

Never
cross the
king's queen.



Forever GOLDEN

KINGS OF CYPRESS PREP BOOK 3
RACHEL & NIKKI
JONAS & THORNE

CONTENTS

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Written by Rachel Jonas

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Content](#)

[Join the Shifter Lounge](#)

[A note from the Authors](#)

[Soundtrack](#)

[About the Author](#)



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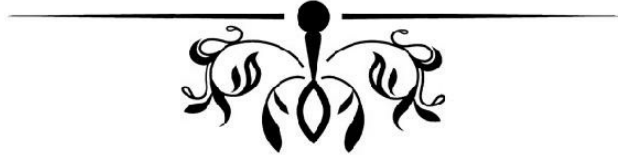
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WRITTEN AS RACHEL JONAS

THE LOST ROYALS SAGA

The Genesis of Evangeline
Dark Side of the Moon
Heart of the Dragon
Season of the Wolf
Fate of the Fallen

DRAGON FIRE ACADEMY

First Term
Second Term
Third Term

THE VAMPIRE'S MARK

Dark Reign
Hell Storm
Cold Heir
Crimson Mist

**WRITTEN AS RACHEL JONAS
& NIKKI THORNE**

KINGS OF CYPRESS PREP

The Golden Boys
Never his Girl
Forever Golden



DESCRIPTION

West Golden—Fierce protector. The one.

The cocky jock I once wanted to kill with my bare hands is now the only one I trust with my heart.

In a city full of corruption and dark secrets, knowing who's on your side gets harder to determine every day. Especially now that Vin's on the warpath, passing out threats he fully intends to see through to the end. His power here in Cypress Pointe seems limitless, and I don't have time to see if that's true. I'm prepared to make sacrifices to keep my family safe.

Even if what's sacrificed is my own happiness.

As our circle of loyal friends becomes clear, we cling to it, because it's all any of us has. And if there's one thing Vin didn't count on, it's that blood isn't always thicker than water.

He might just find out firsthand why it's never wise to cross the king's queen.

FOREVER GOLDEN is the highly anticipated conclusion to this portion of the saga, and a lead-in to the KINGS OF CYPRESS spinoff (which begins with PRETTY BOY D). This book is the final installment of a trilogy and should only be read after completing books one & two, THE GOLDEN BOYS and NEVER HIS GIRL.

This series contains strong bully themes. So, if you're not into romances where hate turns into love (... eventually), and if you don't like your heroes of the unapologetically alpha variety, this might not be the series for you. There is no rape or dubious consent whatsoever. However, due to adult themes and sexual situations, this one's only for the 18+ crowd.

This series is sure to give you GOSSIP GIRL and ONE TREE HILL vibes, and the angst will have you burning through the pages to find out what happens next. One-click and get lost in this series today!

Smooches,

RJ & NT

Thank you for your purchase! I would love to get your feedback once you've finished the book! Please leave a review and let others know what you thought of

"Forever Golden".

You can stay up to date on new releases and sales by joining [my newsletter](#) or by joining my [Facebook Group](#).

For all inquiries, please contact me using my primary email address:

author.racheljonas@gmail.com

CHAPTER 1

WEST

“Something’s wrong.”

I feel it in my gut and haven’t stopped pacing since I made it home an hour ago. I can’t explain it, but I know I’m right.

“Maybe she’s just busy with something,” Joss chimes in, peering up from where she’s posted between Dane and Sterling on the couch.

“Too busy to pick up one of the five times I called? Too busy to return one of the seven texts I sent?” Shaking my head, I double back toward the window. “She wouldn’t just... not respond.”

Joss falls silent again and my nerves are shot. The paranoia started with the conversation between me and Casey earlier—hearing that Vin’s gotten to her and Parker—and now Southside’s in the wind.

“To hell with this. I’m going over there.” The words barely leave my mouth and I already have my keys in hand.

“Ok, breathe. You’ve only been trying her for an hour,” Joss reasons. “I know it feels like it’s been longer, but... don’t you think you should hold off? Maybe this is just Blue giving you a hard time. I mean, it’s possible she wasn’t as cool with you meeting up with Casey as she let on. Isn’t it?”

Joss smiles dimly after speaking, but she doesn’t know Southside like I do. If this was about me going to see Casey, her reaction wouldn’t be to ignore me. She’s more the type who’d arrange a meeting between her fist and my face. Or, you know, take a baseball bat to my windshield.

“Just saying, before you go all Neanderthal and bust her door down, try calling again,” Joss suggests.

I consider it, contemplate waiting until I’m able to announce myself instead of just showing up on Southside’s porch, but when it comes to her, rationale and sensibility rarely come into play. All I know is I need to either hear her voice or lay eyes on her.

Now.

Right now.

“If she gets pissed at me for just dropping in, then let her be pissed,” I conclude. The decision’s been made.

I feel Joss staring, knowing she thinks I should pump the brakes a little, but I’m going with my gut on this one.

“We should come with you then,” Dane says, already standing from his seat.

“Agreed,” Sterling adds. “If something’s wrong, at least you won’t walk in without backup.”

“I’m coming, too,” Joss chimes in. I glance toward her as I shrug into my coat. A breath leaves me, knowing there’s nothing I can say to talk these three out of tagging along.

“Fine, but trail me,” I insist. “That way, if everything’s cool—which it sure as hell better be—you can just take off.”

Sterling nods, not taking issue with that.

Three sets of footsteps follow me to the elevator, and the ride down to the parking structure feels like it takes hours. Not hearing back after having reached out so many times has me on edge, feeling like there are continents between me and Southside, instead of a few miles.

I’m in my car with the engine revving to life as my own words echo inside my head. Three words I said only last night. Three I’ve never said to any other girl in my entire life.

I told Southside that I love her, and I swear I feel it even deeper now that I’ve said it out loud. It’s what’s driving me tonight, what has me ignoring Joss’s advice and tearing out of the lot with my tires screeching.

If something *is* wrong, if I *am* walking into danger... she’s worth it.

“Fuck.”

I glare up at the red light that’s costing me precious seconds when it changes, but it gives me a moment to check my phone.

Maybe she called back and I missed it.

Maybe she texted to say she's fine.

The only notification is one from Pandora, which has my jaw ticking with frustration. Typically, I ignore her B.S., but for some reason I don't dismiss it so easily this time. Instead, I click the familiar pink and black, tiger-print icon and... I'll be damned if my heart doesn't sink.

'You get Pandora's latest update?' Dane's text pops up and I can't even respond because now Sterling's calling.

"I see it," I answer, feeling my blood boil despite the near-freezing temperature outside and in the car.

"Looks like you were right. Vin's up to his usual shady-ass ways."

Hearing Sterling's words, my heart races ten times faster because I know he's right. It isn't far from my mind that Vin's recently been in contact with Parker and Casey as well, which means he likely sees Southside as another loose end to tie up.

I have no idea what my dickhead sperm donor has just said or done to her, but I know it's nothing good.

Never is when it comes to him.

The light turns green and I peel out into the intersection with reckless abandon. There was already a spark inside me, urging me to get to her as fast as I can. But now, after seeing Pandora's post, that spark's turned into a raging blaze.

I swear, if he so much as *breathed* on her wrong... I'll be standing over that asshole's coffin.

@QweenPandora: What have we here, lovelies?

Now, I can't say for certain, but this SUV looks rather familiar. Could it be one from BigDaddy's fleet? If so, it appears he may have taken a sudden interest in KingMidas's love life.

Someone captured this gem a little while ago, and I admit that I held off sharing it, hoping someone might confirm BigDaddy's identity. Don't fret. I haven't gone soft on you.

However, it would've been nice if others had come forward with more

details, additional images to give us a point of reference.

I mean, all we get here is NewGirl climbing out of an SUV I suspect belongs to BigDaddy, and she looks pretty distraught.

But I have questions!

Ok, let's say the visitor is who I think it is; are they coming back from somewhere or did they simply have a meeting in NewGirl's driveway, mob-style?

How long was this visit?

What the heck were they chatting about?

Does this have something to do with NewGirl and SeXyBeAsT being seen dining out together this evening? Making this strange meetup a warning of sorts, on behalf of KingMidas?

While the rest of us know all too well that our beloved QB-1 can hold his own, perhaps BigDaddy simply decided to take matters into his own hands tonight, demanding that NewGirl put some respect on the Golden family name.

This is all speculation of course, but as soon as I know more, you'll be the first to hear about it.

Later, Peeps.

CHAPTER 2

BLUE

West blowing up my phone means he's about to lose his shit. Hell, if he hasn't already. By now, he's probably started thinking the worst and I'm honestly not sure *'the worst'* isn't what just happened—getting cornered and threatened.

He'll want an answer for why I've ignored his calls and texts tonight, an answer for why I broke our plans to connect once he returned from visiting Casey. But I can't get into that with him. The less he knows the better.

And the quicker I can get out of this fucking city, the better off we'll *all* be.

On cue, Jules rings in, followed by Lexi, then Scar. I ignore all three calls and keep moving. There's an invisible clock over my head and, according to Vin, it's winding down.

If I know West, he's probably already resorted to scouring the streets of Cypress Pointe looking for me, hunting me down. Suddenly, I regret not at least texting back to say I'm okay.

Which is a complete lie, by the way. I'm anything *but* okay. I'm a wreck.

Such a wreck that the moment I could see through the rage-induced tears, I immediately ripped suitcases from the closet and stuffed them with anything I deemed essential. I held it together for a while, but the tears came back. Then, packing turned into a crying frenzy, that turned into me wrecking shit with my fist purely out of anger.

My phone buzzes again and it's West, like I assumed it would be. It isn't lost on me that he's worried, but I've got a one-track mind right now, and it's telling me to get what I came to this side of town for and leave.

Quickly.

I peer up at the dark windows of a house I haven't visited in years. And for good reason. I've got enough trouble in my life as it is.

The second my foot touches the bottom step of the porch, a frigid gust of wind slams me hard. Like an omen warning me not to do this, urging me to turn back and head home without knocking on this door.

Only, the monster who got a little too close tonight made this visit completely necessary. If I do nothing else right in this life, I will *not* fail at protecting my sister.

A dog barks and growls on the other side of the threshold when I knock, and paranoia has me checking over my shoulder. It's both a blessing and a curse that the porch light isn't turned on. While I appreciate being able to blend into the night, it also means I can't see my surroundings clearly. As a girl who's lived on the southside all her life, I know the dangers that lurk in the darkness.

Footsteps approaching the door should bring a bit of comfort, but they don't. All because I know the stories that have floated around my hood in recent years aren't fiction. Everything I've heard about Tommy Navarro is one-hundred percent true. But what sets him and Vin apart is that one's the devil I know, while the other remains a complete mystery—an outlier I can't control, one whose moves I can't predict.

A sharp command spoken in Spanish brings the snarling dog under submission. Next, there's a brief pause while I imagine Tommy checks the peephole before unlatching what sounds like about ten deadbolt locks. Then, finally, the door swings open.

A curious stare lands on me and he's definitely confused, but I imagine he knows things must be bad if I'm standing here.

"Shit, Lil' Ruiz. Long time no see," he teases, working a toothpick between his lips.

He passes a sweeping look over me, letting his stare linger on my poorly bandaged hand for a second. I don't explain that these wounds are self-inflicted—the result of punching a mirror in a fit of rage after Vin left—and he doesn't ask. Instead, he just leans against the doorframe, wearing an increasingly devilish grin.

I hated being called *Lil' Ruiz* even when Ricky and I were a thing. Now, it grates my nerves because everyone—including Tommy—knows that ended some time ago.

“Blue,” I sigh. “My name’s Blue. Always has been.”

“Yeah, whatever. You been crying or something? You look like shit.”

It’s been a while since I’ve wanted to punch someone in the dick this bad, but yep, there it is: that oh-so-familiar urge.

“I need a favor.”

“Whoa, slow down,” he laughs. “Favors are things you do for free. Anything I have to offer comes with a price. You know that.”

I stare, remembering the many times I’ve cussed him out for being an ass, just like he’s being right now. Suddenly, I’m even more convinced this is a mistake.

He can probably tell from my expression that I’m far from amused, so he rolls his eyes.

“Relax. I’m kidding. Tell me what you need, and I’ll tell you what it’ll cost. Then, hopefully, I can take my ass back to the couch and watch my show.”

My eyes dart over my shoulder again, making sure I haven’t been spotted.

“Out here?” I ask. “I mean, can’t we handle this inside? I’d kind of rather the whole neighborhood not have eyes on me.”

His smile broadens when I finish speaking.

“Not sure if you noticed, but I’m *already* inside, making that more of a ‘you’ problem, Lil’ Ruiz,” he says with a short laugh. “You’re gonna have to hurry this up, though. Just told you I’ve got shit to do.”

Tommy was a dick even when he hung with Ricky and Hunter back in the day, before he got so full of himself that they couldn’t stand to be around him anymore.

“I need to... make a purchase,” I force out, now knowing the word ‘favor’ isn’t right according to him.

His brow quirks with curiosity. “What kind of purchase?”

“The kind I can use to protect me and my sister. And... bullets would be nice,” I add, hearing my own voice quake at the mere thought of what I’m considering, what I’m prepared to do.

“Ah, I see.” That cocky smile of his is back. “This got anything to do with that photo Pandora just put up?”

“What photo?” My heart races with the question.

“The one with you getting out of Golden’s truck. You wouldn’t be the first person who wants to shoot that motherfucker.”

He laughs, but I’m nowhere near amused. And when my phone goes off again, I’m also not surprised that it’s Ricky this time. Apparently, I’m the last to know Pandora’s already exposed my encounter with Vin.

Well, there goes my plan to go quietly into the night.

Shit.

With fear spiking and my mind going in a thousand different directions, I hadn’t even considered the fact that one of her minions might’ve seen. Which is all the more reason why I shouldn’t be here.

“Just... forget it.”

I’m already halfway down the steps when I speak those words, regretting that I ever thought this was a good idea. I mean, yeah, I have every reason to be terrified of Vin Golden, but if there’s one thing I know for sure about this city, it’s that secrets never stay secret with Pandora around.

“I’ll set something aside I think might suit you, ‘cause whether you like it or not, you’ll be back, Lil’ Ruiz,” Tommy calls out after me.

I don’t bother answering as he watches me speed-walk down the sidewalk, trudging through the snow. All because, deep down in my heart, I’m almost certain he’s right.

CHAPTER 3

WEST

The guys and Joss pull up right behind me when I brake at the curb in front of Southside's house. I barely even have time to shift into park when a third set of headlights are in the rearview mirror. Glaring, I make out the silhouette of a sleek, blue muscle-car that I hate I can recognize.

Ricky.

Of-fucking-course.

Doesn't surprise me that he showed up, but that doesn't mean I'm not pissed about it. He gives off a vibe when it comes to Southside. Like he thinks he's the only one who can protect her. Chances are he saw Pandora's update just like the rest of us, but damn. What part of '*she's moved on*' doesn't this asshole understand?

If she needs anything from anyone, *ever*, I've got that shit covered.

Cursing under my breath, I step out onto the street. Ricky does the same, shrugging into a dark leather jacket as he cuts a look toward me. Pretty sure our thoughts are the same when our gazes lock—*fuck this guy*.

In the brief second when his interior light flashes on, I see he's got Shane and Scarlett in the back. My brothers and Joss crunch snow beneath their boots as they move in closer, and Ricky's half a step behind. He waits at the foot of the steps, keeping his distance while I bang on the security door with my fist.

There's unspoken tension when it comes to him and me. It's the reason I

know this false sense of civility between us won't last. Why? Because he'll eventually open his damn mouth and say some shit that'll set me off.

Always does.

"Guess everything I said to you went in one ear and out the other," he grumbles.

Here we fucking go.

I glance over my shoulder and the hateful glare set on me shouldn't be surprising.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I ask with gritted teeth because... *Why the fuck is he here?!?!*

Shaking his head, he scoffs. Like something I just said is unbelievable to him.

"I told your ass to back the fuck off, but let me guess what happened. You wanted her, right? So bad that you willingly put her dead in the center of your daddy's crosshairs."

I turn and face him completely now, hating that every time I look into this motherfucker's eyes, I see it. Everything he feels for her. He wears that shit right on his damn sleeve, out in the open for me and everyone else to see. He's damn-near arrogant when it comes to loving her. So, if I haven't said it yet... Fuck. Ricky. Ruiz.

Fuck him.

"Why don't I—"

"West," Sterling cuts in with a stern glare. "We don't have time for this shit. Stay focused."

My fists tighten. I know he's right, but it's high time I put Ricky in his place. However, a second glare—from Dane this time—halts me. His eyes are saying the same as Sterling's—*Let it go. For now, anyway.*

One deep breath later—and a promise to myself that I can deal with Ricky's ass when there's less going on—I manage to turn around and let the conversation die. Problem is, Ricky doesn't seem to have the same idea. As soon as I decide to be the bigger man, he starts running his mouth again and something about this dickhead sets my nerves on edge, making ignoring him virtually impossible.

"All I have to say is, let me find out your punk-ass daddy did or said some shit that's got Blue messed up, and I swear I'll—"

"You'll what, bitch?" I'm down the steps in less than a second, right in his face, going over the thousands of reasons I have to knock his ass out cold.

Unlike everyone else in his hood, I'm not scared of him.

"This ain't what you want, rich boy. Trust me. Especially not tonight," he warns.

Only, he's wrong about that. This is *exactly* what I want—a chance to finish what we started when he showed up outside the fieldhouse. My chest slams his when I step closer, and he pushes back. It isn't until Joss's small frame wedges between us, putting a bit of distance where there was none, that I come to my senses again.

"Soooo... I vote we all just calm down and remember that we're here to see about Blue," she chimes in, placing one hand on Ricky's chest and the other on mine.

I haven't lost sight of why we're here, but as usual when it comes to him, I'm seeing red, wondering what the hell Southside ever saw in a hothead like him. Then, it hits me. Probably the same shit she sees in me—crazy that matches her own.

I back off and start toward the door again, deciding to knock for a second time. Honestly, all I want is to get in there and see that she's okay. I didn't come here for Ricky *or* his bullshit. However, when he pushes past, shoulder-checking me in the process, he tests my patience once again. But nothing sets my nerves on fire like seeing him pull a set of keys from his pocket. And it isn't until he slides one into the lock that I accept it.

This asshole has a fucking key.

To *my* girl's house.

I take a step toward him, deciding that tonight—right here and now—is the night Ricky Ruiz loses all his teeth, but three sets of hands grab me backward.

"This isn't the time," Sterling repeats quietly near my ear.

Seething, my gaze snaps to the right and I catch his. He shakes his head, urging me not to do whatever I had in mind, knowing this shit is eating away at me.

"Focus on Southside," he adds quietly.

The statement is short, but it reminds me that being here has nothing to do with the ex who can't seem to learn his fucking place. Hell, it doesn't even have anything to do with *me*. The only person who's important right now is her.

I hold my tongue when the key fucking works, solidifying my hatred for this prick as the front door swings open. Then, with the flip of a switch, the

living room brightens from the light of a single lamp on the end table. There's absolutely no sound whatsoever, other than blood rushing in my ears as my heart pumps double-time.

She's not here.

She's not fucking here.

It isn't lost on me that had this been some weeks ago, my first thought when seeing Southside exit one of my father's SUVs would've been that I was right about her. That she was, in fact, his latest piece of side-ass. But aside from the fact that I've since realized she's not even capable of shit like that, the evidence that's been mounting against Vin speaks for itself.

"Maybe she took off," Sterling suggests, just as I'm starting to reach a whole new level of panic.

"Her car's parked outside," I point out.

Joss glances around while she thinks. "Maybe... she walked?"

It's freezing outside, and snowing like crazy, but if she's pissed, she probably wouldn't have cared about that.

"I'll check her room," Ricky asserts.

"No, I've got it."

After making the correction, my palm slams his chest when he attempts to pass.

There's hatred rolling off him in waves, and it's impossible to miss when his gaze slowly rises from where my hand just landed on his chest. He meets my stare and I'll be damned if I bend on this shit. Whether he likes it or not, if either of us is going down that hallway to Southside's bedroom, it's me.

Alone.

I don't wait for him to get over being put in his place before turning to head toward her bedroom. I start not to bother with the hallway light, but realize I made the right call when glass crunches beneath the sole of my shoe. It doesn't take long to find where it came from—a broken mirror hanging crookedly on the wall. The same wall with a huge hole I know wasn't there the night before.

There's not enough evidence to know exactly what's gone down here, but it's enough that I'm moving faster now, unashamed that I feel desperate as hell, because that's exactly what I am.

Desperate.

I make it to her bedroom door and flip on the light, feeling my heart race when I find it empty. But... not entirely.

Sitting next to her bed are three suitcases. Two of which are nearly bursting at the seams, and the other half-open with clothing spilling out of one side.

It's like she grabbed anything she could in a hurry, preparing to make a run for it.

What the hell did that asshole say to her?

"She's gone. We have to find her," I say in a rush, trying not to freak out when I rejoin the others in the living room. I don't tell them about anything I saw—the packed bags, the broken mirror.

Everyone's clearly concerned, but only one's level of panic even comes *close* to matching my own—Ricky's.

"I'll call Jules," he says quickly, already dialing.

"And we'll hit a lap around the block and see if we spot her," Dane offers.

My head spins and I can't think about anything but finding her, making sure she's okay. I keep picturing those bags, wondering what could've been going through her head. What was so fucking bad that she was ready to bail?

Without answering a single one of my texts or phone calls, no less.

My mood shifts from worried to pissed in zero seconds flat. Not at her, but knowing this is all my father's handiwork.

Sterling grabs the door handle, but pauses when the security door screeches on the other side. My eyes are fixed there as he steps back, giving someone room to enter. A headful of blonde hair peeks inside, glancing around at the five of us standing in her living room.

"Shit. You're okay."

That's all I'm able to say while rushing to where Southside is now standing, trying to hide one poorly-bandaged hand. I'm starting to think I know where the busted wall and mirror I found in the hallway came from.

"Where the fuck were you?" I get the question out and squeeze her tighter than I probably should.

"I'm fine," she answers. "Just went for a walk to clear my head, but... how'd you guys get in here?"

Ricky's response is to dangle his keys and Southside tenses against my chest, knowing what that means.

"Why the hell do you still have that?" she snaps, pulling out of my arms a little when she glares at him. However, instead of answering the question, Ricky shrugs deeper into his jacket and tilts his head in defiance, clearly

decided on not giving an actual response.

But we've got bigger shit to deal with than Ruiz.

"We all saw Pandora's update," I let her know, to which she lets out a frustrated sigh.

"Yeah, apparently *everyone's* seen it."

My eyes slip toward the bloody bandage on her hand again, but when she realizes my attention's shifted, she tucks it inside her coat pocket. Like she hopes I don't call her out on it in front of everyone.

The room's completely silent, but it feels crowded, making it more obvious that I need to be alone with her. It's the only way we can speak freely, air shit out without an audience.

All it takes is a glance toward my brothers and they read my thoughts.

"We'll take off since everything's okay," Sterling speaks up.

He nods toward the door and Dane follows. Joss is right behind them, placing a sympathetic touch on Southside's shoulder on her way out.

While the other three were easily signaled to leave, Ricky—as expected—lingers like a fucking rash. His eyes are locked on Southside and he moves in closer. Closer than what I deem necessary, but why am I even fucking surprised?

"The fuck happened to your hand?" he asks, not bothering to hold his tongue.

Waiting for Southside's answer, I see that damn look in Ricky's eyes again. The one that makes me want to rip him to shreds every single time.

"I was upset," she answers with a sigh. "At the time, I suppose the wall seemed like a great place to plant my fist. And then... maybe the mirror."

A short, humorless laugh is meant to hide her embarrassment, but I see through it. Mostly because I know what's hidden in her room, sitting beside her bed right now. And because I know that before taking a walk to clear her head, she came in and wrecked shit to get her rage out. Something happened here tonight, and I get the feeling she doesn't want to talk about it. However, with Vin being involved, one thing's for sure.

It was shady as fuck.

Ricky and I share a look. Our mutual animosity doesn't ease with time. Actually, it grows whenever we're face-to-face, forced to acknowledge that we're stuck with each other in a way. I know Southside will never fully kick his ass to the curb because they've been friends since childhood. And as much as he wishes otherwise, I'm not going anywhere either.

“I’ll be expecting a call from you by morning, rich boy,” he threatens. “Either you find out what the fuck is going on, or I’ll get the job done myself. And trust me, you don’t want me to get shit done myself.”

“You’re not helping, Ricky!” Southside snaps, interjecting just as I open my mouth to tell this dipshit to go fuck himself.

He meets her gaze, and it isn’t until now that the hatred he holds for me starts to fade. Why? Because he’s not looking at *me* anymore; he’s looking at *her*, and that damn soft spot is showing again.

“I know you’re just worried about me, and I know you made Hunter a promise, but this has nothing to do with you,” she adds. “I’m a big girl and I can take care of myself.”

“So, I’m supposed to just—”

“All you need to know is that West will *not* be calling to report *anything* to you in the morning,” she cuts in, “So, please, just... stop. I can’t do this right now.”

Ricky stares, shoulders heaving as he holds in whatever else he wants to get off his chest, but he says nothing.

Well, I’ll be damned. She did it. She found this dickhead’s off-switch.

Don’t think I’ve ever seen him this quiet. While I would’ve typically gloated a bit, I don’t. Because, as someone who’s seen Ricky off his leash, I know this is just another example of how deep his feelings run for her.

“I’m dropping Scar off with Jules for tonight and taking Shane home, but I’m coming back,” he says flatly. Like his mind is already made up.

“Ricky—”

“I’m coming back, B,” he repeats, but with more authority this time. “I’ll chill in the driveway to keep watch. You know, in case Daddy Warbucks decides to bring his ass back.”

It takes strength I didn’t know I had not to put him in his fucking place. He starts toward the door and makes it to the porch before Southside calls out to him again.

“And I’d like my key back,” she asserts. “Hunter gave you that for emergencies only.”

“Guess it’s a good thing this was an emergency.” He doesn’t bother looking back as he continues toward his car.

“Fine, I’ll just have Dusty change the locks.”

Ricky shrugs, still not meeting Southside’s gaze. “Do what you gotta do.”

“Ugh! He’s so damn stubborn,” she groans, glaring as he hops in his car

and revs the engine.

Frustrated, she slams the door, and all I can think about is what screwed up shit my father might've done or said that made her pack those bags. Made her bust up her hand.

Something my brothers taught me not so long ago stuck in my head. That thing about not pushing too hard, not backing her into a corner.

So, slow and steady it is.

I lift her chin until her gaze meets mine. She's fucking beautiful, yeah, but that's not what has me addicted. Life's dealt her a shit hand, but despite all that, she's one of the toughest people I've ever met. There's a fire in her that nothing's been able to kill—not even me, before I came to my senses.

I lower my stare to her hand and gently examine it. The bandage is bloodier than before, which means the wound needs some attention.

“Does it hurt much?”

She shrugs and meets my gaze. “Probably less than you think, seeing as how this isn't the first time I've done something like this out of anger.”

That doesn't surprise me, but what *does* catch me off guard is when she manages to smile. Her eyes are glassy, though. Like she's holding back unshed tears.

“I know you can stand on your own two feet, and I know you don't need anyone to take care of you, but... maybe you should let me. Just this once, at least.”

She stares for a moment, maybe sensing all the unspoken things that just ran through my head—about loving her, wanting to be whatever she needs me to be.

Her hair shifts when she finally nods, giving in. “...Okay.”

It isn't lost on me that she doesn't let many people in, but somehow—even being the twisted fuck that I am—I managed to be counted in that number. I don't take that lightly. But something unexpected came with the territory of being with a girl like Southside. There's this powerful loyalty she brings to the table and, in turn, she draws the same out of those closest to her.

Guess that's why I'm here instead of out there, hunting down my father for the shit he pulled. I'm staying put, making sure Southside's good, because she needs someone more than ever tonight.

“Let's get this hand cleaned up. Then, we'll talk.”

She hesitates, but eventually nods. There's a tough conversation ahead of us, but we'll take *this* on the same way we're learning to handle everything

else.

Together.

CHAPTER 4

WEST

Don't ask about the bags. At least not before getting her hand cleaned up.

Southside trails me when I head to the bathroom in search of supplies to clean her wound. While I rifle through the medicine cabinet, she takes a seat on the edge of the tub, still not speaking much. All I come up with are a few drops of alcohol, a tube of antiseptic with the cap missing, and one strip of a gauze bandage that *might* be enough.

Note to self: Buy this girl a first-aid kit ASAP. She rages often enough that I'm sure it'll be put to good use.

“Ok, so fair warning—the extent of my experience patching up wounds is limited to tending to injuries I’ve sustained on the field. Just thought you should know.”

She flashes another of those sad smiles before answering. “Thanks for the heads up, but I think I’m in good hands.”

I smile a little too, but hers has already faded. Why? Because Vin did a fucking number on her tonight.

Focus on her. Deal with his ass later.

Southside’s gaze flashes toward me when I settle beside her on the edge of the tub. She watches me loosen the old dressing and, somehow, I manage to get it off without hurting her more than she already is. I get my first good look at her knuckles now, and she definitely did a number on them. None of the gashes seem deep enough to require stitches, though. She got lucky.

Peering up at her, I raise a brow.

“Beautiful girl, hot temper—that’s a deadly combination,” I tease. “Ever consider anger management?”

“Once or twice, but some say being a little on the explosive side is part of my charm.” She winks playfully when I glance up from working on her hand.

“Yeah, well, we all know people lie sometimes, Southside.”

The joke actually draws a laugh out of her. One that sounds genuine, easy. I’d like to think that has something to do with me being here, looking after her.

“Ouch,” she winces, recoiling a bit when I dab her knuckles with alcohol.

“You good?”

Those dark-blue eyes of hers flash up for a second when she nods. Bringing her hand close again, I blow her skin to soothe the sting. Now, her attention’s on me instead of the pain, like it was a moment ago.

“Better?”

She nods again before answering. “Yeah, a little.”

Despite all I know those eyes of hers have seen, they’re so innocent. It guts me every time I look into them. The more I think about whatever Vin’s done, the more I want to hunt him down, even without having any details of their conversation.

“I need to know what he said.”

The words roll off my tongue as I dab ointment on her wounds, aware of having just jumped the gun. My plan was to get her settled before bringing this up, but I couldn’t hold back any longer. It’s a miracle I made it *this* long.

This girl... she has my whole damn heart, and sometimes it’s overwhelming.

Uncomfortable.

Guess I hadn’t realized *how* uncomfortable until now, when it’s been made so fucking clear that I can’t protect her from everything or everyone.

Waiting for her answer is killing me, and so are her red-rimmed eyes. It’s obvious she was crying at some point, even if she wants me to think everything’s cool. As I stare at her, at the aftermath of Hurricane Vin, I know all I need to know.

She won’t even look at me now, hasn’t for almost a full minute. But I don’t push. Instead, I finish dressing her wound, put the first-aid stuff away, then reach for her uninjured hand.

“Where are we going?” she asks, looking every bit as worried as I expect

her to.

“To your room to talk.”

Her eyes widen with the suggestion, and before she even opens her mouth, I know what this is about.

“Actually... why don't we go to the living room instead? I left clothes all over my bed and—”

“I already saw the suitcases,” I cut in, saving her a lie.

Now she knows there's no point in hiding the truth—that she intended to leave. Hell, for all I know, that's *still* her plan.

With that blank stare aimed at me, the silence seems so much louder. So loud it confirms my assumption—that she was fully prepared to bail without telling me a thing.

Her expression's suddenly full of guilt and her eyes pool with unshed tears.

“It's okay. I'm not mad. You were only doing what you thought you had to do,” I say quietly.

It isn't a lie—I *do* understand. She was doing what felt smart, safe. But that shit stings like hell, imagining her bailing on me without saying a word. It brings something to light, though. That there's still so much I don't know, don't understand.

Hesitant, Southside follows me to her room. There's an awkward moment of silence as she gathers the luggage, then places it in her closet. She settles on the floor after that, resting her back against the bed and I lower to sit beside her. Then, after a long stretch of silence where we do nothing but stare at the wall, I try my luck at a conversation again.

“I need you to tell me why Vin was here tonight.”

No answer.

I'm trying to hold my composure, but damn. I don't know where her head is, don't know how vulnerable she is, so I'm walking on eggshells.

I place my hand over hers—the one that's not busted up—and as soon as there's contact, her eyes flood again. Seeing her like this gets to me, probably more than she realizes.

“Please, tell me what happened.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, her gaze lowers. “It wasn't that big a deal.”

“It wasn't that big a...” I stop myself just short of echoing her response, which now has my brow twitching.

It wasn't a big deal? Then why the hell did she freak out and start busting shit up with her fist? Why the hell was she fully prepared to make a run for it?

Because it was a big-fucking deal, which means she's blowing smoke up my ass.

Deep breath. Don't fly off the handle.

"Did he make you sign something?" I ask.

A look of confusion flashes across Southside's face. "No, it was nothing like that."

When she leaves it at that, I feel another spike of frustration and my eyes never leave her. It'd make sense for Vin to come at her with that same NDA bullshit he took to Parker and Casey. It'd make sense for him to assume Southside knows my secret—which she does—so it's not farfetched that he'd be on a mission to silence her like he did the others.

"You worry too much."

She forces a fake-ass smile right after speaking, and I know it's fake because, again, she's on the verge of crying.

"You had a right to freak out. I probably gave you a heart attack when you came in and saw all the glass."

"And your bags. Let's not fucking forget those," I add, making sure she knows that has to be addressed, too.

Frustrated, her stare lingers on me for a moment before her gaze wanders up toward the ceiling.

"I overreacted, let my emotions get me all riled up."

This is the line of bull she tries to feed me next, doing a shit job of pretending not to be affected. And, fuck, I can't stand this tiptoeing shit.

"I can't fix whatever my dad did if I don't know where to start, Blue."

Another fake grin, but bigger this time. "If you're calling me Blue, that means you're blowing this way out of proportion."

"Who the fuck are you trying to kid right now? Throwing in a joke or two doesn't mask the fact that you're crying. Or the fact that something that asshole said had you ready to jump ship and fucking leave without so much as a damn smoke signal. So, like it or not, you're gonna have to give me more than bullshit."

Well... okay. So, I still suck at slow and steady. Noted.

I tried keeping my cool, but all my alarms are sounding off right now. She's trying to make light of what's happened, and all that does is tell me

there's something to hide.

Her stare practically bores a hole through me, but she seems to understand that I'm not buying into the act, not buying her bullshit. Eventually, that brings us to a stalemate.

She shifts her gaze now, instead keeping her eyes trained on the ceiling. I can't read her mind, but she sure as shit isn't forcing that smile anymore, which says a lot.

"There's nothing you can fix, West. Just... let it go."

I draw in a deep breath and there's an unbelievable amount of frustration and tension in my shoulders.

What the hell isn't she saying?

"So, that's where you think we're leaving this? I'm supposed to believe he didn't say anything at all? Supposed to believe you got pissed and fucked up your hand because you didn't like the interior of his SUV or some dumb shit like that?"

With her eyes still aimed toward the ceiling, she sighs. "Damn it, West! He just... he doesn't want us together!"

That last part leaves her mouth awkwardly. Like she would've rather placed her hand on a hot stove than say those words out loud.

"And?"

"And what?" she snaps, rolling her eyes. "The man sees me as 'southside trash'. Meanwhile, you're his fucking heir and shit. Add it all up and he doesn't want someone like me ruining your rep."

She's determined to make me believe this is the conversation they had, but it's not working.

"Bullshit."

She scoffs and I see her frustration brimming over, but I don't give a shit.

Another dramatic eye roll and she faces me again. "Fuck, West! What the hell else do you want me to say? He doesn't want you with me, doesn't want us being together to tarnish your image. End of story," she snaps.

Anger has my blood boiling and both fists clinched tight, because there's more. A *lot* more.

A few heart-pounding seconds go by and we're silent, facing an impasse. Mostly because I know it won't be easy getting her to confess the whole truth, but she has to. The only way *any* of this works is if we bring each other in. On *everything*.

Another sigh from her means she's done talking, done letting me drag

more out of her than she's willing to share.

"That night I came by to air out all our shit, I explained why I targeted you when we first met. You said something that's stuck with me to this day. Do you remember what you asked?"

The only sound in the room are her angry breaths as they puff from her flared nostrils. However, after a few seconds, I at least get some form of a response when she shakes her head.

"You said that one simple conversation is all it would've taken. Just one moment of trust and transparency. That stuck with me, and it's the reason I've been honest with you about everything since," I add. "You, my brothers, and Joss are the only people on this planet I trust one-hundred percent. I know you've seen a lot of shit, have been *through* a lot of shit, but I need you to know you can trust *me* like that."

She doesn't speak right away, but I notice something I'm not even sure *she* realizes yet. She's trembling. Sure, it's slight, but I notice it right off the bat.

"You're safe with me, Southside. Always."

Again, she gives me nothing, but I think she's softening. So, I keep talking.

"Asking if Vin made you sign something wasn't random. I asked because he'd already been to visit Casey before I got there. He made her sign an NDA because of what happened between us. Then come to find out, he did the same to Parker, which means he's on the warpath, covering his tracks *and* mine, but I have no idea why. Seeing her was already a little weird, but even more so knowing she'd seen my dad recently. Made matters worse that she was being super cagey, checking over her shoulder every few minutes."

Southside blinks at me and I can only hope I'm making some sort of progress.

"He added a bribe to sweeten the pot for Casey. My best guess is he did the same for Parker, which explains her recent shopping spree. There is a bright side to all this, though. If you want to call it that."

Southside's brow quirks—the first real sign of life I've seen in a while.

"With her signing the NDA, agreeing not to ever tell what she knows about Casey, we're free to go to Dr. Pryor. We can tell her about the video without Parker being able to retaliate."

Southside's still quiet, but her softening expression gives me a small flare of hope. Maybe she's coming around.

“I thought you only told a handful of people,” she says. “So... how’d your dad find out?”

“That’s the same thing *I’ve* been wondering. My first thought was that Casey may have let something slip to someone other than Parker, and it somehow circled back to Vin. That seems like too big a coincidence, though. He definitely knows shit he shouldn’t, but—”

“The phones.”

I glance toward Southside when she sort of mumbles that to herself, slipping into a thought she has yet to share aloud.

“Meaning?”

“It’s something Hunter said the last time I visited. He told me not to trust the phones and I... I hadn’t put two and two together at the time, but it’s the only thing that makes sense. It would explain how your dad knows about you and Casey. It would explain how he got that picture I only shared with Ricky. I...”

She falls silent, staring at the floor as the weight of this revelation hits her. Hits us *both*.

Would Vin really go that far? Tracking phone calls and text messages?

No sooner than I ask myself that question, I’m reminded of all the other shady shit he’s done lately, and it isn’t hard to believe. The bastard’s *more* than capable, even if the bigger question still remains in play—*why?*

What does he stand to gain by keeping tabs on us? Or what does he stand to lose if he doesn’t and something slips past him?

My mind’s already made up; I’m confronting his ass. He knows I’ve seen Pandora’s post, knows I’m aware that he’s had words with Southside tonight, so he’s likely expecting it. I won’t reveal all my cards, but he needs to know whose side I’m on.

Hers.

It’ll always be hers.

I glance at Southside’s hands again and they’re trembling a little more than before. It’s the only sign she’s not as tough as that look on her face suggests. When I lace her fingers with mine, her watery stare shifts toward me.

“He... threatened me.”

Those words are like a bullet, breaking skin, ripping straight through my heart.

“And as bad as I know you want to give him shit about it, West... you

can't," she adds.

My glare hardens. "He can't keep doing this shit. If I don't make it dead-ass clear to him that—"

"He said he'd hurt Scar."

Those words cut off my train of thought, taking whatever I was going to say right out of my head. When she said he threatened her, I assumed that meant he'd try to get her kicked out of school or some shit like that.

"His exact words were that he'd have her taken from me," Southside explains, meeting my gaze with desperation in her eyes. "But West... he made it abundantly clear how easy it would be to make her disappear—make us *both* disappear—if I don't cooperate," she adds in that same shaken tone.

"Cooperate?"

"Yes." There's tangible fear in her eyes and I don't miss it.

"What the hell does that even mean?"

Trying not to go off the rails, I breathe through another of those long pauses when she takes forever to answer.

"West, honestly, I shouldn't even be telling you *this* much. If he finds out —"

"I'd never do anything to put you *or* Scar in danger," I cut in. "Whatever you don't want him to know, he won't know. You have my word on that."

She studies me a moment. That's when a tear finally slips down her cheek, making it impossible to not feel the weight of what she has yet to say.

"I told you some of it, the part about him wanting you as far away from me as possible, but he was more specific than that," she finally admits. "His instructions were to not only break your heart. He said to break *you*."

I'm stunned, but probably shouldn't be, considering we're talking about Vin. Pushing a hand through my hair I try to wrap my head around this shit.

I can tell you what I *do* know—it's the last fucking straw.

It's not just that he'd try to force Southside out of my life, but that he'd threaten endangerment of hers and Scar's to get it done. I've never been one of Vin's biggest fans, but this more than solidifies the fact that I hate that asshole.

With every-fucking-thing in me.

"I didn't just pack my bags because I'm scared shitless," she confesses. "It was also because leaving would be easier than hurting you, making you hate me."

It feels like there's a knife twisting in my chest. It's one thing to know my

father's a grade-A deadbeat when it comes to being any kind of father to us, but it's something altogether different knowing he'd actively try to destroy my life, knowing he'd physically harm someone.

"I only have two months to make a clean break," she adds, raising my heartrate even more.

I'm seeing red, fighting the urge to spiral into a full rage. "Is that everything?"

"The important parts, but there was just something about the whole thing that made me certain his threats were anything but empty. Especially the part about making me and Scar disappear. He hinted at there being people interested in bidding on us and, I have to be honest, West, the only thing I could think about was all these missing girls. What if he's involved with that?" she asks. "I'm probably not supposed to know anything about this, but when I was with Ricky earlier at the diner, he said something—a word that stuck out to me."

"What was it?"

She fidgets a little, like she'd rather not say.

"He mentioned hearing the term '*cargo*' being tossed around. What if that's code for the girls they've been moving in and out of Cypress Pointe? What if that's what he plans to do to Scar? To me?"

I grab hold of her when her voice shakes.

"That won't happen."

"But how do you know? There's no way *either* of us can say for sure he won't make good on his promise if I don't make good on mine," she fires off. "I can't take that risk, West. I absolutely could not live with myself if something happens to her."

Holding her is the only comfort I can offer, because with how tight these two are, I know there's nothing I can say to ease her mind.

I'm rifling through my thoughts, putting pieces together now that I know the specifics of Vin's threat, now that I hear out loud what she thinks he's involved in. There are still a ton of missing pieces, but I fully believe Vin's capable of the shady-ass shit Southside just accused him of. But what he's definitely not banking on is that he'll have to get through me if he intends to get to her.

A flash of light outside has me leaving her to peer through the blinds.

"Is that him? Is he back?"

It breaks my heart to hear how terrified she is of him.

I shake my head. “Just Ricky.”

As much as I hate the guy, I don’t think having him on lookout tonight is a bad idea. If things are headed in the direction I *think* they’re headed, he and I may need each other to some degree if we intend to protect Southside from whatever Vin has in mind.

“I don’t think I can be alone tonight,” she admits, and I can’t believe she thought I’d even *consider* leaving.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Her loaded stare stays trained on me and she eventually nods. I feel her emotions all the way across the room. Which is why I double back toward her, pulling her up from the floor to hold her tight.

As expected, she’s a ball of anxiety and nervous energy, making me want to skin my father alive. More than I already wanted to.

“I’m terrified,” she admits. “For me. For Scar.” Her words are muffled against my neck. She squeezes tighter and I place a kiss in her hair.

“I’m having an alarm system installed tomorrow,” I reveal, which has her leaning away to stare at me.

“I can’t let you do that. It’ll cost—”

“Fuck the cost,” I cut in. “It’s happening whether you agree to it or not. I’ll need your key to get in, then I’ll hang out here after school while you’re at practice, because you *are* going to practice,” I add quickly, seeing she’s about to protest. “I know that’s the last place you want to be, but we’ve gotta go about things like nothing’s changed. So, by the time you make it home, it’ll be installed.”

She stares. There’s more she wants to say, but I’m guessing she knows I’m firm on this. There’s no way she’s staying here after this without both of us knowing she’s protected.

“Okay,” she nods, unable to hide the sense of relief this brings even if she hates that I’m paying for it.

Words come to mind. They’re kind of transparent, and not ones I’d typically say, but I know she needs to hear them, needs a little more reassurance.

“I’ll always protect you. No matter who or what you’re up against. And you have my word, Southside, no matter what it takes, I’m gonna fix this.”

There’s no response at first, which I hope is because she’s letting that sink in.

Standing here, holding her, I have no clue what expectations she has

when it comes to this relationship. But what I *do* know is that I have to be the best for her. The best at whatever it is she needs me to be. And if what she needs tonight is for someone to exist with her in the silence, or hold her until the fear subsides, then that's what I'll be.

But first chance I get, mark my words—Vin will feel my fucking wrath.

*@QweenPandora: Whoops! Was it something I said?
Looks like the whole crew showed up to rally around their girl after that last post. Not sure what BigDaddy did or said, but one thing's for sure.*

The Golden Boys, VirginVixen and SeXyBeAsT aren't having it.

I know what you're all thinking. It's probably not smart to potentially make an enemy of the city's most powerful man, but if there's one thing you should've figured out by now, it's that I don't take sides. From the greatest to the least, if there's gossip to share, you'd better believe I'm on the job.

*Don't want all of Cypress Pointe rifling through your dirty laundry? Well, might I suggest being a bit more careful next time? Just a tip.
Later, Peeps.*

—P

CHAPTER 5

BLUE

“So, yeah. That’s everything.”

I’m nervous as hell having just admitted all that, laying mine and West’s entire story at Dr. Pryor’s feet.

In the spirit of full disclosure, we made sure to even include the parts that don’t paint either of us in an innocent light. From West admitting he made me his emotional punching bag for several months, to Parker’s sprained ankle being the result of retaliation on my part. We left no stone unturned.

Now, with it all out in the open, the look on Dr. Pryor’s face has me even more uncertain.

Neither West nor I are squeaky clean, but Parker took things to a whole other level. And, honestly, it just felt damn good to expose her—the video leak, the peanut sauce fiasco, my near-drowning in the pool.

All of it.

But there’s another side of the situation—the fact that I’m not sure any of this matters in the big scheme of things. For instance, potentially getting Parker expelled from Cypress Prep could be somewhat of a moot point. Seeing as how I’m not even certain *I’ll* be here long. West is holding out hope that things will work out, but I’m nowhere near as optimistic. Then again, I admit life’s left me feeling a bit jaded.

Dr. Pryor lowers her gaze to my file, but still hasn’t said a word. She sort of just let West and I vomit out all this information without any feedback on

her part. So, I'm honestly not sure if admitting all this just landed us in hot water right alongside Parker.

Dr. P. reaches for a pen and jots something on the first sheet inside my folder. Sitting here, on the opposite side of her desk, I reach for West's hand. Maybe this was a bad idea, and we should've just taken this whole story to our graves.

"You two were brave coming here today, disclosing this information."

"It felt like the right thing to do," I say, flashing a nervous smile.

She nods and seems pretty chill, which eases some of the knots in my gut.

"Well, I'm glad you knew you could talk to me. Of course, I wish you'd come to me sooner, but the important thing is that you've given me something to work with."

"So... what now?" I ask, watching as she closes my file.

"Congratulations, Ms. Riley. You're officially off probation."

The announcement is made in that stoic tone of hers, but I know she's pleased.

I'm not entirely sure what to say in this bittersweet moment, so I keep it simple.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, but let me be clear. There's still some red tape to cut through, but I'm certain the board will decide in your favor. Besides, I think we all know this shouldn't have fallen on you in the *first* place."

Her gaze briefly flashes toward West, and I don't miss the cold look she isn't shy about giving. Actually, she's been like this since we first stepped foot inside her office. From there, her opinion of him only continued to sour, growing as he confessed to his side of things—like plastering the posters about Hunter all over the halls, and placing a target on my back when I got here.

Trust me, I'll be the first to say none of that shit was pretty, but as the girl who endured it, I'm the only one qualified to say he's earned my forgiveness. And in my book, that's what's important. Not the opinions of anyone on the outside looking in.

Dr. Pryor eventually tears her eyes from West and I breathe a bit easier. It's nice being back on her good side, even if I'm not really sure how much that still matters. At least this is one thing crossed off the long list of things I need to set right one way or another, whether I stay or go.

"Well, I appreciate you hearing us out," I conclude, just before West and

I both stand to leave.

“Actually... there *is* one other thing I need to say.”

We stop and turn when Dr. Pryor calls out to us. Right away, her gaze lands on West again and my heart picks up speed like before.

“While it isn’t lost on me that it took a lot of courage for you two to come into my office today, I’m nowhere near impressed with you, Mr. Golden.”

With that, she clasps her hands on top of the desk.

“For the record, understand that if you weren’t who you are, and if I didn’t know that any action taken against you would result in your father storming this building to raise hell, I would personally see to it that you face the harshest punishment the board would allow. The things you’ve done in the name of revenge are completely unacceptable.”

The room is dead silent now, and somehow, her stare is both cold and hot all at the same time.

I have no idea what’s running through West’s head, but I know he doesn’t take kindly to being called out, talked down to. So, when he nods, I’m even more confused. And if I’m not mistaken, that’s humility I see in his stare when he meets Dr. P’s gaze.

“You’re absolutely right,” he admits. “I messed up too many times to count and I can’t take that back, ma’am.”

“Damn right, you can’t,” she seethes. “Now, I have no clue what you did or said to earn this young lady’s forgiveness after everything you’ve done, but you should be thanking your lucky stars that she came in here to vouch for you, instead of heaping coals on your head.”

West nods again and I catch Dr. Pryor’s eyes when they shift toward me, my bandaged knuckles. Her eyes narrow and I feel the question on her mind before she even asks it.

“There something else you’d like to tell me, Ms. Riley?”

I stand in silence, especially when I take note of the knowing look set on her face. It makes me question things. Like whether she knows about Vin’s visit, heard about it through Pandora’s post. Maybe she even knows there’s more to him than meets the eye.

In short, I’m left feeling as if she’s aware. Maybe not aware of everything, but *something*.

“N—no, ma’am,” I manage to answer, but that doesn’t seem to ease her mind any.

“Well, should you decide there’s more you’d like to discuss, you know

where to find me. My door is always open.”

I nod, still trying to read her. “Of course. Thank you.”

Her stare lingers a moment longer and the tight smile she offers makes me even more suspicious. But then, she lowers her head to focus on the document she’s just taken from the corner of her desk, leaving West and I to assume we’re dismissed.

“One more thing,” Dr. P. calls out the second we reach the door. “You’re to speak to no one about this. Parker will likely be expelled for that stunt she pulled. Once that happens, I can almost certainly say that her scholarship and possibly even her college admission will be in jeopardy. What she did is by no means a small offense.”

“We won’t say a word,” I confirm with a nod.

This time, when Pryor glances down at the paperwork, she doesn’t speak again. I exit the office with West, and while I should be pleased with the outcome of this visit, there’s still a dark-ass cloud hanging over my head.

A cloud with a name—Vin Golden.

@QweenPandora: Haven’t you heard, PrincessParker? Big girls don’t cry.

Apparently, you missed that memo, because I’ve received a slew of pics in the past hour. All of which very clearly depict you bawling your eyes out after leaving Dr. Pryor’s office this morning. What’s got you feeling so down, Princess? Could this possibly have something to do with everyone’s fav dysfunctional couple being seen leaving that same office not even twenty minutes earlier?

To add to the mystery, Mr. and Mrs. Holiday just showed up a bit ago and they did not look happy. What’d you do this time, Princess? Cross the wrong King’s queen again?

*Hmm... guess this one’ll remain a mystery. For now, anyway.
Later, Peeps.*

CHAPTER 6

BLUE

“You look miserable. Say the word and we’ll slip out the back door. I’m kind of a pro at it.”

The offer has me peering up as West flashes a smile.

“Thanks, but I’ve been off academic probation all of, what, half the day? I dare not tempt the gods so soon.”

“Just saying, we have options,” he adds with a casual shrug.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

We’ve been posted here, leaning against the brick just outside the cafeteria for five solid minutes. I can’t seem to make myself go in there today. My stomach’s in knots, my head’s throbbing... the works. However, I’m not in the least bit confused about what’s brought it all on.

The possibility of uprooting your entire life in the very near future can take its toll on a girl. Barring there isn’t some miracle that manifests out of thin air, my mind is already made up. I know West will likely do everything in his power to stop me, but I’ll do what’s best for Scar at any cost. Even if that cost is my own happiness.

This is precisely the reason being near West stirs a strange mix of emotion inside me now—disbelief knowing we’ve come so far only to possibly lose everything, sadness knowing I’ll always miss him if I go. Even after the dust settles and years have passed, there will be no getting over him.

No getting over this. Us.

That churning in my gut has me looking away from him. Seems stupid to let myself fall deeper at this point.

Two months—that's the vague cut-off I've been given.

Two damn months to make some form of a clean break from the guy who completely has my heart in the palm of his hands.

There's some small comfort in knowing West would at least understand my reason for leaving if I have to go, but that makes nothing about this easier. Vin wants an ocean of distance between his son and me, and he's kept tabs on me long enough to know threatening Scar was the way to get the job done.

West casually slips an arm around me and my thoughts shift. There are others nearby, hordes of kids rushing into and out of the corridor, but it feels like it's just us. Like always.

I'm drawn deeper into his side, and somehow forget the vow I made to myself last night—while I tossed and turned beside him in my bed. I swore to start pulling away for my own sanity, because I have to do *something* to make this hurt less. But being near him now, all of that has gone out the window. My point is proven when I reach for the hand that rests on my shoulder, lacing my fingers with his.

Damn it, Blue. Don't do this to yourself. Ease away now so you don't have to tear yourself away later.

West nods at one of his teammates who's headed in for lunch, and I use the moment to correct my mistake, slipping my hand out of his. To avoid him reading too much into it, I take my phone from my pocket and check it for the millionth time. Keeping tabs on Scar has become somewhat of an obsession today, and West knows it. If she doesn't respond to my texts within thirty seconds, I go into a full panic.

Letting her leave for school from Jules's house sent my anxiety through the roof. Probably because I couldn't lay eyes on her myself as she walked into the building. Vin's warning repeats in my head, and I wish I believed he only meant to scare me, but I know better. Something tells me he's not one to make idle threats.

Hunter may not have confirmed my suspicion outright, but I know his being in prison has *everything* to do with Vin. I won't lose another sibling to that monster.

Over my dead body.

As if I'm not already on edge, someone's been calling my phone from a

blocked number. There've been three today, and when I pick up... nothing. It reminds me of something West said about Casey's paranoia. He described how she couldn't relax because she was constantly on the lookout.

"Everything okay?"

I'm still a bit distracted when I peer up to find West smiling. Seeing that I'm confused, he nods toward my screen.

"Scar—is she all right?"

"Oh, um... her day's been normal from what I can tell," I answer with a sigh.

"Then, what's with the stalking?"

Glancing down at me and Scar's text history, it isn't hard to see why he'd say that. Guess it does look a little manic on my part. Mostly, there are frantic 'You okay?' messages from me, resulting in 'Don't you have anything better to do?' responses from her.

Then, there's her latest inquiry, which I have yet to answer...

Scar: Shouldn't I be hounding you? We ever gonna talk about that pic Pandora posted? Or are you planning to ignore the question like you did last night when I asked?

Needless to say, I haven't bugged her since.

"She probably just thinks I'm smothering her. Like usual," I say to West. "The girl will be fifteen this weekend and I still hover like a freaking helicopter. Even *before* I had good reason to."

"Relax. You don't smother her. You're just a good sister," he says, squeezing me a little. "But since we're on the subject of smothering the ones we love, it's my turn."

The odd segue has me smiling, despite feeling like actual shit right now.

"I need to know *you're* okay. A lot's happened in the last twenty-four hours," he presses.

Tell me about it.

"I'm dealing," is the only response I feel like giving. Call me crazy, but I'm not in the mood to relive it all so soon. Not that I've forgotten or anything. I suppose that if I *had* moved on, those bags I packed last night wouldn't still be sitting in the closet, ready just in case.

West's energy is so strong that, one second after my mind wanders, I'm pulled out of my thoughts without him saying a word. He has my full attention when he tilts my head just before heat from his kiss covers my lips. Despite telling myself not to let this *or* him affect me, it's too late. I'm in so

deep with him I'm drowning.

"Promise me something," he pulls away to say.

Those green eyes—they decimate the walls I'm trying to build around my heart.

"What is it?"

His touch is firmer now, as though he wants to make sure I'm focused, hearing every word he's about to say.

"I need to know you're giving me time."

My heart sinks hearing his request. All because time is the one thing I can't promise him.

"West—"

"Two months, right?" he cuts in. "I'll fix it by then."

There's that phrase again—'*he'll fix it*'.

I'm not sure I realized before now how desperate he is to make this all okay. It's been clear that he cares, but the look in his eyes tells me he'll lose his shit if we don't beat that clock.

My heart's racing and it's on the tip of my tongue to reveal what he probably already knows—that this thing is bigger than us, that it's bigger than what the two of us can handle. I keep my mouth shut, though. Yes, false hope is probably the last thing we need, and we *should* be preparing for the worst, but I can't bring myself to break his heart right now.

I know a lot about life spiraling out of control, and the way I've survived it over and over again is to brace for impact. And while I know West is blind to it at the moment, we're locked in a vicious tailspin with only one possible ending.

But that look in his eyes... it's tugging at my heart, has me feeling like a coward under his stare. So, instead of giving him the hard reality check I'd give anyone else, I nod.

"Okay," I say. "I'll give you time." He's so relieved it breaks my heart a little more, leaving me with the sense that I've just been irresponsible with his feelings. I shouldn't have done that. He needed to hear the truth. Not some fluffed up version of what we both hope happens.

His mouth crashes down onto mine when he kisses me again, hard and deep. So deep that I nearly forget my vow again.

"Thank you," he rushes to say. "I'm gonna do everything I can."

There's this look in his eyes now, and I know my promise just revived some measure of hope within him, but I want to be one-hundred percent

transparent about the rest of my plan.

“I’m willing to be patient, wait things out, but... I have to send Scar someplace safe,” I explain.

That light I’d just seen flickering in his stare suddenly fades, turning his expression somber.

“She’ll hate me for it, but it’s the only thing I can think to do to keep her out of danger. I can’t watch her twenty-four-seven, and I—”

West faces me head on and I stop speaking because, shit, I’m about to cry again. In front of all these people.

His hands warm both sides of my neck and I focus on him to hold it together. Otherwise, if I let myself think about how fucked up this situation truly is, I’ll lose it.

“You’re right to get her out of here. We don’t know what we’re up against.”

It feels good to hear that someone else agrees I’m doing the right thing. Because heaven knows Scar’s going to put up one hell of a fight to stay.

“Where are you thinking of sending her?” West asks, bringing to mind the less-than-ideal option I came up with last night.

“The only place I could think of—our grandmother. Mike’s mom,” I add. “I’m not even sure she’ll take Scar in, but she’s the only family we have outside Cypress Pointe.”

I’m sick at the thought of my sister going *anywhere*, but especially there. Mike picked up all his nasty vices from that household—the short fuse, his selfishness, the drinking.

West nods. “Ok, well we can start by having you reach out to her. Maybe tell her there’s trouble, but be vague. Where does she stay?”

“A small town in Virginia. She’s got a single-wide in an old trailer park off the interstate, but she’s got a spare bedroom she sometimes rents out to boarders. At least, that was the case the last time we spoke to her.”

Eight years ago.

It feels like there’s a knife twisting in my stomach, pressing deeper with every second that passes.

“Hey,” West says quietly. He tilts my head back until I’m focused on only him, but my eyes blur with tears. “It’s only temporary. Only until we sort this shit out.”

I nod, hoping like hell he’s right about all this. Even if I don’t believe a single word of it beyond the fact that he will do absolutely everything he can

to make things right.

“Okay,” I manage to say.

He holds my gaze for a moment, reading me in that way only he can do. “Okay.”

Eventually, he leans away and I feel stronger than before, empowered even. All because, for the first time in a long time, I’m not doing things all on my own.

Joss and the guys are coming our way, but they seem to notice this moment between me and West is intense, and just head into the cafeteria.

West’s stare lingers there a moment, at the empty doorway where his brothers and Joss just disappeared.

“I know you don’t know them as well as I do, but I really think they can help us sort things out,” he suggests. “Even Joss. She’s not blood, but she’s like family.”

My chest rises when I breathe deep.

“I’m not really in a position to turn down help,” I say, chuffing a humorless laugh, not realizing one of the tears has slipped down my cheek. West brushing it away with his thumb is what signals me that it has.

“With the five of us working together, Vin’s ass won’t know what hit him,” he adds with a faint smile.

“Actually, you should probably make that six,” I hesitate to say, which has West casting a questioning look toward me.

“Six?”

“You forgot Ricky.”

The look he gives next says he could *never* forget Ricky. Seeing as how his permanent place of residence seems to be just under West’s skin.

“I know he’s not your favorite person in the world, but he’s one of the few I trust,” I add.

West could not be unhappier with what I’ve just proposed, but I believe he knows I’m right. Ricky may be stubborn as hell, and a little cocky, but he’s also the most resourceful person I know. Plus, he’s a friend, and I don’t have many of those.

“Six,” he repeats with a nod, but as a statement this time, instead of a question.

I don’t know what’ll come of us all working together, but I can say for sure that we’ll accomplish more as a team than I would on my own.

A team.

Feels so weird to say I actually have one of those, but this guy standing in front of me today is proving to be a rock. I don't know, maybe it's not so crazy to think we'll actually figure this out.

It's obvious I have enough faith in us that I'm willing to give it a shot, which has to mean something, right?

Deciding to give someone my heart is hard enough, but giving someone my *trust*... that almost never happens.

I guess if a girl's going to be blindsided by a guy, being totally knocked off her feet by how amazing he is would be the best possible scenario.

@QweenPandora: You're so vain you probably think this post is about you. Well, I suppose they usually are, but today I've got a bit of a treat for you lovelies.

This one's about me.

It seems I've ruffled the wrong feathers somewhere along the way and there's a rumor going around that someone's using their power for evil. In short, there's a witch hunt in Cypress Pointe and guess who these misguided souls are hoping to find.

Yep, you guessed it—yours truly.

While I'm certain letting me know I'm being pursued was meant to strike fear, I'm rather flattered. Am I really so good that the mere thought of me existing in my little slice of the web has you shaking in your boots?

Who would've guessed little old me had that kind of power?

Maybe I'm selling myself short only dishing dirt on Cypress Prep's elite. Perhaps I should consider going national. You've given me much to consider. At any rate, it seems this little game of cat and mouse is officially on.

Catch me if you can, but be warned: I'm much, MUCH better at this than you

are. And if you do manage to get me in a corner, be careful. I've got one nasty bite.

Be seeing you soon.

Later, Peeps.

—P

CHAPTER 7

WEST

The peace of mind that comes with having the alarm installed at Southside's is unmatched. As soon as school ended, I walked her to practice, got her key, and then met the installer at her place. To some, that move might seem like some serious, overbearing boyfriend-type-shit, but I don't give a fuck what people think. As long as she's safe, I'm good with all the rest.

The next item on my agenda was to bring my brothers up to speed on all the details they've missed. I've officially done that, and Sterling zones out thinking about it all. I can only imagine what's going on inside his head.

But when he speaks up a second later, I'm not left wondering for long.

"Damn. This shit's more fucked up than I thought."

He stands at my bedroom window, overlooking the city as he and Dane process everything I've revealed. His analysis of things isn't wrong—this shit's *definitely* fucked up.

"Guess I get why her hand's all busted. Hell, I might've taken out a whole *wall* if I'd been her," Dane chimes in, but then his brow quirks when he seems to have an epiphany right after. "Anyone else thinking Pandora's last post was about Vin?"

"Oh, it was definitely about Vin," Sterling adds. "That asshole's probably trying to flush her out because she outed him about that little pitstop at Southside's last night. We all know how he gets when something's out of his control."

“Think he’ll succeed? He’s got the cash and resources to do pretty much whatever the hell he wants,” Dane points out.

He turns when I shake my head, laughing a bit. “You kidding me? That bitch won’t get found out until she’s good and ready.”

He shrugs, probably realizing I’m right, but Sterling faces us with concern marking his expression.

“Should we even be talking here?” he asks. “I mean, for all we fucking know, Vin’s got this whole place bugged.”

“Thought about that. When I came home to change for school this morning, I checked everything. Pretty sure it’s just the phones—our calls, our texts,” I explain. “So, once we get the new ones tonight, that should settle it.”

“And... where are these phones coming from again?” Sterling asks, shooting Dane a look.

“You fucking deaf? I said I know a guy.”

Sterling laughs to himself before mocking Dane’s answer. “That’s right. You know a guy. Suddenly, I feel so much more at ease. Thank you for clarifying.”

“Why’s it so hard to believe I communicate with people who aren’t either of *you two* assholes?”

“Let me guess. He’s one of your followers or some weak shit like that. Am I right?”

Dane laughs off the insult, reaching for his phone. When he turns it toward us, he’s pointing at the number representing the army who hang on his every word.

“If nearly two million IG followers is weak, you can kiss my ass,” he adds.

Surprised, Sterling stares at the number in silence. Pretty sure no one’s ever shut him up quicker than Dane just did.

“What time’s this dude supposed to meet you?”

I sound tense as hell when asking, but it comes from not hearing from Southside when she got out of practice. I’ve gotten used to checking in, making sure she’s made it home okay. But now that we know our calls and texts are compromised, we agreed to cut off all communication that’s not face-to-face.

Which fucking sucks.

Dane checks the time. “Soon. I should probably head out in a bit.”

The magic number is seven—three for us, two for Southside and Scar,

one for Joss, and one for that dick, Ricky.

Problem with being a triplet is that the other two seem to read your mind sometimes. Especially when you don't want them to.

"Listen, we know you hate the guy, but it's looking like we might need him."

Leave it to Sterling to be the voice of reason.

He takes the football off my dresser, then tosses it. I snatch it out of the air, still zoning out.

"Doesn't mean I have to fucking like it."

He nods when I finish grumbling. "Never said you had to like it, but he knows things we don't and has *access* to things we don't. Besides, Southside trusts him, so..."

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," I scoff. "Last thing I need is one of you to start fangirling over this asshole, hanging from his nuts and shit."

When I pass the ball to Dane with more power than I mean to, he nearly misses it, but mostly because he's laughing at *my* grumpy ass.

"Relax. I think Sterling's just pointing out the obvious—that it makes sense to bring him in on things," he reasons. "Besides, regardless of whether he's still holding on to *her*, everyone with eyes can see Southside's not into him anymore."

This just in: I'd level her entire fucking neighborhood if I thought otherwise.

I'm focused on the ball when it soars from Dane's hands to Sterling's, then back into mine.

Dane laughs to himself. "If it makes you feel any better, Joss thinks it's 'sweet' that you're jealous."

I don't even respond to that shit, because he *knows* it doesn't make me feel better.

Sweet, my ass...

"Where is she, anyway?" I ask when he mentions Joss's name. She's been hanging with us so much lately it feels weird not having her around, getting on my case about shit.

"The dance squad got roped into being on the Snow Ball committee," he answers.

Ah, the Snow Ball—Cypress Prep's annual Christmas dance, another bullshit way to syphon money out of the student body. My aversion to this time of year means I've never been. Not even once.

“Yeah, she can keep that shit,” I grumble, falling back on the mattress after I make a clean pass to Dane.

“She’ll find some way to talk us all into going since she’s involved in the planning. Just accept it. It’ll be less painful,” Dane says.

I don’t even have room in my head to think of all the reasons that sounds about as fun as a kick to the balls.

Sterling moves back toward the window and I know he’s counting down, just like I am. We agreed I should wait twenty minutes from the time Vin got in from work—or wherever the hell he’s been—before heading up to see him. That twenty-minute window is just about closed now, which means I’m about to look him in the eyes for the first time since he visited Southside. And as much as she doesn’t want me confronting him, it’d be out of character for me not to. So, if we want him to keep thinking we’re not up to anything, I have to respond the way he’d expect.

By going off on his ass.

I have to be smart, though. He can’t know specifics—about Southside caving and telling the whole truth, that her brother warned her about the phones.

All he needs to know is that I saw Pandora’s update. Translation: he’s about to know once and for all that he fucked up. Royally.

Dane stands and my gaze rises with him. “You heading out?” I ask.

He nods. “Yup.”

“I’ll ride with you,” Sterling offers.

“Cool. We’ll meet back here when everything’s done. And if I’m lucky, I won’t lose my shit and do something stupid while I’m up there with Vin,” I add with a laugh.

Guess it’s not really funny, though, seeing as how I’d *love* to light into him.

The guys head out and I’m on my feet, too. It’s go-time.

“Pretty sure I raised you to knock before barging into a damn room, didn’t I?”

I ignore Vin’s bullshit and slam the door to his study behind me. Despite the fact that twenty-four hours have passed, I’m still just as pissed as the

second I laid eyes on the image of Southside climbing out of his SUV. He sees it, the rage spilling over, and it has him on his feet, staring back as I charge toward his desk.

“Mind telling me what the fuck you were doing at Blue’s house last night?”

He doesn’t speak, but the slow smirk spreading across his face says it all. It tells me he thinks what I feel for Southside means nothing. It tells me that he sees her the same way he sees every other girl in this town—as an expendable resource.

“I think you should bring the volume down before we continue this conversation, son.”

“Son?” I scoff, wishing I could say more. “Just... answer the fucking question.”

He’s calm—or at least pretending to be—while I’m anything *but* that.

“You’re clearly hopped up on emotion, but didn’t I warn you about her several weeks ago? She’s toxic.”

I know where this is going and I’m already shaking my head. “No. Bullshit.”

“Think what you want, but I came to you like a man. Even laid my sins bare so we could come to an understanding. But what the fuck did you do? You rejected the truth because, apparently, pussy’s more important than your pride,” he scoffs. “She’s making a damn fool of you, West.”

I look him dead in the eyes, ignoring all the meaningless noise that just left his mouth. “How is it that you just managed to do all that talking, but never got around to answering the fucking question?”

He holds my gaze and then lets out a breath, deciding it’s time to come around his desk and face me.

“For what it’s worth, that post you saw was poorly timed and misleading. It wasn’t what it looked like. I’ve got no romantic interest in her whatsoever. Whatever we had, it’s dead now.”

Does this asshole really think I still believe his bullshit? I nearly laugh hearing the act he’s putting on.

Fucking pathetic.

“Why were you there?”

He lowers his head, and his expression turns solemn. Like he’s deep in thought, troubled. Meanwhile, I’m one hundred percent certain this dick doesn’t even have a heart.

“I was there because she asked me to be.” He sighs, pausing for dramatic effect. “She’s threatened to hurt herself in the past and she sounded unstable, so... I went to her.”

Hearing his excuse, I can hardly stomach it.

“Listen, I’m sure she’s told you a completely different story and, if I’m being honest, she’d be smart to do so,” he reasons. “She’s playing a sick game, West. Whatever she said about me, about why I was there, she’s just trying to protect herself.”

I meet his gaze again and there’s a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“Tell me exactly what she told you.” The words leave his mouth with a calm edge to them, like the psychopath he is.

He presses me with his stare, thinking I’ll cave and trust him, but he has no fucking clue how done I am with his ass. That gleam dims and his expression goes cold. He knows I’m not cracking. So, when I fail to answer, he starts in with the lies again.

“She’s blinded you to the truth! Can’t you see that?” he shouts, causing his face to redden when he loses his temper.

I stare as he begins to pace, and rage shoots through me like a bolt of lightning, forcing me to clench my fists.

“You don’t know when to just... shut the fuck up, do you?”

He’s quiet after I speak, staring with determination in his eyes. He’s not going to stop until he thinks I’ve fallen for his B.S. Problem is, that’ll never happen.

“I’ve got no reason to lie to you, West. What the hell could I possibly gain from you seeing my faults? What good can come from you knowing I was once stupid enough to fall for someone like her?”

And that’s the million-dollar question. Why would you want me to believe something happened between you and Southside? What’s so bad that having me believe this is the better option?

No sooner than I ask the question, I remember what he said to Southside—about how he has the means to make her and Scar disappear, how he’s already had people show interest.

My stomach turns and I have to make myself hold it all in, everything I know about the shady life he leads when he leaves this building every morning.

But then I remember the promise I made to a beautiful girl on the other side of town. One who has so much more riding on this than I do, and I reel

in my ego.

“I’m only gonna say this once,” I warn him. “Stay... the fuck... away from her.”

His stare is set on me—stern, angry.

“We’re not done here,” he insists. “It’s important that I know what she’s said. If she’s filling *your* head with lies, there’s no telling who else she’s feeding them to. Imagine if this shit gets back to Headmaster Harrison! Our family would never live it down. The Golden name wouldn’t mean shit in this city anymore.”

I glare at him and he stares back, waiting for me to respond. Waiting for me to cave.

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing the Golden name *already* doesn’t mean shit to me.”

He manages to hold his composure, but I’m willing to bet World War III is raging inside him. This man’s name is everything to him.

“Watch yourself,” he growls.

“Or what? I’m not fucking scared of you.”

That sick-ass smirk of his returns. “Yeah, maybe not. But you sure as hell should be.”

There’s a stare-down between us and the only thing stopping me from punching him in his shit is the promise I made to Southside. I told her I wouldn’t provoke him, wouldn’t widen the targets on her and Scar’s backs. This promise is also the reason I decide it’s time to leave before I do something I can’t take back.

The one thing that’s more powerful than pride in this moment is love. It’s ruled every decision I’ve made since the first time the word left my mouth, spoken only to Southside. That girl’s got me wrapped around her damn finger and I’m in too deep to fight it, even if I wanted to. Which is why I may as well just fucking admit it.

When the door to the study slams shut behind me, and Vin’s angry steps trudge across the tile, I feel it in my bones that this won’t end well.

For anyone.

CHAPTER 8

BLUE

Nope, don't call. The phones are shady and, besides, he's probably having 'the talk' with his father this very moment. The talk I begged him not to have.

So, to keep from dialing, I stare at my sister. She's channel-surfing while twirling the end of her now jet-black ponytail. I'm guessing the natural blonde we inherited, courtesy of mom, is never good enough. First pink, now this.

The new look she's sporting is the result of having spent the hours between school ending and me getting home from practice at Jules's house. That girl loves playing dress-up on us Rileys, but a warning before dying my sister's hair would've been nice.

I can't help but wonder if Scar knows there isn't anything I wouldn't do for her. My world's revolved around her for so long, I'm pretty sure she doesn't even notice anymore. Even so, I'm good with not getting recognition for doing this one thing right in life.

Loving her.

"What, creep?" Scar shouts with a laugh when she catches me staring.

"Just trying to figure out when you got to be so gorgeous."

She smiles big with the compliment. "Mmm... in a few days, the answer to that question will be fifteen years ago."

I nudge her smart ass with my foot, and she flops against the arm of the couch, giggling.

“That’s right! You *do* have a birthday coming up!”

Her expression goes blank and for half a second she believes I actually forgot. “Ha-ha.”

I leap to her end of the couch and squeeze her as hard as I can, right before covering her entire face with kisses.

“Okay, enough! Get... off me!” she yells, shoving me hard.

It doesn’t work. Having her fight back only fuels the attack.

“I will literally *pay* you to get off me right now,” she pleads.

“Ten bucks.”

“Five,” she counters.

“Deal.”

I back off and she wipes her face where I kissed her last.

“You’re so annoying.”

“Well, since I’m annoying, guess that means I don’t have to buy you a gift. Cool. See ya!”

She grabs my arm when I try to stand.

“Okay, wait! Let’s not get crazy.” She cozies up to me now, forcing my arm around her shoulder while batting her big, blue eyes. “Now, what’s this you say about gifts?”

“Gift. Singular,” I correct her. “And it has to be something small.”

She’s thoughtful for a moment.

“A new phone case?”

I do a bit of mental math, making sure I’ll have enough left over after groceries.

“Mmm... I think I can swing that.”

“Cool,” she beams. “I’ll take black.”

Of course, you will. Since that’s the hair and accessory color of the month.

“What about a party?” I ask.

Ok, so, the word ‘*party*’ might be a bit ambitious. This would be more like a gathering of friends who’ve eaten before stopping by and aren’t expecting anything more than a movie and a couple balloons strung to the porch.

Scar shoots me a look. “A party would require me to have friends.”

Her reaction feels like a knife twisting in my gut. Why? Because *her* pain always feels like *my* failure.

“You have friends, but if you aren’t particularly interested in inviting

them, it can be just the two of us.”

“That’s lame,” she says with a sigh, drawing a laugh out of me.

“Okay... ouch.”

“Don’t be sensitive, you know what I mean. We can hang out anytime,” she clarifies. “What about... maybe inviting the triplets? And Jules, too, of course.”

The suggestion earns her my sternest side-eye, due to the pure lack of subtlety on her part.

“Next time, mention Jules first. At least then it’ll be a little less obvious this is all about the boys,” I tease.

“It’s not like that,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“Sure, it isn’t, but I’ll see what I can do. Won’t that make Shane uncomfortable coming around, though?”

It’s no secret he gets a bit edgy when the triplets are in the vicinity. Now, something I said has earned me a look from Scar.

“Ever think that might be why I suggested it?” she answers with a sneaky grin. “Kid’s been weird lately. “

“Weird in what way?”

She shrugs and gives the question some thought. “Mmm... ‘*distant*’ is the word that comes to mind. I mean, we still talk and hang out, but he’s always kind of distracted. Usually by his phone,” she adds.

I know what this sounds like, but don’t have the heart to say what I’m thinking out loud. The idea of telling my sister she might not be the only one Shane’s interested in is the exact *opposite* of what I want to say right now. Sure, she definitely has his attention, but some boys can be fickle. They can be so into you, yet so into about ten other girls at the same time.

“Why don’t you just talk to him, Scar? Tell him how he’s made you feel lately and just... see where the conversation goes.”

She gives that look again.

“You want me to have a deep, meaningful conversation with a fifteen-year-old boy? Yeah, that’ll go well.”

The girl probably isn’t wrong.

“Well, maybe Shane’s different. You two have been friends since forever. The worst that can happen is he says nothing’s wrong, and that this is all in your head, then you guys go on like normal, right?”

Her shoulders lift beneath the faded black tee she wears.

“Maybe, but still invite the boys. It’s worth getting Shane worked up,”

she concludes.

Of course, that gets the poor guy worked up. Possibly because you eye-bang all three of them every time they step into the room. But what do I know?

I keep the thought to myself, but a laugh slips out.

She pauses to check her phone, and this seems like as good a time as any to spring the news on her about Christmas. You know, while she's in a relatively good mood.

"Since you like hanging out with the triplets so much, what do you think about taking a mini vacay with them? It'd be for about a week over Christmas break."

To my surprise, her head doesn't explode the second those words leave my mouth.

"That's super random, but sounds cool! Where are we going?"

No complaints about having to leave Shane? Things must really be strained between them.

"Well, from what I'm told, their grandfather has a ton of property down in Louisiana. Some town called Dupont Bayou."

"Never heard of it, but sure! I'm down."

I'm beyond shocked that just went so well. All without me telling her about the five cousins who sound like at *least* as much trouble as the triplets.

"Now, since you got all up in *my* business a little bit ago, it's my turn," she says, turning to face me while we sit. "You never answered my question earlier."

Pretending not to have a clue what she means, I glance toward the TV just as the news is starting.

"Seriously?"

That word oozes frustration, but I have no intention on sharing the truth behind Pandora's post with her.

"Whose truck was that you were in? Did it... have anything to do with Mom?"

Shit.

I didn't even consider she'd think that. Her eyes are watering now, and while I was fully prepared to not answer any of her questions, hearing the sudden spike of emotion in her voice has me rethinking my stance.

"It wasn't about Mom. It was just... it was something you don't need to worry about."

Yes, that sounds dismissive as hell, but the alternative is to scare the shit out of my sister, which I won't do.

"What about your hand?" she asks next. "Why's it all bandaged up? You get into a fight or something?"

"Nope," is all I say this time.

"Ok, fine," she huffs. "You don't want to talk about the truck, you don't want to talk about your hand, then at least explain how and why we suddenly have an alarm on the house. It wasn't there yesterday."

Why can't she just be overly preoccupied by her social life and obsessed with her phone like most teens? She has so, so many questions.

I'm at a loss for how to explain the alarm, but I sure as hell feel safer having it. Coming home tonight to see that West had followed through with getting it installed was the first sigh of relief I've exhaled all day. Granted, I don't have the access code yet, and I have *no* clue how to operate the thing, but once I do, I'll rest easier.

Scar's staring hardcore right now, but I'm choosing to bypass this string of questions in favor of facing the TV again.

"Fine," she huffs. "Maybe if I turn this off, you'll focus and tell me what's happening."

She reaches for the remote with a frustrated sigh, but the familiar face at the center of the screen has my hand flying to hers—a tall, dark-skinned man with more gray in his beard than the last time we were face-to-face, but that's definitely him.

"Hang on a sec."

"You're stalling and—"

"Shh! Please, I need to hear this," I say, cutting her off.

When I snatch the remote and turn up the volume, she growls to herself. Or, hell, maybe she's growling at me.

"Isn't that Mike's old partner, Louis?"

"Yes, now be quiet," I say in a rush.

Scar's not happy about being shushed, but she's not talking anymore, and that's the important part.

"Now, Detective Roby, it's our understanding that you're the first, and possibly the *only* member of the department to propose that the disappearances of these missing southside girls might be related. Is that correct?" The reporter's question prompts Detective Roby to nod.

"I *am* the one who initiated the new task force," he explains, "but there's

been tremendous effort from a handful of my peers, who are both vigilant and exceptional in their given fields.”

“I understand this, Detective Roby, but is it true that you received a lot of pushback? Our sources tell us that many who *do* oppose the formation of the new task force base their opinion on the fact that there simply isn’t enough evidence to support there being a connection. What’s your response to anyone who shares this view?”

I’m fixated on Detective Roby as he thinks before responding to the reporter’s question. Seeing him transports me back in time. Back to when he and Mike were partners and the Robys were like family to us. But then Mike’s occasional drinking turned into full-blown dependency, which led to him being let go from the force. Once that happened, Louis, his wife, and their daughter, Dez, sort of forgot we existed. Now, from the looks of it, a promotion has pulled Louis from behind the wheel of a patrol car and placed him behind a desk.

My memory of him is somewhat hazy now, but I remember him being one of the good guys. Even Ricky can attest to that, seeing as how he’s only received lectures from Roby on several occasions when he should’ve been in handcuffs. Louis was even instrumental in getting Hunter a slightly lighter sentence than he deserved.

Detective Roby meets the reporter’s gaze again, and the room is completely quiet as Scar and I listen.

“Well, my response to anyone who believes we’re making a mountain out of a molehill would be to challenge them to pretend—just for one second—that it’s *their* daughter, or *their* granddaughter, or their niece out there, gone without a trace. Then, I’d want them to honestly ask themselves... do they still feel this task force is unnecessary?”

The reporter’s brow rises, and she faces the camera again. “Very well-said, Detective. We appreciate you taking the time to speak with us.”

Detective Roby nods and when his gaze locks with the camera, I feel like he’s looking directly at me.

Like, maybe my seeing this tonight is fate.

Like, maybe he *is* someone we can trust, someone who can help us.

CHAPTER 9

BLUE

The moment Detective Roby's interview ends, Scar gets a call and leaves me for more interesting conversation, I guess. Her bedroom door slams shut and it's just me since my phone is off limits until further notice.

Or maybe not? I mean, as long as there's no pertinent information being passed, a vague *'I miss you'* text wouldn't be so bad, would it?

Don't be stupid. Be patient. You'll see West tomorrow, and he'll tell you everything then. Stop worrying.

With that, I pretend to be content not hearing his voice before bed, then turn off the lights.

But after taking maybe three steps, there's a knock at the door that has my heart racing and my palms sweating. I stare through the darkness and dread the very thought of looking outside to see who's there.

Because there's a chance it's someone I don't want to let in.

I've been startled before, and this isn't that. This is real fear, it's me being scared shitless at the thought of whoever's at the door with malice in their heart.

I'm quiet when slipping between the end table and window to peek through the blinds, but when I see West's face, I'm not so careful anymore, bumping the lamp on my way to the door. I snatch it open and can hardly get the lock disengaged to get to him. Then, the second I do manage to get it right, my arms are around his neck.

“Shit,” he says with a laugh after practically having the wind knocked out of him.

He holds me tight, having no idea how glad I am to see it’s *him* at the door, and not someone else. If I’m being honest, the idea of it just being me and Scar here alone at night scares the hell out of me.

After maybe half a minute, I come to my senses, realizing I’ve kept him out in the cold all this time. At which point, I loosen my grip and back off. There’s a dark bag in his hand I hadn’t noticed until now. He sets it down a moment while shrugging out of his jacket, but my eyes are on it as I lock up.

“I know it’s late and I could’ve waited to see you tomorrow, but... we both know I’m fucking impatient.”

Nothing more than a perfect silhouette in this dark space, West grabs me and I let a laugh slip. Mostly because he isn’t wrong.

“And we both know I’m glad you came,” I admit. “Let’s talk in my room.”

He flashes a smile I can see even without much light. “*Talk*—is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

I kiss him once and then tow the perv behind me the entire length of the hallway, where I lock us inside my room.

“You brought me a gift?” I tease, pointing at the bag he’s still clutching. He follows my gaze to it, but instead of explaining, dumps the contents on my comforter.

“Sort of,” he says with somewhat of a solemn sigh. “We’ve all got new phones. Apparently, Dane *‘knows a guy’*.”

I meet his gaze when he says that, wondering how we even got here. By the look on his face and that thick vein throbbing, I can tell he’s wondering the same thing.

“We’ll go over how the security system works in a bit, but I already added the app to both our new phones. That way, we can arm and disarm it remotely, double-check that the system’s engaged from wherever,” he explains.

Watching him, listening as he openly admits having granted himself access to my home, one corner of my mouth tugs up with a grin.

“You know, some might say you’ve got just the right amount of stalker in you to get away with it. You’re somewhere on the border between devotion and psychopathy,” I tease.

“Overprotective, possessive, psycho—call me what the fuck you want,

but I'm just protecting what's mine," he adds, flashing a faint smile.

A sweeping look passes over me then, and even stressed the hell out, he's still sexy. His hair's a bit damp from the snow that's melted in it, and the sleeves of a white thermal squeeze his biceps. Similar to how those perfectly-fitting gray sweats are hugging the muscles in his thighs and... the one between them.

Dude, you can't seriously be thinking about fucking him right now...

Pretending to have been focused this whole time, my brow gathers when I count three devices instead of two. But before I can ask about the third, West explains.

"One for you, one for Scar, and... one for Ricky," he adds with a sigh.

As usual, you could cut the animosity between them with a knife—despite Ricky being miles away—but the fact that West put their differences aside for a bit speaks volumes.

A fleeting thought enters my head—that I should mention Detective Roby to West—but no sooner than I think it, I change my mind. Yeah, he *seems* like he's trustworthy, but what if I'm wrong? What if telling him somehow only leads to more trouble? It's very likely that Vin could find out I've talked, which could push him to hurt Scar. There are just so many unknowns, which is why, for now, I'm keeping my thoughts to myself.

Instead, I pick up the phone closest to the edge of the bed and study it, trying to figure out how in the world I'll explain this to Scar in the morning, on top of all the other shit she's suspicious about. But her misgivings are the least of our worries, I guess.

"I'd say thanks, but that feels kind of weird for some reason."

A quiet laugh leaves West when he takes me around my waist, pulling me down on top of him.

"Maybe it feels weird because how fucked up are our lives that we have to do weird shit like buy new phones?" he reasons.

Straddling him now, my body collapses on top of his when he leans into the mattress. "Yeah. That's it in a nutshell."

He kisses the top of my hair, then I focus on his stare, feeling torn between not wanting to pry into the conversation he had with Vin, and also not wanting him to think I don't care.

"You want to know how it went, don't you?" he asks, grinning so big I'm not even sure why I was ever worried about bringing it up.

"Very much so," I admit with a nod. "But first, tell me if it went better or

worse than expected.”

A moment passes while he thinks.

“It was pretty much what I thought it’d be,” he answers. “I approached him, he tried feeding me more bullshit about the two of you being a thing, I got to say about ten percent of the shit I *wanted* to say to his lying ass, then I left.”

There are details missing, but there’s no need to draw them out, no need to make him relive it. What matters is that he didn’t let Vin get under his skin, didn’t fall for his B.S. Had this been even a month ago, that conversation might’ve gone a very different way. Just goes to show he’s grown leaps and bounds since then.

“I was scared for you, but... I’m glad you did it,” I confess. “You were right. He needed to know you’re not his bitch.”

My phrasing makes him laugh and it rumbles through his chest and mine where I’m resting on top of him.

“You’ve got a way with words. You know that?” He rasps, lifting my chin until our lips touch once, then a second time. “And if I’m being honest... it makes me fucking want you.”

I breathe him in as both my palms sink into the mattress beside him. He’s locked between my legs, where I feel the truth in what he just said—he *does* fucking want me.

Heat from his fingers streaks up my torso where they disappear beneath my tank. Our impatience has us pulling at each other’s clothes—him tugging the straps of my bra down before finally unclasping it, me only bothering to shove his boxers and sweats down to his knees before pausing just long enough for him to slip on a condom. Then, I lower down onto him and it’s so obvious that we need this, need each other.

The green centers of West’s eyes leave me when they roll back in his head half a second before his lids close. We were too hasty to take precautions like turning on the radio to avoid Scar hearing us, which means I’ll have to keep my voice down—easier said than done when it comes to him.

“Slow down,” he warns in a breathy whisper. “Or I swear, you’re gonna be real fucking disappointed in about thirty seconds.”

Smiling, I ignore him, deciding to take my chances and ride him harder and faster than before.

“Fuck,” he groans, sinking his fingers deeper into my hips. “I mean it,

Southside. Slow down.”

Like before, I pay his warning no attention.

The rhythmic creaking of my ancient box-spring is probably loud enough to be heard down the hall, but I’m almost there, too close to care. And I’m only taken closer when heat from West’s hands warms my tits. He grips them rough, making my nipples harden against his palms.

“Shit.”

That one whispered word seems to send him a message, lets him know I only need to be pushed a little. So, that’s what he does—pushes the right buttons, says the right things, until I swear he’s inside my head.

“I fucking love you,” he groans, sending my heartrate soaring when he adds, “And I love it when you come for me.”

Air breezes over my lips now that I’m panting, letting those words carry me over the edge. One of his hands leaves my chest to cover my mouth half a second before his name is on my lips. Then, without warning, he succumbs to the moment, too.

That vein in his forehead throbs so hard it looks like it’ll explode this time. Then, as his eyes slam shut and perfect white teeth sink into his bottom lip, I finally give him the slow ride he begged for. I don’t have his eyes again until I stop, gently resting on top of him while my breathing syncs with his.

It’s in this moment, when he locks his powerful arms around me, reminding me that I’m his and no one else’s, that my thoughts are confirmed.

I need him. In every way, I need him.

This boy who used to drive me insane is now somehow my sanity.

I place a kiss in the center of his chest and I’m trying not to let it all get to me, but I feel more fucking tears coming and it only makes me angry. Why can’t life just give me a break for once? All I want is to have a chance at something real with him, without all the drama and bullshit. We made it so far, and I hate not knowing what’s ahead for us.

It’s right when I feel myself losing the battle with the water pooling in my eyes that a hard knock at my bedroom door has both West and I scrambling for our clothes.

“Shit.”

“Blue! OMG! Have you not seen your phone?”

Scar’s question has my heart racing again. Because, historically speaking, surprises that come through on social media send my life into a spiral.

“Where the fuck is it?” West whispers from somewhere behind me. “I

don't know where the condom wrapper went.”

I'm zero help, because I've just tripped over my own feet, trying to dive onto the bed for my bra. We're both near hysterics, fumbling around like half-drunk idiots, and Scar's banging her fist against the door nonstop now.

“Coming!” I call out, hopping back into the stretch pants West tossed to my desk.

I glance back at him quickly just to make sure he's dressed and ready, then whip the door open.

Scar gives me a once over as I push a shaky hand through my hair, trying to straighten it. Next, her gaze shifts to West as he sits a bit too staged in the chair at my desk. She eyes me again when her cheeks turn bright red, and I know she knows.

Shit. Of course, she does.

“Anyway,” she says with a dramatic eye roll. “Look!”

Her phone screen is shoved right in my face and I'm not immediately sure what I'm looking at. All I see is Pandora's icon, but it isn't until I start to scan the update that I realize what Scar's so worked up about.

“She's been hacked!” Scar screeches with excitement.

West goes for his phone and I know he's devouring the same info that I am and, for the first time probably *ever*, Pandora's getting a dose of her own medicine.

This war of words just got so much deeper, and if I know Pandora, she'll only strike back harder next time.

@QweenPandora: Looks like your operation isn't as airtight as you thought, bitch. A few clicks of the mouse and your ass is getting exposed.

Poking around in your DMs was quite eye-opening. With all the shit you expose, people would never guess the gems you hold onto. Which begs the question—why lay some of Cypress Pointe's population's shit bare and keep your mouth closed for others?

Could it be that the truth behind your identity is buried somewhere in this long list of unshared tips and photos?

Well, just in case that's true, allow me to give the people what they really want—Pandora uncensored.

Tonight, I'll be posting all the shit Pandora's hidden for her own selfish reasons, and give all of you—her mindless followers—the chance to see the real Cypress Pointe. Not the filtered shit she spoon-feeds you.

*Want to know who your friends and neighbors really are? Stay tuned.
Later, assholes.*

—X

CHAPTER 10

BLUE

You haven't seen paranoia until you've seen the people of Cypress Pointe scared shitless that X's next post will expose their deepest, darkest secret.

The hallways of CPA have been unusually quiet today, and twice I was nearly bowled over by students with their noses pressed to their phone screens, instead of watching where they're walking. But one thing the mysterious X said that was spot on, is that none of us had any idea who our friends and neighbors are.

An alarming number of the withheld photos were of Lexi—featuring her and her weed guy meeting under the bleachers—which didn't go unnoticed by West and crew. And as much as I care about her and value our friendship, it doesn't look good. Lexi's been shielded from the ugly rumors, the backlash the rest of us have to face, which begs the question... *Is Lexi Pandora?*

I hate that I'm even thinking about it, but I am.

What if she's the one who leaked the sex tape after Parker submitted it? What if she's secretly been making life at CPA just a little harder to navigate, thanks to her constant posting of utter bullshit just for clout?

All of that seems so far off base from who I know Lexi to be, but like X suggested... maybe we don't all know each other as well as we think we do.

I round the corner, headed to practice... and it's true what they say. Speak of the devil and he will appear. Or, in this case, *she* will appear.

"Miss me?" Lexi beams, rushing toward me when our gazes lock.

“Of course. Where’ve you been?”

She shrugs and I wonder if she’ll lie to me. Based on rumors I heard, she wasn’t around at lunch or the last half of the day because Dr. Pryor and Headmaster Harrison called an unscheduled meeting with her parents. I’m guessing they didn’t take too kindly to finding out she’d been using school grounds to score drugs.

“They suspended me,” she admits. “They’re still debating for how long, but the board had an emergency conference call last night and the vote was unanimous. They’re giving me ten minutes to get all my shit, then I’ve gotta meet my parents back in the office.”

Ok, so she didn’t lie. That’s a step in the right direction, I suppose.

“I’m sorry,” is all I can think to say, which makes her laugh.

“You kidding me? I get a head start on Christmas break! I couldn’t have planned this better if I tried. Now, I just have to convince my parents that grounding me on top of being suspended is overkill. All I have to do is remind them how *‘traumatized’* I am that my sister’s in jail and they should go pretty easy on me.”

I smile, but my guard is definitely up.

“Sucky thing about it is, now everyone thinks I’m Pandora. I mean, God forbid that she just withheld those pics because life’s crapped on me enough. Everyone wants to be a detective, though,” she concludes.

I’m quiet because her logic doesn’t quite make sense. Yeah, Lexi’s life’s been tough at times, but in a side-by-side comparison with mine, I’m definitely winning *that* contest. Yet, Pandora’s shared some terrible truths *and* lies about me.

She glances over, notices the look on my face, and then laughs. “You’ve gotta be shitting me, Blue! You think I’m her, too, don’t you?”

My response doesn’t come quickly enough, which feeds right into her statement.

“I didn’t say that.”

“And you didn’t *not* say it,” she counters, grabbing my shoulder to stop me when I get a few steps ahead. “Seriously, Blue? You think I’d post all that shit about you and still pretend to be a friend to your face?”

There’s a moment where I consider telling her that’s exactly what I’m starting to think, but then I remember the importance of keeping my cards close right now. So, instead, I laugh off the sudden seriousness that’s crept into the conversation.

“You’d be stupid to do that, seeing as how we’ve, technically, committed a crime together,” I say, reminding her of the remodeling job we did on one of West’s cars. “Pretty sure you know I’d turn your ass in if I found out you sold me out like that.”

She studies me a moment, but then a smile curves the corners of her mouth.

“Good. Thought I was gonna have to shank a bitch,” she teases.

Meanwhile, I feel fake as hell right now because I *don’t* know she’s not Pandora.

“Anywho, I better get my stuff and get out of here before Harrison sends the dogs out to find me. Call you later.”

“Cool. Don’t have too much fun,” I call out after her.

She waves without glancing back and I’m relieved I no longer have to pretend. A small part of me hopes Vin *is* able to flush out whoever Pandora is. At least then I’ll know who to trust and who to bury.

My hand grips the door to the locker room, but before I can pull it open, my phone rings. And seeing as how it’s the new one, which only a handful of people have the number to, it startles me.

“Hey. Hello?” I answer, listening for Scar to respond.

“Did I get it right? Or was I supposed to call your *other* line, 007?” she asks in a noticeably snarky tone.

The amount of questioning I had to dodge while *also* convincing her to accept the new phone is unbelievable. But, if this phone call is any indicator, she’s at least obliging. Even if she doesn’t understand.

“Very cute. What’s up?” I ask.

She sighs. “Shane’s texting someone, and I refuse to stand here looking like a loser.”

It’s impossible to miss how these sudden changes between them are affecting her.

“Well, tell me how school was, since you’re using me,” I tease, leaning against the brick wall near the drinking fountain.

“School was drab as usual. Although, there *was* a fight in the teachers’ lounge before fourth period.”

“Wait, two students fought in the teacher’s lounge?”

“Nope,” Scar clarifies. “Two *teachers* fought in the teachers’ lounge.”

I’m speechless, which has her laughing.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much been *everyone’s* reaction,” she says. “People

are making all kinds of jokes about it, but it sounds like Ms. Pritchard's been sleeping around with Ms. Sanchez's fiancé."

"Geez. Glad they're around to set good examples for you guys," I say with heavy sarcasm.

"Just another day at South Cypress," she adds with a laugh.

I hold the phone away from my ear when one of my coaches passes by, pretending Scar's call *isn't* the reason I'm not changed and in the gym. So, as soon as she's gone, I pick up again.

"I should go. Ricky there to get you guys yet?" I ask, leaning to drink from the fountain before I head in.

"He texted Shane that he's about a minute away, but don't hang up. There's some creepy guy hanging near the curb."

My heart sinks. On a *normal* day, this isn't news I'd want to hear from her. Now, given all that's happened, I'm even more flustered by Scar's update.

"Is he in a vehicle? Is he coming toward you guys?"

I'm aware of sounding just as frantic as I feel on the inside when asking, but there's good reason to be concerned.

"Black van," she answers. "He isn't coming over or anything, but he keeps looking this way."

I instantly go into panic-mode, patting both pockets for my keys. "You need to get inside the building, Scar. Now!"

"Don't be weird," she sighs. "Dude's creepy, but I'm pretty sure it's unnecessary to duck for cover, Blue. Chill."

"Scar, I mean it!"

Yelling, I've earned the attention of several of my teammates as well as other students still lingering in the halls, but I don't care.

"Shane's with me. Relax."

"Damn it! Why won't you just listen to me for once!" I scream, running toward an exit now.

There's silence on the other end and I fear that my headstrong sister just planted her feet even more firmly now that I've shouted at her.

"Fine," she huffs. "I'm dragging Shane toward the door as we speak, but when are you gonna tell me what's turned you into an insane person?" she whisper-shouts into my ear.

Feels like all she does these days is question me on *everything*.

"Please, just get inside."

“Because nothing’s going on with you and everything’s so fucking normal, right?”

In case it isn’t clear, she says those words as sarcastically as humanly possible.

“Scar—”

“Ricky’s here, which means there was zero point in running back inside. I need to go,” she interjects just as I hear the door to the school re-opening when she and Shane head back outside.

She isn’t crying, but I’ve definitely upset her, which likely has more to do with the fact that she’s distinctly aware of how she’s being kept in the dark. My heart’s still racing a mile a minute as I brace myself against the door frame just inside the lobby. While I get that she’s pissed, I can’t let her off the line yet.

“We’ll hang up once you’re in the car with Ricky.”

“Whatever,” she scoffs.

I’m winded and trying to settle down now that I know she and Shane aren’t alone. Then, half a minute later, I breathe a sigh of relief at the sound of Ricky’s voice in the background.

“Hanging up now,” Scar announces, right before following through with those words.

With trembling hands, I shoot Ricky a text.

Blue: *Clearly, whatever shit you had to do today was more important than being on time, so don’t bother with Scar anymore. I’ll figure something else out.*

Distraught and feeling like we just narrowly avoided a tragedy, I fall against the wall to catch my breath. Several who witnessed my meltdown are still watching, and while I’m certain pics of me freaking out will be sent to Pandora, I’m also certain of something else.

I’m done playing it safe.

I have no idea who the hell was in that van watching Scar, but I can’t sit around and wait for something bad to happen. I changed my mind before, but not again. If it comes down to it, it’s a must that I’m equipped to protect her.

By any means necessary.

@QweenPandora: Well, let's see whose life I can randomly ruin today. That's what Pandora's all about, right?

Oh, shit! This one looks fun!

Apparently, things aren't going so well at the dealership. From the looks of this doc I managed to get my hands on, it appears Laurence Holiday's downtown Cypress location is experiencing a bit of financial trouble. And for those of you who don't know, Laurence is none other than Princess P's wallet/father.

Uh-oh! Looks like the princess isn't the only one under that roof whose life's going to shit right now. Guess the whole family's reputation's gone down the drain.

Ah, well. Just another day in our beautiful city.

The moment I dig up something else newsworthy, I'll be back to drag another CP lowlife through the mud.

Later, assholes.

CHAPTER 11

BLUE

I promised myself I'd never come back to this place, but thanks to my completely warranted paranoia, here I am.

All through practice, I kept wondering what would've happened if Ricky had been just a little later. Would my sister be another missing southside girl? By the time we were let out and I changed, my mind was completely made up. I can't just sit around waiting for the worst to happen. I need to be ready.

For anything.

At one point, visiting Louisiana felt like a burden. It was the fear of having to fake my way through the holiday to avoid bringing West down. But all things considered, I can't wait to get the hell out of here. At least in Dupont Bayou, there's no Pandora, no danger, and no Vin. Only safety—which I miss more than anything these days.

A car whizzes by and I rush to hide behind the cover of a large oak tree. I wait to make sure the person doesn't brake, then step out onto the sidewalk again.

Based on X's last post about Mr. Holiday losing one of his dealerships, it's clear whoever this imposter is, they're out for blood. Who knew a hostile Pandora takeover could be so brutal? Considering who I'm certain is behind those posts, the last thing I need is for him to know my next move, so I took extra precautions tonight. Like leaving my car at home and choosing to walk instead. It'll be easier to duck and hide from prying eyes on foot than in my

big, blue hooptie. But now that I've reached my destination, instinct tells me there's more to fear than a photo of me going viral.

Still, despite the pit in my gut, I knock. Like before, the ferocious dog goes nuts on the other side of the threshold. And like before, the door opens and Tommy's staring back at me.

"Back so soon, Lil' Ruiz?"

I don't bother correcting him this time.

"I need to finish what we started," I say in a rush, glancing over my shoulder. While it'd be best to do this indoors, I won't make the mistake of asking again. He's made it clear he does business a certain way and won't deviate from his usual practice just for me.

"Told you you'd be back. Hang on a sec. I set something aside already."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes and instead just stand shivering in the cold while I wait, thinking of all the reasons coming here was a shit idea, but also knowing I don't have much choice.

The Navarro family was once synonymous with the Ruizes, but at some point, Tommy's father and uncles chose to go their own way. They branched off into similar yet separate areas of business, but the separation created a serious rift between the two families. One that's left them just short of being enemies. However, blood ties have been made along the way—marriages and shared descendants—keeping both in their own lane, despite the mutual dislike between them. If it weren't for the fact that I attended South Cypress High with members of both families, I wouldn't likely know any of this, because for the most part, both sides keep the falling-out private.

Still, I was a firsthand witness to Tommy and Ricky's friendship sliding off track.

It feels like an hour's passed by the time I hear Tommy's footsteps on the other side of the threshold, bringing me hope that I'll be able to leave here soon. The door swings open and my gaze lowers to the moderately sized box he's holding.

"Thank you," I rush to say, reaching for the security door, only to find that it's locked.

"Slow down, Lil' Ruiz. Didn't your momma ever teach you any manners?" he asks with a grin. "We need to talk money."

That word makes my throat feel tight and my stomach rolls. He seems to notice and narrows his eyes toward me.

"How much you got on you?"

I swallow hard before speaking. “I have fifty I was supposed to use on groceries, but I can get you more by the weekend.”

He’s laughing before I can even finish speaking. “Now I see why you were trying that little *snatch-and-grab* move. You know that’s not even in the ballpark of what a piece like this costs, right?”

He shakes his head and attempts to close the door, causing my desperation level to creep just a bit higher.

“Name the price?”

He pauses, which means I have his attention again. “You really need this thing, don’t you?”

A frustrated sigh leaves me, but I’m more than aware that he’s calling the shots here. It’s his game and I asked to play it.

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

His head cocks to the side and I hate feeling like an insect caught in his web, but there’s no other way to describe it.

“I’m curious. What’s so bad that a girl like you needs a gun?”

He asked this very question the last time I showed up on his doorstep and I sidestepped it. Something tells me he won’t be so passive this time.

“Just for protection,” I answer.

A chilled breeze sweeps through and I hold my breath, thinking he’ll pry for more details, but surprisingly, he doesn’t. He just moves on.

“So, you and the rich boy just fuck-buddies, or is it serious?”

As much as I don’t want to answer *any* of his questions, this one is the lesser of two evils.

“It’s serious,” is all I say.

That smug look on his face doesn’t leave when he nods.

“Either way, you were smart to get out from under Ricky. The streets are heating up more every day. Be a shame for you to lose him to prison like you did Hunter. Or, you know, worse.”

My gut twists when he says that, and I lose focus a bit.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Tommy shrugs and he’s smiling a bit now. “Nothing in particular, but you’ve at *least* heard the Ruizes haven’t exactly been making friends lately.”

“Your dad and Paul have been at each other’s throats for years now. That’s nothing new.”

“Damn, you miss *everything* being at that fancy-ass school, don’t you?” he says with a dark laugh. “Paul’s got bigger enemies than Pop. Been a lot of

hotshots from out-of-state sniffing around Cypress Pointe the past few months.”

“Like who?”

The question makes his smile grow. “Thought we weren’t sharing information?”

My breathing quickens and I hate everything about this. He knows Ricky and I are close—even if he’s currently on my shit-list for being late, and I’m ignoring his texts—but of course I’d want to know if there was something happening that he needs to look out for.

“I’ll let you have this one for free since you’ve been out of the loop,” Tommy teases. “The O’Farrell family—heard of ‘em?”

I shake my head, feeling my stomach sink for reasons I don’t yet understand. “No, who are they?”

“Bad motherfuckers from Boston,” he answers. “They’ve been doing an awful lot of business in the city lately.”

“Is... that a bad thing?”

I feel so naïve asking that, especially seeing as how my gut’s already answered that question for me.

“Started out friendly enough, but some would say that ain’t the case anymore. My sources tell me the O’Farrells have been trying to do too much too soon, taking a bigger piece of the proverbial pie than what’s been offered. That’s the problem with parasites, though. Leave ‘em unchecked and they tend to kill the host,” he adds. “Guess that’s why it’s been decided not to leave that shit unchecked.”

My heart’s in my throat now, and I’m afraid to think of what this all means for Ricky—directly, indirectly.

“But enough about the family business,” Tommy continues with a smile. “You got any idea how to use this thing?”

My gaze shifts to the box he holds and, suddenly distracted by my own rampant fear, I take a few seconds to answer.

“It’s been a while.”

“Which means no,” he scoffs. “Guess you better block off a weekend and find some YouTube videos. I’m in sales, not training.”

I don’t bother explaining that, back when Mike was still on the force, he *did* teach Hunter and me how to load and handle a handgun. Partly, I keep this to myself because I don’t feel like sharing anything personal at the moment. But I also don’t speak up because it almost sounds like he’s letting

me take the box. I'm reluctant to get my hopes up, though.

"Fifty now, because I know shit's been tough for you since Hunter left, but I expect weekly payments until I say we're square. Understood?"

I nod and fish the money from my pocket. "Understood."

He hesitates as he stares at the chump-change I'm offering, and when he unlocks the security door to take it, he curses to himself through the entire exchange.

"Don't make me come find you to get my money," he warns. "I don't care how far back we go; I always get what's mine."

I'm shivering as I step down off his porch, and it has nothing to do with it being cold as balls out here, while having everything to do with what my gut's telling me—I'm about ninety-nine percent certain I've just made a huge mistake.

But like with all things, time will tell.

@QweenPandora: Looks like I'm bringing you folks a double-header tonight, and this one's kind of juicy.

There's been talk that the Harrisons' marriage is on its last leg. Until now, it's all been rumors, but this pic of Cypress Pointe's beloved headmaster and his better half leaving a counselling session—looking rather distraught, might I add—seems to confirm that theory.

What happened? Wifey's penchant for a fresher, younger cut of meat finally taking its toll? Or perhaps someone has some real insight into what's going on. Got something to add? I'll be here all night.

Later, assholes.

CHAPTER 12

BLUE

Scar hasn't spoken a single word to me since picking her up from the diner. Not even about all the X drama, which she would've loved to chat about. If her silence on *that* issue hadn't already let me know she's pissed about earlier, the sound of her bedroom door slamming shut would've made it obvious.

I have every intention to try and clear the air between us, but first, I have a gun to hide. Standing at the opening of my closet, I look around, deciding to shove the box from Tommy under a pile of hoodies in the far right corner. Then, after moving a few things around to conceal it completely, I head to Scar's room. Surprisingly, she hasn't locked me out.

"Ok, just say whatever you need to say so we can eat dinner and not have our entire night ruined."

Apparently, just the sound of my voice has earned me the death stare, but I don't care. This is how we handle things. We talk them out.

"What difference does it make whether *I* say something or not? Because you'll say absolutely *nothing* in return," she scoffs, dropping down onto her bed after pulling her dark hair into a ponytail.

I should've felt that coming. My gaze lowers to the carpet and I still have no clue how to navigate these waters—tell her enough so she knows to be more mindful of her surroundings, but not so much that she's overly paranoid.

Like me.

“There’s just stuff going on that—”

“That I don’t understand,” she cuts in with an eye roll. “So you keep saying. But honestly, from the outside looking in, you just look like a crazy person who’s becoming even *more* overbearing than you already were.”

Her words cut deep. Yes, I’m completely aware of my tendency to smother her, but how could she not know it’s because I love her? How could she not know I’m desperate to keep her safe because if something happened to her it would literally kill me?

“I’m gonna let that slide, because I know you’re confused and upset right now, but—”

“How long has it just been us?” she asks. “Most people would say since Mike left, but you and I know it’s been much longer than that. Even before mom took off and Hunter got arrested, we were all each other had.”

Listening to her, looking into her eyes, my heart’s in my throat because she isn’t wrong.

“A long time,” I answer.

“So, if there’s anyone in this world I should be able to trust, it’s you, right?” she reasons. “Then, why doesn’t that go both ways? And don’t tell me it does, because if that were true, you wouldn’t be hiding... *whatever* this is from me right now.”

She stands and takes a step to storm off again, but I have her arm before she can leave the room.

“You’re fourteen, Scar.”

“*Fifteen*,” she argues, “which means I’m not a baby. Which means I won’t fall apart if you tell me the truth for once.”

There’s a knot in my stomach that only grows the longer this conversation continues. Shielding her has been, by far, the most exhausting job I’ve ever had, but it’s been worth it. I don’t know, though. Maybe she’s right. She’s growing up and maybe it’s time I let her handle knowing things.

But then, as soon as this thought comes to me, I’m aware of how badly I wished there had been someone to protect my innocence. Someone who felt I was too young to see the things I’ve seen, experience the things I’ve experienced.

“All I can say is that you’re not crazy,” I admit. “Things are going on that you don’t know about, but I’m handling it.”

Handling it—I use that term very loosely.

That death stare is locked on me again and I feel her growing frustration as it expands throughout the room, like it's alive.

“Either tell me what the hell is happening, or... at *least* get better at pretending everything's okay before I lose my mind,” she snaps, sounding like the lump in her throat is all that's keeping her from crying.

“Scar, I am doing... the absolute best I can,” I choke out, feeling my own emotions getting the best of me. To my surprise, she doesn't pull away when I bring her into an embrace.

“You're all I have, and if you're not okay, I'm not okay,” she admits. The tears have broken free now and I draw her closer.

Something has to give. But seeing as how I can't snap my fingers and have this whole thing go away, the only factor I have the power to change is myself. So, if that means taking on more to keep things as normal as I can for Scar, then that's what I'll do.

She leans away and I push wetness from her cheek with my hand, deciding that my new mission is to do what I can to give my sister more... normalcy. She's craving that, and if normalcy is the alternative to shredding her world with the truth, then I'll give her that.

Come hell or high water.

@QweenPandora: Ok, last one for the night.

Let's spin the wheel-of-doom and see whose fate I'll seal this time.

Lookie, lookie. I do believe this one will ruffle a few feathers. It seems everyone's favorite councilman isn't quite the standup guy he'd have us all believe.

Yup, you guessed it. The man formerly known as Judge Francois—which most of us still call him out of habit—has a hidden side. If these pics of him leaving a hotel outside the city (with a scantily clad woman, no less) are any indication, I'm guessing he's got some explaining to do.

Boo-hoo, VirginVixen. Here you are, saving yourself for “the one”, while Poppa Francois is slinging dick to anything in a skirt.

*Come on, people. You have to see the irony in this, right?
At any rate, this one's gonna sting a bit. Guess PrettyBoyD had better break
out the Kleenex. Or might I suggest a pack of condoms instead?*

*Pro tip: Sad girls are an easy lay, kid. Take advantage while you can and
show VV what she's been missing!*

Later, assholes.

—X

CHAPTER 13

BLUE

“Everything’s nice and clean, but I still say you should’ve let me get at least *some* decorations,” Jules huffs, glancing around at the extremely un-festive living room.

I do the same, imagining the place filled with foil balloons and colorful streamers, but that simply wasn’t in my budget. After working the morning shift at the diner, I headed right across the street to the liquor store and cashed my check. Seeing as how I’d given Tommy my last, I had to take from *next* week’s budget to spring for tonight’s pizza.

What I’m saying is, it was either food or decorations, and I chose food.

“It’s too late. Ricky’s dropping her and Shane off any minute now.”

Jules attempts to fluff a completely lifeless throw pillow while eyeing me. “He sticking around for the party?” she asks.

“Ricky? Nope. We’re not exactly on speaking terms right now.”

Jules’s brow quirks. “Uh oh. What’d he do this time?”

I’m not exactly at liberty to tell her the truth—that a rapey van showed up when he was late getting Scar from school—so I keep it vague.

“We just had a minor falling out,” I explain.

“Well, it’s probably best he doesn’t stay then. Scar doesn’t need any drama tonight. Still can’t believe she’s already fifteen! Pretty soon, you’ll be stocking the kid up on condoms and birth control,” she teases, but I don’t laugh, keeping to myself that Scar’s already tested those waters.

“Hopefully not too soon,” I say back.

Jules has moved on to re-wrapping the cord to the vacuum when she speaks again.

“Heard from Mike?”

The mere mention of his name has me wanting to play in the busiest of traffic.

“Nope, and I’m glad for it. As far as I’m concerned, that place can keep him. He’d just come home to raise hell and make life ten times more miserable.”

“He ever been to a place like that before?” Jules asks.

“He’s never cared enough to bother even *trying* to get himself cleaned up. Hell, he’s only there *now* because Uncle Dusty literally dragged his ass down there.”

I know there’s absolutely nothing funny about what I’ve just said, but the memory of Uncle Dusty busting in with a replacement door and tarp was one of the best things I’ve ever seen in my life.

“This is a laughing matter to you?” Jules asks with a smile.

“Not at all, but when you’re me, you learn to find humor where you can.”

She pushes the vacuum against the wall near the kitchen and grabs me around my shoulders.

“I know things suck right now, but look at the bright side. Things can only get better from here, right?”

I peer up at her. “Famous last words.”

She doesn’t get the chance to respond because there’s a heavy knock at the door. I slip from beneath her arm and rush to peek out the window.

I count two pairs of crazy-expensive gym shoes standing on my porch, because that’s all I can see. There are colorful bags and huge bouquets of balloons blocking everything else. To the point that I can’t tell which two of the triplets are waiting to be let in, and who the two silhouettes still in West’s car belong to.

I pull the door open, then hold the security door to let in who I now know to be West and Sterling, which means the two in the car are Dane and Joss.

“Uh... hi.”

I pause to scan all that these two are hauling inside my house.

“I thought you asked if you could grab Scar *a* gift. Singular,” I say, smiling to myself. I should’ve known West would go above and beyond that.

Hence the reason Scar’s early Christmas gift from him was a game

system that probably costs more than a car payment.

“You know me. Go big or go home,” West answers, leaning in to kiss me before he sets Scar’s things on the couch.

There are at least ten bags here, and not all are presents. I see drinks, snacks, and paper goods. Between him and Sterling, I spot a dozen and a half balloons, maybe two. And speaking of Sterling, he’s holding a huge box I can now see is a birthday cake. One with a sticker on the side, stating that it was mixed and baked in a peanut-free zone.

My eyes are blurry, but I’m not going to cry. I do, however, want to squeeze West to death with a hug. So, I do that the second he passes the balloons off to Jules.

“Whoa,” he says with a laugh, catching me when I basically attack him.

“Thank you so much,” I manage to say.

Thank you for caring so much. Thank you for doing for my sister what I wasn’t able to do. Thank you for... just loving me.

He presses a kiss to my cheek and is in no rush to let me go. Jules and Sterling seem to notice that.

“Guess we’re on setup duty,” she teases. “We’ll get started in the kitchen.”

With that, Sterling follows her, and now I’m not so guarded since it’s just West and me. Despite how hard I fought against it, I do shed a few tears, but they’re happy tears for once.

“You didn’t have to do this,” I whisper.

“Mmm... actually, you’re wrong,” he replies. “I *did* have to, because I love Scar, and I *definitely* love her crazy-ass sister.”

A laugh slips out and I squeeze tighter. There are no words for how much I appreciate his thoughtfulness. When I finally do let go, it’s only because I know Scar’s on her way and, unlike before, we’ve got decorations to set up.

Jules and Sterling take care of putting out some of the snacks, while West and I hide the gifts in my room and scatter the balloons all over. Their colorful strings hang down, adding to the ambiance, and I light a few candles so we can kill some of the lights. By the time I hear Scar’s key in the door, everything’s perfect.

This isn’t exactly a surprise party, because she knew we were all hanging out, but she definitely wasn’t expecting all this. Hell, neither was I. But West and crew came through in the eleventh hour to save the evening.

Scar’s eyes light up and that’s enough to make it all worthwhile for me.

“What the heck did you do?” she asks after a sharp gasp.

“Well, actually—”

“Your sister loves you and she went all out to make today special,” West cuts in, stopping me short of giving him and his brothers credit.

When Scar rushes me with a hug, I mouth a tearful, “Thank you,” in West’s direction, to which he responds with a quick nod.

“This looks great!” Scar beams, grabbing a balloon down from the ceiling to bop Shane on the cheek with it. He smiles at her when she does it, but I see the distance Scar spoke of. See it in the way that smile he wears doesn’t quite reach his eyes. If I had to guess, my assumption was right.

The bloom is off the rose and his interest is split between my sister and God knows how many other girls.

I’m pulled away from the quick observation when my phone buzzes in my pocket. It’s that damn ‘*Unavailable*’ caller again. Typically, I’d at least try to pick up, knowing no one will actually say anything back, but not today. Today, I’m focusing on Scar.

West shoots me a questioning look when I shove the phone back in my hoodie, but the quick flash of a smile kills his suspicion.

“Where’s Dane?” Scar asks, glancing around the small room, thinking she somehow missed him.

“He’s in the car with Joss,” West answers, aiming a thumb over his shoulder in that general direction.

“Is... everything okay?” I ask.

He shoots me a hesitant look and his expression says a lot. “You didn’t see X’s post late last night?”

Curious, I shake my head. “I stopped paying attention after the Headmaster Harrison update. What’d I miss?”

West seems troubled when his gaze leaves me. “Some shit came out about Joss’s dad and she’s not taking it too well. She needed to vent to Dane for a bit, but they’ll be in in a sec.”

While it’s sweet that she pushed herself to come tonight, I would’ve understood if she hadn’t. Take it from me, family drama is the worst, but it’s even worse when you have to fake a smile.

Guess there’s nothing to do about it now. She’s already here.

“Mind helping me pour drinks? Pizza should be here any minute.”

Jules perks up when I ask. “Of course.”

We disappear in the kitchen, just the two of us, and I feel her staring

while I arrange the cutesy unicorn cups West chose. He's worse than me, seeing Scar as a little girl and not the almost-woman that she is.

"Look at you," Jules whispers.

"What?"

She rolls her eyes like I should already know what she means. "Blue, he's got you glowing so bright you're practically radioactive," she whispers, grinning just as big as I am now.

I take a deep breath to avoid gushing about him like I really want to. "I don't know he's just—"

"Amazing? Thoughtful? Sexy as hell?" she interjects.

I smile even bigger now. "All those things and *then* some."

She lets out a silent squeal and pushes me deeper into the kitchen after making sure no one else had come in.

"This is the first time I've been around you two since you made things official, and OH MY GOD!"

She whispers that last part, fanning herself like she's going to die of a heat stroke.

"Shut up," I say with a laugh.

"You two are so hot together! And it's only been like five minutes! Has he said the 'L' word yet?"

I pause simply because I know the wait will drive her crazy.

"Blue!"

"He said it a little over a week ago," I admit.

"Ah! I bet it was perfect! Tell me all about it!"

"Later."

"And I want *all* the details," she insists. "Gah! I wish I could've convinced my parents to let me go down south with you guys. Just so I can drool over you two drooling over each *other*."

But before I can say I wish she'd gotten a 'yes' from her parents too, a tall messy-haired guy darkens the doorway—both hands tucked in the pockets of faded jeans. West slinks into the room like he knows we were talking about him. Chances are he heard Jules's big mouth.

"Need some help?" he offers.

Jules shoots me a look and quickly speaks up. "Actually, you two can cover this. I'll go join the party."

Her brows bounce at me before she exits, leaving West and I alone.

"I'll pour. Mind opening the pack of plates and napkins?"

“Whatever you need,” he answers.

My teeth sink into my lip when I can’t help but check him out. The mere thought of him sends my temp soaring.

In my peripheral, I watch as he does what I asked. Then, when he’s finished, his massive body emits heat like a furnace as he approaches from behind. Still pouring, my eyes flit to where both his hands come to rest at either side of me now, sandwiching me between his body and the counter. I feel his breath on my neck and, right away, I’m flashing back to the quickie we snuck in the other night.

“So, I was thinking. We’ve hung out, you’ve been to my games... we’ve fucked,” he adds with an amused rasp, “but we’ve never been on an actual date. What do you say we change that?”

I feel flush all of a sudden, which is strange considering how much less intimate a date is in comparison to the other things we’ve done.

“Blue Riley, more affectionately known as Southside,” he teases, “would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the Snow Ball next weekend?”

I was with him right up until he mentioned the dance—all the hoopla, all the people.

“She accepts,” Scar beams.

Apparently, she’d been spying from the doorway. I could only hope she missed *some* of the conversation, but...

“I know everyone looks at me like I’m some toddler or whatever, but I’m putting my foot down,” she asserts. “Blue *will* be going to that dance if I have to chloroform her and send her out the door in a bathrobe.”

Despite still being on the fence about this, I smile, remembering something she said. About needing me to be okay so *she* can be okay. Maybe this—seeing me behave like a normal eighteen year-old for once—is part of that.

Glancing back over my shoulder and into West’s eyes, I respond to his request. “I accept.”

He lays a very PG-rated kiss on me and leans away.

“Good. Otherwise, I was gonna take Scar up on her offer,” he teases.

He heads to the living room with the first round of drinks, and I hear the door open. I get there just as Dane and Joss are being let in and she’s obviously been crying—red-rimmed eyes, flushed cheeks. Our eyes lock for a moment and she forces a tight smile, but she’s definitely not okay.

Dane’s at her side like the loyal friend I’ve seen him be to her, but

whatever family drama she has going on looks heavy. Still, she seems determined not to let it ruin her night, and I can definitely relate to that.

If she needs tips on how to fake being okay, I'm her girl.

Between pizza, chips, and cake, I think we all ate more than we probably should've. Hence the reason we each struggled to keep our eyes open through the second movie. Things livened up, though, when it came time for Scar to open presents—the phone case I promised, a sweater from Jules, earrings from Joss, and a \$300 gift card from the triplets for new video games to go with her system.

All in all, it was a great night thanks to the help of these five.

"I'm gonna catch a ride home with Ruiz," Jules announces, peeling herself off the couch when a horn honks once outside. She and Shane both get to their feet and I stand to walk them to the door.

As soon as she's in her boots, I squeeze her tight. "Thank you so much. I would've passed out halfway through the cleaning if it weren't for you."

She squeezes back. "Anything for you, BJ. Always."

I let go so she can shrug into her coat, then watch as she and Shane take careful steps down the icy porch and sidewalk.

"We should take off, too," West announces. "Joss can't be out all night."

I glance at her when her name's mentioned. She doesn't look as broken as when she first walked in, but I still see it—the sadness, the disappointment.

"Call you when I make it in." West's words are muffled against my neck when he draws me close.

"Don't forget."

My collarbone tingles when he kisses me there. "Like I'd ever fucking forget you."

With Scar completely engaged in conversation with his brothers, he kisses me deep this time, squeezing my ass tight with both hands, making me wish we were alone, and he didn't have anywhere he needed to be.

"Set the alarm when I'm gone."

I nod, letting him know I will, then Scar and I watch as the last of our guests file out the door.

I'm shocked when her head rests on my shoulder. She hasn't been this

sweet to me in a long time, but I'm guessing today was the dose of '*normal*' she's been in need of.

"Happy birthday, kid."

I ruffle her hair and kiss her forehead.

"Thanks," she says sweetly, adding words I really needed to hear coming from her. "Love you."

Yeah, she can be a major pain in the ass sometimes, but at the end of the day, I wouldn't change a thing about her.

CHAPTER 14

BLUE

Scar tries to help me clean, but I insist that she go enjoy the last fifteen minutes of her birthday, before the clock strikes midnight. Besides, there isn't much to do.

I toss the leftover pizza in the fridge, tie up the garbage, and round up all the balloons to store them in the laundry room. I've just blown out the last candle when an angry knock hits the door.

It's funny how I can tell such a thing—that the person on the other side of the door is angry.

My steps are quiet as I creep to the window to peek out, only to find it's Ricky whose nearly given me a heart attack. Well, at least that explains the angry part.

Our last communication was a string of frustrated text messages after he took his sweet-ass time getting Scar and Shane from school. It ended on a bad note and neither of us had reached out to fix it. So now, I have a pissed Ruiz on my porch, rattling the security door with his fist again.

What now?

I turn off the alarm I'd only set a little bit ago, before snatching the door open to glare at Ricky.

"It's late. What do you want?"

He doesn't wait for an invitation before letting himself in, reminding me I'd forgotten to lock the security door after West and the others took off.

“We need to talk,” he insists.

“You were just here picking up Shane thirty minutes ago. Why didn’t you just say what you needed to then?”

“Because that was before I ran into fucking Tommy Navarro, Blue. What the fuck were you thinking?”

I shrink into myself and I hate that I do, letting him make me feel small.

“I... did what I had to do,” I confess, pushing strands of hair behind my ear. The gesture makes me look insecure, unsure of myself.

Damn, I guess I’m a little of both right now. My visit to Tommy was supposed to stay between me and Tommy. I suppose I should’ve known better than that.

“So, you get on my case about being two fucking minutes late to get them from school, then you go do some dumb shit like this?” he snaps. “You’ve gotta be smarter than this.”

“I did what I had to do,” I repeat.

He doesn’t get to judge me. As someone whose lived his life exactly the way he wants to, with zero regard for how I, or anyone else feels about it, I’m allowed to do what I think is best for me and my sister without his two cents.

“FYI, I paid the rest of your debt, plus interest, because there’s *always* fucking interest,” he seethes. “You *know* Tommy! Which is why I don’t understand what was going through your head. Tommy’s not the kind of guy you go looking for. He’s the kind who comes looking for *you*. And when he does, you get lost.”

Okay, so I made a bad call going to see him, but where the hell else was I supposed to turn? No one can sit here and babysit me and Scar twenty-four-seven. So, I made a choice. Albeit a desperate one, but it was the only one I had at the time.

“You two were friends once. He can’t be that bad,” I reason.

“B, that was kid shit. Things change. You, of all people, should know that.”

I feel the sting in his words. Whether he means for me to or not, I feel them. In his eyes, *I’m* one of those things that’s changed.

He looks away, as if hearing and agreeing with that thought.

“You need to tell me what the fuck’s going on.”

“Keep your voice down,” I whisper.

“Then don’t make me say it twice.”

He’s staring again. This time there’s a coldness to the look that hadn’t

been there before. It's telling of his state of mind right now. He's not in the mood for me to be evasive and guarded.

I waver a bit, knowing West and I agreed to bring Ricky into the fold completely, but I also know him—what a hothead he can be, how he's known for acting without thinking. There's a chance that something I say will trigger him to do something reckless, and I'd never forgive myself if that were to happen.

"I already know this is about Vin's shady ass, but I need to know why. What did he do or say that made you think you needed to buy a gun from fucking Tommy Navarro?" he practically hisses.

I freeze, feeling so, so torn.

"I—"

What if he goes looking for Vin? What if that leads to him getting hurt or worse?

"I... want to tell you, but... I need you to promise me something first."

The request makes him grow even more annoyed with me than he already was.

"Just tell me."

"Only if you promise," I repeat. "I need your word that you won't... react," I force out, deciding that's the phrase that best fits. "Promise me you won't hear what I'm about to say and then go out and do something stupid."

His jaw clenches and a sharp sigh leaves him, but then he nods, and I suppose that'll have to do for now.

My hands are shaking, and I know he sees it. He sees *everything*, notices all my nervous habits.

"When Vin came by that night, he... made threats," I confess.

I haven't even given Ricky the details and, already, I see his rage spike. He wants to speak, wants to let that rage out, but he seems to be mindful of the silent vow he just made.

"He wants me to end things with West, but he wants it done in such a way that there's never any chance of us fixing the relationship. And, apparently, I have two months to get it done." I pause to think. "Well, a little less than that now."

"Why two months?"

I shrug. "Beats me. He wasn't exactly up to a Q&A when we finished. But he made it clear that, if I didn't comply, there would be consequences."

If I thought Ricky's expression was tense before, I was wrong. *This* is his

tense face.

“The fuck kind of consequences are we talking?”

“He threatened to have Scar taken away from me. At first, I thought he just meant he’d call Child Protective Services on us, but then he promised I’d disappear after that,” I admit, adding the most sinister part next. “He mentioned something about already having bids on me, and how easy it would be to have someone take Scar off his hands, too, if he wanted. And... it all made me think of that word you used the other night.”

Ricky meets my gaze before I say it out loud.

“Cargo.”

His jaw’s thick and tight when he grits his teeth. I know he’s already regretting giving me his word he wouldn’t do something reckless, but he did. And I’ll hold him to it.

“So, *that’s* why I went to see Tommy. *That’s* why I was so upset when you were late the other day. Scar spotted a weird van lurking outside the school and I... I panicked,” I admit. “I walk around all day every day just waiting for the other shoe to drop, wondering if Vin will really keep his word and give me time to hurt West. Or will he just swoop in and take what he wants simply because he can?”

I’m quivering now, and I’m made more aware of it when my hand warms. Ricky squeezes it and the sudden contact centers me.

“Why am I just now hearing about this?”

“Because you’re not always the most level-headed person in the world,” I remind him.

He doesn’t argue with that, because he knows I’m right.

“Does West know everything?”

“Not about the gun,” I admit.

“But he knows everything else?”

I nod. “I wasn’t planning to tell him at first, thinking the best thing to do was run, disappear before things could get worse, but he caught me. When you guys beat me here, he’d already seen my bags packed in my room.”

Ricky’s brow quirked. “Run where?”

I shrug. “The only place I could think to go was my grandmother’s.”

“The deadbeat in Virginia?”

Those words would probably anger most people, hearing someone refer to their family in such a way, but he’s completely right.

“Yeah. Her.”

What I don't say is that Virginia isn't completely off the table. At least it isn't for Scar. Every single day, sending her to live there sounds more and more appealing. Especially with creepy black vans popping up where they shouldn't be.

"There's more."

Ricky's brow does that thing again when he meets my gaze. "What is it?"

I glance down at the carpet before speaking. "We were so confused about how Vin ended up with the pic I sent you, but I think we figured it out, and you aren't gonna like it."

He squares his shoulders, and I can already tell he's getting angrier. There's a thick, throbbing vein in the side of his neck that tells me so.

"We already put two and two together and figured out Vin and Uncle Paul have business together, but... I think they listen in on our calls, see our texts and pictures that come through. It's the only way he'd have that pic, the only way Vin could ever know some of the things he knows. But if *yours* is being monitored, that means your uncle had something to do with it."

Ricky doesn't say a word and I feel his wheels turning.

"Did Paul distribute phones to you guys?"

There's a moment where Ricky doesn't respond at all, but when he does, he nods and confirms what I already knew.

"Little over a year ago, he said he had reason to think the old ones had been compromised, so he rounded us all up and upgraded us," he scoffs. "Now I know *he's* the only thing that's been fucking compromised. Shit."

I grip his hand tighter when he tries to walk away, fearing he's about to break his vow and go find someone to take this frustration out on. Like, Paul or Vin.

"Ricky, you promised."

My words halt him and my heart's racing, feeling like it's climbed out of my chest and into my throat.

"We have to be smart about this. Scar's safety is on the line if we let on that we have any idea what's happening," I explain. "All we can do is march to the beat of Vin's drum for now, until we have another option."

Ricky hates this—not being in control—but it is what it is. Welcome to my world.

"I won't do anything stupid, but I need to get out of here. I've gotta clear my head."

"Okay, but hang on a sec."

I feel his stare follow me when I leave the room and disappear down the hallway. Then, when I return with the phone West picked up for him, he's confused.

"I already put my new number into it, and the numbers of everyone else who knows what's going on. It's the safest way we can communicate with each other, but our old phones have to stay in play too. If we all just go radio silent, they'll know something's up."

He stares at the device a moment and I'm not even sure he'll take it. But when he shoves it into his pocket, my heart settles a bit.

"I trust you," I remind him. "Which means I know you're not gonna leave here and do something that'll make me want to kill you."

He smiles a little, and so do I.

"We'll figure something out," I add, realizing this is the first time *I've* been the one to speak those words. Usually, it's West.

Maybe he's wearing off on me, or maybe it's just what I want to believe.

Either way, we're all clued in on the truth now. Whatever happens next, whatever way this whole thing goes, we're in it together.

CHAPTER 15

WEST

“Where the hell have you been all my life?” The question leaves my mouth in a plume of smoke, speaking to the joint pinched between my fingers.

I pass it to Dane, and I swear it’s been a lifetime since any of us took a hit. We have until early summer to get our fill before we’re in the gym for our first college football season. But getting high tonight feels necessary, because life’s so incredibly fucked up at the moment.

I glance down at my phone, checking the app linked to Southside’s security system. The moment I lay eyes on the thing, it switches from ‘disarmed’ to ‘armed’. It seems like a weird coincidence since she’d already turned it on when Scar’s party ended a little more than an hour ago.

West: Everything okay? Just noticed the alarm was off.

Southside: All good. Ricky stopped by and I gave him the phone. On my way to bed.

I smile and can’t resist the chance to get under her skin a little.

West: On your way to bed alone, right? Or is Ruiz still there?

Southside: Ha-ha. Such a fucking comedian.

Despite the sarcastic response, I know she’s laughing.

West: I’d hate to have to kill anyone tonight.

Southside: Not tonight, but if you keep talking...

West: I’ve got it on good authority your ass isn’t going any-damn-where.

Southside: Oh, yeah? That’s what you heard?

West: True shit. Rumor is, you stick around for the good sex.

Southside: OMG whatever.

West: It's like that?

Southside:...

West: Fine. Night. Love you.

She takes her sweet-ass time responding, which I know is one-hundred percent intentional.

Southside: Love you back ;) Also, Jules is stuck here in the city for Christmas, so if you want to buy the plane tickets, it's just me and Scar.

“Get off the damn phone. You’re messing up the rotation,” Sterling complains, shaking the joint at me.

I take another hit, then hand it off to Dane. Right after, I open the app where I’ve had our plane tickets sitting in the cart and pull the trigger on them before I forget.

“You dickheads owe me for your tickets. Joss’s too. No such thing as a free ride,” I announce, letting my head drop back to the mattress.

“Fuck you,” Dane chokes out, making me laugh as he tries to hold in the smoke he just inhaled.

Mentioning Joss’s name with the joke has me thinking about her now, wondering how she’s dealing with the shitstorm X brought into her life last night. With what’s been revealed about her dad, things are kind of a mess over there.

The last twenty-four-hours under her roof have been nothing but chaos—lots of fighting and crying. Most of which Joss has been able to avoid, but of course she’s not completely exempt. We offered to let her chill here for a few days, as a means of escape, but she insisted on being at home. Apparently, she doesn’t trust her folks to be forthcoming with the details, so she’s sticking around to hear it all firsthand.

With all the underhanded shit going on lately, I honestly don’t blame her.

I thought the shift in circumstances might change her mind about coming to Louisiana in a week, but it’s actually had the *opposite* effect. Her original plan was to sneak out and leave her parents a note explaining where she’d gone, but now she wants to just be straight up with them. Apparently, she doesn’t give a fuck what they think about her leaving with us.

Or more specifically, leaving with *Dane*.

The room’s quiet and the weed has me reflecting on other things now.

“As far as fifteen-year-old girls birthday parties go, I’d say that was a

success.”

Sterling nods, agreeing with me. “She seems like a good kid. Southside’s done a good job with her.”

It’s strange at first hearing him say it that way, but he isn’t wrong—she raised Scar on her own. Even when it wasn’t just the two of them.

“Parents fucking suck,” Dane chokes out.

The incredibly general statement has me laughing, but probably only because I’m high as hell right now.

“Speaking of parents that suck, Joss doing okay?” Sterling asks.

Dane shrugs and inhales deep, holding his breath before answering. “She will be.”

As if Pandora’s prying ass wasn’t bad enough, we’re stuck with X until she regains control of her account. Turns out, she wasn’t as heartless as we all thought, having held back all the gems X has graced us with lately. Some are pretty heavy hitters, the kind of shit that can tear families apart. While Joss may be the latest victim, who the fuck knows who’s next.

I glance at the time and in rushes an impulsive thought.

“We should go upstairs,” I suggest. “Let’s rummage through Vin’s shit and see what we find.”

Both my brothers look at me like I’ve lost my fucking mind, but it’s the perfect night. Mom and Vin are at the same charity event they attend every year right before Christmas. And I’m not sure what goes on there, but they’ve never made it back in for the night before three a.m.

“We’ve got a couple hours at least,” I say with a groan, pulling myself up off the bed, still dressed in what I wore over to Southside’s.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Dane asks.

“Hell if I know. Just *anything*,” I reason with a shrug. “We’ll know when we find it.”

Honestly, it’s the weed talking and I have no fucking idea what I’m saying, but I’m convinced this is what we need to do with the rest of our night.

“Sterling, take the lobby. Dane, I need you on elevator watch.”

They look at each other like I’m crazy, and they might be right, but there’s no stopping me. I’m already out of my room, down the hall, and pressing the call button for the private elevator. As I ride it up to my parents’ floor alone, there’s a quiet voice in the back of my head telling me what a shit idea this is, but, like I said, *high* me is unstoppable. And not in the ‘*valiant*,

heroic’ sort of way. More so in the ‘*reckless abandon*’ meaning of the word.

Yep, that’s me. My comic book name would be ‘*Super Stupid*’ or some shit.

The broad, metal doors part and I lay eyes on the polished marble tile of my parents’ foyer. The gleaming white reflects light from the chandelier above. They’ve left every light on, but that’s typical for them. Why conserve energy when you’ve got more money in your bank account than this whole city combined, right?

I step out, thinking I’m on some kind of recon mission, but it isn’t until I hear voices that I realize that assumption was dead-ass wrong. My gut tells me to get back on the elevator before they notice I’m here, but the tone and volume of their voices makes this seem more like an argument than a regular conversation. She’s screaming and, from what I can hear she’s also crying, but I can’t make out her words.

So, being your friendly neighborhood *Super Stupid*, I push forward in the name of justice, or... maybe it’s just blind stupidity.

“You’re saying so much, Vin, but none of it explains what I saw!” Mom yells.

“Pam, for the last time, tell me what the *fuck* you did with it. You have no fucking right to touch my things!”

I’m close enough now that I get a glimpse of my parents through the partially open door to my father’s study. It’s a mess—papers thrown everywhere, books all over the floor, every drawer and cabinet door open. Even the oil painting over the fireplace is pulled away from the wall. Behind it, the faint green glow of the digits on the safe can be seen. I have no clue what’s gone missing, but I do know Vin’s desperate to find it.

His hair’s wild and damp with sweat. The top button of his shirt and the bowtie around his neck are both undone. Mom’s still wearing a long, black formal gown, but the straps from her shoes are dangling from her fingers.

“Dammit, Pam! Tell me what you fucking did with it!” Vin shouts again, and with how my heart’s pounding in my chest, I nearly rush in there, but something tells me to wait.

So, I don’t dismiss that small voice in my head this time, choosing to stay put and listen.

“All those names and dollar amounts. I don’t... I don’t understand. Is it a prostitution ring?” Mom asks, unable to fight the strain I hear so clearly in her voice. “Is that what you’ve gotten yourself into? Because it’s the only

thing that makes sense.”

She pauses then and presses a hand to her mouth when she gets choked up.

“No, *none* of it makes sense,” she corrects herself. “Because we’ve *already* got more cash than we could ever spend in a lifetime, so there’s no reason in the world I can think of that explains why you’d be doing what I think you’re doing.”

Vin slams his fist on the desk, and I swear the whole penthouse rattles.

“Always so fucking self-righteous,” he growls. “We weren’t all born with a silver spoon in our mouths!”

“Is that what this is about?” she scoffs. “You resent me because of where I come from? What my family has? Because last I checked, you benefited from their wealth, too.”

He balls his fist again, but this time stops just short of pounding the desk. Instead, he closes his eyes and tries to regain his composure.

“And did you ever stop to think that maybe I don’t want that hanging over my head anymore? That you’ve brought more to the damn table than I have?”

“I’ve never thrown that in your face,” Mom snaps. “You have *more* than done well for yourself, regardless of how and where you started. Which is why I don’t understand any of this.”

Staring at her, he lifts his hands when a simple answer falls from his mouth. “If there’s more to take, Pam, why not take it?” he reasons. “I’m building a legacy. An *empire*. Why create a limit when there isn’t one?”

Mom’s quiet, like she’s trying to process Vin’s words. “Shouldn’t there always be a limit, though? A line we’re not willing to cross just to add a few more zeros to our bank account?”

He stares at her with hellfire in his eyes, not saying a word, which says it all.

“Guess that answers my question,” Mom scoffs, staggering back a bit after having the wind knocked out of her.

Vin lowers his head and takes a deep breath. “That’s not what I meant. Of course, there are boundaries.”

Mom throws her hand up, clearly fed up with the course of this conversation.

“I *knew* the moment you got involved with your fucking family again it’d be our downfall.”

My brow tenses when she says those words, because I don't understand what it means. I set my confusion aside for now, to listen closely and make sure I don't miss anything.

"Pam, if you just return my ledger, I'd be glad to have a peaceful, civilized conversation with you about this, but the information you took was important and it's also confidential. You could get me in deep shit if I don't have it back in my hands immediately."

She glares at him and I haven't seen this side of her before. Maybe it just took her eyes being opened for her to come around.

"You'll get your ledger when I get the truth."

With that, she turns to leave, and I forgot to mention that being high also makes me slow. Which is why my reaction time is for shit right now and I'm caught.

She stops dead in her tracks, staring at me with mascara streaking down her face. I'm frozen there, unsure of what to do, unsure of whether I should explain why I was eavesdropping, but before I can even think of an excuse, she walks away.

Doesn't speak. Doesn't rat me out to Vin. Just walks away.

For a moment, I'm stunned by her reaction, but then I come to my senses and sprint back to the elevator, grateful I'm barefoot so my exit is silent.

I've got no idea what I just witnessed, but I now know there's some sort of ledger and Vin's just been bested by the woman he's mistreated for years.

I'm not into that sort of thing, but karma's definitely come back to bite him square in the ass.

Standing in the elevator, I pull out my phone and send a text.

West: We need to talk. Can you meet me tonight?

Ricky: The pier. Twenty minutes.

CHAPTER 16

WEST

“You’ve gotta be shitting me. You’re fucking high?”

Ricky spots it right off the bat, the second I walk up on his car wearing a dark hoodie and sweats. No doubt, my red, dilated eyes gave me away.

“Listen, some shit went down,” I say, ignoring his question.

He lowers the driver’s side window a little more, glancing around before he speaks. “You’re gonna get us caught. You know that? Sooner or later, someone’s gonna spot us out here.”

“I played it safe,” I explain. “Left my car in a parking structure a few blocks away, then walked here.”

One of his brows shoots up, then he looks me over from head to toe. “Your dumb ass thought walking a few blocks through the hood in three-hundred-dollar sneakers was *playing it safe*?” He shakes his head at me, then laughs.

After he points all that out, my comic book name comes to mind again. The one I keep living up to tonight.

“You’re lucky this is about Blue,” he adds, still smiling at my expense. “What happened?”

“I overheard my parents arguing tonight,” I explain. “Something about a ledger. Apparently, it’s got all kinds of names in it, and dollar amounts.”

His brow tenses. “You get a good look at it?”

“I didn’t see it at all. Just heard them fighting about it. From what I

gathered, my mom must've hidden it. My dad was apparently searching everywhere, tearing his study apart before he realized what actually happened. At least that's how things seemed to play out."

He's quiet while he thinks, and I shrug deeper into my hoodie when the wind whips past.

"I figured you were the one to talk to because of something I understand you've brought up before."

Ricky peers up from his thought. "What's that?"

"Cargo," I say with a sigh.

He doesn't seem surprised I know, but he does seem troubled.

"Hear anything else?"

My first thought is that I've told him everything, but then something comes to mind.

"She mentioned that she knew getting involved with his family would be trouble. You seen anyone else hanging around? Anyone you're not familiar with?"

Ricky shrugs. "There've been a few new names popping up across the city. I can look into it."

I'm still just as lost about that part as I was before, so I'll take that answer for now.

"Any chance you've seen a ledger of some kind lying around at Paul's place? Something like what I described?" I ask, to which he responds with a short laugh.

"Yeah, right," he scoffs. "Leaving sensitive shit lying around like that is reckless, a mistake only someone who's in over their head would make. Unlike your daddy, Paul's too smart to be that sloppy."

I don't argue with him because he's probably right. About all of it.

"Whatever, just keep your eyes and ears open."

He peers up and stares, letting me know he doesn't need my instruction, then starts rolling up his window.

"Go home, rich boy. Before I call my boys and tell them where they can get some crisp new shoes," he jokes, eyeing my sneakers again.

I start toward the structure where I left my car, staring at Ricky's taillights when he passes me. I make it maybe a few yards before he stops, then backs up.

"I'm probably gonna regret this shit, but Blue would kill me if something happened to your stupid ass and I was the last one to lay eyes on you," he

explains. “Get in. I’ll take you to your ride.”

As far as invitations go, that was about the shittiest I’ve ever gotten in my life, but it’s too fucking cold to turn it down.

I hop in on the passenger side and shut the door. Ricky eyes me, probably finding it hard to believe he even offered, but then he shakes his head and throws the car into drive.

“Tell anyone about this shit, and I’ll deny it. Then, I’ll kill you.”

I laugh to myself, knowing no one would ever believe it anyway. Both of us being irrevocably in love with the same girl means we have to at least tolerate each other.

For now, that’s about as much as either of us can promise.

I guess it’s enough.

CHAPTER 17

BLUE

She's not the big bad wolf. She's not the devil. How bad could this be?

Still in a towel after showering, I let out a breath and stare at the phone. If it hadn't been for the call that came in from West late last night, I wouldn't even be considering this, but knowing there's an actual ledger with names and records of cash exchanged makes this whole thing so much more real. I need to get Scar out of here as soon as possible.

There, I've dialed all the numbers. Now, just to actually make the call.

Just do it. Quick. Like ripping off a Band-Aid.

The next second, the line's trilling in my ear and my stomach's in knots.

"Hello?" an aged, raspy voice answers. A voice I haven't heard in forever.

"Grandma, it's Blue. I'm sorry to bother you."

I hear what sounds like an old box spring creaking in the background, which means I woke her.

"It's early, I know. I wouldn't have called if it weren't an emergency," I explain.

"He dead?" she asks coldly. It only takes a second to realize she's talking about Mike, her son.

"N—no," I stammer. "He's alive. This isn't about him."

A disgusting sound assaults my ears when she clears her throat and barks a rattly, mucus-infused cough.

“Then what the hell do you want?” she presses.

There are no formalities. No questions about how her three grandchildren are faring in this world. No questions about her son, other than to ask if he’s dead.

“I... was hoping I could ask you something. A favor.”

“Just say it, would ya?” she gripes, making it clear this is going to be a million times harder than I thought.

I swallow hard and close my eyes. “It’s Scar. For reasons I can’t really explain, she needs to get out of Cypress Pointe, and your house is the only place safe I could think to send her. So—”

“She pregnant?”

Caught off guard yet again, I stutter a clunky response. “She... I... no.”

“Sure about that?”

“Of course, I’m sure,” I say.

There’s a long pause, a sigh so deep I can tell she’s regretting picking up the phone this morning.

“What is she, eleven? Twelve?”

I roll my eyes, grateful the woman can’t see me. “She just turned fifteen yesterday.”

“That’s a terrible age,” she complains. “Teenagers think they know it all and don’t listen to a damn thing. No. I’m sorry. I can’t help you.”

“Grandma, please.”

It isn’t until those words leave my mouth that I understand the level of my own desperation. To be begging a woman to take my sister in who I know for a fact has never cared a thing for anyone’s wellbeing but her own.

She’s quiet again, either considering what I’ve asked, or she’s thinking of a more effective way to tell me to go fuck myself.

That hateful sigh hisses into my ear again.

“Don’t make me fucking regret this,” she snaps. “I’ve got a paying tenant in the spare room and I ain’t screwing up that arrangement for *anyone*. That means Scarlett will be on the couch and she and Hank can share the guest bath. If things don’t work out, *she’ll* be the one to go.”

Hank—a strange man I don’t know from the *next* guy.

Under the same roof with my sister.

“...Thanks,” I force out. “Can you text me the name of the local school district when we end the call? So I can get the enrollment process started? I’ll likely be bringing her to you early next month.”

“Shit. How the hell did *your* problems become *my* problems this morning?” she says. “I’ll get to it when I get to it. I’m going back to sleep.”

With that, the line beeps in my ear. She hung up.

I stare at my phone when the call ends and I’m sick to my stomach at the thought of... well, *all* of it. My grandmother being my sister’s sole caretaker, Scar being so far away.

Hank.

I take note of the time and toss my phone to the bed. I’ve got the breakfast shift this morning and I *really* don’t need this shit.

I pull my hair into a ponytail and drop my towel, slipping into the powder-blue uniform I’ll be wearing until at least three this afternoon. It’s freezing outside, so I slide on a pair of leggings I’ll take off when I get to Dusty’s. I’m nearly done, swiping on some lip gloss when my eyes dart to the phone again. Grandma Riley isn’t my only option. Hell, she isn’t even the *best* option, and I’m starting to think I know who might be.

Before I can overthink things, I dial the Cypress Pointe Police Department and ask for Detective Roby. I’m on hold for what feels like forever, but that’s mostly my impatience making it seem that way. By the time I hear a familiar voice on the other end of the line, I’ve lost my nerve.

What if he can’t be trusted?

“This is Detective Roby,” he says for a second time.

Just talk to the man. You know him. He’s a good guy. At least he used to be.

“Good morning, Detective. This is... Blue. Blue Riley.”

He’s quiet for a moment and I don’t know how to read his silence.

“It’s been quite some time, Blue,” he says. “You doing all right?”

I’m shaking so bad I can hardly hold the phone, listening to the ambient chatter and shuffling of paperwork in the background.

“I’m good.”

“I stopped into your uncle’s diner a few weeks ago. He said you’ve been waitressing for him.”

“I have. Headed there in a few, actually,” I say. “How’s Dez?”

“She’s well—graduated from Everly with honors last spring. Now, she’s having a great first year according to the grades she’s bringing in. I don’t hear from her much now that she’s all grown up,” he adds with a laugh.

“And Mrs. Roby?”

He pauses this time. “She passed away a few years back. An aneurysm.

Completely unexpected.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I’m so sorry.”

“You couldn’t have known,” he reasons. “Is there something I can help you with this morning?”

The spotlight’s back on me, I guess.

“Actually, yeah. I saw your interview on the news the other night and I... wondered if we could talk about that. You mentioned that you’ve formed a task force just to look into the missing girls.”

“I did,” he says. “It’s been an uphill battle, but we’re making some headway now. I suppose I still don’t understand what this is about. Were you friends with one of the girls who’s disappeared? Do you have some information you think might help?”

I’m losing my nerve, but it’s either Detective Roby or Grandma Riley.

“I think I might know who’s involved,” I confess.

Dead silence again. This time I’m pretty sure it’s because of the bold claim I’ve just made.

“I’m listening.”

“Something happened to me last week. I was confronted by someone and he alluded to having the means to make me and my sister disappear.”

“Those are some pretty serious allegations,” he says, concern heavy in his tone. “Have you spoken to your parents about this incident? Made a police report?”

If only it were that easy.

“My parents aren’t exactly available at the moment, and I didn’t go to the police because, honestly, I’m not sure who I can trust. Which is why I called *you* after seeing you on TV. I know it’s been a while and all, but—”

“Hang on just a sec,” he cuts in before the line goes quiet. Then, maybe half a minute later, he’s back. “I needed to get someplace with a bit more privacy,” he explains. “Now, mind telling me who it was that threatened you? I can swing by his place, maybe bring him down to the station for questioning, but you’d need to file a report before I can take action.”

“I can’t do that.”

The words leave my mouth with force, but I have good reason. Like, keeping a low profile so Vin doesn’t see cause to retaliate.

“For now, I’d just like to tell you what I know, so you can see if any of it fits with what *you* know, and maybe it’ll help you, and... maybe you can help *me*.”

“Do you feel safe?” he asks.

I’m grateful for not being face-to-face with him, because he’d know what I’m about to say is a complete lie.

“Yes.”

“Then why’d you mention needing help?” he wants to know.

“I guess that came out wrong. Mostly, I’m only calling because it felt wrong not sharing what I know if it could make a difference in your case.”

He breathes into the phone, probably not buying any of that. “Ok, tell me. Who threatened you?”

“My boyfriend’s father,” I confess, building up the nerve to add, “Vin Golden.”

A cynical laugh leaves Roby. “Of course it is.”

My brow tenses, hearing his reaction. “Is something wrong?”

He sighs into the phone. “Vin Golden’s what we refer to as an ‘*untouchable*’. One of those who has his hands in so many facets of the city, owns so much of the city, the guy’s basically insulated by his power.”

He stops there and I’m not sure if this changes things. Maybe it means he doesn’t believe me, or that he’s no longer interested in pursuing this thing if Vin’s who he’ll be up against.

“Tell me exactly what he said to you,” Roby suggests.

I breathe deep, hoping to God I didn’t make a mistake here. “Well, he came to my house, asked me to get into his SUV to talk—which I’m sure you saw when Pandora shared. But before the conversation ended, he said that if I didn’t distance myself from his son within the next two months, he’d get Scar taken away from me. Then, he’d make me disappear, too.”

“He specifically said two months?”

“Yes,” I answer.

“And Pandora posted about this incident?”

“She did,” I confirm, nodding as though we’re sitting in the same room together.

“I’ve got a member of our task force assigned to monitoring Pandora, but only for specific activity. He never mentioned this, which means he likely assumed your situation was more of the usual, useless drivel she posts. I suppose we should be looking a bit more closely,” he concludes, which I don’t disagree with. Especially seeing as how Pandora seems to be engaged in an intense war with whoever’s trying to out her.

“Probably a good idea. I resisted downloading the app for years, but at the

very least, it helps to give a heads up when everything's going to shit," I say with a humorless laugh.

"I bet. But getting back to your encounter with Vin, is this all that was said?"

I retreat a bit when it sounds like he's making light of this.

"I mean, he mentioned having people interested in me already. That has to mean something, doesn't it?"

I hear a pen scratching across a notepad in the background. "Anything else?"

There are a *million* things, but I'm admittedly not sure which details to share because I still have no clue if Roby's completely on the level. So, just shy of telling him about the phones, the pic, Vin's connection to Paul, and West overhearing the conversation about the ledger, I hold back.

"That's all."

More of that pen scratching across the notepad.

"While I think we'll both agree it was highly inappropriate for a man his age to approach a girl *your* age in this manner, there's nothing criminal here, Blue. I'm sorry. If I'm being honest with you, I see this sort of thing all the time. Parents from the north side get all up in arms when their kids intermingle with kids from the southside. This is probably that same thing. Especially seeing as how Vin's notoriously obsessed with his and his family's image."

Those words leave his mouth and, instantly, I'm certain this was a mistake.

"But I don't want you to think I'm being dismissive," he adds, right when I was thinking it. "You were heard today, okay? And if there's anything else you need to tell me, or if things get weird, don't hesitate to call. Understood?"

Deep breath. You tried.

"Understood."

"All right. Try to enjoy your weekend. I'll let Dez know you asked about her."

"Sure. Thanks."

The call ends and that got me absolutely nowhere. Roby probably thinks I'm a paranoid nutcase now, but I couldn't show all my cards. Not when I'm still so uncertain who can be trusted. If he's not as clean as I think he is, anything I say could get back to Vin and we'd be screwed. For now, I have to

be content knowing that at the very least, someone else in this town is at least questioning Vin's involvement where the missing girls are concerned.

It isn't much, but it's all I've got for now.

CHAPTER 18

BLUE

“I’m so sorry,” I say to the patron whose lap I just dropped a full basket of bread into. Could’ve been worse. Could’ve been soup or coffee.

The guy isn’t pissed, but I’m embarrassed, nonetheless. All morning, and now the better part of the afternoon, I’ve been distracted by the instant replay of my earlier conversation with Roby. I can’t believe I actually thought that would work. Maybe if I’d been at liberty to share all the details I have, things might’ve been different, but as it stands, that call was completely pointless.

Uncle Dusty gives me *‘the look’* when I toss what otherwise appears to be perfectly good bread into the trash.

“You all right?”

I nod. “All good. Just feeling a little off.”

“Ready to tell me what happened to that hand yet?” he asks, reminding me of the cuts and gashes.

“Nope.” I force a smile as I take the burger and fries combo he just plated for one of my tables. Then, I rush off before he can question me further.

“Here you go. Enjoy your meal.”

The sweet old lady smiles up at me after delivering her food, then I’m off to grab a fresh pot of coffee to refill empty cups. If I keep busy, maybe I won’t think so much.

The chime over the door sounds and I do a double-take when Roger—one of our Sunday regulars—comes wobbling in on his cane. He’s carrying a

large, thin envelope in his hand and his gaze is set on me.

“I believe this is for you, sweetheart,” he pipes up.

Wiping both hands on my apron, I approach him, confused as hell as to what’s going on.

“This is for me?”

He shrugs. “That’s what the young man told me. Or, hell, maybe it was a girl. Whoever it was, they scared the shit out of me, walking up on me wearing all that nonsense—clown mask, hoodie, gloves. There wasn’t an inch of skin showing, come to think of it. Young people are so strange these days.”

As much as I’m trying not to let paranoia continue consuming my day, I’d be lying if I said this doesn’t have it spiking all over again.

“...Thanks,” I say, hesitantly taking the envelope from Roger’s hand. He slowly makes his way over to the coatrack and I’m left staring at... whatever this is.

My name isn’t on it. In fact, the only marking on the whole thing is a thick, dark hashtag right in the center.

On cue, my stomach flips and I’m equal parts curious and terrified to know what’s inside. It feels light, and it’s so thin there can’t be more than one sheet of paper inside, but I won’t figure it out unless I open it.

Stepping behind the counter for at least *some* privacy, I break the seal and slip my hand inside. What I pull out has me wanting to vomit, but my first instinct is to question... *is this even real?*

If it is, Cypress Pointe is in for a treat.

Or, more like a nightmare.

“Roger, did you see which way whoever gave this to you went?”

“Back down the alley, I think.”

I rush out the door as soon as he’s finished speaking, hoping by some small miracle they’re still there. Maybe waiting for me to get this and, I don’t know, answer some of my questions.

Because, shit... I’ve got a million now.

Frigid air slaps me right in the face, but who cares? I need to know who handed this off to Roger and why they thought *I* was the right person to give it to.

I’m only somewhat shocked to find the alley empty. But desperate as I am, I even trek through the deep snow to check on the other side of the dumpster.

Nothing.

No one.

Before I can even process it all, my phone goes off—a notification from Pandora. Instead of heading back inside where it's warm, I quickly open the app and devour the update, scouring it for clues as to what the hell is going on right now.

@QweenPandora: First things first, I'm baaaaaack, lovelies! Sorry about that brief interruption from the soon to be forgotten X, but I assure you order has been restored and things are back on track.

Now, if you're out for your Sunday drive, might I suggest that you pull over and read carefully.

Turns out my stalker's endeavors have turned rather dark lately, resorting to threats of exposure and even bodily harm if it's ever discovered who it is that fills your lives with all the latest local gossip.

Thing is, this coward didn't take into account that I don't scare too easily. In fact, when backed into a corner, I don't break out in a temper tantrum. No, no no... I break out the big guns.

I've just placed some vital information in the hands of someone who might have needed a bit of divine intervention, if you will. Little birdie—yes, you—don't say I never gave you anything. Do with this gift what you will, but I think you know we can't let this happen. For at least a million reasons.

According to my sources, this info will go public in a little less than two months. So, tell the world or hold this one close to the cuff, it's up to you. But if you've got a plan, now would be a great time to see it put into action.

Everyone knows I don't respond to DMs, but for you and the crew, I'm willing to make an exception for a limited time only. Looks like we're in this

one together, Little Birdie.

Later, Peeps.

—P

My breath puffs in the wind and I'm at a loss for words. What did I just read? What did I just see in that envelope? I can't even think right now.

"What are you doing out here?" Dusty asks, snapping me out of the state of utter shock I've drifted into. "You've got a phone call."

I don't even bother answering his question. Instead, I'm rushing back inside where I take the call off hold and answer.

"This is Blue."

"I took your advice and downloaded that app," Detective Roby says on the other end. "Any chance this Little Birdie Pandora speaks of is you?"

I nod, still winded and confused. "Yes, sir."

"So, she delivered something to you today, right? What was it?"

I glance down at the envelope I'm still clutching, and for half a second, I consider not telling him. But it's actually the contents that has me realizing I need his help. We *all* do.

"It's a proof," I confess.

"A proof? Like an image of some sort?"

"More like for a poster."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

I so wish *I* didn't understand, but I do. And Pandora was completely right—there are at least a million reasons why this absolutely cannot happen.

"It's a campaign poster," I finally share with the detective. "For Vin. He's... running for mayor."

Roby is silent on the other end at first. "Shit. Guess we now know why good ol' Vin asked you to make a clean break by the two-month mark."

"Actually, I *don't* understand," I cut in.

Roby sighs and when he speaks again, his tone is gentler, almost compassionate. "I assumed it was a north side versus southside thing, classism, but it's bigger than that. With Hunter's conviction, Golden can't

risk his family name being associated with yours. He doesn't have a background in politics, so he's gotta work extra hard to prove himself. Yeah, the city knows him as a staunch businessman, but not as much else. He has to appear to be above reproach when this shit goes public. That means cleaning up anything he thinks might cost him his shot."

"He wants to control everything and everyone," I say mostly to myself.

"Which would make it a whole hell of a lot easier to hide possible criminal activity," Roby reasons. "Guess I know why I got so much pushback when I tried to fire up the task force. Who knows how deep this shit runs? Half this department could be on Golden's payroll."

"So, you believe me?" My voice is quivering when I ask, because I know I still haven't proven my case much more than I had this morning, but it *sounds* like he believes me.

"We've got our work cut out for us, and I'm not making any promises, but... yeah, I think there could be a connection," he finally says. "If you think of anything else that might help, don't hesitate to call. Morning, noon, or night."

I'm on the verge of tears. "Okay."

And I plan to do just that. As soon as I talk to West and we agree on what's safe to share and what isn't, I'll fill Roby in on the details.

"I'll be in touch, but you stay safe in the meantime. If you see *anything* that seems off, call my cell. The number hasn't changed."

I nod and feel so much relief.

Maybe, just maybe, we have a fighting chance.

Finally.

CHAPTER 19

WEST

Tightening the knot of a red tie around my neck, I consider this to be one of the few useful skills my father taught me. So, if he's ever fishing for accolades, this is all I have for him.

A new black suit, a fresh haircut, and in less than an hour, I'll have the hottest girl in this hemisphere on my arm. Usually, I avoid this particular dance like the plague, but for some reason the idea of it doesn't repulse me this year. Without thinking about it too hard, I know why.

It's her. Any excuse I can come up with to be around Southside, I'll take it.

Come tomorrow morning, I'm getting her away from all the Cypress Pointe bullshit. Dupont Bayou is like a whole other world, the most laid-back place on the planet. There, we won't have to deal with school. No Vin. No Pandora.

Her post last weekend had everyone losing their minds, wondering who this "little birdie" is that she mentioned. I was one of them until I got the frantic call from Southside, describing the contents of the mysterious envelope she received.

And imagine my surprise when I heard the news, that my crooked-ass father has plans to run the city. As if he doesn't already have enough power and influence. I can only imagine the shit he'd pull if he had the police department—and damn-near everyone else—in his back pocket. There

wouldn't be a thing he couldn't get away with and I'm guessing that's the whole point of this stunt.

Now, things are starting to make sense—the two-month timeline he gave Southside to end things with me, the NDAs. He was always looking out for number one.

Himself.

Southside filled me in on bringing in her dad's ex-partner. She didn't tell him everything, but still, my first thought was that she'd fucked up by telling *any* of this to an outsider. But that was before she told me a bit more about him, how he stepped in and did what he could to lighten Hunter's sentence, how he'd been like family before her dad got let go and their friendship fell apart. If any of this is going to work, we have to trust each other. So, if she thinks this guy's on the level, if she's willing to include him knowing Scar's safety is on the line, I have to trust that she knows what she's doing.

Hopefully.

The storm of speculation died down around midweek. By then, people were pretty sure that whoever Pandora had given that open invitation to would never be revealed, so they got tired of investigating. Only *we* know who the behind-the-scenes players are, including Vin being the one harassing the town's digital snitch, posing as X. Or at least he's the one who put someone up to the idea. Now, with what Pandora delivered to Southside, we can assume she knows it's him, too.

I check the time and I've got twenty minutes to get to the other side of town. If I speed, I can make it in fifteen.

Passing my brothers' rooms on my way to the elevator, I see both have their bags packed and on standby for tomorrow. It reminds me that I procrastinated until the very last second and still need to pack when I get in tonight.

"I'm out," I announce.

"Okay."

"Right behind you."

I'm too far away to know who said what, but the plan is to meet up outside the school. The elevator doors close and no sooner than they do, my phone rings. Seeing as how it's not the secret line, I know it isn't Southside, but I definitely don't expect to see Parker's name pop up.

"Shit."

I stare at the screen, ninety-nine percent sure I'm gonna let the call go to

voicemail. But then I remember how I dismissed her at the party before the Championship. Then, she'd been trying to warn me about my dad's NDA spree, and I blew her off. With the possibility of her calling to give some sort of heads up, I go against my gut and answer.

"What the fuck do you want?"

She scoffs into the phone and I don't care that I've already pissed her off within the first millisecond of this call.

"I'm sorry. Am I interrupting while you're getting ready for the Snow Ball?" she asks snidely. "Looked like you had fun playing dress up with your hood rat the other night. You always did have a soft spot for strays."

Apparently, she didn't miss Pandora's montage dedicated to me and Southside's shopping trip a couple days ago. She deserved a new dress for tonight and we thought that by going to a mall a few cities over, we'd avoid having our every move clocked. Obviously, we were wrong about that.

"It's funny," Parker says. "I always thought you hated these things."

She sounds salty as hell, but I don't call it out. Instead, I hit the button to unlock my car as my steps echo in the parking structure.

"What is it about her?" she asks. "I mean, yeah, she's pretty or whatever, but so are all the other randoms you fuck. Did you choose someone so far beneath you because you needed an ego boost? Does being with her make you feel... *superior*?"

I don't have time for this shit.

"Get a fucking life, Parker. I'm hanging up."

"Do you even care?" she rushes to ask, halting me from ending the call.

"The fuck are you talking about?"

She scoffs and I start my engine, letting the call pick up on the car speaker.

"I lost everything, West—my scholarship, my friends. Yeah, I may have fucked up, but do you really think you didn't have any part in that? You don't think there are consequences for how you emotionally abuse women? For how you sweet-talk your way into their heads, fuck them, then fuck them over?"

I let out a breath when I pull out into traffic, resisting the urge to hang up.

"There a point to this call? Or are you just wasting both our time with this bullshit?"

"You're such an asshole!" she shouts.

"Tell me something I *don't* know."

She's fuming. Even without seeing her, I know this to be a fact. She's one of those people who hates it when her anger shoots up to a ten, only for the person she's directing it at to stay cool.

"My parents put the house up for sale, West," she reveals next. "They're getting me out of this city because—thanks to you and that *bitch* you're sponsoring—they've realized how toxic this place is."

I laugh. Can't help it. "And I'm guessing you want me to believe this move has nothing to do with your dad's dealership going under, right?"

I've got her so pissed now I can hear her heavy, angry breaths on the other end.

"Go fuck yourself, West."

"As soon as you get some fucking help, Parker."

The line goes dead then, and I'm left wondering what her point even was. Was hearing that she's leaving Cypress Pointe supposed to make me feel guilty? Far from it. As far as I'm concerned, that bitch can move to the fucking moon and I wouldn't give a shit. She made her own damn bed, now she can lie in it.

BLUE

"Red's *definitely* your color," Jules beams, looking me over in the mirror.

"I tried on about a hundred dresses and it came down to this one and two others. West hasn't seen me in it, though."

Jules laughs a little. "Wasn't he there when you bought it?"

I nod. "Yeah, but when I realized this was the one, I stayed in the dressing room so he wouldn't see me in it."

Looking myself over, I let out a nervous sigh.

"Well, in this dress, you're sure to put the 'ho' back in 'ho-ho-ho' tonight," she teases.

My best friend, the class act.

"It's super cute that he took you shopping."

Listening to Jules swoon, I smooth both hands down the satin clinging to my hips, just above one incredibly high-cut split on the right side.

“I just wish he didn’t have to spend money on me,” I add, still looking myself over.

“Dude, your boyfriend’s a fucking millionaire. He can afford to buy you a damn dress without it taking food off the table,” she teases. “Besides, I’m sure you’ll make it worth his while tonight.”

She peers up from her phone to wink at me.

“Yeah, but it’s not just the dress. It was Scar’s party, and the alarm system, and the trip to Louisiana.”

“To visit *his* family,” she points out. “And like I said, he’s loaded and probably would do a shit-ton more if you’d let him.”

She isn’t wrong about that. With his generous heart, he’d probably pay all my household bills if given the chance.

“I just don’t want him to ever think I see him as a paycheck on legs,” I add. “As it is, people see him and they see dollar signs. Yeah, because of his family being loaded, but also because they’re already saying he’s gonna go pro. I just—”

“Stop,” Jules cuts in, grabbing me by the shoulders after setting down her phone. “You do this all the time. Something totally unrelated will have you stressed out, then you start picking at the low-hanging fruit. What’s *really* bothering you?”

Her question has my gaze shifting to the closet where, inside, a thick white envelope I haven’t had the heart to open rests on the top shelf. Inside it, is the enrollment information for Scar. It came yesterday after I reached out to administrators in my grandmother’s town. It only adds insult to injury that I have it sitting right on top of the envelope Pandora delivered, holding within it this city’s worst nightmare—proof that Vin intends to announce a mayoral campaign in the coming weeks.

“B.J., talk to me,” Jules says, bringing me out of my thoughts.

For so many reasons, I can’t do that, so I do something I hate. I lie.

“Everything’s fine. I guess I’m just nervous.”

She smiles and it’s warm, comforting. “You’re so used to being a grown up, you forgot how to let go. But I need you to promise me you’re gonna try.”

Hearing the truth in those words, I nod. “I’ll try.”

She pulls me into a hug that would’ve probably gone on forever if it weren’t for the knock at the door.

“Crap, he’s here,” she gasps, pausing to check my makeup before giving me the okay to leave.

With her seal of approval, I grab the leather jacket she's loaning me. It completely undermines the formality of this dress, but in an intentional, badass bitch kind of way.

I make it to the door, but when I open it, I swear my heart stops.

I've seen him in jeans and sweats. I've seen him in a football uniform, and even semi dressed up for Homecoming. But West golden in a suit is... a work of art. Especially one that's tailored and incredibly well-fitting.

The dark fabric shows off those deliciously broad shoulders, cinches in at his waist, while also hugging his biceps and muscular thighs just a little.

"Well, shit."

My reaction draws a smile from him. "I'll take that as a compliment."

I'm two seconds from telling him he can take it as a damn marriage proposal.

It takes a hard nudge from Jules to bring me to my senses, making me aware of having left West standing outside in the cold.

"Sorry. I'm ready. Just let me say goodbye to Scar."

Jules has me by the shoulders again, stopping me.

"Text her. She'll be fine. I'm here until whenever you get back, even if that's not until tomorrow," she adds with a wink. "Now, go."

She gently nudges me out onto the porch, then closes and locks the door behind me.

West's hand settles on my back and we walk toward the car. Stealing another glance at him, I swear he got even hotter since I turned away a second ago.

"You look... fucking amazing," he says, eye-banging me so hard I'm honestly wondering if we'll make it to this dance at all.

When he opens the passenger door and I step in front of him, I smile.

"Thanks. The dress is a bit tight, but with any luck it'll loosen up some by the end of the night."

His gaze slips lower until he's staring shamelessly at my ass.

"I sure fucking hope not."

Maybe that shouldn't make me blush, but the heat blooming in my cheeks means I am. He offers his hand and I climb in, then watch as he rounds the hood of the car to join me. As far as 'first dates' go, I have a feeling this'll be one for the books.

@QweenPandora: The big night has finally arrived, lovelies! Yep, you guessed it. It's time for the annual Snow Ball! Whether you've been naughty or nice this year, I'm pretty sure everyone's bells will be getting jingled at the end of the night.

Forget to buy a ticket? You can get yours at the door, but they're charging double.

Guess that's the cost of procrastination. Either way, I wouldn't miss it if I were you.

Have fun, Peeps.

—P

CHAPTER 20

BLUE

My shoes came off an hour ago, my hair has lost most of its bounce, West has stolen every trace of lipstick off my lips, and I can't remember a time I've had more fun. This is the first song we've sat out on since we walked into the gym, and I'm nowhere near tired. In fact, I'm practically buzzing with energy.

Guess I've taken Jules's advice to heart and I'm living a little.

Resting his back against the wall, West grips my hips in front of him while we stare out on the crowd, hundreds of bodies moving to the same beat. Our whole crew is posted now, even Joss. As part of the dance committee, she's spent most of the night working, so it's cool she finally gets to chill for a bit. She and Dane share a laugh, but the music's too loud to even guess what's funny.

Gently grinding against West because the music still has a hold of me, I pan the room. Sterling's standing to our left, wearing a suit that fits almost identical to West's, but in navy blue instead of black. He slips one hand in his pocket and scans the gym, taking a slow drink from his cup. His head swivels a bit and I'm curious when it stops, following his gaze. I can only guess he's just realized the tall blonde near the punchbowl's been watching him.

I recognize her from one of the infamous X's last posts. The woman is definitely Headmaster Harrison's wife, filling the role of a chaperone tonight it seems. Only, she doesn't appear to be interested in anything or *anyone* but

Sterling. She's beautiful, has the body of a woman who spends a fair amount of time in the gym, and the only thing that even hints that she may be up in age is that she's married to Harrison. Otherwise, she'd pass for being in her late twenties, early thirties.

Whatever the case, she's too old for Sterling, but doesn't seem to care.

A slow smile spreads across her glossed lips and my eyes dart back to Sterling. His expression hasn't changed, which gives the impression that he's ignoring her. But when he turns without making a big deal of having had her attention at all, I'm now *certain* he means to ignore her.

My eyes lock with his, and the curious look on my face is likely what gives away that I caught the whole, strange interaction. When one corner of his mouth tugs up into a smile, silently acknowledging what only the two of us seemed to notice, he sets down his empty cup and weaves his way back into the crowd. Eventually, he finds a girl in the right age group to dance with and I glance back toward Harrison's wife. Sure enough, her eyes are glued to him, causing me to see X's post in a whole new light.

Apparently, the woman's known for going after younger guys, and if she has it her way, Sterling might be her next victim.

"Ready to get back out there?"

West's deep timbre pulls me out of my thoughts. I steal a glance at him over my shoulder, then answer his question with an action instead of words. Taking his hand, I lead us back toward the middle of the dancefloor. By the third song in, it's like we never took a break at all. Sweat dampens my hairline, but I'm nowhere near wanting to stop.

Heat.

So much heat.

Where his chest presses against mine. Where his breath caresses my neck. Where his palms slip over the smooth material of my dress.

The music isn't what moves us anymore. It's the thick cloud of lust that's been hanging over us all night. Which is why we seem to keep forgetting it isn't just the two of us out here.

Twice, chaperones have made their way over to remind us to keep things PG. Both times it was because West's hands lingered on my ass a little too long for their liking.

I feel all the eyes on us, especially coming from the corner beside the inflatable Frosty the Snowman. It's Heidi and Ariana—Parker's minions. They don't have nearly as much nerve as they did when their queen was still

attending CPA, but their hatred still burns bright. However, I'm having too good a time to actually care.

I want West so bad I can literally taste it. It's like I can't get close enough, but when I face away from him, grinding my ass against his dick, his hard-on says otherwise. It says we're *plenty* close.

"All right. I fucking give," he growls into my ear, splaying one hand over my belly ring while he speaks.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I tease with a grin.

"Oh, so you *haven't* been trying to drive me crazy all night?"

My smile turns into a laugh and I face him again, meeting that smoldering stare currently fixed on me.

"I'm just having fun."

Another groan leaves him when my hands slip up from his shoulders and lock behind his neck.

"I'm doing my best to get through tonight without making it about sex, but shit, Southside. All I can fucking think about is how good you probably taste right now."

He's teasing me back, and it's working. So well that I'm glancing over my shoulder to see if any of the chaperones are watching. Harrison's wife is still manning the punchbowl, but two teachers have joined her. All three are chatting and laughing, which means they're not paying much attention.

What I'm trying to say is, I think we can pull this off.

"Someone might notice if we leave at the same time," I say against his ear. "Meet me by the pool in five."

His stare darkens and I don't miss the satisfied smirk that touches his lips when I turn to leave. Whatever plans he had to be a perfect gentleman tonight, they'll have to wait for date number two.

My steps echo in the wide-open space as I pace a small section of tile outside the locker room. The smell of chlorine takes me back to a time that seems so long ago—when West and I were still at each other's throats, while secretly wanting to get in each other's pants.

Now, today, you'd never guess we're the same people. Actually, now that I think about it, maybe we're not.

I spin on my heels when a door unlatches on the opposite side of the pool. My heart's racing for half a second, thinking one of the chaperones might've noticed me slip in, but my nerves settle when I lay eyes on him. The one I love, the one I trust with my life.

"Interesting choice of location," West says with a slick smile. The sight of it has me wanting to do less talking and more everything else.

"It's as good as any," I answer, shrugging while my eyes stay trained on him. I'm also clocking each of his slow steps that bring us closer together.

Along the way, he sheds his suit jacket and leaves it draped over the arm of a chair he passes, inspiring me to undress too, starting with the shoes I unstrap and drop to the tile. He unties his tie next, and lets it fall to the floor before undoing the buttons of his shirt. His gaze moves to my shoulder when I push my dress's straps down my skin.

Then, we collide.

His lips are hot against mine. And soft. So soft. Mine part as his tongue slips between them, feeling like he'll devour me if I'd let him, which I'd never object to.

With his mouth still locked to mine, he slowly lowers my hand to the bulge at the front of his pants, revealing the result of my teasing. I caress the length of him, which causes a surge of tension to build between my thighs as I remember what he feels like inside me. As if having just heard this thought, he moves his hand beneath the dress's fabric by way of the deep thigh-slit, then touches me through the silky, black fabric of my underwear. The touch is gentle, but it's enough that I'm breathless now.

West cranes his neck and kisses a trail from my chin to my neck, thoroughly setting my entire body on fire. Impatient, I undo his zipper and push my hand inside his pants first, deciding half a second later to slip it inside his boxers instead. This time when I grip him, direct skin-on-skin contact has me thinking I'll suffocate if I don't have him soon.

I kiss his chest where his open shirt leaves taut skin exposed, not stopping until I'm on my knees, pushing his waistband lower, exposing that damn sexy V.

"What are you doing?"

I hear the breathy question he's just asked, but don't answer. Peering up, my eyes roam over his six pack, then his solid pecs that move rapidly, in sync with his panting. When my stare locks with his, he's maybe wondering if I plan to tease him like I've done all night, but I answer the question in his eyes

a moment later.

By lowering his boxers to his thighs, and then taking him into my mouth.

“Shiiiiit.” It sounds like every ounce of air just left his lungs, only for them to fill again when a breath hisses through his clenched teeth.

His fingers tangle in my hair and I grip his waist, taking him in deeper. When he starts mumbling incoherently, sounding dazed, I take that to mean he’s enjoying this. Seeing as how he’s made me forget what year this is on several occasions, I’m more than eager to return the favor.

“Damn, Southside.”

Hearing him groan those words, I peer up and take in his expression, only to find his obsessive stare already locked on me. He’s enjoying the show, so I give him one. My lips slide down his length like before, but I take him in a little deeper. Then again, and again, and again. Until I sense he’s had about all he can stand if I want him to last.

He’s so hard, and by this point, my *own* needs are calling so loudly I can’t wait any longer. It’s that insatiable craving that has me on my feet again, stepping out of the expensive dress a moment later.

West strips down too, taking a condom from his pocket before grabbing a clean towel off the rack mounted to the wall. He uses it to cover a chair beside the pool before dropping down into it. I stare with the same obsession I’ve seen in his eyes while impatiently waiting for him to sheathe himself. Then, he guides me down onto his lap, slipping in with ease because I’m so damn wet for him.

A needy groan falls from his lips as I ride him like there’s no chance someone can find us here. Like there *aren’t* hundreds of kids right down the hall. Yeah, it’s a big risk, but it’d be a lie if I said that doesn’t turn me on even more.

Holding both sides of West’s face, I kiss him slow and deep, riding him to the same rhythm. His thickness has me wanting to come already, but the unhurried pace helps a little.

Very little.

“Do you have any fucking idea what you do to me?” he asks, breathing the question over my lips when we finally come up for air.

“Tell me.”

He grips my ass and I grind into him.

“You make me insane,” he confesses. “I’ve thought about murdering every motherfucker I’ve ever caught looking at you.”

I smile a little, but mostly I'm focused on how good his body feels against mine. His hands slip back up to my hips, thrusting himself deep inside me. It can't be healthy for my heart to be racing this fast, but there's nothing I can do to stop it, because my heart is his. He controls it.

"I don't want anyone else," he confesses. "Ever."

That word rings inside my head, ricocheting off all the emotional baggage, all the emotional walls I've built. The ones that, at times, have made it hard to imagine someone loving me forever.

But I didn't mishear him. He said *'ever'*.

As in, I'm the last one he ever sees himself with.

As in... I'm enough.

My chest swells with a breath and I can't help but stare at him, knowing he just meant every word he spoke. There's this unmistakable sincerity in his eyes that won't let me believe otherwise.

This moment has us in sync, one's body moving in tandem with the other's, until we're both climaxing and, for me, it's the most emotionally-charged experience I've ever had.

The high slowly subsides, but I still hear that word.

Ever.

It has me looking into West's eyes again and he doesn't shy away, because those weren't just words he threw out in the height of passion. They're what's in his heart, what he feels when he looks at me.

I've had a lot of titles, been a lot of things to a lot of people, but as the days pass and I get to see more of the man beneath the mask, being West Golden's girl might possibly be my favorite.

CHAPTER 21

BLUE

“There. Done.”

I stand back and look at the two suitcases I’ve packed to capacity, feeling like a superhero for having actually gotten this done tonight. Sure, I’m exhausted from the dance and... other activities, but I can always sleep on the plane.

“Good for you, but let the record show that I finished an hour ago,” West gloats through the phone.

I smile and stick out my tongue as if he can see it. “Everyone knows boys only pack a pair of boxers, a stick of deodorant, and one change of clothes. So, if that’s something you’re proud to call a win, then so be it.”

He laughs softly into my ear and I drop down onto the bed.

“Have a good time tonight?” he asks, which causes flashes of our evening to flood my thoughts.

“I had the *best* time, actually. Thanks for making me feel normal.”

He’s quiet on the other end and now I’m thinking about the pool. Or, more specifically, the words he said to me while we were there.

“I can’t wait for the plane to land,” he says with a sigh. “You’re gonna love the bayou.”

“You don’t have to convince me. I just want to get out of here.”

I hadn’t meant that to be funny, but West laughs again.

“I don’t think *any* of us can. My family’s gonna love you, though. Just

brace yourself to be hugged to death by some of my aunts, and they'll probably ask you a million questions. If I know my grandfather, he's planning some kind of gathering for when we first get there."

The thought of it makes my heart beat just a little faster. "How many people are we talking?"

West chuckles. "We'll just say a lot, but like I said, they'll love you."

"How can you be so sure?"

"What's not to love?" he reasons, which has me grinning like a child.

"Guess I'll just take your word for it."

He yawns before speaking, which makes *me* yawn. "Relax. The best part is, no Vin."

The very idea of that has me feeling lighter. "Thank God for small favors."

"I'd consider that a *big* favor," West counters.

He isn't wrong.

The line goes quiet again and I imagine he's deep in thought like I am, maybe going over all the B.S. we won't miss while we're away from this place.

"Fuck it," West seems to say to himself, which makes me snort a laugh. "I'm just gonna say it, and if I scare you, just forget I brought it up, but I think we should make a pact."

"You had my attention at '*fuck it*,'" I tease.

"It's no secret that we've both got shit parents," he begins. "With the exception of my mom, I guess. Maybe. Anyway, I think I came up with a plan. Way, way in the future, we should agree to have a shitload of kids and just be the best fucking parents ever."

I'm laughing again, and also a little shocked. One, because he's planning so far ahead for us. And two, because this is the first time he's ever mentioned wanting a family in the future. I guess I just didn't realize he made plans beyond college and football.

"I like that idea," I answer, feeling my cheeks warm at the thought of it—us spending our lives together, *parenting* together. "But what exactly do you mean by a '*shitload*'? Because, as the one who'd have to push out this *shitload*, I'm a bit concerned."

"Don't be," he reasons. "Seven or eight should do it."

I cough out a laugh before remembering Scar's asleep down the hall. "No way, buddy. Three's the limit."

“Four,” he counters.

My smile broadens. “If you promise to wait on me hand and foot through it all, you have yourself a deal.”

He doesn’t even pause to think about it. “That’s easy. Deal.”

My heart flutters just imagining it, being with him forever, having a family together. For half a second, it makes me sad because I’m still seeing our circumstances as an obstacle we might not overcome. But then, this dream of a future gives me something I don’t expect.

Something more to fight for.

“I love you, West Golden.” I say it simply because it feels like I’ll explode if I don’t.

“I know,” he counters, “but nowhere near as much as I love you.”

Staring at the ceiling, I’m still fantasizing about this picture he’s painted in my head when he speaks again.

“Just as a heads up, when we get to my grandfather’s place, I plan to tell him *everything*,” West admits.

I’m admittedly curious why he’s decided this.

“You really think that’ll make a difference?” I ask.

“Well, there’s no way of knowing for sure, but he’s pretty well connected, and he hates Vin. So, at the very least, he’ll be motivated to help if he can. I just think it wouldn’t hurt bringing him up to speed, then hearing his perspective.”

I’m quiet, but only because I’m thinking. “Okay. If you think that’s best.”

“I do. The worst thing that could happen is he doesn’t know anything more than we do.”

“I trust your judgment,” I say, yawning into the receiver.

“You should get some sleep. We have to be at the airport in five hours,” West reminds me.

I glance at the time. It’s already two. “Yeah, I didn’t realize it was so late.”

“We’re gonna grab Joss first since she’s closer, then we’ll be at your place around six. Sound okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, we’ll be ready.”

Damn, I’ve got butterflies just thinking about leaving so soon.

“Didn’t you set the alarm?” he asks.

Laughing, I roll my eyes. “Yes, Dad, I set it.”

“Mmm... you sure about that? Because I’m looking at the app right now

and it says otherwise.” He’s being cynical and it makes me want to punch him. Gently, of course.

I pull the phone away from my ear and put it on speaker to check for myself. Sure enough, it says it’s disarmed, but I know I set it.

“Looks like it turned off about ten minutes ago,” he adds, sounding slightly on edge now. “Does anyone else have the code?”

“No. Just me and Scar.”

“I’m on my way,” he rushes to say, sounding like he’s already out of bed and changing clothes.

My chest feels tight and every breath I take comes and goes just a little too quickly. Without hesitating, I’m on my feet and headed toward the closet. It’s where the gun is stashed, but I never thought I’d actually have to touch the thing again. It was just for peace of mind, but apparently that assumption was wrong.

With shaky hands, I lower the box. Despite this being the last thing in the world I want to do right now, it’s what I have to do. I have it loaded quickly—thanks to Mike’s instructions—then I move toward my bedroom door.

“Stay put until I get there,” West urges, but that’s not even an option.

“I can’t. I have to at least get to Scar,” I whisper, feeling dizzy from how quickly blood rushes through my veins.

“Fine,” he huffs, brimming with frustration and fear. “Go, then lock yourself in her room. I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

The next thing I hear is his engine revving in the background, then tires screeching over pavement.

I turn the doorknob and peer out into the darkness. I hear nothing, but that doesn’t settle my nerves. The only reason I’m even able to put one foot in front of the other to leave my bedroom is because I need to get to my sister.

My steps are feather light as I make my way to her door, and the moment I reach it, I turn the knob and rush to her bed. My plan is to quietly wake her, but when I feel my way through the dark space and attempt to shake her shoulder, my hands sink into an empty mattress.

“She’s gone,” I say into the phone, feeling air rush in and out as I pant.

“What?”

“She’s not here, West!”

Gripping my hair, I do a complete three-sixty before thinking to check her closet, the bathroom. Maybe she heard something and got spooked and the first thing she thought to do was hide. However, when I check those places,

no longer being careful about keeping the noise down, I find nothing.

Instinct has me checking her window, but it's locked. Next, I go to the back door and snatch it open. There, in the snow, I spot two sets of fresh footprints.

"Someone's been here," I whisper into the phone. "I'm going out to see where they went."

"Like hell you are! Stay in the fucking house, Southside."

The stern tone he's taken with me means nothing, because... *where the fuck is Scarlett?*

"I'm going. I have to." I stare out across the yard, getting up the nerve as the weight of the gun in my hand becomes ten times heavier.

"Just stay where you are," West argues.

"I can't. If she's out there, I have to at least check."

With no time left to hesitate, I slide both feet halfway inside whatever sneakers were left by the door, then make my way out into the freezing cold. It hits my bare legs where my shorts stop, feeling like razor blades slicing through my skin.

Focusing on the tracks, I follow them to where they stop at the side door of the garage. This is when I notice there's an orange extension cord connected to the receptacle box, and then wedged beneath the weatherstrip. I know it wasn't like this the last time I checked. At any rate, it'll be pitch black inside, so I lower the phone from my ear and turn on its flashlight. God only knows what I'll find when I open this door, but I brave it anyway.

I kind of have to.

CHAPTER 22

BLUE

“Blue!” Scar screams.

“Shit!” That little gem came from Shane.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me, Scarlett! I thought someone took you!” Before she can spot it, I hide the gun behind my back.

She doesn’t answer as her face reddens and she scrambles to find her clothes. I’m not sure if I’m more angry or relieved to find that those footprints were just my dumb-ass sister sneaking around with Shane.

Again.

Luckily, they were hidden behind a stack of boxes, so I’m not assaulted by images of his junk while he pulls up his pants. They even set up a heater to keep warm while they... did their business, which means they put thought into this. *Planned* it. Guess that explains the extension cord underneath the door.

Realizing the only thing to fear here is the contagious stupidity, I discreetly tuck the hidden gun in the back of my shorts.

“I want you both inside. Now!” I say sternly, glaring at them because *are you fucking kidding me? Again?*

Crunching snow beneath my feet, I take my frost-bitten ass back inside and put the gun away before heading to the living room.

“I’m pulling up,” West says through the speaker, reminding me I have him on the line. With my sister giving me the shock of a lifetime, for the

second time in my lifetime, I'd forgotten.

"Unlocking the door now. Just let yourself in."

We hang up then and I unlatch the door before dropping back down on the couch and shooting Ricky a text.

Blue: You up?

Ricky: Yeah, I'm still out. Everything good?

Blue: Not exactly. You should get over here. We have a problem.

Ricky: What is it?

Blue: Your brother's here...

Ricky: Shit. I'm on my way.

I throw my phone down on the couch and I'm seething with anger when the two offenders finally waltz in through the back door. Not even ten seconds later, West comes in through the front.

"Sit," I snap, aiming the words right at Scar and Shane.

They do as their told, settling beside one another on the carpet. West doesn't say a word as he lowers to the cushion beside me, warming my freezing cold thigh when he sits close. Shortly after that, there's a knock at the door and I don't need to ask who it is.

"Come in."

West peers up after I speak, looking to see who else decided to join this impromptu powwow. When Ricky walks in I take note that there's slightly less disdain in either's eyes when they meet one another's gazes. But then, as if I haven't had enough shocks tonight... they nod at each other? As in, they kind of greet each other?

What the hell is that about? When did they start being cordial?

While thoroughly weirded out by whatever *these* two have going on, I've got bigger fish to fry. My gaze whips back to Scar and Shane.

"What the hell were you two thinking? You're fifteen years old!"

"And you were, what, sixteen when you and Ricky started screwing? What's the difference? Where do you think I even got the idea to go to the garage? I used to hear you guys out there all the time!" she yells, clearly trying to make this as awkward for me as it is for her.

Really, Scar? In front of West? Thanks.

I ignore the personal jab and stay focused.

"The difference is, I didn't have a big sister ready and waiting to beat my ass over it! I didn't have someone looking out for me, telling me to slow the fuck down, but you do," I remind her. "So, slow the fuck down, Scarlett!"

“You think you’re so perfect,” she hisses, crossing both arms over her chest.

I don’t even justify that with a response. She knows it’s a lie. No one will admit their flaws more readily than I will.

“You gave me your word you two were done with this,” I remind her. “When did a promise between us stop meaning something? What changed?”

She breathes deep and eyes Shane before speaking.

“What changed is... he’s leaving,” she reveals. “He just told me tonight.”

I don’t miss how her voice breaks a little while getting those words out.

Now, I’m wondering if I was wrong. Maybe Shane’s distance wasn’t that he was into someone else, but rather that he was starting to pull away from Scar because he knew he’d be gone soon. I could relate. The thought crossed my mind when I got spooked by Vin.

My gaze flits to Ricky and I’m not sure what to think or say. Naturally, I assume he’s leaving too, and then I’m left wondering why I’m only hearing about it now. It’s possible that my heart may have even sank a little. He’s always been here, not just in this city, but he’s always been here for *me*. It’s hard to imagine life in this city without Ricky Ruiz—one of the best friends I’ve ever had. Hell, our friendship was so strong it even weathered our breakup.

“You’re leaving?” I ask, hoping West doesn’t misread the emotion in my voice for something it isn’t, but I’m a little confused right now.

Ricky shakes his head. “Not me, just him. Aunt Carla’s heading back to Puerto Rico for a bit and I asked her to take Shane. It’ll only be for a little while,” he adds.

“Too long,” Shane mumbles under his breath, prompting Ricky to lower his gaze when I can only guess guilt sets in.

“There’ve been a lot of changes lately and I just think it’s best,” Ricky explains. “I don’t want him getting caught up in anything.”

Oh, the irony. It’s as if he’s inside my head, staring at my plan for Scarlett.

The last thing he said bordered on cryptic, but I probably know more about the hidden meaning behind those words than he thinks. All because of something Tommy clued me in on the last time I saw him. He mentioned a new family working their way into Cypress Pointe’s underworld, and he also mentioned that things were becoming more volatile because of it. Without realizing, Ricky just confirmed what I feared—he’s in deep and he’s scared.

At least for Shane.

I suppose I could relate to that, too. And, like me, Ricky chose to send his brother someplace safe since protecting him seems impossible.

“He’s known for a few weeks. I told him not to say anything, but I guess he felt Scar needed to know,” Ricky adds.

He doesn’t seem pissed that Shane told, just a little uncomfortable. Like it was supposed to stay a secret. From everyone.

I’m finding it hard to be angry now that I know what fueled this late-night garage rendezvous. Especially knowing I’m taking her away for a week. Do I condone my fifteen-year-old sister having sex? No, but I know what it’s like to be in love—to feel like you can’t breathe if you can’t be with someone.

I’ve been there.

Twice.

“Just... go to bed. We’ll talk about this more later.”

Swiping tears, Scar gets to her feet, passing a glance toward Shane that breaks my heart a little. He’s still clinging to her hand and I think it shocks us all when he stands and pulls her to his chest. They hug like they’ll never see each other again and, in a bold show of affection that even takes *Scar* by surprise, he kisses her. Like no one else is in the room. Like no one else exists.

It’s in this moment that I realize they’re not kids anymore. Sure, they have a lot of growing to do, but... what they feel for each other is real and I’ll never take that away from them.

“I’ll call every day,” he promises. “And I’ll come back to visit whenever I can.”

Scar nods and the tears flow faster as her hand lingers in his. Then, she’s gone. Shane’s stare stays trained down the hallway long after Scar disappears. Maybe sensing his brother’s need to escape, Ricky holds out his keys. Shane doesn’t hesitate to take them, then heads out to the car.

With them both out of earshot, I turn to Ricky. “When’s he leaving?”

“Friday.”

Before Scar makes it back to say goodbye. Now, I feel *extra* guilty.

“He hates it, but it’s for the best,” Ricky reasons with a shrug. “He’ll understand one day. At least, that’s my hope.”

I feel his anguish, see him questioning whether he’s made the right choice.

“Anyway, I’m gonna take off. I should make sure he’s okay.”

Knowing I need to go do the big sister thing myself, I nod. “Thanks for coming by to help.”

I follow him to the door and let him step out onto the porch.

“Sorry you had to deal with that,” he says. “I thought I put the fear of God in him that last time.”

“Apparently, it’s going to take a whole lot more than fear to get through to these two,” I joke. “We’ll talk later.”

He nods and I close the door when he turns to leave.

West stands, towering over me and I peer up. “I should take off, too. Pretty sure Scar needs you.”

“Yeah, guess I’ll sleep sometime this week,” I tease, leaning into his chest when he pulls me close. “Thanks for rushing over. Sorry I scared you.”

“As long as *you’re* good, I’m good.”

My arms squeeze him tighter and, despite the crazy circus tonight’s turned into, he makes me feel comforted.

“See you in an hour,” he says with a laugh. It’s a joke, but he’s not too far off.

“Text me when you get in, so I know you made it safe.”

He promises he will, then he’s gone, leaving me to deal with my sister and her vat of emotions. I set the alarm, turn off the lights, then prepare myself for a sleepless night, because Scar needs me and... that’s what sisters are for.

CHAPTER 23

BLUE

Our plane lands exactly two and a half hours after takeoff, and I slept nearly the entire time. My late night with Scar meant I lumbered around like a zombie this morning, trying to get ready and look at least semi-decent for the flight. If you ask West, I'm gorgeous as always. If you ask me, I look like death warmed over.

Beauty's in the eye of the beholder, I guess.

Whatever I look like or feel like this morning, it's worth it. Being up all night gave me a chance to speak candidly with my sister, which I soon realized we both needed. For instance, I am now aware that she and Shane never stopped screwing around, they just got better at hiding it. Perhaps, I was naïve to ever think they ended it, but she swears they tried. Only, that resolution didn't hold up very long. I'm certain the only reason she and Shane will be exercising any measure of restraint is because he'll be a thousand miles away.

All the drama aside, I'm sorry he's leaving. His absence hurts two people I care about deeply, but considering my *own* circumstances, I don't fault Ricky for sending him away. Sometimes, the plight of the older sibling is that we get stuck doing the dirty work. Especially those of us who must also act as our siblings' parents.

We exit the plane and West seems to sense that I'm a bundle of nerves. He keeps a tight hold on my hand while we make our way through the

crowded terminal, down to the baggage claim, then out to the sidewalk to wait for the ride he arranged—a party bus that will fit all six of us, plus our luggage. While we wait, I finally have a moment to turn my phone back on. The new one, that is. At first, I’m leaning on West’s shoulder while I scroll, but pop back up at the sight of an unexpected text.

Roby: Just an update. I’m following a couple new leads, but won’t get my hopes up until I have something solid. Try to enjoy Christmas break without worrying too much. I’m working hard to put this thing to bed.

Blue: Thanks for keeping me in the loop. I’ll try.

I flash the screen toward West, so he’s up to speed. He reads it, then releases my hand to drape an arm around my shoulders.

“He seems like a good guy. You were smart to get him involved,” he assures me.

“I definitely hope so.”

Pulling me deeper into his side, he kisses the top of my hair. “With him working to help us, and once I talk to my grandfather, I think we’ll be one step closer to fixing this shit.”

Taking in a deep breath of warm Louisiana air, I exhale and let West’s words comfort me. This is a vacation, so I’m gonna start treating it like one.

Scar’s standing close, laughing at something Sterling must’ve said. My guess is that West filled his brothers in on what went down last night, so they’ve been trying to keep her spirits lifted. She spent the flight seated by Sterling, so most of that burden fell on him, but he’s great with her and Lord knows she doesn’t hate having his attention.

But I’m not the only one seeming to have a hard time leaving my troubles back in Cypress Pointe.

Joss has barely smiled all day. With all the tension I imagine there to be in her home right now, and how strict I hear her parents are, I’m guessing things may have gotten a bit heated when the guys arrived to get her this morning.

After West explained that X unearthed a secret about her family, I went snooping through the app to read the update. While I probably should’ve left well enough alone, the suspense was killing me. Now, I know what everyone else does—that Joss’s father’s been unfaithful.

Dane seems to have happily taken on the task of cheering her up, but it hasn’t been easy. She teared up a bit while we waited to check our bags and he swallowed her up in the biggest, tightest embrace and for a moment, it was

like she wasn't ever sad. It came back, of course, but he's working double-time to get her smiling.

I don't know if these two see it, or what reason either one has for *fighting* it, but... they belong together. I'm talking soulmate-level shit.

My gaze is lured away from the should-be couple when our ride pulls up. The driver steps out and insists on loading all our luggage himself, so Sterling climbs in first and offers his hand to me, Joss, and Scar, helping us up the large steps. West and Dane board last and my entire body shifts when his massive one settles as close as he can possibly get. Then, just like before, he has my hand.

He swears he's never done this '*boyfriend thing*' before, but he could've fooled me. There's never a missed opportunity to be perfect, and I love that about him. Love that my happiness is so high on his list of priorities.

We rock and sway when the bus takes off. Then, within five minutes we're barreling down a long stretch of highway.

"Ok, tell me what to expect so I can brace myself," Joss speaks up, wearing a smile that's the most natural of any she's given all morning.

"Well, for starters, everyone on staff at the manor will wait on you hand and foot, but we'll have to fend for ourselves Christmas Eve and Christmas day. Grandpa doesn't believe in working people on holidays, keeping them away from family," Dane explains.

"Wait, did you say manor?"

He nods. "It'll make sense once you see it."

"Geez. It's gotta be huge," Joss adds, earning herself that wicked grin Dane's wearing now.

He holds her gaze, never blinking. "First of all, that's what *she* said. And second, yeah, it's fucking huge."

Are we still talking about the house? Knowing Dane, that's a no.

My head tilts when his comment makes me wonder. Are triplets identical in *every* way, or just in the looks department? Because if it's an all-encompassing sort of deal, the guy isn't lying.

Joss's face reddens, then she smiles just enough that I'm certain Dane knows he's gotten inside her head. She rolls her eyes in that way that always seems more flirty than annoyed.

"You're so nasty," she scoffs.

"Oh, you don't even know the half of it," he mumbles to himself.

His eyes stay trained on Joss long after she turns to stare out the window

again, and I'm sure I'm not the only one choking on their sexual tension. Needless to say, she stops asking questions then, probably fearing what Dane's answer might be if she says anything else.

We finally exit the highway onto a two-lane road we seem to ride forever. But just as I'm starting to get restless, we make a sharp right turn. It's another two-lane street, just like the last, but this one feels different. The trees are denser, closer together than before, closer to the *road* than before. Some so tall and broad they arch over the pavement, creating a natural tunnel as we drive through.

Every now and then, I spot the sharp edges of a pitched roof, setting manmade structures apart from nature. But each one is spaced so far from the last, I wonder if whoever lives in them can even consider themselves someone's neighbor. It's so different from the city, where I can literally peek out the bathroom window into Ms. Levinson's kitchen.

The tree line is even thicker now. So thick it appears as if there's nothing more than a dark abyss behind them. I spot a small clearing up ahead where the sun glints off shallow water. It isn't deep, but it's completely saturated the tall grass. But right in the center of it, sits a house no bigger than mine. It's on short stilt-like beams to keep it off the ground, with a short bridge connecting it to dry land. We're definitely not in Cypress Pointe anymore, and with how my head suddenly clears, I'm starting to think this change of setting is just what I needed.

The scenery's kept me so engrossed I hardly notice another twenty minutes passes. It isn't until I spot a sign that reads '*Landry Manor*' that I snap out of it.

"This is it?"

West meets my gaze and nods. "It is. Nervous?"

That may have been the case at first, but my mood has definitely shifted. "Honestly? I'm kind of excited."

He smiles and I quickly turn to stare out the window again, not wanting to miss anything when we turn into what I *thought* would be a driveway. However, I soon realize it's more of a private road. There's still no house in sight, just more of the big, towering trees that form a canopy over us as we creep along slowly.

Beside me, Scar's just as intrigued as I am. She's even stopped texting Shane for two seconds to gawk at how the rough foliage has gradually transitioned into well-maintained landscaping with high, wall-like shrubbery.

Hidden within what almost looks like a maze, tall wrought iron lampposts are strategically placed throughout. I'm imagining how this must all look at night. Incredible, I bet.

A broad, black roof comes into view above the natural walls and that's when I take in the breadth of what West said when he mentioned his grandfather having more than enough room for us all. From the looks of it, this place could function as a hotel if the family wanted. There it sits, a sprawling estate with a porch on both stories that appears to do a complete wrap-around. The impressive white columns are decorated with green garland and large red bows along the railing.

Our bus stops at the apex of the circular drive and I breathe deep.

"Welcome to the Bayou, everyone," Sterling announces, smiling big as he stands from his seat. I nudge Scar with my knee, which gets her to smile a little.

West, still with his fingers laced between mine, leads me to the exit. He stretches as everyone else hops off, belting an easy laugh at another of Dane's off-color jokes. I can't help but stare up at him, convinced he seems lighter here. Honestly, all *three* of them do. Like not being bogged down by the usual Cypress Pointe bullshit suits them well.

"Here goes," Joss sighs.

If I didn't know any better, I'd swear she's more nervous about the impending introduction than I am. Maybe because she's secretly just as concerned about what the family will think of her.

Maybe because... she's more into Dane than she'll ever admit?

Just a theory.

I smooth my hands down my ponytail and hope there aren't dark circles under my eyes due to the lack of sleep.

"Stop worrying. You're fucking beautiful," comes a deep voice in my ear.

When I turn and meet West's gaze, he's checking me out hardcore, not bothering to hide it even when I catch him.

"Thanks, perv," I say under my breath, which he interprets as an invitation to grope my ass while no one's looking.

I don't stop him, of course.

Unlike how *I'm* feeling today, he looks sexy as ever, which is nothing new. His light-wash jeans are stylishly faded with distressed seams and spaced-out rips down each leg. It's far warmer here than Cypress Pointe, but it's far from hot. He's got on a gray hoodie and white sneakers, topped off

with a diamond in his ear that catches the sun just like the ones on his watch.

I guess this is how the rich dress down.

“Ready?” I turn to ask Scar, and she forces another smile when she nods.

I still feel horrible that she’s missing her last week with Shane, but it couldn’t be helped. Before last night, I had no idea he was leaving. If I’d known, I might have at least talked to West about arranging to head back home sooner than planned before he bought tickets.

Scar trudges toward the back where the driver’s handing off our luggage. She hikes her duffle bag up her shoulder then stands off to the side. I see she’s trying to be a good sport about this, but it’s hard. I get it.

Sterling must notice I’m concerned, because when I catch his gaze, he moves in on Scar and drapes his arm around her shoulder to lead her toward the porch. Something he says has her cracking up, like nothing was ever wrong. The triplets really do have this surrogate big brother thing down to a science, despite not having any practice before Scar came into their lives. She needs this, especially with Hunter not being around.

We trudge up the steps with all our bags and I take in the full scope of this massive house, recalling the word Dane used for it, the word on the sign at the end of the road—manor. It’s as grand as it is intimidating.

Very.

I’ve just made it up the last step when the massive double doors swing open, and we’re met by the smiling face of who I can only assume is West’s grandfather. He looks nothing like I expected. Mostly because my dumb-ass could only picture him as Colonel Sanders for some stupid reason. Who I see instead is a man I can tell was pleasantly handsome in his day, although I see none of West or his brothers’ looks mirrored in his. They’re spitting images of their father, but luckily inherited nothing else from that prick.

Mr. Landry is at eye level with West, which means he’s well over six feet, and his bald head appears to be a style choice, as opposed to nature’s doing. He’s fit for a man his age, which is easy to see with the nice button-down he’s wearing tucked neatly into his khaki slacks. Looking him over as he first takes in the sight of his boys, I note that the gray goatee is about the only thing Colonel Sanders-esque about him.

“Well, aren’t you three a sight for sore eyes,” he belts out with a smooth southern drawl. Dane’s already in this giant’s arms, enduring what looks like a painful bearhug.

“I missed you too, but my ribs just healed from last time,” Dane jokes.

“Aw, suck it up, boy,” Mr. Landry counters, shoving Dane aside to grab Sterling this time, squeezing him the same way.

Beside me, Scar grins behind her hand.

“Good to see you,” Sterling says with a groan, drawing in a deep breath of relief once released from his grandfather’s grasp.

“Your turn, kid,” he greets West, bringing him in for the same rough hug.

“Mom sends her love,” West says once he’s free.

“Next time bring her with you,” Mr. Landry replies. “But you know my rule. Don’t bring your—”

“Slick-ass daddy to this door,” West says in unison with him. “I know, Grandpa.”

Apparently, this is something West hears often.

Now, Mr. Landry’s attention is on us girls.

“What on God’s green Earth are three pretty little things like yourselves doing with *these* knuckleheads? You boys bribe em’?” he asks, turning to his grandsons then.

“Grandpa, I’d like you to meet Blue and Scarlett Riley,” West says, placing his hand at the small of my back.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Landry,” I say.

“Call me Boone,” he insists, correcting me with a wave of his hand. “And the pleasure is all mine.”

He places a light kiss on the back of my hand and Scar’s, instead of the bear hugs we witnessed a moment ago.

“And this is Joss,” Dane says next.

Boone looks her over. Not in a creepy, ‘*what’s on the menu?*’ sort of way. Just a general glance as he takes in how gorgeous she is. She’s taken her braids down since I last saw her, choosing to rock her natural, spirally ringlets for the trip.

“Pleasure meeting you, too, sweetheart,” he says, kissing her hand in the same manner as he did with me and Scar. “You *must* be something special if you managed to tame *this* rascal.” He points at Dane then, which has Joss scrambling.

“Oh, we—we’re... not together,” she stammers, which seems to confuse Boone.

When he shoots Dane a look, I’m certain he’s about to get called out.

“If you haven’t locked *this* one down, you’re either blind or dumb. Even West managed to get himself a lady.”

“Thanks, Grandpa,” West says with a laugh.

“Well, you know what I’m talkin’ about! Just a month or two ago you pissed a girl off so bad she vandalized your uniform. Now, look at you. You’ve got yourself settled down.”

West and I share a look, trying not to laugh. “This is, uh... the same girl,” he confesses.

That look of confusion returns to Boone, but then it morphs into a grin.

“I knew I liked you,” he says, while wagging a finger at me. “West *needs* someone who’s gonna put the fear of God in him. At least we know you can hold your own.”

West’s brow shoots up when he agrees with a nod.

“Now, y’all get inside before you have my neighbors thinking I’m a bad host.”

The man doesn’t have a neighbor for miles.

We step in onto a large, fancy rug, and I have to pick my jaw up off the floor. Beautifully polished wood floors, a vintage chaise situated beneath a large, gold-framed mirror, painted portraits I guess to be family, a chandelier the size of a Buick hanging over our heads. It’s a lot to take in. In a good way. A phrase comes to mind—old money.

“Misty should be around here someplace. She’s supposed to see you kids to your rooms,” Boone says distractedly, peering around a corner, seemingly in search of this Misty he speaks of.

“It’s cool, Grandpa. We know the way,” Dane chimes in.

“Well, I suppose you do. Just make sure you put the girls in the white room. It’s the best we’ve got.”

“On it.”

“And don’t dilly dally when you get done, either. Duke’s dropping off a few sacks of crawfish for tonight’s boil. That man’s back’s about twenty years older than he is, so I told him you boys would be here to help,” Boone explains.

“Of course, you did,” Dane grumbles.

“Damn right, I did! What’s the point in running that football up and down the field if it ain’t earned you some muscles! Not only will you help him, you’ll do it with a smile on your face. Now, get flip with me again and I’ll knock your ass into next Tuesday. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Despite Boone’s harsh tone, it’s clear he isn’t serious, which is why Dane

takes the threat in stride, laughing as he grabs Joss's things. He leads the way, ascending the staircase. I reach for my own luggage, but West intervenes, using his solid arm as a barrier between me and my things.

"Sterling, mind taking Southside's and Scar's bags up for me?"

"No problem." Sterling doesn't question why West seems to be hanging back, but I'm curious.

"Southside? What the hell kind of pet name is that for a woman?" Boone mumbles to himself, slipping into another room through a set of French doors.

Now that it's just the two of us, I grip West's hand and meet his gaze. "Not coming up yet?"

He nods once toward where his grandfather just disappeared. "In a few. Figured I'd bring him up to speed first, see what he thinks should happen next."

For a little while, I'd forgotten the trouble we left back home, but West clearly hasn't. Being a protector by nature, I shouldn't be surprised he decided to take immediate action sooner rather than later.

It's hard not to feel like my heart's in a vice when I stare at him, knowing he's carrying the same weight I am.

When I squeeze his hand once before heading upstairs, he knows what it means.

Even when I'm not at his side, I'm with him. Because come hell or high water, we're in this together.

@QweenPandora: What have we here? It looks to me as if TheGoldenBoys and their entire crew—whom I hereby dub TheGoldenCrew—are boarding a plane to beat the winter blues.

Where on earth are you six off to?

I'm certain you took special care to keep your destination under wraps, but CP won't be the same without you. Who else will we gossip about while you're gone?

Later, Peeps.

—P

CHAPTER 24

BLUE

I've only ever seen the inside of a house like this on TV. And when Boone said the white room was the best, he wasn't lying.

With enough space for three queen-size canopy beds, Joss, Scar, and I certainly have zero complaints about sharing a room. Our linen is pure white, as are the wool rugs beside our beds, and the sheer curtains covering both sets of French doors leading out to the balcony. And at the room's center, another extravagant chandelier.

Scar whirls around with her phone, video chatting Shane to show off where we're staying, while Joss and I unpack. She's been quiet, other than the few times she's tried to force herself to talk, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see she's struggling.

"I've been told I'm a pretty good listener." I peek up at her after sliding a small stack of t-shirts in the dresser between my bed and hers.

Joss meets my gaze and offers a weak smile. "I won't ruin your trip by dragging you into my family's shit," she says wearily.

"Trust me. With the things I've seen and lived through, it'd take a bomb falling on me to ruin anything."

She laughs, and so do I.

"I'm assuming you saw the post. Everyone else has," she mumbles.

I nod. "Yeah, I saw it."

"Figured." A dim smile touches her lips, but never her eyes. "Sure you

don't mind? I guess I could use another girl's perspective on things. The guys are hellbent on toughing everything out like *they've* always done, but sometimes, you just—"

"Need someone to tell you it's okay to throw a bitch-fit and eat your way into a chocolate coma?"

She tilts her head. "I swear I've never felt more seen than I do in this *exact* moment."

I laugh and snap to get Scar's attention. "Headphones, kid."

She rolls her eyes, mumbling something about how she's not listening to our conversation anyway, and then pops in her earbuds like I asked her to.

"Okay, I'm all ears," I say, hopping up onto the bed when I decide to stop folding while Joss talks. She does the same, almost needing to get a running start to get onto the high mattress.

"Well," she sighs. "Not sure if you've heard, but my dad would lock me inside a bubble if given the chance."

"Honestly, I thought it was kind of strange they let you come *here*," I admit.

Something I said has her laughing.

"Are you kidding me? I'm not here because I have permission. I'm here because I'm beyond the point of giving a shit what he thinks. My whole life, I've walked this fucking tightrope of expectations, terrified what would happen if I slipped up and disappointed him," she admits, swiping at an angry tear. "He never came out and said I had to be perfect, but he sure as hell made me feel it. Nothing was ever good enough; nothing was ever quite to his liking. And for what? Who the fuck is he to tell me how to live my life?"

I nod, letting her vent without interruption.

"The worst part is, after only a week of deliberation, my mom's decided she isn't leaving him. We have no clue how long this has been going on, no clue how many women there have been, but she's not even considering divorce. It's like he's just getting away with this shit, with zero repercussions!" she sighs.

"I—wow."

"Yeah, I know."

She pauses to think, and maybe to slow the tears, but in the silence, I take note of how she's twisting her ring. I wouldn't know it's significance if Lexi hadn't pointed it out. Apparently, it's a symbol of Joss's virginity, some vow her parents required that she make. As she stares at it now, I imagine it only

serves as nothing more than a symbol of their control.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been angrier in my entire life,” she seethes. “I’m expected to give perfection, never making a damn mistake, but he can make the *mother* of all mistakes and is just forgiven? No,” she says, shaking her head. “Fuck that and fuck him!”

There’s so much pain in her voice, I feel it myself. Especially when she peers up and more tears flood her eyes.

“If X hadn’t blasted that shit on the app, we never would’ve even known. I think that’s the part that pisses me off the most. He’s only trying to make things right with my mom because he got caught, not because he’s actually sorry.” She’s somber now, reflective.

I hop down from my bed and sit beside her instead. When I place my hand on top of hers, she stares at it.

“Believe me, I know what it’s like to have parents who fall way short of expectations, so you’re not alone,” I say, hoping she knows she’ll get no judgment from me.

“I just had no clue I could feel this disappointed. In *either* of them. I’m so pissed she’s staying,” Joss adds, shaking her head.

I shrug and let out a breath before sharing a bit about myself.

“My dad stayed. My mom was the cheater, and he just kept letting her string him along. Hell, they’re *still* in that cycle.”

She glances over at me and some of the sadness has faded.

“Damn.”

I nod. “Exactly.”

Her gaze lands on the rug again while she thinks, but then her phone sounds off. When she glances down at it and a faint smile appears, I don’t peek but can’t help to ask...

“Is it Dane?”

“Huh? Oh... no. Just a friend I met last summer in Cuba,” she answers distractedly, while responding to the message. “We spent time there visiting my mom’s side of the family after staying in Haiti a while with my dad’s parents.”

This is the first she’s mentioned the guy to me, but I do recall that day in Headmaster Harrison’s office when I overheard West and Dane’s phone conversation about him. The guy is definitely a bone of contention between him and Joss.

“So... he’s just a friend?”

She glances up with a laugh. “Is that so hard to believe?”

I shrug. “Not as hard to believe as you and Dane pretending not to want to jump each other’s bones.”

Now, her face is red as a beet, which means I struck a nerve.

“Okay, fine,” she huffs. “I’m not saying there’s *not* something there, but we’ve been friends since we were twelve and we’re just so different, you know?”

“Haven’t you ever heard that opposites attract?”

“Mmm, I think it’s possible to be *too* opposite,” she reasons. “I’m a virgin and have no plans to change that. Especially now that my dad’s taught me men aren’t to be trusted.” She pauses and rolls her eyes before continuing. “Meanwhile, Dane has no plans to stop, you know, doing what *he* does. I’m not judging him, just stating facts. This is who we are, and who we are would drive the other insane.”

She laughs, but it sounds to me like she’s making excuses. I don’t point that out, though.

“Besides, what better way to ruin a perfectly good friendship than by interjecting romantic feelings?”

She laughs again when I squint at her. “I hear you, but aren’t you at least a little curious about him?”

At first, I think she might ignore the question, but then she smiles.

“Okay, so I may or may not have fantasized about losing my V-card to him once or twice, but only because we’re already close and I trust him with my life.”

Her explanation sounds vaguely familiar, making me glance toward Scar.

“I might have also had this fantasy because, let’s be honest, he’s fucking gorgeous,” she admits. “I’m also about ninety-nine percent sure he’d be amazing. Plus, with him, it’d actually mean something, you know? We don’t love each other like *that*, but... there’s still a form of love between us.”

I try and fail to hold in my smile. “I knew it.”

“But,” she proclaims, “I *will* stand my ground. Never in a million years would I risk losing his friendship should things not work out. So, as far as I’m concerned, this will *stay* a fantasy.”

For now, I let her think I believe that.

“How’d you two become friends anyway?”

She peers up and there’s a distant smile on her face. “Well, I guess he’s kind of always been my knight in shining armor. Even back then.”

When she pauses, I'm admittedly on the edge of my seat.

"It was the first day of sixth grade and I'd just moved to Cypress Pointe that summer. Dane and I got put in the same homeroom and I was assigned the seat behind him and this other kid who isn't even around anymore. Back then, I was kind of shy, so I hadn't said one word. To *anyone*. But the other kid kept turning in his seat, giving me this mean-ass glare over his shoulder," she adds, kind of solemnly.

"Anyway, the teacher started taking attendance, and when she called my name, the kid made this ugly, racist comment under his breath that only Dane and I heard. Long story short, Dane got out of his seat and decked the kid, broke his damn nose," she adds with a laugh. "The school suspended them *both* once they got the whole story, but when Dane came back a few days later, we were kind of inseparable."

"Shit, that's awful."

Joss nods. "It was. I'd had things like that happen before, but Dane was the first person to ever go to bat for me. I mean, he got suspended fighting for some girl he didn't even know."

She's lost in thought for a few seconds after reliving the moment, then her eyes flash to me again.

"Enough about me, though. What about that Ricky guy? Was he your first?"

I nod. "He was. Actually, Ricky and I have been everything to each other you can possibly find on the relationship spectrum. Just so happens that we're at our best when we're friends."

She gives me a look.

"What?"

"Just wondering if you're positive he's buying into that whole '*at our best when we're friends*' theory you just mentioned. Because from the outside looking in, it looks like he's still got it pretty bad for you. I mean, West sure as hell thinks he does."

I open and close my mouth several times before actual words come out. "Okay, so we didn't make the cleanest break, but I've moved on. I just have faith that, one day, Ricky will find someone who helps him move on, too."

She's still giving me a look, but this time it shifts into a laugh. "Whatever you say, heartbreaker."

I shove her a little and her laugh dulls into a thoughtful smile.

I know talking things out with me hasn't miraculously solved all her

problems, but I hope she at least feels less alone. At the end of the day, our entire crew can attest to having a less than perfect homelife. The only difference is, until a week ago, Joss had no idea that was the case.

We all needed this getaway, and we can only hope the tiny fires we left behind in Cypress Pointe don't turn into full raging blazes while we're away.

CHAPTER 25

BLUE

So, this is what family looks like.

I scan the yard, looking at maybe fifty or sixty of the triplets' relatives. The closest thing I've experienced to this is the one and only family reunion I ever attended. And with the Riley name attached to it, it's safe to assume it was a disaster. Long story short, Mike got drunk and fought one of his second cousins over a poker game, which then led to our entire family of five getting booted.

Luckily, *this* gathering is nothing like that.

All I see are people having fun. There's good music, lots of laughter, and enough food to feed a moderately sized country. Most are congregating around one of the five bonfires to keep cozy, but fifty-five degrees feels like a heat wave after leaving Cypress Pointe. It warmed up to around seventy this afternoon, and some of that heat stuck around for the evening. Almost like this gathering was meant to be.

From the moment we came down to join the party, West's great-aunt Sheryl seemed to flock to the girls and me. We claimed a table not too far from a stone fountain, chatting about everything from TV to our plans after college.

Her plug for West and I to have our future wedding here at Landry Manor—her idea, not mine—was less than subtle. Apparently, she considers herself to be intuitive when it comes to love matches, and she got good vibes from

Joss and I for her great-nephews, despite Joss insisting her and Dane aren't a thing. Eventually, she gave up protesting and just listened to Aunt Sheryl go on about how it's been years since the family's hosted a wedding here, and how they're notoriously grand events that are *not* to be missed. Who knows, maybe she'll get her wish one day.

A feather-light touch against the side of my neck startles me. What I find when I peer up is West's emerald stare. It's warm and relaxed. I swear I love what this place does to him. He's perfect back home, but in Cypress Pointe, he carries an invisible weight on his shoulders, feeling pressured to live up to an idea of who people *think* he is. But here? He's simply Boone Landry's oldest grandson.

Not a football star.

Not Vin's son.

Just West, which is more than enough for me.

"Mind if I steal the girls for a few, Aunt Sheryl?"

She beams, hearing West's polite request. "Of course not. I've talked their ears off long enough."

He offers her a kind smile that she returns.

"Sterling texted that our cousins just pulled up and they're itching to meet you three," he explains with a laugh. "Apparently, Grandpa talked you ladies up pretty good."

Oh, great. Gotta love being under a microscope.

"Dane and Sterling are already down there waiting," he adds.

I glance toward Aunt Sheryl. "We'll be back if we can break free," I joke, starting to feel just a bit guilty for leaving mid-conversation.

She smiles and waves me in West's direction. "Go have fun, honey. But trust me, those boys won't let you pretty gals get away once they have you. Which brings me to my next point—keep an eye on your sister." She laughs, but I don't.

When Joss and I pass a look toward Scar, her brow lifts and she offers an innocent grin. It's hard to tell if it's sincere or not.

"They can't be that bad," I say, but the look Aunt Sheryl and West share says otherwise.

"How old are they?" Joss asks.

"All of 'em range between fifteen and sixteen, but that brood is hell on wheels. Just ask Deputy Sanders," Aunt Sheryl says with a chuckle. "Poor Boone can't decide whether to hug 'em or kill 'em most days. Lucky for

them, he's got a big heart and the patience of a saint."

What in the world has West gotten us into?

"We'll be back in a bit if we can get away," he promises his aunt, then he offers me his hand when I stand.

He leads us across the wide-open yard to a distant bonfire where, already, the sound of rowdy laughter and loud music fills the air. We get close and I can make out actual voices now. They're deeper than I expected from a group of fifteen and sixteen-year-olds. You'd never guess they're so young from hearing them. Or... seeing them.

Seven tall silhouettes circle the fire, two of which I know are Sterling and Dane, but it's impossible to tell who's who. One glance toward Scar and I can practically hear the girl's hormones revving like an engine.

I swear, she's gonna send me to an early grave.

The raging fire illuminates their features now, and it becomes abundantly clear that good looks aren't lacking in this family. It's hard to believe they left anything for the rest of us. On cue, Scar runs her fingers through the length of her dark hair, making sure she looks decent before we get too close.

"What about Shane?" I lean over to whisper.

"Grow up, Blue. Not wanting to look like a dog doesn't mean I'm trying to get their attention. I'm not interested," she insists.

Not interested.

Sure.

The moment the group takes notice of us walking up, their lively conversation dies down and everyone's attention is suddenly on the four of us. Or, more specifically, us *girls*.

"Well, if it isn't the man with the golden arm."

At those words, West turns to meet the gaze of the only blond out of the bunch. He steps up to West, pushing a mane of shoulder-length curls behind his ears.

"Damn, dude! Last time I saw you, you only came up to my elbow. What the hell have you guys been eating?" West asks with a laugh as he turns to introduce us. "Beau, I'd like you to meet my girl Blue, her sister Scarlett, and a friend of the family, Joss."

"Nice to finally meet you," I say, shaking Beau's hand when he offers it.

"Same," he says politely. "And did I hear right? Your name's Blue?"

Smiling, I nod. "Yeah. It's different, I know."

"Nothing wrong with different," he shrugs, holding my gaze. "If you get

bored at the big house, I just got a new truck. It'd be no trouble to swing by and pick you up. There's lots to see in Dupont Bayou."

I'm not quite sure what to say because he's friendly, yes, but maybe a bit *too* friendly?

West's gaze lingers on my hand, which is still in Beau's because he has yet to release it.

"Ok, so this is the part where you either let go or lose a damn finger," West warns with a smile. When Beau's gaze shifts from me to his big cousin, it's clear he was intentionally trying to get under West's skin by flirting. Which worked like a charm.

Beau laughs and finally releases me, taking a few steps back just in case West's threat isn't quite as empty as he thinks.

"My fingers are my life," he reasons. "I need 'em for playing bass and, you know... *other* things," he adds, passing a look over me that makes me feel naked, dirty.

"Fuck you," West growls, lunging toward Beau with a huge grin. He grabs him in a playful chokehold, and I imagine there's a lot of broken furniture that results from these eight getting together.

Poor Boone.

Without West as a buffer, two more of his prowling cousins stroll over. Twins this time. Looks-wise, they're identical, but they're complete opposites in the style department. One's sporting dark jeans and a button-down rolled to his elbows. He wears glasses that I'm pretty sure make him *look* a whole heck of a lot more innocent than he actually is. Like all the others, he's tall and broad across his shoulders, much like the triplets. His brother opted for a much more casual look tonight—Adidas track pants and a black hoodie. Both looks are trendy, but they're as different as night and day.

"You two must be River and Stoney, right?"

They nod. "In the flesh," the casual one says just before introducing himself. "Stoney."

"River," the one in glasses adds.

Before more can be said, Dane walks up and interrupts, draping an arm around both twins' shoulders. "Nice outfits, guys."

Stoney nods and thanks Dane, but River stares up at the sky, like he hasn't even heard a thing that was said.

"I see you two are still stealing shit." When Dane finishes speaking, he tears off the price tag dangling from Stoney's sleeve.

“Fuck,” he whispers under his breath, turning red as a stop sign.

“You assholes are fucking loaded,” Dane points out. “Anything your parents don’t buy you, Grandpa does. Mind telling me why you still think it’s okay for your happy asses to weigh twice as much when you *leave* the mall than you did when you went in?”

The twins glance at each other and I don’t miss the wicked grins curving their lips.

“Because... we’re fucking good at it?” River proposes with a shrug.

Frustrated, Dane snatches the glasses off River’s face before he can stop him, then proceeds to stomp them into the dirt.

“What the fuck, dude?” River protests, clearly pissed, but also seeming to understand that Dane could kick his ass if he wanted to.

“And what ditz told you you look smart wearing glasses you don’t even fucking need? No one does that,” Dane concludes, walking away after effectively calling the pair out.

It probably goes without saying, but they scatter now that Dane’s thoroughly ripped them both new assholes. But from what I just heard, they needed it. Sterling walks the fourth cousin over and he’s the first that seems even remotely quiet. Not shy, and definitely not innocent, maybe just careful with his words.

“Ladies, this is Keaton.”

We’re offered a half wave, but Keaton’s obviously high off his ass right now. Kid probably doesn’t even know what day it is.

I wave back and so do Joss and Scar, but when he rubs his hand down the scruff on his chin, that’s when I notice his knuckles. They’re bruised like he’s been in a fight recently. I should know. I’ve had bruises just like that on more than one occasion.

Or, you know, maybe he punched a mirror or wall like some *other* dumb-ass I know.

I can now safely assume that this somber, quiet version of him is simply the result of whatever he’s been smoking.

“West tell you these guys are in a band?” Sterling asks.

“No, this is the first I’ve heard. That’s pretty cool. What do you play, Keaton?” I ask, not even sure the guy’s coherent.

“Drums.”

I stare, waiting for him to elaborate, but nothing.

Okay. Good talk.

Shaking his head, Sterling gives up trying to pull conversation from him and walks away. At which point Keaton stumbles back to the lawn chair Sterling plucked him out of and stares at the stars.

I laugh a little to myself. He must've sprung for the strong stuff, because I swear this kid is no longer in this world.

Posted against the trunk of a nearby tree, another of the boys peers up and his fingers go motionless on his guitar. The final, lingering note of the riff he just played dissipates into the night and it's suddenly silent.

He's got that stormy look in his eyes that I often get from West, but instead of the heartbreaker greens I'm used to seeing, his are dark. Like staring down a well in the middle of the night. His skin looks sun-kissed, which I can easily see even with the dim light of the bonfire, but that doesn't make much sense. It's the dead of winter, so I can only assume this smooth, bronzy tone is natural for him.

Curtains of nearly jet-black hair stretch to his torso, covering most of his face, but I see enough to know he's laser focused, honed in on a target.

My sister.

The twins are standing at either side of him now and he leans left to speak to River, but his eyes never leave Scar. As I watch him through the flames, it isn't lost on me that this moment is so familiar. Then it hits me—the many parallels to the night in Bellvue when I first spotted West.

The one with the physical makeup of a certified heartbreaker is walking toward us now. He's confident beyond his years, like he's lived more life than he has, but it doesn't fade even a little as he draws closer.

I glance over at Scar and she's mesmerized, gawking as the length of his hair moves with the breeze. Short of being rude and stepping directly between these two, there's not a damn thing I can do about what's getting ready to happen. It might seem silly to not even want these two to meet, but I know for a fact that my sister has a type—tall, bronzed skin, dark hair. And add to it that he seems to possess that ability to control a room with his presence, just like the Golden boys.

“Hey,” he says.

Scar smiles a little. “Hi.”

His gaze roams from Scar's eyes, down to where the black zip-up she borrowed from Joss shows a bit of her chest, then lower where skin-tight jeans hug her hips.

While he checks her out, I picture his eyes bugging and his tongue rolling

out his mouth like I've seen on cartoons.

"I'm Linden."

"Scarlett."

He nods, finally remembering she has eyes. "How long are you here for?"

"About a week."

He nods again, like he's plotting against her, thinking of all the ways he can defile her before we leave.

"Cool. Maybe we'll get to hang out between now and then. You into music?"

Scar's smile broadens. "Depends."

He's grinning now, too, but it's reserved. Like he's too cool for excitement and shit.

"Well, if you're not too busy, I'd love for you to come hear us play. We've got our second gig Thursday night."

"Oh yeah? Do you sing at all?"

He nods, pretending to be humble, but I see it all over his face. Kid thinks he's the shit.

"I sing lead, actually."

"Ah, that explains the voice."

Scar's statement has him cocking his head. "Meaning?"

Scar shrugs. "It's raspy and kind of strong, I guess. I don't know, it's just... different. In a good way," she adds.

He's eating this up. That slick grin on his face makes that crystal clear.

"So, do you think you'll come check us out?"

Scar makes a big show of considering his offer. "I would, but... I'm kind of seeing someone."

"Kind of?" he repeats. "Doesn't really count if you're not sure."

Scar smiles politely but stands her ground. "I'm only confused about our status, not my feelings for him," she explains. "But I do appreciate the invitation."

With that answer, Scar walks off, having surprised me and Linden *both* with that response, followed by the prompt exit that forces him to end this play he's made for her attention. He's a little wounded by the well-played rejection, but he is far from defeated. In fact, he's still watching her, smirking as she walks away, like he knows something she doesn't.

God, please don't let him be as persistent as West. If he is, the fact that she isn't giving in to him will only make him want her more. At this point,

my only solace is that there are several states between them.

Apparently, Joss and I are finally worthy of Linden's attention, because he suddenly seems to notice that we exist. He puts on an innocent smile as he shoves both hands inside his pockets.

"Nice to meet you both," he croons.

Scar's right about that voice. Pretty sure he's tried to sing the panties off half the girls in this town. Hell, maybe all of them.

I smile but see right through him. "Nice to meet you," I force out.

Not even five seconds have passed and he's glancing over his shoulder again, to where Scar's now posted beside Sterling, chatting while they watch the flames.

Joss and I share a look that suggests this guy's left the same impression on us both.

He's trouble.

West is finally on his way back, and when he pulls me into his side, he seems to take notice of where Linden's sights are set.

"Something over there got your attention?" West asks, prompting Linden's head to whip back toward us.

He doesn't answer, but then a menacing smile tugs at one side of his lips.

"Nope. Don't even fucking think about it," West warns, at which point Linden chuffs a short laugh, and then slowly trudges back to his post. He strums a few chords on his guitar like before, but his eyes never leave Scar.

Never.

"Relax. I'll keep an eye on him," West says close to my ear.

Dane comes to claim Joss, convincing her to join him near the fire. Now, it's just West and me.

"Tired?" he asks.

"Exhausted."

Thinking about how little sleep I'm running on, that was the easiest question I've answered all day.

"I figured, which is why I was thinking."

When he leans in to make sure no one hears but me, I'm admittedly intrigued where this is going.

"When all this is over and everyone leaves, you should meet me somewhere."

A laugh slips out. "This is your cure to my exhaustion?"

"Not exactly," he shrugs, "but if you agree to it, I promise to make it

worth your while.”

This proposal has me thinking I can probably make it a bit longer without rest. I mean, it isn't like I can't sleep in tomorrow, right?

I only hesitate for half a second before asking, “When and where?”

He smirks, knowing he has me on the hook.

“Just keep your phone close. I'll let you know.”

CHAPTER 26

WEST

“Pretty sure this is about the most un-Christmas-like thing I’ve ever done,” Southside huffs, still trying to catch her breath as she lays on my chest.

“You would’ve preferred porn?” I ask, glancing toward the theater screen.

“Not saying *that*, but *It’s a Wonderful Life* just feels like a weird choice,” she reasons, trying to glare at me, but there’s a smile ghosting on her lips.

“Well, it couldn’t have been *too* big a distraction, seeing as how you came in less than five minutes,” I tease, which makes her punch my arm like I fully expect her to.

“Girls can do that. It only ruins the sex if the *guy* taps out early.”

“That’ll never happen, so it’s not even worth talking about.”

Her brow lifts like I’ve just challenged her to a duel she’s sure she can beat me at.

“We’ll see,” she concludes, slipping off me to lie on the blanket I spread out over the carpet when we first got here.

The movie continues in the background while we stare at the ceiling rafters.

“I can’t believe Boone has an actual theater on the property. Is there a Starbucks, too? I could use some coffee,” she teases before a yawn slips out.

“No, you just need to rest. I probably should’ve let you get some sleep, but I can be so damn selfish sometimes.”

She giggles when I turn onto my side and kiss a trail down her neck, stopping when a tight nipple meets my lips before I draw it into my mouth. Then, her giggling turns into a soft moan.

“Thought you said I should rest,” she teases with a sigh.

“Not my fault. You know I’m powerless when you’re naked,” I say against her skin, drawing another laugh out of her.

It isn’t until she yawns again that I actually back off and give her space. Poor girl’s running on fumes. She doesn’t seem in a rush to leave, though. Instead, she’s thoughtful as her gaze drifts to the black and white images on the screen again.

“Did you have a nice time tonight?” I ask, moving my hand across the smoothness of her stomach.

I have her eyes again when she smiles a bit.

“I did. Your great-aunt is amazing,” she beams. “Apparently, she’s already planning our wedding here at Landry Manor, so there’s that.”

I laugh, imagining how that conversation must’ve gone. “Sorry if she scared you.”

Southside shrugs with a smirk. “Eh, not so much. Surprisingly, the idea of spending the rest of my life with you isn’t all that terrifying.”

Whenever our conversation shifts to talk of our future, I don’t feel the dread and frustration that used to creep in when Parker would do that shit. With Southside, all I want is a time machine to speed things up, so we can get to the part where she shares my last name and there’s no more going our separate ways at night. Like now, the idea of not getting to lie like this until the sun comes up is physically painful.

“How’d the talk go with your Grandpa?” she asks, snapping me out of the short-lived fantasy.

“Okay, I guess. He couldn’t tell me much, but he has a box of stuff he wants me to go through. Says he thinks it could help us. Apparently, he hired a private investigator before Mom married Vin, trying to convince her it was a bad move, but all the shit he presented her with didn’t matter. I guess, at the end of the day, she was just in love, willing to believe everything would all work out okay.”

Southside zones out in a thought. “What do you think he’ll have to show you?”

My shoulders lift with a shrug. “Not sure, but what I *do* know is that Boone Landry’s one of the most resourceful men I know.”

She seems comforted by this, and after pressing her lips to mine, she yawns again.

“All right. Time to turn in,” I announce, sitting up to search for our clothes.

Hopefully, I can sneak her back inside the main house without getting caught. With any luck, Grandpa’s asleep, or at least up in his bedroom reading by the fireplace like he’s known to do.

We stand and dress, then I gather the blankets and shut down the theater system. After that, I kill the two dim lights I left on, then we lock up and head out. With blankets bundled under one arm and my girl under the other, I let myself imagine it again—forever with her at my side.

I was already motivated to fix this shit we’ve somehow gotten into, but things have changed. It’s not just about saving what Southside and I have right *now*. It’s about seeing to it that I get to spend a lifetime with the only girl who’s ever mattered. The only one I’ve ever loved.

CHAPTER 27

BLUE

Blue: Merry Christmas, Beautiful.”

*Jules: Merry Christmas, BJ! Speaking of BJs, how’s the trip going so far?
;)*

Blue: Lol things are great! Day one, the whole family stopped over for a seafood boil. Then, yesterday, we mostly chilled. West’s grandpa did teach us how to make authentic, Louisiana beignets, though.

Jules: Ohhhh... make me some when you get home!

Blue: Honestly, I just handed him ingredients, then ate like three when they were done. I swear I’m still full. But that didn’t stop me from eating two bowls of gumbo for dinner.

Jules: Who cares? You’re on vacation!

Blue: I’m gonna have to wear pants with elastic waistbands for like a month lol

Jules: And West wouldn’t even notice. Boy’s blinded by love.

Blue: The feeling’s definitely mutual.

Jules: Get anything good under the tree this morning?

The question has my gaze shifting to the corner of our shared bedroom, where a gift bag with my name on the tag rests on top of my empty suitcase. The family got each of us girls an expensive handbag and gift cards so we wouldn’t have a ton of stuff to lug home, but my favorite thing came from West; a custom, gold bracelet with three charms dangling from the chain.

A flame symbolizing the first time we laid eyes on each other at the Bellvue bonfire. A milkshake to symbolize the first time we kissed at the diner, after West accused me of spitting in the one I served him. Granted, I was definitely guilty of messing with his drink, but he deserved it. The third is a heart because, according to him, I'll always have his.

Blue: I'll show you everything when I get home.

Jules: K. So happy you're happy. Wish I could be there :(

Blue: Next time.

Jules: Definitely! Now go enjoy your man and your Christmas. Love you, woman!

Blue: Love you right back. Apparently, I have a game of truth or dare to get to. Wish me luck <3

I set my phone in the nightstand drawer, then rush downstairs. From what I can hear, the family's gotten much livelier since dinner, so I follow the noise and I find our crew and the five wild ones we met a couple nights ago settled in the great room. The massive, mahogany fireplace is roaring and the gang's getting riled up for what I'm told will be the most invasive game of truth or dare I've ever played in my life.

Should be fun.

Not really.

I scan the room for Scarlett and find Linden—the persistent one—sitting beside her on the hearth. He's leaned forward with both elbows on his knees, smiling while whatever he's saying seems to be charming my sister's pants off. Here's hoping that summation isn't a literal one.

She did a good job of keeping him at bay the other night, but I'm not sure how long she can keep it up. Yeah, she cares for Shane, but this boy looks like he could be just the heartbreaker to change her mind.

West spots me and halts his conversation with River and Stoney to slap a hand to the couch cushion. While I texted Jules, he saved me a seat between him and Joss. Shockingly, Dane's got her laughing free and easy now, which means she's feeling more like herself.

"It's about time you brought your sexy ass back down here," West groans in my ear. I settle in beside him, drawn to him like a bee to honey, but catch myself just shy of planting a kiss on his lips.

Scar's in the room—although she isn't paying me an ounce of attention—but I do try to behave myself in front of her.

Try.

West opts to kiss my neck instead. Heat from his mouth moves toward my collarbone and I nudge him to stop. If he keeps at it, we'll never make it through this game. He pulls back with a smile, but I still feel his stare. He knows he gets to me.

Every damn time.

"All right, now that we're all here, let the games begin," Dane announces, grinning like he's about to open another round of Christmas gifts. "Who wants to start?"

It doesn't surprise me when none of us girls' hands shoot up into the air. Nor does it surprise me when each of the wild five seem to be eager to get things going.

"I'll go," Beau volunteers.

"Okay, truth or dare?"

Zero thought goes into Beau's response. "Dare."

Dane smiles and reaches into his back pocket. "I dare you to let River draw a tattoo on your back with permanent marker. Then you've gotta walk through the parlor where the adults are hanging out."

"Easy." The next second, Beau slides his t-shirt up his back and tosses it to the floor.

Then, we all watch in horror as River writes the words, '*I love pussy*' on his back in bold letters.

"There," River proclaims with a smile. "Make sure Grandpa gets a good look at this."

Completely unaware of what's been written, Beau shrugs, then fearlessly heads across the foyer where all the older members of the family decided to congregate. We can't see in, but we can certainly hear.

"What the hell is wrong with you boy? Get your narrow ass out of here with that foolishness!" Boone yells, half a second before Beau sprints back toward us, sliding across the freshly polished floor in his socks. He's almost home free, but catches Boone's slipper to his back when it's hurled at him from some unseen place.

The eruption of laughter drowns out the sound of Beau sucking in air through his clenched teeth, a reasonable reaction to the sting of having a rubber sole slap against his bare skin.

"What the fuck does this shit say?" he wants to know, walking off the pain as he casts a frustrated glare toward River.

Instead of repeating the phrase, River snaps a pic of the '*tattoo*' and

shoots it to Beau in text.

“No wonder I almost got my ass beat,” Beau growls at River. “All right, *your* turn, motherfucker. Truth or dare?”

“Truth,” River answers.

“Fine. Why don’t you tell everyone when you last pissed yourself.”

River’s face turns bright red, and I’m already intrigued.

“First of all, let me preface my answer by stating that I was shitfaced,” he explains. “But since I’m not a pussy, I’ll just come out and say it. Three months ago. But also note that I passed out outside, so it’s not like I wet my bed and shit.”

“Does that make it any better?” Sterling asks.

Scar covers her mouth when she laughs, trying to hold back. Unlike the rest of us who have no problem further embarrassing the kid.

“Joss,” River says, clearly hoping to get the heat off himself. “Truth or dare?”

Joss strikes me as a *‘play it safe’* kind of girl, so I was beyond shocked with her choice.

“Dare,” she says, holding River’s gaze.

He seems pleasantly surprised, too. “Sweet! Take out your phone, call the last guy you screwed, and tell him you’re pregnant.”

Joss smiles. “Guess I get a pass, because there *was* no last guy. There’s never been *any* guy.”

“Bullshit,” River says with a frown.

Joss shakes her head. “I shit you not.”

As if all five share a brain, each of West’s cousins stare at her, as if they can’t possibly understand how a girl who looks like her managed to get through life unsullied. Then, on cue, their gazes shift to Dane in unison.

“It’s true,” he confirms.

“Well, damn. I guess you *do* get a pass,” River finally concedes. “Actually, no.”

My brow quirks when he speaks up, changing his mind.

He volleys a look between Joss and Dane before asking a question. “You two are just friends, right?” he asks.

Drawing in an uneven breath, Joss nods. “Yeah. Since we were kids.”

River’s wicked smile reminds me of Wests, which means trouble. “Fine. I dare you and Dane to kiss. And I’m not talking some weak-ass, kindergarten kiss,” he clarifies. “Sit in his lap and really get into that shit.”

While most are laughing and intrigued to see how this particular challenge will play out, I'm focused on Joss, feeling her anxiety as she finally gets up the nerve to look at Dane. When their eyes lock, I only see sympathy in his, genuine concern for the girl he calls his best friend. But for those of us who see how they are with each other... we know it's much, *much* more than that.

"You don't have to do this," he says quietly, holding Joss's gaze.

She breathes deep again, but sucks up whatever she's feeling for the sake of the game.

"No, it's fine. Really."

She *says* that, but the look on her face says otherwise.

I remember our talk clearly from the other day. She didn't deny feeling something for Dane, but did make it clear she thinks they're wrong for each other. She also insisted on not risking their friendship to find out if that's true.

With all eyes on her, she stands from the couch and straightens her Rudolph tee over the waistband of the black stretch-pants she changed into after dinner. Dane's eyes are glued to her, lowering with Joss as she straddles him in the giant armchair he chose at the start of the game.

I can't help but wonder, is this the closest they've ever gotten? Sure, I've seen them hug before, but this is certainly more intimate than a hug.

Now face-to-face, Joss presses both palms to either side of Dane's neck. Breathing wildly, she inches closer. His hands lift from where he once seemed resolved to keep them at his sides, deciding to take a chance holding her waist. They're so close now that ringlets from her bangs touch his forehead. His chest rises when he draws in a breath and there's barely enough space between her lips and his to slide a sheet of paper. But then, right before crossing the point of no return...

"I can't," she announces, letting her eyes fall closed while she and Dane continue to hold one another.

"I knew it," River says with a deep laugh.

There's a clear sense of regret in Joss's expression. Is it that she's sorry she let the dare go as far as it did? Or... is she upset she didn't have the nerve to go through with it? Either way, I feel for the girl.

Positively mortified, she mouths a heartfelt, "I'm sorry," to Dane.

He, of course, assures her he's not mad, going as far as to pull her in for a hug. She buries her face in his shoulder before attempting to stand, but he

stops her.

“Actually, hang on a sec,” Dane says, taking hold of her arm before she rises.

She seems confused, but not West. That triplet thing where they read each other’s minds kicks in again. All it takes is a quick glance from Dane, and West tosses him a throw pillow. Before letting Joss go, he wedges it between them, and now I get it.

Yup. Definitely hiding a boner.

“You lose. That means you get a penalty,” River announces, rubbing the failure in Joss’s face.

Heading straight for the shot glasses sitting on the bar against the far wall, he fills it to the brim with a hot sauce so hot they swear it’ll make you wish for death.

Slowly, Joss makes her way over and, after staring at the glass for a few seconds, she downs it.

Right away, she looks like she is in fact wishing for death.

“My go again,” River says. “West, truth or dare?”

“I don’t trust you fuckers. Truth,” he answers.

River looks visibly disappointed.

“Fine. Sorry in advance, Blue, but this is something I’ve been wondering for a couple years now,” he says before glaring at West. “The last time you visited, did you screw that chick who stopped by with her grandmother? I think the lady was an old friend of Aunt Sheryl.”

West sighs and shakes his head. “No, that didn’t happen.”

“She had to have at least sucked you off or something,” River insists. “You two were behind the house for a long time.”

“Well, good thing you only get one damn question,” West groans, shooting River a hateful look. “Now, it’s my turn. Linden, truth or dare?”

Linden peers up from his phone, tucking it away before he answers, “Uh... dare. Why not.”

“Pass your phone to Scar and let her read whatever text just came through,” West says, prompting my sister to hold her hand out with a grin.

Linden smiles back and there’s a certain level of chemistry I see brewing between them, which means they’ve clearly warmed up to one another.

“Brace yourself,” Linden teases, to which Scar responds with a light nudge of her knee.

She stares at the screen and reads. “It says: *‘The vid Kyle posted of the*

band's last gig got a ton of hits and brought new faces to The Loft! Rue's itching to get you guys in to do another set. Got any free weekends coming up?' And... scene," Scar adds with a smile when she finishes and passes Linden's phone back.

West's attempt at embarrassing the guy turned out to be one more thing for Scar to fawn over.

Shit.

"Tell him we're open in a few weeks," Keaton pipes up.

Linden finally manages to tear his eyes away from Scar long enough to reply to the text. Then, when he's done, he has her right back in his sights.

"Scarlett, truth or dare?" he asks.

It doesn't surprise me even a little that he chose her.

"Truth," she answers.

Good girl.

That sly, *you-know-you-want-me* grin of his is back. "Fine. What's your favorite part of the male body?" he asks.

Scar flushes red and I'm biting my tongue, hearing her voice in my head, screaming '*I'm not a kid, Blue!*'. Only, she is to me, and I probably won't feel any differently about that when she's thirty.

The triplets are staring Linden down almost as harshly as I am. Like I said, they slipped into big-brother mode pretty deep.

"Well," Scar starts, "I'd have to say... a guy's hands."

Linden tilts his head and mouths something and I can't hear him, but I swear I just read his lips saying, "For now."

My lips part, ready to rip him a new asshole when Boone steps into the room.

"West, got a moment? Figured we should talk before I get too much bourbon in my system. I have some things I need to show you," Boone announces.

West passes a glance toward me before meeting his grandfather's gaze. "Sure, we're just hanging out."

He stands and I wasn't expecting to be invited, but he has my hand, gently tugging me to my feet.

Before making an exit, I put Joss in charge of watching over Scar, then we leave the group behind and head into a dimly lit room at the end of the hallway. There's a box with folders stacked inside, which means at least some of Vin's truths are about to be revealed.

I don't know whether I should be relieved or afraid, but either way, there's no turning back now.

CHAPTER 28

BLUE

“I presented all this info to your ma twenty years ago and a whole lot of good it did,” Boone sighs, resting his fists against his waist while staring at the folders laid out on his desk. “Not sure it’ll help you kids all that much, seeing as how it wasn’t enough to stop Pam from marrying that sorry S.O.B, but at least you’ll know everything *I* know.”

West says nothing, but slowly approaches the desk. He picks up the folder his grandfather placed there and stares at it.

“I can walk you through it if you want,” Boone offers, prompting West to nod.

Once he hands it over, Boone begins to thumb through the documents.

“Well, your daddy wasn’t exactly Rockefeller when he started sniffing around your ma, but he wasn’t destitute either. He flashed enough cash around when they’d come down to visit that I had my investigator start there, following the money. I wanted to know how he made it and what he did with it,” Boone explains.

“My guy found an old buddy of Vin’s up there in the city, one willing to share what he knew. Cost me a pretty penny, of course, but it was worth it. I mean, it didn’t stop your mom from selling her soul to the devil, but we can’t win ‘em all,” he adds with a laugh.

“Anyway, the friend told the investigator he grew up on the same street as Vin up there in Cypress Pointe, and that as long as he’d known him, Vin had

been well-to-do. The guy never saw Vin's mother work a day in her life, though. So, it seemed to *him* that they lived off some sort of inheritance."

"Was it maybe something left for him by his grandparents?" West asks.

Boone shakes his head. "That was my first thought, but his mother grew up in the foster care system and didn't have any family that she knew of."

I'm so confused, and judging by the look on West's face, he is too.

"So, where'd it come from?" he asks.

Boone breathes deep, then drops down into the armchair near the bay window overlooking the yard.

"Vin ever tell you boys anything about his father?"

"Only that he grew up not knowing who he was, and never got to meet him," West explains.

"Well, I suppose that's true to an extent, but he definitely knows the man's name," Boone reveals. "It's right here on his birth certificate."

He hands it over to West to scan and I fight the urge to peek.

I study West's face as he reads, growing even more intrigued when tension gathers in his brow.

"This doesn't... it doesn't make any sense," he stammers, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Augustin was a married man when he had an affair with your paternal grandmother, Liza Golden. That affair resulted in the birth of your father," Boone explains.

West, keeping his gaze trained on the birth certificate, inches back toward the wall and leans against it.

"Augustin wasn't in Vin's life, but he provided for him financially, which explains why Liza never worked. She wasn't living in the lap of luxury by any means, but her basic needs were taken care of. She was what we used to call a *'kept woman'*," Boone adds. "But from what the source revealed, Vin spent most of his life believing his father was deceased, which I'm guessing was an arrangement made between Augustin and Liza. Only, years down the road, on Liza's deathbed, she apparently told Vin everything because she couldn't stand the thought of him being alone in the world, without family."

"This doesn't make sense," West says, seeming to share his thoughts out loud.

Waiting until he tells me on his own isn't working. The suspense is killing me.

"What is it?" I ask.

I expect him to just share what he sees that's so shocking, but he hands it over instead. I study the document and it only takes three seconds to understand why he's speechless.

"Holy shit." I peer up at Boone. "Excuse my language, it's just... this says Vin's father was Augustin Ruiz? Is this legitimate?"

"It's as real as I'm standing in front of you," he answers with a nod. "Why? That name mean something to you?"

"It... yeah," I stammer, eventually just zoning out on the document.

Growing up, Ricky was practically his grandfather's shadow. They went everywhere together. So much that I spent several of those early years thinking Gus Ruiz was his father, only to discover at around age nine that his *actual* father had passed away a little over four years prior. Not too long after Shane was born.

Now, according to this birth certificate, it appears Vin is an illegitimate son of the Ruiz family patriarch.

My mind is reeling right now, and I drop down into the chair across from Boone, thinking about all the signs we likely missed. But how could we have known? Before agreeing to this trip, I double-checked that the family he wanted to visit here in Louisiana had nothing to do with his dad, and West seemed so certain Vin had no inkling who his father was.

Now, we both know that was a huge lie.

"Vin got in good with Augustin at some point and the family took to him all right, I suppose, but word never got out about Augustin having an illegitimate son. Could've been out of respect for his wife who was still alive at the time, could've been about control. Who the hell knows? But what I do believe is that it suited Vin that this familial tie was an easy secret to keep. After all, the name Ruiz—from what I gather—is one of a few surnames synonymous with criminal activity up there in Cypress Pointe. Is that correct?"

I nod to confirm. "It is."

"Just as I thought," Boone says with a sigh. "Long as I've known Vin, he's been two steps ahead. My guess is that he knew he'd want to practically own that damn city one day and couldn't risk having his reputation associated with the likes of the Ruiz family. Now, don't get me wrong, he gets in the dirt with them up to a point, gets entangled with some of their endeavors when it suits him—like when he's got a business venture to fund. How do you think his career in commercial real estate got started? But he's a proud son of a

bitch, and a *smart* one. As much as I hate to admit it,” he adds with a laugh. “Vin’s always got an angle, though, and you can bet your ass whatever moves he makes, it’s what’s best for him and him alone.”

“The campaign posters,” I say to West, but it’s Boone who’s staring.

“What campaign posters?”

“A... friend—at least, I *guess* you can call her that—she sent me a proof of a poster announcing Vin as a mayoral candidate in the upcoming election.”

Boone’s expression tenses. “No one knows about it yet?”

I shake my head. “No, my guess is the two months he gave me to end things with West marks the date he plans to go public with this. He doesn’t want West and I associated, we just haven’t completely worked out why.”

Boone lets out a frustrated sigh. “It’s likely what West shared with me a couple days ago about your brother. There any connection between the two? Does Vin have any ties with that girl your brother was accused of murdering?”

“If there’s a connection, we haven’t found it yet.” I hate that I don’t have a definitive answer, but that’s the truth of it.

“West tells me you’re concerned about your sister’s safety, so focus on her. Let your detective friend handle things regarding your brother. That’s something you can’t control right now, sweetheart,” Boone adds thoughtfully. “And while I know the information in this box might not be the smoking gun you two hoped it would be, maybe the detective can use it to his advantage.”

“You’ve done more than enough, Grandpa. Thank you,” West says with a gracious nod. “Half the battle’s been proving that my dad’s even got the means to make those girls disappear, so I imagine linking him directly to a known crime family does just that.”

My stomach turns a little because, while the Ruizes can be reduced to ‘*a known crime family*’ to most people, Shane and Ricky are definitely more than that to me. With Scar’s safety on the line, there’s no question what my priority is, but I pray Ricky meant what he said about not being involved with this side of his uncle’s business. If he is, there’s a chance he could go down with the sinking ship.

I race through every recent conversation I’ve had with him, searching for any indication that he hasn’t been honest, but then I remember who I’m dealing with. Ricky is a lot of things, but a liar isn’t one of them. If he says he’s not involved, he’s not involved.

Suddenly, I'm anxious to get this particular bit of info into Roby's hands. It at least establishes that I wasn't crazy to think Vin had some sort of tie to whatever new operation Paul has going on.

"I put in a call yesterday morning and officially brought my guy out of retirement," Boone informs us. "He's got about forty years of investigative experience under his belt and I don't trust anyone else to finish the job he started two decades ago. If I pay him well enough—and I will—he's willing to set up camp up there in Cypress Pointe and do some more digging. So, even though I won't be there in the flesh, I'm on you kids' side," he assures us.

Tearful and so, so confused, I take Boone's hand when he offers it to me. "Thank you. For everything."

He nods with a warm smile. "Anything I can do to help family, I'll do it. And as long as my grandson thinks the sun rises and sets on that pretty little head of yours, you're family."

I stand and go toward where West is still leaning beside the bookcase, but I pause when Boone calls out to me.

"The folder belongs to the two of you. I've got no use for it anymore. But if I could give you one more bit of advice..."

West nods. "Of course."

Boone stands from his seat and comes close. "Your daddy may be a slippery son of a bitch, but one thing he's never been is an idiot. Now, I'm all for you kids working together with that task force to bring Vin Golden to his knees, but in the meantime, march to the beat of his drum. Or, at the very least, give the *appearance* that you are. It'll buy the authorities time to do their job and it'll keep your sister safe," he adds, shifting his gaze to me. "So, if he wants you two separated by the time his campaign announcement goes forth, then... you might want to consider how to go about doing that."

Those words rest heavy on my heart.

"Keep this in mind, though," Boone adds. "If push comes to shove, and either of you feel like you've got nowhere else to run, my door is always open. For *any* of you."

He makes his exit then, patting West's shoulder on his way out. We're left on our own to consider his suggestion—that we play along to keep the peace. In other words, he's not suggesting that I actually break West's heart, but rather that we make it look that way.

"What're you thinking?" I ask quietly, slipping my arms around him.

He sighs and I feel the weight of what he's holding in. "I'm thinking my grandfather's right—both about Vin being smart, and about making him think he's won. But whatever we do, we have to sell the shit out of it."

"Ok, so... how would we go about doing that?"

When West falls quiet, I'm admittedly nervous what he'll say next. Another deep breath leaves him, and his arms tighten around me.

"Let's just say I'm pretty sure I'm gonna fucking hate myself for what I'm thinking, but... it's our best option."

I give a questioning look after that cryptic statement, and West's frustration seems to grow by the second.

"I don't think I understand," I admit.

He peers up and his dark stare locks with mine, causing my breaths to quicken at the sight of it.

"Vin wants it to look like we're done, like there's nothing left of us to repair, so that's what we have to give him," West reasons. "Once we're back in the city, you have to do it, Southside. You have to break me."

CHAPTER 29

BLUE

“There. All done,” Scar says with a satisfied grin.

After having struggled to close her overstuffed suitcase for the last five minutes, she’s finally gotten it.

“And not a second to spare,” I tease, shaking my head as I slip a hoodie over my t-shirt. “Our ride to the airport will be here in a few.”

She plops down onto the bed that’s been hers since we first dropped our bags here in Dupont Bayou. Even though she hasn’t said it, she’ll miss it here. I think we’re *all* feeling it actually. The original plan was to stick around for a few more days, but once West heard that Scar would miss Shane’s last days in Cypress Pointe, he changed our flight plans. I shudder to think how much that must’ve cost him, but he didn’t even bat an eye.

If it’s important to Scar and me, it’s important to him.

Which is exactly why I love him.

Thinking of Shane brings a question to mind. Something I’ve been dying to ask my sister.

“So... what’s up with you and Linden?”

For some reason, I hold my breath after asking.

Scar shrugs. “He seems okay. He talks a lot about their band, school, and his family.”

“His family? Is there drama or something?”

She gives another of her casual shrugs. “No, not really. Mostly it’s just

stuff about his bio-dad's side. They're Choctaw."

I stop what I'm doing to listen. "His dad's Native?"

Scar nods. "Well, he *was*. He died before Linden was born. Seems like he's pretty in touch with his roots, though. His grandmother keeps him active with the local Choctaw community. Which is pretty cool, I guess."

She guesses?

Those hearts in her eyes say otherwise. They say she's *more* than interested in anything and everything having to do with this guy.

"Mmm hmm. Let's go, kiddo."

Scar takes her time getting up to follow me downstairs, but she eventually does. We join the others outside on the porch just as the driver who dropped us off several days ago pulls up in the same bus as before. Seeing him, my heart aches a little.

This trip is ending way, way too soon.

Boone's standing beside me, hands in his pockets as he gazes over at his grandsons. They're obviously so important to him, I imagine parting ways is always tough. In fact, I can see it in his eyes even though he's trying to hide it.

"Thank you so much for having us. We had a great time," I say to him.

"Oh, sweetheart, the pleasure was all mine. The only thing I love more than seeing my grandsons is seeing my grandsons *happy*."

He smiles then, and I find myself wishing I had a grandfather like him. Someone warm and loving, patient. Well, if you don't count the short fuse he has when it comes to the *other* five we met down here. Even then, it's easy to see he doesn't only tolerate that wild bunch. He loves them.

"Give me a hug before you run off," Boone says with a smile.

I lean in to embrace him and he doesn't feel like a stranger anymore. He feels like family.

"I'll be checking in with West to see how things are coming along. And I know the last thing the two of you want to do is let Vin think he's winning, but some things are more important than pride," he reasons. "If he needs to think he's in control while things are being worked out, then so be it. In the end, he'll know the two of you never faltered in your love. Even if it has to look like it for a bit."

I nod, hearing him loud and clear. "Yes, sir."

"None of this '*sir*' business. Just call me Grandpa," he corrects me, confirming my earlier thought—we're like family now.

Scar and Joss move in to hug Boone next, followed by the boys. Boone nearly squeezes the life out of them like before and I could watch him with them all day. They might've gotten a raw deal being Vin's sons, but being Boone's grandsons more than makes up for it.

"You kids keep out of trouble," he calls out with a smile as we descend the steps of the porch, but we never get the chance to board our ride. Before any of us steps foot inside the bus, an engine revs in the distance. Then, what do we see a few seconds later?

A gray pickup barreling up the long driveway.

"Dear God, help us today," Boone groans to himself—his reaction to seeing his other grandsons rolling up in all their loud, rowdy glory.

At least the triplets are happy to see them.

And Scar.

Boone's right. A little divine intervention would be great right now. I especially think so when the truck slams to a stop and Linden hops out the bed of it, coming straight for my sister like there's no one else standing here.

The wind picks up, moving through his hair, and it's apparent that he's too cool to notice it's a little chilly today. Instead of wearing a hoodie or jacket like the rest of us, he's rocking a white t-shirt and jeans.

The other four go straight for West, Joss, and I, saying their goodbyes, but you'd think Scar's the only one Linden sees.

"Couldn't let you leave without giving you this," he says, stepping closer to her. She stares up at him like he's some kind of deity, fallen from the sky to Earth.

"What is it?"

He shrugs and slips both hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Just a little something so you don't forget me."

She shoots him a look that has me thinking she knows he's full of shit—one of those guys who's used to girls eating out the palm of his hand. Then again, there's a small part of me that worries she's falling for it.

She takes the small bag when Linden offers it, and then pulls out a t-shirt.

"I had our guy rush and make you a pink one. That's our band," he explains, pointing at the logo in the center of the shirt.

"What? You thought I'd want pink because I'm a girl?" she asks with a smirk.

"Well, I uh—"

"Relax. I'm kidding. It's sweet." She peers up from the shirt and meets

Linden's gaze and... kill me now.

That look I was terrified I'd one day see in her eyes? The one that contradicts the cold shoulder she's been giving him? Yeah, I see it plain as day.

"Thank you," she eventually says, once she's able to tear her eyes away from him.

"No problem."

There's a moment of awkward silence between them and I completely ignore every single conversation but theirs.

"So, I was thinking. If you give me your number, we can keep in touch. You know, check in on each other every now and then?"

I hold my breath, watching to see how things will play out.

"I told you, I'm involved with someone," Scar explains.

Linden doesn't seem defeated in the least by hearing my sister tell him again why she's off limits.

"So you keep saying," he smirks.

"And yet, you insist on backing me into a corner," Scar shoots back.

Linden's smile grows and he does that thing again, where he eye-bangs my sister so hard I feel dirty witnessing it.

"You're not gonna make this easy for me, are you?"

Scar smirks when he asks. "Not only will I not make it easy, I'll make it impossible."

Instead of letting that deter him, his masochistic ass smiles at her. "So, I take it that's a no on giving me your number."

"Oh, it's a *big* no," she clarifies.

Linden nods, biting the side of his lip as he slips both hands back inside his pockets. "At least give me your socials. What's the harm in that?"

He's not begging, but he's definitely being persistent as hell.

Shaking her head, Scar laughs a bit. "It was great meeting you, Linden. Goodbye."

With that, she offers a cheeky grin and starts toward the bus but isn't quite fast enough. Linden manages to get a hold of her when she passes, and if his light grip on her hand was enough to halt her, it means she *wanted* to be stopped.

"Don't make me stalk you, Scarlett." He croons his warning with a wicked smirk. One that makes Scar's own smile dim a bit. However, I'm convinced this shift has nothing to do with being put off by Linden's

intensity. If anything—based solely on who our mother is, and how we’re both a little broken because of it—I’d say she likes it.

Scar blinks into Linden’s gaze while slowly pulling out of his grasp. Her eyes flit to his parted lips, and then meet his stare again.

“Give it your best shot,” is her parting challenge.

Linden eyes her as she passes, not bothering to stop her this time, but he keeps his gaze trained in her direction long after she’s disappeared inside the bus. Watching him now, I wonder if he’s questioning the same thing I am.

Were Scar’s words meant as a deterrent? Or were they an invitation?

“Ready?” West asks, stealing my attention. “We should get going so we’re not late.”

I glance toward Linden one last time before nodding.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

West’s hand rests against the small of my back and we say our last goodbyes. For so many reasons, this was a trip to remember. In a few hours we’ll be back in Cypress Prep, back where we’ll have to face our problems head on, but I have to believe there will be a break in Roby’s investigation soon. Especially now that we’ve made a connection between Vin and Paul Ruiz. I’m not sure what good it will do yet, but I choose to believe things will start to go our way soon.

I mean, they have to.

Right?

QweenPandora: Incoming, lovelies!

It appears Cypress Prep Royalty has landed. Still no word on where TheGoldenCrew has been all week, but they certainly look well-rested. Perhaps a bit of time away from the city is just what the doctor ordered.

But be careful, oh royal ones. We’ve all heard the age-old adage of how absence makes the heart grow fonder, but I have a theory of my own. Perhaps fondness of heart isn’t the only emotion one’s absence might feed.

Could the same hold true for hatred? Guess we’ll all just have to wait and see.

Later, Peeps.

—P

CHAPTER 30

BLUE

Home sweet home.

Or... something like that, I guess.

I stare at the rickety security door at the front of our small place and beat back the heaviness that tries creeping in. It's stifling and palpable.

It's possible that things could turn out just fine. Don't think the worst.

Scar says her goodbyes to the boys and Joss, then slides out of the backseat. I, on the other hand, am a bit more reluctant to head inside. Getting to spend nearly a week with West felt more like an eternity. In all the best ways, of course. If it *never* ended, that still would've been too soon.

"Already turned off the alarm," West says, flashing his phone screen toward me. His tone is solemn, much like his expression.

"What if I don't want to go back—to real life, to being worried all the time? What if I don't want to go back in *there*?" I ask.

My hand warms in West's when he takes it and holds me captive in his stare.

"I didn't let my grandfather's offer go in one ear and out the other," he says. "If it gets to be too much here, we've got options."

I imagine it—life in Dupont Bayou, the clean air and serenity.

But then, I think about our college plans—how hard West worked to earn his spot at NCU, the hell I went through to get accepted at Cypress Valley. If it were a short-term fix that would keep Scar safe, I'd do it in a heartbeat, but

our problems won't simply go away because we're not here to face them. Eventually, we'd return and Vin would still be here, more powerful than ever.

"It's a nice idea, but... we have to find another way," I say quietly.

Lucky for us, Dane and Sterling are keeping up so much noise in the back, West and I are allowed to speak candidly without being heard.

He nods, seeming to understand my reasoning, but doesn't say a word. Instead, he climbs out to meet Scar at the trunk to unload our things. As expected, he carries it all himself, making it look easy when he walks beside me, headed toward the back door. It's closest to the laundry room where we need to dump our things and get them clean. Somehow, washing clothes just ranked very low on our list of things to do while we were away.

We round the corner, thinking we'll head right in after I unlock the door, but the three of us stop dead in our tracks. Never in a million years did I expect *this* when coming home.

It's like seeing a ghost as I stare at Mike, clean and sober for the first time since... well, *shit*. I can't even remember *when* I've last seen him sober. He's wearing sweats, a long-sleeve thermal, and a dark beanie he didn't leave here in, but not much else.

He seems startled when he lays eyes on us, rushing to stand from where he's been waiting on the steps. His eyes dart back and forth between me and Scar several times, and then to West for a moment. He seems to be at a loss for words, finding it difficult to hold anyone's gaze.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

He peers up when I ask, swallowing hard before answering. "I was released today. A few hours ago," he explains. "I don't have my keys or anything to let myself in. You know, since I wasn't exactly in my right mind when I left."

I fold both arms over my chest, glaring at him. "No, you were drunk off your ass," I hiss. "Just say what it is, Mike."

My words seem to cut like a knife, and I don't even care. His words have been slicing into my flesh, my *soul*, my entire life.

"I—you're right," he concedes, lowering his gaze to the pavement. "I was just hoping you'd let me in so we could talk and—"

"Find someplace else to stay. We don't need you."

Again, he stares, but doesn't seem surprised by my reaction to him showing up here like he hasn't been raising hell in our home for years. Breathing heavily because I'm in shock and trying not to lose my shit, I start

snatching me and Scar's bags from West's hands. All I want is to get inside and close Mike out.

My gaze flashes up toward West, only to find he's already staring at me, already *sympathizing* with me.

"Please, Blue, if we can just talk, we—"

"What the fuck don't you understand?" I snap, yelling at Mike before he even finishes his statement. "I don't want you here. Neither of us do. So, why don't you get a head start on falling off the wagon and pull up a stool at the nearest bar. That's always been more your home than this shithole anyway."

I start toward the door and West speaks up.

"Need me to stick around for a bit?" He's talking to me, but glaring at Mike.

Shaking my head, I fumble with the keys in the lock. "No, we're fine. I'll call you later."

He doesn't move, of course. But what does surprise me is that Mike doesn't bombard his way through the door right behind me and Scar. He's just standing out there a few yards from West, trying to look like a lost dog. I'm too indifferent to his ass to fall for it, but my sister on the other hand, is not.

She pinches the sleeve of my hoodie when I grip the door to close it. I glance back, meeting her gaze, and I see that same look Mom used to get when *she* should've left Mike outside in the cold.

"But Blue, he looks better. And sad," she adds. "What if that place fixed him?"

It breaks my heart to hear the hope in her voice, because if there's one thing I know about Mike, it's that he will always, *always* disappoint you.

"Scar, he's sober *right now*, but the moment he gets a few drinks in him, it'll be the same."

"But it won't," Mike speaks up.

My eyes cut to him. "I was talking to my sister. Not you."

He draws in a deep breath and I see I've wounded him again. That shouldn't feel so good, but it does. Maybe because I'm bitter knowing that, if ever there was a time I could've used the comfort of having a real father in our home, it's now. Instead, I get stuck with *this* piece of shit.

"Please," he begs, sounding so broken and pathetic it makes me want to leap down these steps and tackle him on the cement. He doesn't get to slip in and play this role, doesn't get to confuse Scar into thinking he's changed.

“I tried calling,” he rushes to say. “A few times you answered, but I didn’t know what to say so I just said... *nothing*. I tried again on Scar’s birthday, thinking I finally found the nerve to actually talk to you girls, but you didn’t pick up that time. I figured it was probably because you didn’t recognize the number.”

It’s in this moment that all the mysterious ‘*unavailable*’ calls finally make sense. Still, a few phone calls don’t make up for having to put up with his B.S.

“We’ve got enough to deal with without having to look after you,” I snap, feeling the sting of angry tears pooling in my eyes.

Mike’s shoulders rise and fall when he breathes deep and I swear it looks like he’s in pain seeing me like this, but that’s not possible. He’s never felt anything for me but resentment.

“I promise I won’t be in the way,” he says sheepishly. “And I’ll—I’ll clean up after myself, help with Scar if you let me, and I’m working on getting a job.”

I scoff when he lays that one on me. How many times have I heard that one before?

“I’m serious, Blue Jay.”

“*Don’t* call me that,” I snap.

He throws his hands up with hope of calming me, and then changes his tune.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. We’ve got a long road to being okay, but I *am* serious this time,” he insists. “One of the counselors got me leads on a couple jobs and I’m gonna call and follow up tomorrow.”

I’m not moved in the least, but the feel of Scar discreetly tapping my back means I’m alone in taking this firm stand.

“Please, Blue,” she whispers. “I’m scared what’ll happen if he has to go someplace else.”

I’m mad enough to spit lava right now, but unfortunately, Scar doesn’t understand. She sees the world through a different set of lenses than I do. If I turn him away and he does what I know he’s gonna do—get messed up and prove he’s still the old Mike—she’ll think it’s my fault, think that if I hadn’t been so stubborn it wouldn’t have happened. So, I’m torn.

My gaze flits toward West and I swear he feels me in this moment, feels that I really don’t want to do this, but—

Shit.

“You have *one* chance not to fuck this up,” I warn. “First sign of your same old bullshit and I’ll have Dusty haul your ass out of here faster than you can give another empty apology. Do you understand me?”

Grateful, he nods.

“I understand, but there won’t be any need for that. I mean it. I’m gonna do right by you girls this time,” he promises, easing past me to step inside.

When I meet West’s wary gaze, I’m full of dread, knowing I’ll regret this later. I shouldn’t be surprised, though. After all, today represents the story of my life—always stuck between a rock and a hard place. So much for easing back into business as usual.

In true Blue Riley form, there was literal shit waiting on the back porch to welcome me home.

Fuck you too, Cypress Pointe.

Seems you’re still the bitch I know and hate.

CHAPTER 31

WEST

The gym's loud and crowded, and we have Pandora's constant reminder posts about tonight's game to thank for that. She's been on a roll since school's started back this week. Typically, girls' basketball doesn't get the same fanfare as the guys', but based on this turnout for game one, that might not be the case this season.

We arrived a little early to grab good seats, and within ten minutes of getting settled, Rodriguez walks in looking like a cult nightmare in her usual all-black attire. She spots us and makes it a point to sit on the opposite side of the bleachers. She's never liked us, and we've never thought much about her.

Until the rumors about her possibly being Pandora started.

Who the hell knows if that's true, but I'm resigned to keeping my distance from her crazy ass.

"You both owe me for this shit," Dane announces to Sterling and me, keeping with our tradition of demanding money from each other that we know we'll never recoup.

He drops down into his seat between me and Joss and I snatch my popcorn off his tray.

"How about I take this off what you owe me for your plane ticket?"

That seems to have jogged his memory as he hands Joss her soda. "Well, yeah. That sounds doable, I guess."

"Yeah, that's what I fucking thought," I add with a laugh.

Another surge of bodies flood through the door.

“Geez, the team must be really good this year,” Joss comments, staring as the swarm scrambles for good seats.

“Either that or our peers are information whores. With Southside being on the team, they knew West would be here,” Sterling says.

Joss thinks about that for a sec and then shrugs, agreeing with Sterling’s deduction.

“But while we’re on the subject of ‘*Southside*’,” she chimes in again, “isn’t it kind of demeaning that you three still call her that? She’s your girlfriend now, West. Maybe give it a rest? It’s a new year, perfect time to turn over a new leaf.”

I lean forward to peer around Dane’s greedy ass hoovering down popcorn and meet Joss’s gaze. “You’ve met Blue. If it bothered her, please believe she would’ve called me on my shit by now.”

Joss shrugs again. “Guess you’re right.”

I’ve noticed the girls getting closer lately, and I’m guessing we’re reaching that point where it no longer matters that Joss has known me since we were kids, because you know, ‘*girl power*’ and shit...

I take another handful of popcorn and glance toward the door again. This time, I spot Mike strolling in with Scar. She’s smiling in that blissfully unaware way we all have before our parents do something to permanently mar their images in our eyes. He laughs at something she says, but it’s clear to see he’s on edge. I can tell by how his eyes keep darting toward the empty seats where the team will sit once they come out onto the floor.

My guess? He’s scared shitless about showing up today. Which probably means Blue told him not to come.

I’ve only laid eyes on the guy a handful of times, but this is by far the best I’ve seen him look. His eyes aren’t all glassy, his hair looks clean. Like he might’ve even taken a comb to it.

I’m on edge, though, because if I know my girl, she’s gonna be pissed when she sees him. So pissed I actually feel bad for whoever gets stuck guarding her tonight.

She’s been hell on wheels lately, taking her frustration out on others because she’s furious he’s back in the house. So far, he hasn’t violated any of the many, *many* rules Southside’s laid out for him, but she’s ready and waiting if he does.

It’s crossed my mind that she should consider lightening up on him—

mostly for her *own* sake—but I dare not mention it. She'd bite my head off for sure. So, as someone who knows what a delicate subject family can be, I've chosen to mind my own damn business.

So far, so good.

Someone in Maintenance decided it'd be a good idea to set the heat to 'hell', so I pull off my hoodie and drop it beside me on the bleachers. However, when I do, I regret it immediately because Joss takes one look at my t-shirt and starts with that sappy B.S. again.

"OMG! How sweet!" She points at my white tee, at the last name 'Riley' written in big, bold letters. "And isn't that your jersey number? She picked the same one so you guys could be all cute and matchy?" she gushes.

"Here we go."

"I'm just in awe," she says. "Can we take a moment to talk about this incredible evolution you've gone through since the year started?"

"No."

"Absolutely not."

"I swear I'll die if that happens."

These are the collective responses given by me, Dane, and Sterling, hoping like hell Joss spares us.

She ignores us, of course.

"What brought on this idea? I mean, you're fully committed to this whole '*supportive boyfriend*' thing, aren't you?" she adds with a grin.

"Just doing what she would've done for me during football. You know, had I not been such an ass."

"You were *such* an ass," Joss reiterates with a laugh.

No point in sugarcoating the truth.

"Pandora's gonna eat this shit up. You *do* know that, right?" Sterling asks, eyeing my shirt with a grin.

I shrug, pretending that wasn't the point, but honestly? This is intentional. I need Southside to know she has my heart, know I care more than I've *ever* cared, because things are going to change soon.

This week has been one filled with harsh realities. Starting with the conclusion I reached about two nights ago regarding my dad. Grandpa made a solid point, and I haven't been able to get his words out of my head. He's right about my dad being smart, tactical. Even if we don't see it, he's watching us. Watching to see if she's making the right moves. Watching to see if I'm still head over heels for her or if things are starting to fall apart.

Which means we have to play our roles and we have to play them well.

As if the universe just heard my thoughts, the unlikely answer to all my and Southside's problems comes strolling into the gym.

"Watch my things. I'll be right back."

I feel Joss and my brothers' eyes on me when I stand, grabbing my hoodie before shooting a quick text and heading down the bleachers to the court. When I pass Ricky, he glances down to his phone to read the message.

West: Meet me out back near the track.

If ever there was a conversation I didn't want to have, it's this one. Ricky's been a pain in my ass since the first time I saw him dancing with Southside at the block party. What kills me is the emotion I see in his eyes for her. But tonight, I'm almost relieved he hasn't been able to let go yet, because his love for *my* girl might be the only thing that saves us.

"This better be good. It's fucking cold out here."

I peer up from my phone when Ricky pushes through the doors, announcing himself.

"Wouldn't have asked you to meet me if it wasn't." I haven't even gotten into what I need to say and, already, I feel ill.

"What is it?" he asks.

"Honestly, I don't even know where to start."

"Well, maybe I should leave your ass out here to freeze to death while you figure it out." He starts heading for the door again and I just say it.

"Augustin Ruiz is your grandfather, right?"

Ricky stops in his tracks and turns to face me but doesn't speak.

"I think you'll want to see this," I say next, showing the image I'd been studying before he came out here. I snapped a pic of the birth certificate Boone shared with Southside and me, knowing Ricky would need more than just my word that this was real.

"The fuck am I looking at?"

"My father's birth certificate," I answer, enlarging the document a bit, zooming in so he sees clearly the section marked *Father's Name*.

He snatches my phone and glares at it. With how his shoulders are suddenly heaving, I'm guessing this isn't what he wanted to see tonight.

“This isn’t possible. My grandfather *loved* my grandmother. If this shit were true, it would mean—”

“It’d mean he had secrets,” I interject. “Listen, take it from someone who’s been where you are right now. It sucks hearing that sometimes people we respect can really fuck up, but it doesn’t take away from whatever he was to *you*.”

He shakes his head and hands my phone back. “Nah, this ain’t real. I don’t know what you thought this was gonna prove, but the Augustin Ruiz I know, was a good man.”

He attempts to walk away again, but for so many reasons I can’t let that happen.

“Multiples run in your family, right? Explains me and my brothers,” I say. “And whatever went down between Augustin and my grandmother doesn’t make him some fucking monster. It just means he’s human and he isn’t perfect. Who the hell is?” I add.

“He wouldn’t have done that.”

I let out a breath and glance at the document again. “Well, his name being on my dad’s birth certificate says otherwise. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry to be the one to spring this on you.”

A heavy sigh leaves Ricky when he looks away, shaking his head.

“No fucking way we’re related.”

I laugh a bit. “Trust me, I don’t like it any more than you do, but it is what it is.”

He shrugs and glances toward me again. “So, you just wanted to fuck up my night with this shit or what? Can I go back inside now? Preferably *before* I freeze my nuts off?”

There’s more, but I’m not sure whether what I’m about to share is betraying Southside’s confidence. I just have to assume we’re beyond that now. Besides, bringing Ruiz into all this was *her* idea.

“Blue’s gotten some detective named Roby involved. Ever heard of him?”

Ricky’s eyes shift toward me. “I have. He let me off the hook a few times back in the day. He was her dad’s partner for some years.”

“Well, he’s on our side now and he needed something tying my dad to your uncle, something to at least prove it’s possible they have communication and could be working this thing together. Blue sent him a copy of what we found. We’re hoping it’ll help his case.”

Ricky's suddenly quiet, looking off in the distance while he thinks.

"You know... there's a much simpler way for me to handle your father. A way that doesn't involve the cops."

He peers up when he's done speaking, and it only takes a moment to realize what he means. Apparently, he'd prefer to stop Vin from breathing than to have him sent to jail.

"Believe it or not, letting the police handle things makes shit a whole lot messier," he adds. "Me and you could easily work out the when and where. I'll get in and get out before anyone sees me. Then, just like that, all our problems disappear."

It honestly shocks me how little I feel when he suggests killing the man, but there's zero emotion involved whatsoever.

"You and I both know Blue would have my ass if I let you do that shit. For whatever reason, she cares what happens to you."

Ricky smirks when I admit that, but we both know it's true. She might not still hold romantic feelings for this guy, but she definitely cares about him.

Even if I hate it.

"Besides, this is bigger than all of us. If my dad and your uncle are into what we *think* they're into, there's no telling how many girls are out there, terrified they're gonna die in this shit. We can't let that happen."

As if suddenly remembering the bigger picture, he nods and zones out.

I know I shouldn't ask what I'm about to ask, and I'm also pretty sure he'll say 'no' either way, but I can't help it.

"Have you... done something like that before? What you mentioned doing to Vin?"

Instead of answering, Ricky passes a blank look my way. Apparently, it was stupid to ask.

Fair enough.

"On that note, I'm going in." He turns to leave, but I halt him with two words.

"There's more."

Frustrated, he leans back and faces the sky. "You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

"I need a favor."

"Hell no," he answers. Zero hesitation.

"Poor choice of words. I need a favor, but it's not for me. It's for Blue."

Now, he's listening.

"I know she told you what my dad's forcing her to do, and we're running out of time," I explain. "While we figure shit out, I think it's best if we make it look like we're cooperating with Vin, make it look like she's giving him what he wants."

"What the hell does any of this have to do with me?"

My jaw is tense and I'm trying to force the words out.

"Blue and I are gonna have to stage a breakup. It's the only way, but my dad knows I'm stubborn just like he is, which is why he knew to tell Blue to cut deep. So... that's where you come in."

Ricky's brow arches at me, like I'm speaking a foreign language or something. Clearly, I'm gonna have to spell this shit out.

"If we fake the breakup, I'll have to keep my distance. Which means I need someone around her who'll protect her like *I* would. Someone who loves her like I do," I add, causing my own stomach to turn.

For the first few seconds, Ricky only stares. But then, out of nowhere, he laughs.

"You're out your damn mind, rich boy. So, let me get this straight. Your big master plan is to make it look like she dumped your ass and came back to me?"

He finishes speaking and laughs again.

"All I know is, I can't leave her unprotected. You got a better idea?"

He shrugs and levels a look my way. "Don't get mad, I'm just realizing something."

At the risk of knowing I'm about to regret this, I ask anyway. "What are you talking about?"

"Just saying," he begins, arching a brow as he smirks. "If you think *I'm* your safe option, Blue's clearly spared you a few details about us from back in the day. Hell, even from this time last *year*," he clarifies.

I don't say shit, because until he just mentioned it, I thought I was content knowing they dated for a while, knowing he was her first and the last before me. But now, he has me wondering if throwing them together will be like tossing a lit match into a vat of gasoline.

Southside, I believe in completely. It's *this* motherfucker I don't trust further than I can throw his ass.

"But whatever. I'm in. For her," he adds, like I'd ever think otherwise.

"If we do this shit, there are three things I want you to remember," I

warn. “Number one, this isn’t real. Two, this is temporary. And three, I’ll kick your ass if you try anything.”

He smirks again, already backing toward the building. “I’ll try to keep my hands to myself, but you know, things happen.”

Before there’s even time to get upset, he starts laughing, probably imagining what’s going on inside my head.

“Relax. I’ll behave. She’d never have it any other way.”

He disappears inside the building just as I hear the announcer starting to introduce the players. While this might be one of the worst conversations I’ve ever had to have, it was necessary. It’s no secret Ricky’s not my favorite person in the world, but one thing Blue’s said about him is true. He’s loyal to her.

And in a world where we can’t even trust our own parents, a little loyalty goes a long way.

Ricky’s on board, now here comes the hard part—getting Southside to agree.

@QweenPandora: Well done, Cypress Prep! Our girls were on fire tonight! If you missed it, here’s a recap.

Our southside connection was definitely the star of tonight’s game, knocking down a whopping thirty-nine points on her own. She was alert, she was focused, and no one can say she didn’t give it her all.

Especially the girl who caught that nasty elbow to the ribs while attempting to steal the ball from the beast we all know as NewGirl.

And speaking of beasts...

Anyone else spot SeXyBeAsT in the crowd tonight? He waltzed in boldly, paying no attention to our own KingMidas, seated in the stands repping his girl with a sweet t-shirt to show his support.

Careful, NewGirl. Not a good look having your Ex and your Next seated on the same bleachers. One has to wonder, are you giving SeXyBeAsT reason to

hold on so long?

Let us hope not, because the king's wrath would certainly come down hard and swift.

Consider yourself warned.

Later, Peeps.

CHAPTER 32

BLUE

Roby: Received the docs you scanned and emailed. Much appreciated. Stay safe out there and remember what I told you—don't get too close.

Blue: Noted. Talk soon.

I set my phone on the desk and I'm so tempted to doze. Tonight's game wore me out. Seeing Mike in the stands after I specifically told him not to come, I played a bit harder than usual. A bit more aggressive.

He's been trying to get in good with me since weaseling his way back in a little more than a week ago, but the problem with that is that I don't *want* him to try. The years I needed him to be a father, he chose to drown himself in booze. Now that I'm a breath away from college, he wants to make up for lost time.

No thanks.

Despite how hard I'm fighting it, my lids fall closed, but I'm startled awake when someone bangs the door with their fist. I'm off my bed and sprinting down the hallway before Mike or Scar can even get off the couch. They've been in the living room, talking and laughing since we got home, zoned out on some lame cartoon I was invited to watch. I suppose it goes without saying, but I gave that one a hard pass. Passed on the pizza he ordered, too, choosing to settle for ramen instead.

I make eye contact with him while walking between the couch and TV. He keeps throwing me the sad, puppy dog eyes, but every time I catch him

doing it, I resist the urge to give him the finger.

Fuck him.

Fuck his weak apology.

Fuck him for getting inside Scar's head.

I'm counting the days until he breaks her heart like he's done a million times already.

Before he can ask me to join them again, I rush to the door and unlock it. Smiling as I let Ricky inside.

"Hey. Thanks for stopping by."

"No problem."

After speaking, he glares at Mike. Because Ricky's been here for most of the shit my siblings and I have seen over the years, he holds the same grudge.

"We can talk in my room," I say, knowing we'll need a bit of privacy.

He trails behind me and a few seconds later, the TV's muffled on the other side of my closed door.

Without asking, he drops down onto my bed. Old habits die hard, I guess. So, since he's made himself at home, I sit at the desk.

"Good game tonight."

"Thanks. I'm glad you made it."

"You knew I would," he says with a smile.

"Pretty sure I bruised that girl's ribs, which wasn't intentional. The game just got intense."

"Or *you* got intense," he counters, calling me on my shit.

"Guilty, I guess."

He shakes his head and I'm recalling how many times I nearly got into fights over a game. I grew up playing with guys who didn't take it easy on me at the court, so I've never been one to play a dainty game of ball. I come at the other team hard and fast, and I make no apologies for that.

"How's Shane?" I ask, genuinely concerned with how he's settling in. Puerto Rico is so far away.

Ricky shrugs. "As good as can be expected. Of course, he's pissed about having to leave Scar and school, but he'll be okay," he reasons.

I nod, sympathizing with that in so many ways.

"He'll adjust, make new friends."

Ricky nods once, keeping his eyes trained on me. "Maybe, but your first love's hard to get over."

I draw in a deep breath and let my gaze slip to the floor, knowing we're

no longer talking about my sister and his brother. Which brings me to why I asked him to stop by.

“I hear you and West had a talk tonight.”

After speaking, I imagine how uncomfortable that must have been for both parties involved.

Ricky nods. “We did.”

“And... do you think it’s as crazy an idea as I do?”

He thinks for a moment. “When he first brought it up, yeah, but the more I thought about it, the less insane it seemed. Why? You don’t think it’ll work?”

“Do you?”

He gives a nonchalant shrug. “I’m... optimistically intrigued.”

I think I get what he means. “It’s not so much that I don’t think it’ll work. It’s just that the whole thing feels...”

“Awkward as fuck,” he cuts in when I can’t find the words.

His summation draws a laugh out of me. “That’s one way of putting it. I mean, this whole *‘four-step-plan’* has my head spinning, but West seems so certain this is what it’ll take for his dad to keep his distance.”

“Yeah, he filled me in on the steps part on my drive over here. We had to cut our first conversation short so no one would see.”

I smile at him a little when he finishes explaining. “I get the feeling you two talk more than I realize. Do I smell a bromance in the making?”

He cocks his head to the side, as if to suggest I’ve lost my mind.

“He’s not my type,” he teases as I laugh.

“Seriously, though, how’d you do with the whole *‘cousins’* thing? I imagine that had to be quite the surprise.”

When his chest rises with a deep breath, his expression says it all. Hearing the news about his grandfather was painful, but he’s not so naïve to think it’s impossible.

“Is what it is,” he says plainly, which is code for *‘I don’t want to talk about it’* for those of us who speak fluent Ricky.

I take the hint and move on.

“Well, how are you feeling about this? I mean, with our history and all. Are you—”

He cuts me off with a quiet laugh. “I’m cool, B. You don’t have to worry about me getting attached or getting my feelings hurt. I’m a big boy,” he adds.

I see he wants me to believe that, and I'm trying, but I know the *real* Ricky. He's tough on the outside, and no one on the street would even consider crossing him, but he's got a huge heart. And, as his friend, I'd never want to do something I think could hurt him.

"You're not lying?"

He laughs again. "No, so stop asking all these damn questions."

"Okay, okay."

He peers up and I meet his gaze. "So, does this mean we're doing this?" he asks, making me think long and hard about that before nodding.

"For Scar, for all those girls out there, yeah. I guess we are."

He nods and stands from my bed. "Then, I'm in, too. When's this whole thing supposed to kick off?"

At the thought of it—publicly humiliating West, pretending not to love him anymore—a heavy sigh leaves me before answering.

"Monday."

Ricky seems okay with that. "Cool. Let the games begin."

He puts on a tough act, but I can only hope he's really this strong on the inside. I guess time will tell.

QueenPandora: Did I call it, or did I call it?

What started as just a seemingly innocent pop-up appearance made by SeXyBeAsT at tonight's game, has turned into a shady rendezvous of sorts. Shout out to the follower who just sent this pic of him headed inside NewGirl's house.

While we can't be sure what went on once they were alone, we have our imaginations. Tell me, do you think there's a scandal brewing in Cypress Pointe?

Let the speculation begin.

Later, Peeps.

CHAPTER 33

BLUE

Turns out being exposed in Pandora's last post—although completely unplanned—worked in our favor.

Most commenters are convinced there's some shady reason behind Ricky being at my house, so West thinks we should use that to our advantage for day one of what Joss has officially dubbed Operation: Heartbreak.

I guess naming these missions is kind of her thing.

To start, I'm supposed to seem disinterested when West shows up at my locker to walk me to first hour. So, spotting him coming down the hall, I put on my game face.

"Hey," he says sweetly.

To which I respond with a very unimpressed, "Hey."

I look away and close my locker before we start toward my first class. He puts his arm around me, and I keep my gaze on the ground, not saying another word. When we make it to the door, I barely wave before ditching him to head inside. He lingers there a moment, even after I've taken my seat, and this is already killing me. Even though we're pretending, this is going to hurt us both.

The walk to second-hour is a repeat of the walk to first. I hardly pay him any attention and he plays the role of the dotting boyfriend. At the door, I turn with an eye roll, then leave him hanging like before.

Gut-wrenching. This whole thing.

We wash, rinse, and repeat all the way up until lunch, when the *real* fun is supposed to begin.

West starts out walking with me, but then I make it a point to stay two steps ahead, looking like I'd rather be anyplace but here. Then, when we sit, I say nothing as he and the others carry on as usual. Eventually, his gaze shifts toward me while I pick over my food.

"Fuck it. What the hell is your problem?" he asks, just loud enough for those at the next table to hear and pretend they aren't ear hustling.

I snap a look toward him and play along, just like we planned. "Nothing, just... I don't want to talk about it."

He breathes deep, shaking his head. "You've been acting like a bitch all day and I haven't done shit to you. If anything, *I* should be the one who's pissed."

"Really, you just called me a bitch in front of everyone and *you* should be pissed?"

I glance around just long enough to confirm that people's interest in what's happening at our table is growing.

"You two need a minute?" Sterling asks, looking uncomfortable as West and I start going at it, but we ignore him. After all, he's playing along right with us.

"I never called you a bitch. I said you've been acting like one. There's a difference."

"Whatever, West," I grumble, pushing my food away to fold both arms over my chest like a brat.

"You wouldn't be mad if you saw some shit about me having Parker over? Just asking. Because if it's cool for us to hang out alone with exes, I've got some calls to make."

I peer up at him then, feeling water pool in my eyes.

Oh, God. Why are you about to cry? This isn't part of the plan. And it isn't even real. Pull it together, woman!

I see it. The moment West starts feeling concerned that he's taken things too far, hurt my feelings. This isn't on him, though. Apparently, just the idea of us being at each other's throats like this rips me apart inside.

I blink a couple times, hoping he gets the hint that I'm okay to keep going.

"Fuck you, West."

"Oh, fuck *me*? Sure you wouldn't rather fuck Ricky?" he snaps back.

“Unless, of course, you two already got that out your systems last night.”

I peer up at him again and I swear it’s gotten ten times quieter than a moment ago. Everyone’s tuning in for the spectacle, which is exactly what we need. Someone will get this out to Pandora and she’ll take things from there. By then, Vin will think there’s trouble in paradise and we’ll be that much closer to the last phase of this fiasco—step four, the end.

“I don’t need this shit.” With that, I stand, grab only my bottle of water, and then head for the door.

I’m in knots on the inside and burst through the lunchroom doors, unable to pull my phone from my pocket fast enough. I type as quickly as I can, needing to get rid of all the negative energy, but a text comes through before I’m even able to hit send on my own.

West: I feel like shit. I’m so fucking sorry.

Despite how disgusted I am with having put on that performance, I manage to smile—while hiding around a corner, of course.

Blue: You beat me to the punch. I was just about to apologize.

West: Let’s agree to never do this in real life.

Blue: Deal.

West: Good. Where you headed?

Blue: To sit in my car and pout until lunch ends. Figured it’d be good for optics.

West: You’re probably right. We should start seeing posts soon. I’m off to go punch a locker and look all broody and unstable. People are eating this shit up.

I face away from a small circle of kids who pass by when he draws a laugh out of me.

Blue: Take it from me, punching things is a bad,BAD idea.

West: Noted. Love you.

Blue: Love you, too. Always.

@QueenPandora: It was the argument heard round the world. Today, lunch came with a bit of entertainment.

A hush fell over the crowd as people witnessed with their own eyes, direct fallout from last night’s drama—a love triangle I believe we all saw coming

from a mile away.

A KingMidas, NewGirl, SeXyBeAsT sandwich.

Word on the street is that NewGirl's been giving KingMidas the cold shoulder since morning. Like he's the one who got caught sneaking an ex into his place last night. But it doesn't end there. The tension came to a head today and the pair got caught in a public explosion you had to have been deaf and blind to miss.

*After that disaster, I think we're all wondering the same thing...
What on Earth will happen next?
Stay tuned.*

Later, Peeps.

—P

CHAPTER 34

BLUE

It's been a week of public silence, punctuated with moments of West and I being as nasty to each other as we could possibly stand, and now we're back at game day.

Peering out into the stands, the only faces I see are Scar's, Mike's, Jules's, and Ricky's. West and crew, on the other hand, are nowhere in sight. Staging the breakdown of our relationship has been hell for both of us, but we frequently remind each other that it's for a good cause. Doing this buys us time, it means my sister is safer for now, and means Detective Roby and Boone's investigator have a little more time to work.

I'm on edge like I was last week, but I'm also being mindful to not accidentally injure anyone this time. We're ahead by two points with less than a minute on the clock. It's still anyone's game, which means it'll come down to who wants it more.

Sweat pours down my face and I blink it away, focusing on the brunette dribbling the ball in front of me. She's got determination in her eyes and I know she's about to try her best to pull out the win for her team. I focus on her waist and not the ball—something Hunter and Ricky taught me years ago. She can move left or right, quickly changing the direction of the ball, but the movement in her waist will give away her next move.

Works every time.

She fakes left, then dribbles right and I'm on her, not leaving any room

for her to pass the ball or get past me. I'm reminded of the day I was forced to play defense on West during gym, and I'm also reminded of punching him in the face right after. Not my best moment, but we made it past that, built something real. Something solid.

Before sadness can bring me down, I focus on the game again, going up into the air with the girl when she makes a shift. A fraction of a second later, my fingertips catch the bottom of the ball, changing its direction, sending it soaring opposite of where she intended.

The crowd goes crazy, and I peer up at the clock, not getting too excited too quickly.

Seventeen seconds left. A lot can happen in seventeen seconds.

Their shooting guard passes the ball in and the point guard swipes it quickly. She runs it down the court and gets ready to make a pass, but I stop her momentum, steal the ball right out of her hands, and toss it toward our basket.

It's a clean shot.

My teammates don't waste a second before celebrating, and while I should feel like a million bucks right now, I don't. I'm all out of positive energy these days, so I slap a few high-fives, then head back to the bench to grab my towel.

I spot Mike and Scar on their feet, applauding the play. He's really been laying it on thick lately, trying to pretend he's father of the year, but I'm not buying it. After waving at Jules when she jumps around like a wild woman to get my attention, I turn my back on the crowd and head straight for the locker room.

The team is still buzzing with energy, riding the high from tonight's win, but I'm simply not feeling it.

I strip down, grab my things for the shower, and try to let all the bad shit go.

Hot water rolls off my skin and I'm in no hurry to leave. This is the first time all day I've felt relaxed, felt any kind of relief. The voices go quiet in the background and I have no idea how much time has passed. All I know is I've been in here forever and I'm alone now.

My mind wanders and the next thing I know, the moisture on my face isn't only from the shower. There are tears mingled in with it and I just let them fall. I spend so much time pretending to be strong, letting it all out feels like a weight's lifting off my shoulders.

Hinges squeal from the other side of the locker room and I think nothing of it. We forget things all the time and rush back in to grab them. I'm convinced that's what's happened, until the deep timbre of a male voice has me gasping and spinning on my heels.

"You were on fire tonight," West says from where he's leaned against the tiled archway, watching as water streams down my skin in sheets.

His gaze blazes a trail from where they first land on my eyes, then down from my breasts to my piercing. My chest heaves because I needed him here, and then he showed up seemingly out of thin air.

"Where'd you come from?"

He smiles and nods toward the door. "I couldn't be at the game, so I watched from the second-story track. No one even noticed."

Clever *and* sexy.

"Can't have my girl dominating on the court and I'm not around to see it," he adds, prompting me to walk over to where he stands and kiss him like my life depends on it. Hell, it sure feels like it does.

He doesn't mind that I'm soaked and getting water all over his clothes and shoes. Nor does he mind when I undo his belt and lower his zipper. He steps out of his sneakers and socks, then takes off everything else.

"Did you lock us in?" I ask when he hoists me up and my legs encircle his waist.

"Of course," he groans against my neck, sucking and biting there as he moves us both beneath the running water.

The tile is cool when my back first presses against it, but then I don't notice so much. It's been a week since we've shared even a hug, which felt as critical as going without water or air.

I was so distracted by being able to feel his flesh against my hands, I didn't even notice that he managed to grab a condom from his jeans before taking them off. He reaches down to slide it on, then enters me fast and rough.

I lose my breath and he feels so good inside me I can't even form a meaningful thought. My fingertips dig into his back and I'm already close to coming. His slick chest grazes my nipples in rhythm, and I can't believe I made it this long without him.

One inked arm holds me in place, while the other stretches beside my head, where his fingers splay against the tile as he fucks me into oblivion.

"Harder," I whimper against his shoulder, and he meets my demand

without hesitation.

More than the physical distance, the emotional gulf between us leaves me feeling so empty, hollow on the inside. Being reduced to phone calls at the end of the day simply isn't enough, which is why I can hardly control myself now.

“You can't ever leave me. I'd fucking die,” he pants.

Those breathy words graze my ear and I'm coming undone, wondering how he could think I'd ever even consider it.

“Promise me,” he breathes. “I need to hear you say that shit.”

He slams into me harder, bringing as much pain as there is pleasure.

“I promise.”

He presses his forehead to mine and, staring into his green eyes, I come for him.

My voice carries, echoing off the tiled floor and walls before reverberating right back into my ears. His hips pump faster and, a moment later, he comes and never looks away. He wants me to know I own him—his heart, his body, his soul.

Everything.

He gives it all and I happily accept it.

My feet lower to the water pooling below and I'm no longer a shell of myself. It took his touch to bring me back to life. He asked me to promise him I'd never leave, and I meant it when I gave my word.

I'm in this.

One-hundred percent.

CHAPTER 35

BLUE

“Hey.”

Closing the back door behind me, I peer up when Mike speaks. He’s wearing an old apron I guess used to be Mom’s—back when she actually cared enough to cook, that is. Still, there isn’t an inch of him that’s not covered in flour.

Instead of speaking, I slide my shoes off and keep heading toward my room.

“Took you a little while to get home,” he says. “Did you make a stop first?”

Clearly, he hasn’t gotten the hint that I don’t feel like talking, so with the hardest eye roll ever, I stop in my tracks. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him I’m late because I just fucked my boyfriend in the locker room shower, but I decide against it. Instead, all he gets is a blank stare.

“Well, wherever you were, hopefully you didn’t eat. I just got dinner in the oven. Homemade chicken pot pie, dinner rolls.”

There *is* such a thing as trying too hard, and he’s definitely tapped into that vein.

“No thanks,” I force out, turning again to head toward my room. Phase two of the plan involves me being spotted with Ricky again, so he’ll be here soon.

“That was a good game you played out there.”

I stop again when Mike starts talking.

Again.

“Thanks.”

“You’ve gotten a lot stronger on defense since the last time I saw you play.”

I nod. “You’d be surprise how much someone improves their game in eight years.”

The snide comment just wiped the smile completely off his face.

Good.

He lowers his head and... damn. Why do I feel guilty being mean to this asshole? He’s been nothing *but* mean and nasty to me my whole life. He doesn’t just get to waltz back through the door and get a fresh start. I don’t get back all the hard years. I don’t get a redo.

“I know you don’t want to eat, but maybe you can sit in here with me and Scar just this once. This is kind of a celebration dinner,” he adds, chuckling a bit.

Walk away and leave his ass standing here looking like an idiot. Don’t fall for whatever game he’s playing.

I look at him—pitiful and hopeful.

“A celebration for what?” I ask, hating that I’m even being minutely cordial.

His smile is back, but it’s far more subdued than before.

“I got the job.”

His announcement makes my stomach twist a bit. Maybe it’s shock or... maybe I’m a little excited for what that could mean for our household. I’ve pulled the weight on my own for so long, I—

No. Don’t get your hopes up. There’s no guarantee he’s planning to take care of business. How many times have you seen him blow an entire paycheck on booze and bullshit?

“Congrats,” I say with a dry grin. It’s all I can muster, and I’m not even certain he deserved *that*.

“Thanks. So, does that mean you’ll be joining us? I could kind of use the buffer with Scar. She’s a little upset with me for making her delete that damn gossip app last night. Seemed unhealthy how much she’s on that thing,” he adds with a nervous smile.

I glance over at the table he set, at the sink full of dishes he’s preparing to wash. For so long I wanted this—for him to be a dad—but now I’m terrified

to give him a chance. Having that taken away twice in a lifetime might be too much for me.

“Pass.”

I don't have it in me to hear what he'll say next, to see the disappointed look on his face, so I head to my room and shut the door. I don't let myself think about possibly having just hurt his feelings, because I have a task to complete. And when Ricky honks his horn outside, I'm able to refocus.

Quickly slipping into a pair of stretch pants and an oversized hoodie, I head out and climb into the blue muscle car that awaits me.

“Ready for this?” Ricky asks with a grin, and I smile back.

“Ready as I'll ever be.”

We had two stops planned and we made both as quickly as possible before heading back to his place. First, we got gas at a gas station on the north side, where we'd most likely be seen by a Pandora follower. Next, we hit a fast-food spot and made sure to show a little too much PDA for two people who constantly insist they're just friends. I leaned on his shoulder while waiting in line. Then, while I ordered food, his hand rested at the small of my back. With any luck, those pics would be in circulation before night's end.

Now, we munch on our fries, veg out on his couch, and wait for the updates to start blowing up our phones.

“They put way too much salt on these,” Ricky complains, continuing to stuff his mouth.

Watching him, a laugh slips out. “And yet, you're still eating them. Interesting.”

“I'd eat anything right now. I'm starving,” he admits. “With Aunt Carla gone, I've had to fend for myself, and I'm not gonna lie, it gets a little weird around here at dinner time. Last night, I ate hotdogs and spaghetti noodles.”

Imagining what that would look like on a plate, I frown a bit.

“Well, you could always stop by my house and eat my portion. Mike's suddenly Chef Boyardee. He cooks most nights, which is strange. Pretty sure they gave him shock therapy in that place.”

Ricky eats yet another handful of fries and shrugs. “Maybe he's really trying this time. Either way, if it's an act, he can only keep that up for so

long. Time will tell if he's sincere."

He's right, but I choose to finish my food instead of continuing this conversation. If we keep going, I'll likely lose my appetite.

My phone sounds off and I almost knock over my soda trying to get to it, thinking it's the posts we've been waiting on. It isn't Pandora, but I'm excited all the same.

West: Just saw you an hour ago and I'm already fucking horny again. How the hell is that even possible?

I smile and sit straight in my seat.

Blue: Such a poet. You should put that in a book.

West: Not even kidding. Staying away from you is driving me out of my mind.

West: Currently lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, hard as a brick.

If I could see my own face, I'm pretty sure it'd be bright red.

Blue: Well, do something about it. You've got a hand, don't you?

West: Yeah, but I'd rather have my girl instead.

West: Fuck it. I'll sneak over. Not sure how, but I'll figure it out.

My heart sinks, hearing his plan. He must've forgotten the one we already came up with for tonight.

Blue: I'm with Ricky. Remember?

There's a long bout of silence while waiting for his response, and when he finally does text back, I sense his mood through the words.

West: Right. It slipped my mind. We'll talk later.

Blue: We can keep texting. We're just eating and talking, killing time before he takes me back home.

West: It's cool. I've got shit to do anyway.

Blue: Text or call if you get bored. I'll be around.

West: For sure. Love you.

I set my phone aside and feel kind of sick, knowing he's way across town and I'm sitting here with another guy. And not just *any* guy—my ex, with whom it hasn't even been a full year since the last time we were intimate. I can only imagine how West must feel at home thinking about it.

It'll be over and done with soon enough. Just hang tight.

"That the boyfriend?" Ricky asks.

I glance over at him and nod. "Yeah."

He's thoughtful for a moment, then drops his trash into the now-empty food bag. "You really are happy with him, aren't you?"

Surprisingly, I don't detect any sarcasm. Only genuine curiosity.

"I am."

He studies me a bit, judging my sincerity in silence. "Then, that's all I need to know. If you're happy, I'll figure out a way to tolerate his arrogant ass."

I laugh and give him a look. "I don't know. I can't shake this feeling that you'll end up actually *liking* him."

Now, I'm the one getting a look, and it isn't a pleasant one, but I'm laughing even harder.

"Pump the brakes," he says with a chuckle.

"A girl can dream, can't she?"

"Well, keep that one to yourself," he shoots back, standing from the couch. "Come to the kitchen. I've got ice cream."

I don't hesitate to follow, making sure to grab my phone in case West calls.

"Are you sure we should be eating this? I mean, what if you need it for dinner tomorrow," I tease.

"Real fucking funny. Just remember that joke when you leave for school in the morning and find your tires flat."

I laugh, shoving him in the back, but stop dead in my tracks when I get not just *any* notification, but *the* notification.

Ricky spots me grinning and goes for his phone, too. The next second, our gazes lock and suddenly I'm feeling like West being lonely tonight wasn't all for nothing.

Because... it worked.

@QweenPandora: "Just friends."

Yeah, right.

Anyone else picturing KingMidas at home, sick as he looks at these pics? I almost feel guilty posting them.

Almost.

From day one, I said SeXyBeAsT was one to watch. We all knew he had eyes

for NewGirl, but it was impossible to tell whether she was completely over him, or still pining for the past. However, these images that just rolled in suggest these two are far from over.

*So, KingMidas, inquiring minds want to know.
What's your next move?*

Later, Peeps.

—P

CHAPTER 36

WEST

And there it is, the update we've all been waiting for.

Pandora's gossip might be a pain in the ass most days, but she's helping our plan along without even realizing.

Not gonna lie. Seeing pics of Southside hugged up with *anyone* would suck, but seeing her with Ricky in particular... it fucking guts me.

His comment the night of the first basketball game festers in my head like a gaping wound. The reminder that it hasn't even been a year since he fucked her last makes me fantasize about torturing his ass to death, but then I refocus. What gets me through is knowing Southside's not the kind of girl I have to worry about, and knowing what we're doing is keeping Scar safe.

Lying in the dark isn't helping my mood, but it's late and the only other place I want to be is with *her*. Knowing that can't happen right now, I accept that I've officially become that guy. You know, the one who can't even imagine making a move without his girl?

Makes me want to punch my *own* damn self in the face, but this is what she's done to me.

So, here I am, taking my lame ass to sleep.

At eleven o'clock.

On a fucking Friday night.

Beautiful.

I force my eyes closed, but they pop open at the sound of the elevator bell

dinging. It's entirely possible Dane and Sterling's night is ending early, but it's highly unlikely. Which means the odds of the steps I hear echoing against the marble tile being one of my brothers are slim to none.

There's a stiff knock at my door before it swings open.

"You up?" Vin asks, already sounding annoyed by something.

I keep my eyes trained on the window and don't answer.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," he barks out, half a second before flipping the light switch. "Are you seeing this shit Pandora's posting?"

When he grabs the back of my t-shirt and yanks me to the edge of the bed, I turn quickly, balling both my fists.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" I roar, leveling a glare his way.

"This girl's making a fool of you, *publicly*, and you're asleep," he grumbles. "Check your damn phone, West."

I let out a breath and he's likely reading my frustration toward *him* as frustration about the latest update.

"I wasn't asleep, and I already saw the post," I say flatly.

"You already saw it." He says that mostly to himself. "Well, good thing you're on top of things."

I don't miss the sarcasm.

"So, nowhere in that simple head of yours did it ever occur to you that now's the perfect time to do some serious damage control? People are laughing at you, West. Your classmates, your *teammates*, everyone. All because you didn't *fucking* listen to me. I warned you," he seethes, coming closer as his whole damn face reddens. "I told you this girl was toxic, but you wouldn't listen. Now, she's out running around *your* town in the open, hanging all over some guy who isn't you, while you get a nap in. Nice. Real fucking nice."

Listen to this asshole. He's so pissed at the idea of someone with the last name Golden being made a fool of, he's damn-near frothing at the mouth. But what else I'm realizing is... he's paying attention. Just like we knew he would be.

I stare, watching as a vein in the center of his forehead throbs, as he breaks into a sweat, and I can't believe I'm about to go along with this shitfest. However, he'll never buy that I'm being this passive. After all, he's the one who knew I'd fight for Southside, which is why he told her to cut deep.

"Well, what the fuck do you want me to do at this point?" I snap. "Every

time I've confronted her, she feeds me more B.S. about them being friends, about how they grew up together and have always been close."

"Yeah, from the looks of those pics, they look *real* fucking close."

I'm confused by his anger. Isn't this what he wanted? For Southside to break me? Then, it sinks in. He hadn't taken into account that said heartbreak might be a highly publicized event. One that makes the son of the almighty Vin Golden look weak. Son of a bitch probably wouldn't have even made this deal if he'd thought it all the way through.

"You've gotta get out there and do something, West," he says, leveling a stern glare my way. "How many girls have you turned down since getting involved with this bitch? A dozen or more? My suggestion is that you grab your damn phone, find one out of the bunch who's available tonight, and fuck her somewhere just public enough for someone to catch you in the act. Show that piece of southside trash the Golden men are *never* to be crossed," he fumes.

Tonight's already pushed me to the edge of a dangerous rage, but hearing him talk about Southside like this tests my limits. Knowing this is how he sees her—as trash, a bitch—I'd love to take my frustration out on his sorry ass.

But... the plan.

"I can't," I groan.

"What the fuck do you mean you can't?"

I glare at him before answering. "I have a scholarship to protect, remember? I've already jeopardized that once. I'd never get away with having a video like that getting passed around again."

He blinks and it seems he's thinking a bit more clearly now. "You're right."

When he begins to pace, it's likely he's trying to come up with another idea. Something that *won't* do more harm to my image.

He peers up and sees me dialing, which halts his steps. "You're calling someone?"

I nod. "Yep, Dane. He and Sterling are at a party. I'll link up with them and see what happens from there."

"Good, good. That's a start," he pants, finally calming down now that he thinks I'm taking action. In reality, my plan is to park my ass right back in bed the second he leaves.

"You're doing the right thing, Son," Vin insists. "But let this be a lesson

to you. This is what happens when you let a woman get the upper hand, let them start thinking *they're* in control. Sometimes they just need to be reminded that you've got options. Trust me, if you take my advice, she'll see that tonight."

Trying to stomach this dickhead's twisted logic, I nod. "Understood."

His stare lingers a moment, thinking he's just talked some sense into me, then he turns to head back upstairs. The moment he's gone, I go right back to what I was doing before he barged in—imagining the world without him in it.

Can't fucking wait.

CHAPTER 37

BLUE

With the looks I've been getting today, you'd think I walked through the doors of Cypress Prep stark naked, wearing a sign around my neck that reads '*Cum Dumpster*'. If I thought these assholes were hard on me before, now that I've allegedly betrayed their king, my rep is shot to hell.

Again.

Which is *super* fun.

The only good thing about today is that I have Lexi. Well, kind of. She's a bit standoffish with me because, apparently, not calling to check in on her even once during her two-week suspension didn't go unnoticed. If she only knew all the shit I have on my plate, she'd give me a pass. However, not knowing if she's Pandora, I'm not even *thinking* about sharing. As badly as I don't want to hurt her, I have to stay focused on the goal in mind.

Keep Scar safe, bring down Vin.

"So, are we gonna talk about the pics or just pretend nothing's changed?" she asks, poking around at her lunch.

"Not sure what you mean."

She shoots me a look now, as if to remind me she's not as mindless as the other robots at this school.

"You're not sure what pics I'm talking about? Like, the ones of you and your ex Pandora posted last night?"

I sip my drink and meet her gaze. "We're friends and we were hanging

out. You know Pandora's known for making something out of nothing. The whole situation's just been blown way out of proportion."

Lexi glances over to where the triplets and Joss are seated, then looks at me again.

"Sure about that? Because last time I saw you, you were so deep in love it was hard to stomach. And from what I hear, he's not doing too good with all this," she adds, nodding toward West, giving me an excuse to sneak another peek at him.

She isn't lying. Although all of this is pretend, and mostly his idea, the pain I see on his face is real. And honestly, that kills me a little.

"He's fine," I lie.

"Which is why you're sitting over here with me and he's all the way over there. Right. Got it," she adds with a sigh.

I finally tear my eyes away from West and remember the role I'm supposed to play. The word Joss kept throwing at me was *'indifferent'*.

Be... indifferent.

"I've just been thinking that, I don't know... maybe we moved too fast and I wasn't as ready to settle down with him as I thought."

Lexi's expression softens a bit more, now that I'm no longer treating her like a stranger.

"Well, have you told him that?"

I shrug. "How do you tell a guy you're not sure you still want to be with him?"

Lexi glances over at their table again, then back at me. "Beats me. I don't do relationships, but I'm pretty blunt about shit. So, I'd say just tell him and see what happens."

She's giving the best advice she knows how to give and, whether it's *good* advice or not, I feel guilty that she's trying to help. Seeing as how this whole thing is total B.S.

"Maybe," I sigh. "Right now, I just want to get through the rest of this week without being tarred and feathered."

She laughs. "Well, what did you expect? Don't you know betraying the king is an act of treason?"

I smile at her. "Sure wish this relationship had come with a warning. If it had, I might not have even bothered."

She's about to respond, but her expression goes blank. I follow her gaze and it leads straight to West as he strolls this way. Even knowing exactly

what his next move is about to be, I'm not quite sure I'm ready to play along.

Here goes, I guess.

He drops down into the seat across from me and meets my gaze with a chilled look in his eyes. I, on the other hand, have zero feeling on my face whatsoever.

"What?" I snap, pretending I'm talking to Mike. It helps when trying to come across as being genuinely unimpressed right now.

"Are we gonna talk? I texted and called all night, and every time I've gotten close to you today, you pretend you have somewhere more important to be."

"I *did* have someplace important to be, West. It's called class."

His jaw tenses with frustration. "Here we go again. More of the same bitch-fest I've been getting for the past two weeks," he groans. "Just fucking tell me if we're done, so we can *both* move the fuck on."

I feel Lexi's stare as she wonders what I'll say to that, wonders how West and I went from being so solid, to this.

"Just... I can't do this. Not in front of everyone."

I stand then, leaving West at the table with no more clarity than he walked over here with.

"So, I'm just supposed to fucking wait for you? That's what you think?" he shouts as I storm away.

I don't look back, don't respond, just burst through the lunchroom doors and head toward my locker to wait for the bell to ring. My heart's still racing after that last outburst, but it's getting easier to pretend. Not once has anyone questioned whether we're just putting on a show, because why would we? We're painting a picture where West's getting walked on like a cheap rug, and I look like a monster.

I make it about halfway to my locker before my phone sounds off. I pause to read West's text, having to fight a smile as I scroll.

West: Pretty sure Lexi growled at me when you left.

Blue: Probably. I've been super skeptical of her lately, but I'm actually starting to think she's on the level.

West: Maybe. Anyway, is it weird that all this fake fighting is turning me on?

Blue: Yes, it's weird, but so are you.

West: Fair answer. Send nudes anyway.

Another laugh slips out.

Blue: PTSD won't let me. The last time I did that, the pic ended up in the hands of some creepy old guy. Maybe you've met him?

West: Shit. Forgot about that.

An idea hits me and I'm so close to telling myself it's too risky, but I'm so, so weak when it comes to him.

Blue: Well, are you busy tonight?

West: I have a thing, but I can work around it. Why?

Blue: Locker room. Twenty minutes after practice ends.

@QweenPandora: As we all watch the demise of everyone's fav couple, you'd expect to see PrincessParker gloating from the window of her gilded tower, but she's been far too busy. With what, you ask? Packing boxes.

Yes, you heard right. She—along with her parentals—have been spotted hauling load after load to a moving truck, all while PrincessP looks like her entire world's crumbled around her.

On second thought, maybe it has.

Not only will she spend the remainder of senior year at an all-girls school halfway across the country, she lost the guy, lost her friends, and lost her scholarship.

Perhaps NewGirl should be taking notes. It's a long way down when you fall from the king's good graces.

Later, Peeps.

CHAPTER 38

WEST

Having damp hair in the freezing cold isn't the smartest thing, but an invitation for shower sex with Southside seems worth the pneumonia risk.

I'm too spent to even head inside, hence the reason I've been sitting in my car, staring at the cinderblock walls of the parking structure for the past ten minutes.

My phone buzzes and I look down, seeing an '*I love you*' text from Southside that I return quickly. For a moment, I'm reliving tonight's hookup and it dulls the sting of having to hide behind this bullshit smokescreen we've built. This week alone, I've been approached by ten girls offering to help '*take my mind off things*'. I play into it, giving them false hope that I'll come find them when I'm ready, but it's all part of the lie.

West: Make it home okay?

Blue: I did. Mike cooked again.

West: You eat this time?

Blue: Nope. I don't believe in fraternizing with the enemy.

At first, I was completely on her side with this whole "boycott Mike" mission she's on, but I'm starting to think she's hurting herself as much as she's hurting him. If anyone knows what dicks fathers can be, it's me, but I also like to think I know when someone's genuinely making an effort. And Mike seems to be.

West: Maybe try for Scar. Pretty sure she misses you guys eating as a

family. Might be good for her.

It takes a while to get a response and I wonder if I've overstepped. But when I put myself in her shoes, and imagine if my dad were to legitimately try to be a better man, I like to think I'd be able to give him a chance. Only, alcoholism isn't to blame for who and what Vin is. He's a grade-A asshole all on his own. No excuses.

Blue: I'll consider it. Probably. Maybe.

West: I'll take it. Just want what's best for you.

The phone buzzes with a response, but I quickly shove it in my pocket when I spot Mom easing into her parking space. Seeing her makes me wonder if sitting here was just laziness, or perhaps it's fate.

She's avoided me since I overheard her and Vin discussing the ledger. Then, the one time I did try my hand at sneaking up to snoop through their shit, I discovered that the passcode to their floor had been changed. Seeing as how Vin has no clue I even know the ledger exists, this little safety precaution had to have been taken by her.

My best guesses are that she's either protecting Vin, or *thinks* she's protecting us as a family. Either way, hiding the evidence in that book is the wrong move.

She's mouthing words to whatever song she's listening to, and as soon as she shuts off the engine, I climb out of my car and sprint toward her.

"West!" she gasps, settling down once she realizes the one who just rushed her in the parking structure is me.

"You've been hard to catch lately."

When she shoots me a look, I can only guess she realizes I'm annoyed by being ghosted for more than two weeks now.

"You're being silly," she insists, forcing a smile. "You three were out of town, then I had an event to plan with the women's organization. This is just a busy time of year, sweetheart. You know that."

Her expression softens with a laugh. She expects me to believe I've imagined how she's tried keeping her distance, but I'm not an idiot.

"You and Dad were fighting about a ledger the night you caught me in the hallway. I heard you say there were names and dollar amounts, and I'm sure you find that just as fucking disturbing as I do."

"Language," she winces, which prompts me to roll my eyes.

I don't have time for her delicate sensibilities. Not when I'm starting to look at her as an accomplice in whatever fucked up thing Vin's involved in. I

mean, if she knows what he's got going and does nothing to stop him, she's just as bad.

"I need to know what else is in that book."

She flashes a look toward me, like she wishes I'd just leave this alone, but there's no fucking way that'll happen. She climbs into the elevator, thinking I'll let this shit rest, but I'm making it as clear as possible that I know there's something shady going on.

"Where's the ledger," I repeat, prompting her to point a freshly manicured finger toward the camera in the corner as the doors close us in.

It doesn't go unnoticed that she's avoided putting in the code to her and Vin's place, instead entering mine.

"So, just so I'm clear, you're willing to let whatever he's into slide? Because you're too busy to deal with it?"

Another cold look slices in my direction, but that shit doesn't scare me. I'm not a kid anymore, believing her and Vin are perfect.

She stays quiet the whole time we climb to the penthouse level, then we step out. Finally, once the door closes behind us, she speaks up.

"Why this sudden interest in your father's business? Is there something I'm missing?"

"Are you seriously feeding me this B.S. right now? You expect me to believe you were in tears and chewing his ass out because that book had something legitimate in it?"

With a frustrated huff, she crosses both arms over her chest and clearly wishes I'd leave it alone.

"I'll admit, I can understand why what you saw that night would alarm you, but it was a simple misunderstanding. Your father and I have discussed the situation since then and I overreacted."

Unbelievable. She trusts him more than she trusts herself.

She sees the look on my face and speaks again.

"Okay, West, since you seem to think you know so much, why don't you tell *me* what you think that ledger is for."

I smirk at her, knowing how easily she falls apart, turns into a puddle of weakness anytime someone threatens her world.

"You don't want that," I warn. "Because unlike Vin, I'm not gonna lie to you."

She snarls a bit. "Vin? Since when did you start calling him by his first name? He's your father and he deserves respect."

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” I scoff, causing her to literally clutch the pearls around her neck.

“I honestly don’t know when you got to be so vulgar, but I would appreciate you remembering that I *am* your mother.”

“Then act like it,” I snap.

You could hear a pin drop after those words leave my mouth. She eventually regains her composure and looks away. I, on the other hand, see this as a golden opportunity to speak my mind. Lord knows it’s high time someone was honest with her.

“At what point do you plan to stop letting him feed you his bullshit? You’re a middle-aged woman who’s smart, wealthy in her own right, and yet you allow that asshole to do all the thinking in the relationship. Isn’t that exhausting? Forcing yourself to be blind to all the shit he does? I mean, the man’s fucked half this city!”

At the precise moment her surprised gasp hits the air, a powerful, unapologetic slap sets one side of my face ablaze.

My eyes fall shut and the fury that builds within me is unmatched, contrasting the calm I exude. When I finally do meet her gaze again, I don’t even see her the same.

She eyes me when I smirk, working my jaw a bit.

“Of all the things that could’ve set you off over the years, it’s this? Me? Not the man who’s made you look like a world-class dumb-ass? But me, your son.”

Her eyes water and I still feel nothing for her. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Fuck you.” I stare into her eyes, hoping she feels the raw, unfiltered hatred spewing from every fiber of my being.

There’s a moment of complete silence as she stares, looking as though she feels every bit of regret she just expressed, but it’s too late for that shit.

“I should’ve known you wouldn’t give a damn. You never have. About anything. Your ass sat by while he verbally and emotionally abused all three of us, all because you’re terrified of what life might be like without him.”

She sniffles a bit, but I’m not moved by her tears.

“Allison Duchene. Kimberly Patterson. Theresa Sandoval,” I call out. “Those are the latest southside girls the news says have gone missing. And if you were stupid enough to give that ledger back to Vin—which I really, *really* hope you didn’t do—I guarantee their names have already been

added.”

Her eyes glisten with more tears and she lowers her stare.

“West, I—”

She can’t get the words out, but it doesn’t matter anyway. If Vin’s the devil, she’s his second in command. Being complacent is just as bad as being responsible.

I start toward my bedroom, leaving her standing near the elevator. Things would’ve been easier if she were on board, but I’m willing to do this without her.

Just like I’ve done everything else.

CHAPTER 39

BLUE

Winning a game doesn't hold much weight when it feels like I'm losing at everything else.

I'm squeezed tight and lifted a few inches off the ground when a teammate attacks me with a bearhug. The team, like the crowd, is going crazy as we claim another victory and maintain our undefeated record.

Meanwhile, I'm forcing a smile that's almost painful.

Ricky's in the crowd like he's been for *every* game. Mike and Scar came, too. I'm starting to get used to seeing him here, so I suppose his persistence is working. Honestly, I haven't seen Scar this happy in a long time. It seems that having Mike back has dulled the sting of losing Shane. And I can't lie and say having him around hasn't brought me some measure of peace. He arranged his new work schedule to be off in time to get Scar from school. That's been so much easier than having to find places for her to go, so she was never left alone. He cooks or buys dinner every night, helps her with homework, and hangs out with her before bed. Plus, with his background in law enforcement, he's probably the best person to keep an eye on her.

God, I can't believe I just said that.

Nor can I believe that having him home has me rethinking the decision to send Scar to Virginia. I've been on the fence about it anyway, which is why I haven't bothered returning the school enrollment paperwork. Not to mention, now that Mike's alert and sober, I'd have to fight him tooth and nail to get

Scar out of here.

With little more to say to my team than the occasional “good game,” I shower, change and begrudgingly head out to the parking lot. No surprise visit from West this time, because there’s *another* plan in place tonight.

One that’s got me feeling more down than anything else thus far.

One that has me wanting to say fuck this whole idea because... I just can’t.

However, I know my feelings have very little to do with any of this. The whole thing has been about doing what’s best for my sister, and the other girls this could possibly save down the line. It’s so much bigger than me, so I suck it up, grab my things, shrug into my coat, then head to my car.

As planned, Ricky’s parked beside me, but he’s not inside his ride because he’s leaning against the trunk of mine. He smiles when he spots me and I do the same, but mine is fake. Not because I’m not happy to see him, but because I can’t help but wish there was someone *else* waiting here for me.

“Killed it on the court as usual.”

“Thanks.” My smile broadens because there are enough people still waiting in this lot that I’m certain at least one of them has their phone out to be the next Pandora informant. They’ve been eating up all the curated drama me, West, and Ricky have cooked up. It’s the love triangle that’s turned Cypress Pointe on its head.

I step closer and rest against the hood beside him. Hugging myself inside my jacket for warmth.

“So, what’s next? We just wait here for him to show up?”

“Yep,” I answer with a nod. “And Joss suggested that we find a posture that says, ‘*I’d fuck you if no one was watching*’.”

He laughs, likely not expecting those words to leave my mouth, but they’re not my own.

“Wow. That’s pretty direct.”

I nod. “Sure is.”

There’s an awkward moment while we just stand there, maybe trying to figure out what that looks like exactly. But then, Ricky has an idea.

“Come here.”

I glance his way when he speaks, letting him draw me closer by my hand. I’m facing him again and he brings me to stand between his knees. Then, he slides both hands inside the pockets of my jacket, lacing his fingers with mine.

“This feel about right?”

There’s an awkward tension between us that makes me want to let go, but I can’t. This is great for optics. However, even though this whole thing was West’s idea, I can’t help but to feel horrible standing so close to Ricky. Letting him hold me like I’m still his. Maybe it’s a bit more intense because of our history, but I find myself super uncomfortable as we wait.

He keeps the conversation light—filling me in on how Shane’s adjusting in Puerto Rico. And every now and then, I toss my head back and laugh, making it look as though we’re talking about something far more interesting.

Far more intimate.

We keep it up for about five solid minutes before the screeching of tires signals our next cue. I spin toward the sound, releasing Ricky’s hands, and meet West’s furious glare through his windshield. Yes, he’s acting, but some of that fury is real. I feel it even from here.

“This is what the fuck you wanna do?” He climbs out of the car, yelling these angry words while storming toward me and Ricky.

“West, we were just talking,” I insist. “You overreact about *everything*.”

“Honestly, at this point, who even gives a fuck? If you want to forever be southside trash, fucking around with assholes like this, be my guest,” he scoffs. “In fact, to show you I’m not upset, how about I send you two a pair of tickets to one of my games once I’m drafted?”

There’s the cocky asshole I know and love. And here I was, thinking he’d forgotten how to be a douchebag.

We’re drawing a crowd. Good. At least all this effort won’t be for nothing.

I step away from the hood of my car and move closer to West. “Okay, so you’re done with me. Great. So, why are you here?”

Crossing both arms over my chest like a defiant child, I look him straight in the eyes.

He gives me a sweeping look that’s dripping with disgust. “Just letting you know to your face that this shit’s over. Also, you might want to keep in mind that bitches like you don’t make it far in my city.”

“Watch yourself, rich boy,” Ricky rasps from behind me, sounding menacingly calm.

“Fuck you,” West snaps.

All of a sudden, both are walking toward the other and I’m in the middle.

“Wanna say that shit again?”

“Fuck. You,” West repeats slowly. There’s a challenge in his eyes and it’s clear these two are drawing on their sketchy history to sell this. And based on how the gathering crowd seems to be eating up the drama, they’re convincing more than just me.

Ricky’s fist clenches at his side and I place a hand on each one’s chest, pushing them apart.

“West, just... go!” I yell, holding his gaze. His nostrils flare with rage as he stares, saying so much with his eyes, but I know his heart.

He volleys a look between Ricky and me, then backs off.

“Fuck you both,” he says, “and I hope he dumps your ass for the *next* hood rat.”

I keep my eyes trained on him until he’s back in his car, and then tears out of the parking lot. We’ve got everyone’s attention, which is good and bad all at once. Good for obvious reasons. Bad because, in the blink of an eye... I just became the girl who broke the heart of this city’s golden boy.

*@QweenPandora: RIP NewGirl & KingMidas
That. Was. Brutal.*

If you missed the drama, the short version is that KingMidas finally pulled the plug on his and NewGirl’s relationship. Let’s be honest, though. It’s been on life support for weeks now. Maybe if they’d gotten off to a healthier start, there may have been something to hold onto, but perhaps this breakup is for the best?

It seems it’s NewGirl and SeXyBeAsT for now, but who knows how long that’ll last.

Been there, done that, failed once before.

Guess we’ll be watching this train wreck play out together.

Later, Peeps.

CHAPTER 40

BLUE

Maybe I sold it too hard.

Maybe I said or did something that crossed the line.

All these thoughts and more fly through my head as I dial West for the third time tonight. It's nearly midnight now and I haven't heard a single word from him. It's enough that I'm on edge, pacing in the darkness from one side of my room to the next.

That is, until the sound of an engine revving out front has me rushing toward the window. At the sight of Ricky's car inching toward the curb, I can't help but feel let down, having imagined that it'd be West pulling up. But why would I think a stupid thing like that? Especially after that show we just put on, going through the trouble of staging an ugly breakup.

Scar and Mike are asleep, so I'm not surprised he knows to come to my window instead of the door. A black hoodie casts a shadow over his face while he keeps his eyes trained on the snow, trekking through it. I unlock and lift the window, super confused about why he'd stop by without calling.

"What're you doing here?" I ask, eyeing him as I hug my arms to shield myself from the cold that rushes in.

But then, when he peers up, my heart skips a beat. Because the eyes I'm staring into aren't the steel-gray I expected. They're a deep, otherworldly green that has me rushing to pop the screen out of the window frame. Once it's off, West's height and strength make it easy for him to hoist himself onto

the sill, and then climb inside.

I'm barely able to get the window closed because I'm shaking with excitement. Then, I squeeze him with a hug that says it all—I need this.

“I know this was stupid, and I know I shouldn't be here, but... I had to see you,” he pants, crashing his lips down on mine before I even have a chance to speak.

I'm so confused, but too happy to ask questions. He leads me to the bed, then I'm lowered to the mattress. West pulls off the hoodie that once hid his face, and the fabric of a dark tee strains around his biceps. I stare as the muscles flex while freeing himself of the shirt, then his jeans and boxers follow. I only bother removing my pajama bottoms and underwear, not caring about my shirt because I need him closer.

Now.

Maybe sensing my impatience, West quickly grabs a condom, then he's on top of me the next second.

We're quieter than usual, breathing against one another's skin as I grip the back of his neck. His movements are careful so the bed doesn't creak, but he's pushing deep. So, so deep.

My other hand trails down the smoothness of his back, feeling how it flexes and eases beneath my palm. Heat and moisture from his mouth covers one side of my neck when he sucks there, drawing a sigh of relief from between my lips.

My knees fall open and he responds with a powerful thrust that makes it hard not to cry out, but I muffle the sound against his shoulder instead. His chilled skin has warmed with mine now, making it hard to tell where one's begins and the other's ends. Like we're one.

“I needed you so bad. You're all I fucking think about,” he rasps against my ear.

But more than I *hear* what he's saying, I feel it—his need for me. Maybe because I feel it too, like I can't breathe until he's here, until we touch.

“I love you,” he whispers, making my head spin as I echo those words back to him.

He places a kiss beneath my chin and my fingers slip through his hair, drawing him closer. When I lose my breath, he knows I'm coming and seems to stop caring if we'll make noise, violently churning his hips harder, faster, driving himself deeper. The friction of his aroused flesh against mine has a throaty groan leaving him a few seconds later. To keep from waking Mike or

Scar with whatever sounds of pleasure threaten to leave his mouth, West kisses me hard. He hungrily sucks my lips, breathing deeper with his release. Even when his body's gone still, the kiss doesn't end, which is telling.

Sex with him is more than body. It's heart. It's soul.

"Okay, not that I'm complaining or anything, but... how the hell are you even here?"

The question draws a light laugh from West, and before answering, he kisses me again, still resting between my legs.

"Long story short, you'd be surprised what a guy's willing to do to get to his girl," he begins. "To start, I'm out \$500, which is what your fucking friend charged me to borrow his car for the night."

I laugh a bit louder than I mean to, but... *what?*

"Hold up, Ricky loaned you his car and you willingly paid him all that money just so you could come see me?"

West nods, holding my gaze. "In a nutshell, yeah."

I swear the size of my smile just doubled. Not only is that incredibly sweet, but it's also kind of sexy.

He kisses me again, then shrugs. "I would've paid more, but maybe don't tell him that part."

Pursing my lips together, I pretend to lock them and throw away the key. "Your secret's safe with me."

"Good." He peers down and the love in his eyes is so obvious.

I don't say it out loud, but money or no money, Ricky loaning his car to *anyone* is extremely out of character. But then, I'm reminded of our conversation on his couch. When asked if I was happy with West, I saw how much it mattered to him that I answered yes. Sure, it might've cost West several hundred dollars to convince Ricky to cave, but the Ricky *I* know is unmovable. This is a sign of West and Ricky—two of the most important men in my life—turning a corner, and I couldn't be happier about it.

My body cools when West shifts his weight off me and moves to sit at the edge of the bed. I turn onto my side and stare at the impressive definition of his back, at the ink that slinks up and around his forearm and bicep—a true work of art.

The tattoos.

Him.

"So, I get to keep you all night? Is that what you're telling me?"

"As long as I have the car back before sunrise," he answers. "Moving in

darkness is the only way people won't spot that I'm not him."

But all I hear him say is that I get to hold him and get the best night's sleep I've had in a while. He sneaks to the bathroom for a sec, then locks us inside my room when he comes back. My bed's small, but it gives us an excuse to stay close. Not that we needed one.

With my head settled on his chest, I'm already dozing. Tonight started out shitty, but this is definitely the best way to end it.

Note to self: Thank Ricky later. He's pretty awesome.

@QweenPandora: NewGirl wastes no time!

Several passersby spotted a familiar blue car parked outside our cheating chica's house last night. And when I say last night, I mean ALL night.

Apparently, SeXyBeAsT couldn't wait to rekindle the love, but I sure hope he knows what he's doing. From what we've all seen, NewGirl changes her mind like she changes her socks.

Might've dodged a bullet here KingMidas.

Later, Peeps.

CHAPTER 41

BLUE

Well, I was right. Everyone thinks I'm on West's shit-list, which means I'm now on the whole *school's* shit-list.

Great.

Monday was mostly dirty looks. Tuesday, I got shoved in the hallway and almost bit it in front of everyone, which was awesome. Wednesday, someone wrote '*slut*' on my locker with permanent marker. Thursday, one of my textbooks mysteriously came up missing.

Then, today, some random '*accidentally*' spilled her soda on my shoulder when walking by me and Lexi's table during lunch. While everyone nearby laughed at my expense, West forced himself to smirk a little, giving the appearance of going along with the bullying. Typically, he'd threaten to rip off someone's limbs for even *looking* at me the wrong way, but in our current situation, he has to sit by and watch.

To sum it all up, this feels like being right back at square one with a target on my back.

Did I mention how much this all sucks?

Now that I've officially survived the first week of the '*break up*' from hell, I'm grateful for the weekend. What makes it even better is that there was no game tonight, only practice. Sure, I'm still getting home after dark, but I'll take what I can get.

Rounding the corner, the house comes into view. I'm already fantasizing

about climbing into bed and staying there until work in the morning, but when I pull further into the driveway and glance toward the back door, I have to do a double-take.

There's a figure perched on the steps and I'm finally able to make out the features of the small blonde whose eyes just lit up seeing me. Shock has me convinced I'm imagining things because she's made it a point to stay away so long.

"You've gotta be shitting me."

As if she's just heard me utter those words, my mother—The Great Houdini of Cypress Point, Master of the Disappearing Act—is on her feet and walking toward my car before I can even put it in park. Even from here, I can tell she's pretty messed up. It looks like she hasn't showered in days, if not weeks, and the scabbed over wounds on her face are telling of what her poison of choice has been this time around.

I stare at her and, surprisingly enough, I feel nothing. For almost a year now, I've waited for her to come home, but not like this. Not *looking* like this.

I step out and she puts on a fake smile. "Hey, Blue Jay! It's so good to see you."

She's trailing me to the back door because I'm not stopping for her. I've chased her my whole life and those days are over.

"Aren't you gonna say something? I've missed you girls so much."

"So much that you've been gone almost an entire year?" I snap, spinning on my heels to stare her straight in the eyes.

She's at a loss for words and I reel my emotions in. She's not worth that.

"You can't be here," I say. "The last thing I need is for Scar to see you like this."

She glances down, looking herself over as I do the same, realizing just how far she's fallen in such a short time.

"I know I'm a bit of a mess right now, but that's because I'm in kind of a bad way. And... I was kind of hoping you could help me with that," she starts, and before she can even finish her speech, I'm rolling my eyes.

"Of course, that's why you're here," I sigh. "Why else would you come back? It's not like you're supposed to be a mother or anything."

She steps back, glaring with offense. "*Supposed* to be a mother?"

"There's no way you're offended by that," I scoff. "You missed both mine and Scar's birthdays, you abandoned her, abandoned *me*, and left me to

carry everything by myself. And the only reason I've heard from you at *all* is because you need money."

I try to walk away, knowing I'll say things I can't take back if I don't.

"Just a small loan. Nothing you'd miss," she begs.

I stop and pivot toward her again, feeling like there's actual fire beneath my skin when I lay eyes on her.

"I hate you!"

Those words tumble out, echoing into the night and I know I should regret letting them slip, but I don't. Because they're true.

"You are the *worst* piece of shit I've ever met in my entire life," I add. "What kind of human leaves her kids to fend for themselves in a world like this?"

Tears sting my eyes, but they're steeped in anger and hatred, not sadness.

"You're not telling me anything I don't already know," she confesses, her timid voice barely louder than a whisper. "I failed you kids. No one's more aware of that than me."

"And yet, you continue to only come around when you need something."

She lowers her gaze then, staring at the flip-flops that are doing nothing to shield her feet from the snow-covered ground.

"If I could take back everything with Hunter, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

She says those words as if they should mean something to me, but I have no idea what she's talking about.

"I never should've gotten him involved. He wanted to help out more, bring more money into the house, but I had no clue what they'd do to him."

I dash toward her, taking her unfamiliarly thin arm in my hand.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

She seems surprised by the hard look set on my face, but she needs to know I'm not letting go until she explains herself.

"He... he wanted to earn some quick cash. The kind of cash that could've changed our lives," she says. "So, since Paul and I go way back, I reached out to him. Your brother was already working with the Ruizes, but I let Paul know Hunter was ready for something bigger—a more important role in the business."

By her and Paul going 'way back', she means he used to be her supply guy back in the day, before he was promoted within the family ranks by Augustin years ago.

Tears slip from her eyes and she tries to squirm out of my grasp.

“Mom, what the hell did you do?”

Shaking her head like a terrified toddler, she tries pulling away again. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

I don’t have time for her antics, so I squeeze tighter. “What the fuck did you do to Hunter?”

This time, I scream at her louder than I mean to. My concern isn’t that I’m considering her feelings, but because I’d prefer for strangers not to hear our conversation.

“I talked Paul into taking Hunter in deeper, giving him more responsibility. Then, before we knew it, Hunter said Paul found him a spot moving cargo,” she explains.

Cargo—there goes that damn word again.

“Hunter was so, so excited. Paul wanted to train him in the new business, so he was supposed to keep him under his wing for a week to learn the ropes, but within two days, the cops were knocking at our door, saying Hunter got arrested for killing that Robyn girl.”

I can’t even see straight I’m so pissed at her. “So, Hunter being in jail is *your* fault?”

Suddenly, something Ricky said to me months ago made perfect sense. When I blamed him for Hunter going bad, he told me to look a little closer to home.

He was talking about my mom. He *knew* she was the one who got Hunter entangled in the circumstances that eventually ruined his life.

“No! I was just trying to get him some work!”

“You might be an idiot, but everyone on the southside knows what kind of work Paul Ruiz does! Don’t pretend you had no clue you were putting Hunter in danger. He went in deeper because you wanted him to! Because you’re a greedy bitch who’d rather have that damn poison in her veins than have her kids home safe.”

She attempts to take my wrist when I turn to leave, but I snatch away.

“You have to know I didn’t know this would happen. Please, Blue Jay.”

I ignore her sorry ass and start up the steps, but when I do the back door swings open. While I thought it’d be Scar coming to see what all the racket is, I’m staring up at Mike instead. And his eyes aren’t set on me. They’re on Mom.

I’m half-expecting him to go to her, try to bring her inside, so my guard is up. If he even *looks* like he’s thinking about inviting her into this house, I’m

fully prepared to burn the whole fucking thing down before I'd let that happen. But to add to tonight's surprises, Mike opens the screen to let me in, then closes and locks it behind me, leaving that woman and all her bullshit outside.

"You all right?"

I peer up when he asks, shocked by the sincerity in his gaze.

My body slumps against the door and I draw in a deep breath when I nod. "I'm okay."

He continues to stare, like he's unsure whether to believe me or not.

"She tried calling earlier today and I hung up as soon as I heard her voice. If I thought she'd try to stop by, I would've given you a heads up before coming home. You shouldn't have to deal with that."

I'm not sure how to feel. I have no memory of Mike protecting me, considering my well-being. Nor do I recall him ever not being Mom's doormat.

"It's fine. She doesn't get to me like she used to," I say.

After hearing that, he eventually nods and steps back toward the stove, then stirs whatever's in the pot while flashing a look at me.

"You're probably gonna say no, but I'd love it if you'd eat with me and Scar. I—"

"Sure."

His stare darts toward me again, and I think the only person more shocked that I just agreed to share a meal with him, is me.

There's a dim smile on his face and he goes to the cabinet to pull down a third plate.

"Wash your hands and I'll set the table. And grab your sister on your way back."

I nod. "Okay."

Slow steps carry me toward the hallway, but before I'm out of his sight, Mike speaks again.

"Thank you," he says gravely, and when I look into his eyes again, I don't miss that they're filled with emotion.

This is a small step, and I'm not sure if there will be others, but for tonight, it seems I'll have a father for the first time in a long time.

And... I'd forgotten how nice that feels.

CHAPTER 42

BLUE

Blue: Saw my mom last night and she knows a lot more about my brother's case than anyone realized. She talked a lot about Paul Ruiz. If you can bring her into the station, she may be willing to give a statement, but I'm not sure what good she'll be. Looks like she's started back up with meth.

Roby: I'll send a patrol car out to look for her, but fair warning, people in her condition are hard to find if they don't want to be found. You know we'll do our best, though.

Blue: I'll let you know if I see or hear anything else.

"Anything you'd like to share with the class?" Uncle Dusty teases when he catches me sneaking a text in between customers.

Embarrassed, I slide it back into my pocket and smile. "Nah, just Jules being Jules."

"Say no more," he says with a laugh. "Order's up for table twelve."

"On it." I grab the burger and fries he's just plated and head across the diner.

No sooner than I deliver the meal, the chime over the door rings and I have a new customer to greet.

"Good morning, Sir. Have a seat wherever you'd like. I'll be right with you," I say with a smile. The customer, on the other hand, is stoic and only tips his hat before settling into a corner booth.

I eye him on my way to cash someone out, then I'm standing at the

newcomer's side, waiting to take his order.

His cologne's strong, but not cheap, and his shoes look like they cost him an arm, a leg, and maybe even an ear.

"Can I start you with something to drink?" I ask, getting some pretty intense vibes from this guy and he has yet to say a single word.

"Just coffee today," he answers, the depth of his voice sending a chill down my spine.

"Sounds good. Would you like a slice of pie or anything to go with it?"

He peers up with the brim of his hat still casting a shadow over his eyes, an odd grin on his face.

"No thanks. The coffee will be all."

Feeling creeped out, I offer a smile and head back to the counter to grab a mug. I keep my eyes trained on him the entire time I pour. So intensely that I nearly overflow it and burn my hand. After grabbing a tray, I walk the order back to him.

"Thank you," he says in that unearthly deep voice of his, and again, I only nod before hightailing it back to the other side of the counter.

"Everything going okay now that Mike's back?" Dusty asks, drawing my attention from the stranger briefly when I flash a look toward the kitchen.

"It's... strange, but not as bad as I thought," I explain.

"I've seen less of Scar these days, so I figured she'd been with him mostly after school."

I nod, confirming Dusty's assumption. "Yeah, who would've ever imagined he'd actually keep his word for once?"

Dusty peers up when I glance at him again, still dividing my attention between him and the stranger.

"No signs of him being back on the booze?"

I shake my head. "Surprisingly, no. From what I can tell, he goes to work, then spends the rest of his afternoon and evening looking after Scar. He's even been to all my games so far."

The look of shock on Dusty's face now says it all. "Well, I'll be damned."

"My thoughts precisely," I answer with a laugh, but then I spot a hand in the air. It's the weird guy, beckoning me toward his table.

"That's my cue."

I push off from the counter and grab the coffee pot on my way over. Chances are, he just wants a refill.

"More coffee?" I force that smile again when asking.

The man meets my gaze and he's wearing that same hard look that makes me want to run the other way.

"Actually, I'm all set for the day, but I wanted to give you a tip before I go," he answers, but instead of sliding cash into my hand, he grabs my wrist tight, jerking me closer to his rail-thin body.

A gasp leaves my mouth, but a stern look renders me silent.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," he warns, seeming to notice how I've brought the scalding hot pot of coffee closer to him. I'm completely willing to dump the entire thing in this asshole's lap if he doesn't let go.

"What do you want?" My voice quivers, but I hope he doesn't take that as a sign of weakness. After all, I *am* armed with a pot of hot liquid that could change his life in all the worst ways.

He smirks.

"You *are* a skittish one, aren't you? Vin had you pegged, I guess."

At the mention of that name, my heart bottoms out, making me weak in the knees.

"Relax. I just need to ask you a few questions."

He pauses and glances around to see if we've garnered any unwanted attention. Satisfied that no one seems aware, he continues.

"Vin's curious who you've been talking to. He got word that there's been an agent asking around about him, poking his nose where it doesn't belong. And I'm sure you can guess, that kind of activity isn't good for business," he explains, eyeing me closer. "And it probably isn't good for you either. Or Scarlett."

"Leave my sister out of this," I warn, feeling my grip tighten around the handle.

"Just tell me who you talked to and what you said, and I'll be on my merry way." He flashes a wicked smile that does nothing to settle my nerves, and his nails dig deeper into my flesh.

"I haven't spoken to anyone. Whatever he heard, it's got nothing to do with me," I lie.

Those beady eyes of his stay trained on mine, boring into me like two drills, and then the smile's back.

"Okay," he says far too casually. "Suit yourself."

I hold my breath when he reaches into his pocket, only feeling *mildly* relieved when the only thing he whips out is a phone. I watch as he scrolls through until finding what he's looking for. When he turns the screen toward

me, it's a pic of Scar walking down the hallway at school. Alone, with no clue that she was even vulnerable. The sight of it leaves me shaken.

"Even where you think we aren't, we are," he teases, his grin widening. "Doesn't matter what you do, your sister is never out of reach," he adds, letting out a dark chuckle that nauseates me.

Staring at him, hearing those words, I forget to breathe.

"Just a little something you should keep in mind," he croons.

"I've done exactly what Vin asked." I speak quietly, trying not to shout and alert anyone.

Clearly, the last thing I need to do right now is cause more trouble for myself.

"He wanted me to break his son's heart, I've done that. We've been broken up for a week now. What more does he want from me?"

Oh, God. Don't you dare cry.

I beat back my emotions and stare squarely in this man's eyes, making him think I feel nothing.

"Maybe so," he answers, "But the implied part of that deal was that you'd also keep your mouth shut."

"And I have! I go to school, I work, and I'm home. I don't go anywhere else, and I've talked to no one!"

Despite seeing me get worked up, the man gives a casual shrug.

"Well, that isn't for either of us to decide, now is it? So, if I were you, I'd make *real* sure I keep my nose clean. Because as I'm sure you know, our mutual friend is not a man of second chances."

His stare deepens and my entire body's shaking, but just like that, he lets go and flashes another smile. When he stands, towering over me, he tips his hat and leaves me with a few parting words.

"See you soon."

With long strides, he makes it to the door. I keep my eyes trained on him until he's gone, finally breathing when he leaves the lot driving an indistinct black car. He's gone too fast to get his license plate number, so I have nothing to even identify who he was. All I can think to do is send Roby one final text.

Blue: Vin's onto you.

CHAPTER 43

WEST

West: You said we could message if we needed help, so I guess that's what this is.

QweenPandora: Well, well, what a pleasant surprise. You're right, I did offer, so what can I do for you?

I stare at my phone, eyeing the outside of Dusty's diner down the street. I've been sitting in an adjacent parking lot for ten minutes now, contemplating my next move.

As soon as I got the call from Southside about Vin's guy stopping in to threaten her, I hopped in the car and drove here. Only, she gave specific instructions for me *not* to show up, for obvious reasons.

But how the fuck can I stay away when I know she's terrified right now? When I know she needs me? It doesn't help that this is all my dickhead father's doing.

I breathe deep and peer down at the message again, knowing it's time to make a move.

West: I know this goes against who you are and what you do, but... I need you to hold any pics your followers might send of me and Blue, and any pics that giveaway my location. This might not make much sense, but can you do that?

I hit send and wait, thinking I'm probably making a mistake saying so much, but the response that comes in changes my mind about that.

QweenPandora: What makes you think I haven't been doing that already?

After that question, my notifications sound off when image after image flood in—one of me sneaking into the locker room to see Southside, one of me driving Ricky's car the night I visited, and even one of me sitting in this parking lot, looking like the stalker Southside's accused me of being.

Clearly, Pandora's been covering for us a couple weeks now without us having any clue.

QweenPandora: Not sure why you two are faking it, but I'm pretty sure it has something to do with our common enemy. So, I've been happy to play along, feed the people the drama they love, even though it's been a complete lie ;)

I'm completely floored, at a loss for words, so I say the one thing I can think of. Something simple.

West: Thanks for this. Haven't had many people in our corner lately.

QweenPandora: My pleasure. And if there's anything else I can do, don't be shy. The faster we rid ourselves of you-know-who, the better off we'll all be. Which reminds me, I've become somewhat of a freelance photographer myself recently. Give me a few hours. I'll send over a few pics that might be of interest to you.

West: Noted. I'll be in touch.

With that, I park behind the tire shop where I've been camped out, then dart across traffic to Dusty's, trusting that whatever incriminating evidence Pandora receives will never see the light of day.

Bursting through the door of the diner, I search from corner to corner until I spot Southside. She's clearing a table near the back wall and I rush past the three patrons finishing their meals.

"West, what are you doing here? Someone will see you!" she tries to whisper.

Her eyes say something completely different than the words that just left her mouth. They say she's glad I'm here regardless of what fucking rules we're breaking right now.

She passes a quick look toward her uncle where he's working the grill, then I have her attention again.

"What are you doing here?" she repeats, but I ignore her question to ask one of my own.

"Are you hurt?"

She breathes deep and answers with a sigh. “Just my wrist.”

That response has me taking her hand gently to get a better look. She’s bruised right where that motherfucker grabbed her. I’ve been looking for someone to take out all my pent-up rage on, and whoever this asshole is, he would’ve made a perfect candidate.

She eases her hand out of mine and I don’t miss the panicked look in her eyes. “West, you can’t be here. We can’t risk—”

“I took care of it.”

When I cut her off, she’s quiet, but still not convinced.

“Take a look at this.”

I pull my phone from my pocket, open the thread with Pandora, and hand it over. Southside scrolls and I don’t need to say a word because the proof speaks for itself. The images Pandora’s already received and withheld on our behalf mean she’s on our side.

“She knows,” Southside says under her breath, taking it all in just like I had a moment ago.

“And she’s protecting us,” I add with a nod. “She gave us an invitation to DM her, so I took her up on that and this is what she sent back.”

Southside’s speechless, but I’m aware of being on borrowed time. “Will your uncle let you take a break?”

She glances toward Dusty again and it isn’t surprising that he’s already watching us. Pretty sure my name is mud in this place, seeing as how the last impression I left on the guy was that I defiled his niece in a sex tape that has since gone viral. So, I can only imagine what he’s thinking right now.

“It’s slow. He won’t mind,” she answers.

We slip into a booth and it’s been weeks since we’ve been together in public. I reach for her hands across the table, and she meets my gaze.

“Are you okay?”

The question has her tearing up, on the verge of crying like she’d done when I first got her call little more than half an hour ago.

“I’ll live.”

That answer isn’t nearly good enough. Actually, it has me even more enraged than I already was. All because it serves as proof that Vin’s winning and we’re all miserable as hell because of it.

“We can’t keep doing this. I know we had a plan, but something has to give. If that asshole stopping in here tells us anything, it’s that nothing we do will ever be enough. Vin will trample anything—or *anyone*—standing

between him and what he wants. We're sitting ducks," I point out. "He can do whatever the fuck he wants, and our best option so far has been to look like we're marching to the beat of his damn drum. I'm fucking sick of it."

She doesn't speak, because she knows I'm right.

"I can't just... not do anything," I conclude. "We're sitting around, waiting for a smoking gun we're not even sure exists. Meanwhile, he's tightening his plans, gaining power, gathering allies to vouch for his scheming ass, and soon there won't be a damn thing we can do about it."

When I finish speaking, I'm practically panting, thinking about how deep we're in over our heads. Ricky made an offer weeks ago and it's been going through my mind a lot lately. It's made me wonder if the only way to save the lives of those around me is for Vin's to end. He's gone off the deep end and it feels like we're fighting a losing battle. One that now calls for us to do something drastic.

"You're leaving?" Southside asks, peering up when I stand.

"I've got something to take care of, but I'll call when it's done."

Concern marks her expression. "West."

I turn when my name's called and she's on her feet now, stepping closer. She takes my hand and my gaze shifts there as our fingers lace together.

"Promise me you're not about to do anything dangerous."

I've never lied to this girl. Not since she's been mine. Not since I admitted to loving her. And as easy as it would be to tell her what she wants to hear right now, dishonesty doesn't feel like an option.

She's trembling when I kiss her forehead, letting my hand linger on her cheek. "I'll call."

With that, I leave and head back toward my car, but my phone's already in hand. I'm dialing a number that's been in my call log more than I ever imagined it would be. A few seconds later, Ricky answers and I know exactly why my first instinct was to call him in particular.

Because if there's anyone who's going to match my anger, be down to fuck Vin's shit up as much as I am, it's Ricky Ruiz.

"What's up?"

"We've got a problem. It's about Blue."

"The pier. Fifteen minutes."

CHAPTER 44

RICKY

Typically, news of a bruised wrist isn't enough to have me grabbing heat and storming into my uncle's office, but it was tonight. I've got no clue who showed up at Blue's job earlier, throwing around threats and shit, but I sure as hell intend to find out.

As Paul stares me down from across his desk, I don't think I've ever trusted him less.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, nephew?"

"I need to know about the cargo."

He eyes me, smirking and shit. "That so? Because when I came to you with this offer several months ago, you wanted nothing to do with it. Why the sudden change of heart?"

I shrug but give nothing away. "I wasn't interested then, but I am now."

He doesn't speak right away, just gives me the same look Pop used to when he thought I was up to something.

"Okay, I'm intrigued. Are you interested in upping your game? Or just sticking your nose where it doesn't belong? Because if you want in, that can be arranged, but you must understand there's a process."

"What kind of process?"

His eyes flash toward the ceiling while searching for the right words.

"Consider it a period of being vetted, if you will—proving yourself to me, my colleagues. What you're talking about is big boy stuff," he adds with a

laugh.

I hold his gaze. “Fine. Tell me what I have to do.”

He has no clue getting deeper involved with whatever he’s dragged our family into is the *last* fucking thing I want. But if it’ll get him to tell me more—like where these girls are kept, or how the business is run—I’ll string him along. All I know is Vin’s gotta be stopped. I’ve never snitched in my entire life, but if feeding Roby intel is the only way to protect Blue and Scar, guess that’s what I’ll have to do.

“You’re amusing. You know that?”

He smiles after asking, but I can’t read him.

“There’s no way in hell I’d let you get your hands in this part of the business. The company you’ve kept lately makes you a liability. Why do you think I pressed to get you back home when you went to rescue that Riley girl after that video leaked?” he asks. “Because people were talking about you playing the role of Captain Save-A-Hoe while your ass should’ve been working. You made yourself look weak, like you’d put pussy before business.”

He laughs again and if he weren’t my damn uncle, I’d punch him right in his shit.

“Face it, Ricky, you’ve gotten distracted. Big time,” he adds. “And I’m not the only one who sees it.”

My jaw’s tense, but I’m focused. It’s time for a change of plans.

“Okay, since we’re talking candid, why don’t we talk about you becoming Vin’s bitch.” When that dumb-ass smirk is wiped off his face, I’m smiling myself now. “Yeah, and after doing a little research, imagine my surprise when I discovered that motherfucker’s family.”

Well, look at that. I must’ve struck a nerve, because his ass is getting real uncomfortable over there in that chair.

“I also know he got you mixed up in this trafficking shit, which we weren’t fucking with before his ass started coming around. We kept shit simple. I’m not saying we were saints, but we sure as hell had limits. And kidnapping a bunch of damn kids to sell to whatever twisted asshole has a few thousand to spare was definitely one of those limits,” I snap.

“Careful,” he warns calmly.

“*Fuck* being careful!” I snap. “All this bullshit with the O’Farrells, the beef with the Navarros... it’s not us. We keep our heads down and we make money. That’s it. At least that’s how it *used* to be. But now, Vin’s got us

making enemies faster than we can learn their damn names.”

Glaring, Paul leans forward. “I understand what you *think* you know, but we’ve always been about making money, Ricky. Whatever industry is hot, whatever’s gonna line our pockets, *that’s* the family business,” he adds sternly, slamming his fist on the desk.

“And what about Hunter? I’m supposed to believe Vin didn’t have something to do with that? It’s just funny how one second I’m seeing him in meetings with the two of you, then the next he’s locked up. Maybe it’s just me, but I’m having a hard time believing it’s all a coincidence.”

As expected, he doesn’t have shit to say.

“Who really killed Robyn? Was it Vin?” I ask, keeping my stare trained on him when adding, “Or was it you?”

It seems like he can’t stomach looking at me anymore, so he stands and takes slow steps toward the window, looking down on the city instead.

“I’ve had enough. Get the hell out of my office.”

He pretends to be calm, but I know better. He hates being challenged, hates being questioned on things, but I’m at the point of no longer giving a shit. I won’t get anything else out of him tonight, so I stand and start coming up with my own plan. One that doesn’t include him.

“Wait.”

When I turn to see why he’s called out to me, his gaze is still focused on the ebb and flow of traffic on the streets several floors below.

“You’re family, Ricky, and you’ve been like a son to me. However, it’d be wise for you to remember that being family protects you, but it doesn’t make you invincible.”

I hear his warning and know it’s true, but putting “work” before everything else is the reason I’ve lost more than I’ve gained. So, the decision’s been made. If Paul won’t talk, it’s time to let Rich Boy know we’re on for plan B.

CHAPTER 45

WEST

Unfortunately for Vin, I know exactly where to find him. He always pulls late nights at the office when he has a new client dangling on the line. So, he's distracted, alone, and has no clue I'm coming for him.

Parking a few blocks away, I'm on foot now, sticking to alleys when I can, and keeping my hood up and my head down when I can't. Punching in the access code I've had for years, I bypass security and slip in through the back door, taking six flights of stairs up to the executive suites. Using another memorized code, I ease into the hallway and let the door close gently behind me. There's a plan in place, but mostly, I'm sick of this shit and looking to end Vin's reign in Cypress Pointe.

Double glass doors are all that separate me from the main area of the suites, so I open them silently and slip inside crouching low just in case. This entire floor is pitch black except for exit signs that glow red near the ceiling, and the sliver of light that seeps from underneath Vin's door. I creep toward it, then pause to listen to the tail end of a phone conversation once I'm close enough. As soon as the call ends, I breathe deep, then barge in.

"Shit, West. What the hell are you doing here?" he asks, relaxing behind his desk now that he sees it's only me.

Little does he know, now's not the time to let his guard down.

"Just thought you should hear it from me," I say. "First thing in the morning, I'm going to the media. Pretty sure they'd be interested in hearing

the shit you've been into lately."

He smirks, pretending to have no idea what I'm talking about. When he relaxes deeper into his seat and folds his hands together, I know he's just trying to throw me off.

"Feeling okay? You're not making much sense."

"I'm done fucking around. I know about the ledger."

When those words leave my mouth, the smile leaves his. The mask he hides behind is beginning to crack and just like that, I'm no longer speaking to my father. I'm talking to Vin Golden.

"Ledger?"

"Cut the bullshit. I heard you and Mom arguing about it before Christmas, the night of the charity event. I know it holds the names of southside girls who've gone missing, and what they were sold for."

He lowers his gaze but doesn't look worried. "These are some serious allegations you're making, West."

"And I wouldn't be making them if I weren't sure they're true. And I'm *also* pretty sure your partner would *love* to hear about this mess you've made, exposing the operation," I add, earning his full attention with those words. "And speaking of this partner, I wonder how the people of Cypress Pointe will feel knowing the interesting familial connection of the man who hopes to be their next mayor?"

Vin freezes, in shock from what I've just alluded to, and it feels damn good to have the upper hand for once. He knows I'm on to him, knows I know his deepest, darkest secrets.

Still a bit too calm for my liking, he stands and braces his fingers on the desk while peering up.

"This is that damn girl, isn't it? She's in your head again."

"We broke up a week ago," I lie. "I'm here because I know what you're doing and I'm not a fucking kid anymore. You can't buy me off with ice cream and threats that I'll break Mom's heart. I think we both know you've got her right where you want her—mindless and weak."

He's silent, still eyeing the desk instead of looking up at me.

"What the fuck do you want to come of this?" he asks through gritted teeth. "It can't be money because I give you boys every fucking thing you could ever ask for, handed you these charmed lives on a platter and it *still* isn't enough."

His voice is a deep growl now, which means he's losing his cool.

“Money and things might be enough to keep Mom quiet, but that’s her. Not me. I don’t sleep easy knowing you’ve done God-knows-what with those girls, knowing their families are torn apart, knowing the money in our bank accounts likely came from some damn trafficking ring.”

I’m sick even saying those words out loud.

“Watch your damn mouth,” he snaps, glaring at me.

Up until this moment, he’s tried to hide his hatred for me, but I see it clear as day now. Something I’ve recently figured out is that he loves the *image* of me—how I dominate on the football field, how before Blue I had my pick of any girl I wanted, how people revere me as some sort of god in the flesh. He loved that image because it added to *his*. Made *him* seem like a superior father. It’s the reason he came down so hard on me about my reputation, because it could reflect poorly on him.

It’s never been about me, my brothers, or even Mom.

It’s always been about Vin.

“I’m done sitting on this,” I say. “As soon as we’re done here, I’m taking everything I know to the authorities.”

“You think it’ll be that easy?” he asks with a smirk. “This city worships the ground I walk on, West. And these authorities you seem to think will side with you and bring me down, I’ve got half of them on the docket already. So, tell me, Son, what’s that plan of yours again? I’d love to have another listen.”

There it is, that look that says he thinks he’s won, but I’ve got something else to lay on him.

“My plan is to show these to the press, the police, and anyone else who’ll listen.”

He’s still grinning for about half a second when first glancing down at my screen. Then, the look is wiped clean off his face.

“These pics are interesting, don’t you think? A friend sent them earlier today because she figured I might be interested in getting a closer look at where our fortune comes from.”

There’s fire and brimstone in his eyes, and I know he’s fully prepared to unleash all hell on me right now.

“Every dollar I’ve ever earned comes from me working incredibly damn hard,” he snaps. “All for what? So you can drag the Golden name through the mud? I don’t fucking think so,” he growls.

Continuing to hold his gaze, I ignore the outburst and show him more. I slide from one image to the next, the first of which being his goon’s recent

visit to Dusty's Diner, snapped at the precise moment he grabs Southside by her wrist. Next up is another of the same man climbing out of Vin's SUV. No, it isn't spelled out what their business is together, but it does establish a connection between the two. The pic that follows is a snapshot of the same guy parked in a creepy van outside South Cypress High, either looking for his next prospect or keeping tabs on Scar. And as if this isn't already enough, Pandora's managed to get several of the same guy on many different days, headed into and out of a gated storage facility located on the edge of the city.

Knowing Vin's practically untouchable, a *ghost*, it's clear Pandora focused on the next best thing—his righthand man. Low and behold, keeping tabs on *him* led to a slew of incriminating evidence that links Vin to everything.

Ricky needed time to work on his uncle this evening, so I made myself useful by doing a bit of research while I waited. Turns out that storage facility in the pic was recently sold and acquired by a fledgling investment company with very little info on the web. Didn't take me long to connect something about that business to Vin, and it's all in the name of the parent company under which this new LLC is nestled: Saint Delphine—the parish where my mother was born and raised.

I've learned something valuable about my father. No matter what level of success he reaches, no matter how high he climbs, his guilt is the one thing he can never seem to outrun. Having betrayed my mother in every way imaginable, he habitually scatters bits and pieces of her throughout his world. Now, it's finally come back to bite him.

In a nutshell, we've got his ass cornered.

"Your friend's been a little sloppy," I point out. "My guess is these pics prove there are a few too many coincidences to ignore. At least, that's what I'm betting the detective will think. I'm also willing to bet furniture isn't what you're hiding at that storage facility, but we'll all know the truth by the end of the night, won't we?"

He doesn't answer of course, and having effectively silenced him, my work here is done.

I turn to leave, but the moment my back's to him, the sound of footsteps has me on high-alert. Mostly because they're moving a bit too quickly, a bit too urgently as they come closer. His forearm locks around my throat from behind and he squeezes, blocking any air from getting through. In a way, this is my fault for letting my guard down, for turning my back and thinking he

still looked at me as his son. With what I've just revealed, he only sees me as a threat.

And everyone knows what Vin's solution is for snuffing out threats—he gets rid of them.

A loud grunt belts out when I jab my elbow just below his ribs, forcing his grip to loosen enough that I'm able to break free. Before he can recover from the hit, I sink my fist in his gut.

There's no bridling my rage at this point. I'm seeing red, remembering every fucked up thing he's ever done. From the shit I witnessed as a kid, to his threats toward Southside. It's snowballed, causing me to lose all sense of reasoning.

I cock back again, but this time aiming higher, enjoying the satisfying squelch of my fist connecting with his face. Half a second later, blood's gushing from his nose and down his lips, but he's still on his feet, still looking for a fight.

A slow, disoriented punch whips through the air and he misses, but I sure as hell don't. Following the distinct thud of the punch I just buried in his gut, air sputters from his lungs. I step back, staring at this bloody piece of shit I used to think could do no wrong.

"I fucking hate you. And with any luck, someone'll kill your ass in prison and we'll all breathe a little easier knowing you're not breathing at all. And for what it's worth, no one will miss you. Not even a little."

I hold his gaze a few seconds longer, making sure he knows I mean every word of it as he stares, struggling to catch his breath. I turn to leave with my heart set on ending this shit, but the sound of a gun cocking behind me stops me in my tracks.

"I can't let you do this," he threatens. "I've worked too hard to build an empire, a *legacy*, and I can't just let you take all that away."

Other than my chest moving as I breathe, I stay completely still. He sounds unhinged and I don't doubt for one second that he'll pull that trigger.

"If you'd just... minded your damn business, none of this would've happened," he insists.

I have a response, but it isn't wise to speak right now.

It's true what they say, though. As you stare death in the face, your whole life flashes before your eyes. But what they *don't* tell you is that your future does, too.

I picture it, a life spent with the only girl I've ever loved—her on our

wedding day, carrying her over the threshold of our first home together, holding her on the couch as three little ones who look just like us rush in and end the quiet moment with laughter. I see it all with her. I *want* it all with her. But as Vin's steps carry him closer and I spot a reflection of the gun he aims at my head, I'm not so sure I'll ever get there.

My eyes fall closed and I'm trying to make peace with this, because I don't see any way out of it, but damn if the idea of life ending right here, right now, doesn't sting like hell. Leaving Southside behind, my brothers, my mom...

"I'm sorry," he says, but remorse is the one thing I don't hear in his voice.

Rage, on the other hand, I hear that loud and clear.

I've never been one to pray, but this seems like a good time to start. So, that's what I do—pray for a miracle, pray for Vin to have a change of heart.

Something.

Anything.

"Might not wanna do that, Daddy Warbucks."

My eyes dart toward the sound of a voice, but with cool steel pressed to my head, I'm still hesitant to feel relieved. Standing in the doorway with the barrel of a gun aimed straight at Vin, is Ricky—hidden beneath a dark ski mask and hood to hide his identity. He was also smart enough to disguise his voice a little, for the sake of fully protecting his identity.

"What the fuck took you so long?" I ask.

His eyes stay trained on Vin. "Guess you could say I like to make an entrance," he teases. "You tell him yet?"

I'm still a bit traumatized by the idea of a bullet passing through my skull, so I shake my head instead of speaking.

"Tell me what?" Vin asks through gritted teeth.

"Well, allow me," Ricky begins. "You're not the only one with connections. A friend of ours offered us her platform so we could livestream your recording debut. Wave to the camera. There's one attached to the front of your son's hoodie and one on the back pocket of his jeans. They're tiny motherfuckers, so I can understand how you missed it. But one thing's for damn sure... no one missed a single thing you did or said here tonight. All of Cypress Pointe got to meet the real Vin Golden for the first time ever, so take a bow, bitch," he adds with a laugh.

"Who the fuck are you?" Vin roars. "Tell me your fucking name!"

Still laughing, Ricky shrugs. “All you need to know is I’m the man with a gun pointed at your head and very few reasons not to pull this damn trigger.”

Vin’s speechless, but I hear his heavy breaths loud and clear.

“Figured you’d settle down,” Ricky adds. “But I had a thought. Tonight would be the perfect time for you to tell everyone your big plans, Vin! The city deserves to know who their next mayor could be, right?”

Ricky’s enjoying this shit a little too much.

“Why are you doing this?” Vin adds quietly, like he’s the fucking victim here.

“Pretty sure people are more interested in why you’re holding a gun to your son’s head,” Ricky points out.

In the reflection, I see Vin lowering his weapon, wiping away some of the blood that’s drained down his chin.

“Drop it and kick it over here,” Ricky demands.

Vin eyes him for a moment, and likely considers that there’s a camera pointed on him when he cooperates the next second. Ricky nods and I know it’s finally safe to move.

I stand there, watching as Vin slowly backs toward his desk, eventually cowering on the other side of it.

“This is, uh... this isn’t at all what it seems,” he insists. “We’ve all had family squabbles that have gotten out of hand. This is nothing more than that.”

I’ve got absolutely nothing to say as I stare at him, this man who’s been nothing short of a terrorist.

In this town.

Within our family.

My entire life, I’ve never seen Vin look defeated, but there’s no other way to describe the expression on his face now. He drops down into his seat and doesn’t even glance this way.

Five silhouettes moving through the darkness just outside the office catch my eye, and as planned, I kill both body cams right before Detective Roby and the four officers he’s brought with him step in. I’d never seen him face-to-face, and only had one conversation with him that took place this afternoon. However, Ricky and I knew we’d likely need some bailing out after going live on Pandora’s account, and it’s clear we made the right move asking him to come.

Roby walks closer and I get a better look at him. He’s middle-aged,

brown-skinned, with bits of gray at his temples and in his beard. There's a look set in his eyes that says he's seen more than most, understands more about this city than most.

He passes a reassuring look toward me first, and then to Ricky. "I'll take things from here."

After that, he does something unexpected when he shoots Ricky an inconspicuous look, nodding as he mouths the words, "You need to go."

Southside told me these two have history, but it's different seeing it in action, I guess. He obviously wants Ricky to be in the clear before anyone else sees him. Someone who'd want to question his involvement, or maybe someone who'd want him dead—considering the consequences he could face if he's found out. Still, knowing all of this, he came through in the clutch tonight.

All because of his love for Southside.

With that, Ricky shoots me a look, tucks the gun into the back of his jeans, then takes off faster than I've seen anyone run who wasn't hustling a ball down the field. Roby, flanked by the other officers, moves toward Vin's desk, removing a set of cuffs while kicking aside the gun that's still lying on the floor.

"My name's detective Roby," he announces. "Gonna need to see both your hands on the desk, Mr. Golden."

Vin peers up with defiance in his eyes, but after taking note of the officers' hands on their guns, he complies. Roby reads him his rights as I stare—only half believing what's happening before my eyes. Cypress Pointe's most powerful man, most *dangerous* man, has just been brought to his knees.

"Let's go. It's gonna be a long night," Roby sighs, before glancing toward me. "And we'll need to get a statement from you, too, son. More of my guys are on their way up to clean this place out, see what interesting things we can find," he adds, definitely enjoying that part.

Vin doesn't respond as he's led toward the door, but I don't miss how he glares. A narcissist can never see their wrongs, so I'm sure in his mind, this is my fault.

Lucky for me, I don't give a fuck.

While the detective isn't looking, I flip Vin off and smile, hoping he knows that whatever comes next for me will be so much better.

Because he's gone.

Fucking finally.

CHAPTER 46

BLUE

My nerves are shot to hell. Pacing in the police station lobby, all I can think about is how badly I need to lay eyes on him, see for myself that he's in one piece.

It was one thing getting the report from Ricky, but it'll be different getting to hold West for myself.

Dane, Sterling, and Joss have been here just as long, and they're anxious, too. The scene we saw during the live stream was terrifying, forcing us all to consider what it would do to us if Vin had taken West's life. I've known fear, but what I felt while watching that footage was something far worse. Something that reached deeper into the soul than fear ever could.

The double-doors squeal and I spin on my heels, only to be disappointed when I see a woman walk past with her nose buried in a file. This wait is killing me.

"What the fuck?" Dane groans, clearly frustrated by the lack of updates.

All we know is that West is in back with Detective Roby, like he has been for hours now. The sun will be up soon and the only thing that's kept me from going crazy is walking from one end of the room to the other.

The door whines on its hinges again and, this time, when I turn a gasp leaves me.

"Ma'am, you can't run in here," a voice calls out from behind the front desk, but I ignore it completely, because all I can see or think about is West.

My body slams into his and he lifts both my feet off the ground, sweeping me up into an embrace.

“I was so scared,” I breathe against his neck. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

It’s irrational to blame anything that’s happened tonight on him, but I’m out of my head right now.

He laughs quietly into my ear, sounding every bit as exhausted as I expected him to, but still, he pacifies me with a response.

“Promise. You have my word on that.”

My feet are on the tile again, and when Dane approaches, I’m not sure what I thought would happen next, but I wasn’t expecting him to grab West as tight as he does. It’s a hug, yes, but it’s the kind you give someone you weren’t so sure you’d ever see again.

Which, for so many reasons, is perfectly fitting.

Sterling and Joss follow Dane’s lead, and despite all that’s gone on throughout this highly charged, terrifying day, the Golden boys are going to be fine. *Better* than fine.

The others are a few paces ahead, letting West and I trail behind to talk a bit.

“Are you good?” he asks. “I can imagine you lost your shit when you saw Pandora’s stream.”

How can he worry about me at a time like this? I’m not even a little bit surprised, though.

“I’m okay. It would’ve been worse if Ricky hadn’t called as soon as the video ended. He let me know you were fine, and that Roby had things under control.”

“He’s okay? He took off pretty quickly.”

The urgency in his voice when asking about Ricky catches me off guard. It’s almost like, on some level at least, he cares.

“Yeah, he’s fine,” I answer.

We descend the steps and casually stroll the sidewalk toward Sterling’s car. I hadn’t had a moment to even think about it until now, but with all this shit behind us, there’s no need to pretend anymore. No need to hide that we’re together and in love.

Vin’s reign of terror in Cypress Pointe is over.

In my periphery, I’m aware of the white SUV that’s just parked near the curb on the other side of the street. Realizing this has West’s attention, too, I

keep my eyes trained there, shocked to see his mother climb out.

Even from this distance, it's clear she's been crying—from her red-rimmed eyes, to her flushed cheeks. Tucked beneath her arm, there's a small leatherbound book.

“Is that—”

“The ledger,” West answers.

I glance at her again, wondering what brought her to this moment. She and West have been on the outs lately, but it would seem she's on her way inside to hammer the final nail into Vin's coffin.

“Should you go talk to her?” I ask, peering up at West.

He shakes his head. “No. She needs to do this on her own, needs to see she's strong enough.”

As if having just heard West's words, his mother approaches the steps of the station and stares up at the building, breathing deep. A few seconds later, she finally finds the nerve to go inside.

West stares at the empty space on the sidewalk where his mother just stood, only glancing toward me when I squeeze his hand.

“Let's get out of here.”

His response to my suggestion is to lean in and warm my lips with his. The relief I feel holding him again, *kissing* him again, it's unmatched.

As God is my witness, the fear ends here, and I swear I'll never be ruled by it again. From here on out, the only emotion that's ever allowed to consume me... is love.

CHAPTER 47

One Month Later...

BLUE

At the risk of being perceived as the resident fun-sucker—that person that sucks all the fun out of life—I’m watching West like a hawk. It has nothing to do with the brunette shooting her best shot while he grabs us drinks, but has everything to do with this being our first real outing since Vin’s arrest. I thought we should continue to lay low for a while, but King Midas insisted that we come out and live a little.

So, here goes, I guess.

A smile touches my lips when West says something to the brunette, then leaves her at the table where she now sulks like someone ran over her puppy. Meanwhile, West is unaffected, weaving through the crowd, making his way back to me.

He drops down onto the couch and my body slumps toward his weight. Then, I’m handed one of the canned drinks he nabbed.

“Looks like you broke her heart.” I point toward the one who tried sinking her claws into him a moment ago.

West glances that way, then leans in because the music’s incredibly loud.

“She’ll get over it. Besides, she knows she doesn’t have a chance, seeing as how I told her we recently married in secret.” When he smirks, I shove his arm a little.

“Great. Now, we can expect that little gem to be plastered all over social media by midnight.”

He shrugs. “Good, it’ll give people something to say about us that doesn’t involve my father.”

I eye him for a second. “You might be on to something.”

He hits me with that killer smile again.

“Seriously, though. Don’t get any ideas. I’d never even *consider* eloping. We’ve been through hell, so the moment you pop the question, I want the entire *world* to know.”

He eyes me in a way that makes my stomach feel all knotted, then his smile widens. “Noted.”

“And we can’t forget Aunt Sheryl’s request. She’s calling for a big wedding at Landry Manor, remember?”

West laughs now. “Right. Can’t forget about that.” His eyes flit toward my lips before meeting my gaze again. “You really want that? The big wedding? My crazy family? The media up our asses every day?”

The laugh he lets out is sort of dark.

That part’s been rough on him and his brothers. It was bad enough being stalked by Pandora’s loyal subjects, but now it’s the *big boys* keeping tabs on his family’s every move. Everyone’s interested in seeing what will come of the sons of the now infamous Vin Golden.

Still, even with all that going on, I’m almost shocked he needs to ask at this point.

“West, with you, I want it all. That’ll *never* change.”

His lips crash down on mine and who cares that we have an audience. Hell, we’ve had one our entire relationship—through the good, the bad.

Certainly the dirty.

His fingers warm the side of my neck when he touches me there, bringing me closer. Having him back still feels like a dream. Pretending not to love him broke me. Fearing I might lose him killed me.

But this—touching him, kissing him, loving him out in the open—this is where I belong.

“Need to get that?” I ask against his lips. His phone’s vibrated in his pocket about five times now.

West pulls away to check whatever messages have come through.

“Shit. He’s serious.”

My interest piques. “What is it?”

“Fucking Ricky,” he sighs. “He wants me to meet him at the gun range in the morning. He mentioned it a few days ago, something about how he’s *‘not coming to save my ass again’*. He hasn’t let up since.”

He’s staring at his phone, but I can’t stop smiling. He does a double-take when meeting my gaze.

“What?”

“Not sure if you’ve realized this or not, but you two are falling into a pattern. One of you texts the other at least twice a week.”

He shoots me a look, like I’ve lost my mind or something. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Okay, but why can’t you just admit it?” I ask with a shrug. “You like him.”

There goes that look again.

“Whatever, Southside,” he huffs, drawing a laugh out of me. I won’t push the issue, but I know I’m not wrong.

Next, *my* phone’s the one going off. I unlock the screen to find a pic of Scar and Mike posing like idiots in their 3D glasses in front of a movie poster. Heading to the theater has become part of their weekend ritual. It seems to have taken away the loneliness Scar would’ve felt from having lost Shane.

Scar: Wish you were here!

Blue: Have fun!

Scar: We will. Mike says he loves you.

I stare at that last message and smile a bit before answering.

Blue: Ditto

“Everything cool?” West asks.

I respond by showing him the pic and he laughs just like I did. “She looks happy,” he points out.

“She does. I’m glad I didn’t get in the way of that.”

Sometimes, it scares me to think how close I came to building a wall between them. One that would’ve caused them both undue pain.

West pulls me close and kisses my forehead before rising from the couch. “Let’s find the others.”

I stand when he lifts me to my feet, clinging to his hand as we move

through the tightly-packed crowd. Of course, we make several stops because every few steps, someone's calling his name—mostly just guys he's played ball with over the years.

"I swear you know everyone," I say, clinging to his arm.

He shrugs all casual like. "I've just run in the same circles as a lot of these kids my whole life."

"What you mean is that the rich stick together," I tease, earning myself a playful glare. "It's true, though, isn't it? It's the reason our paths never would've crossed if I didn't get a scholarship."

"Whatever brought you to me, I'm just glad it happened," he answers.

Not sure if he's trying to rack up points or not, but I'm definitely rewarding him for that later.

I spot Dane and Joss first, chilling against a pillar near the patio. He's talking and she's smiling, both pretending they don't wish to be more than they are. Sterling's got two on his lap, one kissing him, the other... I don't know. Waiting her turn?

The guy's wild and single, so who knows what's going on over there.

All in all, it's a good night. Everyone's in their element, having a good time, and I have my guy at my side.

"I love you, West Golden."

He peers down at me, and I swear I feel his response before the words even leave his mouth. "Love you more. Forever."

EPILOGUE

Three months later...

BLUE

There's a bonfire, there's music, but the Bellvue house feels completely different when there's no party. Tonight, it's just us—the solid fivesome Pandora's dubbed “The Golden Crew”. Graduation's been over for hours, but we only changed out of our caps and gowns twenty minutes ago. Guess we kept them on for so long because we're all kind of proud we made it.

And maybe a little surprised, considering.

I'm perched on West's knee, staring out across the water while we sit poolside. This just feels right. Like all the drama, all the chaos was to get us to this very moment.

As soon as I walked across that stage this morning, I felt the change. It was like a switch had flipped and we all took one giant leap forward. No, not every important person was present, but I'm okay with that. This chapter of my life is closing, and I'm beyond excited to see what's next.

My mother was one of those key people missing from the audience, but she's exactly where she needs to be—in rehab, finally getting help. It's not the same as having her home, clean and sober, but if that's ever going to happen, this is the first step. I, at least, have peace of mind. Every night, when I lay down to sleep, I know she's someplace safe, too, being looked after.

Which brings me to Mike, who's made a complete turnaround. For five months now, he's been an actual father to Scar, which is all I ever wanted. To me, it's priceless to see him fully invested in her life, in her future. He's even taken steps to get her waitlisted at Cypress Prep. I'm not usually one to give second chances, but he's proven that it was totally worth it this time.

I certainly had family members missing today, but I wasn't the only one.

We can't turn on the TV or scroll social media without seeing Vin's mugshot. He's been slapped with all kinds of charges, and although he's still awaiting trial, it's common knowledge that he'll likely spend the rest of his life in prison. Not only for the crimes he's committed, but the lives lost on account of him. However, one thing has remained abundantly clear—he's planning to go down alone.

Aside from the few key people brought in on charges tied to the trafficking organization, the Ruiz family has yet to be named. Mike seems to think Vin's keeping his mouth shut because life behind bars will be a million times worse if he's labeled a snitch. Especially with the Ruizes having connections inside, and outside, those walls.

Long story short, Vin can either rot in jail for the rest of his life or die a very painful death when news reaches the Ruizes that he's talked.

Whatever the case, I'm just glad to have him off the streets.

Roby's still on a mission to bring down everyone involved, and I'm learning to trust that whatever the outcome, this case couldn't be in more capable hands. Once they've found irrefutable evidence leading them straight to Paul and crew, they'll all be brought to their knees.

I can only pray that won't include Ricky.

With my thoughts now on him, I picture him seated in the audience today, supporting me like he's always done. No matter what. He didn't stick around long, though. As soon as I exited the stage and looked up, his seat was empty. Not many others know this, but he's heading to Puerto Rico as we speak. Yes, he misses Shane and Carla, but he also needs to lay low. With Roby and his task force up all the Ruiz's asses, they're looking for *any* excuse to lock up members of the family.

Somehow, Ricky caught wind of this before shit started going down, which some might see as a coincidence, but I know better. Roby definitely tipped him off, and I'll never believe he didn't.

Add that to the list of reasons I'm glad I took a chance on trusting him.

Another reason being that he personally interviewed the rescued victims

of the trafficking ring, digging for evidence that eventually proved Hunter hadn't fired the shot that killed Robyn Helms. Since then, he's been moved to a facility closer to home and his sentence has been lightened to only reflect his true involvement in the scheme. Because, according to the witness, Robyn's death isn't on him. It's on the one who actually pulled the trigger.

Vin.

But all that's behind us now. Well, as much as it can be. I suppose we'll always bear the scars of the past to some degree.

As if having heard my thoughts, West's hand settles on my knee and I face him.

"Feels good to be moving on."

"*Damn* good," I counter, leaning in to press my lips to his.

His gaze is locked with mine when I pull away. "The only imperfection is that we'll be miles apart for school."

I nod, agreeing with him. It sucks that we'll have a short drive to see one another, but it could be much, *much* worse.

"Guess it's a good thing I have this."

I glance down when he pulls something from his pocket, confused when he reveals a velvet box. My brow quirks, thinking something crazy. Only, the size of it throws me off.

"Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

He flashes a smile and brings the box closer. "Just open it."

While the others laugh and chat around us, it's just him and me in our own little world.

Gripping the edge of the velvet, I flip open the lid, and I'm only *more* confused.

"A key? I don't get it," I say, right before lifting my eyes to meet his again.

"Well, Sterling's gonna be living on campus in a few months, and since Dane's decided to rent that loft he found, I thought it'd make sense for you and me to have a spot of our own. That is, if you think Scar's okay with Mike now."

My face lights up. "She's fine with him. Now tell me where!"

He makes me wait far too long, then glances up at the house.

"...Here."

I feel my face go slack this time as I try to grasp the idea of the two of us having this huge house all to ourselves.

“Mom’s been thinking about selling it because she doesn’t want to deal with the upkeep, but I talked her into letting us have it. That is, if you’re okay with—”

I plant a kiss on him that shuts him up. My excitement has nothing to do with the fact that this place is huge and lavish. It has *everything* to do with a wish coming true.

Since the first day I realized I loved him, I’ve wanted to be with him every day, every minute. Now, if I’m not dreaming, it seems that’s about to happen.

“Yes,” I say against his lips, kissing him again.

He’s smiling when I finally let up. I didn’t know this day could possibly get any better.

“Do me a favor,” he says, “keep that answer on your lips for a bit. I’d like to get that same response out of you in a few years. Only, next time, I’ll be asking a much bigger question.”

My heart melts and I can’t believe that after all the hell I’ve been through, this southside girl finally has it all—family, friends, love.

“For you, my answer will always be yes, King Midas. Every damn time.”



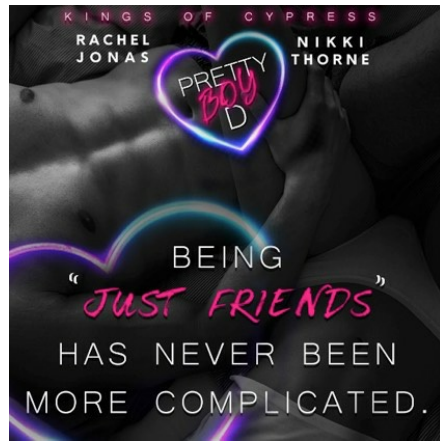
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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading *Forever Golden*, Book 3 in the *Kings of Cypress Prep* series.

If you have enjoyed entering Cypress Prep, show other readers by leaving a review! Just visit: [*Forever Golden*](#)

Be on the lookout for [the next series](#) to kick off summer 2021!

Join my readers' group for more news [*The Shifter Lounge*](#) and my [*Newsletter*](#) today!



SOUNDTRACK

(Listed in no particular order)

Music is a very integral part of my writing process, and I carefully choose songs that fuel each scene. The lyrics may not always be spot on, but sometimes it's more about the emotion evoked. While writing *Kings of Cypress Prep*, I selected music that brought out the intense emotions West & Blue felt during various scenes throughout their journey. I hope this list enhances the reading experience for you, like it did for me while writing.

Note: Piracy is unlawful, and using sites where music can be downloaded for free is equivalent to stealing from the musician. Buying the song or album directly from the artist will always be the best way to show support and appreciation for the artist's work.

“Gambling Hearts”—Harrison Brome

“Shelter”—Harrison Brome

“Come Together”—Gary Clark Jr.

“Gold”—Kiiara

“It was a Good Day”—Ice Cube

“There's No Way”—Lauv

“Ruin”—Shawn Mendes

“Slow Dancing in the Dark”—Joji

“Falling For You”—The 1975

“Often”—The Weeknd

“She Wants”—Metronomy

“Crave You”—Clairo
“Time of the Season”—The Zombies
“Bad Things”—Cults
“I Found”—Amber Run
“Teeth”—5 Seconds of Summer
“Novacane”—Frank Ocean
“We Can Make Love”—SoMo
“Losin Control”—Russ
“Who Needs Love”—Trippie Redd
“Body”—Sinead Harnett
“Abandoned”—Trippie Redd
“Run”—Joi
“Candy Castle”—Glass Candy
“Yeah Right”—Joi
“I think I’m Okay”—Machine Gun Kelly
“Bad Things”—Machine Gun Kelly
“Tearing Me Up (Remix)—Bob Moses
“Stuck in the Middle”—Tai Verdes
“Sweater Weather”—The Neighbourhood
“Broken”—lovelytheband



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Jonas also writes as Nikki Thorne.

Hey, I'm Rachel! Consider this your formal invitation to hang out in my private Facebook group, THE SHIFTER LOUNGE. You'll get fun book convo, exclusive giveaways, and other random acts of nerdiness!

Don't usually talk to strangers? No worries! Allow me to introduce myself. I'm a Michigan native, wife, and mother of three who made a career of indulging the voices inside my head :) With several completed series, and stories in both the paranormal and contemporary YA/NA romance categories, there's something for everyone!

Happy reading!

Don't forget to follow me!

