



FLAWED

The Forsaken Series

HEARTS

CELESTE NIGHT

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Cover: Dark Storm Designs

Editing: Sneaky Ferret Editing

First Edition

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## *Acknowledgments*

I don't really know where to begin with this... time to awkwardly  
through again. First and foremost, I'd like to thank my family bc ... you  
have eaten straight trash since I started this project. I disappear for  
end into my office AKA the cave never to be seen again. I truly am a p  
Jess: Thanks for letting me spitball with you and yelling at me thro  
self-doubt with this book, because there was a ton of it. AND thank  
helping me run a Tiktok and street team!!!

Jacci: Thanks for helping me with my Facebook group and hops... A  
trying to get me organized even though I am a dumpster fire most d  
super impulsive.

Next up, I would like to thank everyone who alpha read for me: Jeni  
Martha, Chelsea, Danielle, and Amanda. All of you helped me to pol  
story, shape it, and mold it into what it is. I made you laugh, cry, and  
me a few times. You tolerated my what-ifs, ramblings, and the  
dropped six chapters out of nowhere. You guys are the best.

My TikTok and street team: You guys rock. Between NSFW gifs, jok  
just hyping me up even on my bad days. Thank you so much for

#allofthethings!

Nixxie: Thanks for being there for this, even on the darkest of days w  
weight of the world was crushing me. Who knew a bad joke about  
lines would become a friendship?

AND finally, thank you, dear reader. Somehow people continue to r  
crazy plots I weave.

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#allofthethings!

Nixxie: Thanks for being there for this, even on the darkest of days when the weight of the world was crushing me. Who knew a bad joke about parallel lines would become a friendship?

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## *Playlist*

*Some songs that inspired me while I was working on this book!*

Today - Smashing Pumpkins

Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous - Good Charlotte

Love-Hate-Sex-Pain – Godsmack

Lovesong – Snake River Conspiracy

Brand New Numb – Motionless In White

like u – Rosenfeld

I Can't Decide - Scissor Sisters

Mount Everest – Labrinth

Cemeterysexxx – Doyle

Hurt Me Harder – Zolita

Venom – Eminem

Words As Weapons – Seether

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*To all of the people that thought the guys in my books were too nice. I  
is for you.*

*I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in th  
things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is rea  
one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light. - Ba  
Brown Taylor*

*To all of the people that thought the guys in my books were too nice. This one is for you.*

*I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light. - Barbara Brown Taylor*

## *Author's Note*



If you have read any of my previous books before, I need to make This is NOT like those. This is a dark college bully romance, emph bullying. The guys are not nice guys, even to our FMC.

I would put in my typical disclaimer of if you are my family don't read that hasn't worked in the past. I will never be able to make eye contact with you at family dinner again. *It's fine.*

A fictional experimental drug is contained within these pages. The term and tease will be used interchangeably for its name.

This is an MMFM why choose romance, meaning that our leading characters have multiple love interests and will not choose between them. The cliffhanger at the end of this book. I promise that there is a happily ever after at the end of the series. Trust the process. For warnings about what material contains, please visit my website, [www.celestenight.com](http://www.celestenight.com).



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## *Character Guide*



Ivy Spencer – Our Main Character

### **The Forsaken**

Vincent – Boss

Angel - Underboss

Rhyker – Enforcer

Camden Barrett

Nikolai Stone

Trey Harrison

### **The Order of The Exalted**

Fletcher Vance

???

### **Other Notables:**

Rosalyn Jensen – Ivy’s BFF

Thomas Spencer - Ivy’s Father

Abraham Wells - Dean of the local college

Caleb Vance – Fletcher’s Grandson

Luthor – Caleb’s Cousin

Arabella – Caleb’s Cousin  
Violet and Emmaline - Arabella’s Friends



Arabella – Caleb’s Cousin

Violet and Emmaline - Arabella’s Friends

## *Prologue*



The burn of the alcohol sliding down my throat made me win  
I watched the ripples glide across the top of the water. A cool  
caressed my skin as I deeply inhaled, the scent of muddy lake water in  
my nostrils. My toes dug into the cool silt of the shoreline and I allow  
mind to wander, moonlight reflecting off of the crystalline surface.

Music drifted down the hill from the house that belonged to son  
grandfather. It was where all the people I once called friends were h  
out, no doubt laughing or dancing. Couples would be sneaking c  
corners to lose themselves in each other, fueled by hormones and liquo  
And here I was, sitting by myself. When I slipped away earlier,  
noticed, or even gave a fuck.

This was supposed to be a celebration, the first party marking not o  
beginning of summer but also our transition between high school and c  
I just couldn't find it inside myself to get excited. After the events of t  
month, all that existed was a deep-seated sense of numbness.

First, there were the nightmares that had been plaguing me. Phantom  
of men surrounding me, touching my body and ripping at my cloth

dreams were fuzzy around the edges and didn't quite make sense. I never recognize who tormented me, but it was all too familiar.

Before the sun rose every morning, I woke up screaming with sweat on my skin and my body shaking, wondering what in the hell that was and what had been happening for months on end, and there was no reprieve in sight. No matter how much I drank or how high I got, there was no relief from the terror. When I asked my father, he simply shrugged it off and told me to be sure it was something my brain had conjured up. "Lay off the horror stories late at night, Ivy."

That was when my father was still around to talk to. Less than a month later, as I sat in my room, my world came crashing down around me after a simple knock at the door. Our housekeeper Maggie answered and was met with federal agents. They swarmed the house with a warrant.

"Mr. Spencer, we need you to come with us. If you could place your hands behind your back," a dark-haired officer calmly told him as he pulled a handgun from his waist.

I watched in shock as my father silently complied with his requests. At that point, I'd fallen to my knees, and the men milling around in the foyer looked at me with sympathy. Maggie, the closest thing I'd ever known to a mother, pulled on my arm to get me to stand and pressed a cold bottle of water into my hands. "Get yourself together," she commanded. "He has one of the best legal teams in the state. I don't know what this is about, but he'll get you out on bail by tomorrow. Mark my words."

And after that, I stood by unmoving as my entire house was trashed and my father was taken away. I'd never met who unceremoniously deposited my father into the back of a black SUV. Initially, my reaction was that there was no way my father was guilty of the crimes the government had charged him with. Sex traff

I couldAfter all, this was the man who raised me. Surely I would know if done something wrong. I'd been his biggest defender for a few overingproclaiming his innocence to anyone who would listen.

bout. ItThen the evidence was leaked to the press. There was no more deny n sight.charges. The lingering glances painted with disgust and hushed worc rom thetoo much to take. The last few weeks of my senior year were miserable he wasMy father's lawyer called me shortly after that to tell me the gove movieswould seek to seize assets and that included my college fund. It was in the coffin and finally, I broke, shattering into a million pieces. Bei th later,didn't bother me, but losing my future did. Well, that and the fa ie door.Maggie had to find new employment. She was one of the last thing its wholeft.

Everyone that I once counted as my friend avoided me. I was certain t r hands was the only reason I'd received an invitation to the party happening le d cuffsa hundred yards away.

My head floated and my vision blurred as the alcohol swam thro ut someveins, giving me a sense of relief that nothing else had been able to lookedHeavy footsteps sounded behind me, and I turned my head to look motherperson approaching.

of waterMicha and I had gone to school together for as long as I could remem e of thewas one of the few people who would still speak to me in passing. He 'll postuncomfortably on his feet, rubbing the back of his neck. "Hey, umn

His voice wavered as he faced me. "My dad just called. Someone set by menyour house and..."

ck of aTime stopped while I allowed his words to sink in. I hadn't moved ou rier waswas one of the things the legal team had bargained for. I was supp icking?

he had have until the end of June to find somewhere new to stay. Tipping  
weeks back, I emptied the rest of the contents before speaking. "How bad is it

Hesitantly, he laid a hand on my shoulder. "Nothing's left."

ing the My eyes burned and my throat was tight, almost like it was difficult  
to breathe. Just count to ten. *Don't let him see you cry. You've cried enough  
in a month.* "Can you take me?" I just needed to see for myself.

He nodded and helped me stand. The world spun a bit as I tried to find  
the nail balance, though if it was from the beverages or the news that my changing  
poor home was gone, I wasn't certain. We shuffled to his car, and he opened  
the door for me, ensuring that I slid inside safely. After I was buckled  
in, I had drove silently, occasionally glancing at me with his mouth pressed into  
a tight line.

What pity Did the drive take twenty minutes or twenty years? It was too long  
and not long enough to prepare me for the riptide of emotions. Fire trucks  
lined the curb outside of where my home once stood. The place I had lived  
through my entire life was gone, and the only thing that remained were charred  
remnants and smoldering embers. I tried to walk onto the property, but Michael  
kept at me, holding onto me tight around the waist as I struggled against him.  
Tears stained my cheeks and it felt like something was lying on my chest.  
That was when I knew nothing would be the same. I just didn't know  
what would happen next.

1, Ivy."

It fire to

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He nodded and helped me stand. The world spun a bit as I tried to find my balance, though if it was from the beverages or the news that my childhood home was gone, I wasn't certain. We shuffled to his car, and he opened the door for me, ensuring that I slid inside safely. After I was buckled in, he drove silently, occasionally glancing at me with his mouth pressed into a thin line.

Did the drive take twenty minutes or twenty years? It was too long and yet not long enough to prepare me for the riptide of emotions. Fire trucks still sat on the curb outside of where my home once stood. The place I had lived my entire life was gone, and the only thing that remained were charred boards and smoldering embers. I tried to walk onto the property, but Micha caught me, holding onto me tight around the waist as I struggled against him. Hot tears stained my cheeks and it felt like something was lying on my chest.

That was when I knew nothing would be the same. I just didn't know what would happen next.

ONE

ONE

## *Ivy*



**H**ow *the mighty have fallen*, I thought as I looked out the car window trying to ignore whatever my aunt was discussing. She was probably saying for the millionth time that she was sorry about everything, it wasn't my fault. I already knew it wasn't, but I couldn't believe I was such an idiot.

My favorite was when she professed my father's innocence, claiming it was all just a mistake, and soon everything would be cleared up. I'd seen the evidence and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he was guilty. Even if he wasn't guilty of the charges stacked against him, he needed to pay for what he'd committed.

Or maybe she was letting me know yet again that "everything happens for a reason; we've just got to trust God's plan." I rolled my eyes at the absurdity of that statement given the situation. I wasn't raised in the church, but there was no way in hell any deity or cosmic force had planned for any of this to happen. If they did, they weren't someone I wanted to talk to anyway. I kept my mouth shut, though. My aunt cherished her faith and who was I to dismiss something that brought her comfort? She was the only family member left.

left, even though I didn't know her well.

The late August heat clung to the car's interior and the air conditioning did nothing to ease it. I rolled the window down a few inches, praying that the wind would be cooler than what was blowing from the dash's vents.

"You know that it's all going to be okay, right?" Regina asked, giving me a worried look from the driver's seat.

I scoffed to myself. She was my father's sister, but we looked nothing alike. She was wiry and thin with heavy makeup coating her face. Some short, bleached-blond hair was teased in the front with enough hairspray

that humidity didn't touch it. If I stared really hard, I could tell my father and I shared the same nose, but that was where the resemblance ended.

I had no actual relationship with her. The entire time I was growing up, no one had mentioned her, not even once. Maybe if my mother was around, she would have, but I had no memories of her either.

The only family I'd ever known was my father, little good that had done for me. In the course of a summer, I'd lost him, all of my friends, and my home. Now I was moving across the state. Sure, I could have tried to get a job and maybe move in with one of my so-called friends, but after they discovered what my dad had done, I'd been shunned even though I wasn't the guilty one.

I guess it was the whole sins of the father thing.

"Yeah, I know it isn't my fault," I mumbled, more to myself than to Regina, clutching the door tightly. "It's just a lot of changes and stuff."

*It was better this way*, I reminded myself. Moving to Clearhaven, North Strathmore meant I got to start over and no one knew who I was or that I was related to Thomas Spencer.

Thoughts of how I ended up here continued to flit through my head, but I shoved them down. *Not right now*, I reminded myself. *You can think*

*everything tonight after you make it through the day.*

ing didWe pulled into my aunt's neighborhood, and I stared at the small that the lining the street. It was a far cry from the life I'd grown accustomed to

Clearhaven was a coastal town of a few thousand people. Most re ig me a worked at either the local steel plant, which was going under, or the mill on the outskirts of town. Everyone knew everyone here. It was g alike.modern-day Mayberry, except they also knew everybody else's busin ow hergossip spread like wildfire. That part didn't bode well for me. No on that theever find out about my past or what had brought me here.

and herOther than my aunt offering me a place to live, Clearhaven offered : other advantage. The local college. It was the only good thing my fat up, noever done: arrange a scholarship that covered all the tuition and fees, e nd, shehad to pay for my textbooks. After my college funds were seiz contacted one of his friends to see if could help arrange somethi one me.Abraham Wells agreed.

ne, andI remembered Dean Wells vaguely from the parties that my father thr job andthat was the extent of it. Clearhaven University was a far cry from coveredLeague schools I had applied to, but I was still grateful. It was bett lty one.nothing, which was what I expected in May.

The plan was to keep my head down, attend classes, and try to find a j an her,next four years would fly by and I could get the hell out of here. Mayl fresh start somewhere else. Somewhere no one knew who my fath n fromSomewhere no one knew who I was.

at I wasWe pulled up in front of a small white shotgun house, and Regina par car near the curb. I hesitantly opened the door, knowing that once I : d and Iout of the vehicle, that was it—the beginning of my new life. It w k aboutexhilarating and nerve-wracking. The clean slate I'd been looking for.

Sweat rolled down my skin from the humidity, and I hoisted my bag over my shoulder, everything I owned inside of the bag. Exiting the vehicle, I approached the house and ascended the cracked concrete stairs, noting the residents' gray peeling paint. *Home sweet home, I guess.* Regina slid her key into the papered front door lock and it swung open.

As if a warm gust of stale air hit me in the face. Walking into the house, it felt so foreign. Scarred hardwood floors lay under my feet and a worn sofa from a different decade sat in the living room. My aunt hurried away, muttering about turning on the window unit "real quick". I brushed back the tears forming in my eyes as I ambled into the small hallway in front of which she had spotted three doorways.

Even if I cautiously, I pushed open one and found a small bathroom. It contained a pale pink tile, a matching tub, and a toilet. I raised my eyebrows in surprise and unsure of what to think. Prior to this moment, I'd been unaware that toilets ever existed.

Well, but I closed the wooden door and opened the next one, finding it empty. In the corner, a small twin bed sat near the window. A gray tub with a lid sat at the end of the bed and a threadbare quilt was laid on top with a plaid blanket folded at the foot. An old alarm clock sat on the windowsill.

My old bedroom consisted of dark wood furniture and carpet so plush that the cushions sank on impact. It was such a drastic departure from the life I had known. One full of parties where you plastered a polite smile on your face behind new dresses, fruity cocktails, powerful men with wandering hands, and secrets that you didn't dare utter to anyone else. This would be safer.

"I'm glad you found your room," my aunt stated happily behind me. "Remember, we can paint it any way you decide."

I gave her a small nod despite the tears in my eyes. She really was trying

backpack we had both been thrust into an unfair situation. “So where do I put the vehicle, II asked, completely overwhelmed.

ing theShe gave me a pat on the back and gestured toward the gray tub. “Fit into the right now. We’ll find a dresser soon at the thrift store. I know that’s a tremendous change for you, but we can make it work.” She fidgeted with her fingers, obviously nervous. “I was thinking we should make a trip home from before your classes start. You’ll need new clothes.”

utteringAnd she wasn’t wrong. Earlier this summer, everything that was mine had been burned in the fire. Two pairs of jeans, three t-shirts, a nearly empty bank account, and a scholarship were all I had to my name, but I couldn’t help but feel guilty. From looking around the house, my aunt didn’t have a job, and I couldn’t allow her to purchase my clothing. I would simply have to search for a job.

at pink“I’ll leave you to settle in tonight and tomorrow we’ll get started. If you want to rest.” The last thing I wanted to do was rest or relax. It just gave me time to think about things better left alone.

it at theDropping my backpack in the corner, I sat on the bed, mattress squishing under me, and let the weight of the world crush me as tears streamed down my face. The temperature inside the house was suffocating, but it wasn’t as heavy as the emotions churning inside of me. I dug my nails into my palms, focusing on the sting and wishing it were just a little more. The temptation to dig through my backpack for something to dull my feelings was there, but I knew I’d turn up empty-handed. Just one more reason to get a job.

Instead, I closed my eyes and laid back, allowing the sharp bite of the ground beneath me while my memories and the heat swallowed me whole. I couldn’t think of the night my father was arrested—the night my entire life was turned upside down—or the night that my childhood home had burned



others?"ground. Just a few short months ago, I'd had it all, riding on the coat  
my father's success—no matter how ill-gotten.

Here for Now all that was left behind was ash.

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ground. Just a few short months ago, I'd had it all, riding on the coattails of my father's success—no matter how ill-gotten. Now all that was left behind was ash.

TWO

TWO

## *Ivy*



*M*en wearing three-piece suits sipped bourbon, murmuring voices and leering at the young woman strapped to the poker table in front of them. Her facial features were cloudy, but she looked so familiar, like I had seen her before. I tried to get up to help her but I knew what would happen next, but my body refused to cooperate. Trying to move my arms and legs took more strength than I had. I opened my mouth to scream for her to move, but my tongue was caught like it was made of glue. I'd been here before and I was trapped in my skin.

Panic engulfed me and ice flooded my veins as one man stood, skimming his fingers along the inner thigh of the woman dressed in her pretty blue cocktail dress. Her mascara ran down her face in black streaks and there was no sound. I could do as he unceremoniously lifted the hem of her skirt. I tried to close my eyes, but it was as if they were glued open.

“Just sit back and enjoy, little lamb,” a deep voice whispered, his breath making my stomach churn. “Soon it will be your turn. I can’t wait to see you’ll look like pinned down and at our mercy.”

*The woman's panties were ripped from her body, exposing her to every part of the room, and yet she still lay there silently. The whispering man's hands brushed along my arms and fear crept up my spine. I tried to turn my head to look at him, but I couldn't.*

*Why couldn't I move? Why couldn't I fucking breathe?*

The alarm clock blared from across the room, pulling me from the nightmare I'd been having. All night, memories of the past blended together, scenarios pulled from the recesses of my mind, things that could have possibly happened. Dreams like this had been occurring since the beginning

*in low*

of summer, haunting me every time I closed my eyes. I would often wake up breathless and shaking, asking myself what in the fuck was that about

*table in*

I was still partying back home, I chalked it up to too much alcohol and too many drugs. Silently I hoped that once I moved here, they would disappear

*vaguely*

I wasn't that lucky.

*cause I*

*ying to*

Shifting on the squeaky bed, I threw my blanket off and rubbed the sleep from my eyes before stumbling toward the source of the noise, trying to

*mouth to*

*of lead.*

figure out how to turn it off. Every muscle in my body ached from the noise and turning all night long, but I ignored it. I didn't have time to think

*ting his*

*cocktail*

nightmares, crappy mattresses, or the fact that I felt like a ninety-year-old

*nothing*

woman. According to the bright red numbers, it was already nine and ten, a full day of job hunting ahead of me.

*to close*

The house was thankfully cooler this morning, and the sound of my phone

*breath*

chattering with someone reverberated down the hallway. Another voice, slightly lower but no less enthusiastic, chimed in. Not quite ready to

*see what*

deal with whatever was happening, I stepped into the bathroom to splash water on my face and twist my hair into a messy bun on top of my head.

Once I'd delayed as long as possible, I finally strolled into the kitchen.

My aunt and someone approximately my age with short brown hair and smoky umber skin were seated around the small round table. The woman was wearing a blue floral sundress and flip-flops. "Ivy, you're awake! You've received the best news this morning! Truly a blessing."

The other person grimaced a little at my aunt's words and caught my eye, plastered a polite smile to my face, one that had been practiced over the years, and replied, "Oh really?" while opening the cabinet near my coffee maker.

While looking for cups, she rambled on, her entire face lit up with excitement. "Well, I had mentioned during Sunday school last week that you were coming to stay with me for a while and how difficult it was to be trying to balance transportation between the two of us. And Mrs. Jensen told me that her son had a car he wasn't using anymore. It needs a lot of work but..."

My aunt continued filling me in on the details of her discussion, waving her hands in the air for emphasis, while I poured coffee into a mug that said "Ivy's kind." I added sugar and powdered creamer, trying to focus on everything she said. It wasn't exactly high-end coffee, but it would have to do.

At that point, her guest looked like she was ready to crawl under the table or through one of the curtained windows, but Regina didn't notice. "Jensen's willing to part with it for a hundred dollars a month! Isn't that a deal? Then you won't have to worry about riding the bus everywhere!" She tucked her hands in her lap and waited for my reply.

I didn't want to seem ungrateful and needed to muster an equal amount of enthusiasm, which with a lack of caffeine, was difficult. This was

updated conversation to have first thing in the morning, especially after not so well. The extremely uncomfortable young woman sitting at the table air and me. "Ms. Spencer, give her a chance to wake up first. Can't you see stranger half asleep on her feet?" Her voice was deep and sultry, her thick southern accent music to my ears. "Forgive me for speaking out of turn, Ivy know this is a lot this early in the morning. Come sit down and drink coffee. My name's Rosalyn."

ver the I arched an eyebrow at her, but followed her advice and joined them at my aunt's table. "Thank you," I mouthed to her and she gave me a subtle wink.

"Rosalyn is Mr. Jensen's granddaughter and you couldn't find a better person with whom to talk. She was raised in the church and can help you meet the right kind of people and how Regina beamed.

s going "Now, now, Ms. Spencer. Who are we to say who the right and wrong Jensen people are? You know, Jesus himself hung out with tax collectors and sinners. If we aren't bringing the good word to everyone, then are we really doing our duty?" Rosalyn shot back with a smile.

ing her My eyebrows had climbed into my hairline by this point and I kept my head "lovecast down, hoping to hide my expression. "You've got a good point, but I'm just wanting to make sure Ivy meets good people." My aunt glanced up at the clock on the wall and was startled. "Oh, the time got away from me. I need to get ready for work. Now, the two of you behave today. Ivy, Rosalyn, go with Mr. Jensen to show you around town and take you to pick up the car in the afternoon." She wrapped her arms around my shoulders. "Be sure to say hello to Mr. Jensen for me."

"Don't worry, I will."

ount of Once my aunt was out of earshot, Rosalyn shot me a serious look and lowered her voice. "Go throw on some clothes and brush your hair. If



leaping to spend another minute in this house, I might scream. Don't get me wrong, I love your aunt, but some days she makes me want to steal the corn she's swine."

I snorted at her as I stood, trying to figure her out. "Yeah, I'm learning, but I can be a little intense."

Thank your



1 at the

After getting dressed in record time, my aunt handed me sixty dollars to spend on clothes at the local thrift shop and for lunch. Gone were the days of eating overpriced salads and shopping at boutiques, which was fine

and I was quickly learning that I would take Rosalyn's company over that of any frenemies any day. "So, you and my aunt..." I prodded while sitting in the passenger seat of the gigantic truck she fondly called Black Betty.

Rosalyn grinned at me and pulled a pair of rose-tinted aviators from the

"Your aunt's a nice lady. I've known her since before I was born. She goes to church with my whole family down at First Community. I mean, she's my dear. I'm a bit zealous, but she means well. The good news for you is that she

is a saint, and that's going to work to your advantage."

I've got She turned up the radio, drowning out any attempts at awkward conversation with hip-hop music. I laid my head back against the leather seat and

as the bass vibrates through my body as I looked out the window. Soon we pulled into a small parking lot that contained a chain budget store, a grocery store, and the local thrift shop named Mustard Seeds. I jumped out of the truck

and brushed the wrinkles from my clothes while I waited on Rosalyn.

ok and

if I have

wrong, I  
She pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head and gave me a big  
munion  
“Don’t be alarmed, but the thrift shop is also run by First Communit  
said as she linked arms with me. We drew closer and the small print  
ing she  
bottom of the banner suddenly made sense. “Just like in the book of M  
we’re moving mountains!” This town might be the death of me. “Yo  
used to it, I promise. Now to find you some clothes,” she whisper  
entered the shop, icy air hitting my skin.

I scoured the racks of clothing and Rosalyn held up items she thought  
llars to  
look good on my short, curvy frame, wiggling her eyebrows at a few  
days of  
more suggestive tops. Once we hit the dress section, her excitement ra  
. I was  
up to an eleven. “You need at least one of these!”

my ex-  
She held up a short black body con dress with cutouts around the mid  
g in the  
my eyes grew wide. “No! What would I need something like th  
Remember, these are clothes for class,” I hissed under my breat  
ie dash.  
thought of crawling beneath the rack of clothing occurred to me briefly  
goes to  
Her hearty chuckle filled the room, and she shook her head. “There is  
can get  
I’m letting you leave here without at least one dress for a night out. I  
e thinks  
seriously think I would let you hide in your bedroom every weeke  
your self-appointed best friend, I would be failing.”

ersation  
“Fine.” I took the dress from her hands, pondering how in the world I  
l let the  
even fit in the thing, and added it to the top of the pile of clothes in m  
pulled  
So far, I had five t-shirts, two pairs of jeans, and one extremely small c  
y store,  
nearly doubled my wardrobe and would have to do with the budget I  
ick and  
“Hey, after this is there anyway—”

Rosalyn cut me off by waving her hand in the air. “Already taken c  
After this, we’re going to lunch—my treat. Later this afternoon we can  
my grandfather’s house to pick up the car. Don’t worry so much, girl!”

g smile. I paid at the small cash register and thought about how it was good t  
y,” she new found, self-proclaimed best friend was paying for lunch consider  
: on the clothing total came up to \$56.45. Despite being worried over money,  
at the w, stark differences between Clearhaven and Strathmore, things were :  
u’ll get up. So far, no one knew who I was and shopping, even if it was at  
l as we named Mustard Seeds, was a break from the chaos of the past several r

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I paid at the small cash register and thought about how it was good that my newfound, self-proclaimed best friend was paying for lunch considering the clothing total came up to \$56.45. Despite being worried over money, and the stark differences between Clearhaven and Strathmore, things were shaping up. So far, no one knew who I was and shopping, even if it was at a store named Mustard Seeds, was a break from the chaos of the past several months.

THREE

THREE

## *Camden*



**E**very muscle in my body ached as I stood beneath the lukewarm shower of water in the locker room. Practice this afternoon had been grueling with the midday sun beating down on us. We were getting ready for the final game of the season in two weeks, and Coach was determined to use this moment to torture us.

As I lathered the soap onto my body, I did a mental checklist of what needed to be done this afternoon. The guys were supposed to be waiting for me in the parking lot because our presence was being requested by Vincent at his house on the east side. After that, as long as orders didn't interfere, we were to grab a bite to eat and hang out. Rinsing off, I tried to focus on letting my muscles relax while I thought about what Vincent wanted. He was the head of the local chapter of the Forsaken and in his eyes, we were nothing more than three college guys who could push his product or shake down people who owed him.

Turning off the tepid jets, I grabbed my towel and quickly dressed, ready to get things over with. I had more important things to focus on, specifically the party we were throwing on Friday night. Football was great, a way to

my inner demons, but I lived for the nights we got together and let I wasn't necessarily about the drinking or the drugs, though those were It was all about finding a toy to use that night, and women lined up in They'd heard the rumors and knew what was in store for them at our h Just the very thought had my pulse quickening and my cock getting h I ignored it. Business came first, then I could let my monsters out to pl Exiting the school into the parking lot, sweat immediately formed on r again, and I swore under my breath while looking for Trey and I glanced down at my phone, questioning where in the hell they were. I

didn't enjoy being left waiting, and they'd promised that for just once n spray lives, they would be on time this afternoon.

1 brutal Tires squealed and the twenty-five-year-old black Mustang Cobra spe he first the empty drag of asphalt with the top down, stopping abruptly next e every "Get in, loser," Trey yelled over the thrum of the bass from inside the

I glared at Niko, who sat in the driver's seat with sunglasses on needed forward, looking completely unbothered. "Why do we never take Trey e in the It actually has a back seat I can fit in comfortably."

s house Niko shrugged one shoulder, his black shirt straining under his muscl e going didn't bother glancing in my direction. *Fucker*. Trey laughed at r ing my hitched his thumb toward the tiny backseat. "Just get in. We don't t ie head car ever because it would break down on the side of the road and yo ng. Just it." He had a good point, but I would never let him know that. In le who grumbled as I folded myself into the car and set my bag next to me.

Niko had spent time and energy completely rebuilding this car. eady to weekend for months, he poured all of his sweat and frustration i ally the project that he now proudly called his baby. Somehow, he'd even scr uncage up enough money to get a new paint job and tinted windows.



oose. ItTrey... He was too busy with other projects. Even though he technically had a plus.a car, it needed repairs more often than not. I'd offered to help him, but he just droves.waved me off, telling me we both had more important things to worry about. "If you're so worried about legroom, go buy yourself a car instead, butcomplaining all the time," Niko mumbled as he adjusted the rearview mirror. I stayed silent and stared up at the sky as we pulled away from the city. I knew Niko was just looking for a fight. Ever since that night, the two of us had been on rocky ground, but neither of us wanted to bring it up. Clinging to Vincentto ignore the tension, I let the wind whip around my face while I thought about everything.

Reliable transportation was in my near future, it just hadn't been made a priority yet. Finding a way to leave my house and ensure my sister's safety was what led me to the Forsaken in the first place. It was a goal to become financially independent in a town with few opportunities, especially legal ones.

The landscape close to the college slowly fell away. The polished buildings and well-manicured lawns slowly morphed into dilapidated structures, and that had seen better years and sidewalks where dandelions sprouted between the cracks. Old men sat on one of the porches, invested in a game of cards, and a tray of beer scattered around a makeshift table. A toddler in nothing but a diaper roamed inside one of the fenced-in yards, no parents in sight, and I turned my head. This was why so many children turned up missing here; most probably too high to even realize the kid had escaped outside.

Everytime Niko cut the engine in front of a creamy yellow house with a white door and grass-green shutters that hadn't been updated since at least the eighties, a rusted chain link fence surrounded the perimeter of the building and several cars were parked against the street curb. Guys we'd grown up with stood

illy had the carport, smoking whatever was available and watching two but heneighborhood girls dance with one another. *Home sweet home.* about. It was no wonder that we had all fallen for Vincent's speech about instead of had an easy way for us to make a little quick cash. Now that I was a mirror. was easy to see through his bullshit, but when you're a fourteen-year-college, with nothing? We had thought he was a god among men. There was no of us food and weed, parties every night, plenty of liquor, and lots of free pissing the beginning, he had a way of making us feel special, but as time went thought things changed. Now he was nothing but a means to an end.

I sighed as I unfolded myself from the car and stretched, dreading what my main would have us do this time. Last time it was to shake down one of the safety shop owners near the Strip who refused to continue to pay for his protection way to The time before that, it was to threaten a drug dealer who had encroached at least little too close to Forsaken territory.

"Let's get this over with. We have plans that have nothing to do with building hellhole," Trey said under his breath as he pushed his glasses up his nose. houses Strolling toward the house, Vincent's right-hand man clutched my shoulder in a thoroughly, catching my attention. "How's practice going? Are we going to win, cans Holden next week?" Angel asked as he tipped back his drink.

in a diaper Angel was probably my favorite one of Vincent's underlings. His demeaned my demeanor made him easy to get along with. It was ironic that in a moment was everything going on, and all the things there were to worry about, asking about the opening game of the season.

awning I gave him a quick smile. "You know we're going to win... as long as we don't get killed. A doesn't kill us first."

and cars "That's the spirit." He patted my back and let me go. "Be careful around today. Something has crawled up his ass, and he's been in a bad

of the Great. That was the last thing I wanted to face, but I couldn't help  
thankful for Angel's heads-up. Niko shook his head and turned on his  
heels, headed for the house with Trey tagging along behind him.

After delaying as long as I could, I finally followed them. As expected,  
old kid Vincent sat in the living room rapidly typing on his phone while other  
guys always hung around on the remaining furniture vying for his attention. Des-  
pite my arrival, he acted like we weren't there while he finished with the  
conversation he was holding. Niko leaned against the wall, his dad  
observing the scene unfolding before us, and Trey shoved his hands  
into his pockets while staring into space. Not nearly as patient as either of  
my elders, he pulled one of the chairs in front of him and sat down, crossing my  
attention. my chest.

As Vincent's icy gaze finally lifted, and he paused for a moment like he  
was trying to see into my soul. If he thought intimidating me would work, he was  
wrong. After nearly eight years, very little scared me. "Who said you could mess  
with my furniture?"

The tension permeating the room ratcheted up to a ten. Vincent  
was exactly the type of man you messed with and no one dared to cross  
him, at least on this side of town. I studied him carefully, taking in his pre-  
sented calm blond hair and the scar running down the left side of his face near his  
eye. Whereas everyone else here dressed like they were headed to the beach,  
he was just getting off work at one of the plants, Vincent always looked like  
he was ready to step into a boardroom. Just another thing that was an illusion.

Trey shifted uncomfortably, messing with the edge of his t-shirt. I gave  
him a confident smirk and leaned back. "Me, but don't worry. I'll put it back  
with you. I was just getting comfortable waiting to see when you would  
lose your loyal subjects. After all, you asked us to be here ten minutes

but be something about it being really important and you couldn't trust  
is heel, else."

Vincent's usually serious expression cracked and he let out a chuckle, eyes crinkling around the corners. "You have some serious balls, Cam. People come into my house, move my furniture, and then act like a little shit. Despite our I'll give you a pass today since, as you mentioned, we have something so important to talk about. Everyone but you three needs to get the hell out of here. Go have a drink or something."

As we waited while people shuffled from the room and Vincent leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. Once we were alone, he finally spoke. "I know a lot of you, but I have a special favor. Someone very important approached me with an experimental drug named tease and I need to offload some of it. It's going to be very lucrative, and I wanted to approach all of you. I know you could use the money given your personal situations and my positions at the college."

My eyebrows raised slightly. "Experimental drug? What are the effects?"

Vincent lifted a hand in the air flippantly, dismissing me. "Not your concern. The only thing I need from you is the distribution of the product. Make sure it's one of those after-game parties?"

Niko inhaled deeply, the muscle in his jaw flexing from whatever he was about to say, and Trey's nervous movements stopped completely. Both of us

were waiting for my reply. "How long do we have before we need to give you an answer?"

Vincent rolled his eyes at me. "Cam, I'm not really asking. Just be direct. Phrasing it that way doesn't mean it was a request. Even though this is a little late."

anyone last year of college, you're still Forsaken until I say so. Remember you  
*Blood in and blood out.*"

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last year of college, you're still Forsaken until I say so. Remember your oath.  
*Blood in and blood out.*"

FOUR

FOUR



## *Niko*



**A**nger simmered beneath my veins the longer Vincent talked. *Blood and blood out.* Yeah, I remembered every word of that stupid oath we took before our balls had even dropped and how easily he persuaded us to take it. He knew the position that each of us was in and how desperate we were to get out of Clearhaven. I flexed my fingers at my feet and watched Cam's reaction to Vincent's words.

Cam talked a big game, but the only reason he was mixed up in this situation was Maya. It was the same way that Vincent had trapped me with Kat and Sergei. Trey was an entirely different story. Between the three of us, our parents weren't exactly winning awards. Two were completely absent, one was an addict, one was an alcoholic, another was in prison, and the last one was dead.

"Let's go," I barked. "We have his orders and there's nothing to discuss."

Vincent's eyes grew wide and the corner of his lips twitched. "So speak." He shoved an envelope in my hand. "You know what to do."

I simply pulled my shades from the top of my head and walked out bothering to respond. He wasn't worth it. The guys knew my opinion entire situation and I had other things to worry about. If he wanted us his drugs, there was nothing I could do to stop him.

In the past, when I'd refused to follow his orders, he'd threatened my but when he saw that didn't work, he switched tactics. The day my came home from a friend's house telling me that Vincent had visited knew I was cornered. My siblings' lives were more important to n fighting against the inevitable. If he wanted this new drug to be at ever

for the next month and we refused, he'd just use someone else to push  
lood in I started the car and waited for Trey and Cam to say their goodl  
fucking everyone, turning up the music playing on the radio as loud as it wo  
ly he'd without busting my speakers. I didn't have the money to replace the  
nd how now. Rent was due next week and Katya's cheerleading fees were su  
ny side to be paid yesterday.

Was my father remotely worried about any of that? No, he wa  
hit was concerned about where he was going to get his next fix. The only re  
tya and hadn't tried to sell my car was that the title was in my name. I'd wait  
us, our was eighteen to purchase it for that reason.

nt. One I started growing impatient as I watched one of the neighborhood gi  
ast one close to Cam and whisper something in his ear. His hand wrapped aro  
waist. He could come back by here later tonight without me. I laid  
else to horn, hoping to get his attention. Trey raced to the car, hopping into tl  
seat before Cam let go of whoever he was touching and waltzed  
you do direction.

He jumped into the back, this time not complaining about the am  
space. "You're being extra grumpy today, Niko baby. I think you



both of my siblings, this year hadn't quite panned out as I'd planned. I pulled graduate from high school, my brother desperately needed tutoring next. I calculus and it was the one subject I wasn't great at.

a night We strolled into the restaurant and I kept my eyes peeled for Rosalyn. One of them was sitting at a booth in the back corner. Opposite her was someone I must have known. She had long auburn hair thrown into a messy bun. As I ordered my food, I

got a peek at her companion, but from that angle, the only thing I could see was the pale skin covering her neck.

I hate it "Who's that with her?" Trey whispered as we paid.

Cam grinned at him, grabbing his cup to fill at the soda fountain. "I had an idea, but how long has it been since someone new moved into town?"

at dark I quietly made my way to the booth and sat beside Rosalyn. Camden

was sitting beside the new girl, essentially caging her in, and Trey pulled a chair over to the end of the booth from a nearby table. Rosalyn ignored us, continuing to chew her food as I gave the new girl a once-over.

and they Her skin was the color of porcelain, and a smattering of freckles accented her nose. Before I could begin fantasizing about what she would look like

if she were mine. "Cammy mercy, with scuffed knees and covered in bite marks, her jade eyes

glared at mine. I shifted in my seat, my breath catching in my throat. She had a skyline-stunning, and I was curious about what her body looked like beneath that baggy shirt hiding her curves.

They aren't Rosalyn cleared her throat and glared at me. "Don't get any ideas. Ivy needs the trouble the three of you bring."

What's she's Trey feigned innocence and held his hand to his chest. "Us? What trouble would we start?"

all had. Cam wrapped his arm over the object of my attention and a pang of jealousy ran through me, though whether it was for the girl or him, I wasn't

ed. To Definitely the girl. “Ros, you know she’s in excellent hands with  
ring in wouldn’t let anything happen to her.”

“Mm hmm. You wouldn’t let anyone else hurt her, but I know how  
n, who work and so does everyone else in Clearhaven. Ivy, are you ready to  
ne with still need to pick up your car.”

tried to I stood up to let Rosalyn out of the booth. “We’re still good for Tuesd  
uld see asked in a low voice, the music from the speakers nearly drowning  
question.

She gave me a small nod. “You know I’ve always got you. Now these  
have not two...”

The redhead pushed at Cam’s body, hoping he’d take the hint. Inst  
t slid in gave her a smirk. “Ask nicely, and I’ll consider moving, or maybe yo  
ir up to trapped here while I finish my food.”

uing to Ivy puffed out her cheeks and blew a breath upward toward the ten  
hair that had escaped into her face. “Can you move? Please?”

ntuated Cam shoved a bite of pizza into his mouth and stood. When she scoo  
t like at of her seat, he caught her by the waist and held her there, leaning clos  
yes me tear. “We’re having a party Friday night. Rosalyn, make sure she com  
he was you.”

ath the I tapped on my knee under the table. This was definitely not the way  
new girl’s heart, or into her panties. From the look of shock on her fa  
doesn’t wasn’t used to taking orders from anyone. “Cam—”

Rosalyn shot me a look, and I closed my mouth. “Don’t worry, your n  
kind of We’ll be there,” she said as she raised one eyebrow at us. “But only l  
of the free beer.”

ealousy I hid my face behind a napkin as I watched Cam’s jaw drop. After all c  
’t sure years, he’d never figured out how to take Rosalyn’s sass. She was on

us. We few women at the college that didn't literally fall to her knees over his boy façade.

Why? Unfortunately for us, she was going to warn Ivy away from us before we had a chance to play. Rosalyn knew all of our secrets and had heard the

She knew all about the gang, drugs, and what we did after the parties on Friday nights.

Both the women left without a backward glance and for the first time while I felt alive. The thrill of the hunt tended to do that.

the other



head, he

Later that night, my phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out to see who would text me at that time of the night. All the kids were in bed and Cam and I were chilling on the couch next to me. Neither of us was in the mood to really do anything else.

**Arabella:** I need a hit.

**Me:** Sucks to suck, I guess.

**Arabella:** Please. I'll pay double. Plus, I can give you what you want.

**Me:** And what would that be?

**Me:** Nevermind. Don't answer that and I'll let you surprise me. I'll be there in fifteen.

I didn't know why she was so obsessed with the guys and me. She'd chosen her the night that I'd chosen her, running out of the room in tears as soon as she pulled out his knife after Cam put her on her knees. Her grandfather would drop dead if he knew that his perfect grandchild who came from a line of these home wanted to be used by three "thugs," as he'd called us.

the

I sighed and grabbed my keys just as Cam caught my wrist. “Where going?”

His gaze was dark and flames danced under my skin at his touch. I shrugged at him. “Just need to deliver something. I’ll be back soon.”

He looked down at where his hand gripped my arm and then dropped before running a hand through his sandy colored hair. “Want me to get you in a you? I can pay for a six-pack on the way back?”

He chewed on his bottom lip, and I turned away from him. “Nah. It shouldn’t take long. I’ll pick up some for us for later.”

He said nothing as I exited the house, not looking over my shoulder. I needed to escape for a little while and clear my head. I needed to get away from the people who

thing I wanted to be was bound by some of Cam’s ridiculous rules and especially after hearing that we were pushing some new shit from Vince

I didn’t really want to see Arabella, but I needed the money. Using her would just be a bonus and if it was stuffed full of cock, then she would be able to talk. I could put all the lip fillers that her grandfather paid for to use. As long as I didn’t touch her pussy, Cam wouldn’t say a word and he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

The ride to the other side of Clearhaven wasn’t long enough as I watched the run-down houses give way and poverty fade. The divide between the rich

the poor was stark. I pulled up in front of her house—well, it was close to the mansion—noting that no one else was home.

I’d been here before, usually to sell drugs to the rich kids that wanted it, but every time it astounded me. The sheer size combined with the fact that the private beachfront screamed wealth, power, and decadence—things

are you wasn't used to. At home, I was just happy if Katya wasn't hogging the bathroom in the morning to do her makeup.

1, but I Shoving some weed, coke, and the new shit in my pockets, I strolled to the yard slowly. Before I even made it down the walkway, the door popped it open and Arabella leaned against the frame, giving me what I assume goes with supposed to be a seductive look. "I knew you would come through Niko."

ouldn't Not that Arabella was unattractive—if you liked women who were not plastic. She had long black hair that hung straight down her back and a perfect hour-glass figure that had been honed by hours in a gym and under a surgeon's scalpel. Yet as she stood in front of me wearing the last nothing but a tiny bikini top that threatened to expose her nipples and bottoms that were a size too small, I felt nothing.

cent. I managed to smirk at her. "Yeah, and I brought some new product to try on your mouth." She reached out and grabbed my hand, leading me inside. I didn't look around at the art hanging on the walls or the crystal chandelier that adorned the ceiling while she dragged me through the space to exterior patio that overlooked the ocean. On the small patio sat a cafe table with two tumblers and a bottle of whiskey that cost more than my rent. She poured the fingers into each glass and offered me one. "So tell me more about the product."

ser to a "I don't know. I got it this afternoon." Pulling out the contents of my pocket,

I watched as her eyes lit up with excitement. She picked up the small bottle and ran her tongue over her bottom lip, then took a small sip of the liquid while watching her dump the contents into a glass on the table top and sniff some before cleaning her face with the back of her hand.

She picked up her glass and leaned back in her chair, pressing her



ing thetogether. “Fuck, Niko. I need more of whatever that is.” I suppressed  
roll as she arched her back toward me, pushing her breasts together  
throughonly thing that would make it better would be your cock inside of me.”  
I swungI wanted a distraction from my life, but wasn’t willing to fuck her. I  
ied wasway she wanted me to. I tossed back the contents of the glass and  
for me,another two inches into the glass. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

Her face fell a little before she dropped to her knees and crawled  
made ofwhere I was sitting. Her hands traveled up my thighs and unzipped my  
: and a“Oh, Niko. Why did you show up then? You must be stressed out to t  
m anddown. You know I can make you feel good.”

wearingI sat unmoving as she wrapped her hand around my cock and pumped  
les andrushed to the area as she moved her hand up and down over the  
barbells. I drank more of the whiskey while I closed my eyes, envi  
ry.” that it was someone else. The grip would be stronger and more callo  
botherocean blue eyes peered up with me, begging me to return the favor.  
ers thatmy hips upward into the hand covering my cock.

r doorsAnd then a whiny voice pulled me from my fantasy. “I’ve never been  
ith twoguy with piercings before. I read an article about Jacob’s—”

red twoI cut off whatever she was going to say by fisting a handful of her and  
he newmyself into her mouth. If she really wanted to make me feel good, th  
would shut the hell up. “Less talk, Arabella. If you’re so desperate  
ockets,dick, then suck it like the slut you are.”

baggieShe moaned as I moved her head up and down my length, he  
m lip. Idisappearing inside her bathing suit bottoms. I closed my eyes, trying  
onto theback into the fantasy that I had conjured moments ago, and zoned  
and. slurping noises. I tangled my fingers further into her hair, trying to i  
: thighsthat it was someone else’s tongue swirling around the head of my

an eyeAnother moan slipped out of Arabella's mouth and I pushed her head  
r. "The down so that her nose was flush with my skin. She gagged, but that w  
' by me as I imagined the scent of the ocean enveloping me and large  
Not the tugging at my balls. I pistoned my hips against her face, wishing t  
poured would suck harder or graze her teeth against me. *God, even her thro  
loose.*

over toEvery noise she made set me back further from coming, but finally  
y pants feel a tingle near my spine. I clenched her hair in my fist and held her  
turn me not giving her a warning. She sputtered and choked as I pulled her of  
spilled from the sides of her bruised lips and her eyes were glassy.

. Blood Tucking myself away, I zipped my pants. "I need to get the fuck out o  
row of I didn't make eye contact with the girl who was still on her knees, cl  
sioning to hold my hand out. "You know the deal, Arabella."

used as She sighed and reached into her bathing suit top, pulling out a wad  
I thrust and slapping it into my palm. "You don't want to hang out longer or g  
swim?"

i with a I narrowed my eyes and turned my head to her, sneering. "Why tl  
would I do that?"

forcing Her face turned red, and she brushed through her mussed up hair w  
hen she hands. "You're an asshole, Niko."

for my I didn't respond to her as I left and headed to my car. I was an asshole.

The worst blowjob in the history of blowjobs didn't result in taking m  
r handoff of anything. In fact, it only aggravated me further. The one perso  
g to get trying to forget about was who I ended up coming to.

out her

magine

y cock.

Another moan slipped out of Arabella's mouth and I pushed her head further down so that her nose was flush with my skin. She gagged, but that was fine by me as I imagined the scent of the ocean enveloping me and larger hands tugging at my balls. I pistoned my hips against her face, wishing that she would suck harder or graze her teeth against me. *God, even her throat was loose.*

Every noise she made set me back further from coming, but finally I could feel a tingle near my spine. I clenched her hair in my fist and held her down, not giving her a warning. She sputtered and choked as I pulled her off. Cum spilled from the sides of her bruised lips and her eyes were glassy.

Tucking myself away, I zipped my pants. "I need to get the fuck out of here." I didn't make eye contact with the girl who was still on her knees, choosing to hold my hand out. "You know the deal, Arabella."

She sighed and reached into her bathing suit top, pulling out a wad of cash and slapping it into my palm. "You don't want to hang out longer or go for a swim?"

I narrowed my eyes and turned my head to her, sneering. "Why the fuck would I do that?"

Her face turned red, and she brushed through her mussed up hair with her hands. "You're an asshole, Niko."

I didn't respond to her as I left and headed to my car. I was an asshole.

The worst blowjob in the history of blowjobs didn't result in taking my mind off of anything. In fact, it only aggravated me further. The one person I was trying to forget about was who I ended up coming to.

FIVE

# FIVE

## *Ivy*



Rosalyn stayed silent as we left the restaurant, unlocking her car with a word and leaving me to think of the three men who had invited themselves to sit at the table in front of us. In one word, they were incredible. Gorgeous with dark eyes that seemed to dissect my every thought. The person whose name I had managed to catch was Cam, the one with the hair that peaked out of his collar. Who had wrapped his large hands around my waist, holding me in place and stealing my breath.

It was unexpected. Part of me wanted to bask in his warmth and the firm muscles pressing at my back. The rational part of me screamed I should run and hide. Something about the way he looked at me was unsettling.

The way all three of them had.

“So, who were they?” I broached as Rosalyn pulled into a parking garage in a neighborhood near the Strip. The area was nice with small colorful buildings that dotted the street. Somehow, the plants that lined the yards flourished rather than withered despite the heat.

Rosalyn’s lips curled up with amusement. “Those three? Well, it seems like you’re acquainted with Camden now. Trey is the one with glasses, and

one whispering in my ear was Niko. I see the stars in your eyes from here. I don't get me wrong, those three are fine as hell, but don't think that they are relationship material. I wasn't joking when I said that trouble with a capital T." That was fine because I wasn't looking for a relationship with anyone right now, much less men who looked at me like they already owned me or could see into my soul.

She slowed the truck and parked in front of the most adorable coral house I'd ever seen with bushes blooming bright pink and ferns hanging from the front porch. All the houses where I was from were painted in "respectable colors" like white or beige, and all the shrubberies were well-manicured evergreens. This neighborhood was unexpected, but I loved it.

I unbuckled my seat belt and followed behind her to the front door, where her words piqued my interest. "What makes them trouble? Just so I have your understanding of why I should avoid them."

She quirked her lips and a small laugh slipped out. She held up a hand. "Well, for one, they're members of the Forsaken. Your aunt would have a field day with that. And two," a second finger joined her first, "let's just say the tales of their sexcapades are legendary and they have very specific tastes."

Curiosity bubbled up inside of me at her words and my cheeks flushed. The thought of Cam pressed against me fluttered through my brain. "Sure." She cut me off with a look as she knocked on the door, plastering a smile on her face.

An older man with short silver hair and pale skin opened the door. "I was wondering when you would get here, Ros. How's my granddaughter doing today?" he asked as he wrapped her in a tight hug. "Good now that I'm here. This is Ivy, Regina's niece she told you about."

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ere and came to see the car,” she said as she squeezed him back.

any of He let her go, and his face lit up with recognition. “That’s right! Ivy, it  
ney are to meet you.” He extended his hand, and I took it awkwardly, unsure  
g for ato say. Thankfully, he didn’t wait for a response. “Now, I’m sure yo  
me like told you it’s a hundred a month, but don’t worry about that. You  
focus on getting a job and starting your classes first.”

cottage He moved aside, letting us into the house. The faint scent of old paper  
rom themy nose as I entered. It was a cozy space filled with a leather armchair  
ectable matching loveseat. The walls were covered with bookshelves over  
-tended with antique hardbacks and my fingers longed to trail along their spine  
see what secrets hid inside the pages.

but her He cleared his throat, drawing my attention back to the present. “Ro  
a clear grandmother isn’t here right now, or she’d probably be the one to sho

In the afternoons, she meets up with some of the other ladies from t  
finger plan events. The car used to belong to our son Marcus, but these c  
have a doesn’t drive.”

just say The carefully painted expression on Rosalyn’s face fell for a fractio  
specific second, but she was quick to fix it. “It’s alright, Pops. She’s busy, a  
doesn’t need our entire family history. You know how she can ge  
d as the threw in a strained chuckle and straightened her dress.

ch as?” He patted her back again and then turned on his heel, walking thro  
grin on house. “Let me grab the keys. It’s not a lot to look at, but it will get yo  
point A to point B. It needs a little bodywork, but I might be able  
‘Well, I around town.’”

favorite Filing away Rosalyn’s reaction to ask about it later, we follow  
g. grandfather out the back door to a small cinder block garage sitting  
out. We alleyway. He lifted the door and dust flew into the air, the contents



building obviously not disturbed for a while. We coughed before inching into the dark space. "Sorry about that. I don't spend as much time out here as you once did."

The older man grabbed the corner of the cloth covering the car and yanked it away, uncovering a small red sedan. It was still in good condition, except for the driver's side door which was caved in. He had mentioned that it needed a little work, but what he said didn't exactly prepare me for this morning and was fine, though. I just needed a car to get to school and work.

Mr. Jensen pressed the key into my palm. "It's a 2003 Honda Civic. Pretty well. The automatic locks don't work right, so you'll have to manually unlock the doors and the driver's side won't open. I'll start asking around to see who I know that can help you."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and gave him a small smile to show my gratitude. It was nothing like the BMW that I had my senior year at school, but none of that mattered. Prior to this morning, I'd resolved to walk or ride the bus for my freshman year of college. "It's perfect, sir. Thank you so much for everything."

He gave me a small nod of his head and patted my back. "Now, until we get everything fixed, you'll have to open the passenger side and crawl through, but hopefully that will be short term. The window on that side won't roll down either." If I was a betting person, I'd say it didn't. Given the extent of the damage, I would be surprised if it did. "You girls better get going. Ros, carry her by Frankie's place to put in an application. I know she needs a cashier."

I wasn't sure who Frankie was, but at this point, it didn't matter. A car payment would be welcome. Between textbooks and now a car payment, I would be nearly anything.

ing into Rosalyn gave her grandfather one last hug and glanced at me. "I'll v  
ere as I you to start the car, we'll drop it off at your aunt's, and then I'll take y  
to Frankie's. You're going to love it."

anked it After unlocking the passenger side door and heaving myself across the  
cept for seats, I put the key into the ignition and started the car with only  
eeded a trouble. Despite the sputtering, I was happy. After I paid the \$1000,  
nent. It mine. It gave me a small sense of freedom and independence for the fi  
in a while.

It runs  
anually  
ound to



My aunt was gone when I parked the small red car in front of her hou  
ow him; in some ways, I was grateful. I needed to figure out how to responc  
of high eternal optimism despite everything feeling so bleak. We hadn't di  
o either what her hours were at work yet, but that was something I needed to f  
. Thank sometime soon.

Rosalyn drove us back toward the Strip and continued several minute  
we can the road until the buildings thinned out. A small turquoise building sai  
l crawl left-hand side of the road with several parking spots in front of it. We  
e might in and I stared for several moments at the mural painted on the side  
with the building, trying to find the courage to get out of the truck.

tter get Rosalyn threw open my door and placed her hands on her hips. "Cc  
erheard let's get this over with. The sooner you have a job, the sooner we get  
out. As your new self-appointed best friend, we have parties to go  
any job things to do."  
uld take

wait for My eyes widened at her words. I wasn't exactly accustomed to having  
ou over anymore. "I wasn't aware you were my friend. I mean, we just n  
morning. We're taking things kind of fast, but I'll accept it," I jok  
bucket jumped out of the truck. "I can use all the allies I can get right now. E  
a little I guess I don't want the next four years to be boring."

, it was She chuckled at my words and turned to the shop. "Oh, I would never  
rst time happen."

She opened the heavy glass door and strode into the establishment v  
directly behind her. Inside was a variety of surfboards, shell necklac  
swimwear in a kaleidoscope of colors that bombarded my senses. A  
woman with purple hair and leathery tan skin sat behind a cash  
ise and, toward the entrance wearing denim shorts and a tie-dye tank top. Sh  
l to her me warily before grinning at my new friend. "Roselyn, no one told  
scussed were coming in today. How's your grandfather?"

ind out Roslyn gave her a hug. "Actually, he's the one who asked me to com  
here. Frankie, she's looking for a job and I heard you need help. Ivy  
s down Spencer's niece, and she just got into town yesterday."

t on the I didn't know what I had expected from someone named Frankie  
turned certainly wasn't a woman my grandmother's age with eggplant-color  
of the The older woman's mouth turned down slightly into a frown. "Well,  
know anything about running a cash register?"

me on, I gave her the most confident smile I could and straightened my sho  
to chill "No, but I'm a fast learner and I really need a job. I was hoping  
to and something that would work with my schedule. I'm starting classes nex  
at the college."

She curtly thrust her hand toward me. "How about we do a trial ton  
afternoon? Be here around noon and we'll see how well we work toget

friends I cautiously took her hand, excitement bubbling up inside of me. Was it  
net this that easy? As long as I passed her test, I could be working before  
ed as I weekend. I would have money to pay for my car note and my books.  
Besides, Perhaps everything would be okay after all.

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her.”

I cautiously took her hand, excitement bubbling up inside of me. Was it really that easy? As long as I passed her test, I could be working before the weekend. I would have money to pay for my car note and my books. Perhaps everything would be okay after all.

SIX

SIX

## *Ivy*



The rest of the week quickly passed by and thankfully gave me little to think about except at night when I was by myself. Days were filled with working at Frankie's shop and the evening was spent with Rosalyn going out drinking, or both.

I discovered that I really enjoyed working with Frankie. She was loud and mouthed, but everyone that walked into the shop loved her. It didn't matter if they were fifteen or sixty-five. Somehow, I managed to pass all the tests with flying colors. However, I still wasn't sure.

On Fridays, the shop closed at six and by the time I was done counting the register and sweeping the sand from the floor, I was exhausted and ready to crawl over the seat of my car and drive home, but fate had other plans.

Rosalyn strolled in wearing a short denim skirt that showed off a good amount of leg, a tight teal crop top, and a pair of flip-flops. In her hand was the tiny black dress she convinced me to purchase at the thrift store. I grimaced at her. "No, absolutely not. I'm tired and just want to go to bed. Do not try to squeeze into that."



Frankie snorted behind me at my commentary, but continued straight  
rack of swimsuits nearby, acting like she wasn't listening to every word  
slipped out of my mouth. Rosalyn simply grinned and pushed the door  
toward me. "We have a party to go to and your presence is being requested."  
She leveled her eyes at me. "Besides, you don't exactly say no to  
members of the Forsaken. Cam will never let me live it down if you're not  
there."

My mouth went dry at her words. I hadn't really thought of the threat  
from lunch this week. Well, except a few stray passing thoughts, but I was  
busy. *I'm here for a fresh start and to go to college, not some entanglement  
with members of a gang.* Rosalyn's words about me steering clear of  
and whatever their specific tastes in the bedroom echoed in my head.  
I did the intensity of Cam's blue eyes and the black ink trailing up her  
arms. What harm would a few drinks and some light flirting do?  
Shaking my head, I sighed and logic won out. "I really am tired.  
I thought you told me to avoid them."

Frankie cleared her throat and looked at the ceiling. "Girl, you still have  
to learn about Clearhaven. Your friend is right. You can't ignore an invitation  
from the Forsaken. They can either make your life heaven or hell."  
I was ushered me back to a room in the back corner of the small building  
and other changed. I don't know how you're going to fit into that thing," she meant  
mainly to herself.

Slipping into the dress was surprisingly easy as the fabric stretched  
every curve I had. The air conditioning of the shop hit every exposed part of  
skin, chilling me. My nerves ratcheted up to a ten, and I tugged at the hem,  
willing it to grow longer. When I stepped out into Frankie's line of

ening ashe clicked her tongue and pulled a pair of sandals from a rack ne  
ord that “You can’t wear sneakers with that.”

e dress “But I can’t take—”

ested.” She cut off my argument. “You can and you will. Go have a go  
to the tonight before classes start on Monday.” I slipped the sandals on and f

1 aren’t the thin straps around my ankles while they silently watched me. I

glanced at her phone several times while I folded the clothes I wore  
e guys and placed them neatly into my bag. Once I was ready to go, sh  
’d been Frankie a hug.

gment “Make sure she’s safe tonight,” Frankie whispered to her. “Is it at th  
of them or the house?”

But so Rosalyn’s mouth curled upward, and the air was thick with unspoken t  
Niko’s “The beach. I’ll do what I can. It will be fine, I’m sure.”

I puffed out a small breath, blowing a stray hair out of my face. “W  
Plus, Ifine. It’s just a party. What could possibly happen in one night? We’  
some drinks and dance, then go home. Alone,” I stated with more l  
ve a lot than I felt. In reality, my boss’ words made me nervous.

vitation I carefully hoisted myself into Rosalyn’s truck, desperately trying  
l.” She show my underwear, but it was useless. I threw my bag into the back

g. “Get she turned the key in the ignition and off we went, driving silently do  
uttered road until she turned off into a small parking area near the ocean. Th

was high in the sky, reflecting off of every surface, and the scent of sa  
l across filled the air. A light breeze ruffled through my hair and I inhaled deep  
piece of Tonight wouldn’t be that bad. I could simply grab a drink, sit near the  
ie hem, edge, and be home before midnight.

vision, Rosalyn linked arms with me as we made our way down the  
embankment closer to where the bass reverberated from a nearby spe

ear her. fire roared in the middle of the beach and shadows danced around the  
in time to the beat. Bodies melted against one another, limbs twisting  
moving. Rosalyn ducked her head close to mine so that I could hear w  
od time said. "Let's grab a drink."

astened My feet sank into the silty ground, sand filling my new sandals. T  
Rosalyn party I had been to was months ago, and the chaos of everything aro  
earlier clouded my senses. A drink right now would be amazing. I stopped br  
ie gave pull off my sandals while Rosalyn sauntered up to a guy in his mid-t  
standing at a folding table with bottles lining the top and held up two  
e beach to him. I couldn't hear their exchange, but he grinned at her and gav  
quick wink while he poured something into red plastic cups. She thi  
ension. head back and laughed at whatever he said before taking the cups fr  
hands.

ve'll be I tossed my sandy shoes to the left of the table. "Who's he?" I asked a  
'll have the drink and took a large sip, letting the fruity pink beverage mix c  
ravado tongue.

Rosalyn shrugged a little as she tipped her cup back. "Rhyker. He's j  
not too of Vincent's henchmen, but he's gorgeous isn't he?"  
seat as I glanced at the man in question with his black waves that swept over l  
own the and broad shoulders covered by the dark cotton of his dark t-shir  
e moon indeed.

It water The alcohol warmed my stomach. It was deceptive—smooth and  
ly. camouflaging the bitterness of whatever it had been mixed with. I n  
water's internal note to pace myself because I hadn't really eaten anything oth  
a sandwich hours before my shift.

sandy Those thoughts were soon forgotten, though. The more we drank and  
aker. About nothing, the more all the demons that continually played at the

flamesmy mind faded. Their constant uttering went from the usual shouts to  
ing andmutter before being completely silenced. The first cup quickly turn  
that shesecond and then a third.

My body was light and warm, buzzing with electricity. Rosalyn led  
The lastthe crowd of bodies, saying something that I couldn't quite make ou  
und memany people were here tonight? It didn't matter. I was free finally.  
iefly toknew who I was.

wentiesHer hands grabbed my waist as our hips moved, sweat beading on m  
fingersfrom the humidity and the nearby fire. No one paid attention as we tw  
re her athe tempo. I giggled to myself for some reason I couldn't quite  
rew herSuddenly I was glad that I'd come here instead of heading back to the  
rom hishouse across town.

All the fatigue from earlier was replaced by movement. The musi  
s I tookvibrated through my body and every touch against my skin felt li  
coat mylicked paths along it. Alcohol had never affected me like this, but I ch  
up to the atmosphere, music, and the flames dancing beside me.

ust oneStrong hands grabbed my waist from behind, trailing along the cut out  
midriff. Whoever it was smelled like musk and the ocean. I wanted  
his facemy face to bury it in their chest, breathe deeply, and commit the s  
t. Finememory, but I managed to stop myself. Rosalyn wiggled her eyebrow  
and giggled, stumbling slightly on her feet.

sweet, "Having a good time, little ghost?" The deep baritone caressed my ear  
nade anfeathering along my neck. The fire beneath my skin turned into an in  
ier thanwanted to get lost in the hard body pressed into my back, moving sea  
with the rhythm.

l talkedThe only reply I could think of was, "I really like the music." It sou  
back ofjuvenile and didn't encompass how I was feeling. A rumble of laught

o a dull from behind and all I could think was that the timbre was beautiful, r  
ed to a perfectly with the music wrapping around my body. One hand gently  
my throat and a soft whimper escaped my mouth. The fire spreading t  
us into my veins traveled between my thighs.

it. How I didn't even know who it was, but I'd never felt a connection like th  
No one anyone. All throughout high school, boys had chased me, but I played

I questioned their motives and what they really wanted from me, esp  
y body after the news of my father's crimes was announced. The handful c  
isted to and kisses I shared was lackluster, yet here I was with a complete s  
place. anticipating what his next move was. Would his touches drift up al  
e empty skin? Would the hand wrapped around my throat squeeze tighter?

Would I like that?

c itself Warm, soft lips brushed along my shoulder, and my eyes briefly f  
ike fire shut, relishing the sensation. When I opened them, Rosalyn's eyes wer  
alked it but she chuckled to herself. Bending close, she whispered, "Seems l

Forsaken have made their choice tonight, and so have you. Be carefu  
s at my was telling me something important, but I couldn't focus enough to f  
to turnout. "I'm going to find a new dance partner. Find me before you leave.  
cent to I nodded before losing myself to the tempest raging inside of me. I wa  
s at meat that moment, simply a vessel for the fire that burned brightly, cr  
against the dark sky. There was nothing else even when a second  
, breath hands, this time slightly smaller, found my skin. One drifted along  
ferno. I and the other traced my jaw. Familiar whiskey-colored eyes from  
mlessly earlier in the week peered at me.

Trey had seemed like the nicest of the three, the safest. His la  
aded so mannerisms put me at ease. Tonight I questioned that assumption w  
er came looked at me like he was ready to devour me.

Somehow, every golden brown hair was perfectly in place, even with the movements of our bodies. The black-rimmed glasses from earlier were in his hand and embers reflected in his irises as the fire popped. If Trey was in front of me, who was behind me? I tried to remind myself yet again about the warnings Rosalyn had given me, but at that moment, they didn't matter. I stared at the flecks of amber and gold swirling in his eyes. Instead, I decided to lean further into his touch.

Trey pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, his grip on me tightening. Looking at him like that, little ghost. If you don't, he'll strip you down in front of everyone here and make you choke on his cock," the man behind me murmured into my ear.

My thoughts raced as moisture slicked the inside of my thighs. Would he do that? The answer unequivocally was that I would be willing to give up my virginity without a second thought, like there were people watching our every action.

I shook my head trying to clear it, and pulled away from them, needing a moment to myself. I turned to face them and was met with the bluest eyes I had ever seen. Cam. He was the one who had caged me in at the pizza place, not more importantly the one who smelled like the ocean. "More drink," I said, nodding, shaking my cup for emphasis.

As I walked back toward Rhyker to get more alcohol that I certainly needed, I laughed to myself and decided to throw caution to the wind.

*Here's to bad decisions.*

id-back

hile he

Somehow, every golden brown hair was perfectly in place, even with the movements of our bodies. The black-rimmed glasses from earlier were gone and embers reflected in his irises as the fire popped. If Trey was in front of me, who was behind me? I tried to remind myself yet again about the warnings Rosalyn had given me, but at that moment, they didn't matter while I stared at the flecks of amber and gold swirling in his eyes. Instead, I chose to lean further into his touch.

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My thoughts raced as moisture slicked the inside of my thighs. Would I let him do that? The answer unequivocally was that I would be willing to give the two men surrounding me my virginity without a second thought, even if there were people watching our every action.

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*Here's to bad decisions.*

SEVEN



# SEVEN

## *Cam*



Seeing Ivy creep through the crowd of bodies, silently moving between the masses unnoticed, reminded me of a specter. It was almost as if she was used to making herself as small as possible, and it piqued my curiosity. Why would someone as beautiful as the new girl want to be unseen? Her auburn hair reflected the color of the flames, contrasting with the pale color of her skin in the moonlight.

I stood to the side with Trey and Niko for a while, sipping water and the beverages we'd chosen for the evening. Tonight, everyone's drinks were spiked with the shit Vincent demanded I distribute. Well, everyone's drinks were ours.

After what happened last year, I needed to know what the side effects were to prevent another incident. The night before, we had all sampled the new experimental drug and nothing bad had happened to us. The best way to describe it was almost like it was a mixture of ecstasy and marijuana. Everything was a little brighter, and every touch was heightened. It was like being on a cloud from how light you felt and the way all of your problems just faded into the background.

I could see the appeal of wanting to distribute it, but wasn't sure about the details. Who was making this and why? I needed to see what happened on a larger scale. Trey, ever cautious, tried arguing with me that everyone's drinks was a dangerous move, and Niko didn't exactly agree with my plan either, but in the end, both backed down. I had told Rhyker to mix in a little, and so far things were going smoothly. No obvious overreactions, no aggression. Just people dancing and drinking.

The pull toward Ivy was magnetic and as much as I wanted to fight it, I stayed away, after a while I laid my bottle down and drifted toward her, mesmerized by the way her hips moved to the music. I imagined her looking at me, like she would look beneath me and writhing to a different tempo with her flushed and lips parted.

The decision about who we played with at the end of the night was typically a group discussion, but Ivy was an exception even though I knew nothing about her. Well, except that I wanted to mark her as mine for more than tonight.

That wasn't how we did things, though. One girl per night with no repeat was a rule we didn't break. None of us wanted anyone getting attached, except assuming that there was more to the arrangement than there was. Nor

had the time and with our lives, women would bring nothing but complications. We couldn't ensure our own safety, much less their safety, other members of the Forsaken or organizations they associated with.

When I was lured in closer to the mystery girl dancing in the sand, I contemplated it could be different.

I molded my body behind hers and allowed my hands to travel along her skin, enjoying the way she responded to me. Every touch and whisper was devoured, begging for more as she ground against me, never questioning

It was wrapped around her. Every whimper that fell from her lips meant she was on harder.

Surprise lined Rosalyn's face but said nothing as the three of us were fueled by alcohol and hormones. Despite the decree that she was off limits, I was half tempted to see if she wanted to join us tonight, but quickly shot the idea down. I didn't want to deal with the fallout from our leader's grandfather and the people associated with him. The temptation was completely extinguished when she drifted away without a second glance. I doubt looking for a hookup of her own. My bet was on Rhyker, but now she's been proven wrong before.

Trey had been watching us from the edges of the crowd and took the opportunity to move in where Rosalyn once stood, gliding his hands over her torso. Ivy's skin felt like heaven beneath my palms, and her legs slipped easily into my hand. I squeezed lightly, testing to see what she would do. She melted further into me gasping.

Trey smirked when she suddenly pulled away from us, stating quietly. "I need more drink. Out of anyone here tonight, you had to choose the hottest girl. Does she know the rules?"

Everyone thought that out of the three of us, Trey was the gentle one, but they were wrong. He hid behind his computer screen and studied his cards carefully in place. "I think that she'll be a fast learner."

We exited the sea of bodies and followed behind her to the drink table. I was close to her space, but not enough to truly escape. Rhyker winked as he handed her another plastic cup filled with alcohol and she sipped on it while tugging at her softer clothes due to either being overheated or how sensitive her skin was to the substances coursing through her body.

Trey approached her like he would prey, slowly and with soft words.

ade lulled her into a false sense of security. “Hey, new girl. Want to get away from everyone for a while?” His fingers trailed up her arms, and she danced, at him, not knowing what he was really asking. He took her free hand, cradled it in his as he led her away from the crowd.

I caught Niko’s eyes and jerked my head in the direction they were watching her. The music faded, and the light fell away as we headed to the small grove of trees further down the beach. We came here sometimes to drink alone, now was the best place for what we had planned. At the edge of the trees, huge logs formed an L-shaped bench, and we stood there silently for a moment, simply watching the gorgeous girl as she took a seat, her hands resting on her thighs.

Trey was the first to make a move. He sat so that he was straddling the log and wrapped his arms around her from behind, allowing his fingers to caress her skin as he kissed along her neck beneath her ear. Niko deposited himself on the other side and grasped her chin before leisurely running his fingers along her bottom lip. Her eyes closed and mouth parted, granting him entrance to delve inside. I watched for just a moment, my cock painful at the sight and rubbing against the zipper of my jeans, before stalking over to her.

Kneeling in front of her, my fingers brushed up her calves slowly, inch by inch, where I wanted them to be. Once they reached her knees, I nuzzled her, giving up and hooked them over the other man’s legs, exposing her to my view. My mouth found the sensitive flesh on the inside of her thighs and began licking at it, widening further. I nipped a place inches from the black cotton strip and knew would be drenched and sucked the skin, trailing my tongue across her thigh to soothe the sting. I kept my eyes on the scene happening in front of me, watching the two men that

at away wanting to miss a single thing that happened or how Ivy reacted to the nodded of us.

and Niko's fingers tangled into her hair and grasped the elastic tying it

Roughly, he jerked, her hair cascading down around her body. They were talking, one of her breasts through the black dress, squeezing it as his mouth strove over the exposed portion of her shoulder. I continued to move slowly upward, but she pulled away from Niko's kisses, her breath ragged. Her cheeks were red, and her eyes hooded. It took everything in me not to yank down her dress for underwear and plunge inside of her. *Patience*, I tried to remind myself. She bit her bottom lip, hesitating for a moment. "I've never done anything like this. What if..."

Was she saying what I thought she was saying? Was Ivy a sweet little thing ready for us to corrupt her? Niko handled the situation, running his fingers over her pouty lip, freeing it from her teeth. "Trust us, pretty girl. We'll be careful with you."

There was no way in hell he would keep his word, but she didn't know it. I ran a finger along the cloth covering her pussy, gauging her reaction. I knew toward right that she was already soaked and ready for us to do whatever we wanted.

She gasped and dropped her drink, the sweet alcohol splashing on me. She bucked against me. I ignored the cold liquid as I pulled the wet cloth to the side and gingerly ran my tongue through her folds. Focusing on her clit, I swirled my tongue around the nub. She completely lost herself in the moment and grabbed at my hair, holding me against her.

Trey's hand disappeared beneath the top of her dress and Niko captured her moans in his mouth, stealing all of her moans from me. Pressing two fingers inside me, his other walls squeezed around them, and I curled them upward. As I moved them in and out of her, I continued to assault her with my mouth. He

ie threeheaved, and she arched her back, nearly on the cusp of falling over.

sucked the sensitive bundle of nerves between my lips, she pulsed around it back.fingers and wetness coated my face. Watching her body thrash against my cupped hands and hearing the noises coming from her was a thing of nightmares. I assaulted her orgasm as long as I could before finally pulling my hand away, and from her when her hands untangled from my hair.

ere rosyI held my hand up to her mouth and gave her a smirk. “Little ghost, you need to clean up the mess you made.” She looked hesitant at first.

when I pressed my fingers between her lips, her tongue swirled around them, licking and sucking them.

*Fuck.* I stood and leaned over her, pressing my mouth to hers. She was a virgin perfect. Right now I was willing to forget every rule I’d ever made for myself, and I hadn’t even had my cock in her yet.

ve’ll beWhen I pulled back, Niko smirked at me like he could read my thoughts. He grasped her face between both of his hands, holding her attention. I kissed her lips. He skated over hers and he ran his thumb along her cheek. “Do you want to play? We’ve had a game with us?”

wanted.She giggled a little from nerves. “What kind of game?”

as sheIt took everything in me not to laugh out loud and tell her the kind of game I had in mind. She wasn’t ready for, but I simply shook my head. They right themselves. He ran his hand over her clit, I clothes while he whispered to her, coaxing her into doing what we wanted. “When we tell you to run, you run. You try to hide in the trees behind us. If we catch you, then we do whatever we want.” His fingers traced the neckline of her dress. “But we can make you feel good again. How would you like that?”

of her,that?”

workedShe was apprehensive and swallowed hard, her throat bobbing with her chest motion. I wanted to wrap my fingers around the column of her throat and

When I feel the muscles work beneath them. And then she stood, messing v  
und myhem of her dress. "You'll be careful?"

inst my "We promise," Niko told her, the lying bastard. "I'll even give you  
magic. I start this time."

fingers I leaned close to her and smiled. "Run."

I think  
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feel the muscles work beneath them. And then she stood, messing with the hem of her dress. “You’ll be careful?”

“We promise,” Niko told her, the lying bastard. “I’ll even give you a head start this time.”

I leaned close to her and smiled. “Run.”

EIGHT

EIGHT

## *Niko*



Ivy tasted like spun sugar and as I swallowed her moans, I committed her to memory. The way her body shuddered against me when she got off to memorize the way her face twisted with pleasure and she arched her body toward me, twining her fingers in Cam's hair, would be a fantasy I played on repeat when I was alone.

When she finally came down from the high of getting off, her eyes were glassy and she looked dazed. I never expected her to agree so quickly to the game I wanted to play. My pulse thrummed in my chest when Cam told me the single word.

*Run.*

This would be the only time that I would chase after her like this, all because of Cam's stupid rules. He didn't want any of us getting attached and I'd questioned it before tonight, but seeing Ivy's pale legs pumping and her sprinted with wide eyes toward the thicket of trees made me regret my agreement.

Cam smirked at me while we waited, giving her a head start. "Her perfume is mine."

I rolled my eyes at his statement. That was fine by me. I was more interested in pursuing her while her heart beat erratically. Seeing the pulse in her hand pounding away from fear and adrenaline while she tried to catch her breath. Maybe she would try to hide from me in the shadows with one hand covering her mouth.

Trey looked down at his watch and jerked his head in my direction, and I knew it was time. My feet padded softly along the sand toward the grove, moving as silently as possible. The leaves from the trees blocked the moonlight and darkness shrouded me while I listened, trying to make small movements. Thirty feet in, something rustled nearby.

*The pretty girl isn't very good at hiding yet.*

My motions stilled while I listened, intentionally treading loudly to draw her attention. Fallen leaves from a storm several weeks ago were scattered all over the ground and I kicked at them carefully to see what Ivy would do. A whisper echoed in the night and my pulse quickened, roaring in my ears. Pushing toward the noise, she stood and darted out, running blindly in the opposite direction. I took off behind her at an easy pace, my cock hard in my pants while I listened to Ivy drag in harsh breaths.

She was wearing down, that much was clear. Her movements were getting sluggish, and I didn't want her completely spent. Not yet. Closing the distance between us, I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her against my chest, my arms banding around her like a vise. Her soft protests struggled against mine for a moment, fingernails digging into my forearms. Trey and Cam were several feet away, the sound of their footsteps approaching.

"Caught you," I murmured against her skin, noting her scent. Beneath the sweat, she smelled like oranges and vanilla. I ran my tongue along

interested column of the neck, licking the salt from her flesh as her body shuddered beneath my grasp. Her chest heaved, and she sniffled.

Imagine her *Hmm. She's crying and probably doesn't even know why.* I know with her subconsciously she could see beneath our masks at the monsters she was to play with. Her tears excited me, the sense of helplessness she felt by letting our mercy.

The small Trey gave her a cruel smile when he stepped in front of her and reached out brushing his fingers along the tears that tracked down both cheeks. His hand descended into his pocket and he pulled out a small knife, flicking it open with ease. "Ready for round two, new girl?"

Ivy's breath caught in her throat and she sniffled again before biting her lower lip. Her next words surprised me. "Yes."

My grip on her loosened, and I allowed one hand to travel to her thigh, clutching it tightly. "You like this, don't you? You enjoyed being charmed, not knowing what we'll do next. If I checked right now, I bet your pretentious pussy is soaking for me, begging for my cock."

The whimper she let out was enough verification that everything I said was true. Cam leaned against a nearby tree, his hand slowly rubbing through his pants while he patiently waited for his turn. The blade in my palm gently glided across Ivy's skin, never leaving a mark, trailing down her neck and then across her collarbones.

"I think we need to see what's underneath this dress," Trey stated, his arms raised. Ivy's gaze as the knife ripped through the thin fabric clinging to her body. Letting go of her for a moment, I jerked the cloth from her shoulders, allowing my hands to linger on her arms, leaving her in nothing but the cotton underwear that hugged her round ass.

Even in the dim lighting, she was perfection with thick thighs and

redder with a slight curve. And her tits. Pale globes of flesh that were made for worship. Pulling her flush against my body, I palmed one of her breasts. Perhaps nipple hard beneath my hand. I traced my other hand down her torso, stopping to agree it beneath her panties and cupping her. “Tell me who this belongs to tonight,” I said, my finger tracing the peak of her nipple. The tip of the blade traveled across her other nipple, the peak growing as Trey circled it, teasing her. “You,” she replied.

I licked out, I clicked my tongue and pinched her nipple roughly and pressed the tip of my other hand against her clit. She cried out and pushed her ass back against me, seeking more pressure. “Wrong answer. Who do you belong to tonight?” I asked, my fingers didn’t move as I waited for her answer.

Trey chuckled as his blade continued downward, brushing along the plane of her stomach. I glanced toward Cam, his eyes hooded and dark. His hand disappeared beneath the waist of his pants and my pulse quickened as he stroked himself further. I watched him stroke himself, the fabric moving in a little rhythm before I tore my gaze away. “All of you,” Ivy whispered, laying her head back against my chest.

Those words were enough to break the small amount of restraint that I had. Spinning her around, I feathered my lips against hers for a moment. Trey’s reward before placing my hands on her shoulders. Bearing down on her gently with just enough force to encourage her I said, “Then show me.”

She sank to her knees in front of me, and Trey followed behind her, holding her steady on the hard ground. With shaking hands, her fingers fumbled with my zipper. He rolled her nipple between his fingers while the edge of the knife skimmed her shoulders and thighs in circles. She gasped and her eyes widened when she released the blackcock from where it was confined. “I’ve never done this before and you pierced.”

Trey chuckled, the dark sound forming goosebumps on Ivy’s skin. He

ade forthrough the thin strings holding up her underwear, the fabric fallin  
sts, hercompletely exposing her to us and the night air. The handle of th  
snakingdipped between her legs hidden from sight. Her eyes closed, and I c  
night.” her cheek, allowing her a moment to just feel before I eased her into  
; harderwanted. “It’s okay. I’ll teach you what I like. Open your mouth.”

Her lips parted, and I waited, my thumb never leaving her face. Tent  
heel ofher tongue brushed along my dick, running up the length and tracin  
nst me,the path of metal barbells with uncertainty. “Fuck, this is hot,” Trey m  
it?” Myto himself, pulling his dick out of his pants. I watched as he positio

knife on the ground near Ivy’s knees and plunged his fingers inside  
lanes ofwhile he slowly stroked himself.

and hadWhatever he was doing caused her to lose the unsureness she’d had m  
l in mybefore. She closed her eyes and took my crown in her mouth, swirl  
a slowtongue along the bottom ridge. My fingers wound their way through h  
ing herflame-colored locks, tightening as she took me deeper and p  
enveloped me in hot, wet heat. Her head bobbed up and down my shaf  
t I had.taking its full length. When her cheeks hollowed out around me,  
nt as aeverything not to slam the rest of the way inside.

n themThere was no way she’d never sucked a dick before, no matter what sl  
” I reminded myself to focus and drag this out as long as possible.

r to theTrey’s motions quickened, and she moaned, the vibrations from her  
r. Treycoursing through my body. Pushing her head down my length by her  
ned herforced her to take more of me until her nose grazed my pelvis. Wl  
sed mygagged, I let up briefly, allowing her a moment to recover. “Just relax,  
l... it’sTrey told her in a soft tone, reassuring the girl who was willing to let  
her. “And breathe through your nose.”

e slicedAfter she caught her breath, I thrust in again easing into the back



g awaythroat, and held her there for a moment, relishing the warm heat. He knifesparkled with unshed tears as I began slowly rocking my hips back and pressedchasing my pleasure. Even when she shuddered against Trey, and what Iripping through her body, I didn't slow my rhythm. "Fucking beautiful" murmured and stood beside me, jerking himself faster. I watched as I actively,tightened and his jaw tensed. When he groaned, jets of cum landed on g alongpretty flawless skin, dirtying her up and marking her as ours.

umbledI slowed my motions as Cam moved in behind her and pressed down on the shoulder blades, forcing her to bend onto her elbows. Like the good of herwas, my cock never left her mouth. She claimed she was a virgin and had promised her he would be gentle with her, but I had my doubts. I enjoyed being cruel and rough. Add in the size of his dick, and I didn't mind using herIvy's pussy at that moment. Cam pushed his pants down his thighs and her silkyheld my gaze as he stroked himself twice before driving into her. I partiallymotion. She moaned and gripped the knife beside her in her fist.

it, neverMy eyes were still locked with Cam's and I watched as he pounded in it. It tookHis assault was unrelenting as his face contorted in pleasure. A sharp pain bit my hip and I glanced down to see that the pretty girl had done what he said.*That's unexpected.*

She was ballsy to try to match our level of crazy. It wasn't deep, but it was mouthnick, and yet watching the scarlet drops fall down my skin pushed me to my hair, Ito my destination. It wasn't the sight of the blood that excited me. It was the fact that out of all the women we shared, none would have had the balls to have a baby,"what Ivy just had.

to useI wrapped my fingers around the hilt of the knife and pressed it further. Tingles started at the base of my spine as I focused on the sensation of hermouth and Cam's tempo, his cock sliding in and out of her as th

er eyessharpened. My muscles clenched and reality faded when I finally  
d forth, holding Ivy's hair tightly and forcing her to swallow every drop. Whe  
orgasmdone, I fell to my knees and grabbed her jaw. Sweat beaded along he  
ful," heand her hair clung to her face. *One more kiss as a reward.* "Such a go  
his gripfor us tonight, Ivy," I whispered against her lips.

n Ivy'sMy hand slipped between her legs to her already sensitive clit.

circling it at first, I pinched and she came apart again. The look on his  
on herhe brutally used her was one of pure ecstasy, and soon she careened c  
toy sheedge with her body shaking. His grip on her hips loosened as he came  
id Camof her and I could see the bruises forming on her skin from his fingers.  
bts. HeIvy crumpled to the ground, muscles worn from fatigue, and I ran my  
t envydown her spine, basking in the feeling of her skin. I leaned close to v  
and heto her while Cam adjusted his clothes, nuzzling my cheek against her h  
in oneTrey held out his shirt to me for her, and I growled at him, pushing it a

she was going to be wearing anyone's shirt, it would be mine. In  
nto her.tugged my shirt over my head and helped Ivy into a sitting positio  
sting ofgently pulled the fabric over her head and threaded her arms through  
cut me.eyes fluttered closed and she sighed. I cradled her against me and she

into my chest, seemingly completely trusting us despite what we h  
arely adone. Trey raised one eyebrow at me in question and I simply lift  
e closershoulder in answer. *Hell if I knew.*

was theDespite the savageness that we'd shone while we fucked her, I wanted  
ls to doEven just one more night. One more night to see Trey allow his dem

to play. One more night to see Cam's face lose its hard edges and soft  
ther in.forgot everything around him. Another time to swallow her moans ar  
i of herher body pressed against mine. One last chance to see the girl who lay  
ie sting

came, lap match my viciousness. They didn't know it yet, but she was per  
n I wasus.

er brow

ood girl



Slowly A while later, we pulled up in front of the house Ivy had been stay  
face as We'd known Regina Spencer since we were kids forced to attend V  
over the Bible School each summer. She didn't exactly approve of us, but the  
e inside was mutual. She would get the fuck over it. How was she going to  
seeing her sweet, innocent niece being carried inside by us?

fingers The front door was unlocked and Cam pushed it open for me. Regi  
whisper the table in the kitchen with a sour look on her face while I held Ivy  
air. chest, sound asleep. "Evening, ma'am," Cam said with his voice barely  
rway. If a whisper, waltzing into the kitchen toward her while I continued thro  
stead, I house.

n. As I Trey opened every door before finding a small, bare room with a tw  
it, her He pulled back her blankets, and I tucked her in, taking my time to p  
relaxed lips to her forehead and breathe in her citrusy scent one last time.

had just I shut the door quietly behind me and headed back to the kitchen to  
ted one Cam. Regina and he were in a heated argument about something,  
drowned out by the roar of the air conditioner in the window. "Just sta  
d more. from her," she spat out, her face ruddy from anger.

ons out We'd see about that.

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NINE

NINE

## Ivy



Soft morning light filtered through the window, pulling me from sleep. I'd somehow slept through the night. Last night, for the first time in forever, my nightmares didn't haunt me causing me to wake up tearing my sheets with a scream caught in my throat. There were no appendages clawing at my skin and no faceless girls being tortured.

I rolled over and my body ached, pieces of the night before drifting through my mind. My hand drifted between my thighs at the memory, wondering how my brain had conjured it up from some subconscious fantasy. *Definitely not* my sensitive skin was sticky and tender from being used so roughly.

My cheeks burned at the thought I had lost my virginity in such a way, yet remembering the actions of the three men made me shiver. The intensity of Niko's eyes while he thrust into my mouth while Trey touched my breasts with silver barbells that lined his length and the way he shuddered as my fingers ran over them. The set of Camden's jaw while he gripped my hips. A part of me wanted to deny that it had ever happened, but the way I felt between my legs told me it was all true. What was I even thinking last night?

My eyes slowly fluttered open, and my vision was hazy. I wasn't prepared for the pounding in my head or my surroundings. Confusion and the remnants of sleep clouded my thoughts, and it took several moments for me to realize I was where I was supposed to be. This was my home now, not the sprawling square-foot estate I'd grown up in.

I glanced at the alarm clock and noticed that it was only eight. Deciding that taking medicine for my headache and a shower were top priorities, I rolled over and tucked myself underneath my blankets and noted that the shirt I was wearing definitely wasn't mine. Despite my curves, it hung to my knees, and I lifted a cautious breath to inhale it. Beneath the musky scent, sandalwood clung to the fabric.

From my first time

The house was silent as I walked to the bathroom, and my muscles pricked in the entire way. The first thing I did was pop open the medicine cabinet in search of something that would ease the pain in my head. After swallowing two of the off-brand pills, I stripped off the shirt and folded it, placing it on the edge of the sink.

Just if my idiot. The

I looked at myself in the mirror, questioning if outwardly I looked different. Dirt marred my skin and bruises littered my body. Tiny marks covered my shoulders and neck. Other than that, everything was exactly the same.

any, and intensity

The spray of warm water stung the scrapes on my knees and elbows I hadn't noticed before now, bits of rock from the night before still clinging to the abrasions. Soaping up my body, I gently washed and noticed the blood on my thighs. It was confusing, especially as rough as they felt on me.

me. The tongue

part of

even my

But then again, some women didn't bleed when they lost their virginity. Maybe I was just lucky.

I lathered my hair with the orange-scented shampoo and allowed my



ared forenjoy the feeling of the water cascading over me, relieving the aches  
ants ofbody. While I scrubbed, I was completely on autopilot, lost in my thou  
ize thatthe night before. A lot of things didn't make sense in the light of day  
e 3500-did I react the way I did? Was the sex so good that my nightmares va

And out of everyone there, why did they choose me?

ing thatAfter toweling off and putting on clean clothes, I gathered the shirt fo  
ut fromthe sink and tucked it under my arm. Padding quietly to my room, I he  
:finitelymy face and inhaled it one last time, wondering which of the guys had  
orner tome in and how I had gotten home. Placing it inside the small gray cont  
makingprayed my aunt had been asleep or gone.

Soon I learned I wasn't that lucky. Of course, I wasn't. As soon as I  
:otestedthe kitchen, my aunt was waiting for me with a cup of coffee in her ha  
oinet inraised her eyebrows and said nothing as I scoured the cabinets for  
llowingmug, hoping that caffeine would help the pounding behind my eyes.

ing it onThe coffee cup she was holding clattered onto the wooden tabletop :

turned to me as I was pouring the steaming liquid. "I want you to sta  
fferent.from those three, Ivy. No niece of mine is going to be involved with th  
red myI closed my eyes and took a deep breath, reminding myself that I sh

lose my temper. My aunt simply wanted what was best for me, ever  
s that Ididn't really know me. I took a sip of the bitter, hot liquid before sp  
iging to"We're just friends."

lack ofWere we even friends? I somehow doubted that. One night of ho  
treatedfueled sexual activities hardly started a friendship of any type, but tell

to the woman who spent every Sunday morning in the front pew woul  
rginity.me any favors. I knew nothing about any of them except they were a  
the Forsaken and everyone kept telling me to stay away from.

yself toShe huffed and wryly chuckled. "I doubt that. I've known them sin

s in my first started school and I've heard the rumors. Plus, if you were just :  
ights of why were they carrying you inside at two in the morning? Nothing  
y. Why happens after midnight. There are rules in this house and one of them  
nished? from now on, unless you are with Rosalyn, you are to be in before ten.

My mouth fell open at her statement. The past several months, I ha  
lded on with things no one else my age could fathom. I was starting college  
eld it today, and yet I was standing here with someone I barely knew telling  
tucked had a curfew. In another life, I would have argued and told her she c  
ainer, I tell me what to do, but I stopped myself. The words would fall on de  
and I didn't know how far I could push her.

entered If she kicked me out, I had nowhere to go. I mean, sure, I could p  
nd. She clothes back in my bag and sleep in the car I'd acquired, but how long  
a cleando that for? Would it be safe?

“And one more thing. I want you to go to church with me starting ton  
and she morning. Services start at 10:45 a.m. I'll pick you up something app  
y away to wear this evening. If you aren't at work, then you'll be learning  
em.” God's love.” Her eyes narrowed as she picked up the mug off the ta  
ouldn't she shifted in her seat. “Or at least maybe how to keep your legs close  
1 if she good girls make mistakes,” she mumbled under her breath.

eaking. My cheeks heated at her words, and anger flooded my system, mak  
hands shake. There was so much to unpack in what she had just said  
rmone-didn't have time for that. Instead, I poured more coffee and turned awa  
ing that her, stalking to my room to look for my shoes. I needed to get the hel  
dn't do here.

part of I didn't mind going to church with her, and I could live with a curfe  
though I was starting college. Staying away from Cam, Niko, and Trey  
ce they be easy. After classes started, I wouldn't have a lot of free time, anyw

friends, the phrase “keep your legs closed.” It made my blood boil. She was asking good things about what happened last night, and even though she was curious that it. And what did “good girls make mistakes” even mean?

” It didn’t take long for me to realize my bag from yesterday was dead. I dealt with Rosalyn’s truck, and my new sandals were all but forgotten in the sack in the trunk. My car was still parked outside of Frankie’s from the night before. I leaned against the wall and ran my hands over my face. The first thing I couldn’t afford to buy with my money was a cell phone. If I had Rosalyn’s number, I could have simply texted her I needed my shoes and ask for a ride.

I was a mess and had an hour to spare before work. Rather than letting my tears that were burning my eyes fall, I set my jaw and finished getting ready. I brushed my hair and straightened my shoulders. The distance to the bus stop was only ten blocks away, and once I got to Frankie’s, I could use the narrow phone to call Rosalyn. Well, if Frankie had her number. Right now, I was not in the mood to speak to my aunt or ask for her help. I couldn’t deal with her judgment or the judgment in her eyes.

I slipped out the front door, carefully closing it behind me so that it didn’t make as little noise as possible. It wasn’t hot yet, but my feet weren’t

the heat of the concrete being warmed by the sun. I stared at the ground as I walked, diligent to avoid any large gravel or the shards of glass I could find. Five blocks into my journey, I wanted to give up. With every step, tiny pebbles dug in and the sidewalk scorched my soles. Sweat rolled down my back as the late summer sun beat down on my skin. If Hell was truly a place

you were tortured for all of eternity, then my punishment would be to walk this journey repeatedly. All of this while nursing the worst hangover I would have. *I am never drinking again*, I thought as I continued my trek.

Stubbornness won out in the end, driving me closer to my destination.

suming blocks was my halfway point, and there was no way I was going  
orrect, I around and ask my aunt for anything. Not after what she had said. In

staggered off the concrete into the grass at the edge of the yards lin  
still in street. It wasn't great still, but the dry, crunchy lawn was better th  
and last burning cement that blistered my feet.

efore. I Two blocks from the bus stop, a car pulled up beside me. Niko sat  
thing I driver's seat with sunglasses on, and Cam sat opposite him, c  
mber, I observing me. I continued forward, ignoring the fact that they were fo

me. "What are you doing, little ghost?" he said loud enough to hear c  
ting the sound of the engine.

g ready. I rolled my eyes at him even as goosebumps formed on my skin from t  
us stop of his voice. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

shop's His lips twisted with amusement and I stopped beneath the shade of a  
wasn't a moment, grateful for a reprieve from the sun. Niko stopped the c  
th what allowed it to idle, turning his face to look at me. "Where the hell a  
shoes?"

ould I stared at him for a moment, deliberating how much to say. "Look, I  
used to bag in Rosalyn's truck and I forgot my only other shoes at the bea  
ind as I night. I have work today and—"

I see. I stopped speaking when Niko reached underneath his seat and pulled  
y rock sandals from the night before. "I forgot to bring them in last night. Ge  
ack and car. It's ninety degrees outside."

where I eyed him warily before stumbling toward the car, my feet screamin  
o relive inch of the way. I was ready to settle into the back seat, but Cam ope  
of my door and pulled me into his lap, banding his arms around my waist.  
sure this is illegal. I can sit in the back."

n. Five His grip on me tightened and he rested his chin on my shoulder. "Nah,

to turn sitting here. Besides, lots of things we do are illegal. The cops around here won't pull us over. Trust me."

Niko handed me the shoes, and I fastened them as he pulled away, trying to ignore the hard body beneath mine. "You're working at Frankie's, right?" Cam asked as he pressed his lips against my salty neck, and I felt the heat in the car. Most of the drive was spent in silence with me trying to move as casually as possible and trying to ignore Cam's hands and mouth. I jumped when he suddenly grabbed my thigh and squeezed, allowing his fingers to linger there for at least the wind cooled the sweat on my skin, but by the time Niko pulled up in front of the surf shop, my entire body felt like it was on fire.

I reached for the car door, signaling that I needed to get out, but Cam stopped me in my tracks. "Where do you think you're going? You can't just thank us or tell us goodbye yet." I turned my head to look at him, but his car door and mouth crashed into mine. It wasn't a tender kiss meant to convey affection; it was all-consuming and fevered, like he was staking a claim on me. I was left away dazed and breathless, gingerly touching my fingers to my lips. Niko smirked at me and opened the door, gesturing that I was free to go.

I hopped out and gave Niko a wave before disappearing inside the building, willing my heart to slow down. Frankie simply shook her head and sat on the stool next to the large windows but didn't comment.

That was good because I didn't know what to tell her if she asked questions.

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"Pretty

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sitting here. Besides, lots of things we do are illegal. The cops around here won't pull us over. Trust me."

Niko handed me the shoes, and I fastened them as he pulled away, trying to ignore the hard body beneath mine. "You're working at Frankie's now, right?" Cam asked as he pressed his lips against my salty neck, and I nodded. Most of the drive was spent in silence with me trying to move as little as possible and trying to ignore Cam's hands and mouth. I jumped when Niko's hand grabbed my thigh and squeezed, allowing his fingers to linger there. At least the wind cooled the sweat on my skin, but by the time Niko parked in front of the surf shop, my entire body felt like it was on fire.

I reached for the car door, signaling that I needed to get out, but Cam's voice stopped me in my tracks. "Where do you think you're going? You didn't thank us or tell us goodbye yet." I turned my head to look at him and his mouth crashed into mine. It wasn't a tender kiss meant to convey affection. It was all-consuming and fevered, like he was staking a claim on me. I pulled away dazed and breathless, gingerly touching my fingers to my lips. He smirked at me and opened the door, gesturing that I was free to go.

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That was good because I didn't know what to tell her if she asked questions.

TEN

TEN



## *Trey*



The code on the screen in front of me blurred together, and I rubbed my eyes, trying to stay focused. The work was tedious, but in the end it would be worth it. After last night's play session, I couldn't sleep. Visiting Ivy picking up the knife beside her and cutting open Niko's skin played in my mind on repeat. I ignored how painfully hard I was knowing that it would be foolish to jerk off to her memory. Our rules were in place for a reason, a part of what cemented us together in this shitty town. The last thing I wanted to do was to obsess over someone who was now off limits.

So I tried to preoccupy myself and started working on a new string of code that wasn't sure what I was going to use it for yet, but I knew it would come in handy. It wasn't nearly as satisfying as getting off or fantasizing about marking Ivy's pale skin, but it distracted me. The basic idea behind the "program" was to have access to private information on a user's cell phone. Text messages, web history, emails. People did everything on their phones now and knowledge was power. Especially if you were trying to get out of Clearhaven. I didn't have all the details worked out just yet, but I had some ideas floating around.

When the sun rose, I stood up and stretched. The small desk I worked nestled in the corner of the living room, a few feet away from a tiny kitchen. Cam sauntered over, desperate for a caffeine fix, and celebrated when I discovered Cam had left a pack of energy drinks in the back of the refrigerator. Gone, I popped it open and took a gulp before shuddering. The taste explained why anyone drank these. It was purely for the energy to either crush exams or to avoid sleep.

Moving into this apartment was the best decision I'd ever made. Escape from my family had been my top priority after high school. I'd never known my father—he got a life sentence before I was born—and my mother... that was a completely different story.

The best way to describe her was absent. She was more concerned with partying and looking for her next ex-husband than raising a kid. I scratched my wrist as I thought of the last man she'd brought home and tried to push away the memories that threatened to claw their way to the surface.

By the time my sophomore year of high school rolled around, I knew I needed to get out of that house, and the only way I could do that was money. The errands we ran for the Forsaken weren't enough, so I taught myself to repair computers. I spent every waking moment hustling or studying, saving my hard earned cash in a hole in the underside of my mattress. The day I turned eighteen, I walked out of the trailer my mother lived in at the time and never looked back.

Despite that, sometimes it was lonely. Holidays and birthdays were the only times I spent most of them with a bottle of vodka in front of my computer, trying to forget I existed. Cam and Niko had both promised that as soon as they moved in with me and help pay the rent, but right now, they were still raising younger siblings that their parents seemed to forget existed.

l at was crashed here some nights, especially now that the kids were getting old  
tchen. It didn't fill the emptiness inside of me.

covered *One day, everything would be different.* I wandered back to the computer  
I'd built from parts scavenged out of old systems that were beyond repair  
wasn't ignored the quiet of the house, fixating instead on the project in front  
of me for hours later, the front door opening pulled me from what I was working

Looking up from my desk, Cam leaned against the wall next to me  
scraping "You look like shit. Have you even slept yet?"

I blinked to clear my vision and ran my hands through my hair, debating  
what I should be honest or not. Niko strode in balancing pizza in one hand and  
a beer in the other. He placed everything on the counter and looked me over  
and with shaking his head. "Another all nighter I see."

Cam motioned for me to get up. "Come get some food, asshole.  
I know you haven't slept, I know you haven't eaten all day."

The scent of sausage and onions filled the air, and my stomach clenched  
at the exact moment to rumble. We opened the boxes sitting on the cabinet  
by the sink. I reached for a beer, but Cam's hand wrapped around my wrist, stopping  
me from my tracks. "Water first. You can't live off alcohol and energy drinks."  
I glared at him briefly when he added, "And after this, you need a shower  
every day." "Fine, Dad," I grumbled before shoving a piece of pizza into my mouth  
and grabbing a bottle of water. My aggravation fell away as I ate, the pit in  
my stomach disappearing. Cam was just trying to show me he cared, even if  
it was the worst overbearing. I finished the bottle of water and grabbed a beer while  
trying to ignore the silence.

Once we'd finished, Niko glanced between me and Cam before tipping  
his beer back. His gaze lingered on Cam for a few moments before he  
looked at me. "So last night..."

der, but I cocked an eyebrow up, waiting to see where this went. Not that we sometimes discuss our conquests, but last night was different. Usually after that end of being used, the girl was in tears or ready to run from us. A fair amount tried coming back for more, but we turned them away.

of me. And then there was Ivy. She took everything we gave her and then coming on in Niko's lap with her eyes closed.

y desk. "What about it?" Cam asked as he peeled up the edge of the label bottle.

ting if I Niko's lips pressed into a thin line, and he crossed his arms over his chest and beer want her again."

before A thread of hope formed in my chest for some reason, and I couldn't place the feeling. "I do too," I admitted quietly, more to myself than to you else.

Cam sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "You guys know the case that and—"

it and I "Fuck the rules," Niko barked, taking a step closer to him. "She's digging me in. We want her and so do you. Don't deny it, especially after that car ride thanks." I "What are you talking about?" I asked, curious about what I had observed. "I missed.

h while Niko looked in my direction for a moment. "Nothing, other than the fact inside of we found *little ghost* wandering around barefoot and gave her a hell he was work." He leaned close to Cam, their faces inches apart. "You wouldn't eat in let her sit in her own seat. Insisted she sit in your lap."

Cam shoved at his chest. "You're just jealous because it wasn't you." During his The tension in the room mounted the longer the two of them stared at spoke other. Niko was the first to look away, his eyes focused on something the ceiling. "Classes start on Monday. We aren't the only ones who

She didn't hear at the party the other night. Are you telling me you'll be okay with her, by the people touching her? Sticking their dick—"

Now he had Cam balled his fists at his side and clenched his jaw. "Shut the fuck up."

I cleared my throat to gain both of their attention. "He has a point. If you don't want her, that's fine, but someone else is going to snatch her up and do something you can live with? Especially after you took her virginity?"

He said, "Well, there's some debate about that," Cam muttered. I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but I would ask him later. He bit his cheek before he spoke. "This hands in the air. "Fine. I'll consider putting our rule aside for Ivy's condition. Trey, I want to know everything about her. Tonight."

It wasn't quiteHe wouldn't hear any arguments from me. A different girl each night, anyone getting old, and I wanted to know more about Ivy. I grabbed another

chair and put it beside me on my desk and strode to my computer, closing the rules program I was working on. Tapping out a quick text message to Rose, I asked what Ivy's last name was. When she responded, a lump formed in my throat. Spencer. *It had to be a coincidence.*

"I pulled up my search engine and typed in her name. My heart fell in my stomach because Niko and I had already lost.

Most college girls have a huge internet footprint. Photos from every social media site, YouConnect updates, Chirp statuses. Those are the first things you see. Pictures of their dogs or summer vacation photographs. Not even a little ghost. He was going to be pissed once I told him.

I tipped my beer back, finishing the rest of the bottle in one drink, and started loudly reading from the news article in front of me. "Ivy Spencer, the daughter of Thomas Spencer, was seen leaving the Crimson Cove Correctional Facility earlier today. Mr. Spencer was recently accused of sex trafficking."

h otherand conspiracy to traffic minors. He is being held without bail considered a flight risk.”

.” The silence was suffocating once I finished. The only sound you could hear was the drip of the leaky faucet in the bathroom. Niko’s eyes had gone wide. Is that but Cam... he was pissed. His face was ruddy and the vein in his neck

Suddenly he turned around and punched the wall hard enough that the plaster underneath caved. *Just fucking great. One more thing to fix.*

I knew he was going to react this way. His younger sister Maya was one of Thomas Spencer’s victims. He hadn’t told us all the details still, and I

didn’t know if he ever would. The courts decided to drop the charges regarding Maya, claiming there wasn’t enough evidence to pursue the case. A

few beer later, Cam found her on the bathroom floor attempting to overdose.

He shook his hand out as his chest heaved with every breath. “I wish you were gone. Gone from Clearhaven and the university. Fuck that bitch. I managed to grit out. “We’re going to make her life hell.”

I didn’t agree with the idea of torturing Ivy for something that her father had done, but I wouldn’t go against Cam’s wishes. Maya deserved

whatever punishment that was. The three of us intimately knew that son of a bitch social you paid for the sins of your parents and that life wasn’t fair.

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I didn’t agree with the idea of torturing Ivy for something that her father had done, but I wouldn’t go against Cam’s wishes. Maya deserved justice, however warped that was. The three of us intimately knew that sometimes you paid for the sins of your parents and that life wasn’t fair.

ELEVEN



# ELEVEN

## *Ivy*



**A**fter I got to work on Saturday, Frankie asked me to watch the store around lunchtime and disappeared for an hour. When she came back she shoved a prepaid phone at me and told me I “didn’t need to be around town without a way to call someone, especially not in my car.” My mouth opened to argue, but she dismissed me and said that she’d already programmed her and Rosalyn’s number in it. I texted Ros the bag that the keys in it was still in Black Betty. Within fifteen minutes she showed up with not only my belongings but also a soda. I was grateful for the caffeine and sugar after the morning I had.

The rest of my shift was quiet, my hangover slowly fading in the background. When I got home, I chose not to speak to my aunt, the events from the morning still fresh in my mind. Instead, I undressed and crawled beneath the covers on my bed, hoping that my dreams would be empty when they were the night before.

*It wasn’t meant to be.*

I spent the night tossing and turning, waiting for oblivion to pull and I fell. When I finally fell, it was the same thing that had been happening for

and then I woke up, clawing at my throat, a scream bubbling up in my  
The phantom hands that clutched at me still ghosted against my skin.  
sweat covered every inch of my body while I tried to catch my breath.  
The real horror wasn't even the dreams that haunted me every night.  
morning, my aunt barged into my room holding an ankle length navy  
dress covered in white flowers, complete with shoulder pads and  
length sleeves. While she hung it on the back of my door, I stared in shock  
at the clothing that was ripped straight from the early nineties. She demanded  
that I get up and shower because we needed to leave early for church services.

I made a note to myself to beg Frankie for Sunday shifts while I  
showered. In an act of defiance, I ripped the shoulder pads out of the  
back, before yanking it over my head. My hair still dripping, I twisted it  
into a messy bun and threw on the sneakers I wore with every outfit. In the  
morning, my aunt barged into my room holding an ankle length navy  
dress covered in white flowers, complete with shoulder pads and  
length sleeves. While she hung it on the back of my door, I stared in shock  
at the clothing that was ripped straight from the early nineties. She demanded  
that I get up and shower because we needed to leave early for church services.

Sunday church services weren't actually that bad, just a long-  
discussion of what was considered a sin, damnation, and, of course,  
mention of Hell. As the preacher droned on, my eyes grew heavy  
and I pinched the skin on my hand to stay awake. The last thing I needed  
was to fall asleep here and wake up screaming. My aunt would be mortified  
and I would definitely be chastised for that.

As soon as I was home, I changed clothes and headed out, foregoing  
my usual routine with my aunt and her friends.

I checked my phone, noticing a missed message.

**Ros:** I just want to see how you are after everything.

I mulled over a way to respond before finally settling on, "I'm fine,"  
and I sent, throwing it into the center console. There was no point in pouring

y chest.my frustrations on the one friend I had.

kin andI drove aimlessly, wasting precious gas while I thought about every  
needed to do and how much my life had changed. Monday was the be  
Sundayof the next four years of my life.

vy blue

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hock at



nandedA clap of thunder made me jump, and my heart skipped a beat as I shi  
ervice. into fresh clothes the next morning. The nightmares that plagued me  
quicklyslowed since my move to Clearhaven. If anything, they had becom  
ie dressvivid except for my one night with the Forsaken. My stomach rolle  
t into a nervousness and excitement.

back ofBriefly, I wondered if I would see any of them on campus later in t  
g touchand a different type of anticipation built inside of me. I had assum

Friday night's party was just a one off, a stupid decision that was fu  
windedalcohol. Then Niko and Cam rescued me on Saturday. That kiss. *It*  
a small*something, right?*

7 and I I threw my bag over my shoulder, shoved my new phone in my pock  
was tograbbed my keys off of the cabinet. Suddenly, I wished I had a ho  
d and Iprotect my hair from the rain that was coming down in sheets outsid  
would be the next thing I purchased from the thrift store in town.

g lunchlocked the door, I turned around and my heart fell.

*What in the fuck?* The Honda Civic that I hadn't even made a payn  
was covered in spray paint. Words like whore and bitch covered ever

My personal favorite that made me want to vomit was "we know." So  
and hit had discovered my secret, and I hadn't been in town for a month.

ing out

My body pulled me forward into the rain against my will. Lightning  
through the sky as my fingers trailed over the car's body, taking in eve  
ginning of what had been done sometime during the night. To make matters  
three of the four tires were flat, huge gouges cut into them.

I froze and allowed myself to live in the moment. Tears mingled with  
falling from the sky. For the first time in forever, everything had been  
right. Well, mostly. I had made a friend, found a job, and was starting  
today. This was my fresh start and now that was over.

I sank to my knees as the gravity of the situation hit me, allowing my  
to be saturated by the water pelting me from the heavens. Even the so  
d from the thunder faded away and a small part of me wished that the  
consumed me. Who had done this? How would I be able to afford thr  
he day, tires to get back and forth to school? My hands shook as I pulled my  
ied that out, calling the one person I could think of.

Rosalyn answered after two rings, sounding happy despite the hour  
storm raging over us. "What's up?"

I sniffled, and the words tumbled out of my mouth before I could sto  
et, and "Can you come pick me up?"

"Ivy, what's going on? Have you been crying?"

A sob caught in my throat. "Someone slashed my tires—"

Even over the phone, anger laced her tone. "I'll be right there."

Standing up, I went back inside the house on autopilot, knowing that I  
to change into dry clothes. I tucked my emotions back inside, determ  
not let anyone see me fall apart and dried off. Just as I was putting  
sandals Frankie had given me, Rosalyn pulled up. I ran out the door t  
into her car with my bag that was soaked from the rain.

Her jaw was clenched and her lips were pursed as she narrowed her

flashed my car. She peeled away as soon as my seat belt was fastened. “Do you  
try inch who did that?”

worse, I shook my head at her. “No idea. How am I going to pay for new  
They’re so damn expensive and even working at the surf shop... I need  
the rain still need to buy books for my classes...” I was fumbling with my work  
n going my throat felt thick from all the emotions.

classes She tightened her grip on the steering wheel. “I’ve got some ideas. I  
one. I saw an ad online the other day on one of the campus forums  
clothes football team is looking for a tutor for one of their players. They didn’t  
ound of who it is but there’s no harm in applying. And number two.” She hit  
ground for a moment and then gave me a soft smile. “The tires won’t be that bad  
ree new can go to the takeoff place across town. Most of the time they’re less  
7 phone forty a piece.”

I laid my head back against the seat and allowed relief to wash over  
and the Rosalyn’s speech had put me more at ease. Forty dollars wouldn’t be  
as bad as the \$150 I was expecting and tutoring sounded like a good  
p them. make a little extra cash. I would simply have to fit the sessions in between  
my classes and work. “So, what am I going to do about the spray paint  
She rolled her bottom lip between her teeth, thinking. “Leave that up to  
have a trick I can show you this afternoon.”

Soon we pulled up on campus and she parked the truck in a lot close  
needed several academic buildings. Rosalyn grabbed her bag from the back seat  
lined to gesture for me to do the same. “Today is going to be an amazing day  
on the let this morning get you down. It’s just a minor setback. What time  
to jump last class over?”

I gripped the seat strap in my hand, embarrassed by my theatrical  
eyes at “Three. I tried to schedule everything for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday

u know wanted to have more time to work.”

She tilted her head up in acknowledgment and pulled the hood of her raincoat over her hair. “I’ll wait in the dining hall for you.” She lingered beside me for a moment and then grabbed my hand, gently squeezing it. “Don’t worry, everything is going to be fine, I promise.”

I gave her a cautious smile and threw my bag over my shoulder, preparing myself to run through the rain to my first class. “Yeah. It’s all going to be okay.”

I didn’t say *It had to be*. I jumped out of the truck and shut the door behind me, then jogged to a nearby building. I’d studied the campus map some last night. Most of my classes were thankfully nearby. Rain pelted my skin, drenching me faster than my clothes once more. Entering the lecture hall where my first college class

was held, I looked like a drowned rat. I really needed to invest in a raincoat. Half of my day would be spent in damp clothes.

Every class that day went the same way. The professor handed out a syllabus and then discussed expectations for the semester. Afterward, they reviewed the syllabus and it was important to have our textbooks by the end of the week and to buy them now. “You’re no longer high school. Even if we were honor students then, we’re not anymore. You have to study now. I wasn’t worried about it but made a mental note to buy them now.”

I checked how much my textbooks were this afternoon. My first paycheck from my part-time job was being deposited Thursday and there was no way it would cover everything. I had only been working there a few days.

It was just one more thing to worry about.

That afternoon, the rain finally let up. After hours of listening to professors drone on and struggling to stay awake, I quickly stopped by the bookstore earlier. My stomach rumbled, reminding me I hadn’t eaten anything since Friday. Before and it was now lunch. I ignored it knowing that I only had

dollars to my name and there was something to eat at home, even if my jacket was the one who purchased it. I was still angry about what she had done to me for Saturday morning, but I also wasn't foolish enough to rock the boat to my worry yet. Right now, I needed her, even if her support came with judgment.

Pulling the sheets from my nearly dry backpack, I perused the shelves, trying to keep my eyes from popping out of my head. All the books were expensive, but calculus might have been the worst. Nearly \$300 for a book?

Even if Frankie was extremely generous with my pay, I would have to sell a kidney to make it through this semester.

Sighing deeply, I glanced through, trying to see if there were any useful books among the textbooks I needed for my classes, and then at the small bulletin board near the entrance where people posted books they were attempting to sell. Of course, the ones I was looking for weren't available.

Howard Athletic Complex sat across campus and I decided to make a stop there to apply for the tutoring position before meeting Rosalyn. I would spend every penny this semester between classes, gas money, books, and food. That this students laughed and talked with each other as they sauntered to their destination and a hint of longing struck me. I wanted that kind of companionship again. I hadn't seen any of the guys from Friday night on campus yet, but part of me wanted to catch at least a glimpse of them.

Looking down at my feet, I lost myself in my head, worrying about what I was going to do. Not paying attention to where I was going, I suddenly stepped into something solid. The breath was knocked out of me and I fell forward, my face instantly heating. Standing in front of me was Camden. His jaw was clenched and his eyes narrowed as he glared at me. I had hoped to see them today, but this wasn't what I had in mind. "I'm sorry," I said and walked away.



ny aunt Trey and Niko stood nearby, casually watching our interaction with ad said expressions. Cam gave me a cold smile and slowly prowled closer. He o mucha piece of hair behind my ear that had fallen out of my bun at some po leaned close to my face. Whatever softness I had seen from him on S ves and morning had vanished, and a look that could only be described as mal ks were replaced it. His breath caressed my skin and goosebumps formed al for one arms. “No apologies are necessary, little ghost. In fact, I was wond need to you would show up today after what happened to your car.”

His fingers trailed down my neck and wrapped around my thro l copies warning. The realization that they were responsible for what happenec n board car floored me. *What in the fuck did I do to them? What possibly happ sell. Of the past forty-eight hours?* My heart sped up as I tried to jerk out of h but he was faster than I was. His other arm banded around my waist, c the trek me flush against his body.

ld need “I need you to listen closely to what I’m going to say. You shoul w tires. Clearhaven, withdraw from all of your classes, and purchase a ti air next somewhere else. Seeing you makes me sick.”

of easy I looked over to the other two men that I’d spent the night with and ight on moved a muscle. Niko stared down at his nails while Trey fished a ki of his pocket, twirling it between his fingers.

what I Steeling my spine, I met his stony gaze. His blue eyes looked like the iddenly a stormy day, dark and wild. “No,” I gritted out from between my te looked embarrassment from earlier gone. I fisted my hands in his shirt, my ch His jaw fire from anger. “Get fucked, Camden.”

l to run Our lips were a fraction of an inch from one another and from the e blurted my vision, I could see a crowd forming around us. He lowered his v that only I could hear. “Oh, but I already have, little ghost. Here’s a

1 bored hint. The next time you decide to fuck around, don't play the innocent tucked girl. It doesn't suit you. There's no way in hell you were a virgin as innocent and your sweet cunt is, and as rough as I was while I plowed into you. I Saturday my surprise when I discovered there was no blood coating my cock at all. I had acted so timid about sucking Niko's dick."

Along my Rage and hurt dueled inside me. This self-absorbed prick. I wasn't preparing it to be *anything*, but his words brought back the questions I'd had in the shower the morning after. Choosing not to address that for the moment, I turned off all of my emotions, willing the burning behind my eyes to melt away. "I don't know what in the hell this is about, but if you were concerned about me becoming clingy or getting attached, don't bother."

In his grip, He let out a loud laugh and then squeezed tighter, leaving me to struggle for my breath. "You didn't think anyone would discover your dirty little secret, did you?" I clawed at his hand that branded my throat, but it did no good. "You don't leave, I'll make your life a living hell. I'll make sure that pathetic existence is lonely and everyone knows exactly who your dad is."

The edges of my vision darkened. Sucking in a deep breath, desperate for precious air, I plotted out my next move. It was unfair that I was going to be outpunished yet again for my father's actions. Any logical person would have had no knowledge of my father's crimes. When the evidence was leaked on the media, I was as shocked as everyone else. "I'm not going anywhere, my somehow managed to rasp out. "There's nowhere else for me to go."

Weeks on I lifted my knee quickly in one last desperate attempt to escape his grip, but I missed my mark. Instead of kneeling him in the dick, all I managed to do was hit his rock hard thigh, injuring myself in the process. He squeezed me more before pushing me away like I was trash. I stumbled back a few feet and landed on the concrete. Pain shot through my body but my hands

ent, coy to my throat as I quickly sucked in several breaths, trying to calm my tight as heart.

Imagine Niko stalked toward Cam and laid a hand on his forearm, shaking his finger at you him. Cam ignored him and ran his tongue over his bottom lip. He raised his voice so that the onlookers could hear him. "No one speaks to Ivy S. She's dead to everyone in Clearhaven. Spread the word. If you go against me, there will be consequences."

Next, I glanced around at the crowd of people. A few had looks of pity crossed their faces, and some were bored. A group of girls dressed in athletic wear had their phones pointed in my direction. Great, just what I needed—for my name to be all over social media again. They moved closer to the others and jostled for his throat. "Alright, the show's over, guys. Get the hell out of here."

In secret, the three of them turned their backs to me without another word. "If I sauntered off like they didn't have a care in the world as the onlookers dispersed. I sat on the ground for several moments, stunned by how shitty my day had gone to shit.

Nothing was going according to plan at this point. Clearhaven was supposed to be my fresh start.

If Cam thought he could break me by turning me into a social pariah, he was wrong. I'd already lived through that back home. It hurt a lot worse to be ostracized here, by people I'd known my entire life than by people I had just met.

Even though, deep down inside, it still hurt—just a little.

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# TWELVE

# TWELVE

## Ivy



**T**rudging inside of the athletic's building, I first darted inside the women's restroom to clean myself up. One look in the mirror told me everything that I needed to know. My cheeks were still ruddy from the confrontation I'd had with Cam and my hair poked out from the hair bun I'd thrown it into this morning.

Turning the water on, I stuck my hands under the cold liquid and noticed the stinging on my palms. They were scraped from my fall earlier, but I didn't notice until that moment. My pride was more wounded than my body. I splashed cold water on my cheeks and carefully blotted my face with paper towels before trying to dust my clothes off.

When I was leaving the bathroom, a dark haired woman in a crop top looked at me while flipping her hair over her shoulder. *Whatever.* Her attitude had nothing to do with Camden's royal decree and everything to do with the fact I looked like a hot mess. My phone buzzed in my pocket, but I ignored it. I would check it after I applied for the tutoring position. I was going to prove that no one, even the Forsaken, would run me off.

Down a small corridor, I finally found an administrative office tucked in a corner, hidden away from the rest of the world. Behind a wooden door, an ancient woman with horn-rimmed glasses typed on a keyboard. As I walked in, she held up one finger, asking me to give her a moment. I awkwardly stood there listening to the sound of keys clicking and the tick of the clock hanging on the wall. Finally, she looked up at me and sighed, her face drawn. “How can I help you?” Her tone told me she would rather be bothered now or at any time in the future.

“Yeah, I’m here about the tutoring position,” I managed to stammer out.

She sniffed and stood, handing me a piece of paper from the top of the desk.

“Fill this out, but the position is yours. No one wanted it because of the student’s... attitude.”

I raised my eyebrow as she shoved the pen and paper in front of me.

Whoever it was couldn’t possibly be as bad as Cam. I could put up with

nearly anything. I found it odd that she didn’t ask how I was qualified

to be the student or even mention which subject it was.

On the form, there was a line asking if I was comfortable reading

and discussing literary works. *Piece of cake*. I filled in the blanks on the

form quickly and handed it back to the older woman. She nodded and

shoved it into a folder. “The hours are Tuesday from noon to two. He’s request

is that you meet him at the campus library on the third floor near the archives

and get one hundred dollars a week with a bonus payout at midterm and the

end of the semester—if he passes. Well, and if you make it that long.”

I gave her a tight smile. “Thank you for your time. I’ll be there.”

When I exited the building, I pulled my phone from my pocket. I had

been ignoring it while I was pulling myself together and applying for the

position. There were twenty notifications, all from Rosalyn.



l into a **Ros:** Where are you?

desk, an **Ros:** We were supposed to meet after classes.

When **I Ros:** I'm worried about you. I'm sending a message to Trey.

ment. I My heart sank. Was she included in the whole "no one can speak  
tick of thing? Even though we hadn't been friends long, I really liked her.

ied, her **Ros:** I'm going to kill them

r not be **Ros:** Just tell me you're okay.

**Ros:** Fucking assholes.

it. **Ros:** I'm waiting for you in the dining hall still.

ie desk. **Ros:** After we take care of your car, a bottle of vodka is calling our name

of this **Ros:** I can't believe they are the ones responsible for your car. I'm so  
right now.

of me. I shut off my phone and picked up my pace, headed to meet her. At  
up with knew she wouldn't abandon me based on the decree of one g  
to tutor douchebag. A bottle of vodka sounded fantastic right about now.

Stepping into the dining hall, I spotted Rosalyn instantly. Her jack  
ng and earlier was gone and in her hands was a bag of food. She jogged tow  
ie sheet and handed me a soda. "I picked up food for us to eat on the way. W  
loved it shit to do. "

ing that If I thought I was determined earlier, she was on a whole other lev  
. Pay iss shoulders were pulled back and her head held high as she pulled us t  
end of the people milling about on campus. Every time someone so much as  
our way, she held up her middle finger in their direction.

"Ivy, you will not allow those three thugs to run your life here," she s  
ad been we approached her car. "I love them all. Grew up with them." She sw  
utoring door open and met my eyes. "But this time, they're wrong." She  
herself into the driver's seat and motioned impatiently for me to get in.

As I fastened my seat belt, she dug through the brown bag and passed something wrapped in paper. The scent of onions filled the car and my stomach growled again. “Eat,” she commanded.

She didn’t have to tell me twice. It was just a hamburger, but the flavor was heaven. In less than three minutes, the entire sandwich was gone. As the paper crumpled into the bottom of the bag, I opened the cap on the soda and took a deep drink, hoping that the caffeine and sugar would make me feel more alive.

For some reason, I had assumed we were headed back to my aunt’s home. Instead, Rosalyn pulled her truck into the parking lot of a blue cinderblock building with two garage doors. The side had the words “Mack’s Tire & Oil” painted in spray paint. The logo was pulled straight out of the 1950s and at least reminded me of the old-school DC Comics’ ‘pow’ or ‘bam’.

I took another sip of my drink and Rosalyn jumped out of the truck. An attractive tall, broad man with sleeve tattoos stalked out of the building and caught her around the waist. *What did they put in the water here? What made all of the men insanely gorgeous?* She scowled at him and pushed him away, placing her hands on her hips.

One day I hoped to convey the same level of sass. Finally, I exited the truck. He was curious about why we were there. “Baby girl, your car’s almost ready. If you want to help, then this can be done in less than an hour.”

My eyes widened at his words, confused by what he was talking about. My car was ready? I’d left it in front of Regina’s house this morning.

Rosalyn bumped my hip with hers, grinning. “I asked for a few favors this morning and picked up the spare key to the car from my grandmother. Surprise.”

My heart beat faster. She had helped me despite everything today.

sed medon't have the money to pay you back..." I stalled, unsure of what to  
and mybronzed god standing nearby. "Or your friend."

He offered me his hand and chuckled. "Mack, but don't worry. She  
rst biteowe me cash. I'll take my payment out of her—"

PlacingRos' cheeks turned bright red as she shoved an elbow into his ribs, s  
: cherryhis sentence in its tracks. "Enough from you," she muttered. "Now, v  
d makeyou need us to do?"

Mack laughed harder, throwing his head back at her reaction. He har  
house.rags when we entered the shop and a bottle of nail polish remover. Si  
r blockthe bay was my Honda with four new to me tires and half of the spra  
res andmissing from the body. "I was in the middle of taking the graffiti of  
60s andyou texted me to say you were on the way. I didn't have time to fix t  
today, but the two of you should be able to finish this up in the ne  
car. Anwhile I make some calls."

ing andHe pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head while she glared at hin  
ly werehe was safely out of earshot, the corner of my mouth lifted. "So you'r  
1 away,poured a small amount of acetone onto the rag and gingerly rubbec  
graffiti while waiting for an answer.

e truck,She pursed her lips while she thought of what to say. "Aren't togeth  
. If youhave an arrangement. He wants more than I'll give him. Plus, I can't  
bring him to meet my family. I can just imagine what my grandfather  
out. Mysay. 'Boys like that are nothing but trouble.'" She mimicked an old m  
I snorted.

ors this"Okay, so you and Mack aren't a thing... yet." I peered up at her o  
dfather.hood and lowered my voice. "You didn't have to help me. I'll never  
to repay you."

"Ros, IShe rolled her eyes as she scrubbed at the spray paint. "I didn't hav

call the anything, but I wanted to.”

My emotions were creeping right below the surface of my skin, doesn't swallowed hard. “What if the guys find out? They said there consequences if anyone defies them.”

topping The corner of her mouth tipped up with amusement. “Yeah, for most what do but I'm not like most people, am I? Besides, Niko needs me too much they won't do shit. Some things are bigger than the Forsaken.”

ided us We spent the next hour in comfortable silence, listening to the music tting in over the shop's speakers. When everything was done, my car looked y pain had when I picked it up from Ros' grandfather's last week.

if when

he door

xt hour



Later that evening, we drove to a cemetery on the outskirts of town. Once parked. Rosalyn pulled a bottle of vodka out from underneath her seat. “...?” I grabbed my hand. “Let's go.”

I at the Shivers of excitement traveled down my spine. I wasn't sure what was doing, but I loved ancient places like this. They held secrets no one would utter, not even in the middle of the night. We crept past the broken iron exactly the chain that had locked it long since gone. We walked for a while, hooting overhead. The clouds from earlier had dissipated and now the moon, and shined down, casting everything in its glow. Some tombstone crumbled and a tall mausoleum lay on the right side of the property.

ver the “Why are we here?” I whispered.

be able She chuckled at me as she opened the glass bottle and tilted it up, to drink. “It was here or the beach and I thought after the day you had e to do

prefer not to run into anyone else.” A stone bench from decades gone  
and Ion the left-hand side and she took a seat. “Besides, I like to come  
will benight and think. It’s quiet. The dead don’t bother me. It’s the living you  
to worry about.”

people, I grabbed the vodka from her hand, not knowing how to respond, and  
rich and alcohol burn my throat. I winced a little, trying to suppress the cough  
was coming. We passed the bottle back and forth for a while, the o  
playing calling out overhead and the cicadas screaming. “The only time t  
I like it graveyard isn’t quiet is around Halloween. The Forsaken throw an en  
party here.”

I picked at the hem of my shirt where a thread was coming loose. “I’ll  
to stay home that night,” I mumbled under my breath before taking  
swig and allowing the warmth to spread through my veins.

“Absolutely not.” She took the bottle from my hands and stared up at t  
eat and “They’ll be over it by then, hopefully.” She sniffed and then coughed  
clearing her throat. “I know why they reacted the way they did  
Camden anyway. He’s got a younger sister and well...” She rubbed h  
before tipping the bottle back. “They dropped her case. Your dad..  
doing better now, but for a while it was hit-and-miss. I don’t agree w  
he’s acting, but they won’t stand up to him. Niko might once he gets fe  
What a hell of a way to end the day: drinking cheap vodka in an aba  
graveyard and discovering that your father hadn’t just ruined your l  
also the life of a girl you’d never met. “I get it, but it still sucks,”  
peering at the weathered stone in front of me. “I just wish thing  
different.”

She clutched my arm and laid her head on my shoulder. “So do I.”

There was an entire list of things I wished were different and regrets I

past satwe passed the bottle back and forth, I thought of Cam's sister, a girl  
here atknow but that my heart hurt for. There was more to the story that was  
ou havebut I was quickly learning that whatever was done in the dark wo  
brought to light, eventually.

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we passed the bottle back and forth, I thought of Cam's sister, a girl I didn't know but that my heart hurt for. There was more to the story that wasn't said, but I was quickly learning that whatever was done in the dark would be brought to light, eventually.

THIRTEEN



THIRTEEN

*Cam*



**B**y the time Niko and I got home that evening, all of our siblings were bustling around the kitchen preparing dinner. Maya ignored me and cut potatoes into chunks. Niko ruffled Sergei's hair as he passed by, and I went for a glass in the dish rack. Only his younger sister, Katya, greeted us. "Where are you guys late? We had to figure out what to cook without you!"

Katya was the exact opposite of her brother, with bright green eyes and white-blond hair. She'd formed a fast friendship with my sister who were in preschool. Niko and I had raised all of them given both of our difficult situations. Between absentee parents, alcoholic mothers, addict fathers, and poverty, we had managed to win the lottery.

"Squirt, we had something to take care of. Besides, it looks like the t-shirt you managed all on your own." I winked at her, keeping my mask in place. Really, the rage from earlier still simmered under my façade and I didn't know what to do with it. Even practice hadn't helped to displace the darkness swirling inside of me. Out of every person in the world, Ivy had to be the one to talk to him.

"We shouldn't have to, Camden," she sassied back.

I rubbed the back of my neck and closed my eyes. “Kat, all three of us were in high school now. It isn’t fair, but you’re going to have to pick up the slack.”

By the time Niko was her age, he and I had started the weekday tradition and we all spent the night at his house afterward. It was safer than at home. His mom had overdosed when we were younger leaving everything, and his dad was never home, off looking for his next fix. It was still better than my mother.

For years, we made sure that all of their homework was complete, even brushed their teeth, and they were tucked in. Maya slept on a bunk in Katya’s room, oblivious to everything happening around her, thinking every night was a slumber party. We would sneak out once they were asleep to do whatever needed to be done, and afterward we crashed in bed.

Katya interrupted my bitter stroll down memory lane. “I get it. You’re a business,” she used air quotes and I rolled my eyes, “to take care of our little warning would be nice.”

Maya hummed in agreement while she tossed seasoning onto the pot for Niko and Sergei - well he watched them while leaning against the wall.

After everyone’s homework was finished and the dishes were washed, the three of us disappeared into the neighborhood while Niko and I pulled out our textbooks. He passed me a bottle of beer from the refrigerator and our fingers met for a moment too long causing sparks to ignite beneath my skin. “We need to talk,” he mumbled as he pulled a stool beside mine.

I cocked an eyebrow up and opened my drink. “What about? If it’s about \_\_\_\_\_”

He put his hand over my mouth, silencing me. He leaned closer, and I

you are sure what he would say next. His eyes were dark with anger and sorrow, but I didn't want to think about right now—or remember. “Cam, shut the fuck up. This isn't about Ivy. It's about Sergei, but if you want to fight about it after dinner, we can. You acted like a complete dick.” I stayed silent until he removed his hand. “He wants to join the Forsaken, and I need to convince him otherwise. We joined so they wouldn't have to. It was supposed to be our ticket out of this place, but now it's basically anchored here. I don't want that for him or the girls.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Over my dead body will either of the girls be in there. You know what that means for both of them.” I looked away to bring back the intensity of the moment. “I'll talk to Sergei. He's smart and his grades sound good. Right now, he could make it out of here.” I almost added “unlike Niko's” but kept my mouth shut. I knew better than to feed into Niko's current

The last thing I wanted tonight was a fight between the two of us or with you. You have might lead. Coach would ream my ass tomorrow at practice if I showed up with a black eye.

Opening up the literature anthology, I sighed. The words jumbled together and I pressed my fingertips into my eyes, allowing spots to form beneath my lids. It had always been like this for as long as I could remember. At home, at school, I'd skated by convincing other people to write my papers and avoid talking to my teachers.

Our college had proven to be more difficult, and I needed to get it to my skin. American literature was one of the last classes I needed to graduate.

I could pay someone to write my papers—the quiet girls in class were more than happy to help me however I needed, basking in the little attention they got from me—but if I didn't understand the material, I would never pass the exam. Niko placed his hand on my shoulder, all the fire from moments ago

nothing from his expression. “You know I’ll help you, right?”

he fuck I just bobbed my head at him, completely exhausted. Between running out this for the gang, practice for football, taking care of Maya, and now Ivy and he wanted to sleep. I gave him a cheeky grin that I didn’t feel to reassure you to “Hey but C’s get degrees. And C’s keep me playing on Saturdays.”

It was He rolled his eyes at me. “Did they find a new tutor yet?”  
“Yeah, I checked my email earlier and I get to meet the new person tomorrow at noon.”

His join. He gently squeezed my shoulder, and I pulled away. He frowned at the lack of contact, but I ignored it. Even something as small as physical comfort was a luxury I couldn’t allow myself. “Don’t run this one off, man. I know I like us,” pisses you off, but keep your temper. You need them.”

That mood. “I know. Besides, if I can just make it through this one class, I’ll be good where it pulled out the blue reading ruler from my bag. “Your next race is Tuesday night? Have you told Trey that he has to leave his hole to make an appearance yet?” We all did things on the side to make a little cash.

Together, was street racing, and I had never seen him lose.

With my He tapped a pencil on the piece of paper in front of him. “I’ll call him in a little while. We probably need to make sure he has food again. I don’t understand why he won’t just eat dinner with us every night.”

I looked down at my book and pretended to focus on the words in front of me. Niko didn’t understand, but I did.

Sure, I know Trey didn’t want to burden us any more than he felt like he already was. Living on his own, he knew all about financial struggles, but he

I gave him understand that one more person wouldn’t matter. We would do anything for him. The three of us were brothers, not by blood, but by choice. We were stronger when we were all taken care of.

g drugs

7, I just

re him. Around lunch the next day, Niko and Trey dropped me off on campus they headed to Vincent's house. He wasn't pleased that I wouldn't be but I had politely told him to fuck off. Between meeting my new tutor tomorrow practice, I didn't have time for his shit. I would deal with him on Thursday. Phillips-Thompson Library was nestled next to a greenway. All the other buildings were scattered around a fountain, and students gathered in the courtyard was grass to study and talk in the sunlight. For a fleeting moment, I questioned if I know it all of their lives were as complicated as mine.

After stalling for as long as I could, I stepped inside the tall brick building. "Good." I turned left to climb the stairs to the third floor. No one really came here and I liked the privacy that it offered. A table sat in the corner next to a large window that overlooked the campus and was hidden from sight by Niko's bookshelves piled with dusty books that no one had checked out in years.

I dropped my bag beside the table and sat down in a chair, staring out the window and wondering who the athletic department would send this time. I don't think the previous tutors had lasted less than a month, frustrated over my performance or scared off by my outbursts. I was only doing this to continue playing in front of the team.

Really, I wanted nothing more than to disappear inside the darkroom on campus and develop the photos I'd taken. Trey helped me sell some of the photos online and the money I made went to groceries and Maya's therapy bills. Living in a town like Clearhaven, becoming a full-time photographer was a pipe dream. No one had the money for photography sessions here. Every penny I

either making ends meet or drugs. Still, I held onto the hope that one would all escape. It was one of the few things holding me together.

I tapped on the wooden table in front of me impatiently and glanced at my watch. 12:05. Punctuality was obviously not in my new tutor's vocabulary. I found myself getting annoyed. These two hours a week were the time I had carved out in my schedule to make sure I could pass this class—especially since I failed it over the summer. At any moment, some lanky guy with glasses would come sauntering up the steps holding an overpriced coffee from some chain off campus. The longer I sat there, the more aggravated I got by the situation. By 12:10, I was livid.

And then she walked in.

My lips curled into a cruel smile as she scanned the room, looking for whoever she was supposed to be meeting. She hadn't noticed me yet, but I was my new tutor, fate had a fucked up sense of humor. It would work perfectly for me. Two hours a week to torment her and convince her that she needed to disappear from Clearhaven for good.

Finally, her eyes met mine, and realization dawned on her. Her face paled. All her eyes grew wide. I winked as she shuffled slowly to the table and took a deep breath. This semester had just taken an interesting turn.

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FOURTEEN

FOURTEEN

## Ivy



I'd been running slow all morning. My nightmares were back, vengeance and the lack of sleep was getting to me. When I saw it was already 11:40, I left the house, breaking every traffic law that I thought I could get away with. It looked bad to show up late to my first teaching session, and I really needed the job.

The parking lot near the library was full when I arrived on campus. It would be busier than it was at eight in the morning but this was ridiculous. I followed the signs to the overflow lot across campus near the student center complex and grimaced realizing I was going to be late even if I jogged the entire way. It wasn't exactly a great first impression, but perhaps they can understand.

There wasn't a cloud in sight as I locked the door for my car and took off practically sprinting. The sun beat down on me and sweat trickled down my back. The bag slung across my shoulders felt like it weighed a million pounds although it only held a notebook and some pens. *Only two days until I can buy part of my books*, I reminded myself.

Entering the air-conditioned library, I breathed a sigh of relief and realized I would need to climb two flights of stairs. *Fuck my life.* I looked down at my phone I saw it was already 12:09, and I prayed that whoever was waiting for me had some degree of patience. My thigh muscles screamed when I finally arrived on the third floor. I scanned the nearly empty hallway looking for any sign of life. I quietly wandered, peering around bookshelves for any student that might be waiting.

And then I saw him. *You have got to be fucking kidding me.* Out of everyone on campus, it would have to be Camden. My heart skipped a beat as I walked my way to the table he was sitting at. *It would be okay. What was the*

with a *thing that would happen?* He needed help with his lit class; I needed the

it was Surely everything from yesterday would be forgotten, right?

ought I *Wrong.* As soon as he saw me, his lips turned up into a malicious smile. I knew things wouldn't go according to plan. When he stood, I took

back away from him, hoping to gain some much-needed distance. Despite the coarse words from yesterday, my traitorous body still reacted to his presence.

ulous. I "Hey, little ghost. You're looking pale, even for you."

athletic He prowled closer, and soon I was trapped. My back hit one of the bookshelves lining the room and I held my breath, waiting to see what

ged the would do. His proximity and the scent of the ocean clouded my senses. I

ook off, picked up a lock of hair that had fallen from my bun and rubbed it between

own my two fingers. "So, I guess you aren't going to drop your classes and move

pounds town like I suggested yesterday." He dropped the strands and edged closer, placing both hands beside my body and caging me in.

*if I can* The heat from his skin and the smell of the ocean enveloped me, giving me a false sense of security. Logic told me not to let my guard down despite his calm demeanor. I swallowed hard and tilted my head up to look him

and then eyes. “No. I told you yesterday that I wouldn’t. I’m stuck here just looking at you,” I said, my voice wavering a bit.

Ever was Cam dropped his face closer, his mouth hovering near mine. His feathers feathered against my lips and his left hand suddenly gripped my hip. He stalked forward, eating away at the little bit of distance that was between us. “Is that so?”

Like an idiot, I froze. My brain screamed at me that I was in danger, that everyone was a traitor. Between his proximity and the breath caressing my neck, I made my heart sped up and my nipples hardened. I could only pray that the dark, worn t-shirt I was wearing helped hide the effect he was having on me. The only thing I needed was for him to know and hold it over my head. I gritted

teeth together, trying to think of what to say or do. “What makes you think you’re the only one trapped here, Cam?”

His fingers brushed up my torso from my hip to below my breast. His mouth suddenly felt dry. “It must be so hard for you, Ivy, to go from being a student to a tutor. Everything that kids around here could only dream of to having nothing to do with.”

His thumb brushed over my nipple, sending sparks of arousal shooting down my spine. He raised an eyebrow. “How badly do you need this tutoring position? Being stuck with me once a week for two weeks. He will be your own personal hell.”

I bit down on my lip and stalled, trying to think of how to get out of the position I was in. Telling him I needed the tutoring gig seemed like a reasonable request, but the reality was that I wasn’t leaving the library. An extra \$400 a month

would help me buy my books, a jacket before cooler weather set in, and a car to get to work. “You don’t scare me. I need the money and you need the money. I need this class to keep playing sports for the university.”

His thumb continued to circle my hardened peak. Voices echoed softly in the background.

like you somewhere across the room behind the massive shelf I was trapped by. He grabbed his wrist, coming to my senses. “Stop. Someone might see us. We’re wasting time. I’m here to help you with literature, not suck your dick. HeI told him, my voice coming out louder than I intended. “We have less than an hour and a half to get started.”

He smirked and moved his mouth close to my ear. “Shh. I need you to be quiet or I’ll find something to shove into your mouth.” His teeth grazed my face, earlobe, and I bit down on my lip. “Here’s the thing. The reason you have an hour and a half is that you were late. You wasted my time and the last we have to come to some type of agreement. Since I can’t convince you to quit and save us both the heartache, I think we should have a little fun for you to think around.”

My eyes widened at his words. His audacity knew no bounds. “Absolutely not,” I hissed, careful to keep my voice lowered. “Let go of me so that we can get started.”

He gripped my shoulders and turned me quickly like I was nothing more than a feather, pressing my front into the shelf behind us. I tried to struggle but he banded one arm tightly around my mid. “Here’s what I think is going to happen. I could have had any person on campus show up today, but it will be you. Since you need this job so desperately and you don’t want your dad about daddy getting out, I think we need to come to an understanding. Do everything that I say without an argument.”

One of his massive hands cupped my breast and squeezed as he sucked my skin below my ear into his mouth. My cheeks flushed at his words and I clenched my thighs together, praying that this moment would be over.

“And if I don’t?”

His hand snaked below the hem of my top and the feeling of his

behind. Against my bare skin caused my breath to hitch. Leisurely, he trailed his hands up and down my torso until he caressed the edge of my bra. “I’ll make sure that the picture of your dick,” you and your father end up plastered all over social media, including more than university groups.”

Cam’s words were a punch to the gut. The last thing I wanted was for you to be to know about my past. Right now, I was only a social outcast because I had been humiliated. I had commanded no one to speak to me. If word got out, I would either be laughed at or pitied.

And now I tried to throw an elbow backward—anything to stop him and show you my displeasure—but he easily dodged it and chuckled before rolling his hips against my ass. He was hard. Really hard. His fingers dipped beneath the top of my bra and he rolled my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “You’re absolutely something, little ghost. As much as you want to hate me at this moment, how wet would you be if I were to check right now?”

My cheeks were on fire and I was embarrassed knowing that although I was more than essentially blackmailing me into what he wanted, my underwear was still on, but he—How was it possible to be angry, ashamed, and turned on all at the same time? “Go fuck yourself, Cam,” I whispered.

It had to be. He laughed again as the arm that was banded around my waist loosened and his hand splayed across my stomach. He bit down hard on the side of my neck causing me to wince before his tongue lapped along the sensitive skin.

Goosebumps erupted on my arms and I leaned my head back, my body shaking without my permission.

What the fuck was he doing to me? He quickly undid the top button of my jeans before pushing beneath the fabric. He knew exactly the effect

he was having on me, no matter how unwelcome it was, as he slowly slid his fingers through my wet folds.

up my “Fuck, you really do like this, don’t you?” he murmured. “Me caging you  
tures of trapping you like you’re nothing more than prey.” He rubbed against  
ing the and a whimper escaped from beneath my throat. It felt good even though  
didn’t want it to. He quickly yanked the hand that was clutching my  
anyone from beneath my shirt and covered my mouth, his fingers gripping my  
he had “None of that now. There is someone on the other side of this book she  
e hated know that the last thing you want is for someone to hear us. You have  
quiet for me.”

ow my I fought against the waves of arousal as they coursed through me, driving  
his hip higher and higher as he drew circles around the sensitive nub. Suddenly  
the cup plunged two fingers inside of me, grinding the heel of his palm against  
r. “Tell me, clit. I gripped his arm, trying to steady myself, digging my nails into his  
s exact until it broke the skin.

I could fight this. He could use me however he wanted, but I wouldn’t  
he was in. Cam sucked along the column of my neck hard enough to leave me  
; damp. his fingers thrust in and out of me, every pass grazing my clit. My  
e same tightened around him and I tried to think of anything else but the sensation  
that had overtaken my body.

ried and “Just give in, ghost. I feel how tightly your pussy is wrapped around  
of my fingers. Your body is begging for you to let go. Let me see you lose control  
ve skin. Behind my eyes stung at his words. He knew what I was doing. He moved  
y acting hand from my mouth and turned my face to his. His mouth met mine,  
forced his tongue inside, tasting like mint. At the same time, the  
1 of my inside of me curled upward, hitting a spot that made me groan, and though  
he was all it took.

fingers My traitorous body gave him what he wanted.

Cam’s hold on me tightened and my body trembled as the edges of



you and faded. Arousal dripped down my thighs and my walls pulsed around my clit fingers. It was both heaven and hell wrapped in one neat package. The rough I who wanted to destroy me swallowed my cries as I came and a tear fell on my breast my cheek.

my face. My breathing slowed and reality crashed back in. What in the fuck had I done? I turned my head, and he removed his fingers from inside me, my ears began to beg listening on them. I glared and pushed at his hard body, willing my heart rate to slow. He took a step back and gave me a lazy smirk as I adjusted my clothes and fastened the button on my pants.

Finally, he said, “Freshly fucked is a good look on you,” he said as he pulled some cash out from his wallet and threw it on the table. “Here’s your pay for this week of my flesh.” My jaw dropped at his statement, and a mixture of anger and hurt struck me. He was dismissing me and treating me like I was a whore.

I can’t give a tutor. We hadn’t even cracked open a book. Without realizing what he was doing, my hand raised and swung toward his face. He caught my wrist and squeezed, a tinge of pain running up my arm. His grin widened at the confrontation. “Don’t you dare. I like your spirit, but if you hit me, I’ll put you on your knees and shove my cock in your mouth. Next week I expect you to show up on my own time or I’ll change where we meet to somewhere much more private with my control.” Completely ashamed of myself and livid at his words, I grabbed the cash and my bag. I couldn’t deal with his shit right now and I had to work. I went to the surf shop. If he thought he could somehow break me or treat me how he wanted, he was wrong—no matter how pretty his stupid face was. He didn’t deserve any of my tears. He could fail for all I cared.

As I raced out of the library, people looked up from their books and stared at me. Whatever. They could fuck themselves, too. I had other things to worry about, like figuring out how to exist.

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FIFTEEN

FIFTEEN

## Ivy



It was Wednesday, and I was struggling to keep my eyes open. The professor at the front of the room discussed the development of World civilization was a mandatory general education class for graduates but most of the information that was being relayed had already been covered in my AP classes in high school. And middle school. It didn't help that the night before was restless and fevered. The memory of the dream was fresh in my mind and I rubbed my hands down my cheeks.

*“Little lamb,” a deep voice said as I stared at the golden light hanging from the ceiling. My vision was blurred, and the object was always immobile, unable to use my legs or arms. I wanted to scratch his hot breath scorched my cheek and bile rose in my throat. My back was stiff, and I wasn't sure where my clothes were as his fingers touched places that I didn't want. His hands were harsh, like blades of ice as they pressed into my hip. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a shadow moving to the other side. Hot trails of tears streaked my cheeks from fear, and I was sure that I was suffocating.*

*“We’ve all waited so long for this moment.” the man stated with reverence as someone parted my thighs. Which was worse, that I couldn’t scream or I couldn’t fight them off while I was stuck in my head? Between my legs at the intrusion of something, and pain lanced through my body.*

*No, no no! This couldn’t be happening.*

*I managed to make a muffled noise, but someone tsked at me. “I thought I said you gave her enough. She shouldn’t be able to say anything,” she grumbled.*

*Another of the shadows spoke, black eyes standing out in the haze.*

*worry, I’ll take care of this. Next time, we’ll give her more.” Roughly as the grasped my jaw, painfully forcing my mouth wide as they shoved someone inside.*

*The deep voice next to me whispered, almost like he was consoling me. “Hush, little lamb. If you relax, it will be easier. You knew your turn was coming.”*

*Even in the light of day, sweat formed on my brow, and panic clawed my throat. I knew they were only dreams, but sometimes they felt so real. I inhaled sharply and focused on the blank paper in front of me, catching shapes on the corner of the page.*

*Finally, the professor stopped her lecture, and I sat up straight, trying to pay attention to whatever homework she might decide to dole out. “This is what I want everyone to read chapters one through five. Remember to check your university email! I’ll be sending out a document outlining a project worth thirty percent of your final grade. You need to find a partner for next week.”*

*Great.*

*After the Forsaken’s declaration last week, finding someone who was*

ence asto openly defy them was going to be difficult. Maybe if I spoke  
or that I professor, she would let me work alone. I rubbed my eyes and shov  
burned notebook into my backpack, waiting for the class to trickle out so  
speak to her alone.

I walked down the stairs in the large auditorium and waited to the sid  
ght you she spoke with a tall guy. He had broad shoulders that pulled at the se  
omeone his polo while he moved and hair that reminded me of wheat. Overall,  
classically handsome with a sharp jaw. When he caught me watching  
“Don’t he gave me a friendly smile and a wink. I rolled my eyes and conti  
i handswait. Once he finally shifted and moved out of the way, I approach  
nothing older woman who was packing her things away.

“Umm, excuse me, Professor,” I racked my brain trying to remember  
a child.name. “Hurst. I was wondering if I could talk to you about the pro  
irn was there anyway that I can work on it solo? I just moved here and I don’t  
know anyone. Add in work and—”

d at my She cut me off and gave me a sympathetic look. “Miss, I’m sure yo  
real. I good reasons for wanting to complete your project on your own, but  
lrawing the college experience is participating with others in an academic sett  
fostering a sense of community. I’m sure that you will find someone  
; to pay to work with you.” Her lips flattened as she picked up her bag and she  
week I her back to me. “Besides, Mr. Vance needs a partner, so you’re in luck  
ck your The conversation didn’t go the way I hoped it would, and there was  
: that is that I could explain that no one on campus was supposed to have any  
· before with me. I seriously doubted that Mr. Vance, who looked like he was  
straight out of an American Eagle ad, would want to stand up t  
members. I sighed as I shuffled to the door, not intending on speaking  
willing How much would she dock my grade if I just completed it on my own?

to theThe guy, whose first name I still didn't know, caught up to me as I exited my building. "Hey, wait up!" he called out from behind me, but I pretended I couldn't hear him, keeping my head ducked low. His hand landed on my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks. "Listen, I need a partner for the project while I'm overheard what you said to Hurst."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "That's not a good idea. You seem nice enough, but surely you've overheard that you're not supposed to speak to me." He rolled his eyes and gave me an easygoing grin. "Oh, you mean the 'no one can speak or touch' thing I saw plastered all over the intercom system the night because of Camden Barrett? Yeah, I'm not worried about him. He won't bother me."

I raised my eyebrows at him, curious about what that meant. "I can just decline the offer. Is that by itself, but I appreciate the offer."

He ignored me as he grabbed my hand and pulled me along toward the computer science building. Several girls stared as we passed by, and I knew that word was going to make it back to my tormentors. "So, it's done. We're partners and we can get started on the project this weekend. I'll email you the guidelines and check our email and print the guidelines out."

I was shocked by his brazenness and shook my head. It was his funeral. "My name is Caleb, just in case you were wondering." He opened the door to a small computer lab and ushered me inside. "Looks like one of your friends is here."

Sure enough, sitting across the room Trey stared at something on the wall. I pulled in front of him. I stared for a moment, drinking in the set of his jaw, the way he concentrated and how he brushed his hair from his eyes, causing it to fall across his forehead. I loathed the fact that I still found him attractive, especially after he hadn't stood up to Cam. He was completely oblivious



ited themy attention while he worked, occasionally typing something ded notkeyboard.

oulder,Hopefully, I could keep it that way. I sat at one of the computers , too. Itoward the edge of the room and logged into my university email. I checked it yet and as soon as it popped up, I learned I had missed enough,emails. Sorting through them, I quickly found out that most were p advertisements for clubs and groups. One was information regarding e wholerush, and I quickly deleted it.

net lastI didn't have the time or money for something like that right now. E 1. Theybeing forced to wear dresses and plaster on a fake smile no longer aj to me. I'd left that life behind when I moved here.

st workOne email held my attention, and I quickly clicked on it. It was a p note from the dean and I was nervous, wondering what the contents ard thehold.

I knew*Dear Ivy,*

ecided.*I am requesting for you to stop by my office at your earliest convenie .et's goyou may be aware, I am close friends with your father and promise would look after you during your stay at Clearhaven Univers: l. appointment is necessary.*

door to*Sincerely,*

friends*Abraham Wells*

Well crap. The email was sent on Monday and I knew I needed to : screenbefore I headed to Frankie's this evening. The email was odd, but giv /hile hehe knew my father, perhaps it was nothing. Just him trying to check o wavemake sure I was settling in.

ractive,I quickly printed off the assignment the civ professor mailed to u: rious toCaleb stood by patiently waiting and gave him an apologetic smil

on the should exchange numbers. I hate to run, but I have something I need care of.”

nestled “I understand. Give me your phone,” he said, holding out his hand. I didn’t hadn’t task and in my periphery, I caught movement. Trey had finally caught twenty of me and stalked toward us. Caleb was unaware of the confrontation less was about to occur, and I held my breath, bracing for impact.

; Greek Trey leaned against the wall near us and watched silently for a moment twirling a knife. When Caleb finally looked up to hand me back my keys besides, amusement glinted in his eyes. The atmosphere was stifling, and I appeared wanted to hide from the awkwardness. Caleb didn’t seem concerned crossed his arms over his chest. “Hey, Trey. How’s it going?”

personal Trey looked at Caleb with indifference. “It would be better if you wouldn’t listen for once. You heard the rule. New girl is off limits.”

The situation made me nervous. *Who just pulls out a knife in the middle of a computer lab?* Caleb tilted his head to the side and looked at Trey and me. As completely unfazed. “Nah. I don’t think so. Besides, she needs a partner *d that I* Hurst’s project. You had her last semester, so you know how that goes. *ity.* No broke eye contact and grabbed my hand. “Come on, Ivy. You just meet you have things to do today. Trey will be fine, won’t you?”

My eyes widened when Trey nodded. “Sure, but you know I have to take care of and Niko.”

stop by Caleb scoffed at him and pulled me toward the door. “Do whatever you want then thatto. I’m not worried about it.”

up and Once we were outside, I pulled my hand back, unsure of what I had just transpire. Was it some type of dick measuring contest or was Caleb getting s while not concerned? I cleared my throat. “Hey, I’ll catch you in class one day. e. “We’ve got to go.” I hooked my thumb toward the administrative building

to takeHe simply hefted his backpack higher. “Saturday we should figure  
project. You have my number if you need me.”

id as heI gave him a thumbs up, unsure of what to say before turning and j  
ht sightacross the academic quad toward the building I knew the Dean’s offi  
on thatin while making a mental note to ask Ros about Caleb. I had less than  
before my next class, but curiosity, with a hint of trepidation, pushed  
nomentdiscover what he wanted.

phone,Abraham Wells was someone I vaguely remembered from some of the  
t of memy father held in the past. They were always stuffy affairs where men  
d as hesmoked cigars and drank scotch while women in cocktail dresses  
quietly in corners. For an older man, he was attractive with dark h  
wouldsilvered at the temples and even darker eyes, but there was nothing tha  
out in my mind about our previous interactions other than someti  
*dle of a*stared a little too long. All of my father’s friends did.

l down,The administrative building was a massive brick structure that called  
tner fora different period. Flowers still somehow bloomed in front of it des  
es.” Hescorching late summer heat and concrete stairs with wrought-iron  
ntionedlead to its entrance. I stepped inside the air conditioning, imme  
grateful for the cooler air, and noted how quiet it was. The ring of the  
all Camechoed off of the tile floors and as the heavy door shut behind me, I sta  
“Can I help you?” a woman wearing a red blouse asked from the info  
ou needdesk.

I strode closer so that I could ask her which office was the Dean’s  
ist seenraising my voice. “Can you direct me to Abraham Wells’ office?”  
nuinelyShe frowned at me with distaste and sniffed. “Do you have an appointi  
Friday.“Umm. No, I received an email from him that said—”

. She waved her hand in the air, dismissing me. *Rude*. “The dean on

out our students when they set up an appointment. He's extremely busy. I  
your academic advisor could handle whatever issue you're having."

jogging A door opened across the large space, and someone cleared their voice  
ice was Juliet, that's enough. I told Ivy to stop by at her earliest convenienc  
an hour lips curled up into something that resembled a smile, but it didn't re  
I me to eyes. As he gazed up and down my body, I twisted my hands into the  
my t-shirt from discomfort. I forgot that Abraham Wells made my skin  
parties All of my father's friends did. "Come on, Ivy. I'm sure we have a lot t  
in suits up on."

chatted As soon as I was close enough, he placed his hand on my lowe  
air that pushing me inside of the dark enclosure he called his office. His touc  
at stood my blood turn to ice, and I wasn't sure why terror clawed at my thro  
mes he door closed behind us and he motioned to the chairs in front of th

"Take a seat and get comfortable, Ms. Spencer." He sat on the corne  
back too a desk and I knew I wanted to put as much space between us as poss  
pite the "No thank you, sir. I would rather stand. My next class is in a few m  
railings and I really need to make sure I'm there on time," I replied, lookin  
mediately polite way to turn him down.

phone "Nonsense. You don't have another class for at least thirty minutes. I  
artled. upon myself to look at your schedule." I shifted on my feet before cl  
rmation the seat furthest from him. A dark look passed over his face, but it wa  
so quickly that I could have sworn that it was just my imaginati  
without nightmares were probably messing with my head.

"Tell me how you're settling in, Ivy. I know you've had a lot of c  
nent?" happen in such a short period of time."

I folded my hands in my lap and pressed my thumb into the skin of m  
ly sees finger until a crescent moon shape formed, allowing the pain to dist

Perhaps from the anxiety tumbling through my brain. “Everything is fine. Clearhaven is great and I found a job at a local shop. Clearhaven is wonderful.”

“Miss The weak smile I gave him apparently wasn’t very reassuring. “I see. You need anything at all, please let me know. I want to ensure that each of his college years are a success in every sense of the word. It’s really a shame about your father. He’s a good man.”

My first thought was that my father was not a good man. The facade presented to society was good, but underneath it all he was evil. The evidence presented to the court showed that.

My second thought was that it was weird. Within the past half hour, I had different people offer their help. One offer I wasn’t sure about, but that unnerved me. Perhaps it was because of his proximity to my past, but I wouldn’t be letting him know anything anytime soon.

He leaned closer and grabbed my hand not unlike what Caleb had done earlier. My breath caught in my throat, and nausea churned in my stomach at his touch. He ran his thumb along my wrist and my eyes widened. “Would you like to come by my house sometime soon for dinner? For old time’s sake?”

I stood quickly and darted to the door, my heart racing in my chest. I took it for the invitation, but I’m pretty busy right now. Some other time. I managed to say as I pulled open the door and escaped as quickly as possible. I wasn’t sure what that was about, but I really didn’t want to find out. I closed the door behind me.

Sunlight blinded me as I took a deep breath, inhaling as much oxygen as my lungs would allow. Off to the side, Niko sat on the stairs next to a porch with black hair, the same one that sneered at me from the athletic’s building.

A feeling that I didn’t want to name reared its ugly head as he smirked at me. Suddenly, he grabbed her hand and I caught what was happening. She looked at me.

sses are him an unknown amount of cash and he handed her a baggie of sor  
discreetly.

Well, if They weren't flirting. Well, not necessarily. I had just witnessed a dr  
at your in front of the campus administrative building. For some reason, the t  
shamethem peddling drugs didn't surprise me, but I filed the information a  
later. Not that I was interested in drugs exactly, but some weed might  
made hemy nightmares, or at least my racing thoughts.

videnceCash was tight, but I could potentially scrounge up enough money  
knew there was no way in hell Cam would sell to me, but maybe  
had twoconvince one of the other guys.

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him an unknown amount of cash and he handed her a baggie of something discreetly.

They weren't flirting. Well, not necessarily. I had just witnessed a drug deal in front of the campus administrative building. For some reason, the three of them peddling drugs didn't surprise me, but I filed the information away for later. Not that I was interested in drugs exactly, but some weed might silence my nightmares, or at least my racing thoughts.

Cash was tight, but I could potentially scrounge up enough money soon. I knew there was no way in hell Cam would sell to me, but maybe I could convince one of the other guys.

SIXTEEN



SIXTEEN

## *Niko*



I'd been stalking Ivy all day, but she didn't know that. They had put her schedule for me, assuming it was part of the plan to run her off. I couldn't be further from the truth. I understood Cam wanted to punish the crimes that her father committed, but I wasn't behind his plan. I couldn't be.

Ivy haunted every dream and waking moment I had, even if I wasn't allowed to touch her.

Calculus, world civilization, sociology, and American literature. It was easy enough to track her movements across campus and ensure that no one other than us spoke to her, but then Caleb Vance appeared, holding her. Anger and jealousy ripped through me as I watched him lead her across campus to the computer labs. I clung to the shadows observing him. I thought he could defy us, or worse, move in on Ivy to offer her the comfort, he was wrong.

I didn't care who he was connected to.

I leaned against the side of the building and waited, scrolling through my phone to kill time. When Ivy came out of the building, Caleb was holding

hand again, touching what wasn't his. I saw her give him an awkward she pulled away and gave him a thumbs-up before racing across the green toward some of the administrative buildings.

Standing up straight, I tucked my phone away and approached intending on intimidating him some. I stepped behind him wordlessly sighed. "I know you're there, Stone. It must be my lucky day because I spoke to your friend inside."

He was talking about Trey. Most of his waking hours were spent inside the computer lab or in front of a screen. This time of the day, Cam was probably holed up inside of the art building processing film between class and practice.

"Oh, and what did he say? That you should stay away from Ivy? I know you've heard what happened the other day." I crossed my arms over my chest when he turned to face me.

The corner of his mouth lifted in amusement, and he rolled his eyes. "I've heard just like the rest of campus. Half of the cheerleading squad has pictures of Ivy and put it on YouConnect with the hashtag trash. Everyone knows as well as I do that your rules don't apply to me."

My scowl deepened at his words. *Fucker*. "I don't care who you're referring to or the fact that you think you're untouchable, Caleb. Ivy is off limits."

"That's up to her, isn't it?" He shrugged at me and glanced over his shoulder in the direction Ivy had disappeared in. When he looked back at me, his smile widened. "Look, I have somewhere to be, but tell Cam I said hi."

He's got to be pretty busy right now with the first game of the season happening in a few days. Sometimes I question how he juggles it all. Between taking care of his sister because of a drunk mom, and his drug use—

look as I couldn't stop myself and before I knew it, my fist slammed into the campus his face, knocking him back and throwing him off balance. No one about fucking Cam like that. Caleb couldn't understand the things Caleb, gone through or the choices he'd been forced to make. I grabbed the cap and he his polo and glared at him, blood trickling from his nose. "Keep his name I just of your mouth, Vance. You don't know shit."

I shoved him back hard, and he wiped his nose with the back of his hand, a streak of blood across his cheek before grinning again and probably cocked his head to the left. "I mean this with the utmost disrespect, I mean Get fucked."

His uncaring attitude pissed me off worse and I balled my hands into my fists, reminding myself that now wasn't the time and I couldn't take disciplinary action right now. He hiked up his bag higher on his shoulder and gave me a wave before sauntering off without a care in the world.

Sure, I would talk to Trey and Cam about him later, but right now, I wanted to know where Ivy was going. According to her schedule, she was supposed to be in sociology soon, which was definitely not in the direction of the administrative building.

I was strolling in the general direction I had seen her disappear in, but I hoped perhaps she was just going to see her advisor. My stomach sank when I thought the dean had requested a meeting with her. Rumors had been spread around campus about him, and while there was no evidence about his indiscretions, I believed them. After all, I knew how he worked on a professional level.

As I approached the concrete stairs, someone tugged on my arm, trying to deal with my attention. My focus was solely on marching inside of the building to see what Ivy was doing, so I attempted to ignore them. I continued

side of door, vaguely aware of the person following me, persistent in their attempt to talk to me. The glass cutout out of the heavy doors was in front of me and I had time to glance inside, my hand reaching for the knob.

Dean Wells' hand was firmly planted on Ivy's lower back, ushering me out inside his office. The door closed and before I could react, a feminine hand

pulled me from my haze. "Niko, are you ignoring me? I'm trying to talk to you."

Arabella glared at me, still holding onto the sleeve of my shirt. Why was Nikolai touching me again? Arabella was attractive enough, but I wasn't interested

in her or whatever she had to say.

I raised an eyebrow and let a mask of indifference slip over my face. "What do you want now?"

She huffed out a breath and sat on the top step, motioning for me to join her.

I settled down next to her and she leaned close to whisper. "I need some feedback on the new product that you're pushing. Lambda Pi is having a party this week and Jenny told me you have more tea."

I closed my eyes, hating that this is what my life had become—that

everyone knew I was the campus drug dealer and the person to go to when you needed something. Instead of saying any of that or telling her to fuck off because I was busy, I went with, "How much?" I needed to push the new product and get Vincent off of our backs.

"Whatever you have on you. If it's a hit, then I'll need more next week." I managed to hold in my sigh and told her my new price before digging

into my pocket. Mid exchange, the door behind me opened. If it was Ivy, I didn't want her seeing me sitting next to Arabella because to the untrained eye, it would look like more than it was.

Without counting, I shoved the money in my pocket and announced

empt to would see her next week. Her face fell, but I didn't give a shit. Arabella  
t of message five clinger and I couldn't deal with her today.

I rushed down the stairs and grabbed my obsession's shoulder gently.  
g them did the dean want?" I asked, my voice coming out in a growl.

the voice She spun around, her fiery locks blazing at me in the sunlight, and na  
talk to her eyes. "The better question is, what do you want, Niko? After eve

that happened the other day. You didn't step in or tell Cam to fuck h  
was she You acted like you were bored and now suddenly you're concerne  
ested in what I'm doing in my free time? Get over yourself. I don't ov  
answers."

atures. I clenched my jaw and leaned close to her ear, allowing my breath

across her skin. Her cheeks flushed, and it crept down her neck  
in her. In earnest. Images from Friday night with her on her hands and knees  
e of the through my mind, and I absentmindedly touched the cut on my hip  
weekend given me. "I like it when you're angry; it's hot. And I already told you  
want. What did the dean say to you?"

people "Nothing," she muttered, not meeting my gaze. "He just wanted to kno  
wanted I was adjusting to Clearhaven." She wrung her hands together wh  
because I stared at the ground, and it clicked.

uct and She was hiding something. I didn't know what it was, but I would  
keep her secrets for now. Eventually, I would find out. I always did.

week." I inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of citrus that had been haunt  
ng into before I pulled away. "Stay away from Caleb. If you don't, Cam wi  
I didn't your life hell."

l eye it She finally looked up and rolled her eyes. "He already is. Besides it  
project, Niko. There's nothing else happening there. If we're done,

l that I

a was aclass and then work.” She walked by, checking her shoulder into the my body, and I grinned.

“WhatCam didn’t realize the fire blazing beneath Ivy’s skin, but I could see was angry, and she didn’t even know it. One day, she was going to c rrowedand I couldn’t wait to see the havoc it caused.

rythingMy phone vibrated in my pocket, and I suppressed a sigh, wondering himself!was this time. Putting in my passcode, I glanced and bit the inside d aboutcheek until I tasted copper flood my mouth. It was like he knew I ha ve youwatching him and wanted to know what he was up to. The tex

Abraham Wells was short and to the point. *Tomorrow at noon. We i to fantalk.*

at my  
flashed  
p she’d



what I Later that evening, after everything was settled, Cam and I convinced come over so we could talk. Between classes and Cam’s football sc ow how we spent less time together during the fall semester, and there were thi uile she needed to figure out. The first one was what to do about Caleb. Trey a a run-in with him, although he somehow had less blood involved.

let her We sat wedged together on the tiny back porch of the house, d lukewarm cheap beers and swatting away the mosquitoes that landed ing me bare skin. “We should teach him a lesson about defying us. Hypoth ll make scare him a bit,” Trey offered.

Cam mulled it over for a moment and rubbed his hand across his ’s for a thought. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. We can’t take it too far, though I have grandfather finds out—”

side of I cut him off between sips. "He won't tell anyone. Trust me."

Trey eyed me warily before reaching into his pocket and pulling it. She knife, opening it with a flick of his wrist. "How can you be so sure?" I exploded I examined the bottle in my hands and peeled back the edge of the

"Because we have something that he wants." Cam raised an eyebrow at my question, urging me to continue. "Little ghost. He won't dare to bring more attention to her than he already has. Besides, I'm sure he'll lose interest in her as soon as the newness wears off."

Or at least that was what I hoped. I would share her with my brother. Caleb was a wealthy dickhead I'd never gotten along with. He and Ivy were future together. Caleb was too much of a coward to introduce her to his family. He would openly defy us, but he wouldn't go against the command of his grandfather and risk his inheritance.

Ivy deserved to be more than someone's dirty little secret.

"One more thing," I added. "We have a meeting with the dean." Trey's knife slipped when the words registered in his brain, creating a shallow slice on the palm of his hand. Crimson droplets trailed his hand as he ignored it. "What does he want?"

Cam closed his eyes and answered for me. "The same thing he always says to remind us about what we owe him."

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etically

chin in  
l. If his



I cut him off between sips. “He won’t tell anyone. Trust me.”

Trey eyed me warily before reaching into his pocket and pulling out his knife, opening it with a flick of his wrist. “How can you be so sure?”

I examined the bottle in my hands and peeled back the edge of the label. “Because we have something that he wants.” Cam raised an eyebrow at me in question, urging me to continue. “Little ghost. He won’t dare to bring any more attention to her than he already has. Besides, I’m sure he’ll lose interest in her as soon as the newness wears off.”

Or at least that was what I hoped. I would share her with my brothers, but Caleb was a wealthy dickhead I’d never gotten along with. He and Ivy had no future together. Caleb was too much of a coward to introduce her to his family. He would openly defy us, but he wouldn’t go against the command of his grandfather and risk his inheritance.

Ivy deserved to be more than someone’s dirty little secret.

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Cam closed his eyes and answered for me. “The same thing he always wants. To remind us about what we owe him.”

SEVENTEEN

SEVENTEEN

## Ivy



**T**hursday morning, I woke up to a notification on my phone that my paycheck from Frankie had been deposited into my account. I logged into online banking, my breath caught. There had to be a mistake. *There was absolutely no way I had earned this at the surf shop.*

My hands trembled as I pressed call to talk to my boss and I nearly dropped the phone several times. Frankie sounded amused when she answered. I could practically hear the laughter in her voice. “What do you need, Ivy?” “There’s been a mistake.” My voice was shaky and the tremor in my hands hadn’t stopped. “I checked my account just now and I can give the money back.”

Frankie cackled at me. “Ivy, calm down. You need to get a cup of coffee then head to the bookstore. There’s no mistake. Think of it as a sign-on bonus.” *A sign-on bonus?* They offered those for important people like Doctors, lawyers, nurses. Not someone who helped to fold clothes or run a cash register. “And before you argue with me, don’t worry. You’ll earn your penny. I think Sunday we should wax the floors.”

Working on Sunday would get me out of another church service with my aunt, so it sounded perfect to me. “Better than the alternative,” I said quietly.

Frankie simply chuckled again and told me she would see me later in the evening. I showered quickly and threw on whatever clothes were clean before grabbing a cup of coffee.

*A thousand dollars.* That was how much I had in my account. It was time to go to the bank to pay for my books and stop by the thrift store for another pair of jeans and a jacket.

It was still early and the campus bookstore would be open at eight for my first grab what I needed. I sent a text to Ros to see if she wanted to meet me at Mustard Seeds before I needed to clock in at work. I felt lighter than I had in a while. While nothing had changed on the social front and I would still have to deal with the guys from the Forsaken harassing me, but at least the situation was looking up for now.

Right when I pulled up on campus, Ros sent me a text letting me know she would wait for me. I entered the bookstore and grabbed a basket and a debit card from my back pocket. Scouring the shelves, I found everything that I needed easily. My arms ached as I toted the books to the front toward the register and I wasn't looking forward to lugging them around campus. At least I would have them. I waited with bated breath on the total while the cashier scanned things looking bored and half asleep.

The total damage for the books came up to nearly \$800, and I tried to hold my vomit as I slid my debit card to pay. There was a time not too long ago when the total wouldn't have impacted me. Since May, I had been trying to save as cheaply as possible and spending that much at one time made me nervous.

With mythe employee placed my books in the bag, I clutched the receipt I joked handed me like it was a life preserver anchoring me to reality.

he day.  
etting a



Black Betty was parked in front of Mustard Seeds when I finally arrived as soon as I pulled the key from the ignition, Rosalyn was already leaning toward my car. “They don’t open for another fifteen minutes so we have to catch up,” she told me as she pulled me into a tight hug. “Plus, it gives me time to convince you to go to the game on Saturday. And the after party set up at I patted her arm, signaling that she was squeezing the breath out of me I had in she giggled while she loosened her grip. It was hard not to give in enthusiasm, but attending a football game sounded like hell, and going to a money after-party was a terrible idea. “Umm, do you remember that whole ‘can talk to me’ thing? Pretty sure that includes parties.”

Now she She waved me off and dragged me closer to the door. “They’ll be on the list especially since Clearhaven is slated to win. Cam will be so busy drinking and drowning in girls that he won’t even notice you’re there.” She leaned in her voice and looked around to make sure that no one could hear, but at “Besides, you know the rules, right?”

While the I shook my head in confusion. Rules? This was the first time I heard anything about them. “What do you mean?”

I don’t know Her eyes lit up with mischief. “The Forsaken have this set of guidelines that I came up with in high school. It’s a one-and-done thing. Because they live as you at the beach party, you’re safe. They won’t mess with you again.”  
ous. As

they'd I should have been ecstatic. After all, this week Cam had made it a p  
humiliate me in front of the school. And then there was the library in  
where he gave me one of the best orgasms of my life after blackmail  
For some reason, my emotions were jumbled and a pang of emot  
through my chest. *Was I jealous or sad? Both?*

ed, and Whatever it was didn't matter because they were assholes.

rushing I cleared my throat even though my chest was tight. "Yeah, that's p  
ve time for the best. I had one crazy night that I can tell my grandkids abou  
ives me happened before they turned on me." The words tasted bitter on my to  
y." I recalled the things Cam had uttered this week.

ne, and Rosalyn grabbed my hand and squeezed. "I'm going to say this w  
l to her whole chest, Ivy. Fuck them. They don't know what they are missing  
g to the to the party and we can dance, drink, and since they are preoccupied, f  
'no one someone to flirt with." She wiggled her eyebrows and I couldn't h  
laugh that spilled from my mouth.

oe fine, Begrudgingly, I agreed. "Fine, but I need to find a really cute top to w  
rinking I was being forced to attend a party and see women crawl over the guy  
owered I wanted them to at least realize what they were losing out on. A  
ar her. woman whose silver hair was neatly styled into a bun unlocked th  
store's doors, pausing the conversation. I gave her a small smile and  
nything in acknowledgment as I made my way to the rack of jeans.

Ros gave me a questioning look, her eyebrows furrowed and her hands  
ies they hips. "I'm not saying no to shopping because I'm sure we can fi  
y chose something that looks amazing, but what happened to your dress?"

I groaned, dreading her response, and my cheeks heated. There was n  
could lie about the reason my dress was no longer an acceptable ch  
anything. "So... Trey kind of cut it off."

Her mouth gaped open and then closed. And then opened. “What incident, mean cut?” she whispered, looking over her shoulder toward the woman straightening racks.

I pulled out a pair of jeans and hung them over my arm. “With a knife exactly what it sounds like.”

Ros’ eyes grew comically wide. “I’ve heard rumors, but I never knew—probably I smiled as I shuffled to a rack with hoodies on it. ”Whatever you hear and it them is probably true.”

The door chimed as someone else entered the small shop and a family with golden brown hair stood in the doorway, scanning the small space. My nose looked slightly swollen and under his eye was lightly bruised. What happened? We just saw each other yesterday. He tucked his hands in his pockets and strolled through the haphazard piles of clothes like he owned the place. Once he was close, he gave Ros a one-armed hug and leaned in to kiss her.

She glared at him, but her mouth twitched at the corners, giving away that she wasn’t really annoyed. “What are you doing here, Caleb?”

I tried to ignore their exchange, my heart beating faster in my chest. I drewled, “I saw your truck and Ivy’s car out front and decided to stop. He *knew what my car looked like?* We had only spoken because of a project yesterday and partners were apparently mandatory.

Rosalyn untangled herself from his hold and drifted to the top of the rack and away. “Ivy needs some clothes, and I’m trying to convince her to go to the football game this weekend.”

Caleb stalked closer to me, the woodsy scent of his soap filling the air. He stepped directly behind me, not touching me but close enough that I



do your radiating off of his body warmed my skin. “And what did she say?” he asked as his fingertips traced a path down my biceps.

Rosalyn’s hands stalled for a moment when she looked up and saw how I felt. “Well, I think I convinced her to go. And to the party, you might need a little more convincing.”

—” Caleb slowly trailed his hands down my arms, leaving goosebumps and I swallowed roughly. “Do you really need convincing, princess?”

I didn’t respond, instead focusing on the black hoodie in front of me. His voice came out low, and I almost didn’t recognize it. “What happened to your face?”

His hand caught my wrist and his thumb slowly caressed the pulse point. “Don’t worry about that. The boyfriend thought he could run me off. He doesn’t realize I can be persistent when it comes to something I want.”

I froze as his words hit me. I tried to turn to face him, and he wrapped his arm around my waist, enveloping me in his warmth. His body was behind mine and my mouth went dry. *What was wrong with me? Speaking to him was like a crazy night with three hot guys and all of a sudden, my libido didn’t lurch.* “Well,” *crazy night with three hot guys and all of a sudden, my libido didn’t lurch.* “Who?” I croaked.

“Who?” I croaked.

His hand splayed across my abdomen. “Don’t worry about it. What you need to be concerned about is the fact that we’re going to the football game. Once we’re there, we can even discuss this project.” He let go of me and stepped back, shooting me an arrogant smirk, almost like he knew the effect he’d have on me. “I’ll see you at the game.”

I watched as he exited the building, leaving me even more confused than I was mere minutes ago. Rosalyn’s voice brought me back to the present.

he asked "What was that about? Are you just collecting men?" she asked with a grin.

How close "I have no idea."

Why? She said "And I didn't. Not really. I had three men who claimed they wanted to take my life to hell and another who didn't care what they wanted. I couldn't do anything in their lives. Rosalyn said that he simply wanted to work on our paper but that would be a mess?" Only one thing was certain. Saturday night's party was bound to be interesting.

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“What was that about? Are you just collecting men?” she asked with a sly grin.

“I have no idea.”

And I didn't. Not really. I had three men who claimed they wanted to make my life hell and another who didn't care what they wanted. I could tell Rosalyn that he simply wanted to work on our paper but that would be a lie. Only one thing was certain. Saturday night's party was bound to be interesting.

EIGHTEEN

EIGHTEEN

*Cam*



**O**n Thursday morning, I woke up irritated with good reason. I was going to a bullshit meeting with Abraham Wells. We didn't check-in to remind us that he could ruin the rest of our lives with a word. I had practice this afternoon, homework to complete, a game on Saturday, and obligations to the Forsaken. It was almost time for Virgil to give us another "assignment" and my stomach churned at what it might be. Add in Maya, Katya, and Sergei, along with Niko's race tonight, and my schedule was full.

It didn't help that thoughts of Ivy had been preoccupying my mind. I saw her, distracting me from what was important. What happened Tuesday at the library had been playing on repeat every time I was alone. Even when I tried breaking her, she still managed to tell me to fuck myself. Even though I hated her and what she represented, somehow she still got me hard. I wanted her, yet I still wanted her gone.

It was exhausting.

Beside me, Niko still dozed peacefully, completely unbothered by the fact that he'd slept through not one, not two, but three alarms. Midnight

fell across his forehead, nearly falling into his eyes. My fingers tw nearly reaching out to brush them away but thinking better of it. The had fallen during the night, showing off the ink that swirled in pattern top of his chest. My eyes traveled down his body, noticing the b pitching below his waist. My heart rate picked up, and I averted m blowing out a steady breath while a memory from a different time cr my thoughts.

*The wind was like blades of ice cutting through our skin as we stalked up to the house just outside of Clearhaven. That was the thing that realized about living near the ocean. In the summer the breeze coming water cooled your skin and filled the air with the scent of salt, but winter it just felt bitter. I hunched my shoulders up further around r and shoved my hands in my pockets, cold metal caressing my fin. Tonight, I was taking care of unfinished business and no one else cou know that we were here.*

*My mother had failed to protect me from the men that stumbled i house late at night. She had failed to protect me from herself. Now the older, I intended to protect myself.*

*He deserved what was going to happen to him.*

*After prying open a window, we crawled inside the dilapidated hou caught our breath. The air was still chilled, but at least we were pr from the wind. The darkness helped to shroud us as we took in the int loveseat and recliner were pushed against the far wall and a hallwa the right. Given the time of night, Patrick would be asleep, whi unfortunate. He might need a wake up call so that he got the full exper A door at the end of the hallway was open, and loud snores filtered us. The only light in the house came from the window behind the bed*

lit the room in a blue glow. Sitting on the bedside table was an open bottle of whiskey with only an inch in the bottom and a half-smoked joint. I was passed out. That was why he didn't hear us.

Other people would probably feel something at that moment. Adrenaline. Terror. Happiness. Relief. Remorse. And yet all that existed in a black void as I stared at his sleeping form.

Patrick had changed little since the night he shoved his hand over my mouth to muffle my cries. I was smaller then and the memory of his hot stare and the smell of tequila and chewing tobacco had haunted me for years. He had a few more gray hairs and a few more lines around his face, but he was the same that he had always been. He got off on hurting children. The memories would always be there.

Niko and Trey stood by waiting to see what I would do. I winked at Niko and straddled Patrick's chest, covering his mouth and nose with my hand.

His eyes shot open, first in confusion and then in panic as he realized who it was that was depriving him of air. He struggled to push me off, but I was stronger than he was now that I was older. I outweighed him by at least fifty pounds.

"Hey, Patrick. I know it's been a few years, but it's nice to know you recognize me." The man beneath me shook his head, trying to convey some sort of message, but I wasn't interested in talking. I had tried to tell my mother about it after the first time, but she waved me off and told me I was overreacting. I had never had a nightmare. Patrick would never do something like that.

Honestly, she was the one I should have killed that night. I hadn't—there was still time and I had an entire list of people that deserved execution. That they got.

I pulled the piece from my pocket, a sliver of moonlight glinting off the blade. Patrick tried to scream beneath my palm, but I laughed at him. No amount of pain could hurt me now.



... of begging would stop me. I pressed the muzzle against his temple and  
He was the trigger; the pop echoed through the silent house. Liquid splattered  
my hands as gunpowder and sulfur filled the air.

Anxiety. I knelt on top of him, staring down at his face and watching  
... remnants of life left his eyes. Inky stains marred my skin and the  
blood pooled beneath Patrick.

... mouth I still felt nothing. A part of me had thought I would feel some  
... breath afterward. Happiness or closure. Perhaps regret. The only thing that  
... was satisfaction at the fact his chest was no longer moving.

... he was Niko grabbed my bicep and tugged at me. "Come on, Cam. We need to  
... bruises case the neighbors call the cops."

"We've got to get the fuck out of here," Trey hissed as he pushed past  
... Niko and I sauntered out of Patrick's home, trying to fight the hysteria that  
... of my bubbling up inside of my chest. By the time I crawled into Niko's back  
... realized laughter slipped out of my mouth. My body shook as I pulled a pack  
... but he cigarettes from my pocket and both of my friends stared at me.

... sounds. "What the fuck?" Niko muttered. "Why are you laughing?"  
... you still Good question. Who the fuck laughed after murdering someone? I wiped  
... my hand over my eyes and shook my head. "It's nothing."

... tell my The ride home was silent after that as Niko dropped Trey off at his  
... I must apartment. I sat in the back and rolled my window down. Niko growled  
... the front seat and swung open his door roughly before gripping my arm  
... yet—but dragging me from where I was sitting.

... anything "Get the fuck up, Cam. We need to burn your clothes before someone  
... them," he muttered at me. "The last thing we need is Maya or Katya  
... metal. questions about why you're covered in blood." He pulled me along  
... mount off front door and through the house before forcing me into the bathroom.

I pulled “You need to chill out,” I hissed. “No one will ever know.” Our siblings had all nestled into their beds hours ago, safe and warm. Completely unaware of what had transpired across town.

As any steam filled the bathroom as the shower ran in the background and Niko muttered at my shirt insistently, mumbling under his breath about how my kill was. It wasn't the first for any of us, but it was the first one that felt personal.

It was also the first one that wasn't sanctioned by Vincent.

I stood and stripped before stepping under the warm spray, staring at the tiles in front of me, not bothering to respond. Niko gathered my clothes and disappeared for a while, leaving me to stare at the occasional streak of water in the bottom of the tub. I grabbed the soap and scrubbed until it was washing away whatever evidence was left.

Finally, Niko came back and threw open the thin plastic shower liner, stepping back off the stream of water, and held a towel out to me. His voice was still thick with anger when he spoke, and he stared at the bathroom wall. “I've got a fire going outside already. Get dressed so you don't freeze.”

After I shrugged on the clothes he'd laid out, we trudged through the hallway silently, careful not to wake anyone. A fire was started at the edge of the tent, and two camp chairs were set up in front of it. I settled into my seat, and I leaned forward from the heat from the flames to lick at my skin. It was better than the numbness that permeated every ounce of my being.

For a while we passed a bottle of cheap vodka back and forth, letting the alcohol soothe our throats, and just watched as embers danced in the air. There was a tension between the two of us and had been for a while. The alcohol blurred my vision and crushed my barriers. I leaned closer and grabbed the collar

gs wereshirt. He tried to pull away, but I clutched him tighter, not willing to  
ware ofjust yet.

“What the fuck is your problem tonight? Everything went according to  
id NikoHe swallowed and I watched as his Adam’s apple bobbed, wondering  
sloppywould feel like under my fingers. Eventually, I let him break free and  
hat wasmy gaze for a moment before clearing his throat. “I think we need to—”

Acting on impulse, I cut him off, pressing my lips to his roughly and si  
whatever he was going to say. I wasn’t sure what I was doing, and i  
I at thedeal with the consequences of my actions later. Niko thought I had  
hes andhow sometimes his gaze would linger or how his touch would las  
of pinkseconds longer than necessary. I hadn’t, but feelings weren’t somethin  
y skin,willing to explore with anyone right now.

Potentially ever.

turnedHe sat stock still, his body a statue as my tongue glided into his mou  
ill linedmy hands bunched into his shirt. Everything felt right as I slowly coa  
got theinto relaxing while I explored his mouth.

And then he finally responded. His body came to life under my tou  
e househand grasping my jaw and the other wrapping around my neck, sq  
he yardgently. We were lost in each other as the fire crackled in front of  
llowingnipped at my bottom lip, first tentatively and then harder, drawing blo  
mbnesstaste of metal and salt flooded my tongue, and I gingerly licked at my

pulled at my hair, jerking my head back and yanking me back to real  
it burneyes were dark and he frowned. “We should stop. Between the alcoi  
tensionearlier tonight...”

red myI grabbed his dick through his pants and it was hard, just like I knew i  
r of hisbe. I squeezed and his eyes fluttered closed. “You want this as much  
right now. Tell me you don’t want me.”

let go When he opened them, the grip on my hair tightened and he leaned  
me, his breath scorching my skin. He squeezed my throat again, th  
plan.” leaving me struggling for air. “I didn’t say I didn’t want you. Toni  
what it bad idea.” He let go of me, shoving me away.

he held Fuck him for being logical. Fuck him for making me feel something.

” I pushed the memory aside, unwilling to deal with it for now. Secret  
lencing and whispered words hidden by the darkness of night were more dan  
I would to me than even my preoccupation with Ivy.

missed I took in a deep breath again and reached for Niko’s shoulder, sha  
t a few roughly. He let out a groan and reached for my wrist, wrapping his  
g I was around it. “Five more minutes.” His voice sounded like gravel

swallowed roughly, choosing to start coffee instead of fighting with hi

Throwing back the covers so that they landed on him, I padded down  
uth and kitchen and pulled the canister from the cabinet making a mental not  
ked him what I needed to accomplish. Once the pot brewed, Niko stumbled i

kitchen looking bleary-eyed and half asleep. I poured him a cup of th  
ch, one liquid and handed it to him, our fingertips grazing briefly. He tipped h  
ueezing to the side and eyed me with a question, but I cleared my throat as I  
us. He away. “Are you ready for tonight?”

od. The He brushed his hair out of his face and grinned. “I always am.”

lip. He

ity. His

hol and



An hour later, we were standing outside Clearhaven First Com  
t would Church. The building looked like it had been plucked from the p  
as I do history with stone columns that wrapped around the exterior. Thick

close to covered the sun lending to the already somber mood I was in. A w  
is timewillow grew at the side of the building and I frowned. Befo  
ght is a grandmother passed away, she used to tell me they symbolized nothing.

She had lots of superstitions that she believed to be true and an unspc  
of rules that she lived by.

touches At that moment, I wondered if they were all accurate.

angerous Leaning against the car, the three of us said nothing, choosing to  
silence. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end when I heard  
aking it pull into the empty parking lot. They were finally here.

fingers The black Mercedes whipped into the parking space next to us and  
and I formed in my stomach. The car cost more than the house we lived in,  
m. demonstration of wealth and power caused rage to swim in my vein  
1 to the we were peddling drugs and doing whatever else they told us to do jus  
e about food on the table every evening, but these assholes got to keep their  
into the clean while living in the lap of luxury.

ie bitter The driver's side door swung open and Abraham Wells exited the v  
his head carefully straightening his clothes. A serious expression was painted  
[ pulled his features while he waited for his passenger to make his appearance  
dragged on until finally Vincent unfolded himself. He gave me a bitter  
and I realized that this wasn't just another meeting to threaten us.

They knew something that we didn't.

“Boys, it's been a while,” Dean Wells stated. “Hopefully you're doing  
How are Maya and Katya?”

immunity I flared my nostrils at him, but Niko was the one who answered. He  
ages of further back against the car and stared at him. “That's none of your  
clouds business.”

Vincent clicked his tongue and his grin widened. “That's not true. You

weeping know they are most definitely our business. The well-being of the y  
ore mythe city is something we take great interest in.” Wells laughed at the j  
g good. I flexed my fingers, trying not to give them the satisfaction of a respon  
ken set “What the fuck do you want?” I gritted out. “We’ve done everythi  
you’ve asked, and a text message should have been sufficient.”

Wells snorted and exchanged a quick look with Vincent. “You would  
wait into remember who’s in charge here, Mr. Barrett. The same goes f  
the car Harrison and Stone. After all, it would be a shame for the police to f  
about that incident last summer. If that information were to slip c  
d knots someone knew exactly where that young man’s body was hidden.  
and the let’s just say all three of you would take the fall. Who would take  
s. Here poor Katya and Maya then? There are several men in the community  
it to put am sure would open up their homes for young women during desperat  
r hands for just a small fee.”

The thought of going to prison was terrifying, but the idea that these m  
vehicle, would get their hands on either of the girls? Maya had barely lived thr  
l across the first time and she wouldn’t survive it again.

e. Time I wasn’t sure how the Forsaken and the Order of the Exalter  
r smile, interconnected, but I knew that girls from the wrong side of the track  
missing in Clearhaven all the time. No one knew who all the member  
order were—they operated in whispers—but every position of power in  
ig well. was held by someone who was rumored to be associated with them.

The only person who I could guarantee was a member was Dean Well  
leaned the incident, as he so eloquently put it, I had seen a brand of a  
fuckings swallowing his tail on his forearm—an ouroboros. I knew.

Trey rolled his eyes beside me as he shoved his hands into his p  
ou three “Gentlemen, if we could stop posturing and get back to the matter a

outh of Why are we here? Dean, you usually insist on sending commands t  
oke and text message and Vincent... we're distributing the tea just like you  
se. Everything is in order and I have better things to do."

ng that Dean Wells' laughter cut through the air. "Not so fast, Mr. Harrison. V

two favors. The new girl on campus, Ivy Spencer, I need you to ma  
do wellshe's getting this new drug. Do whatever you have to, but make it happ

for Mr. As much as I told myself that I hated Ivy, something about the situati  
ind out off. Niko gritted his teeth so hard beside me, I could hear him. I put m

out and on his arm to tell him to keep his cool, but the muscles in his fo  
.. well, strained beneath my touch. "Why?" I asked. "What do you want with l

care of Vincent snorted. "Calm down, boys. We won't hurt your prett  
7 who I play thing. At least not yet. Don't think that we haven't all noticed the

e times you sniffing after her. I'm sure you noticed that tease helps people  
little. That's all." He avoided my question completely, brushing me

ionsters usual. "Tomorrow night, I need the three of you to pay a little visit to  
rough it Haney. I'll send you the address, but there's a rumor that he's been tal

the new detective at Clearhaven PD. Detective Ross is a pain in my  
d were has been digging things up about the Forsaken. I think we need to shut

ks went up. You know what to do."

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the city

s. After

serpent

ockets.

it hand.

Why are we here? Dean, you usually insist on sending commands through text message and Vincent... we're distributing the tea just like you asked. Everything is in order and I have better things to do."

Dean Wells' laughter cut through the air. "Not so fast, Mr. Harrison. We need two favors. The new girl on campus, Ivy Spencer, I need you to make sure she's getting this new drug. Do whatever you have to, but make it happen."

As much as I told myself that I hated Ivy, something about the situation was off. Niko gritted his teeth so hard beside me, I could hear him. I put my hand on his arm to tell him to keep his cool, but the muscles in his forearms strained beneath my touch. "Why?" I asked. "What do you want with her?"

Vincent snorted. "Calm down, boys. We won't hurt your pretty little plaything. At least not yet. Don't think that we haven't all noticed the three of you sniffing after her. I'm sure you noticed that tease helps people relax a little. That's all." He avoided my question completely, brushing me off like usual. "Tomorrow night, I need the three of you to pay a little visit to Ashton Haney. I'll send you the address, but there's a rumor that he's been talking to the new detective at Clearhaven PD. Detective Ross is a pain in my ass and has been digging things up about the Forsaken. I think we need to shut Haney up. You know what to do."



NINETEEN

NINETEEN

## Niko



The meeting from earlier replayed in my mind over and over. I forced my way through the crowd. The idea that my sister, or that I was trapped in the sight of Abraham Wells made my blood boil. I clenched my jaw at the thought as I pushed through the sea of bodies.

I wouldn't give Ivy tea just because they asked me to. Something about the situation unsettled me. Why was the dean insistent that she needed it?

There were more people hanging around Hangman's Alley tonight than there usually were on a race night. Women wearing tiny shorts and bare midriffs hung around the cars that were parked hoping to catch the eye of someone. They knew that when the dust settled at the end of the race, the people would look to funnel their leftover adrenaline into pussy and ass. Someone with dark hair grabbed at my shirt as I tried to find Tyler. I pulled away and glanced down to see who was trying to get my attention.

*Arabella.* Lately, she had been showing up at races and trailing me around campus. Ignoring her wasn't getting the message across. Tonight she was wearing a hot pink halter top that barely contained her tits and a skirt s

that if she bent over, I would see what color her underwear was—if she was wearing any.

“Not now,” I gritted out as I spotted Tyler.

“Niko, we need to talk. Please?” She pouted at me and fluttered her eyelashes, looking like she was having some type of seizure as she pressed her breasts together. At any moment, a nipple would slip out of her bra. I struggled not to roll my eyes as I inhaled sharply. *Did she think that made me look sexy?*

She placed her hand on the edge of my shirt and I brushed it off, focusing on the older man in front of me. “Unless this deals with business, no.”

Arabella scowled and stomped away, probably back to where her sisters were drinking. I crossed my arms over my chest and waited a moment for the accountant with his silver-rimmed glasses and button-up shirts that I had seen who helped organize illegal races and street fights, but what did I know about the man in there? His eyes twinkled when he saw me waiting and ushered me close. I pulled a twenty-dollar entry fee out of my pocket and handed it to him. “You going to win tonight?” he asked in a thick New York accent.

I bowed my head. “I always do.”

And I did. I had too much on the line to lose. The rent needed to be paid, the liquor lights had to stay on, my siblings needed food, the leak under the bathroom sink needed to be fixed, and Sergei probably needed new shoes again. While my father was busy snorting, smoking, and injecting whatever he could get his hands on, I was handling shit the best I could. Winning one race brought in more money than I could in an entire week working at one of the tourist shops near the beach.

The older man shoved his glasses up on his nose and peered over them at me.

she was clipboard at me. “Have you given any more thought to what I asked?”

Tyler had been on me to sign up for one of the underground fights organized because he knew I was desperate for money, but Saturday had been busy for me. I tried to attend Cam’s home games with Trey. I had pressed homework and everything else... It wasn’t exactly a no, but it didn’t get to the top. I wasn’t a yes either. I rubbed the back of my neck. “Give me more time.” *ade her* simply tipped his head in acknowledgment of my answer before becoming the next person forward.

As I slowly fought my way back through the crowd, ignoring the looks of the people as I shoved through the bodies. Settling into the front seat, I pressed my head back and closed my eyes. Anticipation for the events of the evening as Tyler made me feel jittery, and I drummed my fingers along my pants as the car like a no of the crowd turned into a dull roar. I let everything fade away as I focused on the rise and fall of my chest, knowing that I needed to be focused on the road. It was time. The twists and turns of the road we used were challenging. I had a lot riding on tonight.

“Someone’s engine revved beside me and I opened my eyes to glance out the window, wondering who had pulled me from my thoughts. I huffed a breath when I saw the obnoxious yellow Aston Martin sitting beside me. *aid, the course, he would fucking show up tonight.*

Caleb Vance didn’t belong on this side of town. Between his perfect life, the car that screamed look at me, and a mansion that could get to the ocean, I’d never understood why he didn’t go away to some Ivy League school and escape Clearhaven. Sure, his grandfather tied him here, but he had a crappy trust fund he’d inherited at twenty-one.

We had raced against each other a few times before and I’d always left him in the dust despite his expensive car. I was just a better driver, plain and simple.

And then he hopped out, leaving his car running and ran off to the side, his arms wrapping his arms around a girl's waist and spinning her around. It wasn't just any girl; it was the girl I'd been obsessing over all week. I bit the inside of my cheek and grabbed the bottle of water sitting in the center console. "Why was she here, and why was he touching her again? Why couldn't he just listen and stay home instead of openly defying Cam? Instead of becoming the social pariah he'd hoped, she simply ignored what he said and did what she wanted.

All focus I'd had previously was gone as I watched her tilt her head back and laugh at something Rosalyn or Caleb said. He brushed her hair behind her ears and smiled like she was the most perfect thing in the world. The louder the sounds of the crowd watching that dickhead touching her, the angrier I got.

I glanced into the crowd and caught Cam staring in their direction, his body tense. He started to walk in that direction, but Trey stopped him, and the look on both of their faces said everything I needed to know. Neither of them liked him touching her.

The flag girl of the night took her position in front of the cars in the periphery, but all of my attention was back on Caleb. He grabbed Ivy's hand and brushed his lips against it like he was some knight seeking favor in a tournament. *Who even does that?* If she were mine, I would press my hands against her and sear her soul, ensuring everyone knew who she belonged to. I was half tempted to jump out and do just that when I heard the crowd cheering around me, signaling that it was almost time.

I drank a sip of the water and placed it back in the cup holder, trying to focus on some semblance of concentration. Gripping the steering wheel, I stared out the windshield at the girl holding the flag wearing a short black dress, simple and elegant. My mind still wandered to the girl standing on the sidelines who she

delines, cheering for me instead of the douchebag driving a yellow car. *Who c*  
*wasn't yellow car?*

e inside I turned my music up to deafening levels, letting the bass vibrate m  
le. and drown out everything else. If Ivy thought I wouldn't talk to her ab  
ln't she later, she was wrong.

of her The flag went down and then we were off. Muscle memory took ov  
aid and shifted gears and let adrenaline pump through my veins. I wound aro  
asphalt and relished the darkness that covered the landscape, choo  
ack and focus on the curves of the road rather than the other drivers around r  
ind her hands sweated and my heart pounded in my ears.

onger I Soon, I'd left everyone far behind. Everyone except Caleb. Up ahe  
road narrowed into two lanes before sharply twisting to the left and if  
s entire put some distance between us there, then victory was mine. Out of no  
m. The the Aston Martin pulled up beside me, hovering there for several y  
of them gave the car more gas and pushed it thinking that it would give me the  
needed, but instead, he easily coasted, drifting in front of me right be  
in my twist.

's hand This time of the night, no one traveled these roads, and I was cc  
before a enough to change lanes to try to pass him after we were out of that c  
y body gritted my teeth and readied myself, the road opening up in front  
ged to. I Changing lanes, I pushed the car once again, the wind shaking the c  
engines from the speed and the roughness of the untended road. Trees were o  
side of us, a thin metal guardrail the only protection from the ravine c  
) regain sides.

red out Suddenly, headlights appeared in front of me and the sound of a h  
but my through my music. I cursed under my breath as I debated my best cc  
ould be action and realized I couldn't pass him. I slowed to drift back behind C

drives at the headlights grew nearer. The final sharp curve closed in on us and I grew.

My hands clutched the steering wheel as the finish line came back into view. The road opening back up to four lanes. And despite my best efforts, I couldn't get over as quickly as it began.

Caleb jumped out of the Aston Martin and ran over to Ivy as I was throwing the car into park. As I slammed my door behind me, the only thing I could see was him pressing his lips to her mouth. I stalked close to them, wanting to get caught up in the celebration. Someone caught me by the shoulder and jerked me back. My fist balled up on instinct, ready to swing at whoever was touching me. "Chill the fuck out," Trey hissed at me. "We're taking care of him, but not today. Not in front of so many people."

Cam glared at me as he held his hand out. "Give me your keys. We're taking care of you. Get the fuck out of here."

Both of them knew why I was here tonight—how important it was to me. I threw the keys at Cam and allowed Trey to drag me back so that I could get my wounds in private.

This was just one more reason to show Caleb that he wasn't the boss of us. One more reason to punish Ivy. If she hadn't shown up, I would have won. Just like every other time.

exterior  
on either  
on both



Trey and Cam sat on my front stairs passing a bottle of whiskey between them. No one had said anything on the ride home, all of us too trapped in our own heads. The evening hadn't gone the way any of us expected. Caleb as



his lead To make matters worse, once I got back, my father was passed out at the kitchen table with a lit cigarette hanging from his mouth. It took every ounce of strength inside of me not to lose it as I dragged him to his room and threw him on the bed, it was bed where he could sleep off whatever he had taken earlier in the evening. I wasn't even sure why he came home at this point.

rowing If he could get his shit together, I wouldn't have to win any races. If he couldn't, I could. If I could get his shit together, I wouldn't be the one worried about whether or not Sergei and Katya would have somewhere to live this month. I held my breath through my nose, willing myself to calm down.

whoever "What was that back there?" Trey asked as he took a sip from the bottle. I ran my hands through my hair and stared up at the sky, wishing I knew the answer. "I mean, you saw. Now I've got to figure out how the fuck to get out of here—"

"No, not that part. I mean, what the fuck are both of you thinking? We're not going to win. I was staying away from Ivy and then both of you lose your minds and start talking about time she is anywhere near you. Why do you care so much about Caleb getting her attention? He's just a rich boy who will use her and then throw her away." "I'm not talking about Caleb," I said. "I'm talking about Ros."

ld have Cam shot him a warning look and snatched the bottle from his hand. "I don't give a fuck about Caleb. No one is supposed to be speaking to her. Not even Ros."

I laughed and pulled at my hair, letting the pain ground me for a moment. "Good luck telling Ros what to do. She couldn't care less about the feud between her and Vance or any of that shit. Trey has a point, though. If you hate her so much because of her father, then why did it look like you were ready to beat Vance's ass?" I grabbed the bottle from Cam's hand and turned it up, letting the alcohol

It went into my veins. It wouldn't solve my problems, but perhaps it could numb everything of my feelings.

He stood up and crossed his arms over his chest. "I just don't want anything else to touch her—or speak to her. If someone is going to break her, I want to be me."

I smirked at him and took another swallow, ready to start a fight. "You know or not what I think, Cam? I think that you just love to hate her. You want to break her slowly, don't want to admit it even to yourself. You claim you want to break her, but I'm willing to bet that she's the only thing you can think of when you're jerking off in the shower."

Trey stayed silent and pursed his lips, trying to hide his amusement. Cam rushed toward me and grabbed the collar of my shirt. His lips were inches from mine while he glared at me, the vein on the side of his head pulsing from anger. "Fuck you, Niko."

I readied myself for the blow that I knew was coming and leaned back, lowering my voice to a whisper. "Careful, Cam. Remember the last time your lips were this close? Tonight I won't stop you." I bit his ear, and he flinched before his fist landed on my stomach, knocking the breath out of me.

Trey raised his eyebrow and held his hands up. "On that note, I'm going to pass out. It looks like the two of you have things you need to work out, but I'm not sure if it's fighting or fucking, though."

Cam glared at me and pushed me backward, the alcohol causing me to lose my balance as I stumbled. "Nah. I'm not putting up with his shit tonight because just being a prick."

Both of them disappeared into the house and Cam slammed the door behind him. "Whatever. He could be pissed off."

I took off down the sidewalk with the bottle of cheap whiskey in my hand.

umb all first, I wasn't sure where I was headed while I drank and thought of  
was going to do to fix my problems, but when Regina Spencer's house  
anyone into view, I knew. I tipped back the bottle and swallowed the remain  
want it Laying it down in the grass at the side of the house, I walked as quiet  
could so I didn't alert any of the neighbors. My limbs were sluggish  
u know fatigue and the alcohol while I allowed my hands to trace the wooden  
her and The window I had been searching for was in front of me, and my  
her, but doubled as I peered inside. Ivy was fast asleep laying on her side, h  
you're pinched from whatever dream she was having. My fingers clumsily fo  
edge and pushed up, praying that she was foolish enough to leave it un  
it when It lifted easily, squeaking only the slightest bit as I opened it enoug  
s were through.

is neck I hoisted myself up onto the open sill and swung inside, careful to  
myself before I hit the ground. *Reminder to self: don't drink before d  
closer, to break into someone's house.* By some great miracle, Ivy didn't sti  
me our closed the window before stepping close to her bed.

gasped I stared down at her, admiring her sleeping form. She wore a black t-sl  
underwear. Her bare legs were tangled in the blankets and sweat bea  
oing to her brow. Her long auburn locks fanned across her pillow and  
out. I'm everything in me not to reach out to touch her. Any part of her. I took  
shoes and settled onto the edge of the bed, watching as her breathing  
to lose up. Her hands clawed at the sheet beneath her like she was in pain. A  
at. He's cry fell from her lips and I tilted my head to the side, curious about w  
was dreaming.

behind I laid down beside her on the small bed, surprised that she didn't wak  
the mattress dipping beneath my weight. Putting my head on the edge  
and. At

what I pillow, I watched for a while, listening to her soft whines as the room came around me. Tomorrow morning I would feel like hell.

ing sip. A part of me, a very small part, wanted to wake her up and tell her everything as I would be fine. It would be a lie, though.

sh from After Saturday night, she would know we were monsters.

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pillow, I watched for a while, listening to her soft whines as the room spun around me. Tomorrow morning I would feel like hell.

A part of me, a very small part, wanted to wake her up and tell her everything would be fine. It would be a lie, though.

After Saturday night, she would know we were monsters.

TWENTY

TWENTY

## *Ivy*



“**S**ure you’ll be okay by yourself?” Frankie asked as she grabbed her messenger bag from the small office at the back of the shop. I gave her a reassuring look and leaned against the counter. “Besides, we close in an hour. What could happen between now and then?” She raised her eyebrows and drew her lips into a thin line while she spoke to me before nodding. “Call me if you need me. For anything.”

As she left, I thought about how we’d fallen into such a comfortable routine. Around eight every night she grabbed her things and checked on me, ensuring that my day was going alright. I couldn’t exactly tell her the details about what had been happening for the past week, but it was nice to have someone in my corner.

Music streamed from my phone as I swept and straightened the shelves, dancing and singing as I worked. The shop closed in less than an hour and one customer came in this late. I actually wasn’t sure why Frankie kept it open. It wouldn’t argue about working. It kept me from having to go home and face my aunt who had been suspiciously absent all week.



I grabbed a broom and let my mind wander to the night before. Caleb had said that Ros and I come to watch him race. Racing didn't really appeal to me, but the week had already been exciting enough. Add in the fact that there was a football game on Saturday, and I really needed to finish some reading classes. In typical fashion, I tried turning him down, but as always, he dragged me along anyway stating, "College is about more than just academics, bestie."

Even to myself, I hated admitting that I had fun. The energy of the crowd was electric, and I was able to disappear in the sea of bodies, going completely unnoticed by everyone. Niko, Cam, and Trey were there, but none of them spotted me. At least not to my knowledge. If they had, they would have approached me, demanding that I leave or some other bullshit.

My biggest surprise was when Caleb kissed me, obviously caught up in the high of his win. I tried not to read anything into it, but I stopped and touched my fingers to my mouth remembering everything. His lips were soft and demanding, and his eyes held a question I wasn't sure how to answer. Rosalyn cheered at us wildly, grinning the whole time.

I went home alone and when I woke up, my sheets smelled like sand and were reminding me of someone else. It had to be my subconscious reminding me of somebody I couldn't have. Not now.

The door chimed as someone entered the shop and I yelled out, "Be w... in one second," as I dumped the dustpan into the small can in the... Brushing off my hands on my jeans, I stopped in my tracks as I took a... sight in front of me. Cam, Niko, and Trey hung around the front of the... looking bored and sifting through things at the cash wrap.

Cam straightened up and stalked toward me slowly, almost like he knew my heart raced in my chest and at any moment I might bolt out of the

insisted He clenched his jaw when he reached me and extended his arm, brushing his thumb over my bottom lip. I stood there frozen, wondering why he was there and hating the fact that part of me still enjoyed his touch. The ringing from music that had been playing on my phone and I glared at him.

Rosalyn Coming to my senses, I placed my hands on his chest and pushed. He didn't move an inch, but it made me feel better. "Why are you here? Oh, maybe I need some surf wax."

Cam looked amused at my statement and grabbed a loop on my jeans, pulling me roughly toward him. He tipped his lips close to mine and hovered over them for a moment. "What I need is for you to cooperate, but since that isn't going to happen, I wanted to extend an invitation to the party Saturday night."

My blood turned to ice. That was the party Rosalyn had convinced me to go to, telling me that the guys wouldn't even notice I was there. I cleared my throat and looked Cam in the eyes. "Thanks for the invitation, but I'm busy."

His lips curled up before he leaned in to bite my lip. I gasped at the pain and he chuckled. "It wasn't a request, Ivy. I'll see you there. We'll be a surprise for you, and I can't wait to see your face." My face only registered the horror I experienced at the idea of them surprising me.

Niko hooked his fingers in Niko's direction. "Come here and show her where you belong."

Niko's eyes trailed up and down my body for a moment before he stepped forward and pulled me from Cam's grasp. He looked angry, but I could understand why as he peered down. He grabbed my ponytail and tilted

his head how he wanted before crashing his lips against mine. There was nothing gentle or reassuring by the motion. He was branding me from the inside, marking me as he staked his claim.

ing hisElectricity shot through my veins at our contact, but I was mad. I c  
y werebelieve the audacity of the three of them. Well, I guess Trey didn'  
cut thesince he stood to the side looking bored while examining the handle  
knife. First Cam threatened me in front of a crowd, then he got me of  
e didn'tlibrary. Niko and Trey both tried intimidating Caleb. Now Niko's tong  
/be youin my mouth and my traitorous body was enjoying every second of it.

They ran so hot and cold and it had been exactly a week since the l  
jerkings was getting sick of whatever their game was.

d thereI pulled back enough to raise my palm and strike Niko's cheek. "Fuck  
't goingfaced Cam. "And you. You don't get to tell me who I belong to."

" Niko swiped his tongue over his lip slowly while he gingerly rubl  
ie to gocheek, saying nothing, and Cam laughed. He winked at me before turr  
red myback to me. "That's where you're wrong, little ghost. I'll see you ton  
I'll benight at eight."

My mouth was dry, and I simply stood there while watching them file  
sting ofdisappear into the night. I pulled out my phone and shot Rosalyn a text  
I have a**Me:** Guess who just left Frankie's.

viously**Ros:** Caleb? After that kiss last night...

me. He**Me:** No. The three douchebags.

/ho she**Ros:** You mean the three hot douchebags who can't seem to get th  
together? What did they want?

stalked**Me:** For me to come to the party tomorrow night.

ouldn't**Ros:** Oh shit.

ltd myOh shit indeed. I shoved the phone back in my pocket and locked  
nothingshop, lost in my thoughts. I wasn't ready to go home yet and see if r  
ide out,was there, prepared to bombard me with questions about where I'd l  
who I was spending time with. She hadn't been home lately to enfc

couldn't curfew she enacted, so I decided to trek to the beach. It was less than a count-minute from the surf shop and the sound of the ocean waves would soothe my soul.

I climbed down the embankment separating the road from the beach. I waded through the dune grasses as the sea came into view. The sun reflected on the water's surface and a sense of peace came over me. I took off my shoes, relishing the sensation of the cool sand beneath my feet. The scent of salt clinging to the air. Strolling along the beach I almost forgot you." Everything else faded, and I was just me.

Here, my father wasn't in prison for being a piece of shit. Here, I wasn't hated for who I was relating to. Here, I was even desired for reasons I didn't understand. I didn't have to worry about what the future held or what would happen tomorrow. Or the next day. I would manage to incur my aunt's wrath.

Suddenly, my throat felt thick as I stared down at my feet, sinking with each step. Who was I now after everything that had happened? I wasn't the same person from last year or even six months ago. After all the dust had settled, finally, who would I be? What pieces were still me? Did I still love to write or read?

I stooped down to pick up a sand dollar that was partially concealed in the sand. I heard someone crying nearby. Between my thoughts and the roar of the water, I had somehow completely missed the small shadow sitting just a few yards from me. I drew closer slowly, trying to see what was happening without wanting to startle the girl.

My aunt She was a little younger than me with brown hair and tear-stained cheeks. Her knees were drawn to her chest, and she held them tightly as she searched for me amidst the incoming waves. Apparently, she hadn't noticed me either.

an five Unsure of what to do, I sat next to her in silence and looked down at the  
soothedollar in my hand. She sniffled and stole a glance in my direction. Her  
was flat when she spoke. "It's supposed to be good luck if you find one  
ch andI turned it over in my hand slowly. "Well, right now I need all the luck  
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She thought for a moment and then gave me a sad smile. "I wouldn't  
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moon was high in the sky, she dusted her pants off and declared that  
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settledthing I needed was to earn the displeasure of my aunt yet again.

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Unsure of what to do, I sat next to her in silence and looked down at the sand dollar in my hand. She sniffled and stole a glance in my direction. Her voice was flat when she spoke. “It’s supposed to be good luck if you find one.”

I turned it over in my hand slowly. “Well, right now I need all the luck I can get.”

She huffed out a stuttered breath and wiped her palms against her face. “Same. Want to talk about it?”

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t know where to begin. What about you?”

She thought for a moment and then gave me a sad smile. “I wouldn’t know either.”

And that was how I spent the evening, sitting quietly with another sad girl on the shoreline, both of us lost in our thoughts. I didn’t know who she was or why she was here, but the company was comforting in a way. When the moon was high in the sky, she dusted her pants off and declared that she’d better get home before her brother found out she was missing.

I didn’t ask any questions because I knew I needed to do the same. The last thing I needed was to earn the displeasure of my aunt yet again.

TWENTY-ONE

TWENTY-ONE



## *Trey*



Niko parked the car in front of the Lonely Sun and scanned the lot looking for the white Camry that Ashton Haney drove town. He lifted his chin once he spotted it and grabbed for his door “You guys remember the plan, right?”

The past forty-eight hours had been a shit show. All I wanted to do was sit in my apartment and work on my program, forgetting all about the Football, Caleb Vance, and the green-eyed girl who was disrupting all of our lives. Niko losing the race was a problem. The money he earned from the race was how he ensured his siblings had somewhere to live. Cam and his complicated matters. He’d never told us why he chose not to go home, why Niko’s father being high was better than his mother stumbling drunk. Perhaps it had to do with the endless string of men that waltz into the house unannounced and acted like they owned the place.

I could relate to that.

For the first time in my life, I almost wished that instead of an apartment I bought a house. It would have solved at least a few of our problems.

I couldn't fix the tension that was brewing between Cam and Niko. I'd been building for years, even if the two of them were oblivious to it. The other night I was almost certain it was going to finally come to a head. Would I have thought that the red-haired siren who appeared out of the shadows would be the tipping point they needed?

Niko's assessment of the situation with Ivy was spot on. She'd caught my eye, and he hated it. I was staying out of it for now. Did she intrigue me? Sure. Would I turn her down? No. Thoughts of her on her knees still kept me up at night. But I wouldn't stop Cam from exacting his own form of justice for Maya as twisted as it was. He'd almost lost her and what she'd

parking  
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handle.

through...

Thomas Spencer deserved a bullet in the head, not a concrete cell home for a few years.

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Part of me wished things were different. That Ivy was someone else. A little ghost would have been perfect for the three of us. She wasn't scared of who we were or the demons that writhed under our skin, even though she should have been. She didn't back down from our demands and would do anything all exactly what she thought.

Maya  
ome, or  
g home  
ed into

"Trey, you remember what we're doing tonight?" Cam asked, bringing me back to the present.

I stepped  
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ent, I'd

I stepped out of the car and placed my fingers on the blade sitting in my pocket, letting the smoothness of the handle soothe me before pushing up my glasses. "Yeah, I remember. We cornered him in the bathroom, but didn't kill him. Yet."

He got to live a little longer because we needed information from him. Ashton was higher up than we were in the gang's ranks, and I'd confided in him more often than not. We hoped that he could tell us

. It had about the dean's sudden interest in Ivy or how Vincent was tied to the  
it. The mess.

d. Who The exterior of the Lonely Sun was nothing special—a flickering neon  
thin air crumbling brick exterior, and prostitutes hoping to find someone who  
pay for a quick blowjob in the corner of a parking lot—but the interior  
: Cam's bleaker. The smell of body odor mingled with cheap perfume as our  
ue me? stuck to the hardwood floor from the remnants of old beer and over  
kept me counter margarita mix that had been spilled by tipsy patrons.

justice We sat at the bar in front of one of the employees and ordered a round  
'd be drinks to blend in, gazing around the dimly lit space. A sad count  
played from the jukebox in the corner and the singer crooned about how  
to call wife left him and his dog ran away. It was fucking depressing, just like  
place. Why did anyone come here to drink?

Cam's I wasn't even sure why I was here or involved with this side of the Force  
ared by Vincent had told everyone that I was better suited to do different things  
ugh she jobs for him.

I tell us Ashton sat in the corner at a table with a woman wearing a short red  
that rode up her thighs. Her hair was teased and heavy makeup accentuating  
ing me the lines on her face. He came here every Friday night to drink and  
whoever was interested. The neighborhood girls avoided him like the plague  
; in my they knew the kinds of things he liked after one of them left with a  
; up my jaw.

Don't kill This was the easiest place to find him, given that he'd supposedly  
down on his luck since his last girlfriend kicked him out for cheating on  
m him and stealing her painkillers. The final straw was wrecking her car on  
Vincent When the cops showed up and another woman was with him, it was  
is more Since then, Ashton crashed at various people's houses or in his car.

the whole. His greasy hair hung in his face while he leered at the woman across the bar and she subtly pressed her breasts together. *We were doing her a favor* in the sun, *as he didn't even know it*. He licked his lips and stood, leaning over the bar to tell her something. I watched as he disappeared down the dark hallway toward the men's room to either piss or snort something up his nose.

His shoes "Showtime," Cam mumbled under his breath. The three of us slid from the bar stools and I threw forty dollars on the bar as I winked at the bartender. Tomorrow he would forget we were ever here, just another face in the crowd. The back hallway's lone lightbulb flickered, casting the hallway in a long shadow as Niko swung open the door. Inside, Ashton was bent over a urinal with his dick out, oblivious to his surroundings, and I sighed. I didn't like this what Vincent saw in the people he surrounded himself with. To be a criminal, they weren't great at it. It was probably why half of them were forsaken last—either the cops arrested them or they ended up dead in an alley. Types of murders never investigated.

I pulled the knife out of my pocket, snapping it open with the motion of a dress wrist, and stalked behind him, pressing the blade to his throat. "Put your hands back in your pants and listen closely, or I'll gut you right here and leave your body on the bathroom floor."

His motions stilled and his throat bobbed as he swallowed. "What the fuck do you three want?"

For some reason, he still didn't realize that he wasn't in charge of the situation, so I pressed the blade in slightly harder, allowing it to make a shallow cut on his neck. Blood beaded on his skin and I watched as it trickled down the column of his throat. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to zip your pants over and we're going to walk through the backdoor to the car. After that we're going for a ride and you're going to answer some questions."

the table I allowed the knife to slide across his skin, down to his abdomen.

or, and Niko placed his hand on Cam's shoulder to gesture that it was time to go. I opened the door to the hallway, which was thankfully empty. "Let's go." The emergency exit alarm had been disabled long ago because of patrons stumbling out with whatever warm body they'd found to spend the night with. The balmy night air cleared my senses and helped to wash away the grime of the bar's interior. Once we were outside, Ashton grabbed my wrist in an attempt to save himself, knowing that if he complied with their demands, his miserable life was over. I sank the blade through his skin into a urinal into his skin a quarter of an inch, just enough for a warning.

I tried to swallow down how I was feeling. The violence, pain, and bloodstains on his skin made me hard. I knew it was fucked up—some left over from my past.

“Don't even fucking try it. If you get away from me, do you think you'll get away from both of them, too?”

“Let's put him in the trunk,” Niko grumbled as he unlocked it. “I don't want your dick blood on my seats.” He pulled zip ties from the black bag he stored in the back. “And you owe me after this. I want my entire car detailed.”

Cam stood casually, watching as Niko secured Ashton's wrists and I stepped back, allowing them to wrangle him into the small space that would hold him for the next twenty minutes. He attempted to struggle until Niko pressed his fingers into the wound on his stomach, causing him to groan in pain. “I know you think that we're bad, he could have sent Rhyker in our place.”

Ashton's eyes went wide, and he stopped, his body turning completely instantly. *I should have threatened him with that first.*

Everyone thought Rhyker was the happy-go-lucky Forsaken member who helped old ladies with their groceries and rescued cats from trees. And

those things, but he was also the one that Vincent sent out when  
o move needed to take someone out. Around the Forsaken, he was known  
's go." Butcher.

drunk Niko slammed down the trunk lid and glanced at Cam, who smirked. 'end the the fuck are we taking him? Don't say your apartment because there  
h away many witnesses at this time of the night."

bed my He had a point. Junkies and prostitutes hung around my street at all h  
with my the day. They were the last people that would talk to the cops, but bet  
nirt and than sorry. A murder charge would keep me trapped in Clearhaven f

"By the paper mill. There's that area covered by trees and people dur  
scarlet over there."

ver shit Tyburn Hill was secluded enough that no one would interrupt us. I

common place to dispose of a body. The news reported someone wa  
u'll get there every week.

Niko nodded and got in, waiting for me to follow him. I crawled into t  
i't want and we took off, the breeze kissing my face. Niko turned up the  
l in the drowning out all the sounds of the city and the banging coming fr

trunk. I spent the time going over my checklist of things to ask Ashton  
.huffed I allowed him to die.

old him When we arrived at our destination, I glanced around, making sure  
ssed his one was there before tapping Cam's shoulder to signal that it wa

"If you Ashton was suspiciously quiet, and the banging had stopped. I wonc

he'd resigned himself to his fate because the cuts weren't deep enough  
mplianthim from blood loss. That would change soon.

Niko and Cam popped open the trunk and lifted the man we'd known  
er who past eight years, dragging him further into the tree line. I followec  
l he did listening to the sound of leaves crunching under our feet. Once w

ever heshrouded by darkness and the roadway was completely out of sight as the stopped and Niko turned him to face me.

“We’ve got some questions, and I know that you have answers.” They stared at me for a moment before spitting in my face. Niko wrapped his hands around Ashton’s throat and squeezed while I readied the blade in my hand.

“Disrespect is never tolerated.” I cut through the filthy shirt he was wearing, exposing his chest to the open air. “How are Vincent and Abraham Wells connected?” Ashton laughed. I dug the tip in, allowing it to slide down his sternum. Even in the shadows, I could see darkness pooling on his skin.

“Fuck, put the knife down. You could have asked me that at the bar. It wasn’t worth this shit,” he gritted out. I raised an eyebrow at him while he searched for him to continue. “The dean’s part of that secret society. Hell, even the mayor has power in this godforsaken town is. They’re paying Vincent extra to help him backdistribute that new drug. One of their chemists came up with it.”

On the radio, we all knew that the dean was part of the Order, and I’d suspected that they were behind the tea. “Why do they want Ivy Spencer on tea so badly?”

Before he lifted one shoulder, and I pressed the knife into the soft flesh of his stomach, allowing the blade to sink in. Cam’s eyes narrowed when she saw that he wasn’t screaming. “I never knew you were such a bitch, Ashton,” he muttered. “Answer the questions and, hypothetically, we’ll let you go.”

He hissed from the pain and gritted out, “Fuck, I don’t know. Sorry, I don’t know about how the dean owned her.”

Niko scoffed, and I smirked. She wasn’t mine, but there was no way that Ivy belonged to Wells. I’d make sure of it. It was Cam who rescued them, first. “We own the new girl, not him. He can play his sick game if he wants to be someone else.”

ght, weI left the blade in place while I spoke. “Who else is involved in this b  
arrangement?”

he manA tear ran down his face. “Please, just let me go,” he choked out. “  
is handknow shit.”

y hand.I twisted the handle feeling resistance and chuckled. “Unlikely story  
all, you’ve been meeting with the police. What did you tell the de  
ie nightdown at the station?”

ed, andAshton’s eyes went wide with shock and Niko’s grasp tightened, maki  
dows, Iwheeze. “Why do you think Vincent wants you dead? What happ  
snitches in our world?” I asked.

My lifeThe man choked out a sob and struggled against Niko’s restraint. “J  
waitingme. It’s nothing you don’t already know. The new guy on the force  
yone inmy ass, showing up everywhere and talking about how he could o  
cash toprotection.” Niko let up on the pressure on his throat for a moment  
coughed before dragging in a deep breath. “No one’s safe in this town.  
iat theywant you dead, that’s what happens.”

I yanked the blade from his stomach and held it to his throat. “What  
of histell him?”

Ashton“Just that there’s a new drug on the street and none of us really knows  
uttered.does.”

Niko nodded to me, signaling that was enough. We’d planned this ou  
nothingof time. I sliced open Ashton’s throat and watched crimson run dc  
skin.

in hellNiko let go of him, and Ashton fell to the ground, clutching at the w  
pondedcould have made things easier for him with a single bullet, but he d  
es witheverything he got. The tales I’d heard of him hitting women and kids  
demons of my own from the past, reminding me of every “boyfrien



businessmother brought home after my father went to prison. Shooting him was  
too gentle of a death.

'I don'tAfter pushing Ashton's body further down the hill into a ravine, we got  
the car and I pretended like nothing had happened. We had learned  
7. Afternew other than that the dean thought he had some sort of claim on Ivy.  
etectiveAfter tomorrow night, she'd know the truth. Even if Cam wanted to  
her, she belonged to us.

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mother brought home after my father went to prison. Shooting him would be too gentle of a death.

After pushing Ashton's body further down the hill into a ravine, we got into the car and I pretended like nothing had happened. We had learned nothing new other than that the dean thought he had some sort of claim on Ivy.

After tomorrow night, she'd know the truth. Even if Cam wanted to destroy her, she belonged to us.

TWENTY-TWO

TWENTY-TWO

## *Ivy*



The stands were packed at the stadium, a sea of white and blue covering every inch of the bleachers. I scanned the crowd looking for Caleb, curious about where he was. He'd texted me earlier in the day in the guise of our project promising that he'd be here. Rosalyn yelled that someone from Clearhaven intercepted the ball from our opponents.

Groveton and Clearhaven apparently played each other yearly despite being an out-of-conference game, each hoping for an easy win.

I stood quietly beside her and pulled out my phone noticing that around the same time Caleb had gone silent. I shot him a quick text asking where he was and waited. And then waited some more. Ten minutes later, I shoved the phone back into my pocket, deciding not to let it ruin my night.

Ros grabbed my hand and squeezed. "Don't worry, he'll show up. In the meantime, we're here to have fun." I bobbed my head at her in agreement.

I was out of the house and away from my aunt on a Saturday. Rosalyn purchased us sodas and candy for the game. Sports had never been my thing, but it was easy to get caught up in the excitement of the people.

surrounded us. It was even easier to pretend that I was someone whose life was normal and whose future was bright.

Last night, my aunt stumbled in after midnight, her words slurring while she talked loudly on the phone to someone claiming that Jesus' miracle was turning water into wine. I crept quietly to my door and pressed my ear against it, trying to listen to the conversation.

Regina had been acting suspiciously. First, she had a fit about me hanging around the Forsaken and imposed a curfew. Then she'd been absent for the week. *Where had she been? Who was she talking to?*

The snippets I could overhear provided no answers, only more questions. Something about how "everything was going according to plan" and "we needed a little more time."

I sipped the ice-cold soda in my hand, savoring the sweetness while I stood around the stands. Trey and Niko were also absent. Would they really be there for their best friend's opening game?

The phone in my pocket never vibrated while people jumped up and down around me. It was fine. He probably had something better to do than hang out with Ros and me. It's not like we were anything special, just partners in a class project.

Finally, I settled into the game, watching as men in blue jerseys lined up. My eyes immediately caught on number thirty-eight. Even from this distance, I recognized exactly who it was. I wasn't sure if it was because of the power he exuded or his gait, but there was no doubt in my mind that it was Camden Barrett.

The crowd around me exploded as the quarterback threw the ball down the field, number thirty-eight catching it easily. Watching him, I forgot about the laid-back guy who had an easy smile and gave no fucks about anything.

ie else.was absent. Instead, I was enraptured by the man who was curren center of my torment. It was almost too easy to ignore the cruel wor slightly said to me as he glided down the field. Cam ran with the ball, gra is' first bobbing and weaving through the other players until he reached the en pressed scoring a touchdown.

I grabbed Rosalyn and hugged her, letting myself get swept up in the raring When Cam took off his helmet and shook out his golden hair, the s for half lights glinted off of it. He looked nearly angelic, all the usual hardne from his features. This was what he excelled at, what made him thrive. estions. That was the way the rest of the evening went. We danced to the musi she just band, cheered at every touchdown, and drank so much soda my bladder out for mercy. Occasionally, Ros would flip off one of the mean gi looked shot me a look or narrowed their eyes, mumbling under her breath th ly miss needed to get over themselves.

By the time we climbed into Black Betty, I was on cloud nine and d down forward to the party that Ros originally had to convince me to go to. ang out “invitation” was the furthest thing from my mind as we grabbed tac rs for a the drive-through so that we had something to eat before drinking—Ro idea, not mine. We ate quickly as she drove to a house close to the up. My laughing the entire way. It was good, almost too good.

tance, I The driveway was full and the entire street was lined with cars by the t aura of arrived. No one had bothered to mention that the party was being h t it was mansion. It was literally the biggest house I'd ever seen, and that was a lot. I'd grown up around wealth and decadence.

own the Music vibrated from inside, and people sat on the lawn in circles hold out the plastic cups. I linked my arm with Ros as we drew closer to the door ng who lives here?”

ntly theShe grinned at me and lowered her voice. “Caleb’s cousin Luth  
ds he’dparents are supposedly out for the month on a trip to Europe.”

icefullyIt was my turn to raise my eyebrows. Of course, they were in Europe  
d zone,now, the only parts of Clearhaven I had seen were poverty-stric  
middle-class. Families doing the best they could to make it until p  
e game.people living in modest houses and driving average cars. *Perhaps ev  
stadiumhad a small group of the elite that ran everything.*

ss goneWe walked inside and up the stairs, dodging couples who were mak  
and girls dancing in tiny skirts. Ros pulled me into the kitchen where  
c of theof liquor and mixer were lined up on the island cabinet. Rhyker, the Fo  
er criedwho played bartender last week, sidled up behind her and wrapped h  
rls thataround her waist, planting a kiss on the side of her neck.

at theyRos gave him a sheepish grin as she pushed at his face, but he clung  
and kissed her exposed shoulder. “Do you two want to party tonight?”  
lookingI lifted an eyebrow at his words, but Ros placed her hands on top of hi  
Cam’syou offering to share your weed with us?”

os from“I will if you want because I have a feeling that you,” he stated quietl  
salyn’spointed at me, “are going to need to take the edge off before Cam se  
beach,but I’ve got something better.”

His warning about Cam sent a chill through my body, but instead, I f  
ime weon the fact that he was offering to give us drugs. Ros let her head fa  
eld at aagainst his chest. “Rhyker, if you’re offering us some crazy shit like h  
sayingstill remember the time you—”

He quieted her objections by nipping at her ear and I asked myself not  
ling redfirst time what their deal was. “Baby, I’m not giving you any of that sl  
: “Whogot some tablets of this new thing called tea if you want them. 5  
completely safe.”



or. His I turned back to the liquor on the island, deciding to mix myself a drink.

I talked. “Listen, I really appreciate it, but I’m not into taking something like that. Do you remember that news report a few years ago where that guy got punched in the forehead and bit someone’s face? The last thing I need is to do some crazy shit on payday and get arrested.”

Rhyker’s laughter filled the air, and his body quaked. I stared at him for a moment, wondering of why he was so amused. Finally, he cleared his throat and pressed a quick kiss to the top of Ros’ head before releasing her. “New girl, you’re hitting the two of you already had it last week. Half the people here have forsaken punch at the beach was spiked with it and no one bit anyone’s arm is anything crazy.”

His words crashed into me. I knew that alcohol had never affected me the way it did to her before. My skin itself was on fire and all of my problems melted away into the background. And all of that was before Cam’s shit this week. I held my breath. “Are you serious? I want one.”

He gave Ros a look, and she nodded her head, also holding her hand to her chest. “I still want some of your weed later.” She elbowed me in the side and I turned to her, her voice into a mock whisper. “He has the good shit.”

Long gone was the initial impression of Ros that I’d gotten when she was focused on my kitchen table arguing with my aunt about religion. She was the girl from the back who was confident enough to bend the rules, didn’t care what people thought, and had random guys who were smitten with her all while wearing floral dresses on Sunday morning.

Rhyker handed us each a small white tablet, and I stared at it for a moment, debating if I was really going to take it. *Fuck it.* If it made everything go away for the evening again, I was more than happy to try it.

We finished making drinks and Rhyker motioned for us to follow him.

back while the back deck that overlooked a gigantic pool. Thousands of fairy lights lit up the backyard, and I sipped my drink, waiting for the euphoria to kick in. Ros pulled out a joint from his pocket and lit it, taking a long drag before handing it to Ros. He gave me a strange look and pursed his lips. "Give the teen fifteen minutes to kick in. In the meantime, enjoy the ride."

I stood there waiting for my turn while watching the people below push one another into the pool and flirt, thinking about how different things were here. Just about how my father had hidden a secret life, or that I had never been. The everything, but how different I was. I'd been to parties before and seen people do weed, but knowingly taking a drug from someone who was a stranger six months ago would never have considered that.

Ros handed me the joint and I took a drag, trying to remember to hold my breath into the smoke and not look like a complete fool in front of my friend. My lungs burned and when I exhaled, I coughed. Ros grinned and patted my back, his eyes twinkling with amusement. Between the burn of the alcohol and the buzz of the weed, I felt good. Really good.

And then the familiar fire started under my skin. Whatever punishment he had in store for me, I could live with as long as it didn't take away the euphoria I was experiencing.

We finished smoking before Ros pulled both of us back inside, following the sound of the music and dancing. She snorted at something Rhyker was saying in her ear as we descended the stairs into a huge dimly lit living room. The furniture was pushed to the side, and I didn't pay attention to who else was in the room. All that mattered to me was the bass of the music.

I swayed my hips as we danced toward the crowd of people who were writhing on the makeshift dance floor. One of the other women from my university was standing on top of a marble table, hands brushing

ts lit updown her sides to the beat. Rhyker stared at the corner of the room a  
t in. Hewas when I saw it.

passingTrey, Niko, and Cam were sprawled out on a sectional sofa, dressed i  
a ten orand t-shirts that accentuated every bit of muscle and put all of their tat

display. In Niko's lap sat the pretty dark-haired girl from the other c  
sh eachone that I knew he gave drugs to. Her arms were wound around his  
re. Notshe whispered something only he could hear. His eyes were clos  
ad lostdespite how things were, a brief flash of jealousy curled inside of  
smokedwasn't mine, and they had rules, even if Cam had already broken them  
er? MeCam's gaze caught mine, and he hooked two fingers toward me, bec

for me to come closer like he was a monarch holding court. I held m  
d in theback and laughed at the absurdity, deciding that he could go fuck hi  
y lungstipped back the rest of the cup, letting the liquor burn my throat and  
ack, herspread further in my veins.

and theI wrapped my arms around Ros' neck and pressed my forehead again

“Did I just see you ignore Camden Barrett? I can't wait to see how h  
nt Camto that.”

e bliss IHe probably wouldn't react at all. After all, they had the attention of th

haired nameless girl who seemed extremely comfortable sitting with  
/ing theThe beat of the music drummed inside my veins as we moved together  
isperedSuddenly, my hold on Ros was jerked away, and my body lifted  
m. Theground. All I could see was a black t-shirt and the ground, a hard sl  
: was impressed against my stomach. I squealed at the weightless sensati

kicked my legs. The scent of the ocean bombarded me. *Cam*. I watch  
vere alleyes grow wide with disbelief and Rhyker shake his head before he  
om theaway. Later, I would tell him he was a coward.

up andI glanced at the sectional sofa and noticed that the dark-haired girl

and that herself now; Trey and Niko were both absent. “Let me down,” I hissed and hit his back. “There are rules.”

in jeans Cam swatted my ass, his palm stinging me through the denim. “Who you are determined to break every chance you have. And since neither of you seem to follow the rules, I want to show you a little surprise I’ve arranged for you.”

He stepped and his feet covered the ground quickly with me caught in his clutches. He climbed two sets of stairs. He stopped in front of a bedroom door and unlocked it open before dropping me onto the ground. I landed with a thud. Cam flicked on the light switch, illuminating the office. A heavy wooden chair sat near huge windows, and bookcases lined all the walls.

Myself. My mouth fell open as I took in everything. Off to the left, a heavy chair sat in the corner and tied to it was Caleb. Ropes bound his torso and wrists, tethering him in place, and a black cloth was shoved in his mouth. His knuckles were busted and a new bruise was forming on his opposite cheek. Trey and Niko stood beside him, both looking entirely unbothered by the situation.

He hadn’t stood me up. He’d been tied up here this entire time. That was the only thing I could think of. Trey and Niko had also been absent from the football game. “What the hell is this?” I asked, my voice coming out quiet. Everything was slightly off between the alcohol, tea, and weed, and part of me wanted to believe that this whole situation was just another nightmare.

Cam gave me a cruel smile and leaned against the edge of the desk. “I’ve seen Ros’ ghost, I think we have a problem. I seem to remember I told everyone that you and I were an outcast and off limits.” He turned his head to look at Caleb, who was openly glaring at him. “And Vance. You knew what we’d said, and yet you sat by other night you kissed Ivy at the race. I hope it was worth it.”

sed and Cam straightened and strolled next to where I sat, crouching down so  
could meet my eyes. He traced along my jaw with his thumb, trailing  
ich you my bottom lip. “Both of your actions can’t go unpunished, so here’s  
us can go to happen. After tonight, I want there to be no question that  
ged for ours, Ivy. No one else is allowed to touch you without our permission.”

He lifted his chin at Trey who sauntered toward me slowly, pulling  
s as he from his pocket. “Get on your knees, baby.” I heard the flick of the  
pushed behind me and a shiver skated down my spine. I should have been sca  
l as he a part of me anticipated what was going to happen next.

lesk sat “Fuck off, Cam. What will you do if I don’t?” The edge of the kn  
through the back of my t-shirt and I rolled my eyes. “And you? Can y  
hair sat cutting off all of my clothes? Unlike some people, I actually have to w  
l limbs, my stuff.”

th. His Cam’s lips twisted up at the corner, and he grabbed my chin with hi  
cheek. “The last thing you need to be worried about is your shirt, Ivy. Unl  
by the want Prince Charming over there to know about why you’re l

Clearhaven instead of at some posh Ivy League school, I suggest you  
as why your knees. I want him to see that you belong to the three of us.”

he fuck I closed my eyes and positioned myself so that I was kneeling, the res  
/ blurry fight going out of me. My brain was muddled by all the conflicting er  
hat this that raced through my veins alongside whatever I had taken tonight.

want Caleb to learn about my past. Really, I didn’t want anyone to kno  
“Little information was available with a simple internet search, but I’d ho  
me you simply blend into the shadows—just another anonymous body in town.  
who was After tonight, I needed to distance myself from the handsome rebellio  
yet the boy who was tied up in the corner. Other than this stupid project for cl

that he needed to stay away from one another. Hell, there was still time to do it overclass.

what's I opened my eyes and looked up, watching as Cam slowly unzipped his pants, his hard cock springing free. I glanced at Caleb one more time, noticing despite everything, a bulge tented the front of his pants. He was into it as much as a knife was just as fucked up as the three guys who had captured him and had me on my knees.

red, but I wetted my lips and readied myself for whatever they were about to do to me, allowing the fire that was crawling across my skin to consume me completely. After tonight, all bets were off. Cam thought he could pay me to stop around and break me, but he was wrong. I would find a way to pay him back for

his hand.

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know. The

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ass, we

needed to stay away from one another. Hell, there was still time to drop the class.

I opened my eyes and looked up, watching as Cam slowly unzipped his pants, his hard cock springing free. I glanced at Caleb one more time, noticing that despite everything, a bulge tented the front of his pants. He was into this. He was just as fucked up as the three guys who had captured him and had me on my knees.

I wetted my lips and readied myself for whatever they were about to do to me, allowing the fire that was crawling across my skin to consume me completely. After tonight, all bets were off. Cam thought he could push me around and break me, but he was wrong. I would find a way to pay him back.

TWENTY-THREE



TWENTY-THREE

## Caleb



**E**ven from a distance, I could tell that Ivy's pupils were the saucers. Her hair was wild and her cheeks were flushed pink and certain that I'd never seen anything more beautiful than her on her *Anything more feral*. Despite the position they had her in, she still Cam at every turn.

I knew what her secret was. I had since she moved to Clearhaven discussion with my grandfather over Sunday morning brunch, but I kept my mouth shut. She didn't want anyone to know about her past, and I couldn't blame her.

After all, I had secrets of my own.

Initially, when I began talking to her, it started out as one more way underneath the Forsaken's skin, among other things. That was the reason I showed up on Thursday night to race. Niko was undefeated, and I wanted to knock him down off of his pedestal. The three of them walked around they were royalty, and everyone bowed to their demands.

But I quickly learned that I enjoyed being around Ivy. I liked her fighting the chaos that surrounded her. She drew me into her orbit with the an-

masked her sadness.

When Niko and Trey showed up as I was leaving for the football game evening, I wasn't surprised. I got in a few punches of my own before he choked me, knocking me out.

And then I woke up here.

I stared at the red-haired girl whose face was lined with determination. Her chest heaved and I let my gaze travel down her body, noticing the white bra that barely contained her breasts. Her pink nipples were hard beneath the fabric, and she bit down on her lower lip before tracing it with her

She was into this, just as fucked up as the rest of us.

I tried to shift in my seat to adjust myself and hide the fact that my knees were shaking. I tried to keep my hands from shaking, but they defied me. I almost choked on my own spit. I was after a moment with Cam.

He could say what he wanted to, but I saw through all of his bullshit. I couldn't help but think that though he wanted someone to pay for what happened to his sister, he was drawn to Ivy and he hated it. He was punishing both of them for crimes neither had committed.

Cam's hips began moving slowly, rocking against Ivy's face, and she closed her eyes, letting herself get swept away in the moment. Her cheeks flushed out as his pace increased with every thrust. One of his hands wound around the back of Ivy's hair while the other stayed on her jaw. The muscle in his ass flexed with every stroke and her fingers dug into his skin.

Trey stood behind them, carefully tracing his knife in a pattern down her back, reverently never nicking her skin—something that surprised me

the cuts on my own torso from earlier. His motions stopped sudden  
me thisgrabbed the clasp of her bra with one hand and undid the clasp, carefu  
re Nikocut through the fabric. *I guess he listened to at least one thing she said*

Her breasts spilled out, and I took in the contrast of her skin

Camden's thighs. Trey bit down on his bottom lip and freed himself, g  
on. Herhis cock lightly. He slowly stroked himself while he traced the curve  
ite lacebreast, occasionally flicking the flat side of the knife against her  
eath thenipples. A moan escaped from between Ivy's lips and her hand disap  
tongue.between her thighs. Niko, who had been standing off to the side and

himself through his pants, darted closer and grabbed her wrist. "You  
t I wasget off unless we say so, and tonight isn't for your pleasure. It's to  
l Cam'spoint."

ner jawI tried to free my wrists for the millionth time, not necessarily to sto  
eir eyeswas happening, but to relieve the ache that was growing in my pa  
e placestouch the wild creature that they had on her knees. Ivy wasn't the type  
that could be owned or possessed by someone, even if the other me  
t. Evenher body didn't realize it yet.

he wasNiko wrapped her hand around his cock and helped her find the rhy  
nes thatliked, the row of metal barbells shining beneath the office lights. He

moved fluidly up and down the length without hesitation while Cam  
e closedincreased, brutally using her mouth. The tenderness from earlier was  
ollowedhe moved her head how he liked. Spit and tears dribbled down her face  
up into*She was so fucking beautiful*. Did she even realize that? All I could e  
s of hiswas her soft pink lips wrapped around my cock while I used her as I p

None of them deserved her. I would let her touch her clit while I dic  
n Ivy'smoans from her mouth vibrating up my spine.

e givenCam's hand encased her neck and Niko licked a trail up her face, tast

ly. Her tears that had fallen. Finally, Trey carefully flicked the blade against her skin. It did not touch her ribs, blood tarnishing her perfect skin. His tongue brushed against the wound and he closed his eyes, a low groan slipping past his lips.

At the rate they were going, none of them would last much longer. He rasped and pulled his cock out of her mouth and rubbed the head against her lips. “Remember how I told you I was going to mark you so that everyone would know you were ours?” He jerked himself several times and his jaw tensed. “White jets landed on Ivy’s body.”

“Open your mouth up, Ivy, and keep it open.” She tried to defy him, but he won’t. He grasped her jaw. When her lips parted, he leaned close and spit into her mouth. He moved out of the way, and Trey took his place. Ivy’s tongue darted out to taste him, but he gave her a hard stare, stopping her. “What tracks. Trey’s cum joined Cam’s on Ivy’s breasts.”

He ran his tongue along her bottom lip and nipped it before pulling away. “You’re so pretty like this, new girl.” Saliva fell into her mouth and he used it to close.

It was degrading as shit but somehow still exciting. Niko leaned over her, running his tongue through the mess that had been made before grasping her hand. Ivy’s face. Cum and saliva dripped between her lips. He pulled her close and thrust his tongue inside, branding her as his.

Her motions faltered slightly, and he placed his hand over hers, helping her finish him. He came on her stomach before he pulled away and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Ivy looked shocked as Cam bent down, snaking his hand into her pants. “Little ghost, you liked what we did to you,” he said. “I think you like being treated like our whore. You look so perfect right now with your skin marked by us.”

Her eyes fluttered closed as she rocked her hips against his hand. Cam

the sideaway when she moaned and yanked the gag from my mouth. “Open  
inst thecommanded. I clenched my jaw in defiance, refusing to give in to w  
game he was playing. Rather than give up, he gripped my jaw and  
r. Camenough force that pain lanced through my face. I opened up, and he th  
er lips.fingers inside my mouth. Ivy’s arousal was still wet on his fingers  
: wouldtaste bloomed on my tongue, salty and tangy.

nsed asShe tasted good, but I would never tell them that. His fingers rubbe  
my lips and he laid his forehead against mine, glaring. “That’s the on  
ut Camyou’ll ever get of her.” I spit in his face, but he simply laughed at  
nto herrubbed his palm down his cheek, wiping it on his pants.

tongue“Alright, Ivy. It’s time to go. Grab your bra.”

in herHer eyes widened and her eyebrows shot up. “What about my—”

Niko’s chuckle rumbled through the room, and Trey shrugged. “Sorry  
; away.Remember how we told you that everyone would know you were our  
ier eyeshanded her the thin white lace and waited. “Don’t think about trying t  
up before you head downstairs. If you do, we’ll just haul you back in  
closer,do it again.”

rabbingHer cheeks turned red, and she faced away from everyone while she f  
ose andthe bra and adjusted it. “Can I at least have my shirt?”

Trey smiled and picked it up off the floor, tucking it under his arm. “  
g her tothink so.”

e her a“What about me? We’re done here and I have shit to do,” I g  
ing hisdetermined not to let them get to me.

mirked.Cam rolled his eyes. “Not yet, lover boy. Can’t have you trying to r  
ht now,and rescue the damsel in distress. Besides, who said we were done wi

You cost Niko the race and defied our orders.”

1 pulledNiko grabbed Ivy’s hand and pulled her through the door. She cast c

up,” he glance at me before she disappeared and I wondered what in the future  
whatever were going to do next.

applied Tonight hadn’t changed anything about me and Ivy. They just didn’t  
trust his yet. If they thought this was going to deter me from speaking to her  
and they were wrong.

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glance at me before she disappeared and I wondered what in the fuck they were going to do next.

Tonight hadn't changed anything about me and Ivy. They just didn't know it yet. If they thought this was going to deter me from speaking to her, they were wrong.



TWENTY-FOUR

TWENTY-FOUR

## *Ivy*



**M**y entire body was engulfed in flames, and my mouth felt like I wasn't sure if it was from the tea I'd taken earlier, being turned into a monster, being angry, or feeling humiliated. Niko's hand was placed on the side of my back, guiding me down the stairs. I thought he was just leading me outside to take me home, but I was wrong. Camden and Trey followed us silently as people stopped whatever they were doing to stare.

I was covered in semen, my lips were swollen, and whatever mascara I had put on me streaked down my cheeks. When we hit the bottom of the second set of stairs, I stopped in my tracks ready to fight them, but Niko simply leaned close and grabbed my wrist, dragging me forward through the crowd. "This wasn't part of the deal," I gritted out where only he could hear me.

"I told you that after tonight everyone would know who you belonged to," Niko smirked, hauling me to the edge of the room where a sound system was playing. The whispers were growing and I kept my eyes on my feet. I didn't know who was seeing me in this state or what they were saying. Just a few more minutes of embarrassment and then I could hide.

Trey cut the sound and everything fell silent around us, suffocating me. The whispers stopped when Cam raised his voice. "In case you haven't heard, this is the new girl, Ivy. She defied our orders by talking to someone on campus. She's our property, our plaything to do with as we wish. No one is to look at her, speak to her, or even think about her." He traced a path through the cold cum sitting on my chest, smearing it further. He looked glaring at Rhyker. "And no one else is to give her anything to help her be more comfortable during her stay here in Clearhaven, however short that stay may be."

Rosalyn glowered at him and gave him the middle finger before he turned me back toward the crowd. "Now get out of here. If I find out that you're anywhere but home, next time will be twice as bad." Flashes from people's phones went off in my periphery as I hurried toward the front door, the exit away from this hellhole. I grabbed the handle behind the door and stepped outside, trying to pull myself together. I stared down at my shoes as I lead me away from the house. The ocean breeze chilled my skin despite the warm late summer temperature and I pondered how the hell I had ended up here. Punishing me was one thing. I could accept that. Maybe I was a masochist because a part of me enjoyed how they treated me in the office. Fuck, I could even potentially accept how they'd treated Caleb. He had also dared to break the rules by trying to get close to me. Parading me around in front of the crowd, of the party, though?

*Fuck them.*

My legs were putty, and I zoned out, ignoring everything around me. Someone's hand grabbed my shoulder, but I shrugged it off. "Where do you think you're going?" Rosalyn's voice cut through the fog in my brain.

e. Even I didn't look up because I couldn't stand to see the pity in her eyes. "H  
t heard, Rhyker jogged up to me and stood in my path, forcing me to raise m  
ie from "For fuck's sake, Ivy, stop for a second. You can't walk home dress  
me else that. Someone else will see you and you'll end up on the evening r  
a finger another statistic."

ked up, The anger from early that had been extinguished returned with a venge  
her feel jabbed my finger into his chest as I enunciated every word. "You  
iat may knew what they were going to do."

He opened his mouth and then shut it, choosing his words carefully. "I  
shoved know their whole plan, and I'm sorry. I couldn't have stopped C  
you go anyway. At least let me or Ros take you home."

I crossed my arms over my body and stepped around him, lookin  
toward down. "No. You heard what they said. The last thing I need is for t  
and ran mess with anyone else because of me."

my feet "If you won't let me help you, at least take this." Rosalyn shrugged  
pite the thin jacket she was wearing and pressed it into my hand. Rhyker p  
ided up paper towel from his pocket and gave it to me, not meeting my eyes.

you dare think that this is the end of our friendship, Ivy Spencer. I'll  
isochist here when you're ready to stop being so stubborn. You better not l  
I could win."

o break I wiped my chest and stomach off, throwing the paper towel on the  
the rest not caring if it was littering, before putting the jacket on over my

buttoned as many buttons as I could, concealing at least some of m  
before sighing and gave her a weak smile. "Don't worry. They thi  
nd me. have the upper hand, but I'm not done fighting. I just don't want them.

do you She simply patted my back. "Are you sure that you don't want a ride I  
can deal with those three."

ome.” I shoved my hands in my pockets. “No. You two go have fun.”  
y eyes. Rhyker coughed and shifted on his feet. “It’s not like that.”  
sed like I turned my back to them and started walking. “Sure,” I yelled o  
ews as shoulder.

After I was out of sight, I pulled my phone from my pocket, trying to  
eance. I on my best plan of attack and ignore the ache between my thighs.  
fucking confusing. I was angry, but between the drugs and being denied an or  
was left wanting.

I didn’t I pulled up one of the social media apps to distract myself and  
amden, speculated about if it would be easier to just get into my car and dis

Take the money from my bank account and try to start somewhere n  
ig back never lived out of a car before, but I could figure it out.

hem to I typed in Cam’s name, dreading what I would find. Cars passed me

roadway, but I ignored them as I scrolled through endless photos of th  
off the taking selfies together. Cam wearing his football uniform. The three c  
ulled at taking shots. Girls clinging to each of them like they were the answer t  
“Don’t their prayers. *Nothing I could use for blackmail.*

still be I pulled up the internet browser and typed in his name again, hopi  
et them something I could actually use would pop up. There were a few news

about his high school football days and how they were expecting  
ground, attend one of the more prominent colleges several states away. I scroll  
/ bra. I several knowing that the reason he hadn’t escaped was his younger sis  
y tors stayed here for her.

ak they And then I hit the jackpot. On the police blotter, Samantha Barrett ha  
...” arrested in Clearhaven for a DUI. I skimmed through the charges an

ome? I cases, taking in the information. From her mugshot, she was defini  
mother. The same crystal blue eyes and golden hair with pouty lips.

younger days, she would have been attractive, but now her cheeks were ruddy from years of alcohol.

Out of curiosity, I typed in Trey and Niko's names. Earlier, my heart had broken for them, but now I looked at it with clinical interest. All their home lives were shit. Between alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution, and prison, none of them had anyone. They only had each other. Perhaps we weren't as different as I'd initially thought. No amount of sympathy could have stopped me from what I was planning, though. I briefly thought that I'd just fall in line, they were wrong.

Finally, my aunt's house came into view. My feet hurt from the trek here. I'd been ready to crawl into the shower to scrub the night's events off my skin. Unfortunately, the front porch light was on and her car was parked on the driveway. Silently, I hoped she was already asleep, but my heart raced at the guys' chest. I glanced down at the time on my phone, noting that it was just past midnight and I'd definitely broken curfew.

Slipping inside the dark house, I closed the door behind me carefully, hoping that it wouldn't give me away. It creaked and my aunt's voice came filtering through the house. "Ivy, I was wondering when you would stumble in." I plastered a smile on my face and ran my fingers through my hair, trying to tame some of the waves. "Sorry I'm late," I answered as I exited the hallway and led past the entryway into the light.

She lifted one eyebrow at me as she appraised my appearance. And when she opened her mouth, I knew that whatever she was going to say would have been off. "Well, you're dressed like a common whore. I can see your braids, but I don't know your father taught you to dress better than that." Shock painfully hit my features at the abruptness of her words. I knew I looked like hell, but she hadn't even asked if I was alright.

She sniffed as she pulled a cigarette out of a pack on the table and I  
won't allow you to continue to break my rules, Ivy. I'll kick you out  
of the house before you tarnish my reputation here. You're turning into your  
father and I can't have that."

My heart fell into my stomach and I suddenly felt nauseous. My mother  
didn't even remember her and had only ever seen one photograph of her  
throughout my entire life. I was forbidden from asking questions about her. She  
kept it a dirty secret. As I had gotten older, I assumed that she'd abandoned  
me because she didn't want me. Perhaps becoming a mother was too much  
for her, and she couldn't handle my father's demands.

I cleared my throat, willing my tears to not fall while I straightened  
my shoulders. "Don't worry. This will be the last time I break curfew. You  
don't have to worry about me."

I didn't bother adding in that it was because I didn't have anyone as I  
went to the shower. Or that I was pushing Rosalyn and Caleb away to  
protect them.

I turned the shower on as hot as it would go and climbed in, thinking  
I would do first thing in the morning. Dropping world civilization as  
possible seemed like the best choice and would keep Caleb at arm's length.  
I could exchange it for one of the general education classes I knew I needed  
to graduate. Something in the art or music department. I scrubbed my skin  
until it was raw and pink, almost like I could wash the events of the past few  
years away.

Wrapping my towel around me, I tiptoed to my room, unwilling to  
step on my aunt's toes. I pulled the lid off of the gray plastic box to find clean  
clothes, but the first thing I saw was the t-shirt that Niko had dressed me in  
when he was carrying me home last week. His scent still clung to it and I pushed



lit it. “While I dressed. Still, the shirt called to me. I grabbed it before heading  
t of my and lifted it to my nose.

mother The smell comforted me even though they’d shown me who they really  
tonight. I guess they really had since the very beginning, but I had  
other. I away. I pulled the shirt over my head and crawled beneath my blanket  
f her in inside of my thighs were coated with arousal and the scent of sand  
e was only intensified the throbbing between my legs.

ned me I never had really touched myself before. The few times I had tried h  
uch, or frustrated me further as I had fumbled, never able to get off on my own  
my hand trailed down my torso and slipped inside of the band  
ned my underwear.

u don’t I closed my eyes and let myself imagine what tonight could have be  
instead of the nightmare that it was. In my fantasy, Caleb wasn’t tied  
trudged chair and instead was behind me, squeezing my breasts while I sit  
protect Niko’s face. His fingers dug into my hips, forcing me flush with his mouth  
his tongue explored inside of me.

of what I pulled up the hem of my shirt, exposing my breasts and pinched my  
soon as my finger traced my clit, slowly getting faster as I thought of  
length. It touches.

eded to Trey would stand beside me, his thick cock pressed against my lips  
in until tongue would dart out to tease him, licking the bead of pre-cum off  
w hours crown while Cam kissed my neck. His lips would latch on to  
whispered words where he told me I was such a good little slut for being  
peak to take them all.

clothes I needed more, and I pressed my middle two fingers inside, my palm  
before the sensitive bundle of nerves. Electricity shot through my body and I  
it as I pistoned them inside of me and pulled on my nipples.

g to bedNiko's lips would find my clit and suck, allowing his teeth to brush a  
and Trey would grab my hair, encouraging me to put him in my mo  
ly werewould rock his hips against my face and tell me how beautiful I  
lookedInstead of his usual indifference, he would look at me like I was the o  
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alwoodI flipped onto my stomach, grinding against my palm while thinking o  
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After I caught my breath and readjusted my clothes, relief was repla  
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raddledthe house covered in come and yet I was imagining them bring  
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I turned onto my side and pulled the blanket up to my chin, praying fo  
nipplesto come. In a few brief hours, I was going to be the one acting like a n  
f roughThey just didn't know it yet.

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Niko's lips would find my clit and suck, allowing his teeth to brush along it, and Trey would grab my hair, encouraging me to put him in my mouth. He would rock his hips against my face and tell me how beautiful I looked. Instead of his usual indifference, he would look at me like I was the one who hung the stars in the sky.

I flipped onto my stomach, grinding against my palm while thinking of ocean blue eyes, wishing that instead of my fingers, it was one of their cocks. My muscles tensed as I writhed against my mattress and sweat beaded on my skin. Black spots appeared on the edges of my vision and everything ceased to exist as my body shuddered and my pussy clamped down on my fingers.

After I caught my breath and readjusted my clothes, relief was replaced by shame. I had just gotten off to thoughts of the three men who were determined to humiliate me. They had acted like monsters, casting me out of the house covered in come and yet I was imagining them bringing me pleasure.

I turned onto my side and pulled the blanket up to my chin, praying for sleep to come. In a few brief hours, I was going to be the one acting like a monster. They just didn't know it yet.

TWENTY-FIVE

TWENTY-FIVE

## *Niko*



The parking lot was full Monday morning by the time Cam and I pulled up. I overslept and didn't want to get out of bed, the events of Saturday night playing through my head on repeat. Part of me wanted to regret what had happened, how harshly we'd treated Ivy, but I didn't. I was not completely.

I disagreed with parading her around in front of the people that had shown up for the party and disliked the fact that Cam kicked her out of the party afterward. I wasn't sure if he was trying to claim her or humiliate her with his actions. Maybe it was both. Pictures of her standing there in her bikini were already all over social media by Sunday morning, and word had spread around campus.

What I didn't regret was seeing her on her knees again, even if it was through coercion. The way her eyelids fluttered and her tongue darted out to lick whatever we gave her. She wasn't fragile and I would take her however I could get her, even if she hated me afterward.

Cam was so determined to break her, and all I wanted to do was possess

I exited the car and noticed that Trey was already waiting on us, against a light pole, looking bored. As I ambled closer, he frowned and picked up his phone. "Have you guys checked YouConnect this morning?"

I shook my head, curious why he was asking about the social media site that was the most of the university used. "No, why?"

Trey simply raised an eyebrow and typed something into his phone, passing it to Cam first. A string of expletives left his mouth, and he held it up to me so that I could see. A new account by the name of JustAGh posted screenshot after screenshot, targeting each of us. The user name

told me who it was as I clutched the phone, the only person who dared stand up to us. Evidently, Cam had finally gotten under her skin.

First was Cam, where there were mugshots of his mother who had been in for more DUIs than I could count and a charge of public indecency

followed were pictures of him standing next to her at our high school graduation where it was evident from her glassy eyes she wasn't sober

was nothing about his father because... no one knew who he was from a drunken one-night stand that didn't bother staying in touch.

The next several posts were dedicated to Trey. Screenshots of the news articles detailing his father's failed robbery attempt and the court case that followed appeared.

Obviously, Ivy couldn't leave well enough alone and included mugshots of his mother as well. Years of prostitution charges were listed

my cheeks heated with anger. There were also the charges from where the Johns had beaten Trey so badly, we'd carried him to the hospital.

Dread curled in my stomach knowing that I was next. What had she managed to pull up on my family?

My father's drug charges obviously showed up, but that didn't bother me. Hell, everyone in Clearhaven knew about the emergency phone

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leaning whenever he OD'ed. What got me was the news articles about my mother and her death. How she had been found overdosed in an alleyway not far from where hookers solicited potential customers. The jagged wound in my chest that never quite healed, and Ivy had managed to rip the bandage off.

The account already had 15,000 followers, and it had only started yesterday. Before anger and shame mingled together and before I could stop myself, I dropped the phone on the concrete sidewalk, the screen busting into a million pieces. "Motherfucker," Trey cursed under his breath as he stared at the picture on the screen. "I should have known better than to hand the two of you anything that was supposed to be valuable."

I didn't need this right now. None of us did. The fact that I'd lost the rent money on Thursday still loomed over my head. I was already behind on rent for next week. What next payment was coming up next week. Not that the information Ivy had given me about the school was some sort of big secret in Clearhaven. Everyone knew the background of the three broken boys who joined the Forsaken as soon as they were able. Some of it was the fact that she threw things that were beyond our control back at our faces. Things that still broke us and we had never healed from. My parents were always addicts, but losing my mother changed everything. We didn't have the money for a funeral and, seeing that the only thing she left behind was a tiny box of ashes broke me. My sister and brother cried at night for months, asking when she would be back to kiss them goodnight. It was the final domino that pushed me into this life.

I flexed my fingers at my sides, trying to regain some semblance of composure. "So what are you going to do about it?"

Trey grinned at me and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I say turn it over to me. Fair play. She should have known better than to fuck with us. It was her call to move on her part."



mother's As deep as my obsession with Ivy was, I had to agree with his statement where reactions couldn't go unchecked. We couldn't look weak, especially not to Vincent or his associates.

Cam ran his hands through his hair. "I agree, but the two of you just closed yesterday. Take care of it. Unless she skips out, she has tutoring with me tomorrow. I threw—" "What are you going to do?" I asked, lifting my backpack higher on my shoulder.

When he grinned, a shiver skated down my spine. "Like Trey said, tutoring is fair play. Everyone here knows who our families are, but who knows her history?"

I chewed on the inside of my cheek for a moment, mulling everything and the—"Isn't that the only leverage we have?" I wasn't completely behind to protect her or making her an outcast like Cam, but if this was a chess game, sacrificing such a crucial piece made me unsettled.

Trey's eyes twinkled with amusement and he stood up straight, looking back into the building behind us. "Don't worry about that. I set up a camera in the hallway the other night. I'm sure Ivy wouldn't want that getting out. Especially with how her aunt is."

I should have expected nothing less from him. As outwardly cruel as he might be, Trey was cruel in different ways. He was logical and methodical, always thinking three steps ahead. Part of me wanted to see the tape of the four of us and relive the moment, but a voice in the back of my mind reminded me that before everything was done, she'd hate us.

I took a deep breath and looked down at my phone. My class was starting in about fifteen minutes. I gave them a fist bump before I left, trying to focus on the dumb things. I had more important things to worry about, like how I was going to pay my rent and if I should ask Tyler to sign me up for a fight.

ent. Her

not to



hill. I'll All day long, I'd thought about whether I should call Tyler. Ins  
v." focusing on whatever the professor was saying in my economics cl  
on my mulled over ways to make enough quick cash to satisfy my landlo  
guys were preoccupied with thoughts of how to pay back Ivy, and I  
rnabout want to bother them with my problems. Cam and Trey both had enou  
s about on their plates.

I made a mental list of things that I could do. Stealing a car and offlo  
ig over at Mack's was one option. Breaking into a houses in the rich area c  
orturing was another. Hell, breaking into Caleb's house and stealing  
game, grandmother's diamonds felt fitting, but something stopped me.

The only thing that was off limits at this point was selling my car. I'd  
g at the my blood, sweat, and tears into it. Plus, it was our only  
e office transportation. Trey's car could break down on the side of the road ton  
ally not Contacting Tyler would be the second safest option from a legal star

The only thing I would need to worry about was winning. I wouldn't h  
as Cam worry of searching for cameras or the police catching me lifting a car  
iodical, wouldn't have to worry about pawning anything or the paper trail som  
e of the kept.

y head As soon as my last class ended, I sat on the bench closest  
administrative building and pulled out my phone. Ivy had been  
rting in around, which surprised me. After the stunt she pulled, I had expecte  
n other her. I still couldn't believe that she had the nerve to use that as a hanc  
oing to knew we would realize who it was immediately.

After wasting some time on social media, seeing if JustAGhost had anything new, I closed out all the apps and opened my contacts. I allowed my finger to hover over the name while debating with myself. It was never and I didn't want Vincent or the guys to talk me out of what I was considering. Tyler picked up after one ring. "Yeah?" I rolled my eyes at his greeting. He was all business, never one for easy conversation. "Look, I need you to hook me up with a fight as soon as possible."

He chuckled under his breath, and I heard the rustle of papers in the background. "The soonest I can do is October." A heavy breath left my chest and my heart fell. "Any way you can hook me up something sooner? I really need the money, man. After the last race..." My heart raced as I waited for his next words and I chewed on the edge of my tongue. "If you're willing to drive three hours, I can hook you up. You even live in Strathmore?"

"Book me and text me the details. I'll be there." My stomach coiled with nerves. I'd never really been outside of Cleveland before—poverty tended to do that, anchoring people to a place—but this was my shot at trying to save the home I'd grown up in. It was the place where my brother and sister went to sleep every night and where my mother's ghost haunted the halls.

I'd never fought inside of a ring before, even an illegal one, but I had plenty of fights. With shaky legs, I stood and gathered my things, then I took a quick glance down at my phone as it buzzed in my hands, listing the information I needed. I would win my match because even without training, I had an edge few did—desperation.

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TWENTY-SIX

TWENTY-SIX

## *Ivy*



**A**fter the events of the party this weekend and then my decision back against the guys, Monday I skipped classes. I wasn't ready to deal with the shame of being paraded in front of everyone at the party, I had to confront the fact that I had to push Caleb away. I also wasn't ready to deal with the repercussions of posting what I had on social media. They deserved what I had done, but there would be consequences. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Instead, I stopped by the small thrift store—swearing that I would look like I was not affiliated with my aunt's church—and rummaged through the shelves, looking for a few pieces that would make me feel more confident in myself. Other than the dress that Trey had cut off of me, it had been a long time since I'd worn anything that made me feel pretty.

I had decided that it was time to find myself again. It was time that I got back into a routine that didn't revolve around work, school, and studying. Even though I was pushing Ros and Caleb away, there was no reason I couldn't be confident or at least appear that way on the outside. If anyone thought they could break me, they were wrong. I was already broken.

I pulled out several skirts and tops from the clothing racks and checked the price tags before folding them over my arms. Several pairs of cotton athletic pants completed the list of items I was looking for. I was paying for my purchase with the money Cam threw at me in the living room. I stopped by the small shoe store next door and found knee-high black boots on clearance. They would be perfect to pair with the new to me clothes.

My last stop of the day was at a small dollar store at the end of the street. Inside, I scoured through the budget makeup, determined to stretch the the money I had made “tutoring.” Cam didn’t learn anything, but I had every penny. Inside of the small yellow basket laid back eyeliner, mascara, and lip gloss.

After the three shops, I still had enough left over for a small latte. It was a small break that I’d so desperately needed before reality crashed back in again.

The middle of my day was spent washing and hanging up my new purchases. My aunt was thankfully absent given that it was noon, and unable to come see the purchases I’d made. I played music on my phone and sipped my coffee, trying to make it last as long as possible.

Tomorrow I would have to deal with Camden Barrett, but today I would pretend like I was the old Ivy Spencer who didn’t have a care in the world. *At least for a little while.*

I still showed up at work that afternoon, pouring myself into what needed to be done. The summer was slowly coming to a close and soon the tourists who flocked to the beaches would be replaced by older couples who we welcomed each winter by moving south for the worst months. To get ready for the change, we added the new inventory she ordered of lightweight hoodies to the wall, the only addition she made to the shop.

Afterward, I swept the floors and carried out the trash while she watched.



carefully and quietly. That evening before I left, her hand gently squeezed my shoulder and a line formed between her brows. "Are you sure about what you're doing, Ivy?"

Finally, I gave her a once over, noticing that the lines around her eyes seemed a lot deeper on her tan skin, and her mouth was set into a thin line. Frankie was worried and rarely talked about serious topics. She was a refuge for me in the middle of the storm, always quick to tell a joke or make me laugh.

At last I gave her a smile and swallowed. "I don't know what you're talking about, but if I did, my answer is yes. They need a reminder that they can't scare people like they are trash." Which was exactly what I felt like when they marched me downstairs in front of everyone.

She huffed out a breath and patted me. "I saw those posts. Just remember, you're playing a dangerous game. Be careful. The last thing you need is to attract attention to yourself, and I'm not talking about those boys."

I didn't know how to respond, so I nodded and exited the shop, telling her I would be at work the next day. Unlocking the passenger side of the car, I crawled over the seats and mumbled to myself about finding the money I could use. The vehicle was great, but the daily ritual of climbing in and out of the driver's side of the car was getting old. *That was probably what I should have done with the money I'd earned instead of buying new clothes*, a voice in the back of my head whispered, but I ignored it. Being practical only got me so far.

The campus gym was open until midnight during the week and I drove there without hesitation, knowing that at this hour, it would be empty. The other students would all be home or out doing whatever they did with the Forsaken and she would be busy. She'd texted me multiple times ensuring that I was okay, but I had to head me

oulder, I told her I was fine. I just needed space to deal with everything and you're want her tangled up in whatever was happening.

Grabbing the bag I packed earlier and tucking my phone into the glove compartment, I headed inside the huge concrete building. I followed the signs on the wall while taking in the facility. The women's locker room sat on the left side of the building and I ducked inside to change my clothes.

Three girls stood to the side talking as they dried off and I kept my eyes down, careful not to draw any attention to myself. They spoke loudly but not about the social media posts from last night, and it piqued their attention. My motions slowed as I listened in, glancing up briefly. "I don't know who posted any of that, but they need to watch their backs. Remember that news to everyone that grew up here."

The dark-haired girl that hovered around Niko snorted to herself, "Probably that whore who's been hanging around. None of them want to be like her. She just keeps throwing herself at them. I bet that's why they had to share the car, a lesson the other night."

I was careful not to show any emotion even though blood rushed to my face and I shoved my clothes inside a small brown locker. There weren't any other girls in there, but considering how empty the building was at this time of the night, I wasn't concerned. A small gaggle of mean girls wouldn't do anything to me from my plans.

I kneeled down to tie my shoes while they kept talking. "They never act like that way. Guess they just realize she's trash. Why else would they be coming back to her?" She flipped her hair over her shoulder and adjusted her shirt.

They had no idea what was really happening, so I stood to make my way out and that was when they saw me. A cruel smile curled up on her face.

I didn't trolled my eyes, turning my back to them to leave. Suddenly my head yanked back, pain lancing through my scalp from how tightly the e box, I behind me pulled my hair.

he wall I inhaled deeply and gritted my teeth. "Let me go, you dumb bitch. No side of supposed to touch me or speak to me. I'm pretty sure that include things like pulling my hair."

yes cast She giggled at me and yanked again, passing me off. "I doubt that, sv r to one Her voice was saccharine and grated on me like nails on a chalkboard ied my away from the Forsaken. Niko is mine."

'I don't Despite her grasp on me, I laughed. My entire body vibrated as tears It's old to my eyes. "That's hilarious. Tell your boyfriend to stay away from keep his cock away from my mouth, then." Her grasp loosened f. "It's slightly, the coarseness of my words shocking her, and I swung arc her and face her. Shoving her against the lockers, her head bounced against the row her and I got in her face, grabbing her throat. "One last thing. What name?"

ny face When she didn't answer, I squeezed enough that she knew I wasn't y locks The past few weeks around the guys brought out a side of me I wasn of the comfortable with yet. I was sick of everything. "Arabella," she squeak eter me and I loosened my hold.

"Arabella." The name rolled off my tongue as I glared at her and she c treated her hand from my hair. Her two friends stood nearby with wide ey ey keeps slack jaws. "Not only will I be telling Niko about tonight, but if yo sted her touch me again, I will gouge your eyes out." I let go of her and dusted hands on the black cotton pants I was wearing, acting like I was disgu escape her touch. If I had learned anything from my private prep school days e and I

had was that you couldn't bow to mean girls. "Now, if you'll excuse me, some person came here for a reason other than to gossip."

I found a treadmill out on the main floor and turned up the speed and I was ready for my lungs to burn and muscles shake. A row of large televisions was pettily mounted on the wall across from the cardio equipment, and I honed in on playing a matchmaking reality show. Even though it was all fake, I've never watched anything in months and I quickly got lost in it as sweat poured down my back. "Stay my back."

When the episode was over, I glanced at the clock on the wall and I realized I sprang that my curfew was in less than an hour. Not wanting to argue with my mother and more than I would in the morning when I dressed in my new clothes, I begrudgingly slowed the speed on the treadmill to cool down. When I jumped off, everything was shiny and my skin was hot from my workout. My heart still pounded in my chest and every muscle ached. "It's your turn to feel good. Better than I had in a while."

Grabbing my towel from the small locker and a bottle of body wash, I quickly showered. Footsteps echoed against the tile in the room but I didn't quit them as I lathered up my body. Turning off the water and wrapping the towel around me, I exited the small stall. Opening the locker I used to store my things, everything was missing except a note. I unfolded the paper, realizing I had dropped contents in seconds. In scrawling loopy handwriting were two words and "Payback's a bitch and so are you. Watch your back."

The missing items weren't in the trash or any of the shower stalls. I looked inside of the toilets. Every time I found a single moment of peace in this town, someone had to fuck it up. Now I had to replace not only my things, it was but a pair of sneakers.

I closed my eyes, trying to center myself. Fucking Arabella. It was her

ie of us of her friends. They were the only ones who knew which locker I had earlier. All of my clothes were missing and so was the bag that contained my keys. I couldn't exactly show up at home in nothing but a towel. The only person whose opinion was Regina's face would be priceless.

on one In the corner of the room sat a small box labeled lost and found. I hadn't gone through the contents until I found a shirt and a pair of sweatpants that smelled musty, but it was better than the alternative. I shrugged them off and then marched out to the desk barefoot. The student standing behind the desk realized computer gawked for a moment before speaking. "Can I help you?"

Regina "Yeah, there were three girls who left here earlier. They have some clothes, I imagine. Do you know where they went?"

He finally He continued staring for a few moments before smirking at me. "You're my new girl, aren't you? The one that was at the party—"

I cut him off, not in the mood to deal with whatever was going to come out of his mouth. "Listen, I just really need my car keys."

wash, I "My name's Jake." He leaned onto his elbows, leering, eating and ignoring whatever personal space I had, and licking his lips. "I could help you get your towel home. For a small price."

earlier, I held up my hand, done with the conversation. "Thanks, but nothing is going to happen. Super creep could go fuck himself.

lines. Coming to the gym was the worst idea I'd had, apparently.

I walked outside and glanced around, trying to find the right object for me. I even had planned. A large stone with jagged edges sat in the landscaping in front of the building and I shook my head at what I was about to do. I picked up the stone and winced as I stepped across the parking lot, the asphalt cutting into my feet.

For one My muscles felt like gelatin from my run, but if I could just throw it

had used hard enough, I could bust my passenger side window and grab my keys. Even though I was trying to push Ros away, maybe she would do me a favor by bringing me the spare key to the car.

A small black sedan pulled up beside me and honked the horn. I ignored it. I steadied myself, trying to figure out the best way to approach breaking the car window. The window rolled down, and I froze when I heard his voice and “New girl, what the fuck are you doing? And what are you wearing?” I turned to the car and Trey grinned at me, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

I chewed on my lip, wondering whether I should bother telling him anything.

He was part of the reason I was in this mess. If it weren't for the declarations and the show they put on Saturday night, I wouldn't

be on Arabella's radar. “Can I use your phone? I need to call Ros.”

He rubbed his bottom lip with his thumb and held my gaze. “If you can, please use your phone.”

I dropped the rock I was holding in my hand and leaned against the trunk of my car. “Nothing. Just a bunch of petty girls who are jealous of the

trunk.” I shoved the note in his direction. He took it from me and looked at it for several moments before placing it inside his center console.

His expression never changing. “For the record, I just wanted to run. Now please use your phone?”

His fingers swiftly moved over his screen and he placed it on the ground in front of me, waiting for Ros to answer. Her voice was groggy with sleep when she picked it up. “What do you want, asshole?”

He tapped on the steering wheel and bit his lip. “Your girl seems to be in a predicament. Can you drop off her spare key?”

“Shit. Give me ten minutes. Text me where you are,” she huffed.

phone.ending the call.

one lastHis fingers drifted across the phone's surface before he set the phone  
dash and looked back at me. I hated the fact that he was the one to h  
ed it aseven though he disinterestedly stood by whenever Cam decided to pun  
ing out aI hated the fact that he always looked smug and, above it all, fidgetin  
s voice.his stupid knife. Most of all, I hated the fact that I still found him at  
even though I was certain that beneath his exterior, he was worse t  
on theothers. "Come sit inside, new girl. Tell me about your day."

I shifted my weight onto my other foot. "I don't think that's a good  
ything.muttered. "You'll probably cut off my shirt or something."

or theirHe held his head back and chuckled, his whiskey-colored eyes shini  
: be onlocks of brown hair falling onto his forehead. "I promise to behave

Don't tell me you would rather stand out there with no shoes." I debat  
tell memyself for a few moments before closing the gap. His car smelled fair  
weed and cigarettes, and I settled inside, pressing my body as close  
side ofdoor as possible. His amusement didn't fade at my posture. "Calm o  
hree ofwon't bite. You seem like you've had a hell of a day."

ed at itHe turned his body to face me completely and rested his back agai  
le, hisdoor. "Tell me something. How does revenge taste right now?"

v, can IMy breath caught. With everything else that happened today, I forg  
released the information almost twenty-four hours ago. "I don't... I n  
peaker,stammered, unsure of what to say.

finallyHe pulled out a joint from his center console and lit the end, taking  
drag and passing it to me, his fingers brushing against mine. "Chill c  
in a bitcalling a truce for tonight. Tomorrow is another story. You need to b  
for whatever Cam has in store. I don't know what game you're playi  
beforeyou can't win. Not against us."

I took a hit from what he offered me and closed my eyes, letting the  
e on his curl around me as I waited on Rosalyn to come rescue me. This would  
elp me, last time. The tears that always seemed to hover in the background  
ish me absent. Even if tomorrow was hell, releasing the information had felt  
ng with was worth it knowing that I'd gotten under their skin.

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I took a hit from what he offered me and closed my eyes, letting the smoke curl around me as I waited on Rosalyn to come rescue me. This would be the last time. The tears that always seemed to hover in the background were absent. Even if tomorrow was hell, releasing the information had felt good. It was worth it knowing that I'd gotten under their skin.

TWENTY-SEVEN

TWENTY-SEVEN

## *Niko*



**E**ven after Ivy had put everything on social media, I couldn't stay away from her. Later that night, I watched from the shadows on the porch of the vacant house across the street as she pulled in well after midnight. My aunt was already home tonight, and I would have to be careful when I went in. I just wanted to see her again.

Waiting gave me too much time to think of everything going on in my life and what would happen if I couldn't come up with the money I needed. After I shattered Trey's phone screen, I offered to replace it, but he shook his head at me and said he had it covered. It was one more thing I needed to pay for, and I wasn't sure how I would.

I had to keep my family together, minus my father. I didn't care what happened to him right now. He'd had every opportunity to get clean and find a normal job, but he was more concerned with getting his next fix. Sergei and Katya were both still in high school, and I intended to keep them that way. Sergei had already been hanging around with some of the Forsyth boys in his class, hinting that he was ready to join. I'd forbidden it, but that was the matter. He was seventeen and knew everything. Katya was a good girl,

now that she was getting older... There was no way that I could watch twenty-four hours a day. The last thing that I needed was for us to leave home and risk anyone else getting involved.

Add Cam and Maya into the mix, and I knew that everyone else was on me. They couldn't go home, especially not Cam. I knew what happened when she snuck in drunk in the middle of the night, and Maya... We knew Thomas Spencer broke her last year, the last thing she needed was her mother's "boyfriends" being left unchecked. Us staying together was the best thing for everyone.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I sighed, rubbing my eyes. I pulled it out of my pocket, I noticed it was Arabella. Again. I hit the button, annoyed at the situation. She only had my number to buy drugs. Her now she was clinging to me like she was something special. She wasn't I snuck I should have turned my phone off before I decided to stalk Ivy. I exactly want Cam or Trey to know where I was. Visiting her went my life whatever made-up rules were in place this week.

The yelling from inside of the house across the street drew my attention. I crept across quickly to peer inside. Regina had a hand on her hip and her finger pointed in Ivy's direction. She yelled that Ivy had broken curfew and there were rules to live there. Then she added in a scripture verse as a good measure and said that she wouldn't allow her to run around town with the type of people she was.

Ivy stood like a statue in the middle of the kitchen barefoot wearing... was she wearing? Her cheeks were rosy and eyes glassy as she stared in the distance, her aunt's words seeming not to impact her. She gave her a smile and turned her back as Regina threw a cup at the wall and said something about how she was "ruining everything."

With them Ivy simply lifted her hand in a wave and disappeared. I waited for those moments before I snuck around the side of the house to the window

Ivy's room lay. The light flickered on briefly and I watched as she locked the door behind her before leaning against it. She rubbed her cheeks and she did the hem of her shirt, pulling it over her head. I bit down on my lip; she was all, after wearing a bra and her pale skin was on full display as she removed her bra. What I was doing was an invasion of her privacy, hell so was breaking into the best house to watch her sleep, but I couldn't drag my eyes away. From

a vantage point, I could see the curve of her ass and the gentle slope of her stomach, the cut on the side of her ribs that hadn't healed. How her body tightened from being exposed to the air. She opened a small container, but contained clothing and pulled out black cotton underwear, stepping into it and dragging them up her legs. Her head tilted to the side, almost lost in thought before she strode toward the bed and moved her hand against pulling out a familiar t-shirt.

My already hard cock ached at the sight of her tugging on my shirt, it was on, and down her legs and covering her. She held the collar up to her nose and inhaled deeply, closing her eyes for a moment before turning off the light. I again bit down on my lip, copper and salt coating the tip of my tongue. I had waited for the perfect moment. She pulled the quilt around her waist and with the moonlight I stood there, gazing at her.

After a while, her face went slack and her breathing slowed, her chest rising and falling. I climbed in like I had several other times before and quietly slipped closer, laying next to her on the bed. Her body twisted and she covered again, exposing the patch of black cotton fabric between her legs. This time, it wasn't in a nightmare. I was enraptured by the look on her face as a quiet moan slipped from her mouth. She was dreaming of someone

for a few could only hope that it was me. My fingers inched closer, brushing  
where thigh as her hips rolled against the air.

Touching her lightly and watching her was torturous, and I struggled  
grabbed my breathing quiet, not wanting to wake her. She needed the sleep,  
wasn't needed something else as well. I trailed my hands up her legs and  
pants. along the edge of her underwear, dampness already coating them. Ge  
ng into that I wouldn't wake her, I pushed aside the edge of the cloth and slip  
om this fingers between her folds. She was so fucking wet and hot already th  
of her to stifle a groan at the sensation.

nipples Was what I was doing wrong? So fucking wrong, but it was worth it.  
ner that me was tempted to stroke myself to relieve the pressure, or at least ur  
to the pants, but I wouldn't. *At least not tonight.*

like she Her hips rocked against my hand, and her lips parted as I adjust  
pillow, position, sliding a finger inside of her. Leaning onto my elbow, I lif  
edge of the shirt she was wearing, my shirt, and exposed her breasts. I  
falling my head down, I captured one nipple in my mouth, sucking on it gen  
se and tongue licked across the hardened peak while my thumb pressed down  
lights. In her clit and her eyelashes fluttered. For a moment, I thought she  
while I wake up and catch me in her room, but she didn't. I sped up the motio  
and in fingers and her pussy clamped down on them.

What I wouldn't give to chase her again in the woods, her heart beating  
slowly chest as she looked for somewhere to hide.

ore and Her breath caught as she trembled and her movements stopped  
d in the trembled against the mattress softly whimpering. I pulled my fingers fr  
egs, but and put them in my mouth, licking away her arousal. Carefully, I adju  
face as shirt to cover her body. Suddenly she rolled over and nestled into the c  
e and I

up her my shoulder, throwing her arm, over my chest. As she melted into  
hesitantly brushed my fingers through the ends of her hair.  
to keep I closed my eyes, allowing myself to enjoy the sensation of her body  
but she mine. It was both heaven and hell as I counted backward from one h  
I traced willing my erection to go down. For just a moment, everything was pe  
ntly, some life, but when the sun came up, things would go back to how they  
ped two When dawn came, she would be blissfully unaware of what had happ  
at I had the darkness and the weight of the world would crush all of us again.

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my shoulder, throwing her arm, over my chest. As she melted into me, I hesitantly brushed my fingers through the ends of her hair.

I closed my eyes, allowing myself to enjoy the sensation of her body against mine. It was both heaven and hell as I counted backward from one hundred, willing my erection to go down. For just a moment, everything was perfect in my life, but when the sun came up, things would go back to how they were.

When dawn came, she would be blissfully unaware of what had happened in the darkness and the weight of the world would crush all of us again.

TWENTY-EIGHT

TWENTY-EIGHT

## *Ivy*



One would think that after the events of the previous week, I have slept like a log, my body and mind both exhausted. Of that wasn't exactly how things worked. My nightmares were replaced with something else entirely. When I did finally fall asleep, my dreams were with four very familiar men touching me and when I woke up, the panties I'd put on the night before were drenched.

I was confused but relieved at the same time by the turn of events. Even when I got high with one of the guys, my nightmares vanished. It was a small slope, but in the back of my mind I was contemplating finding someone to buy the tea. I would ask one of the three guys who seemed like they would break me, but I didn't want them to have any more information on me than they already had.

Determined to make the most of the day, I stripped out of Niko's shirt. The sheets smelled like him every morning, even though the shirt was losing the traces of the sandalwood and musk that were him.

After looking through my new clothes, I decided on my black boots, a skirt that skimmed mid thigh, and a button-up shirt. At noon, I had a t

session with Cam, and I was determined to show him that Saturday hadn't scared me off. I needed the hundred dollars, and he needed his to stay high enough to play football.

I applied my new makeup like a shield that would protect me. Heavy eye makeup and mascara covered my eyes, concealer hid the shadows from too many sleepless nights, and gloss coated my lips. Looking in the mirror, I caught traces of someone from the past, someone I almost didn't recognize as I

Grabbing my backpack which held my lit book and some paper, I hefted it over my shoulder, dreading the fact that my aunt was still home. After last night's fight, I wasn't looking forward to seeing her this morning. Thankfully, she

said nothing as I poured a cup of coffee from the carafe and added a level spoon of sugar.

She didn't have to say anything, though. Her eyes drifted across my coffee and she pursed her lips. It was obvious she didn't approve, but after the last few weeks, I didn't care. The worst thing she could do was kick me out because I was marring her perfect reputation.

If only the community knew the truth about her. My initial impression of her was completely off base. At one point, I thought she was just overbearing but meant well. In truth, she was hateful and controlling. She tried to bring me down at every turn. It all changed the night that I went to the party on the beach.

That was the night that everything had changed and if I could go back to that point I probably would. My plan of remaining just another anonymous face in a sea of people vanished, along with any hope that the next four years would be peaceful.

Once I was on campus, I was quick to make sure my mask was in place. No one here would see me crack. The heat wasn't as oppressive, leaving

my night eyeliner intact and I mulled over the fact that soon summer would be over. The distance to the library was short, and I lifted my chin, ignoring the looks of other students passing by.

I still had fifteen minutes before tutoring started with Cam, so I stopped by the computer near the entrance and logged into my email to ensure I had not missed anything in class the day before. I skimmed through announcements from several clubs. One from the Dean sat unread in my inbox and I clicked over, curious as to what it said.

*Dear Ivy,*  
*Your presence is requested at the home of Abraham Wells on September 17th at 11 AM. The dress code is smart casual. Several members of Clearhaven University's Board of Directors will be in attendance, along with other scholarship students.*

*Abraham Wells*  
Quickly I thought through a million scenarios, curious about how come he was to invite students to an event like this. Wells unnerved me even if he was one of my father's friends. I appreciated the scholarship that was given to me, but he was a bit too intense for me to feel comfortable in his presence. There was no way to skip the brunch? I could fake a stomach virus or claim I overslept. Pushing that aside, I logged out and climbed the stairs. I could deal with one issue at a time.

Sitting on the third floor, at a table in the middle of the room, was Barrett. When he spotted me, his eyes widened a fraction and I lifted my eyebrow. Silent communication passed between us as I closed the gap and sat next to him, unzipping my bag. Cutting through any niceties, I pulled out my book. "What are we working on?"

He opened his mouth and closed it when the Dean moved into my

bb into sight with several people dressed in business suits. My blood chilled  
ing the looked down, hoping he wouldn't notice me. "Ladies and gentlemen, i  
excuse me for just a moment," he said, and a shadow hovered over m  
d at the what a surprise to see you here. Did you receive my email?"  
missed I grabbed the edge of the table and gave him one of my best fake sm  
s about did, and I'm not really sure that I can make it. Between work and clas  
cked it, schedule is pretty hectic right now." So much for claiming that I  
stomach virus.

He grabbed one of my hands and squeezed. Cam's eyes narrowed  
*Sunday*, gesture and I tried to pull away, but his grip tightened. "I'm sure you c  
*ember* time. After all, certain benefactors will be present and they are curio  
*as well* their money is going to this year." He glanced down at my clothes, l  
lingering longer on my chest than I was comfortable with. "Yo  
absolutely lovely today, Ivy, but I don't think that would be appropria  
amon it brunch. I'll send a package to your aunt later this week. Be sure to wea  
he was It was my turn to be shocked as I froze, my hand trapped in his. "I don  
to me, that's necessary, sir. I can find something for Sunday."  
e. Was He squeezed again, and bile rose in my throat. "Nonsense. Think of  
n that I favor for your father." Finally he released me and breath rushed i  
ild only lungs. "See you Sunday."

He adjusted his tie as he sauntered back to the group of people who ha  
Cam den the table directly across from us. The world spun around me as I w  
fted an what in the fuck was going on. Cam placed his hand on my thigh bene  
and sat table, his fingers biting into the flesh hidden beneath my skirt. I his  
out my glared at him. "What was that about, little ghost?"

I held his eyes. "Cam, I have no fucking clue."  
line of His hand inched up my thigh, and his knuckles rubbed against my und

l, and I kept my face as expressionless as possible, not wanting to cause a scene. “If you’ll have an idea.”

“Ivy, The dean glanced up from the quiet conversation happening in his office and I looked back down, opening my book to a random page. “Here’s what’s going to happen, Ivy. You still need to be punished for the stunt that you pulled on Sunday night and I have a point to prove to Wells,” Cameron had said in my ear. His tone was laced with rage and possessiveness. His hand pulled my underwear aside, and he cupped me.

“This pussy is ours. No one else’s and it seems like Wells never can find out. You’re ours to break... and ours to protect if we see anyone else who looks at you like that. Even as my face heated, his words shot anger through every inch of my body. It was his fault that last night Arabella stole my clothing. It was his fault that guys around campus leered at me.

“If I’m yours to protect, then call your bitches off, Cam,” I mumbled under my breath. His fingers dipped through my folds and he plunged inside easily, a testament to how far gone that I already was.

His breath caressed my cheek, and he laid his chin on my shoulder. “What are your bitches? You’re the only one I’ve touched in weeks, little ghost. When I’m in the shower, jerking off, it’s all thoughts of you. Sometimes it’s about how I want to bury myself in your sweet cunt, and other times it’s about choking you with my cock.”

His confession made me clutch the table a little harder. “I’m going to tell them you come on my fingers in front of him. My only question is, are you going to stay silent or will the whole library find out you’re my dirty little whore?”

I bit the inside of my cheek, embarrassed by the sounds that his hand was making moving in and out of me. Anyone who walked by would have seen exactly what was happening. The heel of his palm rubbed against my



cene. “I closed my eyes, trying to convince my body not to react. “To answer the question from before we were rudely interrupted, and because you were in meeting class yesterday, we were reading *Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God*. What would help both of us if you read it out loud.”

That you I inhaled sharply, trying to ignore the sensation that was building in my stomach. I stumbled, aware of the group of people sitting only a few feet away, and turned my finger to the page where the excerpt began. The irony wasn’t lost on me that Edwards’ sermon focused on hell as a real place and the judgment of God and I needed to be reading it while being fingered in public.

it.” As quietly, my voice barely above a whisper, I read to Cam, his eyes were full of my leaving my face. Every time he pressed against my clit, I stumbled. It was his whatever I was saying. My heart raced in my chest and my knuckles turned white as Cam tortured me slowly. My thighs were coated in arousal, and I shuddered. His good as he felt, part of me was humiliated. He was proving to me that to everyone else that his words were true: I was his whore.

Finally, I made it to the last paragraph, grateful that my body hadn’t betrayed me yet. Out of my periphery, Abraham Wells stood. “Thank you so much for what I’m in your time today.”

burying Cam turned his head to look at them as his fingers sped up and my head tilted back. I knew what he was doing. My fingers moved to his wrist and clamped down.

“Please don’t do this,” I whispered. “Not right now.”

to make He didn’t stop though, even as the dean moved closer to our table, his hands going shaking several hands and patting someone on the back. Abraham Wells’ face more?” watched, a vein pulsing in his forehead and his jaw tight. That was the last thing I saw as my fingers came undone, closing my eyes and biting down on my lip, trying to steady myself and know body from shaking under Cam’s fingers. Cam pressed a gentle kiss to my neck, my clit and

er your neck. “Such a good girl, Ivy. I don’t think that anyone but Wells even missed what was happening. I didn’t know that you could be so quiet.”

God. It As Cam removed his fingers, the squelch echoed in the library. So cleared their throat, and I looked up. “Is everything okay over here inside of Spencer?” the older man asked.

turned to My mouth wouldn’t move. Cam’s fingers were still coated in my arousal. I watched in shock as he stuck them in his mouth and sucked. He would be the dean before popping them out and placing his hand over

“Everything is perfect. Ivy was just helping me with something.”

s never The dean’s eyes narrowed at Cam. “The two of us have things we need to discuss, Ivy.” He turned on his heel to step away and I let out a sigh of relief.

turned Cam ran his nose along the column of my neck almost delicately. “I want to know what your reward is for being so good?” He shifted and pulled out his phone, typing something in before pulling me back against him.

His arms wrapped around my waist as he positioned the screen in front of me. On it were news articles of my father and pictures of us uploaded to the YouConnect app. Before I could say anything, he pushed a button and the information was released into the world.

part fell. A scream was caught in my chest, but I swallowed it down, refusing to let him see me while I shattered. “Do not fuck with me, Ivy. You won’t win this game we’re playing,” he growled before releasing me.

le after My hands trembled as I shoved my book into the bag and zipped it. I scrambled to get away from him. “Fuck you, Cam,” I managed to say when I even though behind my eyes stung. I thrust my hand in his face. “Give me my fucking money. I’ve earned it.”

to my He smirked as he handed it to me, curling my fingers around the bills.

I adjusted my skirt and grabbed my bag, determined not to let him see

noticed much he affected me.

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TWENTY-NINE

TWENTY-NINE

## *Ivy*



**A**fter tutoring with Cam, I took the money I “earned” and bought a pair of running shoes and a lock from one of the local budget stores on the way to work. My next paycheck from Frankie would cover the payment I owed Ros’ grandfather for my car.

The information about who I was and what my father had done was plastered all over the internet now for all of Clearhaven to see. There was no use in denying it now, and I wouldn’t allow anyone to control my life.

I struggled to figure out my emotions about what happened in the past. However, begrudgingly I felt about it, getting off in front of strangers was arousing. I was confused by both Cam’s possessiveness and passion, but mostly I was angry. I was angry that he thought I was just a plaything he could use when he wanted, and then cast aside. Angry that he used me as a pawn in whatever game he was playing with Wells.

And now I absolutely dreaded going to the dean’s house on Sunday morning. I didn’t want to look him in the face knowing that he’d seen me fall apart. I’d begun questioning whether a scholarship was worth the shit I went through. At work, I was careful not to say much to Frankie. She had

for knowing something was wrong, and she shot me worried glances all night. Finally, she told me to get out of there, that I needed some space to myself. I gave her a hug and struggled not to cry when I left.

I did need some time to myself and space to sort through everything that happened. A moment to just breathe. I wasn't sure where I was going, but it wasn't "home." Everywhere I turned, someone was there. The gym was safe, and neither was the beach. Driving down the road aimlessly while listening to music, I pulled down a small road and realized where I was: a cemetery where Ros and I had drunk cheap vodka. It felt like an eternity, but that wasn't accurate. I missed the late-night texts we had, and our going friendship, but my mind was made up. I wouldn't allow them to pull her into whatever they were doing.

Cutting my ignition, I crawled out of the car and shut the door quietly. It was peaceful here at night, the only sound was the crickets and owls calling to another. I ambled aimlessly among the tombstones, reading the dates that were nearly worn away from age.

In the distance, faint music floated through the air and I followed the sound, tiptoeing so that I wouldn't make noise. The night blanketed me as I tried to find the source of the sound. Sweet-smelling smoke drifted along the ground, but still, I didn't stop myself.

My boot caught on a vine and I stumbled, catching myself before I fell. The music paused, and I ducked down beneath the statue of the fallen soldier, hoping that it would hide me from whoever was there. I was close enough to see the fire from a cherry in the darkness and a can being crushed under the phantom's hands.

"You can come out. I know you're there," a familiar voice murmured. Footsteps sounded near me and the flashlight from his phone shined down on me.



ces theme. “For fuck’s sake, Ivy. Get up. Why are you hiding out here?”

ne time Niko held out a hand and I took it, letting the warmth of his touch seep into my skin. “I just wanted some time to think,” I stated quietly, afraid to speak at that moment. He turned off the light as I brushed the dirt off my knees, but it was you out here?”

wasn’t He shrugged his shoulders as he turned away from me and prowled back to the blanket a few yards away. Reaching into a bag, he pulled out two cans of beer and patted beside him. “I just wanted some time to think.”

ity ago, Hesitantly, I sat next to him and smoothed my skirt over my legs. The air easily echoed my words and offered nothing else made me curious, but I tried to drag a can from his hand. He leaned back against the grave marker and inhaled.

joint, sucking in a lung full of smoke and holding it. I held out my hand. It was he shook his head, motioning to me with two fingers. I edged slightly closer to him and he caught my jaw between his hands, angling my head how he wanted. He pressed his lips against mine and understanding dawned on me. I

for him and allowed the smoke to travel between us, dulling my senses. I heard no sound, thoughts. My skin heated, the telltale sign it was laced with tea.

tried to After he pulled away from me, I rested my head against his shoulder. The breeze popped the tab on my beer. “What do you have to think about?” I asked.

inhaled more of the joint and I took a sip of the lukewarm liquid.

all. The He raised his eyebrows and flicked out the cherry. “More than you want, angel, What are you thinking about tonight?”

ough to A comeback was on the tip of my tongue, but I decided to take another breath and just enjoy the way his body felt near mine. “Everything. Play a song for me?”

me?” My voice came out low in the darkness and he stilled before lifting his guitar into his lap. His fingers moved over the strings gracefully. I sat on the ground, watching, mesmerized by the motion. Time evaporated as a mournful melody

spilled from his soul and he occasionally hummed along. I let myself slip into feeling more calm than I had in days. He played, occasionally stopping to shatter open a fresh drink or light a joint, but the two of us didn't speak. I said, "Why want to interrupt the moment, but I also wasn't really sure what to say."

His phone rang, breaking the magic of the moment. He cursed to himself and then answered the call, listening to whatever the person on the other end had to say. Finally, he hung up and sighed. "Show's over for tonight, baby. No more calls."

In fact, he wasn't sure what he was rushing off to do, and I wasn't certain I would know. "Hey, can I ask you for a favor?"

He stood up and started packing his things. "It depends on what it is." I said, but "I want to buy whatever we were smoking. I've got the cash."

He ran his hands through his hair and sighed. "No. Not a chance in hell I'm going to do that." I wasn't expecting a flat-out rejection and for some reason, his words opened quickly adjusted my clothes and lifted the edge of the blanket, in and my folding it. "Right. Sorry, I just thought that after tonight..." My

sounded hollow and I hated I was weak. I shouldn't have bothered.

As I folded the blanket in half, his hand landed on my wrist. "Why?"

His eyes were even darker in the moonlight, and his tone was sharp. I took a deep breath. "It's to sleep. At night I have a hard time and I just don't know how to escape."

He tapped on his thigh before dragging his hand through his hair. "Rather than work silently as he zipped his guitar case and he slung it over his shoulder, he said, "Follow me."

I wasn't sure why I listened to him when all I wanted to do was sleep and I thought of him. He sold shit to Arabella; I had seen it. What was the difference between his melody

of relax, her and me? I carried the blanket clutched to my chest and tried not to ping to emotions get the best of me.

I didn't The graveyard fell away as we walked and a small parking lot came into view. Niko opened the door of his car and shoved everything in the back seat himself as before turning to me. I shoved the blanket in his direction, ready to run. He had to have caught me by the waist. "If I do this for you, you can't tell anyone. Duty. And you have to promise me it's only to help you sleep."

I let his words sink in. He wasn't telling me no, he just wanted it to be secret. I swallowed and bobbed my head as I reached into my bra for the money from Cam. I pulled out one bill, and he shook his head as he stepped inside his vehicle, opening the glove box. He handed me a small bag of pills. "Only to sleep."

"I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed, hugging him tightly. He was stung. I you. I promise." His phone buzzed again, and he pulled away, staring out at the tent on the sky. "I guess I need to go anyway, before Regina has a heart attack. / voicetime is it?"

He gave me a sad look before looking down at the illuminated screen. "Why?"

sucked "Fuck. If she's home already, she's going to have a fit. I'm out past curfew." He wanted He gave me a cheeky grin. "Just park down the street and use your walk. It's how I visit you at night."

ight." I My eyes widened, but he simply lifted a shoulder. Was that why his shoulder lingered in my room and on my sheets long after it should have? He got into his car and started the engine, his cue that the conversation was over. I curled my fingers around the baggy in my palm and meandered back through the street between darkness, even more confused by my feelings than when I'd arrived.

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ne into

The next morning, I was on campus after my classes started. A new backpack seat was packed for the gym after my classes were over and a lock was placed in the front pouch. I locked my car door and headed toward class. The pills that Niko had given me had helped keep the nightmare to be a day and hopefully not have any run-ins with Caleb.

It was a big campus, so a girl could dream.

Caleb obviously had other plans. As I rushed down a hallway inside of the academic buildings, the heels of my boots clicking against the tile

muscular arms pulled me inside of a doorway. The only light in the space was a sliver under the door. Arms banded around my waist and I froze, unsure

who was touching me. I pushed against their chest, attempting to escape. A quiet voice whispered in my ear. "Shh, princess, it's just me. Calm

I've got you."

I eased into his embrace for a moment before remembering that I couldn't be here. He couldn't be here. "Caleb, you can't be in here. We can't be here, especially not together. The guys..."

"Don't talk about them right now. This is just the two of us. Tell me what you've been."

I curled my hands into the bottom of his shirt. "After the other night I needed some space. I think that you need to find a new partner for class."

Warm palms engulfed my cheeks and soft lips met mine, barely there like a butterfly's wings. "No."

I huffed out a breath, exasperated by the men that seemed drawn to me. Niko told me no last night, and now Caleb. "It's for the best."

His mouth descended on mine again, swallowing my breaths, and his bag was my body pushing me against a wall. My legs wrapped around him and I carelessly fell in the darkness, clattering to the floor.

Breathlessly, he pulled back and one hand cupped my jaw. "No. No one is allowed to dictate what is best for me, and you aren't allowed to pull away."

My hands traced along his broad shoulders. "I'm dropping Civ. Saturday night was insane. They kidnapped you." My words came out sharper than I intended. "What's the next step, Caleb?"

"The hell you are. Is that why you skipped Monday?" His thumb traced my bottom lip. "They can't hurt me, Ivy, not really. I already knew what my father was and what he had done. They can't keep me away from you. I made a mistake letting me have a taste of you. He thought it would hurt me by seeing you on your knees, but it only made me want you more."

He rocked his hips against me as he licked along my lip. His teeth grazed my jaw, and I was painfully aware of how little clothing we truly had between us.

His hands gripped my ass, and my hands roamed his chest while his mouth explored my neck, sucking and biting the sensitive skin. My pulse raced, my resolve weakened with every passing second. His cock was hard against me, and every movement brushed against my clit.

"I don't just want you physically, princess. I want to know everything about you. What makes you tick?" He pressed a kiss behind my ear. "What do you love?" He nipped my earlobe and I shuddered. "What scares you the most?"

I grabbed for the button of his pants, wanting his words to stop. "I can't accept passion and desire, but his words were too much. What he wanted was more than I had ever given anyone. He stopped me, kissing my knee."

ie. First “Not yet, and not here. I’m not fucking you in a closet. When I have you going to be sprawled across my sheets.”

e lifted I unwrapped myself from him and let myself slide down his body. “What do you really want from me, Caleb? Just be honest.” That was something

had learned quickly growing up. Everyone wanted something. It could be your body, or it might just be friendship, but nothing came without strings

“You. You’re what I want. But first, I want to taste you again.” He crawled to his knees in front of me and his hands skated up my thighs to the top

of my panties. His fingers brushed across the cotton fabric and my body

heated knowing that he would find out they were already damp from his touch. I held my breath as his nose grazed my pussy and inhaled deeply.

“You smell so good.”

His fingers hooked into the waistband of my underwear and he slowly pulled them down my legs, shoving them in his pocket. “I need those back,”

he tried to argue, but my complaints died as he hooked one leg over his shoulder and

licked me from the back to front.

His mouth latched onto my clit, sucking it hard. He pulled away briefly, but

he didn’t think so. I think you need to walk around for the rest of the day reminding

of how hard I’m about to make you come.”

He nipped at the bundle of nerves before his tongue circled the sensitive

flesh, soothing the bite. My hands wove into his hair and my head fell against the wall behind me as he alternated between sucking and licking my

you, it scurled, hitting a spot I hadn't known existed until that moment. I wrapped around my clit as his fingers pumped in and out. I rolled my head against his face, trying to find some type of relief.

When he sucked harder, a moan escaped from between my lips and should bewracked my body. Wetness trickled down my thighs and his tongue lapped at my neck. Finally, he lowered my leg to the ground and grabbed my face. His lips captured mine as he pressed his tongue inside. His lips were still coated with the edge of my arousal, and the salty taste made me groan. My hands reached for my cheeks, wanting to return the favor, but he stopped me. "No. Today is about you." He pressed his lips to my forehead before moving away.

"Fuck, I adjusted my skirt and messed with my hair, hoping to make it look like I'd just been pushed against a wall and eaten out. "So, staying away from me is an option?"

There were so many other things I wanted to say. Caleb was funny and attractive. He was stubborn, and his no fucks given attitude appealed to me. He was willing to stand up to the guys, even if they tortured him. Why would I? "They wouldn't take it too far was beyond me.

"You'll never escape me, princess. Not if I have anything to do with you." He grabbed my hand and opened the closet door. "But first, Civ. We still haven't discussed our project."

A smile spread across my face despite the weariness that I felt. He was trying to help me despite all the strings attached.

And then my heart fell as soon as I entered the hallway. Leaning against the wall was Niko, who, from the look on his face, had heard everything. He chuckled. "Vance, it's been what? Four days? You didn't get the message on Saturday night?"

Caleb winked and licked his lips, tugging me against his chest. "Get

his lipsStone.”

ny hipsBeing stuck between the two of them was awkward, and I pried

fingers from my body. “I should go. See you in class.”

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Being stuck between the two of them was awkward, and I pried Caleb’s fingers from my body. “I should go. See you in class.”

I scurried down the hall away from them, my lips swollen and my cheeks red. Whatever pissing contest was about to happen, they could sort it out themselves. I never answered his question about what scared me the most. My answer wasn’t the nightmares that plagued me or the fact my aunt could kick me out. It wasn’t losing my scholarship. It was him.

THIRTY

THIRTY

## Cam



I tugged on my jacket, the night air cooler than it had been in September in Clearhaven wasn't as warm as the balmy summers we used to. Trey and Niko sat with me on the beach as we watched the roll in. "Tell me what happened Monday night," I said to Trey. "He mentioned something about having to rescue Ivy?"

He traced the bottle label with his finger, furrowing his brow in concentration. "All I know is I was running an errand for Vincent and I was driving by the gym. Ivy was standing in the middle of the parking lot wearing sweatpants that were three sizes too big, no shoes, and holding a rock in her hand. She was going to break the window out of her car to call Rebecca. He reached into his pocket and handed me a small slip of paper. "And then he gave me this."

"Who was responsible?" Niko asked. "She didn't mention any of this when I saw her."

I reached out and grabbed the piece of paper, rolling my eyes at the man. "Let me guess. Some petty girl who thinks she has a claim on one of us."

Trey laughed. “Well, it wasn’t me. I don’t entertain women, even if their feelings. You should ask Niko about Arabella.”

Niko scowled as he laid back on the sand, his face turned to the sky. “I be her. She’s been clingy ever since the night that she gave me the blowjob of my life. I had to imagine someone else to get off.”

Until that moment, I had been unaware that Arabella had ever given blowjob. The night that we were going to share her, Trey scared before the fun had ever begun. Jealousy threatened to creep up, but it about the fact that he had been with Arabella. I pushed it aside, choosing to ignore the emotion. “Who did you think of?”

He didn’t answer, instead turning his face to me and winking. I raised my eyebrow at him, but he stayed silent, staring at my lips. Finally, he cleared his throat. “On a serious note, Arabella uses the fact that I’m her dealer as an advantage. She blew up my phone that night.”

I ran my hand through my hair. “What did she have to say?”

He scoffed at me before rolling onto his side in my direction. “I wasn’t fucking know considering the fact I turned my phone off. You should be warning yourself.”

“I’ll do better than ask her.” Asking her meant that I would have to let her speak. “Trey, see if you can pull the camera feed from the gym that night when she was there. If it was her, she needs to learn her place.”

Niko chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, and I was tempted to run my thumb across the bruised skin with my thumb. “I saw you released everything about Ivy’s father on social media. How did that go, exactly?”

I smirked at him. “She took it better than I thought she would. Honestly, she just seemed a little pissed off.”

Visions of Tuesday in the library played out in my mind, and I tried to

it hurt them. How her hands clutched the edge of the table and her knuckles went white. How quietly she whimpered as I touched her, trying to keep them from seeing what I was doing to her. How softly her body shuddered at the worst mine. I was certain that she wanted to physically harm me after it was especially when she realized Wells had been watching everything. Fuck, Niko. He needed to learn that he wasn't the one who had a claim on her. Well, ever since that day in the church parking lot, I had been pissed at her. It wasn't Vincent's words.

They weren't allowed to touch Ivy, and they needed to stay far away from Maya and Katya. They had an entire city full of delinquent youths who would do anything for whatever they did behind closed doors.

"Anything else I need to know about regarding our girl?"

Niko raised an eyebrow at me, knowing that I was careful with what I said. "Yeah. Caleb didn't exactly get the message we were trying to get across to him. Apparently, being kidnapped and forced to watch the three of us wouldn't exactly scare him. Yesterday I saw him leaving the janitor's closet with her and I know for a fact they weren't just talking."

I leaned back on my elbows and stared at him for a moment. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Who the fuck knows? I have other things going on. I told Tyler I was going to fight in Strathmore because I need the cash." He shrugged. "Before we could brushhandle it. I don't know what else we can do. Short of killing him, which we can't, there's nothing else. Everyone knows who his family is and how they're involved in. We don't have any sex tapes to blackmail him with. Hell, even if we did, the fucker would just gloat about it. I mean, even if we forced him to suck your dick, he would smile the entire time." Niko's words rang true and I sighed.

Everyone knew exactly who his grandfather was. Fletcher Vance was the dean who owned the paper mill outside of town, the major source of employment next to the area. He was also connected to the Order of the Exalted. The brand that was on Wells' forearm decorated his, pretentious fuck. People crossed him ended up missing, never to be heard from again. His daughter-in-law had disappeared fifteen years ago, leaving behind Cal. The rumor was that he had his own son killed, and honestly, it wouldn't surprise me. Men wearing suits guarded his property and no one could get in without an invitation. The whole thing was unsettling, and the fact that Vincent was connected to them bothered me.

Briefly, I wondered what would happen if I killed Caleb. He was a prick and needed to learn not to touch what wasn't his. Would they know it was the three of us? "What do you mean, you handled it?" "I roughed him up a bit and threatened him again. I don't know what you wanted me to do."

I turned toward him and grabbed his jaw, pressing my fingers into his teeth. "I need you to tell me. That's what I want from you. I don't want to know if you didn't shit the next day." His hand grabbed my wrist, and he squeezed just to warn me he was getting sick of my shit.

"Don't take your frustration out on me, asshole. The two of us," he said. I darted in Trey's direction, who sat back looking amused at the two of us. "we're the ones who have always had your back."

I loosened my grip on him slightly before removing my hand completely and laying back on the cold sand. His hand fell away and rested between us. "You're right. Is there anything else I missed? Ivy trying to break into her car window and Caleb ignores every warning we've sent him..."

Niko swallowed and chewed on his lip again, hesitating to answer me

the one think that covers it unless Trey knows anything else.” There was more to the story, but I let it go. It would all come out in the wash eventually.

The same Trey tipped his bottle up and chugged the rest of what was left. “No people that knowledge, but I think the two of you need to get laid or work off some tension and this pent-up aggression. If you want, I can make you a copy of the web page. They made the other night,” he snorted before grabbing another beer from the cooler next to him. “You want us to tell you everything, but you didn’t exactly let us know the details of how you took care of Ivy. All we know is that you reacted to that shit on social media and told us to share it.”

The three of us sat on the sand for a while, each of us keeping our mouths smugly close to our chests. Not that I cared if they knew what I had done to Ivy, really that I used her to piss off Wells. It was the fact that what happened between the two of us for the moment. They would eventually find out everything, just not yet.

“Do me a favor. Can you hack into her email and social media accounts for me? I want to know who has been talking to her. The dean is still blowing this around and I’m more than a little curious about why.”

“Yeah, sure. That’s easy enough. He’s probably just being a creep because he usually is and thinks that she’s a poor scholarship girl that would satisfy his eyes for a little attention.”

One of us, that might have been true, but I doubted it. There were easier targets on campus than Ivy and he had all the access to pussy he wanted through the back door.

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sneak out



. “No, I



e to his Later that night, after drinking the rest of the beer we had brought, I decided to walk home. I was questioning what I was doing and so did Trey, but I brushed them off claiming that I just needed to let off some steam. It was only ten, and I didn't want to be around anyone else. Frankie's shop was on the way, so I bagged and trekked down the empty road, kicking at pebbles as I went. Ivy's car was parked in front and the lights were still on inside. I stopped for a moment and watched as she lifted boxes and carried them to the back room, probably taking care of something that had been delivered earlier in the day. Once in a while, she would stop and wipe her hand across her forehead or brush stray hairs that had escaped from her face. Between tasks, she would shake her hips to a sound only she could hear, dancing with herself. She was completely oblivious to what was happening on the other side of the glass and the fact that someone was watching her. If only she had been nice to someone else, things could have been different. I admired the fact that even though we continued to torment her, she let it roll off of her back and didn't shit back to us. There was no doubt in my mind that she would find a way to pay me back for what happened in the library on Tuesday. A car engine started across the street and the sound of it idling drew my attention. I looked in that direction and saw a black SUV parked across the street from the shop. The driver's identity was concealed by the darkness, but something about the situation bothered me. I waited for several minutes for the driver of the SUV to leave, but he didn't. I was tempted to get closer to figure out who it was, but decided against it, choosing to watch them from a distance. Finally, Ivy turned off the lights inside and exited the shop, turning the door handle with her hand. The driver of the vehicle also stepped outside, quietly approaching closer to her. I still couldn't tell who it was. They were dressed in

ght and beanie and long black trench coat. The shape seemed familiar, but I couldn't place it with the added bulk of the jacket. I kicked at the gravel to signal them off, then I was there and they froze, debating their next move.

Not wanting Ivy to realize I was there, I prowled closer to the shadowed alley, so I took off in a run, crashing into the side of the car and pulling open the door. He drove off before I could reach him. I braced my hands on my legs and glanced in the direction of the fire-haired girl who was seemingly oblivious to the world. She unlocked her car door and when she removed something from her ears it hit me why. She was wearing earbuds.

The two of us would have a conversation about situational awareness, but for tonight I needed to text Trey and Niko. I wanted to know what they were

watching Ivy and what they wanted. One of us needed to watch out for her when she was closing the shop by herself or have a conversation with her. I had been about what had happened. The old woman was firmly anti-Forsaken, but she would do a favor for us if it dealt with Ivy. For some reason, the older woman was fond of her, and she wasn't fond of anyone else in this hellhole.

Clearhaven wasn't a safe place for young women who didn't have family, and it seemed like Ivy had caught someone's eye. I just hoped it wasn't someone from the Order.

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The two of us would have a conversation about situational awareness later, but for tonight I needed to text Trey and Niko. I wanted to know who was watching Ivy and what they wanted. One of us needed to watch out for her when she was closing the shop by herself or have a conversation with Frankie about what had happened. The old woman was firmly anti-Forsaken, but she would do a favor for us if it dealt with Ivy. For some reason, the older woman was fond of her, and she wasn't fond of anyone else in this hellhole.

Clearhaven wasn't a safe place for young women who didn't have any family, and it seemed like Ivy had caught someone's eye. I just hoped it wasn't someone from the Order.

THIRTY-ONE

THIRTY-ONE

## *Ivy*



The entire town was getting ready to watch the football game, whether they were attending in person or headed to a sports bar down river. I, on the other hand, had absolutely no desire to sit through one of Camden Barrett's games. He could go fuck himself after the way he had. Between the after party last week, Arabella and her friends, and the moment in the library.

The fact that tomorrow morning I had to sit through a brunch at the house-made everything worse. The longer I thought about it, the more embarrassed I got. Abraham Wells knew exactly what had happened, just from the color of his face and how tightly he pursed his lips. Hopefully, there would be enough people invited to the event that I wouldn't be left alone with him. I didn't want to know what he would say to me.

Instead of participating in whatever evening festivities most college students did on Saturday, I decided to study. Dressed in a pair of black athletic pants and one of my ratty t-shirts, I sprawled out across my bed on my stomach with my textbooks in front of me, determined to focus. My grade was important; I couldn't lose the scholarship that I had.

Someone knocked on my bedroom door, and I sighed, laying my head on my mattress. “Yes?”

With no further prompting, Regina opened the door. “This package came for you. Since when are you getting gifts from Abraham Wells?”

If I could suffocate myself with my pillow, I would. “I’m not.”

She thrust the box in my direction and I sat up to open it, dread curling in my stomach. After the way, he insisted he would purchase something for me to wear, and how adamantly I didn’t want to, this “surprise” was the last thing I wanted to deal with. I opened the lid on the white box and moved the

paper. Inside was a navy blue tea-length dress with three-quarter sleeves and a lace overlay. It was something I wouldn’t have chosen for myself in a million years and reminded me of the dresses that the men surrounding my father wore. I grimaced when I saw the cream-colored lace that matched the lace and put the lid back on the box, pushing it toward her. “I don’t want it.”

She gave me a tight smile and placed her hands on her hips. “Of course I can do, honey. You should have told me you were seeing him. A man like that can offer you a lot more than the three you have been running around with. The temptation to stab her with the pencil laying beside me was strong, but I ignored it. Instead, I wrinkled my nose and shook my head. “First of all, that would be gross. He’s the same age as Dad and they’re friends. You’re doing everything completely wrong. This is for a brunch tomorrow, Regina.”

Her smile stayed in place. “No, I don’t think I have anything wrong with you. You just don’t realize it yet. Speaking of your father, what’s the meaning of that social media post?”

Camden’s actions from Tuesday still managed to bite me in the ass, even though I chose to ignore the whispers in the hallway and the glare

against people at Frankie's. "I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't been on social media this week."

She huffed out a fake laugh. "Don't play coy, Ivy. It doesn't suit you. The post was shared all over Clearhaven. I have people sending it to me in messages. It was started by Camden, the thug I told you to keep your ass in my closed around. I think you wanted to pay me back for trying to keep me from seeing you apart."

I hid my face between my hands, wishing that the conversation was over. "You have everything wrong. The last thing I want to do was be around you. I'm straight now. I just want to study by myself—and for everyone to leave me alone. Why would I want anyone to know that my father is in prison? Everything is about you."

She closed the gap between us, and her palm landed on my cheek with a sharp slap. I was too stunned to feel the sting of pain that should be present.

Thinking of all the bad things my father had done, and the torture the guys had put me through, none of them had ever hit me. Instead of being sad, all I felt was anger. "Reputation is everything in this town, something you haven't earned yet. If you were going to sleep around, it should at least be with someone who won't be dead in the next six months. It's funny, I told your father that should have never..."

She trailed off and backed away, brushing her hands on her skirt like she was dirt on them. "He shouldn't have what?"

She ignored me and closed the door behind her as she stomped away, leaving the box against the wall. It wouldn't leave a hole and it wouldn't damage the contents, but it would make me feel better. My phone chimed next to me, and I saw I had a text message.

Text from **Caleb**: What are you doing? Watching Cam tonight?



It's been **Me:** No, I was trying to study, but I need to get the hell out of here.

**Caleb:** Perfect. I'll be there in five.

How. *The* *How did he know where I lived?* I touched the warm spot on my cheek privately responding.

our legs **Me:** Meet me at the bus stop. I'll be right there.

the two The last thing that I needed was for my aunt to see a fourth guy I was around me. She would immediately assume that I was sleeping with him was over. Wednesday he'd made it clear that my plan to stay away from him was not working and Camwork and somehow he also knew what my father had done before he was released on social media. He still liked me despite knowing who I was. Where? Not where I came from.

After debating with myself for a moment, I popped one of the pills I'd taken earlier in the week into my mouth. If anyone deserved an escape, it was me. Out of By the time I got back home, the tea would be in full swing and I could put me out until I needed to get ready for the dean's "mandatory" brunch. I changed into a nicer t-shirt and slipped on my new running shoes before grabbing my ID and phone. Listening for a moment to make sure that my aunt was not hiding in the hallway, I locked my bedroom door and crawled out through the window, making sure to close it all the way. If Niko could sneak in through the window, I could sneak out.

There I glanced at the house, paranoid that my aunt would be standing in the window, and snuck around before breaking into a light jog, ready to throw distance between myself and whatever in the hell had just happened.

Age the True to his word, Caleb sat inside his bright yellow sports car at the bus stop. He grinned when he saw me and pulled open the door handle. His face lit up.

I slid in next to him, his thumb touching my cheek. "What happened?"

I shrugged, not wanting to talk about it. "Just a misunderstanding."

where we're going."

His eyes were dark and I could briefly see beneath the easy-going facade before he usually wore. Just like the three other men in my life, a monster under his skin, enraged about whatever he was imagining. As quickly as he had appeared, it vanished, and he gave me a cocky grin. "I was just thinking that my princess might enjoy pizza. Have you been to Master Pieces in Lima too. Strip?"

A brief pang shot through my chest remembering the last time I had been there, back when things seemed impossible, but they were infinitely more so than they were now. Back when I first met Ros and Cam just seemed like another college fuck boy. "Yeah, I've been. The food is pretty good."

He placed a chaste kiss on my lips and waited for me to fasten my seat belt. "After that, we can do whatever you want to. It's close to the beach, so you could walk over."

I didn't tell him that walking along the beach at this time of the night was the last thing I wanted to do. He was trying to cheer me up, rescuing me from a house that felt less like a home every day. I tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. "That sounds nice."

He turned up the music while he drove and I laid my head back against the seat. The tea was beginning to kick in and the stress of the evening was melting away, leaving behind fire in my veins. Even the bass from the music put goosebumps on my skin. It was a feeling I wasn't sure if I would ever get enough of. Nothing seemed to matter except sensation itself.

The ride was too short, and he opened my door, giving me a curious look as I climbed out of the car and wrapped my arms around him, burying my face in his chest. He smelled so good at the moment and all I wanted to do was fall inside his scent. He chuckled as he ran his hand through the ends

ponytail. When he pulled away, he gave me a curious look and reached that my hand. “You’re okay, right?”

I lurked I nodded and felt my mouth pulling up. “Never better.”

ly as it He watched my face for a brief second before tugging me into the dining restaurant. A young woman with bright blond hair was the hostess, and she on the whispered something to her before pulling me through the crowded

Televisions playing the game were mounted to a wall near the bar, and it had been from a band filtered through the air. It was complete chaos between the 7 easier noise in the space, but it was comforting. It was the kind of place you would find a likehide in plain sight. Maybe Cam was right; maybe I was a ghost.

To the right side of the restaurant, a thick glass door stood and slowly made our way toward it. When we finally emerged from the other side, a wooden patio came into view. It was covered with small metal table

speakers streamed music from inside. Compared to the inside, it was a cramped. Caleb led me to a table at the edge that overlooked part of the room and pulled a chair out for me to sit on. “I thought you might like it a little better tonight. Saturdays can be a little crazy, but the music is good, and the food is even better.”

inst the I folded my hands in my lap and just watched him as he scanned the menu, trying to decide what he wanted. “What are you having?”

music left I scooted my chair closer to him and let my chin rest on his shoulder. I wasn't really caring what I ate. A small voice inside of my head wanted me

him that all I wanted was him, but I stopped myself. Caleb’s sincerity was a look. In my head and it was the drugs talking. Still, part of me wanted to know if he would be like to have his mouth on me or his cock inside of me. “Is that a good idea?”

of my He smirked at me. “Practically everything.”

hed for When the waitress arrived to take our order, I told her I would have the thing as Caleb. We ate in comfortable silence while I danced in my seat and the band playing through the speaker.

ide the “What’s their name?” I asked as I shoved a piece of crust into my mouth and he “Hmm? Oh, Dissension Stars. I went to high school with the band. Supposedly, they have a record deal and are flying out to LA next month. I had to admit that they were good, and internally, their success made me all the happier. At least someone had escaped Clearhaven. A group of girls came through the patio door giggling and I grimaced, recognizing one of their voices. It had to be my luck that Arabella would be here out of all the people in town. I turned my body away from them, hoping that they wouldn’t see me in the dim light. For a while I thought my plan worked. Caleb asked me questions about my classes and the two of us talked about our projects. My luck eventually ran out. After the waitress disappeared and their drinks were delivered, I heard a snarky sounding, “Watch this.”

out here I assumed she was simply going to walk over to the table and threaten me to stay away from Niko some more. In the state I was in, I was ready to

he was crawling into my bedroom window, not hers. Instead, the icy drink was poured over my head, freezing my skin and drenching my clothes. I was in too much shock to react. Caleb shot out of his chair and grabbed her by the upper arm. “What the fuck, Arabella? What is your problem?”

to tell She simply gave him a saccharine smile. “Caleb, I don’t know what you’re scared talking about. Get your hands off of me or I’ll tell Granddaddy you’ve been spending time with her. You know better than to hang around with that girl. What looks bad for all the Vances.”

Instead of letting go of her, his grip tightened, and she winced as he leaned close. “Politely fuck off, Bella. Grandfather knows exactly who

ie samearound with. Touch her again and see what happens. I would hate f  
at to thecar to blow up next week with you inside of it.”

She rolled her eyes and dug her nails into his hand, blood welling on h  
th. “You wouldn’t dare. Besides, why would you want her, anyway? I  
e guys.men aren’t enough for her, why would you think a fourth would be? Y  
ith.” her at the party.”

ade meHe let go, and she sauntered back to the table, her bottom lip sticking  
strolledridiculous pout. The words and the ice in my lap were enough to sober  
of the some. Who was his grandfather? We hadn’t known each other lo  
e placesthings like family connections mattered little to me anymore. How  
see meArabella and he related? He handed me napkins from the dispenser and  
ked meto dry myself off, but it was no use. Sticky sugar stuck to my sk  
. dripped from my hair. “Let’s just go,” I told him, disappointed that no  
e drinkswhere I went, someone was there to bother me.

I picked up my glass and as we passed by, I poured it over Arabella a  
n me to walking. Fucking bitch.

tell herThe ride home was awkward. I was worried about Caleb’s leather se  
/ liquidthe fact I was drenched in soda. Whatever plans I had died before they  
s. I wasA part of me had wanted to convince him to kiss me and straddle him  
e by hercar despite his words of wanting to lay me out on the bed. Ins  
awkwardly sat in the passenger seat and asked him questions about  
you’reknew Arabella. It turned out that she was his cousin. Even Caleb  
ve beentense after the confrontation at the restaurant. He dropped me off  
rash. Itfrom my aunt’s house after a single kiss.

I snuck inside through the window, my newfound source of freedo  
aned ingathered clothes for a quick shower. While I was in there, I hope  
I hang

or you would visit me, even if I was asleep. Something about the fact that he  
in made me feel a little less alone, even if I wasn't awake.

his skin.

If three

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would visit me, even if I was asleep. Something about the fact that he snuck in made me feel a little less alone, even if I wasn't awake.

THIRTY-TWO



THIRTY-TWO

## *Caleb*



**E**arly Sunday morning after my workout, I showered and dressed in black slacks and a white button-up. My grandfather expected my presence this morning. A brunch at the dean's house was the last thing on my mind, especially after Arabella's behavior last night.

Her showing up at Master Pieces was unexpected and the two girls who surrounded herself with only condoned her behavior. Emmaline and I were harmless enough, but when the three of them were together their behavior took on a life of its own. Mob mentality exhausted me at the times, but the motivation behind their actions angered me. Arabella deciding to call me out in front of Ivy for "tarnishing" the Vance name was too much. Pouring her drink on Ivy? Completely uncalled for.

I knew everything about Ivy's background, including what her father was in prison for. What started as a simple favor for my grandfather turned into something else. Approaching her to be my project partner wasn't all that bad but it quickly morphed into something different. The fact that it got to be Camden's skin only sweetened the deal.

The dean's house was located directly off campus, a gigantic two-story colonial with white columns and black shutters. Why a single man need so much space was beyond me, but I adjusted my tie and got out of my car, ready to deal with whatever bullshit was about to happen.

From the edge of my vision, a Honda Civic drove slowly down the road. I held my breath, praying that it wasn't who I thought it was. When I saw the smashed door, I hoped maybe it was a mistake. She would keep driving and pass by the house.

And because life is a bitch, none of that happened.

Instead, Ivy pulled down the long driveway and parked along the curb. As she crawled from the passenger side of her car, I noticed what she was dressed in and my heart raced. Whether it was an act of defiance or she genuinely didn't know the dress code of the event we were walking to, I wasn't sure. Plump pale thighs were showcased in all of their glory, accentuated by a red plaid skirt and tall black boots. The shirt she was wearing stretched taut over her breasts and I wanted to cover her with my jacket to hide her from the predators inside. She was wearing more makeup than usual, the dark black eyeliner accentuating her bright green eyes that were dilated again today.

I thought last night had been a one-off when I realized she was high, not just her face against my skin—a way she was blowing off steam. Now I was more worried, but until I knew more, I'd keep my mouth shut. We both had other things to worry about. I plastered my typical arrogant expression on my face and leaned against the car, waiting for recognition to dawn on her face. Her face lit up when she saw it was me. "What are you doing here?" she asked. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair curled wildly around her face. I gave her a quick peck on the cheek and held out my arm to her. I led

my brick and lowered my voice so that only she could hear me. “The better question would be what are you doing here, princess? I thought you had work today.”

She quirked up an eyebrow as she laced her arm through mine. “How do you know that? I never mentioned...”

We started drifting toward the door. “Well, I needed to know where you were so that I could see you when Cam was busy, so I decided to do some research.” I left out the part about how my grandfather had encouraged my behavior. Eventually, I would have to confess that information, but for now I didn’t want her to second-guess my motivations. What had started as a way to keep tabs on Thomas Spencer’s daughter had turned into something different. Now I would do what I could to shield her from the powers of magic in this town.

There was nothing I could do about her presence today or the outfit that she was wearing, but after this, I would have to keep a closer eye on her. I didn’t know what she was getting into. Being tangled up with the Fae was bad enough, but they weren’t the actual issue.

The corners of her lips turned up at me. “It’s creepy that you know something about me, but kind of sweet. Are you proposing a hidden love affair with Vance?”

I wanted nothing more than to correct her. To tell her that there was a little secret about how I wanted her, but kept my mouth shut. If the dear old grandfather caught wind of what I wanted to do to Ivy...

I pressed the doorbell beside the massive black wooden doors and waited. A moment before it opened. Emilia, the housekeeper, squealed with excitement when she saw me. “Caleb, look at you. Just as handsome as ever.” She wiped her hands on the apron attached to her waist before squeezed me tightly.

tion is, She was the mother figure that I needed after my parents vanished. Memories of my mother and father had dimmed throughout the years, but moments with Emilia were bright spots from my bleak childhood. She taught me to bake chocolate chip cookies and how to read. When I was sick with flu in third grade, she was the one who sat at the edge of my bed and read me stories about dragons and knights. My grandfather was always preoccupied to spend time with me and felt that I needed to toughen up now, because the world was a cruel place. I was destined to rule and rulers could not be weak.

Perhaps that was the real issue between me and Cam. It wasn't the cursed girl that haunted my dreams, but that we were the future kings of kingdoms that held only a tentative peace, poised to go to war at that predetermined time.

Finally, Emilia let me go and sniffed. "I've missed you."

My throat felt tight. My grandfather had let her go when I was a senior in high school, replacing her with a young girl half her age named Claire. There was no way in hell he had hired Claire for her cooking skills given that she could burn water. At the time, it had devastated me. The fight ensued resulted in a broken nose and scars that I hid beneath my clothing, but at least he helped Emilia find a new job.

Unfortunately, it was with Wells. The only comfort I had in the situation was the fact that at least I still got to see her around holidays. It was not intended from the arrangement many of my "friends" parents had when their parents divorced and their father upgraded his wife to a new model.

"I've missed you too. I'm assuming that Fletcher is already here?"

She gave me a tight nod and then looked at Ivy with something that could only be labeled as a mixture of worry and pity. "Be careful with the

ed. MyThey collect pretty girls.” Ivy’s eyes widened, but I didn’t address w  
but thesaid. They did collect pretty girls, especially ones who had no money.  
ight mebetter go say hello.”

the fluI patted her shoulder one last time before heading further into the hou  
ead mesteped beside me, staring at the side of my face expectantly. “What v  
ys tooabout?”

hen upI rolled up the cuffs of my sleeves to avoid her gaze. “Which part?”  
ouldn’t“They collect pretty girls?”

“She meant every word she said. Try to avoid being cornered by any  
vy red-men here, Ivy. I can’t protect you if you’re caught in their web.”

of twoHer face paled. This was the most serious I had ever been in front  
ar at a“Why do you know so much about me, but I know nothing about you  
world?”

Her question stopped me in my tracks. We were feet away from the  
enior inroom where I knew a dozen “well respected” men would be seated a  
). Theretable acting like this was just another Sunday morning. I wanted to tou  
the factreassure her that everything was going to be alright, but I couldn’t. N  
ght thatnow. Someone could be watching us. “We’ll have to talk about all  
hes. Atlater. This world is something that you don’t want to be a part of. Yo  
once and you have a chance to escape it. That’s like saying you craw  
ion wasof hell and want to return.”

ifferentHer features hardened at my words and I knew they were probably ta  
parentsof context, but I let her turn away from me. It was probably better if s  
angry, especially heading into the den of wolves.

As soon as we set foot inside the massive dining room, all eyes were  
it couldMy grandfather gave me a handshake, but from his posture, I knew he  
his one.have questions for me later. He wasn’t pleased with the fact that

hat she shown up around the same time, and there would be no convincing him  
“You’d just a coincidence. His gaze trailed down Ivy’s body and he pressed  
together in a thin line. Disapproval. Other members were busy staring  
at her. Ivy specifically the creamy skin of her thighs that I wanted wrapped around  
my face. It took everything in me not to hide her behind me, but an act  
that would be seen as a weakness.

In this world, women were simply another thing you surrounded yourself  
with to show off your success or a hole to stick your dick in when the  
heat of the rose. The men here wouldn’t understand me wanting to hide her away  
from them. Abraham Wells stood from the head of the table, the look  
of her displeasure clear on his face. “Ivy and Caleb. I wasn’t aware the two  
of you were close. Come have a seat and I can introduce you to everyone.”

I didn’t need to be introduced to anyone here. I had known them since  
I was a child. The dining room was small.  
Ivy made small talk while holding her chin high and sipping on the drink  
beside her, that Emilia sat in front of her place. My appetite had vanished as soon  
as I saw the Civic pull into the driveway, so I sat there, completely checked  
out of everything around me until a firm hand landed on my back. “A word,  
you were gently touched the scar on my chest hidden beneath my clothes. It  
reminded me of the same one that each of them had on their bodies.

I was careful not to give away how I was feeling as I stood. Apprehensive  
I didn’t want to leave Ivy alone, but couldn’t defy my grandfather in front  
of the other men at the table. We walked down a long hallway into  
his office and he shut the door behind him, blocking my only exit. “What  
is the meaning of this, Caleb?” His face was amused, but his tone was clipped  
and would be dangerous. “I told you to get close to her, not fuck her.”  
I grinned at him and sat in the chair next to the bookcase. “Who said

Did it was fucked her? You didn't say that I couldn't taste her pussy."

His lipsHe closed the gap between us quickly, his hands pressing down  
; at her,bruises he knew were underneath my shirt. "She's not yours. I've told  
and mythat since the beginning. If you need to get your dick wet, there  
ion like a thousand other girls in this town. At least a hundred within the Order

will fall on their knees for you. Your job was to make her comfortable and  
yourselfher a false sense of security. Take her out to dinner or see a movie  
he needed rubbed across his chin and glared. "One day you'll be given someone  
any from Order, but it will never be her. Any idea you have of saving Ivy ends to

look ofThe pain searing through my bicep made my eyes water, but I wouldn't  
of youhim how much it hurt. How much his words hurt. I knew who they

chosen for me, but neither of us wanted the other. When we'd found  
e I washad both agreed to pretend like it wasn't real. The older men might

change their minds and realize how ill fitted we were for one another. I grit  
my teeth, trying to decide how to proceed with the conversation. "And who  
you as I choose not to fall in line?"

He'd pulled out ofHis fingers loosened and he clenched his jaw. "It would be a shame  
son." I am sure there are other people I can bestow my favor on, son. Never forget that.

She was the simply one tool that is at my disposal. After all, what if I gave  
this assignment to your cousin? What would he think of Ivy? It's a miracle  
insive. I haven't drawn his attention yet."

In front ofEverything was too much, and I stood, clearing my throat. "I get it."

a smallI had to play my part to keep her safe, at least until the time came  
at's thewould be forced to let her go. Part of me wanted to march into the  
dining room and yell at her to run, take everything she owned, and leave the

she wouldn't though. I was selfish enough to believe that saving her from  
and I've seen women in the dining room was possible.



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THIRTY-THREE

THIRTY-THREE

## *Ivy*



**A**fter Caleb was whisked away by his grandfather, I tried to focus on the juice and muffin that Emilia had placed in front of me before it disappeared. My appetite was completely gone, and the men sitting around the table stared at me too intensely. It wasn't just that I was a scholarship student that was under the microscope. That much was evident from the lingering glances and the fact that all conversation had died the moment I walked in. I cleared my throat and pushed my chair back away from the edge of the table. "If you'll excuse me."

I rushed out of the room and pushed into the hallway in search of a restroom. There was something too familiar about the men who were leering at me. Panic clawed at my throat, attempting to break free. I needed a moment to breathe away from everything. A stiff hand grabbed my wrist and tightened, squeezing the bones to the point of pain. "Where do you think you're going, Ivy?"

A shiver ran down my spine as I turned to face Abraham Wells. "I need the restroom. I needed to freshen up."

His hand darted out and cupped the side of my cheek. “You just got h  
your makeup looks like it’s still intact to me. Tell me, why are  
wearing the dress I sent you?”

I swallowed and shook my head. “It’s not exactly my style.”

The corner of his lip lifted. “I’m sure it’s not, but you’ll grow usec  
gifts.” His hand dropped and his index finger traced my collarbone. I  
jerk away, but the pain in my wrist grew, spreading up my arm. “Did y  
your little game with Mr. Barrett in the library?”

My voice faltered and my face grew hot with his words. I had known  
dean was aware of what Cam was doing, but the affirmation ma  
uncomfortable for reasons I couldn’t pinpoint. “You’re hurting  
whispered. “Please let me go or I’ll scream.”

A malicious smile spread across his face. “Even if you did, the mer  
dining room wouldn’t save you. I could strip you down and fuck you  
of the table in front of them, and do you know what they would do?  
they could have a turn.”

Something about his words made bile rise into my throat. My s  
churned, and the world spun around me. “Stay away from Camden. He  
he owns you, but he has no claim.”

Suddenly he stalked closer, forcing me backward and caging me in. M  
galloped in my chest as his papery lips brushed against mine. He let  
finally, and I fled down the hall into a random room, slamming th  
behind me. I slid down the wall as tears streamed down my fa  
understanding how I attracted the attention of Wells.

s. “The



ere and After Caleb's grandfather spoke to him at brunch, his entire de  
n't you changed toward me. He gave me an occasional tense smile and esco  
to my car, but he seemed strangely distant, preoccupied with what  
happened between the two of them. After I'd made it back home, I  
l to my send him several texts, but he was silent on his end. He didn't even b  
tried to look at them. For some reason, I had assumed that we were growing  
ou like between dinner and what happened in the closet.

The longer I sat in my room, wasting time before I headed to work, th  
that the frustrated I got with everything. I headed down to the local fish mark  
ade me the Strip and used some of the leftover cash from my tutoring session  
me," I fresh shrimp. I didn't have time to enact my plan before work, and I  
thrilled about my car smelling like seafood, but it was fine. Every  
1 in the needed was stored in a small bag, ready for later.

in front I parked in front of my aunt's and bided my time after my shift.  
' Ask if midnight struck, I started jogging with my satchel full of goodies, dre  
dark denim and a black t-shirt, deciding that it was time to enact  
tomach amount of petty revenge. I didn't have any leverage over the member  
e thinks Forsaken, but I did have pettiness on my side. Between the time of ni  
the color of my clothes, I hoped no one would notice me.

ly heart Nikos's house was only a few blocks away and from the rumors tha  
: me go heard, the two of them lived together. I didn't know exactly when  
ie door lived, but he wasn't the one I wanted to pay back. Not really. He hel  
ce, not call Rosalyn when I needed it and that cleared at least some of his  
Earlier at work, I searched for Niko's name on the internet and discov  
lived a few blocks from my aunt. As I strolled, I scanned the house nu  
trying to ensure that I broke into the right one. I stopped underneath

meanor tree and pulled out my phone, triple checking for the last time that the  
rted me was standing in front of was the correct one, and then took a deep br  
ver had was now or never.

tried to Nikos's car was absent from the small driveway and wasn't parked al  
other to side of the street, which was perfect. It would make what I was p  
3 closer easier. All the lights in the house were off except the kitchen, and I  
into the window. No one was up and everything was silent. I crept  
ie more glancing inside and praying that the neighbors wouldn't call the cops.  
et near neighborhood, it was unlikely, but with my luck lately...

to buy Finally, I found the back door. There wasn't a welcome mat in front o  
wasn't there was a large rock sitting to the side. Lifting it, I discovered a sma  
thing I key and struggled not to laugh. To supposedly be hardened crimin  
guys thought it was secure to put a key under a rock.

When My heart beat in my chest as I slid the key into the lock and opened t  
assed in as quietly as possible. It creaked softly, and I darted inside. My enti  
a small vibrated with nerves as I unzipped my pack and pulled out the shrin  
s of the earlier. After a quick once over, I realized that all the air vents in the  
ght and were located along the baseboards. I pulled out my screwdriver and  
work, moving as quickly as possible. The adrenaline flowing thro  
it I had veins was heady as I shoved handfuls of shrimp into every vent I co  
re Trey and replaced the screws. Eventually, they would figure out why the  
ped me smelled, but there would be no way to trace it back to me.

3 debts. Softly, I snuck through the back hallway, seeing that there wer  
ered he bedroom doors. I had saved the last little bit and wanted to ensure tha  
mbers, punishing the right person. One wrong move and my games were  
an oak stared at each of the doors, pressing my ear against them to see if I cou  
any noises from inside. The closest one had soft snores, and I shook n

house I knowing that wasn't the room I wanted. Shuffling to the next door, I held my breath. It breath. No sound was coming from inside, but that meant little. I turned the knob as fast as I dared and glanced inside. Pushed against the wall along the queen-size bed that had a navy comforter strewn across the top. I struggled to remove the vent from near the baseboard just inside of the room. Once I peered over the edges of it and I chewed the inside of my cheek as I used my fingers around, in my hand to pry it open.

In this After depositing the last bit of seafood, I closed the door behind me and moved to the door at the end of the hallway. Only one more thing and I would get out of this house, away from the possibility of getting caught. I located the bottle of shampoo and grinned to myself. I pulled out the blue dye, opened the shampoo cap, and poured what I could inside.

With a small piece of toilet paper, I wiped down the exterior of the bottle and threw it in my bag.

It felt good to take back another piece of my life, even if it was ten minutes and childish. With halting hands, I zipped up my bag and slung it over my shoulder, ready to make my escape. The rush of everything was exhilarating. I got to something else that would be easy to get addicted to. Everything was vibrating through my entire body from the thrill.

A car door slammed outside and loud voices that were all too familiar shouted at one another. I ran into the hallway, hoping that I would have enough time to make it to the back door. Suddenly, large hands caught me and a firm body pulled me into the third bedroom. A scream left my mouth as I was but a hand clamped over it. "Unless you want to get caught by them, stay quiet. I'm trying to help you."

I pulled away and a guy a few years younger stared down at me. He placed his index finger over his lips, telling me to be silent. I observed him while listening



heard someone slam the front door, noting that he shared the same eyes as Ned. He had broad shoulders and a tattoo that peeked out from the collar of his shirt. "So you're what all the fuss is over. I can see why they both want you." "I don't know what you're talking about," I hissed under my breath. "The only thing they want is to be complete, utter assholes. I've decided it's my primary goal in life."

He tilted his head to the side and smirked. "Keep telling yourself that." "Why are you helping me? You could have let them catch me."

He tenderly touched the side of my cheek and then moved to sit on top of the bed. "Maybe I just like chaos."

We stayed like that until the bedroom door closed in the hallway.

With a look spread across his face and he closed his eyes. "If you want to run before your chance. The two of them are fighting and at any moment, one of them will storm out of the room to go smoke in the backyard. Your other opportunity that you can stay the night with me, but something tells me that my dick will be even more pissed knowing that I stole his girl and my dick is getting stronger."

My mouth fell open to argue with him, but he started counting backwards. "Ten, nine—"

I didn't want to see what happened when he finished and took his acid. As I reached the back door, I heard the bedroom slam again and I was stumbling under his breath. My ears roared as I ran out into the night. I stopped until I was outside of my bedroom window, my lungs burning and my muscles shaking. I slid down the side of the house and laughed to myself.

The next day Cam showed up on campus, his normally sunshine-colored eyes now tinted shades of green. I hated that it didn't make him less attractive, but I still had a smug sense of satisfaction that I had gotten away with it.

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THIRTY-FOUR

THIRTY-FOUR

## *Trey*



I sat in front of my computer with an energy drink open, staring at the monitor. Ivy's university email was boring for the most part, except for two emails from the dean. One requested she meet him in his office, the second was an invitation to a brunch at his house. I noted Ivy had responded to either, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

My phone rang next to me and I silenced the call, trying to focus on everything I needed to do. Finding proof of Arabella's involvement in harassing Ivy was next on my list, and whoever wanted to talk could call until later. It rang again and I picked up the phone, not bothering to see who was on the other line. "What the fuck do you want?"

"Is that how you greet your mother after all this time, Trey? I taught you better than that." It took everything in me not to tell her that the only lesson she taught me was that she was a bitch that allowed her boyfriends to use her as a punching bag, but I held my tongue. It was better not to give her the energy that I could use elsewhere.

"Okay, I'll try again. What the fuck do you want, mother? Why are you calling me? I thought that when I made it clear, whatever relationship

was severed.” It wasn’t on the advice of a therapist or anything like that. Cutting ties with her was the best thing I had done. That and getting far away from her.

There was sniffing on the other end of the phone. There was no doubt in my mind that her tears were as fake as her acrylic nails. Even if there was a camera in the house, her nails were always done and her hair was perfectly styled. She claimed it was to help lure in clients and provide us with a better life. I knew better. It was really to help her party. “Trey, baby, please. I will call if I didn’t need you. I need some money. Ricky, you remember him, right? I owe him a little cash, and I was wondering if maybe you could borrow it.”

I lifted my glasses to my forehead and rubbed my eyes. It was the same story that I had heard a million times before. Let me borrow money or I will pawn the television. Whatever she needed to do to keep the party going. I got her next fix. “Of course, I remember Ricky. He’s the dealer who got me started on my arm when I was in seventh grade. After that, you swore you would never bring him around anymore, but that only lasted a week,” I spit out. I could have bothered mentioning the other dozen times he’d done terrible things to me, but how every time was the last time. “The answer’s no.”

“But, baby,” she wailed and I rolled my eyes. “If I don’t have the money next week—”

I hung up the phone, not wanting to hear anything else she had to say. I had other things I needed to do, like pull the footage from the gym last week. The phone rang beside me again and I cut the power. If Cam or Niko needed it, they could find a different way to contact me or wait until the morning. This was the last errand I ran for Vincent, he could go fuck himself.

I sat back in my chair and watched the grainy footage from my monitor.

ke that.it, Ivy went inside the gym with a small black bag. Less than an hour  
a placethree women came out carrying a very similar black bag. My b

Arabella and her two cronies, Emmaline and Violet. I tapped my foot  
t in my thought of the best way to get through to her. She was obsessed with  
r't foodWell, maybe Niko the most. She clung to him every chance she got,  
ct. She couldn't kill her. It was the same problem we had with Caleb  
e, but I grandfather secretly ran the entire town and people that pissed I  
ouldn't suddenly disappeared.

er him, In the end, I decided to leave it up to the guys how we would threaten  
I let me decided that I needed a break away from everything. My favorite new

clip was simply a click away. I opened the folder on my desktop and I  
ie thing Ivy had no idea that we had filmed the night in the office where Ca  
need to be tied to the chair. If Cam was intent on destroying her, then he  
ing and have things to hold over her head. I unzipped my pants and palmed my  
o broke wrapping my fingers around it.

ouldn't In the video, Cam traced along Ivy's jaw and then I moved forward  
I didn't cheeks were flushed and her pupils blown, giving her a wild look  
o me or dropped to her knees. The knife shredded the back of the t-shirt, exposing  
bare back, and blood rushed away from my brain straight to my cock  
oney by you stop cutting off all of my clothes?"

I had wanted to tell her there wasn't a chance in hell. I would be  
y. I had whatever she needed, but her clothes were the least of her problems.  
ek. My cloth fell away from her body on the screen, her rosy nipples were  
led me, display beneath the thin lace of her bra and her mouth fell open  
g. After grabbed Cam's thighs.

Slowly I glided my fist up and down, taking my time to enjoy every se  
tor. On and imagine it was her pillowy lips wrapped around me. Her tongue

er later, swirl along my crown as I gripped her hair. Slowly I squeezed as I v  
et wasthe red-haired girl deep throat Cam's cock, imagining that it was me  
oot andof him. Her cheeks would hollow out around me as I hit the back  
with us.throat, urging her to relax enough to let me slide down her throat.

but weEven as I worked my hand up and down my shaft, I needed more.  
b. Hermonitor, I glided a blade along Ivy's skin before I unclasped her bra.  
nim offwere perfect and her nipples were hard as I traced my knife along it,  
her.

her andI pumped my hand faster and rocked my hips upward, trying to imag  
v videoinstead of my fist, it was her tight pussy.

it play.My eyes were glued to the monitor as Ivy's hand disappeared betw  
leb hadthick creamy thighs and Niko grabbed her wrist. If it had been up t  
had towould have let her get herself off while I was down her throat, m  
y dick,wrapped around it so I could feel her screams.

I needed more and pulled my knife out of my pocket, slicing it acr  
rd. Herpalm. Crimson ribbons of blood trailed down my skin and I gripped n  
as sheagain, watching as blood stained my skin. Each up and down motio  
sing herthe cut, and I hissed. My eyes darted between the girl on the screen  
κ. "Cancock.

Ivy's hand was now wrapped around Niko while Cam used her face  
uy hergroaned. We had gotten to the part of the film where my self-control s

As theCarefully, I had cut along her ribs, allowing droplets of blood to deco  
on fullskin. I had licked and sucked along the wound while Ivy moaned.

as sheI moved my hand faster, feeling my balls tighten and the base of m  
tingle. I fantasized about what it would feel like with my dick deep ir  
nsationher, her pussy strangling me as she came.

ouldAnd when I came on her chest, I closed my eyes and bit my bottom lip



watched muscle in my body tensed as hot jets of cum spilled onto my  
instead mingling with the blood that was already there.

of her I stood and headed to the restroom, looking for a towel to clean up,  
more frustrated than I had. *Fuck, I needed to get laid.*

On the\*\*\*

Her tits

teasing



ine that The next night, Cam, Niko, and I waited in the gym parking lot around  
Arabella liked to visit every day around this time with her friends. I  
een her on the hood of her fancy luxury car and fidgeted with my knife with  
o me, I waited for her to make her grand appearance. Niko stood nearby smiling  
y hand joint while Cam crossed his arms over his chest, glaring in the  
direction. There was no use telling him to calm down when he felt like  
oss my When Arabella did finally appear, her friends followed behind her, and  
y cock were giggling at something. Arabella pulled out her phone and took  
n stung of the three of them that would appear on YouConnect in the next hour  
and my she doctored it. When she saw the three of us, she grinned and ran

Niko, wrapping her arms around his waist. He took one last puff of the  
, and I he was holding before placing his palm on her forehead and pushing her  
slipped back. “Why the fuck are you touching me again? I’ve told you a  
rate her times that this, us, it’s never going to happen. You’re just too fucking  
to realize it.”

y spine Arabella pouted at him but shuffled back. “But you’re out here waiting  
inside of me.”

), Every

fingers, Cam prowled forward and grabbed her hand, his eyes wild in the mo

“We are. It’s because I have a surprise for you.” He placed his arm feeling her shoulder and motioned for her to follow him. When he opened the door of her car, her mouth fell open. “That was locked.”

I scratched across the finish of the hood with my knife, watching her expression as the screech of metal filled the air. “You’re going to—”

Cam interrupted her by pulling a black bag from the car. “We’re going to do what, baby? Pay for a fresh coat of paint? I don’t think so. Why is Ivy in your car?”

Her mouth opened to speak, but Violet was the one who finally answered. “We don’t know how that got in there.”

Cam laughed and pulled Arabella closer, squeezing her tightly to his chest. “The three of you know exactly how that got in there. Didn’t I tell you to stay off limits?”

Arabella’s face turned red, and she tried to struggle against him. “Not hurting me, Cam,” she whined.

“Not nearly as much as I want to. If it were up to me, you’d be in an unmarked grave.” He nodded to me as Niko moved in front of her.

isolating them from saving her. I grabbed the ponytail that swung near her waist as Cam held her still and sawed through her hair with the blade in my hand, watching as the dark locks fell to the ground. Arabella screamed but no one came to save her. They wouldn’t—not on campus.

I allowed the edge of the knife to nick her neck, and blood trailed across her skin. Cam let go of her and pushed her toward her friends. “Good luck to your hairdresser fix that. Next time, it will be more than your hair. So fuck away from Ivy.”

Niko spit at her foot, and the three of us loaded back into his car.

onlight.drove away, I watched Arabella cover her face with her hands. “Do you  
aroundshe learned her lesson?” Niko asked.

ne backI scoffed at him. “I seriously doubt it. We kidnapped her cousin and  
off on the girl that he was trying to impress. The whole family is  
ing hercrazy.” She deserved more than just a bad haircut, but our hands were

Somehow I doubted Arabella had learned her lesson, but I was w  
oing toescalate the situation any further. The last thing I wanted to deal w  
y’s shitweek was Fletcher Vance. Between Niko’s debut fight, everything was

Cam playing football, the program I was designing, and all of our clas  
swered.week was already pretty full.

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As we

drove away, I watched Arabella cover her face with her hands. “Do you think she learned her lesson?” Niko asked.

I scoffed at him. “I seriously doubt it. We kidnapped her cousin and jacked off on the girl that he was trying to impress. The whole family is fucking crazy.” She deserved more than just a bad haircut, but our hands were tied. Somehow I doubted Arabella had learned her lesson, but I was weary to escalate the situation any further. The last thing I wanted to deal with this week was Fletcher Vance. Between Niko’s debut fight, everything with Ivy, Cam playing football, the program I was designing, and all of our classes, the week was already pretty full.

THIRTY-FIVE

THIRTY-FIVE

## *Ivy*



**F**rankie had closed the shop early Wednesday night, so I decided to take advantage of the free time that I suddenly had. After seeing Niko at the graveyard, I didn't want to head back there. I would rather have dealt with a crying stranger on the beach than run into anyone I knew. The town was damn small, and I didn't know of enough places where I could hide in plain sight.

The last thing I wanted to do was deal with any of the guys who were surrounded me since my arrival in Clearhaven. They seemed to hide in every corner. Caleb had been silent, only sending me texts to let me know he had started his end of our class project. Ros had sent me a text to check in on me last night and I reassured her that everything was fine and we would get together for coffee or pizza when my aunt was away at work. I valued our constant camaraderie, but I really didn't want to drag her into any mess I was caught up in.

After locking up, I headed to the beach, my black hoodie zipped up. The wind at night in Clearhaven was cool, but I refused to stay inside or go to the beach to hide. That was the last place I wanted to be.

I unzipped the boots that I had worn every day since buying the replaced them with my athletic shoes before jogging across the sand where the ocean waited for me. A storm brewed off the coast and I was as lightning struck the water, mesmerized by the perfection of it all. Once I left Clearhaven, I would find somewhere near the ocean to settle something that I loved.

“Hey, Ivy. What are you doing out this late?” an unfamiliar deep voice from down the beach. I wrapped my arms around myself, unsettled by the fact that I was no longer alone. Standing about fifteen feet away were three large men, their features shrouded by the darkness. It was one thing to stumble on a lonely crying teenager and another by a man this time of night, especially after everything that had happened. I’d had to deal with a man winking at me and making enough lewd gestures for a lifetime.

I took a step backward, trying to put more distance between them and I backed into a broad chest and broad arms banded around me like

“Let me down,” I told whoever it was, but their hold tightened.

“Not a chance in hell, beautiful. Everyone else in town has had a turn with you. Why shouldn’t we?” His hot breath made my stomach churn. My face heated at his words from anger and embarrassment. Sure, I had been with a lot of men since I had shown up in Clearhaven, but that was my choice—most of the time. Even if I had sucked off a hundred men since I had been here, that was my business and no one else’s.

I dug my short nails into the skin on his arm and he cursed, loosening his hold enough for me to scramble away. “Fucking bitch,” he yelled, but I didn’t waste any time as I took off across the beach, my feet sinking into the sand with every movement. I shouted, hoping that someone would hear and scare off the three men that were behind me. The air rushed from my lungs



Someone collided with my back, tackling me onto the cool sand. The  
treet hit into the skin of my legs, but I fought to stand. Anything to escape  
watched one thing for me to give my body away and another for someone to take  
Maybe wasn't theirs. "Help me with her. I wish I had known she was a fighter  
I was doing tonight. Tonight would have happened a lot sooner," someone else  
"Hold her ankles, John."

His weight was crushing me and I couldn't get enough breath, couldn't  
by their lungs. I couldn't get my knees underneath me to stand. Hot, sweat  
were two gripping my ankles, and fingers pressed against the bones. The man  
hanging back shifted, one hand circling my neck and the other pulling up the  
hem of her skirt. Every time I fought, he squeezed harder, the edges of my  
underwear spotting with black. The third man moved in front of me and fell to his

I distinctly heard his zipper being released even as I fought, even  
me, but slowly dimming around me. "Open your mouth up, whore." I clenched  
my jaw in refusal. A fist hit the side of my head, pain lancing through my  
underwear was ripped down my legs. "You can have a turn with her  
when I'm done," one of them said.

Fingers branded my thighs, prying them apart. I coughed, trying to  
take one more breath so that I could continue fighting. A gunshot echoed  
nearby, but I couldn't hold on. Everything went black around me  
as I had



ing his

I didn't When I came to, Frankie sat beside me on the backseat of a car, my  
head cradled in her lap. Behind my eyes pounded and my throat felt raw  
from being choked or from screaming. The skin on my legs didn't feel  
like anything as

grains better. The gentle motion of a car driving vaguely registered in my mind. It was Frankie stroked my hair, looking at me with a mixture of pity and concern. "Were they able--?"

before "Shh, don't say anything, girl. I was able to get there before..." He said. Frankie broke and she looked off to the side so that she didn't betray her emotions.

I wasn't as lucky as hot tears fell down my cheeks. No matter what I tried to do, it wouldn't stop, even as she murmured reassurances to me. I curled my hands and let myself feel, even if just for a moment. By the time we stopped, we were in front of Regina's house. I wiped at my nose and the edge of my eye at the pain I felt as I touched it. The pain I felt everywhere.

Someone cleared their throat from the front seat and I looked up to see Rhyker's knees. My second savior was. Rhyker was staring at me from the rearview mirror. "Baby girl, let me help you into the house."

Frankie shook her head at him. "I've got this. You stay here. It will take time, but I can handle this. You stay here. It will take time, but I can handle this. You stay here. It will take time, but I can handle this." She ran her fingers across my cheeks gingerly. "You ready to do this, Ivy?"

I turned my face away. "Not yet, please." I didn't want to hear what Rhyker would say. Even though I couldn't be certain, I knew it wouldn't be pleasant. Frankie carefully cradled my face in her hands, forcing me to look at her. "You won't hide, Ivy. Not now and not ever. Don't let them break you. Remember me so much of someone that I used to know."

And with that, she opened the car door so that the two of us could face the world—or at least my aunt—together.

I trudged into the house with my face hidden, my head hung low. I didn't expect, Regina was sitting at the kitchen table with a coffee cup on it. "Where the hell have you been, Ivy?"

Frankie wrapped an arm around my shoulder, holding me up as the

mind as started again. "Shut the fuck up, Gina, and leave the girl alone tonight. I relief. My aunt stood and I tried to move, but Frankie held me firmly in place dare you talk to me like that in my house?"

er voice "I'll say a lot worse, you hypocrite. Sit back down and enjoy your winotions. I make sure your niece is taken care of." My aunt stood there with her at, they open as Frankie helped me into my room. "She's always been a nto my Frankie mumbled so that only I could hear. A small laugh escaped me the car the tears that were still in my eyes. Blame it on hysteria, but it was ; winced see someone stand up to her. "You've got it from here, right?"

I nodded to her, and my throat felt tight. I gave her a quick hug. "Thank ee who for everything tonight," I whispered as I wrapped my arms around my mirror. She gently patted me before she turned away. "Anytime. I was just glad was there."

ce more After she had driven off, I snuck into the bathroom and stood beneath fingers shower spray, scrubbing my skin until my body was raw and the water cold. I popped some pain relievers and one of the pills Niko had given ny aunt ready for the oblivion it would give me. My head was cloudy and m easant. heavy as I locked my bedroom door and put on the shirt that Ni at her. dressed me in. I rolled onto my side and curled my legs up to my chest ou. You I held the shirt close to my face, trying desperately not to think c almost happened. If Frankie hadn't found me in time.

face the My chest heaved as I cried and I held my pillow over it to muffle the s didn't want Regina busting into my room. My window creaked as ow. As lifted and I turned to face the wall. I didn't want anyone, especially not of wine. the guys, to see me like this. His fingers trailed down the injured skin legs softly. "What happened tonight?"

ie tears I said nothing because I didn't know how to respond. He pulled me :

” chest and held me while I cried silently into his shirt. “I should bri  
: “How something different to sleep in,” he said gruffly, his voice thick with e

“You probably need to wash this one.”

e while My breath stuttered when I tried to speak. “I can’t because then it won  
: mouthlike you,” I whispered so quietly I prayed he didn’t hear my confessor  
bitch,” We lay there until a dreamless sleep overtook me and when I woke  
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chest and held me while I cried silently into his shirt. “I should bring you something different to sleep in,” he said gruffly, his voice thick with emotion. “You probably need to wash this one.”

My breath stuttered when I tried to speak. “I can’t because then it won’t smell like you,” I whispered so quietly I prayed he didn’t hear my confession.

We lay there until a dreamless sleep overtook me and when I woke up, he was gone like always.

THIRTY-SIX

THIRTY-SIX

## Cam



When I woke Thursday morning, Niko was still gone and his the bed was cold. For the past two weeks, he had been sneak at night, especially when we argued, but usually, he was back before I didn't know what he was doing, whether it was escaping to the cem if he had a girl that he was secretly seeing, but I'd let him keep his The three of us had plenty of them and one more wouldn't hurt. He ne blow off some steam, especially because Friday evening he had a Strathmore. None of us had been there, and I was the only one that h left Clearhaven for even a brief amount of time—and that was only b of football. None of us were really looking forward to the fight, thoug much was riding on it.

I staggered to the kitchen, ready to make a cup of coffee before my and Niko sat at the small table with his head in his hands. When we up at me, his eyes were bloodshot from not enough sleep and his mou set into a firm line. “You look like shit. What’s going on with you?” He shifted in his seat and ran a hand through his hair, pulling lightly roots. “Someone attacked Ivy last night. She wouldn’t tell me what hap



but she has bruises on her throat and face and her legs are scraped  
need to fix this shit.”

I laid my coffee cup on the cabinet top without saying a word. “Give  
minutes and send a text to Trey.” I threw on a t-shirt and my sneak  
one got to touch her except for us, and the people in this town were a  
get that message. I didn’t ask when he had seen Ivy or how he knew w  
happened, but part of me questioned if maybe that was where he ha  
escaping to every night.

We drove to Trey’s apartment in silence. Niko looked worried, but all  
feel was pissed. Trey didn’t ask questions, and Niko didn’t turn  
music. The tension was suffocating inside of the car. When the three  
finally arrived at Regina Spencer’s house, I got out and didn’t  
knocking on the front door, instead taking it upon myself to rush  
Regina was making something in the kitchen and opened her mouth, b  
one glare, she stopped whatever she was going to say. I didn’t ha  
patience to deal with her holier-than-thou crap this morning or her idle  
about how we all needed to stay away.

I opened the small bedroom door that belonged to Ivy and found her  
up on her mattress facing away from me. Her legs were expose  
beneath the blanket and abrasions covered her calves. Gently, I touc  
shoulder, trying to convince her to face me. Trey stood in the d  
observing us curiously and Niko lingered in the hallway, holding sor  
in his arms. “Little ghost, I need you to look at me.”

She stayed completely still until Niko crossed the threshold in the ro  
sat down beside her. “Ivy, I brought you something.” Finally, she tur  
head, and I swallowed when I saw the swelling on her face and the  
lining her skin. Around her neck, someone’s handprints circled it. I s

up. We watching the two of them and jealousy flared inside of me at how tenderly she touched her. She scooted up against her pillows into a sitting position and I crossed her legs. Her eyes were swollen from crying and her skin was pale. Not as usual. She tugged the blanket up around her chest, and I waited patiently for Niko to coax the information I needed out of her.

That had he placed a pile of t-shirts into her lap and grabbed her hand, brushing his thumb across her palm. "You need to tell us who did this to you. I can't protect you if I don't know."

I could see a fire raging behind her eyes briefly, removing the morose expression she'd been wearing. "Protect me?" A wry laugh bubbled up in her throat. "You are the reason I'm in this situation."

My patience snapped. "How about this, then? I need to know who touched you inside so they can never lay their hands on you again. Even if it means torturing you, no one else is allowed to."

Even I was beginning to slowly question my motivations with the red-haired woman who fought me at every turn. I wanted revenge for what happened to Maya and the fact that I had almost lost her. She was one of the few things I had left in this world. Ivy haunted my thoughts, though. I wanted to punish her and break her, possess her, but no one else could touch her. She was mine.

Her fingers caressed the clothing laying in her lap. "I have no idea. Niko and Rhyker are the ones who stopped them."

I lifted my eyebrows at her words and balled my fists at my sides. My face had a hard edge when the next words came out. "What do you mean by that? Ivy, what did they do?"

She closed her eyes. "Nothing happened, Cam. Just let it go." But I wouldn't let it go. She had to know that. She said nothing else.

lerly hegestured for the guys to follow me. We left her sitting on the bed, clin  
ion andNiko's shirts for comfort. If he brought her a feeling of safety right now  
as palerif it was false, I wouldn't destroy it. Not yet. She needed something  
atientlydid he, something that I couldn't give either of them.

As we were trying to leave, Regina blocked our path to the doorwa  
ing hisheld a cup of coffee in one hand while she lifted her chin in defiance  
I can'tthree of you know better than to come to my house."

I sighed because I had more important things to deal with than he  
she hadattitude. "We were just leaving. I needed to check on your niece at  
"All ofnight."

She shrugged at me. "What happened to Ivy was her fault. If she had  
he fuckdifferently or maybe kept her legs closed, then she would have been sa  
n if wehas a curfew for a reason, and she broke it."

It was Trey who got to her first, not giving me a chance to react. He  
l-hairedher into the plaster wall and her head bounced against it. Before I cou  
iat hadhim, his knife was pressed against her throat. "Is that so, Regina?  
e of thedecided to end your life right now, would it be your fault and not  
wantedBecause I think you're asking for it." The usual calm demeanor had  
h whataway, leaving only cold anger. "Who she fucks or not is her business.

that you're just jealous of her because no one wants you and they  
Frankiehave." Slowly, he trailed the blade down her neck. "I wonder if Ivy  
your secrets?" He pulled away and adjusted her shirt, ignoring the  
y voicestricken look that was plastered on her face. "Stay the fuck out of our v  
m, stopI pushed past the woman who clung to the wall beside us, hitting her v  
shoulder as I left. If Ivy was mine, really mine, I would make sure sh  
set foot in this house again.

3, and IBut she wasn't mine.

ing toThe drive to Frankie and Rhyker's was short and the entire time I che  
w, eventhe corner of my nail, ignoring whatever Niko and Trey were saying  
and solived on the outskirts of the same neighborhood, but the houses her  
nicer. Even the air felt cleaner. Rain began falling around us and  
ay. Sheboomed in the distance, setting the mood for how the rest of the day  
e. "Thego.

*My mother had stumbled into the house earlier, waking me up from  
r shittysleep. A man screamed at her and glass shattered somewhere in the hc  
fter lastI just prayed that they wouldn't wake up Maya. Well, and then I pray  
god I wasn't sure existed that whoever had come home with my  
dressedwouldn't hit either of us... or worse. I'd made sure that Maya had f  
ife. Sheher homework and gone to bed hours ago while Mom was out on w  
called a date. Even in eighth grade, I knew what that meant. As I sh  
shovedearlier, I knew she would come in drunk or high with someone that s  
ld stoppicked up. My only hope was that they would stay away from me  
So if Isister.*

*mine?The door to my room creaked open, and I held my breath, hoping  
d fadedwasn't one of her boyfriends. I laid completely still, not wanting to  
I thinkmuscle. Relief flooded my veins, and I relaxed as the smell of roses fi  
y neverair. It was just my mother coming to check on me. The mattress dippec  
knowslay behind me, her hands landing on my hips. She sniffled to herself  
horror-fingers trailed the edge of my shirt.*

ay." I quickly shook myself out of the memory as Niko cut the engine in  
with myFrankie's house. That was the night that I had learned that even  
e neverexisted, he had forsaken me completely. Even if I wanted to punish  
wouldn't allow others to touch her.

I knocked at the front door, not daring to barge into Frankie's hous

wed on had Regina's. She would shoot me and not think twice about it, even if I was a friend. They were friends with Rhyker. The short older woman answered the door and we were removed aside. "What do you three want?"

thunder "We need to ask you or your grandson some questions if we can. I would be careful not to overstep my boundaries or she would shut down and go out. Frankie was the one person in this town who didn't care about a dead Forsaken or the Order, even if she technically played by the rules. I was surprised that she still allowed Rhyker to live here with what he did. I wanted to ask him what happened later in the day, but I wanted to take care of my mother everything now.

finished She impatiently gestured for us to enter the house and waited. "I saw that she you've seen what happened to the girl?" She waltzed past the three of us and yelled for Rhyker to get up, not bothering with the niceties most people would have. When she sat down, she picked up her knitting needles and began working, not bothering to say anything until Rhyker stumbled into the room. "Tell them about last night."

that it Rhyker leaned against the door frame and yawned. "Ma, you could have moved them. I'm not even awake yet."

lled the She leveled him a look over the top of her knitting needles. "Well, I was out at all hours of the night torturing people, you'd probably have had some coffee by now." Every time she opened her mouth, she surprised me. She knew what we did and even though all four of us had at least a front of her, she didn't care.

if God "Fine. You're probably right." He motioned for the three of us to follow him to the kitchen and spoke while he filled a carafe with water. "What do you want to tell you?"

like I Niko pulled a chipped cup from the cabinet. "Nothing."

n if weHe scooped coffee into the basket and hit the power button without lo  
or andher. “You know how I try to take her out to dinner twice a mont  
gestured toward the living room. “She claims she isn’t lonely sin  
’ I wasgranddad died, but I know better. Anyway, we were driving past. I ne  
kick usget her home before I went to work, and we noticed Ivy’s car was  
out thefront of the shop. Ma told me to park, and that something wasn’t  
. I wasthought she was overreacting and figured Ivy was with Ros. We  
lid. Wescreams and by the time we got there, three guys had her held down  
care ofbeach. Ma had a shotgun and scared them off, but if we had gotten  
minute later...”

supposeThe rage I was trying to keep concealed threatened to boil over. “W  
us andit?”

people“Peter Bell and Jake Fox. The third one ran off before I could see  
les andwas.”

into theNiko clapped a hand on Rhyker’s shoulder in thanks and I tipped my  
Frankie’s direction. She raised an eyebrow at me before we turned  
ive toldheels and headed for the front door. Frankie was one of the only pe  
Clearhaven that didn’t put up with our shit and I didn’t want to piss  
. if youEver.

ly haveAfter all, she was the one that had raised Rhyker. He had inherited hi  
rprisedfrom somewhere.

t a foot



ow him

did sheThe rest of the day we spent in classes trying to act like everythi  
normal when it was anything but. This week we didn’t have the lu

...king at waiting until Friday night to take care of what needed to be done because  
th.” He Niko’s fight and Saturday I had a game. Trey had already promised  
nce my would look for camera feeds in the area to figure out who the third r  
eded to assailant was, but Peter and Jake were dead. They just didn’t know it y  
still in We had given Ivy some space for a few days, but I doubted Niko would  
right. His word. When we passed her on campus earlier, she was back to v  
e heard baggy jeans and t-shirts, either to conceal some of her injuries or to h  
on the body. A piece of me wanted to reassure her that the words her at  
there as spoken weren’t true. It wasn’t her fault the same way that it wasn’t I  
but I shoved it down.

ho was That night, we headed to a party at Phi Delta. Peter and Jake were bro  
the fraternity and every Thursday they partied before stumbling into  
who it Friday morning looking dazed. Our presence wouldn’t alarm  
considering that we added to the entertainment. There was an un  
head in agreement that every Thursday night we would be there to give the  
on our polished rich kids what they wanted. It was another one of Vincent’s  
people in that I hated. In the past, I hadn’t minded as much because there was a  
her off. gaggle of girls who were ready to spend the night with guys from the  
side of the tracks that their father wouldn’t approve of, but tonight  
is crazy annoyed me. I bided my time, waiting in the corner and sipping a soda  
Once Peter disappeared outside onto the back deck, I made my mov  
and Trey already had Jake waiting in the car. I pressed the gun into th  
of his back when I stepped up behind him. “Let’s go, rich boy. We’re  
to walk around the house and you aren’t going to make any noise or I’  
ng was your brains out.”

xury of He whimpered a little and his gait faltered as we made our way  
Niko’s car. To the untrained eye, it looked like we were just two guys

ause of a conversation, which is exactly what they would tell the police wh  
that he investigated their disappearance. This murder wasn't sanctioned  
mystery Forsaken, and we wouldn't have the cops on our side. I shoved my  
et. into the back seat with my weapon trained on him and Niko to  
ld keep Usually, I would feel regret or remorse for what I was going to  
wearing tonight all I felt was icy rage. Even though five people were cramm  
ide her Niko's car, only three would be returning.  
int had I wasn't sure how we would find the third man who attacked Ivy  
Maya's, beach, but we would. They would expose themselves. Eventually.

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a conversation, which is exactly what they would tell the police when they investigated their disappearance. This murder wasn't sanctioned by the Forsaken, and we wouldn't have the cops on our side. I shoved my victim into the back seat with my weapon trained on him and Niko took off. Usually, I would feel regret or remorse for what I was going to do, but tonight all I felt was icy rage. Even though five people were crammed into Niko's car, only three would be returning.

I wasn't sure how we would find the third man who attacked Ivy on the beach, but we would. They would expose themselves. Eventually.

THIRTY-SEVEN

THIRTY-SEVEN

## *Caleb*



**M**y fingers hovered over my phone, begging me to text the blonde haired girl that had been on my mind. I sighed and pocketed my phone, choosing to stay away to keep her safe instead. If my grandfather or his associates thought we were getting too close, it would spell disaster for both of us. I wasn't sure why they were so preoccupied with Ivy considering the fact that she seemed to be unaware of the fact her father had promised to Abraham Wells.

Seeing Ivy with Cam and Niko was bad enough most days, but the idea of being with Wells infuriated me. I flexed my fingers around the highball I was holding and tried to push the thoughts out of my head. I couldn't think about it right now, especially given who else was gathered around the mahogany conference table. Fletcher Vance, Abraham Wells, Jensen, Gervais Fouquet, and Zachary Dixon sat around with cigarettes, casually talking business. I ignored most of it and kept my mask carefully in place.

“Caleb, how is Rosalyn doing?” Fouquet asked me, pulling me from the chaos in my head.

I tilted my head to the side and stared at Andrew. “You should be a deacon. It’s his granddaughter, after all.”

My grandfather clenched his jaw and took a long puff of his cigar, let the smoke into the air before leaning back further into his seat. “Caleb talked about this. You are being asked because she is who we have named you with. Neither of you have taken that seriously. Ms. Jensen has trusted upon herself to run around with gangsters, and you seem to be too careless in Ivy Spencer, even after our last conversation.”

Wells spoke up. “Not that I can blame you. If I were your age and had been asked to befriend a girl like Ivy, I would have taken advantage of the opportunity well. I just want you to remember that all of your actions will have repercussions for her. She will be punished how we see fit.”

Ivy had already been punished enough even if the drugs they plied her with distorted her memories. I’d heard the whispers behind closed doors. As Andrew Jensen was, at least he protected his granddaughter.

I glared at the dean and took a sip of the liquid in my glass, not wanting to fuel the fire further. “For everyone’s information, I have only contacted her since our talk to discuss an assignment for class.”

I wanted to add that the last thing I wanted was for Ivy to draw the attention of Luthor or for Ivy to be punished more than she already would be. Being betrothed to Wells would already be her own personal hell. I had seen Andrew treat the girls at parties, and I knew what happened when the girls were summoned to his office. I also knew that I couldn’t live with myself if I actually married him.

“That also wasn’t the arrangement, Caleb. How can you make her feel better if you’ve distanced yourself from her? She needs to remain unassuming until the pieces fall into place.”

I stayed silent and stared into the distance, hoping that the conversation would end. "Now on to other topics." I zoned back out, not really thinking about zoning regulations or political topics. Everything in Clearhaven, we've run by the men sitting around the table. They decided who became matched who sat on the city council seats. The police were in their pockets and taken it well for their part. The Order chose which businesses received permits and which laws were passed... and which girls would either learn to serve or disappear.

Conversation slowed as several young women entered the room carrying glasses of champagne. At least they were local women that I knew well, all have the age of eighteen, but I wanted no part of what was about to happen. I inhaled sharply and tried to stand, but a heavy hand pushed me back into my seat. "You can't leave before the festivities are over, son," my grandfather said, as he whispered in my ear. "Remember my promises. If you don't start your part, I will let your cousin have the girl that you're so preoccupied with." What was it that happened to Leyla that night? My memory seemed to have failed me a bit.

I didn't bother looking at him and turned up my cup, refusing to allow my emotions to show on my face. The night before Leyla disappeared, she had been paid to spend the night with Luthor. I wasn't in the room, but I heard her screams that echoed down the hall and her pleas for someone to save her. My grandfather simply laughed with the men standing near him as they talked about how she knew what it was like to be used by a real man now.

The morning after, I saw the mangled bedsheets covered in scarlet. I was safe from being stripped by whatever housekeeper he had at the time. She disappeared until all the next week. No one ever asked what had happened to either of them. It was something the Order was good at: finding people that no one would

conversation Fletcher Vance's grip tightened on my shoulder. "You're a part  
of caring whether or not you like it. Now you're going to sit back and let one  
of the men whores unzip your pants and do her job. Any more resistance and you  
know what will happen," he threatened in a low tone.

and paid He let go of me finally and gave one of the girls a charming smile, mo  
ving, which for her to come closer. His arm banded around her waist as I poure  
d them oralcohol, hating myself and the life I was born into. If I had known that  
this was one of those meetings, I would have tried to find an excuse to ge  
t away from carrying it.

are over "Make sure you take good care of him tonight, Clarissa. He's been  
in a lot of pressure lately," my grandfather murmured against her neck.  
I closed my eyes and sipped on my scotch while Clarissa kneeled in front of  
my grandfather, wishing I was someone else. While she unbuttoned my pants, I  
was playing come up with some sort of plan to save Ivy. Hell, to even save Ros  
e had to be some way out of the hellscape we were stuck in.

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Fletcher Vance's grip tightened on my shoulder. "You're a part of this, whether or not you like it. Now you're going to sit back and let one of our whores unzip your pants and do her job. Any more resistance and you know what will happen," he threatened in a low tone.

He let go of me finally and gave one of the girls a charming smile, motioning for her to come closer. His arm banded around her waist as I poured more alcohol, hating myself and the life I was born into. If I had known that tonight was one of those meetings, I would have tried to find an excuse to get out of it.

"Make sure you take good care of him tonight, Clarissa. He's been under a lot of pressure lately," my grandfather murmured against her neck.

I closed my eyes and sipped on my scotch while Clarissa kneeled in front of me, wishing I was someone else. While she unbuttoned my pants, I tried to come up with some sort of plan to save Ivy. Hell, to even save Ros. There had to be some way out of the hellscape we were stuck in.



THIRTY-EIGHT

THIRTY-EIGHT

## *Niko*



The metal warehouse looked like it had seen better days. Pieces of metal flaked off of it and spots of rust showed through. Concrete steps leading to double doors lay twenty feet to my left, but instead, I lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, hoping that the act would calm my nerves. Cam had stood by waiting patiently for me to finish before I went to find Tyler and Strathmore was nothing like I expected. The news always painted it as a place where politicians and businessmen hung out in fancy restaurants, but in reality, it was a film that seemed to cling to the city. There was poverty in Clearwater but this was different.

I crushed the cigarette under my heel before taking one last look at the parking lot. It was filled with cars and motorcycles, which meant that the inside would be crowded, hot, and loud. Even from outside, I could hear the dull roar of people talking and yelling inside. My fight was in less than an hour, the second to last of the night. I took a deep breath before climbing the steps.

My knuckles were already busted open from the night before. So were Peter's and Cam's. Peter and Jake had gotten what they deserved. My only

were that I wasn't able to hurt them more than I had. Ivy hadn't spoke and when I tried to check in on her after I was finished, her window locked, a signal that she wasn't ready to see me yet. If she ever was.

Opening the door, the sound intensified to a deafening level. I pushed bodies in front of me, trying to catch sight of either Tyler or the running the fight. In the center ring, two men were hashing it out, sw blood covering their bodies. Cash exchanged hands, and the air smel musk, beer, and smoke.

Finally, I saw them. An older man sat against the far wall at a tab Tyler across from him. Their heads were bowed close, no doubt in c hear what the other had to say.

I hated everything about the place and the fact I was fighting. Racing v thing, but at least outside the sea of people didn't feel as suffocating.

reached the table, I took another deep breath and tapped on Tyler's sl to get his attention. He looked at me and grinned, holding out his fi quick bump. "My boy! The man of the hour. Niko, this is Maurice. I stuff up here. I was just telling him you were going to make us a money."

He glanced over what I was wearing with approval: Jeans, a black sh the steel-toed boots I wore when I was out on certain types of erra Vincent. Maurice didn't stand, but he extended his hand for a sha fighter with no frills. We'll see how well you do tonight, and maybe make this a regular thing." I kept my mouth shut, choosing not to tell l the last thing I wanted to do was make this a regular thing. Between th

and gas money, it wasn't really how I wanted to spend my Friday Getting my face beaten to a pulp wasn't really my scene.

A blond-haired guy holding a leather jacket jogged up to Maurice and

n to mea kiss on his cheek. "Maurice, baby, tell me you saved me a spot tonight  
ow wasThe older man rolled his eyes and wiped his hand across his face. "E

Ethan, you always do this to me. Where the hell is Ignacio? He was su  
past theto keep an eye on you. Aren't you supposed to be laying low? If y  
personarrested, I don't want to hear anything from Dominic this week."

eat andThe man he called Ethan, who looked more like a tattooed surf  
led likesomeone I expected to fight in a place like this, gave me a wink. He

least a decade older than me, but his arrogance made me chuckle. "  
le withknows I'm here but you. Help me out."

order toI gave Tyler a wave goodbye to let him know I would see him after n

and pushed back through the sea of people, closer to the makeshi

was oneAnxiety churned in my stomach and crawled beneath my skin. I wa

Once Ifor the fight if for no other reason than to burn off the excess adrenal  
houlder made my heart pound.

st for aWhen Ethan prowled into the ring, I grinned to myself. Somehow,

He runsmanaged to talk his way into a spot. Ethan wasn't a small guy. He wa

a lot ofmy height but made like a swimmer with broad shoulders and a

waist. When he stripped off his shirt and threw it at a guy near the ri

irt, andglared at him, I could see just how much ink covered every inch of h

nds forAs tall as Ethan was, his opponent was taller and bulkier. I v

ike. "Amesmerized as the two of them exchanged blows. Ethan bounced

we caneasily on his feet, dodging and ducking out of reach. He was compl

him thatease in front of the crowd and when he emerged victorious, the oth

ie driveunconscious on the concrete floor, I cheered.

nights.And then the announcer called my name, cringing me back to reality

here to participate, not simply watch. Cam gave me a tight hug. "You

plantedthis, man." Trey lightly punched my shoulder, and I exhaled, ste

ht.” myself as I walked to the metal fencing rounding the ring. I hopped o  
Dammitt,a hand caught my bicep. Ethan stared at me for a moment and his f  
pposedsoftened as he leaned close so that only I could hear what he wanted  
you get“You’re about the same age that I was when I started, and I can tell  
your first time.”

er than“How?” I mouthed at him, certain that the noise from the surrounding  
was atwould wash out my words.

No oneHis eyes twinkled with amusement. “You’re a little too pale and  
covered in sweat. Right now, you need to push out everything else  
y fightgoing on inside of your head. Don’t let him land too many punch  
ft ring.tipped his chin toward the person I was paired against. We were  
s readymatched as far as height, but he outweighed me by at least fifty poi  
ine thatmuscle. “He’s fucking brutal; don’t let him corner you. Remember t  
only rule here is not to murder the other person.” He slapped my back  
he hadmy money on you.”

s about“Thanks,” I told him and moved away, ready to get the fight over with  
taperedThe other guy started toward me fast as soon as I was inside, obviou  
ng whoready. He was faster than I would have thought considering his sheer s  
is skin.I had made the mistake of thinking that I would have time to acclima  
vatchedfist caught my jaw, momentarily stunning me before I realized I ne  
aroundmove. Ethan was right. This guy was brutal. I had been in plenty of  
etely atbut none of them were like this. I careened to the left to avoid another  
er manthe face. His foot almost caught my knees, but I managed to step ou  
way just in time and landed a punch against his ribs. We danced like  
r. I waswhat could have been seconds or an eternity. The only thing I coul  
i’ve gotabout was that I needed to win. My brother and sister were relying on  
eadingsoon as my palm collided with his nose, a crunch I felt under my tou

ver and blood trickled down his face. Even over the crowd, I could hear siren features background.

to say. The anxiety that had slowly been disappearing returned, amplified by this knowledge that I couldn't get caught here. None of us had bail money.

The demeanor of the other man changed swiftly. He thrust his hand toward me and patted me on the back. "Maybe next time we can actually finish.

fuck out of here. You don't want to get caught by Strathmore PD."

I gave him a quick nod. Cam and Trey waited beside Ethan as I jumped over the metal fencing, the four of us pushing with the rest of the crowd toward the exit before the entire thing was busted up. As soon as we

were outside, Ethan vanished into the night and the three of us raced toward the car. Cam jumped in the driver's side, peeling out of the parking

lot that the speeding in the opposite direction of the red and blue lights. As they vanished. "I put in the rearview mirror, a wave of nausea washed over me.

Whatever chance I had to get the money I needed had just vanished.

I pulled out my phone and sent a text to Tyler asking him if there was a fight or a race scheduled for the next week. The response I got was

exactly what I had been expecting: no. I sent a second text to the slacker who owned the house and asked for just a little more time. His response

was better than I expected. He said he could give me until mid-October. In the fights, making me feel better, like there was hope, all I felt was my throat tight

and I laid my head against the car window and stayed there for the rest of the night. Once we were outside of Strathmore's city limits, Cam slowed down

and grabbed my hand with his, lacing his fingers with mine and squeezing. I knew Trey saw it, but I didn't pull away from him. The last time I

felt like this, the hurt washed over his face and tonight I didn't think I could handle it.

What the fuck, and I didn't know what the fuck I was going to do, but I couldn't give up

s in the many people were relying on me.

After Cam dropped Trey off, I asked him to drop me off a few blocks by the house. The corner of his mouth tipped up, but he said nothing. I was sure if he knew where I was going, but I didn't want to argue.

I walked to Regina Spencer's house, hoping that just maybe I could get the girl who preoccupied too many of my thoughts. My heart fell when I tried the window and it was locked. She was shutting me out still. My finger rubbed over the scar on my hip where she had marked me.

It wasn't like I could blame her, but it hurt. Just a little bit.

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THIRTY-NINE

THIRTY-NINE

## *Ivy*



**I**t had been two weeks since my attack, and things had been fairly well, quiet as far as Clearhaven went. There had been a few incidents of bullying, but they didn't even bother me. Trash had been thrown into my car and the word 'whore' was spray painted on the sidewalk of my house. The side of the Honda had been keyed, as if that would hurt me. Had they seen the driver's side door? Despite my physical appearance, a few guys propositioned me for money.

Mostly, I felt nothing. Not about any of that.

The Forsaken left me alone for the most part. We were all choosing to ignore each other, which suited me fine even though sometimes I still wore pajamas to bed, even if I locked my window at night. The bruises from unknown men had mostly faded, the remnants easily covered by foundation and concealer, and life continued on as usual, with me praying that the next four years would go by quickly.

Rosalyn had texted me earlier that day asking if I wanted to grab a coffee on campus before I holed up inside my room for the weekend. I had agreed. Since I was off the Forsaken's radar for the moment, seeing

person who I could call my friend was a risk I was willing to take. As she entered the small dining hall, she wrapped her arms around my neck and squeezed tightly. The hug made my body hurt, but I relished it. I missed human contact and the small display of affection made me feel happy for the first time in days.

“How are you feeling?” she asked me, worry creasing her brow.

While we waited in line for the barista, I messed with the edge of my hair and tried giving her a reassuring look. “I’m fine. I’ve just been busy with work and school.”

She raised her eyebrows and put a hand on her hip. “You’re fine? Even though you were so quiet about what happened on the beach?”

I didn’t want her to worry about me and I didn’t want to talk about how I was really feeling. The pills that I had gotten from Niko weren’t working as well as they had in the beginning, and the supply I’d gotten was dwindling. My nightmares had returned, making me dread the idea of sleeping. Being alone in my room while phantom hands clawed at me reminded me too much of what happened at the beach. Even now, the thought made me feel sick. “You’re just trying to focus on the positives. Now that I’ve started focusing on the positives, Regina’s laid off some.”

We gave the barista our order and stepped outside to the campus grounds where the sun was already setting. Frankie had given me the day off, but I wasn’t really sure what to do with my time. All of my homework and the project with Caleb were complete. I didn’t have a clue how I had accomplished all of that while high and half the time drunk. I briefly considered going to the gym, but the thought of being out by myself didn’t appeal to me.

“What are your plans for the evening? The guys are all busy with school.”

soon as meeting involving the gang so we could go to dinner and they would  
ack and know. Just the two of us.”

missed I hesitated for a moment before giving her a small smile. “Yeah, that  
for the good. Let me grab my car so that when we’re done, I can head home. The  
thing I want to do is invoke Regina’s wrath again.”

Lately, our relationship had been less volatile. Between the fact that  
t-shirt homebody who never broke curfew and me wearing jeans and t-shirts  
between conceal the bruises on my body, she’d left me alone. Occasionally, she  
if I had spoken to the dean, but I avoided her questions by quickly changing  
en after the subject. He had sent me an email to which I didn’t respond asking  
to stop by his office, but after the brunch where he cornered me, I would  
w I was swallowed rusty nails rather than be alone with him.

as well She grabbed my arm, stopping me in my tracks. “Don’t worry about your  
ing. The right now. I’ll just drop you off later.”

ng held “I really should go get my car,” I insisted. “Just in case. What if Regina  
of what done early or something?”

ah, I’m “No, it’s really not a problem. Besides, I miss you playing DJ while I was  
school, I narrowed my eyes at her and pulled her along to the parking lot. “Really  
are you hiding?” She looked guilty while my gaze swept the parking  
eenway “Where the fuck is my car?”

f, and I She cleared her throat and gave me a sheepish grin. “It was supposed  
half of surprise, but I’m having your door fixed. It should be done by the time  
time to you off tonight. After what happened at the beach, I wanted you to have  
sidered easy way to escape if you needed it.”

hat late I turned my face away from her so that I wouldn’t cry again. I had given  
grandfather his payment for the car last week and squirreled away the  
me big my paycheck to replace the smashed in door. Crawling over the sea-

d never fine when I thought Clearhaven was safe, but now? “I can’t pay you by the week, but between the hours I am working at Frankie’s—”

sounds She grabbed my hand and pulled me over to Black Betty. “You don’t care about the last anything, Ivy. Well, just one thing, but it isn’t money. After today, I’m shutting me out of your life. I know why you have been avoiding me, but I was always going to mess with me. We grew up together and right now I am asking Niko several favors. They’ll get over themselves at some point. Come on, I’ve asked needs to work through his shit.”

anging *And in the meantime, I was caught in the crossfire.*

for me I simply grabbed her hand and squeezed. Ros always made me feel like I was alone. “Thank you for everything.”

“Whatever, bitch. Now get in the truck so I can kidnap you.”

our car Despite the tightness in my throat, I snorted. “The last thing you want is kidnapping charges, so I guess I’ll go.”

nyker is We hopped in the truck and headed to a small diner that wasn’t on the main street, hoping to avoid at least some of the crowd. Everyone would be getting ready for parties and the game this weekend. As Ros drove, she peered at me out of the corner of her eye. “Did you hear about the two guys that are missing from campus?”

I shook my head while watching the buildings pass by. The leaves had started to change colors and spots of red, orange, and gold decorated the trees. “Do the police have any leads yet?”

have an “Peter Bell and Jake Fox, two of the frat boys from campus. What was that they showed up at a party and then vanished sometime that weekend? One of them left a note saying that they both wanted a fresh start and the rest of them couldn’t get that in Clearhaven. The parents argue that there is no one who was

ack this either of them would have done that. Peter was dating Arabella's Violet, and she is claiming that he wouldn't have left her behind."

owe me In the back of my mind, a voice told me that there was something y, stop about the entire situation. Maybe the two men had run off to but the Clearhaven. God knew that was what I wanted to do, but I had to ask. 1 doing did they go missing?"

am just Ros turned off the main drag and parked in front of Waffles and I

"About two weeks ago." Right around the same time that three attempted to rape me on the beach. I couldn't say for certain what a little happened to Peter and Jake, but I didn't think that they had left town and the only people who knew for certain were currently avoiding clutched the door handle, ready to get out and change the subject.

need is I didn't feel sad that the two of them were dead. If they were the one attacked me, they deserved whatever happened to them. The only thing e Strip, felt was a trace of fear. One guy was still out there and they could come

g ready

ie from

ig from



Ros and I ate patty melts and drank milkshakes at a booth inside. The l begun was exactly like what you would expect and transported you to a d . "Who era. Red stools and checkered tile with pin-up girl posters plastered walls. Even though I wasn't overly hungry, I forced myself to eat. I I heard been interested in food lately—I hadn't really been interested in anything t night. Rosalyn was watching me carefully as she shoved cheese fries in ind that mouth. We took our time eating and talking as the sun disappeared no way sky faded to black.



A bell over the door rang and the high school girl who was waitress  
whoever it was to sit wherever they liked. The diner wasn't super b  
weird and there were plenty of open booths. Drunk college students w  
escape until after midnight. I glanced over my shoulder when pe  
"When in the booth directly behind me, annoyed that our bubble of privacy h  
broken.

Scoops. Arabella sat there staring with her two friends, a smirk plastered on h  
e men "Who would have imagined that we would have run into you here, Ivy  
at had I didn't respond and turned away, choosing to grab one of Ros' frie  
either, ignore them," she said under her breath. "Bella is a bitch because she  
g me. I Niko, but she can't have him."

I scoffed and grabbed another fry, even though I was ready to leave.  
es who the other girls, the one with bleach blond hair, spoke up. "You know,  
g that I that they all dumped you now. Guess they found out about what a p  
e back. trash you really are."

I stood up and leaned over the girl, whose eyes widened. "Here's the p  
with that rumor. I would have to date one of them for them to dump m  
girl's eyes widened and behind me, I heard a soft laugh. "I'll be back  
interior need to get some fresh air. Something in here smells bad."

Rosalyn grinned at me as she scooted out of the booth. "Yeah, let me p  
on the we can get the hell out of here. I'll be out in just a minute."

hadn't The night air cooled my face when I exited the building. Tonight ha  
ing—but damn near perfect before Arabella showed up and I wondered why s  
nto her so obsessed with me. I had left her alone and Niko wasn't speaking t  
and the locked my window every night.

Leaning against the tailgate of Rosalyn's truck, I stared up at the sky a  
a deep breath. Gravel crunched nearby, and I looked up. A man stood

ng toldfeet away, and I straightened up, ready to run if I needed to. Somethin  
usy yethim was familiar, but I couldn't place it. "There you are. I was wo  
ouldn'twhere you had gone to."

ople satHis smile was stiff and didn't reach his eyes. I took a step back, but  
ad beenfast, grabbing me by the arm and yanking me close to him. "Not this ti  
one's here to save you, and I think my sister has plans for you." I su  
er face.felt a sharp prick in my neck and a wave of nausea hit me, even as m  
?" began relaxing.

s. "JustMy vision went dark as a scratchy hood was placed over my head. "  
e wantsgo," I managed to slur out, my fists weakly pounding against my ass:  
can't believe this is happening again. At least Ros knows where I am  
One ofhurries, she'll see him and call the cops, or maybe Niko. Would he s  
I heardeven after everything that had happened?

iece ofA car door opened nearby and my body was shoved inside. I fought  
my eyes open and my breathing even, although I thought my heart  
roblemburst out of my chest. What was going to happen to me? My eyelids  
e." Theheavy as my limbs and something inside of me was terrified of letting  
κ. I justgiving into the grogginess overtaking me. My legs and arms were no  
my own. I didn't know what he would do to me, what he wanted,  
pay andwould ever wake up again. I was torn between trying to fight and just  
in.

ad beenFlashes of the monsters that visited me night after night played beh  
she waseyes. The hands that grabbed at me while I couldn't fight back and th  
o me—Iof hopelessness that accompanied the dreams. The thought intensif  
nausea that threatened me. Throwing up in the hood was the last thin  
nd tookneeded to do.

d a fewEventually, the need to sleep, even if for just a moment, won.

g about  
ndering



he was When I finally woke, it was to icy liquid being poured over my  
me. No shocking me awake. My head pounded from whatever they had given  
suddenly and the shivers wracking my body only intensified the pain. The ho  
y limbs still in place and I couldn't see anything. A cold, hard surface was l  
me and my ankles and wrists were tethered together behind my  
Let me contorting my body into an uncomfortable position. "How much c  
ailant. I even give her?" a shrill feminine voice asked. Fucking Arabella. I  
l. If she have known that she was involved with whatever bullshit was happe  
ave me me.

A masculine laugh echoed in the space, and I wiggled my fingers, tr  
to keep regain sensation. "I gave her enough to get her in the car. She sho  
: would waking up now. Let me know when the three of you are done with l  
were as I'll take care of it. Remember not to kill her. You know who she belon  
go and My breath felt too hot inside the hood, the scratchy fabric clinging  
) longer skin. I tried to stay calm, knowing that if I hyperventilated right  
or if I wouldn't do any good. When something heavy hit the center of my st  
: giving I screamed. That wasn't a punch. Each successive blow caused more  
lance through my body. Again and again, they hit me with something  
ind my and my throat grew hoarse from the screams that they elicited.  
e sense And then the taunts started. Whore. Trash. Slut. Between each blow  
ied the body, the three of them chanted things. Words like those could be i  
g that I but they morphed into something else entirely. "Everyone knew w  
showed up here. The poor fallen rich girl living in poverty. From

heard, daddy never really loved you. That's why you were sold off highest bidder." Someone drove their foot into my ribs and I groaned not wanting them to know that I was even conscious. I reminded myself the man from earlier said they couldn't kill me, but when someone kicked me in the head, that thought faded away. Even if they didn't kill me, the god was trying their damndest. Breathing became difficult as the pain overtook me and tears trailed down my face.

Eventually, I closed my eyes, realizing that there was no escape whatever hellscape I found myself in. I faded in and out of consciousness allowing the pain and fatigue to pull me under, blanketing me from what happened. If they killed me, at least the pain would end. I briefly questioned what would happen if I died. Would the nightmares that haunted me cease to exist, or would we be trapped together for the rest of eternity? The last thing I heard before the darkness took me was, "Let's see if they want you after this. No one will," as pain seared through my cheek.

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heard, daddy never really loved you. That's why you were sold off to the highest bidder." Someone drove their foot into my ribs and I groaned despite not wanting them to know that I was even conscious. I reminded myself that the man from earlier said they couldn't kill me, but when someone kicked me in the head, that thought faded away. Even if they didn't kill me, they were trying their damndest. Breathing became difficult as the pain overtook me and tears trailed down my face.

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FORTY

FORTY

## *Trey*



**M**y eyes were blurry from staring at the screen in front of me, the lines of code fading into one another. Every time I attempted to connect, there was an error message. Somewhere, there was a typo, and I just had to find it. My phone had been vibrating beside me for the last hour, but I had ignored it. My mother had called earlier in the day and I didn't want to talk with her again so soon. Whatever mess she was in between her drug dealer and Johns, she could work out. Once I left home, I swore I wouldn't be involved in any more situations or give her money to feed her addictions.

I grabbed my keys and headed out, making sure that I locked the door behind me. If my mother discovered where I was living, she would steal anything she felt was worthwhile to pawn. I learned that when I was a teenager. My mother's dealer found out where I lived and she really owed him that much money... I didn't want to think about it.

What I really needed was to grab more energy drinks. Niko and Cameron were probably asleep by this time of the night, especially with the game tonight. We'd been lying low and focusing on school and shit with the Forsaken. The night Peter and Jake disappeared. Someone at the party had snitched



claimed that they saw Cam with one of the guys. The police had show campus and asked us a few questions, but the three of us played it cool didn't have any evidence we actually knew anything and were grass straws. They needed someone to point a finger at or give a reason for what happened.

If Peter and Jake had been kids from our side of town, no one would have lifted a finger. The authorities only cared if they were rich white kids who had their entire future in front of them. No one was surprised when someone from the wrong side of town disappeared. They were declared runaways if they were under the age of eighteen and if they were older... Their parents cried themselves to sleep with the help of a bottle. Dozens of missing items littered the outside of the tienda on the corner and the gas station on the highway, faded and tattered from the weather and time.

Cam was still playing football and stealing time for photography when I had a chance. Niko was... who knew? He was quieter than usual and disappeared or making excuses for reasons he couldn't go out with us at night. I had to talk to him, but ever since the fight was broken up, he had been a distant conversation. As far as what I had been doing, it was just more of the same shit on a different day. Running errands for Vincent in the middle of the night and focusing on my programming while trying to keep my head down.

And if I tried to start my car, and the engine sputtered for a moment before turning over. My phone rang again, and I sighed before looking at the

Vincent. "Sup?" I answered, not really in the mood for whatever he was saying. "Where the fuck are you and why haven't you been answering my texts?" "Shit."

"Sorry man, I didn't hear it ring." It was a lie, but completely believable. Music played in the background and a woman squealed. "What

n up on need?"

l. They "Sam has a package for me, and I want you to bring it over. I can trust you to keep your mouth shut."

or what I knew the drill, but I didn't understand why shit like this couldn't wait until morning. "Yeah, I got you."

ld have Sam lived behind the gas station, so the stop was easy enough, but it didn't matter to me that I would be out longer than I cared for. I pulled into his driveway and someone opened my backdoor, depositing a tote bag of whatever. The two of us got in the car and I spoke and this pick up was no exception. I could have been transporting anything from stolen cars to black market organs and I would be none the wiser. Occasionally I'd see posters almost got to me, but it was better if I didn't know. The only thing I cared about was the money I earned doing bullshit like this. It meant

after I graduated, I could get the fuck out of here and drag the guys with me. When I pulled up at Vincent's house, Angel was outside waiting for me. He had a cocky grin when he opened the back door and reached for the bag, hoisting it over his shoulder. "Catch you after the game tomorrow night?" he asked, making small talk. I always wondered why Angel was around this town and how he had ended up in the Forsaken. If you followed him long enough, you quickly came to the conclusion that he was smart

watched everything going on around him and was careful with what he said. I finally bumped knuckles with him through the driver's side window. "We can't see. You know how Cam gets if he loses a game."

anted. "I hear that." He turned his back to me and disappeared inside the front door. "On the way back to the gas station to finally pick up a source of caffeine"

phone vibrated again, but I ignored it. Whatever Vincent wanted could wait until morning. Between his neighborhood and mine, there was a long drive home. The road that was completely empty late at night and thick clusters of

grew on both sides of the road. In the early fall, I loved rolling down the windows and turning up my music, letting myself go for just a moment. I could almost taste freedom, even if I still had seven more months until I could leave Clearhaven behind.

On the side of the road, a pale shape lay in the ditch. It wasn't a bag of shit and it wasn't an injured animal. Typically, I would ignore shit like that and he especially as late as it was, but something about it stole my breath. I slammed my brakes so hard that my car swerved to the right as it skidded to a stop. I opened my door and jogged over to the mass in the ditch. It was a woman. From the shirt she was wearing, I knew exactly who it was. A note pinned to the front of her shirt, but I didn't look at it yet. Her wrists and ankles were tied together behind her back, and a black sack concealed her identity.

My mind raced through all the possibilities of what I could do with her. I knew Niko was going to be devastated. I wasn't sure what Cam would feel, but I knew she would be moved. I was going to fly off the handle.

I reached for her wrist and pressed down with my thumb, checking for a pulse. At least she was still alive, even if after this she didn't want to live. I worked quickly, untying the black sack tied around her neck and lifting her. My fingers gingerly traced her pale face and examined the injuries. I could see. Blood was caked around her nose and the side of her head, but her face looked better than I had expected. They had avoided hitting her face for the most part.

The long red tresses that I'd grown accustomed to were gone; inches of her hair had been hacked off, and I knew who was to blame without ever looking at the note. I undid the knots and waited for her to wake up. I lifted her carefully. Her face tensed in pain even though she was conscious. "New girl, I need you to wake up."

My mind raced through all the possibilities of what I could do with her.

own my hospital wasn't an option, not in this town, and neither were the courts. I could go fuck herself. Gently I placed her on the backseat and slid into the car, knowing that I really only had one option—Niko's house.

I took off looking down at my speedometer occasionally, careful to stay under the speed limit. The last thing that I needed was for the sheriff to see that, me over at this time of the night with Ivy in the condition she was in. She hit the whimpered softly, the pain and the motion of the vehicle rousing her to stop. I drove from whatever state she was in.

Some foreign emotion clung to me as I glanced in the rearview mirror. The girl was laying there and mingled with the anger I felt. It had been years since I had been afraid. I wanted to chalk it all up to fatigue, but that wasn't allowed her. If Cam wanted to punish her, I'd allow it, but no one else was supposed to touch her.

I skidded to a stop in front of Niko's house and got her out, cradling her against my chest while I jogged down the sidewalk toward the front door. Ivy, for all my arms, she felt small and fragile, vulnerable and breakable. So until she was safe to be. I knew she really was inside. No one else could ever put her through the bullshit she had lived through. I shifted her weight and tried the door, which surprisingly wasn't locked. "Niko!" I called out, not caring if he was home. Even if he was, he would be too high to be of any help.

Niko and Cam appeared from the kitchen, with Ros and Rhyker behind them. Niko's hair was disheveled like he had been running his hands through it and Ros' eyes were red. "Where the fuck have you been? Haven't you answered the phone, asshole?" Cam gritted out. Every breath wasn't tense when he saw who I was holding in my arms.

"Shit," Niko muttered under his breath as he took Ivy from me. She groaned and Ros started crying again, hiding in the crook of Rhyker's arm.

ps. Hershoulder.

I inside “Guys, I didn’t know you had been trying to call me. I thought it was  
mom. She’s been calling again,” I mumbled, hoping to defuse the tension.  
keep it rolled off Cam in waves. “What’s going on?”

to pull Ros rubbed her hands across her cheeks. “We went to the diner and A  
in. Ivy showed up. Ivy walked outside while I was paying, and by the time  
slightly done, she was gone. I called Niko to see if he had heard from her or  
anything. We drove around for hours trying to find her. The cops were  
at the anything unless she’s missing for twenty-four hours. You remember  
since I happened when my uncle was missing...”

accurate. She trailed off while she watched Niko. He touched Ivy’s hair, what  
used to of it, clenching his jaw before he pulled the note from the front of her

“They cut off her hair in retribution. The bitch is dead.”

ing her “It was an eye for an eye.” I’d heard Niko pissed before, but this  
floor. Indifferent. I looked at him and shook my head. “If she was anyone else  
like the agree. We need to be smart about our next steps. Right now, we need to  
up with Ivy. We need to undress her and see how bad she really is. I didn’t  
a knob, her to the hospital because...”

s father Ros’ eyes went wide. “You can’t,” she hissed at me. “The last thing  
needs is to get any more attention from anyone within the Order. She  
directly has Wells sending her emails.”

s hands I pushed my glasses to the top of my head and leaned back against the  
1? Why “I know that.”

part of Rhyker pulled Ros to his chest and met my eyes. “Call Angel. He’s  
medic in the Army before all of this bullshit. Tell him I told you to be  
quietly not to tell Vincent. He owes me a favor.”

hyker’s I wanted to ask why, but instead dialed the number. “Didn’t expect

from you again tonight.”

was my “Yeah, me neither. Listen.” I relayed the message from Rhyker and  
ion that him to meet us at Niko’s house. He swore under his breath but told  
would see me in fifteen.

Arabella

and I was

or knew



on’t do The moments while we waited were some of the longest in my life. I  
er what heard his motorcycle pull up outside, I breathed a sigh of relief. She  
more than a simple once-over from a gang member, but it was better  
was left nothing. I regretted the fact that none of us had majored in something  
er shirt with health care. With a little more knowledge, we wouldn’t have  
bring someone else into this shit.

his was Angel strolled through the door and paled when he saw the girl Niko had  
else, I’d on the couch. “What the fuck is going on, you guys?” he muttered  
to focus sitting on the edge of the sofa.

er’t take Cam started toward him, but Niko pushed a hand into the center of his  
holding him back. “He has to examine her, Cam,” he whispered. Angel  
ing she the shirt covering her torso and Cam tried to move again, but Niko  
already him around the shoulders with both arms and blocked his vision. “He had

Ivy groaned beneath Angel’s touch and her eyelids fluttered as he pressed  
ie wall her ribs and stomach. Black and red streaks marred her skin. Whatever

happened to her, this wasn’t just punches and kicks. Rope burns adorned  
his wrists. His fingers stopped at her neck and he tilted his head to the side  
call and examined something. He pulled out a small penlight and lifted her

staring at her pupils. “I wish she was awake. She definitely has a conscious  
to hear

and I think they drugged her. I'm going to stitch up her cheek the best I can but... Just keep an eye on her. I'll be back in the morning. She needs to be awake by then."

"What do we need to do until then?" Rosalyn asked.

Angel pressed his lips into a thin line as he shoved the penlight into his mouth. "Nothing. Now you wait and keep her comfortable. Give her something to ease the pain." He looked between Cam, Niko, Rhyker, and me. "I need someone between the four of you, someone has something. And, Rhyker, you need to take Ros home before her grandfather has a fit. My debt to you is paid. Deal with it tonight."

Rhyker extended his hand, and the two of them shook, understanding that some communication was occurring between them.

Angel went outside and pulled a small bag from his saddlebag. He laid it on the floor beside the couch, and I watched in amazement at how quickly he worked. "It's probably going to scar," he muttered to himself as he worked. "I'm sorry, baby girl."

He shoved the dental floss back into his bag and stood, passing the needle to me. "Throw that shit away. I'm headed out, but try to keep it clean. I'll come by to check on it again tomorrow."

After he finally left, Ros pressed a quick kiss to Ivy's forehead and took her home. "Should we try to clean her up?" I asked.

Niko shook his head and bit the inside of his cheek. "Let's just keep her comfortable. When she wakes up, we'll do it."

Cam lifted Ivy from the couch and headed toward the bedroom that Niko shared. The three of us worked on removing her shoes and the jeans she was wearing before adjusting her on a pillow in the center of the bed. I lay on one side and Niko on the other while I made a pallet on the floor

st that I “They can’t be allowed to get away with this,” Cam muttered. He was  
ight beside, propped up on his elbow and staring down at the girl I’d found  
side of the road while Niko watched them both carefully.

Niko reached out and brushed the hair from Cam’s eyes before rest  
s pants. hand next to Ivy. “We will, but first, let’s worry about tomorrow.”

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“They can’t be allowed to get away with this,” Cam muttered. He was on his side, propped up on his elbow and staring down at the girl I’d found on the side of the road while Niko watched them both carefully.

Niko reached out and brushed the hair from Cam’s eyes before resting his hand next to Ivy. “We will, but first, let’s worry about tomorrow.”

FORTY-ONE

FORTY-ONE

## *Ivy*



**E**very part of my body ached. Behind my eyes, both arms, my wrists, my cheeks. It even hurt to breathe. It felt like my head was heavy and full of water I couldn't clear. My eyes were glued shut, and I struggled to pry them. When I finally did, I regretted it. The light streaming into the room was blinding and made me want to vomit. My throat was dry as I swallowed down the bile that tried to escape.

I tried to figure out where I was, but the bedding surrounding me was unfamiliar. Then it dawned on me. The scent of the ocean and sand tinged with musk didn't reassure me as it might have a few weeks ago. Arabella was behind the attack, but I was quickly learning to trust no one. I just needed to figure out how to get up so I could walk home and lay in my own bed.

And then there was the vague scent of rotten seafood that someone had tried to mask with air fresheners. No amount of odor eliminator could get rid of that smell. It just added to the nausea. I really hadn't thought through my plan for revenge and I regretted it.

The pain was blinding as I tried to sit up. Every breath was a struggle, the pain in my sides. Still, I fought, my fingers digging into the mattress, inched my way into an upright position. The world spun around me, I waited for it to stop, closing my eyes for a moment.

“Look who’s finally awake,” a deep voice stated, and I looked up. He leaned against the doorframe, shirtless in low-slung basketball shorts. His hair was typically hidden by his shirt covered his ribs and chest. “How are you feeling, new girl?”

“It hurts,” was all I managed to get out. Even talking hurt.

He closed the gap between us and sat on the edge of the bed. His hands traced the marks on my wrist and I winced. “I bet. Let’s get you some water for your throat and I’ll get you something to help you feel better. I’ll be back.”

I closed my eyes again, resting my head against the headboard behind me. Voices drifted inside from the hallway, and I snorted when I overheard

they were saying. “Quit spraying that shit. It isn’t helping!”

“Yeah, well, maybe you need to clean your gear or you left food somewhere weird again. Open the windows up because I can’t live like this.”

“Do you think someone spilled shit on the carpet?”

“After we check on Ivy, we’ll see how much it costs to rent a new room because this is fucked.”

I laughed slightly and instantly regretted it. Apparently, laughing also hurt. They got everything they deserved, but unfortunately, I was going to be punished by the smell—at least until I could figure out how to get the fuck out of there.

Niko popped his head into the room and frowned when he saw me sitting up. In his hands, he had a bottle of water and some pills. He approached

le from carefully, like I was a wounded animal. “How are you feeling?”  
ess as It was only the second time someone had asked me, but I held out m  
e and I determined to do things on my own. He uncapped the bottle and hand  
me. The water made my throat feel a little better. Swallowing the pi  
p. Treya another story. Each one felt like a shard of glass, but I didn’t dare to s  
Ink that out loud. I also didn’t bother asking what he gave me. After wh  
are you happened to me since I ended up in Clearhaven, maybe death wou  
mercy.

The irony wasn’t lost on me that the boys who tormented me were n  
; finger caretakers as Cam entered the room. His shoulders were tense and  
e water was clenched as he looked me over. A mixture of anger and sadne  
be right plastered on his face. I wanted to hide beneath the blankets from the  
and the guys who were all treating me as if they were actually conce  
ind me. I didn’t know how they were connected to my latest attack, but I kne  
rd what were. All roads led back to them.

I didn’t want to feel anything for any of them, especially not Cam. M  
ewhere was already broken and my heart, no matter how bruised, was all I had  
Trey finally returned holding a pile of clothes. “I think we should  
cleaned up, new girl. You’ve been in those clothes since Friday mornin  
nachine I wanted to ask them how long I had been out, but chose to keep my  
shut. Whatever Niko had given me was slowly taking effect, helping  
o made at least dull the pain. Slowly, I scooted to the edge of the bed. Niko offe  
as also his hand, but I ignored it, determined to do everything by myself. He  
v to get me, pulling the blankets back and moving them out of the way while C  
a hand through his hair. “This is fucking ridiculous,” he muttered  
ting up. scooping me into his arms.  
the bed Even being picked up hurt, despite whatever drugs were coursing thro

system. He held me against his body like I was something precious in his hand, something he was determined to destroy. Tears pricked at the back of my eyes again, a feeling that I was becoming all too familiar with. I didn't know his name was Camden Barrett. He was hot and cold, busy telling me he would break me and then treating me like porcelain. He walked down the hallway and then deposited me on the toilet while he turned on the water. I stared at the tile in front of me for a moment, not recognizing the woman who looked like me.

The red mass of waves that had once hung to my waist were gone. Through my curls that were haphazardly cut were left in their place. Dried blood caked his jaw the side of my head and under my nose. My face was a little swollen but it wasn't as bad as I expected.

The world My body was another story, and I looked down at the bathroom tile that I had earned. I wasn't seeing anything else.

Now they Niko appeared a moment later, holding a pair of basketball shorts and a cotton shirt, but Cam scowled at him. "She's not wearing that. Go get her out of my body of my clothes." Niko opened his mouth to argue but Cam simply said, "I'll leave. I'll test me today."

Get you Niko disappeared as Camden adjusted the temperature and then turned back to me. "I'm wordlessly reaching for the hem of my shirt. I closed my eyes and pretended my mouth was somewhere else as he helped me remove my clothes and his eyes were fixed on the bruises that marked my torso. Gently, he took my chin and lifted it to meet his. It was a contrast to how he usually treated me. "The people responsible for this are going to pay, little ghost. I promise you. No one is allowed to break you but me. I'm not going to let anyone else hurt you like this."

Before Cam stalked out of the bathroom, leaving me sitting there by myself. A moment later, Niko reappeared holding a different set of clothing. I didn't know why it mattered what I wore. As soon as I could, I would face

and not asleep. Being awake was exhausting and at least I could hide from reality of my dreams, no matter how shitty they were. Taking in a deep breath, I didn't get to stand, but my knees buckled beneath me from a sharp stab of pain. My hands caught me and held me, holding me up. "Come on. Let's get you in the shower and then back into bed."

As much as I didn't want Niko worming his way into my heart, when things like that, I could feel where he had worked his way through the inch. He knew me and what I wanted. He stripped down quickly, and I tried to get away. The three men who were looking after me while I was broken, but it like they were crafted by Renaissance sculptors. Their muscles were lines carved into their flesh and then adorned by tattoos. Anyone else would be happy to be surrounded by them, but I just wanted to be left alone.

Maybe Cam was right. I was a ghost, clinging to the shadows and unable to be seen by most. Forgotten by nearly everyone.

Niko helped me into the shower and held me up from behind. The spray of water hit my skin, and I hissed from the sting. Slowly, he soaked a cloth and rubbed it over my body, gently washing every part of me. Afterward, while I leaned on the wall, he shampooed my hair. When I was left of it. His fingers massaged my scalp and let myself enjoy his touch. He turned off the water and toweled me off before dressing me in the clothes he had brought in before turning away.

Instead of picking me up like Cam had, Niko waited patiently for me to get dressed and walk back to his room. Every step was torture, and I knew my goal of trying to go home on my own was unattainable. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the girl from the beach watching me. She said nothing, but I didn't duck back around the corner.

By the time I was tucked back into bed, my eyes were heavy again and



ality inready to sleep. Any questions that they had could wait.

, I tried

. Warm

ou into



By Wednesday, I was ready to go back home, or at least to Regina's  
he said The headache that had plagued me since I woke up was long gone,  
cracks. smell in the house had intensified. Stick-on air fresheners were so  
to look across the house, but it didn't help. It just smelled like flowers mixed  
looked dead fish. Who would have known that my trying to get back at them  
re hard backfire? Rotting shrimp permeated every surface of the house, but  
I would had figured out the source—which was every vent I had found. I had

every class this week and Rosalyn sent me assignments when she could  
noticed was determined that by Friday I would be back on campus, bruises and

From the whisperings I had heard from the guys late at night, the  
I warm planning on paying back Arabella and her friends. It gave me a smug s  
aped up joy to know that they wouldn't go unpunished for what happened to  
of me. was it enough? Could I keep them from targeting me again? The line  
l, what said about my father selling me off to the highest bidder played in m  
I touch. on repeat and I pondered if there was any truth to it.

clothes I spent the daytime catching up on what I had missed earlier. Niko  
brought me food and tried to convince me to eat. I nibbled at whatever  
to stand offered, but my appetite was gone. I was confused about why the  
original taking care of me when three weeks ago, Cam had made it clear he wa  
corner of tear me down.

ing and Despite my absence, my aunt hadn't written to me, which made me fee

d I was

Niko helped me to wrap my ribs, and every night they made a small the backyard. He pulled me into his lap and gave me bottles of beer with my pills. My pain was present but dulled in those moments. I list they talked about sports or things with the Forsaken while Niko house. stroked my back.

but the Every night I lay wedged between Niko's and Cam's bodies, and one cattered hands laid on my hip possessively. Their presence reassured me and t ed with me at the same time. No one had mentioned the terrible haircut I ha t would knew I needed to fix, or the bruises that were slowly turning greener. no one Still, I knew I couldn't get comfortable with them. Even though it missed like things were changing, there was a false sense of security clin d, but I them.

l all. Thursday morning, when Trey and Cam were both absent, Niko sat y were edge of the bed to check on me. He handed me the pills he usually di ense of fresh bottle of water. "What are your plans for the day?" me, but "I'm going home today after the three of you leave for school." M she had sounded surer than it had for a while. I couldn't cling to them. Onc y head feeling better, things would go back to how they had been, no matter wanted. Despite the pain, the past several days had been something c or Trey fantasy novel. Three guys who waited on you hand and foot and care ver they how you were feeling? It wasn't reality, especially given the three gu y were begun questioning if the kick to the head I received last Friday nig nted to given me mild brain damage.

He swallowed, and I watched his Adam's apple bob. "Are you going el sick. me away again?" I shrugged at him and stayed silent. "You need allie could be that. I could convince Cam to lay off, at least until you feel be "We'll see." That was all I could offer him. He pulled my clothes fi

l fire indresser, placing them in a neat pile. They had been washed and fold  
to takeheart was shattering into a million pieces, but I couldn't show him. I c  
ened aslet anyone know. A small part of me wanted to stay forever, but it  
slowlynever last. Cam had made it obvious that no matter what, he would br  
eventually. What he didn't realize was I was already broken and now  
of theirknow if I could put myself back together again.

errifiedNiko pulled a small baggy of pills from his pocket and laid them be  
d that I“Remember, these are only to help you sleep.”

I just nodded at him, letting him blindly believe that was what would l  
seemedA small part of me speculated that if I took them all at once, I mi  
ging toasleep and never wake up again.

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dresser, placing them in a neat pile. They had been washed and folded. My heart was shattering into a million pieces, but I couldn't show him. I couldn't let anyone know. A small part of me wanted to stay forever, but it would never last. Cam had made it obvious that no matter what, he would break me eventually. What he didn't realize was I was already broken and now I didn't know if I could put myself back together again.

Niko pulled a small baggy of pills from his pocket and laid them beside it. "Remember, these are only to help you sleep."

I just nodded at him, letting him blindly believe that was what would happen. A small part of me speculated that if I took them all at once, I might fall asleep and never wake up again.

FORTY-TWO

FORTY-TWO

## *Ivy*



**W**hen I arrived at Regina's house, my car was sitting out front the curb and hers was gone, hopefully to work. My eyes widened when I saw the door was fixed and there was a bow on it. After sending a quick text message thanking her for my car and letting her know I was home, I hid the baggy of pills inside a hole in the underside of my mattress. There they were out of sight. I tried to tell myself that I would only take them when I was going to sleep and that I could live with the pain. My ribs ached and my bruises were still tender, but it was fine. More and more I was wondering if I should pack my things in the car and try to stay somewhere else.

I messaged Frankie to let her know I would be at work later that afternoon. Rhyker had spoken to her for me when I was staying with the guys. She tried to convince me to take more time off to recover and that my pay would be fine, but I couldn't. I needed out of my head and away from home. Staying busy would keep me from thinking too much and about everything. If I could just stay busy...

I found a pair of scissors in the kitchen and stepped into the bathroom examining what was left of my hair. Carefully, I trimmed some pieces even them out. No one had said anything about it yet, and I was grateful I knew it was just hair and that it would grow back, but the angry red on my cheek was another story. I could hope that it wouldn't scar, but the stitches told another story. If Arabella thought that cutting my hair off was tied up would break me, she was wrong. Nothing she did could be as bad as what the guys had done or Caleb pushing me away. I wiped away the blood that was left laying on the sink and started the shower to get ready for

After I dressed in a pair of jeans and a shirt, I applied eyeliner and ran next to the mirror before deciding to style my hair. My aunt had a bottle of gel on the shelf, so I squirted some in my palm, determined to make the most of the situation. I ran my hands through my hair, dispersing the product evenly and scrunching it some. Between the new haircut and the eyeliner, I looked like I belonged in a '90s punk band. I could live with that.

The pills hidden under my bed called my name and impulsively I popped them into my mouth before I left. If I was stuck in hell, I might as well as make it more tolerable.

Afternoon.

He tried

Friday morning, I was on campus early. Caleb had sent me three texts from the office asking me to talk while I was at work last night. I finally caved and agreed to see him before classes to get it over with. As much as I didn't want to admit it to myself, I missed him, even though he had been ignoring me.



hroom, Niko, Cam, and Trey were waiting beside the building where my first race was held and I rolled my eyes at them as I tried to rush past. Calm and patient. I supposed to meet me inside in five minutes, and I didn't have time to waste with whatever they wanted. Sure, they had taken care of me, but that was ultimately the reason I was incapacitated in the first place. As I opened the door, someone's arm banded around my torso and pulled me back against a hard chest. "Where do you think you're going without even saying hello?" Niko murmured against my neck before biting a spot below my ear. I elbowed him, but he simply chuckled. "I really like your hair like this." I huffed out a breath and turned to face him. "Since when do you want to say hello?"

He raised an eyebrow up at me. "It's obvious that we were waiting for you." He held up a small paper bag. "I brought you breakfast." I stared at him for a moment. "Why would you do that?"

He lifted a shoulder in response. Cam watched the situation with concern and ran his thumb over his bottom lip, lost in thought. "Little ghost, you can't just show up without saying goodbye. Why are you here so early?"

I grabbed the bag from Niko before shifting away. I wasn't sure if I should trust them not to poison me, but the food smelled good and they hadn't hurt me. Yet. "If you must know, I'm meeting Caleb in a few minutes."

The muscle along his jaw ticked, and he stalked closer, touching my uninjured cheek. "The fuck you are. After last weekend, everything you do is for our business. Everything."

I glared at him and tried removing his hand, but it didn't budge. "Shouldn't I meet him, Cam? Give me a good reason and I'll think about it." "I could give you a million, but I'll just tell you one. You shouldn't meet Caleb. His grandfather and your father are friends. In fact, his gran-

st class and Abraham Wells are also good friends. Don't you find it suspicious that Caleb didn't try to contact you the entire time that you were staying in town to deal but now suddenly he wants to talk?"

My heart fell, and I clutched the paper bag tighter. Any hope that I had managed to gain regarding Caleb died a little with every word Cam said against a "Are you trying to insinuate something?" I asked quietly.

"Hello?" Footsteps sounded behind me and Cam leaned forward, brushing his lips against mine in an almost kiss. "You're a smart girl. I'm sure you can put the puzzle pieces together." He drifted away and looked over my shoulder at me. "You're a slow learner, Vance. So is your cousin."

When I turned my head toward him, his eyes widened for a moment, but he was quick to wipe the shock off his face. Instead, he focused on Cam and smiled. "Well, good morning to you, too. Here I was thinking that you were making friends after our run-in at the party where you shoved your fingers in my curiosity mouth. Guess I misjudged the situation." He put his hand on the shoulder you left my back and winked. "The same way you misjudged the fact that I can't only get to taste Ivy one time."

My cheeks heated as I stood there caught between the four of them. I didn't killed my throat and opened the door. "If you want to talk, let's talk."

I headed inside to a small sitting area designed for students to sit during my between classes and pulled out an orange chair on the far side. You do followed me inside a moment later. He pulled a chair up next to me and reached for my hand. I pulled it away and crossed my arms over my chest. "Why? What did you need to say since it had to be in person?"

"First, I want to know what in the fuck happened, Ivy? I saw you last night. I don't trust and you wouldn't talk to me. Your cheek..."

"Is the least of my problems right now."

ous thatHe chewed on his lip for a moment. "I'm sorry for pushing you  
with us,thought it would be better. My grandfather and his friends... they're  
struggled to find the words to say, and I grew more aggravated w  
t I hadconversation by the moment. "I think you need to leave Clearhaven  
spoke.your bags, change your number, and never look back. I pulled some  
out of my trust fund. The two of us can go together. We'll ditch my ca  
his lipsstate line and buy something with cash. Hell, we can get new identities  
put theI overheard--"

oulder.I cut him off by standing up. "I can't just run away with you. This is  
We barely know each other. When were you going to tell m  
but hegrandfather was friends with the dean and my father?" He paled a  
am andstood up, trying to reach for me, but I stumbled back. "How do I know  
re weretrust you? What else have you decided to hide from me, Caleb?"  
ngers in"Then just take the money I withdrew and run, princess. I'll make su  
mall ofenough time has passed and then I'll find you."

I wouldI shook my head in disbelief. "No. I'm not taking your money. When I  
to run, it will be on my terms, and I'll make sure that no one from Clea  
clearedwill ever find me. First, you don't talk to me for nearly three weeks a  
you try to convince me to run away. What's really going on?"

tudy inHe worried his lip between his teeth again, the skin raw. "I can't tell yo  
CalebHis words tasted bitter, and I turned my back. "Let me know when yo  
me andI shouted over my shoulder.

y chest.On the outside I was strong, but inside, everything hurt. I had hoped  
would clarify things for me, but he was quick to tell me he couldn't  
st weeksame way that I couldn't just take his money. In a different lifetime,  
we could have run away together and had a happily ever after. I cou  
pretended to be completely oblivious to his current connections.

away. I But this wasn't a fairy tale, and everyone had secrets, including me. I  
...” He inside the bathroom to splash water on my cheeks and take something  
with the would dull my feelings again.

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But this wasn't a fairy tale, and everyone had secrets, including me. I bolted inside the bathroom to splash water on my cheeks and take something that would dull my feelings again.

FORTY-THREE

FORTY-THREE

*Cam*



I sat in the passenger seat of Niko's car on Saturday evening waiting for Arabella and her friends to come out of the house. Thankfully, this was a bye week. I had too much shit to do, and even though I loved the party, I needed a moment to breathe. I also had something that I needed to take care of. Ivy was safely tucked away at Frankie's, out of harm's reach, and I was under direct orders not to allow her to come to the Forsaken party that was happening tonight. Rhyker knew what we were doing and agreed, that Ivy had already been through enough shit.

Arabella, Violet, and whatever the third girl's name finally sauntered into Luthor's beach home fifteen minutes after she said she would. Pun wasn't her strong suit, and she didn't even try to make an excuse, unlike the other girls. The three of them were dressed in skirts that barely covered their asses and tank tops that plunged to their waist. It was perfect for what I had planned. She looked at the seats in the car and grinned at me. "There are three seats and only—"

I gave her my best fake smile and pulled her into my lap, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. She had gone to the hairdresser shortly after her



incident in the parking lot at the gym and now her hair was neatly tucked into a chin-length bob. Her actions against Ivy were completely unnecessary. She didn't even score, but women rarely did. Which is why I invited her and her friends out tonight. I had told her to stay away, and that Ivy had her limits, but Arabella refused to listen. "That's because I wanted to keep you close to me tonight," I whispered in her ear.

She was an idiot for trusting me after everything that I had said to her and three of them were. All it had taken for them to agree to come with us was a small phone call stating that we missed her and the Forsaken were throwing a party. She squealed with joy and told me she knew we would get tired at some point. I laughed to myself about that. I wasn't done with Ivy yet by a long shot.

Niko pulled a joint out from the glove box and lit it up, taking a long drag. "Aren't you going to share with us?" Arabella asked in her nasal voice. It was the thing about Arabella and other girls like her. She rarely wrote a script. I knew that as soon as Niko lit up, she would demand to share.

I wondered what her grandfather's reaction would be if he knew she forced the three of us around like a lost puppy, begging for dick. In seven or eight years, she would graduate and leave all of this behind. We were supposed to do something to do while she bided her time and, later on, have stories to tell her friends at the country club. She probably already had a loveless engagement on the horizon brokered by elderly men to strengthen "family ties." What that meant. When she became a lonely housewife whose husband was cheating on her with his secretary, we would be the ones she fantasized about at night as she got off.

I brushed my fingers along the exposed skin of her arms. "Don't worry, I have something for you and your girls and once we get to the party,

rimmed will be more where that came from.” I pulled the new strain of tea w  
ecessary supposed to distribute from my pocket. The new strain hit harder and  
ited her been tested by the three of us yet, but I had seen what happened when  
was off Vincent’s girls took it. It was perfect for what I wanted.

rep you She held out her hand, but I clicked my tongue. “Open up.” And I  
good little slut she was, she complied, allowing me to place the pill ins  
ner. All mouth. I brushed my thumb along her lower lip and watched her eye  
s was a before giving the other two to Trey. He smiled at the girls who were  
owing a on either side of him, leaning against him. If they thought they were sa  
l of Ivy him, they were wrong.

ret. Not By the time we pulled up in front of Vincent’s, their pupils were blo  
they swayed on their feet once they got out of the car. Arabella wrap  
g drag arms around my waist to hold herself up and I allowed it, consider  
e. That necessary evil. We strolled up the sidewalk with her clinging to me, si  
rent off my shirt. I rubbed a circle on the exposed skin of her back to reasst

“Once we’re inside, I’ll get you a drink and drop you off in the game  
ollowed You should make some new friends while you’re here, baby. I  
months’ something to take care of, but I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

simply She stuck out her bottom lip and pouted. “But I thought we were g  
tell her hang out.”

gement I gave her another fake smile and poked her bottom lip. “Don’t worry.  
hate ever going to have a great time.”

nd was The music from inside was deafening, and people were everywh  
d about lights inside were dim, but in the corner, I saw several of the guy

Arabella over from head to toe. They were another group of peop  
y, baby. would never go off script. The predictability was boring but perfect. I  
y, there

ve were into the kitchen and grabbed a red plastic cup. “What would you  
l hadn’t drink?”

one of She nuzzled into my chest again, rubbing her body against me. “Sor  
with fruit.” Her voice was husky, and I tried not to laugh at her. This  
like the version of being seductive, and it was pathetic.

side her I poured some pineapple juice, coconut rum, and melon liqueur into  
s dilate and stirred it. “Try this and see what you think.”

: sitting She tipped the cup back and swallowed. And swallowed. And swa  
ife with some more. I raised my eyebrows when she handed it back to me.

another.” As I fixed her a second drink, Trey and Niko came into th  
wn and with Violet and... whatever her name was in tow. “Guys, you’ve go  
ped her this drink,” she told her friends as she rubbed my chest.

ing it a I gave them a tight smile. I wasn’t supposed to be bartender tonight,  
melling patience was already wearing thin with Arabella touching me so  
re her. Niko’s eyes crinkled at the corner as he watched me. He knew how  
e room. hated her and he was amused by the whole thing. I handed them each  
’ve got Arabella fisted the front of my shirt and brought me down closer  
mouth. “You promised there would be more of the pills when we go  
oing to Cam.”

That was off-script for the evening, but I was prepared for it all the  
You’re “Are you sure you need another one? You seem like you’re already  
pretty good.”

re. The She licked her lips and batted her eyelashes. “Please?”

ys look I handed her the three remaining pills from my pocket and they ea  
ple that one. “Alright ladies, time to get you settled in while we talk about sor  
pushed important.” I placed my arm around Arabella’s shoulder and led her  
set of stairs into a finished basement. Along the walls, there were c

like to and loveseats where people were making out. The lights had been replaced with colored bulbs, casting the space in a red light. Speakers played something from upstairs. A few people were playing darts on the far side of the bar and a game of pool was happening in the middle.

Angel and Rhyker watched me from the bar that was set up along the cupside, and I lifted my hand to point to them. "If the three of you need any drinks, just ask them and they'll take care of you tonight," I said loudly enough for Arabella to hear me over the bass. "Do you like pool?" She nodded. "I need a drink at me as she took everything in, and I led her toward the table. The room walked toward us with Justice a step behind him.

"Boys, who have you brought with you tonight? You rarely introduce your friends."

I grinned at him and gave him a fist bump. "Hey man. This is Arabella. Violet, and..."

"Emmaline," Trey supplied as he stared at me.

"Yeah, Emmaline." I gave the brunette a cheeky grin. "I promised the three of them a good time tonight and maybe the guys could help me out here, Vincent narrowed his eyes for a moment at me, but then smirked. "We can."

His fingers traced along Arabella's chest and her lips parted at the same time as his touch.

I squeezed her fingers and leaned in close. "Give me fifteen minutes and I'll be back to check on you."

Her eyes were fixated on Vincent as he kissed her knuckles and I was almost forgotten. I guess bagging him would be the ultimate fuck you to her. The five of them gathered around the pool table and I snuck outside for a moment to work on my plan.

Niko pulled out another joint and lit it, letting his body rest against the

replaced the house. "Are you sure about this?"

The music Trey rubbed his eyes. "She gets what she deserves, Niko. Don't forget the room what she did to Ivy. Besides, she's getting exactly what she wanted, just with us."

the left When we were done smoking, we snuck back inside and took out Ivy more heading back to the basement. It was a shame that I had to take the pictures enough needed with a phone and not my camera. When we finally found out about her back to the girls inside, even I was surprised. I expected to get a few pictures of Vincent of her with her skirt hiked up, but the scene in front of me exceeded my wildest expectations.

the us to Violet was lying on top of the pool table with her skirt around her waist and her tits hanging out. Arabella was bent over with her face between Arabella's thighs and Vincent plowing into her from behind. His palm held her against the green felt. In the corner, Emmaline was riding Justice like she depended on it. I opened the camera on the phone in my hand and snapped a few quick photos.

the." The scene almost would have been hot if the three of them weren't doing it. Yeah, I cunts. I sent the photos to Trey so he could do his thing with them. He started laughing at the entire situation. All of their parents would receive a call shortly, and so would Fletcher Vance, Arabella's grandfather. I wanted to see and I'll wished that I could see the look on his face when he realized Vincent had raped his granddaughter.

as long We were also posting it on social media for the rest of the campus to see. My family wasn't allowed to kill Arabella, which was exactly what she deserved, but to give one said that I couldn't make her life hell.

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FORTY-FOUR

FORTY-FOUR



## *Niko*



Later that night, after most of the partygoers had left, I grabbed a drink before heading to the deck. Vincent was sitting out on himself, and I needed a chance to talk to him without the guys around meant well, but they would stop me from what I was planning. Cam and had headed home earlier in the night. They were sending out photos of Arabella, Violet, and Emmaline for everyone to see. I had argued that they deserved to be killed no matter what the consequences were, but Vincent reminded me I needed to have patience. This was just a warning. No one in this town was untouchable, even if they thought they were.

Arabella and the others were... somewhere. Holed up in one of the rooms on a couch. Their hangovers tomorrow would be the kind that would make them wish they were dead, especially when they found out what we had done. Vincent lit a cigarette in the darkness and gave me a long look. I approached him. “The girls that you brought with you tonight are in hell. I like them.”

I wasn't sure how to respond. He was going to lose his shit when he found out that Arabella was Fletcher's granddaughter. There were just some

he didn't like messing with. "Yeah, they are something else." I showed hands in my pockets and rocked back on my heels. "I need a favor, and hoping that maybe you could help me out."

He studied the cherry on the end of the cigarette for a moment. "What favor do you need, Niko?"

The conversation was going better than I anticipated but I was weary. It came with a price tag. "I need to make some quick cash. The rent's due and it's due next week. I've tried everything, but the next race isn't for weeks and..."

He gave me a smug look. "That's all? I expected something worse. I can do exactly what you can do. There's a party tomorrow night at Fouquet's house and I think that they'd appreciate you. It would add entertainment."

I took a large sip of my drink and nodded to him in acknowledgment. "What's the pay?" "A thousand cash. Just treat them right and do what they ask. Take some before you head over there. They'll like that. A good-looking guy like you shouldn't have any problems making money at a party."

I felt sick to my stomach but chugged the drink in my hand and crushed the cup. "Thanks, man. I really appreciate it."

I lay in bed that night and felt like I was drowning. Cam snored softly next to me and I watched him while I struggled to breathe, wondering how in the hell I was going to keep what I was doing a secret. Whatever may have happened between us in the future vanished into thin air. If he or Ivy found out, they would want me.

Gervais was a part of the Order, just like every other rich person in this city. Just like every person who had power. I knew exactly what I was v

ved myinto tomorrow night, but I had to. I needed to make sure that Kat  
d I wasSergei stayed in school and that the three of us stayed together, no  
what. They were all I had.

kind of



Favors

behindThe next night, I parked in front of the brick mansion and popped so  
r a fewjust like Vincent suggested. I'd worn a pair of dark-wash denim jean  
black button-up shirt, not knowing the dress code for an event like thi

I knowdid you wear when you were going to suck a rich dude's dick?

GervaisEven though I'd considered it with Cam, I didn't have any experien  
l to thethe entire situation put me on edge. After I felt my muscles relax, I k  
on the front door. Gervais answered the door and he smiled at m

gment.you're the young man that Vincent texted me about. Come in and get  
Do you like wine?" His words were colored by his accent, making  
ome tea more at ease even as he let his eyes linger longer than might be polite.

like youThe truth was I hated wine. It was too bitter and dry for my tastes ar  
me a terrible hangover, but I still politely responded, "I'd love a glass."  
hed theHe gestured for me to come in and once I was inside, his hand landed

back, urging me to continue forward. He made small talk about just r  
r beside tonight and how it was a small party, but I was too busy looking ar  
the hell pay any attention. The difference between how I lived, and he c

ppenedstaggering. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceilings and the marb  
neither was so clean, light reflected off of it. Large oil paintings hung on th  
and piano music floated through the air.

s town.

walking

tya andThe apprehension that I had felt when I arrived faded away as I looked at the other occupants of the room. The party wasn't what I had expected.

Everyone was glassy-eyed and rosy-cheeked from the alcohol, but it wasn't the orgy I had expected. Everyone was still clothed. A few women sat around the room talking to the men beside them, laughing.

Gervais brought me a glass of scarlet-colored liquid and I took a sip, and the bitter fruitiness to coat my tongue. "Thank you."

He gave me a small smile. "You're welcome. I have a few friends that I love to meet you."

I drank the wine as we sauntered around the room making small talk with the guests. Every time that my drink was half empty, someone would knock it casually. My body and head felt light, almost like a balloon that would pop away. After a while, I put my glass down, knowing that I had more than enough to drink. Everything was too hot, and I unfastened the top button of my shirt, hoping that it would cool me some. I couldn't quite hold on to the conversation that the men surrounding me were having about the market. I heard the words, but they seemed almost distant.

I mumbled an excuse about needing to find the restroom, and someone offered to help me find it.

That was the last thing that I actually remembered with complete clarity about that night. Everything went dark afterward. Later, I would realize that my legs and arms wouldn't work. It was like they didn't belong to me. I had never affected me that way, and neither did alcohol. I remember waking up in the middle of the night laying on my stomach, my clothes stripped off.

Someone whispered in my ear something about being a wolf in sheep's clothing. The voice was so familiar, but I couldn't place it and didn't know what my mind was playing tricks on me. The only other thing that I remembered

d at the was blinding pain as someone shoved themselves inside of me. What  
t to be. know was how many of them there were or if there were photos taken  
wasn't like that. Vincent hadn't warned me they would drug me.

around The next morning, I woke up feeling sore. My head felt like I had been  
a freight train, and so did my ass. I ignored the droplets of blood on th  
llowing as I dressed quickly, ready to get the hell away from Gervais. On the l  
table were five one hundred-dollar bills and a note.

t would *Niko,*

*I had a great time last night. I hope to see you around.*

with all *Gervais*

ld refill I shoved the money into my pocket and dialed Vincent. When he ans  
ld float didn't let him speak. "I thought you said it was a thousand."

re than "Calm down and be thankful you got the job. It was a thousand, but I  
itton of take my cut. You know I get fifty percent, whether it's drugs or ass."

1 to the I hung up and peeled away, driving aimlessly. Of course Vincent go  
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tears of frustration to stream down my face. I had been so close to h  
omeone's solution to my problems. Instead, I just had one more secret to keep.

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was blinding pain as someone shoved themselves inside of me. What I didn't know was how many of them there were or if there were photos taken of me like that. Vincent hadn't warned me they would drug me.

The next morning, I woke up feeling sore. My head felt like I had been hit by a freight train, and so did my ass. I ignored the droplets of blood on the sheet as I dressed quickly, ready to get the hell away from Gervais. On the bedside table were five one hundred-dollar bills and a note.

*Niko,*

*I had a great time last night. I hope to see you around.*

*Gervais*

I shoved the money into my pocket and dialed Vincent. When he answered, I didn't let him speak. "I thought you said it was a thousand."

"Calm down and be thankful you got the job. It was a thousand, but I had to take my cut. You know I get fifty percent, whether it's drugs or ass."

I hung up and peeled away, driving aimlessly. Of course Vincent got a cut. Nothing that he did was for free. I beat on my steering wheel and allowed tears of frustration to stream down my face. I had been so close to having a solution to my problems. Instead, I just had one more secret to keep.

FORTY-FIVE

FORTY-FIVE



## *Ivy*



**N**one of the guys had spoken to me since our run-in on Friday morning. Well, except Caleb. He texted me once a day to ask me if I considered his offer. I didn't bother responding to him because the situation was still the same. I couldn't run away with someone I didn't really know or trust. Angel stopped by to remove my stitches at Frankie's shop and awkwardly handed me a bottle of vitamin e oil and told me to apply it to my scar. It supposedly helped it heal.

I was curious what his story was and how he had gotten tangled up with Forsaken. He was quiet and intense but looked like the god Thor come to life with his long blond hair and bright blue eyes. When he stared at you, it was like he was prying pieces of your very soul from you.

I saw Rosalyn flirt with him as he was leaving, but decided not to question her about it. She'd already said that Rhyker and her weren't a thing, but she hadn't gotten the message yet. If she wanted to tell me something, she would.

The project for Civ was due the next Friday and Caleb already had no time. The project was worth thirty percent of my grade and my school

depended on my doing well. He said that he would send me the paper in my email if I wouldn't meet him. Even if I refused to run, he still submit the assignment for us.

Monday night I popped two of the tablets that were left in the bag a shower, hoping that by doubling the dose I would actually sleep and that my nightmares would stay away. They were bad enough over summer, but after the attacks... somehow things had gotten worse. It longer faceless men that were vaguely familiar. They had morph something else entirely. Men who held me down while I struggled them and people kicking me while they taunted me were added. spiteful thing that had been said was uttered back by the phantoms.

I was also beginning to wonder if the recurrent dreams—the ones watched the girl being used by the older men—had any basis in reality parts seemed so familiar, but if something had happened to me, would remember it?

The air in the house was stifling, so I lifted the window to let in breeze hoping that the mosquitoes would stay outside where they be My aunt was gone again. When she saw the scar on my face, she she head and told me that no one would want me now. It was a slap in the mirror to what Arabella had said to me before she cut me. Maybe the right. The only four guys who ever had any interest in me either wa punish me, keep secrets from me, or lie to me. Maybe I was defective before my face was scarred.

I shrugged off the pants I was wearing and changed into one of N shirts, letting the scent that lingered on the cloth soothe me before I c beneath the sheets. I closed my eyes and drifted off.

inished  
would



After a while later, the creak of the springs on the bed woke me. I was still praying but I pried my eyes open to look at the man who had snuck in again. He was lying on his back, and the scent of sandalwood enveloped me as he whispered along my jaw. "You left the window open for me tonight," he murmured quietly in my ear.

I managed to roll over toward him, letting my fingertips play in the hair against his face. Every strand of hair that had fallen into his face. "I didn't mean to."

There was tension between us that had never been present before. I chalked it up to the drugs that were still racing through my veins, setting me on fire. Even his breath against my neck was torture as I stared at his eyes, which were as dark as the night. My fingers traced his lips and along his jaw, memorizing how each feature felt.

"I know you didn't mean to, but I decided to take advantage of the fact that you did." He caught my wrist and pressed a feather-light kiss on my cheek. Even the simple action made me clench my thighs together. His beard against my face, a close to me was a bad idea.

"You should go," I whispered.

He pressed another kiss to the inside of my forearm. "I should, but I'm not going to. I guess that's something you'll have to live with."

I thought of how effortless Rosalyn made it seem to have those situationships with her string of men that seemed to worship her and how much I admired that. She was bold and maybe it was time for me to be as well. Even if I couldn't have him in the light, I could still have him in the dark.

strings attached in the darkness. I straddled his waist and his hands gripped my hips. “What are you doing, beautiful?”

“What I want.” My lips crashed down on his as my hands slid under his shirt, touching the taut muscles that hid beneath his clothes. My fingers scratched at his skin as his mouth parted for me, allowing my tongue to trace and explore his. The kiss was passion and desperation intertwined with something I traced was everything that I felt but couldn’t say. He seemed hesitant to let me go, but I traced back, allowing me to do all the work. I rolled my hips against him, grinding my pussy against his cock through the material between us, trying to get him on. I wanted him to lose control with me. Even in the grove of trees, but I knew Cam and Trey, his actions had been measured.

He flipped me onto my back and nestled his body between my open legs, giving in to temptation. My legs wrapped around him to hold him close, rocking against him, needing more. Our tongues battled before he broke, breathing heavily. He groaned and laid his head against my shoulder, acting that we really shouldn’t. There are things you don’t know.”

I nipped along his jaw and untied the sweatpants he was wearing, slipping my hand inside. His cock was hard, and I circled my hand around it, realizing how thick it was. I moved up and down its length, mindful of the barbells that decorated it. The only one who had ever been inside of me was Cam, and I wondered what it would feel like as he thrust deep inside, taking me hard and fast. He groaned as I moved my hand faster. “Are

are things you don’t know about me. This entire town is full of secrets. And how His mouth latched onto the skin on my neck, sucking it hard enough to leave a mark behind. His teeth grazed along the skin before his tongue swirled with no it, soothing the discomfort. My heels dug into his back while his mouth and tongue worked my body into a frenzy. My back arched off of the bed.

grabbed pulled up my shirt, exposing my breasts to him. He pinched one nipple, sucking the other into his mouth. All I wanted was him, even if I would have to wear his shirt, it when I woke up.

My nails I pulled my underwear to the side and rubbed the head of his cock against my tongue to the wetness, trying to show him what he was doing to me. Every pass was a narrow. The head against my clit brought me closer to where I wanted to be. “Fuck,” I kissed myself and muttered to himself, pulling away from me.

Grinding Immediately, I missed the heat from his body, and a hollowness formed in my chest. He was going to leave. I had thrown myself at him and for the first time in a long time, he didn't want me even though he was lying in my bed. I rolled onto my side so that I could avoid looking at his face. He ripped something from my thighs, and a second later, he rolled me onto my back before yanking my underwear down my legs. He pushed my thighs apart and slammed inside. “Where the hell were you going, you think you were going?” he pulled nearly all the way out before slamming back in. “Ivy, inside again, the force taking my breath away. “Isn't this what you wanted?”

Ivy? Even after I said that we shouldn't, you still wanted me.” Thrust after thrust, filling my least my cock.” Thrust. “Or you just want to punish yourself.”

Delivering There was a harshness present in his tone that wasn't usually there, but I let myself get lost in his body, my nails biting at his skin and my heels digging into his ass. Every pass of his cock and the piercings lining it hit a spot on my body that I didn't know existed. The sound of our skin slapping together filled the room, and I could only hope that my aunt was passed out. He grabbed the edge of the mattress with one hand and reached between us with the other, rubbing my clit. His touch wasn't gentle, and I bit his shoulder to help muffle my scream that was attempting to break loose from my throat. His thrusts were harder, nearly violent, and I felt like I was going to split in half before he got off. “How does it feel for me to be filling up that tight pussy,

le as he Tomorrow, when you're rushing around on campus or working in Fri  
d regretshop, you'll still be able to feel me inside of you. Even when you si  
tomorrow, you'll know I was there."

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Another piece of my heart shattered, and I wondered what in the fu  
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, baby?

Tomorrow, when you're rushing around on campus or working in Frankie's shop, you'll still be able to feel me inside of you. Even when you sit down tomorrow, you'll know I was there."

It hurt, but felt good when he pinched my clit, sending me over the edge. The world around me spun as my body shuddered beneath his and wetness flooded the sheets from between my legs. Even as my muscles trembled, he didn't slow down. Instead, he threw my legs over my shoulders as he continued to ram into me, his mouth set in a cruel smirk.

I wasn't sure what had flipped the switch inside of him, or what had happened, but this wasn't the Niko that I had grown so used to. The one who I never thought would hurt me. It was nothing like what I had imagined it would be. For some reason, I thought that after he came, he would lie beside me and hold me to his chest while he played with my hair. Instead, he pulled out before he filled the condom and tucked himself away, not bothering to look at me as he walked away. He climbed back outside into the night and closed the window, slamming it shut. He didn't even bother to say goodbye. Another piece of my heart shattered, and I wondered what in the fuck just happened.

FORTY-SIX



FORTY-SIX

## *Trey*



Cam was sitting on my couch, glaring down at his literature book. He had killed his best friend. He was never exactly happy, but all he had been more of an asshole than usual. Arabella and her friends had been on campus since I emailed their parents using a throwaway account. It seemed like Cam's plans to get back at them had worked. That alone would have usually lifted his spirits.

I tried to ignore his sighs as I looked through the dean's private email account. His university email account hadn't given us any new information. Most of it was correspondence about financial documents and events going on around campus. There were a few to Ivy that made me raise my eyebrows. Several were sent recently that she hadn't bothered to respond to. He wanted to speak to her in person about her scholarship for the spring semester, even that went unanswered.

Abraham Well's private email was a different story. Nothing was specifically detailed inside the messages, but there were certain ones that stood out. They were vague enough to mention new merchandise being brought in, but they talked about what it was talking about. A party had occurred Sunday night and a man

labeled as X stated that there was a unique product that would be around. Wells replied he wouldn't miss the opportunity to sample fresh and asked if pictures would be uploaded to the usual site afterward.

Cam slammed his book down on the coffee table in front of him and rubbed my eyes. "What is going on with you today?"

He leaned forward, resting his elbows. "Where the hell is Niko at? Even the party with Arabella, he's been missing." He shifted on the couch and looked up at me. "Ivy didn't show up today."

I stared at him blankly, not knowing what to say. "Maybe she decided

she didn't need the money from tutoring you anymore. She hasn't shown up since those guys attacked her on the beach. Why would today be any different?"

He shrugged at me and I decided to drop it, not knowing where his mind was at. Of course, Ivy hadn't shown up today. He was so hot and cold with me, so it

wasn't like it would be any different. The intensity of his supposed feelings was only equal to how much he wanted her, but couldn't have her. The

issue wasn't that Ivy hadn't shown up again. It was the fact that Niko hadn't also been absent. The two of them had lived together since we were in high school. They ate together, rode to school together, slept in the same bed, and

fucked the same women. I'd seen how both of them looked at each other when they thought I was watching. Cam didn't like the fact that Niko was shutting him out, but

he didn't know what in the hell was up with him, but I figured he would tell me if he felt like it.

My phone rang next to me and I didn't look at the screen, instead answering and assuming it was Vincent needing a favor. That was my mistake. "Hello?"

"Hey, baby. I know you said we could talk about me borrowing some money from you."

"I know you said we could talk about me borrowing some money from you."

passed later, but..." I most certainly hadn't said anything of the sort, but he  
1 goodsaddled brain probably couldn't remember that. I put the phone on speaker  
placed it on the desk while she rambled. "So he told me I gotta help  
, and I money to him by Saturday. You've got to help me, Trey."

"You know I can't do that, Mom. I have to pay my rent and electricity  
er since sure that there is someone's dick you can suck for money, just like you  
ich and while I was growing up."

She wailed on the other end of the line, trying to elicit some sort of em  
led she response from me. "Everything that I ever did, I did for you. You just  
up since understand the sacrifices—"

nt?" I hung up the phone, unwilling to hear what else she had to say. It was  
ind was the same old shit painted with differing degrees of guilt. I doubted t  
ith her, drug dealer would actually kill her, but if he did, the world would be  
l hatred place.

The real Cam stood up and stretched before he headed into the kitchen. "How l  
iko had that shit been going on?"

in high I grabbed the energy drink sitting on my desk and frowned when I rea  
ed, and was empty. "A couple of weeks I guess. She just hasn't gotten the hint

"Be glad she doesn't know where you live."

no one I grabbed my keys. "No shit. Let's get out of here. I need caffeine a  
n out. I look like you could use a beer. Plus, I have an idea where lover boy  
l talk to Cam scowled but followed me out the door.

I stopped by the convenience store so that we could both grab coffee  
ad just alcohol for later, but that wasn't the real purpose of the trip. I ha  
a huge suspicious of Niko for a while. Sometimes he would disappear to  
himself in the middle of the night, but the frequency lately was high  
money usual.

er drug-When I turned down the street Regina Spencer lived on and killed the  
ker anda block from her house, Cam raised an eyebrow at me. “Why are we h  
ave theI smirked at him as I grabbed my energy drink and exited the vehicle. ‘

see.” I shoved one hand in my pocket as I chugged the icy beverage  
ity. I’mstrode toward Ivy’s house. Rather than going up to the front do  
you didknocking, I cut into the yard, clinging to the shadows.

The curtains in front of Ivy’s window were drawn and on her bed, Ni  
otionallying on his back with Ivy straddling him. Cam’s eyes grew wide and  
st don’ttensed as he watched the scene unfolding in front of him. Whatever a

felt took a backseat when Niko flipped her onto her back and h  
alwayswrapped around his waist. He groaned beside me and laid his head  
hat herthe siding. “You knew this was going on?”

a betterMy eyes were fixated on the two bodies grinding on the bed and Ivy  
disappearing beneath Niko’s pants. “Not this exactly. I wasn’t aware  
ong haswere going to get to watch them fuck.”

Ivy’s back arched off of the bed toward Niko and he pulled up he  
lized itexposing her perfect tits. All I could imagine was that I was the one w  
yet.” sucking on her nipples, trailing my knife across her gorgeous pal

leaving trails of crimson behind. Blood rushed to my cock, and I laid  
nd youon the grass beside the house. Even through the panes of glass, I cou  
is at.”Ivy’s soft moans. My cock ached from seeing the two of them a

fantasy, begging me to touch it and find relief. It had been too long  
ine andhad fucked anyone. Hell, I only got to jack off on Ivy. Right now, I  
id beensell my soul for her pouty lips to be wrapped around me while I used h

be byCam’s eyes were dark and hooded, and his hand shoved inside of the  
er thanshorts he’d shrugged on after practice. Every muscle in his body was t  
he watched Ivy roll away from Niko while he rolled a condom on. F

engine was stormy as he ripped her panties off and roughly forced her thigh  
ere?” When he thrust inside of her, I had to suppress a groan of my own. I  
“You’ll sure what was going on but from where I was standing, it looked like  
and we hate fucking her.

or and “Fuck it,” I muttered to myself, unzipping my pants and freeing my  
spit into my palm and wrapped my hand around my cock tightly,  
Niko was myself get lost in the feeling. I could almost imagine that it was Ivy  
his jaw pussy clenching around me as I listened to the violent slap of skin  
nger he from inside of the bedroom. Ivy’s whimpers were music to my ear  
er legs jerked myself faster. I wanted to get off as fast as possible knowing  
against needed to vanish before Niko was done.

Cam’s breaths were ragged standing next to me as his hand moved  
’s hand down his shaft. Niko’s back was lined with deep red scratches, and I  
that we more than anything for Ivy to inflict the same level of pain on me

Niko threw Ivy’s legs over his shoulder giving me a look at her bra  
er shirt, cunt, I knew I wouldn’t last much longer. That we were watching th  
who was they had no idea—that we could be caught at any moment—turned me  
le skin, Ivy screamed and her body trembled, her nails cutting into Niko’s back  
my can face twisted with pleasure, and that was all it took. Cam closed his eye  
ld hear groaned beside me, every muscle in his body tense. I leaned my face  
and my against the windowsill as thick ropes of cum shot onto the side of the  
since I and my heart pounded in my chest. I gave myself a moment to recover  
I would tucking myself away.

er. When I glanced back in, I noticed Niko had pulled out of Ivy and I g  
athletic Cam’s arm. “We need to vanish or he’s going to know.”

ense as Cam gritted his teeth and I could hear it where I stood. It was a mir  
his face hadn’t chipped any of them. “Maybe I should let him catch me and the

s apart.him clean up the mess I made.”

wasn'tI grinned at him and pulled slightly. “With the mood he's in... I mig  
he wasuntil morning.”

We jogged back to my car, and I laughed to myself. Maybe that was  
dick. Iwhat the two of them needed: an honest conversation and a hate fuck  
lettingtheir heads.

's tight  
coming  
irs as I



that weThe next morning, I hung near the administrative office and watched  
headed inside. She had finally responded to an email from the dean and  
up andthat she would stop by on her lunch break. The blinds in the dean's  
wantedwere open, and I snuck around the side of the building so that I cou  
. Whenconcealed but still had a good vantage point to watch what happened.  
eautifulIvy seemed nervous as she walked in holding her backpack close to he  
em andThe dean crowded her space, touching her every chance he got as he  
: on. her up against a wall. I popped the tab on my energy drink as I watch  
k as hersay something to her and the color drained from her cheeks. A l  
yes andresignation passed over her, and she turned her face away. He leanec  
oreheadto her, his hands landing on her hips as he pulled her against his bo  
e housedidn't seem happy about whatever was happening, but she wasn't f  
: beforehim, either. What did he have on her that we didn't? Why was he so ol  
with her?

grabbedI raised an eyebrow, questioning if Cam knew about this. It didn't ta  
for me to find out what he thought. “What the fuck are you doing over  
acle hehe whispered. I held a finger up to my lips and pointed in the wi  
n make

direction. The dean's hands had traveled further up Ivy's torso and the light waitressing beneath her rib cage. "Do you think..."

I shook my head at him. "If you don't want him touching her, you probably need to go interrupt this, Romeo. I don't know what I think right now to clear her's holding something over her head the same way that he does with you."

You, of all people, know how this works. What we really need to do is find time to break into his office and figure out what's going on. While we're there, we can find out what evidence he has on our shit and steal it back. Cam turned red when he saw Wells' hand drift further north and trail across the swell of Ivy's breast. "I'll be right back."

In less than sixty seconds, I had a front-row seat to Cam busting Ivy's office door. The wooden door bounced against the wall and the dean still stayed back like he had been burned. Cam grabbed Ivy's wrist and dragged her outside with him. Once they were away from the building, he nodded to her chest. "What the fuck is going on between the two of you?"

Ivy took a deep breath and jerked her arm away from Cam. "Fuck you, Romeo. Why would you think that anything is going on with us? He just wanted to look at my scholarship."

"Yeah, well, that didn't look like it dealt with any scholarship I've ever seen." Ivy told me. "Tell me what's really going on. Are you actually fucking him?"

Ivy didn't answer, choosing instead to glare in response. The two of us were drawing more attention than they needed, so I stepped between them.

"Cam, go cool off. The two of you can talk later when there are no witnesses."

He was gritting his teeth so hard that I could hear them from where I was standing. It was a miracle that he didn't break a tooth. After looking back at me and Ivy, he stalked away muttering under his breath. I stared as he



ey were slowly disappeared across the campus greenway before I took another  
my drink. "You alright?"

robably "Yeah, I'm fine."

ow, but I didn't turn to face her, but I knew she was lying. Even her tone s  
with us. dejected. "New girl, let's go get some lunch. I know he was talking  
is find about more than a scholarship, but unlike him, I'm going to let it slide.  
ve're in talk when you're ready."

k." She rolled her eyes at me. "Do you think that I'm sleeping with him?"  
ace the I swallowed the last bit of liquid in the can and smiled. "It doesn't  
what I think. I'm just along for the ride."

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slowly disappeared across the campus greenway before I took another sip of my drink. “You alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

I didn’t turn to face her, but I knew she was lying. Even her tone sounded dejected. “New girl, let’s go get some lunch. I know he was talking to you about more than a scholarship, but unlike him, I’m going to let it slide. You’ll talk when you’re ready.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Do you think that I’m sleeping with him?”

I swallowed the last bit of liquid in the can and smiled. “It doesn’t matter what I think. I’m just along for the ride.”

FORTY-SEVEN

FORTY-SEVEN

*Cam*



The water in the pot on the stove rippled while I listened to Ni  
Trey talk at the kitchen table. Niko was actually around for on  
even though something was going on with him, he was enraged w  
heard about Wells and Ivy. “He had his hands on her? In his office?”

Trey stayed silent for a moment. “I think that there is more to the s  
than meets the eye, guys. I get it. The two of you want her, but what  
really know about her? Her background?”

I picked up the box of spaghetti noodles and opened it. Everyone still  
eat, no matter what was going on in our lives. “Exactly,” I bit out. “V  
we really know about her? For all we know, she’s just as bad as her  
Wells could be using her to find out more about us. Between h  
Vincent, potentially they worked out some sort of deal to keep us in li  
could have been playing us the entire time.”

The water finally bubbled, and I broke the noodles in half to fit tl  
inside the pot. “I really don’t think that’s what was going on, asshe  
you see her body language? She looked like she was just getting  
with.”

Niko tapped his foot and rubbed his hands on his pants. "Are you sure what the two of you saw?"

"Positive," I snapped, over the conversation. "I still don't trust her. If I'm working with Wells to collect evidence on the three of us, we could be over. She's seen us dealing drugs and knows that we're associated with and Jake going missing. If the cops ask her, will she keep quiet?"

Trey traced the edge of his energy drink with his finger. "We never told anything, Cam. She's smart enough to put the pieces together, but we won't give her any details. As far as the drugs, she won't say anything. Has

she really taken a good look at her lately? She's strung out half the time. Her eyes..."

Niko's motions stopped, and he paled. I narrowed my eyes at him. "When he

He shook his head. "I didn't say anything."

Maya and Katya sauntered into the kitchen, holding their backpacks. Katya's sister was the one who spoke, digging through the back of the refrigerator.

"What are you guys talking about?"

"Don't worry about it. Dinner should be done in a little while."

Maya popped her head out and clutched the refrigerator door. "You don't have to lie to me, dickhead. You're so loud that we could hear you talking to your father."

Lay off her. She really isn't that bad. You're worse than the boy who used to tie little girls' pigtails to let them know he likes them." She flipped me

she started digging through the refrigerator again, dismissing me.

With the exception of plastic bags rattling, everyone was silent. Katya's eyes had gone wide as Sergei stepped into the room and leaned against the

doorframe. "How would you know she isn't that bad, Maya?"

Maya slammed the door shut and huffed out. "She talked to me on the phone. It's alright? One night, I snuck out when I was upset. Plus, I saw the three

e that's taking care of her. The house is too small and there aren't any secrets.

Every time the two of you fight," she pointed between me and Niko. "If she hears it, we can hear everything."

I gave her a hard look. "You spoke to her."

Peter Sergei grinned at me and patted me on the shoulder. "I have, too. Come on, agree with Maya on this. I offered to let her ride this dick, but she refused."

She laughed at his joke and it took everything inside of me not to choke him. "You didn't?" Niko sputtered before standing up and closing the door between the two. He fisted the front of Sergei's shirt in his hand.

Sergei's smile widened, and he leaned closer. "Don't worry, Niko. It happened. I think she was scared of what my abilities were, but I need to keep you a secret." I expected him to say something ridiculous, but his next words made me see red. "You should check the vents."

Niko let go of him and grabbed a screwdriver from the junk drawer under the generator, kneeling on the floor. He carefully removed the screws and pulled them out before gagging. "What in the literal fuck?" he managed to say between heaves.

Ivy thought that she could fuck with me, but she was wrong. My sister was completely off-limits to her. Her family had done enough damage and she was still fragile. Her therapist had said as much. The icing on the cake was that she was responsible for how the house smelled. And to top it off, she was responsible for my hair turning green before I realized there was dye in Ivy's eye shampoo. It had mostly faded now, but still.

All of it was Ivy's fault, and she had sealed her fate. After her attack, I allowed myself to think that maybe there could be something between us, but now?

She had made me look like a fool. I wouldn't allow anyone else to touch

ts here.but she was mine to torment.

co, “we



mpletely That night, after we finished cleaning rotten shrimp from every ven  
an.” He house, I went to Trey’s. Niko had disappeared into his room and told  
n. needed to catch up on some things. He was lying, and Maya was right  
distance could hear everything in this fucking house. As he strummed on the  
the mournful tune drifted through the walls. I left him alone, giving him  
nothing to think about whatever was bothering him.

l to tell Even though I had made spaghetti, no one had the appetite to eat  
t words scrubbed every surface in the house afterward and left the windows open  
it didn’t matter. The longer I thought about everything, the angrier I got  
before and Niko had convinced me not to drive to Frankie’s shop to confront  
re plate The more that I scrubbed, rage blinded me. Fuck her.

get out I mulled over the best way to get back at her. She was already at  
Caleb. All it took was me telling her who his grandfather was. If I could  
ter was have her, then neither could he. There was nothing I could do about Regina  
d Maya she was ride or die. She’d proven that to the three of us more times  
ike was could count. Even with all of our shit, she still stood by our side. Hell,  
she was already made her life miserable. Regina Spencer had a tendency to  
e in the We had found nothing about her mother and her father was in prison  
hard to break someone when they didn’t have anything left.

o, I had There was only one thing that she cared about, and that was her school  
een the Trey sat in front of his computer with a knife in his hand, pressing the

ich her,



the pads of his index finger. "You're sure about this? If I do it, the going back. It might finally send her over the edge."

I twisted the top off the bottle of beer in my hand. "Good."

"And if she leaves? There's nothing holding her here."

I shrugged at him. Ivy leaving would be the best thing for Maya. It would be one less reminder of what Thomas Spencer had done to her. It would be the best thing for all of us.

The cracks that had formed in our close-knit group hadn't appeared until now. The guitar, the time.

Trey turned back to the monitor and placed the knife beside him before we began typing. I watched him while he worked and ten minutes later he was back in his chair. "It's done."

I smiled to myself and finished my beer. The reaction from Ivy was genuine. It would be priceless.

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FORTY-EIGHT

FORTY-EIGHT

## *Ivy*



The phone rang again, and I rubbed my eyes. Thursdays were the only days that I could sleep in. The only thing I had to do was show up at work, but someone was insistent that they needed to speak to me. My finger hovered over the screen to answer the call. “Yeah?” I answered, sounding half-asleep. The positives of taking tea were that everything was a little duller and the nightmares that kept me up all night were missing. The downside was that when they wore off, I was exhausted. No amount of caffeine could shake the weariness I felt in my body. I wasn’t sure if that was the drugs or the constant touch of depression. The pills that I had gotten from Niko were nearly gone, and I would have to replace them soon. There was no way in hell I could get any of the guys for them, not now that Niko wasn’t speaking to me. Rhyker would tell Ros.

“Have you checked the grades for the project yet?” Caleb asked on the other end of the line. His voice held a sharp edge to it, and I wondered why he was so pissed off.

Other than the texts telling me I should run away, we hadn’t communicated much. Hearing his voice was a shock to my system. “What?” It’s not that I

hear him, it was that in my brain the words didn't make sense.

He lowered his voice and spoke slowly. "Check. The. Portal. Our grade posted last night after eleven."

"I don't have a computer at home, Caleb, and my phone is too slow to log up. Everything crashes. Just tell me what is going on."

The sound of keys clicking angrily filled the background. "Well, according to this, we made a twenty-five on the assignment."

Panic filled my veins, turning my blood to ice. My heart skipped a beat as I clutched the sheet beneath me. "That's impossible. I saw what you posted and... there has to be some kind of mistake. I'm getting dressed and I'm heading to the school to talk to the professor. Maybe it's a typo."

An eighty-five I could accept. Hell, even a seventy-five. But a twenty-five? That was the kind of grade that gave you no room for mistakes, especially since it was worth thirty percent of my grade. A grade like that would put my scholarship in jeopardy.

It would change my future yet again.



I stood outside Professor Hurst's office by ten waiting for her lecture to begin. I scanned the bulletin board attached to her door that had a large sign that read "No appointments outside of office hours. No exceptions." Foolishly, I hoped she would make one, just today. Time ticked on as I examined every flier taped to the cinderblock walls waiting for the professor to arrive.

I didn't

When she did, I knew I was out of luck. The look on her face when she came in sitting on the floor beside the door was one of frustration. “Can you?”

I stood and adjusted my clothes. “Actually yes. I was looking at the [redacted] from the project and—“

“I’m sorry, but all grades are final and not up for debate. If you want to set up an appointment for the two of us to sit down and discuss why I got this, and I think like that.”

I balled my fists at my side. “I was just wondering if there was a typo in the information we presented, I just can’t imagine getting a low grade. I was grasping at straws, trying to find a way to get through to her.”

Her face hardened. “I highly doubt that, miss. After all, this isn’t high school anymore. The work that may have passed there won’t here. Clearhaven put my expectations for their students.”

I inhaled deeply trying to keep my temper. You would have thought Clearhaven was Ivy League or prestigious from the way she was speaking. “Professor, I understand what you are saying, but I am positive that this has been a mistake.”

She rolled her eyes at me as she unlocked her office. “I’ve heard that a few times over the years, and I reassure you that there has never been a negative sign on any of our [redacted] options.” “feel free to make an appointment.”

I scanned over the paper and the rage inside of me nearly boiled over. My next appointment was in mid-November. That was a long time to sit in limbo, stressing whether or not I would be here next semester or if I would even pass the class. The other seventy percent were divided equally in three chunks: the mid-term and final. Both had essay portions, and if she did

he took my project, a quickly scrawled essay question could be my downfall. I help. My midterm was scheduled for Monday morning and my heart sank further into my stomach.

I jotted down my name on the empty line in November and left with a word, headed to the campus green. Standing near the fountain was the one I can't who would absorb my wrath. He was six foot three with golden hair and a smug smile plastered on his beautiful face. Without thinking, I walked up to him, balled up my fist, and hit him as hard as I could. Any conversation was going on stopped as everyone watched to see what I would do next. "I was," I said. He didn't drop the smug look. Instead, his tongue darted out to lick the taste of blood from the corner of his mouth. "Why'd you do that, little girl?" he taunted. "What's the matter?" he taunted.

I went to hit him again, but he caught my wrist and pulled me against his body. "I love it when you lose it like this, Ivy, but you're causing a slight distraction. You wanted my dick again, all you had to do was ask, baby," he said. I growled in frustration and kicked his knee. Rage was the only thing keeping me together. "I don't know how you did it, but I know you're responsible for my fucking grade, jackass. I know it's you."

His lips traced the shell of my ear, and he chuckled. "How I did it is a mistake. Let me list your sins so that you can understand why. We won't even start from the beginning. You were the one who messed with my shampoo. You know the reason the house smelled like death for weeks on end. Do you know how long it took to clean that up? You allowed the dean to touch you, even though you said that no one else could. But your biggest sin, Ivy, was speaking to your sister." A tear fell down my cheek as I listened to him list everything I supposedly had done.

The girl that peered at me from around the corner was his sister. The c



all. They father hurt.

ner into "I didn't know," I whispered. Trey and Niko stood off to the side wor

Trey's face had the same bored expression it did the day that Cam throu  
thout ato tell everyone about my father. For some reason, I had thought that  
e target of us were growing closer, or at least had an understanding of some so  
r and aHis thumb caught one of the tears, and he licked it off. "You ha  
d up to sweetest tears I've ever tasted. I warned you that you should leave, l  
ion that chose to stay, so now you have to suffer the consequences. Poor little r  
t. that no one loves. How does it feel to be utterly alone?" His words  
he drop dagger to the heart. "Who do you really have, Ivy? A best friend that  
ghost? known for two months? What do you really know about her? You h  
one and nothing. Even the piece of shit car you drive isn't yours yet."

inst hisI pulled away from him and ran to the parking lot as fast as I could. 's  
cene. If was speaking to the Professor and confronting Cam, someone had  
shaving cream on my car and taped photos of my father's mugshot  
holding exterior. I looked at the parking lot and saw that fliers were tucked l  
ible for every windshield wiper in sight. Fuck this. It was the least of my pro

The entire universe could know who my father was and what he had o  
secret. wouldn't change anything.

start at Cam's words rang in my ears on repeat as I drove to the one place I  
ou were least at work, Frankie wouldn't pry. I could spend hours losing my  
ow how whatever she needed to have done at the shop.

1 after II had thought that after they had taken care of me, things would be di  
; to my that maybe we had some sort of unspoken truce. The bruises on my bc  
ng that faded, but they still weren't gone, and somehow things were worse tha

I hated that what he said to me was accurate, and I hated that I was cry  
one that again.

For the first time in my entire life, I felt completely alone and like th  
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FORTY-NINE

FORTY-NINE

## *Niko*



Ivy ran away, and I just watched her as her figure disappeared around the corner. Part of me wanted to run after her, but after how I had left Monday night, I let her go. It was better this way. Leaving Clearhaven would be good for her, even if she didn't see it yet. She would be out of the gaze of the Order, out of harm's reach, and somewhere that I couldn't find her anymore.

I'd spent the week feeling like a complete failure. The letter from the landlord would be in the mail either today or tomorrow, telling me I had to vacate the premises within ninety days. I wouldn't waste his time looking for a new place. I'd find somewhere new before Christmas so he could make the repairs that were needed and move a new set of tenants into the house. He'd given me an extra week, but despite pawning everything that I had of value, I was still short \$500. I had to buy groceries and pay the power bill. Charlie had chipped in his half of the expenses, but it just wasn't enough after my father had "borrowed" some of the cash without my knowledge. After all, the children were more important than the children he had helped bring into this world.

The other feeling I couldn't shake was one of disgust. What I had done over the weekend ate at me. I was tainted inside now by what had happened. I shouldn't have treated Ivy the way I did. When I crawled through the window, I wanted nothing more than to watch her sleep. She didn't know what I had done and if she did, she wouldn't have practically begged me to fuck her. I lost my temper with her and the world and treated her like I did. I somehow fucked up everything that I touched.

After the crowd around us dispersed, I glared at Cam. "Was that fucking necessary? Her grades? The stupid scholarship is the only thing she

has left." I shoved Trey, who stood there watching the two of us. "I know you were involved. What did she do to you?" He didn't respond, and I rushed

Cam, ramming my shoulder into his to make a point. Heavy footsteps followed me to the parking lot, but I ignored him. He needed to know I

was pissed. When I saw the flier beneath the blade of my wiper, I exploded. I kicked the tire of my car and started walking, ripping every one that

was left from their place. "The damage was already done, and you got the results you wanted. Was this fucking necessary?" I shouted at him.

His jaw clenched and he picked one up. "This wasn't me. I wouldn't do anything with something so childish. Everyone already knows who her father is

and how much his heart hurt for Ivy seeing this shit so soon after Cam fucked with her. I stepped from car to car, collecting the fliers in silence. I

couldn't fix anything, and it didn't solve my problems, but at least Ivy would be forced to see them again.

Once we were done, I got into the car and waited for the two guys to come. I called my best friends. The look on Cam's face made me want to

talk to him, so I chose not to speak while I drove home. The air itself was thick with the tension between the two of us. I wasn't really angry at Trey for

ne overhappened; he was just following orders like he always did. But Cam  
ened. I enraged at him.

igh herShe had planted shrimp in the air vents, but that was well deserved for  
t knowshit we had put her through. Her speaking to Maya, though? That v  
l me to catalyst for ruining any chance of a future? I thought that he woul  
rash. I chilled out about it by today, but that wasn't the case. Ivy speaking to  
wasn't out of malice or to hurt her. I didn't know the story, but I kno  
t really even if she thought no one did.

ing sheI got out of the car and slammed my door to make a point once I was  
ow youHe wasn't getting off as easily as he always did when the two of us  
ied past argue and then, after we slept, everything was better. I stopped  
not steps mailbox on the way inside, knowing that the letter I was waiting for c  
w that I in the stack. I stalked into the kitchen, pulling out a bottle of cheap v  
loded. It'd hidden in the back of the cabinet. Not bothering to grab a glass, I  
I found sip and let it slide down my throat as I threw the envelopes on the table  
response Cam grabbed my shirt collar and pulled me close enough that his lip  
only an inch from mine. I stared at them for a moment before turn  
: bother head and taking another drink. "Let go of me."

is." MyHe grabbed the bottle from my hand and turned it up. I watched as th  
r. Cam, bubbled once before he slammed it down on the table. "Not a chance i  
t didn'tHis grip on me tightened, pulling me closer into his orbit so that I c  
dn't be escape. All I could see was the rage in his ocean-colored eyes being re  
on me.

s that I bit my lip hard enough that I tasted blood. "I don't want to do this w  
murderright now."

ck from "And I don't give a fuck. What's going on with you? Is this really ab  
or what or is there something else you want to tell me? You've been sneaking



? I was the house for weeks and then this week you've been in a weird mood."

He walked us back several steps and the back of my legs hit the floor all the cabinets with a thud, throwing off my balance. "Fuck you. You don't know what you're talking about," I gritted out. He used his weight to pull me backward, bending my body as he hovered close. My hands clutched onto the Mayan countertop so that I wouldn't do something stupid like hit him.

Ivy, "That's just it, Niko. I do know what I'm talking about. You not coming home last night?"

Trey's last night? Me waking up every morning and your side of the bed was cold? You crying in the shower? Quit fucking around and talk to me. He would kick my legs apart and dissolve any distance between us. Maybe I reacted to being so close to him, despite my anger at him and the way he would betray me. He wouldn't notice that I was hard, but the chance was slim. His whiskey let go of my shirt and gripped my jaw, his fingers biting into my skin.

His lips crashed against mine and his teeth bit down on my lower lip, aggravating the bleeding skin. I hissed as his tongue lapped at the corner of my mouth.

Before he plunged his tongue inside my mouth. Everything dissolved except my anger except the anger simmering beneath both of our skins as he punished me.

He was still fighting, just speaking a different language. I grabbed at his hair and pulled, hoping to inflict on him the pain that I felt inside, and groaned, rocking his hips against me to show him how much I wanted him. I shoved him hard to right myself and turned us, slamming us into the wall behind us.

Tension and frustration had been building between the two of us for a long time. The long stares and the jealousy. The bickering. We were both broken people.

Our souls called to each other even though they shouldn't. Whatever was happening between us would change things, and potentially not for the better. I pushed all the jumbled thoughts out of my head as I allowed my hands to roam over his body.

skim beneath his shirt and enjoy the feeling of his muscles tensing under my touch. He tasted like copper and whiskey and I wanted more.

Slow clapping brought me back to the moment, bursting the bubble I'd been shrouded in. I pushed him one last time as I stumbled away and brushed my mouth with the back of my hand. "Well, it's about fucking time."

"I'm happy that Mommy and Daddy are making up now," Trey grinned from the doorway. "I take one phone call and miss all the fun."

My cheeks heated at the fact Trey had seen me in a momentary lapse of sanity. The anger and passion between us dissipated as I righted my bodyclothes. Cam ignored him as he stared at me with hooded eyes. "I'm not looking for an answer from you, asshole."

I couldn't tell him I'd been sneaking around to see Ivy or that I'd been giving her drugs. I couldn't tell him what had happened on Sunday night, there was no way in hell I would tell him what had transpired on Monday night in the shadows of her room. Instead, I sifted through the mail around the table and handed him an envelope addressed to Mr. Nikolai Stone. The name of the junior attached to the name. It was meant for my father who would open the envelope. I didn't bother opening the letter. I knew what the contents contained.

His eyes scanned the words, and he muttered under his breath, "Why didn't you tell me? I could have given you the money."

I scoffed at him. "What money? From selling photographs? The money I use to help me buy gas? None of us have anything."

He closed his eyes. "The money I've been saving to buy a car is better. Douchebag. I would have given it to you and not thought twice."

I buried my face in my hands. "I couldn't ask you for that, Cam."

beneath “Yeah, but you would have put his dick in your mouth a few minutes ago.”

Trey mumbled to himself as he stared down at the letter in his hands. I didn't bother to tell them that was just the tip of the iceberg and there were more secrets that I had been hiding. I didn't tell them I felt like I was drowning. Instead, I grabbed the whiskey from the table and swallowed the poison inside the bottle.

“We always have a backup plan,” Cam said to himself. “Just come stay with mom's.”

I glared at him and sat in the chair closest to me, feeling too heavy to move anymore. “Why? You don't even want to stay there.”

His voice was barely above a whisper, and I wondered if Trey could hear what he said. “I just don't want to stay there alone.”

That night when I passed out from everything that I had drunk, Cam was closer to mine than usual. His breath ghosted along my skin and I considered when the fuck I would come clean to him. What would be his reaction when he discovered everything that I had been hiding? Would he still want me? More than anything, I wanted him to put his arm around me to hold my hand and tell me everything would be alright. But he

Nothing would be alright because this was Clearhaven, where the rich were richer and the poor suffocated under the weight of the world.

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FIFTY

FIFTY

## *Caleb*



Ivy had been ignoring the texts that I had sent her since I confronted her on campus. Instead of just leaving me on read, she no longer even responded to the messages. I had meant every word that I'd said about giving her money to run, but she didn't trust me—with good reason. She needed to get out of Clearhaven, but she was stubborn.

I sat at the table in front of my grandfather, pushing food around my plate. Eggs were another dish that Claire couldn't cook. He had requested to eat breakfast together last night, citing that he needed to speak to me about Order business. He looked completely relaxed with a newspaper spread out in front of him, staring at an article on stock market trends. I'd tried telling him when I was in high school that no one used physical newspapers anymore, but he was set in his ways and stuck in the past. Claire refilled the black coffee in his mug and he absentmindedly grabbed a handful of her ass. She giggled, oblivious to the fact that she was just one of many women that my grandfather employed in one fashion or another.

After she left the room, I cleared my throat, hoping to grab his attention. I held up one finger. "Don't worry, I haven't forgotten you're still here, Caleb."

He continued to read, and I pushed the plate away, no longer caring about my appearance. "Yes, but you're forgetting that some of us have other things to do today. I have class in less than an hour."

He neatly folded the paper and pushed his reading glasses to the top of his head. "Fine. Let's get to business, shall we? It's been a while since I've done any jobs for the Order with the exception of Ivy Spencer." He reached

down into the briefcase sitting beside his chair and pulled out a small envelope, passing it to me. "As you know, we all have sacrifices we make for the greater good."

Carefully, I unsealed the envelope and pulled out the documents. I tucked one inside of my cheek as I scanned the photograph, instantly recognizing the subject and then looked at the accompanying information. "What's this?"

My grandfather tapped his finger along the top of the table. "You know what it is. Don't play dumb, son. She needs to be taken care of."

I closed my eyes, trying to find the best way to ask the question that was on the tip of my tongue. A way that wouldn't invoke his wrath. Fletcher was not known for his patience, especially behind closed doors. He didn't like anyone to question him, expecting everyone to act as soon as he told them to. "What did Clarissa do except suck my dick? Last time I checked, she didn't put the Order in danger."

He chuckled to himself before rubbing between his eyebrows with his fingers. "No, the blowjob isn't the problem. If it was, half of Clea would be dead right now. The issue is that she opened her mouth about



ion. He happens behind closed doors and we can't have that. She was also  
l there, speaking to the new police detective. You know what you have to do."

I shoved everything back into the envelope and stood up to leave the  
g about Before I reached the exit, his voice stopped me. "Make sure that it'  
things to care of in the next week, Caleb. I shouldn't have to remind you w  
stake if you don't."

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you've now he would hold it over my head. Him making me disappear the sam  
reached my parents had was the least of my concerns. I wasn't ready to die  
manilla him hurting Ivy because of me? I wouldn't be able to live with myself.  
ake for This was why I had tried to distance myself from her. Why I had

convince her she should take my money and leave. If the Order was  
bit the to kill Clarissa for spreading rumors, what would they do when Ivy  
ing there remembering everything that had happened to her?

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happens behind closed doors and we can't have that. She was also caught speaking to the new police detective. You know what you have to do."

I shoved everything back into the envelope and stood up to leave the room. Before I reached the exit, his voice stopped me. "Make sure that it's taken care of in the next week, Caleb. I shouldn't have to remind you what's at stake if you don't."

I had made a mistake in him discovering that I cared about Ivy Spencer, and now he would hold it over my head. Him making me disappear the same way my parents had was the least of my concerns. I wasn't ready to die yet, but him hurting Ivy because of me? I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

This was why I had tried to distance myself from her. Why I had tried to convince her she should take my money and leave. If the Order was willing to kill Clarissa for spreading rumors, what would they do when Ivy began remembering everything that had happened to her?

FIFTY-ONE

FIFTY-ONE

## *Trey*



**B**efore classes on Friday morning, someone knocked on the door to my apartment and I staggered out of bed, unsure of what was going on. It was too early to deal with whatever fuckery was happening. After a quick glance outside, I realized the sun wasn't even up. I managed to put on some clothes before stumbling to the door, lamenting the fact that I had only been awake for three hours.

The blow-up between Niko and Cam the night before had been coming, but not even I had expected to walk in on the culmination of it. Seeing them fight didn't surprise me, not really. The two of them somehow fit together, even if no one else saw it. I'd excused myself shortly after to give them some space. Things would either work themselves out or they wouldn't, but there was no way in hell I was getting caught in the crossfire.

Niko losing his house though... that I hadn't expected. Since we had graduated high school, he'd always made sure that every bill was paid and that his younger siblings had everything provided for them. It was funny how one thing could change the course of everything else. Maybe chaos then

correct and a butterfly's wings could change the trajectory of someone's entire life. Or potentially it was just fate.

Still, as I answered the door, I never expected to see my mother there. I had never given her my home address, and her presence was anything but welcome. "What do you want?"

"Not even a good morning, or it's nice to see you?" The lines on her face were deeper than the last time I had seen her and her skin seemed pale, probably from whatever drugs she was taking. Her clothes were clean and her hair was surprising given the circumstances.

"It's five in the morning. What did you really expect?" I bit out. There was a sharp edge to my words that my mother didn't seem to notice.

She peered around my body, looking into the space beyond my shoulder.

"You wouldn't answer my text messages, so I thought maybe I could see you in person," she whispered. Seeing her in person almost made me cry. At one point, I adored her. She was the person who gave birth to me. She

was the person who had bandaged my knees when she wasn't too high to know what she was going on around her.

"Right. I thought that when I moved out, we agreed that we'd never see each other again." It was hard to be angry at her this time of the morning. All I could feel was indifference and mistrust. The number of lies that she had told me over the years made it difficult to look her in the eyes.

Her red-rimmed eyes became glassy, probably to garner my sympathy. "I know when I said that I needed your help, I meant it. They'll kill me if I don't have the money by Sunday."

That was all it took for me to close the door on her. It was always about the money, something I didn't have a lot of. Everything that I had saved was to help move me and the guys away from a place that God had forgotten.

neone's long ago. She pounded at the door as the deadbolt clicked into place  
turned on music to drown out the sound. It was too early.

Later in the morning when I left for classes, my mother was gone. I knew  
she would grow tired of waiting by the door and expecting me to cav  
I popped the tab on my energy drink and got into my car, a thought  
crossed my face. How did she know where to find me?

When I moved out to escape her and the string of men that she brought  
with her, which I never gave her an address. I had always been careful not to disclose  
where I lived to anyone other than the guys to prevent her from following.  
With everything that had been going on, I hadn't considered how in  
fact she had gotten my phone number either. I'd been so caught up  
in my world that I hadn't thought of Forsaken and Ivy that when she called, I had just accepted it at face value.

I talked to  
her. At  
the time



When I got home late that night, the door to my apartment was standing  
open. I sighed and pulled the knife from my pocket before stepping  
out, questioning what in the hell was going on. As long as I had lived  
in that building, no one had ever tried breaking in. In fact, that was the thing  
I could tell you about living in this part of town: no one had anything worth stealing, so there  
was very little property crime.

"Trey, Papers were scattered across the floor, and furniture was turned over.  
A hole decorated the wall next to the door. The entire place was trash  
and that wasn't the worst of it. The computer that I had spent so long building  
up was about upgrading was missing.

was to  
be about

It was really the only thing of value in the entire place. It was the only thing that was truly mine other than the shitty car I drove and the clothes I wore. The programs and files on it were backed up on the cloud, but it wasn't the point. It was mine and yet again, something else was taken from me.

Immediately, I knew who was responsible, even if they weren't the ones who had broken in. It was my mother, or at least one of her friends. Somewhere they followed me home and decided to take my things in order to pay my debts. I was lucky that my car wasn't outside. They would have stolen it and stripped it for parts.

Not bothering to close the door, I straightened up one of the overturned chairs and sat down in it, resting my head in my hands. I had worked so hard to get away from her and now she thought she could come back into my life picking up where we had left off. Sitting in the chair gave me time to think and figure out what my options were.

Grabbing the baseball bat I kept in my closet, I stood and closed the door behind me as I left the apartment. There was no point in attempting to lock it given the wood that was splintered along the frame. Locks only kept people out. Slowly, I drove to Niko's, sipping on the flat energy drink I had earlier in the day and rehearsing what I wanted to say to my friends.

Niko needed somewhere to stay with his sister and brother, Cam hated their old home, and now I needed to move. The timing was shitty, and we were still enough going on, but perhaps there was a solution that could benefit all of us. I pulled up in front of Niko's house and they were both sitting on the porch speaking in low tones. When Niko saw me, he raised his eyebrows, surprised that I had shown up. Earlier, I had told them I was headed home to work on my homework and a new app that I was designing. Now I was swinging



ly thing my left hand, waiting for them to wrap up their conversation. “What  
on my two talking about?” I asked casually.

out that “Just what the hell I’m going to do about everything.” The circles un  
en from eyes told me he hadn’t been sleeping well. Join the club.

I sat on the step below them, leaning against the bat, and held out my  
ies who gesturing for them to pass me whatever they were drinking. “That’s a  
one had why I’m here. My mother found my apartment. This morning I just  
for hershe would get bored and leave me alone but... Someone broke in and s  
len that computer.”

Cam’s eyes widened, and he handed me a can of beer from the bag  
d chair him. “What else did they take?”

d to get I rubbed my eyes and stared into the distance. “No clue. I didn’t even  
ny life, checking. Want to come with me to get it back?”

o think Cam smirked at me. “Fuck yes. Let’s do it. Does she still live c  
Bradford?”

ne door “Last I heard.” As we drove, I tried to find the right way to appro  
o lock it other topic that had been on my mind. I hesitated for a moment be  
: honest wasn’t sure how either of them would react. The three of us were pro  
ik from didn’t like relying on anyone else. “Listen, I’ve been thinking. What

buy a house together? Y’all need somewhere safe to crash and I need t  
d going somewhere new. If my mother or her dealer have broken in once, they  
all had again.”

ll of us. Niko looked in the rearview mirror. “Trey, it’s a great idea, but where  
e stairs, going to get the money to do something like that? I couldn’t even pay  
rprised this month.”

work on I rolled my eyes and didn’t bother looking in his direction, instead fo  
a bat in on a single star in the sky outside my window. “That’s because you di

are you know you were that far behind. I've been saving money since I  
apartment so that when we graduated, we could all get the hell  
ider his Clearhaven and get a fresh start. Maybe we need one now."

"And I've got the money I was saving to buy a car." Cam sat up str  
y hand, and put his hand on Niko's knee cautiously. "How much do we need?"  
actually "The two of you can't just—"

thought I cut Niko off. "We can. The three of us have been through hell tog  
tole my have no idea how much money it's going to take, but we'll figure it o

going to take some time to find something, but we can start this weeke  
beside Niko groaned and rubbed a hand through his hair as we pulled up in t

my mom's trailer. "You should stay with us tonight after we g  
i bother computer back. Tomorrow you need to change your number."

I tipped my chin up in acknowledgment as I crawled out of the cramp  
over on seat. The three of us sauntered to the front door, which was cracked

kicked it in, not bothering to check who was inside. "Surprise, Mo  
ach the home!" I yelled as I swung the bat at the pictures lining the living roo  
cause I Glass shattered and wood cracked as I smashed everything in sight.

oud and Cam just grinned at me and I rolled my eyes. "Are you sure she's eve  
it if we She—"

o move His words faltered as my mother stumbled into the living room. "Trey,  
'll do it she slurred. Track marks lined her arms and her dirty satin nightgow

off of her body. "You didn't tell me you were coming for a visit."

are we I slammed the bat into the television sitting on the floor in the corne  
the rent Mom! You know how much I love to see you. Especially when you s  
of my shit! The same way you have my entire life. Give it back."

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idn't let

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out of



raighter After destroying half of my mother's house, she finally confessed what  
' had taken my computer. After a quick trip to Rick's Pawn Shop, it was  
in my possession.

ether. I I wasn't sure if moving or changing my number would solve the  
out. It's issues I had, but it was better than dealing with them late at night. I  
nd." them had worked so far and at that moment, I didn't have a better solution  
front of We sat around drinking in silence until Cam stood up and stretched. "M  
at your there's a mandatory assembly on campus."

I stared at him, wondering what that had to do with anything and how  
ed back going to solve our problems. "And?"

open. I He tucked his hands into his pockets and shrugged. "I was just thinking  
m! I'm What if we were to break into Wells' office then? We can dig up some  
m wall him. He'd be willing to pay us to keep quiet. Right now, we need  
penny that we can get."

n here? Niko tapped on his bottle, thinking. "It's dangerous to fuck with Wells  
much."

baby," I mulled it over for a moment. "What the hell? Let's do it. If nothing else  
n hung might find the information that he has on us and destroy it." After a few  
overdosed on campus, we called Vincent to figure out a way to cover  
r. "Oh, Unfortunately, Wells showed up instead. The cops stayed out of it, but  
steal all since that moment, he had held evidence of the crime over our heads a  
turn.

I smiled to myself. "This weekend presents us with another opportunity for gentlemen."

Saturday night after the football game, the annual Forsaken Halloween was being held at the graveyard and I knew how I wanted to celebrate. Rosalyn would be there with Rhyker, and if I dared to make a wager, she would insist on Ivy tagging along. I detailed my plan to the guys, and my family were in agreement. We were going to give Ivy an evening to recognize her before she tried to disappear from Clearhaven.

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I smiled to myself. “This weekend presents us with another opportunity, gentlemen.”

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FIFTY-TWO

FIFTY-TWO

## *Ivy*



Saturday evening when I got home from work, a small white box on my pillow and I stared at it for a while in confusion. The front door had been locked when I arrived home and my windows had been locked all day. Still, I went through the house double checking every lock to ensure there wasn't a way for someone to get inside. Finally, after eyeing the box with apprehension, I opened it. Inside was a baggy of pills and a note that said *you*. It had to be from Niko.

Even though things had been awkward, maybe he was worried about me, especially after how he'd left things the last time he was in my room. I could help that he refused to stand up to Cam. Or that he went along with cheating on my grades and printing out fliers of my father.

Throughout the week, I had been cutting back on what I was taking, but the withdrawal was brutal. Word on the street was that tea didn't have any side effects and wasn't addictive, but that was bullshit, at least for the amount I was taking. In the morning my head hurt and my hands trembled and I was sweating. I woke up in a pile of sweat, but I wasn't sure if that was from the night before.



or weaning myself off. I'd felt empty all week and sometimes I was that the hollowness would consume me.

The temptation to take one of the pills nagged at the back of my mind. The phone in my bag rang. I pulled it out and saw that it was Rosalyn. She'd been trying to call me all week, especially after news of my confrontation with Cam spread on campus and pictures of the fliers circulated on social media. I hadn't answered because I wasn't sure what to say and preening to be fine was too difficult. I looked at the phone for several moments before silencing it, telling myself that I would talk to her first thing in the morning.

She'd understand if I just changed into my pajamas and lay in bed, especially if I brought her coffee.

Ten minutes later, someone knocked on the front door and my head throbbed against my ribs, the fear reminding me I was actually alive. Who would knock on the door at this time of the night? I looked out the front window with a sigh of relief. Rosalyn.

I unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in bed or visiting one of the men that are chasing you around?"

She laughed at me as she walked inside. "Perhaps, but we're going out tonight. I shook my head, not wanting to disappoint her because we hadn't spent much of time together lately, but also not wanting to leave the house. I had been her miserable company lately with everything that has been going on. Cam and the guys had basically stripped everything that I still had away. Cal's loss of optimism, and potentially my scholarship. Add in attempted rape, being assaulted, and my hair being forcefully cut. Really, I just wanted to stop the nightmares. I don't think so. Not tonight."

She laced her fingers with mine and dragged me toward my bedroom.

certainly tonight. I heard a rumor from a source that the Forsaken are holding an annual Halloween party tonight. I told you when you first arrived, it would be an event that you absolutely couldn't miss. I would be a terrible best friend if I hadn't convince you to go with me."

Despite not wanting to leave the house, her words made me grin. "Right, I guess. The source was Rhyker because he wanted to see you."

She sifted through the gray tote, throwing a skirt and low cut top on the bed before me. "I would never reveal my sources, Ivy. Get dressed because you're going to work tomorrow, even if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you out of the house. Especially if I snorted at the vision of her trying to tote me anywhere. I wasn't

slender, but Rosalyn would find a way if she could. "Fine, give me about ten minutes and I'll go. No promises on if I'll have a good time." The other members of the Forsaken who had taken up entirely too many of my things would be there, probably looking for a quick lay or someone to torment. The thought made the party sound infinitely less fun.

"Oh, you'll have a good time. We'll just hang out on the couch and listen to the band here?" "Apparently, Dissension Stars are playing tonight."

I did really like Dissension Stars the time that they played at Master's house. "Picking up the skirt laying on my quilt, I tried to remember everything Rosalyn had told me about the party the first time she mentioned it. "Hadn't they have a band playing in the cemetery?"

"A band and a bonfire. No second thought. Just get dressed." Rosalyn was being a little pushy, but that was just her and I knew she had my best interests in mind. Still, I shooed her out of the room so that I could get dressed. She waited in the hallway while I tugged on my clothes.

In a moment's hesitation, I popped one of the pills that had been left on the table. "Yes,

ing their iron my pillow. If I was going to a party, I might as well be comfortably  
was the just like everyone else who was there.

end if I



ght. Let

The party was amazing, and Rosalyn was right, at least for a while. I  
he bed. even noticed we were there except Rhyker. He was drawn to her like  
going to a flame as the band played. The bonfire that someone had set cast ev  
house.” in an eerie light as people danced and cheered, begging for them to  
exactly cover of their favorite song. The alcohol warmed my veins and made  
fifteen hazy while I swayed to the beat. Everything was perfect. For a bit.

ie three Strong hands grabbed my hips, and I jumped, unsure of who was beh  
thoughts “Little ghost, I didn’t expect to find you here, especially after this week  
nt. The I groaned to myself, the noise lost from the volume of the music. The

only one person who called me a ghost no matter how much I felt li  
its skirts. and I wasn’t in the mood to deal with him. “What do you want, Cam?”

I glanced behind me, seeing that he had face paint on in honor  
Pieces. upcoming holiday. His tan was painted white and black accents were  
ing that around his eyes and mouth, making him look like a skeleton. His lips

“Wait. onto the sensitive skin of my neck before he traced his nose up the le  
my neck. “We need to have a conversation. Alone.”

Ros side-eyed him and rolled her eyes. “I don’t think so. Whenever  
had my of you are alone together, something bad happens.”

ould get I held up my hand to stop her. “It’s fine. I mean, really, what else cou  
After a do to me this week?”

the box

The corner of Cam's lips curled up in amusement. "Besides, it won't be me and her. Trey and Niko are here also."

"Like that makes things any better, asshole," Ros muttered.

I gave her a look that I hoped would be reassuring. "I'll be back."

Cam grabbed my elbow and dragged me across the graveyard. As we walked, the tombstones fell away and the music dimmed. A small part of me screamed at me to turn back around and save myself. I might have had any self-preservation left, but instead I stumbled over roots numbly. Niko and Trey came into view, we stopped and Cam shoved me forward. Both were wearing face paint similar to Cam's and a chill ran down my spine. Niko leaned against an ancient oak tree, the cherry from his jacket only illumination.

"What are you doing here, new girl?" Trey asked. His voice was dark, there was an edge to it that wasn't normally there. "This is a Forsaken place, you would have thought that after everything that we had done to you, you would have stayed away."

We were all cast in shadows, and it was the first time that fear grabbed me. Blood rushed in my ears and my heart hammered rapidly in my chest. I were to yell for help, no one would hear me. Even if they could, they couldn't save me. Still, I tried to act brave, and I threw my shoulders back. I was invited to come by Rosalyn. Besides, it's not like there is anything you can take away from me. What are you going to do, humiliate me further?"

Cam's hands landed on my hips, and he laid his head on my shoulder. "That's where you're wrong, Ivy. People always have something left and it's clear from your attitude we haven't broken you yet."

My nails bit into the top of his hands, and I shifted to face him.

just bedarkness. “What do you mean that there is always something left to lo  
wry laugh escaped from me against my will. “You already used  
information you had about me to try to get me to submit, and it didn’  
My dad being a criminal is old news now.”

walked,In the darkness, Cam’s blue eyes looked nearly black, and I swallow  
y brainas he leaned closer. “You really think that you have nothing? Baby, I p  
if I hadyou that you will always have something left to lose. Did you really th  
. Whenwe would release the information about your father without  
orward.something else to hold over your head? You remember that night in th  
wn mywhere I had my cock down your throat and you left covered in cum?’  
oint thea tape of that. Unless you want your aunt to see how eagerly you stu  
tongue out and practically begged for more, don’t go there.”

ark andNiko stepped up behind me, wedging me between his body and Cam  
party. Iheat radiating off the two of them was suffocating. Niko’s hands re  
I wouldmy ribs and his lips brushed against my jawline. Despite the fear c  
through my body and the malice in their tone, my body shivere  
oed me.anticipation, wondering what he would say. “How do you think yo  
Even ifwould react to seeing you like that? After all, she’s a pillar of the com  
no oneDo you really think that she’ll let you live at her house after a video l  
ack. “Igets out? Especially given her standing in the church.”

ing leftTrey stalked toward me and caressed my jaw before turning my face  
ate mehiss. “No, I don’t think that her aunt would let her stay there after tha  
rich girl. How does it feel to have everything stripped away, piece by  
oulder.He traced his bottom lip with his tongue. “There is that assembly on M  
to lose,that the entire campus has to go to. It would be a shame if that videotaj  
accidentally played.”

in the“Why?” My question came out barely above a whisper and any false t

use?" AI had faded. The knowledge that there was a videotape of that night  
all the sank in. They were right. Regina would kick me out without a second  
t work. if she saw what they had done. Forget the fact that they had blackma  
into it. She wouldn't care. She had already made comments about "I  
ed hard my legs closed." Having actual verification would just fan the fire.  
promise Trey's fingers dug into my skin and all traces of the apathy that were  
ink that present dissolved. "Why not?"

having My mind reeled as I tried to come up with some way to convince then  
e officer release the information. There was still a chance that my professor wo  
There's that the grade had been tampered with. Or I could potentially so  
ck your convince the guys to change it back. "What do you want from me?"

Cam took a step back. "Just because I want to break you doesn't mea  
i's. The don't want to play with you still, little ghost. Remember that you're ou  
sted on Niko bit my earlobe and I could feel how hard he was against my  
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ed with He shoved me, and I froze before finally turning on my heel and runni  
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I had faded. The knowledge that there was a videotape of that night slowly sank in. They were right. Regina would kick me out without a second thought if she saw what they had done. Forget the fact that they had blackmailed me into it. She wouldn't care. She had already made comments about "keeping my legs closed." Having actual verification would just fan the fire.

Trey's fingers dug into my skin and all traces of the apathy that were usually present dissolved. "Why not?"

My mind reeled as I tried to come up with some way to convince them not to release the information. There was still a chance that my professor would see that the grade had been tampered with. Or I could potentially somehow convince the guys to change it back. "What do you want from me?"

Cam took a step back. "Just because I want to break you doesn't mean that I don't want to play with you still, little ghost. Remember that you're ours."

Niko bit my earlobe and I could feel how hard he was against my ass. "I suggest that you run."

He shoved me, and I froze before finally turning on my heel and running.

FIFTY-THREE



FIFTY-THREE

## *Ivy*



The last thing that I wanted was for them to release the tape that strip the last thing I had left from me. I didn't really enjoy living with Regina and I didn't exactly trust her, but I didn't have a lot of choices. My shoes caught on roots and brambles as I ran in the darkness, further from the party that was happening somewhere in the distance. The light from the bonfire was long gone, as was any illumination from streetlights or houses. My eyes struggled to adjust in the shadows, everything cast in tones of gray. The muscles in my legs screamed at me as I padded along the silty dirt. Thunder rumbled in the distance, ratcheting my heart rate further, and sweat trickled down my back. The skin on my thighs burned, as did my lungs from running.

Every part of me felt like flames as I slowed my approach. Between the adrenaline and tea, I almost wanted them to catch me. The trees that lined the ancient cemetery were thick in this part, their limbs barren and dark against the night sky. I rested against the trunk of one close to me, trying to catch my breath and listen for the sound of footsteps or snapping twigs. It was completely silent save for an owl in the distance. The heavy beat

band was completely lost. A branch snapped somewhere nearby, pressed my hand over my mouth, hoping to stifle the sound of my breaths. Slowly, I backed away with my heart galloping against my ribs. Walking backward was a mistake. I stumbled, falling onto my ass. A scream echoed among the trees and I scrambled backward, trying to regain my footing. I spun around, running blindly. Hands grabbed me around the waist and pushed me to the ground. Burning pain seared the skin of my leg as a sharp object cut into me while the weight of one of the guys pressed me further into the dirt. "I think that you're just as fucked up as us," a deep voice whispered in my ear.

I hadn't expected Trey to be the one to catch me. He was always the one who seemed completely indifferent to my existence. I mean, he had helped me a few times when I needed it like with my car, but other than that. Still, beneath him, my cheek pressed against old leaves, my skin heated by his body. The heat of his breath inhaled his musky amber scent. A tear trickled down my cheek against my will, a reminder of the adrenaline that was coursing through every inch of my body. "What are you going to do to me?" His tongue flicked out, licking the tear. "Don't worry, pretty girl. One day you truly want me to." His teeth nipped at my ear and he rustled behind my hair. A click sounded near my ear and a sharp point kissed the exposed skin of my back. "Are you going to be a good girl who stays still when I release you, or am I going to chase you again?" I didn't reply as I tried to slow my breathing. I was going to run again, but I didn't want him to know that. His weight eased off of me and he lay beside me, his hands slowly brushing up my legs. The point of the dagger traveled along the inside of my thighs before slicing through the fabric of the shorts.

and underwear. "Every time," I muttered to myself, and his palm landed unevenly on my ass.

"If it were up to me, you wouldn't ever wear underwear," he murmured. A laugh pressed a kiss to the stinging skin. He shifted behind me and I took in vain my chance to escape. I wasn't running because I was scared of him, even if I probably should have been. It was the idea of resistance. Just because he agreed to it didn't mean that I shouldn't fight back. There was nowhere in my life that I could, no one else I could fight with.

I scrambled to my feet and took off running, the cool night air blowing against every intimate part of my body while the scrapes on my skin screamed at me. I looked behind me out of habit, trying to gauge how close they'd be, but Trey was catching up to me. The breath was knocked out of me when I lay into a hard wall of muscle and arms banded around me. "I knew you'd go back as I going to run again. You like this as much as I do," Niko whispered, despite my lining his tone. One hand grabbed the ass cheek that still throbbed from the touch of my hand and I moaned against him as electricity shot through my skin.

He was right, and so was Trey. I did like it and I was just as fucked up as they were, if not more. Despite everything they had done, I was attracted to them and I hated myself for it. Niko's mouth was punishing as it sought entry into my mine. His teeth bit at my lips and tongue. Frustration at my life bled through me as I gripped his biceps and dug my nails in. I caught his lower lip between my teeth and bit down hard until copper flooded my mouth.

He groaned against me and grabbed my hair, pulling my face away from his. "I like that you try to play rough, Ivy. I think it turns you on." He snatched the knife around and shoved me against a tree, my face pushed against the rough bark of the trunk and his body pressed into my back. Two sets of footsteps approached from behind.

againstreached beneath my skirt, running his fingers through my folds. “You’re always so wet and greedy for us.”

red andCam cleared his throat and leaned casually against the tree, his head pressed against his elbow. “That’s because her body knows who owns it.” He then joined Niko’s beneath my skirt as he plunged two fingers inside of me because I circled my clit as Cam pumped in and out. I gasped and laid my head against Niko’s shoulder, using his body as an anchor to the world.

“Here’s what I think should happen. The other night, when the two of us were fucking, we didn’t get a good view of Ivy,” Cam stated, his tongue skinned even as he curled his fingers inside of me. Niko’s motions faltered whetherbody tensed behind me. Cam chuckled to himself. “Don’t worry, Niko, when I said I didn’t think that you could keep it a secret from me, did you?”

you wereCam’s other hand squeezed my breast through the fabric before he grabbed Niko’s shirt, pulling him closer. His lips ghosted over Niko’s. The two of them were both so close that I could feel their breaths against my skin. “But because you and me have had a turn with our little ghost. I think it’s time that Tre and they turn, don’t you think?” He turned his face toward me slightly and pressed his lips along the wounded skin of my bottom lip, his eyes dancing with amusement to “Do you think you deserve to come?”

throughI closed my eyes, choosing not to answer that as Niko’s fingers circled my sensitive nub. My walls clenched around Cam’s fingers and my breath tightened. Just when I thought I was going to get off, Cam removed himself from him and gripped Niko’s wrist. “Not until she’s earned it.”

pun meMy body slumped against the tree trunk, every inch an inferno of hellish barkanger. He had just denied me an orgasm after chasing me through the forest as NikoAfter tormenting me since the beginning of the semester. I raised my fist to hit him, but he caught it and pulled me against his body. “Don’t you

‘cunt is little ghost. I’ll let you get off if you’re a good girl.” He tugged the my shirt and pulled it over my head before pushing me toward Trey, who dropped sitting against the base of a tree five feet away, his pants pushed around his thighs. Cam’s arm was thrown around Niko’s torso, holding him in place. Niko I wasn’t sure what I was doing as I straddled Trey. With more gentleness against I thought was possible from the three of them, Trey’s hands gripped me and guided me, slowly sinking me onto his cock. “Just move your hips of you girl,” he whispered in my ear. “This is as much about punishing Niko as it is about you. Just focus on me and I’ll make sure you feel good.”

and his And I did. It was easy to get lost as the edges of reality faded as I rolled. You hips against him while his lips traced along my collarbones. “Why are you being punished?” I whispered to where only he could hear.

grabbed “Because Cam is in love with him... and you. They’ve never had sex before and you’re destroying the three of us.” He thrust his hips up into me, his pelvis hitting my clit.

you had a “Fuck, just like that,” I whimpered.

licked His arm wrapped around my waist, tethering me to him, and he picked up the knife laying on the ground beside him, placing the handle in his mouth in that moment. He pulled it out with a pop. “Do you trust me?”

shook the “Not a chance in hell.”

muscles He smirked at me as the handle of the knife disappeared from sight.

is hand your eyes then and just feel.”

My head fell onto his shoulder as he slowed his motions momentarily. Something warm and wet dripped down my back and across my arms. A tight ring of muscle that no one had ever touched before was being circled by his hand to something cold and hard. I gasped at him and tensed, but slowly inhaled. You dare,

hem of inside, burning and stretching me. The sensation of fullness was pain  
who was somehow amazing. "Tell me you just didn't--"

and his His mouth captured mine as he roughly rammed upward, stealing my  
ice. Every thrust hit my clit. When he finally pulled his mouth away, he g

ess than "Don't overthink it, new girl." My fingers wove into his hair as he pus  
ny hip handle to the knife further in. The hand that had been gripping my hip

ps, new my cheek, and he turned my face as his hips rolled beneath me.

as it is Standing fifteen feet away, Niko was on his knees with his eyes clo

Cam's cock in his mouth. Cam's eyes locked on mine in the dim li  
lled my Trey brushed his nose up the column of my neck. "There are

is Niko punishments out there, Ivy. Remember that."

secrets  
nto me,



By the time the Forsaken were done with me, Rosalyn had left the pa  
the band was long gone. The guys said nothing as we trudged thro  
l up the cemetery. Dirt was caked on my skin, and every muscle in my body sc  
th for a at me. I picked leaves out of my hair as I wondered why my skin

sticky. As we neared the parking lot, I glanced down, realizing w  
warm, wet feeling had been. Blood. I looked like I had been an ext  
"Close horror movie. My mouth fell open, and I punched Trey's shoulder. "  
got to be shitting me."

ntarily. "That's not what you said fifteen minutes ago. In fact, it was someth  
ss. The "Oh, God, Trey. Don't stop." He fake moaned and then winked at m  
cled by me know if you ever need a repeat, new girl."

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FIFTY-FOUR

FIFTY-FOUR

*Cam*



All weekend, we discussed what we were going to do during assembly. The timing, what exactly we were looking for, and how we were going to break in. The administrative offices were closing early that day and it would give us ample time to look through Wells' files without being caught. We would still have to be careful, but a few hours of uninterrupted time in the dean's office. Usually, there was at least one person working late in the evening or people milling around campus that would see us at this time.

Niko stood at the heavy double doors and picked the lock while Tre kept lookout. It was unlikely that anyone would venture this far from the auditorium, but it was a precautionary measure. The days were getting shorter now and by the time we left, the night would help to conceal our exit. Adrenaline pumped through my veins, setting me on edge, and when we disappeared inside the building, it was time to get to work. Looking for something to blackmail the dean with was infinitely more interesting than sitting through a presentation about a collegiate honor society, especially

that we had sat through for the past three years. With Ivy's actual grace should have received a letter from the college, but not now.

We walked into Wells' office and flipped on a flashlight, heading to his desk.

Inside the top three drawers were literally nothing but office supplies and sticky notes. Niko dug through a set of filing cabinets, looking for anything that could be of use to us. Trey turned on his computer while I sifted through the contents, finding nothing of use.

We worked quietly in the dim light. The only noise was the click of keys from the computer or the rustle of papers. We moved methodically, sifting through the contents of the office. Finally, I caught a break. The

right drawer was locked, and I tried to wiggle it, hoping the lock would magically pop. Niko sighed at me. "Move over, asshole."

I watched as he inserted a small lock pick, his fingers carefully twisting until he heard a click. He stepped aside, and I knelt down, curious about whether the locked drawer would hold. Two manilla envelopes laid in the bottom of the drawer and I held my breath as I carefully opened the first. Inside were photos of the guys and me digging a hole deep in the middle of the

Beside us lay a blue tarp with sneakers that peeked out at the end. Thinking about the last time I had trusted Vincent and how Abraham Wells managed to weasel his way into our lives.

*I stared down at my phone, trying to decide what to do. Fucking experimenting with drugs and fucking David Hyde. The guy had always been the life of the party and pushed too much too fast. He was the guy who stood on top of the bar wearing his stupid cowboy hat, singing old country and western songs out of the top of his lungs. Women loved him and everyone laughed at his jokes. He had one problem.*

*David loved cocaine more than he loved life itself.*

les, she When he'd heard that we had new shit, he swore he would take it easy  
of us had any idea how it would impact anyone. After the party cleared  
is desk. came to me sweaty and pale. I knew something wasn't right.

and old And then he collapsed.

nything Niko had checked him for a pulse, but there was nothing and there  
throughway in hell I was calling the cops. They would find all the drugs or  
and us and my life would be over. I wouldn't take the fall for whatever  
of keyshit had happened tonight.

as we Finally, I settled on calling Vincent. I put the phone on speakerphone  
bottom waited for him to answer. "What do you want?"

would What a way for him to answer the phone. "We've got a problem. Someone  
took the new shit you're pushing and now I'm staring at a dead body."  
ing until Vincent huffed out an audible breath. "Fine. Load it up in your trunk  
ut what meet you over near Tyburn Hill."

ttom of After wrapping David in a blue tarp that Niko kept in his trunk, we  
le were toward Tyburn Hill and waited for Vincent to tell us what in the  
woods. wanted us to do. Headlights blinded me from behind and I stepped out  
hat was vehicle, waiting.

aged to Abraham Wells exited from the passenger side of the car, a gun in one  
and his phone in the other. "It looks like you three are in a bit of a  
imental predicament." He motioned to us with the gun. "Mr. Stone, I believe  
ie party should grab the shovel from my trunk. Move slowly and I might let you  
f tables Vincent finally turned off the car and slammed his door shut. "Ab  
s at the we've talked about this before. You can't shoot my guys just because you  
, but hell like it."

He scoffed at the younger man, his weapon trained on Niko the entire time.  
"Who would really miss the three of them, Vinnie? No one."

y. None Vincent shrugged, and his lips quirked with amusement. “Yeah, but red, heloyal. It’s hard to train young guys.” I balled my hands into fists, trying their words roll over me. “Isn’t that right, Camden? Blood in and out.”

was noI passed it to Trey before turning my attention to the second envelope. DavidNiko’s eyes widened as the sound of heavy doors slamming echoed r dumb of the office. He shoved my shoulder and mouthed, “what the fuck?”

clicked on the keyboard until I tugged on his shirt. The three of us dropped me and the floor behind the desk and I scrambled to shove myself underneath it.

My heart pounded in my ears as steps grew closer to the door. It opened, and a light spread across the office space. I swallowed, getting ready to spring into action. “They must have forgotten to lock up,” a deep male voice murmured. Keys jingled as the door closed again and I relaxed, laying my head against the wood of the desk.

drove “Well, that was close,” Niko mumbled, taking the envelope from my hand. He slowly opened it and pulled out its contents. His face paled as he examined each one and I wondered what in the fuck it was he was seeing.

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*Vincent shrugged, and his lips quirked with amusement. “Yeah, but they’re loyal. It’s hard to train young guys.” I balled my hands into fists, trying to let their words roll over me. “Isn’t that right, Camden? Blood in and blood out.”*

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FIFTY-FIVE



FIFTY-FIVE

## *Niko*



Time stopped as the photos tumbled from the envelope. Every one of them was of Ivy. They started out innocently enough. Her at a party with her father, holding a crystal glass in between well-manicured hands. Slowly, they morphed into something else. Men stood around a poker table, but instead of cards, Ivy lay in the middle. She wasn't present at the time the photo was taken; the vacant look on her face said she had checked out long before then. Her eyes were glassy and limp hands fell off the edge of the table. The dress she had been wearing in earlier photos was pushed up past her knees, and the straps pulled down below her breasts, exposing her to the men in the other photos. Her legs were spread wide. Each of the photos showed a different man with a potbelly and shriveled up dick using her like she was more than a rag doll.

I stared at the photos in my hands, trying to quell the wave of nausea that threatened me. She had been passed around at one of their parties, the way I was.

It was difficult to see the identity of the men in the pictures, but they had one thing in common. Each had a scar on their forearm. They w

members of the Order. My breaths had grown ragged. “What the fuck  
muttered before gagging.

I turned the picture over. On the back, in neat cursive, someone had  
“My little lamb. Age sixteen.” I still didn’t know all the details, but that  
why Abraham Wells was obsessed with her. This was why he wanted  
take tea and why he wanted me to steer clear.

I ground my teeth as I stared at them, wondering if Ivy had any clue  
what had happened to her. She had thought she was a virgin when she  
but they had used her like she was a piece of trash to pass around. Suddenly  
wanted to talk to her and ask her questions about what she remembered  
doing so would out my own secrets.

Maybe one day.

I shoved the pictures back in the envelope and handed them to Cam  
standing. Sweat beaded on my brow as I leaned against the wall for a  
moment

A heavy hand landed on my back and rubbed gentle circles. “Let’s  
fuck out of here. We got what we came for.”

“Don’t use those to blackmail Wells, Cam. We’ve done enough to her.

Cam nodded as he took my keys from me and I settled into the back  
the car. The entire ride home, the images that I had seen haunted me  
the cool glass beneath my cheek did nothing to stop the thoughts that tumbled  
through my head. Whatever vendetta Cam had against Ivy had to stop  
had suffered enough under our hands.

When we got home, Maya was sitting on the couch, her lips pursed  
stood and shoved against Cam’s chest. “You’re an asshole.”

Cam looked confused as he stumbled back. “What?”

“I saw what you posted on YouConnect.”

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FIFTY-SIX

FIFTY-SIX

## *Ivy*



**A**pprehension clawed at my heart as I sat in the auditorium. I had the last of the pills in the box that had been left on my pillow in the restroom before walking inside. Saturday night, the guys claimed they would keep the recording of me to themselves as long as I did what I was told. Now I was worried they had changed the terms of the agreement. It would be the first time something like that had happened. After all, Cass initially wanted me to vanish from Clearhaven, but instead, things had turned into something else entirely.

My muscles still ached and my skin stung from the abrasions I'd gotten Saturday night. That evening, I'd managed to sneak past Regina into the bathroom without her saying a word. The jets from the shower burned my skin as I scrubbed it raw, trying to clean the debris, dirt, and blood from my body. I swore to myself that I would never allow Ros to convince me to go to another party every again. Every time, something seemed to happen. I should have hated the three of them with their perfect smiles and how they had tormented me, but I didn't, at least not entirely. I was attracted to them. Something inside of my mind was stuck on the idea of what could have

They weren't entirely bad. I saw that in small glimpses, like when the care of me. Niko who played guitar quietly in a graveyard and Trey, who found me on the side of the road. Hell, even with Cam's fierce loyalty sister.

But as I sat there clutching the arms of my seat, I realized I didn't trust Rosalyn was absent, and I texted her, hoping that she was just running. The dean took the stage and tapped the microphone, ensuring that it was "I'd like to thank you all for coming. As you know, academics are a portion of..." I zoned him out and stared down at my feet, counting down seconds until I could leave. "And now, without further ado, I'd like to show a short film about the history of Clearhaven University."

The lights dimmed around us and I settled in, thinking anything was better than listening to Abraham Wells drone on. I was clearly wrong. The first minute was full of clips of smiling students and flowers that grew on campus but then it changed. Gasps lit up the entire auditorium as I watched a horror at the film playing on the screen. They had done it even after I told them they wouldn't. My face was feverish with embarrassment. From the angle of the camera, you couldn't see Caleb tied to a chair, but it was obvious it was me kneeling as Cam thrust into my mouth. I sat there horrified as people turned to face me. Low murmuring started and people nudged people next to them, pointing in my direction. None of the faculty members stopped the film. "Remember how I told you I was going to mark you for everyone would see you were ours?"

Before I knew what I was doing, I leaped out of my chair and bolted for the door. My life in Clearhaven was over. My aunt would see the video and kick me out if someone hadn't already texted her. I raced to the parking lot, my hands shaking as I fumbled to pull out my keys.



ey took I didn't know where I would go, but anywhere would be better than who had peeled out of the parking lot and headed north, pushing the speed limit sign to his sun was already setting, but that was fine. Who needed sleep?

Tears trickled down my cheeks as the film played on repeat in my mind. Along with the whispers and looks. They had broken their word and been late to me. As I recalled Cam's words from Saturday, a sob erupted from deep within me, crushing whatever had been left of my heart. "I promise you that a vital will always have something left to lose."

own the Fuck them.

to play a Blue and red lights flashed behind me as I approached the city limit sign. I glanced at my speedometer. Eighty-one. I slowed the car and pulled over to the left shoulder, praying that the cop would take mercy on me. He approached the first vehicle with a hand on his weapon and I wiped my cheeks on my sleeve. I rolled down the window.

ed with "Miss, I need you to step out of the car for me." I raised my eyebrows in confusion. Typically, with a routine traffic stop, he would ask to see my license and registration. "Now."

ous that Hesitantly, I unbuckled my seat belt and removed myself from the car. He stepped around and put your hands behind your back." My brain was screaming that this wasn't right. Something was off, but I ignored it. I was just moved to from everything that had happened. Surely, after he searched the car and found nothing in it, he'd let me go with a ticket.

Metal clicked around my wrists, securing my hands behind my back, and he led me to his unmarked car. His partner that I hadn't seen until that moment kicked open the trunk and that was when I realized I needed to fight. Somewhere in the parking lot, my about the whole situation was wrong. I thrashed against the hands of the cop, trying to force me closer to the trunk, but the partner prowled close

here. I saw it. In his hand was a needle. "Please, don't do this," I cried. They  
hit. The moment as he stabbed me in the neck and depressed the plunger. He tossed  
the side of the road before lifting my feet.

In my mind, The officer behind me lifted my torso. "You really should save your  
retrayed You're going to need it."

Inside I kicked at him, hoping that they would drop me, but it didn't do any  
hat you They deposited me inside the cramped trunk and slammed the hood. I

thing I heard before losing consciousness was, "Don't worry, Mr. Var  
got her."

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saw it. In his hand was a needle. "Please, don't do this," I cried. They ignored me as he stabbed me in the neck and depressed the plunger. He tossed it to the side of the road before lifting my feet.

The officer behind me lifted my torso. "You really should save your energy. You're going to need it."

I kicked at him, hoping that they would drop me, but it didn't do any good. They deposited me inside the cramped trunk and slammed the hood. The last thing I heard before losing consciousness was, "Don't worry, Mr. Vance. We got her."

FIFTY-SEVEN

FIFTY-SEVEN

## *Caleb*



**F**lames crackled in the stone fireplace in front of the leather sett. Embers flew into the air. Casually, I brushed my fingers through brown curls, allowing them to linger for a moment. My grandfather was in his study meeting with Abraham Wells and Deacon Jensen about what he knows while I nursed the scotch in my glass, waiting for a text message. Rosalyn's head lay on my lap, entranced by the fire. "Any word yet?" I asked, not bothering to turn toward me.

My fingers stalled as my phone notified me I had a text message.

**Q:** I've taken care of it.

I took a drink of the smoky liquid before responding. "Yeah, it's done." She sighed and pulled her knees closer to her chest. "Do you think they know it was us?"

Ivy Spencer was a complication that I had never imagined appearing in my life. Despite knowing that I should push her away, she occupied more of my waking thoughts than I cared to admit. I picked up one of Rosalyn's curls between my thumb and forefinger, examining it absentmindedly. "Let it be." "Not."



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## *Promise of Embers*

I was offered one last job. One last job and I would be free from anyone anything. It was enough money that I would be able to pay final semester of college and change my life forever. How could I say that? The job was straightforward: burn down an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Strathmore. My life was suddenly turned upside down when I discovered that the job was a set up by one of the most powerful men in the city. My entire future and maybe even my life is now at stake.

That's how I became tangled up with them. Dominic Butler, Ethan and Hunter Nicholson. At face value, they were the wealthy businessmen who ran Jupiter Financial. Underneath this façade, they were as crooked as the dice. They became determined to protect me at any cost. My head told me I should try to keep these dangerous men at arm's length, but would my head and body listen? I wasn't sure if my life would ever be the same.

**Turn the page for a sneak peek of *Promise of Embers* available on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited!**



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## *Prologue*

I sat cross-legged on the cool concrete, watching the flames crackle and drank a deep swig of the cheap rum. I should have realized that a man like Trace didn't want me. He saw me as a pretty plaything, like everything else in his life. When we met, he filled my head with sweet little lies. He told me I was beautiful and said he would be there for me. He claimed he loved me. Trace had money, power, and looks. What did I have? Extra weight, a sick stomach and holes in my clothes. Nothing and no one. I should have known better than to trust him. After all, wasn't I the only person that he truly count on?

So I decided to teach him a lesson. It was a decision that I would come to simultaneously regret and relish.

*Last night was the final straw.* If he had just told me he didn't want me, things would have been different. I was so foolish. He told me he would never see me and that he couldn't stand for me to stay mad at him. When I walked into the living room after my shift, I was met with the sight of two women kneeling near him in nothing but lace underwear. It was his usual type

bleach blonde, fake tits, extra makeup. His pants were unzipped and down around his thighs.

“Oh, you’re so big,” one of them giggled in a high-pitched, nasal voice alone made me want to stab her. I turned around and left, careful to make any noise, as a plan began to form in my mind.

Trace only loved himself and his things. The way to strike back at him was easy. His sleek, expensive sports car sat in the driveway, and I glared at it and steeled myself. In my hand was an empty bottle filled with gasoline and a rag. I shoved the rag into the bottle while tears of anger made sleet

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down my face. It was now or never. I threw the bottle with the lit rag into the open window of the car.

*Seriously, what kind of arrogant prick leaves the windows down on a car that costs more than a house, even in this neighborhood?*

I sat down and lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply. *Fuck him.*

The flames spread throughout the interior quickly, licking at the roof of the car. They cast the surrounding area with a gentle glow of orange light and the heat warmed me. I sat a careful distance away to avoid the gas explosion and watched as smoke wafted up into the dark starless sky and the smell of gasoline filled the air.

Would there be hell to pay for this? Yes. Could I go to jail for this? A

I didn’t care, I was exhausted. All I had ever done was fight and at the end, I would get free food in jail.

Heavy footsteps approached me, but I was too tired to care. I took a long drag and a drink of rum. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” I muttered to myself. I stood behind me. Someone cocked a gun and cool metal pressed against my temple.

“To die, to sleep- To sleep, perchance to dream,” I quoted, taking a

I pulled drag and stubbing my cigarette out.

“I expected more fight out of you after a stunt like this little girl,” he said. Herbaritone chided. I turned my head to glare at him, the gun digging into my forehead. The man was in his mid-fifties, and despite his age, still attractive with silver hair and piercing blue eyes. He was muscular and exuded an air of quiet authority. Studying him carefully, I could not find a resemblance.

“So he called in the cavalry,” I sneered. “He couldn’t take care of himself? How does it feel to have raised such a self-absorbed prick?” “Careful with what you say next.” He lowered the gun and watched me think we need to talk. Joey put her in my car.” The tall, broad man’s car that beside him started towards me.

“Can I at least finish watching the show? I still have some drink.” I lit a bottle, shaking it for emphasis. “I think you’ve had enough excitement tonight. I don’t particularly care about this here when the fire department arrives. You can finish your drink on the tank’s.” Joey lifted me as if I weighed nothing, cradling me against his chest. “Ash can put me down. I can walk.”

His face remained impassive. “Orders are orders, something you must learn quickly. Besides, I don’t feel like chasing you down, even though at least I don’t think you would make it very far tonight.” He was right. My head was heavy, and the world floated around me. I clutched the bottle of whiskey against my chest and planted my head against the man’s shoulder, even as the world turned dark around me.

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drag and stubbing my cigarette out.

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## *Rayne*

The bass from the music over the loudspeakers reverberated in my head. The smell of beer, sweat, and cigar smoke filled the air. It was Saturday at Inferno, and I could not wait until my shift ended. My feet were killing me and sweat ran down my body. I was certain that the red light emanating from the overhead wasn't helping the headache that was threatening to ruin my night. I couldn't wait to get home and sink into bed. Tomorrow was Sunday and I hoped I could sleep in for once. It was almost midnight, which meant my shift would be over soon. I just needed to make it another hour.\*\*\*

A group of guys from one of the local colleges sat around a table near the top of the bar watching a woman dancing on stage. "Hey, babe! Can we get you to come round down here?" one of them called out, gesturing vaguely between himself and his friends.

"Sure thing," I said, forcing my mouth into a smile that didn't quite reach my eyes, hoping that the interaction would be swift.

"Hey boss man wants to see you, Rayne," Victoria said, frowning. A man in a suit approached with an armful of dirty glasses. I hoped that what he wanted to discuss was as innocuous as me working extra hours.

“Ugh. I wonder what he wants. Probably for me to take another shift next week,” I groaned.

“Want me to take over?” Victoria asked quietly, picking up glasses around the bar. She was my only real friend, having worked together for years. I could count on her to make me laugh or hide a body if it came to that. Men fell all over themselves when they looked at her. She was tall and thin with glossy black hair that fell past her shoulders. In other words, she was everything that I wasn't.

“Don't worry, I can handle them. Just your average frat boys out on the town. They probably have names like Chad or Kyle. Oliver can wait,”

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placing steins of beer onto a tray.

“When is your shift over?” one of the guys asked as I wandered over to the table. “I would love to take you home. I bet I could show you a real good time,” he slurred slightly, licking his lips.

Yep, I'm officially over today.

“Oh, I'm sure you'd like to, but I'm going to take a hard pass,” I chuckled.

He reached out and clasped my wrist. “Well, if you change your mind, I know. I could come back in here and see you next week. Maybe you could be dancing instead.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his friends grin at his boldness.

I didn't bother replying to the comment about me dancing. I didn't have the confidence to get up on the stage or dance in one of the cages that were suspended from the ceiling. Not that I would dance for this loser anyway. I only worked here because Oliver Griffith, the owner, wanted to keep his eye on me. Inferno was one of the many strip clubs here in the great city of Strathmore. As far as strip clubs went, it was pretty nice. Security

ift nextclose eye on the patrons and made sure that all of the dancers we

Unlike The Ruby Rose down the street, it didn't double as an illegal  
as fromor deal in sex trafficking. I was almost certain that Inferno only ex  
for fivelaunder money for some of Oliver's other ventures. He was heavily ir  
e downin the city's criminal underbelly. The less I knew, the better.

was tall "I'm busy next week," I drawled, a smile still plastered on my face.  
words, my arm away from him, I asked, "Y'all need anything else?" Not wai  
a response, I sauntered over to a different table to clean up and ignc  
e town. raucous laughter coming from behind me. They probably wouldn't le  
I said, a tip, but that was fine. I needed to see Olly.

Our relationship began tumultuously, with a literal gun pointed at m  
to theirbut in the past five years, we had grown close. He was the crimina  
al goodfigure I never knew I needed.

I walked through the dark hallway towards his office, wondering hov  
world I had gotten so caught up in this web. The gigantic man outsid  
asuallyoffice, Joey, nodded in my direction. "Go on in. You know how he l  
be left waiting." Oliver was known for many things, but patience was  
, let me of them.

ou'll beI entered the small office and looked around. Oliver was leaning back  
ning at leather chair behind the dark wood desk, smoking a cigar, slowly strol  
silver beard. A cloud of smoke hung over the room, coating it in t  
ave the scent of tobacco with a note of caramel. Even on a Saturday night, Oli  
at were immaculately dressed. You would almost think that he was the owr  
ay. law firm and not a strip club.

a closeHe gestured towards the leather chair across from his desk. "Take  
city of Rayne. How's my favorite firebug doing tonight?" He laughed lightl  
kept a nickname as he examined his cigar.



re safe. I sat in the chair before responding. "Olly, I wish for nothing more than to get home and sleep until Monday morning. It's been a long day and I have a paper due for a lit class next week."

involved "Well, I won't keep you long, but I have a favor to ask you." He was in a fairly good mood it seemed. What kind of favor would he ask for this time? I wasn't completely exhausted, I might have dreaded what he was getting to say. He stood up and reached for a bottle of whiskey. "Have a drink and tell me how school is going." Not a question, a command. He poured the liquid into two glasses and handed one to me.

I picked up the glass and swirled the liquid around before answering. "The semester's almost over, at least. My grades are great. I only have a year until I graduate."

He nodded his head slowly. "How is money right now? Don't bullshit either."

He said "Money is... it's fine. I paid my rent. I have enough for food."

It was true. I could make it off of next to nothing. Oliver always worried about food, but years of growing up poor meant that I could stretch out a grocery budget. I could make cereal for breakfast, peanut butter sandwiches for lunch, and bean burritos for dinner. Bananas, apples, and cabbage filled out my menu when I needed them to. After I graduate things would be different.

He asked "Tuition?"

Oliver said "Oliver, if this is about money... I really can't accept any money from you that comes with strings. At this rate, I will never be finished owing you for a seat, know what it entails." I shot him a knowing look across the desk. I learned at an early age that nothing was free in this world.

"What if I were to offer you a job? A big job. It's for a warehouse

than totown. It's either you or I can send out Big Tony. I would prefer you, but I have to see, Big Tony gets sloppy sometimes with his work. I already had to call the police a few months ago with that last gig he did." He took another sip of his whiskey, watching my reaction.

"How much? I need more details if I am going to consider this." My car was going to end up killing me, but I also knew that Oliver was only asking for money with nice. He had already decided that I was the person for this assignment. "How about \$25,000 and I will sweeten the pot? All of your old friends will disappear. Including the incident." I grimaced while I mulled it over.

"Well, offering a lot of money. It would be enough to pay off my tuition for the next year and then some. I wouldn't have to think about my rent.

The most compelling thing was that I would no longer owe him for his car. I had been working off that debt for five years now, shortly after I had run away. I was waitressing at a local mom-and-pop restaurant when I met Trace. He was handsome and charming, at least at first. Then, I realized that he cheated on me one too many times, I lost my temper and acted like a psychopath. I groaned internally and secretly wished that rather than a nice car, he had owned a clunker. That debt would have been paid off by now. "I still don't regret that. He got what he deserved. I should have killed him, castrated him." I smiled slightly.

When I finally woke up, the room was dark. What time is it? But where am I?

The events from the night before replayed in my head. How could I have been so careless to get caught? My head was pounding from the rain. I had a headache, and my body ached. My hands were tied behind my back. I struggled against the ropes in vain. If I could topple this chair over...

"I need you to understand that I don't give a rat's ass that you torched

though. little firebug. The problem I have is that you disrespected my son, pay off doing so made me seem weak. I will deal with him later, but I'm not going to negotiate with you," a familiar baritone voice calls out in the darkness.

"Go to hell," I spat out.

Curiosity Laughter filled the space. "I'll save you a seat. In the meantime, though I don't need you to shut your smart mouth and listen. I don't know what happens and right now I don't care. Come to work for me. I'll pay you well and I'll keep an eye on you."

He was "I don't trust you. How can I know you won't kill me anyway?"

He placed a cigarette between my lips and struck a match. "I don't trust you either. Trust, like respect, is earned. I guess you'll just have to find a way to earn it. Trust me, you, are you going to behave?" He lit the cigarette, and I took a deep breath. "On one condition."

"What's that?"

"Do you have something for a headache?"

"He honestly deserved worse. I would have let you get away with it if you weren't my only child. You could just work for me full time, and I'll pay you well. I mean at the bar," he stated. "I am sure I could find enough jobs to support you. You could move out of that shitty apartment. I would give you enough time off for you to finish school. There aren't many people that can do the balls you do. You're a survivor, Rayne. Tough as nails."

It was a high compliment coming from this man. When did he start valuing me with such respect? At some point, I had carved out a special place in his cold, dark heart. "If I start working for you full time, will I stop?" The words caught in my throat and I stared at the wall. The last thing I wanted was to show weakness to anyone. "Give me the details and I will do the job for you. No promises on anything else."

and in “That’s the thing, I don’t even have the details. I am doing this as a favor to you. Do you know who Dominic Butler is? Jupiter Financial’s CEO? I have a meeting set up for you to meet him and his associates at lunch tomorrow at Duci’s Central.”

Oh, I just thought there goes my Sunday morning sleeping in. Of course, I knew who Duci was. Everyone in Strathmore did. He was a millionaire philanthropist and his name was always in the city’s headlines. According to some of the local gossip columns, he was one of the most eligible bachelors in town, but he was never seen with anyone other than his two closest friends. I had seen a few photos of the three men from a charity gala a few months before. The last thing that I need is to get caught up with another arrogant man, I thought to myself.

I sighed loudly. “Should have asked for more money. What kind of favors do you owe them? I don’t own anything nice enough to get into Duci’s.” true. With my budget, I didn’t exactly have the money to go shopping for clothing to wear to a restaurant where an appetizer would cost more than my weekly grocery budget.

“Don’t worry about what favors I owe. I am confident you can give me something nice. Do you have a black dress?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a black dress.” I finished my drink, hoping that would be the end of that I was over this meeting.

“Wear that then. Do you need some of the money in advance for your meeting?”

I stood up and stretched. “No. I’ve got it. I need to get home if I have a meeting tomorrow.” I rolled my eyes and smiled. “Remember, after we’re even. The only jobs I take from now on are the ones I want to take.”

The next morning, I woke up before my alarm went off and couldn’t get

vor. Do fall back asleep. I decided that the first order of business was to put on meeting pot of coffee and feed the stray cat that lived outside of my apartment. I walked outside with a scoop of dry food and found the cat curled up in front of the door. "Smudge, how is your morning going?" I asked the cat in a soft voice. I petted her silky black fur as she rubbed against my legs, purring loudly. More often than not, I sat on the stairs of the apartment complex of that night to pet her. It was my favorite part of the day, next to drinking coffee in the city, of course.

After several cups of coffee, I realized I had procrastinated for as long as I could afford. I desperately needed a shower to wash all the sweat, grime, and smoke off from the night before. I looked around at my small apartment and took in the sight. Tonight, it was essential to do some laundry and the dishes. They had piled up this week between working and partying. It was how was I supposed to fit whatever this was into my schedule? I was feeling a little jittery before a job, knowing that this time I could be caught in a trap. If I was late, it would screw up my chances of ever getting a legit job.

I showered quickly, dried my hair, and then rifled through the closet and finally found the one black dress I owned. It would have to do. I had purchased it when I was still dating Trace to go to a play with him. It was a fairly simple, sleeveless number with a sweetheart neck and a skirt that hit right above the knees. I applied a small amount of makeup: some concealer to hide the dark circles under my eyes, mascara, and lip gloss. My hair was a wavy mess of curls.

I decided to style it into a twist of some type. Digging through the floor of a lunch closet, I finally found patent leather peep-toe black pumps. They were the only dress shoes I owned. When I hazarded a quick glance in the mirror, I thought I looked presentable enough for this meeting, more like someone's secretary than a criminal.

a largeHad Oliver told them who would meet them to discuss the job?  
ment. Idoubtful.

near myThe drive downtown was quick, and dilapidated buildings fell aw.  
ig-songapproached my destination. I sipped on yet another mug of coff  
purringthought about what I wanted to cover in the paper I needed to write for  
lex latewas supposed to discuss the themes found within Poe's "The Fall  
coffee,House of Usher." My fingers lightly tapped on the steering whe  
hummed along to a song playing on the radio.

ng as II parked my car in a garage about two blocks from the restaurant and  
ne, anddown the street, glad for the small warmth the sun provided. I shou  
studiograbbed a coat, but I didn't own one nice enough to match the dres  
laundrywearing. As I entered the restaurant, I hesitantly spoke to the hostess,  
school.so sorry to bother you, but I am here to meet Mr. Butler."

alwaysShe frowned a bit before turning to guide me. "Right this way, mis  
and if Irestaurant screamed wealth, with high ceilings and marble floors. Tabl  
draped in fine white linens and I was certain that my face was full of  
: until I had never dined in a restaurant remotely this nice, and I knew I c  
aised itafford whatever they were serving. There was a low hum in the a  
modestpeople chatting quietly among themselves.

ove myAs we neared the back of the restaurant, I could see three men sitting  
: circlesat a table in the corner. The one in the middle stood up. He looked  
irls andGreek god with a strong jawline accentuated by a tasteful amount of s  
r of myshort black hair, and piercing eyes the color of emeralds. The other me  
ere thetable were equally attractive, and I attempted not to stare for long  
irror, Iseemed polite. He raised his eyebrows at me slightly as he glanced  
neone'sother men sitting with him.

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## *Dominic*

I sat at the table with Ethan and Hunter, waiting for whoever Oliver sent. He didn't tell me who would be coming to today's meeting and simply sent me to worry. My best guess was that he would be sending Joey or one of the other men. I glanced at my watch and noticed it was 11:55. I hoped Oliver's guy was punctual; I hated waiting. There were plenty of things I needed to do on a Sunday that didn't involve me sitting around and entertaining a fifty-year-old overweight felon with a comb-over.

"Guys, why did I have to come? You could talk to Olly's guy without me." Ethan complained.

"Shut up. What would you be doing at noon on a Sunday anyway, other than looking for a coked-up socialite to get into your bed?" Hunter quipped. A funny thing was, Hunter wasn't wrong. I had lost count of the number of times I had woken up and found a half-naked woman wandering around the kitchen at the penthouse. Women loved Ethan. He was 6'3" with dark, wavy hair, bright blue eyes, and tattoos that covered most of his body. He looked more like a surfer than a financial advisor.

"You would do the same if you had half the game I have," Ethan chuckled.



“Just because I don’t parade women around doesn’t mean I’m not any. When you brought Libby around, she certainly didn’t complain my game.” Hunter had this whole tall, dark, mysterious vibe going that made women’s panties fall off. Long black hair that he could pull into a ponytail, dark eyes, and tattoos completed the package. Unlike Ethan, who was impulsive and acted before he thought, Hunter was always waiting for everything to unfold, carefully contemplating what his next move would be. “Alright gentlemen, let’s not argue here. Speaking of Libby, has anyone heard from her recently?” I asked.

ent. He said not of his ed that hings I nd and ut me, er than ed. The nber of nd our sandy- of his kled.

“No.” Ethan frowned a bit to himself and the friendly banter came to an end. Libby was a girl that Ethan dated casually for a while, but he had broken off months ago. She told Ethan that she thought they were soulmates but she hadn’t taken the breakup well. Libby wasn’t exactly my type, but that’s what stopped the three of us from sharing her a few times.

Watching the restaurant, I noticed a young woman approaching, and it pulled me from my thoughts. She was short, around 5’3“ with hair the color of sunshine tied into a bun. Her hair wasn’t what made me stare though it was her curves. She wasn’t a petite woman; she had full hips and large breasts that I wouldn’t mind seeing more of. As she approached our table, I realized that there must be some mistake. I couldn’t help but think that the host had sent me to the wrong table.

She cleared her throat as she looked at us and sat down. Her gaze met mine. “Dominic Butler I am assuming?” She had eyes the color of a stormy sea and pouty lips. Why would Oliver send me this woman for a job?

“That’s me. These are my associates, Ethan Carter and Hunter Nicholson,” I said, trying to figure out what was happening. The look on Ethan and Hunter’s faces didn’t mask their surprise.

getting “Rayne Woodward.” She smiled slightly, but it seemed like she was nervous about her. Her knuckles turned white from holding her clutch so tightly and her face made her seem tense. She settled into the seat across from me, sitting on the tail edge.

“So, Oliver sent you over?” I gave her a small smile, hoping to reassure her. “He did. He spoke with me last night about doing a job but didn’t give any details. Tell me a bit more about what needs to be done.” A polite smile was plastered to her face and she laced her fingers together on top of the table.

Ethan spoke first, his voice sounding huskier than I thought he intended. In any case, he said exactly what we were all thinking. “Are you certain that you want to take this job? I can always speak to Oliver and request something if you hadn’t else.”

“I’m certain. Every time I do a job for Oliver, I assume that there is a certain amount of risk. I wouldn’t have met with you for anyone else. Are you concerned that I can’t do the job because I’m a woman?” She pursed her lips and I caught her eye, it was loudly, trying to cover the laugh bubbling up in my throat. I had never before anyone call Ethan out on his bullshit.

“Perhaps we should order some drinks. Ethan meant no offense. What would you like, Ms. Woodward?”

“Water is fine, thank you.”

“Cost isn’t an object. I would like to know more about you before I take the job and what the job is. I’m sure you understand. This job requires not only competence but also a certain degree of discretion. Do you like bourbon?” She nodded, I flagged a waiter and ordered drinks, hoping that alcohol would help to lessen the tension at the table.

Hunter remained silent, simply observing the exchange. Finally, he

ervous. “How many jobs have you done for Oliver? How long have you  
posture him?”

he very Her face remained impassive as she responded. “Since I was nineteen  
his son’s car on fire. I have no idea how many jobs I have done for him  
e her. reassure you I am good at what I do.”

give me My eyes grew wide at her statement and Hunter choked on his drink. I  
e smile seen anyone surprise him in a decade. “Wait, that was you? He let y  
of the after that?”

She shrugged. “Yeah. We came to an understanding.”

ded. Of *Holy shit. The woman sitting across from me is the one that set Trace*  
hat you *on fire*. The rumor was that Trace had pissed the wrong person off. I  
omeone care for him, but I would never have dared to cross him. Oliver  
wasn’t exactly known for lenience or compassion. If he trusted her, I  
degrees should too. The bourbon finally arrived, and we sat there sipping it qui  
erned Ia moment.

oughed “Do you know who Wayne Ayers is?” I asked. I would be surprised  
er se didn’t know who he was. Wayne Ayers was one of the wealthiest men  
city. His primary legitimate business involved telecommunications, but  
t would most powerful people in Strathmore, he was involved to a degree in other  
than legal activities.

“Ayers Industries?” She held my gaze as she spoke, running her fing  
tell you the edge of the glass.

ot only “That’s him. I need you to burn a building down for me in Midtown.”  
on?” At “Why?” she asked, studying our expressions, slowly sipping her drink.  
would I hesitated to say anything for a moment. I hadn’t expected to be asked  
needed someone to commit arson. “Because I did some work for him  
spoke.

known decided not to give me the cut we agreed upon. This building house servers. Consider it my pound of flesh,” I responded coolly.

and lit “Out of curiosity, why not do this yourselves?” she asked. Not orn, but I Rayne beautiful, but she was also intelligent. It was a dangerous comb and I shifted in my seat, intrigued by her.

I hadn’t “Because we can’t get our hands dirty. The less attention we draw on ourselves right now, the better,” Ethan said dryly. “Otherwise, I would have been delighted to burn down half the block. We have to keep up appearances and the last thing we need is Wayne Ayers breathing down our necks. The cops suspect it’s us, but will have no proof.” I slid a small piece of paper across the table and Rayne placed it in her clutch.

Griffith “Give me a few days. I’ll scope out security and figure out when I can get the job done.”

quietly for “That’s it?” For some reason, I expected more questions.

“The fewer questions I ask, the better. Even if I asked more questions, would you answer honestly? I think not.” She tilted her head to the side and smiled in the “Don’t worry though, I promise to be *discreet*. Do you boys have any more questions for me? Because if not, I have things I need to do today.” I caught her less than a second later, the smile forming on my lips. If things were different, I would have tempted to ask her out for dinner. There was something about her overbearing attitude that sent a thrill up my spine.

“How will we get in touch with you?” Ethan asked.

“I’ll contact you. I hope you gentlemen have a great afternoon.”

She stood up to leave and offered us another polite smile that didn’t reach her eyes. I watched as Rayne walked away, her hips swaying. A few minutes later, after I was certain Rayne had exited the restaurant, I looked at Ethan and Hunter. “Well, that was completely unexpected.”

As some Ethan grinned and I dreaded what was going to come out of his mouth, I wouldn't mind getting her in my bed." Neither would I if I were honestly washed.

"In your dreams," Hunter replied. "You wouldn't be able to handle a woman like that." It was true. Ethan was used to dating docile upper-class women who were scared to break a nail, and I was almost certain that the woman I had just met was anything but docile.

"We should learn more about her. I can't believe she lit Trace's car on fire. He'll have to pay off the arson investigator. I could give him a call," I said, trying to sound bored. I didn't want either of them to know that I was interested in Rayne as they were.

"Or we could visit him. Monday nights he hangs out over at Inferno. What's the worst that can happen?" Ethan asked. Surely that was a rhetorical question.

"Oliver could shoot you and not think twice about it. I can't imagine how much you will bitch while nursing a bullet wound," Hunter scoffed.

Later that night, I half-heartedly watched television. My thoughts weren't consumed by the woman from earlier in the day. Visions of her powerful and tumultuous eyes played in my head. Ethan collapsed onto the sofa next to me, deep in thought.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Nothing makes sense. I looked into our mystery girl like you asked. She's extremely secretive on social media and has no criminal record. The only information I can find about her is that she currently attends Strathmore University."

That was intriguing. *Most people have a much more extensive electronic footprint than that.* Hell, I knew people that posted every minute of

outh. “Their daily lives. Who was Rayne Woodward? She was a mystery, and  
e being different circumstances, I would be tempted to try to figure her out.

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their daily lives. Who was Rayne Woodward? She was a mystery, and under different circumstances, I would be tempted to try to figure her out.

## *Ties That Bind*

### **Nia**

Feeling like I had no other options, I made a deal with the devil. Family is the most important thing, right? Along the way, I met Enzo Renzetti and my heart knew I should stay away from him. He was gorgeous, dark, but most importantly dangerous. After one night of passion that would change my life forever, I ran, but fate has a funny way of coming full circle. I'm in London, Enzo is in Strathmore and I know it's inevitable we'll cross paths again.

### **Enzo**

My destiny was always to take over my father's criminal empire. I don't have time for love, especially after being burned once. Nia Maslow had everything that I wanted in a woman: gorgeous, determined, and quick with a smart mouth, but after she vanished I swore off relationships. Now, later, she's reappeared and I haven't decided if I want to destroy her completely or claim her for myself.

**Turn the page for a sneak peek of *Ties That Bind*, available on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited!**



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## *Nia*

**M**y phone rang on my bedside table and I winced, the sound of the pounding in my head to intensify. I rolled over, suddenly aware of the warm body lying beside me. Foggy memories from the night before floated through my brain and I hazarded a quick glance at the man who was still sleeping.

John was an orderly at Sacred Hope, the same hospital where I worked. We had talked in passing for months. He was funny and obscenely attractive with wavy blond hair and eyes the color of caramel. I could picture him playing football in college with his broad shoulders and cocky attitude. So late one night when he asked me to have drinks with him after our shift ended, I decided to take him up on his offer. His easygoing nature made it nearly effortless to say yes.

It was time to try to rip the band-aid off again. Time to get over *him*. The night was fun, and the conversation was great. I laughed and drank too many margaritas on the rocks before working up the nerve to dance with John. He felt safe and while we danced, I thought about what it would be like to live a normal life and the possibility of starting over with someone

Someone that was a sure bet. Someone who would love Elijah like their own child. Have a few more kids, get a dog, and move into a house with a picket fence. The whole American dream. I could be someone different, a better version of myself.

It was nothing but a fantasy though. I would never let anyone get close enough to me to live a normal life like that. Even though I had moved to a new country, *he* would find me if he ever discovered Elijah.

When we stumbled into my apartment later that night, hands and feet roaming each other's bodies, I could forget for a while. I didn't think of the dark hair that felt like silk under my palms or steel-gray eyes that looked like steel under my skin. The sex was adequate, perhaps even good, but as soon as I fell asleep, tears fell down my face.

It was just like every other one-night stand for the past three years. I wanted a beautiful man, bring him home, and allow regret to flow through me afterward because my stupid heart wouldn't listen to my brain. Logic told me that staying away meant my child was safe, but I longed for Enzo.

I rolled over and looked at who was calling. My sister. "Yeah?" I answered quietly, my voice thick from sleep. I didn't want to wake the man lying next to me, but my sister wouldn't call in the morning unless it was important. Sniffles came across from the other end of the line. "I need you to come home. It's Mom," Evie cried.

Confusion washed over me as I stared at the ceiling in shock, waiting for more details. "What are you talking about?"

My mother had fallen two weeks ago and broke her left ulna. She'd had surgery, but it was routine and I'd spoken to my father the day of surgery and it had gone well with no complications.

My sister's voice was filled with sorrow as she sobbed. "We had to

he was paramedics. She said she was having trouble breathing and we thought she had asthma. Nia, she's in the ICU. You've got to come home."

I took a deep breath in. "Let me call work, Evie. I'll be there soon."

Struggling from my covers, I searched for clothes to pull on. I wasn't sure what I would be dealing with once I made it home and I needed my own space to think. John was really nice, and an excellent distraction for the night, but he would never be anything more. It was time for him to go.

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paramedics. She said she was having trouble breathing and we thought it was her asthma. Nia, she's in the ICU. You've got to come home."

I took a deep breath in. "Let me call work, Evie. I'll be there soon."

Struggling from my covers, I searched for clothes to pull on. I wasn't sure what I would be dealing with once I made it home and I needed my overnight guest to vanish. John was really nice, and an excellent distraction for the night, but he would never be anything more. It was time for him to go.

## *Nia*

I turned off the engine and rested my head against the back of the seat for a moment knowing that as soon as I walked in the door, chaos would ensue. Last night's shift at the hospital was long and I just needed a few more minutes to breathe.

My typical evening was filled with everything from strep throat cases to lacerations and wounds, but last night was action-packed from start to finish. The icing on the cake was Oliver Griffith being brought in with a gunshot wound to the chest. Oliver was the bogeyman of Strathmore and someone I, unfortunately, owed a few favors to dating back to my days in college.

After the phone call several months ago, I'd quit my job in Clearwater and moved back home, and started work at Strathmore General. My mother had just recovered and went home, but things were different now. My father needed help taking care of her and wanted my support. At the time, it felt like the right thing to do despite the massive pay cut. I didn't exactly regret the decision, but my life was less complicated living elsewhere.

Finally getting my bearings, I plastered a smile on my face and forced myself out of the car. It was just after seven in the morning and the entire

would be up, getting ready for the day. I pulled my keys from the pocket of my fleece jacket and allowed the early morning sun to warm my face for a moment before walking up the rickety back steps. The boards were soft and splintering from age. *Just another thing to fix.*

This was the house I'd grown up in. It wasn't anything fancy and could not be what you would expect a doctor to live in, but it would do for now. One day, I would find a job working somewhere else, but when I moved here several months ago, Strathmore General was the only place hiring in the north of the state.

I loved my job, but the pay was abysmal. Doctors were barely paid more than residents because of funding. As the only county-run hospital, the budget was tight. Still, at least I made a difference to the patients who came in every evening.

I unlocked the house and opened the door, the blaring of the news on the living room television greeting me. The noise and chaos in the house were equal parts my father being hard of hearing, noise from my mother's radio, the equipment, and Elijah singing in the bathroom. *Please don't let him shove another toy stuffed another toy down the drain. Where is my sister?*

Part of the agreement for me to move home was that she kept an eye on me when I was at work. All I wanted was a few hours of sleep sometime each week and a hot shower, but both would have to wait.

Before I even opened the door, I knew it wouldn't be good. A small puddle had formed outside of the bathroom door and I grimaced, listening to Elijah cough at the top of his lungs. I opened the door and gasped, trying to think of the best way to handle the situation. He stood in front of the sink on his blue stool slapping his small hands in the overflowing basin. Water covered an inch of the floor.

ocket of “Hey, Eli baby,” I said, sweeping the toddler into my arms. “Remember for adon’t play in the bathroom.” I planted a sloppy kiss on top of his dark hair. “Have you had breakfast yet? Where’s Aunt Evie or Poppy?”

He shrugged at me and giggled. “I’m hungry, Mama.”

certainly I tickled his sides, deciding to make him breakfast before I started cleaning up the mess. One up Lake Strathmore which had formed on the bathroom floor. “Yeah, you’d homeset him down on his feet. “Come on, kid. Let’s fill up your belly. After this part need to have a talk with your aunt.”

Eli frowned at me as he took my hand. “Is she in trouble?”

more than We walked through the house, stopping in the living room to turn down the TV. “Not too much,” I responded, squeezing his tiny hand.

in each I settled him at the old wooden table. “Toast or cereal this morning?”

waiting for his response. I was exhausted and had to deal with my sister. I was really hoping he decided that cereal was what he wanted.

se were He grinned as he placed his chubby hand under his chin. Even though he was three, almost four, he hadn’t lost all of his baby fat yet. His cheeks were round and tinted with pink. Dark waves fell over his gray eyes. He

just like his father, the man who didn’t realize he existed. How long would it be before he found out now that I was living in Strathmore again? I remembered myself that staying away from him was the best thing to do.

“Cereal. Cereal is my favorite food.”

puddle I laughed at him and put my hand on my hip. “Last week you claimed that was your favorite food. The week before that, it was strawberries.”

the best an eyebrow at him and he squealed in delight. “What type of cereal do you want today? We have,” I walked over to the refrigerator and stared at every box lining the top, “Marshmallow Oats or Fruit Rings.”

He acted like he was thinking for a few moments, but I knew what he



ber, we choose before he ever spoke. “Marshmallow Oats.”

k curls. I nodded my head at him, pulled the box from where it rested, and  
across the room to remove a bowl from the cabinet. I poured the cer  
milk into the bowl and slid it in front of the small child who was my  
leaning “Enjoy. I’ll be back in just a few minutes, baby.” I ruffled his hair  
yeah.” I scowled at me.

ward, I trudged through the house to the dark hallway and stopped outside  
sister’s door, taking a deep breath before pushing it open. My eyes w  
as I took in the sight. “What in the fuck, Evie?” I hissed as her eyes f  
own the open.

Laying in the bed next to my nineteen-year-old sister was a very mu  
I asked, very naked man with red hair. By my best guess, he was in his early  
ter, so I and every inch of his exposed skin was covered by tattoos.

“Oh my God, Nia, close the door!” she yelled.

he was With those words, shock turned to anger. “No. Both of you need  
ere still dressed. Now.” I turned my back to them. “We obviously need to have  
looked talk.”

would it She huffed at me and the man chuckled. “I’m not a kid anymore. Yo  
minded tell me what to do.”

I swung back around and stepped near the bed, putting my face close

“No, you’re absolutely right. You aren’t a kid anymore, and I h  
ed eggs intention of treating you like one. My problem is that it’s your respor  
I raised to watch Eli until I get home from my shift at the hospital. Imagine my  
do you when I found him literally flooding the bathroom and every adult in th  
l at the sleep still. This time it was just water, but what if he had gotten I  
poked my finger into her shoulder. The man lying next to her was tr

o would

suppress a laugh. "I have no problem with you having visitors over, but you told him how old you are? That is a grown-ass man in your bed." I straightened my back and took two steps toward the door. "Don't either of you are leaving without breakfast. I hope you like bacon and eggs." I strode toward the only bathroom in the house and began throwing towels from the hamper onto the massive amount of water covering the floor. A man walked up behind me and gasped. "I don't want to hear any apologies now," I told her.

The man from earlier touched me on the hand. "Let me help you with your fault because I distracted her." I shook my head. "No. It's my fault for assuming that I could trust her. She's young and wants to live her life."

He gently moved around me and mopped up the excess water with towels, ringing them into the bathtub as he worked. "Since I'm required to get breakfast, you should go get started. I'll handle this for you. It's really a long least I can do."

Evie stood back, her cheeks fire engine red. I sighed and walked back toward the kitchen. Eli still sat at the kitchen table, slurping from his bowl. "Hey, monster, are you still hungry? I'm going to fix you some eggs and bacon. Do you want some?"

"My mouth might still be a little hungry," he grinned. "But only for a minute." *My mouth might be hungry.* Only my child. I pulled everything out of the fridge and got started, wondering what in the hell was going on.

The man and Evie walked into the kitchen and he brushed a chastisement from her knuckles before pulling a chair out for her. "Let me make a pot of coffee for us. I need some caffeine, and I'm sure that everyone could use a little. We can deal with one another during this awkward family breakfast."

I grunted at him and ignored his presence while I worked on brown bacon in my skillet. It wasn't really his fault. He probably had no idea he was supposed to be awake watching Eli this early in the morning. He might have slept through her alarm. *But seriously, how old is this* towel she expected her to bring home a young man from the college or somewhere. Evie the mall, not Mr. Tall, Muscled, and Handsome.

I handed a piece of bacon to Eli and he munched on it as Mr. Tall v on, smiling at him. He didn't seem like a bad guy, but I had been wrong before. I cleared my throat. "So, how did the two of you meet?" I asked as I plated food.

My sister twirled a piece of her dark hair. "Just around."

I glared at her for several moments, hoping that it would intimidate her into spilling more information, but she sat there silently, never looking at me. I didn't know what around means. Around could be anything from the grocery store to a biker bar."

She sighed at me and rolled her eyes. "Listen, Nia, I appreciate you. I'm not your parent."

"You know what? You're absolutely right. I'm not your parent. If you were like an adult, I wouldn't need to treat you like a child. Excuse me for expressing concern given your age and the fact our parents are busy with everything." I slammed the plate of food in front of her.

She pushed the plate in front of the man sitting beside her. "You have the audacity interrogating me." She threw her hands up in the air. "You kiss me plenty of your own secrets."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" I asked, my voice rising with my sword. My temper was slipping and I needed to cool off before this escalated further.

ing the “Don’t curse at me.” She stood up and put her hands on her hips. “You  
ea Evie well know what I’m talking about, Nia. You don’t get to act all hi  
ll, Evie mighty. No one even knows who Eli’s daddy is.”

guy? I cleared my throat again, trying to control my rage. This was not th  
ie from that would help me calm down. “Hey, Eli, why don’t you go into the  
room? You can color for one minute while Mama says something t  
atched Evie.” I waited as he hopped down from his chair and stopped by to l  
proven leg before skipping out of the room, obviously unaffected by wh  
eet?” I happening around him. I pointed my finger in Evie’s direction and l  
my voice until it was barely above a whisper. “If you don’t want to  
anything about this grown man sitting at the kitchen table—”

er into The man held up his hands. “Hey, I understand you’re upset, but I h  
: me. “I idea what’s going on. My name is Liam and I’ve known your sister fo  
grocery a month. I didn’t realize a kid lived here. We didn’t mean any harm.”

I shot him daggers. “I’ll get to you in a moment.” He had the patien  
I really saint because he simply sat back in his chair and pursed his lips, tr  
suppress his amusement. “As I was saying. If you don’t want to tell m  
u acted Liam, fine, but you don’t get to ask about Eli’s *father*. I’ve raised him.  
while I never been involved, and it’s better that way. Trust me.” I walked  
y with coffee pot, turned my back to my sister, and finally poured myself a  
coffee. “My biggest problem is that no one was awake to watch Eli  
e some walked in. He can’t take care of himself, Evie.”

u have “I know you came back to help Mom and Dad, but Eli is  
responsibility, Nia! I didn’t give birth to him.”

h every I nodded my head at her and raised my eyebrows. “You’re right, but  
scalated paying the house note now? Who’s working sixty hours a week?  
paying for all the groceries and Mom’s medicine? It certainly isn’t y

u damn your current boyfriend.” I turned my face to poor Liam who sat there eating a slice of bacon. “Sorry, no offense. You obviously caught me at an awkward moment.”

He paused between bites. “None taken.”

“How *did* you meet? Why are you hanging out with my barely legal sister?” Aunt He sat up straighter at my words. “It didn’t start like that, I swear.” His phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out, furrowing his brow as he looked at the screen before cursing under his breath. “I’m so sorry, but I have to go. I promise we can talk whenever you have time. Have Evie text me on your off days. Hell, we could take Eli to the park to give you a break.”

My eyes widened in disbelief. Surely this man did not just offer to take a child to the park. I didn’t know him and obviously couldn’t trust Evie’s word about as I could throw her.

I took a sip of the scalding black liquid in my cup and stared at him. “Thank you for the offer. I’ll think about it.”

He gave me a tight nod and Evie a quick peck on the cheek before we went out the back door. I leaned against the kitchen cabinet and covered my face with my hands. “Why isn’t Dad awake yet?” I asked.

She stood from her chair and picked up the half-eaten plate of food, scooped up the remains into the garbage. “Honestly, I have no idea. He’s been sleeping lately. Mom might have had a bad night.”

I bit my tongue, holding in my response. *Of course, you wouldn’t know. We weren’t here for half the night.*

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Who’s

you. Or

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She stood from her chair and picked up the half-eaten plate of food, scraping the remains into the garbage. “Honestly, I have no idea. He’s been sleeping a lot lately. Mom might have had a bad night.”

I bit my tongue, holding in my response. *Of course, you wouldn’t know. You weren’t here for half the night.*

## Enzo

I stretched my neck to the side and cracked my knuckles, staring around the space at the boxes and crates lining the walls. I walked into the small corner at the back of the warehouse, not bothering to knock. *This won't go well.* My father sat behind the weathered desk, looking at a piece of paper. He pushed his reading glasses onto the top of his head and gave me a hard look. "Enzo, I see you made it. On time for once in your life." He pushed the paper back on the concrete floor and reached into the bottom drawer pulling out two highball tumblers and a bottle of whiskey.

Aldo Renzetti, one of the three men who ran Strathmore. Seeing him was like looking in the mirror at the man I would become in thirty years. I got my looks from him except for my eyes. Even though he was older, he was the one I loved my father. Dark hair, broad shoulders. Sharp cheekbones with a sharper tongue.

I settled into a seat across from him and slipped into the role of a begrudgingly dutiful son. "Of course I showed up on time, Father. It's my job to be summoned to court these days."

He scoffed at me as he poured the amber liquid into the tumbler. “attitude, son. We have a problem.”

I reached out and took the glass he was offering, lifting it slightly direction. “There’s always a problem. It comes with the territory.”

He shook his head at me. “Not like this. Some of the last ship missing.”

I stiffened at his words. By shipment he meant drugs. The question went missing? Heroin? Marijuana? Cocaine? Ecstasy? “Which one, a much?”

und the He swallowed a quick drink of his whiskey and then placed the glass  
office at desk before folding his hands in front of him. “Heroin. From what Li  
me, about ten bricks are missing. We need to figure out what happer  
who has it.”

per. He Ten bricks? No wonder my father called me in to deal with this. The  
rd look. of money that my father had potentially lost could pay for an entire cit  
re chair with money left over.

ing out “What do you want me to do about it?” I took a drink of the smoky  
liquid and laid the tumbler on the top of his desk before standing. M  
was like was wasted sitting in this office listening to issues that weren’t my p  
t all of “I thought you were the one in charge of that.”

women My father pinched the bridge of his nose, obviously over the conversa  
an even want you to call your guys and figure out who took the dope, Enzo.

of the just about losing money. If those drugs fall in the wrong hands...” He  
so rare off and waved his hand at me in dismissal. “I have more important th  
worry about. Your godfather is in the hospital right now.”

I stopped in my tracks, halfway to the door. “What do you mean Oliv  
the hospital?”



Cut the My father pursed his lips and stroked his chin. "I mean that a stray somehow made it into his chest. I have more going on than just in his drugs." He leaned his chair back and closed his eyes. "I understand you want to get involved, but I need you to pick up the slack for a few weeks. The first step is to check the cameras in the warehouse."

I inhaled deeply through my nostrils trying to center myself and combed my fingers through my hair while thinking. "Fine. I'll figure it out." My dad nodded his head but said nothing before I slipped out the door.

As I removed my phone from my pocket, I wondered who had the audacity to put a hit out on Oliver Griffith. Showing any outward emotion around my father would have been a mistake, but inside I was devastated. "A bullet" was no mistake. He was not only a mainstay in my life growing up but also the head of organized crime in the city. I dialed the number of the one person I could trust with my life.

Liam and I had been friends since childhood. When his father was alive, he did jobs for my dad. We were always stuck together when we were young, and somehow it took. He was an asshole on the best of days, but I trusted him more than anyone else.

The call went to voicemail and I muttered under my breath, wondering what he was. What could he possibly be doing that was more important? The December sunlight blinded me and I lowered my shades. Most of the time, it's not I ran for my father recently occurred in the dead of night; I wasn't used to the early morning light.

I stuck my key into the ignition and turned it as my phone vibrated in my pocket. I looked at it before answering. "You're an asshole. What side are you shacking up with this week?"

Liam's warm laughter filled the other end of the phone, obviously amused.

bulletmy aggravated tone. “Sorry, man, I was busy this morning. It was pers  
missingPersonal just meant a random woman he picked up at Inferno or one  
u don’tother clubs downtown. “Yeah, whatever. Listen, I need you to meet r  
ks. Theon Main and help me go through some footage from the cameras. Hel  
Jesse is free.”

bed mySilence encompassed the line as I heard gravel crunching under his fee  
car starting. “Alright, I can text him. Anything you need before I get th

. “Nah. I’m grabbing coffee on the way,” I told him as I parked in front  
acity tooof the local gas stations. “So you’re not going to tell me anything ab  
ind mynight?”

A strayHe sounded flustered as he blew out a harsh breath audible over the lin  
ing up,tell you if it’s something worthwhile. Her sister fucking hates me.”

r of theI laughed as I walked into the rundown convenience store. “When l  
ever stopped you before?”

re, he’d“Fuck you,” Liam chuckled over the line before ending the call.

ounger  
ted him



whereOnce we were all assembled in the warehouse’s office, I pressed play  
The latevideo from the night before. “What are we looking for?” Jesse asked.

errandsI didn’t know Jesse as well as I did Liam, but hell, how many peop  
d to theknow that well? We’d met in college at a party and had been inse

since. He was calm tempered, logical, and women loved him. He v  
l in myopposite of me with long blond hair, blue eyes, and a million-dollar  
le piecenever understood why he hadn’t settled down yet. I guess the same c  
said of me.

used by

onal.” Sure, there was a woman who I had been certain was the one years ago of the she ghosted me without a word.

one over Nia was gorgeous with dark curly hair, plump lips, and the mouth of a lion. I see if she had a stubborn streak a mile wide, but that was our thing. She found

it turned me on, and then we made up. I’d been chasing her since college and she turned me down without a second thought every time until one night here?” That was in the past, though. Whatever had been between us was obviously one-sided. Ever since then, I avoided any serious relationships.

out last “Apparently, some drugs have turned up missing in the past two hours. My father thinks that it’s my responsibility to find them, so I’m starting in the obvious place. I could have done this on my own, but it might be nice to have some company.”

was that Jesse nodded at me and turned toward the television on the wall. We sat quietly sipping coffee, watching the footage for a while until the timestamp on the video read 1:25. Everything went black and I raised my eyes, waiting to see how long the blackout was. When the video came back on, the timestamp read 1:35.

Liam rubbed his eyes. “How in the fuck are we supposed to figure out who’s responsible for this? There’s no evidence.”

Jesse shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. “They were smart. Cutting the feed and hitting the place when no one was around.”

I narrowed my eyes and rewound the tape before settling back into my chair. “Yeah, they were smart, but they had to leave something. It has to be

someone familiar with our operation.” I paused the video right before it went black. “Besides, who else in the city can offload that much heroin without

batting an eye? A new competitor wouldn’t dare cross my father. It has to be someone who is established and already has a vendetta.”

go, but There was only one potential solution to who had taken the drugs that  
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a sailor the other side of the city. Last summer they were nearly eradicated  
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ht. employees were involved in this and what would I need to do to take  
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## *Other Works*

### **Promises Series**

Queen of Clubs

Promise of Embers

Promise of Flames

Promise of Hellfire

### **Forsaken Series**

Flawed Hearts

Foolish Hearts

### **Standalones**

Ties That Bind

Deviant Devotion

### **Anthologies**

## Personal Demons

## Personal Demons



## *About Celeste Night*

Celeste Night detests writing in third person , so....

I am a romance author living somewhere outside of Birmingham, A my husband, two children, two dogs, three cats, and a partridge in a pe I studied psychology in undergrad and thought I was going to be a th Even when I was young, I would weave crazy stories and as I grev dabbled in fan fiction. I never imagined that I would write a novel, mu publish it, so the journey has been amazing!

My relationship with the infamous Mr. Night was ripped straight ou pages of a book (complete with angst and drama) and one day I fictionalize that. I love morally gray (sometimes morally black) m memes. When I'm not plotting imaginary murders or dreaming up n favorite book boyfriend, I enjoy reading and playing video games (loc you Stardew Valley). My favorite holiday is Halloween and my favori is black. I love possums because I also wake up screaming each morni

Follow me on social media to stay up to date on my latest projects! F links at [www.celestenight.com](http://www.celestenight.com) !

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