “Does it matter if you do?”

I shake my head, smashing my mouth to the side to keep from grinning.

He says nothing, turns around, and is about to leave me standing here, but then I realize something and lurch forward.

“Wait!”

Royce pauses, but only glances back with his head.

“If you thought I was only coming back here to say hi, why couldn’t you just...” I give a small shrug. “You know, say hi back?”

His features pull.

A few silent seconds pass, and when he speaks there’s a hesitancy in his tone that wasn’t there before. “Rules, little Bishop.”

Rules.

Right.

I hate rules.

His eyes move between mine once more, and then he turns and walks away.

The second he does, I pull out my phone to check the time.

It’s not even six yet.

A smile finds my lips and I dial my brother.

“Sister.”

“Brother.” I smile, my eyes travel over the mansion once more, falling to the window when I spot a man’s figure shadowed there—their father, Rolland Brayshaw. The ex-con and former head of Brayshaw watches me.

I make my way toward the group home.

“Everything okay?” There’s some shuffling around, then he comes back on clearer. “You don’t usually call this time of day.”

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” Better than. Anticipation has my stomach muscles tightening. “Hey, so... where are you right now?”

“I’m... working,” he hesitates.

My shoulders fall. “So you’re not home?”

“Not right now, no.” His voice is quieter than before, and a long pause follows. “Why do you ask?”

Because I want to surprise you.

“No reason.” I smile.

I almost grow sad, but I don’t allow it to take over. I’m not hundreds of miles away anymore. There’s always later, maybe even tonight?

“I’m gonna see you soon, sister. I promise. Things are just ___”

“It’s okay,” I cut him off quickly. His dejected tone was slipping in and there’s no need for it anymore. “You will see me soon.”

Sooner than you realize.

There’s a commotion in the background, and the line goes dead, another conversation cut short, but that ends soon.

No more required secrets, no more lost time. He can share his world with me, because now, it’s mine too.

I’m here, brother. Literally.

Before I can put my phone away, a text comes through.

Bass: I’m sorry. I’ll call you back soon.

Bass: I love you, little sister. Never change who you are.

Never change who you are.

Something is up with him, he’s been off more than normal the last couple months. Answering only half of my calls, calling me even less, and talking like the end of the world is creeping in on him, but those specific words seem to dig in

worse than any others he's spoken, as if he sees me clearly when I can't seem to see myself.

With one last look over my shoulder, I find Royce's focus pointed this way, a towel now draped around his neck.

He doesn't look away, but I do.

I walk back to the house with slow, forced steps, a single thought plaguing me all the way.

What if change is what I need?

Royce

HER EYES, AS TURQUOISE AND TIRED AS THE LAST TIME I SAW them.

Her demeanor, as harmless but determined as I decided she is.

Her approach to the entire situation... frustrating as hell.

I tried to piss her off, to demand something of a girl desperate to be free of expectation, and instead of fighting me, she got excited.

Laughed.

Fuckin' smiled?

I searched for a sign of sarcasm and was almost irritated when I came up short, but I know for damn certain had I found it, I'd have still been mad about it.

Lose, lose?

Maddoc steps beside me, his gaze focused where mine is, on the girl who has just stepped between the trees, on her way back to the group home she'll now call home.

She had to have been talking to her brother just now.

You tell him you're here, little Bishop?

A frown digs at my forehead, and finally, when Brielle's as good as gone, Maddoc and I face each other.

"Who is she?" he asks, and rightfully so.

She came near his home, his woman, and unborn kid.

Our niece.

I meet their eyes but hold Raven's.

"Brielle Bishop."

"Bishop," Raven repeats. "As in..."

"As in your boy Bass? His little sister."

"I..." She shakes her head. "Didn't expect that."

Victoria chuckles, joining us, and both me and Cap look to Zoey sittin' on the lounge chair, her entire little arm disappearing into a bag of beef jerky.

Cap turns to me. "Miss Maybell sent her down here, didn't she?"

"She didn't admit it," I tell them. "Didn't deny it, either."

"She didn't want to rat her out," Raven realizes. "Why would she care?"

"Sounds like a loyal move," Victoria throws out and I pin her with a glare.

"Don't start your shit."

She laughs, hopping onto Captain's back. "Just saying."

"Well, don't and don't try to get this girl... it won't work."

"Why not?" Victoria wonders.

"Just trust me, the girl's off."

"Off how?" Raven drops into the chair next to Zoey, accepting the half-chewed piece of jerky she holds out for her. "Like she eats chips with a fork *off* or she'd cut your junk off in your sleep and convince you later she did it because she loves you *off*?"

“The fuck, RaeRae?” I chuckle, but a small shudder shoots through my body and I cup my traumatized cock.

“Come on, Ponyboy, give us something,” Raven pushes.

“Fuck you want me to say?” I lift my hands with a laugh. “She laughs when she should be scared, jokes when she should be mad, and—”

“So she’s Royce-proof?” Victoria interrupts me, making Raven laugh.

“Girl, quit playin’!” I shout, backing up to escape being caged between Bonnie and Bonnie. “All I said is she’s off. Meet her, talk to her, scare the piss out of her, I don’t care, then decide for your fuckin’ selves.”

“On that note... I say we have some fun.” Raven wiggles her brows.

I laugh, grabbing my phone from the chair when it rings.

I answer and put it to my ear. “Talk to me, MacMoney?”

“We got a problem,” he fires off.

My pulse kicks up, my shoulder muscles stretching.

My brothers sense it and step closer with tight expressions. I put the call on speaker.

“Talk to us.”

“That fight rumor that was going ‘round about a fight?’ he leads. “It happened.”

My blood instantly heats.

“Who?” Maddoc asks.

“Coach Von.”

We look to each other. “For real?”

“Yup. He got his ass whooped and whooped good, couple of his players found him in the dugout on the baseball field. The new scoreboard was busted too, but that was off camera. I’ll send the pictures now, it was clearly a fucking bat and

there's busted up Mickey's bottles out here too. Even a fucking lime."

"Damn, bro."

"That's not all..." He trails off.

"Come on, Mac." Captain glares.

"He says he don't know who it was, that he didn't see him coming, but I already pulled it up and watched it on camera."

Raven frowns. "He lied."

"You can't see the guy's face, but you can see them argue for a minute before he gets his ass handed to him."

"So not only did he see the person, he knows them. Why lie?"

He sighs. "Don't know yet."

"There's a reason." Victoria begins pacing and we all look to her.

The thing about Victoria is she's a little secret seeker, sees what others don't, finishes the puzzle when she's only got half the pieces... most of the time.

Mac adds, "Yeah, like there's a reason Coach Von didn't fight back."

Our eyes fly between one another.

"Not even a single hit?"

"Nope."

"Motherfucker."

Maddoc's jaw tightens. "He knew we'd find out and go looking."

"And we'd pause on the first person with a mark on him. Whoever it was has something on the guy."

"Fuck," Mac hisses.

Tension tightens my chest. "What is it?"

“The equipment container lock was cut. Looks like some shit’s missing, but I need to get the lights on to be sure.”

“Someone’s fuckin’ bold.”

“Almost too bold,” Victoria wonders out loud, looking to us. “They went after the coach, the scoreboard, and the gear? He says he doesn’t know who it was, but didn’t fight back *and* someone was careful enough not to be in view of the camera but left beer bottles behind?”

“We’re missing something...”

She nods. “If it was a bat that was used on the board, but not on the coach, then we need to start with someone on the team. Starting pitcher or star hitter maybe?”

Maddoc nods. “Lucky for us, it happens to be the same fucking person.”

Raven leans back. “Scope him tomorrow, invite him to party tomorrow night.”

Everyone nods and there we are.

We’ll bring the mouse to the mouse hunt.

Chapter 10



ROYCE

MICAH MAKES IT UP THE STEPS OF THE GIRLS HOME RIGHT AS A group of them push out of the door. They pause at the sight of him, but he's not used to these kinds of girls. They don't smile and gawk at the good-looking fucker, they shoulder right past him and down the road they go.

Raven and Victoria laugh at the offended look on his face, but we just shake our heads.

He'll learn quick enough.

They'll be plenty of the trust fund girls at the school who will fall at the sight of him, but it won't be these ones.

Last night, Mac let us know when Micah got in, so me, my brothers, and the girls came down to meet him while giving him his first task.

A plan I'm about to cancel when the girl is the last one to make it out of the house and her smile goes straight to Micah, it's tight-lipped, but it's there. When he leans in to give her a hug, she accepts, a familiar manila folder hanging from her hand—her Brayshaw High paperwork.

I shift in my seat, watching. Annoyed with how I feel so damn annoyed.

And of what?

Fuck if I know!

Raven leans over as much as her belly allows, resting her forearms on the dash. “*That girl* is Bass Bishop’s little sister?”

Maybell’s well-played words of wisdom come back.

Expectations are for fools, and you are far from one of those.

“Not what you’d expect?”

In my peripheral, Raven shakes her head. “Far from it. I guess I pictured someone tall and rogue model-like, like him.”

That gives me something fun to focus on, and I look to Maddoc with a grin, waiting for his reaction but all he gives is an exhaled rumble, making his woman laugh.

“Man, I’d kill for an ass like that,” Victoria muses, dragging my attention back to Brielle.

“Same,” Raven agrees. “How’s it so... full?”

My head snaps back to the porch as the two climb down the stairs, his hand at the base of her back, as if she needs to be led.

She doesn’t.

An unexpected urge to knock Micah off the steps follows, but I push that shit back, letting irritation take its place.

I must growl out loud as Raven turns to me.

She grins. “You doin’ okay back there, Ponyboy?”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t notice. Ass is your jam.”

The girl was wearing a school uniform fit for a forty-year-old every time I saw her, minus yesterday when she wore a pair of baggy sweats and T-shirt—road trip, comfort clothes—but like Raven pointed out, I can spot a nice ass from a mile away, find that shit under any kind of material known to man, thick or thin. So, like I said. I saw it.

Gotta admit, she’s got more than I realized.

Hips too.

Not that I care.

With each step Brielle takes, her smile spreads wider.

“Look at her.” Captain watches her. “She’s not even nervous.”

“She’s the last thing from nervous. Excited, maybe even content.” Victoria tips her head to follow her as she passes the front of the SUV and keeps toward Mac’s that sits at the edge of the curb, waiting for them.

“Told you. Off.”

“Does this girl know anything about us, man, or is she coming in blind?” Cap glances my way briefly.

“Guess we’ll see.”

“Poor girl.” Raven sits back. “She has no idea what she’s in for.”

Not a fucking clue.

The laughter and chatter die down as we head for the school.

We’ve got a mess to clean, and today is setup day.

Brielle

LAST NIGHT, AFTER MAC AND MICAH GOT ALL OF MY BAGS put in my room, Mac took us for a late-night burger to fill us in on their newest issue and go over some things he said we needed to know—things that are expected and what’ll get us a one-way ticket underground.

Okay, so he didn’t use that term, but I think it’s fitting.

People here, they do disappear, but nobody talks about that.

Just like we're not to talk about anything that's shared with us, we take part in, see, discover, or even fail at. Basically, we're like the CIA, but really not at all, more like rogue rebels.

Or they are. Not me.

I'm 'whatever Royce tells me to be'—words Mac awkwardly delivered on behalf of his BFF.

I decided he's the Manny Rae to Royce's Tony Montana, but a version who doesn't die in the end at his best friend's hand.

Okay, maybe that's a really bad comparison, but it's fine.

He's important, that's all I know.

"All right, it's all yours, my man." Mac passes a set of keys to Micah.

Keys to his now car, his bonus for joining their team.

We look over to find a black Denali.

Identical to the ones the Brayshaws drive.

Micah frowns from it to Mac, but Mac only nods.

"GPS is already set to get you back to the school," he shares. "Follow it and don't be late. You'll draw attention to yourself being new and we don't want to make a show."

We nod and switch cars.

Micah is grinning from ear to ear and keeps whistling as he checks out gadgets on the dash.

He looks to me with a smile. "How about some flat cakes? I saw a McDonald's across the bridge when I drove in?"

"Mac told us not to be late."

"We have a half hour and look." He pushes buttons on the navigation system. "It says it's six minutes away." When I

hesitate, he nudges my shoulder with a smile. “Come on. New place, new life. It’s just a pancake.”

I laugh. “I already ate... but I guess I could go for a hot chocolate?”

He laughs. “There we go.”

As Micah said, we’re there in six minutes, and pulling away after three.

He looks to me with a grin that dims as he faces forward. “Is this weird, being in a car with me like this?”

I exhale. “Kind of, but surprisingly not as bad as I thought it would be when Mac suggested it last night.”

I look to Micah and we both laugh.

“Hey, so,” I tread lightly, messing with my phone in my palm. “Did you meet everyone at the boys home?”

Micah shrugs. “I met a couple. I guess some were out late, some are gone on jobs and shit. Be back in a week or something.” He scowls. “Why, you not meet any of the girls?”

“No, yeah, I did. All of the ones who were interested in laying eyes on the new girl anyway, the rest stayed in their rooms.” Micah laughs. “I was just... wondering—” About my brother.

We begin rolling across the bridge, but as we do, a car cuts us off, and Micah’s forced to slam on the brakes.

My body flies forward, but the seat belt catches me. Unfortunately, not my drink, and then my entire chest burns with steaming cocoa.

I gasp, pulling at it, and Micah turns to me with wide eyes.

“Shit!” He throws the thing in park, and turns to me, but as my head lifts, I realize the car that cut us off has stopped.

I hit his arm, frowning forward. “Micah...”

“I know, here let me help. I—”

“No. Micah... look.”

His eyes pop up to mine, then snap out the front window.

The car rolls backward, toward us.

Micah tenses. “What the fuck?”

“Go.”

He doesn’t move.

“Micah, go.” The car stops inches in front of us.

Micah quickly throws the thing in reverse, but as the rearview dash cam pops up on the screen, a low curse leaves him.

And shit is right.

Another car is behind us.

“We’re blocked in.”

As if over his initial surprise, Micah throws the thing in drive, his eyes hard on the road. “Not for long.”

He inches forward, his bumper teasing against the car ahead of us, but that car, he backs up, its tires screeching. So, Micah throws it in reverse, and slams into the one behind us.

The front one comes back, hitting against us right as a third car, much larger, flies up beside us.

I scream as it takes out the mirror, getting as close as it possibly can.

My heart begins to pound in my chest, and I try to breathe through it.

Micah guns it, driving the car behind us back, then flies forward at a bit of a curve, effectively driving a small wedge between the two front cars and we manage to slip through, but within seconds, all three are on our ass.

“Shit,” I hiss, the pressure at my temples doubling.

I throw my seat belt off and Micah cuts wide eyes toward me.

“What the hell?” he shouts, gripping my arm when he takes a sharp turn. “Sit down and buckle. If we wreck, you’re out the fucking window.”

“There’re three cars to our one, Micah!” I shout, throwing myself into the back seat. “We’re getting penned in again.”

I reach over the third row, my hand shooting up to grip the handles at the top when Micah swerves again.

With one hand, I yank off the siding and voila!

Emergency road kit.

I dig through it, my hand meeting a cool piece of metal right as the car comes to a screeching halt.

I fly over, hitting my back on the side panel, a crowbar now in my hand.

“You good?!” Micah shouts.

“Yeah.” I tear out the wrench, my eyes wide when I look out the back door. “Oh shit. Micah, they opened the door.”

“Up here too. Fuck!”

I spin around, and sure as hell, two people with masks over their faces climb from the car in front, the drivers of the cars behind us doing and wearing the same.

My vision begins to fog, but I fight through it and spin, holding one of the weapons out for Micah.

He grips it, looking from me quickly and back.

Slowly, they round the car, one on each side of our doors, one at each of the back doors.

They bang wildly on the windows.

Micah tries to hit the gas and fly forward, but the car in front of us must have had another person inside, because they sensed it and rev back at the same time.

The guy beside his door hops back, and Micah sighs. Cutting a quick glance to me.

“Get in the driver’s seat, Brielle. Get the fuck out of here.”

“What—”

He throws his door open and jumps out.

He lifts the weapon, going straight for the guy, but he forgets to watch his back, and is quickly wrapped up and taken to the ground.

“Shit!”

I hop over the seat, locking the door right as another one is slamming his palms against it, tearing at the handle.

The guy’s head tilts like the freak from *The Purge*, and he slams a hand on the window, but then his arm disappears behind his back, and I blink rapidly, my pulse far too erratic to stop the blood flow to my brain.

His hand flies out, and on reflex, I flinch.

But that hand, it doesn’t hold a gun or knife or whatever I came up with in my head.

It holds a key.

I inhale, and then the lock pops open.

The door is yanked open, and he darts forward, but I lift the crowbar from my lap and thrust it forward as hard as I can, driving it into the person’s neck.

And that person?

He laughs.

Everything in me both freezes and melts, and I tear the mask off his head.

“Are you shitting me?” comes out as a harsh whisper.

The other three walk around, each pulling off their masks.

They grin wide, eyes trailing and while I can’t see the shades of them, I can see their figures, and I know who they are.

I blink several times, long and hard, and when my lids open again, things are a little clearer.

I stare into the shadowy eyes across from mine, feel the strong grip that wraps around my fingers to push the crowbar down, and a grin that tugs at the lips inches from mine.

A fourth car skids up beside us, and in my peripheral, I watch as the door is thrown open, a fifth person stepping out.

And then heated breaths meet my skin, just over my collarbone, and the devilishly delivered words whispered send a shiver down my spine. “Welcome to Brayshaw.”

Holy.

Shit.

I’M NOT SURE HOW LONG I STARE INTO THE CHOCOLATE EYES before me, but then his lips lift, and right as the shapes around me regain their clarity.

My eyes fly from one figure to the other like a pinball, waiting to see more of each one, but at the same time, eager to see more from the next.

The infamous Brayshaw boys, and the rest of their family stare straight at me, a different expression on each of their faces, but I do my best to focus on one at a time

The boys, they’re so easy to tell apart, each with distinct features of their own.

Maddoc, who stands there with a blank face, has thick, dark hair, and caramel-colored skin which gives him away instantly. He’s every bit of a living Greek god. An angry, eerily emotionless one. From what I’ve gathered, he’s the one to watch. Not the leader, as they’re all thought of as equal, but there’s something about him that merits extra caution and meticulous care.

Captain stands beside him and offers a slight tip of his chin and a small smile. He's as tall as Royce and Maddoc, but with wider shoulders, creamier colored skin, and blond hair—the most obvious contrast of his adoptive siblings. He's got that all-American vibe going, but to be blinded by first glance is to miss the confidence in his wide stance, the tension in his shoulders—he's pretty, but perilous.

A gorgeous girl with golden hair that meets her hips has her elbow propped on Captain's shoulder, but I'm not sure who she is.

His BrayGirl, maybe?

A quick laugh comes from the left and my head jerks that way.

My breath lodges in my throat as my eyes land on Raven Carver.

Or I should say Raven Brayshaw.

Long, dark hair, ink black and shining, she tips her head with a grin.

The heir to the entire Brayshaw empire who nobody even knew existed until she showed up on the doorstep of the very group home I now live in, if what I've learned is true.

A product of rape in a war between the founding families of this town, raised by a vile mother, a whore in true form, every bit a trailer trash disaster, and abused as a young girl.

Yet here she stands.

Strong.

Bold.

Inspiring.

Very, very pregnant.

“*That.*” She jerks her head. “Is Victoria, and my sister. And yes, Cap's BrayGirl.”

“Bitch.” Victoria draws my attention with a smile. “I’m his now, tomorrow, always... and you.” She nods with a smirk, her eyes falling to the crowbar in Royce’s hand, slowly coming back to mine. “Are off to a good start.”

Royce’s eyes fall to my top and he frowns. “You good?”

I look down with a nod. “Yeah, it’s... I’m fine.” It stings, but only a little now.

“Good.” He looks to Micah as he steps up to us. “Never cross this bridge. Graven Prep is on this side, and we don’t fuck with them. They’re on their own and as long as they keep staying out of our way, we’ll leave them that way.” He turns to Micah again. “You didn’t really think we’d let you drive around in a beast like ours, did you?”

“Well, I definitely didn’t think you’d trash a perfectly badass ride, either.” Micah chuckles.

“That’s fair.” Royce grins, tosses him a set of keys and slowly they back away, climb into their ride and off they go. Just like that.

Me?

I remain frozen in the seat they left me in.

The pressure surrounding my eyes is long gone, but it now sits heavy against my chest as a sense of pride blooms within it.

I trail the black SUV as it pulls away, carrying the family who earned my brother’s loyalty as he did theirs, the teenagers who live like grown-ass men in a world like no other, full of chaos and crookedness and... freedom.

The family Bass came to believe in and gave his all to in hopes of earning me a place beside him.

Yes, they took my brother from me without pause or consideration of the girl they were leaving behind, or more, casting out alone, but I can’t say I don’t understand why or that I’m angry over it.

Does it sting?

Of course it does. My brother was the only person in my world I could depend on. We were only safe, away from the home we were born and raised in for less than twenty-four hours when they came for him, and not twenty-four after that I was on my way to my aunt's, without him.

Like I said, though, I understand, and as much as it has sucked to be without him, I'm grateful for them and what they gave him. If anyone deserved a chance in a world that meant something, it was him. I was okay knowing he was okay.

I can only hope I don't make a fool of him now that I have a chance to join him.

I won't.

Chapter 11



ROYCE

“WHATCHA LOOKIN’ FOR, PONYBOY?”

“A way to tell Maddoc it’s my kid you’re carryin’.”

Raven laughs while I duck to avoid Maddoc’s open palm.

“For real, what’s up?” She leans back in her chair, her hands on her big-ass belly.

I reach out, putting my hand beside hers, my eyes still scanning the room. “She ain’t in here, I’m wondering if she’s curled in a corner somewhere.”

Raven tips her head. “You want her to be?”

I look back to her with a brow raised. “If I wanted her to be, she would be.”

Victoria shrugs. “People have no reason to be threatened by her, so she should be fine.”

“Exactly.” Raven nods. “She’s just a girl from the group home... until you make her something different.”

“Which will happen never.” I glare.

Raven smirks. “Uh-huh.”

“Check it out.” Captain gains our attention.

Enoch Cameron, Brayshaw High's star pitcher, sits wide legged at a table near the back exit, chatting up Giana Fritz, a chick from the tennis team.

He reaches out, flicking her hair near her shoulders, and she leans a little closer.

"Lay it on thick, fucker," I muse. "Your girl's only sittin' a table over."

We glance at Taylor Simms, the girl he's had on his hip since freshman year.

"Right on time," Maddoc speaks low, and the rest of us look toward the door.

Coach Von walks right through, cut lip, black eye and guaran-fucking-tee some fractured-ass ribs under his firm pressed dress shirt.

Victoria sits forward in her chair, studying their body language while we look for a sign that reads foul play.

What do you know, while Enoch doesn't look his way, the fucker does sit up in his seat.

His eyes fly to Taylor, who shrinks in her chair, hiding her face behind her phone.

Neither of them look toward the coach.

Maddoc leans back. "It was him."

"Yeah. We're missing something." Cap nods.

"They're playin' bitch boy games."

"But is it me..." Victoria squints. "Or does Taylor look like she's about to break down with waterworks any second now?"

She does.

"Looking at that dude, seems he's looking for a new flavor."

Victoria eyes her, shaking her head. "We need to look at her a little deeper."

Nobody argues. Victoria is usually right when it comes to this kind of thing, but until we find out more, it is what it is.

My eyes shift to Enoch when he stands. He says something to Giana that has her nodding before he walks away.

Dipshit.

I turn to Captain. “Aye, let me take Zoey on Sunday.”

He frowns. “You know you can come with us. Always.”

I grin.

Fuck me, love to hear that, not that I need to. They never throw it in my face, never try to sneak away alone. We might have added to our threesome, but it’s got no effect on how tight we are.

They know me and are fully aware I give a fuck-ton about their relationships.

In fact, they’d kick my ass if they knew I didn’t have plans on days I pass on their outings, but I’d take it if they found out because I want them to have the time they deserve with their girls, always.

I love my brothers as much as I know how, but the love they get from their equal halves isn’t one I can match. It isn’t one I’d ever cut in on either.

“I know, brother.” I nod. “But I want her to my damn self. I’ve gotta score back some points since Uncle Dick over here keeps sneaking stuffed trains in her room.”

Captain swings his frown to Maddoc.

Maddoc’s glare snaps my way, and he tosses a bottle cap at me.

“You said no more stuffed animals,” Cap calls him out.

I sit back, grinning with Raven and Victoria while Maddoc does his damn best to justify Zoey’s need for every fuckin’ thing she wants. And more.

What neither of them know is I rented out the entire Build-A-Bear Workshop for Sunday night for the princess.

I grin thinking about it, a grin that widens when Katie Kline slides up with a heavy coat of lip gloss and a long, slow blink.

The table goes back to their own conversations while I focus on Katie.

“You ran out on me pretty fast the other night,” she says with a small smirk.

I ditched her, and she still came back. I’ll reward her for that, even if this little stopover is as purposeful as the leak of every single celebrity sex tape.

It’s cool though, I’ll play her little game of show and tell, her objective: *let me show you who I played with, now go tell all your friends.*

I kick my leg out.

Never willing to pass on an invitation, she lowers her ass onto my left thigh.

“Come on now, Katie K.” I tilt my head slightly. “Don’t front like you expected me to stay.”

She brings her upper body closer to mine. “Doesn’t hurt to hope you might.”

“It should.” I grin, squeezing her thigh. “It should sting real good.”

Katie laughs, swaying her knee back and forth. I glance to Raven to see if she’s noticed the clear shot up her skirt, but her focus lies on the far side of the cafeteria.

I know that face and skim the room. I don’t find anything that would give the girl a reason to harden though. “RaeRae.”

My slow and tight call of her name has Maddoc’s head snapping toward her with concern.

Her eyes dart to his first, quickly moving to mine only to swing right back where they were. “*New flavor, you say?*”

Only when a group of freshmen with trays in their hands start walking again, do I spot what she has—short silver hair parked right in front of a dead pitcher walking.

Enoch fucking Cameron blocks her from me. The only glimpse I get is a half shot of sleek-ass shine teasing at the edge of an exposed shoulder that wasn’t exposed earlier.

Enoch slides behind her then, and at the slight angle I have, it looks as if he’s gripping on to her arm. He’s definitely saying something.

Talking to her.

Right near her fucking ear, like I was only hours ago when I realized she smells like sunshine and wicked red wine.

The sweet with a bite that follows.

I put my hands on Katie’s outer thighs, ready to move her ass and stand, but then Mac is there.

He slaps a hard hand down on the back of Enoch’s neck in a good old friendly gesture that says ‘get back motherfucker’ and uses the move to turn his body sideways. Away from Brielle. The potential—and very likely—fuckup, and Mac now facing each other.

Mac smiles spewing something and Enoch grins back, lifting his fist to give him props.

There you go, my man. Play him right, get him where we need him tonight.

Mac slowly eases between the two, and then dismisses Enoch altogether, turning toward Brielle.

She’s got her shades on now, but smiles up at him with ease.

He says something, and she laughs, her hands slipping into her hair.

“And here comes Chloe,” Victoria singsongs.

At the mention of her friend, Katie pulls her face from her phone, seeking out the former queen bee and Mac’s honey.

Chloe struts up like a runway ruler, confident and flawless as always, and a fucking giant compared to Brielle. She’s got a foot on her easy, and that’s not including the six inches added by her Valentinos either.

Raven and Victoria laugh when Chloe plants her ass at her man’s side, her opening move being her slipping a shoulder in front of Mac, her little show of territory over her man.

Brielle doesn’t cower away, grow nervous, or get mad.

The girl smiles at her.

I cut quick glances at Raven and Victoria, who both sit back with curious, questioning eyes.

Told them.

Off.

Brielle sticks her hand out, and just like that, Chloe grins bright. Like Victoria said, she puts off no threat. She’s kind.

“Have you met her yet?” Katie reminds us she’s still here, like her bony ass isn’t stabbing into my thigh muscle more and more by the second.

All eyes turn to her.

She squirms, unable to handle all of our attention at once. She attempts to cover the nervousness in her tone but fails. “She’s the newest girl from the group home, right?”

“Those are the only new students we take.”

She knows this. Everyone does.

There are only two scenarios for students who go to Brayshaw High—the legacy kids, the ones whose mother or father or some other family member went here and held up the town with pride, and the ones we allow in on a trial basis. Those are the neglected or abused or downright fucked

teenage boys and girls who never had a chance but deserve one.

Like the chance Brielle was supposed to get after she was freed from her fucked-up family but never got.

A nasty sense of guilt seeps in, pulling at my ribs and forcing me to stretch my torso.

She lost a lot of time.

“She’s in my AP calculus class.” Katie tries to cover up her pointless question. “Smart as hell, I guess.”

“Why you say that?”

“Well for one, she’s a junior and in calculus.” She sips her smoothie. “That and I heard Coach Von tell her she could help grade papers after school anytime she wanted.”

I force myself not to react, play bored and flick my eyes past my brothers.

Now that’s some interesting shit.

Invite the new girl after class so quickly, freshly fucked-up face and all?

“Maybe she’ll do my homework.” Raven plays it cool, shifting the conversation to safer zones.

Katie’s full of starry eyes as she stares at her queen. “I don’t think there’s anyone here who wouldn’t do whatever you asked them to.”

Raven looks away. She wouldn’t ask a soul to do shit for her. Anyone who knows a thing about her, knows that much.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I dig it out.

MACMONEY: MICAH’S ABOUT TO GRAB HER.

I LOCK EYES WITH HIM FROM ACROSS THE ROOM, AND WHEN I give no signal for him to intervene, he grabs his girl, the two

disappearing as Micah steps up.

His arm slips over her shoulder and she leaves it there, allowing him to lead her across the cafeteria, right to where most of the guys from the home kick back along with a few others who don't live on our property, but work out at the warehouses.

She smiles and waves along with the group, laughing at something as she pushes Micah's arm off her. One of them shoves out a chair and she doesn't hesitate to sit.

She puts her elbows on the table and joins their conversation with ease.

Captain's eyes narrow. "They're never that friendly that quick."

"They're afraid of her brother," Raven teases.

So *not* just a group home chick. One protected by her brother's name.

"Wait, who is her brother?" Katie leans forward, a gleam for gossip in her gaze.

Maddoc looks to me and I nod, sliding my eyes to Katie.

I tap on her ass and her leg muscles clench.

She pauses but knows better and removes herself from my lap. She walks away and I lean forward, dropping my forearms on the table.

"If she's in her class, her last name would have stuck and she'd know who her brother was," Raven says.

My features smooth, and I lean back in my chair. This can only mean one thing.

"They don't know."

Cap's eyes narrow and he guesses, "Maybell."

"She must have hooked her up."

But why?

Raven eyes the group curiously. “So, they don’t know Bishop is her brother. She’s been here, what, three hours, and they like her already?”

“I mean... look at her, you guys.” Victoria shakes her head, a smoothness taking over her face as she does what she does best, reading words that aren’t there. “She’s not like we were, standoffish and disgruntled, angry.” She pauses. “Think about how she was this morning when we scared the shit out of her. She didn’t get freaked out or even get embarrassed, she looked at us like... I don’t know, but there was a gentleness to her and not in a fearful way. And then right now, she walked up to a group of rough-ass, bruised up, tatted and pierced punks and thugs with zero hesitation and a smile. A *real* smile. No judgment in her tone, not unease or tension they can sense. She’s soft, calm-like, and she doesn’t realize it. People are drawn to that, even if they don’t know what to do with it. They just... want to be near.” She looks to Captain. “Zoey would like her.”

He grins, squeezing her thigh.

The pit of my stomach clenches, folds over, but I shake it off. This is nothin’ but bullshit talk.

Useless.

A waste of fucking time.

The table jolts as I hop up and low laughs float from the girls. “There’s ten minutes left, let’s shoot some hoops.”

“Need to let off some steam, brother?” Maddoc smirks.

I flip him off.

“You know they wouldn’t be so friendly if they knew she was with us.” Raven raises a brow.

“She’s not with us. She works for us, same as a couple dozen others.”

Maddoc pushes to his feet, helping Raven to hers and coming to stand beside me.

He clamps a hand on my shoulder. “Your knuckles are lookin’ white, brother.”

“Your eye’s about to look black, *brother*.”

He tips his head. “You know I’m dying to spar.”

I nod, leading us toward the back door. “Okay, fucker. Me and you, gloves tomorrow.”

The others chuckle behind him, and I hold the door open for them to pass through, but before I step out, I cut a quick glance at Brielle.

The second my attention lands on her, her head happens to shift, and I know she’s spotted me, even if I can’t see her eyes behind the frames.

I pause, waiting.

And waiting.

And she turns away, laughing at something the dude across from her says.

Tension that tugs a lot like anger wraps around my shoulders, but I roll it out and head for the court.

Right as I drop my backpack, my phone goes off in my hand, and I glance to the screen. My pulse kicks when I see her name. It’s fucking irritating.

I must be annoyed, pent up or somethin’, ‘cause this shit’s whack.

LITTLE BISHOP: I TRIED, BUT THAT WAS WEIRD.

MY LIP TWITCHES, BUT I FORCE A FROWN QUICKLY.

ME: DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT.

LITTLE BISHOP: SURE YOU DO.

SMART-ASS.

LITTLE BISHOP: I SAY HI TO THE MAILMAN WHEN I SEE HIM. I'm not going to pass by you and not say hi.

ME: SO I'M ON EQUAL PLAYING GROUND AS A MAILMAN? Nice.

LIKE AN ELBOW IN A GAME OF STREET BALL, CONFUSION
knocks hard at my ribs.

Why'd I send that?!

LITTLE BISHOP: YOU ARE DEFINITELY NOT ON THE same level as the mailman.

THAT'S RIGHT. I'M NOT.

LITTLE BISHOP: HE SAYS HI FIRST...

A SCOFFED LAUGH ESCAPES.

This girl, I swear.

LITTLE BISHOP: SO YEAH, THIS IS YOUR FAIR WARNING. I'M going to say hi when I see you because I want to, but I won't be showy about it. Promise. Nobody will ever even assume we've spoken a word to each other.

THAT LAST LINE SHOULDN'T PISS ME OFF.

In fact, I'm pretty fucking sure it should do the opposite, but like I said, I must be annoyed today.

Irritation heats my limbs.

Strangers.

Just another person in the hall, not connected to us, not protected by us, but watched out for by other Bray employees, like one of their own.

Bray employees like the ones she's chatting up in the cafeteria, that smile and laugh at her 'cause they know an honest girl when they meet one, spot a beaten soul when they cross one, and soak up light when it's in reach.

She's in their reach.

And fuck me, the girl's got a lot of light.

"Royce."

I look to my brother.

Maddoc rolls the basketball between his fingers, eyeing me.

I tap my phone in my palm, and his gaze narrows.

I look to Captain, and then the girls who chat at the picnic table not five feet away.

With a nod, I stuff my phone in my pocket, and clap my hands together, asking for the ball.

Maddoc passes it my way, and I slowly dribble forward, but my foot barely passes the foul line. I abandon the thing and spin on my fucking heels.

In my peripheral, the girls' heads turn, following me.

I throw the cafeteria door open, knowing it will slam against the wall, only to fly back and hit even harder on the

frame. The shit's loud and gains the attention of everyone around.

Everyone but the silver-haired thing in the corner.

She continues to stare forward, her laughter rippling across the room, outshining every sound and pissing me off.

Jonah, one of our ground's boys, sits in front of her, his eyes popping up to mine as I slip closer.

Those around are waiting, watching. Holding their damn breaths. They pretend not to be, but they are. Every fuckin' one of them.

Brielle finally notices the table's attention slipped over her head and glances over her shoulder.

The air in the room shifts, each and every one growing stiff while waiting on shriveled sacks.

Not her though.

Brielle doesn't tense or freeze or jolt, doesn't put on a sassy smirk or lean forward to put her chest on display for me, doesn't trip or try to spice up the least bit.

No fear, no flex.

The girl spins in her chair and fuckin' smiles, wide and welcoming.

Pleased, and not in a conceited, knowing way.

Goddamn, if it doesn't take effort to not pause my own punk boy steps.

There's a heavy beat in my palms, unexpected adrenaline firing through me and making my limbs grow heavy. Tired.

It's almost enough for me to walk away.

Fuck's happening here?

Brielle's elbow is propped up, so she lays her head on her folded fist.

With a whole helluva lot of effort, I force my eyes from her, look across the table, and nod at the guys. A few lift their fists and I meet them with mine.

These are the assholes who have our backs, and we have their paychecks. There's respect there, loyalty, and it goes both ways.

They don't know Brielle's off-limits.

Fuckin' Christ.

I look to Brielle.

Her smile deepens.

A weight falls on my chest, right where the center of my chain hangs, my family crest.

Off-limits?

"What up, man?" Micah grins, stepping beside me.

I jerk my chin, not bothering to look his way. I might want to nut check him if I do, and I don't care to know why.

"Not much. Just came to grab somethin'."

Her eyes flash with amusement, and the turquoise brightens, reminding me of the waters in Panama, where our dad took us on our last family vacation more than a decade ago before shit here hit the fan and kept on spinning.

"Anything, man." Micah nods, hungry to please, to prove himself. "Tell me what you need."

I glance his way and he shifts, stands tall, proud, like a soldier facing his general.

It's a good ass way to be, a great fucking sign from the new guy, but I'm not here for him.

I look to Brielle.

The table looks to Brielle.

And Brielle, she laughs.

I don't have to tell her to stand up, she does it on her own, and only then do I get a good look at her.

How I didn't notice this morning, I don't know. Maybe because I was busy putting a bit of fear in her. Maybe it's because any fear she may have felt disappeared the second her eyes found mine.

I cut the thoughts quick, focusing on the strappy sandals and pink painted toes planted two steps from mine and follow the path of tan and toned legs.

Thick thighs hugged tight by little white shorts lay a little low on wide hips. A loose fitted green tank with a board shop logo in the right corner that doesn't quite meet her bottoms.

She shifts to grab her backpack from beside her feet, and that little hint of skin between her belt and top widens, offering with it a sneak of what's beneath. A different shade of silver catches the light, but it's hidden as quick as it was exposed.

Was that... a piercing?

I'm tempted to lift the hem of her top and get a better look, but when my eyes cut left, finding Micah's just discovered, or is wondering, the same thing, and he ain't looking away, decide against it.

"Thanks for letting me sit with you." She's focused on Micah, then turns to the table with a small wave. "I'll see you guys soon, I'm sure."

I'm prepared to lead her where I want her, but Brielle doesn't stand there waiting for direction.

She doesn't wait for a sign from me at all.

She slips by with a smile, and some-fucking-how it's me, following her out.

The second we're standing in the warm outside air, and there aren't dozens of fucking ears surrounding us, I slip in front of her, halting her footsteps.

She grins, but it falters when she realizes I'm not.

I'm irritated.

Why?

Who fucking knows!

But I am.

So I find something to bark about.

"You seem pretty fucking comfortable already."

Her mouth pinches to the side. "I thought it was nice of Micah to introduce me to some people he met already."

"From lame little loner to suddenly needing a gang around you, and all in a half day's work."

Brielle nods, and she looks away. "Yeah, Royce, that's exactly it."

"Don't pretend it's not, nobody likes a fake."

An angry little flare has her chest rising. "And nobody likes a guy who's an ass in an effort to drown out his own inner issues."

My jaw flexes, my tone dark. Warning. "Watch it, baby girl."

This girl, she either doesn't notice, or doesn't care.

She steps into my space. "Man up, *baby boy*."

I push toward her. "I swear to God—"

"If something I do bothers you, say it," she cuts me off with a soft shout. "Or better yet, growl it since that seems to be your favorite way to communicate."

"You're pissing me off."

"I'm getting the feeling you're perpetually pissed off." A sour laugh slips from her, but a soberness is quick to take its place. "If there's something you want me to know, tell me all about it. Something you want me to stop doing or do more of, spell it out for me. Something you need from or of me, ask for

it. I will give it to you if I'm able, and if I'm not, I'll try to find a way."

Something wraps around my upper body, squeezing. Pulling.

I swear there's a crack.

I don't like it.

She'll do what she can, as much of it as she's got, for me.

'Cause that's what I hired her for, right? What a good employee would do?

My lungs fill with air.

Right?

Brielle's arms fall to her side. "All I want is to be whatever it is you hoped for the minute you decided I was worth this place," she whispers with purpose. "But I can't be if you don't help me figure out what that is."

I push my chest out, my attempt to stretch through the heaviness building and building.

And fucking building.

She wants to be whatever I want her to be.

Whatever *I* want her to be.

I want her to be better off than she was because she was supposed to be.

I want her to be everything her brother doesn't.

I want her to do all the things he'd hate.

See all the things he tried to shield her from.

The pain and anger, the danger and resolution.

I want her in the middle of trouble and forced to fight her way out.

I want her to be nothing she is and everything she's not.

That's why I brought her here, to change her, to give her more and use her to piss off her brother?

Isn't it?

To create something new for Bass Bishop's little sister.

To obliterate the softness, bury the bright, and lead her into the darkness?

To erase everything she is and rewrite her completely.

RIGHT?!

I don't realize I'm holding my breath until a hard hand comes down on my shoulder.

I meet Maddoc's gaze, and he lowers his chin.

Snap out of it, brother, that's what he's saying.

With his help, I do. I force my muscles loose and push a chuckle past my lips.

I grab the ball he offers and begin walking backward, Brielle studying me closely.

"That..." I trail off, plant my feet and throw for a three-pointer, slowly turning back, not stopping until I'm directly in front of her. "Was one of the most pathetic things I've ever heard."

Her eyes move between mine. "I highly doubt that."

"You shouldn't."

"And you should go," she says softly. "Your BrayGirl is waiting."

BrayGirl?

I look over as she does.

Katie K stands near the double doors leading to the empty locker room, pretending not to be eavesdropping.

She's far from mine, just someone I enjoyed playing with, but I don't tell her this.

I lick my lips.

“You were wrong, you know.” We meet each other’s eyes. “You said a BrayGirl is good enough for our bed, but not our heart.”

I’m not sure she realizes it, but she takes a step back before speaking. “So you could love a girl who would give herself to you when you haven’t earned it?”

“No.”

Her frown is as quick as my response, but it doesn’t hold long.

She understands what I’m saying.

Not only is a Brayshaw’s heart off-limits to the girls they sleep with, but their beds are, too.

With that, I walk away, grab Katie K and get the fuck out of there.

I should have realized right then and there Brielle Bishop would be a problem for me.

I didn’t.

Chapter 12



BRIELLE

I WALK THROUGH THE FOOTBALL FIELD AND OUT THE BACK gate instead of going out the front.

I have no idea if Royce or Micah or any of the other girls from the home will be waiting around for me or not, but it's not likely.

A fact that's proven when a half hour passes, and I get no calls or texts asking where the hell I disappeared to. I could always say I stayed after to help my teacher, but if they asked him about it, I doubt he'd lie for a student he doesn't even know.

Not that they would ask or that I have a reason to lie.

I'm technically a free reigner here until I'm called on by the game maker, aka Royce freaking Brayshaw and his hot and cold attitude.

That's the logic I use when I hop on the city bus and take it the forty-five-minute route to the edge of town.

It's the line where Brayshaw ends and the real world begins. Just behind this neighborhood are almond orchards and small, privately owned vineyards. Those go on for miles and at the very end of them sits a highway. It too, is miles long to the

next true town, and the exact reason this one is able to function as it does.

Well, that and the money flowing through it.

Money is power.

But money isn't always good.

People would never guess, but me and my brother? We weren't poor.

We weren't even a leg up on Brayshaw wealthy, but we weren't poor.

Did we go hungry? Yes, but as a punishment.

Have fewer fancy things and rotate clothes like champs? Oh yeah, but again. Punishment.

We were pale and frail and silent, just as they wanted.

My brother is still a guy of few words, but he's far from frail, though he hides it well. He built strength, but he built it how he wanted it—deceptively.

If our father taught him anything, it was how to hide what he didn't want others to see.

I'm not too bad at it either, but as far as strength, I'm still trying to figure out where mine lies.

I can't exactly kill with kindness.

That was one thing my father hated most about me. He said I wore my heart on my sleeve and one day it would be shattered, if he didn't shatter it first.

What he didn't understand was I was the way I was, because he was the way *he* was.

It wasn't a weakness; it was a choice.

My heart was on my sleeve so my brother would know I still had love to give, and I'll admit, a way to spite our parents. I needed to show them I wasn't bitter and broken, like they wanted. I saw deeper, understood young, they weren't normal

or good or even decent, and I knew I would be nothing like them.

I give my brother a large amount of credit for that. He and I, through all of it, we had loved each other. And that alone was enough to endure the tomorrow that we knew would forever come.

Speaking of my brother, where is he?

I pull out my phone, but we're too close, I have to focus, so I stuff it back in my bag.

I sit on the edge of the plastic and felt-covered bus seat, staring out the window.

With each stop made, we grow closer.

I lift my hand to yank the wire lining the windows that lets the driver know to make the next stop, but as my hand wraps around it, I chicken out. My fingers rest on the cooled pull string, and then someone else tugs it down.

I guess it's settled.

We're making the next stop.

I could easily not get off, but I came all this way.

I step from the bus, walking down my old street for the first time in four years. A street that, the day I was finally off of, I told myself I never wanted to set foot on again. Never see or think about.

That only lasted a few months.

It's like the saying goes, you want what you can't have, only warped.

I didn't want to see my home, but being sent away, unable to, I wanted the chance to stand across the street and stare at it.

I thought about it a thousand times, and each time, Bass was beside me.

The entire situation, and conversation, played out in my head.

We would wait here, across the street until the living room got too smoky and our dad needed fresher air to blow his piney tobacco into. He'd come out on the porch and freeze, spotting us there, in the light, during summer, for all the neighbors to see.

What he'd say.

What we'd say back.

What our dad would try to do, and how we'd stop him.

How I'd get behind the wheel of my brother's Cutlass and hit the gas, paint the brown garage red, if he even bleeds the same way we do.

No, that's wrong, he doesn't.

Me and Bass, we bleed on the inside where no one can see.

Pain becomes pity, and we never wanted any of that, so we showed none.

We participated in PE with achy ribs and blank faces, because to show discomfort meant to raise questions, raising questions meant raising our dad's fists.

Silence was best.

Secrets were necessary.

Trust was nonexistent.

We didn't trust our father not to kill us, our mother to save us. We didn't even trust ourselves, which meant we couldn't trust each other. Not because we thought we'd do one another wrong, but because we'd do *anything* for each other. Anything. Always. No matter what.

People say all the time how they'd die for someone they love, *in a heartbeat*, they usually follow the statement with, but most have never and will never be faced with a situation where they'd have to put their money where their mouth is.

It's easy to say *I'd die for you* in a moment of hyped emotion or an attempt to prove your love or loyalty.

But would they?

If you stared down the barrel of a custom, steel-bodied, Glock when the safety's off, would they step in front of it?

Probably not.

“You okay?”

My elbow lifts, flying around with my body, but the guy jumps back before he catches it to the jawbone.

His hands lift and he takes a careful step back. “Hey, I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you, but we got off the bus almost five minutes ago, and you’ve been standing there staring at the stop sign ever since.”

I turn back to the stop sign I had no idea I was looking at.

My dad banged my head against that once.

Bass taught me how to ride a bike. My mom came out pretending to be proud, and he followed.

I fell and he strolled over.

A perfect fatherly thing to do, right? Lift your little girl off the ground when she falls flat against it.

He did, my bike too. He even helped me out of my helmet, while Bass stood by warily watching, an apology in his eyes. And then as we crossed the street, my dad pretended to bump into me. My head “just happened” to knock right into the metal post, leaving a large knot in the center.

To anyone around, it was a harmless accident. I might have even thought so too, if he didn’t take the time to whisper, “Now you know what it will feel like next time you fall.” He threw my helmet in the trash that night.

The guy clears his throat and I blink out of the memory.

I say the first thing that comes to mind. “I don’t like this stop sign.”

He chuckles, his eyes quickly taking me in. “Yeah, I’m not a fan of that yield sign on the next block up,” he jokes. “You

headed that way?" He points forward.

I nod.

"Well, I was a scout, and scouts are required to help people cross the street."

"Old people."

He grins. "I was hoping you didn't know that."

A light laugh leaves me, and we both step up to the curb.

He's not a creep, doesn't try to hold my arm or hand or anything, and he doesn't drop behind me to check out my ass. We walk side by side across the street.

We don't speak as we make it past the first few houses, but when we get to the curb of the next block, he turns to me.

I look from his blond hair to his light eyes.

He tips his head. "You don't seem eager to get wherever you're going."

"I'm not."

He nods, glances away and turns back with a slight tilt of his head. "There's a taco truck a couple streets back." He motions toward where we came. "I could eat."

Yeah. "I could eat, too."

He grins and we head in the direction he suggested.

We order burritos and sit across from one another at a picnic table.

"So." He stares at me.

"So." I laugh lightly. "I hope I didn't keep you from something."

"Not at all, this is where I was headed."

My brows pull in and I smile. "But you were walking in the opposite direction."

He opens his mouth, but then laughs it off. “Yeah, no. I just mean I was planning on getting some heartburn this afternoon. Figured it may as well be now instead of later.”

A low laugh leaves me. “So where were you going?”

“Oh, uh, I missed my stop, but what about you? You seemed to know the area.”

“What makes you think I don’t live over here?”

“I would have seen on my walk home before if you did.”

“I thought you got off on the wrong stop?” I tease.

He frowns, but a quick chuckle leaves him. “Yeah, no, I —” He’s cut off by the ringing of my phone.

I pull it out to look at the screen, seeing Royce’s name flashing across it.

“You can get that,” the guy says.

My eyes pop up finding his on my screen, they lift, and a quick grin forms on his lips.

“Trust me, I have to,” I joke, even if it is lost on him.

I answer the call, climb off the seat and take a few steps away.

“Hey.”

“You’re not at the house, at the school, or anywhere in between. That leaves one place, little Bishop.”

Yeah, right. Like he would expect—

“Your mom ain’t there no more.”

I freeze.

“Garbage goes out as soon as we’re made aware of it. No exceptions.”

“Is she...” I trail off. “Where is she?”

“Where are you?”

My eyes cut to... shit, did he even tell me his name?

Wait.

I spin around. “Where are *you*?”

He goes silent, so I mute the call but keep it to my ear as I turn back to the table with a small smile. “I have to go.”

There’s a slight pinch at the edges of his eyes, but when he blinks, it’s gone, and then our order is called.

He nods, holding a finger up and runs over to grab it, quickly handing me mine, but he doesn’t let it go. “What’s your name?”

Oh, yeah! Names. “I’m Brielle.”

He nods, a smile slowly forming. “You’re Brielle. I’m August.”

“You have five seconds to tell me where you are.” Royce’s voice fills my ear.

“Nice to meet you, maybe I’ll see you around.”

“You will.”

I pause, but then wave and rush away.

I take the phone off of mute and sigh. “I’m crossing eleventh on J.”

“I’m on Tenth passing I.”

My eyes widen and step back into the street. Sure enough, a shiny black SUV comes around the corner.

It rolls to a stop in front of me. I can’t see through the windshield, but still make my way to the passenger door and slip inside.

Royce looks from me to the burrito in my hand and rolls forward.

He whips into the taco truck parking lot and gets out.

He walks slowly, surveying the people around, but August isn’t one of them.

I don't know where he went, but he's somehow already long gone.

Royce steps up to the window, talking with the man behind it for several seconds, and he doesn't come back to the car until a burrito of his own is in his hands.

His face is stern, eyes hard, but he slips a pair of black-lensed sunglasses over them. He drives us back to the Brayshaw property without a word, stopping in front of the group home, so I climb out and head inside.

I go straight to my room, lock the door, and step into the bathroom to wash my hands.

When I come back out, I freeze.

Royce is halfway through my window.

He says nothing, acts as if this is normal behavior, and drops onto the carpet.

He starts to eat, so I drop right beside him and do the same thing.

It takes him several bites before he speaks and when he does, it's not a question I expect.

"What's yours?"

"My what?"

"Your zodiac whatever." His eyes flick up to mine. "You asked me mine. What's yours?"

I grin, probably a little too wide. "I'm a Cancer."

He nods, but doesn't comment again, instead switching gears, as I should have expected.

"If you're bored, you need to find something to fill your time."

When I look to him, he shifts only his eyes my way.

"You can't go off like that. Not here. Not when we have shit in the air."

“Is there ever something *not* happening?”

“No.” His expression is firm and after a second, he tears his eyes away.

“Micah had said some of the guys from the home are on a job, like they were sent somewhere for a few days, but they’ll be back.” My stomach tightens. “Is that normal?”

Suspicion sharpens his gaze. “Sometimes. Why?”

“There’s still a lot of people for me to meet.” Not a lie.

I busy myself with another bite.

“You don’t need to meet anyone,” he comes back. “If or when that changes, you will.”

“Then it will because I want to.”

He eyes me a long moment and then hops to his feet.

Royce climbs back out into the daylight, spins and leans down. He plants his forearms on the frame and pokes his head inside. “We have *shit happening* tonight. Be out the door at ten.”

I pinch my lips together with a grin. “Ten?”

The cocky playboy cocks his head. “Thought it was fitting.”

I scoff a laugh. “Where we going?”

His chin lifts as he licks his lips and backs away. “To ‘meet’ people, Tink.”

“Tink.” I lean my forearms on the windowsill. “That’s not even original.”

The corner of his lips lift. “You sure?”

I open my mouth, but the gleam in his eyes has me closing them.

I like him like this.

As he walks away, I realize that’s not true.

I think I like all the shades of him.

Oops.

Chapter 13



ROYCE

PRE-SUMMER HEAT HAS CREPT IN ON US HERE AND IT LOOKS like little Bishop's ready for it.

She's wearing a pair of black shorts with rips in the front, her slightly suntanned skin peeking through the shreds. Her white top is tucked deep into the waistband and stretching all the way up her neck, the collar wrapping all the way around, soft but secure, like skilled hands would be in bed.

Like mine would be.

When she turns to close the door, we're given a back view, a full fucking back view.

Her shirt lays wide open from her shoulder blades to the top of her hips.

I groan. "I should have been more specific on what Micah was allowed to bring of hers."

My brothers laugh and I turn to Raven when her head swivels this way.

"There isn't a pair of pants, shorts, or even a Maybell style muumuu that could hide dat ass." Raven laughs.

"You ain't lyin', RaeRae."

Wish you were.

Brielle starts walking toward us but right as I'm about to push open the back door, she passes, and all our eyes follow as she skips over to Micah, who's just hopping off the side porch of the boys home.

He grins, holding his arms out and she laughs, tucking her miniature body beneath one.

All heads snap my way, but I don't look to them.

"Stop," I demand. "I already said it once, it ain't like that."

"K. It ain't like that, but you pulled her ass out of the cafeteria today... and you're squeezin' on the door handle," Raven says, evidence of her grin sneaking into her words.

"But it ain't like that, Raven," Victoria teases.

I shove the fucking thing open and step out, my asshole family laughing behind me.

Brielle

"YOU READY FOR THIS?" MICAH ASKS, GRINNING DOWN AT ME.

"Oh, yeah." I laugh, pretty much bouncing in anticipation. "I always wondered what it was like out there."

Mac called us a little bit ago to tell us we were headed to the warehouses tonight, which is the place my brother has run for the last few years. I tried to find some info about it over the years, but they do a good job of keeping it off of social media.

Micah smiles and then his head lifts. "What's up, man?"

I turn to find Royce rounding the hood of the black SUV.

He pulls off a simple pair of black jeans, and a black sleeveless shirt, like the best of them, his tattoos the perfect accessories.

As always, a hint of silver peeks from beneath the black, a chain he never pulls front and center but forever seems to wear.

Royce is in full-on alpha mode tonight—dark eyes, hair, and clothes.

Dark disposition.

I'm starting to think that's just him and the force he puts into the universe purely by breathing.

"Time to go." His command is simply stated, his gaze moving from me to Micah.

"Ready, my man." Micah nods, making his way to the driver's seat of his car.

I follow, but Royce slips in front of me with a blank expression and I ease back.

"What are you doing?" His tone is firm.

"Getting ready to leave?"

His eyes tighten slightly, and I study him.

"We talked about this." I shake my head. "Bark orders, be transparent, and all that."

His frown deepens. "I told you to be ready at ten. What part of that made you think you weren't riding with me?"

"The fact that you and your brothers ride together," I answer instantly. "Add in how they don't know me, and how there's been zero trust established between any of us, it seemed exactly like what you'd want me to do."

His lips press into a firm line, his jaw clenching slightly.

"Is that not the right way of thinking?" I ask, suddenly unsure.

I thought I was approaching this as I was supposed to, with their customs in mind.

Family runs deeper than blood, trust must be earned, not given, and all the jazz that comes along with that, but maybe

I'm wrong?

Micah pulls up beside us then, and with his lips pinched tight, Royce opens the passenger door with a hard jerk.

When I don't move, an exasperated sigh leaves him. "Get in the fuckin' car, Bishop."

I smile and do as he says, but before he closes it, he pops his head inside. "You don't step out until I tell you to." He looks to Micah, his expression now flat. "Follow us through the gate, but don't block us inside."

"You got it, boss." Micah nods.

"Yeah, boss, see you there."

Royce's eyes snap toward me, and while they narrow, the corner of his mouth twitches. "Ten minute drive, don't fuckin' lose us."

He slams the door, slips into the SUV and then we're both rolling forward.

All I can think as we pull off the property is *finally*.

After nearly four long years, it's happening. I'm going to walk into the place my brother lives for.

My nerves, they aren't the dangerous kind tonight. They don't raise my pulse, but swim in my stomach, flickering like the stars above us, driven by excitement that grows wilder and wilder as the minutes tick by. Before I know it, we're creeping down a deserted street, rolling into a dirt parking lot, and bypassing a few rows of random cars until we're lined up with a slightly hidden, and very large section of iron walls.

We never make it to a full stop as the moment we're in the exact spot they intended us to be, those 'walls' turn into doors, and glide open. Seconds later we're trapped within them, the laughs and shouts of dozens upon dozens heard through the thin windows of Micah's new car.

Other than the boys' SUV, Micah's car is the only other one on this side of the gates.

He kills the engine and when he does, I reach for the handle.

Micah shoots an arm across my middle, and my eyes fly to his.

“No way, girl.” He frowns. “You heard the man. Park your ass until he climbs out.”

I drop against the seat, but Micah keeps his hand in place.

“I’m not going to sneak out.”

“And I’m not taking the chance in case you decide to.”

We both laugh and then the door is yanked open.

Royce looks to Micah’s hand, stretched across my chest, and his eyes slide his way.

“Out,” he commands.

Micah doesn’t hesitate, but as I unbuckle my seat belt and attempt to do the same, Royce crouches down, balancing on bent knees.

We’re eye level now and he studies me before saying, “There’re different tiers of people on our payroll, not everyone is equal as far as positions go. You’ll figure that out quickly. You want to earn a place here, find what you’re good at, show us how we can benefit from you or you are worthless.”

“If you thought I was worthless, you wouldn’t have brought me here.”

“If you think you know why I brought you here, you’re mistaken,” he snaps back.

I give a slow shake of my head and his frown slides in.

“If you think I care about semantics, *you’re* mistaken.” I shrug. “I’m home and that’s what matters.”

I climb out, forcing him to stand, and look up into his tightly drawn eyes.

“I thought you and I were going to be able to be friends. I kind of sort of thought we were starting to be already, to be

honest, but if you want to keep me at this push and pull level, make it clear we aren't and won't be, that's fine. I'm more than capable of being whatever else it is you need me to be, but if you decide you might have room for one more person to, you know, not hate, I won't pretend I wouldn't like that." I tuck my hands in my pockets. "I'm not embarrassed to admit I could use a friend. It's been a while since I've had one."

I go to walk by, but he slides in my space again.

He speaks with a bit of an ambiguous rasp. "I know you asked Maybell to hide your last name, but it will come out, and then everyone will want to be your *friend*. Nine out of ten of them will be the farthest fucking thing from real. You say you aren't naïve, but you'd give me your friendship so easy? Will you give them the same?"

I shake my head and his eyes narrow.

It's as if he's trying to talk himself out of asking, but he does it anyway. "Why?"

"I don't trust them."

A heavy strain tugs at his forehead, his eyes bouncing between mine. "You sayin' you trust me?"

I don't know why, but...

"Yes."

He swallows, looking away only to come right back, his expression now empty.

He bends, bringing his face closer to mine all to shift at the last second, his lips now level with my ear so he can whisper his reproach. "That, right there... is your first mistake."

He slides along my back, disappearing in seconds.

His vanishing act prompts the doors to the SUV to open, and all at once, four pairs of eyes land on me.

The girls climb out, the boys right behind them.

Victoria speaks first, and with a vivid grin. “What do you say, guys, isn’t she perfectly unsuspecting?”

She looks to the others with a brow raised and they nod.

Raven winks while Maddoc takes a step closer to me.

“Brielle Bishop.” He cocks his head. “How’s your poker game?”

I smile.

Here we go.

Chapter 14



BRIELLE

IT'S SURREAL, MOVIE-LIKE, HOW THE CROWD LITERALLY PARTS, leaving a wide path for their kings and queens to slide through with ease, and to do so with zero hostility rolling off of any of them is something to be noted.

All these people, they're happy to be here and recognize it hurts them none to give those who own and run this place the respect they should, and space they need, to settle their minds.

It's rare.

Motivating.

As is the rawness of this place.

These guys, they're richer than Wall Street. You'd think they'd need the biggest and brightest of life, but this place is far from a rich boy's fantasy.

It's a punk's paradise.

Grit and goons.

It's everything my brother loves.

Iron walls three, maybe four times my height wrap for all around, forming a giant oval-like shape, massive sheets of mismatched metal woven between them, caging the outside

world off and leaving nothing but the one created within it—a pit of dark and dirty.

The energy is wild, high-spirited, and enticing, and this is only the outside.

The far right corner is where we're headed, toward a giant floor to ceiling steel door that sits inches open and is guarded by a beast of a guy with the baddest braids I've ever seen. A guy whose eyes have just landed on me, but quickly jump along the group.

His hand lifts, coming down on the thing twice, and it's thrown open instantly.

He slips to the side and Raven steps through, Maddoc at her back, Captain and Victoria right behind them, me on the tail.

I don't walk straight in as they do, though.

My steps slow in the doorway, and I pull in a lungful of air.

My limbs prickle with eagerness, chilling my body only for my skin to warm a second later as I take in every inch of the place.

Black, white, and royal blue are the colors that make up the room. There's a giant wolf's head painted in the middle of the largest wall, a couple card games going on in one corner—one being poker—various TVs playing sports highlights hanging in several areas, with small tables and couches strategically placed all around. A long bar lines the back, fully stocked and lit with LED lights.

I spot Chloe and Mac and my curiosity is officially piqued when he walks her backward, and the two disappear completely behind a long black curtain in the front right corner.

I take in the room once more, and my chest expands with another full breath.

The lighting's low, music's high, and the air's painted with sweat and smoke, with promiscuity.

A risqué, rugged retreat.

A small smile pulls at my lips as I reach back, gripping the edge of the door, and shift slightly to look outside.

This place, it's gold.

A hidden haven for people like me, those of us raring for freedom not so easily found, an underground world designed to erase the one we live in, if only for a little while. An escape to color our worlds brighter.

It's dark and loud, crowded and a little scary but it's... god, it's—

“Alive?”

I look over my shoulder to find Royce standing there, drink in hand and nearly empty.

I nod, a small smile on my lips. My attention moves back to the crowd, settling on a group a few feet forward.

They're dancing under the light of the stars in ripped up cut-offs and cute little crop tops, while the people a few spaces away lean against the crates drinking and laughing, having fun in joggers and tank tops.

I scan the crowd when Royce pushes into my back, speaking near my ear. “The guys in the corner, second group,” he begins. “Look close.”

I stop searching and do as he says, my awareness heightening the longer I study them.

Tension frames their foreheads and keeps their shoulders tight.

I stretch a little taller when not one but two stand at the same time, but it's the way one grips the neck of a Corona bottle that has my toes curling in my shoes.

The guys barely push to their full height when another group breaks from the crowd, headed right for them, but before they can step up to the others, a third crew sidles in, each one draped in black from shirt to shoe.

There is no arguing, no shouting, not even an attempt at an explanation.

The bottle is set down, all mouths are locked closed, and every single one of them, from the first group to the last, make a straight line back the way we came in.

“What just happened?” I look up and over my shoulder at Royce.

“They’re as dumb as they are smart.” He shrugs, finishing off the last bit of liquor in his cup. “One of the two came here looking for the other and dared to start shit. The other was almost given no choice but to defend themselves, but when our guys popped in, they remembered where they are and what would happen if they fucked-up here.”

“So your people, they have respect, too?” I ask.

“They’re all our people.”

“But the guys who broke it up, people don’t mess with them when you’re not around?”

“Sometimes, but those are the dumb fuckers.”

“What happens to those ones?”

Royce grins. “Fed to the giant.”

A laugh from my left catches my attention and I turn to find the guy who was guarding the door, leaning just outside of it.

“Hi.”

He smiles, glancing from Royce to me. “Hi.”

“I’m Brielle.”

“I know.” He chuckles, pushing off the door, and I have to crank my neck several inches more. “I’m Andre.”

“Are you the giant, Andre?”

He laughs louder, crossing his arms as he turns his body to face us more. “You tell me.” His eyes fall over my body in a slow perusal. “Am I a giant, little mama?”

I laugh and Royce's shadow grows larger around me.

"I mean, everyone's pretty much a giant compared to me, so really you could be no more than average, and I wouldn't know for sure."

"Damn, girl." Andre feigns wounded, his eyes wide with humor. "How's a little thing like you make me feel dime size?"

I turn a raised brow to Royce, who watches me closely. "Yeah, I hear I'm bad for the ego."

Royce scoffs, but his lips are pulled to the side the tiniest bit.

I look back toward Andre, and his eyes move from Royce, settling on me.

In that one instant, his body language flips.

He straightens his spine, giving a curt nod. "I was your brother's main man, the Brays are my boys. You need somethin', this is where I'll be, got me?"

I step closer. "You know my brother?"

He chuckles. "Ain't a soul out here who don't, girl, but don't worry. I know not to share that until it's out."

Royce's breath hits my ear in the next second, and suddenly Andre turns, now focused and pointed forward. He slips right back into guard mode, our conversation over.

"One of the nine, or the one out of ten?" Royce asks.

Nine out of ten are fake...

I spin to face him, following his backward steps into the building.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

He holds his hands out. "You wanna trust a dude 'cause someone else tells you to or you want proof that says you can?"

“He wouldn’t be standing at the door if you didn’t trust him.”

“You’re right. He wouldn’t,” he says, leading me to the bar, and signaling for two of something. He spins, his back to the liquor, arms stretched out, elbows on the countertop. He looks to me. “Maybe he’s got a problem with your brother, a score to settle, point to prove. Maybe he never thought about sticking it to him, but putting eyes on you just now sparked his interest.”

“Maybe it did.” I wiggle my brows.

His frown is instant, and I laugh, climbing up on the barstool.

I scan the room quickly, a sliver of disappointment seeping in before I give all my attention to Royce again.

“Give me some credit,” I tell him. “I get it, I’ve been here for a day, but I’m not sitting here pretending to know how your world works, but I want to learn. I want you to teach me everything you’re capable of teaching.”

His features pull, but he looks away as the bartender sets down two drinks.

Royce pushes one my way, but I push it right back.

I smile at the guy, but his face remains emotionless.

“Do you have just... a cold beer?”

He nods, walks a few feet over and comes right back with a Shock Top in hand, pops the top and hands it over with a wink.

“Thanks.” I grin, turn to a frowning Royce and take a quick drink. “And since I’m willing to learn from you, you need to be willing to learn *about* me.”

“Maybe I don’t want to learn about you.”

“A good boss would want to know a little something about the new hire hanging around.”

“Might hate what I find.”

“Then you hate what you find.” I laugh lightly. “Who cares? At least you’d know for sure.”

His gaze narrows as if he was expecting a different response.

He’s quiet for several seconds. When he decides to ask his question, it’s in a flat tone. “Why you care if I know you or not?”

I lift a shoulder, suddenly a little uneasy under his cavernous glare.

“I mean... would it hurt?”

His tongue slips out to wet his lips and he pulls his bottom one in a bit.

He shifts until his body is fully facing away from mine, downs his drink and pushes to stand.

He walks away, but not before I catch a low mumbled whisper, “It might.”

Royce

THE WAREHOUSES CAN BE A BADASS PLACE TO BE, THE PERFECT place to chill and escape the assholes trying to squeeze in where they haven’t earned, especially since the remodel.

That, or it’s the complete opposite.

It can be a fucking nightmare, a pit of Bray wannabes and club chasers—depending on who you go with, who you let in, and where you hang out.

Andre does good work, decides who comes inside and who doesn’t, and for the most part, it’s only those who work for us and a few extras here and there.

Tonight, inside we've got a solid mix of people, half Brayshaw payroll and the other half Brayshaw High students, outside though, it's a fuckin' pit of random.

People who lay low in town but don't disrespect it, people who run things, people *running* from things. Fuck-ups and future fuckin' state senators.

Here, no one is more than the other.

Here, they're equals or they're out.

Raven steps beside me.

"So Bass Bishop's little sister." She tests the words on her tongue, her eyes moving to Brielle across the room.

She sits at the poker table, cards in one hand, beer in the other.

I nod. "Bass Bishop's little sister."

Raven does her best to read her. "She's been looking around all night."

"I know." I turn my head toward Brielle with a nod. "Not sure why yet."

We meet each other's gazes only to look right back.

Brielle sets her beer on the tabletop, turning to laugh at something the star of the fucking night says from the seat to her left.

She responds, and Enoch leans over to whisper something near her ear.

Dumb fucker.

My eyes lift then, meeting Micah's a space behind her, and he takes the cue, moving right in.

No hesitation. Good.

He leans forward, reaching from one side of the table to the next to say what's up to someone, drawing attention to his right hand, making everyone laugh like the smooth son of a

bitch he is, all while his left quickly skates across the longneck of a bottle—she had to go and trade out her cup.

Micah's swift, slick, and backing away in seconds.

Raven knows this kind of shit too well and recognizes the play instantly, stepping closer.

I finish off my drink, my eyes sharp and on Brielle.

She faces forward again, smiling at the punk beside her, her hand blindly reaching for the beer she left out of reach and out of sight for no more than ten, fifteen seconds tops.

She wraps a hand around the bottle, and fuck me, my blood pumps heavy in expectation I have no business waiting for.

My eyes are glued to Brielle's fingers as they tighten around the glass, my awareness heightening, pricking at my skin as she lifts it to her mouth.

For a split second, the cooled glass sits against her lips, but then Brielle's eyes fall to the bottle, and she doesn't hesitate to set it on the floor near her feet.

Raven looks to me as a low chuckle leaves me, and I meet her eyes.

I push to stand, lifting a beer from the ice bucket I had set behind the bar.

“Royce, what are you gonna do with her?” Raven's questions got nothing to do with right now, and everything to do with the fact that Brielle is here at all.

So, I tell her.

“I'm gonna do the farthest thing from what big brother wanted,” I tell her. “I'm gonna throw her in the deep end.” I pop the top with my teeth, sliding the ridged cap along my palm, before tossing it to her.

She catches it with ease, gauging me. “Throw her in the deep end... and watch her sink.”

“Nah, RaeRae.” I spin, walking backward so I can keep our gazes locked, a small smirk pulling at my lips. “Imma teach her how to swim.”

I turn around, making my way to Brielle.

The girl knows I’m coming, but she doesn’t look up until my left hand is planted on the table beside her elbow, my body leaning over hers.

She grins when I set a fresh bottle of beer directly in front of her, but that grin turns into a small frown when I lift her retired beer bottle from the ground and bring it to my lips.

I knock it back, setting the empty glass beside her as I bend at the knees to bring us face-to-face.

She watches me closely, confusion whirling in her crazy cool eyes.

I pull my lips back, revealing the tiny pill capsule between my teeth, and whisper, “Good girl.”

Her eyes widen when I bite it open, the inside powder spilling on my tongue, a small splash of her new beer to wash it down.

Micah knows to watch the ballplayer, my brothers know to watch them all, so I stand with ease, make my way across the room for my own drink, and slip behind the satin curtained room on the right to join MacMoney and his honey.

She didn’t panic this morning when we ran her off the road, thought quick and found a weapon to defend herself.

She didn’t drink from the bottle she left unattended, aware anything could happen anywhere.

It’s to say little Bishop is off to a good little start.

Now it’s time to fuckin’ party.

Chapter 15



ROYCE

Maddoc comes to get me when the fights are set to start and in perfect fucking timing. My bodies starting to heat, so it's either I turn the place into a strip club or find something else to focus on.

He glances over my shoulder. "The girl, she sittin' with us?"

"No, no." I tap at my chest, and my palm decides to flatten there. "It ain't like that. This is business."

"As in she's going to handle *your business*?" Raven teases.

"No, RaeRae, she ain't."

"You sure?" Raven smirks. "'Cause you're full-on rubbing yourself right now."

"And I'll find someone to help me out with that later. Not her."

"It's a fuckin' chair, brother." Maddoc frowns. "Yes or no?"

"I said no, dick, and it ain't just a chair and you pricks know it."

He grins, pulling Raven into his chest and draping his arms over her shoulders.

After Raven got pregnant, Maddoc had concrete, above-crowd seats put in at the edge of the main circle, blocked and gated from the regular crowd who's still allowed ringside, just not along the line of six chairs forever reserved for us.

That's right.

Six.

As in four for my pussy-whipped brothers and their queens, and two left for me and whoever I want in the other one.

I don't want anyone in it.

I'm a loner, a lost boy.

I've got my brothers and RaeRae, VicVee, too.

Little Zo and soon another little to play with.

Little.

Brielle's fuckin' little.

Tiny and Tink-like.

"Royce."

"Huh?" I look to Maddoc when he snaps.

"Stop fucking rubbing your leg."

I look down, my hands at my sides and sure as shit... rubbing.

I tear my hands away, running them through my hair, and a grin takes over.

"Fuck." Maddoc shakes his head with a chuckle. "You're fuckin' rollin'. Want me to find Mac?"

"Nah, brother, where you think I came from? He's watchin', wherever he is now, and it was only half a pill, I didn't want to fuck the girl up if she was dumb enough to drink it. I'm chill. Gonna drown it out with a couple quick shots anyway."

"So no to the seats?"

I nod. "I'll take Brielle up the wall or some shit."

"Take me where?"

I whip around, Cap, Victoria, and Brielle now standing behind me.

My grin spreads when I have to look down to see Brielle.

I'm a fucking beast compared.

Hold up, she asked a question.

"Outside, Imma take you outside. Wait," I pause. "You afraid of the dark? 'Cause if you are, me and my brothers are good at distracting—"

"Shut up." Raven chuckles.

I smile, and Brielle frowns between us.

"Nah, never mind. I know you're not afraid of the dark." I don't realize I've slipped closer until the fabric of her shirt heats my fingertips. "You sleep in it, ain't that right, little Bishop?"

She squishes her lips to the side. "That's right."

"How else you sleep?"

She reaches up to pat my chest, and my pulse jumps beneath her palm like a pubescent little punk, my hand flying up to keep it there, pressing it firmer against me.

Damn, that shit's warm.

She laughs, shaking her head lightly. "You want to know how else I sleep, Playboy?"

"Tell me all about it, Tink."

She lifts her chin to bring herself closer, but she's so damn small, she's still far as fuck away. "Alone."

My family's laughs wrap around us, and Brielle smiles.

My focus falls to find shiny, wet lips, but not just wet lips.

Thick and full ones, peachy pink with rich ridges and a *bite me, baby* pout.

Where'd they come from?

Better yet, where they willing to go?

Wait, what?

I squeeze my eyes shut and jerk back, shaking myself out of... whatever the fuck I'm in.

I need those shots.

Brielle tips her head. "I take it that pill you tried to kill me with is kicking in?"

"Not kill, just horn you out a bit so you'd learn." I grin, and her mouth falls open and a laugh. "It'll wear off quick. Takes two to roll right."

She flicks her eyes to the ceiling. "Of course it does."

Brielle steps back, looking to the others.

Neither of us misses the way Maddoc watches her, the others, too, but they're more chill about it where Maddoc wants her little ass to know where she stands—in motherfuckin' limbo until he knows what she's about.

It's good, she needs to feel that divider between us and her, 'cause it's big.

"All right, we'll head to the crates," I tell him.

Maddoc nods. "We'll meet you in here after the fight."

Before I can respond, Brielle takes a step toward Maddoc, unaware of how Raven moves with her, pregnant and all.

"Wait, fight?" she asks.

Raven smiles now. "Wrapped knuckles, but no gloves, no gear. Just sweat and blood, like animals."

Brielle starts to shake her head, her mouth opening as she turns to look at me, but then her expression goes slack.

"Okay," she says.

“No, no.” Now I’m the one shaking my head and stepping toward her. “Don’t.”

She frowns. “Don’t what?”

She knows what I’m saying, but since she wants to play dumb, I lay it out for her.

“Don’t close your mouth when you’ve got something to say. Don’t back down when you’ve got an opinion, and don’t let what someone else thinks, likes, or wants have any fuckin’ lead or sway on what you do, got me?”

Her neck grows red, a small fire lighting in her eyes. “I thought you wanted good little soldiers who fall in line?” she dares.

Irritation burns under my skin and I move closer, bending to get in her face more. “You’re not a soldier, little Bishop. You’re too soft, but we’ll harden you up in time. Not sure you’ll ever get there, though, if you can’t even share what pops in that pretty little head of yours.”

“I can speak my mind fine and don’t need any coaching to do it.”

“So why bite your tongue, baby girl?”

She steps into me, tipping her head with both brows lifted. “Because there’s a difference in backing down and choosing not to be disrespectful.”

“It’s called weakness. Fear of backlash.”

“It’s called not being a dick, and what kind of privileged asshole are you to think I have to share a single thing that happens in my *pretty little head* with you or anyone else?”

“That,” I snap, a slow grin following. “Is more like it.”

Her eyes fly to mine, holding, and a small laugh leaves her. “So which is it, Playboy, you want me to play the lamb or the lion?”

My muscles flex beneath my shirt. “How ‘bout my lamb, the world’s lion?”

Wait, what?

I'm about to take it back, erase the line from the universe but then she fails to hide her smile.

She looks away. "You're impossible. And kind of bipolar."

"Nah," I drag out. "I'm a fuckin' cake walk."

"Maybe I hate cake."

"Maybe you're lying."

She laughs.

"I think we're gonna enjoy this wanton, *Playboy*," Raven says, pulling everyone's attention to her. "I kind of like you guys' foreplay."

Maddoc shakes his head with a smirk while Brielle looks ready to walk away.

Or apologize.

Or maybe deny.

Wait, did she say foreplay?

Raven turns to her. "For real, though, do you not wanna watch the fights?"

"I can't watch people getting their heads... beat on," Brielle admits with a hesitance that has me pausing.

"It does get ugly," Raven's honest. "But it's stopped before any real damage is done."

"You can't know that for sure." Brielle's tone is clear, her voice strong.

I expect myself to snap at her, but it never comes, a completely different train of thought slipping in.

There you go, Tink.

Raven's eyes tighten at first, but she appreciates someone who speaks their mind and smirks next. "Guess we can't, can we?"

Brielle offers her a small smile, tension lining her eyes and hiding something deeper behind them as she turns to me.

“Mind if I stay inside?” she asks.

Asks.

After all the push back just now, she’s doing what I wanted, recognizing I’m the fucking gatekeeper and asking for permission.

Not running off or demanding or telling me what she will and won’t do.

Not fighting, but showing a hint of obedience, what we’ve chased for years.

What my brother fought fierce and wild for with Raven only to share it in the end.

What Captain created in the bedroom when his woman wouldn’t budge.

Not that this shit’s any kind of the same, she ain’t mine like they’re theirs.

She’s a job, I’m her boss, and she’s asking for my permission, as she should.

I should be kissing my own ass ‘cause good shit, right?

I didn’t even have to fight her for it.

So, why the fuck am I annoyed, ready to tear at her?

I don’t.

I keep my face blank, shrug my shoulders and I motion for the bartender, not bothering to spare her another glance. “Fuck if I care.”

I know she doesn’t look away. I sense her trailing my movement as I grab the half bottle from the bottle boy rather than the single glass on the tray.

I take a swig and walk toward the door.

“Do what you want, little Bishop,” I blow her off. “But don’t forget Micah’s your ride, be good to go when he is or get stranded.”

“I will be.” She speaks to my back.

I don’t say anything else, instead leading the group out of the building and to our seats. We climb up and get ready for a fight, but not before I pull my phone out to text Micah the direction of a single word.

ME: LEAVE.

Raven laughs at my side, shaking her head. “Ah, Ponyboy. This is going to get interesting.”

Interestingly irritating.

Brielle

IT’S AFTER TWO WHEN I FINALLY STEP FROM THE BATHROOM with my robe wrapped around me, and I’m more than surprised when I find Maybell sitting on the edge of my bed.

I wince. “Did I wake you up? I tried to be quiet.”

She waves me off with a low chuckle. “No, child. I was doing bed checks.” She eyes me. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“No. I tried to call my brother, but I guess he’s busy doing... whatever it is he does, so figured I’d paint my nails and shower while I waited for a call back.” I shrug. “No luck yet.”

A slight frown mars her forehead, but she smiles through it. “I’m sure he’ll call, child.” She looks away, but comes right back and switches gears. “I wanted to thank you.”

I step farther into the room. “For what?”

“I heard you invite my new girl with you tonight.”

“I thought I was the new girl?” I tease.

She chuckles. “No child, you’re the new... well, never mind.” She winks. “Valine came a few weeks ago and she’s a tough one.”

“Yeah, I kind of got that when instead of a yes or a no, I got a ‘F you’.”

Maybell smiles. “But baby steps are better than no steps at all, hm?”

I nod.

“The others, they don’t quite understand her,” she shares.

“Trying to understand is the problem.” I chuckle and she joins in. “People don’t like being asked questions, I figured that out a long time ago, so you kind of have to just... hang out, talk about nothing. Not that I know much about that anymore, but it worked when I was a kid.” I shrug. “Sometimes all they need is someone to stare at the sand with.”

“That’s exactly right.” She nods, a soft searching in her eyes that stirs something inside me. “I think you’ll do well here.”

I try to force my smile away, but she catches it and a low laugh leaves her as she stands and moves toward the door only to pause there and turn back. “I think a stray might have come through your window tonight.”

My confusion must be evident as she motions toward something shiny sitting beneath the windowsill.

I look from it to her.

She raises a dark brow. “The thing does lock, if you ever decide you might want it to.”

My neck warms and I nod. “Got it.”

She chuckles. “I guess I should tell you that it won’t stop the boy if you did, he’d just come right through the door and cause a stir.”

I laugh, not at all doubting her words.

With a wink, she walks out, closing my door behind her, and I waste no time moving toward the window.

I lift the small bag and lower it into the seat it was placed on.

I look outside, into the night, and almost swear I see a Royce-size silhouette deep inside the orchards, but I can’t say for sure.

I peek inside the bag and a quick laugh breaks from me.

A piece of freaking cake.

I search the darkness once more, and what do you know... the silhouette is gone.

This cake’s about to be, too.

Chapter 16



ROYCE

SHE'S WATERING THE TOMATO PLANTS WHEN I SNEAK UP behind her, pinching her by the hips.

She whips around with a light yelp, the hose pointed right at my damn chest.

“Fuck!” I jump back.

Brielle's eyes widen. “Oh my god, I...” She trails off, but then her shoulders start to shake, and she can no longer hold it in.

She laughs loudly, bending back a bit and everything, one hand coming up to cover her mouth while the other lifts, spraying me with the fuckin' hose again on accident and the girl only rolls harder.

I'm already soaked when I dash forward to grab the shit from her hand and toss it to the ground, but she keeps laughing.

“Sorry,” she chokes back her amusement, clearing her throat as she stands as tall as Mighty Mouse is able. “I'm sorry.”

“I'm fuckin' drenched.”

“My bad.” She smiles. “At least it's only water.”

“Oh, only water.” I raise a brow, bending to grab the thing.

I expect her to run, warn me, or at least say something about how her makeup and hair is done and not to ruin it—it is, but she doesn’t.

Brielle smiles. “Go for it, rain man. It’s hot out here.”

I frown, throwing the thing back to the ground. “What’s the point if it doesn’t piss you off?”

“Maybe it’s reverse psychology.”

“Maybe not.”

She laughs, walking closer. “Yeah, maybe not.”

I glance around, spotting a few of the other girls on the opposite side of the yard pulling weeds. “You don’t have to do house chores, so why are you?”

“To keep it equal.”

I frown. “It’s not equal, I told you that.”

“It’s fine, it’ll help keep the peace in the house.” She shrugs.

“Playing the noblewoman card, huh?”

“Oh yeah.” She rolls her eyes playfully. “Next up, betrothing a prince.”

I scoff, and when she bends down, picking up two small pieces of garbage, I lean over her to turn off the hose.

“Nah, a prince wouldn’t do the trick.”

She pushes back to her feet, smiling at her hands as she tugs the gardening gloves off. “Oh, you don’t think so?”

“I know so.”

She smirks. “Do tell.”

“A prince chases power, but has no command of his own, forever waiting for his time to lead. Too blameless to be brutal, too decent to be a dick. He’s weak until he’s forced to make a real move. Good-hearted ‘cause he’s never been in the dark.”

She frowns. “You don’t think I’d be enough?”

I reach forward, flicking her hair and her eyes come up to mine.

“Tell me, little Bishop, what’s a prince who’s never even seen the dark... gonna do with a girl who lived it most her life?”

She opens her mouth, but closes it, a look in her eye I don’t recognize. “You think I need more,” she says quietly.

A bridled warning blares in my brain, forcing me a step back. “You’re putting words in my mouth. Don’t.”

The soft gleam in her gaze is still way too present, but she goes for playful. “Well come on then, Mr. Miyagi, break it down for me. *Don’t hold back*, remember?”

“You know the sayin’, Tink. Do as I say, never as I do.”

“What an easy out,” she muses with a smile. After a second, she clears her throat. “So, I’m almost done for the day. Me and Micah were thinking about checking things out, finding a waterhole or something somewhere. Want to come?”

Annoyance slams over me, erasing the last few minutes.

“Do I want to come with you and Micah?”

Her eyes tighten, but she nods.

I lick my suddenly dry lips, gripping my shirt near my chest and pulling the wet material away from my skin. “When’d you plan this?”

“On the ride home last night,” she tells me, glancing over her shoulder quickly as she drops the soiled gloves in a garbage bag.

“So you’re gonna run around town with Micah all day, huh?”

She looks my way, gliding her fingertips along her temple, a curious expression on her face. “And Valine.”

“Valine.”

She nods. “Tall, tan, curly brown hair,” she lays out her basics as if I don’t know who lives in our group homes and need a reminder. “Miss Maybell said she has the hardest time with her. I guess she’s tough to handle, doesn’t get along with the girls, but I taught her how to make omelets today and she didn’t try to burn me with the frying pan.”

“That’s how you decided she’s not a serial killer?”

Brielle laughs. “I think she needs some free minutes of careless fun, I know I do.”

“That’s weak-minded.”

She studies me and then starts walking backward for the house. “Right, well, you have fun doing whatever it is strong-minded people do, and maybe I’ll see you later.”

“Man, little Bishop, you’re on a fuckin’ roll, aren’t ya?” flies from my mouth before she can get a step farther. “Already got friends, plans, and a backbone.”

She gapes at me. “Are you serious right now?”

“Are *you*?” I snap.

Her head draws back.

“I’m sorry,” she drags out, tipping her head like a brat. “Am I supposed to feel bad right now, because that’s crap. I’ve spent four years studying, sitting in the dark, fixing things other people broke, all while having no choice but to go to a school I hated, in a town that hated me. So, if you’re trying to guilt me for wanting to spend a couple hours with someone my own age, who doesn’t look at me and assume they know who I am, and do something fun and simple, don’t. It won’t work.”

“You sure?” I walk toward the porch and call her out like an asshole. “‘Cause you look like you’re ‘bout to cry.”

She throws her hands up with a little growl and stomps her ass two steps down, bringing us eye level, face-to-fucking-face. Our mouths dangerously close and both curved with frowns.

“You know what, fine,” she forces past clenched teeth. “Call me a liar because now I do feel guilty, but only because for a split *clearly wasted* second I thought maybe I hurt your feelings for not asking you first. That’s dumb of me though because you’re the one who said I’m not here to be your friend.”

“You forget where I said don’t trust those who want to be yours?”

“Well, good thing for me, Valine isn’t interested. I’m pretty much forcing myself on her ‘cause sometimes that’s what helps break through to people. She’s alone in her mind, like I have been for years. Sue me for not wanting someone to deal with what I have.”

“Little Miss Fixer, huh?”

“I don’t want to fix anyone, and it’s not like we’re off to get matching flower tattoos or brushing each other’s hair. I only want to offer my company to someone who might actually want it, even if she says different.”

Maybe I want it.

Wait, no.

No. no...

I get us back on track. “And Micah? How’s he fit into this?”

“I’ve gone to school with him for years, Royce. I know him well.”

“Well,” I repeat. “Which kind of well, little Bishop?” I shuffle closer until my shoe has no more room against the step. “You know what kind of topping he likes on his pizza, or is it that you know the face he makes when he comes?”

I wait for her to shout, deny, or run away to cry, but she does none of this.

Instead, she calls me out.

“Don’t stand here and act like you didn’t ask him all this when you hired him, and no,” she bites out. “He didn’t tell me that. I knew I was being watched, and two and two makes four.”

Watching her?

“What do you mean watching you?”

She sighs. “There’s no reason to deny it now.”

I’m not denying shit. He was watching her, but for a fucking day to make sure no bullshit came her way because of me.

Maybe her brother has someone loosely looking out for her after all?

A HORN HONKS FROM ACROSS THE YARD, AND WE BOTH LOOK to find Micah hopping out, nothin’ but a pair of swim trunks on.

Fit little fucker.

He grins, holding a hand up as if to tell her they leave in five, offering me a tip of his chin before he disappears around the side of the boys home.

Mine and Brielle’s eyes move back to each other’s.

“Better go, little Bishop.” I slide a few spots backward, fighting off the irritation crawling up my skin. “Got people waiting on you.”

In the blink of an eye, her features smooth out, and she’s stepping down the porch.

“That’s it,” she whispers.

Another step down.

She flails me with a look of realization. Of understanding, and my muscles begin to coil.

“There’s no one home, is there?” she asks quietly, dropping a shoulder against the old post. “Your brothers, the girls...” She pauses, tipping her head slightly. “They’re out today?”

I scoff, shaking my head as I turn to walk away, a heavy twist in my ribs.

Annoyance.

That’s what it is.

She’s fucking annoying and out of line and—

“Royce,” she calls and way too fuckin’ tender-like.

Like she gets it.

Like she gets me.

I stop walking, telling myself not to look back, but do it anyway.

A small smile is what I find.

“I wanted to ask you to show me around today, but I thought you’d laugh or, you know.” She shrugs. “Tell me to piss off.”

Damn if I don’t clench my teeth to keep my lips from twitching.

“Maybe that makes me sound lame, but it’s the truth,” she admits.

“I told you, don’t let fear stop you from a damn thing. Ever.” I look from her silver hair to her turquoise eyes. “Next time you want to ask me something, do it.”

“I never said I was afraid.” Her body sways slightly as her eyes move between mine. “But I will, and maybe next time you want to bring me cake... you’ll stay long enough for me to say thank you.”

Thank me, like she did in that single text the night after I left her, when she realized I got the dickhead, who might have

ran his mouth about the lonely girl I found in the dark on my lonely late-night drive.

A text I thought for sure was her colors showing, the inner bloodhound coming out as it does with every other girl who comes near me and mine. But that's not at all what it was, and I was slapped in the face with a different kind of confusion, an unfamiliar one.

She thanked me.

It wasn't delivered with unnecessary innuendos or phrases that could read naughty or nice, leaving it to me to decipher her true intentions.

It was simple, honest, and real fuckin' unexpected.

The girl thanked me for fixing my own fuck-up, and it made me feel like a dick, 'cause damn, I'm the piece of shit who couldn't say for sure it was for her benefit.

I like to think it was, 'cause the alternative pisses me off and makes no fuckin' sense.

What did I care if people thought she was easy and made a play for her, right?

I didn't.

Don't.

I don't.

She's my sweet little vengeance, nothing else.

She is little, but I wonder just how sweet she is?

No.

Fuck, man... I gotta go.

I meet her eyes once more, and the fucking girl gives a small, side smile.

“Thank you for the cake, Royce Brayshaw.”

Right, cake she said.

I pop a shoulder, smoothing my shirt out with my left hand. “Don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, Brielle Bishop.”

“Right.” She nods.

My phone rings in my pocket, so I use it as an excuse to turn away from her.

“What up, Cap?”

“We were right, Enoch’s involved.”

I stop in my tracks. “We found proof?”

There’s a shuffle and then I hear Cap shout, “Zo, don’t put your hands in the cage, or you’ll be monkey meat.”

I laugh. “That girl would live at the zoo if you let her.”

“Yeah, I know.” He chuckles. “Here, talk to Beauty, Zoey wants me to feed these fucking things.”

Victoria comes on the line a second later. “Hey.”

“VicVee, how’d you find hard ties?”

“Enoch got fucked-up last night, like we hoped.”

“Thank fuck he showed up.”

“They always do.”

“So, what happened, you heard him spill his shit or what?”

“Mm, not exactly me.” She laughs. “But we’ll save that explanation for later. First, guess what his order was?”

I grin, thinking back to the broken shards of green Mac found all over the field. “Mickey’s with a lime.”

“All night long,” she sings. “Maddoc talked to Will behind the bar, and he took a look at the orders. He said he’s never restocked Mickey’s, *and* Enoch’s the first to ever order.”

“Cause it tastes like warm piss. I didn’t even know we carried the shit.”

“That’s what Captain said, but back to spilling his business. So Enoch’s whole getting fresh with the girl in the

cafeteria, and approaching the fresh meat, aka Brielle, on sight yesterday?”

I frown.

“Seems he’s on the heartbreak rebound.”

“So long-time girlfriend Taylor Simms is now the ex-girlfriend.” I slow. “We thinkin’ she fucked with the coach?”

“It makes the most sense.”

“Pissed off boyfriend, 101.”

“Yep.” She runs through it. “Enoch Cameron, feeling bad for himself, as he should, takes a twelve-pack of Mickey’s with lime to the field to drink away his sorrows, gets too wasted and busts out a bat.”

“Takes it to the board, and what? Coach shows up in the middle of it?”

“Or he called his once-loved coach to trick him into coming, punish him for touching what wasn’t his?”

“So why rob us, and why’s Coach Von lie and say he doesn’t know how it was? The seasons over and Enoch’s a senior, not like he’d have lost his starting player?”

“And why the tears from Taylor?”

I nod. “So there’s more, but we know enough to know Enoch’s guilty of something.”

“Exactly. He for sure smashed the board in, but the rest is still in the air.” She sighs. “You’ll call Maddoc?”

“Yup.”

“K. Bye.”

She hangs up, and I dial Maddoc. He answers on the first ring, and I run through everything with him.

“Break two fingers on Enoch’s left hand,” he says instantly.

“He pitches right.”

“I know, but it’s a solid fucking warning. You don’t fuck with our shit, and you sure as fuck don’t put panic in our school. People think an outsider came onto our campus, that was on purpose. He should know better.”

“He should have come to us if there was a fucking problem.”

“That’s the fuckin’ thing. He went about it wrong. He knows that shit ain’t allowed and we’ll be forced to handle it.”

“We gonna give him a little batting lesson?”

“You know it, but we’ll let him think he’s in the clear for a minute so we can catch him off guard.” Maddoc chuckles.

“That’s the best way to play, brother.” I laugh. “Aye, have fun buying diapers.”

Maddoc scoffs. “I will, dickhead, and Raven said since you didn’t come with us today you’re making your lasagna tonight.”

I grin. “Anything for my baby.”

“I’ll fuck you up.”

I laugh, my eyes sliding across the yard when Micah appears again. I frown. “Gotta go, brother. I got plans to ruin.”

I hang up the line, tapping my phone against my leg, and figure, fuck it.

Saturdays are the best days to party, and clearly, I’ve still got a shitload of tension to release.

Last night wasn’t enough.

I send two texts as I walk back to my house, the first to Micah and the second to Brielle.

ME: BE READY TO LEAVE IN TEN MINUTES. I’LL PICK YOU up.

ME: BE READY AT TEN. MAC WILL PICK YOU UP.

I GRIN.

Sorry little Bishop, but consider your plans canceled.

I'm taking Micah for the day and putting you both to work tonight.

Brielle

“TRY THIS ONE.” VALINE HANDS ME A FUDGE BALL COVERED in white powder.

I pop it into my mouth and gag, quickly spitting it out.

She smirks, shaking her head in faux disappointment. “You're a pansy.”

“No, you're just trying to kill me,” I tease. “What is that? Chile flavored vanilla?”

“Something like that, yeah.” She tosses the rest in the garbage and hops up. “All right, I'm out. I've had enough human contact for one day. I'm ready to flip some people off or something.”

I laugh and stand with her. “Okay.”

I'm almost positive Royce was hoping I'd be upset that he took over my afternoon as I'm sure he believes he did, but honestly, I don't even care. I still had Valine, even if it did take some bribery to get her to come out with me in the end.

“So don't look.” She digs into her bag, pulling out some ChapStick. “But the weirdo over by the bathrooms keeps looking this way.”

“What makes him a weirdo?”

Her hand pauses at her lips. “He’s standing outside the men’s bathroom, peeping on two girls on a park bench.”

I grab a piece of garbage off the ground so I can turn to throw it away.

Valine scoffs. “Real subtle, chick. Remind me never to do recon with you.”

“Shut up.” I look over and squint. “Wait, I know that guy.”

“Ugh,” she grumbles. “Of course you do. Well, I’m out. See you at the house later tonight.”

I nod and start walking forward.

His eyes lift, shifting right this way but when he realizes I’m headed to him, they widen.

He quickly straightens and puts on a small grin. “Hey, Brielle, right?”

I laugh. “Yeah, August, right?” I tease.

We both know he didn’t forget but got caught staring.

He gives a sheepish grin, glancing toward Valine. “New girl?”

I tilt my head. “So you live around here, then?”

His eyes pop to mine. “I do, yeah. Just moved back actually, so I’m sort of out of tune with things. Need to play catch-up, reunite, you know?”

I nod. “Well, there’s supposed to be a party tonight, you should come. You can give me your number and I can send you the address?”

He rubs his lips together. “Who are you going with?”

“Oh, I’m actually working,” I tell him and a slight frown forms above his brows. “But I’ll be there, and I’m sure some others you might know will be if you’re from here. Did you go to Brayshaw High?”

A low chuckle leaves him and he looks over my shoulder. “Maybe next time, but I’ll see you soon.” He begins walking

backward, and then spins and cuts behind the building.

A few seconds later a horn honks, and my name is called.

I turn to find Chloe at the curb, staring this way.

I rush over, smiling at her little convertible.

“Girl, if your man knew you were out here like this, he’d whoop that ass.” She chuckles. “But maybe that’s what you’re into, huh?”

I shake my head. “Not my man, trust me.”

“But you are into it?”

I laugh and she nods for me to climb in. “Mac’s supposed to pick you up in a couple hours, right?”

“That’s what Royce said, yeah. Do you mind?”

Her head snaps my way, and she smirks. “Girl, if you only knew how good I am at sharing.”

A few minutes pass and then she’s pulling up in front of the group home.

I climb out, but something has me turning back to ask, “Hey, do you know a guy named August?”

“August?” She tips her head. “That would be a no. Why?”

“I met him twice now since I’ve been here. He said he just moved back.”

She nods, her eyes narrowing. “Huh, be careful, maybe ask Royce?” She pauses and then we’re both laughing because yeah right.

I head inside and before I know it, I’m climbing into Mac’s truck and headed for the party.

Excitement swims in my abdomen as we arrive, and promptly fifteen minutes later, it’s long gone.

I was excited to ‘work’, but now I’ll be excited when it’s time to go home.

With a huff, I toss the plastic cups in the garbage and pull out a new stack, setting them beside the array of half-empty bottles.

When Royce said ‘work’ I thought... I don’t know what I thought, but I definitely didn’t expect to be cleaning up after half drunk, half sober, half-naked, Brayshaw students. Yet, here I am, doing exactly that.

Yay freaking me.

Mac steps through the screen door with an empty beer bottle and lifts it up, so I open the bag in my hand and he drops it inside.

“Thanks.” He leans his hips against the counter near me, glancing over when his girlfriend, Chloe, walks in behind him.

She steps between his legs and leans her back to his chest.

“Hey.” She smiles, her eyes roaming over my outfit in approval.

It’s just a simple black romper with no straps that lays about mid-thigh, but it’s cute and fun and something I’ve had for so long but never had a place to wear it to.

“Hey.”

“You know he’s fucking with you, right?” She tilts her head, letting me in on a secret that should have been obvious. “He has a cleanup crew. They take care of everything before, during, *and* after.”

“Then why am I doing this?”

She smirks. “I don’t know, why are you?”

“He said—” I cut myself off.

He said to ‘keep it clean’ and followed with a clipped ‘find a way’.

I look to the garbage can I just filled up that’s somehow already emptied, fresh bag already inside of it and the small splash I’d spotted on the wall already gone.

I lower my arm, the half-full bag in my hand resting near my feet as I survey the kitchen.

At the round table, several guys play a game of King's Cup, drinking based on the cards they pull while a few girls laugh and chat behind them.

A burst of excitement flows from the living room in the form of whistles and quick cheering, so I lean slightly to get a better look.

A guy tugs his shirt off and starts spinning it over his head, only to toss it onto a girl who sits on the couch not far from him.

The girl blushes, her head tipping a little, and I smile to myself.

So cute.

A few others dance around him, getting loud and enjoying their night.

A scrape of wood against wood pulls my attention back this way right as a girl with brown hair decides to join one of the guys in his chair.

She straddles him, completely ignoring the other players at the card table. Each of them observes her public playtime as well, except one.

He watches her and closely, his grip on the bottle in front of him tight.

Awareness prickles at my skin when bottle gripping guy's leg begins to bounce, but my head snaps up when a rush of red catches my eye.

Back in the living room, a dark-haired dude wearing a Bulls jersey gets into shirtless guy's face and the shy girl, still holding onto that discarded T-shirt, sits straight up in a panic.

Shirtless guy grins, but when he's shoved backward a few spaces, a heavy glare takes over and he steps forward again.

I look between the two about to fight over shirt girl and the three toying with each other at the kitchen table—the new hookup and the last one, I decide.

Lap dance guy's hand begins to disappear under his rider's skirt and in the living room shirtless guy and jersey guy are bumping chests.

“Keep it clean,” I whisper to myself.

I look to Mac and Chloe, and Mac winks, offering a subtle nod.

I drop the bag to the floor and spin around, grabbing a bottle from the ice bucket and a half tray of Jell-O shots off the counter and head for the table.

I smile, walking up to the group of chatting girls with a bit of nerves.

At first, they scowl when I interrupt their conversation, but as they realize what I'm holding, they shout in drunken excitement and all take one, effectively gaining their lost friend's attention.

She lifts her head from the dude's neck, eyes pink and cheeks flushed to match.

I lift the tray in one hand and reach for her with the other, the neck of the beer bottle tucked between my fingers.

She smiles, reaches out, and lets me tug her up. I subtly spin her and pass off the tray and then I'm forgotten, but I make my way over to the ex, trade out his empty bottle with the new, and wink.

He smiles but drops his grin to his chest to hide it.

I pat his back and quickly make my way into the living room.

I offer an apologetic smile to the couch girl and when I reach for the shirt she's clutching. She lets it go.

Jersey guy shouts, something about “stay away from his sister” and as he does, he rears back a little. Probably to come

back even stronger, more aggressive, but I take his slip out as my way in, and place my palms on shirtless guy's waist driving him backward.

At first, his eyes narrow and his hands begin to come down to shove me away, but I tip my head, lifting my brows and he freezes. It only lasts a second, and then he forces himself to chill, wraps his arms around me lazily, and his head lifts.

He licks his lips with a smirk and shrugs. "What? You thought I was stripping for that?" he motions toward the 'sister' and shakes his head. "Nah. I got a woman to play with tonight."

I make a mental note to find the girl later and explain.

I spin in his arms, and his hands drop to my hips.

Jersey guy glares but seems to accept our charade. He nods, grabs the bottle he must have dropped on the floor, cuts a hard look toward his sister, and backs up, rejoining his group—he keeps his sister in view.

My eyes flash to the kitchen quickly.

Chloe grins wide but Mac, his eyes are wide, and not in surprise, but something else.

He shakes his head, but the guy at my back's mouth finds my ear and I look to him.

"Thanks," he whispers.

I nod with a small smile and jerk my head toward the back door. "We should probably head that way for a little bit, let him cool?"

A low, drunken laugh escapes him. "Yeah, you're right."

He grabs my hand, salutes the brother, and tugs me behind him.

"Yo, Jenson."

The guy pauses in the doorway, so that must be him.

We look over and Mac's shifted closer.

He stands there, face blank. “Might not wanna step out there.”

Jenson chuckles, and out the door we go.

He releases me as we clear the last step of the porch and turns to me with a smile.

And then he’s punched in the jaw.

I jolt backward, my eyes snapping up.

“Oh my god, Royce!” I shoot forward, but then hands are around my waist and words fall on my ears.

Mac’s voice is calm. “Told him not to come out.”

“Mac, what the hell?!”

His words are closer, more hushed. “Stop talking. Your voice will only make it worse.”

“My voice?” I shake my head. “How?”

“Quiet, trust me,” he hisses back.

I focus forward when a deep, half-rasped, and not at all humorous laugh leaves Royce.

Royce begins rounding all creepy and Joker-like while *Jenson*, as Mac called him, hops up, fists tight and ready, but he realizes it’s Royce.

His hands lift into the air and he takes an instant backward step. “Hey, man—”

He’s caught by the throat.

The veins in Royce’s forearm pop out with a vengeance and his hold grows tighter.

Jenson’s eyes fly to mine in accusation, and I mouth, ‘I’m sorry,’ but just as the last word shapes on my lips, Royce turns, catching it, too.

He chuckles, but it’s malicious and then he’s tossing the five-foot-eleven dude aside like a rag doll and coming right for me. Mac’s arms fall and then it’s just us.

He glares.

I glare.

He opens his mouth, and I shout.

“What in the hell is wrong with you?!”

His lips clamp shut.

The yard grows silent, so so silent.

A fire builds in Royce’s eyes, but they’re so bloodshot, he’s so far gone tonight, it could be easily missed. I don’t miss it though because they’re staring intently into mine.

Anger and heavy frustration, but who is it for? Me or him?

I’m not sure he knows.

He speaks, but only for me. “Why was he touching you?”

My head tugs back, my mouth opening, but it takes a second for words to find their way out. “Are you serious?”

“*Brielle.*”

My arms lift with my shoulders. “Because I was his diversion.”

A foul laugh leaves him, and he slips closer, licking his lips. “You weren’t, won’t be, are fuckin’ not, his anything.”

“I meant—”

Wait, what?

I eye him and slowly explain. “You said keep it clean, to find a way. That’s what I did.”

“So that’s how you play, huh?” He creeps in, hands covering the exact spot Jenson’s had been. He squeezes and I inhale. “Like to use this body to do what needs done? To get what needs got?”

No. Never that, but I repeat what I already said. What he said first.

“Find a way.”

His grip tightens and then he's walking me back, leading as he pleases until we're surrounded by darkness. Still, he keeps forward, driving me backward.

The summer night wind whistles through the trees, blowing my hair into my face, sending a shiver down my spine, and obstructing my view. Of him. Of the moonlight.

I go to push it back, but he does it first, his pinky skating along the soft, sensitive skin of my temples. I tense when he grows closer to my scar, but he doesn't dive deeper into my hair.

"I asked you to keep it clean," he says, his shadowy eyes locking on to mine. "What part of that made you think touching someone else was allowed?"

Someone else.

Someone else?

"I don't understand."

A scoffed laugh leaves him, and he drops his gaze to my neck. "Yeah, you wouldn't."

"Try me."

He slips his fingers beneath the strap of my tank top and slides them down to where the end meets the cup of my bra and tugs.

I slap his hand away and his glare snaps up to mine.

He gets in my face, and I don't realize I was sliding backward until my shoulder blades meet a wired fence.

His arms stretch out beside us, and he leans in. "It means you aren't here to whore out."

"Excuse me?!" I try to jolt forward, but he's a wall of weight, barricading me in. "Get away from me."

"Don't want to." He frowns, one of his hands coming down to skate along my fingertips. "Why you let him hold your hand?"

I swallow, but snap, “If that pisses you off, then it was damn good you weren’t in the house when we were.”

Trying a wolf isn’t smart, but caging a fawn isn’t either.

I may be ‘new’ here, but that doesn’t mean I’ll be a still target.

He shoves even closer, so close my chest has no room to inflate with my heavy inhale. “Fuck’s that mean?”

“It means I know what the slope of his muscles feel like right before they disappear into his jeans.”

Oh my god!

Why’d I say that?! Like he cares—

A growl leaves him, and he stretches his arms out, dipping back only to come in again.

Okay, so he doesn’t like people messing with his stuff.

I mean staff.

Noted.

Definitely not going to mention Jenson’s arms wrapping around me and pulling me in.

His eyes flash and he jerks away, charging toward the house.

Mac suddenly appears, his head snapping from his friend to me and back as he falls in line.

“You didn’t.” He glares.

“Didn’t what?”

He throws an arm out. “Taunt him.”

“Taunt *him*?” I jerk. “Are you joking? He’s acting like a crazy, unstable, confusing person!”

“Not an act, he’s exactly all of those things, Brielle. What did you say to him?”

“Nothing.” *Not really.*

He glares. “You talked out loud again, didn’t you?”

“I—”

Ooooh.

Oops.

“Fuck.” Mac spins and runs around the house, so I follow.

We get there right as Royce is tearing the door open to what must be Jenson’s truck.

He grabs him by the neckline of the shirt he must have just put on and rips him from the seat.

I gasp.

Someone laughs beside me.

I look over to find Chloe grinning with her phone in her hand. She pushes some buttons, then crosses her arms and smiles at the chaos.

She looks to me. “Oh, honey, get used to this, catalog it even. It makes for some good after-hour thoughts, if you know what I mean.”

I meet her eyes and she winks.

“Your boy’s got stamina, lots and lots of stamina. And since you arrived?” She giggles with a grin. “He’s pretty much exhaling testosterone, he’s so repressed.”

Yeah, I’m not touching any of that.

I rush closer to the sidewalk as Royce grips the guy by the neck and lifts him from the floor. He says something, but nobody else can hear it, and then Jenson lifts his hand and what do you know, it points toward me.

Royce whips around.

A loud, cruel laugh leaves him and then Jenson’s head meets the side mirror. Both he and his mirror crash to the ground.

Royce isn't satisfied, and steps over him, but I'm done with this.

I shoot forward.

Mac tries to grab me, but I cut left quickly and evade him, grab an abandoned bottle from the grass and smash it against the hood.

Royce's wild eyes snap up, his lip curling.

They flash when it's me he finds.

"Stop."

He leers at me through thick lashes. "Get the fuck out of here."

"No. I said stop."

"Baby girl, I will tear you apart—"

"So do it. This isn't on him." I explain, "He and another guy were about to light up the living room in there. I was helping."

"Helping. By letting people touch you. By touching someone. That's not helping, that's hoeing."

Anger burns my skin, and I step closer. "You are a dick and he was only playing along to defuse the situation. *You* said ___"

"I don't care what I said!" His shout is rushed and wrathful. "Listen to what the fuck I'm saying now or you're gone." His chest heaves and he steps over Jenson's forgotten body, slithering toward mine. "You will touch no one, and *no* fucking one will dare to touch you. Do you understand?"

I clench my teeth and look away.

This is what I asked for, isn't it? Him to tell me what he expects, what he wants me to and not to do.

So I don't argue.

I turn back and meet his eyes with resolved strength in my own.

I will not get kicked out of this place, especially not yet.

My brother said he's headed home tomorrow, and when he gets here, he'll find out I am too.

"Okay, Playboy. No one touches me. I touch no one."

His chest rises and falls rapidly and with eerily slow movements, he licks his lips and closes the slight gap between us. His eyes slide between mine, his warm, cinnamon and zest hinted alcohol breath fanning across my skin.

My body starts to heat, but this time for an entirely different reason.

He's looking at me like a broken boy, like I hurt him and he doesn't understand how it's possible.

That makes two of us.

Royce comes even closer, his thumb finding and pressing into the hollow of my throat. He pushes a little harder, a need to be rougher twitching against me, but it's with a gentle pressure he glides higher, until he's lifting my chin.

My heart beats faster as I meet his muddled gaze.

Blood from his busted knuckles splats silently against my collarbone, shocking the skin there and creating prickles around it.

"You want to play, Tink, play," he rasps headily. "Take. Demand." His eyes darken and he leans forward, pressing the left curve of his lips to my ear, gliding them slightly, as if he has a need to press them against me, but he refuses himself. "Demand... *and receive, my little Tink.*"

Tires screech against the road in the distance, the cease of brakes following.

Royce steps around me, and my entire body finds the need to follow his escape, spinning with his as he slips away, taking the air from my lungs with him.

Right there, in the center of the street, stands Maddoc and Captain, blank expressions on both their faces, one solid black

SUV idling at their backs.

The back door opens and Raven steps out.

Her eyes fly from Royce to me and narrow.

He steps up to her and after a short stare-off, she finally slips back inside, Royce following.

He doesn't shut his door and when I look to Maddoc, he drops his chin expectantly.

I don't realize I'm moving forward until I've reached him.

"Get in." He glares past me.

"I don't think that's a good idea. He's mad at me."

"It wasn't a question." The command is short and sharp. His eyes shift to mine, and while they're brimming with a heady warning, there's no anger there.

Room for discussion? Definitely not, but no anger.

He faces forward, and only then do I look behind me.

The house and back yard must be completely empty now as every partygoer is scattered along the front catching the show.

There isn't a single one who isn't staring at me. At Maddoc. At the car behind us and back to me.

Micah breaks through the crowd then, tension lining his features, and for a second I'm relieved. Maddoc must sense it, because he shakes his head, and in the same exact second one brother tells me no without a word, another wraps his fingers around mine hanging loosely at my sides.

I look down, following the tattooed forearm up until my eyes collide with a pair of clouded brown ones. Royce hangs half out of the door, holding on to me.

He tugs, and for some reason, even though he was a giant jackass just now, I let him.

I climb in beside the drunken playboy, trying to ignore how his hold on me grows tighter, more possessive, with each

passing second, and pretending his lips aren't slightly brushing against the side of my neck.

They are, but every time they meet my skin fully, they disappear, taking the air from my lungs with them.

I don't know what it means or that he'll remember this tomorrow.

I don't know why he said what he said, did what he did, or if it even matters.

And I don't know why, when the night basically went to crap, thrill burns me to the core.

I know it's reckless.

But I'm not sure I can control it.

I'm also not so sure I want to.

Chapter 17



ROYCE

“DADDY, LOOK IT!” ZO RUNS AHEAD OF ME, DAMN NEAR tripping over herself while trying to carry a giant-ass panda bear that’s a solid foot bigger than she is.

Captain comes around the corner with a grin, his steps slowing when he spots her, the panda, the new stuffed penguin backpack she has on and the two black bears in my hands.

His eyes pop up to mine and he frowns, but when he drops to his knees in front of his baby girl it’s with a smile.

“Uncle Bro taked me to make stuff, see!” She smiles, shoving it in Cap’s arms and runs to me, snags the bears and runs back. She hops into Cap’s arms, knowing he’ll catch her, and pushes the ballerina and basketball player dressed black bears in his face.

I laugh, wiping at my mouth in an attempt to hide it, and Cap’s grin doesn’t fall until Zoey is running around the corner to go show Victoria.

He hops up and punches my shoulder.

I laugh. “Hey, Madman’s playin’ dirty. Had to show him up. I’m her favorite.”

He chuckles. “All right, but no more animals. Pretty soon we won’t be able to find her in her bed, she’ll be so covered.”

“Fine, fine.” I grin. “I’m gonna put this away.” I lift the small gift box at my side.

Cap’s grin widens and he slips closer. “What’s in there?”

The fucker knows it’s for the soon to be here baby Bray.

“Nuh, uh. That’s for me to know. I’m the special one.” I grin and he laughs.

I leave his ass there laughing.

The second I’ve got the box stuffed in my closet, my phone rings.

“What up, MacMoney?” I answer.

“Your girl’s in the pool.”

I freeze, squeezing my phone. “I don’t have a girl.”

“All right.” I hear his punk-ass smile. “Brielle hopped the fence, she’s in the pool.”

“At the school?”

“Yup. The sensors went off, that’s how I know.”

“How the fuck did she of all people manage to make her way up that fence, it’s three times the size of her.”

Mac laughs. “Right. You want me to go get her out?”

I’m already down the stairs and out the front door. “I got this.”

“Yeah... figured you did.”

“Fuck off. But, aye, keep your phone on you in case I need backup.”

“Oh, for sure man, five-foot silver-haired girls can be dangerous.” He laughs. “Make sure you turn off the cameras if the need presents itself.”

I groan and hang up.

He jokes, but for real though... she might be.

For me.

I went off half-cocked last night.

I text Captain to let him know I left so Zoey doesn't go looking for me and let Maddoc know I'll be missing the first part of the movie he wanted to watch tonight.

I'm turning into the school lot minutes later. I could easily pull up on the property, drive around to the back and avoid a walk, get there sooner.

I think I'll sneak up on her instead.

Brielle

I PUSH OFF THE SIDING, GLIDING FROM ONE END TO THE OTHER before coming up for a breath. I walk out as deep as I can reach, dropping my head back.

I smile at the stars, zoning in on the Little Dipper, but I don't short myself the rest of the night sky.

The stars, they're bright and shining, lighting up the dark sky and giving hope to those of us reaching for more, searching for a sign it's out there.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, choking on it a second later when my peacefulness is interrupted.

"Fuck you doing?"

I gasp and whip around, searching the night for the one and only Royce Brayshaw.

He slips through the gate, sliding up in a pair of black jeans and a sleeveless gray T-shirt, tattoos proudly displayed, not that he thinks about that.

His art of choice isn't for the sake of others, but himself.

One day he'll be decked out, looking the part of a polo player and the next, be center stage at a sold-out hip-hop

concert. He could even hop on a Harley and fit into the roughest of biker clubs. He's universal perfection.

He tips his head and I remember he asked a question.

What am I doing?

"Swimming." I dip down until the water is just beneath my lips. "You gonna tell?"

He scoffs and slips closer, his face now half illuminated by the light. "Tell who, me?" he mocks. "Ain't nobody else gonna get you in trouble."

I roll my eyes and spin around, smiling at the resistance of my widespread fingers under the water. I face him again. "So am I?"

"Are you what?"

"In trouble."

He studies me a long moment, and then he's kicking his shoes off, tugging his shirt over his head and dropping his jeans.

He steps toward the water, the gleam of the moon catching and radiating off the chain that he leaves draped around his neck, allowing me to see it for the first time. Not that he realizes it.

It's not too thick, reaches just below his pecs, and from it hangs a perfect circle, a crest-like charm that I can't make out.

His hand comes up, rubbing along his stomach and my eyes fly to the spot, to the clean, tan satin of his skin that disappears into the silk of his boxers.

I swallow. "Your cocks are on."

He smirks.

"Socks!" I shout. Oh my god, what is wrong with me?!
"Your socks. They're on."

He ignores me and makes his way over to the diving boards. He climbs all the way up to the highest platform, and

with ease and precision, dives straight in.

An exhilarating jolt shoots through me and I laugh, tracing the empty air back up to the top and then dunking under, searching for him deep in the dark water.

He swims right for me, and when he begins to rise, I do too.

My smile slowly fades as I stare at him, his eyes bouncing between mine.

“You like to swim.” He decides.

“I love the water.” I slide backward a few steps and he swims in. “We didn’t go outside during summer when we were little, so I never actually learned the whole swimming part. Sad for a Cancer, right? Water is supposed to be my element.”

A shadow slips over his eyes. “Is that supposed to magically save you from drowning?”

I laugh. “No.”

“So why’d you hop in the pool, in the dark, *alone*, if you can’t swim?”

“I don’t leave the shallow end. I just push off the side where I can reach, and glide from one corner to the other.”

“You can’t swim.”

I turn, kick off the edge and begin doggy paddling, but my body begins to sink so I let my feet fall back to the bottom. Laughing, I turn to him.

“I can doggy paddle, Playboy. Kind of.”

A grin pulls at his lips and he stands now in the shallow end with me. “That’s pathetic, even my niece’s doggy paddle game is stronger than that.”

I smile.

Royce’s face goes slack, realizing he’s, once again, slid out from behind the armor he’s built so strong around him, and

this time, what slipped out was about something, *someone*, far more precious in his life.

He whips around, disappearing under the water.

A niece. He has a niece.

I want to ask more, but when Royce comes up, it's right in front of me. He towers over me, a heavy warning in his shaky glare. "Forget what I said, do you understand? Mention her and I'll—"

"I get it," I cut him off in a whisper, and his face hardens, his nostrils flaring as he stares at me.

I give a small smile.

"You don't have to do all that, threaten and warn me every time we have a conversation. It will only lead to me not wanting to have any more."

"What makes you think I care?"

I can feel that you do, even if you don't want to...

I don't say that.

I shrug and glide back in the water. "I mean, you're in the water with me right now. Kinda seems like you might not hate being around me, even if you do get mad at least once every time we're around each other."

"That's 'cause you piss me off."

"You piss yourself off."

He glares and I laugh.

I spin around, bringing myself closer to the wall where the water comes about halfway up my stomach.

Royce's eyes fall to my triangle top and thank god for padded swimsuits.

"Come on, Playboy."

Slowly, his eyes lift to mine.

"Teach me how to swim?"

He stares a long moment. “I’ll have to touch you.”

A laugh bubbles out of me. “Is that a problem for you?”

“It will be for you.”

I tip my head playfully. “Oh yeah, how so?”

He scoffs, a small tug playing on his lips as his body suddenly loses all of its tension. He walks forward as fast as the water allows him to and smirks. “Clearly you’ve never been touched by a Bray.”

Oh, he’s got jokes.

Okay.

I plant my feet against the wall, grip the edge, turn to look at him, and smirk back. “I’ve never been touched at all.”

I kick off, holding my breath longer than I should as I glide through the water. When I pop up, it’s with a loud gasp. I look toward Royce.

He has yet to move his body, but his eyes, they followed.

I can’t see them from here, the moon now at his back, but I know they’re on me.

Without a word, he climbs out, grabs his clothes.

He leaves.

Ten minutes later Mac is coming through the gate, offering me a ride back to the house.

His ‘offer’ sounds a lot like a requirement, so I accept, and ten minutes after that, I’m stepping into the shower in my bedroom.

I don’t remember falling asleep, but the next thing I know I’m awoken to the sound of my phone ringing.

I frown when I see it’s Ciara who is calling, but quickly answer and bring it to my ear.

“Hey.”

Sniffles sound on the other end and I push against my headboard. “Ciara?”

“Hey,” she whispers.

I frown. “What’s wrong?”

“My mom,” she says quietly, as if she has to whisper. “She’s a piece of shit.”

“What happened?”

“You left.”

I open my mouth but nothing comes out, so I wait for her to speak.

“When I heard you were carried out of school, I went home to... you know, see if you were okay or whatever.” She clears her throat, and my lips twitch. “When I got there Micah was just leaving with all your shit, which is so fucking weird by the way.” A low laugh leaves her.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” I mumble.

“Franky sort of had a fit about that, too, by the way. He’s convinced you two must have been screwing around before that...” She trails off.

I drop my head against the headboard. I hate that for her.

She’s quiet for several seconds before adding. “A guy showed up at the house an hour or so after Micah left.”

“What guy?”

“I don’t know who he was, but he had a smile and a chocolate cake and so she let him in. Right away he started asking her all these questions about you and your brother.”

I sit up. “Like what?”

“If she talked to him before you left, if he *knew* you left. My mom got pissed, she figured you told people about your life before us, about her brother, but I just assumed he was a friend of Bass’ or something, you know?”

“So what happened?”

“I don’t even know,” she begins to cry, guilt heavy in her tone. “She started yelling at the guy and I just... took off and haven’t been back. I left her in the house with some wannabe square with a freaking comb-over.” She pauses. “I just couldn’t deal. I’m so tired of this crap, Brielle.”

I nod, pulling my knees up and wrapping my arm around them. “I know.” I was too. “So where’s your mom now?”

“Sitting in room 104 with tubes in her arm.” She clears her throat. “She’ll be fine, I guess.”

My eyes widen. “She’s in the hospital?”

“It’ll do her some good to be clean for a few days, something about too much Valium.” She scoffs. “I didn’t even know she was mixing pills with her liquor.”

My brows pull.

Mixing pills with liquor...

No. Can’t be.

Why would Royce send someone to my house after Micah?

He wouldn’t need to, right?

I need to talk to my brother.

Where the hell is my brother?

“Are you okay where you are, Brielle?” she whispers.

I nod. “Yeah. I am.”

“Good,” she swallows. “That’s good. Don’t come back here, okay?”

She knows I don’t plan to, but this helps her feel like she has some sort of control over her life. So I leave her to have it.

“Okay, Ciara,” I breathe into the line, and then it goes dead.

I pause a moment, and then try calling my brother, but get no answer. Again.

So I get up and get ready for school, Ciara's words heavy on my mind.

Who came to my aunt's and what the hell did he want?

AS I STEP INTO THE LIVING ROOM, I SPOT MAYBELL ON THE couch. "Everyone's gone?"

"You didn't come out, so I thought you might want to take a day." Maybell stands, coming over to me.

"I was talking to my cousin, and then I tried to get a hold of my brother, but he hasn't answered in days. It's not like him."

I wait, hoping she'll offer some insight on why he wouldn't, but she doesn't, and hey, maybe she's unaware of the things the boys send their team to handle.

"You can wait, if you need to, child." Maybell's eyes scan over the red swollenness framing mine.

I offer a tight small shrug. "If I skipped every time this happens, I'd have failed a long time ago. There will be a next time, and then another, until... well. Until there isn't," I tell her even though I get the sense she's fully aware.

She pulls in a full breath, a slow nod following, "You know, sometimes having my boys at your side makes the world around you real dark." Her smile's slow and real. "But every now and again, someone comes along who realizes the world around them holds no light... when they're not."

Something inside me twists at her perfectly chosen words.

A world of darkness.

That's what I'm risking by being here.

If she knows this, she doesn't voice it, but pats my cheek.

"Will you remember something for me?" she asks, speaking before I can respond. "I need you to remember what

feels like the end, is always the beginning. My boys are tough, but I've known for some time that breaking into a certain one's soul would prove to be the hardest battle yet. So just... remember those words, will you, child?"

I swallow, nod, and she does the same, leaving me in the living room alone.

With a deep breath, I head out the front door, and I'm met with an SUV full of Brayshaws.

Instantly, Royce's eyes meet mine and narrow.

"You're here."

"I knew you'd step out eventually." He takes in my swollen skin but doesn't comment. He pushes off the back door, pulling it open for me.

When I don't rush forward, he gives a cocky grin.

He thinks I'm nervous, maybe even second-guessing myself and the reason for him being here, but he's wrong.

I don't know why he is here, but I'm sure it's because he pulled me from the cafeteria at lunch my first day, and then the whole him causing a scene at his own party.

Not that I'm complaining.

I tow my backpack up a little higher on my shoulder and smile.

His brows furrow, and I glance past him to find a grin on Captain's face.

I skip down the steps and toward Royce, slipping past and right into the seat.

I reach out to grip the handle, and he stares at me like I'm some creature he isn't so sure what to do with.

I close the door, and I'll admit, there's a bit of fluttering happening in my stomach when I glance around the vehicle.

Cap has spun in the driver's seat, smiling back at me while Raven watches me intently from the front seat. Victoria is at

my side and winks while Maddoc keeps his smirk to himself and steps out his door.

Royce walks around and Maddoc pushes the seat forward but makes no other move.

“Fuckin’ for real?” Royce glares.

Maddoc laughs. “My girl’s in the front seat to give her more room, gotta be behind her.”

“Motherfucker, please. Bet your ass is *behind* her every fuckin’ night since her belly’s busting out in the front.”

Raven laughs, fueling Royce’s fire.

“Unless she’s got Ginuwine on repeat, practicin’ for a rodeo.” He grins.

Maddoc fakes like he’s about to box his brother, and Royce’s hands fly up just as quick. They bounce around a time or two, making everyone laugh.

It’s cute, how playful they are.

I miss that the most, easy fun with my brother.

It’s Royce who gives in, shoves Maddoc, and climbs in the back with a grin that turns into a frown the second we’re all inside and the doors closed.

Captain starts driving now and I shift to face Royce.

He stares out the side window, his easy grin now a flat frown.

He must see my head turn in his peripheral because he looks to me, tipping his head back.

“What’s wrong?”

I swear he tenses though he hides it well, and I *know* the girls’ heads have snapped this way, but I don’t look. I stare at the boy in the back.

The tiniest of creases frame his eyes when I’m positive he tries for blank and bleak. “Not a damn thing.”

“Liar.”

Silence.

A long, creepy beat of it.

Royce licks his lips and looks away.

I face forward. “Who’s SUV is this one?”

Raven studies me. “It’s Pacman’s, why?”

Pacman must be Captain considering her hand fell on his shoulder as she said it.

He meets my eyes in the mirror.

“Are you finicky about your car?”

He gives a slow shake of his head, his smirk returning to the road. “Go for it, Bishop.”

Awe, look. He gets it.

I unbuckle and climb into the back row, plopping down right beside Royce and refasten my seat belt.

I look up, meeting Royce’s frown, and reach past him.

He trails my hand over his shoulder and past his neck. I grab his seat belt, tug it over his body and click it into place.

I smile. “Playboys should always wrap it up, right?”

His side grin’s so wide it has his lips parting, he flashes a hint of his perfect whites, but he faces forward, unwilling to give it to me completely. His hand lifts to help wipe it away and he kicks a leg out a little farther.

It’s the perfect reaction really, because he’s settling into the seat more, his frown officially turned upside down.

Objective met.

A raspy chuckle slips from Raven in the front seat, and when I face forward, she meets my eyes.

She nods and faces forward.

Later that morning, when I walk into my second period class, the teacher hands me a summer school ballot, the first class listed to start six weeks from now, check marked, and circled in red?

Swimming.

I smile, an unexpected warmth blooming in my chest, sign where the highlighted section tells me to, and hand it back.

I make my way to my seat, a sigh escaping as I take it.

The light Maybell was talking about, a sliver of it shines through, and not for the first time, and it has everything to do with the stubborn, bighearted, Brayshaw.

Thank you, Playboy.

Chapter 18



ROYCE

BRIELLE STEPS AROUND THE CORNER OF THE LIVING ROOM AND into the kitchen, squinting when she spots me standing outside the screen door.

I wait for her to reach me, shove the thing open and come outside, but she doesn't. She wraps her hand around the frame and pokes her head out, the rest of her still tucked inside.

“What are you doing here?”

What am I doing here?

That's what she comes at me with?

For real?

My face must give me away because she laughs and slips the rest of the way onto the porch. “I only meant I didn't expect to see you after school. I mean, I didn't expect to see you this morning either, after you ditched me in the pool last night and—”

“I get it.”

She laughs again and fuck, man. I shouldn't be here.

Why am I here?

I don't realize I'm walking backward until suddenly she's eye level.

She has no makeup on today, and there's no sign of puffiness on her face, which is good.

I like her face like this, clear and smooth.

Nothing but her.

I kinda like her.

Wait, no. Not like her like her, but I like her.

I mean, she's what I like.

Wait! No.

I mean she's cool, as in not annoying.

She's a pain in my ass but not the kind I want to run over with my 22's.

The kind I want to do naughty ass things to.

WHOA.

Bro... chill.

"Where you going?" she asks.

My eyes dart up to hers.

Virgin.

"What?"

She fights a smile, and I notice I'm standing in the dirt in a brand-new pair of Nike throwbacks.

For real? Now I'm a full three feet from the porch steps?

Fuck this.

I shake my shoulders out and make a mental note to ask Maybell about that shoe cleaner she uses.

"Put a suit on. I'll wait."

Her brows lift. "Like a blazer?"

"Like a swimsuit."

“Now?”

“I said I’ll wait.” I frown, turn away, and head back for my ride.

The girl laughs her way back into the house.

She’s buckling into the passenger seat and we’re pulling away from the property within five minutes.

“So, where we going?” She pulls a bottle of lotion from her bag, and squirts some in her hand.

“You’ll see when we get there.”

In my peripheral, her palms flatten against her thighs and start to rub.

I squeeze the wheel a little tighter, my dick twitching in my trunks.

Fuck, man, what am I, twelve?!

She’s putting lotion on. And? Who cares!

I’m not even looking, touching or rubbing and the hot dog printed over my groin is about to be a jumbo dog.

“Royce.”

My head snaps her way.

She tilts hers. “You okay?”

I quickly focus on the road. “Huh. Yeah. I’m good. Fine. Put that shit away, yeah?” I jerk my chin toward her.

She squints and then looks to her hands. “Oh, yeah, sorry. I should have asked.”

“The answer will always be no.”

She doesn’t say anything for several minutes, instead staring out the window. When we’re on an old dirt road, she looks my way. “This looks like an exquisite place to dump a body.”

I scoff. “There’s a little waterhole back here, some sandbars and cliffs and shit.” I cut her a quick glance and keep

down the narrowing path. “The entrance is on the other side, but this is the way Maybell would bring us when we were kids.”

“Why not the entrance?”

“No one could see us back here.” I frown at the road.

When we were young, we were tough, but we were just little boys. We were smart, but not always smarter than grown-ass men with agendas. As added precaution, we were hidden away for the most part.

We had each other, lacked nothing in life, but we weren't free to roam. The world around us wasn't safe, facts we understand now more than ever.

It only took one brother falling in love and risking it all, the other getting shot at and me, well, I pretty much partied through it all, came in to fuck up who needed fucked-up, and went on my merry way.

Before we were wild fuckers, we were brave boys.

Places like this were our escape, even if it was still just the three of us.

I don't know why I'm bringing her out here, and this way.

My foot finds the brake and I'm ready to stop, throw it in reverse and go around, but then I look to Brielle.

She's unbuckled her seat belt and has her shoulders and face out the window.

When she realizes we've stopped, she shifts, her shiny silver hair sticking to the gloss she must have snuck onto her lips as she looks over her shoulder. Right at me.

My stomach hollows and I wonder if I forgot to eat.

And then I remember... I ate plenty.

A heavy frown forms and concern seeps into her crazy, unusual turquoise eyes.

I face forward, take my foot off the brake, and fuck it.

I keep forward until we're at the wide, flat embankment, park and hop the fuck out.

I don't wait for her, instead leaping along the smaller rocks. Once I'm on the flat dirt plane, I ditch my shoes, and then jump up another. I continue until I'm at the highest peak point.

It doesn't take long for her to make her way to me, but she pauses a rock below. I don't have to glance over to know she's eating the place up.

She loves the water, and this place offers a hell of a view.

Foothills of all sizes make up the place, large boulders mixed within them. Some of the hillsides stretch long and wide, curl and curve around the banks while others cut off completely, leaving a straight shot into the cool-ass, fresh and clean mountain water. There're more hidden groves in this place than any other around here. You could come out here, walk all around on the busiest of days and still find your own private, hidden little cove.

"This is so nice." She scans the area as far as she can see.

I nod, pointing over to the far left peak. "Soon as school's out, the swim team will start settin' up rafting trips that'll leave right back there and take you about four hours downstream."

She nods. "I think my brother was invited once, I remember him mentioning something, but... he never learned to swim either. It was something we were supposed to do together."

I study her profile, and the shadowy look that comes over it. I need it gone.

"Come up here." I tap my foot along the top of the rock.

She looks to me. "Up there?"

I grin. "You afraid, Bishop?"

She scoffs a laugh, but nods. “Kind of, yeah.” She looks over the side, at the twenty-foot drop down into the deep, dark water beneath us. “What if I fall?”

“What if I said I won’t let you?”

Her eyes fly to mine and she opens her mouth to speak, but then lowers her smile to her feet. She licks her lips, peeking up through her long lashes.

Without a word, she walks closer, her hand reaching out for mine.

I don’t know what the fuck it is, but something that stirs like nerves builds behind my ribs, twisting and fucking tightening.

It ain’t nerves, though.

I’m not nervous.

But what am I?

I drop onto my ass and scoot toward her, take her outstretched hand and steal the other. Her chest inflates when I link our fingers together rather than tug on her open palms.

“Climb me, Tink.”

“Climb you?” she deadpans.

I grin. “Like your favorite, sexy tree.”

A laugh bursts from her, but she quickly swallows it, takes a deep breath, and climbs.

She ditched her shoes where I did, so she lifts her legs as high as she can, using the base of my feet as a steppingstone. Her left knee comes down then, first pressing into the muscle of my thigh but as she lifts the right, the other slides along the material of my shorts, widening her legs.

To keep her from scraping her kneecaps on the rock’s surface, I quickly tear my hands from her, lean back so she doesn’t *fall* back, and glide my palms underneath.

The move forces her to lean forward.

Her hands land on my shoulders, her chest pressing into mine, her cotton shorts right the fuck against my starving cock.

She wiggles, attempting to climb higher maybe, off hopefully, but neither of those things happen.

What happens is I twitch against her and fuck me, she feels it.

Her head's fallen near my ear, and the gasp that breaks from her as she feels me jolt against her pussy, has me clenching my muscles.

She doesn't play into the position like every single other girl I've ever fucking met would, but presses her knee into my palm firmer to get her balance. She quickly stands.

Brielle smirks down at me, standing over me all proud and cocky like.

She made it up the rock, all five-foot of her, and she's damn happy about it, even if she needed help to make it happen in the end.

“Fair warning, little Bishop.”

She glances at me, confusion drawing creases along her forehead.

“Move, or I'm looking up the shorts.”

Her mouth drops open and she hops over with a laugh, but it turns into a sigh as she looks out, able to see beyond the blocking trees near the lower rock. “Wow.”

I nod and push to my feet, staring in the same direction.

“What's this place called?” she wonders.

“Knight's Ferry.”

She glances over, her lashes fluttering in full-on mocking motions. “Are you a knight?”

“I'm a soldier, a knight, a fuckin' hoodlum.” I shrug.

Her head tilts and she pulls her lips in to fight a grin.

“What?”

She lifts a shoulder, her eyes following her hand as she trails it along an overhanging tree limb. “Figured you say something like *I’m a king, little Bishop.*”

“If I had, your smart-ass would throw back something like *only in your dreams, Playboy.*”

She giggles. “Do you want to be king? You know, your world’s kind of king?”

“Nah.” I look off, squinting at nothing. “Not the kind you’re thinking, anyway.”

“And what is it I’m thinking?” She shifts closer.

I frown at the hills before us. “Same shit as everyone else.”

Things they’re led to believe at my own hand. Based on the persona I’ve created and created well.

She nods, slipping in front of me, and waits for me to meet her eyes. “And what is that?”

I glare, running my tongue along the backs of my teeth. Everyone thinks it, no reason to keep my mouth shut about it, yeah? So I don’t.

“That I want or need to be the head, in charge or important, all eyes on me front line seen.”

Her lips twitch. “And you don’t?”

I shake my head.

“So, if that’s what me and everyone else assumes, like you said, then what do you mean by you want to be a king, but not the kind *we* are thinking?”

When I don’t open my mouth, her tone drops.

“What kind of king do you want to be, Royce Brayshaw?”

No.

Nope.

She withdraws, realizing she has no place to ask. That I have no reason to answer, and then she takes another step away and I don't like it, the distance.

The separation.

So fuck it.

I slide in, closing the gap she put between us and glare down at her.

“You want to know what kind of king I want to be? Fine, I'll tell you, and then I'll ruin you if you run around and tell another soul. Got me?”

Swear to God she wants to laugh but fights the shit out of the urge, and nods instead.

I dip down, getting in her face a bit and lay it all out. I give her what others don't see or understand. What I've never admitted to anyone, but know my brothers comprehend. And they should, they've already become their kind of king themselves.

“I want to be the guy a girl closes her eyes at night and sees. The one she wakes thinking about 'cause she wants to fuck me or fuck with me, fight with me. And not because she wants to gain something or prove something, but because I'm all that she can see and she feels blind without me, even if she wishes she didn't sometimes. I want to be her light and dark and, yeah, sometimes her fucking nightmare. A fucking *king* in her eyes and she'd be all those things right back, the queen in mine. Of mine.”

My breaths are coming out quicker than expected, and I'm tempted to get her fucked-up so she forgets I said any of that. Tension wraps around my shoulders, and I flex the cords in my neck, waiting for the laugh, the backlash, the fucking foul play to light up her wild, hypnotic eyes.

I get none of that.

This girl... this fucking girl, man.

She smiles, and without a hint of mockery.

It's pure and true and... fuck me, it's gorgeous.

She's gorgeous.

Beautiful.

She tips her head and my pulse kicks up, a softness in her eyes I wasn't prepared for and I'm not sure I want to see staring back at me. Not a damn thing good can come of her looking at me like this. Like she sees me. Like she understands.

Like she hopes to someday somewhere find the same things?

Like she hopes she has?

I swallow.

The corner of her lips lift, and she does what she knows I need.

She adds a little fun into her tender tone. "That's almost sweet."

"Oh she'll have to be sweet." I follow her lead. "I'm a candy man."

Brielle laughs and I step back.

There we go, back in safe waters.

Speaking of water...

"Come on." I grab her hand and tug her forward.

I turn toward her, my smile wide and devious.

Her head tugs back slowly, warily, and rightfully. "What...?"

"We're jumpin'."

Her eyes couldn't get any wider. "Oh hell no—"

And then she's screaming, 'cause she's in my arms and we're over the edge.

Brielle

IT HAPPENS SO FAST I HAVE NO TIME TO ARGUE OR PREPARE, SO I latch on to Royce's neck, bury my face in it and point my toes.

We hit the water with a splash that echoes in my ears beneath the water.

Royce's arms fall from around me the second we're submerged, quickly gripping on to one of my hands, and together we pop back up to the surface.

I gasp, a laughed 'holy shit' flying from me as a shiver runs over my body and he waits not a second, tugging me along while I splash at him with my free hand.

He grins, and not five feet in, he's able to reach the ground. I try, but my head dips under and he pulls me closer.

He chuckles, his hands finding my hips as he walks us in a little more, and as soon as my tiptoes feel the mushy ground beneath them, I nod.

He stops.

I reach up, slapping at his chest, and he grins, catching my wrist and tugging me forward.

I laugh, my fingers subconsciously curling around the chain hanging from his neck, and his grin begins to slip, a far more hazardous expression covers him.

My stomach dips.

It's as if he's stoking a fire I didn't know I'd built.

Or maybe he built it.

How can I feel hot all over when I'm submerged up to my shoulders in cold water?

My hair falls into my face, and I welcome it.

Hide me.

Hide my truth, even *from* me.

I don't want to know what this feeling means.

Royce's attention falls to the strand of hair stuck to my cheek, and his fingers twitch against my wrists. He wants to push it away, but I can't let him.

He can't touch me. Not now. Not with both hands. Not when my body's boiling like a witch's favorite cocktail, bristling and brewing, overflowing with wicked, wicked things.

I tip my head back as a way to escape those dark and daunting eyes a moment, bending until the water reaches the roots along my forehead and give it a light shake to make sure it's drenched completely. I lift slowly so it slicks back and out of my face. When I face forward again, Royce's eyes are locked on my neck.

When I swallow, his jaw flexes and his eyes pop up to mine. Angry. Frustrated.

Chaotic?

He whips us around, placing me closer to the bank, and frees my hand from his chain as he tears away from me. He climbs out and up the short hill.

When he comes back, he tosses a few boogie boards to the ground, his phone is in his hand

With aggravated, jerky movements, his fingers pound at his screen. It beeps once and with that one sound, or whatever that sound delivered, relief loosens his shoulders. He sets the phone on a rock, tugs his soiled shirt off, and drops it right beside it.

Abs. For days.

His chain nowhere to be found.

I don't allow myself to get lost in the corded body in front of me or the special piece of silver draped around him. Instead,

I ask, “You okay?”

He nods, focusing everywhere but on me, and shrugs. “I’m bored, need some real entertainment.”

My hands freeze beneath the water and I blink hard. “Are you joking?”

Those dark eyes finally come back to mine, and when they do, they’re distant. Bleak. *Bored*, as he said he was. “Why would I be joking?”

I couldn’t hide the dry laugh that bursts from me if I tried, not that I care to. I dunk under the water to calm my nerves.

Deep freaking breath, Brielle. This is who he is.

As I think it, something in the back of my mind screams it isn’t true, that the guy who just showed up is the Royce he pretends to be, the one he wants the world to see and know and fear.

I see more.

I rise, make my way over to the flat land, and step from the water.

I don’t look his way, but notice with my every foot forward, he shifts in the opposite direction. I brush through my hair with my fingers and tousle it over so it’s not stuck flat to my head and ensuring my scalp is covered. “Are you ready to head back then?”

“Nope. Party’s coming here.”

I freeze, turning toward him. “Here.”

He watches me closely.

“Okay.” My eyes shift between his. “Are we driving to the other side then?”

He tilts his head. “And the point of that would be?”

“You said this is where you come to avoid being seen, your own little hideaway. Do you really want to bring people here?”

His raucous laugh stings when I wish it wouldn't, his hand coming up to rest against his ribs even, but it's all for show.

There's no humor to be found.

His tone, it's vile, as is the look in his eyes when he flicks them over me. "You think I'd bring you somewhere I was saving for myself, to a sacred place I wanted to hide from the world?" Another foul laugh. "Nah, baby girl. This place served its purpose when we were young. Ain't nothin' special or sacred about it anymore."

Dick. Head.

I nod, forcing myself to hold his intense, hardened gaze.

As if I was sitting back thinking he was sharing some piece of his soul with me by bringing me here. I didn't. Am I glad he did? Yes, completely. But truth be told, I hadn't even paused enough to break down our little trip out here, I was too busy appreciating the scenery, and, yeah, enjoying his company. I'm sure I would have later, but I hadn't yet.

I don't hate being around him, even if maybe I should, since all of our interactions are pretty much the same and on repeat.

He laughs, I laugh, he gets pissed off and leaves.

He's angry, I make a joke, he laughs, and then he leaves.

That's how it goes, so I guess I was supposed to expect this.

Hot and cold.

Sweet and sour.

Unpredictable with diehard mood swings—you have to hope he's warm on the inside when he's warm on the out. Chances are, he's not.

Pizza freaking pocket.

Screw your little Pisces complex.

I smile, and it's not even fake because, again, screw him. I'm not going to let him ruin my day. I've allowed too many people to do that for too long.

“Sounds good, Playboy. I bet it'll be fun.”

His brows snap to the center, his gaze narrowing and falling to my hands when they meet the hem of my shirt. They cut back and forth between my eyes and my shirt as I lift it over my head. But once my face is covered, I spin, facing away from him.

“What are you doing?” His question is delivered with a sharp edge.

I shimmy my shorts down and hang my clothes over a nearby tree branch to dry before stepping into the water.

“What do you care what I'm doing, Playboy?” I don't look back, eyeing the small sandbar that's maybe thirty feet across the water. “I'm boring and your entertainment is on its way.”

I snag one of the little boogie boards he tossed to the ground, step as far in as I can, but close enough to still get some momentum to push off with my feet, my stomach flat on the floating device, and paddle my way across while hoping I won't fall off and drown.

I'll stay there until his 'party' gets here, and then I'm going to have a good-ass time.

Without him.

Chapter 19



ROYCE

SHE'S ANNOYING.

And irritating.

And the hottest fucking thing out here.

I groan to myself, tear Katie K's claws off my chest, and walk to the water's edge, glaring right across it where half the party has migrated, right fucking to her.

Like a herd of wild fuckin' bulls, that red bikini pulled them right in.

Poor punks, rich pricks, outsiders who found their way to the spot—they all hover around her, her smile drawing them closer, her laid-back laughter stealing out their own.

She's soft and enigmatic, a fuckin' tornado, sucking you into its path and keeping you there, swiveling and circling. Suffocating. A prisoner to an energy she's clueless she possesses.

The most irritating part, it ain't just the guys, but the girls too.

I should be able to chill knowing they'll check her, push her, take a bite out of her for the attention she's getting, but

they aren't. They joke with her, drink with her, grin right alongside her and it's because all that 'attention' she's getting?

She hasn't a fuckin' clue.

She doesn't see it, seek it or sense it. The girl is simply enjoying her damn self.

There's a strange stir in my chest, but before I can decide what it is, another unexpected and irri-fucking-tating reaction leaps to the forefront.

Rage, but not the kind I like or am used to.

The kind that pisses me off and makes me want to spin on my fuckin' bare ass feet—that are somehow now buried beneath the water's surface when a second ago they were on dry land—and get the fuck out. Get fucked. Lost, preferably in a warm ass cunt, if I'm honest. That usually does the trick, erasing everything around me for a solid hour fifteen.

That's what sex is, right? Mind control, a thought eraser.

Yeah, I could use that right now.

Jonah steps up behind Brielle, and he's not a tall fucker, so he doesn't have to bend far for his lips to meet her ear.

Whatever he says has her laughing and looking over her shoulder.

His hands find her shoulders, latching on, and she fuckin' lets him.

A shoulder slips in front of mine and I'm knocked slightly, my eyes flying right to find Maddoc.

He wears a blank expression. "Brother. Not here, it's too dangerous. Water. Cliffs. Can't happen."

"You think I care?"

He says nothing 'cause he knows I don't.

I open my mouth to speak, but quickly close it.

Laughter, calm and kind, penetrates my ears, stabbing at my eardrums and making me fucking crazy.

It's hers and it's getting closer.

Water splashes, voices growing near, and I know she's on her way back to this side and not alone.

She should be alone.

She's been alone, my brain screams, but my psyche doesn't care and wants to keep her that way.

Lonely.

Lost.

Friendless.

A forever open calendar for only me to fill.

There's a jolt in my chest, a flare of panic.

Fill with what?

Hate?

Ugly?

Darkness?

"Royce." Worry, alarm, that's what's woven in Raven's tone when she calls my name.

I don't answer.

My feet carry me backward, and when I reach the top plane of the hill, *she* does too, Jonah at her side.

Jonah motions toward the large rock, the one I helped her up, held her on, and carried her off of.

My pulse pounds against my temples and only grows wilder, harder when she doesn't simply nod and stick her hand out for him to lead the way. Jonah walks for the rock, but Brielle, she stops, and looks from it... to me.

She stares, waiting.

And that's how I leave her.

Her hesitation, it speaks volumes, and my ears are already ringing, I can't take much more.

Not of this.

Not of her.

Something's wrong with me, and I need to find out what it is. I need to stop these weird jolts, the unwelcome thoughts, and random aches that keep coming.

Yeah, I need to figure this shit out, and right this fuckin' instant, 'cause I can't take it.

Instead, I find a bottle, and the second the engine's off and I'm parked in front of my house, I drown in that bitch.

Chapter 20



ROYCE

WE GAVE ENOCH LONG ENOUGH TO BREATHE, AND FROM WHAT we could tell, he walked around without a fucking worry. He has no clue we suspect him, which is dumb as shit on his part.

Right this minute, the asshole is at scout's camp, so we're about to grab Micah a throwaway ride and have him run him off the road on his way back. When he does, we'll be there waiting.

Cap takes the driver's seat, Maddoc forces Raven into the passenger's, and the rest of us load up in back, waving to Zoey when she and my dad roll out of the driveway ahead of us.

Off we fuckin' go.

Andre pulls into the dirt parking lot the same time we do, and we all climb out at the same time.

"I can pull the gate back, let you roll in?" he calls over his hood.

"We're good, my man. Let's get it open so we can slip through when Micah gets here."

He nods, and jogs for the gate right as a third set of tires hit the gravel.

Andre looks over and frowns. “Hey, boss.” He looks to me specifically. “Imma need you to tell me who walks through and who doesn’t.”

I glance over my shoulder as Micah parks, my eyes instantly pulled to the passenger seat.

The fuck?

I’m at his door the second his shoe hits the ground, and I shove him back.

His arms fly up, but he waits for me to speak.

“We gonna have a problem, Micah?”

“What? No.” He shakes his head, but quickly realizes what I’m talking about, or more, who. “She just jumped in, man. I told her I had to cancel, and she wouldn’t get out.”

Cancel.

Cancel what?

I pull him in only to slam him back.

“She weighs fifty fuckin’ pounds,” I growl. “If she don’t listen, you lift and throw her ass out.”

Brielle climbs from the car and stomps her way around it.

“To be fair,” he draws out, his eyes flicking from where my family stands watching me. “I was going to... and then I thought better of it.”

My family dares to fucking laugh, but cuts off when I hit them with a glare.

I focus on Micah. “Going to what?”

“You know, pull her out.” He gestures toward her. “But back home, when Franky grabbed her by the arm, you fed him his own ass. Thought maybe she wasn’t to be touched.”

My fingers flex with a sudden need to agree, because fuck me...

The thought of hands on her makes me see red.

That's a fucking problem.

And unexpected.

And not part of the plan.

I didn't bring her here for me.

Didn't bring her here for anyone else to have either.

I shake my head, shoving him away.

He stumbles, waiting for me to face Brielle before he walks over to stand beside Andre.

Brielle rubs her lips together. "You don't always have to put your hands on people."

"You don't always have to make me."

She flicks her lashes toward the sky, shaking her head.

"Why are you here?"

"I work for you."

"I didn't call for you."

Her eyes narrow. "Maybe I'm an overachiever."

"Nah, you're feeling bad for yourself 'cause you got ditched yesterday."

"That's good. Keep thinking that." She tips her head like a brat. "That means my poker face is getting better."

"I saw your poker face at the warehouses. It sucks."

"It was good enough to get Enoch Cameron to spill his little heart out to me and admit he had a cheating girlfriend." She pops a brow. "Or should I say *ex*-girlfriend."

My frown is instant, and I dart forward. "Wait, what?"

I look to my brothers, both standing casually near the hood of the SUV, focused on us.

"Oh, my bad," she sasses. "You thought I ended up at the table, in the chair right beside the guy you and your family strategically invited that night, by accident?"

“How the fuck—”

“Did I know to pry?” she interrupts with a laugh, not bothering to get permission to share. “Your brother, you can ask which one. He told me to be friendly to a green bottle, but to keep my hands to myself. I know that means go hunting.”

“I know which one, and that was stupid. Dangerous.” My heart pounds heavy in my chest. “You should never hunt without protection.”

Protection.

I’ve never been touched at all.

Fuck.

“Oh, I had protection,” she teases, a knowing look in her eye. “See, there was this wolf who tracked me all that night, and from what I’ve gathered, his teeth are *real* sharp.”

My abs tighten beneath my shirt.

Yeah, I watched her. I constantly watch her.

I can’t fucking stop.

It’s irritating and why I had to leave yesterday after I fucked-up the day by bringing others into it. Because frustrated or not, I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

Brielle fights a smile. “Maybe I’m good at poker after all, huh, Playboy?”

My eyes slide between hers and that smile she tried to bury breaks free.

I lick my lips. “Maybe.”

“Only one way to find out,” she leads. “Use me, Royce Brayshaw.”

Heat spreads through my groin at a rate I could never fight off, but I don’t allow it to take over the task at hand.

I study her a long moment, glancing from her to Micah, to my family.

They leave it in my hands.

“Okay, little Bishop.” I reach up, pulling her hair free of the little tie and trailing the silver strands as they fall, teasing the skin of her neck and shoulders.

She straightens her spine, waiting.

“Go on in, pick your poison.”

She steps ahead, falling in line with Micah and Andre and I hold back, turning toward my family.

I glare at Victoria. “This what you meant when you said you’d save the explanation for later?”

She grins. “Yep.”

I look to Maddoc.

He shrugs. “She was there, made sense to use her.”

I scoff. “You come up with that just now based on her little speech?”

A grin pulls at his lips, but he says nothing.

We start walking in, and Raven falls in line beside me, props her forearm on my shoulder and says, “Speaking of using her...”

Her eyes fall to Brielle’s little red shorts, high up on her waist and nice and fuckin’ stretchy around the backside.

I laugh, spin, and whisper one word.

“Virgin.”

The grins on all their faces fall flat, a harmonized ‘oh shit’ following.

I turn around and make my way to the others, one thing playing in my mind.

Oh shit is right.

Virgins and me?

We don’t get along.

I'm not a good guy, I know this, and to fuck me now is to get what they're after in the day's since, but it doesn't last. There is no 'if things go sour or to shit', it's when, and guess what the first thing is they'll want back but will never again have?

That flashing V-card.

Bad guy or not, a girl's first time isn't the one they should regret.

I can do nothing about the other times, I'm not a saint, but I can at least refuse to ruin the one memory they're unable to erase

But this is perfect.

She's here to piss off her brother, to get into some trouble and strip herself of the good everyone's forced her into.

That's it.

A nagging little voice in the back, I'm talking *way, way* back, of my mind calls me a damn liar.

I tell it to fuck off.

Brielle

I HAD NO CLUE WHAT I WAS ASKING WHEN I SAID USE ME, AND I still don't. But walking through the junkyard-looking gate and entering a small, confined walkway of dirt and tarps with barking dogs in the distance, I'm not convinced he didn't bring Micah here for some kind of underground gang ritual that I just threw myself into.

I take slow and steady breaths when the aisle ends and hold it as we wrap around to an open clearing of rottweilers and rocks.

When I stutter step, Royce laughs, sliding his hands in his pockets with ease.

Not one of the dogs come closer, but they each continue to bark until Andre calls out for them to ‘silence’. He tosses them out one by one, and then the big ol’ beasts wag their tails and trot along like sweet boys.

The four of us keep forward, a gang of Brayshaws only steps behind, and we’re quickly in full view of the hidden space.

The yard is wide open and goes on for miles, cypress trees from one edge to the next, completely boxing the giant square in. From the outside, it looks like some sort of old salvage yard, but it’s clean and neat, not a hint of junk to be found.

There’s a huge tin building to the left that has long windows lining the top, ‘Brayshaw’ painted large and proud along the door.

I look to Royce. “The jet?”

He doesn’t look my way, instead down the landing strip. “When we brought you here, we came in and went out on that end. You couldn’t see any of this from there.”

“Was that purposeful?”

His eyes slide my way. “What do you think?”

Of course it was.

I follow his hand as he points to the right. “First row is off-limits, second is where you’ll look.”

I turn to find two parallel lines, the first a line of at least three dozen vehicles, makes and models of all kinds—trucks, Jeeps, SUVs, even a hearse—with a common theme of black on black.

Black paint, rims, and almost completely blacked-out windows.

If someone were to be sitting in any one of them right this moment, you would never know it.

The second row is a mix of more and of no particular style.

There's everything from a poor kid's fixer-upper to a rich man's midlife crisis, silver, blues, and browns, the first being the familiar white car he was driving when he showed up at my aunt's.

We take a few steps closer and Royce nods to the small house in the front right. "We're checking out the hangar and then going in. Find a ride and be quick about it. Remember the number on the front and meet us inside. Andre will pull it up when we're done, and then we'll tell you where you're taking it."

He doesn't wait for a response, walking his family over to where the jet is and then it's just me and dozens of plateless cars, cars that have likely seen more than a nightmare could show me.

I start down the aisle, but I only make it past the first few vehicles when my attention is pulled to one stored right behind them.

Sitting against the back gate, tucked into a corner with a tarp lazily thrown over it, is the dented-up front end of a 1972 Cutlass. I'd recognize the rusty red anywhere.

My feet carry me right to it, and I stumble along the rocks, falling before the crushed in bumper.

The license plate hangs by a thread of a single busted bolt, and scrapes the ground beneath it.

I reach out to touch the custom lettering, and it falls face down, hiding the words I've read a solid thousand times.

I pick it up, my knees tremble as I grip the microfiber material hiding the rest of the car and tug it back. It gets hooked on something somewhere, but it doesn't matter. I can see enough.

The passenger side is smashed in, the front tire completely bent beneath it. The windshield is busted, but holds on near the bottom, the upper half pushed in and shattered, hanging low inside the car.

I run around to the driver's side door, a heavy growl leaving me as I pull on the handle. I lift my foot, planting it on the back door for added force, yanking and jiggling the thing until it finally wrenches open.

Quickly dipping inside, I run my hands over the cool leather he must have had redone without my knowing, but that's not what has my lungs closing in or my head growing dizzy.

Blood.

Everywhere.

On the seats and the door and the smashed-in windshield.

On the driver and passenger side, the airbags hanging and torn.

I begin to hyperventilate, fumbling to get my phone from my pocket, and dial my brother, but after two rings it goes straight to voicemail.

“Shit.”

I try again, my hand tapping furiously against my knee. “Come on, Bass. Where the hell are you? Pick up the phone.”

This time it doesn't even ring, and a low growl leaves me.

“*What* are you doin'?”

I scream, swiftly reaching for the door and yank it closed, locking it only seconds before Royce's hand slaps against the outer handle, and I jump over the seat into the back.

“Unlock it.” Royce's voice is calm, controlled. “Now.”

I cut a quick glance over his shoulder, at his family who stare at the car rather than the crazy girl hiding in it.

“There's no way in hell.” I look back to Royce.

Royce's entire face hardens as his hands grip on to the roof and he leans down to steal my focus. “I will bust this fucking window the rest of the way, and every other one on this thing. Get out.”

“Get away from me.”

He hits the old metal with the base of his fist, and I jolt.

“Fuckin’ funny, girl.” His eyes narrow slightly, quickly flicking to my legs. “You’re bleeding. Don’t fucking move.”

With angry, heavy steps, he makes his way around, but I quickly lock this side door and his palms come down on the window.

“Where is my brother?!” I shout, hardly recognizing my own voice. “This is his car. There’s blood. He wasn’t at the warehouses when we were, he hasn’t been at the house since I got here, he’s not answering my calls. Where is he?!”

Royce’s body straightens, his hands falling to his sides as he eyes me.

My pulse begins to pound heavily against my temples and I try to calm myself, to slow the blood rushing fiercely through my body, but I can’t focus on anything other than the unknown.

“Where is he?!” I scream, the pressure in my head doubling.

Shit, I squeeze my eyes shut, and when they open again Royce’s face is a little fuzzy, my vision threatening to abandon me, but I *can* still see. And Royce’s frown, it’s taken an entirely new form.

“Royce.” Raven steps forward, but she has a hard time looking away from the car, and her hands fall to her baby bump.

Royce licks his lips, not bothering to turn toward the others. “Go. We’ll catch the fucker tonight.”

Oh my god, I found out their secret and now he’s going to kill me!

Micah steps closer. “Brie—”

“Don’t make me chop your fuckin’ junk off, Micah.” Royce cuts him a glance, one that has Micah dropping his eyes

and jogging away, Andre on his heels.

His family goes next.

It's just us now.

“Wanna talk, open the door,” he says.

“Why, so you can add my blood to this, no need for a cleanup crew if it's all mixed in the last mess, right?”

“Take that as a no.” He turns and walks away.

I lean forward, grabbing on to the seat to keep my eyes on him.

Royce pops the trunk to the black vehicle closest to him, and within seconds, he's coming back, a bat hanging from his hand.

He swings it in a circle, tipping his head at me, and my heart races as I clench the leather as tight as I can.

“Your call, little Bishop. How we doin' this?”

I feel along the edge of the seat, my fingers finding something cool and hard, and I stretch the slightest bit to wrap my palm around it. “The glass will fly at me.”

“I know.”

“You wouldn't—”

“You sure?” He brings the bat down for a hard knock against the hood and I jump—I can only see shades of him now, black and whites, and swift movements. “I'm thinkin' no, since you feel the need to lock yourself in there. Weak move, by the way. A smart girl would have run, but a brave one would have grabbed the crowbar you're reaching for at your feet”—shit — “and took it to the windows of the house while we were still inside.”

“I'm not weak.”

“Then ask me.”

Ask him?

Okay, fine.

“Did you hurt my brother?”

“Nah.” He grins as if this is some sick joke. “My brothers wouldn’t let me.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean?”

“Open the door.”

“Why should I believe you?”

I trail his shadow around the side of the car and he crouches down to bring us eye level.

I blink several times, taking a deep breath and when I open my eyes his are right there.

He glares. “You shouldn’t.”

I really shouldn’t.

It would be naïve to think I could, to believe I know him, if even just a little bit, when he’s so good at hiding.

The world around him sees what he wants them to, but I can’t help but think I see more.

The change in his eyes, the thought behind them.

It’s hard to say for sure, but something tells me he might be aware of it.

If he is, he hates it, and if he is that would make me dangerous.

All the more reason to be rid of me, isn’t it?

He’s right, I shouldn’t believe him.

I unlock it anyway.

Royce wastes no time tearing it open and dipping inside with angry, jerky movements, but it’s with gentle hands and a soft grip that he scoops my body into his arms, and lifts me out.

Chapter 21



BRIELLE

I'M FAR FROM BROKEN AND BRUISED, BUT WHEN ROYCE carries and sets me on the edge of the still open trunk of the SUV he pulled the bat from, I don't argue.

He tosses the wooden weapon to the side, quickly tearing out a first aid kit.

I keep my mouth shut as he does this, focusing on getting my heart rate down so the pressure in my head will settle and leave my sight alone.

His frown darts up to mine, and he dares to glare, but his eyes don't match his touch.

His hands are slow and soft as far as grip goes, but from the pads of his fingers to the base of his palm is textured evidence of his years of basketball, and more, a calm roughness from hard work put in.

The carefulness in which he wraps his hand around the back of my calves, twisting and turning to inspect the tiny little cuts is unexpected. It's as if he's almost cautious, afraid to push the little shards of glass in deeper, maybe?

I can't imagine he's ever put his hands on anyone with restraint, be it for pain or pleasure.

Royce is far from controlled, but when he touches you... it's with purpose.

To test or tease, to scare or scar, want or warn.

From what I've gathered in the time we've spent together, it's understanding the intention that can be tricky.

He gives nothing freely, but if you look close enough, it's there, hidden under thick lashes and deep, dark eyes.

Eyes that lift to meet mine.

Not five seconds later a sharp sting has me jumping, and when he looks down, I do too.

A teeny-tiny, thin piece of glass sits between his fingertips, and he bends, finding another.

He looks up and I nod, smashing my lips together as he pulls it out as well.

As he plucks out the third, he asks, "Why do you do that with your eyes?"

I tense, and his eyes pop to mine. "Do what?"

"Blink like crazy, squeeze them closed, pat on your eyelids like you did when I found you outside at your aunt's?"

He notices?

I look down, twitching when he goes for another shard of glass. "My vision..." How much do I share? "It gets foggy sometimes, doubles, but it always comes back." For now, until the nerves give completely, and all that's left is darkness.

His features harden as he stares at the cuts on my legs, and I know he wants to ask more, but he changes the subject. "How often do you and Bishop talk?"

I sigh. "We used to talk almost every other day at the least, but the last few months, it's been a lot less."

"Has he said why?"

"No." I hate how my voice lowers.

“What did he say the last time you spoke?”

“That’s none of your business.”

He frowns. “You want to fuckin’ talk or not?”

I try to jerk my leg from his hold, but his grip tightens, holding me there.

It takes a second of neither of us giving in for him to finally scoff and get back to fixing me up.

“When did he wreck his car?”

Royce hesitates and then says, “Months ago.”

“Months ago. Wow.” While the sting in my chest is real, I don’t show it, but I couldn’t hide the bitterness that seeps into my next words if I tried. “Must be Brayshaw related.”

His eyes slice to mine. “Don’t act like you don’t know more than you should.”

“Don’t insinuate my brother is the reason behind that. He’s not.”

He drops my leg from his hold. “You’re real damn protective of someone who left you behind.”

“As if he had a choice.”

Royce’s frown deepens as he clenches his jaw, but he doesn’t say anything when it’s so obvious he wants to.

I push up on my hands more. “I love how you keep telling me to say what I want, but you hold back every time you can.”

“Trust me, there’s a difference.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“No.”

“Why not?” I snap. “You clearly have an issue with my brother. What do you care?”

“It’s Brayshaw—”

“Brayshaw business?” I say at the same time, cutting off his last word. “Is that not why you brought me here, so I can learn more? Did I not pass your little drug test? Help your family with Enoch? Were you not about to use me today?”

“Watch it.”

“Why am I even here, Royce?!”

“I said watch it.” His tone is an icy black that has me biting my tongue. “You wanna know what happened?” He gives in. “Your brother almost got his ass fuckin’ hung and hung tight. The only reason he’s still breathing is because he stood with and protected Raven when we weren’t in reach to do it. Why weren’t we in reach, because the motherfucker went behind our backs to help where she needed it.”

Betrayal? All my brother ever talked about was loyalty. Honesty.

I swallow, a queasiness swimming in my stomach. I barely get my next words out. “He turned his back on you guys?”

Royce’s jaw flexes and shakes his head. “Every ounce of his loyalty was rooted in our grounds, in our name, and then Raven came along. She became his friend before any of us knew she was a part of us, so when word dropped she was of Brayshaw blood, hidden away for eighteen years only to come back with a fuckin’ bang, he was already all in. His loyalty shifted to her.”

My shoulders fall, and I turn my body to face his better. “Was that wrong of him?”

His eyes cut to mine and he releases me. “Was it wrong to do and be whatever the hell she needed of him? No. It wasn’t. Not even a little bit.”

Royce speaks with unrestrained anger, but the boy is right beside me, and his tells are clear.

His heartbeat is heavy as is his mind, his fists tight but shaking, his breaths deep and harsh, but aching.

Anger is only the outer layer, front and center for all to observe, to fear, while something much deeper suffocates behind it.

I can guarantee I'm not supposed to understand the difference.

He bleeds on the inside too.

His glare is a guard, an impenetrable piece of armor that serves him well.

He has no reason to question his most practiced protection, but pain recognizes pain.

“It wasn't wrong of him... but it felt like it.”

He grinds his teeth and looks away.

“Tell me what happened.”

He scoffs, licking his lips as he focuses on the sky. “I don't even fuckin' know you.”

He says it, but his tone tells a different story. He says he doesn't know me, but he feels as if he does, and maybe it scares him a little. So, I tease.

“Sure you do. You've been watching me, remember?”

He keeps his head facing forward, but lazily slides his gaze to mine. “Took Polaroids too,” he jokes.

“Oh, I don't doubt it.” I laugh lightly, and he lets a hint of a grin tip his lips. “One thing my brother did tell me was how nothing is ever buried or unreachable, nothing is off-limits, and no one can do a damn thing to stop you.”

“*Me* or my family?”

“I thought he meant all of you.” I lift one shoulder. “But now I'm kind of wondering if he did mean you.”

He eyes me a long moment and then turns his attention to the bent plate at my side.

He leans over, picks it up, and taps it against his free palm.

I study his profile, the doubling tension framing his eyes.

He wants to talk, a true conversation, but he's unsure... and he hates it.

Like me, he has no one of his own to trust, not with anything real or unscripted.

Pain recognizes pain.

I reach out, swiping my hand along the dust of the blue stamped letters and he holds it out, revealing what's beneath it.

"Lame for a custom." He stares.

I nod, tracing the number four with my middle finger, and decide vulnerability is only fair when it's coming from both angles. I don't talk to people either, but talking to him somehow feels right.

"It was the gift my sick mother gave her casted up son a day after she begged him to lie to the doctors when, for the first time, he couldn't be 'fixed' with time, a forced shot of Jack and a handful of ibuprofen."

Royce's frown deepens, but he doesn't look away from my hand. "Your mom was sick?"

I sigh, leaning against the window. "In the head."

This time he does glance my way, and I offer a tight smile.

"I mean, she'd have to be, right?"

I try to hide the inner sorrow the irrational question brings, but if the sudden and unexpected bleak look in his eyes means anything, I failed.

A heavy strain falls over his forehead and his chest inflates with a deep inhale. "Tell me what happened," he mimics my words.

I hold my hand out and reluctantly, he slaps the license plate into it.

I stare down at the bold letters, the stamped number four, and our last name.

4 Bishop.

“I was sitting on the back patio, admiring the sky and trying to recognize a new constellation of stars I was studying when I heard my dad’s car pull into the driveway. I jumped up as fast as I could and ran up to my room before he even managed to get the front door unlocked. His norm was to ransack the kitchen first, watch the Warriors highlights, and there was hope he’d pass out in the process, but not three minutes after the latch of the door rattled the house, his boots were stomping up the stairs. He went straight for Bass,” I remember.

“I tore my door open as quick as I could and ran for him, but my mom flew from her room the second she heard me step from mine and grabbed me around the waist. She held me back, so I yelled—something I *never* did—and she yanked my hair for it. But Bass...”

“He told you to be quiet.”

“Without speaking a single word.” I nod. “He met my eye for a split second, and I about swallowed my tongue.” I scratch at the red printed California at the top of the item and jump ahead. “My mom was on her knees at my brother’s side when my dad was done with him, but not to cry and hold her son. She *was* crying, but her tears were in fear of what would happen to my dad, to her. She sat there and pleaded with Bass, and only when he agreed to lie when asked, did she allow me to help him into the car so we could take him to the hospital. I had to grab an old shovel from the garage to balance me out.” I scoff, shaking my head. “She wouldn’t even help me get him to his feet.”

I turn to Royce, who hasn’t looked away yet.

“Bass told the people at the hospital he fell down a hill riding his bike when really my father drug him out his bedroom window and rolled him off the roof into the long bed of his stupid El Camino.” I swallow, sharing the last, maybe even worst, part. “All because *Bass* had left the back door open.”

Tension lines Royce's face as he pieces it together.

"Day or night, we weren't allowed outside in the summer, and we were never allowed to leave doors open and risk the neighbors hearing what went on inside our walls."

"Summer," he drags out.

"My dad's favorite season."

"No school."

He's getting it.

"No school, no reason for restraint... no swimsuits that would show our family's secrets."

His eyes slide between mine. "Bass, he told you that night wasn't your fault."

I sigh, looking out at the stupid car my mom bought him.

"Oh yeah, but we both know that it was. I could have sworn I closed and locked the door, but I was in such a hurry to get up there without getting caught I guess I just... forgot. Bass said it happened how it was supposed to because it gave him the car."

My mouth twitches. "He'd tell me stories all the time how it would one day be our ticket out of there. He was only twelve when that happened, couldn't even drive the damn thing yet." I laugh, but it quickly dies. "It took me a while to understand why she'd give a child a car he couldn't drive, but then I realized it was nothing but another wicked way to show us we were helpless. Like... here's your car, but I'll hang on to the keys while you dream of a way out that will never come."

I frown. "Bass was back in the hospital with a broken jaw a week later." I lick my lips, glancing back to Royce. "The lies came easier after that."

"Yeah?" His eyes narrow in suspicion. "What was the incentive?"

I knew he understood.

“Come on, Playboy.” I run my tongue along my teeth. “Let’s not pretend there’s more than one answer to that question.”

I pull my legs up, wrapping my arms around them only to wince.

With jerky movements, Royce slides closer, bending a bit to get a better look.

“I need to get these out.” He tilts my right leg before quickly double checking my left again.

He drops to his knees in front of me, hooks my calf over his shoulder, his head now positioned between my legs, and only an inch before my kneecaps.

This is one of those rare times I wish I had longer legs because *oh my god!*

He’s a head dip away from my crotch.

“Stop.”

My eyes fly to his, but he keeps focused on the tiny pieces of glass shimmering in the sunlight.

“Stop what?”

That has him looking up. “Every muscle in your body went stiff just then. I can’t do this right if you can’t relax, if you can’t relax on your own, then I might have no other choice than to *dip my head* and help you out.”

My hands come up to slap over my face and I drop my body all the way back on the folded down seat. “Oh my god, I hate myself.”

I swear his smirk is clear in his words. “Are you gonna chill or not?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I take a deep breath and do my best to calm myself with Brayshaw’s only bachelor between my legs.

“You stopped breathing.”

Ugh!

I manage to relax enough for him to pull the few out, and then he reaches over me to grab an alcohol wipe from the first aid kit he pulled out earlier. He dabs against the spot he's just cleaned—the soft skin of my inner thigh.

He dips his head, blowing along the area to help it dry.

I pull in a breath and hold it.

I know he feels them, the goose bumps as they raise, and not just where his warm breath reached or where his steady hand touches, but everywhere.

All over.

From root to tip, my body reveals me.

Royce's gaze pops up to mine, and either the sun shifts above us at that exact moment, or the brown of his eyes deepens before me.

His thumb floats along the freshly cleaned spot in slow, back-and-forth motions, in the slightest of sweeps. It's as if he's hardly grazing the skin, maybe not even at all, his touch is so light.

I could be imagining it.

“That hurt?” he rasps.

“Does it look like it hurts?”

He pauses, but only for a split second, and then a low laugh leaves him.

He lets go and I roll my eyes at myself, pushing my hair behind my ears.

I'd make fans out of my hands if it wouldn't be completely humiliating, and not for fun either, but because I'm legit sweating right now.

“My bad, that was embarrassing.”

He chuckles, pushing to his feet. “Nah, all part of my superpowers.”

I shake my head with a grin, but it smooths out as he watches me closely, indecision in his eyes.

A slow breath leaves him as he looks away.

“Our world is fucked-up,” he says as he puts the bat and first aid kit away. “It’s dangerous and always shifting. Right when things begin to calm, a wave of new bullshit comes in and it rolls on from there.”

“Think it will ever stop?”

“Not a chance in hell.” He shakes his head. “Ninety-seven percent of people want power, money, and the three percent who don’t? They’re the crazy fucks you have to watch out for, ‘cause they’re coming after your soul, your blood, your whole fucking world, and for no other reason than to say they took it from you if they succeed.”

“People with nothing to lose.”

“People okay with losing.”

I swallow and try again. “Tell me what happened.”

Royce pauses for a second and then reaches in to grab a bat once more.

He turns to me and holds it out, so I wrap my hands around the grip.

He walks toward my brother’s busted up car, and I follow his lead.

Royce steps around the back of it, tearing the tarp off completely.

A lost look covers his face as he inspects the car from the back window to the passenger one.

He plants his feet there and stares inside.

“My family was dealing with some straight Jerry Springer shit for a minute, fucked-up family members, connected bloodlines and things you’d never believe. Hit after hit until it all started to crumble. Your brother pissed us off, but when it

came down to it, we trusted him more than anyone, so when the one person who meant as much to each of us as we meant to each other needed an extra eye, he was the only one who could do it.”

I swallow. *Raven.*

He puts his hand on the doorframe, leaning in to look inside with a tight frown. “Me and Maddoc were headed to see our niece when Captain was... unable. We came around the corner to find two cars in the middle of the road, one we didn’t recognize and one we’d seen a million times. Smoke and small flames, and the body of a girl on the ground was all we could see.”

I step around the driver’s side, listening as I too focus on the car.

“We hopped out with the car still rolling and ran. Bishop had this asshole by the neck, a knife to him.”

I must gasp as his eyes pop up to mine briefly.

“Then we spotted Raven falling against the car—the girl on the ground wasn’t her. She was white as a fuckin’ ghost, about to fall on her ass. She called for Bass, and he didn’t hesitate, dropped the guy instantly. He left his back blind and went for her, just like that.”

I take a deep breath.

“We were running up right as the motherfucker stood. It was a guy we trusted not long before that. Our friend, *his* friend.”

“Who was it?”

He hesitates and then says, “His name was Leo, he was a towheaded little bitch, sharpest shot we’d ever seen. In Leo’s mind, Raven took a place he wanted, but he was too dumb to realize it wasn’t a place we knew would be filled. Bass was already ahead of him, but they were cool, so when Bass was suddenly the one called on, Leo grew even more bitter. He was

fucking up before then, but obviously, it took over his weak little mind, enough to try to take our own out.”

Jesus. I swallow. “So what happened when Leo got up?”

“He ran for Bass’ back, a big-ass piece of broken glass in his grip. Maddoc went for Raven.”

“And you helped my brother.”

His eyes snap to mine. “Shouldn’t have had to. He should have called when she asked him to take her somewhere.”

“But he didn’t, and you still had his back.”

Royce glares at the busted airbags. “He had hers, and not just that time.”

“Was he in love with her?”

“Nah, I don’t think so, but only he could say for sure.” He pauses, and then says, “They both came from a fucked-up place, so he understood her, and she understood him.”

“Where’s Leo now?”

He eyes me. “Ask your brother. I tried to get Bass to leave the crash site with us, but he refused, said he knew just where to take Leo to drown him out.”

“Drown him out... my brother didn’t know how to swim.”

He shrugs. “Maybe Leo didn’t either.”

I sigh, looking along the car. “My brother. He’s not here, is he?”

“No,” he answers instantly, watching me closely.

“Did you make him leave?”

He stares a long hard moment and then shakes his head.

No.

He didn’t make him leave.

He chose to leave and didn’t tell me.

Did he feel like he couldn’t?

My chest begins to ache as I stand in front of a car I've been waiting to find parked outside my aunt's house for the past four years.

Bass said he was working to better our lives, and maybe he is, but what a shitty sister I've been to do nothing other than wait for his hand to take mine.

I've been sitting idle, waiting for my big brother to call and tell me it's time, that we'd be a family again and build a new life somewhere away from it all. Start over.

Why should I be his responsibility?

Why should he have to grind his ass for anyone other than himself?

Maybe he no longer wants the added weight a little sister brings?

He didn't ask for the messed-up life we had, and he's already saved me once, many times if I count all the days and nights he took the beatings for me.

I step back, eyeing the Cutlass, flashes of the day he was finally given the keys, still too young but able to reach the pedals to drive it, coming back and with it, the ache of the blows that followed increasing in numbers.

I never told my brother how every time he'd leave for an angry evening's drive, angrier hands would come down on me.

He needed his escape, and I was okay with being the punching bag that allowed him that.

I was younger, thinner, and weaker, smaller all around, but for a few short minutes, I was protecting him.

Or that's what I convinced myself.

Anger swims in my stomach, stiffening my muscles as pressure builds behind my eyes.

My dad told me if I wanted it to stop, I'd tell my brother to stay home.

I lied to my dad and said I begged Bass to, often, but he wouldn't listen, all so my dad would think Bass didn't care as much as our dad thought he did.

If I really had asked, Bass would have stayed without hesitation, sold the car and stashed the cash so the desire to hop behind the wheel was never there. My dad would have then used the knowledge to hurt us in a different way.

Bass by going after me, me by going after him.

My hands begin to sweat.

I'm so sorry, brother. It's time for you to live your life without having to worry about mine.

I lift the bat over my head, bringing it down with all my might, and the windshield shatters the rest of the way, breaking off and falling into the front seats of the car.

I lift it again, taking it to the back ones. I swing and swing, from right to left, left to right, until, finally, they too bust through.

I growl and grunt, the bat between my shaky hands held high in the air when suddenly Royce is at my back. He uses his hips to push me forward until my body is pressed into the car.

His hands start at the curve of my elbow, warning me they're coming, and slide up from there, not stopping until his fingers are spread wide along mine. He wraps his palms over my hands and pushes even closer.

I've got it is what I imagine he'd whisper if he felt the need to speak, but his body does it for him, strong and firm and unmoving.

I let go.

My arms fall like dead weight, but with his held up the way they are, the way mine were, mine can only drop backward, over our heads.

My elbows rest over his chest near his shoulders, my wrists lying perfectly at the curve of his neck, our height is so different.

When he doesn't force them down, I make a risky move. I give him all my weight, hoping he'll accept it and close my eyes as blackness takes over them.

He does with zero hesitation.

My heart pounds wildly in my chest, and I attempt to calm it, but each breath comes out choppy than the last, more ragged.

Royce's arms drop back, his fingers finding and lacing over mine at the base of his neck. He folds them there.

I hold on to him, but really, it's he who is holding on to me.

I turn my head to the left and tilt it up a bit so my cheek rests near the beat of his heart and focus on the tempo.

I breathe him in, blend *into* him, our heartbeats in sync.

"Slow and steady," he rasps.

Deep and full.

His hands release mine, and when mine don't fall, he wraps his long fingers around my wrist and tugs.

My eyes pop open and it takes several seconds for the fog to clear, and then they meet his.

He watches me a long moment, and at my back, his chest rises a little fuller, falls a little faster.

Suddenly his hands are on my hips and I'm spun around, his body pressing into mine as his features pull tighter and tighter, the muscles of my stomach doing the same.

His fingers twitch against my skin, pressing firmer and tugging some unexpected strings low in my abdomen.

This isn't what it feels like, Brielle. Don't fool yourself.

Don't fall.

He slips closer, his right hand coming up, his knuckle glides up my breastbone, my neck, until it's resting beneath my chin. He tips my head back, and his begins to lower.

His eyes are hard and focus on my mouth and I forget to breathe.

To blink.

To think.

My lips part.

A low groan leaves him.

All at once, the weight of his hands, the heat of his breath, and the pressure of his body is gone.

As if left starved, I drag in a desperate lungful of air, and his eyes cut away.

“Come on,” he says, a slight strain in his voice. “Let’s put this back.”

I nod, clearing my throat, and with slower steps, I follow behind him, stepping to the side as he leans into the back of the SUV.

“So.” I swallow, shifting us back into proper territory. “Do you keep a bat in all these cars?”

“Nah.” He shrugs a shoulder, and when he turns to me it’s with a straight face. “We keep three.”

I shake my head with a grin. “See, Three Musketeers... one for all. Not that that’s what it means, but it works.”

A light laugh leaves him, and with slower than normal movements, the two of us head out the way we entered. Thankfully, with each step taken, the heaviness of the last few minutes falls away.

When we step out front, there’s an empty SUV waiting.

Only when we’re pulling to a stop in front of the girls’ group home does he turn to me.

“You expected him to be here, that’s why you came without a fight.”

I nod.

He gauges me. “Now what?”

I drop my smile to my lap and push the door open, but he reaches over, yanking it closed.

When I turn, his face is *right there*. Right in mine.

“You stayin’ or not?” His tone is angry, but his eyes... they’re something else entirely.

My stomach dips.

He wants me to stay, I can sense it, but he doesn’t know how to say it.

“AS IF YOU’D GIVE ME THE OPTION,” I WHISPER WITH A HINT of a smile.

His jaw muscles flex, his eyes falling to my mouth. “As if you’d need one.”

“I wouldn’t.”

His gaze snaps back to mine, and just like that, the air around him grows playful.

I knew it.

He grins, a low laugh leaving him as he shifts the SUV in gear. “I know.”

That grin? It turns to a smirk, and the worst kind.

The kind you sit and wonder about for hours upon hours because it could mean one of so many things.

However, that’s not what plagues me as the day goes on, but the truth behind my answer.

I do want to stay, and not for anyone else this time.

For me.

Royce

I DON'T KNOW HOW I KNEW SHE'D BE WAITING FOR ME, BUT AS I step out at the mansion, there she is.

Sitting on the porch with soft eyes and a knowing smile, Maybell pats the space beside her, so I don't hesitate to drop right down.

“You knew she thought he was here, didn't you?”

She nods, looking out over the trees. “She was too proud to be home, boy. I saw the longing in her those pretty eyes of hers,” she says quietly. “She was missing something, and he's the only thing she thinks it is.”

We look to each other and I raise a dark brow. “Thinks it is?”

“Yes, boy. *Thinks*,” she says, her tone stern. “Way I see it is what that girl needs is what she's yet to realize she wants, as it's something else entirely, but she's getting there, more and more each day.” She bumps her shoulder into mine. “I know you'll help her figure it out.”

I look away, glaring at the rocks in the driveway. “How exactly am I supposed to do that?” I can't stop myself from asking even if I wish I could.”

Maybell stands and stares down at me. “By being you, while she's busy being her.”

I frown and she chuckles.

“Trust me, boy.” She smiles and walks away.

Chapter 22



ROYCE

BRIELLE'S LITTLE FREAK-OUT SENT EVERYTHING TO SHIT earlier today, but we're used to things going off course, so we rested and rallied and here we are, round two-ing it only a handful of hours later.

The plan was always to be slick with this guy, catch him alone so we could do what was necessary to get the truth out of him, especially since we're playing the waiting game on the other half of this issue. I might be reckless and wild, but that's because I don't give a shit. I am fully fucking capable of being careful and smooth when I have to be. Sort of.

I mean I am sipping on a bottle of water right now, but as Brielle walks into the room, a bottle of whiskey starts to sound real fucking nice.

The blood in my veins runs warm, and calls for a mandatory long, slow review of the five-foot, lively little thing.

Tight black pants that reach above her belly button, hiding the piercing I got a better—not at all good enough—look at when she stripped her top off at the water, and making me want to know what's under there even more. Her shirt reaches where her pants end and is a plain, solid red, the same exact shade her lips are tinted tonight. Shiny and plump.

Speaking of plump, that ass.

Fuck me, that. Ass.

Peachy and round.

How'd she fit the thing in that bikini?

She shifts, glancing around the room, stretching her slender neck to see beyond where her frame allows.

She's so tiny, I could lift her ass up—literally.

Yeah, I could get it nice and high, and right against the wall, high enough to put her sweet pussy level with my mouth. I'd start with my tongue, slide it out and between her legs, free her clit of her lips and suck it between mine.

I'd bite her, but just a little.

Yeah, she'd like that. Know she would.

I groan, stretching my leg out and only then do I realize hands slipped over my thigh, inching toward my junk.

I blink, spotting a heap of blonde hair leaning near my face, a shoulder that's too broad to be my baby girl's in my space.

Maddoc catches my eye from his seat beneath Raven and pointedly looks to my hand, clutched tight on the arm of the chair. I let go, instead curving it around Grace's back as she sits on an ice chest to my right.

Grace. Yeah, that's this chick's name, but I don't know why she's over here.

Nobody invited her to sit.

Grace looks over her shoulder, grinning at me, and lowers her cup to her lap. "You know I'm willing to get out of here if you are."

A laugh leaves me and my head falls to the side. "You'd give me what you got without making me earn it?"

I tense.

The fuck'd I just say?

Her expression mimics my inner thoughts, but she attempts to laugh it off. "I'd say it's well earned."

Right. Because of my name and the bragging rights that come along with it.

They want it.

Yeah, they. 'Cause she's just one of many, and I'm the guy that made it clear it's an easy thing to accomplish.

Wanna fuck a Brayshaw? Go for the fucked-up one with tattoos you could never understand and a mind you could never live inside, a soul you could never reach. One and done.

You don't have to get to know him, you don't even have to like him, and the chump won't even care, he's that detached.

"Hey, Brielle." Captain's voice is loud, pulling me from my thoughts and forcing me into right now.

Brielle is right in front of us.

She waves at Captain, says hi to Raven and Victoria, and turns to me.

"Hey." She grins and my thigh muscles clench.

I tip my chin, bringing my water to my lips.

"Hi." Grace leans closer to me, and I wait for a sign from Brielle.

You want her away from me?

Brielle fucking smiles at her—no bitter, jealous mouth twist or calculated look in her eyes. Nothing but a damn smile, a *genuine* smile. "Grace, right? I think you're in my English class," she says.

My eyes cut to Maddoc's.

Grace is silent at first, and then she sits forward. "Oh my god, yes! You convinced the teacher to allow us to use our notebooks for the final essay!"

She laughs with a shrug. “I casually reminded him the scores of his less-than-interested class would reflect on him as a teacher and might not look so good during raise and review time.”

“Girl, you saved my ass from getting my credit card taken away.” Grace giggles. “Hey, you want to get a drink, I could use a refill?”

Brielle opens her mouth, but then closes it, glancing over her shoulder. I can’t see behind her, but when she looks back, unease lines her eyes and her fingers slip through her shiny, metallic-like hair, gliding through it nearer her temple as she likes to do when she’s thinking, unsure. Nervous.

Why you nervous, baby girl?

I don’t have to wonder long, a drink is held out in front of her only seconds later. A cup.

A cup, cup, as in an open top, drink already inside it, red Solo cup, cup. From the hands of someone who isn’t me.

Jonah’s face comes into view and I’m pretty sure I’ll rearrange it tonight.

When her smile lifts to meet his, I’m positive of it.

Fuck him.

Fuck her, too.

Her eyes come back to Grace. “It looks like I’ve got one, but we can go get one for you?”

Grace laughs, stands and doesn’t look back. Off they fucking go.

Raven waits for them to be out of earshot before she starts teasing. “Oh, man. How’s it feel, Ponyboy?”

I grunt, kicking back in my chair and downing my water bottle. “Pretty limp, if I’m honest.” I grin, turning to her. “Wanna check?”

She smirks, shaking her head and Maddoc flips me off. “You straight lost a piece of ass to the newest, nicest one in town.”

“You ain’t lyin’, RaeRae.” I push to my feet.

My family’s eyes pop up to mine.

“What are you doing, brother?” Maddoc watches me closely.

“Distracting myself. When it’s time, we deal and get the fuck out of here.”

“Yeah, and when we do, we takin’ Brielle with us?”

I grin as wide as I can.

“Nah, bro. She’s not with us. She stays.”

“And Jonah?” he pushes, knowing damn well what he’s doing.

Forcing me to face it, to feel it, the motherfucking gasoline as it seeps down my throat and waiting for the match to light me on fire. It’s coming.

I know it.

They sense it.

I hate it.

“If she’s yours.” He lowers his chin. “Let them know.”

I choke on a chuckle, rubbing at my chest and walk backward, away from them. “Yeah.” Another laugh, but this one hollow. “And who’s gonna tell her, huh?” *Laugh. Ache.*

Why’d I say that?

I shake it off and bring that fake little lip curve back, even though I know it fools none of them. “She ain’t mine, Madman. She’s nothing to me.”

“She’s behind you.” Raven’s eyes tighten, and I whip around.

Brielle stands there, an unopen beer bottle in her hand, fresh water bottle in the other.

With a tight-lipped smile, she waves the water out for me, a fog dimming the color of her eyes, like she told me ‘happens sometimes,’ but this is different.

This is hurt.

Did my words hurt, baby?

She blinks and it’s still there.

I don’t like it. I want to see them bright and wide. Alive.

Stimulated.

She thrusts the water toward me. “You finished off the one you had, thought you might want another.”

I might want you.

Fuck.

Virgin!

I take it from her, slide closer, and wrap my hand around the one holding the beer bottle. I bring it to my mouth and pop the lid off with my teeth.

The corner of her plump ass *taunting you to taste* crooked lips twitches as her chest inflates and it pisses me off.

I don’t know why, but it does.

“Thanks,” she says quietly.

“Get away from me.” My face hardens, and I slip past her, squeeze my eyes closed and when they open, it’s with a sharp snap. A wild fucking tic and I know I’ll be no good to my brothers, not for the safe laid plan.

So, fuck it.

End goal, yeah? That’s all we need?

The devil hears my pleas—the man of the hour slips through the door.

I spin to face my brothers and flick my eyes toward the entrance.

Party's here.

They look and I turn back around, stand tall and proud, putting on a fucking *playboy* smile, cause that's all I am, right?

I slap a hand on his shoulder. "What up, Enoch? How 'bout a shot?"

He grins and follows me into the kitchen.

Stupid fucker.

Brielle

IF THE PLAN MAC, MADDOC, AND CAPTAIN WENT OVER WITH me and Micah this afternoon is still the one they were going with, things are far off course.

Mac said he'd text us if things changed, but he hasn't.

All we were supposed to do was show up tonight, linger around, hear what might be said or catch looks of suspicion. Basically, we're to blend as lookouts while they did their Brayshaw thing and brought the hammer down.

None of what we were told matches what's happening now.

Tonight's plan didn't involve any inkling of alcohol. In fact, we were told to hold a drink in our hands, toss it after thirty minutes when no one was looking, and grab another. Consuming none, yet Royce stands at the kitchen counter, pouring shot after shot, *taking* shot after shot, Enoch, Jenson, and Mac at his side.

Royce's voice is growing louder, his shoulder slaps and 'playful' shoves, harder, stronger.

A heavy sigh is released beside me, and I look to find Raven.

“He’s picking a fight.”

“Yeah.” She squeezes her lips together. “He is.” Her eyes come to mine, a crazy gray in color, and focused. “It’s what he does when his head’s too heavy for him to hold up.”

I noticed.

This is my fault.

If I didn’t break down today over my brother’s car, we wouldn’t even be here right now. Everything would have been handled and I would have had a hand in helping.

I don’t know why I didn’t realize it before, but this is on me. I have to be the one to fix this.

Turning, I meet Raven’s eyes.

Raven’s scowls, trying to read the thoughts in mine. “If we move,” she says. “He’ll start beating on the guy, no hesitation, no chance of another outcome. You move...” Her lips pull to one side.

“My shadow moves with me.”

She nods. “He hasn’t taken a single shot since you’ve been standing here talking to me.”

Realization heats my stomach as if I’m the one shooting back eighty proof, grade A liquor. “Because he’s focused.”

She smirks. “Drunk again or not, he can rein it in when he needs to. He wants to know what we’re talking about, and he knows it revolves around him. He’s watching you. He will *keep* watching you, just like you’ll keep watching him.”

I glance his way and his eyes narrow on the bottle he pours from.

Yeah, he sees me.

No matter what, he’ll be watching.

Maybe this is what he wants.

Maddoc walks up then, his arms wrapping around Raven and pulling her against him.

“Can I borrow your keys?” I ask him.

“I didn’t drive.” He studies me.

“But you have a set of keys.” I hold his stare. “I heard them in your pocket when she pushed her ass into you.”

Raven chuckles. “They all keep keys on them, in case we need a quick escape.”

Maddoc slips his hands in his pocket and holds them out, but before I can snag them, he closes his fist. “Why you want ‘em?”

“I have an idea.”

“I haven’t seen your ideas yet. Might be a shit one.”

“It’s not.”

“I should believe you, why?”

I shrug, a smirk playing at my lips. “I guess you’ll have to trust me.”

He scoffs, and we both know we aren’t there. We also know it doesn’t matter because the Brayshaws can spin anything, so if I screw up, they’ll clean up.

I’m not going to screw up.

It’s simple, really.

I take the keys, slip them in my pocket, pull my phone out and dial Micah.

He answers on the first ring, “Hey.”

“Just talk back.”

“What?”

I walk into the kitchen with my phone to my ear. “Are you sure?”

“Uh, Brielle?” Micah drags out.

Jenson grins at me as I walk in, nodding his chin in hello so I wave, but quickly look away and pull open the fridge door. “Taylor Simms.”

Enoch’s head snaps toward me, but he hides it by sipping on his drink.

“She’s there right now?” I keep going with my fake conversation.

Royce has stopped moving, staring at his drink now.

“Hang on, let me go outside, it’s too loud in here.”

I close the fridge and spin around. “Yeah, I’ll tell you what she told me. One sec.”

I head out front, quickly unlock Captain’s SUV, and slip the keys in the ignition.

“Girl, what the hell are you doing?” Micah asks through the line, his tone uneasy.

I hop out and push the door almost all the way closed and move to stand near the rear driver’s side.

“Can you see me?” I whisper.

“Front left,” he tells me where to find him.

I look, spotting his outline at the edge of the back gate.

He nods and then the front door opens.

I spin when it does, knowing Enoch is following and who will follow next.

“Yeah, so Taylor said she’s going out with you next week. Is that true?” I casually shift on my feet, confirming Enoch is out here, pretending to be checking something on his phone.

I wait until he’s a little closer, and drop mine, pulling my heel up so it bounces off my knee.

“Crap!”

“Here!” Enoch jerks forward instantly, seeing nothing but opportunity as he quickly stuffs his back into his pocket.

He grins, already bending down. “Let me help.”

He means *let me pretend to help all so I can see whose name or number is on the screen when I pick it up.*

He gets down on his knees, his hands planted flat against the ground as he tucks his upper body beneath the car, stretching to reach my phone.

I dash forward, rip open the SUV door, and hop in the driver’s seat. I press the brake, and put the thing in neutral, the slight incline of the driveway sending it rolling backward, right over the left hand of Brayshaw High’s starting pitcher.

His scream is loud, panicked, and my heart leaps into my throat.

I put it into drive, ready to free him, but a hand comes down on my shoulder and I whip around.

Captain.

He pulls my fingers off the gear stick, shaking his head slowly.

I look toward the house to find Mac blocking the front door, Micah guarding the back gate, and in the rearview mirror, Maddoc.

That means...

I hop out, quickly spinning around.

Enoch’s body is curled over, his head down. His free hand has formed a tight fist, and he’s jammed it between his teeth in an effort to silence his own cries of pain.

Royce is crouched beside him, a crooked, criminal grin in place. He chuckles low and spiteful. “Well, fuckin’, well, Cameron. Would you look at that? And to think, we were only gonna snap three fingers, and my girl here got you for four, maybe even a couple of them bones a little lower, huh?”

Tears break from Enoch, his jaw shaking.

I drop my eyes to the ground at my feet, but then Captain's fingers are sliding under my chin, and pulling it up, forcing me to face the scene I'm responsible for.

"Come on, girl. You're a part of this," he whispers.

I nod and stand up taller.

I'm a part of this.

"Hell of an accident, yeah, Enoch?" Royce grips him by the hair, tugging his head back. "Random as the broken scoreboard, ain't it?"

Drool falls from his mouth, his teeth clenched tight to fight the pain.

Enoch nods.

"That's right, and your old man will be happy to donate to the school? Replace the items that *someone* made off with, yeah?"

Another nod.

Royce dips close, whispering something in Enoch's ear before shoving his head back down.

Royce pushes to his feet, his eyes finding mine when he plants himself in front of me. "That was reckless and could have easily flipped on you."

I nod. "I know, but I knew you'd get to me before it could."

He glares heavy, hard, and his hand comes up to rub across his mouth, but he says nothing.

He walks away.

Captain grips him by the arm on his escape, but Royce jerks free and disappears into the house.

Maddoc watches him go, dropping his eyes to me once he's out of view. "He's right, that wasn't foolproof."

"Is anything?"

“You were going to free his hand without making sure we were close enough to stop him should he come after you.”

“He did what he did in heartbreak. He had no reason to come after me.”

“He’s going pro, Brielle.” Maddoc frowns. “If he were to panic enough after getting his hand crushed, he just fucking might.” He looks to Raven and back to me.

“I didn’t think about that.”

“I know. Royce knows. That’s why he’s pissed. If you get hurt, it’s on him.”

“No—”

“Yes,” Captain cuts in.

Maddoc looks from Captain to me. “That was quick thinking, and a good move, but run through A to Z before you make decisions.” His eyes, they aren’t angry, but they are firm.

I nod and he motions for Micah.

“Get her in the back,” he tells him.

Micah’s hand finds my lower back and Maddoc slaps it away with a glare. “Get her in the back without fucking touching her.”

Reluctantly, I follow Micah into the back yard.

The lights of the SUV spear through the fence boards only seconds after we’re closed behind it.

We step into the yard, choosing to lean against an air conditioning unit rather than taking a seat on the main deck.

“Let me get you a drink?” Micah eyes me.

I nod, take a deep breath and look around.

This house, it belongs to the boys.

Since they don’t accept people into their home on the Brayshaw property, they did what rich boys do and bought another one, or so Micah told me. As far as I know, it’s

nothing more than a party pad, along with whatever else their hearts desire.

I'm sure it's where Royce... *plays*.

I turn, looking out at the darkness behind me, staring up at the North Star.

Micah walks up then.

"You ever spend your night staring up at the North Star and wonder how many it's helped find their way?"

Micah grins. "Nah, Brielle. Can't say I did, grew up in a fog-filled town with horse shit on the sidewalk and sack races on Sundays."

I chuckle and look to him.

He holds my drink out, and only when I lift my hand to wrap it around the bottle, do I realize they're shaking.

Micah and I lock eyes at the same time, and he gives a sad smile, stepping closer.

He takes the bottle, setting it beside us, and pulls my hands in and up to his mouth.

He blows warm breath into my palms, encasing them within his own and I close my eyes.

Next thing I know, my back is hitting the edge of the metal frame of the AC unit, and Micah is knocked on his ass with one strong, solid, *drunken*, punch.

From Royce.

The yard goes quiet as Micah lifts his hands and backs away.

Royce's angry glare sweeps my way.

And me?

I stop breathing and wait, because based on the crazed look in his eyes... this is it.

Royce

I CAN'T FEEL MY LEGS.

I can't feel my fuckin' legs, but I'm somehow growing closer.

My limbs hurt, my head's ready to explode, and my mind... it's all over the damn place.

I hate her, she don't listen.

I like her, she challenges me.

I can't stand the sight of her, she distracts me.

I can't function when she's out of sight, she's all I want to see.

I growl at myself and step into her space as heavy creases frame her face.

“What'd I say, Brielle?” I can't hear my own voice, my blood's pumping too loud. Too fiercely, but she must.

She shakes her head.

I slam a hand on the metal at her side, and she glares. “I said no one touches you. I *said* you touch *no one*. What the fuck part of that are you too airheaded to understand?”

Her teeth clamp shut, and she holds back, but only for a split second. “Screw you.”

“Nah.” I flick my eyes over her. “You're hymenly whole. That ain't gonna happen.”

Her chest inflates, maybe she gasped, I can't be sure.

My features harden, but hers... hers soften and I'm about to lose it.

Why won't she get angry? Fight me? Force me away?

Brielle shakes her head, a jagged break in her voice. “You don’t have to do all this.”

“All what?”

“Go full-on asshole mode. Hit your friend. Snap at me.”

My throat grows raw, but I push past it. “You act like you thought I was different.”

She pulls her lips in, tipping her head, and I think she steps closer.

Or maybe it’s me.

“Not different.” She reaches out, placing a hand on my chest, discovering the proof of my manic state. “More.”

She presses it there with a gentleness I’ve never known, but it hits like a hammer, stealing the air from my lungs and leaving me suffocating. Aching.

More.

More than anger and recklessness, more than impulse and fuckery.

No.

I’m not *more*.

“I’ve seen it,” she promises, her ability to read me fucking me up even more. “This is only a part of you,” she goes on. “And it’s not even a bad part, just more... dominant.”

I swallow, shove her hand off me and step back.

My glare is heavy, angry and directed at her. “You think you’ve seen some part of me others haven’t? That I opened up to you more than I do all the girls I’m preparing to fuck? ‘Cause if that’s the case, little Bishop, you’re as pathetic as I expected you to be.”

I’m fucking heated, burning, screaming on the inside and I don’t know why. I don’t know what it is or how to make it stop.

I need it to stop.

Brielle nods, and when she turns away, I catch the gloss now covering her eyes.

Hiding my favorite shade of turquoise, dulling the most perfect color I've ever seen, in the most perfect pair of eyes I've ever looked into. Stared into.

Found in my fuckin' dreams.

Cursed in my nightmares.

A tear slips from her eyes and Brielle dashes left, running for the side of the house, toward the gate that'll help her escape. Help her run from me.

In my nightmares, when I curse her, she never runs.

She stays and smiles and understands.

I'm broken.

She's breaking me.

My hands dive into my hair and pull.

"Fuck!"

I drive forward, rush after her, and catch her by the shirt.

I yank her back, pushing her against the house and a low cry falls from her lips, but she cuts it off. Swallows it whole and meets my eyes with her own.

"What do you want from me?" she whispers, desperate for an answer I can't give.

My grip tightens, stretching and tearing the fabric of her top angrily, keeping her here.

With me.

Don't go.

An unexpected, unfamiliar ache hits deep in my chest and my frown deepens.

What the hell was that?

My knuckles move on their own, sliding across her jawline and lock in place when her head tilts the tiniest bit.

This girl, after my bullshit tonight, today, every other fucking day, she doesn't pull away.

She leans into my touch, the edges of her eyes smoothing, her unease fading away into the darkness surrounding us.

I did that, comforted her with my touch.

Me, the throwaway Bray.

I soothed her.

Another unwelcome sting fires in my gut, and goddamn it! Why's it make me want to sting hers?

When she blinks, the moisture that was building in her eyes falls, and my knuckle flies up to catch it. I bring it to my mouth, rubbing her tears across my lips, tasting a tiny piece of her.

Big fucking mistake.

I crowd her, fully and completely, and the little sliver of a thread left, the one wrapped around my sanity, the one that's been thinning and splitting hair by fucking hair since the day she took over my mind... it snaps.

Splits in fucking two and all that's left is her.

Me.

And greed.

I slam my mouth to hers and she gasps, but not a second's hesitation comes from her.

She opens up for me.

My tongue drives inside, raring to explore every bit of her.

Desperate for more.

Starved for it.

I might fuckin' pass out, the need's too strong.

A need to get closer.

To kiss longer.

To taste more.

Have more.

Take fucking more.

Her chest swells then, right against mine, and it's too fucking much. Suffocating. Overwhelming.

What the fuck am I doing?

I tear away, put some distance between us and force the barest, blankest of expressions as I watch the wonder on hers die.

She understands me, so she knows what's coming and her hand lifts to her chest in preparation.

“What do I want from you?” I rasp, my eyes hard, hers tense and tangled, even more so when I slowly slip away. “Absolutely nothing.”

There it is.

The sting she can't hide.

It's only fair she feels it when I do.

Who is she to make me ache?

Nobody. That's who.

Chapter 23



BRIELLE

FRESHLY SHOWERED, MIND MUDDLED, AND EMOTIONALLY spent, I step from my bathroom.

I don't get a foot onto the carpet when a hand slaps over my mouth, shoving me back into the wall.

The sudden surge of panic has my vision blurring, but after a long, hard, blink, it returns. Panic has my heart rate climbing, but I quickly focus on the familiar face shoved in mine.

Royce stands in front of me, body pressed to mine, alcohol blanketing his breath and hazing his brown eyes. Eyes that grow darker the longer he stares.

His hand slides down the wall near my side, and then it's wrapping around my left thigh.

In one quick move, he dips and lifts me, pressing me into the wall with his hips.

I lock my legs around his back, my robe falling open slightly around my legs, and he groans, running his fingers along the soft skin there. He squeezes, growing against me, hardening, stabbing at my stomach and creating heat within it.

His arms come up, fingers gliding along my neck and throat.

“Baby girl,” he rasps, and his eyes slam into mine.

Anguish, absolute and complete, stares back.

I want to take it away, always.

Royce’s focus falls to my lips, a hostile glare written across him and knotting inside me.

His tongue slips out to wet his lips, and when I do the same, every muscle in his body locks.

He fights it, his want, and he fights it well.

But I don’t want him to, and he came here for a reason.

Because just as I felt tonight, his kiss of anger wasn’t enough.

We need more.

We need real.

I want him to kiss me again, to devour me.

I want him to break me.

It’ll be worth it.

So, I dare pull his chain from beneath his shirt, my fingers gliding along the expensive item.

He instantly slaps my hand away, but there’s a sense of wonder in his eyes almost imploring me to push him further. To take what I want.

Demand and receive he once told me.

So when his eyes fall to the silver around his neck and hold, I ever so slowly try again.

I slip my fingers behind it, allowing it to rest on my palm, and read the inscription etched into it, his family’s motto.

My palm closes around the crest, the strength of the words now locked inside my fist.

My grip is tight, and his chest expands.

I tug it toward me, tug him toward me.

Chest to chest, my legs wrapped tight around his hips, I press down, my ass meeting the head of his swollen cock. And my god... does he respond.

His breaths turn ragged, his hand shoving into my hair, and then the world stops turning.

The sun meets the moon.

And my soul, it wraps around his.

Royce takes my lips in a deep, devilish, *exhilarating* kiss.

There is no anger in it this time.

It's a pure, thrilling—terrifying—need to drown in one another.

It's intoxicating.

He is intoxicating.

Royce's mouth molds to mine, his tongue sweeping in greedy, hungry grazes.

He moans, and groans, and growls against my mouth, pressing his body into mine and when he slopes a little lower, his cock rubs right along my center.

I gasp, my eyes slamming closed, my head falling back, and he dips, sucking and biting on my neck.

An unfamiliar, exotic sound seeps past my lips and he tears back, looks me in the eye and then slams his lips into mine again.

His kiss is hard, rough, and so so good, but after a few moments, something shifts.

His hold loosens, his lips growing lax.

Royce kisses me slow, lazy, and long. And somehow, this kiss is *more* than the ones before.

It's honest.

It's an apology.

It's us.

It's him.

It's more.

When he pulls away, he rests his head in the crook of my neck, and my fingers come up to glide along his fade.

“My little Tink,” he rasps. “Help me fly...”

An unquenchable tingling stirs low in my stomach as he brings himself closer.

“Help me fly, ‘cause this lost boy is on his way down, baby girl...” He quiets, his hold tightening.

Those tingles, they turn into fireworks.

He's on his way down...

He's falling.

My pulse thuds wildly in my ears, anticipation of what this could mean and fear of what will likely follow sending a shudder through my heated body.

What would he say if he knew I hit the ground long ago?

He hums against my skin, his tongue flicking me there, and I feel him grin against me.

Slowly, he lets my legs drop, his hands coming up to cup my face and hold my eyes on his.

He stares a long moment, and then leans in, his lips pressing into the corner of mine. He doesn't let go or pull back, but a strangled, whispered, and maybe even unaware, “What are you doing to me” follows.

My breath lodges in my throat, and I don't respond. I don't think I'm meant to.

And then he's gone.

I go to bed having no clue what tomorrow will bring, but knowing one thing for sure.

Royce Brayshaw has the ability to feed my soul... or feast on it.

And me?

I must be as sick as my mother was... because I'm pretty sure I'd let him do both.

Chapter 24



BRIELLE

HOLY HICKEY!

I gape at the mirror, pushing my hair aside and lean closer.

It's big, like the size of a freaking baseball big!

How?!

He was only there for a few seconds, right?

But he has skills, Brielle.

I turn my head more.

Okay, maybe not the size of a baseball, but definitely a golf ball. It starts farther back on my neck and higher up, almost to my hairline, and comes down like a jacked-up J, right into that sweet spot he found.

My core heats at the thought of last night, at the taste of his lips, the strength behind them.

He was all in, giving me a taste of what he can do to me, and I gladly accepted, begged on the inside, not that I'd be opposed to begging on the out.

I'm starting to realize, though, Royce can only work off what his mind allows.

No one can dictate his next move for him, maybe not even him half the time. To try and force something on Royce messes with his mind and leads to frustration. Annoyance. And that's when the hardheaded, foul words follow.

He's kind of like a child in that way, unsure of what's coming at him, so he acts out, but not for attention.

It's the opposite really.

"Oh, you think you see me?" —fires a missile, straight to the jugular— "well how about now? Did you see that coming?"

It's the only way he knows how to keep out what he's afraid to let in.

Possibility.

Hope.

Love?

He's afraid to feel. Afraid to hurt once he does because he believes that's all that follows. So, he spends his time with gorgeous girls he has no desire to know, who have no wish to know him either, and he tells himself he's okay with it.

He's not.

I see it when he looks at his sister-in-law, at Victoria, and his brothers.

He craves what they have, but he doesn't believe he can have it, too.

This world, it can seem tame at times, but there is always more going on under the surface waiting to be weeded out. The boys' past is only one example of that.

Royce is no stranger to darkness, the pain it can bring, and the unscalable mountains that rise from ash.

Pain recognizes pain.

I run my fingers over the purplish-red marking he left behind for me to find this morning, knowing I'd replay how it

came to be.

It's dark and angry, like him.

The corner of my mouth lifts, and I glide my fingers from the hickey to my lips. I trace over them with the pad of my middle finger. I think they're still a little swollen. Raw.

I look into my eyes, at the turquoise within them, at the hint of red fogging up the edges, but I don't care.

The light will still shine through.

My hand comes up to my hair, subconsciously reaching for my scar, but I spot it in the mirror and force it back down.

I step back, smiling at the girl in the mirror, and unexpected moisture fills my eyes, because for the first time, the girl who smiles back?

I believe her.

I HELP WITH BREAKFAST AT THE HOME BUT SKIP OUT ON THE chores since Maybell continues to remind me it's not my job to help. I feel bad about it, but not bad enough to stay behind this time.

I walk to the main street of town, grab a donut from the donut shop Raven told me about, and spend some time checking out the shops.

As a kid, I don't remember ever coming to town. Our parents kept us on the outskirts, away from people, so it's all new to me.

The stores are smaller, independent-like places. There is nothing commercial or mainstream here, not even the grocery stores. They're all family named and owned, if I had to guess. Members of the Brayshaw community who understand the rules and want to be a part of it, following generations before them.

I walk across the park and into the market located beside it to grab what I came out for. Once I have it, I head back for the house.

“Brielle?” My name is called.

I turn, bending to allow myself to see through the open window, and the guy inside of it pulls his glasses off, pushing his hat up to show his blond hair. “August, hey. How’s it going?”

He nods with a grin. “Not bad. Let me give you a ride.”

I pause, my eyes dropping to a pile of treats in the passenger seat. “I’m okay, thanks, besides it looks like you have some serious gorging plans. I’d hate to keep you from all that chocolate.”

His eyes dart down, and a stiff laugh leaves him. “A gift for a friend.”

“Nice.” I smile.

“Get in, I can spare you one. Give you a ride wherever you’re headed.” He unlocks the door, waiting.

I shake my head. “I appreciate it, but I’m really enjoying the sun. And hey, nice car. No more bus for you, huh?”

“Turtleneck, huh?” His eyes fall to my top in a pointed look, but he grins a little.

I laugh, heat creeping up my neck, not that he can see it. “At least it’s sleeveless. I feel like I finally understand why such a shirt exists.”

He nods, the corners of his eyes tightening, but he smiles through it. “You might be on to something there.” He looks forward, drumming on the steering wheel a few times before he turns back to me. “You sure you don’t want a ride?”

I nod.

“Okay.” He drops his eyes to the bag in my hand. “Well, I should go. Can’t hold up traffic.”

I laugh. There isn't a single car behind him. "You do that."

He lifts two fingers. "See you around, Bishop."

I nod. "Yeah, see you around."

With that, I head back for the house.

I stuff the two sandwiches in the freezer, wrap up the box with a grin, and make my way to the Brayshaw mansion.

I'm not exactly nervous to see him after last night, but I am a little unsure, and pretty dang good at an icebreaker.

So, with that thought in mind, I slip from the trees, around the backs of the SUVs and set the shiny *silver* wrapped item on the porch bench, quickly slinking away.

My plan is to go find Valine and convince her to watch a movie with me, but as I step off the last stair, both feet now on the ground, the door swings open behind me. *Several* voices fill the air... and simultaneously cut off.

My back burns knowing they're staring, and not knowing if they're angry I'm so close to their home.

I consider pretending I don't hear them, but as quick as the door opens, a soft, sweet voice shouts for them to 'hurry up', and then the sound of light footsteps are padding against the wood.

"Zoey, wait!" Victoria shouts, but it's too late.

Zoey's little shadow falls over my feet.

I turn around, and there she is, teetering on the edge of the last step, maybe three away from me, Victoria now at her side, her arms half thrown in front of her, shielding her while holding her back.

My ribs grow tight, the charge in the air a powerful one, even with a good hundred feet between her and me.

The hairs on my arms rise slightly, and I can't fight the slight lift of my lips.

Victoria is a mother, the little one at her side her entire world.

Loved and protected, as every child should be.

I'd bet she isn't fearful of what I may do, fully believing in Royce and the choices he makes, but as I said... she's a mother, and her little one trumps all.

I allow my eyes to move back to Zoey, and my smile grows freely.

"Hi." She watches me curiously.

"Hi."

"Uncle Bro said his friend is coming today. Are you his friend?" She whips around, running back before I can answer.

My eyes follow her, straight to Royce.

He bends, ready for her when she throws herself into his arms.

"Uncle Bro, is that your friend?" Zoey smiles, laying her head on Royce's shoulder. "I like her hair."

She's so cute, her pronunciation still not quite clear.

He kisses her head, his eyes hot—the good kind—and on me. "Yeah, Zoey Bear. That's my friend, and she's in *trooouble*."

A sharp zing runs down my back, heat rising to my cheeks

Zoey's head pops up and she gasps. "What'd you do?" The cutest, tiniest little scowl takes over her face.

I laugh, noticing the others do too, even if they try to hide it.

"Look at that mean mug, Zo." Captain grins, shifting to take her from his brother. He kisses her temple, bouncing her lightly. "You be nice."

Her face falls and she kicks to be let down.

Captain hesitates, looking to Royce. They have a silent conversation that leads to Captain, very, very slowly, lowering his daughter back to the ground.

She runs right up to me, Victoria making her way down the steps behind her.

I bend, bringing myself closer and she drops her chin to her chest, her pretty blue-green eyes lifting and sad.

“Daddy said I was mean,” she whispers or tries to. It’s loud enough for everyone around to hear. “Did I hurt your heart?”

At her words, my heart does sort of feel hurt, but it’s more of an honest kind of ache.

How sweet is she?

I shake my head. “No, sweet girl, you didn’t hurt my heart, but it’s very nice of you to ask.”

She smiles, looks to her dad who has the gentlest of expressions pointed right at her. He gives a proud little nod, and her eyes light up as she turns back to me. “My name is Zoey... but I’m not supposed to tell people my last name.”

Captain sighs, Royce chuckles, and I pull in my lips to hide my smile.

“Guess what, Zoey?” I pretend to whisper. “My name is Brielle, and I don’t tell people my last name either.”

She grins, her hand lifting to cover her lips as if we now share the world’s largest secret.

I laugh and glance behind her.

All eyes on me.

Shit.

“Well, Zoey.” I look back to her. “It was nice to meet you, but I should get back before Miss Maybell comes searching.”

“But the zoo.” Her smile falls and she turns away from me. “Rora, the zoo.”

A small frown forms when it's Victoria who steps forward at 'Rora'.

Victoria picks her up, and they drop their foreheads to each other's at the same exact time. "We're going, ZoZo." Her eyes flick my way. "Uncle Bro forgot to tell his *friend*, that's all. Let's get buckled up, okay?"

Zoey smiles and the two head for Captain's SUV.

I look to the others and it's Maddoc who discovers and lifts the wrapped item into the air with a dark brow raised.

Embarrassing.

"It's... just some fun."

Royce looks from me to it with a curious grin, snags it from his brother and shakes it. "What is it?"

Embarrassing, that's what!

"Open it." Or you know, *don't*.

He opens it, and my stupid heart beats harder when a slow smile spreads along his lips.

He laughs, but his eyes fall fast, and I know he's thinking about his hot and cold antics the last few days. I don't blame him for it. I know it's simply him, but still. It's funny and proves my point wasn't all crazy talk.

He shakes the empty pizza pocket box in the air, tosses it behind him, and takes the stairs two at a time.

He places himself right in front of me. "Little Bishop."

"Playboy."

"I'm a fucking pizza pocket."

I laugh, and his eyes roam my face. "But when you're hot..." I tease.

His tongue touches the lifted corner of his lips and shifts closer. "Hop in my ride, we're going to the zoo."

"Not going to ask me if I have plans or even want to go?"

His frown is instant, and I laugh.

“I’m kidding.”

“Wouldn’t matter if you weren’t.” He glares at my shirt.
“You’re mine today.”

With a hint of haughtiness, he smirks and steps around me.

All I can think is... how about tomorrow?

WE MAKE IT THROUGH THE EXOTIC BIRDS, MONKEYS, AND THE butterfly room when Zoey decides she’s ready to play at the playground, so we head for the center of the place, where a large open playzone is. The entire park is animal themed. The slide is the giraffe bent to eat, the spinning saucer in the center a turtle’s shell, and monkey bars that are, well, not monkeys, but designed to look like bamboo and straw and have little stone monkeys at the edges. Zoey, though, she went down each slide exactly one time, and has been sitting in front of the garden, watching the groundskeepers as they plant a brand-new row not far from where she is, Victoria at her back, running her fingers through her hair. Neither of them have yet to look away.

“Cutest fuckin’ thing you’ve ever seen, yeah?” Royce looks to me.

I grin, nodding. “She calls you Uncle Bro?”

His smile grows wide at that, a softness in his eyes that’s new to me.

It’s calm and gentle. I’d like to see it more often.

“Maddoc’s Uncle D, I’m Uncle Bro, RaeRae is... well, RaeRae.” He chuckles. “She picked up on my nickname for Raven and it stuck.”

I grin, look to Victoria and Zoey again and chance asking, “And her mom, she calls her Rora?”

The gentleness is gone in a flash, and his eyes snap to mine. They're guarded and unsure, but then he blinks, his features smooth and he makes a decision.

Whatever it was though, he isn't forced to share it. Captain comes out of nowhere and does first.

"Victoria isn't her birth mother," he shares as he watches them, a tenderness in his tone that can't be described it's so raw. So real.

Royce clamps a hand on his shoulder and walks away, but I keep my focus on Captain.

Not her birth mother?

"Her mom is gone, not dead, but she might as well be. She never wanted Zoey, and maybe one day I think she'll regret her choices. It will be too late when or if she does." His eyes flick to mine and back.

"Zoey is too much like us, loyal to a fault. Honest. She doesn't realize it yet because she's not around anyone to hear the word mom, we have no mothers, but she'll see it soon, with Raven, and then who knows what will follow. But it's just a word." He shakes his head fiercely. "That girl right there." He speaks of Victoria. "She's the reason Zoey was born."

I expect him to stop there, but Captain opens himself up a little more.

"It doesn't matter what she calls her, what that little girl feels is the love of a mother. Victoria *is* her mother, in every way that counts, and more." Captain looks my way.

The corner of my mouth lifts, and my nostrils flare so I don't tear up in front of him. "She's very lucky."

"I'm lucky," he replies instantly. "We're lucky. She's just a child, getting what every child should. There should be no luck in that." The despondency in his tone is easily deciphered.

"And yet places like Brayshaw, and the Brayshaw group home exists. Because even though no child should be raised in

hate or anger or pain... we are.” I don’t realize I was whispering until the last word leaves and I force a laugh.

I stand, but Captain doesn’t let me pass. I look up and he gives a small smile.

“You’ve been through some shit, more than I know, but you’re not hardened or bitter.” He shakes his head, true, honest perplexity clear in his tone. “How?”

“If you’re worried your little girl will grow and—”

“I’m not,” he cuts me off. “I know she’ll be okay, better than. I want to know about you. How are you... you? Caring and gentle. Good.”

My lips pinch into a tight smile as my shoulders lift and hold. “I had a brother who loved me, who I loved back. He told me our life was not what life was about, that we’d have more. I don’t think he believed it, but *I* believed *him*, and when things were dark, his words gave me light,” I share.

“That’s not all,” he guesses.

I hesitate at first, and then decide I want to share. He cares enough to ask, so that’s something.

“It would have been easy to fall into the ugly surrounding us, and sometimes it took *a lot* of self-convincing to remember my brother’s promises, but living with what we did, it made the world around me so much clearer. It only took one glance or one nervous conversation of no importance with kids at school or wherever, to know they lived with darkness, too.” I look off. “Their eyes were a little dead, and I realized they didn’t have a brother like mine, someone to give them hope... a North Star to believe in, to... seek out for guidance when they felt lost.”

“So you gave them one.” Understanding, maybe a bit of realization, brings creases to his forehead. “You were strong for strangers. You helped them see there’s more. You were the hope to lost souls.”

An unexpected stir builds beneath my ribs, and I meet Captain's gaze again.

"I tried." My lips pull into a one-sided smile. "It was only words, a smile or someone to sit with at lunch, play with at recess."

"And the idea of more, the possibility of hope not lost. You gave them something they could reach for in the dark if all they had was themselves and the sky above them. That's a fucking lot, Brielle."

"It wasn't really," I say quietly. "But it was all I had to offer."

Captain nods, his expression tight, a richer sentiment flashing across him, one I have no idea how to read it's so profound. "I know you could be happy here. Do you?"

"That's all I wanted."

Concern draws his brows together, and he inches closer. "Wanted?"

I open my mouth, but close it.

Why did I say wanted?

Do I not want that?

Do I want more?

Captain's face grows serious. "I can see what's happening, Brielle. We all can."

Tension buds low in my stomach, seeking a place on the surface as the flowers in the garden before us.

"As far as what?"

His eyes cut across the place where Maddoc and Royce are waiting in a long line at a snack shack.

"He's not easy to handle." Captain's tone is firm, but worry weighs heavy in his words. "He's the toughest person I know. The bravest, boldest, but he's... not easy to handle. He fucks up when he feels."

I shift in the seat, my eyes sliding to Raven who sits only a space away, focused on us.

I look back to Captain. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because there’ll be a time when you need to remember it.”

Is that not what I’ve been doing?

Not that he’s aware.

Or maybe he is.

No secrets among them, right?

“You sound so sure, Captain.”

“That’s because I am.” His response is instant. “I need you to understand that what feels like the end, is always the beginning. It’s where he has to be pushed back, or he’ll get lost.”

He stares.

Maybell said the same thing, but hearing it from Captain, the words somehow hit harder.

When I finally force a nod, he nods back and walks away.

My head falls to the iron backing of the bench and I look up at the sky, trailing over the small line of clouds and focus on the shades around them, but even breathing in color isn’t working right now, as it always does.

Raven must sense it because she scoots into the space beside me.

“You know Captain’s right. Royce is tough. Too tough. The rest, it gets buried.” She shifts toward me. “When I first got here, I fucked-up their world, turned it upside down, all while having no idea I was doing it.”

I smile at her stomach and her hands come down to cover where my eyes touched. “I have a feeling they would describe your arrival a lot different.”

“That’s because they’re not normal.” She laughs, but quickly refocuses. “I won’t get into details, he can tell you all about it another time, but basically everything went to shit and quick. Victoria wasn’t with us yet. Me and Cap were held up in a hotel trying to find a way out of the mess we were in, but there was no answer we could come up with, so it went on and on. Maddoc... he left.” Her eyes hit mine. “Don’t think less of him, the situation was fucked and you have no idea what he had to sit back and try to accept. He didn’t want to leave... he had to.”

I hardly hear what she’s saying, I’m too focused on what’s behind her words.

Raven and Captain, they were held up.

Victoria wasn’t in the picture, and Maddoc, he was gone...

Royce was alone, or that’s how he felt.

“Exactly.”

Our eyes meet, and a solemnness covers hers.

“This is when my brother was helping you?”

She nods.

Jesus.

He really felt... left behind, every bit the lost boy.

“These boys, they’re so much the same, but Royce...” She trails off.

“You love him.”

She nods. “I love all three, but I love them differently. My relationship with each one is spades away from the other, but at the end of the day I would die for them the same. And then they’d hate me for it.”

There’s that line again, but I believe it coming from her.

She looks to where Maddoc and Royce are now waiting for their order. “Royce, I’m not shitting you, is delicate, but he never lets anyone get close enough to know it. It’s masked

under his anger and playfulness. He wants to love, but he's not capable of loving lightly. It's not in his nature. He's explosive, and he knows it, but you know that, too."

I take a deep breath and she turns to me.

"He will love fiercer than anyone ever could, deeper than most would think possible, but chances are, he'll tear you apart in the process. Can you handle that?"

I swallow, shaking my head. "I'm so far from enough for him, and I don't say that in self-pity. I say it because I understand the reality around me. I'm not afraid to say I want him, but I know I'm not a girl he would ever love. Not the kind of love he's after."

The all-consuming love he angrily shared he wants. The queen who fits his black fairy tale.

Raven drops her eyes to the grass, a slight smile on her lips as she scoots herself to the edge of the bench with a wince. She pushes to her feet, her gorgeous, light eyes meeting mine. "That right there, is exactly why he will."

With her hands cupping her underside of her belly, she walks away.

With each step farther she grows, my breathing speeds up, the possibility of what she's saying blooming in my chest, but it's an acidic sting, not a ruffle of butterflies.

To love Royce Brayshaw would be so easy, and dare I say I'm almost there, but to be loved *by* Royce Brayshaw... that's an entirely different story.

It's not long later we're packing up and heading for the parking lot.

Captain and Victoria step ahead, helping Zoey inside, and Royce chooses that moment to throw his arm around my shoulder.

I look up, finding his eyes already on me, and he halts us both in place.

My lips tingle in memory, and his tongue pokes out to wet his own.

“Member when I said you were in trouble?” he rumbles.

I nod.

“Good, ‘cause that shirt? Hiding *my* mark on your skin?” He raises a brow, bringing his lips to my ear. “I’m gonna tear it to shreds... while it’s still on your body.”

My core heats, my lips parting.

“And I’m gonna use my teeth to do it.” He slips closer. “Just wait. I’m—”

“Oh fuck... guys?” Raven’s voice cuts through the air.

Royce tears away.

Captain steps out of the front seat while Victoria rounds the side.

Maddoc pushes her hair over, gripping her chin and bringing her eyes to his.

“We’re not making the reservation,” she hisses.

His other hand comes up to her face, holding her still. “What is it, baby?”

Her face scrunches and she nods. “That’s exactly what it is.”

Maddoc frowns, and all at once, their eyes fall to the ground.

A small puddle of liquid pools around her shoes.

The boys freeze, each one of them.

Stuck like stone. Unblinking. Unmoving. Doubtfully breathing.

I look to Victoria.

She frowns from one to the next, and a sigh leaves her. She glances my way. “You drive?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” She closes Zoey’s door. “Cause this shit’s about to get interesting in three, two...”

All at once, the boys come out of their state of shock, each shouting the same exact thing at the same exact moment.

“Holy shit! The fuckin’ baby!”

And then Maddoc passes out.

Chapter 25



ROYCE

BABY.

The baby's coming.

Holy shit.

“Royce!”

My head snaps left to find Victoria throwing her hands up at me, Raven glaring down at Maddoc on the ground, and Cap frozen with his hand on the door handle.

“Captain isn't moving,” she says.

Fuckin' swear she's speaking in slow motion. And when did it get foggy? “I need you to grab Maddoc—”

She cuts off when suddenly Brielle's pouring a bottle of water over his head.

He flies up like a demon possessed, eyes wild and crazed, hands fisted. He towers over her.

“Well, that worked.” Victoria smiles.

Brielle fights a laugh and points behind him.

He whips around and Raven lifts a brow, reaching for him.

He rushes to her, his knuckles finding her chin. “Snow?”

“You ready for this, Big Man?” she rasps, and fuck me, my brother’s grin.

I’ve never seen a thing like it.

I look to Brielle who saw it too, and her eyes fall to the ground right before finding me.

She winks, and as if the pull of her lips is connected to a string bound around my organs, everything inside me grows tighter, the corners of her mouth lifting so damn high. For my family. Sharing in our moment.

I’m snapped out of my Tink trance when Raven’s heavy huffed breath fills the air.

Raven scoffs a small laugh, her hands falling to her stomach, the corners of her eyes a little tense. She knows each of us are ready to bombard her with questions and beats us to the punch. “I’m fine. It’s fine. Breathe.”

I think that last one was for Maddoc, but my ass needed the reminder.

“We need to go.” Victoria walks over, slips her hand in my pocket and tugs out my keys. She tosses them to Brielle. “Raven’s with you. I don’t want to scare Zoey.”

“Why would Zoey be scared?” Maddoc steps toward Victoria, but quickly jerks back to Raven, so I crowd her instead.

“Why would she be scared, what do you mean?”

Victoria gapes at the both of us. “You guys, she’s gonna hurt. She might even scream. Get ready for it.”

My brother’s face pales and he shakes his head. “No.”

Brielle and Victoria laugh. “Yes. Now get her in the car, we need to get to the hospital.”

“I can’t feel my legs.”

“I can’t feel my fuckin’ body,” Maddoc rasps.

“K, well, I can feel a whole lot of funky shit happening in mine, so maybe can we do this on the way?” Raven rushes out, a low hum following.

“Baby.” Maddoc reaches out to touch but her hands shoot up.

“The car.” She nods. “Now.”

He grabs his girl’s hand and I slip behind them to supervise.

Before she can step inside, she hunches over with a fought groan.

Maddoc’s eyes hit mine. They’re strained with worry, fear, and all the other shit my brother never shows.

I grip his shoulder and then Cap is beside us.

We stand there, surrounding her, and finally she stands again.

Raven spins around, meeting each of our eyes, and fuck me, tears fill hers. She starts to laugh, shaking her head. “Don’t do this shit to me, my hormones are fucked.” She smiles. “Just... get in, yeah?”

Maddoc slips in first, reaching for her.

She puts a hand in his, and Cap holds out his arms, helping her up and into the car.

He climbs in beside her, and I only remember to move when a soft, gentle hand slips into mine.

I look from the warm, calming connection to the girl responsible for it, and when she tugs, I follow. She must have opened the door, because next thing I know, I’m in the front seat, staring at Brielle behind the wheel of my ride and liking the look of it.

We’re on the road in seconds.

Minutes into the drive, Raven’s breaths grow deeper, small huffs, and low groans following. Her head keeps falling back

on the seat, only for her to lean forward in the next. It's the longest, most stressful ride I can remember taking.

"Your dad's already here," Brielle mentions as we're pulling into the parking lot. "Victoria must have called him."

She drives right up front, stopping where our dad's standing with wide and worried eyes. He rushes over and rips open the door.

He gives Brielle a double take when he spots her behind the wheel, but quickly focuses on the rest of us. "Raven. You doin' okay?"

Raven nods and he lets out a harsh breath.

"Zoey?" He looks to Captain.

"Papa!" Zo calls right then.

He turns to see her running up, Victoria behind her.

From there, everything happens quickly.

We rush into the private elevator. I grin when Maddoc starts banging on the doors, trying to hurry them up and get us to the Brayshaw wing, and laugh when he runs into a lab cart, knocking the thing out of the way in his rush to get Raven to the nurses' station.

The chicks ask us to stay outside while they get her settled. This time it's Raven who laughs and then glares at the lady who sticks a couple needles in her arm.

We didn't go out.

Now here we are, pacing a large room while Raven sits tied to a bed, staring at the wall across from her. She's not really tied, but there're wires and tubes and shit placed in places I can't see so... tied.

"Under different circumstances, her being strapped to a bed might be kinda fun, eh Madman?"

Maddoc's head snaps my way, and it takes a second, but his shoulders fall, an airy laugh leaving him. It follows around

the room, and the stiffness we fell into begins to soften.

“Fuck, man. I might need a nurse.” Maddoc grins from me to Cap. “I think I had a heart attack.”

“I think I need some oxygen, feels like my lungs collapsed.”

They laugh.

Captain walks closer to Raven, placing a hand on her belly.

She looks up at him with a smile. “You okay, Cap?”

He nods, staring at her stomach.

“You don’t have to stay inside if it’s too much,” she tells him what he already knows, and likely knowing his response before it even comes.

He shakes his head, not once moving his focus from her belly. “I didn’t get to be a part of all this with Zo, I’m not missing any of this.” His mouth twitches and he looks to Maddoc. “Baby’s moving.”

Maddoc’s hands fall to the other side.

Victoria grips my shoulder and squeezes and I knock my knee into hers.

Cap looks to Victoria and back to Raven. “Can we let Zoey in for a minute? I think she’s worried something’s wrong, maybe let her see you’re okay?”

“Don’t ask, Captain.” Raven tips her head. “She wants in, you bring her in.” My dad must have been hovering at the door, waiting for the words to come, because seconds later, Zoey pokes her little head through.

She pushes the blonde curls from her face and walks toward Maddoc who stands hovering over Raven, legit hovering.

“Come here, Zo.” He lifts her up, setting her right beside Raven on the bed.

She looks to Raven, placing her hand on her belly and her pretty little eyes tighten.

“Does it feel different?” Raven asks her.

Zoey nods, following with the same question she’s asked since the very first day she understood there was a baby inside Raven’s stomach. “Is baby sleeping, RaeRae?”

Raven’s lips pinch tight and she shrugs. “I don’t know, Zo.” Her voice is strained, fighting to hide the pain from her niece and us. “Do you think baby’s sleeping?”

Zoey shakes her head. “Um, Rora said baby’s ready to come see us today.”

“I think Rora’s right.” Raven’s nose begins to turn red, and she looks to Maddoc.

He stares down at her, his features pulled tight as he drops his forehead to hers, his hand coming up to hold her steady.

Holy shit.

The others will finally learn what I’ve known for weeks.

The sex of the baby.

I’ve held the secret strong, but today it comes out and I can’t wait to see my brother’s face when his little one is born.

This is the last time it will ever be just the two of them.

Raven and Maddoc.

What a fucking feeling that must be. A legit part of him is coming to change our world once again.

Raven’s hand shoots up to grip Maddoc’s wrist, and all at once, we stand.

“Hey, Zoey Bear,” I call and move closer. “Want to go tell Papa, RaeRae and Uncle D are okay?”

“Yes!” she shouts and hops down.

I grab her hand and together, all of us step into the waiting area to give the soon-to-be parents their last minutes as a duo.

Brielle sits beside Maybell in the waiting room, my dad just across from them. They push to their feet.

“She okay?” my dad asks. “Maddoc?”

“Yeah.” I nod, smiling through a sigh. “It’s wild, but they’re good.”

He nods through his nerves and spins to his chair, handing me the gift box he grabbed from my closet.

“You look at it?”

“Nope.”

I narrow my eyes.

He laughs and turns to Zoey. “Want to go with Papa to find something to drink?”

“And candy for Uncle Bro?” She lights up.

He laughs, grabs her hand and off they go.

Maybell, Captain, and Victoria follow them down the short hall to the small snack station.

Brielle grabs her bag off the seat and hands me my keys. “Thanks for today. I had fun. Your family’s amazing, and Zoey, she’s too cute.”

“Wait.” Victoria comes out of nowhere. “You’re leaving?”

Brielle’s lips tip up slightly and she nods. “I think I should, yeah.”

“You should stay. I could use your help.”

She steps closer, a low laugh leaving her.

“Who knows what will happen here when Raven gets farther into this and the unkillable pain kicks in. I’ll need all hands on deck. Zoey likes you. Royce trusts you.” She nods. “Stay.”

Royce trusts you.

Brielle’s eyes meet mine but quickly return to Victoria.

“I need to be in there as long as Raven will let me, but Zoey could use someone to play with out here, that way if Rolland wants to pop in sometimes while we wait, he can? And Maybell, she might have to run and check on the girls at the house and back. Something.”

My dad slips in then, sticking a hand out to Brielle. “Brielle Bishop, it’s very nice to meet you after all these years.”

“You as well, sir.” She shakes his hand, but quickly turns to me, unsure. She comes closer. “Should I go or...”

“She asked you to help.” My eyes move between hers, a heavy sense of expectation stirring in my chest. “You tell me, you want to help? Play with my niece? Make today easier for me?”

For me?

“For us.”

Her lips twitch, a knowing look in those metallic eyes. “I mean, you might need someone to bring one of you back to life again the next time someone passes out.” She teases with a shrug.

Victoria and I laugh, but my dad raises a dark brow.

“We should go back in.” Captain grabs Victoria’s hand, his other landing on my shoulder. “Brielle, give her whatever she wants to keep her happy. If she tries to force candy on you, you don’t have to eat it.”

Victoria laughs, but little does he know, my girl loves her some sweets.

Brielle smiles, her eyes popping up to mine, cheeks growing a perfect shade of unexpected pink when I step so close, her chest rests on my shirt.

I push her hair over her shoulder and she inhales.

“You’ll be here when I come out.”

“That didn’t sound like a question,” she says quietly.

“Yeah. I know.” I trace her features, meeting her eyes. “Be here when I come out.”

Her laugh is low and airy, Victoria’s the same at my back, and then I’m steered away.

WE REJOIN THE OTHERS IN THE HOSPITAL ROOM, WAITING FOR the newest Brayshaw to meet the world.

IT’S NEAR ONE IN THE MORNING WHEN THE DOCTORS DELIVER nightmare news.

The baby’s heart rate is dropping, and Raven needs an emergency C-section, one that Maddoc can’t be in for because there was no time to prep.

To say I was surprised when he didn’t scream and yell and get his way is an understatement, but he let her go like a man, forced to trust the doctors to do right by his entire fucking world.

The nurse realized we planned to stand right outside the doors she was wheeled through the entire time, so it didn’t take long for her to have three chairs moved in front of it.

So here we sit, together, silently screaming as fear begins to tug at our hearts and minds.

Maddoc’s knees bounce, but the rest of him is unmoving, his chin tucked to his chest, eyes frozen open and unblinking.

Captain hasn’t moved, not his hands or his feet, not his frown, which is locked on the double doors not three feet from us.

And me?

I’m wiggling out, but already pulled at every bit of patience I have, which ain’t much, and have been holding back the urge to joke it off or run from it, to punch shit or pick a fight, to

take a dozen shots to numb my emotions, like I do when they peak too high for me to handle.

I simply sit here beside my brothers and wait for our family to grow bigger.

Twenty-five torturous minutes go by, and finally, the nurse pokes her head out.

“Mr. Brayshaw.”

Maddoc darts up and we’re right there with him.

She smiles brightly. “Everything went beautifully,” she says, and our hands dart out to steady our brother when his knees give.

“It did?” he asks, standing on his own now and taking slow, subconscious steps toward his missing pieces.

She nods. “We’re sewing her up now.”

“Sewing?” he rasps.

The nurse pins him with a gentle stare. “She didn’t feel a thing, honey, I promise. She’s beginning to wake now, but the baby is ready for you, if you’re ready.”

Maddoc’s hands shoot out, gripping on to the sleeves of our hoodies. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She laughs through a smile.

“What about Raven? Has she held the baby yet?” he asks.

“Not yet, but as I said, she’s waking now. Would you like to come in, see your little one together for the first time?”

A choppy breath leaves him and when I look over, his jaw is tight, eyes misted. He gives a jerky nod and releases us. He looks from me to Cap.

“Go, brother,” Cap whispers. “We’ll be right here waiting.”

Maddoc disappears behind the double doors, and not fifteen minutes later, they open again.

A bed is pushed through, Raven sitting up inside of it, a little cocoon-like blanket gently tucked tight in her arms, a pillow beneath it, Maddoc at her side.

Something comes over me, settles into me.

Never in my life have I seen that look on my brother's face and I can't even explain it.

It's as if for the first time, he's whole. Complete.

What a feeling that must be.

Victoria runs around the corner then, her hands flying up to her mouth, and Raven lets out a choked laugh.

Raven's eyes find mine, and I step closer.

Closer to her, my brother, and their baby.

Zoey's little footsteps sound behind me and I can't not spin toward her, everyone else doing the same.

Nobody wants to miss her little when she meets her cousin for the first time.

We stare and she slows her steps, walking up with her hands over her mouth, her little dog ear slippers flapping all around, my dad and Victoria behind her, Maybell behind them.

I pull the small gift from the box, kneeling in front of Zoey.

She reluctantly pulls her eyes from Raven's arms and meets mine.

I place a pink stuffed wolf in Zoey's hands with a wink.

She smiles, nods and looks to her daddy.

Captain bends, lifts her, and holds her right beside Raven.

Zoey looks to Raven. "Baby's not sleeping, RaeRae."

"No, ZoZo." Raven swallows. "Baby is wide awake."

Raven's eyes come to mine. "So, tell us, Uncle Bro. Was the sonogram right?"

I step closer, staring down at the perfect little baby in her arms, and choke back the emotion threatening to escape.

I pull a second stuffed wolf from the box and lay it against her arm.

She inhales a choppy breath and I lean down, kissing her temple.

I breathe through a smile.

“Yeah, it was right,” I whisper, holding her eyes. “You did good, RaeRae. He’s perfect.”

Zoey leans over, officially making each and every one of us lose our damn cool when she whispers to her baby cousin for the very first time, “I love you, best friend. So, so much.”

Chapter 26



ROYCE

NOBODY WANTED TO LEAVE THE HOSPITAL AND WE PRETTY much flat-out refused until Maybell worked her voodoo on us. In the end, we agreed to head home for the rest of the night and let them know we'd be back the second our eyes opened.

She had a point, they need their time, Cap needed to get his baby girl into a real bed and not the little cot they brought out for her, even if she was excited to lay in it. He and his girls walked out just before me.

They'll go home, tuck their daughter into bed and then climb into one together.

Maddoc will stay with his wife and newborn son, as he should.

And me?

“Royce?”

I don't realize I've slowed the car until Brielle calls my name from the passenger seat.

A car horn honks behind us, and it pisses me off.

I hit the gas, only to hit the brakes harder, and the horn honks again.

Brielle jolts forward with a small squeal, frowning as my slow grin spreads. “Royce?”

I reach into the back, grab a bat and push my door open.

Brielle leaps across the center console, grabbing me by the arm. “What are you doing?”

“He’s being a dick.”

“Because you slammed on the brakes, and how do you know it’s a he?”

“Don’t, but I’m about to find out.”

“That’s what you want to do right now, fight? Hurt people?” she snaps. “You just spent an amazing day with your family, waited all night like a kid with a golden Wonka ticket, dying with excitement to meet your nephew, and *this* is how you want to end the night?”

“And you care why? You’re going home to an empty-ass room like always. I go home and what... fuckin’ sit there?”

“It’s three in the morning, Royce,” she whispers. “You go home, climb into bed, and fall asleep.”

I scoff a laugh, shaking my head, but nothing’s fucking funny.

Nothing *is* funny.

I’m alone.

Strictly solo.

The leftover Brayshaw.

I drop her off and it officially begins, the *just me*.

The silent nights that scream loud in my mind.

Dread spreads through my veins, heating and weighing my body down.

“I wanna get fucked-up.”

“Newsflash, Playboy, you are.”

My head snaps her way, eyes angry... until I see hers.

Hers are smiling. Perceptive. "It's true, you bought a pink *and* blue wolf so no one would know for sure what the baby was when they peeked. And guess what. They *all* peeked. They told me," she teases. "So fucked-up,"

My frown begins to fade, and before I can stop it, a low laugh leaves me.

I close my door and drop my head against the headrest. "You just said fuck."

Brielle grins, and I let her take the bat. "Drive, playboy, before they get out and knock on your window and I have to find another way to reel you in."

"Maybe I should stay right where I am then."

She laughs and I put the car in drive, headed for the group home.

Brielle

WE ROLL TO A STOP, AND ROYCE SIGHS, STARING AT ME.

I don't say anything, but wait for him to instead, and it doesn't take long.

"You trip me out," he shares.

A small grin twitches at my lips. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." His voice is heavy, full of rasp. "You make me laugh when I wanna tear shit apart."

You make me feel things I'm not sure I should.

Royce's knuckle lifts, lazily trailing along my jaw. "What kind of things, baby girl?"

My gaze flies up to his, and the heat in his is too much.

My stomach comes alive with a million flutters.

He grins, but it's faint, something so much deeper playing in his eyes.

"Do you have blankets in your truck?" I find myself whispering.

He stares, his tone low. "Why?"

"We could lay them out, watch the stars..."

His hand comes up to push my hair back. "You wanna spend your night with me, Tink?"

I think I want to spend all my nights with you.

I don't say that. Instead, I answer simply. "Yes."

He pulls in a long breath and then we're headed forward again. "I've got a better idea."

That's all he says, and I don't care to ask what the idea is.

I'm all in regardless.

In more ways than one.

Royce continues forward, curving around the back of the property, a place I've yet to see.

Tucked behind the mansion is a giant trampoline with a large net wrapped around it. It's in the center of a wide-open field to the left of the overflowing flower garden and pool house.

"We put this up for Zoey about a week ago, but I don't think she'd mind loaning it to us for the night." He grins, his eyes shifting to mine. "You good with that?"

I nod, because I'm not sure what my voice would sound like.

He brought me to his house, where no one is allowed.

Okay, sure, I've come back here on my own twice and this isn't quite the house, but I know this boy, and this is just as much his home as anything inside that mansion is. Not that

going into his home wouldn't feel like, I don't know, more? Because it would, but this. This is more than I'd have expected.

“There's a zipper where the stepstool is, climb in and I'll be right back.”

I nod and head right for the trampoline.

The moment I step inside it, lights flick on.

Running along the bars at the bottom and trimming along the tip-top of the net, soft white lights shine, illuminating the area. And then they change to pink, and then blue, green, and purple.

I grin, spinning as I wait for the next color to show itself.

Royce is back as quick as he disappeared, large puffy blankets in his hands.

He shoves them in, and I grab one, laying it along the bottom.

I notice there are two more, one for him, one for me, maybe, but I leave those on the side and drop onto my back.

Royce climbs in, a bag of candy and two water bottles in his hand. “We were out of Yoo-hoos.”

“The travesty,” I gasp playfully.

We lay back, and after a few minutes, both of us let out a long sigh.

“It's calming, isn't it? The sky.”

“It's dark.”

I smile. “There are so many colors.”

“It's a pit of darkness, like my soul,” he jokes.

I laugh. “If that's the case, let's look closer, find what you can't see.” I scoot my head toward his, my hands lifting above us to point out the varying shades. “In this darker spot, you can't see many stars, but you can see the deep, dark blue—”

“Blackness.”

I grin. “The *blue* that takes up this space.”

“Anger.”

I grin into the night. “Okay, fine, but here.” I run my hand left. “That darkness, *or anger*, blends into the lighter, more royal blue we’ll call loyalty. Then a deep violet shade, devotion.” I make a wave with my fingers. “And then you get here, just before the edges of the stars that allow for the most unsuspecting part, a softness. An almost gentle-like baby blue. Tenderness, maybe?”

Royce’s hand comes up to encase mine, and our eyes meet.

He holds my gaze. “Don’t forget the silver.”

I swallow. “Silver?”

He nods slowly. “It’s in there, too. All over, everywhere.”

Everywhere.

Jesus.

“Thousands and thousands of specs of silver, too many to forget.” His eyes fall to my lips. “Too many to leave out or let go.”

The stars.

The shades of his soul.

Silver.

“See?” I breathe. “There’s so much more than darkness.”

A faint smile falls over him and he faces the sky again.

Mere minutes pass, and he’s already falling asleep... his hand in mine.

It’s times like this, when the lights go out or when he thinks no one can see, that his heart opens.

At the end of the day, he’s just a lonely boy who doesn’t understand how he can have so much, brothers and more who

love him, who are there for him when and if ever he needs, no matter what, yet still, at night, after dark, he aches.

Like a lonely boy.

Like a lost boy.

I could take away that pain, if he'd allow it.

After all, lonely recognizes lonely.

I'M NOT SURE HOW MUCH LATER IT IS WHEN I WAKE UP COLD, but before I can lean over and grab a blanket, one falls over me, and then a large, strong and warm body presses into mine.

Royce's arm wraps around me, holding me there, so I scoot back more, tucking myself farther into him and when I do, I feel his need pressing against my ass cheeks.

He's hard, and large and while my body shivers, I'm no longer cold.

I'm hot all over.

Pulling in a deep breath, I push into him more, and his face buries into my neck in an instant.

"You don't want to do that, baby girl."

"Yeah, I really do."

He chuckles, but then I do it again, and that chuckle becomes a low groan.

His hand flattens on my stomach. "I'm not as strong as you seem to think I am."

"You're stronger than you know, but you don't need to be right now."

"Fuck," he growls. "Careful."

"I'm tired of being careful. I want to be—"

“Bad.” He kisses my jaw. “Naughty.” Another kiss. “Dirty?”

“Free. Valued.” My breathing is picking up now. “I want to know what it feels like to be wanted.” No, wait, that’s not right... “I want *you* to show me what that feels like.”

“If I touch you, I might get addicted.”

Please get addicted.

His shoulder tenses and then shakes in silent laughter.

I roll my ass into him again and a sharp hiss heats my ear. It serves as a lightning bolt, sending a shock wave down my spine.

Royce’s hand dips lower. Completely flat against my stomach, he glides over the V of my jeans while biting at my earlobe.

A low moan escapes, but I bury it in the blanket.

“Listen to me, Tink.” He kisses directly over my heavy beating pulse there. “I need to know every fucking thing you like and dislike. What’s good and what’s better. You think something in your head, let it out.” I feel his smirk against my skin. “Not that you’re real good at hiding your thoughts.”

I grin. “Got it. Royce?”

“Hm?”

“Touch me,” I demand instantly. “And not over my jeans.”

The button on my pants is popped with zero hesitancy, but his fingertips, they pause at the edge of my underwear. His strong chest inflates at my back and then he slips inside.

The heat of his hand alone, the roughness of his skin, has my muscles curling.

“Tell me the truth,” he whispers into the night. “You really never been touched?”

“Do my hands count?”

He groans.

“Not even a little bit,” he rasps as two fingers slide lower, slipping between my slit and gliding along my clit. I jerk, and his heady exhale follows. “You touch yourself since you been here?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s a yes.” He scrapes his teeth over my earlobe. “And you thought of me, didn’t you? When you fucked yourself?”

My “yes” is a low moan and he responds with a bite.

“And before me?” His lips brushing over the edge of my exposed shoulder. “Who would you think about?”

I close my eyes, waiting for more. “Just the feeling.”

He flexes against me, his hold tightening. “Good fuckin’ answer, baby girl, now hook your left leg over mine.”

I do as he says, and the idea of this position has my toes curling.

“I thought of you, too,” he admits. “When my cock was in my hands, swollen and fuckin’ aching.” He pushes against me. “I played your addictive-ass voice in my head, imagined your naked little body lying under mine, your pussy...” He slips the tip of his finger inside, and his muscles grow tight. “Fuck,” he rumbles. “Sucking me in.” I clench around him, and he whispers, “Just like that.”

I grip his forearm when he pulls, my back arching, and he’s done with the lead-up.

Two of his long, strong fingers push inside me.

The pressure and the scent of him, the heat of his breath on my skin, it’s enough to make me come, but I want more.

So much more.

So I tell him, and his response is epic.

His teeth bite at the material of my shirt, his free fingers curling inside of it at the base of my neck, and like he began to promise earlier, he shreds the thing from my body.

The cool night air stings my skin, my breasts threatening to pop from my bra, and my body has no clue what to do. It's firing on every nerve—hot and cold, wild and wanting.

I'm consumed by him and his every move.

Royce's fingers pause, but don't pull out as his mouth falls to the hollow of my neck. He sears a path down my breastbone, dominating my body with his lips alone.

His mouth comes back up, biting over the mark he gave me earlier, and he growls, grinding into me as his fingers begin to slip in and out with impressive speed. His thumb reaches up to roll around my clit, and the fire in my core builds, taking me over inch by glorious Royce infused inch.

My legs shoot straight, stiff as a board, and I moan into the air.

Royce pulls back then, and my body cries in protest.

I look over my shoulder, but I'm met with his eager lips, hard and pressing.

I tug my body free, roll over, and climb onto him.

I ride him with my clothes on, but he still finds a way to push his hand back into my jeans. He rubs at my clit with perfectly applied pressure, vibrating his fingers against me, and I freeze above him, biting into his lip, and crying into his mouth.

As my body starts to shake, his free hand comes around, pushing me down against his cock and feeling how hard he is for me, that does it.

I come and it's not short and a quick one.

It's bursting and breath-stealing and oh my god, Royce is underneath me.

With eyes as black as a scorched night's forest, he doesn't dare look away. I might bite into him harder if he tried.

I grip his hair, and his hand comes out of my jeans, gripping on to my ass, and I start grinding on him.

A heavy dip forms between his brow and when I make a circle, those lips of his part, and he grinds right back.

His hands shoot up to my shoulder and he yanks me down. We kiss with such a savage harmony it aches deep in my chest. I don't want to stop, but I know this might not be enough for him, and I refuse to end this night without earning his orgasm, something of his I've wanted for weeks.

It's beyond wanting him to know I can make him feel good. I need him to know that I can.

I can give him all he needs, even if he has to show me how to do so first, and something tells me he'll be more than willing.

So I lift, slipping my hands into his basketball shorts, and he doesn't protest.

He lets me take him into my palm, and when I crawl off of him, he follows me with eyes as dark as black satin.

I've watched porn, I've seen raunchy movies.

I know how to give head, or I know enough to know how to start.

"Tell me what you like."

He slams his head back onto the blanket, only to lift it again with a growl. "You put that mouth on me, it's mine."

My heart hammers in my chest.

His words are enticing and bury themselves deep into my bones.

It might sound pathetic, but all I've ever wanted is to *be* wanted for real, and for Royce to be that someone is more than I could ever ask for. *He* is more than I could ever ask for.

I dip my head, and his hand shoots out, gently wrapping around my neck and leading my eyes to his.

They're firm and hooded like a hawk.

“I’m far from fuckin’ playin’. Last chance. Touch my cock, you’re mine.”

“Then stop talking, Playboy. Let me make it official.”

His jaw sets, those eyes searching mine, and a curt nod follows. His hand on my neck spreads out, curling around to the side of my face, and while he doesn’t guide me down, he leaves it there as I lower myself.

My lips meet the head of his cock, and I relish in the soft satin of his skin against my mouth, skimming back and forth over the tip, and hard breaths has his nostrils flaring.

I run my tongue along the underside, twisting and testing his reaction. His shoulders pull forward, his core curling, so I take that as a good sign.

I wet my lips and pull the head into my mouth, but I don’t stop there. I glide down as far as I can and suck in my cheeks, slipping back up to the tip and dip down again.

I repeat this several times, rolling and gliding my tongue along him as I go and his head slams back.

“Fuck me, that mouth. I knew it was made for me,” he pants. “Like that. Just like that.”

I do as he asks, and after a minute or two, he begins pumping into my mouth. Slow at first, and then a little quicker. His body curls up, his hands gripping on to my face and right when he’s about to come, he tears me up his body, one hand flying to his dick to help it the rest of the way, allowing it to spill all over my stomach.

His thumbs spread it in, dragging his cum and circling it around the diamonds of my micro dermal piercings on my hipbones. His eyes lift to mine, and then he’s gripping the back of my neck. His mouth lands hard on mine and he groans into it. Sucking my tongue and twitching as he rides his wave.

We kiss until his breathing calms, and then he strips himself of his shirt, using it to clean up the mess.

He tosses it aside, tugs me into him, his knuckle trailing over the hickey on my neck. “This right here, I need people to see it, Tink.” His lips brush mine. “Let them see.”

Let them see his mark on my skin.

I’m too afraid to pause and think beyond tonight, so I pour all my focus into this moment.

He kisses me again, slower, softer, and my chest tightens when he whispers, “For the record, as far as I’m concerned you were already mine, and baby girl... know that I’m yours.”

I don’t even remember falling asleep, but we must have, because the next thing I know, I’m waking up beside him.

Chapter 27



ROYCE

RAVEN HAS TO STAY IN THE HOSPITAL FOR ANOTHER DAY because of the emergency C-section.

When the doc came in and told her so, he said two more days, but the girl refused, and used Maybell as her excuse, not that she needed one—she said she had a nurse and a gang at home and didn't need to be here that long.

The doc couldn't argue, so he moved onto the next bit of info, mentioning Raven was to refrain from 'sexual intercourse' for six weeks—something they both knew but pretended would never come. Maddoc argued she didn't push a baby out and we laughed our asses off at his expense.

He decided not to debate the point with the doctor and gave Raven a look that said that wouldn't be happening, a look she gave him right back.

He's a sneaky fuck, though, got her a present he said was a long time coming in the twenty minutes it took her to shower—I got to watch the little man sleep in his plastic little cube thing while he snuck out.

I was a good-ass sitter—he didn't even wake up.

Doubt Maddoc'll tell me how his 'present' worked out, but I guess that means they're waiting that six-week mark after all,

give them *both* time to heal.

Now, we're all back in the room, Zoey's sitting up in a chair the nurse brought specifically for her, staring down at her best friend.

We skipped school and have just gotten our lunch delivered when Raven's eyes slide to me and hold.

Raven winces as she pushes up in the hospital bed, lifts the baby onto her shoulder, holding his little head near hers, and Maddoc leans over to kiss his hair. "You weren't alone last night."

I say nothing but put my food away, wash my hands in the sink, and make my way to her.

With a small smile, she hands me my nephew.

He's smaller than a football, perfect in every fucking way.

I take the seat opposite of Maddoc and cradle him in my arms like Maybell showed me, making sure his head is tucked perfectly into the crook of my elbow.

I run a hand over his full head of dark hair, as black as a raven, just like his mama. He starts to stir, a small cry slipping from his lips and I freeze.

The others laugh but Raven quickly passes me a weird-ass circle pacifier, nothing like the ones they brought home when they went and bought a truckload of shit.

She holds it up to his mouth, but I take over, and the little guy settles.

His dark lashes flutter and my chest warms. His eyes are near the same shade of green as Maddoc's, maybe a little lighter. He's the perfect mix of them both.

"Hey, little bro," I whisper. "You got milk drunk last night and didn't get a good look at me. I'm your favorite uncle."

Light laughs fill the room, but I ignore them. This is me and little man's time.

“Your pops is gonna try to teach you to dunk, but when he’s not looking, come to me. He’s got the perfect shot, but the dunk is all me, my man.”

He makes a little sound and my smile widens.

“Yeah, you know what I’m talking about, don’t you?” I grab his hand, feeling his tiny fingers, and they close around me. “Me and Zoey Bear, we’re gonna show you all sorts of stuff, ain’t that right, Zo?” I look over, having sensed her eyes on the two of us and a wide smile takes over her lips.

I jerk my head and she runs to us, so I lift her onto my knee.

“He’s so cute.” Zoey smiles at him, waving her hand, but his eyes are already closing.

She leans in and kisses his forehead. “I love you, bestest friend.” She lays her head on my shoulder and yawns, her nap time officially closing in. “Your turn, Uncle Bro.”

I lean down, kissing his right temple. “I love you, Phoenix Brayshaw.”

Brielle

OF ALL THE MORNINGS FOR MY BROTHER TO CALL, HE CHOSE this one.

It was just after seven-thirty, when I’d normally be on my bus ride to school, but this morning, at seven-thirty, I wasn’t on a bus or in a town I was forced into. I wasn’t with a family who didn’t really want me there or at a school where kids weren’t sure what to think about the sad little weird girl who came in with a bald spot and puffy eyes.

This morning, I was wrapped in a cocoon of tattooed arms, barricaded by long and lean muscles, and held on to with a

comfort I wasn't sure existed.

I haven't heard back from my brother, which was almost scary, but knowing he wasn't here made it a little easier. I figure he hasn't answered because every time he does, he's forced to lie, or more, hide the truth.

I've been waiting for his call for so many reasons... and I ignored it.

I was already awake, breathing in the early morning air and letting my eyes roam the parts of the property I could see from where we were. My phone vibrated beside me, and I ignored it.

I would almost go as far as to say I was angry his call came when it did, interrupting my morning, but I had to get up, get back to the house to get ready anyway. I figured the Brays wouldn't be at school today and I was right. I even saw Mac and Chloe leaving at lunch and figured they were headed to meet the newest member of the Brayshaw family.

When the school bell rings, I'm ready for it, and pull my phone out to call my brother back.

Surprise, surprise, he answers on the first ring. "I was five seconds from hopping on a plane."

I find it hard to laugh when normally I would. "Maybe I should ignore your calls more often, like you've been ignoring mine."

He's quiet, a sigh woven in his words. "That's not fair, B. You know I'd be with you if I could."

I nod, squeezing my eyes shut and tell myself he's being honest when it's getting harder to believe.

I shouldn't ask what follows, but I can't stop myself.

"Those Brays keeping you busy, big brother?"

He clears his throat, a rasped and hesitant "Yeah, B, they are" following.

When my eyes cloud over, I pretend the lie didn't fall so easily.

"I called you seven hours ago," he says next. "You didn't text back. Why not?"

"Sorry, I was busy, and then, you know, school." I pull a petal off one of the giant rose bushes framing the side of the school and rub it between my fingers.

"Busy at seven in the morning?" His tone is full of suspicion.

The added noise on the line lets me know he's no longer alone and our two minutes of sibling time is about to end, so before he can cut me off, tell me he has to go do... whatever the hell it is he's doing wherever the hell he's at, I beat him to the punch.

"I have to go, Bass." I let the red petal fall to the ground. "Maybe we'll talk soon."

"Brielle?"

I drop my head, my chest aching.

I understand the worry in his tone, the sadness. I feel it too, the disconnect.

I've never allowed myself to be upset with my brother.

He's my best friend. My only family. My *only* friend.

Or he was.

I have new friends now, a couple anyway. And I have Royce, but my brother?

I feel like I'm losing him, and I'm not okay with that.

He's always been everything to me. I couldn't live with myself if I allowed a wedge to form between us. I also don't know how to fix it, but what I do know is I'd do anything for him, no matter the cost. Always, as he's done for me.

It's who we are, the Bishop bastards.

"Brielle!"

I whip around to find Micah at the curb, Valine in the front seat and Jonah in the back. He smiles, nodding his head at me. “Come on, girl!”

“Brielle?” Bass draws into the line. I’d almost forgotten he was still on it.

There’s so much commotion surrounding him now I can hardly hear him through it anyway.

“I have to go,” I repeat. “My friends are waiting for me.”

“That’s... that’s good, B. Have fun, but be careful. Some weird shit’s going down, so let me know if anything feels off, okay?” There’s a hint of uncertainty in his tone now, and for some reason it brings the moisture back to my eyes.

“I will... wait.” I plug my left ear to hear him better. “Ciara said.” I pause. Shit, okay. I lie. “She said she’s been seeing a car parked around lately. Did you happen to send someone to, you know, watch me?”

“No,” he rushes out. “I haven’t. I told you the Brayshaws might send someone your way. Just, stay away. Stick to the plan.”

My mouth opens, but I quickly close it, and squeeze my eyes shut. “Yeah, brother. I’ll stick to the plan.”

It takes effort to hang up the line, but I do, and make my way over to Micah.

He pushes the door open before I’ve even reached it, and grins wide. “We’re off tonight, Mac gave the okay for Valine to crash the Wolves Den with us.”

“The warehouses?”

He nods. “Yup.”

My phone beeps, and I look to the screen to find a text from my brother.

BASS: I LOVE YOU, B. I’LL BRING YOU HOME SOON.

I'm already here, brother... where the hell are you?

I take a deep breath, turn off my phone, and shove it into my backpack.

“So, what’s up, girl? You in?”

Am I in? Down to party on a weekday?

School’s out in nine days for summer, so screw it.

I hop in the car.

Four hours, two and a half-tempted third shots later, I’m feelin’ good, dancing and enjoying the heavy scent of bad decisions and teenage foreplay.

Valine smirks, pulling her cup to her lips and whispers, “Incoming.”

Micah and Jonah slip up and start dancing around us. Jonah closer to me, Micah her.

I’ve never really danced in front of anyone before, mainly in my bedroom or while cleaning, but this is addicting. Freeing.

I let my body lead, maybe the alcohol a bit, too, and it feels good.

I’m not out waiting for time to pass because I’m forced to be, I don’t have to wonder about what mess awaits me when I get home. I’m here, enjoying the now, and all because I chose to be.

To be here tonight.

To live in this town.

To work for this family.

To fall for one of its members?

Well, *that* was accidental.

Jonah’s hands reach for me, but Micah comes between us before they can land, laughing as he shoves Jonah toward Valine.

“Partner switch?” I raise a brow.

He winks, comes in closer and lifts his arms, they case me in, but don’t hold on and I keep tempo with him, swaying and air grinding as he does. “More like ensuring his arms don’t get ripped from their sockets.”

I laugh and do a little twirl.

Micah follows my lead, pretending to dip me without actually touching me, effectively playing along.

“You’re pretty good at that,” I tease.

He grins. “What if I told you I used to practice the waltz when I was younger ‘cause I thought that was how junior high dances would be?”

A laugh bubbles out of me. “I bet you were terribly upset when you got there and realized it was straight street dancing.”

He chuckles, but it smooths out. “You never came to any of the dances at the high school.”

I shrug. “I don’t people well.”

“Look at you, girl, you people just fine.”

“It’s the difference in where I was and where I belonged.” I shake my head. I give a playful eye roll so I don’t sound so stagey. “Besides, nobody talked to me, not that I made it easy or gave any effort either.”

“I talked to you,” Micah points out. “I’ve always talked to you.”

“You were in at least two of my classes every year, my writing partner in English for two. You kind of had to.”

He nods, but there’s something else in his eyes, an emotion I can’t quite read. He lifts a shoulder. “I’d have talked to you even if I wasn’t,” he admits. “In your classes, I mean.”

I could easily point out how he didn’t, but I don’t see a point. It is what it is, and it’s done with.

A smile finds my lips. “I’m glad we—”

“There you go, little Bishop.” The words spoke somewhere in the distance are a heady growl, a sheer leading comment of what’s to come.

Micah jumps three steps back as we turn to look at the guy who’s just walked in.

Dressed in black from head to toe, Royce slips farther in with slow motion-like movement.

His jeans, expensive and perfectly fit, lay against his black high-tops and he wears a crisp dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up to rest on the curve of his elbow, tattoos gleaming in the low light. The white of his eyes are near nonexistent as he creeps closer with the aura of a snake.

His approach is silent.

“Smile wide at the fucker.” His lips curl in what’s meant to be a grin but is far, far from it. “Get closer, let him see what my cock did to that filthy little mouth of yours.”

My stomach hollows out and I can’t even force myself to look at Micah. Guilt colors my neck red, and it has nothing to do with being here, but everything to do with the little after-dark *personal* moment of ours.

“What are you doing?”

“Me?” He slides forward with a nasty chuckle, now hovering over me, caging me in—a wild animal and its prey.

The ruler and the stray.

The vein in his jaw tics angrily. “What are you playin’ at, Brielle?”

He glares through dark, tethered lashes, but the longer I look into them, the more I see.

The anger, it’s for everyone else, but the fear, it’s for me.

Or more, because of me... and invisible to all *but* me.

My eyes quickly flick over his body again, his nice clothes, freshly showered hair.

He was ready to celebrate, and not with just anyone.

With me.

So I ignore his foul words and mucky glower and make my way to him.

He doesn't fight me, but it's easy to see his instincts tell him to, so those he does battle on the inside, I'm sure of it. But not for long.

I wrap my arms around his middle and he glares down his nose at me, his body shaking slightly, rage rearing its way out, but he can't hide the long exhale—I feel it against my chest.

I lift my chin, then slowly tip my head, exposing my neck as if offering it as a meal to a starved vampire.

His eyes fall to the angry mark he darkened up last night and his chest rumbles against mine.

“They see,” I whisper, reminding him of what he asked of me last night.

To show them, *them* being everyone.

Slowly, his muscles loosen. “They see, but do they know who put it there?”

I shrug, baiting him with my smirk, knowing how much he loves to bite.

And bite he does.

His arms sling greedily around me, lifting me from the floor, and my legs wrap around him.

His eyes bore into mine with a silent demand, one I'll gladly meet.

I press my lips to his, right there in the middle of the room, and he growls his appreciation, kissing me back just as hard for all to see.

As we pull away, he grins, and then Mac is beside us, offering us both a shot.

Royce chuckles and lowers me to my feet, nodding for me to take it.

So I do.

Chapter 28



ROYCE

I'M A BASTARD. I KNOW THIS.

I acted like a dick, like always, but my girl... she understood where it came from—a fucked-up mind of a guy who is desperate for all she can give me but admittedly—pitifully—fearful of the fallout he knows will follow, not that that's an excuse.

It's not. She deserves better, I know this.

But Brielle, she doesn't hold it against me.

She's kind when others aren't, forgiving when she shouldn't be, because she's fucking light and she can't help but shine it over everyone.

She always understands what I want and what I need, when I need it and why. It's fucked-up to have to deal with my bullshit, but she does it with stride.

Right now, she laughs with Chloe across the room, but when her eyes skate this way, finding mine on her, she breaks from their conversation and heads for where I'm sitting on a couch.

She slips between my legs, eyeing me.

I run my knuckles along her neck and down her breastbone, my eyes flicking to hers when goose bumps follow.

She sighs, and it heats me to the core.

Fuck Bass and the bullshit before this, fuck everything.

All I want is this.

Her.

In the morning and at night, every hour in between.

I told her I'd get addicted, and I was at first taste... if I wasn't before that.

Pretty fucking sure I was.

Brielle's lips hover over mine. "You have a nephew. How is he?"

Fuck me, I do.

My family grew last night.

My whole world grew last night...

I push her hair over her shoulder, and she smiles. "He's perfect, like I knew he would be."

I pull her forward until her mouth is in line with mine.

"Stay with me again tonight."

She kisses me, but pulls away too quick, a slow smirk growing. "We'll see."

"We'll see." I frown. "We'll *see*? Tink, swear to God—"

Her lips crush mine and we're done fuckin' talking.

It's not long after that I take my baby home. As we step from my ride, I grip her and she latches on, kissing me while I carry her across the property, through the open pool gate, and walk us straight into the water.

She gasps, the cold a surprise, but her grip never wavers, and neither do her eyes.

I drag my hands along her ribs and squeeze, inhaling her exhale, and step us out a little deeper into the water.

“Lie back, onto my hands,” I rasp.

She doesn't ask why, doing as I said, her body straight as a board and light in my palms.

I keep my hands pressed against her upper thighs and lower back.

“Close your eyes, relax your muscles, and breathe deep, baby girl. Steady.”

She does, her chest rising before me and it takes serious effort not to run my hands over her breasts.

“Let go of everything on the inside, and just ...breathe.” Slowly, I remove my hands, staying close at her side for several moments before slowly drifting away.

The water ripples with my retraction and her eyes open. I lift my hands high, so she doesn't lose focus as she seeks me out, and her lips curl up gently.

At the sight, my lungs hollow out.

I might be a sinking fucking ship, I can't deny that, but if I do go down, she doesn't have to drown with me.

And now she won't.

This girl, she's brave.

She's not afraid to be vulnerable, could care less of what people think of her. She wants nothing more than to simply... be.

The truth is, I wish I was like her.

I'm not.

I'm who the outside world expects me to be. Young, rich, and privileged and everything those three worthless words entail.

Like I said, I might drown in a persona of my own making, but my baby, she won't.

She'll float. One day learn to swim. And then this girl, she'll soar way the fuck above me, because she's so much more than I could ever be.

Yet here she is, smiling up at the stars in my pool, on my property, in my reach.

She's perfect

And she's mine.

Brielle

HIS LIPS, GOD I LOVE THEM. SO SOFT BUT ROUGH, FULL AND commanding, masterfully purposeful as is his every touch.

Royce must have bewitched me because I don't know how it happens or if anyone spotted us, but when my eyes open and the lustful fog lifts a little, I realize we're no longer in the pool, but climbing stairs. Stairs *inside* the Brayshaw mansion.

Royce pulls back, his gaze eager, heartbeat erratic, but his hold... tense.

For the boy who doesn't show the world who he really is, this is huge. Tough, even if he won't say the words out loud.

He brought me into his home, into his safe space, the only place he can be free to smile and laugh for real, to love and play and breathe.

His steps slow as we reach the top of the stairs and I glide my hand along his cheek, into his hair, holding on to him.

His eyes close, a hard puffed breath fans across my lips, sending a shiver down my spine.

"You can turn around right now and I promise you, my feelings won't be hurt." I slide my other hand up and case him in fully.

His pulse pounds against my fingers, his brows caving in.

I offer him a small smile and I nod in encouragement. “Turn around, Royce. Take me outside.”

His forehead falls to mine and he pauses. A few seconds pass, and then his eyes pop up, one hand leaving me, the twist of a knob sparking the nerves low in my stomach.

With every step into the room he takes, his muscles ease, his confidence rolling back in and strengthening his grip, his gaze, his being.

Gone are the creases along his face, and in their place is a smooth hint of certainty.

He grips my hips, so I allow my legs to fall from around him, and the second my feet hit the floor, his hands are tugging my soiled shirt over my head. He drops it where we stand and his fingers slide to the button of my shorts, unfastening them.

His hands glide along the waist and he pushes them down.

They fall to my feet, and I don't hesitate to step out of them.

The pads of his thumbs find the piercings on my hipbones and a low groan leaves him as he floats across the embedded silver, curving around to my ass from there.

He squeezes and a sharp gasp escapes me, my chest falling to his, and my bra's unhooked a moment later.

His eyes find and hold mine as he dips his head, using his chin to push the straps down my shoulder and moving over to do the same to the other.

The fan above us blows quiet and cool, hitting the wet spot left behind and causing a chill to spread through me.

Royce's hand sneaks between our bodies, and he tugs my bra from between us, my breasts now naked against his button-up.

He swallows, licking his lips as his fingertips skate along my ribs, hooking into the hem of my underwear. “I take these

off, I'm sliding in."

"I might beat you if you don't."

His chuckle is low but cut short when his fist wraps up the thin cotton, stretching it while he works through the last bit of his reserve. And then he tears them, rips the sides, and they fall to the floor in a shredded mess. I'm naked against him.

His mouth falls to mine, kissing and nipping and sucking on my lower lip until, once again, his forehead falls forward. "Lie back on my bed, baby, let me look at you."

There's a heavy pull between my legs, and my nipples peak, growing hard and firm for him.

I push onto my toes, tug his head down, and crush my mouth into his. Royce kisses me back with such vigor I can hardly stand it.

He's so raw and primal. Perfect.

I can't believe this is me, us. I feel like I'm about to burst and he's hardly touched me, but there's something about being naked and in his grasp that has me teetering.

I'm on the edge of addictive insanity, wicked decisions, and life-changing trials.

And I'm ready for it.

If Royce is with me, I'm so ready for it.

I tear away from him, push against his chest to force him a space away, and lower my naked ass onto his comforter. I scoot until my palms reach his pillow and fall onto my back.

I don't cower or cover.

I lie there, bared to him, body and soul.

But he's yet to look.

His eyes, they hold mine, and then he stands tall, to his full height and right at the edge of his giant bed.

In a slow, thorough, perusal, his eyes rake over me inch by inch, the muscles in his jaw flexing when they reach my

waxed center. Chills run over me, bringing goose bumps to the surface when his tongue slips out to wet the corner of his mouth.

His eyes snap to mine, a raw, rush of possession swimming within them.

“This is my bed, Tink. My room,” he rasps. “You look damn good in it.”

“Want to know how I feel in it?”

He nods, the muscles of his arms flexing.

“Lonely.”

A quick laugh bursts from him and I grin, settling into the pillow more.

“Strip for me.”

His head falls back slightly, his teeth pulling in the plumpest part of his bottom lip. “What will you be doing while I’m doing that?”

“Anything you want.”

He groans, his hand falling to the bulge in his jeans and squeezing, eyes lowering to the neediest part of me.

He doesn’t have to say it, the way he grips himself, the change in his breathing, says it all.

I pull my knee up slightly, gliding the side of my hand along my breastbone in the timidest of touches, more of a graze, to warn my body of what’s to come, and only go lower from there.

I slide my hand down my stomach, slowly circling my piercings, and when my fingertips reach my bare pussy, they pause, lightly gliding back and forth.

His mouth is open, eyes dark, and when he realizes I’ve stopped, they pop up to mine with an angry flare.

I pop a brow and fight a grin.

He tips his head, raising one right back, and wastes no time unbuttoning his shirt and sliding it off his shoulders, his tan, tattooed skin stirring even more heat inside me.

I lower my fingers to my clit and push down with two fingers, swirling and adding more and more pressure, the sight of his naked chest, strong, flexing abs and ink working wonders.

I lick my lips and his hands fall to his pants, unbuckling and unzipping with a deliberate, snail-like pace, but I'm here for it.

It's a perfect lead-up to the grand prize.

His jeans disappear, the tip of his cock straining to get free of his briefs. He's hard and ready and I'm wet and needy.

I slide my hands farther, open my legs wider, and watch him trail my fingers as they disappear inside me.

He moans and then his boxers are gone.

All that's left in front of me is him, thick and solid. Aching.

My other hand comes down to join in on the fun, and I slowly pump in and out of myself while my free fingers rub and press against my clit.

My stomach muscles tighten, my eyes zoned in on his cock, and when it bobs in the air, my pussy clenches.

His knee comes up, planting onto the mattress and I gasp, swirl faster, drive my fingers deeper.

Another knee and I'm panting, and then he's crawling up my body, his lips gliding along my leg, kissing across my thigh until he's gently biting into my knuckles.

My hands fly up, clamping on to his head, and his tongue takes their place.

I thought I'd be nervous or embarrassed, but I'm neither of those things.

The last thing I want to do is hide from him, miss anything this night has to offer.

I push up into him. “Make me come,” I pant.

He doesn’t deny me.

He growls and sucks, licks and pulls, and then his lips close around my clit, and he twirls his tongue, sucking at the same time. My legs begin to shake.

He grasps my thighs and slides around to my ass. He squeezes, rolling my hips as if I were riding him, and a liquid fire builds inside me.

“Damn I—” I moan. “I need to — oh my god right there,” I gasp, my head driving into the pillow, my back flying off of the bed and now it’s me rocking my hips. Chasing. My body seizes, but he doesn’t let up, his warm tongue continues to dance along me and I can’t hold it in.

I cry into the air, and he growls against me.

I grip his face, hooking my legs around his sides, and tug.

He flies up, like I wanted, and slams his mouth to mine, his dick pressing on my still throbbing clit and sliding against it.

I taste myself on his lips and it serves as an aphrodisiac, heating me to the core and leaving me aching for more.

“I’m gonna take you now,” he promises. “While you’re drippin’ for me. Hear me, baby, once I slide in, it’s gone. Regret doesn’t allow for a redo.”

My legs fall open in response and I reach down, gripping his cock in my palm.

He groans, his eyes squeezing shut, and I shift, positioning him at my entrance.

Creases pull at his forehead. “I’m not small, baby girl. This is gonna hurt.”

“Then make it hurt good.”

He groans, twitching in my palm, and then he pulls it up, intertwining our fingers together as he begins to connect our bodies.

He's bare, allowing nothing between us and it's exactly how I want him.

Raw. Unconcealed.

He pushes in slow, slipping back a tiny bit with each short thrust.

My muscles tighten, and he lowers his lips to mine, kissing me slowly, and I wrap my arms around him, begging for more.

He gives it to me in one long and slow drive.

I wince and he pushes his hips into me, pinching my nipple as his tongue takes over my mouth.

He begins to move in and out and at first, it stings, but as his rhythm switches, his breathing growing labored, my body welcomes him. The pain fades and all that's left is us.

"There we go, baby. You're open for me now." A small smile curves his lips and he sits up, his knees spread slightly as he holds me by the hip, grinding me into him as he pulls in and out of me. "Now, bring those legs up, nice and tight." He moans, releasing one of my hands so he can hold his body up for a better position.

I do as he asks, and oh my god!

He's deeper.

His rough palms slide along my stomach, nearly reaching my throat and holding me down so my back stays flat on the mattress.

His fingers spread wide, biting into my skin and I moan, clenching around him.

"Pinch those nipples for me, yeah?" he rasps, his head falling back as he pumps faster, but when I do as he says, a cried moaning leaves me his head snaps back.

“She likes a little pain,” he murmurs, flexing inside me, and I squeeze him back.

His hands fall back to my hips and he grows wilder, hungrier and I might be bruising my nipples I’m pulling so tight, but god, I can’t stop.

My breathing picks up, my eyes closing, and I tug and twist at them.

Royce’s nose is pushing me out of the way seconds later and he bites down, sending me into a tailspin.

I clasp my arms around his neck and he falls forward, his weight on me as he pumps into me with full, long strokes.

I start to shake, and he moans, nipping at my neck, kissing at my throat and then his lips command mine.

“Kiss me while you come, Tink.”

I do and he twitches with me, the pleasure perfect and explosive.

As he starts to come down, his eyes find mine, so tender that my chest grows tight.

Minutes pass of us simply staring at each other, and then I’m on my side beside him, in his bed. Under his covers.

My hands glide along the thick, expensive material of his comforter. “Black on black. I could have guessed as much.”

“Like my soul.” His lips run along my collarbone.

I grin into the night. “Like your eyes while you fucked me.”

“Mm,” he moans. “You said fuck again.”

I laugh and his head lifts.

“I didn’t fuck you, by the way,” he tells me. “I stole you.”

My brows jump teasingly. “Stole me?”

“Yeah. You don’t belong to you anymore.”

My throat grows thick as I stare at the boy beside me. “Is that right?”

He nods. “You belong to me and there’s nothing you can do to change that.”

My blood runs warm, my chest squeezing. “I think I’m okay with that.”

“Wouldn’t matter if you weren’t.”

I laugh, my head falling to the side and he grins, crawling on top of me.

His lips skate along my throat, and when he reaches my mouth, he smiles, a softness in his gaze he’s yet to share but can’t or chooses not to hide.

His hand trails over my breast, and he grins when my nipples pebble for him. “Lie down, baby girl. Let me show you what you do to me.”

There’s so much I want to say to him right now, but none of it would be enough to convey what I’m feeling, so instead of trying, I do as he wishes, and he does what he says.

Twice.

Chapter 29



BRIELLE

ROYCE TOOK A FEW CALLS, SLIPPED FROM HIS BED LONG enough to bring back food, but other than that we didn't leave.

Now, it's a little after nine in the morning, and a full thirty-ish hours later that I'm slipping from Royce's room and down the stairs. I almost make it to the door when a throat clears, causing my muscles to lock up on me.

My head snaps toward the sound and I suddenly have a desperate need to disappear.

Not one, not two, but *all* of the Brays are scattered around in the kitchen.

Raven and Maddoc lean against the counter, coffee cups in hand. Captain has Victoria wrapped up while she stirs something on the stovetop. Zoey sits at the bar, holding on to the little pink wolf and then there's Rolland, the boys' dad.

He's sitting beside Zoey, his new grandson in his arms.

They must have just gotten home, and here I am... killing their morning.

"Well." My shoulders fall. "This is embarrassing."

Raven is the first to crack, and then low chuckles follow around the room.

My face might be bright red right now, not that I'd know it. I'm too mortified to tell.

Maddoc reaches over Raven, pulling another coffee mug from the cupboard, and holds it out for me.

"Oh... no, I... just no." I shake my head, spin on my heels and yelp, my hand flying to my chest.

Royce grins in front of me. "Scared?"

"Dying inside," I hiss, but not in a whisper. I know he'd only say it louder, so I let them hear and another round of laughs follow.

"Good. Now next time you won't try to sneak out."

"I wasn't sneaking. I was, you know, quietly leaving."

"Sneaking." He pushes closer and good god, he's shirtless, and oh look, my bra's in my hand. I stuff it beneath my shirt—more laughs.

Royce crosses his arms. "So, did you not catch how I said 'next time'?"

"What—" I tilt my head. "Yeah, I did..."

His head tugs back, a look of pure confusion on his face.

I'm pretty sure I hear a muffled 'oh boy' that can only come from his dad.

"And nothin'?" He crosses his arms.

A laugh bubbles out of me. "Do you really think I'd be here if I wasn't positive this wouldn't end here?"

"Yes."

This time, I'm laughing with his family and his glare snaps their way.

I take a deep breath and close the small gap between us.

He looks down his nose at me, a small frown in place, but once my body is near his, he can't help himself, and his arms wrap me in.

“You’re adorably wrong, Playboy.”

His hold tightens, I fight the sigh that tries to escape.

“And you’re annoyingly naïve if you think you’re walking out that door right now, so park that ass, Tink, and get ready for some Brayshaw breakfast.” He releases me and walks into the kitchen.

When I glance back, everyone has moved on, no one is staring, and all are going about their normal routine. Reaching beyond each other, shifting out of the other’s way.

One grabs the milk, the other the bread, one a pan.

Raven pours the coffee and Victoria pulls out the silverware.

As I dare to inch closer, it’s Raven who spins toward me with a brow raised and hidden wink. “Coffee?”

“Hot Chocolate?”

Her grin is wide and instant, her eyes tight and something else I can’t note. They shift to Royce, to the glass set out on the counter that must have been for him, something hot and steaming already inside it, and drops the one Maddoc pulled out for me directly beside it, a low and self-murmured, “perfect” following.

“Take a seat, Brielle.” Rolland smiles softly. “I hope you like crepes.”

“It’s my first time making them, so if they suck, lie to me.” Cap grins.

“Oooh, Daddy!” Zoey’s little hands come up to her mouth. “You want her to tell a lie? That’s not honest! That’s bad.”

Cap’s mouth opens, but he looks to Victoria for help, and she sweeps in with ease.

“ZoZo, remember how I used to eat all the sweets you wanted to share with me, even though sweets aren’t my favorite?” She smiles at her daughter.

Zoey nods, pushing her blonde curls from her eyes. “Um, because you wanted to be kind? Make me happy?”

“Exactly.” Victoria’s eyes shine. “It’s Daddy’s first time trying something new, and he needs encouragement, so instead of saying something that could make him sad, we would find a way to say something that might make him smile and not feel so bad if we didn’t like them. Get it?”

Zoey nods and turns to Rolland. “Papa, it’s nice when you cut my strawberries little even though I’m big and like to hold and bite them.”

Rolland’s mouth drops open, and then the room erupts with laughter.

I smile at the scene, and hesitantly take the seat at Rolland’s side, smiling down at baby Phoenix in his little basketball striped onesie.

“Point taken, Zo.” Rolland kisses her head. “Papa won’t cut your strawberries anymore.”

Zoey smiles, kicking her feet and looks to Captain, who winks at her.

“Okay, here goes nothing.” Captain sighs.

“I’m sure they’ll be great.” I turn his way. “The only real trick is to make sure they’re evenly thin.”

All eyes cut to me.

I glance around the room but settle on Cap as his grin grows.

“You know how to make crepes?” He’s already wiping his hands on a towel and stepping away from the stove.

“I... I mean, yeah. I was sort of the maid and the chef of the house the last couple years.”

He leans across the counter, tosses up the spatula, and catches it on the opposite end, thrusting it toward me.

I look to Royce, who grins from his brother to me.

Well, screw it.

I hop up, my bra still tucked under my top, and cook breakfast for not one Bray, but every single one.

Royce

“SO SHE COOKS *AND* HAS A GREEN THUMB.” VICTORIA DROPS into the seat beside me, giving her a perfect view of Brielle and Zoey in the garden.

I scoff a laugh. “She’s got it all, VicVee.”

Victoria nods, slowly swinging her head to mine and waiting for me to look over.

“Does she?” She raises a brow.

I turn away, smiling at Zoey when she tucks Brielle’s hair back and tries to stick a little wilted flower they cut from the stem in it.

I know what Victoria’s asking.

Am *I* hers?

If Brielle has everything, does that mean she has me?

Is that even a fucking question?

She’s stirred the corners of my sleeping soul.

I lick my lips, meeting Victoria’s brown eyes. “Is it weird if I can’t remember when she didn’t?”

Victoria smiles, shaking her head. “Not even a little bit.”

Raven joins us with my nephew in her arms, and Victoria jumps up to hold him so she can ease herself into the cushiony seat. She winces, but once she’s settled, reaches for her son again.

Brielle laughs in the distance, and the sound echoes through my body, wrapping around my bones.

The three of us spot Captain walking up to them, and he points toward the trampoline.

Zoey smiles, tosses her little shovel and runs, but Brielle, she drops a hidden smile to the grass, her eyes peaking up and hitting mine for a quick, shared secret.

Yeah, baby, I'm thinking of it too.

Slowly, hesitantly, she turns away, following the two to the giant toy, and with every step she takes, my lungs constrict.

A small smile graces her flawless lips, and with a bit of a hop, she joins my brother and niece inside the netting, jumping and attempting to dunk a ball in the little hoop attached to the top.

She fails, but still she laughs.

She's fucking stunning.

And perfect.

Happy.

Can I keep her that way?

I'LL KILL MYSELF TRYING.

She glances toward Brielle. "I like her. She's—"

"Bass Bishop's little sister?"

Raven shakes her head with a playful scoff. "It has nothing to do with that and you know it, but it *is* hard to explain. It's like..." Raven trails off, searching for the right words.

"Her existence is comforting?" Victoria tries and Raven's eyes slide to her. "I don't feel on edge when she's around, worried or a need to watch my back, watch what I say." Both of them look to me. "How is that possible when we're still getting to know her? Does that make us fools?"

I shake my head, my gaze moving back to the girl of the hour, the night, the fucking century. “Nah, ‘cause that’s the same shit I noticed the day I met her. I thought then I was being fooled, and even more so after the second day, but I know for fucking certain, this is her. She’s soft, but not in a weak way. Kind but not to trick. Generous but not for clout.” I sigh, my body relaxing in the seat. “Loyal but without hatred, trusting but not blind.”

Breathing with ease for what might be the first time in a real long fuckin’ time for the girl we allowed to be sent away. Left and forgot about.

She’s not someone who should ever be forgotten.

“She’s pure-hearted despite the fucked-up place she came from.” Raven frowns after her, but there’s a calm to the way her lips curve.

“Yeah.” Victoria nods in my peripheral. “All that. She’s—”

“Stronger than us,” Raven finishes her sentence. “But in a different way than us.”

I glance from Raven and Victoria, who share a look among themselves.

Brielle’s voice calls for me, and when I lock my gaze on to hers, everything fades away.

She smiles and my chest plate fucking cracks. “Come over here. Zoey said *Uncle Bro* can teach me how to dunk.”

I don’t hesitate or make her ask twice.

I push to my feet and head right for her.

Cap knows what’s up and spins, cutting his smirk toward the pool.

He distracts Zoey long enough for me to glide my hand into the silkiest, shiniest of hair, hook my fingers through mini belt loops, and lower my lips to a pair of the softest, plush, waiting ones.

Wanting ones.

Ones that have been wrapped around my cock, nice and fucking tight.

I planned to ravage her quick, but that's not what happens.

The second my lips touch hers, I kiss her soft and slow, but end it quick, and when she smiles against my mouth, I lose my damn breath.

My stomach sucks in, tightening.

Baby girl, you're mine.

A low laugh leaves her and my eyes flick open to meet hers.

She leans into me, then holds the ball up at our sides. "What do you say, Playboy? Teach me?"

"I've got a better idea. Let the little master show you how it's done." I juke around her, grab Zoey by the hip, and spin her in the air.

Without a second thought, Zo bends her little knees, ready to push off for a high jump and twists her little hips, folds her arms behind her head, and dunks the ball straight in, gripping on to the plastic rim with a smile. I hold her there until she lets go, and then pull her into me.

Zoey laughs, and comes in for a high five, smiling bright at Brielle. Her hands come out for a sassy little. "Boom!"

Everyone laughs and Brielle bows.

Zo kicks to be let down and rushes right over to Brielle. "Um, my daddy said Rora needs to move in his room 'cause you're gonna need hers soon."

My eyes fly to Captain's when he starts busting up laughing, and a low cursed 'Jesus' leaves Victoria.

Captain grins, grabbing his daughter. "Zo, we talked about this. We don't blurt out everything we hear when we're *pretending* to be asleep, remember?"

"But I like her, and Rora said no." Zoey pouts.

I grin at Victoria. “You sleep in there every night. Why keep a room?”

“See, he wants it free for his girl.” Cap holds a hand out.

“Whoa, hey—”

“Don’t even start,” Victoria warns.

“Why not, maybe we should hear their thoughts?” Captain raises a brow.

“You, for sure, should hear my thoughts.” Raven laughs.

Victoria whips around. “You back off *miss I’ll punch someone in the face to avoid talking.*”

“I said I was sorry.” Raven grins. “And why are we bringing up old news?”

I cut a look at Brielle and her lips are pulled in, fighting a smile.

“Oh, I know!” Zoey shouts, bouncing on the trampoline and drawing our eyes back to her. She looks from me to Brielle. “You can share with Uncle Bro and when he sneaks me out of my room to watch movies at bedtime, you can come with us!”

Captain’s glare flies to mine and I widen my eyes. “Zo, you’re droppin’ secrets, girl.”

Zoey’s eyes widen, but instead of backtracking or pretending to be kidding, the girl who is too smart for her own damn good and fully incapable of telling a lie, slips from the netting and makes a run for the pool house, shouting for her papa all the way.

Brielle clears her throat with a small smile. “I should go.” She hooks a finger over her shoulder, walking backward toward the opening in the net. “Maybell is probably curious where I disappeared to.”

When all three of these assholes laugh, Brielle glances from them to me.

It's Cap who puts his hands on her shoulder for a gentle pat and teasing 'good luck with that'.

Dickhead.

But for real, she's funny.

And going nowhere, which she realizes real damn quick.

It's a couple hours later when Mac is racing up the driveway and charging right toward us.

My brothers and I stand.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Taylor Simms." He glances between us. "She tried to kill herself."

Holy shit.

Chapter 30



ROYCE

IT'S AFTER EIGHT IN THE MORNING WHEN TAYLOR IS FINALLY awake and coherent, according to the doc. Mac, Brielle, and I waited down here most of the night, but the others are just strolling into the waiting room.

“Zoey’s with dad?”

Cap nods. “And Raven. We wanted to have breakfast with her before we came down here, not knowing how long we’d be gone.”

“That’s good.” I look to Maddoc.

“Her and Phoenix are fine, man. I’m not going anywhere,” he answers my unasked question and refuses the order he knew I’d drop after it. “Run through it for us again.”

Mac rubs his hand down his face, exhausted. “She took some pills, washed ‘em down with a pint of her daddy’s best scotch. She called Enoch, and he knew something was off. He called 911 and headed over there.”

I pass him the note and he reads it aloud.

“I have tried to forgive myself for what I have done, but how can I do that when I don’t even remember what I did in the first place? He says I killed his dream, but why would I do

that when we share the same one?” He sighs, looking up. “Why is this crumpled up?”

“Enoch knew where she kept her diary. He took it, tore that page out, and gave it to Mac.”

“Damn,” Victoria whispers. “So we were missing something.”

“Where is Enoch now?” Cap asks.

“I’ve got Micah and Jenson keeping him locked in a room down the hall. Didn’t want him to go off half-cocked again.”

“And Taylor?” Victoria asks, lifting Phoenix from Raven’s arms.

I nod, looking to Cap. “We had them bring her up to the Bray wing so she’s not bothered by people from the school, and so we can talk to her without anyone around when she’s up for it.”

“I don’t think she’ll talk to you guys.” Comes from Brielle, and all our eyes move to her. “Let me go to her.”

My brows snap to the center. “That’s not gonna happen.”

“It might be your only option.” She offers a small smile. “You’ll make her nervous and she’ll forget things or hold back. You guys are intimidating, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You scare the fuck out of me.”

She laughs, a softness in her eyes.

Around the room, my family looks between the two of us, and I know the shift is clear. They see.

“Trust me,” she whispers. “I’m... kind of good with this stuff.”

Captain steps up. “She’s right. Calm and caring ain’t our area.” He points a soft look at Brielle, one that reaches deep inside my chest. “This is perfect for her.”

Maddoc scowls. “Don’t forget you just ran over her dude’s fucking hand. She might hate you.”

Brielle glances his way, the corner of her mouth lifted a bit. “But he knows better than to tell who did it, right?”

Maddoc smirks. “That’s right. Just making sure you realized that before you went and apologized the second she looked at you.” He glares but it’s playful. “Seems like somethin’ you’d do.”

Brielle chuckles. “I’d probably have thought about it, yeah.”

Maddoc looks to me and tips his chin.

My girl, my call.

I frown at Brielle. “What are you gonna say to her?”

Brielle pushes to her feet and gives a slow shrug. “Nothing. I’m going to sit with her, and then let her say whatever she needs to say to me.”

She reaches for the note and Captain doesn’t hesitate in handing it over to her.

“I don’t get it.”

She steps up to me and pats at my chest with a hint of tease. “You don’t have to. You just have to trust me when I say it will work.”

She tries to walk by, but I grip her wrist, yank her back to me, lift her chin. “I do.”

“I know.” She smiles, pulls herself free, and walks out.

I follow her with my eyes, and when I look back, everyone is focused on me.

“Business, huh, Royce?” Victoria teases.

I flip her off with a smirk.

Fuck business.

That’s my baby.

Brielle

AS I WALK UP TO THE DOOR TAYLOR IS BEHIND, I FIND WHO must be her parents standing in front of it embracing. I consider walking away and giving them more time, but the man spots me when his teary eyes open.

He loosens his hold on the woman, and they both turn to me.

“Mr. and Mrs. Simms?” I guess.

They nod.

“I’m Brielle, I go to school with Taylor.”

Her mom begins to cry. “We feel like such failures.”

I nod, placing my hand on her arm. “Some people are very good at hiding. I was.”

I don’t break down what I hid as the situation is very different, but as I hoped it would, a little light sparks in her eyes. To see me standing here gives her some sort of hope when she feels so lost.

“She won’t talk to us.” The woman clutches her husband. “She doesn’t even want us in the room.”

My lips pull to the side, and I point over my shoulder. “There’s a little coffee bar around the corner, it’s specific to this floor so you won’t run into anyone accept maybe a Brayshaw or two, and they won’t bother you.”

They understand, but fear has them clutching each other tighter.

“Please, trust me.”

After a second, her parents nod, and the way her mom grips my shoulders as she walks by is beautifully heartbreaking.

With a deep breath, I slip inside the room.

Taylor doesn't even open her eyes. "Please, Mom. Not now," she rasps.

"They went to get coffee."

Her lids fly open and she frowns. "Brielle?"

I nod, walking farther into the room, and taking the seat a few feet away. "You know my name."

"Everyone knows your name after Royce's little claim at the school."

"Yeah, that was—"

"Sweet where he's concerned," she cuts me off, her tone low and tired.

A low laugh leaves me. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

Her smile is a sad one, and she looks away. "Why are you here? I don't even know you, and I don't feel like talking."

I nod, reaching for the remote, and sit back. "I know."

I click on the TV, skip to a cooking show and turn the volume all the way down.

We sit there, silently watching as a pile of vegetables turns into an entire meal. It's about fifteen minutes later when she sighs from her hospital bed.

"He hates me," she whispers.

I look to her and wait.

"We were engaged, me and Enoch." Tears build in her eyes. "We didn't tell anyone, not even our parents because we didn't want to worry them. They have all these visions for us, some we shared, but our main one was just... us. We already leased a house just outside Oakland, he'd train during the day, I'd go to school, and we'd have our nights together." Her last words break off in a full cry and she turns away from me, so I focus on the TV.

Several minutes later she shares, “I ruined everything. He’s hurt, acting out. I think he slept with Giana Fritz to get back at me for...” Her eyes find mine. “We were virgins when we met and were supposed to be each other’s only. That’s what we wanted.”

I pull the paper from my front pocket and walk over to her bed, slowly lowering myself on the mattress near the foot.

She glares at it, her lips trembling. “Please tell me he didn’t see that.”

“He did,” I tell her softly. “He was worried, and he knew about your diary. He took it after the paramedics carted you away.”

“I probably seem like such a selfish bitch, making everything about myself.” Her tears fall angrily. “No one was supposed to see that.”

“But he’s not just anyone.”

“No,” she whispers. “He’s not.” She snuffles, rolling the blanket between her fingers. “I wasn’t... I mean, I didn’t try to kill myself,” she swears. “Everything just... hurt and I wanted it to go away for a little while. So stupid.” Her eyes flick to the ceiling, tears falling down her cheek. “Nobody will believe that, but it’s the truth.”

“They might,” I say quietly, knowing I can’t assure of something that might not be true.

It takes her several minutes, but she shares what she’s been holding in. “The fight with Coach Von? It wasn’t Enoch.”

I try to hold in my frown, because if that’s true, it’s news to all of us.

“I knew something was coming, because he did bust the scoreboard, but he didn’t touch his coach. He can’t even look at him, let alone be in the same place as him. That was his mentor, and I was his fiancée. Can you imagine the pain from such a low blow, because I can’t.” She looks away. “I’m a slut.”

“How do you know if you don’t remember?” I ease, asking an open question since she’s led us to it.

“Because Enoch showed me the photo.”

I shift closer. “What photo?”

“The one of me in Coach Von’s office. We were sitting on his couch... and my dress was on the floor beside it.”

“You don’t remember taking it?”

“I don’t even remember undressing,” she whispers with a shake of her head. “I’m shy, Brielle. Self-conscious. It took me a long time to let go and be... uninhibited with Enoch, and I love him. It makes no sense. One minute I was helping Coach grade papers after school, and the next thing I know, my eyes were peeling open. I was sleeping on the couch and he was where I remember, behind his desk and teasing me for falling asleep.”

My brows furrow. “Grading papers?”

She nods. “I helped him a few times the week before, but I didn’t go back after that. It was the very next morning Enoch broke up with me.” Her eyes hit mine. “I had gone over to Enoch’s after I left the school that night.” She begins to cry again. “I had sex with my man, and apparently only hours after having sex with his mentor.”

I scoot toward her, wrapping her in a hug and she lets me, gripping my arms and crying into my chest.

This is wrong, but I can’t say this to her yet.

We need proof, especially when the truth will ease her mind, while in turn damaging her soul.

She cries for several minutes, and when she pulls back, she looks up at me with a small smile. “Will you find my mom and dad?”

Tears build in my eyes, and I nod.

I guarantee they are right outside, waiting for the moment their baby girl will welcome them in, and as I step out... I find

I'm right.

But they aren't alone.

Royce is there, too.

We send them inside, and the look of gratitude lighting both their faces is one I'll never forget.

I tell them everything she told me and when I'm finished, I turn to Royce for the hard part.

"It has to be me."

His glare is sharp and instant. "What has to be you?"

"To get the proof."

His head tips slightly and then his eyes bug and a hollow, short laugh escapes him. "No. *Fuck* to the motherfuckin' *no*."

I step up to him, and he stretches his shoulders wide, but the longer he stares, the more he eases.

A growled sigh leaves him, and he lifts his hands to wrap them around my neck, his thumbs under my chin and tilting it up. "He asked you to grade papers after school on your first day here."

It's not a question, he heard from someone, but it meant nothing then.

His fingertips bite into my skin a little harder. "He won't suspect you, will he?"

I shake my head no. "And you'll be there before anything bad happens."

His mouth lowers to mine, and he kisses me, punishing me for the idea with a gentle nip to my bottom lip. "You've got this, Tink. Tell us what to do."

I nod, but on the inside, my gut twists with worry.

I know I'm the only one of us who can do this. He'll see Victoria coming from a mile away, Raven, too, not that she's able to right now anyway.

The risk of me doing this is high, though, but like I said, Royce will be right there, and knowing that should keep my pulse in check, keep my blood flow stable, my sight strong.

It'll be fine.

Yeah. It'll be fine.

I repeat that line for the next several hours and then before I know it, I'm walking into Brayshaw High.

Deep freaking breath... and exhale.

I go to text Royce one more time, but before I can even get a single word typed out, one comes through from him.

ROYCE: I'M WATCHING. GO.

I LOOK UP INTO THE RIGHT-HAND CORNER, WHERE MAC TOLD me the camera would be, and give a tight smile. My hands begin to sweat, so I slide my phone in my back pocket, and wipe my palms on my jean shorts as I step into the main hall.

The school bell rang fifteen minutes ago, and Mac said Coach Von is still inside his room. So, with my head held high and my backpack over my shoulder, I step up to his classroom door, knocking lightly with my knuckle.

His head pops up instantly, and he grins wide as he stands from his seat. "Brielle, hi. I missed you in class today."

I grip the strap of my bag tight as he comes closer. "I have a note."

He nods. "It's okay, I trust you."

Keep smiling.

"I have some free time today, if you could use any help."

He eyes me a moment, and then a slow smile forms on his lips. He's across from me quicker than expected, his answer a low, chilling murmur, "Always."

Pressure falls on my chest, but I breathe through it.

Royce is right here. He's watching.

He pulls the door free of its stop lock, and motions for me to enter. "Please, come in."

His hand begins to lower on my shoulder, so I quickly slip by him and into the room.

No matter how hard I try and convince myself to calm, my brain doesn't hear it.

I've just locked myself alone in a room with a man I don't know.

Society tells me I should be safe in his presence, that he's an educator, a superior, but the world around me warns there's no room for blind trust.

The man before me is capable of more than anyone would have guessed, and I'm here to expose him of this.

I'm the bait.

I pull my phone from my back pocket, clutching it in my palm just in case, but it's gently tugged from my hand in the same second. I whip around. "Mr.—"

"Sorry, no phones out during correcting. It could distract you," he cuts me off, steps past me, and sets it on the far side of his desk.

I want to argue that it won't, but I don't want to mess this up. Everyone is depending on me, and Taylor deserves to understand what happened to her, Enoch too, for that matter.

"And please." He turns to me. "Call me Coach." He grins, his hand slipping inside the drawer of his desk. "All my favorite students do, and all my favorite students also... get one of these." He holds out a perfectly wrapped square with a far too eager smile.

"What is it?"

"A treat." He smiles. "All girls love chocolate, right?"

When I hesitate, he holds it out farther. “Come on, no one has ever passed on a treat.”

That’s it.

The treat.

If I don’t accept, he might grow suspicious. If I don’t take it, this entire thing is a waste.

I reach out, and he places it in my palm.

“Go ahead, try some. I’ll get those papers for you, okay?”
He nods.

I smile, setting my bag down and trail him toward the back of the glass. He steps into a corner storage room and I quickly tear the plastic wrapping open and break off a small chunk. With nowhere else to put it, I shove it into my front pocket, and when he turns back, act as if I pull it from my lips.

As he comes back, he rolls his sleeves with a smirk, his hands completely empty. Whatever he did back there just now, it had nothing to do with grabbing papers.

“You should sit down, Brielle. Get comfortable.” Just like that, his smile is gone, his eyes sharp... and roaming over my body.

I cut a quick glance at the clock.

Royce said he’d bust in at the nine-minute mark.

It’s been eight.

My mind begins to race, several scenarios playing out in my mind of how this is about to go down, but just as my smile grows and I take that seat as he asked, the clock ticks past the twelve.

The door isn’t thrown open.

To make it worse, Coach Von drops into the seat beside me, urging me to bite from the brownie in my palm.

I swallow, curling my toes in my shoes to try and keep calm, but I know my body, and I know it’s no use.

I lift a tiny piece to my mouth to appease him, my heart rate kicks up instantly. I know what comes next, and damn it, I'm not so sure I can stop it.

Where the hell are you, Royce?

Chapter 31



ROYCE

“TWO MINUTES, LET’S GO.” I STUFF MY PHONE IN MY POCKET, and all at once, me, Mac, Micah, and Captain step from Micah’s car. We rush up the back steps of the school and go to push through the gate, our momentum driving us backward when we push against it and it doesn’t budge.

My stomach falls to my feet, alarm threatening to send vomit up my throat.

“What the fuck!” I yank on it.

They yank on it.

Nothing fucking happens.

I take a few steps back, run, and scale the fucking thing, the others right behind me.

My shirt gets caught on the sharp metal, tearing slightly when I drop down and run forward, but as we reach the double doors, those fucking things are locked too.

We chose the back for a reason—their students aren’t allowed to exit this way, we wouldn’t raise eyebrows, but nothing should ever be locked like this. Ever.

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” Captain shouts, already rushing around to the front, Micah and Mac on his tail, but

Mac skids, losing his footing, and turns back to me when he notices I haven't moved.

“Royce,” he snaps.

I shake my head and jerk right, opposite of them. “This ain't right. Go with Cap.”

He doesn't argue, and I'm gone, jumping the garden fence and running down the green strip.

The gate and door was locked, bet the fucking classroom is too, and I'm willing to bet the fucker wouldn't dare open it on his own, which means they'll have to bust through.

He'll know he's a fucking dead man, and dead men run. He'll have one option at that point and one option only. I need to take that away, because I'll be fucking damned if the son of a bitch *gets* away.

Not from me.

People see me run by, but nothing registers, all I hear is her soft voice calling me, wondering where I am and why I'm not there like I told her I would be.

I stood there, right in front of her, looked her in her eyes and she trusted my word.

I brought her into this shit, said she could handle it. That she was strong enough.

She's got survival skills—she found something to protect herself when she thought she was being attacked that morning on the bridge.

She's aware—didn't blindly drink the beer she'd left unattended, unaware I slipped a pill inside it but cautious just in case,

She's daring and quick—put a plan together on her own and took care of Enoch without help.

She's smart—knew what was needed for Taylor and how to handle her with care.

She's brave—willing to walk into a lion's den today... trusting I would be there.

I should have been and thirty seconds before promised.

No matter fucking what, I should have been.

I thought hanging back, staying out of sight so we didn't raise questions was the smooth move, the one that would keep his guard down—everyone knows when we arrive, the charge in the air shifts, and he would have felt it.

I'm a piece of shit.

I fuck up.

I wreck.

So, wreck I fucking will.

I'll start with Coach Von's face... and then move onto something much fuckin' harder. More devastating.

I refuse to paint her world black when she's only begun to see the shades of the summer sun.

It's with that thought I burst wide, running in a curved circle to gain momentum.

I don't slow, think, or pause. I throw my arm up, my body forward, and bust through the fucking window. I catch his wide eyes the split second before I'm through the glass, and that's all I remember, 'cause in that same moment, mine are drawn to a frozen Brielle, clutching the arm of her chair, her eyes tight and, rapidly blinking, and on me.

She jumps up and dashes for me, but she bumps into a desk and stumbles a bit, catching herself on the chair.

I briefly register Mac's slow and cautious voice from the other side of the door, urging me to open it for him and the others.

I don't.

I notice Coach Von's shirt is unbuttoned, his belt undone, and everything around me burns black.

I hear faint screams, they may even be mine, but I can't say for sure.

And right now, I couldn't care fucking less, 'cause Brielle is safe, but this bitch is still breathing, and I'm not okay with that.

I lunge for him.

Brielle

ROYCE'S EYES FLASH, BLACKNESS TAKING OVER, AND IT'S AS if he leaves his body completely.

He's raging, but his face is scarily blank as his hand shoots out to grip on to Coach Von's shoulder, the other slamming into his stomach and knocking the air from his lungs.

Coach Von groans but doesn't crumple and begins to straighten. "We were just—"

Royce's palm darts up, cupping the back of his head and jerking it down. His knee slams into his ribs, sending him stumbling in the opposite direction.

Beads of sweat form along my neck when Coach Von growls angrily and begins reaching into his back pocket.

I dart forward, but arms wrap around me, halting my advance.

I think I scream. I don't remember anyone else entering, but when I look over my shoulder, it's Captain's eyes I find.

Mine widen, relief mixed with fear swimming in my core. "Captain, please. Get him and let's go."

"Never going to happen." His expression holds an apology, but his grip is tight and sure. "There is no stopping him right now."

Damn it!

My chest pounds heavy, pressure threatening to close my throat and meeting my temples.

Royce wraps Coach Von's tie around his neck and tugs, dragging him to his tiptoes before swinging him around and tossing him into the wall behind him. He doesn't let him catch his breath, but lifts him and slams him on top of the desk, his back crashing down on the computer monitor.

Coach Von cries out, attempting to scurry away, but Royce leaps up onto the desktop.

Royce's pulse throbs in his neck, the veins in his arms protruding, pounding heavily, matching the rhythm of mine. He swings his foot around, kicking the man square in the jaw, the crack of bone echoing around the room, and the light begins to dull.

Coach Von groans, hits the wall and glides down it, his body giving out on him, but the idiot dares to make a point. "You're a fool if you think I'm the only one who wants her," he pants in a low gurgle, swallowing and choking on his own blood. "That there is isn't someone else out there waiting, watching."

Royce screams like a madman and hops down right in front of him, shouts and drags him to his feet, forcing him to stand so he can get in his face. Blood trickles down the coach's face, his eyes near swollen shut. Royce headbutts him, releasing him as he does and down he goes again

"Oh my god." I struggle to get free, everything around me now free of color and beginning to cloud. "Captain, please, let go. He's going to kill him."

"I know," his voice is a gentle whisper.

He gives up and begins to beg, pleading for forgiveness that falls on deaf ears.

Royce spins, picks up a chair and slams it into the wall. He bends, grabbing a broken piece of wood he can use as a bat

and swings it between his palm.

I start to cry, glance around, and spot Maddoc now standing near the entrance, his eyes on Royce. A hint of unease is written along his brow, but he quickly erases it when he realizes I've caught it.

He shakes his head no and I growl, twisting and turning my hands, but get nowhere.

This is bad.

This is only going to get worse.

Tension lines my forehead, a heavy throbbing taking over not only my head, but my entire body. I try to take a deep breath, but it does nothing. I blink and blink again, but with each one, my vision only fogs more.

The fiercely pumping blood and high heart rate, this is what I'm supposed to avoid. Stress and anxiety, the very things this world is made of.

Royce screams something at Coach Von. I can't hear it, but I *see* Coach Von's decision before it's made, he's ready for his last-ditch effort, the one that will get him killed, right here in this very classroom. The man lifts a piece of glass into his palm. He's yet to fight back, but he knows now it's his life or Royce's.

Everyone else sees it too. Captain's hold twitches, his body growing rigid behind me, and Maddoc's shadow has slipped farther into the room.

Royce must too, because his entire body eases, ready. Excited almost.

We know he deserves a fate much worse, but this isn't the place to put the final nail into the coffin, the lead up to it, sure, but the end can't be here where students could very well be watching from outside the busted window.

Captain quickly spins me around, rushing me toward the door, and shoves me to Micah who suddenly appears there and

whips back around. I pretend to go easily, but slip away, sliding on my feet and darting around the far side of Captain.

Maddoc's eyes shoot wide, and he lunges for me, but I'm already too far past him too.

Mac flies for me, eyes wide in panic, but we're on the same timing and I'm two steps ahead.

I intend to approach them from the side, get Royce's eyes to fall on me to bring him back to life, but two steps away, my condition takes control of me. My vision clouds, darkens, and then it's gone.

Not a second later, my foot slides the wrong way, and I fall into something hard, whipping backward and slamming onto my back a second later, my skull bouncing hard against the floor.

It hurts, stings, but only for a second and then... nothing.

I CHOKE ON WATER AS IT'S POURED OVER MY MOUTH AND chest, coughing and spitting it out as I turn my body, but a low cry slips past my lips and forces me back down.

My palms flatten out, finding something hard and cold.

Am I on the floor?

I need to open my eyes.

I take a deep breath, and a heavy throbbing whirls through my head, making me dizzy.

I open my eyes, but nothing is there.

I try again.

And again.

No. No, no no.

My hands fly up, moving over my eyelids and I blink, feeling my eyelashes flick across my skin swiftly. They're

open.

A sharp cry slips out. “No.”

Hands grab mine, moving them from my face, but I smack the person’s touch away and squeeze my eyes shut. My palms plant beside me and I scurry backward until I hit something warm and solid.

“Brielle, stop.”

Captain.

“Just breathe,” he continues. “Tell us you’re okay.”

“I can’t... I ...” I swallow. Hanging my head and covering my eyes. A hiss follows as I touch my face, and wetness coats my fingers. It’s warm.

Blood?

“Oh my god!” I try to stand, but I’m held down.

“Get the car, now!” This comes from Maddoc, but whoever he’s speaking to must not move fast enough, because it shouted again and three times as loud. “I said now!”

The floor vibrates beneath my body and moisture fills my eyes, finds my cheeks, and soaks my palms completely.

“Brielle, look at me. Let me see.”

I blink wildly in my palms, take a long and full breath, and lift my head.

My eyes are open, but I can’t see.

Blackness is all there is.

My cries are silent and have nothing to do with the ache on the back of my head or the burn along my temple, the sting in my chest, but everything to do with my stolen sight.

This is the longest it’s stayed black.

It’s normally only short periods of time, fifteen or forty-five seconds, enough time for me to panic even more, make it worse and then force myself into a calmer state.

It always works.

Why isn't it working?!

“Why isn't what working?”

I freeze.

“My... I...” I close my lids one last, long minute, leaving them that way for five full breaths, and when I reopen them, the room comes back into view. It's nothing but a shadowed silhouette, but I can see.

I *see* Royce helplessly slumped against the wall, Maddoc holding him up as his body hangs limp in his arms. His head is dropped back against the wall, lips parted, and brows drawn in.

With a black cloud surrounding him, he forces his gaze to mine and holds.

A shuddered breath pushes past his lips, his eyes squeezing tight.

And then he walks away.

Somehow, with nothing but a world of gloom and gray in front of me, his departure colors it spades darker.

My limbs grow too heavy to hold, a sudden wave of exhaustion overcoming me.

“I think I'm going to be sick,” I gasp, my head spinning, my body breaking out into a full sweat.

The voices around me grow muffled, and my eyes close.

“She's passing out again,” is shouted.

Darkness wins.

Chapter 32



ROYCE

I DON'T REMEMBER LEAVING THE SCHOOL, BUT SUDDENLY I'M standing in the middle of a hospital room, and everything inside me is deep and dark and fucking tragic.

I try to wash out the realization of the moment, but it's creeping in, taunting me, mocking the parts of me that believed I could ever do right and reconfirming I'm nothing but a reckless fuck up who will forever remain one.

No matter how bad I wish I could be, the more Brielle claims she sees.

Fact is, I'm not more. I need to stop trying to be and embrace who I am.

I'm a dick, I ruin.

I break.

My goal for today, above all, was to keep Brielle safe. That was number one, and it went out the window the second I smashed through it.

I couldn't control myself, and to be honest, I didn't even try.

I wanted to fuck the man up as much as possible. He deserved a beating and more.

A good man would have wanted to protect his girl from seeing that.

Decent one would have at least cared.

I did neither and look where it led.

I went in there to protect my girl from harm, and I'm the motherfucker who ended up hurting her.

I hit her.

Square across the temple when I wound my hand back, and my fucking god... she fell.

Brielle went straight down onto her back, went unconscious, and all I did was stand there and fucking die inside.

I didn't drop beside her, cry for her, help her.

I was frozen, unmoving.

What's that say about me?

My head lifts on its own, meeting the eyes of a monster's in the mirror on the wall, and the person staring back can't face himself.

He's weak, suffocating, red-painted palm prints smeared along his neck, and matching the shade stained across his hands and arms and clothes.

My clothes.

I wish it were mine, pooled at my feet and allowing me to drown in it, because I sure as fuck don't deserve to stand here right now.

So, I walk away, into the hall where my family stands with wide, worried eyes, but I don't pause beside them, and they don't dare to try to stop me.

But she does.

My name is whispered from behind, and it's a song that sears my soul.

It's the softest, gentlest voice, the calm I don't possess but desperately need, crave, and want.

I feel it tugging at my insides, allowing the smallest bit of air into my throat, reviving my lungs.

Breathing life into a fuckin' zombie.

My mind refuses, but my body spins, facing the way I've just come from.

My chest caves in, hollows out.

Tears the fuck open.

My girl, my baby, *fuck*. She stands in the doorway, leaning on it for support because I'm offering her none.

She reaches for me... but I don't reach back.

I turn and give her mine.

Hours must pass, because the next thing my eyes are peeling open and it's nightfall. I know I'm sitting on the fucking ground, fisting the neck of the bottle, so fuck it, I tip the bitch to my lips, but nothing comes out. I glare at the gold-flecked thing.

Who drank it all?

I toss it to the side, my arm falling with it, and slump against the tree, but the thing moves, sending me flat onto my back.

Fucking moving tree.

I chuckle and attempt to push up, but my arms ain't havin' it, so the ground it is.

I stare at the stars, and when I find the Little Dipper, the Ursa fucking Minor she talked about, my fuckin' chest plate cracks. Wide the fuck open.

Or that's what it feels like.

After our night on the trampoline, I realized something I should have long before that—she loves the sky, and all that it holds. So, when she was gone, I looked up some shit and

figured out how to spot the things she searches for in the dark.
I had to know more about what she loved and why.

They look like the thing that comes in the Easter dye kits
Maybell used to buy us after it's been good and used, fucked-
up shaped and bent at the handle. Don't know what they mean
or stand for, but I bet she does.

I was gonna steal her, get her out in the night again so we
could find these fuckers, and then I'd sit back and stare at her
while she told me all about 'em.

I wonder what she's doin' now?

Staring at the stars?

Smiling at the shades of blue?

Crying into her pillow?

There's a hitch in my gut and it rises into my throat,
creating a tight strain.

Worry.

Fear.

Two things Brays aren't supposed to be, but maybe I'm the
weak link.

The fraudulent fool among superior souls.

Destined to fail.

To fall.

I'm fucking falling.

Into oblivion.

My throat closes, and I clench my jaw.

My head pounds so hard I grow dizzy, but the pain is still
there, and I don't want it.

Can't take it.

It's intense and motherfucking unbearable.

I'm a weak bitch.

A piece of shit.

I hook my shoe into the bag at my feet and tug it up.

I dig into the black plastic bag and pull out a new bottle.

If I get drunk enough, maybe I'll forget those nasty little facts.

I wonder how much it would take to convince myself I'm not in love with the girl I have to let go? That I haven't loved her since before I realized it.

That pushing my baby away isn't about to fuck me?

Wreck me?

Fucking break me?

Because it is.

Brielle

ONCE I GET HOME, IT'S LATE, BUT I'M UNABLE TO FALL asleep, and when the sun comes up and through my window, my head only pounds harder, my mind running crazy.

When I first got here, I was buzzing and each day my happiness grew, but this morning all I feel is tired and unsure.

Back at my aunt's, it was easy to control my emotions, to limit my body's impulses and internal reactions. The simple way to do so was to simply not engage. People there, they made it easy, they wanted me to keep to myself. When my aunt first began expecting me to be her live-in maid, my blood would boil with every scrub of the sponge, every sweep of the mop, but I quickly realized there was no point in getting angry and I was only hurting myself. I had to do it, so I'd put on some music and clean in peace.

Since the day I landed there, I told myself all I wanted was out, but these last eight or nine months killed me. I didn't only want out, I needed out.

I *needed* my brother.

A connection.

One person, that's all I wanted.

One person I could wake up and smile at, who would smile at me, truly happy to see me.

I needed to *see* happiness, to catalog it, in case there came a time I couldn't see at all.

Not in case, when.

The restlessness that came with waiting for the day Bass would show up began to eat me up. That's when I noticed the puffiness returning and far more frequent.

Still, all I could do was sit quietly and imagine what I'd have when I was gone.

A life where I could be happy and free, have friends, and above all, my brother. I'd be like the tacky wall stencil found in my aunt's living room and live, laugh, and love.

Now here I am, living, laughing...

I swallow.

Loving.

I guess I forgot why I cut off the possibility of connections in the first place, but I remember well now.

I can't control my emotions when other people are in my life, and they saw it firsthand, what a liability I can be, and now I'm forced to wonder if I can handle the world I was taken from but now living in the middle of.

If this life, this place, is *worth* a lifetime of darkness in an already dark world.

I've asked myself this question at least a dozen times since yesterday's accident, and every... single... time... I do, a

haunted, addictive, infectiously live pair of brown eyes pop into my mind, and mine close, a deep, raspy voice answering with the same nine words...

Never let fear hold you back, baby girl. Ever.

So, as he would say, fuck it.

Everything sucks, so what more can it hurt?

My mind screams a lot, but I ignore it.

I shouldn't have.

“I DON'T THINK WE SHOULD BE HERE.”

“Shut up, Valine.”

“Bitch!” she snaps, but when I start laughing, she playfully shoves me.

“You might be right, we probably shouldn't, but have you ever let that stop you, because I have, and guess what.” I pause, looking to her. “I'm over it. I need to talk to him and it needs to be now.”

Her grin is slow. “About fuckin' time. Here. I'll give you a boost.” She runs to the gate, bends, and waits.

“We're not sneaking in. We're going right through the door.”

Her eyes narrow. “How?”

I sigh, eyeing the place. “I've got a feeling they'll let me pass.” And not a good one.

Royce walked away from me, and that can only mean one thing—he blames himself for what happened to me, and that's my fault.

I should have told him more about my condition so he understood, but I was afraid he'd push me out, and now here we are.

The boy with the sweetest hidden heart, who wants nothing more than to find his epic ending, did the one thing his mind can't handle, the thing that makes him lose the little bit of cool he possesses, as I saw on the very first day when Franky gripped on to my arm—he hit a girl.

He hit me, at least that's the way he sees it.

I need to talk to him, to explain what he couldn't see.

I need him to listen to me.

We reach the front gate and as I thought, we walk right through without any issues, but as we reach the doors to the Wolves Den, Andre slips farther in front of the door.

“Really?” My shoulders fall. “I thought you were a friendly giant where I was concerned?”

“Gotta know what your plan is before I let you in there, girl. A broken Brayshaw ain't pretty, and I need to call for backup if you're here to drive the blade deeper.”

“Come on, Andre. You know me well enough by now. Do you think I'd pour salt in a wound?”

His eyes move between mine and he grins. “Nah, you'd pacify the pain, but I'll tell you, this ain't gonna go however you worked out in that pretty little head. Our boy, he's on another level tonight.”

“Thanks for the warning, now do me a favor and tell me where my man is.”

“Come on now, girl, you know your boy better than that.” He moves aside and there he is, smack dab in the middle of the room, an entourage already around him. “Front and center.”

Being what they expect.

He spots me right away, like he was waiting for me to walk through the doors.

“Well, well.” He accepts a fresh popped bottle from a girl I've never seen, kicking his leg out for her to take a seat that doesn't belong to her.

“Look who’s showed up.” His head falls back lazily.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t know I was coming,” I call him out. “That’s the only reason you snapped your fingers and allowed in the swarm of swans.”

He flies from the seat, the girl falling to the floor, but he doesn’t pause to help her.

He stalks toward me, his chest puffed high, but his shoulders, they’re drawn up tight. And he’s angry.

So damn angry.

It’s fear that’s caused it, and he has no idea what to do with it.

He leans in, his lip curling, but my god, his body shakes.

It’s light, almost unnoticeable, but it’s there and it creates a sting within my own.

He’s aching on the inside, and it’s vibrating through his very being, and for some reason, this boy in front of me feels the need to hide it. To hide himself. Hide from himself behind these people who could never truly love him because they don’t know him like I do.

He’s a fraud in his own skin.

He’s going to make this hurt.

I can see it in his lonely, broken boy eyes.

I guess this is where it all falls apart.

The saying goes nothing lasts forever, but that saying is a damn lie, because pain does.

Pain lasts a lifetime.

Here comes mine.

“I DON’T KNOW WHY YOU’RE HERE WHEN YOU’RE NOT WANTED or allowed,” I force out. “Leave.”

Her shoulders fall, but she keeps that little lift of her mouth in place. “I can’t. Not until you talk to me.”

“I’ve got nothing to say to you. If I did, I’d have called you. I didn’t.” I force myself a step back.

Goddamn it, she’s close.

Too close.

Not close enough.

Before I realize it, I’m reaching for her, but I sloppily pull back, growling as I spin away from her. “I said go. Group home girls aren’t allowed here.”

“Good thing I’m far from one of those.”

“Not anymore.” I spit onto the floor, glancing over my shoulder. “You’re as worthless here as you were where you came from. They had no use for you, and neither do I.”

Fucking kill me.

My insides burn as if someone shot me with a syringe full of their best cut venom, but still I add, “Go back to your aunt, you’re no longer wanted here.” I barely get the last few words out before I’m forced to swallow the vomit beginning to rise.

My veins burn, my throat’s closing, but it’s nothing compared to the jagged blade slicing down my torso at her next words.

“Your hand did some damage.”

My palm flies to my ribs, holding them in place, fighting the sting, soothing the ache. I plant my fucking feet, steel my trembling jaw, and force myself to spin, to face my demon head-on—the marking on my girl’s left temple.

My shoulders fall, the weakness in me showing itself to the one girl I wish I was strong for.

“B—”

“I only said that to get your attention,” she rushes out. “I... lost my sight. ”

Her words are making no sense to me, and mine are a harsh lie. “Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“I’m trying to tell you this wasn’t your fault. I’m going blind, Royce. I blacked out,” she whispers, and my mind screams, my head spinning, fighting to understand past the alcohol swimming in my veins.

Is she lying so I’ll give in?

I can’t give in, especially if this is true.

Bass said she’d fall into darkness in our world. Did he mean it literally and I was too much of a dick to realize this?

Will she really lose her ability to see when she’s spent the last four years seeing nothing at all?

Four years wasted. Her spirit dimming with her sight.

She shifts closer, and her nearness burns as much as the distance had. “This wasn’t your fault,” she affirms. “But the hurt that followed when I watched you walk away, that was.”

Cause I’m a piece of shit.

And I’m about to become an even bigger one.

I draw up another rancid laugh and this one damn near knocks me on my ass. “You say this shit, tell your little lies, like I’m supposed to care. Newsflash. I don’t. Not about how you feel, not about what you’re going through, not about you.”

LIE, LIE, FUCKING PAINFUL ASS LIE.

Silence, cold and dark, threatens to swallow us.

I should let it, but don’t know how.

I tell myself to walk away, but my feet refuse to move, so fuck it. I get in her face.

“I should take you right here, right now, give you a little goodbye present so I can send you on your way. We both know I don’t have to like you to fuck you.”

“No,” she whispers, her hand coming up to touch my chest, but I jerk away. “You don’t, but you would have to love me to take my virginity like you did, because Royce Brayshaw doesn’t touch virgins otherwise.”

I try to speak, to snap back, but my throat’s officially clogged.

My Brielle.

My baby.

She can never be mine. I’ll destroy her.

Proof is the angry red mark staring back at me.

“Call me a fool,” I whisper hatefully. “Cause what a rookie mistake that was. Now look at you, standing here expecting more, like you’re special. Like you weren’t just a body to be played with, for me to fuck the second I decided I wanted to... and you gave, didn’t you? *Right* when I said go, just like the rest of them.”

She runs her tongue over her teeth, flicking her eyes away to conceal her hurt briefly only to bring them right back.

Pure agony burns in my gut, melts my defenses, and threatens to swallow my resolve.

I want to tell her that I didn’t *fuck* her, that I worship her body, want to treat it like a fucking temple, bring her as close to the stars as I can, knowing how much she loves the sight of them. How I want to set us both aflame, over and over and over again. And then do it again, but I can’t say any of that, because I’m bad for her.

Bad, period.

Everyone knows it, so she must too, right?

Realize that girls rope me in because they want to fuck me, ‘cause I’m the disposable asshole who can make them feel

good for a night or two, but that's it. They keep Cap. They want Maddoc, they settle for me.

Nobody wants to keep me.

The fuckup.

The bad guy with bad intentions.

Do what you do best, Royce. Push, but you better push fucking hard, 'cause if she comes to you, it's over. Settled.

And way too fucking selfish.

“Come on now, little Bishop. Don't stand there looking so helpless. You had to know what was happening here. We talked about what playing dumb makes you look like.”

Her chest begins to rise and fall in short pants, her lungs refusing to share the same air as me, the bastard who hurt her. Who is hurting her now.

“I know what you're doing,” she rasps. “And you can kiss my ass if you think this will work, but go ahead, Playboy. Break me if you dare.”

Her big, turquoise eyes holding mine and waiting for more bile to make its way up and out.

I force myself not to look away, not to flinch. “I needed to catch Coach Von in the act.” My shoulder lifts, but I hardly feel the move. “He had it coming after everything with Enoch and his girl, the girls he likely hurt before her. Took longer than I thought, but you finally did something useful, fell right in. I mean, come on, you're so desperate to feel wanted you even volunteered for the dirty little role.”

A fucking knife, right through the heart.

Her face caves, a sharp huff pushing past her nostrils.

“Royce,” Captain snaps.

I ignore him, frowning at her, but I'm not really looking at her, I can't.

I focus on my peripheral.

“You were nothing but a game piece, one I had to track, bring in, and mold into the perfect little part. And it worked. Why you think I tested you out first?” I force a foul fuckin’ laugh, welcoming the rotten taste in my throat. “Why you think I put molly in your drink the first night here? To see how much work I had to put in to blind you. I was shootin’ for figuratively, but man, maybe I’m better than I thought, yeah, since you ‘lost your sight’?” I speak as mocking as I can muster, tip my head, and wish for a fucking sword to chop it from my body. “But it took a whole lot of *work*, didn’t it?”

Captain pushes on my chest, trying to drive me away, but I shove his hand off and he shakes his head, unable to look at Brielle.

“You’re such an asshole.” She rasps, uncertainty in her gaze.

“I know.” And this will be my greatest show.

An R-rated fucking nightmare, never to be forgotten, a sight I’ll forever be haunted by.

She blinks but nothing new shines back as she does and it tears me in two, yet she doesn’t run, doesn’t move an inch.

She stands still, staring right at me.

I need her away before I crack.

“I’m sorry for what happened to you, it never should have.” The only true words to leave me tonight. “But I’m not gonna stand here and pretend I have any more use for you. I’ve already taken all you’ve got to offer. Used you up like I planned to. Erased the halo hanging above your head and replaced it with some horns, but that’s what you wanted, right? To be bad? To be a part of the darkness of our world.” I walk backward, retaking my place on the couch, Katie on one side, Giana on the other. I shrug. “You’ve got nothing left I want, so go on, little Bishop,” I rasp, not recognizing my own voice. “Get out of here before you get bit. I’m trying to celebrate, and you’re killing the mood.”

“I’m not done talking to you,” she pushes on, her voice so low it’s almost missed, her hope damn near dead at my hands.

Micah steps up, gripping her arm gently and I fly from my seat, shove him back, and dip into her face. I growl the final gauntlet; one I know will get her to leave.

“You really want another person to get their ass beat because of you?”

My heart cracks, shame and self-reproach stabbing straight through my skin, the blade jagged, wrapped in wire, and twisted on impact.

How dare I use what she told me about what happened to her brother against her.

Her lip trembles, but she fights it. “How dare you say that to me.”

The cords in my neck stretch tight and I grind my teeth together. “You’re pathetic to think I wouldn’t.”

“And you’re a bastard who’s afraid to show himself because *what if* people don’t love you when you do?” She pushes into my chest. “Well, fuck those people, and fuck you too for being too much of a coward to stand here and do what you really want, because I know it’s not this, but I guess you want to learn this the hard way.” She begins to back away. “Watch me walk away from you this time, Royce, and don’t expect me to be the one who strolls on back.”

She turns around and leaves, tearing my heart out and taking it with her.

Fucking me even more, my brother leaves with her.

Chapter 33



BRIELLE

“BRIELLE, WAIT!”

I keep rushing for the exit, but Captain catches up to me, gently shooting in front of me.

“Please, just—”

“Get the fuck away from her.”

I jump, swinging around and searching the darkness, and there he is, creeping up with slow angry strides, a dark shadow falling over his eyes as he approaches.

He doesn’t spare Captain a glance, but steps right in front of me.

The events of the night, the last few days, and everything in between come crashing around me at the sight of him. Tears fill my eyes, clogging my vision, and I fall into him.

His arms wrap around me instantly, pulling me closer, and I begin to full-on cry.

He clutches the back of my head gently, and whispers, “I’ve got you, baby sister.”

I grip on to my brother’s jacket, and his hold on me tightens.

He sways me like he did when we were kids, when he'd come to comfort me after an episode from our father.

I hate that this is how he's seeing me for the first time in so long—weak and needy.

“Tell your brother he's a dead man,” Bass growls.

“Fuck you,” Captain rumbles, his presence growing closer. “Threaten my brother again, Bishop. You know what'll happen.”

“Stop,” I whisper, pulling myself free.

I turn to Captain, and his eyes soften, instant understanding.

He nods. “I'll get Valine home.”

My lip twitches, and I turn to her, but she throws her hands up and follows him off, not needing an explanation.

Captain steps in once more his voice a desperate whisper, “remember what we talked about at the zoo, Brielle.”

I drop my eyes to my feet and he walks away.

Nervously, I spin back to my brother, and he nods his head, so I follow him toward the edge of the gate, but he falls behind, saying hello to the people who spot him on his way through the crowd.

Once outside, he faces me.

“Look at you, B,” he rasps, running his tongue along his lips and looking away when his eyes gloss over. “Little but... not.”

I chuckle and he reaches out, so I slip my hand into his.

“You're beautiful, B.”

A small smile finds my lips, and I look up. “You're somehow taller than I remember.”

He leads us farther toward the car he must have drove up in.

It's nice, nicer than anything I'd expect he could afford. A classic, like he's always wanted.

A 1969 Mustang Fastback, the exact car he had taped to his bedroom wall for as long as I can remember. I don't have to wonder if it's his or something he borrowed to make the drive, the plate gives him away.

BISHOP2.

Something comes over me and the tears come rushing back.

"Yeah," he rasps. "I'm must be fucked-up in the head to reuse anything those assholes did, but I couldn't not, so I used it right. I know *four* Bishop was her way of giving a gift, but there have never been four of us." His eyes slide to mine, my sweet, protecting brother. "There's always only ever been two. Just me and you, B."

More stupid tears slip free as a heavy silence falls over us, and it's devastating how uncomfortable of a feeling it is. To fill it, we slide into his car and he starts down the road.

It takes several minutes for him to finally speak. "What the hell happened, Brielle? How did you end up here?"

I shrug and answer simply. "Royce came to town, like you said he would, and then he came back and took me home with him."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why didn't you tell me you left this place?" I counter in a whisper. "I came here thinking you'd be here with me."

"And when you realized I wasn't, you should have come to me."

"Once I realized you were gone, I didn't need to run to you, Bass."

Worry tightens his eyes. "You sure? Look at you. Are you even okay?"

I swallow. “Yeah, I’m fine. It was an accident. I ... blacked out.”

He jerks and I tense. “What do you mean, it’s happening again?”

I look away, guilt I shouldn’t feel tearing at me.

“Fuck, it never stopped,” he rasps. “But it got worse here, didn’t it?” he guesses.

“I’m fine, Bass.”

“You don’t look fine, Brielle. I know what the destruction a Bray’s path left behind looks like,” Bass snaps. “Something happens and suddenly you mean shit, if you ever meant a damn fucking thing in the first place.”

“Tonight was just... a bad night.”

“There are always going to be bad nights. They don’t stop. They only get worse. Is that what you want?”

“This isn’t who he is. He’s upset with himself.”

He stops at a light, looking to me. “And that’s an excuse?!”

“What’s yours?!” I find myself shouting, growing defensive of the life I’m building here and the people in it.

My brothers face falls. “Brielle—”

“What’s your excuse, Bass?!”

“You were never supposed to come here,” he says instead. “I told you to *lie*. To be you and stay away and you’d be fine!”

“Why be me?!” I scream, shifting in my seat to face him full on. “Because he could never love a girl like me?! Because I’m not worth it?! Well, guess what, Bass, it wasn’t him I lied to. It was you!”

His head pulls back.

I keep my frown in place. “You asked me if he fell for your plan, and I said yes. I said yes because it was true. You told me to be me, to make sure Ciara was around when I was, so he’d see us both, and fall for the lie, and he did. He took one look at

her, and just like you said he would, decided she was me. Bass Bishop's tall, gorgeous, look-alike."

"Brielle." He shakes his head, but I don't let him say more.

"What I didn't tell you, was how she outed me not fifteen minutes later, so I stuck to your little plan. I did *exactly* what you said, like I always do." I throw my hands out, letting them fall to my lap with a slap. "I was me, fully and completely, and what do you know, he didn't hate me for it. He didn't throw me away for being me, like you did."

He blanches.

"Yeah, Bass, I know." I glare. "I know now that you're the one who made the decision for me. You had me sent away, split us apart. Not them. You."

His eyes harden, flying over my shoulder. "He tell you that?"

"You know what, no he didn't, but he should have. I gave him a lot of crap for it and not once did he throw that in my face when he could have so many times, and you know why?" I ask but don't allow him to answer. "Because he knew how much you meant to me and that it would break my damn heart to find out the truth before I was ready for it."

"He has you manipulated."

"No," I snap. "He doesn't. But thanks for letting me know how unstable you think I am."

"I don't think you're unstable." He shakes his head. "But you're young. You—"

"I'm not young," I cut in with a low laugh. "Bass, I've lived the life of a grown-ass adult since I was in grammar school, just like you. I've never been a kid and you know it. Neither of us had that honor."

"You're still my sister." His knee bounces and he looks away. "And you're not staying here, Brielle. I'm sorry, but you're not."

I push against the seat. “Well, I’m sorry, because it’s not your choice. You don’t get to do this, remember me when it’s convenient, and then show up when I *finally* no longer feel like I’m waiting for you.”

“We’ll talk about this at the hotel.”

“No.”

His head snaps toward me and he glares.

“Take me home.”

“Brielle—”

“I said take me home.” I stare straight ahead, an unexpected numbness crawling over me.

He wants to argue, but with a low curse, he heads that way.

Only when I’m climbing from the car, preparing to slam the door does he whisper, “This isn’t your home.”

I slam the thing as hard as I can.

I can’t believe I’ve been waiting for so long to see my brother face-to-face. To hug him and laugh with him and this is how our reunion goes.

Screw tonight!

Screw Royce Brayshaw and screw my brother.

I’m going to get high with my friend because I can, and then I’m going to pass out and hope tomorrow is a better day.

MY HOPE WENT TO SHIT.

The next day was as crappy as the one before, and today sucks just as much, but I can’t hide in my room anymore.

My brother has called me nonstop, showed up a half dozen times, and I’ve brushed him off each and every time.

I'm not ready to deal with him yet when everything else is so fucked-up.

The reality that surrounds him is the fact that he'll be leaving, and when he does... is he leaving alone or with a plus one?

I can't think about that right now, so I'm doing my best not to think at all, sitting on a park bench, taking hold of the joint Valine passes me.

"You look like shit." She flicks her hair over her shoulder, her pointy nails clicking together as she does.

I fight off a cough, grinning as I blow out a long line of smoke, trailing it until it disappears into the air. "Yeah, I could use a brush."

"And maybe some eyeliner."

I laugh, bumping my shoulder into hers. "Here, take your pinner back."

"Bitch, you think I can afford to roll more than a half gram at once? Negative."

I cut my eyes her way. "Can I ask how you make money?"

"Can I ask why you wear an ice mask to bed?" She pops a perfectly shaped brow. "Pre-punch by your man, that it?" she jokes to lighten the mood.

A scoffed laugh leaves me and I look away.

Touché.

My muscles have finally calmed enough to allow for a long exhale.

"Nice, right? Letting this shit chill you out?" She blows out a cloud of smoke, pulling in another and holding it. "My mom used to say it's a street girl's Xanax." She nods, looking over the town. "Makes sense, I guess."

I don't push on the mom comment, I know it will only have her jumping up and flipping me off on her way out, so I

go with something totally different.

“You know I hadn’t smoked in a year before the other night?”

“I haven’t smoked in nine months.”

Our heads cut over our shoulders to find Raven walking up.

Her eyes are on Valine. “I need to steal your friend.”

Valine leans forward, tilting her head. “I don’t know, I’m kinda not hating her right now.”

“I kinda don’t care.” Raven pulls a baggy from her pocket and holds it between two fingers.

Valine grins and pushes to her feet. “I kinda like you.” She walks away.

Raven watches her go, and then her eyes slide back to mine. “That’s been in the glovebox since before I got pregnant. It’s dry as shit, but she won’t figure it out until we’re done talking.”

A low chuckle leaves me. “I don’t think she’ll care.”

Raven nods and walks closer. “Broke girls never do. Weed is weed. An escape is an escape.” She speaks from experience.

Raven stands near the bench and looks out over the planter boxes. “I’d sit if it didn’t sting like a bitch to get up.”

“How *are* you feeling?” I pull my lips to the side.

She scoffs a laugh. “Like I did after I got stabbed.”

My head jerks toward her.

“Long story.” She chuckles.

One my brother likely knows.

“And the baby, how is he?”

She smiles wide this time, looking away. “With a dad and uncles like his? Guaranteed to be one of a fucking kind.” She

laughs. “I’m almost terrified, but for now? He’s tiny and perfect.”

I meet her eyes and her lip twitches. “He has a beautiful and fitting name.” I haven’t had a chance to tell her that. “The raven and the phoenix.”

“And the wolf.” She grins. “I’m just waiting for that first person to clown so I can knock their teeth in,” she teases. “No more baby in here, even if it still kind of looks like it.”

Both of us laugh, but hers dries up quickly and she grows somber.

A heavy dose of tension begins to encase us, growing thicker and thicker the longer we stare at each other.

SHE SQUINTS. “I HEARD WHAT HAPPENED.”

“I figured you would have.”

She nods and then shifts her entire body toward me. “You’ve thought about leaving.”

It’s not a question, so I don’t answer.

“Don’t do it, Brielle.” She’s not commanding but pleading cautiously, the ache in her tone clear as day. “If you go, he’ll find you and bring you back anyway. So just don’t do it.”

“Then maybe I should.” I sit back.

Her frown is instant. “Are you serious? You’d for real walk away from him?”

“Oh, that would be me doing the walking?” My eyes widen.

“Don’t act so blind like you don’t see why he’s doing this.”

Her choice of words is triggering and I jump off the bench, glaring at her. “Screw you, Raven.”

The click of a door sounds behind me, but I don’t look, not even when Raven holds up a hand to halt the watcher’s

advance. Not once does she take her sturdy gaze from mine.

Questions rise in her eyes, but she doesn't ask them, instead lowering her hand to her side.

I know she's not angry with me, that she's simply worried about Royce, and the last thing I want to do is pick a fight with her when I'm already fighting with enough people.

Her defenses fall. "I need your help, Brielle."

A mix of emotions stir low inside me, and I swallow.

Pain blankets her features, the reason obvious.

Royce.

"He's fucked-up," she confirms my heart's whispers with a broken one of her own. "And for the first fucking time, we can't help him."

Of course.

An ugly sense of self-pity creeps in before I can block it out. "So you come to me as a last resort."

"Not last, Brielle. First. *Only.*" She steps toward me. "I've never seen him like this, and we've been through some shit. It doesn't take much to recognize heartache from a Brayshaw." She looks behind me, and I cut a quick glance over my shoulder to find Maddoc standing at the back door of the idling black Denali. "These boys, they self-destruct. Fuckin' crash from the inside and by the time it's on the out?" Her eyes come back to mine, and she shakes her head. "We need your help."

I look to Maddoc, and he takes a single step forward, lowering his chin at me. I turn back to Raven.

"I understand, I do." I grab my bag off of the bench. "And I know you understand exactly why I won't. It's like you said, he'll only come for me once I'm gone. So maybe I should be?" I lift a shoulder. "My brother is only a call away."

Her eyes narrow and just like that, she leaves.

Royce

“YOU SELF-SABOTAGING DUMBASS!”

I groan, opening my eyes when the trampoline wobbles beneath me.

Raven stands over me, glare heavy and eyes heated. “How many times do you think you can push a girl before she tumbles?”

“Mac already told me fuckhead’s here now, RaeRae.” My hands lift. “It’s almost over.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh my god. *You* called him.” She shakes her head “Royce, what the fuck is wrong with you?!”

“What’s the big fuckin’ deal?”

Her arm flies out. “Her fucking leaving with him, that’s what!”

“I’m giving her what she’s wanted from the beginning. News flash, RaeRae. It ain’t me.”

She scoffs, her palm slapping onto her forehead. “You really are an idiot.”

My lips tip up. “Never claimed I wasn’t. At least you see it now.”

“Don’t play your word games, they don’t work with me and you know it, and I know you. She leaves, and you will crash and burn. Hard.”

“I’m good with it.”

“Well, we aren’t.” She flashes. “Something fucks up with one of us and we all fuck up. Don’t do this.”

“Says the girl who blew up our fucking world, and more than once.”

“Did you *not* learn from that?!” she damn near screams, throwing a phone at my head.

“Fuck, RaeRae!” I push myself up, rubbing my skull.

“You’re a dumbass. Get up. Get your head out of your ass!”

“I failed her!” I shout, falling back against the netting. “I fucking failed her when I didn’t even know her, Raven. If that’s not a sure ass sign I’ll keep doing it, like I have several times now, I don’t know what is.”

Her features pull. “Are you talking about sending her to her aunt’s? Royce, that wasn’t on you.”

“Wasn’t it?” I argue. “We take people from shitty situations and help them out, offer them more, but what happens to the ones who don’t make it here? Or the ones like Brielle, who don’t even get a chance? We sent her away because we trusted it was better for her, and yeah, she didn’t get beat on with her aunt like she did with her parents, but it wasn’t fucking good.” I point toward the front of the house. “That girl’s had no one, for almost four fuckin’ years, not a soul to trust or body to hold on to. She was alone, in her house, in the dark, in her fucking mind. No friends, no family, other than a brother who was here, *protecting mine* while no one was around to protect her.” A humorless laugh scrapes past my lips. “How fucked is that?”

Raven offers a tight smile and small shrug. “You ever think maybe she was strong enough to handle all that by herself? That she didn’t need a hand to hold her, that she could make it on her own until it was time for her to... fall into the arms she was meant for?”

“What, mine?” I scoff and it burns in my throat. “Please. She’s everything I am, all that I’m not, and so much more. I could never be enough to deserve someone like her, and I refuse to steal her fucking light.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

I whip my head around to find Maddoc standing there, and he's pissed. Fuming and damn near foaming at the mouth. He holds my gaze.

"You're the reason we have what we have," he snaps angrily, growing closer. "*You* believed in Raven first, led us into the thought of opening up to someone new. *You* saw something in Victoria we refused to until you convinced us to look deeper. When we break, *you* step up with a bottle and break with us. You don't judge, you don't push, and you don't fucking run. If there was something in this life I couldn't give Raven, I couldn't live with that, but you're *stronger* than I am, brother. If your girl for real loses her sight, you'll find a way to make her see. No-fucking-body else will be able to give her that. You're not her ruin, Royce, you're her only fuckin' recovery."

"Think about it, Ponyboy," Raven whispers. "You don't get close to people, neither does she. She's been alone, and you feel alone even when you're not. Maybe that's because deep down you feel something's missing, something we can't give you." She stands with a shrug. "*Maybe* that something is her."

"I told you to stop trying to convince yourself of something none of us, including Brielle, will ever be convinced of. I didn't think a single soul would ever deserve to be loved by you, Royce Brayshaw, but now it's so obvious it's her. I know she will never want for anything in her life, she'll never fear a soul, and she will *never* look back with regret," she whispers. "Now get your ass up and go talk to that girl before Bass does something stupid we'll be forced to kick his ass for, like tie her up and throw her in his car."

My throat begins to clog. "And if she decides she wants to go with him?"

"Then you bare your broken boy soul to her and convince her otherwise. If that doesn't work, we do the tying." She lifts a shoulder. "Our town, our rules, right?"

I look to my brother who nods to Cap several yards away, keeping his eyes on the two who must still be near the porch and us tucked back here in the corner. He tips his chin.

I look to Raven and hold my hand out.

I don't allow her to hold my weight, I know she's still sore, but her grip is firm on mine.

She smirks. "Go on, Ponyboy. Show her what you're made of."

"Trust me, RaeRae," I whisper. "She knows."

Raven's eyes dart to mine and then the three of us laugh.

We hop out, and toward the front of the house I go.

Ready or not, baby. Here I fucking come.

Chapter 34



ROYCE

WITH MY KEYS IN MY HAND, I RUN OUT THE FRONT DOOR, AND the sun punishes me for all the alcohol I've been drowning in, shocking and fogging my vision.

I squint, flopping a hand up to block the summer rays for a clearer look, and fuck me, I'm hit with every emotion all at once, my thoughts and vision coming back with a vengeance.

Brielle stands a few feet away, leaning against my ride all gorgeous and perfect-like with no makeup and tied back hair.

Something raw and deep burns in my gut, twisting and fucking turning.

Never in my life have I ever touched a girl harmfully.

I do all I can to protect people from shit like that, to hurt assholes who hurt others, especially girls, women.

This time I was the asshole. It's my turn to hurt and goddamn if I'm not aching from the pain I've caused her, but it's not enough.

I deserve so much worse, and Brielle...

Fuck man, Brielle.

I've met my fair share of people, and it's rare to find someone who is both honest and loyal. To find someone who

is those things *and* kind? Unjudging and just... more than you knew to exist?

That shit's unheard of.

She deserves the fucking world.

A sad little smile curves those lips of hers and it serves as a cupid's arrow through my chest, but the deadly one. The one with the red tip, coated in poison that eats away at your organs.

Baby girl... fuck.

I jog down the stairs and straight to her.

Her smile is soft and knowing, and she pushes off the side. "Took you long enough."

"Tell me you're not trying to leave."

"I'm not trying to leave," she whispers. "But you needed a little push to get you ahead in the game."

I dart forward, wrapping my arm around her shoulder, my free hand coming up to the marking on her temple. "I'm so fucking sorry. I didn't mean... I can't fucking believe..."

"I know." She grips my wrist, pulling it to her mouth to kiss the edge of my tattoo there.

I dip, lifting her by the ass, holding her tiny body in my arms.

As if she's meant to be right here, in my grasp, her legs need no leading, her arms no guidance, both wrapping around me for a better grasp. A stronger hold.

A fucking greedy grip.

As I stare at her, I'm overcome by the shit I caused, and my chin falls to my chest, but my baby, she doesn't allow it.

She does what I do to her, using her knuckles to force my eyes to hers. "Yeah," she whispers. "You were a complete ass to me, and in front of everyone."

My ribs ache and I squeeze her tighter. “I can’t believe I did this to you.” My hand goes back to the bruising on her face. “I never wanted to hurt you, and the shit I said to you.” My voice cracks. “I’m so fucking sorry, baby.”

“I know,” she rasps.

“I’m a bastard.”

“And I’m going blind.”

My eyes fly to hers, my organs seizing.

“Baby...” I shake my head, everything inside me aching for the gorgeous girl in my arms.

She offers a small smile, but it does nothing.

She told me this the other night, my brother confirmed it in his words earlier, but I didn’t allow her to explain, refused to hear what she was trying to tell me, blocked her out when she was being vulnerable and sharing her best-kept secret in a room full of assholes.

I was too busy trying to run her off, like a dumbass who convinced himself that what we had wasn’t far too strong for such a fucking move.

It is.

So much stronger.

Standing here, I’ve never been so desperate or terrified to understand something before. I need to know every little thing, so I wait for her to give me more.

Her fingertips find my chest. “Slide your hand into my hair, where I do, and tell me what you feel.”

I gently spin her, placing her on the front hood in front of me, but she keeps her legs locked tight around my torso.

My grip flexes against her, but my need to know why she asked has me doing exactly what she wanted.

My fingers, though, they find the spot I marked her with first, and she tries not to flinch but fails and my heart jolts with

her.

“Baby—”

“Glide your hand back farther.” She nods her encouragement.

I do, my body trembling with more than I can name when the pads of my fingers skate across slightly raised skin. I move her hair aside, and she tips her head, granting me a better look at the scar.

It’s at a slight angle and spans maybe three inches. It’s not very wide, and isn’t raised all that much, but it’s there.

“Tell me what happened,” I murmur.

“My dad tried to kill me, and I tried to let him,” she admits.

My eyes slide to hers and my body slumps into hers.

“If Bass hadn’t gotten home when he did, he would have. My brother jumped in front of me. The bullet shot across the side of my head and wedged into the muscle of his shoulder. He fell back, and my dad came forward. He hit me with the barrel, three times is all I remember, but I was told it was five.”

I clench my teeth, flexing my jaw as I stare at the most perfect fucking thing I’ve ever seen, touched. Been in the fucking presence of.

Hurt by a man she should have been able to trust.

By a man who was supposed to love her.

And by me, a man who does.

Fuck.

“He cracked my skull. I was in the hospital for a few weeks, couldn’t see at all for the first nine days,” she admits. “I have optic nerve damage and it will never go away. It causes blind spells. We learned that when my anxiety is high, or I get worried or scared or emotionally overloaded, it

happens. My blood pumps too quickly, inflaming the eye, and I lose clarity... or sight completely.”

“Back at your aunt’s, when I found you sleeping outside, you freaked when you woke up...” I remember.

She nods, her eyes softening. “When I opened my eyes, all I saw was darkness, and I thought my sight was gone. I didn’t realize I fell asleep out there.” She grips my cheeks.

All the heavy blinking, the red, swollenness...

“Royce, at the school, I saw you losing control and started to panic. Your brothers tried to keep me away, they knew what might happen, but I didn’t listen. All I saw was you losing yourself. I got free and was going to try to stop you before things got worse.” She pauses, deep creasing framing her face. “I lost sight and tripped. Baby, you didn’t swing and hit me,” she whispers. “I fell forward and *right* when you flung your hand back. I *fell* into it.”

My breath comes out in a hard, panted, huff.

“You were crazed and angry, all you understood was your hand whipped around and you saw me slam to the floor, but it wasn’t your fault. I fell.” Tears fill her eyes and I want to wipe them away.

I never want them clouded from me, changed or—

Okay, I’m a selfish prick.

I want her eyes to fall on me, smile at me, glare at me, even if that means absolutely nothing and no one else. If there’s only one person in the world she can see, I need it to be me.

I swallow, dropping my head to hers, and she pulls in a full breath.

“I went to my place today, the place I took you, by the water,” I tell her. “There were people there.”

Her lips pull in and she waits.

“I lied to you,” I rasp. “I know we’re past that day, but I need you to know it *was* special to me, but I freaked out, panicked like a bitch when I realized I gave you a piece of me I’d never given anyone, that I let you in without consent. So, I invited people there to try to bury it, to downplay what you do to me, and now it’s ruined.”

My eyes open, locking with hers, and I case her face in with my palms. “That’s what I do to special things, I ruin them.”

Broken and pained, she whispers, “Royce—”

“Don’t let me ruin you. I’m not good.”

Her gaze is troubled but clear and sure.

“I’m not and you know it.” I trace over her cheekbone and my body warms.

A long quiet pause stretches between us, and my knuckle finds its way beneath her jaw, bringing those eyes back to me, where they belong.

I tip my head, gliding my thumb along her bottom lip.

She sighs, leaning into my touch with a long, gentle blink, and my muscles tighten with emotions I can’t begin to name but ain’t mad at. Not right now.

I want to feel all she can do to me. I need to.

She pushes closer and my pulse climbs. “I told you the day I met you, Playboy.” Her voice is a low murmur, her chin lifted and lips as close as she can fuckin’ get ‘em. “I’m so sick of good and I don’t want calm. I want a hurricane. I need a nightmare and someone to hold my hand through the darkness that follows. I want raw realness and a catastrophic mess because that’s real life. I need something real and honest, hard-living and so true it hurts to think about. I want the pain that comes with something so deep that I bleed when you’re the one who’s cut.”

“Baby.” I don’t even recognize my voice. It’s deeper than normal, wounded, fucking petrified and ready. Needy. It has

her chest inflating, her shoulders squaring and my baby girl, she pushes closer.

“You were right before and you know it.” She stares at me, into my soul, and whispers, “It’s not the prince I’d go for.”

Fuck me, if those aren’t the magic words. Words I needed but didn’t, ‘cause like she said, I was right, and I knew it when I said it to her.

She repeats the words I spoke to her once with a shaky but sure little laugh. “You’re far from decent and a total dick.”

I hold her as close as possible, an uncontrollable eagerness firing off my every nerve and soaking up any alcohol left inside me. I’m stone-cold fucking sober and staring into the soul that’s bound itself to mine.

“Trust me, Tink. I know.”

She brings her mouth closer to mine, right against my lips. “Make it up to me,” she breathes.

I take her lips as mine.

Because they are.

And so is she.

All fucking mine.

After a moment, she pulls back with a smirk. “Do you get it now?”

“Get what, baby?”

“You can’t push me away. I’m inside you and you know it.” Her voice lowers and with it, my throat bobs. “You couldn’t claw me out if you tried.”

“I will never try again.”

I know nothing is ever so clean and clear, that there’s no such thing as good without a bit bad, no love without heartache, and I’m aware love only grows off the roots of pain, but that doesn’t have to mean it’s fucked.

Loneliness is what brought Brielle here, pain is what drew her to me, and longing is what bonded us together.

Need recognizes need.

Her and I, we need each other.

But the universe decides we're not in the clear yet, that there's another mountain to climb, a massive wave to ride out before we can breathe, and it comes in the form of the roaring engine of a 1969 Mustang Fastback.

I grab her hand and tug her to the porch, an apology in my eyes.

That's when she hears it and hers narrow.

"Is that..."

"Boys will be boys, baby girl."

"Royce."

"Stay back."

"Is this necessary?"

"It's inevitable."

Her glare is sharp and flying over my shoulder, and then my dad comes out of nowhere, wraps her up, and carries her inside.

With a deep breath, I nod my head and spin around, right as the old muscle car whips into view, screeching to a stop not five inches from my shins.

Here we go.

BASS IS OUT OF THE CAR AND IN MY FACE IN FOUR SECONDS flat and tossing a stack of papers in my face. "You got a message for me, Brayshaw? I'm here. Serve it up."

I ignore his bullshit, hold my arms out, and the motherfucker doesn't hesitate like every other person in this place does.

Nah, he takes his shot, catching me clear across the jaw.

I welcome it, knowing damn well I deserve it, but he's far from innocent, too, so he'll get his just the same.

I spit, lick my lips, and grin at the punk.

Jet black hair and jacket to match, he stands fucking tall. Bold.

"Bass fucking Bishop." I creep closer and his fists clench tighter at his sides. "Welcome back, motherfucker."

My right hook flies forward, sending him against the hood of his pretty-ass ride behind him, but not before his foot kicks out, knocking me on my ass at the same time.

I roll to my feet as he does, sliding in to connect with his gut as he catches me in the ribs. Both of us cough, but neither slows down.

Blow after blow, we keep the same pace, trade punches and break through skin. Blood drips down my lips while his flows from above his left eye.

We go in for more, but I switch shit up knowing we could go all night, and when we did tire, it would be at the same damn time.

I would know.

I trained the motherfucker.

I knock him in the ribs, first right, dodging his uppercut, and connect with his left next. He allows himself a single second to breathe, and I use that second to bend my upper body back, twist and spin around him, wrapping him into a headlock.

His next move is to give me all his weight, but I drop us both to the fucking ground before he can and scoot my ass

back until the passenger side door meets my back, offering more balance.

Bass growls, his hands locked on my arms, his legs fighting for dominance he won't get.

But then my hair is pulled from above and my head darts up to meet the Malibu fucking Barbie hanging half out the window.

"The fuck?!" I shout, banging my head against the door to jerk myself free, but she digs her claws in deeper.

"I said stay in your fucking seat!" Bass shouts.

"I'm in *the* fucking seat, you said nothing about the window." The girl smirks and his growl turns into a groan.

"Hey, Pamela Anderson's spawn, get your fucking hands off me or you're gonna have problems."

"Oh." She fake pouts. "I've got plenty of those, what's one more?"

"How 'bout one that ends with a knife in your side?"

Our heads jerk toward the porch to find Raven, Victoria, Maddoc, and Cap all standing there.

Raven flips her knife open, running it along her index finger, her eyes popping up. "Been a while since I've got to use this baby. Give me a reason to."

A rasped, mocking laugh leaves the girl but Bass cuts her off quickly.

"Cut it, rich girl. Let the bitch go."

I tighten my hold, digging my knee into his spine and he jerks, trying to reach back.

He manages to slip around, and then we're rolling again.

We jump to our feet, his grip tight on my stretched collar, until he has my chain locked in his fist.

The motherfucker meets my eyes, and a fire flares in mine.

He knows better than to touch—

He rips it off, my family crest flying somewhere to the left, so I lay his ass out.

He falls back, slamming hard onto the rocks beneath his feet, and I jump on top. I serve him another hard hit to the jaw and his hand shoots up to grip my neck, squeezing, and my airway closes.

But I wink at the bitch, wishing for unconsciousness.

It's only fair I lose it too, right? Like she did?

I let him go, allow him his other hand to fly up and grip me tighter.

The world around me starts to spin, and when a grin starts to split my lips as the gray takes over, his eyes narrow.

The bastard sees what I want and tosses me aside instead, refusing to give it to me.

I cough, choking for air, and he pants, climbing to his feet as I do.

“Are you guys done now?”

Our eyes fly to the porch to find Brielle standing there.

It's Bass who speaks first. “You're in his house...” He trails off, pushing to his full height, and we both slip closer. “I know what this place means to them, to him. If you're inside this house, then you're...” His features pull tight.

She gives a small smile. “Inside his heart?”

Fuck me, my chest pounds heavy.

His jaw tics, the tension on his face doubling. “Brielle,” he edges.

Her eyes find mine and I have to grip the porch railing to keep myself standing.

Baby girl...

Brielle's eyes soften, a small curve to her lips. I don't realize I've moved closer until I'm shoved aside, and Bass slips between us.

He dashes up the steps, grips her by the arm, and pulls.

I lose my shit, dart forward, rip his arm from her body and gently nudge her back.

My brothers come to stand before her, and Bass' eyes shoot wide.

“Are you for fucking real?!” he shouts. “You want to guard her *from me*? That's my fucking sister!”

Brielle's hand lands on Captain's arm and his eyes find mine.

I give him no sign, so when she goes to step around him, he lets her.

She steps closer, toward me, and my gut twists when she inches past. “Bass, please. Don't do this.”

“Seriously?!” is shouted from behind us and all eyes snap that way.

Barbie sits on the edge of the door, her arms folded over the hood. “We drove ten fucking hours through the night to get to you, then you ignore him for days, and that's the first shit you say when he whoops ass in your name?!”

“Shut up!” Bass shouts.

You can spot her eye roll from here. “What, you know you're thinking the same thing!”

He whips around. “I said—”

“Yeah, yeah,” she cuts him off, dropping back in the seat and rolling up the window.

Brielle tips her head, squinting at the car, at the girl. “Who is that?”

“Don't.” He glares at her. “Get in the car, Brielle. Now.”

My heart stops.

She can't leave.

I need her here, *we* need her here.

As if he could hear my inner thoughts, he says to her, "You don't belong here, Brielle. Let's go."

"You're an idiot if you think that's true."

"And you don't know shit," he forces past clenched teeth. "Stay the fuck out of it."

"I know you haven't been to see her, that you don't have someone watching out for her. That you pretty fucking much dropped her and ran and she was miserable before us."

He rushes me, pushing his bloody forehead to mine. "Watch it."

"Nah, motherfucker." I'm getting pissed over my own words, over what she went through. "You watch it. You might not be under our thumb no more, punk, but don't forget where you're at. I could run you over with that sweet little ride of yours, and there ain't shit you could do about it."

"I will—"

I meet his step forward with one of my own. "You'll what?"

"Stop!" Brielle shouts, coming down the stairs and facing off with us both. She frowns from me to him. She looks ready to say something, to shout, but the longer she stands there, staring at him, reality slips back where it belongs, front and fucking center.

This is her brother, her family.

The one person in the world she felt she could—can—depend on. Her safe place.

And she's missed him, she told me so.

What am I supposed to do? Make her choose between me and him? One or the other?

We're no longer in the same place, so how can she have us both?

If she leaves, I'll crumble.

It will break me.

Goddamn it, I might have to follow her.

But my family...

"Stop thinking about what you want, Brielle, and think about what's best for you." Bass glares at her.

I almost feel bad for the dickhead after that, because those are the wrong words to say to the girl who has only ever done what her big brother asked of her.

Brielle comes down the steps, her eyes tight, unease heavy within them, but she's strong, and she's ready to make him understand.

So I step back and let her take the lead.

Brielle

"ARE YOU REALLY GOING TO STAND HERE AND PRETEND YOU know what's best for me?" I ask, but not for a response. "You have no clue what my life has looked like since the day I was sent away, and now I know that all that time you lied to me about the one thing in my life I hated more than our parents." My voice dies down, and my brother's features grow taut. "Do you even know what that was?"

Royce is closer now, too far to touch, but close enough to feel.

My silent support.

My lungs expand. "Not being able to be with you, forced, or so I thought, to be separated *from* you." A low laugh leaves me. "You were all I ever had, Bass. Did you not feel like half of you is missing when we were apart like I did? Are you

really just happy living this lavish life somewhere else? A life I don't even know about where you have a fancy car and drive around with Miss America in your front seat? I mean, am I nothing to you?"

He slips closer, his eyes pleading. "I have done all of this for us both. I came here alone, sent you there, left, found somewhere to create a brand-new fucking life *for us*."

I shake my head. "You might tell yourself this when you're forced to think about it, but it's not true. If you understood me at all, you would have known I didn't need all that. All I needed was my brother."

Bass swallows, a barely audible 'Needed' escaping him.

My back burns with Royce's presence.

He's even closer now.

"Yeah. Needed." I nod. "I don't need you anymore," I admit to myself and him. "I love you, and I want to see and talk to you more, like before, but I don't need you like I need him."

He licks his lips, a strangled look in his eye. "You're leaving with me, Brielle."

My muscles constrict as I stare at my brother. "No. I'm not."

"And look what being here has gotten you."

"That's not fair."

"It never is, Brielle!" he stresses. "It *never* is. It never will be."

Anger swims in my gut. I don't shout, but I'm stern. "Maybe you should go back to whatever it is you found that became more important to you than me and I'll do the same."

My brother, his face falls flat, shocked and he draws back as if I've slapped him and maybe it's wrong, but I'm glad. He should feel that.

“For once in my life, I have something I don’t have to let go of like I *had* to let go of you. I have the chance to stay and fight for what I want. Don’t ask me not to. You won’t like what follows.”

Bass glares heavy, and then he suddenly darts out, grabbing Royce by the collar, and getting into his face. “You’re not playing your fucking games with my sister.”

This time Maddoc is quick to hop up on the steps and throws himself between them. Their chests hit, but Bass doesn’t push.

Maddoc’s voice is low and clear, a chilling calm. “Touch my brother again, and I’ll roll your car down a hill with the blonde still inside.”

“You both need to fucking breathe a minute.” Cap steps up, looking from Bass to Royce.

Royce shakes his head. “I’m gonna find my fucking necklace this chump ripped off.”

He steps off the porch, his brothers following him, and I turn to my brother, but the girl inside the gorgeous, shiny black vehicle catches my eyes. She winks, refocusing on her phone in the next second.

“Should you maybe see if she wants to get out?”

“No,” Bass answers instantly, frowning her way. “She can sit there.”

“That’s kind of rude.”

“Trust me, she could use a little nudge off of her Prada pedestal,” he grumbles, but a heavy sigh follows. He pins me with a quizzical look, a question he doesn’t have to ask.

I nod, and he drags his hands down his face, a low cursed ‘fuck’ following.

Raven steps down the stairs, now standing off with my brother, her friend. “What the fuck are you doin’, Bishop?”

“That’s my sister, Carver.” Bass frowns.

Raven's gaze narrows. "It's Brayshaw, and you might want to remember that."

His lips twitch, a softness taking over him, and she scoffs a low laugh.

"Congratulations, *Brayshaw*." My brother grins at her. "I bet he's as beautiful and strong as his mother."

She looks to him, a cloud covering her eyes. "Thank you, for all you did for me and more," she rasps. "But fuck you for what you're doing right now. Brielle is family. She stays."

She walks inside the house, the door slams shut behind her and my brother laughs lightly, but it's swallowed when he meets my gaze. "You don't belong here, you heard him say it too, and I'm sorry, but it's true. You don't."

"How can you stand there and say it so sure?" Anger envelops me, but disappointment weighs down my words. "The last time you saw me, you clearly saw a weak little girl, fragile and frail, but that's not who I am. You hardly know me anymore, Bass." I begin stepping backward up the steps. "And lately, I've realized, that I... I don't know you at all."

His shoulders fall with his features, but I don't stand there and wait for whatever it is that's weighed him down. Our damaged relationship is his fault, not mine.

"Yo, what's this shit?"

We turn to find Maddoc lifting the papers off the ground, the one's Bass threw.

As if his memory was jogged, he makes his way over there, tearing a few off the ground and thrusting them into Royce's chest. "Ask your fuckin' brother."

He's met with a growl and slight shove.

Royce looks to the papers as I make my way over. "Fuck is this?" He flips through them, his eyes popping up to Bass. "This ain't me."

Bass narrows his eyes. "No?"

He walks to the back of his car and pops the trunk, nodding toward it. “This either?”

He doesn’t believe him.

We walk around, and the entire trunk is full of the same sheets of paper.

“My car was over-fucking-flowing with this shit this morning.”

I pick up the calendar sheet, the Brayshaw High logo stamped at the top.

“Every single one is July.” Captain frowns.

“And has the twenty-third circled.” Maddoc looks to my brother. “Why?”

“Figured it was a twisted message.” He glares at Royce. “July twenty-third is my birthday.”

“And the first day of the Leo.”

I don’t realize everyone has frozen around me until I look up and around and all eyes are tight, wide, or worried.

“What?” Maddoc asks slowly.

“July twenty-third.” I look between them. “I’m a Cancer. On the twenty-third, the signs change, and Leo takes reign... why is everyone looking at me like that?”

Maddoc darts past us, running up the porch, and disappears into the house.

I look to the others. “What’s wrong?”

“Remember the guy I told you about, who crashed into Raven and your brother, wrecked his ride?”

“His name was Leo.” My eyes widen and I look at my brother.

Royce and Captain share a private look.

“My team, they said they thought they saw someone watching—” He cut off, looking to me. “You were here when

we talked, weren't you?"

Shit.

I look to Royce and he narrows his eyes, stalking closer.

"Tink?"

I open my mouth, but close it. "I talked to Ciara, and she said someone came to the house after I left."

"Who?" His dark eyes flash.

I shrug. "She didn't know. All she said was he was asking questions and brought chocolate cake—" I freeze. "Holy shit." I step toward Royce and his hands find my hips, bringing me into him. My brother glares and looks away from us.

"Coach Von. Royce, he used *chocolate brownie* as his way to get me and Taylor to take the Valium. The person who went to my house brought chocolate cake, and my aunt ended up in the hospital. It had to be this Leo guy."

Captain looks from me to Royce. "The shit with Enoch, it didn't start until you got to her, and doubled once she was here. Coach Von said he wasn't the only one watching her, someone else *wanted* her. Maybe he was led to her."

Bass whips around, his hands folding over his head. "Fuck!"

"What'd you do, Bishop?" Royce growls, releasing me and pushing me to the side.

"What'd I do? What the fuck did you do?! Look at my sister's face!"

The arguing starts again, accusations flying around, and they get in each other's faces again.

Captain slips between them, and now they're all shoving.

"You guys!" They ignore me.

Nobody, however, can ignore the screech of brakes, a large cloud of dusk that flies up in the driveway as Mac whips around it.

His door is thrown open, and he jumps up on the side. “The courts at the school are on fire, alarm didn’t go off.”

“Fuck,” Royce snaps, cutting a warning glance at my brother before he runs forward.

I run with him and he whips around.

“No.” He stops me short.

I glare. “If you don’t let me in with you, I’ll get in my brother’s.”

Royce growls, wraps his arms around me and yanks me to him. “That’s low, baby. Real low.” He kisses me hard and quick. “Get in.”

Cap runs inside while we jam out of the parking lot and toward the school.

As we pull in, the smoke is easily spotted.

Royce jumps out, Mac with him, and then my brother whips in and hops out, too.

“Call the fire department.”

Both Bass and Mac shake their heads, and all at once, they move forward.

Royce pauses a few feet away. “Stay in the car.”

My brother throws a look over his shoulder that says the same damn thing, but it’s not for me.

It’s for the blonde in his front seat.

As soon as they’re out of sight, we both push our doors open and step out, staring up at the dark cloud of smoke coming from the back of the school.

She walks up beside me, turning to me with a smile.

“Brielle Bishop, in the flesh.” She flicks her eyes over me. “You don’t look like the helpless little lamb he’s made you out to be.”

I frown, my heart pounding, but I take deep breaths to settle it. “Not to be rude, but I don’t want to talk to you right now. I don’t even know who you are.”

The corner of her eyes crease slightly. “Really?”

That surprises her?

She faces forward. “Huh.” She nods, walks back to the car, and slips inside.

She puts her earbuds in and closes her eyes.

Well, okay then.

I run my hands through my hair, and walk to the side of Mac’s truck she can’t see, lean against it and take a breath.

What a day it’s been.

What a month it’s been.

I never intended for anything that has happened since I got here to happen, but I can’t say I’m upset over any of it, because it led me to something I couldn’t imagine if I tried.

With that said, I hate that I yelled at my brother like I did. I made him feel like shit and that’s not what I wanted, but I *need* him to understand what I found here—more than I ever dreamed of.

Friends, a life, a lover.

Purpose.

I had none of those things before this place and I couldn’t leave it behind, even if Royce wasn’t part of the equation. He is, thank god, but if he wasn’t, I’d still want to stay for me.

I need my brother to be happy for me because his support means so much to me. I love him and I know all his backlash is coming from the same place, his love for me.

A car rolls up behind Mac’s, the front red bumper showing itself first. Slowly, I step out to look inside it.

I breathe a sigh of relief when August pushes the door open and stands at the edge of it. “August, hey.”

He grins. “How’s it going, Bishop?”

I smile, but it freezes.

Bishop?

I never told him my last name.

Now that I think about it, this isn’t the first time he called me that. Last time I saw him, when he was suddenly at the curb while I was walking, he said it too.

When he offered me a ride and I...

Holy shit.

The ‘chocolate treats’ from his front seat, he had said they were for a friend.

A certain coach, I’m betting?

I take a step backward and he steps with me.

THE SUN CATCHES THE LIGHT OF SOMETHING GOLDEN, AND I look to the necklace around his neck.

A lion.

I force my voice calm. “Let me guess, your zodiac sign?”

He smirks, his eyes tightening. “King of the jungle.”

Flashes of the blood in my brother’s smashed-up car fly through my brain.

August is the longest month of the lion. Of fire.

Of the *Leo*.

Our eyes meet, and for the first time, I see the malicious hint behind his, one I’m not supposed to notice and pretend I don’t.

I grin and he chuckles, dark and deviously.

Shit.

Chapter 35



ROYCE

MAC TOSSES THE FIRE EXTINGUISHER TO THE SIDE, AND WE step back, eyeing the pile of half-burnt trash in the middle of the asphalt, each net still up in flames around the rims, not a hint of fucking sparks anywhere near the buildings or anything else that could possibly catch on fire.

“This is almost worse than if the school was on fire,” Mac says after a moment.

“It’s a slap in the fucking face.” I sigh, looking to Bass.

Mac clasps his hand on my shoulder as he walks by. “I’m gonna go check the back fence, just in case.”

I nod, not looking away from Bishop.

He’s moved a few feet down, the panic offset once we got here and shit was still standing—he was always a solid one to ride regardless of where we were going. Regardless of his urge to bury me alive, he was still all the fuck in.

The bastard’s Brayshaw at heart, even if he is out after his own empire now.

He stands there, rubbing at the back of his neck while staring up at the stars. He’s thinking of Brielle, I’d bet, and he’s fucked in the head, not knowing what to do. Wanting to

do what's right, no doubt, but the answer ain't as clear as he expected it to be.

“Talk to the man, brother. Lay it out. Let him see.”

My ribs constrict, my features pulling. “See what, brother?”

Cap grips my arm, whips me around and locks his hands on my shoulders. “You think Phoenix won't need proof of what's inside someone when Zoey gives her heart away? You think he won't burn the house down to find it?”

My stomach heats, my pulse kicking and a small grin forms. “Come on, Cap. He's a Brayshaw. He'll have the world up in flames.”

Cap chuckles, but levels me with a steady glare. “Say it out loud, brother. Make it real. Take what's yours. She wants you to, and Bass? He needs you to, even if he doesn't realize it yet.”

I pull in a full, aching breath of air and nod. “I got you, Cap.”

I turn and walk closer to Bishop.

He spots me in his peripheral and pulls a smoke from his pocket and up to his mouth.

I leave him to light the thing, wait for him to pull in a hit and as he does, his head drops back with a sigh. “She's fragile, man. You'll destroy her.”

“You think I don't know that?” I laugh, but there ain't a damn thing funny. “That I didn't warn her, fight this all the fucking way? Because I did. You can ask her all about it and you'll hate the shit she shares. I pushed, and pushed again, and that *fragile girl*, she wouldn't hear it. Doesn't accept it. I'm telling you, Bishop, she's stronger than you know, tougher than I ever could have thought, and not like me, not with her fists or body. With her fucking spirit. And mind. And everything in between.”

He looks away, steadies himself and when his eyes come back, they're hardened. "I want to take her with me."

"Well, you're too late and too fucking bad," I shout. "Where you been the last four years? Do you have any fucking clue what she's been going through?"

He shifts, facing me fully, and getting angry all over again. "Don't question me when it comes to my sister. I love her more than anything. More than anyone!"

"Not more than me!" I hit my chest. Fuck, man.

Fuck this.

I dart forward and his eyes narrow farther.

"I love her more than anyone has ever loved a soul. So much so I don't even own mine anymore. She does. She said she's inside me, and she was right. Every fucking bone in my body aches for her. I ain't afraid to admit anymore that I will be nothing, fucking *nothing*, without her. I worship that girl."

"Fucking funny from the guy trying to drive her away," he seethes.

I get in his face, and fuck if the deeper truth doesn't come up like vomit.

"All she ever wanted in her life is her family back, the one fucking person who protected her all her life, who stood with her. The brother she took beatings for—yeah, that happened, and you didn't even fuckin' know—the brother she'd do anything for if asked, and you're gonna fucking ask, Bishop. You're gonna ask, and in the end, she might just go, 'cause *you* are the one she's been waiting for. You're her fucking family." I swallow, taking slow steps back. "I was nothin' but the stand-in."

He curses under his breath, then forces his gaze to mine. "Tell me, Brayshaw, would you jump in front of a bullet for her?"

"And make sure it stopped on me."

He blanches, smashing his lips together, his nostrils flaring. “She told you.”

“About the car, about the bullet, and the life you promised and never delivered on.” His eyes narrow. “She didn’t see it like that, not until she came across your busted-ass Cutlass and realized you weren’t even here. That’s the only reason she came here, by the way. She didn’t do it to disobey or because I forced her. It had nothing to do with me. She came for you.”

He scoffs, but it’s broken. “Yeah, and why’d she stay after that, huh? Why not call me, confront me?”

“I’m bettin’ she did, asshole. Maybe not to call your ass out, but I know she fucking called.”

He grinds his jaw.

“Ain’t it fuckin’ obvious? It’s because she loves you, and she was afraid of what you might say. Because she likes it here, and she scared herself when she realized she *could* be happy in a place you didn’t exist. She saw for the first time all she knew wasn’t all there was. She had more to offer, more to gain.”

He swallows. “She was supposed to live a healthy, happy life. A normal fucking life.”

“She’s half you, man.” I shrug and his eyes cut to mine. “She ain’t fuckin’ normal. She’s meant for more.”

He runs his hands down his face.

“Fuck, man,” he groans. “For real?” His arms fall to his side. “This is for real?”

He stalks over, planting his feet directly in front of mine, and glares. “You love her, completely? Down to your black ass fucking core? Enough to give up everything else, *everyone* else?”

“I see nothing else. I told you, there’s nothing left inside me that’s mine. I’m made up of her and not a damn thing else.” I take a deep breath, but it never reaches my lungs. “But I won’t make her choose between me and her family. I want

her happy, and she'll resent me later if I do. I can't live with that."

"So you'll put her safety above everything, above what you want, and let her go when it's time for us to leave, if she asked you to?" He eyes me.

It's as if he's knocked me in the chest with a two by four.

My body, I fall backward, bumping into a picnic table behind me.

It takes some effort, and my head won't lift, but my eyes do, locking on to his.

My vision fogs, the muscles in my jaw flexing.

My baby girl.

My tiny Tink.

I choke on nothing, my eyes blurred, and I shake my head. "No. I won't let her go. I can't." Fuck, if she chooses to leave, that gives me only one option. I look to my brother a few feet away, and my features pull tight. "I'll have no choice but to go with her."

Bass jerks back, a cracked breath huffs from him and he spins around, his hands coming up to fold over his hair.

"Damn you, Brayshaw." His head falls, his resistant response directed toward the sky. "You had to go and fall in love with my sister."

I breathe a little easier.

He's getting it—this shit's real.

He groans, straightens, and faces me. "As much as I hate to fucking admit it, I know you. I know the way you work, and I know your strength." He licks his lips. "If there is anyone in this fucking world that can protect my sister like me, *better* than me, it's you."

My heart hammers beneath my ribs, so hard he must hear it. “I said I won’t make her choose.”

“Don’t kid yourself, man. She already did,” he says quietly. “I didn’t ask her permission, I told her she was leaving with me, and my sister flat-out refused. She *refused* to leave you.”

The weight of a thousand pounds both falls and lifts over me, sinks my stomach only to feed my soul. “I fucking love her. I’ll never stop.”

“Yeah, man,” he grumbles. “I’m getting that.”

I look to Captain, to Maddoc who has suddenly appeared, at the taut expression he wears.

The fear I feel, the pain I let in, the possibility of tomorrow, and every emotion in between, it flows through them too.

I feel, they feel.

They want this for me, for us.

The final loop.

The calm for our storms.

None of us have it, the purity she brings.

The strength she’ll give and not just me, but all of us.

We’re the five points of the star, and she’s the circle that’ll seal us in.

“Go get your girl, brother.” Maddoc swallows, tipping his chin.

I look to Bass and the dude holds his knuckle out, so fuck me, I lift mine to his.

“Still think you’re a bitch, but I might let you come to my wedding.” I grin.

Bass scoffs a laugh, but it turns into a groan. “Don’t start your ‘Brayshaws start early’ bullshit, man. It’s day one.”

“For you. She’s been mine for a hot minute.”

He flips me off with a laugh.

Captain steps up to Bass, a hard expression on his face.

My brother, he cares for Brielle. He *believes* in her place here, and his words prove it.

“You’re wrong to think she don’t belong.” Cap’s straightforward with Bass, standing tall and sure. “We have power, we have schemes, we have knowledge, what we don’t have are gentle hearts. *She* does. She’ll round us out, and we’ll all be better leaders because of it. Because of her.”

Bishop’s eyes gloss and he gives a hard, curt nod, turning to me.

“The fuck you waiting for, Brayshaw? Don’t make my sister wait like I did. Let her know we’re good, we both know what it’ll mean to her.”

I spin on my heels and dart forward, but something has me pausing and whipping back around.

Bishop chuckles, and damn, it’s a deep one. “You really are fucking whipped.”

He knows as well as I do why I stopped—it’s the look in my girl’s eye that I know I’ll get if her brother walks up beside me. If he gives her what she doesn’t need but desperately wants, even if she hasn’t said it yet. His blessing.

I grin. “I ain’t mad about it.”

He shakes his head and falls in line beside me.

My brothers head out the back gate where Maddoc parked, and the two of us head back toward the front. We don’t have to say we’ll worry about this shit later. It’s agreed upon without a word.

We step around the side of the school, slowing the closer we get when Brielle isn’t easily seen through the windows of Mac’s car.

“Royce...”

“Maybe she’s lying down.”

We step up to it, tear the doors open, but it’s empty.

Bass spins to his car, and his Barbie sits up in the seat, stepping out.

“Where is she?”

“Where is who?” She smirks.

“Fuck this. Let’s head back, grab her on the way.”

“Yeah, that won’t work.” She tips her head. “She didn’t walk.”

Bass crowds her. “What are you talking about?”

She shakes her head with a smirk. “I was scrolling through Instagram and lost services, so I hopped out and walked around a bit, within the five-foot span, so don’t have an aneurism.”

“Keep talking,” he demands.

“Imagine my surprise when I spotted the girl of the hour slipping into the night with a different *knight*.” she looks to the moon with a mocking edge. “Ah, the irony, right?”

“Get to the fucking point, girl.”

“Oh, an angry boy, nice.” She tips her head.

“Cut it,” Bass snaps. “Where’d she go?”

“Hopped in a car.”

“What fucking car?”

She smirks. “I could show you.”

I rush her, but Bass doesn’t let me too close.

She laughs, her eyes sliding to his. “Ah, down boy,” she whispers like a privileged brat. “First, I need your word that you’ll—”

Bass shuts her ass up by slamming his lips into hers, and her eyes shoot wide.

“Quiet, Rich Girl,” he rasps against her lips, snagging the phone from her hand.

I glance between the two, at her, stuck there frozen, mouth parted, hand up even though her phone’s no longer in it.

I laugh and her eyes snap to mine, her face smoothing and going back to the bitchy Barbie. “Damn, Bishop, girl’s got a Brayshaw size hard-on for you.”

He scoffs. “Yeah, try and convince her of that,” he mumbles, looking to her. “Password?”

She blinks, reaching out. “I’ll put it in.”

He pulls it back. “Password.”

She clamps her lips together, looking away when his eyes narrow, and he stalks toward her.

“We don’t have time for this junior high bullshit.”

Her lip curls my way, but her gaze falls when Bass pushes against her. “I haven’t changed it in a while...”

“Password,” he snaps.

She lifts her head, stealing herself. “D-O...”

“M?” he growls.

She clears her throat, nodding. “And add an S.”

“Who’s Dom?”

Bass glares and she slinks away, leaving her phone in his hand.

Whatever just happened is forgotten, as he pulls up the photo.

His face turns white. “Motherfucker.”

I yank it from him, zooming in on the car, and the dead man beside it.

Leo.

Chapter 36



ROYCE

“THERE’S NO WAY SHE’D WALK AWAY WITH A STRANGER. SHE had to know him or think she did. He made his way to her and introduced himself as someone different. Something.”

“He had to have followed her here.” Bass shakes his head. “Think about it, someone had to lock the gates and that door that kept you out of the school those few extra minutes. Coach Von couldn’t do that and be in there at the same time.”

“He knew she’d black out,” I realize, brows drawn. “He knows all about her. He watched her, followed her, and then I showed up in that town and threw him off course, but the fucker knew I’d never walk away from her. He bet on it and set shit off here, then followed her back.”

“And he knew you’d fuck up, and that you’d call me to take her away when you did.” Bass glares, shaking his head. “Punk bitch,” he growls.

This is why we don’t let people into our core group, this shit happens when things go sour.

Bass closes his eyes. “I sent her to my aunt’s to keep her away from this, and it didn’t fucking matter, because I was still fucking in it. Everyone connected to anyone in worlds like this are at risk.” He meets my gaze, hit with a realization of his own. “People we love are safer with us than without.”

He begins to pace and then suddenly freezes.

“Bishop.” I dart toward him.

“He led us here, knowing she’d be with us but not too close. That we’d keep her back just in case.” He starts walking, then breaks out into a jog, and I’m forced to follow.

“Bass!”

“He’s doing this because of me. I know where he’s taken her.”

I fall in line beside him, running at his pace.

“I thought I ended him,” Bass admits. “If he hurts her, I’ll kill him.”

“He touched her.” I clench my phone in my hand. “He’s already dead.”

The only way he’s going anywhere is in a body bag.

Bass skids around the building, jerking to a halt a half court’s space away from the pool and my muscles clench.

“No...”

His eyes hit mine, torment heavy in his.

I don’t have to ask if he’s sure, because her shrill scream fills the night sky, echoes through my body, and boomerangs against my throat.

No!

We speed up, coming to a screeching halt when we’re staring down the barrel of an ancient, M16 rifle from the other side of the fence. “My, how the power has shifted.” Leo smirks. “How you doing, Brayshaw?”

“Royce! Bass!”

We look up to find Brielle standing at the edge of the high dive, her hands held close to her body in fear, her wrists tied.

“It’s okay, baby! Breathe.”

“Don’t lie to her!” Leo barks. “Tell her the truth. This is where she dies.”

“You’re fucking dead!” I roar.

We hop up, gripping the top of the fence, but then he lays on the trigger, several shots ringing out loud, fragments of the fence breaking off and jamming into our skin.

We fall back onto the cement. Brielle screams, but we quickly roll up, spotting the hole now two feet from where we stand.

Leo smirks. “Pops was a sharpshooter, that’s where he picked up his heavy hands. Only thing useful he gave me?” His face flips, anger front and fucking center. “A perfect shot, but you knew that already.”

“Put the gun down, Leo, and I’ll let you die quickly.”

“Shut the fuck up.” He points it at Brielle in warning. “Back off the fence. I know you got hops, Brayshaw, but you think you can jump that bitch before I put a bullet in yours?” He glances at Brielle.

“Leo, come on. I’m fucking sorry. Leave my sister out of this, man!” Bass screams, his grip so tight on the metal links blood trickles down his hands. One of his shoes lifts, tucking in the side.

Leo locks eyes on Bass and fires three rounds toward Brielle while keeping his eyes on us.

Panic flares through our bodies, and we look up as she screams.

He’s shot a whole perfectly through the board, three feet from her. “Jump,” he demands of her.

“Brielle, ignore him!” Bass shouts.

His gun points at us, and he repeats it. “I said jump!”

I look to her, shake my head, but when he lets off a couple our way again, forcing us to drop to the ground, she doesn’t hesitate.

She fucking jumps.

The water splashes onto the cement, her body popping back up to the surface from the momentum, but then she starts to sink, flapping around as much as her tied wrists allow.

Her body, her adrenaline, it's too high. She jerks wildly in the pool.

I flatten myself against the fence as she begins screaming for help, shouting and choking on water.

What—

“Fucking help her!” Bass screams, damn near fucking cries, attempting to climb once more, and this time, Leo's shot is closer, intentionally missed, but closer.

A shard of metal slices through Bass' cheek, but he doesn't flinch. I'm not even sure he's aware of it.

My mind races, eyes glued on Brielle, on the water as it bubbles at the surface.

“Brielle!” I shout, panic brewing in my gut. “Baby, re—”

“Remember this pool, Bishop?” Leo shouts, cutting me off. “Remember your little story of how we were one and the same, kids locked inside ‘cause proof of our daddies' hands were printed across us, how you tried to get in my head, relate to me? How you shared that, like me, you *and your little sister* never learned to swim. How you tossed me in there, watched me drown only to pull me out last second, and toss me in again? And again?” he seethes.

My brows lift and I quickly realize what's happening here.

Bass, he's downright fuckin' terrified, two seconds from being blown apart—he's about to hop this fucking fence and do all he can to save her, gun yielding psycho be damned.

Brielle begins to sink and a shrill zing shoots through my body. I shake my head.

This ain't right.

I remember Brielle's story, about the water, how they never learned.

How she and Bass talked about the two learning to swim, and the sadness she heard in his voice. The pain.

That must have been the night after he nearly killed Leo with a weapon that he realized then could easily be used against himself—water.

But not Brielle.

Not my girl.

Because my baby, I taught her how to float.

He grabs a hold of me, tearing me to him. "You lying prick." Bass' lip curls, his body shaking. "You said you loved her and look at you—"

"Trust me," I beg.

He jerks in my hold, but I yank him tight.

"Fucking trust me, goddamn it!" I hiss through clenched teeth.

Tears fill his eyes. "She's—"

"Faking."

His brows snap together, his nostrils flaring as he whips around, staring.

"She's fucking faking, man," I whisper.

Right? That's what she's doing?

I look to her, at her lifeless body as it floats along the surface.

"Royce," he croaks.

My chest aches, and I grip the fence, the night around me denying my lungs air.

I choke on nothing.

Was I wrong?

Did she panic?

Forget?

Her body. It hasn't moved.

I bang on the fence, and nothing.

Leo's laughter rings in the distance, Bass' desperate plea, and my knees slam against the concrete.

Her hair, it's fanned out at her side, her torso up higher than her arms and legs, and I think her head is tipped just enough to sneak the smallest of breaths through the edge of her lips, but I can't be sure.

My mind says to trust her, that she's brave and smart and a fighter in her own way, but my heart can hardly fucking take it.

"Well, that was sort of anti-climactic." Leo tips his head. He walks to the far corner of the pool, farthest away from us, and allows the gun to hang low on its strap, the weight carrying it to his back. He picks up a long pool pole, a giant net attached to the end.

He walks toward the other side of the deep end, and slips it into the water, drawing closer to her and my hands find the metal links again. "Let's see if she's good and gone, huh?"

Slowly, I pull to my feet, Bass right beside me.

My gut tightens.

Bass shakes his head, ready to say fuck it, and scale the fence. "We can't get over before he reaches her. We can't get over before he reaches for the gun either."

I swallow, licking my lips. I know.

I thought of this already, and there's only one answer.

"He can't shoot us both, Bishop."

In my peripheral, his head snaps my way, but I don't look.

"He's only got one shot left." I force past my lips.

Me.

It has to be me.

If I jump, he'll focus on me, use what I'm not sure he realizes is his last shot on me, and she can get to safety while Bass takes his ass out.

It has to be me.

This must be what I was meant for, why I never grew close to anyone else but her, because I was meant for this moment, born for it.

I was born to love Brielle Bishop, so in the end, I would be here to save her, to give her back what she lost—her family. Her life.

I was born to die for her, and that's something I won't hesitate to do.

Something I'll do with pride, for her.

So, I take a deep breath and say a silent fucking prayer to anyone who might hear.

I wish for my dad and Maybell to step up, because my brothers will need them more than ever after tonight.

I wish for my beautiful niece and the nephew I'll never get to know... that they never question my love for them.

For Raven and Victoria, not to cry for me, because it'll tear their men in two.

I wish for my... for my brothers not to hate me for this, even if I know they might, at least for a while.

I hope that they forgive me and never forget me, that they know how much it hurts to leave them.

That my girl, she'll one day understand the choice I made tonight and why I had to make it.

That none of them feel the ache of my loss, but remember the good, if there's good to be left behind.

That I fucking love them all with all I am.

A sharp breath escapes, a nervous, fucking petrified laugh following, but I force it away.

Brayshaws, we don't fear, we don't back down, and we refuse to lose.

And if there is one thing this world can't afford to lose, it's a soul like Brielle Bishop's.

It would be a darker fucking place without her.

But me?

Me it can.

They can.

They'll be okay.

My vision clouds, my cheeks growing wet.

“Tell your sister I'll love her. Always.”

I scale the fucking fence, dropping to my feet seconds later, and when my eyes lift, my right foot planting a single step ahead of my left, they lock on to Leo's.

He smiles wide, proud, the gun already in his hand.

It's up to Bass now.

Leo readies himself with a grin. “I always knew you were the fool of the three.”

He pulls the trigger, firing off his last and final shot.

And my body hits the ground.

Goodbye, baby girl.

Chapter 37



BRIELLE

A MUFFLED SHOT RINGS ABOVE THE WATER RIGHT AS I CLASP my hand around the pole. I flip over with a loud and sharp gasp.

Leo stands wide-eyed, gun hanging in his hands.

“Brielle!” Is shouted in the darkness, and I recognize my brother’s voice, it’s closer now, but I can’t look away.

“Surprised?” I croak, slowly gliding my other hand over the pole.

Leo frowns.

“You know, you fooled me with the August/Leo thing. You got me. But bringing me here? It doesn’t take much to realize why, now that I know my brother was left to handle you.” I tip my head to the side. “Tell me, do you know what *Leos* fear?” I try to stay calm so I don’t sink, so I don’t black out, how I haven’t already, I don’t know, but I know it’s coming, color is already gone. “They fear being ignored, overlooked... forgotten.”

“Shut the fuck up!” He stiffens, his nostrils flaring.

“Do you know what lions fear?” I slowly swim closer to him.

“I said shut up!”

“Come on, it’s an easy one.”

“Girl, I will—”

“Human beings.”

His jaw sets, and then the lights above us flick on. His head tips back, and he squints, unable to see beyond the square he locked us inside.

The blonde from my brother’s car catches my eye at the edge of the fence line, where the light board is located, and something in me settles, the hint of uncertainty fading completely when footsteps follow.

Leo whips around to find Maddoc and Captain are standing there.

He jerks left, but more come from the other side. His head snaps right to find Micah, Mac, and Andre, but they’re all on the outside of the gate and we’re in here.

The gun points back to me.

I get a solid grip on the bar, my toes brushing the wall of the pool now. “Who will remember you after tonight, Leo?”

He growls, now at the very edge of the pool’s side.

With all my might, I yank on the pole he still holds on to, and into the pool he falls, and this time, there will be no one to help him climb out.

I quickly kick-off, spearing myself across the water so that there’s no possibility of him reaching me, but the tiny bit of relief is short-lived, because then I hear their jarring cries.

I whip around, only halfway to the edge, and my body ceases.

Royce lies on the ground.

His brothers rushing to his side.

It happens in slow motion, they fall to their knees beside him, their eyes growing wide, instant tears and deep screams

following, but it's when my brother's wretched expression finds mine that I double over.

His jaw tight and his chin falls to his chest.

There's a loud cry, and I think it's mine, the screams too, but suddenly everything inside me is numb, so I can't be sure.

I can't even breathe.

And with my next blink, can no longer see.

The darkness takes over, and then the water.

I start to sink, and I don't care to find my way to the surface.

Not if his eyes won't be there waiting for me.

Not if I can no longer seek out his touch, hear his voice, or feel the depths of his heart.

Not if he'll never reach for me again and pull me into his open and wanting arms.

Not if his love is gone.

As I sink to the bottom, and the blackness takes over, his eyes appear behind mine.

Suddenly, everything is right, because he's *right* here.

He's with me.

You die, I die, baby.

That's what I tell him.

And tonight, under the summer moon we lay beneath, in the town we were born in, surrounded by the people that we love...

We let go of the hurt, and the pain, and the ache, and we do it together.

I love you, Royce Brayshaw.

Always.

Chapter 38



BASS

I CAN COUNT ON ONE HAND THE NUMBER OF TIMES I'VE CRIED in my life, and today, looking down at my baby sister's beautiful face, it's number four.

When I think back on our lives, the pain we lived, the darkness we saw, the end result, as much as it hurts to admit, was inevitable, but the path toward it, I'd never have fucking guessed.

All my life, all I ever wanted was to protect my sister, to make sure she understood how important she was to me, as a good brother would, but somehow, with those thoughts constantly sitting in the back of my mind, I dropped the ball. And this is where it brought me.

To the goodbye.

I failed her in more ways than I can count, failed myself, and I'll never forget it.

Never ever forgive myself for it.

But I *will* be better for it. Because of it.

The memory of what happened here will never leave me, and the nightmares will only get worse, but I'll find comfort in knowing my baby sister isn't alone.

That she'll be loved, no matter where she is.

That she'll be safe and without fear.

That no one can ever hurt her again.

And if they tried, they'd have a hell of a fucking wall to get through to do it.

Because my baby sister... she's no Bishop.

She's Brayshaw.

Through and fucking through.

Chapter 39



BRIELLE

I LIFT MY HAND TO MY BROTHER'S BRUISED AND BUSTED FACE, and the tears he's fought hard to keep locked in place slip free, my own following.

"Big brothers aren't supposed to cry."

"Little sisters aren't supposed to die."

"They brought me back." My voice is a scratchy whisper, coated in a heavy layer of overflowing emotion, but my attempt to tease, to lighten the far too grim mood, works a little.

His frown deepens, but his lip twitches. "Yeah and thank *fuck* for that." He trails the bruising on my cheek up to my temple. "What you did was reckless."

My mouth pulls to one side and I nod. "I know."

We both know I can't apologize for it, because I'm not sorry.

His face falls and my lungs ache, but it has nothing to do with my injuries, and everything to do with what I know is coming. "You need to leave."

His eyes snap to mine. "I won't," he swears. "If you say you need me, I won't."

“But...”

He sighs, his face tightening as he shakes his head. “But you’ve already said you don’t, and as hard as it is to admit, I believe you.”

I tilt my head to peek over his shoulder, and meet the eyes of not one, but four Brayshaws.

A low laugh leaves me, and when I wince, everyone winces with me.

My hand falls to clasp around my brother’s, and I look into the eyes of the person who taught me how to love and how to reach for more.

“I will always need you, Bass. No matter who I have...” I swallow. “Or who I lose. I will *always* need my brother, but that doesn’t mean you have to be here *to be here*,” I whisper. “You can go home without guilt and keep working on the happiness you’re chasing but have yet to discover.”

His jaw flexes. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I promise. “You’ve been sitting beside me for four days. I can’t imagine the new world you’ve found can run smoothly without you in it.”

His lips smash together, and he raises a teasing, dark brow. “You have no idea.”

“I object to that statement.”

We look toward the door to find the blonde he rode in with, and he sighs.

She walks in the room, and both Victoria and Raven push to their feet, making her smirk grow, but as her eyes come to mine, it smoothes out. She runs her tongue along her teeth, swallowing. “For the record, by *helpless little lamb*, I meant worried big brother.”

Bass’ brows pull but he doesn’t turn to look at her.

She licks her lips. “So, yeah. See you around, or hopefully, I don’t. No offense, I’m just sort of... trying to shake a stray.”

Bass rolls his eyes and I glance from him to her.

“*No offense*,” I say right back. “But you don’t really seem like his type.”

She gives a close-lipped smile and inhales. “Yeah, I tried that line, too, a time or ten.”

She spins on her wedges, heading for the door, but as she goes to push it open, it opens on its own and a low, whispered, ‘oh shit’ leaves her.

Rolland enters, a man I don’t know at his side, but the Brays seem to know him as they rise with his entrance.

The man looks to my brother, but Bass doesn’t give him the time of day.

“Take it outside,” Bass says without turning away from me. “Now.”

There isn’t a moment’s pause, they follow my brother’s command.

“This new life of yours, it must be pretty interesting.”

A small smile grows on my face, and Bass reaches up to hold my cheek.

“I’ll be back before the end of summer to see you,” he guarantees, an ache in his tone. “Think you could teach your brother how to stay above water?”

My throat grows thick, and more tears fall. “Yeah, I do.”

He chuckles lightly, leaning in to kiss my forehead, and whispers, “Goodbye, baby sister.”

He stands and as he walks away, he pauses, narrowing his eyes and says, “When I call, answer.”

A low, raspy scoff warms the room, followed by a teasing, “Good luck with that shit, Bishop.”

Low laughter follows, and my brother nods, glances around, and walks out.

As he does, I feel no sadness or hurt, not a hint of the abandonment I used to bury, because this time, as he walks away, I know I could go with him and he'd gladly hold the door open for me. This time, I'm okay with his goodbye.

This time, I chose to stay behind, because when I look to my right, into the dark and loving eyes waiting for mine, I know I'm staring at everything in this world I could ever want... and so much more.

Royce freaking Brayshaw.

Chapter 40



ROYCE

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I THOUGHT I KNEW WHAT MY LIFE WOULD be.

I'd be strong and bold and free. Wild and untamed and not a damn thing could stop me, change me, *see me*.

I would hide behind a mask I'd created to protect the one thing I didn't want anyone to touch—the organ beating inside my chest.

I knew what love did, and I wanted none of it.

Love was a thief. It robbed you of your good senses and bred weakness inside the mind. It created doubt and jealousy and downright drives you mad.

That's what I knew of love.

I didn't know shit.

I was never strong or bold or free, not really.

As a kid, I was locked in my own mind, fearing what would come—a day where I'd lose my brothers to someone or something.

I was nothing but a lost boy, and in flew my Tink to rewrite all I thought I knew about strength and freedom.

She saved me *from* me by loving every jacked-up part of me.

Love did make me crazy, it took from me, changed me, but not for the worse. For the better.

Brielle, she is my strength, where my bravery will come from, and only when she's with me, will I ever be free.

Free of fear or loss or pain, of regret.

To love Brielle Bishop is to breathe deep and full, to be loved by her is something too deep to explain.

She smiles, reaching up to run her fingers along my healing wound. "Your eyes are telling a story... you're thinking."

I lower, running my lips along hers only to pull back. "Of you. Always you."

"Yeah, and what about this time, hm?"

"Captain told me what you did, for Enoch and Taylor." I trace my fingertips along her neck. "You helped them find their way back to each other."

"They deserved it. They love each other, and none of what happened was their fault."

"Always the light in the darkness," I whisper, emotion thickening up my tone as I stare at her. "You had to go and one-up me, huh, in my white knight moment?"

She chuckles, but it transitions into a sigh.

She pulls my face down to hers, closing her eyes. "We died together."

"And we were brought back together."

"Right beside each other. Are we zombies now?" she whispers with a laugh, her arms lazily draping around my neck.

"Nah, superheroes maybe."

“Yeah, I think that’s better. Does basically being born again mean we have new birthdays?”

“Oh fuck yeah, Tink. But not new, *two*.” I grin. “I’m cashin’ in on doubles.”

“You would,” she teases, her legs falling open for me.

I settle right between them, hovering over her.

“Baby girl,” I whisper. “I’ve got another rule for you.”

“Let’s hear it, Playboy.”

“Love me forever,” I rasp, a deep ache in my body, a heavy need for her now, her tomorrow, her every day after that. “Let me love you forever. Don’t leave me, always want me, and never stop fighting with me.”

Those eyes, the ones I’ve dreamed of for months, craved, fucking thirsted for, grow so damn warm and full I can hardly stand it. I almost have to look away, but don’t.

I need this from her.

“That’s a lot of rules,” she says softly.

“That’s not an answer.”

She laughs, nudges me on the side so I slowly roll us over, and she gently climbs on top.

My pulse beats heavy under my skin, and her hand comes up to cover my heart, feeling it beat against her, *for* her.

“I know you’re worried, more now than before, I’d bet. I know lying in the hospital bed beside me, you wondered at least once if this is right. You still worry you’re taking from me, by being with me, but do you want to know the truth?” She entwines her free hand with one of mine, lifting it over her heavily beating heart.

“Always,” I rasp, anxiousness creeping up my throat.

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath and a small smile forms along those perfect lips of hers.

When she doesn't move after several seconds, I glide my fingers along the line of her underwear.

“What are you doing, baby?”

That smile, it widens. “I'm staring into your eyes, at the deep brown that changes from golden to cocoa to the night sky.”

My brows pull and then her lashes lift and she smiles.

“You said you wanted to be the guy a girl sees when she closes her eyes at night...”

My breath lodges in my throat as I stare at her.

“Well, I'm wide awake, Playboy. It's ten in the morning, and guess what?” she whispers, tears filling her eyes.

My muscles tighten to the point of pain, but the good kind.

“Baby...”

“I see you, Royce. Every time I close my eyes, every time the darkness creeps in, there you are.” Her voice cracks. “You're not the darkness I can't escape, you're the light I'll forever follow. Without you, my sight means nothing, because you're the only thing I want to see.”

My teeth clamp together, but it does nothing to stop the emotions from showing themselves to the girl above me and I don't even fucking care, 'cause I can trust her with them.

Fully.

Completely.

I push myself up and yank her closer, her smile hitting my lips as I devour them.

She laughs, sighs, and then my baby moans.

Low and long and greedy.

Her arms wrap around me, in a death grip I forever want to feel.

This girl, this life... it's more than I deserve, and I'll never forget that.

"Royce?" she fucking purrs right into my ear, her hand slipping between us. Her head pulls back, her eyes darkening by the fucking second, hitting mine. "Fuck me slow."

I groan, lift her, and slide her right down my shaft in one, full and quick move.

She gasps into my mouth, her head falling back and I dive right in, kissing and licking and sucking on her neck. *My neck.*

She rolls her hips like a champ, dancing on my dick like a ballerina and I meet her every move with more. Always more.

We fuck in slow motion, to the beat of our very own song of silence.

The need in our hearts.

I pull her shirt from her body, tossing it to the side, and she lets her knees slide farther into the mattress.

This, this is the position made for us.

She's right here, in my lap, riding me like a fucking stallion.

My hands slide around her, cupping her ass cheeks and squeezing. Her pussy—*my pussy*—squeezes around me, so I do it again and she pushes into my hands, her clit now rubbing harder against my skin and fuck me, she's growing tighter.

Her eyes close, her head falling to my shoulder, so I try a little something I've got a feeling my girl will like.

I slide my middle finger down her ass crack, and tap on the hole I'll claim and claim soon.

She cries out, loud and needy and her head snaps up, eyes wild.

My smirk is slow, her need is clear.

"Do it," she rasps.

"It'll be tight."

“I said do it.” Her little glare has my balls drawing up, my cock shoving in her farther and she gives a desperate, closed mouth moan.

I press my lips to hers, kissing her greedily and whisper against them, “You fucking got it.”

I glide my finger lower, coating it with her dripping juices at the base of my dick and move right back.

She rides harder, faster and when she comes back down, my finger is waiting. I wedge inside, and she bites into my lip, shaking, fucking trembling.

Her pussy vibrates from the inside out, but she doesn't sit there and ride what's hitting her.

She rides me more.

Pushes for more.

Begs for more.

“Faster,” she pants.

“You said slow.”

She glares, her hands coming up to case in my neck and shoves her tongue in my mouth, grinding and bouncing and I fuuuuck.

I use my other hand to wrap up her tiny body and carefully lay back, her chest coming down flat with mine.

There's a bit of a sting, but I don't care.

I thrust up into her, pinching into her ass with my free fingers and gently moving the one inside her around.

She goes crazy.

She's panting, flying up and down on my dick and I meet her, slapping back harder and harder, and then she screams, loud and long and right in my ear.

It hums inside me, through every nerve and I come with her.

Inside her.

Where every piece of me already lives.

Her body goes limp over me, and she chuckles into my skin, biting and batting at me.

“Oh my god.”

“Oh your Royce.”

She laughs, her chin planting on my pec.

I move the hair stuck to her forehead and she smiles.

“That was—”

“Exactly why my family planned a three-day trip, miles and miles the fuck away, the second the doc cleared us.”

She laughs, and then tips her head with a shy little look in her eyes. “You mean we can’t be free like this all the time?”

My muscles lock and I tug back to see her fully.

All the time.

All the fucking time?

Oh, fuck me, baby. Yes.

I’d already planned it, thought it, but hadn’t mentioned it yet. I don’t want to push her. For once, I wasn’t going to demand but roll with it, it had to be that way after what we just went through—not only did I die for her, but she wanted to die if she lost me.

That’s not normal, that’s some powerful, admittedly fucked-up shit.

But it’s our fucked-up shit.

And we ain’t normal.

We’re Brayshaw.

Me and my baby.

“What?” she teases. “You thought I was gonna wait for you to ask?” She draws circles on my chest. “Maybell already

packed my things, Playboy. They're on the porch by now. I'm here today and have no plans to leave tomorrow." She slides up my chest, her nipples hardening and tickling along my skin. "You're stuck with me, but I'm gonna need a guarantee of a lot more of that or I might change my—"

She yelps, cutting off mid-sentence when I tickle her sides.

"Trust me, Tink. There'll be so much more." I kiss her lips, gliding mine across them. "Even if I have to buy you a muzzle."

She laughs loudly, her forehead falling to mine.

For the millionth time today, she sighs, and it's the very reason my heart beats strong.

"I love you, Brielle Bishop. More than the stars love the darkness, and you love me, too."

"More than you'll ever know," she whispers. "I could lose my sight overnight, and I'd still have more than I could ever ask for in you."

If bones break from the depth of words spoken, mine would be in pieces beneath her.

My fucking queen.

I said I never wanted to be a king, and I meant it, but fuck me if I don't feel like one now.

"You are in my eyes," she breathes, and my features tighten. Slowly she starts grinding her sweet spot over me. "You're the one and only, all-ruling, all-consuming, *king* in mine. *Of mine.*"

"Damn fuckin' straight." I rasp, growl, and groan. And then I flip her on her back, slide inside and hold there.

She gasps, smiles, and tugs my lips to hers.

My fucking girl.

Mine.

“Close your eyes, baby girl,” I whisper a gentle command. “Let me show you how touch is a fuck-ton more powerful than sight could ever be.”

Her moan purrs through my veins, stealing my sanity as I’m about to steal hers.

IT’S ALMOST NOON WHEN WE FINALLY MAKE IT FROM THE shower and down the stairs.

We’re naked and starved, and normally, there would be some fresh cut fruit left from Zoey’s snack or leftover whatever Cap whipped up for breakfast, but there’s nothing quick to grab.

I look around and realize how quiet the house is with everyone gone.

I catch Brielle staring at me, and she gives a soft smile before glancing at the clock.

“Wanna go to the store?” I say and she slides closer, wrapping her arms around me, and my fingers glide into her hair. “We’ll hit a drive-through, and then grab something to cook for tonight’s FaceTime dinner with my brothers?”

She lifts her chin, so I give her what she wants, meeting her lips with mine.

“Or we could have dinner with them,” she says quietly, knowingly. “How fast can Mac get the jet-fueled?”

This girl, she gets me to the core, and she should, it’s made up of her.

I shoot up straight, my phone already in my palm. “Thirty minutes, tops.”

She laughs, tilting her head. “Go pack a bag while I grab mine from the porch?”

I grab her, kiss her, and then we kick our asses into gear.

Chapter 41



ROYCE

ZOEY'S RUNNING STRAIGHT AHEAD, TIPPING HER TOES IN THE water when we creep around the side of the beach house.

As the wave rolls up, I watch Cap move closer to her, even though the water won't even make it to her ankles from where she stands.

Brielle laughs at my side and shoves me forward.

My eyes meet hers, and she shakes her head, nudging me again. "Go on, Uncle Bro. I don't see Maddoc playing in the water. I'd say there are some serious uncle points to be scored right now."

"I fuckin' love you," I growl and run forward.

My brothers do a double take, spotting me coming and first, it's confusion, then grins that take over.

I reach my niece, toss her in the air, and when she lands in my hands with a laugh, her tiny hands wrap around my neck. We run into the open ocean with matching screams of excitement.

"It's coldies!" she shouts with a smile, and I plant a wet kiss on her cheek.

"It is, huh?" I grin, hugging her tight.

Her eyes shoot wide and she kicks her legs. “Papa, oh no!”

I spin to find Maddoc and Captain running this way, my dad now hanging between their arms.

They’re laughing and shouting, and they don’t stop, going down with him.

When they pop up, they make their way toward me with wide smiles.

They shift, standing silently beside me.

My dad shakes his hair out with a smile, a heavy dose of pride clouding his eyes when his hand clamps onto my shoulder. He gives me a good squeeze, steals his granddaughter and off they go in search of seashells.

My brothers and I, we share a look, but nobody says a thing, all of us breathing a little lighter now that we’re together.

I knew they were feeling it too, the heavy of the last few weeks.

These are times we need each other most.

It’s always like this and always will be.

We don’t like to be separated, and we have no reason to be.

We’re brothers. Best friends.

Our girls may be our other, better, more than necessary halves to our souls, but in order to be completely whole, *this* is what we need.

Each other, if for no other reason than to simply stand here, like this.

The three of us by each other’s sides.

The kings to our queens.

The boys of Brayshaw.

I look to Brielle, standing on Raven’s left, Victoria smiling up at them from her seat in the sand.

My girl lifts my nephew in her arms and hugs him tight to her chest, her eyes finding mine from across the water.

It's then I make a silent promise, one she understands if her smile tells me anything.

She knows and trusts that if her sight grows dark, I'll light her fucking soul on fire.

The flame will grow so wide, so bright, everything inside her will burn brighter than the sun could ever glow, then the stars could ever guide.

I will be her light.

And she will be my everything.

She doesn't know it yet, but her cousin, Ciara, is on her way to town.

Come to find out, when Brielle left, her aunt went a bit wild as her paydays stopped coming, and Ciara was forced to deal with the fallout.

She didn't call me, but I could sense my baby girl loved her cousin, even if she was an asshole to her most of the time, so I made sure someone was looking out for her.

Sensing my thoughts, Captain asks, "Maybell get the room ready for the cousin?"

I nod, not taking my eyes off our girls. "Yeah, she'll share with the crazy, Valine, chick. Maybe they'll both learn to chill the fuck out."

We laugh, knowing it's not likely.

Brielle says something to the girls, and then she lowers herself into a seat as Raven and Victoria make their way to us, warm smiles on their faces.

They felt the same loss my brothers did without me here, without *us* here, and they're happy we're whole once again.

I see everything so much clearer now, our purpose. And not just the three of us, but all of us as a unit.

Our girls and their roles alongside us, the power they hold on their own, it's unmatched.

And Brielle, she was the missing link.

She is the pull, the venom others can't wait to drown in.

Victoria, she's the preface, the discoverer. She sees what others can't.

Raven, she's the endgame. The heavy push to the edge.

Together they can stand as a team with unbreakable strengths and equal roles, and that's without us.

With us?

Now that's an entirely different story.

Our family has never been stronger.

And that strength will only grow with time.

Speaking of growing...

“So.” I clap my hands and turn toward Maddoc and Captain, to Raven and Victoria. “How many times I gotta come inside her to put a mini-me in there?”

They gape at me, and all at once, the three of us start laughing and my body eases.

This is it.

This is where it's at.

Brielle

PHOENIX AND ZOEY HAVE BEEN SLEEPING FOR THE LAST HOUR, his little bassinet set up directly beside her bed—she wouldn't lay down without him by her side—and Rolland's just announced he's done for the day as well, so it's just the six of us. The boys are sitting around the mini bonfire at the end of

the deck, waiting for us to return with drinks and snacks in hand.

I spin, snagging a box from my bag on the counter, and when I turn back around, I meet Raven's outstretched hand.

I look from hers to mine and we both laugh.

With a heavyhearted sigh, she sets down the box she was about to give me, looking to the same exact hot chocolate as in my grasp.

She smirks, turns and goes back to grabbing whatever it was Maddoc asked for.

Only after I've got the hot water poured into two mugs, and I'm tearing into the cocoa packets does my gaze snap to hers. "You knew we'd come."

Victoria smiles into her mug, looking between the two of us and Raven laughs, turning to face me with a shrug.

She sighs with a smile. "Yeah, I did."

"How?"

She comes closer, takes the cups from my hands and shocks me when she hugs me, her words hitting my ear. "'Cause you're absolutely fucking perfect for him, Brielle. For us and this place." She pulls back. "Thank you for... loving him like no one else could. For pushing back when he pushed good and hard."

"You don't have to thank me for any of that."

She smiles, grabs her cups, and walks ahead of me. "I know, now come on. Our boys are waiting."

She leaves and Victoria steps in front of me, but her mouth freezes open when a sweet, sleepy, little voice sounds from the bedroom.

"Mommy, I'm thirsty," Zoey calls.

Every muscle in Victoria's body goes limp and she shoots a hand out, allowing me to steady her, to hold her up.

Her eyes are wide and on mine, instant tears pouring down her cheeks.

“Did I... did you hear that?” she dares to whisper, swallowing hard and afraid to look away.

“Mommy...” her daughter calls again.

She squeezes tighter, and my eyes cloud. “Yeah,” I whisper. “I did.”

She gasps through a laugh, spins around to grab a bottle of water and looks back to me.

I smile, reach up and wipe her tears away and she nods.

Off she goes to give her little girl what she needs.

I stare until she disappears, and then grab the mugs off the counter, but before I can spin with them, a heartbeat that matches mine, that knows mine, beats against my back.

His lips bury in my neck as he holds me from behind.

“Baby girl.”

“Baby boy.”

He hums. “That could be fun.”

I chuckle lightly, spinning in his arms and he brings his finger up, now covered in whipped cream. He slips it between my lips, taking them with his in the next movement.

I smile. “I brought the chocolate syrup, too.”

He groans, tugging me closer. “My sweet baby,” he whispers. “I want you.”

“You have me, and you’ll *have* me tonight, but first...”

“Cocoa and candy?”

I laugh. “And a night under the stars with your family.”

He drops his forehead to mine, his hand coming up to subconsciously trace my scar as he does at least four to five times a day now. “Under our stars with *our* family.”

Our.

My chest rises and falls quickly, a slow smile finding my lips, because he's right and I feel it.

The acceptance.

The care.

The love.

What once was five is now six.

The circle now full.

Until the littles grow... then who the hell knows what'll happen.

But now isn't the time to think about that.

Now is the time to enjoy what we have... front row seats to watch as the boys of Brayshaw High grow into the men of the Brayshaw mansion.

"I love you, Tink."

"And I love you."

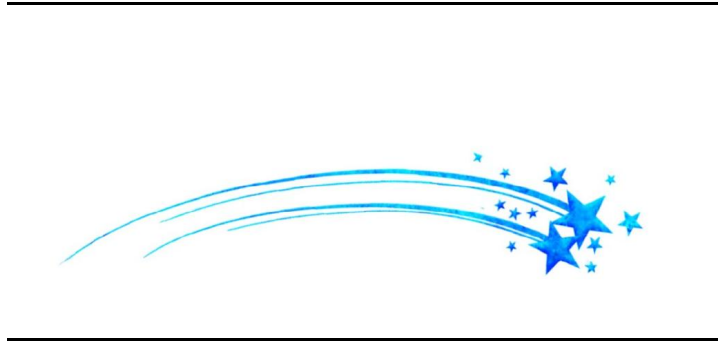
I stare at my man.

My world, it will be painted black and sooner than it should, but I can say now with complete honesty that I'm okay with that, because Royce Brayshaw will be my light.

My night.

My everything.

He's my kind of king.



Epilogue

BRIELLE

SIX MONTHS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE DAY ROYCE AND I CAME home from the hospital, and the beginning of near every night has looked exactly the same.

Royce takes me onto the balcony he had built outside our bedroom window, and we lie back on the large, round couch or sit tall in the king and queens' chairs he refused to pass up that are placed beside it, staring up at the stars. Two of which now belong to us.

My baby bought me my own star and named it Tink. Of course, he said I couldn't be anywhere he wasn't, so he bought himself one two, and named it Lost Boy.

He says we'll forever fly together...among so many other dirty, dirty things.

Tonight though, I'm beyond nervous as a surprise is in the works, one I'm more anxious about than anything ever before.

I always knew the good would one day come, but never expected to feel so eager for the days that follow.

I'm eighteen, graduated early, and will start college in the fall as a second semester freshman, study youth counseling and be the first Brayshaw to go to college. Though, I'm pretty dang sure the others are *this close* to deciding to join me,

especially since the boys would have a chance to play basketball again. They've been asking so many questions and grow more curious by the day, everyone minus Raven. She hated school and is more than happy at home with Phoenix, and the work she's doing to her faster kids around our state – even if it's not something she talks about.

It's so crazy, how my life has changed so much so quickly.

I have a family who watches out for me and will forever be here to help the second I need it.

I have a man whom I love, who loves me, and is only missing one thing in life, something that only *I* can give him.

After tonight, he'll have it all.

It's not uncommon for the family to join us on our balcony, so he's clueless as to what's to come.

Right now, Maddoc and Raven sit on the couch, Victoria and Captain lean against the ledge, and Phoenix is crawling around their feet, Zoey following his every move. Rolland is perched against the door at our backs, and Royce doesn't know it, but Maybell is on the grass way down below us, waiting.

In exactly two minutes, she'll release two dozen balloons that will travel this way with the help of the night's breeze and reveal my greatest secret.

Zoey is now three, and Captain has already decided to keep her home an extra year so that Phoenix and she are close in grades.

Maddoc says he's working on another bodyguard for Zoey – I'm positive he's already accomplished this, but it hasn't been announced yet and I know why.

For his brother.

After tonight, I'm sure they'll share it with us, because tonight, Royce will find out he's going to be a father.

If someone asked me a year ago if I wanted kids, the answer would have been a solid yes, and quickly followed with ‘in ten years or more’.

I felt I needed time to live before I could possibly care for someone else, especially since I spent so many years avoiding life. But then Royce happened, and this place and I realized I could do it, and more, that I wanted to. I wanted to be for someone what my brother was for me, as I tried to be for others as I grew up. As I hope to be for so many more once I finish school and as I try to be now for the girls that come through the home – the light in their darkness, as Royce likes to put it.

I want to be a mother, so there was no question when Royce shared what he wanted for his kids – a bond with their family as tight as the one he shares with his– and asked me if I was ready.

When it comes to him and anything he might want or need, the answer will always be a quick and instant yes. I forever want to give him all of me, as he gives himself the same.

We didn’t know how long it would take or how quickly it could happen, but he would have been okay with it taking forever. He was happy knowing we were on the same page, sticking to the Brayshaw way of the last several decades and starting young so we could be forever strong for them, until they grew and took over, becoming strong for themselves and what will then be their world.

I didn’t know what to expect outside of the obvious I’ve seen, so Raven and Victoria realized it first, and when they insisted on taking me to the doctor, the three of us went together.

That day was full of surprises.

As tonight will be.

Because my man isn’t only getting what he wants, he’s getting double.

Royce stands then, dropping to the ground beside his niece and nephew.

Zoey climbs into his lap while he puts a hand out for Phoenix, who pulls his little self up on wobbly knees, his gummy little smile wide and showing the two teeth that have broken through the bottom.

“Look, Zoey Bear. You see that star, the big bright one?” he whispers.

“I see it.” she smiles, dropping her head onto his shoulder.

“Yeah, it is. If you ever get scared, you find that sucker and think of all the bright places it could lead, yeah?”

“I got you, Uncle Bro.”

The rest of us chuckle, and Royce’s eyes find mine with a wink.

I can’t cover the emotion in mine and his narrow suspiciously, but then Zoey’s little gasp draws him right back to her and I’m safe...for a couple more seconds.

Zoey jumps up and runs to the railing, gripping it tight. She smiles wide and points. “Balloons!”

My stomach flips as I watch Royce’s brows furrow.

He lifts Phoenix into his arms and climbs to his feet, moving to the edge and right as they reach eye level.

Baby blue and pink, little feet stamped along the sides and tiny lights inside them to make sure the imprints aren’t missed.

Maddoc steals his son as Royce spins around, those eyes crashing into mine.

“Baby girl?” he rasps, the hand on the railing tightening.

“Or boy...”

The air leaves his lungs on a heavy, broken laugh.

I stand, and he heads for me, but then behind us, Rolland steps up, two tiny basketballs in his hands and Royce freezes.

His eyes move from the items, to me, and back. “What...” he looks to Raven with a grin. “He knock you up again?”

She laughs but doesn't confirm. “That's not for us.”

Confused he looks to Cap, his grin widening. “Yeah, brother?”

Cap smiles, wrapping his arms around Victoria as he shakes his head.

Royce's face falls, his head snapping toward me and I know that look.

My skin heats, boils and his family laughs, all of them making their way out of here, Rolland setting the basketballs on the now vacant chairs.

Royce rushes me, grips my face in his hands and lifts it toward him.

“Say it,” his command is shaky but strong.

“I'm pregnant,” I whisper instantly. “With twins.”

He slams his mouth into mine, owning me with his lips as he does every morning, all day, and each night.

He kisses me hard but soft, slow but ravaging and then we're on our bed, the walls now soundproofed so my man can forever be his wild, untamed self.

He has my clothes off in seconds, my body laid bare for his eyes only.

He kisses down my neck, breastbone and doesn't stop until he's reached my stomach.

His palms flatten there, spreading wide as his fingers glide over my piercings.

“We were meant for this. For two,” he whispers. “We were two lost and lonely souls, we died together, as two, and came back as two, stronger than before.”

Something cold meets my stomach and I look to his hands, where a neckless now hangs.

It's not dainty, but a thick braided silver to match his only thinner, and there is no heart hanging from it, but a perfect circle, identical to the one that hangs along his neck.

He reaches for me, so I slip my hand in his and he pulls me into a sitting position.

He lays it in my palm, flicking it open to show me the inside, both the right and left sides empty.

"I bought this for you months ago. I wasn't even sure you'd like it, or why the second I saw it I had to have it. I spent hours, fuckin' days even, drove my brothers nuts asking them for help and trying to figure out what to put inside, but nothing seemed like enough, and now I know why." His brown eyes meet mine. "It was meant for them. For twins." A low laugh leaves him and he swallows, his free hand resting low on my abdomen. He bends, his eyes closing as his forehead falls to my belly button.

"Twins." He speaks, but not to me. "Not even while you grow strong enough to meet the world, will you be alone."

My chest swells.

My lonely, lost boy.

Now found, complete, and given exactly what he needed to keep peace inside his heart – affirmation that no matter what, no part of him will ever feel alone.

Not even in the womb.

His eyes hit mine.

My crazed, impatient man.

My rough and ready Brayshaw.

The look in his eyes says he's about to serve me hard, then tender, and I'm so ready for it, but he surprises me when he lifts his head with an arrogant smirk. "I knew my sperm would be the strongest."

I laugh and he swallows it with his lips, but the second I try to undo his jeans, he jerks away, frantically searching for

his phone and keys.

“What are you doing?” I trail him with a grin.

“Sorry, Tink, no time for dick dazing. Clothes back on.”

I laugh. “Why not, where we going?”

His grin is mischievous, and he tosses a duffel bag onto the bed. “This requires a face-to-face drop in.”

My eyes narrow and his smirk grows wider.

“Royce...”

“Up. Now. I gotta tell the others.”

“Royce!” I shout, and he jerks around.

He rushes me, quickly getting in my face, tilting it up to his.

“Don’t be gettin’ cray, baby girl,” he tells me, fighting a grin. “Wouldn’t wanna blindfold ya again.”

I scoff a laugh. “Liar.”

His eyes soften, his thumb coming up to skim along my temple.

We’ve had four visits with a specialist on the East coast, the best of the best according to Rolland, who went searching the second he learned I had optic nerve damage.

The specialist confirmed for Royce what I already knew, there was no fixing what I had, no outrunning the inevitable, but he did say I had more time with my sight than expected, which was good. And even better, the doctor shared there may be a way to prolong it with experimental medicine, so after the babies, we’ll do what we can to try.

“Didn’t you torture my brother enough last time he was here?”

“Nope. I wanna piss in a fresh cut right now.” He tugs me closer. “Let me.”

He grips my wrist, bringing it to his lips before flipping it over to look at my ring.

He's remembering the day he tricked me into marrying him.

I walked outside in one of his hoodies and a pair of leggings ready for what was supposed to be movie night to find the entire family, my brother included, sitting on the grass at the edge of Zoey's garden, Royce and a freaking priest a foot in front of them.

I was shocked, and then I was married.

Let's not forget how I almost passed out when Royce slipped the ring on my finger, and not just any ring, but a custom white gold one.

A silver one.

Spearing from one side to the next are two stars that almost meet in the middle, one slightly raised over the other, each with small diamonds trailing their path, designed to look like shooting stars in the sky.

It's perfect, more meaningful than anyone else could understand.

We were lonely souls, floating around in the dark sky, and like shooting stars, we fell.

And right into each other.

I might not make sense in logical terms, but the sentiment behind it does where we're concerned.

So, yeah. I'm a married, knocked up eighteen year old college student and I couldn't be happier about it.

But hold on...

I pull back, studying Royce. "How do you know where to find Bass? He still hasn't told me where he is."

"Come on now, Tink. I know how to find a man."

Suspicious, I narrow my eyes. "How?"

“Follow the puss, and it shall lead to the punk,” he grins proud.

A chuckle leaves me. “So the blonde whose name I don’t even know?”

“The blonde,” he confirms. “Now, no more talkin’. Let’s go. Bass needs to hear, in person, how I’m the manliest man of us all, not that we’re surprised.”

With a laugh, we do exactly that, and not just me and Royce.

The whole damn family.

Exactly as it should be.

Keep reading for...

Keep reading to find a
Brayshaw Bonus Scene,
Free first chapter,
and MORE!

Note From The Author

(KEEP READING FOR A BRAYSHAW BONUS SCENE)

-

I can't believe we made it to the end!!! Those who discovered Royce for the first time with this book may not know this, but I have been in this world for almost two years!!! I have lived and breathed all things Brayshaw and writing THE END in a world that literally changed my life was SO hard! I cried. Several times. Stressed more than ever before.

Some may have noticed the tiny tweak in timeline from the previous sneak peek in Captain's book (the start of Break Me was no longer four months prior to Cap's HEA), and if you did, trust it was made for the overall benefit of the story. It had to happen and I'm so happy with that decision. I'm so proud of Royce and Brielle's book, and I hope you are as well!

I just want to say that I am so grateful for everyone who took the time to read this book, and any others of mine you may have read as well! I knew from the beginning Royce would be last and that he would give me the most trouble, and man was I right.

Insiders scoop?

I wrote, rewrote, deleted, and flipped this book on its ass to get Royce's story out the way he was telling it in my head. It was

tough, my toughest challenge yet and I'm so extremely proud of the end result. Again, I hope you loved it!!

NOW! If you ARE new to this world, you don't want to miss where it all began. You can find Maddoc and Raven's beginning, Boys of Brayshaw High here: <https://www.meaganbrandy.com/books>

But before you go, I want to leave you with something that maybe you or someone you know may need, and that is the phone number listed below:

American Council of the Blind NATIONAL Hotline: 800-424-8666

A quote from their website (please note, I am not affiliated with this program. This has been included strictly as a resource for those who may need it): "The American Council of the Blind strives to increase the independence, security, equality of opportunity, and quality of life for all blind and visually impaired people."

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Free First Chapter



DEMI

Chemistry, my least favorite subject, but the class I've looked forward to the most since school started last week, and even more so today.

Finally, we're being assigned our lab partners, and I know exactly who mine will be.

Not counting myself, there are only three others left standing, two being uninterested, academically opposed football players while the third is second in our class, also on the team, but possesses the brains *and* the brawn.

It's an obvious choice.

Mr. Brando looks to his paper, ready to announce another pairing, and I can hardly hold in my grin.

"Nico Sykes."

I step toward Alex only to freeze, my frown cutting to Mr. Brando, *who just read off the wrong name!*

"Wait." I glance from Alex's tense expression to Nico, already on his way to the lab table. I turn toward Mr. B,

keeping my voice low. “Are you sure? Shouldn’t I be with—”

“I’m going to stop you right there, Ms. Davenport,” he cuts me off. “While I asked each of you to list the person you’d prefer as a partner, I gave no guarantees. So, if you are about to make a judgment call on one of your peers, I suggest you don’t finish your thought. I’m aware you’re a bit of a teacher’s pet, however, in my class, you won’t make, nor influence my decisions,” he states scornfully.

My ears heat in both anger and embarrassment, but my hair works as a shield to cover it, my expression giving no sign his words meant a damn thing.

Talk about a judgment call.

Asshole.

“Go, Ms. Davenport. Mr. Sykes is seated and ready to go.” He dismisses me, turning to the last two standing.

Defeated, I head for the back of the classroom where my ‘partner’ has chosen to sit – of course the last space up front wasn’t the one he wanted.

And ready to go? Please! He hasn’t even opened his backpack.

Nico is simply sitting there with his elbows on the tabletop, waiting.

As I approach, he pushes off the cement slab, now lazily leaning against his chair with those eyes, as dark and impassive as always, locked on me.

I stop in front of him. “Guess we’re stuck with each other all year.”

His gaze narrows. “Guess we are.”

When I don’t move, he drapes an arm over the back of my seat, tipping his chin.

“Sit down, D. I don’t bite without permission.”

A heavy sigh leaves me as I walk around, dropping beside him. “Sure you do. Third grade, Ms. Fisher’s class, and I’ve got the scar to prove it.” I flip him off with my ring finger, right where his bite mark was left.

“That’s called leaving my mark. I was smart at eight.”

“Too bad it didn’t carry over to eighteen, huh?”

He only stares, not a word spoken, no sign of a functioning train of thought on his flawless face.

I shake my head, pull out my materials, and set them in front of me.

Mr. Brando makes his way to the front of the room to go over how the class will work now that we’ve been paired up, but I lose track of what he’s saying when I notice Alex’s attention pointed in my direction.

He’s focused on Nico, so I peek over to find Nico hasn’t a clue. Or at least he pretends not to as his face is buried in his phone. When I look back, Alex’s stare slides to mine.

His shoulder lifts in a small shrug, and he nods toward Mr. B as if he doesn’t understand the teacher’s choice either.

For the last two years, he and I have been partners, and it’s worked perfectly. We put in equal time and effort, and the end result is less stress and a perfect grade.

This unpredicted switch, though, means I’ll likely have to pull double hours to make up for what, I’m sure, will be a consistently ill-prepared Nico, but hitting the books harder isn’t even the worst part of this.

Being paired with Nico puts a twist in my plan.

It’s senior year, and I was *finally* going to bite the bullet and go full schoolgirl mode on Alex, make my interest obvious since he’s never seemed to catch on. Yes, he typically dates the Round Robin girls, the ones who make their way through all the teams in the school depending on the season and don’t care about the commitment side, but still. It could happen.

We're friends, we run in the same crowd for the most part, and usually go to the same parties. We both want to do well in school and sports and have a good time along the way.

We would work well together.

Alex begins to turn to face forward, but suddenly his glare cuts back to my partner.

In the same second, warm air fans across the hollow of my neck and my body responds to the heat, the knot in my stomach tightening even more when Nico's unexpected whisper follows.

"Not that you could be more obvious, but don't waste your time, D." His voice is low and raspy. "He's already chasing tail, Sandra Black."

An instant frown forms, and I force my eyes to Nico.

"Been braggin' about how he's got it locked in at practice all week." He shrugs, focusing back on his phone.

I glance to Alex again.

He's observing Nico, a question I can't decipher written across his face, and I don't have much time to try either.

Mr. Brando walks up behind him, slapping a palm on his table to get his attention.

Alex turns around while I sit and trip on Nico's words.

He's not one for gossip, or conversation for that matter, so his bothering to mention it must mean it's true.

Sandra Black.

Five-eleven, gorgeous caramel skin, and my competition for this year's valedictorian, not to mention, the nicest person you'll ever meet, Sandra Black.

Awesome.

I flip open my booklet, about to tell Nico what he can help with when his hand covers mine on top of my paper. My eyes flash to his.

“I got the answers.” He doesn’t look away as he slides his already completed packet over with his free hand. “You can thank me later.”

“Thank you?” I deadpan, attempting to tug myself free of his hold, but he presses harder. “For getting one of your fans to do your work for you?”

He shakes his head, a smirk now playing on his full lips.

“Nah.” His grip lessens, his fingertips dragging along my skin with their retreat.

My eyes fall to the contact, a heavy tension tugging at my muscles as I force my gaze back to his, but Nico is no longer looking at me.

His focus has fallen to my chest, and he takes his sweet time bringing it back, leaning the slightest bit closer as he does.

My frown deepens.

“For being the reason lover boy can’t stop slantin’ back.”

With his last word, an angry, almost annoyed, arrogance slips into his gaze, and I realize I’m being mocked.

“I don’t need your help getting his attention.”

“You sure about that? You’re not exactly the forward type.”

I glare. “Don’t pretend you know me.”

“Don’t forget, I do.”

“Did,” I correct in a low hiss. “Past tense.”

Nico leans forward, his frown sliding between mine with unmistakable tenacity, but his lips remain sealed.

I eye him a moment, slowly moving my focus back to my paper. “Whatever, I don’t care what you think of me.”

“Lies.”

His instant response has my head jerking his way again.

Now it's him who glares. "You care what people think, it's why you're friendly to everyone when they don't deserve it. Like Alex Hammons, for example."

"It's called human decency, you should try it sometime, and I didn't ask your opinion, nor do I care what you think of me or Alex or anyone else for that matter."

"You care he's still lookin' back?" he quips.

He is?

A quiet scoff leaves him, confirming my curiosity isn't hidden well.

"Course you do." Leaning even closer, a tight scowl in place as he tips his head all cocky like. "Go on, D. Look at him," he dares. "See if what I'm saying is true, you know you want to."

My lips press into a firm line and I'm damn near twitching to know if he's lying or not, but I cover my interest with a glare while commanding my eyes to my paper. It takes all my strength to keep them there.

Nico's low, snide chuckle is proof my struggle isn't lost on him.

I kick him under the table when five minutes later, he rasps, "Your boy's lookin' again."

Asshole.

**Find and fall hard for Nico and Demi here:*

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Acknowledgments

There are so many to thank in this process!

To **my readers**, thank you! You are literally what keeps me pushing along when things get tough! I am so grateful for you and I hope you follow me into my next adventure...he's really going to HEAT the pages!

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Stefanie and Kelli! I appreciate you guys taking the time, especially during all the crazy right now, to read and help me

through this process!

Sarah Grim Sentz! It happened with the first book in the series, and it's only fitting it happened with the last. You were so beyond amazing and helpful. I can say with 1000% certainty this book would not be what it is without your help!

THANK YOU!

To my **review teams**, thank you for wanting to be a part of this crazy ride with me, and taking the time to spend evenings with my words!

Bloggers and Bookstagrammers, thank you for participating and helping spread the word! I hope you loved Royce and Brielle's story, and are here for what's to follow!

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About the Author

USA Today and Wall Street Journal bestselling author, Meagan Brandy, writes New Adult romance books. She's a candy crazed, jukebox junkie who tends to speak in lyrics. Born and raised in California, she is a married mother of three crazy boys who keep her bouncing from one sports field to another, depending on the season, and she wouldn't have it any other way. Starbucks is her best friend and words are her sanity.

