

THE SECRET

SECRETS DEFINE YOU
LOVE WILL BREAK YOU



ALEXIA MANTZOURANIS

IDENTITY

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Visit my website at www.authoralexiamantzouranis.com

Cover Designer: <http://nogginadvertising.com>

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Trigger warning: Reader's discretion is advised

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*This is to people who suffer from
mental illness and grief.
God picks the hardest fights for
his strongest warriors.
Keep rocking on.*

PLAYLIST

Birthday Cake – Dylan Conrique
Lonely – Justin Bieber, Benny Blanco
I guess I'm in love – Clinton Kane
All of me – John Legend
Heaven – Julia Michaels
Monster – Shawn Mendes, Justin Bieber
You Are The Reason – Calum Scott
jealousy, jealousy – Olivia Rodrigo
LIKE I WOULD – ZAYN
Train Wreck – James Arthur
Lost – Maroon 5
LIKE A ROCKSTAR – Chase Atlantic
Might Not – Belly, The Weekend
Like I Can – Sam Smith
Traitor – Olivia Rodrigo
Strange - Celeste

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ONE

TRINITY

As the refreshing breeze of this summer day wafts through the air, blowing my hair back, I keep my eyes forward as I think to myself, *I've never felt this tired and drained.* I'm tired of feeling the painful emotion of sadness, guilt that eats me alive until I believe I'll be a shallow shell of who I used to be.

I know people think I'm weird. I'm the girl who hates music. I mean, who hates music? Me—that's who. I do everything to not hear a single chord of music in my life.

I drive in my car in silence, I read in my room in silence, and I also do my homework in silence. To others, music is therapeutic. It relaxes them. Other people sing along and dance to the rhythm, but I freeze as my heartbeat quickens.

All the memories I have bottled away always seem to arise when I hear melodies. Others scream and dance. I just cover my ears and wish it all to go away. Don't be fooled. I wasn't always this way. I used to love music. I even used to sing. Music was my life. That all stopped that one sunny afternoon four years ago when not only did my happiness drain from me, but also the things that I loved.

Everything was taken from me ...

I loved dancing around my room in my PJs. I especially enjoyed going to concerts with my best friends that I had. Now, they're gone too. I pushed them away. I run from my problems now. I run from my feelings, run from pain, happiness—everything.

Those distant memories of me and my father sitting on our front porch, singing together lightly while he strummed his guitar, are something that I

dream of now. My dad would call me downstairs every night. We would both sit down on the bench swing hanging out front. He would smile down at me with the smile I now miss dearly and start singing. I remember growing up and always being comforted by his voice, how soft it was and how safe it made me feel. He would always dedicate every song to me, making me feel in awe of how much he loved me. As I grew up, he taught me his ways. I grew more comfortable with my singing abilities and would sing with him for hours on end.

But that stopped the sunny afternoon they killed him. He was killed by a stray bullet.

It went right through his heart, and he was dead on the scene. When my mom heard the news, she dropped to the ground in tears, already mourning the loss of her husband. All I could do was stand there in shock. I couldn't believe what I had heard. I couldn't believe it till I saw him.

The entire drive to the hospital, I kept reassuring myself, *He's not dead. He can't be. He's probably on life support.* Anything would have been better than him being dead. As Mom and I walked through those doors leading to the emergency room, I was quickly snapped out of my positive thoughts.

A poor mistake to keep my hopes up.

He's dead. He's really dead.

No more hugs and kisses. No more drives to school and no more songs.

As I looked down at his lifeless body, pale skin as if he'd been dead for years, I felt the life inside me drain out. It was as if my heart had been ripped out, squeezed, and laughed at in the murderer's hand. The tightness in my chest made it really hard to breathe, causing me to run out of the depressing white hospital room. Finding the nearest trash can in the hallway, I let up all the bile arising in my throat. The bitter taste made me gag into the stinky garbage.

Not only have I hated music since that day, but I also have so much bottled-up anger toward my dad's killers. They walked away from the scene without a single scratch, living in this world like they hadn't killed an innocent man. Left his wife and daughter alone to fend for themselves now. I hate them. I want them to rot in jail for the rest of their lives.

We haven't gotten justice yet, and every day that they're not found, it feels more impossible to find them.

So impossible ...

My brain tells me that we won't ever find them, that they'll be free to live

the rest of their lives how they please—just how my dad was supposed to. It takes a lot of energy to push those thoughts aside and look at the positives.

That explains why I have trust issues, depression, and anger. All I am now is cold and distant. I don't trust people, and I never will, although I wish I could. I cry a lot ... and when I hear music, I turn it off. Too many memories, too many heartaches. I can't bear it.

When there are reports regarding a new singer or a band on the news, I turn down the volume until it's over. At night, sometimes, my mind drifts off into what-ifs.

What if I'd recorded his voice while he was singing? Would I remember it the same?

Would I be as sad as I am right now?

Would I be a different person?

And would I be strong enough to turn on the radio and listen to a damn song?

I know Mom is depressed. She hides behind her smiles and hugs. But I can tell otherwise. Since that day, she's tried to do everything to make me happy, and I return the favor. She's the only one I have. I can't imagine—and hope I never understand—the feeling of losing a husband so brutally as she did. Some days, I find her more distant. She's gone for most of the day, and she heads up to her room immediately after work. I'm not sure why she's suddenly pulling back from me, avoiding me like I have a deadly disease. It hurts. But I treat her how Dad would have wanted me to.

He would have wanted me to love her just like he did ...

Love this town like he did.

We live in a small town. Our medium-sized house lies on big acreage. We don't have any crops or farm animals. My dad was just interested and loved the idea of—and I quote—“farmland and living in clean air.” I hated it here at first. No one's around us, just one house miles away next to ours. I can see their front porch and a couple of windows clearly from my window. It's white with black shutters, and a *Sold* sign is stuck in the ground, blowing in the wind. The nice elderly couple who used to live there for many years decided that they needed to downgrade.

I can't help but wonder, *Who's going to move in there? Will they be nice? Do they have children my age who would look at me like I'm a freak?*

Probably.

Our small town is an hour away from the lively city of Toronto. Our main

street is lined with self-owned businesses, coffee shops, and bakeries. Basically, it's like every town you see in a Hallmark movie.

Luckily, the last day of school was two days ago. I hated driving to school for more than an hour in the morning. My tired eyes couldn't handle the bright sun and the long, winding road ahead. As you can tell, I'm not a morning person.

Yet a positive is that I graduated high school. I'm now free of the hell people call school. Knowing I don't have to walk through those miserable halls, sit in the tight desks, and eat terrible cafeteria food that more resembled shit than food is a relief.

The only negative is not seeing my dad in the crowds at my graduation, in the seat beside my mom, where he is supposed to be.

This entire town is a reminder of him.

The one thing that I adore here is the silence. It's peaceful. The forest around my house looks like the forest Bella, the main character in *Twilight*, lives next to. I've always referred to that as a flex in my life. Hardly any cars drive by. And if they do, I always go to the window and look. Curiosity gets the best of me.

I'm not crazy, just lonely.

"You should go out more, sweetie. Have some fun," Mom says from behind me. Her fingers brush through my long, straight brown hair.

I smile at the feeling. I love when people play with my hair.

"I'm perfectly happy here, Mom." I look over my shoulder and smile up at her. "I'm happy here with you."

She nods her head and gives my forehead a kiss. "I'm glad you want to hang out with your old mom," she jokes and chuckles slowly, making me smile. "But don't you want to have fun with your friends ... maybe live a little?"

Shaking my head, I glance away from her hopeful eyes. Staring straight ahead, I pick up my spoon and scoop a spoonful of yogurt into my mouth.

"You can't keep avoiding people, Trinity. Your father—"

"Don't use that card on me, Mom. I'm trying every day to be better—you know this. It's just hard," I mumble, interrupting her.

She looks disappointed and shocked at my outburst. See, this is what I meant about the anger. I don't mean to raise my voice; it just happens.

"As your mother, I want what's best for you," she explains.

"I love you, Mom, but please let me deal with my own social life."

I know she wants to argue further, but she keeps her mouth shut and nods. “I just love you,” she whispers after a few minutes.

Turning in her direction, I face her. “I love you too, Mom. I know you want what’s best for me, but I don’t like when you pry like that.”

Her hand cups my cheek. “I’ll try to do better, honey.”

I nod. “I’ll try too.”

Sitting in the chair ahead of me, she types on her phone for a few minutes before speaking into the silence. “Have you chosen which college you want to go to?”

God, I hate college talk.

Just thinking about how taking majors will define how my future goes makes chills travel up my spine.

“I’m deciding between two majors,” I say simply, not wanting to get into the stressful topic.

“Which ones?”

Ugh. “Journalism and psychology.”

She nods, biting the inside of her cheek as she cocks her head to the side. “Both really good options. I know you would be happy either way.”

I laugh. “I hope.” Fiddling with the ring around my finger, I worry. “I’m only eighteen. It’s scary to think I’m figuring out my future right now. I have no idea what I want to do tomorrow, let alone twenty years from now.” I throw my hands up in the air.

“Taking one day at a time is important—”

“I know; I know.” I wave at her. “I’m just stressing out for no reason.”

“You wouldn’t be my daughter if you didn’t overthink for stupid reasons,” she jokes, bringing her coffee cup in the air, clinking it against mine.

“Amen to that.”



“Come here, boy,” I say happily to Simba.

My excited golden retriever puppy runs over to my bed and stands on his back legs. His golden fur shines due to the sunlight that beams into my room. He can’t reach my bed yet since he’s just a small puppy. Mom surprised me with him a couple of weeks ago. Even though I’m lonely, Simba fills a big

part of my heart. He's always happy to see me, and that feels good. That feels refreshing.

"How's my boy doing?" I ask him.

I smile when his cute face comes closer to mine. Giving my cheek a kiss, he snuggles his head into my neck. Over the past couple of weeks, I've noticed how snuggly he is whenever I hold him. He always falls asleep in my arms, which is the most wholesome thing ever.

I truly do feel like a mom to him. He makes me feel like I have a purpose.

I smile and kiss his head softly. Reaching my hand over to my nightstand, I grab the book I'm currently reading. A forbidden, enemies-to-lovers romance with so much steam that I had to place it down a couple of times before resuming.

My love life might be nonexistent, but at least I fall in love with every fictional man I read about.

I look up and let my eyes roam over my bedroom. The wall opposite of my queen-size bed is a giant bookshelf. All my money goes to local bookstores. Reading is my new hobby since I don't do anything else with my life. Whenever I go somewhere, I take a book with me. Even if I don't plan on reading, it's always in my black leather backpack I carry around with me. Reading is therapeutic. It's like escaping to a world without actually escaping. I sometimes wonder how words on pages can bring me so much joy.

I'm snapped out of my thoughts when I see my phone light up, showing an incoming FaceTime call. *Harper* pops up on the screen, informing me that my best friend is calling me. She calls at least once a day. Sometimes, I pick up, and other days, I don't.

I'll give her credit; she's the only person who hasn't given up on me. I know she's tired of me, but she understands I want space. I'm super grateful for her.

I smile sadly down at the profile picture I placed for her. She's giving me a piggyback at an outdoor concert we went to one night before the shooting. Her tongue is sticking out playfully. My olive skin stands out, compared to her beautiful brown skin. I've known her since we were five. She's the sibling I never had, and I know my parents are practically her parents as well.

Well, just my mom now ...

I know I promised I would try, but I don't feel like talking today. I want to enjoy my book. Silencing my phone, I go back to reading.



I wake up with a start when my book goes crashing down to the floor from my bed, causing my heart to speed up from the sudden loudness. “Shit,” I mutter and rub my sleepy eyes.

I glance down toward my lap and see Simba staring at me with his big chocolate-brown eyes. The sudden bang my book made must have startled him as well.

“Did that scare you too?” I ask him, and he whines. “Sorry, boy,” I say as I pet his head.

Internally, I groan on the inside. My book closed ... without my bookmark inside of it.

“Just my luck.”

As I reach down to the floor in an awkward position because of Simba lounging on my lap, I almost tumble to the ground. My hand stops me just before my head meets the hardwood floor.

Thank you, Jesus. You must've been looking out for me.

Simba jumps off my bed and runs out of my room in a hurry without looking back.

“Just my fucking luck,” I repeat to myself but louder than before.

If I were him, I would have run away too.

My hands turn the book in all directions once I've picked it up. I hate when my books get damaged. I try to keep them in perfect condition. Even one crease and folded page will make me get the urge to buy a new copy. I'm a mess ... but at least, I'm a hot mess.

Placing my book on my bookshelf, I smooth my clammy hands down my bare legs. Breathing in and out, I let my fingers graze across multiple spines.

My attention is caught when I hear the roar of various engines outside. *Who's driving down this road? It's like a ghost town here.*

I pull my curtains aside. My eyes squint as I try to make out the cars in the distance. A car exhaust becomes louder, the closer it gets.

I press my forehead hard into the glass, and I frown when I see two fancy cars. An expensive white G-Wagon and a red Audi TT pull into the sold house beside ours.

What the hell?

“Trinity,” Mom yells lightly from the hallway. Peeking her head through the door, she smiles at me. “Guess we have new neighbors!”

Great.

TWO

TRINITY

New neighbors. I don't know how I feel about this. My head's a mess, filled with mixed thoughts. Should I jump in joy or drown my sorrows in junk food? I'm leaning more toward the unhealthy option even though I know I'll regret it later, but you do only live once.

Junk food it is.

"Nope," Mom says, rushing into my room when I walk back toward my bed. "We're going to go meet them after they settle in."

"Mom," I groan and drop my face in my pillow, hiding from her view.

Please, just leave me alone.

I'm not in the mood today to meet new people and put on my fake smile that wears me down. I have my bad days and good days. Today is bad.

"They look like a big family. It's a great opportunity for you to make friends."

"I have friends, for your information," I grunt against my pillow.

A second later, it's yanked from my face and thrown across the room. I gasp as the pillow flies and lands on Simba's face, making him fall to the floor on his stomach in shock.

Poor baby.

He looks confused and heartbroken.

"Mom, how could you?!" I whisper-yell before running over to my poor dog. "Look what you did to my son." Cradling him in my arms, I gesture him toward Mom. "It's okay, baby. Mommy's got you." I rush out as he nuzzles his head in the bend of my arm.

Hands on her hips, she rolls her eyes at me. "You're eighteen."

I snuggle my face into his fur. "You're forty-five. What's your point?"

Her mouth drops open in shock as she shakes her head. She tries to hide the smile that's lifting her mouth, but she fails miserably.

"I see that smile, girl," I joke. "Let it shine, let it shine," I say right before she pushes my shoulder playfully.

"Get ready," she says from over her shoulder as she walks to my bedroom door.

"Do I have to?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

She plainly says, "Yes."

"I'll buy you dinner for an entire week if you let me skip."

Pointing at me from the doorway of my room, she demands, "Hard pass. Get ready, miss."

She disappears from my sight, and I open my mouth to argue, but she interrupts like she can see me, which is freaky.

"Don't argue with me," she calls from the hallway. "And wear something appropriate—no booty shorts or anything like that. We have to make a good impression!"

Damn, is that what she thinks of me? I wasn't planning on wearing my "booty shorts."

"I'll wear my bikini then," I call back and let out a laugh when I hear her gasp. "I'm joking! I'm joking!" I exclaim with a wide smile as she rushes back into the room with a scowl.

I love pushing her buttons, and deep down, I know she kinda loves it too. It keeps things interesting when things are anything but that.

Mom stands in the doorway for a couple of seconds before finally leaving me to get dressed. Making sure to lock my bedroom door, I open my two closet doors and peer at all my clothes hanging neatly.

Going comfy is the best route. It's not like I'm meeting the Queen of England. It's probably just another old couple. What other young people would want to move here?

People my age like parties, blaring music—basically everything loud. Here has everything but that.

Gathering the clothes that I've chosen in my arms, I undress. A pair of light-blue mom jeans with holes at the knees cover my long legs, and a black crop top covers my toned stomach. Not having the energy to style my hair, I just throw it up in a messy bun with some short pieces of hair defining my face.

Glancing at my reflection in the mirror, I nod. It's the best they're going

to get from me today.

“At least you’re not showing your ass,” Mom grumbles from where she stands at the front door, waiting for me as I walk down the steps.

Her eyes stay glued to my stomach.

“I’m not showing anything,” I say, looking down at myself.

She snorts and nods.

“Whatever,” I mutter back, getting annoyed. “It’s not like I want to welcome our stupid new neighbors.”

I walk through the open door, immediately getting hit by the fresh summer air, and she closes the front door as I make my way down the steps.

“It’s not the 1970s, you know. We don’t have to greet our neighbors,” I continue.

I really don’t feel like socializing with people today. I hate having to plaster a fake smile on my face and pretend to be someone I’m not. It wasn’t tiring at first; however, now, it gets harder to do every time.

She sighs and stops walking abruptly. “I’m trying here, Trinity. This is the nice thing to do. You would want people to welcome you if you were new. Wouldn’t you?”

No. “Yes.”

“Good. There’s a bit of sense still in that brain of yours,” she mutters.

Rude. Little does she know, I was lying just to make her feel better.

As we walk closer to the house, I notice how rich they seem. Expensive cars that I’m afraid to touch, Louis Vuitton bags and suitcases lying all over the driveway. Just looking at their luggage, I can tell they have some serious money.

Did a Mafia family move out here? Oh God, I’m going to have to move. If I witness a crime, I’ll be a target, and I’ll die miserably.

“Mafia?” I sneer lowly at Mom.

Whipping her head in my direction, she laughs. “Forget what I said. There’s nothing up there,” she replies.

I dodge her hand when it comes up to my head to knock on it.

“Whatever. I’m going to say *I told you so* when I unfortunately witness a crime that leaves me even more traumatized.”

“You won’t witness a crime, Trinity—”

I interrupt, “Fine. Then, they’re a bunch of rich people. Yay!” I keep my tone bored to add to the *fuck this* vibe.

What are people this rich doing all the way out here anyway? I imagine

them being in the city, in a mansion, with butlers and maids, having people drive them all around town. Not here, in a regular-sized house in the middle of nowhere.

Please, someone, get me out of here.

“Maybe they’re not bad. Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

She always sees the good in everything. I always see the negative.

I hate this. I hate this. I hate this.

My legs feel heavier than they were before as I walk up their front porch steps. Mom’s hand rises and knocks on the wooden door three times. My heart rate quickens.

Please let it be an old lady, so I’m not forced to hang out with anyone.

Please, please, please.

Here comes the anxiety.

I feel like I’m going to vomit. I hate meeting new people. I always get mini tornadoes in my stomach.

Breathe in and out. You’ll be fine.

What catches my breath when the door swings open is not my anxiety. It’s the sight of a drop-dead handsome guy.

Holy shit.

I’m finding it severely difficult to keep my mouth from dropping open. He’s the most striking guy I’ve ever seen in my entire life. We don’t have guys who look like this in our town. It makes me wonder what he’s doing here. He screams sarcastic, freaky, reserved, and somehow soft. He looks like a Greek sculpture, carved into perfection. Well-built curves show through his clothing. He’s brawny-looking but boyish at the same time. His jawline is razor-sharp, lips so rosy and plump, making me slightly jealous. Let’s not forget the small tattoos that linger on his long fingers.

A few strands of silky brown hair pop out from under a black beanie that lies over his head. If I take off that hat, I’ll be met with gorgeous, smooth hair. Black jeans fit his toned legs well. A gray sweatshirt with colorful graphics covers his torso. Under that hoodie, I know there’ll be a six-pack. And what makes him even more droolworthy—which I don’t know how that’s remotely possible—are the rings on his slim fingers.

Someone, catch me. I’m going to faint. He wears rings!

I’m trying to distract myself from the feeling of a thousand butterflies in my stomach, but it’s very hard when a literal superstar is standing in front of me, looking very confused.

“Can I help you?” his husky voice asks. He looks over at my mom in question. Even his voice is sexy, deep with a hint of rasp.

Mom extends her hand out to him, gripping his. He gives her a polite smile.

“Hi. We’re just stopping by to say hello to our new neighbors,” Mom explains, and he nods in understanding.

“So, you’re the other family who lives in the middle of nowhere,” he jokes, showcasing his beautiful dimples when he smiles.

God.

I know pink coats my cheeks when he glances over at me. His eyes open in shock slightly, but he quickly covers it up with a cough.

Did he just get affected by me? No way. A guy like that can’t like a girl like me.

“Would you like to come in?” he asks Mom, recovering from his shock. He pushes the door open wider, allowing Mom and me to see an elegant staircase.

Our house certainly doesn’t look like this. They must have had someone renovate it before they moved in.

See, they’re rich, rich.

“No, it’s okay. We don’t want to be a bother. We just wanted to stop by and say hello.” Mom waves her hand and takes a step back.

I follow her lead, but I don’t take my eyes off the guy.

I wonder what his name is. *Is it as sexy as he looks? No, his name is probably Bob.*

“You’re not a bother at all. My mom was going to drop by your place anyway. She keeps talking about it, so you might as well meet her now that you’re already here.”

I give my mom a look because I know she’s going to accept, but going in was not the plan at all. She ignores me.

“All right.” She gives him one last smile and walks through the door, leaving me behind with Mr. Hottie.

Looking me up and down, he clears his throat. “Are you coming in?”

His rich chocolate-brown eyes, full of wisdom, bore into mine. I know if I open my mouth and say anything, my voice will crack, like I’m a frog. So, that’s why I shrug my shoulders and hurry past him through the open doorway while secretly freaking out on the inside.

Keep calm, Trinity. You got this, girl.

From the corner of my eye, as we awkwardly walk down the hallway together in silence, I can see him raise an eyebrow in question and maybe surprise.

Why does he look relieved?

Finally glancing at me, he assesses me. “What’s your name?” his rough voice asks from beside me.

Mom’s voice gets louder each step I take down this long hallway. I’m not sure if I’m grateful for that, seeing that he asked me such a basic question and I’m having trouble forming words.

“Trinity Jones,” I say confidently even though I feel like cringing on the inside.

My body warms up when I feel his body heat. He’s so close to me. I might just pass out. This guy is hotter than Shawn Mendes—yes, ladies, I said it because it’s true. He’s so tall that the top of my head reaches just below his chin. His biceps are right in my face, practically begging me to run my finger along them.

Shut up, Trinity.

Why am I acting this way? I’ve never been affected by a guy this much.

Looking over at him, I find him looking down at me while biting his lower lip. When he notices I’m gazing at him, he pops it out of his mouth.

Holy.

“Aren’t you going to tell me your name?” I muster up the courage to tease him.

“You never asked,” he replies simply with a shrug of his shoulders.

I give him a sarcastic smile. “Well, now, I am.”

Tucking his hands in his hoodie pocket, he looks straight ahead. “My name is Leo Drakos. Leo is short for Leonidas.”

Say what now?

When I almost trip over my own feet, he smirks slightly. Leonidas is the hottest name I’ve ever heard in my entire life. The way his tongue rolled on the *L*.

Why does that suit him so well? I’ve never met anyone before with the name Leonidas.

“That’s Greek,” I point out when I compose myself.

He nods, and a smile lifts his face. “A Greek name for a Greek guy,” he says proudly.

Greek ... holy shit. I thought he couldn’t get any better a second ago. I’m

mistaken.

Now looking at him, I can clearly see his European features. His olive-toned skin, his dark hair. Yep, definitely attractive.

I question why I lose most of my confidence around him. I hate losing my cool and not being able to control myself fully. It's probably because he's so hot—and not to mention, Greek. Leonidas is the first guy to ever walk into this town who looks this droolworthy and expensive.

“Oh, there you are. I was worried you went home,” my mom says and breathes out a sigh of relief when I walk through the kitchen door. “This is my daughter, Trinity. Trinity, this is Athena.”

A gorgeous lady with medium-brown hair walks over to me with a warm smile. “With a name like Trinity, I knew you were going to be stunning.”

Leo stops behind me when she pulls my body into hers. She squeezes the daylight out of me. I say nothing though because I can feel the happiness in her hug.

Pulling away from me, Athena gives me the biggest smile I've ever received. Just like Leo, she looks somehow relieved. Strange but in a good way.

“You're going to love my daughter.” She looks over at Leo. “Go call your sister and brother down, please.”

Another son and a daughter? How many kids has this lady birthed?

Seeing siblings has always made me sad. I've never had someone to call my brother or sister. I used to beg my parents for one, but they would say one kid in their lives was enough.

“Seeing that you're an only child, love, you can come here anytime you'd like,” she states while running a hand through my hair.

I nod at her with a small smile. Her offer means a lot. I don't think I'll be able to be around Leo every single day. I know he's the typical bad boy with a bad attitude, just by looking at him and seeing the way he holds himself. The tattoos that are inked on his fingers prove my point. Just being in his presence for two minutes makes me feel like I'm on fire.

Athena gives off a good vibe. She somehow makes me feel welcome, and I just got here.

I take the glass filled with iced tea she offered me and take a seat at the kitchen table. My mom takes the seat on my left, which leaves the chair to my right available. I pray to God that Leo doesn't sit there.

Not a second later, Leo walks back into the kitchen, but this time, he's

with a girl and another guy by his side. The girl is breathtaking with blonde hair falling below her shoulders. She's tall but not as tall as me.

A smile graces her face. Her eyes light up once they land on me. Squealing, she runs over to me, roughly pulling out the chair beside me. She gives me a relieved smile. "Hi. Gosh, you're pretty. I'm so relieved that you live here. I thought I'd be stuck alone here with those two doofuses for months."

Her smile brightens the room. She's exactly like her mom. Just as beautiful, kind, and warm.

"One of you is enough," Leo grumbles and rolls his eyes at his sister.

She rolls them back and gives my shoulder a light punch.

"You're lucky you're an only child," she mentions, looking around the kitchen and only seeing me and Mom.

I want to argue and tell her she's wrong, that it gets very lonely, but I keep my mouth shut once again.

She scolds, "I have to suffer every single day. Do you know how long they take in the bathroom? You would think they were secretly girls. Not to mention how I have to fight for dinner. It's ridiculous!"

I wish I had those problems. *Want to trade lives?*

"That doesn't seem that bad. It sounds entertaining." I shrug while tracing the tip of my finger on the edge of my glass.

Her mouth drops open.

"What?" I ask, confused by her expression.

"We're triplets," Leo notes to me.

Damn, that must have hurt Athena.

My eyes widen as I take in the three of them. I stop for a slight second on Leo and Amelia's brother. He looks like both of them combined. He must sense my gaze on him.

"Elijah." He introduces himself with a friendly smile.

Smiling back in his direction, I freak out inside.

I'm going to be living beside triplets? I mean, what's the worst that can happen?

My mind screams at me, *Everything.*

THREE

TRINITY

I always find myself sitting here. My back is resting against this gigantic oak tree right in front of my house, providing me just enough shade to read. I have the perfect view from here. The long, winding road ahead and the forest bring a peaceful aura in the air. Mom always worries that a bear or a coyote might run out of the forest and eat me alive—if only I were that lucky. But I reassure her it would never happen.

Since the strange triplets moved in, it hasn't been as quiet as it was before. I always hear them talking and laughing loudly—sound travels here. Sometimes, I look out the window and search for them, curious to see what they do during the day.

They go into town a lot. Every day, I see them pile into their car. I wonder where they go. Do they know anyone here? And if they do, how did they meet people so fast? It's only been two weeks.

Or maybe they're just in the Mafia ...

Amelia, Leo's sister, keeps trying to talk to me. I see the way she stands on her lawn with a thoughtful expression on her face as she glances over toward our home. I feel bad for ignoring her, but she seems too wild and loud for my liking.

I wasn't always a loser. I was the life of the party. Meeting up with guys on Friday nights and having a good time, going to parties, concerts. I had so many friends at school that I couldn't keep count.

Now, it's like I'm a ghost—forgotten, looking like I'm dead.

“Bitch, where have you been?” Amelia's voice yells over at me suddenly as she runs toward me. “I've been trying to talk to you for days now!” She plops down beside me and playfully rolls her eyes at me.

There goes my peaceful silence.

Giving her a guilty smile, I set my book down on the grass. “You’ll learn I’m not the most social person on the planet.”

Her eyes fill with compassion. “I got that.” She turns and studies me. “You don’t get out a lot, do you?”

Chuckling, I lean my head back on the stubbing bark of the tree. “I used to, but not anymore.”

“How come?”

I shrug my shoulders, not really in the mood to explain my sob story. “I just realized what was important in life and started focusing on that.”

Crossing her ankles, she nods in understanding. “What’s important to you?”

“Family,” I reply, simply not having to think twice.

Family is the only thing that matters anymore. I quickly realized how fast that could be taken away from you, how life isn’t promised.

“We’re more alike than you think,” she says back.

I hate judging people without knowing them fully, but I don’t think she’s anything like me. It looks like she has her life put together. Whereas I’m taking it one day at a time.

“Why did you guys move here?” I ask, trying to get the conversation away from me.

Amelia stays silent for a while, eyes looking distant as they focus on the forest ahead. “We were having family problems, so we moved out here to get closer to one another,” she whispers finally, her tone wavering.

A gust of wind blows, making my gaze travel to the swaying tree branches.

“I hope you guys are doing better.” I attempt to lighten the mood.

She nods her head and gives me a smile. “It’s refreshing here. We love it. It’s different from what we’re used to.”

I agree, “I love the quiet.”

“How long have you lived out here?”

“We moved out here when I was ten.” I swallow tightly. “My dad wanted to be here for all the land even though he’s not a farmer.”

Please don’t ask any more questions. Please.

She looks puzzled. “I haven’t seen your dad for the past two weeks. Is he away?”

Damn it. Of course, the one topic I didn’t want to talk about is brought

up.

Breathe in and out, Trinity, and tell her.

“My dad passed away four years ago,” I whisper, forcing my voice not to crack.

Great. Now, she’s going to look at me like I’m a freak, just like everyone else.

Her breath gets caught in her throat. She glances over at me with shock, then sadness. “I’m so sorry. I wouldn’t have said anything if I had known,” she stammers and places a hand on my arm. “God, I feel so horrible now.”

I chuckle while waving my hand in the air. “Don’t apologize. How would you have known if I didn’t tell you?”

Looking down at her lap, she reaches toward the grass and starts yanking strands out from the ground. Twirling a piece between her fingers, she lets out a sigh. Now, I feel bad. She looks so heartbroken. I wish I hadn’t told her.

A bark attracts both of our attention. I spot Simba running over to us. His tongue hanging out happily as his tail wags back and forth.

“You have a dog! I hate you for keeping him away from me.” Amelia pushes my shoulder as she smiles over toward the ball of sunshine.

My heartbeat quickens and stops when I notice he’s running too fast to halt beside me.

He’s running toward the road ...

“Shit,” Amelia yells as we spot Leo’s car racing down the road ... right to where Simba is running.

“Simba!” I scream.

My throat closes as I jump to my feet in a frenzy. I can’t lose him too. I just got him. I can’t fail him. I force my body to run as fast as humanly possible. Simba stands still on the road due to shock.

Move, move!

I don’t care if I get hit. I can’t lose something else I love.

“Leo!” Amelia yells and waves her hands in the air, trying to get her brother’s attention but it doesn’t work.

What the hell is he doing that he doesn’t see what’s going on in front of him?

My lungs burn as my feet smash against the concrete road. My eyes go wide from the car to my puppy. Finally reaching Simba, I quickly scoop him up in my arms and run back toward Amelia.

I let out a panicked cry as I realize he’s going too fast. There’s no way

he's going to stop. I'm going to get hit and die.

"Holy shit!" I hear Leo suddenly exclaim through his open window. His body roughly presses back against the seat as he slams on the brakes as hard as he can.

Please, please, please.

Thankfully, he skids to a stop centimeters away from me and Simba. His tires let out a protest as rubber burns on the concrete, leaving tire marks on the road.

Holy crap, I'm still alive. I'm still breathing.

Every bone in my body is intact. My heart is beating a mile a minute as I stare at the front of his car, which, might I add, is way too close for comfort for me.

"Are you fucking crazy?" Amelia yells as she stomps toward his car. She pokes her head into his window and gives him the angriest look I've ever seen in my life. "You almost just killed someone!"

"I was distracted!" he stammers as he raises his hands in surrender.

"I was screaming at you. We both were." She scoffs. "You shouldn't be using the excuse that you were distracted. That's a huge mistake, Leo! Do you know what this would do to us?"

He leans his head against the headrest and rubs his eyes with the palms of his hands. "I don't want to talk about this. I'm in shock, okay? I didn't mean to almost run over a human, let alone our neighbor."

"Are you fucked up or—"

"I said I'm sorry. You're acting like I'm a killer," he yells at her, finally losing his cool.

Amelia staggers back from her brother's outburst and laughs at him. "Fine. Go do what you were doing. I guess that's more important than paying attention to the road ahead of you." Turning her back to him, she pulls my arm and drags me toward her house. "Let's go, Trinity. Leave that dick, so he can drown in his thoughts."

Harsh.

Still in shock, I don't realize I've stepped into her house until I'm sitting on her giant bed. *Did I space out or something?*

"Are you okay?" she says softly while placing a hand on my knee.

Nodding once, I glance down at my pup, which I hold tighter now. He sleeps in my arms peacefully, obviously forgetting what just happened.

"I'm so sorry about my brother. I don't know what's going on with him."

Her eyes plead with mine to forgive him.

“It’s okay,” I whisper and shrug. “It’s not your fault.”

“No, it’s not okay.” She gets up from the bed. “My brother almost killed your dog, then you! And he didn’t even apologize to you nicely.”

She paces back and forth, then lets out a frustrated groan.

Turning to me, she snaps her fingers. “Wait here. I’m going to get Elijah.” She runs out of the room and leaves me in confusion.

From what I saw of Elijah, he seems more reserved than the other two. Amelia is definitely the most outgoing and confident triplet. I’m not sure about Leo though. He has me confused. He seems confident, but then he’s closed off and rude.

Leo is kind of like me—stone-cold, but actually sweet if trying.

Elijah suddenly gets yanked into the room by his sister, which makes me jump in surprise. The poor guy looks as if he just rolled out of bed. His brown eyes are tired and slightly red from sleep. I don’t feel intimidated by his presence. He feels peaceful, almost as if he were an angel.

It’s official. I’ve lost my mind.

I already like him.

I’ve noticed the triplets have the same earrings in little black studs. It probably means something deeper to them. I wish I had someone to do that with. I used to. I wonder what Harper’s doing and how she is. I know she called me, and she’s trying ... but I should start trying too.

I’ll call her tonight.

He gives me a polite nod as he spots me on his sister's bed. No emotion crosses his face as he glances back at his sister and motions for her to speak.

“Leo’s crazy. He almost killed her today—” she rants.

“What do you mean, he almost killed her?” he interrupts in shock. He peeks at me and back at his sister.

“You heard me.” She walks over to the bed and plops down beside me.

Not a second later, he takes a place on my left.

“He almost hit her with his big dumpster truck because he wasn’t paying attention.”

I can’t help it. I let out a laugh at her use of words. The two look over at me like I’m crazy.

“It’s okay. It’s kind of funny now that I think about it.” I wave them off and try to change the topic. “Amelia, I’m jealous of your bed. Don’t be surprised if I come and steal it. How is it possible that a bed is this big?”

She laughs and bumps my shoulder with hers. “It cost a fortune, so you’d better like it. My mom got it made for me—well, we all have one,” she simply replies.

How rich are these people? I wish I were able to get a custom bed made for myself.

“Tell me something about yourself,” Elijah and Amelia say at the same time.

I sit there in shock as they give one another an understanding look.

“Triplets thing. It happens a lot.” He brushes it off like it’s no big deal.

Okay then ...

Thinking clearly, I search my brain for something “interesting” to tell them.

“I love reading,” I answer. “That’s about it.”

It’s weird how confident I feel around these two. To anyone else, I would cringe as I told them my reading habits.

Elijah nods and leans his back against the headboard. “What’s your favorite genre?”

“Romance.”

He laughs and smiles.

He has a cute smile.

“Figures,” he mutters.

“Why’s that?” Amelia questions before I can.

“Every girl likes romance books. It’s practically in your blood.”

“Yeah, Mr. Confident? Let’s see if you can guess what my favorite book is.”

He laughs and looks over at me like I’m stupid. “*Twilight*, of course.”

I’ve never read it, which is stupid of me because it’s practically a classic now. It’s definitely high on my To Be Read list. I’ve only watched the movie thousands of times.

It’s my turn to laugh. I look over at Amelia and wink at her. “My favorite book is actually *It*, but good try.”

Scoffing, he rolls his eyes and head in disbelief. “No way. I don’t believe you.”

“It’s okay. I know you’re sad that you’re wrong,” I tease him and raise an eyebrow.

“Bet,” he says and picks up the TV remote. “Let’s watch it since you’re not scared of it.”

Shit, this backfired on me. I wanted to prove a point that not all girls love romance. Oh God ... why did I put myself in this position?

I'm going to pee my pants. I hate everything scary. Sometimes, I find myself stupidly scared of my own shadow. I don't care if you call me cliché. I hate being scared more than anything.

I won't let him win. I refuse to raise his ego. I'll put on my best acting skills and show him scary movies don't faze me.

"Deal," I reply strongly and look toward the TV.

Amelia gasps from beside me. "I don't want to watch a scary movie—"

"We don't care," he interrupts when he finds the movie on demand and presses play.

Here goes nothing ...

Jesus, please be with me.



"Holy shit, I'm going to shit my pants," Amelia mutters in my shoulder as she hides her face in fright.

I want to tell her, *Ditto*, but I can't. I won't lose.

Elijah keeps looking at me, waiting for my reaction whenever something creepy happens. However, I keep my face straight and scream internally. Why couldn't I say my favorite book was *Divergent*? Anything is better than this.

And to make matters worse, all the lights are off, making the atmosphere even creepier.

How will I sleep alone at night tonight? Thank God I'll have Simba to cuddle with, and I won't be alone in the dark.

"Are you scared yet?" Elijah whispers from beside me.

He's teasing me ... that shit.

"Nope," I say, popping the *P*.

"Are you suuuure?"

"Yesss." I drag out the *S* and squeeze Amelia's hand tighter.

She knows I'm terrified, yet we both don't want her brother to win.

What happens next makes me feel like I've gone to heaven due to my heart rate going way too high suddenly.

Her bedroom door slowly creeps open.

Not a second later, a male body jumps into the room, screaming, “Boo!”
And can you guess who screams the loudest?

Elijah.

“Kill her, not me!” Elijah screams and pulls me in front of his body.

“Don’t kill me either. I’m too pretty to die,” Amelia yells and throws her body under Elijah’s and mine.

“If you touch me,” I warn, “I’ll go psycho bitch on your skanky ass.”

Silence fills the room.

After my firm statement, the light is flicked on ... and there stands Leo.

He looks scared, pleased, and confused.

Oh God, did I really just say that?

He opens his mouth to say something but closes it a second later. “Well, that was not the reaction I was expecting,” he finally says blankly.

Both Elijah and Amelia let go of me and return to their original spots. Not before giving their amused brother a dirty look.

“You should have seen the way you guys held on to each other. Might as well have said the Hail Mary.” Leo gives us all a once-over and smiles at our straight, aggrieved faces. “That was the highlight of my month.” A throaty laugh escapes his mouth.

I rest my head on Amelia’s shoulder and glance away from him. From the corner of my eye, I can see his eyes lingering on me. I try not to let that affect me, but in reality, it makes me want to fan myself.

“Why were you guys watching *It* out of all the movies you could have picked?” he asks from the doorway.

Elijah lies smoothly, “Trinity felt like peeing her pants.”

I fake laugh in his direction and glance over at Leo. “Who screamed the loudest?”

Not missing a beat, he points over to his brother. “Elijah.”

Ha.

Throwing his hands up in the air in defeat, he scolds, “As soon as a pretty girl’s in the room, you always choose her and not me.”

So, he thinks I’m pretty? That’s cute.

“Why lie when I could tell the truth?” He flashes his brother a shit-eating grin before focusing on me. “Can I speak to you outside?”

No? Yes? Maybe?

He wants to speak to me alone? About what? Calm down, Trinity. He’s just a really hot, rich, and mysterious guy who wants to talk to you alone.

Nothing to panic about.

Nodding my head slightly, I scoot off the bed and give a questioning look toward Amelia. She shrugs and bats me away while snuggling Simba.

As I get closer to where he stands at the door, he motions with his hand for me to go ahead of him. My heart rate quickens when I stop in place in the dimly light hallway. Being in Amelia's room for most of the day with the blinds closed must have taken up more of the day than I originally thought. I didn't even realize the sun had gone down for the night. Mom must be worried.

Leo leads me down the hallway and pushes a door open. We walk inside, and he closes the door behind me. A clean bedroom greets me.

Huh, this must be his bedroom.

Although what I find weird is that he hasn't unpacked a single box since he's been here. Boxes lie all over the floor and on a desk that's placed in the middle of his room. Maybe he hasn't had the time? He and his siblings leave every day to go somewhere. I would ask Amelia, but I don't want to pry.

"Hey, look, Trinity, I'm really sorry about earlier."

I wave him off and finally meet his intense gaze. His eyes plead with mine. It takes me aback.

When he almost ran me over, he was rude and snarky, and now, he seems desperate.

"What's something you love?" he asks out of the blue, catching me off guard.

I have to think for a few seconds. I don't enjoy many things anymore. That was all stolen from me four years ago.

"I love reading," I answer, repeating what I told his siblings.

"Done," he says and extends his hand in the air.

I raise my hand slowly in confusion and slap his. Gosh, his skin is so warm and smooth.

"Done what?"

His body leans against the wall beside him. "Tomorrow, I'm picking you up, and I'll take you to the bookstore. I'll buy you as many books as you want as my apology."

Say what now?

He wants to take me to the bookstore. I totally didn't just fall a little in love.

I want to wave him off and say it's fine, that he doesn't need to buy me

anything, that hearing him say sorry is enough, except I can tell he doesn't take no for an answer.

“What if I'm busy tomorrow?”

His brow rises. “Are you busy tomorrow?”

I scrunch my nose. “Well, no—”

“Great!” He claps his hands before straightening up to his full height. “Be ready in the morning,” he calls over his shoulder before leaving the room.

Like I said before, what in the world just happened?



“I never thought I would be happy to see my child sneak in at night,” Mom calls out as I sneak in through the back door.

It's eight o'clock. I know that's not late. When your daughter spends all her time in her room, it's a big deal when she comes home and the sun is down. I don't even know why I tried to sneak in. She would know if I wasn't home.

She jokes from where she sits on the couch, “I would have called and asked where you were, but I loved the quiet.”

The news is lightly playing in the background. She pats the seat beside her. Walking toward her, I snuggle under a blanket.

“I'm going somewhere tomorrow,” I confess.

She crosses her legs and faces me. “Spill.”

I tell her all about my day. I tell her about almost dying, which she scolds me for. She gives me an entire lecture of how I shouldn't have run onto the road for Simba. Then, after I am done getting yelled at, I tell her about watching a movie with the triplets and about my plans for tomorrow morning. To say she is excited for me is an understatement.

And the weirdest feeling of all ... for once, I'm excited to wake up and face another day.

FOUR

TRINITY

All these years since my dad's passing, I've felt like I lost all my feelings within. I am empty. Living ... but without a purpose.

But as I stand here, looking at myself in the mirror, I feel something ... so that means I'm living. I'm alive for a reason.

I should scold myself. I just met him. I can't already like him. Growing attached will only make the outcome at the end worse.

That's why when I smooth my long hair down and apply my lip gloss, I promise myself I won't fall for the mysterious guy I just met.

I won't ... I promise.



His car is luxurious on the inside. The smell of a new car lingers in the air, making me question whether he just got it or not. It's spotless. My eyes can't find a single imperfection, making me second-guess sitting on the black leather seat, worried that I'll ruin it somehow. For a nineteen-year-old guy, he sure has a nice car. It's a G-Wagon. I don't even have my own car. I drive my mom's Mini. I must look like an embarrassment beside him.

Yet his car isn't the most stunning feature I see at the moment. It's him.

One hand on the steering wheel and one resting on the door. He has black Ray-Ban sunglasses on, hiding the brown eyes I sure could get lost in. His wavy brown hair blows in the wind, and a small smile plays on his lips. He wears slightly ripped dark blue jeans and a simple black tee. And the black earrings that I noticed the triplets all wear are intact in his ears.

I look straight ahead and remind myself of the promise I made.

Guys only cause pain.

My instinct tells me something is off. They all seem like they're holding something back. It's as if they're not telling me the full, honest truth.

I need to look at things positively, I think to encourage myself.

His deep voice cuts me out of my thoughts. "Are you always this quiet?"

My cheeks turn pink as I turn my face away from his vision. "I'm not quiet. I just don't have a lot to say," I respond.

He hums in agreement and starts tapping his steering wheel. I shift in my seat.

Trinity, don't let yourself go there. Happy thoughts. He'll think you're a freak if you tell him to stop.

A couple of minutes later, he starts humming lowly. As much as I hate it, his voice sounds so soothing and soft.

I wonder what his actual voice sounds like when he sings. Of course, I don't want to know. All I want to do is stuff a sock in his mouth and tell him to be quiet.

When his long, tatted fingers reach for the radio dial, every bone in my body grows cold. My breath gets caught in my throat when a guy comes on, singing a sad song. What I find weirder is how Leo acts. His eyes widen as he shuts off the radio abruptly.

What was that? Why did he act like that?

He sees me looking at him and gives me a pointed look. "I don't like bands."

"I never said you did," I point out.

He rolls his eyes and looks straight ahead at the road. "Then, why are you looking at me like that?"

I open my mouth to say something snarky back, but I snap it closed when he sends me a dirty look.

He gets moody quickly. Noted.

"I can't look at you?"

His chuckle vibrates throughout my body. "You're trying to figure me out," he says bluntly.

"I could say the same to you." I see him glancing at me from the corner of his eye.

If he wants to play innocent, then I'll do the same.

For a while, we just sit in silence as he drives. I can tell he's thinking. He

has a distant look in his eyes. Biting his lip must be something he does when he thinks.

“You don’t seem like the quiet type,” he points out.

I wasn’t the quiet type, but going through hell will do that to a person.

“You’re mysterious,” I say back, trying to change the topic off of me.

“I don’t think I’m the biggest mystery here. Plus, I don’t think I’m mysterious.”

I snort and shake my head. I leave the conversation at that.

Once we pull up to the small local bookstore in town, he reaches behind him and pulls out a baseball cap. It’s not even that sunny outside. The dark, stormy clouds prove my point.

“Why the hell are you putting a hat on when it’s cloudy?”

Leo mumbles under his breath, “I’m having a bad hair day.”

He’s definitely not having a bad hair day. The guy looks like he just walked out of a photo shoot.

Liar.

He places the cap on his head and nods to me. “Let’s go.”

My eyes meet his, but he still hides his with his sunglasses.

I shake off the weird feeling and follow him outside.

“Morning,” the old lady says from behind the counter once Leo and I step inside the small bookstore.

My eyes light up, and a smile lifts my mouth once I take in the sight in front of me. All the bookshelves are fully stocked with books. My heart flutters. I’m instantly filled with happiness.

I don’t even care where Leo is. I run straight for the romance section. My eyes scan over the colorful books as my finger skims the spines I pass.

I know what I’m looking for, and I’ll be damned if anyone gets in my way. Looking up and down, I try to spot the black cover with a pop of red and white. I know I’m a book lover, and some might call me crazy, but I’ve never read *Twilight* before. Criminal, right? It sounds amazing and right up my alley. Plus, I loved the movies, so I’m positive the books are better—they always are.

“What are you looking for? You’re zooming in and out of the aisles like a crazy person,” Leo calls from behind me, his heavy footsteps turning faster as he tries to catch up to me.

I pause suddenly when I see just what I’m looking for perched on the tallest shelf. “Damn you!”

Leo gasps when he almost collides with my body from behind. Goose bumps arise on my skin when I feel his breath on the back of my neck. Shaking out my thoughts about Leo, I rise on my tippy-toes and reach for the book.

If only I were a couple of centimeters taller. My fingertips touch the bottom of the shelf I'm reaching for.

He chuckles beside me, leaning his back against the shelves, he crosses his ankles. "You good there?"

Douche.

"Yes," I mutter out and extend my arm higher, gritting my teeth. I jump slightly, but I have no luck.

Letting out a sigh of frustration, I turn to him. He's watching me intently with an amused smile plastered on his face. His glasses are low on his nose. Making it possible for me to see his rich eyes.

He sends me a secretive smile. "You need some help?"

"No." I drag out the *O* on purpose and roll my eyes at him. Does he not see me struggling over here?

"Here." His hand touches mine. Not even having to stand on his tippy-toes, he grabs two paperbacks.

Why is he grabbing two?

"I just need one—" I protest, but he cuts me off.

"This"—he holds up one book—"is for me. The other is for you."

No way. This can't be real.

"You read?" I ask, my mouth dropping open in shock.

Walking over to the counter, he glances over his shoulder at me. "No, but we're going to read this together."

Say what now?



"So, how will this work?" I ask him as we sit across from one another at an ice cream parlor.

He drops the spoon in his cup, making chocolate ice cream splatter on the white table. Taking off his cap, he runs his hand through his hair. I have to keep in my swoon when he places his cap backward on his head, giving him a boyish look.

Why does that look ten times hotter? Jeez, someone, fan me.

His fingers fiddle with the black ring that's looped around his finger. "Every day, we read the same number of chapters," he explains his plan. "Then, we have a conversation about it. We can call it our book club. But we won't read the full book in one sitting. We have to talk about our thoughts." He leans back in his seat.

Leo looks at me with a bored expression ... like he didn't just tell me he wants to have a book club with me. I would have never imagined a guy like him to read. His aura screams dark, dangerous, mysterious, and *I don't give a fuck.*

Why would he want to read with a weird girl like me? Time will tell, I guess.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks.

Picking up his spoon, he flicks it at me.

"Hey!" I exclaim and push my seat back before it can land on my lap.

The dark chocolate ice cream will make me look like I pooped myself. Luckily, no one's around to witness my outburst because I surely would have caused unwanted attention on myself.

"What was that for?" I ask him with an annoyed tone in my voice. I pick up the spoon from where it landed on the ground and toss it into his empty cup.

"What was that look?" he repeats his question and ignores mine.

What look? Is he crazy or on drugs?

He sighs impatiently. "When I told you about the book, why did you look at me like that?"

Oh, right ... stupid, confused brain.

"I didn't think you were the type to read." I shrug my shoulders.

He laughs and rolls his eyes. "And why not?"

I gesture my hands up and down. "Well, look at you."

Resting his elbows on the table, he leans forward toward me. "I look at myself all the time. I even—"

I wave my hand in the air, stopping him mid-sentence. I know he was going to say something dirty. I don't feel like blushing in front of him. He's a guy who would smirk at me and let me suffer. For God's sake, he would probably sit back and enjoy the show. But I can't imagine how he would look under my sheets, hot and sweaty—

Shut up.

I promised myself ... I can't fall for this guy. I can't like him. I have to hate him. I know nothing about him, yet I feel so connected to him already.

"You just look ..." I pause and search for the right words. "You just seem like the type to ride motorcycles and get drunk every day of the week," I explain. "Not the guy who sits in his bedroom all day and reads books willingly."

He just stares at me with his jaw clenched. After a while, I shift in my seat and glance down at my lap.

Why is he just looking at me? Did I say something wrong? Is he going to kidnap me and torture me? Damn it, I knew he was in the Mafia!

When I glance back up at him through my eyelashes, I meet his intense stare.

"I've never willingly read before," he admits. His husky, deep voice makes me focus harder than before. "I thought I would try it. It might help me with my boredom." His eyes travel around the small plaza we're currently sitting in. "I write." Leo continues, "But I haven't been able to write for a while ..." He trails off, lost in thought.

So, the mysterious guy writes. I wonder if he writes poetry or books. One day, if he's still around, I'd definitely like to get my hands on his work. He's very hard to read. I wonder if reading his work would help me understand him better.

"That's cool." I nod at him.

Leo sends me a surprised look before a small smile reaches his lips. "Yeah, I guess it is."

I pick at my nails awkwardly and jump, surprised when he rises from his seat in a frenzy. Picking up his cup, he throws it into the trash can. I watch as it bounces off the edge and lands inside.

Grabbing his car keys off the table, he nods at me with slightly wide eyes. "Let's go."

Telling him we just got here is at the tip of my tongue. I throw away my trash and chase after him. Looking behind me as I run, I find nothing out of the ordinary.

What's up his butt?

Once he settles into the driver's seat, he starts the engine. The car speeds off with a squeal just as I slam my door shut.

"Leo!" I gasp as my body jolts forward from the force. Securing my seat belt around my body safely, I can't help but stare at him in shock.

What was that about? That was the weirdest thing that's ever happened to me.

As he drives out of the parking lot, I spot three teenage girls staring at us in shock. One of them is jumping in happiness, and the other two are looking at each other in confusion.

Does Leo know them and want to avoid them? I decide not to bring it up when I see the look on his face. Annoyance, yet somehow, he makes it look hot.

God, give me strength.



It's been two days since Leo took me to the bookstore. It's been forty-eight hours since the strange moment with him leaving in a hurry without even a warning. After that awkward, silent car ride, he dropped me off at home and told me to come find him when I finished reading chapter five. I just nodded at him and thanked him for the book.

What else more could I have said?

Now, I sit in my room, just thinking. I do that a lot.

I'm snapped out of my thoughts when my phone rings from beside me. Seeing that it's Amelia, I answer it. Over the past few weeks, she and I have gotten closer. She's nice, and she doesn't make me feel weird.

"Bitch, pack your bags. You're coming to my place for a sleepover," she yells and hangs up.

Demanding much?

Sleep in the same house as Leo? Why do I love the sound of that?

FIVE

TRINITY

“Do we add in the chocolate chips now or later?” Elijah asks, confused, as he holds up the bag of chocolate to me and Amelia.

I came to the triplets’ house three hours ago. It’s eight o’clock. The sun just set an hour ago. Currently, we are in the middle of making chocolate chip cookies. Amelia and I have it under control, but Elijah just stands to the side and watches.

Leo is nowhere to be seen.

He’s probably hooking up with some girl, I tell myself.

Breathe in and out.

That shouldn’t bother me. It’s not like I’m a virgin either.

“Yes,” Amelia says, extending her arm out to her brother as she grabs the chocolate out of his hands. “Give them to me before you eat them all,” she scolds him.

He smiles, popping some he still has in his palm into his mouth.

She pours the chocolate into the cookie dough and stirs it in. “Hand me that,” she demands and points to a cookie sheet.

Reaching over the counter, I lean my arm as far as I can and reach for the pan. You might think I’m short, but I’m not. Their kitchen is so grand that it’s unreal.

As my fingers get a grip on the pan, I feel something drop into my shirt. Let me clarify—in my bra. I look up, surprised. Leo stands across from me with a smirk on his face.

When did he get here? He wasn’t here a minute ago.

I give him a strange look when I see Elijah hand him chocolate.

Leo smirks as he pops another one in his mouth.

Did he just ...

I gasp as I reach into my bra and hold up a chocolate chip. He just tossed that into my bra. That means he saw my goodies when I leaned forward.

Oh God.

“What? I thought it was a basketball net.” He shrugs nonchalantly when he sees my frown.

“Perv!” Amelia yells and throws a spoon at him.

He dodges it and chuckles lowly.

His large, tall, toned body sits on the barstool, facing us. He watches as I place my hands on my hips and glare at him. He cocks his eyebrow up in a challenge. I raise my hand and throw the chip at him, hoping it hits his head.

What he does next is something that I don’t expect. He stretches up and catches the chip in his mouth. The chocolate that was just in my bra ...

Oh my God ...

Leo licks his lips and never breaks eye contact with me.

His eyes are filled with fire that I don’t want to extinguish. I want to burn.

Stop it, Trinity.

He doesn’t like me like that. He can’t. He’s a tease. He craves to see me blush.

“Go have sex in your bedroom, Leo, not in the kitchen,” Elijah mumbles.

“I don’t want to eat sex cookies.” He glares at me, then at his brother. “No one messes with my cookies.” Elijah’s eyebrows frown.

I’m having a hard time taking him seriously. Elijah looks funny when he’s grumpy.

Leo starts singing softly from where he stands across from me. I can’t make out the lyrics.

I stand still in my spot for several reasons. One, his voice is velvety smooth. Two, he looks so sexy when he sings. And three, I know he’s teasing me. He looks me up and down with a smirk as he sings lowly.

And the thing that terrifies me the most is, I don’t even panic when he sings.

It’s only been a couple of weeks. I can’t fall for him. He’s making that extremely hard. He knows what affects me and is using that to his advantage.

Every day, he seems to surprise me even more.

Amelia and Elijah cast Leo a panicked look, which makes my eyebrows rise, and he stops immediately.

What are they hiding? They make me feel so awkward and out of the

loop.

Amelia glances over at me and nods toward the dough. “Help me roll these up in balls.”

I do as she said, but the weird feeling never leaves my gut.



“Tell me about yourself,” Elijah says from beside me.

We’re all currently lounging on the couch while devouring the fresh cookies we just baked from scratch. I have to hold back a moan from the way the hot chocolate melts in my mouth. It makes me close my eyes in pleasure.

Placing my feet in Amelia’s lap, I lean my head back on a pillow near Elijah’s. Leo’s frame takes up the space beside his sister. His intense eyes never glance away from my body.

Over the past few hours, Elijah and I have gotten closer. He’s funny and softhearted. I can tell he’ll make a fantastic friend. I can’t say the same for his brother. He drives me mad already.

I think about his question and glance over at him. “My favorite color is black, I live off of coffee, I love cars, and I hate music.” I admit the thing I’m most terrified of telling anyone. Yet I already feel so comfortable around these three.

They all turn to me with shocked looks on their faces.

“You don’t like music?” Amelia breathes out.

“How can you not love music?” Leo leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

I shrug my shoulders and turn the ring around on my finger. “It brings up memories I don’t want to remember.”

He cocks his head to the side in confusion.

“My dad used to sing to me before he died. It just reminds me of him,” I mumble.

“I get that,” he replies. “But that shouldn’t stop you from enjoying something you love. His death should make you love music even more than you did.”

I’m appreciative that he’s trying to shine a light on my dad’s death, but he doesn’t understand how he died. No one will feel the guilt I feel on the inside.

“It’s more complicated than that,” I whisper. “I don’t really know how to

explain myself without sounding like an idiot.”

“We understand,” Amelia says sternly, looking at her brother. “You don’t have to explain yourself. Loving something that you shared with someone special who died too soon must be hard. The last thought in my mind is not that you’re an idiot. It’s how strong you are.”

I smile at her words.

In short, Leo thinks I’m a freak. They all think I’m a freak. Despite that, when depressing memories unfold, you want nothing but to get rid of those thoughts. That’s how my mind works when music starts playing. The flashbacks start coming—the time my heart stopped when we got the call, when I saw my dad dead in a hospital with blood all along his chest.

“I’ll talk about it another night. Right now, I just want to stuff my face with cookies.” I clap my hands. Reaching for another cookie, I take a bite while holding eye contact with Leo.

Smiling at me slightly, he reaches for the remote. “Let’s watch a movie, but I’ll make sure it’s not scary this time.” He sends a wink in my direction.

SIX

LEO

I once loved singing. I used to love hearing my name being screamed from all directions in the arena. I craved the crowd and how I felt when I sang into my microphone. The best part of it all was when I glanced behind me and saw my best friends.

My brother, Elijah, and my sister, Amelia.

To the world, we're known as Times Three. A famous rock band. With three members, who are triplets.

Before we got fame and started touring the world, we would practice downstairs in our basement. Jumping off the couches, we would strum our invisible guitars and yell into our fists. Since we were little, we longed of this. I never thought I could live this life in reality.

It's a dream, and I feel like I'm going to be shaken awake any second.

One day, my siblings and I decided to make a YouTube channel and post a video of us covering a song. To our surprise, the video went viral. We got millions of views. The video hype escalated and got shared on local news stations. From there, everything just took off very quickly.

In a matter of a few months, we went from sitting in the basement, shooting videos, to standing in front of screaming crowds.

I still remember the day we had to choose our band name. We sat around a big, round table with our agent, Justin. He said it needed to be catchy. We sat there for hours on end until we thought of it.

X3—however, you pronounce it as Times Three.

Many people wonder why we chose that as our band name. It seemed fitting since the three of us are triplets. Amelia is the oldest, I come second, and Elijah is the youngest. They are my life, my best friends. We have caused

trouble since we were in the womb together.

Without them, I wouldn't be here today. I wouldn't want to be on a stage with anyone else. As our careers took off and we gained millions of supporters all around the world, my love for singing left me.

Singing in front of hundreds of people was fun, but now, when we stand in front of a sold-out arena with people holding signs and screaming at the top of their lungs to our music ... something has changed for me. Writing music and then singing it for hours, it feels like a chore.

Waking up every day and knowing I have to go to rehearsals and meet and greets is something I dread. Our agent pressures us to be perfect. I have to sound flawless and look the part. Yet how can anyone be perfect?

At fifteen, our fame took off. My voice was still cracking, and I had acne on my face. I was figuring out who I was. Now, four years later, I feel lost. I don't know who I am.

I understand how the world sees me, but who am I to myself?

As we got more followers and sold more tickets, my father became my worst nightmare. In our downtime, he would force us to practice. He would push us too far. He made me hate singing even more.

The few nights that I had to myself, I would write.

I'm the singer of the group, Amelia is the drummer, and Elijah plays the guitar. Since day one, I've always been responsible for writing our songs. Each line and melody comes from my heart.

Over time, fans have gotten crazier, spreading rumors, loving me too much, to the point where I feel like I am suffocating. I can't even open my social media accounts without getting overwhelmed by how many messages, comments, and posts I see about myself. It feels like I'm constantly being watched with a microscope. People just wait for me to mess up. Once I do, there they go to Twitter.

I lost all my motivation under all the lights.

I haven't written a song in months. They're all horrible, and I wouldn't dare put them out into the world. If it's not my best work, then I won't let anyone hear it. Every single one of my songs has a specific deep meaning—our life journey, our struggles. The multiple pages that I've thrown out with random lines scribbled down in my horrible chicken scratch had none of the emotion that I'm used to writing with. I can't seem to shake myself out of this writer's block.

My dad, our agent, and producers are getting fed up with me. The fans are

wondering why we haven't come out with any new songs.

Now, don't get me wrong; I love my fans. Without them, I wouldn't have the life I have right now. I appreciate everyone who streams our songs. Yet having to change into a completely different person at just only nineteen is a pain in the ass. Amelia, Elijah, and I had to grow up fast.

Too fast.

We finished high school online a year early because of tours, and we don't go to parties like most people our age. For God's sake, I can't even go out in public without getting attacked by paparazzi.

I miss who I was before all the fame, but I also love my job now. I'm a confused mess.

One day, my dad got very fed up with me not being able to write songs and sent us out here. We all argued and tried to stay put in LA, but he wasn't having it. He booked a flight and told us we had three hours to pack our bags for a couple of months.

I have to stay in this stupid town for who knows how long. I didn't realize how much I enjoyed getting my food served to me before I moved here. Elijah and Amelia love it here. They love their independence, and I do too. But I know what's expected of me here.

They are free to hang out with the hot girl next door they love, yet I have to write as many songs as I can before we leave—and make them Billboard-worthy.

Easy? I think not.

What Dad doesn't understand is, I won't be able to write excellent songs when I have no motivation at all, when all I want to do is sit on my ass and do absolutely nothing for once. The team is so controlling that I can't willingly do that without being scolded. Not to mention, they made a set of rules for us living out here.

1. No one can know who we are.
2. No one can know where we've gone.
3. No social media.
4. No distractions.

Simple, right?

I beg to differ. I bet all our fans are freaking out because they don't know where we are. All they seem to know is that we've disappeared. I kind of like that. It's like we're a mystery.

Since we came to town, I find myself driving to clear my thoughts. I

spotted this opening in the forest and parked my car at the side of the road. I started walking through the tress and down the clear pathway. My eyes traveled along the luscious green leaves, trying to take in every single detail. In the distance, I spotted something. Walking closer, I stopped in my tracks once I was below it.

An abandoned tree house. By the looks of it, no one had been up there in years. It still looked stable, just forgotten.

Every day, I drive to that spot with my notebook in hand and try to write. Whenever I'm up there, tapping my pen against my leg and trying to get a good beat, I think about her.

Why is she in my head?

She's just a girl ... a weird girl who has no idea who we truly are—and I don't plan on telling her.

Feeling normal isn't something that I've felt in four years. I'm going to soak in this feeling. At first, when she rang my doorbell, I thought she was playing with me, but I can normally read someone through their eyes. I didn't find an ounce of manipulation in her dark brown eyes that put me in a state of calmness.

Before her, I hadn't had any patience with girls. I didn't give them a second glance. My last relationship was the first year we signed with the record label. I found out months later that she was just with me to get fame. That was the last time I ever dated a girl. She'd broken my heart ... and after that, I have had a hard time trusting people. Sure, I hook up with girls, flirt with them a bit, smash, a few texts back and forth, and then I leave. People think I'm heartless, and they're right.

Trinity is the only girl who makes me so confused, where I feel like I'm going insane. She's like a girl version of me. The *I don't give a fuck* vibe. Just by looking at her, I want to know about her more. She's interesting. I want to explore her.

Nothing serious. I just want to know how she smells and how soft her lips feel.

"Earth to Leonidas." My sister snaps her fingers in my face with a look of annoyance.

Moving away from her fingers, I scold, "What?"

"You spaced out when we were in the middle of an important conversation." She rolls her eyes.

"It was obviously not that important if I—"

Elijah interrupts from where he sits across from me at the kitchen table, “Leonidas, dude, I love you, but we can’t play around out here. The team is watching us like we’re psychopaths outside for recess.”

Sighing because I know he’s right, I slouch in my seat while fiddling with a pen in hand. “Got it. We’re currently psychopaths out for recess. What are we planning?”

“We need to get our groove back,” Amelia states. “Leonidas, I know you feel a lot of pressure from the team, so maybe we can help you with writing ___”

I wave her off. “Leave the writing to me, sis. I got it.”

“Well, if you’re sure, but I feel bad, doing nothing and leaving everything to you.” She shrugs.

Instead of voicing my concerns, I keep them hidden. “I’m used to the pressure.”

“That’s probably why you can’t write. You shouldn’t feel all that pressure just on your shoulders. It’s getting to you.” Elijah places his hand on mine, stopping me from twirling the pen between two of my fingers.

I laugh, covering up the frown that’s trying to make its way on my face. “I appreciate you guys caring. But there’s nothing to worry about. I’m fine.”

“When a girl says they’re fine, it’s usually the opposite,” Elijah whispers to Amelia.

Nodding her head, she casts me a worried look.

I mutter back, “I’m not a girl, so that doesn’t apply to me, weirdo.”

“Right, sorry. I thought you had a—” he starts to say, but he gets cut off when Amelia slaps her hand on his mouth.

I smirk over at him as he glances down at where our sister’s hand prevents him from talking.

“Anyway.” She drags out her word before setting Elijah free. “Let’s talk about the fact that Trinity has no idea who we are. How crazy is that?” she exclaims, jumping in her seat.

“Should we feel offended by that?” Elijah points out, confused. “Wait, no, we shouldn’t. She doesn’t listen to music.” He smiles as his slow brain comes to terms with what he should have figured out a while ago.

“It’s refreshing, being able to be myself.” Amelia speaks freely. “But we have to tell her. As much as I love the feeling of normalcy, it’s not fair to lie and keep something this gigantic.”

Dropping the pen to the wooden table below me, I give my siblings a

stern look. “I don’t want Trinity to know. Why would we do something that stupid and throw away feeling like actual human beings for once?”

“We can’t do this, Leo—”

I butt in with a hard tone, “We will. Don’t ruin this for me for once.”

I enjoy the fact that she has no idea who we are. I want to keep it that way. I’ll be damned if I don’t get what I want.

SEVEN

TRINITY

I finished reading the five chapters in one night. To say it intrigued me is an understatement. I know this book gets a lot of love, but it also gets a lot of hate. Yet I don't understand why it does. It's amazing.

It caught my attention immediately. Blinking took effort because the plot is so intense. I didn't want to look away for a second. I was very tempted to go past chapter five, but I had a feeling that Leo would ask if I went past what I was supposed to. And he would know if I was lying. So, I forced myself to stop and lay down on my bed. My head was swimming with thoughts.

What would I do if I were Bella? Would I run away from Edward, or would I run to him with open arms?

Probably the first. Sorry, but I love my blood too much.

My hands are inching toward the paperback lying next to me.

How should I tell him I finished the chapters? Should I call him or text him? Wait ... I don't even have his number. I have the brain of a fruit fly. Maybe it's the stubborn side of me, but I want him to come to me. I will not be the chaser. I will be the chased.

Yet a part of me thinks he's never read a book for fun before, so it might even take him a while to get through the first five chapters. It's sweet that he wants to do this with me though.

I know I should get up from my bed since it's one o'clock in the afternoon, but my bones feel ten times heavier today. Pushing off my fluffy blankets, I walk toward my bathroom, half-asleep with gunk in my eyes. Brushing my teeth and washing my face, I get ready for the day. I pull on a pair of black Nike Pro shorts and an oversize T-shirt I bought at a local thrift

store. Putting my sneakers on, I make my way downstairs.

“There you are,” Mom says from the kitchen once she sees me walk in.

I give her the best smile I can muster and grab a slice of cold toast. She must have made it for me earlier, thinking I was coming down. But my late night of reading has obviously made me more exhausted than I usually am.

“Guess who stopped by this morning,” she says from over her shoulder.

I shrug my shoulders and wait for her to continue as I hop onto the counter and sway my legs back and forth.

“Harper.”

My toast stops midway to my mouth, and I stare, shocked.

“She came here for you. I was going to wake you up, but I heard you up late last night. So, I told her you would call her.” She continues, “You can’t avoid her forever.”

I sigh and lean my head against the cabinets. “Don’t you think I know that?”

“Then, do something about it. You’re only causing harm here.”

I hold myself from talking back. Mom really doesn’t understand. I can’t talk to Harper. I feel like a loser. I ditched her because the pain within me was too much to carry. I’m upset that I did that. She loved my dad probably just as much as I loved him, yet I left her alone after his death.

I’m the worst friend.

“I’ll call her. I’ll try to make things right.” I sigh and hop down from the counter. Giving her a kiss on the cheek, I nod my thumb over my shoulder, toward the door. “I’m going out.”

She puffs out dramatically. “My daughter is going out?” She pauses and places her hand on my forehead. Looking up in a thinking motion, she hums. “Nope, you don’t have a fever. You must be going crazy.”

I push her hand away and scoff. “Be quiet.”

“Have fun. Don’t get pregnant,” she calls out as I head to the front door.

“I’ll make sure I get pregnant with twins,” I yell back and slam the door.

Rushing down the front steps, I hear her gasp.

She loves me.



As I drive down the narrow road, I eat the French fries I bought from a local

diner. My window is wide open, causing my hair to blow in the wind. A smile lifts my face at the feeling of being free. I don't know where I'm driving to, but I need space to clear my head.

Every time I go for a drive, I tell myself I'm going to explore and see an area of this town I haven't seen before. But I always find myself in the same place.

The tree house.

My dad and I built it a while ago. I always go up there, dangle my feet through the wide window, and stare at the trees.

Nothing's changed since Dad and I used to go up there together. I know it looks rough, but it reminds me of my childhood. It reminds me of him.

Parking my car on the side of the road, I make my way down the path I know leads to the tree house.

Gripping the wooden ladder that's hammered into the tree bark, I climb up slowly. When I was little, I hated climbing up here. I was constantly afraid I was going to fall. Nothing has changed to this day. I'm still nervous. I let out a relieved sigh when I get to the top and through the door.

Thank God I didn't fall. Those steps don't look promising now.

“What the fuck?!” A gasp leaves my mouth as I stagger back.

My feet fumble as I try to regain my footing. Leo turns his head in shock and lets out a curse, jumping up with incredible speed. He quickly wraps his arms around my waist to prevent me from falling to the forest floor. My chest slams into his, and we both tumble back into the wall behind him. I grip his forearms as he pulls me along with him.

Letting out an, “Oof,” he swears under his breath.

When he tightens his arms around my waist, I feel every breath he takes against my chest.

Scarlet, for sure, covers my entire face as his muscles strain against my body. He feels so good against me. Just right.

Leo's fingers squeeze my waist, causing me to snap out of my dirty thoughts. Pushing away from my body, his arms fall to his sides. Leaving me suddenly cold and empty.

“What the hell are you doing up here?” I send him a shocked look.

He scoffs and points a finger to his chest. “What am I doing here? What are you doing here?”

I gesture around us and don't break my gaze with his heated one. “This is my tree house. The question is, how did you find it?”

“This shit is close to falling down.” He starts running a hand down his face. “I was driving down the road, and I saw the opening.”

What did he just say? One thing that I can’t stand is rich people acting as if they were royalty.

“If this piece of crap isn’t good enough for you, leave,” I remark. Placing my hands on my hips, I raise an eyebrow up at him.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he grits out and fiddles with the black beanie on top of his head.

Why is he wearing a hat when it’s warm outside? So many questions, yet so little answered.

“Don’t act like I haven’t noticed.” I smirk and walk toward the window.

As I sit on the ledge, he eyes me carefully.

Is Mr. Bad Boy afraid I’m going to fall?

Good.

“Noticed what—”

I cut him off, “You and your family are definitely well off, so go to your fancy house and leave me alone.”

A distant look clouds his eyes. He averts his eyes from my own and takes a step back. “You woke up today and decided to be a bitch.” He turns to leave but second-guesses himself. Facing me, he questions, “Why should I leave? You don’t own this forest.”

Damn, I want to punch his face and kiss it at the same time.

I need therapy.

“Just because you have a dick doesn’t mean you have to act like one,” I argue back.

“Real original.”

Leo is the only guy who seems to get under my skin so easily. One day, he’s nice, and then he’s a jerk with an attitude problem.

“You’re giving me whiplash,” I admit to him. “What’s up your ass? One second, you’re throwing chocolate chips in my bra, and then the next, you’re calling me a bitch. Am I missing something?”

Leaning back against the unstable-looking wall, he bites his lip. “Don’t think you’re special. This is just my amazing personality.”

Amazing in the jerk category is right.

“I can’t deal with you today,” I run a hand down my face. Swinging my legs slightly out the window, I acknowledge him with a frown. “Just go, please. I came up here because I need to be alone.”

“Fine, I’ll leave,” he starts to say but stops. “I’ll only leave if you get down from there.”

“Are you worried about me?” I tease him with a smile. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m safe. I always sit on this ledge.”

He protests, “Trinity, this tree house is rotting, the more we speak. Get down before you fall and kill yourself.”

“You can’t boss me around—”

Striding to me with a determined look on his face, he yanks me off the ledge by my waist. When he pulls me up tightly against his body, I grip the back of his neck. My mouth accidentally brushes against his ear as he places me on the ground, making my skin blush at the feel of his smooth, hot skin. His body freezes against mine, and then Leo steps away immediately while clearing his throat.

I hate to admit, that was the hottest thing I’ve ever witnessed. The possessiveness that took over his eyes as he stalked over to me could have burned down a building.

“Just because I can’t stand you some days doesn’t mean I want you to die.”

“How charming,” I breathe out, lost for words.

“Are you trying to kill yourself?” he says after a moment, looking at me as if I were fine china.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

“Yes, I’m trying to kill myself right in front of you. How did you know, Mr. Smarty-Pants?” My tone is dry with sarcasm.

He hums while placing a finger to his chin in a thinking motion. “Let me take a wild guess. Maybe it’s the fact that you placed your entire body weight on a structure that’s ready to fall down!”

I scoff. “I don’t weigh six hundred pounds.”

“I didn’t say you did.” He pinches his nose in frustration. “Whatever. I can’t help someone who doesn’t want help. I’ll be leaving now.” His massive shoulder brushes against mine.

“You can’t help me because I don’t need any help!” I exclaim, not understanding why he’s taking this so seriously.

Not getting a single reply back, I turn and find him glancing at me before walking down the ladder. My body slouches down on the tree house floor when I hear his feet slam against the ground beneath me.

Well then ... that was interesting.

He was in a terrible mood today. I wonder why. Sighing, I lean my head against the wood and take out my phone.

After a while of just sitting in quiet, my finger hovers over Harper's name.

I can do this. I'm strong.

I click her name and hear her pick up the line. My heart skips a beat.

"Trinity?" she whispers hoarsely.

Hearing her voice break makes me tear up. I did that to her. I hurt her because I'm selfish.

"Hi." My voice matches hers. "Can I see you?"

"Of course," she answers fast.

"Tree house," I say.

"I'll see you in ten," she says before hanging up.

Here goes nothing ...

I'm going to see my best friend for the first time in months. I'm not sure why I'm so nervous. Maybe it's me not knowing if she's going to forgive me. I know she will ... she has to.



I turn my head toward the door when I hear a body swing through the opening.

Harper.

She stands at the door in an awkward stance. She walks over to me and sits beside me. "Don't even ask if I'm going to forgive you. You know what my answer is."

I nod and sadly glance down at my lap. She can't forgive me.

I knew it. I ruined a thirteen-year friendship by being stupid.

"Yes. Yes, I forgive you. Yes, I still love you. And, yes, I still want to be your friend after you ghosted me." Her voice is firm as she nudges her elbow into my arm.

Tears fill my eyes as my lip wobbles. "I'm not sure why."

I wouldn't forgive myself if I were in her shoes. I just disappeared and stopped talking to her. I'm a jerk.

"Your dad got killed. I understand you needed space." She pauses and swings her legs back and forth. "I would have moved far away if I were you.

I wouldn't want to be anywhere near this town."

I glance over at her and give her a small smile. "Eventually, you just get numb. You force yourself to keep going ... because if you don't, you'll get stuck." I pause and let out a sad laugh. "I have thought about leaving, but I'm too broke. The only thing I could afford is a pack of ramen noodles," I joke.

"I feel that on another level," she agrees. "We wouldn't want you living on the street. Your life wouldn't be any better."

I'm grateful that Harper's trying to make the best out of the situation. Sometimes, I feel alone. I get too tired to do anything. I've let my mom down, and I've let myself down. Four years ago, I would have never thought my life would be this way. Where I don't want to continue on with my days, how I want to disappear.

My one motivation in life now is to try to not let people down—well, the people that I have left in my life. That's why the triplets are so refreshing. They don't look at me with sympathy, which I hate. I feel normal when I'm around them.

Harper's voice brings me back to reality. "You're my best friend. I love you so much. Trinity, you're the sister I never had. And seeing you like this"—her voice cracks as she places a hand on my knee—"it breaks me. I need you to be okay, so I can be okay."

I nod, trying to avoid the tears in my eyes from escaping.

"You would have to do something really fucked up for me to not forgive you," she reassures me. "Everyone misses you. Wyatt is really worried about you."

I tune out after that.

Wyatt misses me? I feel bad for thinking this, but I've forgotten about him.

Wyatt was my boyfriend I met during my first year of high school. We broke up a couple of weeks after my dad's passing. It was mutual and not messy. I liked him as much as a fourteen-year-old could, and I know he felt the same, but we grew apart. I started distancing myself. He would chase me, but I didn't want him to.

I know our breakup was my fault, but he didn't let me take the full blame.

So, why does my heart skip a beat when I find out he's worried about me? Does that mean he still cares?

"What did he say?" I ask.

"I ran into him at the coffee shop. He asked if you would get mad if he

dropped by to see you.”

I stare at her in shock. I haven't talked to him in a while. I wonder why he's suddenly concerned about my current state. Maybe he still has feelings for me, but I doubt it. We only dated for a couple of months, not to mention we were young when things ended.

“What did you say?” I ask her and listen intently.

She shrugs her shoulders and gives me a small smile. “I said that you've been dying to see him and that he's in your dreams every night.”

Laughing, I push her shoulder and tell her to shut up.

We stay up in the tree house until the sun sets and the mosquitoes come out to play. And the best part of it all is, Harper and I pick up right where we left off.

EIGHT

LEO

I didn't know it was her tree house. If I had, I wouldn't have gone up there. I could read her face any day. The clear look of distress was written all over her stunning facial features. Something within me had to push her buttons. I find myself snappy around her, like I can't control what I'm about to say or do.

One minute, I want to insult her to get a reaction, and the next, I want to push her against the wall and make her feel good. She's the only girl who hasn't thrown herself at me, and somehow, I like that.

I like the chase. I like the game she's playing.

"Leonidas, where have you been?" Mom asks as soon as I open the front door.

Is it too late to pretend I never came home?

"Out," I answer, not in the mood to talk.

"Be more specific."

I walk past her, making my way to the staircase. "Why are we here, Mom?" I ask, throwing my hands up in defeat.

I look over my shoulder and find her glaring at me with her hands on her hips.

"For the three of you—you know this. Now, answer my question."

"I went to write, Mom," I explain. "I can't write in this house. I found a place in the forest."

"The forest?" she barks out in disbelief. "Do you not understand how dangerous that is?" Her fingers pinch her nose. "What if you got in trouble? Who would be around to help you or even know you were in trouble?"

My jaw clenches. "I'm a big boy, Mom. Do you think other nineteen-

year-old guys are calling their moms every single second and giving them updates on their lives?”

“I don’t care about other guys your age or how other mothers parent. All I care about is you,” she snarks back.

Why is she being so pushy today? She’s usually the chill one who understands when I need space.

“Why are you so mad, Ma?”

She walks toward me and points a finger in my chest. “Because you knew you had an online meeting with your father and agent today.” She pauses and gives me a sad look. “Why didn’t you come back on time?”

I try to interrupt, but she continues, “Don’t tell me you forgot because you never forget these things.”

She’s right. I never forget my meetings with the record label. But today, when I woke up, I didn’t want to look at my dad’s face. He’s a piece of shit. A piece of shit who only cares about the money and fame his children make. I can’t even stand to look in his black eyes that have no emotion in them.

He uses us, and I’m the only one who seems to care. I don’t like getting taken advantage of. One day, I won’t hold myself back from punching him in his face.

“Mom,” I sigh while running a hand down my face. “I don’t feel like talking about this right now. I’m sorry I missed the meeting, but I chose not to attend for a reason.” I turn around from her fuming body and walk up the stairs toward my bedroom.

“Leo,” she calls after me. “Leonidas Drakos!” I hear her yell when I slam my bedroom door shut.

Placing my forehead against the door, I let out a groan. I need a chick. Badly.

“Hey, dick,” I hear from behind me.

I turn in shock and immediately roll my eyes when I see Amelia and Elijah. Amelia is turning in my chair, and Elijah is lounging on my bed with his hands behind his head.

“Holy shit, you scared me.” I walk toward my bed and plop down beside Elijah.

“Why the hell didn’t you show up?” Amelia demands and jumps in the middle of us.

I shrug my shoulders and fold my hands together on my stomach. “I didn’t feel like it.”

“I don’t feel like showering sometimes, but I still do it,” Elijah remarks.

Amelia snorts and jabs her elbow into his ribs. “The two aren’t really the same thing.”

He scoffs. “Yes, attending a meeting and showering are responsibilities we have in life.”

“You shock me every day.” My tone drips with sarcasm as my fingers flick his temple.

He jumps from the sudden feeling and whines, “Leonidas, don’t! I’m sensitive.”

“Look,” I say, pushing my body up. I turn sideways and lean on my elbow. Facing the two, I give them a pointed look. “I was in the mood to write. When inspiration calls, there’s nothing I can do about it. Plus, you guys out of everyone should know I avoid Dad at all costs.”

“So, you left us to suffer alone?” Amelia shakes her head and rolls her eyes. “We’re a team.”

I look at the two and sigh when they don’t meet my gaze. I didn’t know they would be this upset over the fact that I missed one stupid meeting.

“I know you don’t like Dad, but none of us do—not even Mom anymore,” Elijah says, deep in thought. “She’s trying to divorce him, but he’s giving her a hard time. I see it on her face every day—the stress and pain. It kills me, but we have to be here for each other. That’s what families are all about.”

They always find a way to make me feel bad. It’s Elijah and his stupid puppy-dog eyes. He looks like a five-year-old when he juts out his lip like that.

“Plus, you’re the lead in the group. We just play behind you. You glue us all together. You’ve always held the band in place,” Amelia pipes in. “I’m not even ashamed to say that Elijah and I would be lost without you. Leonidas, you write all the music and sing to the gods.” She gives me a soft smile.

That’s not fair. They don’t give themselves enough credit. What good would a band be if there wasn’t music? Amelia’s drum skills hold the beat together, and Elijah has mad guitar skills. We all have a part in X3.

“Remember, there are three members in X3, not just one,” I reassure them.

My sister rolls her eyes. “I know. I know we’re all amazing. But you’re the star, Leonidas, and everyone knows that. Everyone loves the handsome

Leo Drakos, and we're okay with it."

Elijah nods in agreement.

The two laugh at one another.

"Oh, Leo. What a handsome young fella he is. I would love to date him. I wonder if he smells as good as he looks," Elijah mocks in a high-pitched voice.

Amelia joins in with a gasp. "I wonder if he's just as handsome with his clothes off."

"Duh, girl, he's even better."

"All right, all right. I get I'm the hottest triplet, and everyone in the world agrees. No need to be mad." I wave them off with a knowing smile.

The room is filled with silence.

"Move out of the way, Amelia. I'm about to punch him in the face," he whispers loudly.

I snort. "I could take you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!" I beam.

Just as I feel his body shift on the bed, Amelia cries out and slams his body back down. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Let's talk about the hottie next door," Elijah says and grunts a second later when Amelia punches him in the stomach.

"She's my best friend, dumb fuck."

He stares at her like she's crazy. "You haven't even known her for that long. How is she your best friend already?"

"She's different," she defends. Getting up, she turns around and faces us as she crosses her legs. "She's a real friend, not someone using us. Besides, we're alike in so many ways!"

I'm happy to see my sister happy. I do feel joy, knowing Trinity likes us for who we are. I know if she ever finds out, this won't end well. I can feel it deep within my bones. She'll hate and resent us.

Elijah points out what I'm thinking, "This will break her."

Triplets shit.

"She doesn't have to know yet," I say, and Amelia looks at me funny. "What?"

"Don't," is all she says.

"Don't what?"

"Use her like you always do."

Damn, that hurts.

When I open my mouth to defend myself, she glares. “I see the *fuck me* eyes whenever you guys are together.”

She has *fuck me* eyes too? Why does that make me want to run out of the house and meet her in her room? Is she even there? Would she say yes?

Probably not.

I shrug my shoulders, hoping I hide my excitement well. “She’s really nice on the eyes.”

“Leonidas,” she grits out. “No. You can’t do this to her. You know what she’s going through.”

It’s not like I’m going to kill her. If two adults want to smash, that shouldn’t be a problem.

Getting up from my bed, I change into a clean shirt. Glancing over my shoulder, I send her a pointed look. “I’m not going to break her heart. Chill out. Have a little faith in me, sis.”

Elijah nods at me. “I have faith in you, bro.” Seeing the questioning look on Amelia’s face, he defends, “What? I ship them together.”

“Oh God, I live with a bunch of idiots.” She giggles. “Trinity is a smart girl. She’ll never give in to Leonidas. Mark my words.”

“Words marked.” My lips twitch.

“Where are you going?” Elijah’s voice calls.

Making my way down the hallway and to the stairs, I smirk when I hear him yell, “Wear a fucking condom, Leonidas Drakos, or I swear to God I’ll beat you up! You know how strong I am!”

NINE

TRINITY

I make a fist and rub the mist away from the mirror. I stare at myself and smirk. I know I have problems, but at least I'm hot. Grasping my shorts, I put them on and grab my large gray hoodie.

Blow-drying and straightening my hair, I reflect on the day I've had. Today was a surprisingly good day. I reunited with Harper, and our friendship grew even stronger. I now have peace of mind that I still have her as a friend.

After the forest, I always come home and have a shower. You never know what might have dropped onto your head from the trees. A shiver travels down my spine at the thought of bugs.

Tidying up my mess, I pick up my wet towels and hang them behind the door to dry. With my dirty clothes in hand, I walk out of the bathroom and throw them in the hamper, where they wait to be washed.

Grabbing my retainer case, I stop when I see Simba in a protective stance beside me. His low growls cause my heart rate to quicken. I've seen way too many videos of dogs barking at nothing in the middle of the night. The fact that I'm turned away from the direction he's barking at causes my nerves to skyrocket even more.

I really hope there isn't a ghost in my room because I'll be moving out in a heartbeat. I'm too afraid to turn. My sweaty palms grip the closest thing near me. I swing around and throw ... a banana?

Oh my God, I just threw a banana in self-defense. And it wasn't even hard. It was a rotten banana that I'd forgotten I brought up here.

"Shit," the male voice says and dodges my attack.

"What the hell?" we both say.

Leo is standing in the middle of my room, looking at me like I'm the crazy one.

What the hell is he doing here?

"Did you just try to kill me with a banana?" he grumbles and picks the fruit up from the floor. He holds it out to me and smirks. "Real smart and dangerous. Next time, make sure it's ripe."

Ignoring his insult, I demand, "What are you doing in my room? How the hell did you get in?"

Leo shrugs and walks over to my bed. Lying down in the middle, he places his hands behind his head. "Climbed through the window."

I stare at him, shocked. He's just going to lie there and pretend that nothing is wrong with breaking into someone else's house. Thank God I didn't come out of the bathroom, naked. That would have been mortifying.

I point toward the window and give him the sternest glare I can muster. "Get the hell out of here."

"Nope," he says, popping the *P*. "I'm pretty comfortable here. In fact, I could fall asleep if I just closed my eyes."

Walking over to my closed window in a hurry, I pull it up. "Get your fat ass up and go."

Mom will kill me if she finds him in here. I don't feel like getting a beating today.

Leo just smirks and snuggles in my bed further. "How about you tell your squirrel of a dog to calm down?" He points toward Simba.

I look over toward my adorable dog. He still stands in a protective stance, looking from me to Leo on my bed.

Perfect.

I flash him a shit-eating grin. "If you don't get out, I'll tell him to attack you."

He scoffs and rolls his eyes. "What damage would he do to me?"

Don't be fooled. He has sharp teeth. When he bites, you can still feel the pain minutes after. Simba's teething, so he'll bite anything he comes in contact with. I even saw him trying to bite the wall yesterday. I almost peed my pants, watching him.

Leo clears his throat, which snaps me out of my thoughts. If I didn't dislike him, I would stand here and openly admire him. Even in comfy clothes, he looks like he's ready to walk down the runway. Not to mention how flawless, his wavy, short brown hair looks on my pillow. The silver

chain around his neck catches my attention ... he watches me watch him.

Stop. I need to hate him. He's not good for me. Or maybe I'm the one who isn't good.

Taking a deep breath, I glare at him.

"One." I walk closer to him.

He stays still while smiling.

Oh my God, he looks so hot on my bed.

"Two." Another step.

When I'm a foot away from the bed, he reaches his hand out and skims his finger along my exposed thigh. I stop in my tracks, and my breath catches in my throat. I feel shivers throughout my entire body as he trails a line right to where my shorts end.

"What were you saying again?" he whispers and glances up at me with heat in his eyes.

I open my mouth, but the only thing that comes out is a stutter. Leo stares at me like he wants to destroy me, but what if I want to do the same to him?

The way his finger brushes up and down on my thigh, his lip between his teeth. He looks droolworthy, and he knows it.

"Just by touching you like this, I make you breathless," he rasps out.

Sitting up, he comes close to my face. His soft-looking lips are centimeters from mine. "Imagine what I could do if we had time."

He bites the corner of his lip, and I do the same.

Holy shit, stop, my brain tells me as he leans even closer.

When I feel his breath on my lips, I can't help but lean in as well. Oh goodness, I want this so badly. I haven't been touched in so long.

My door is thrown open, and a gasp comes from my doorway, making me jump away from Leo in panic. I turn toward the door and am immediately filled with dread. My mother stands there with a shocked expression on her face. Yet what shocks me the most is Wyatt, my ex, standing behind her. His face shows no emotion as he looks from me to Leo. I want to jump out the window or be buried alive. Either would be good. I'm not picky.

What the hell is he doing here? I haven't seen him in months. He still looks the same, just firmer and more muscular. Looking at him makes me realize why I fell for him. He looks like a teddy bear, someone who gives good hugs. Leo looks like the complete opposite—hard, unapproachable ...

Speaking of Leo, he's just staring Wyatt down, a frown on his face. His body is behind mine. His fingertip still plays with the back of my thigh. Up,

down, up, down.

I hope Mom can't see what he's currently doing. I'll be mortified. Slapping his hand away will only cause attention to his actions, so I stay still even though I feel like squealing.

"Trinity." Mom pauses and pinches her nose. "Why is Leo in your room?"

I want to scream at her and plead that I didn't know he was in here, but Leo opens his mouth before I can respond. "We were having a playdate."

Oh my God, please strike me with lightning.

My mouth drops open, and I gesture my hand out to my mom. "I swear I didn't know. I came out of the shower, and he was in here, being a dick."

Her face is stone-cold, eyes burning with fury. I've never seen Mom this mad before. "I'll talk to you about this later." She gestures between us. After looking at an awkward Wyatt behind her, she glances at me. "Go talk to Wyatt. He actually came through the door to see you." Then, she looks at Leo. "You, out right now. Don't sneak through my daughter's window again."

Scoffing, he rolls his eyes and sneaks a peek at me one last time with an unreadable expression.

Mom butts in curtly when he makes his way to the window, "Out through the door."

Dragging his feet on his way, he smirks at my mom and salutes her. "Yes, ma'am. See you later, Trin."

Wyatt, Mom, and I all wait until we hear the front door slam behind him.

Letting out a relieved sigh, I look at Wyatt and give him my best smile. "Hi."

He nods. "Hey."

Mom shuffles backward toward the door. "I'll leave you two alone to talk." She turns and walks down the stairs.

I turn away from my ex, my fingers running through my long locks. I'm dead. My mom just walked in on me and Leo. Not to mention, my ex witnessed the same thing. I'm mortified. Embarrassment fills every single bone in my body.

"Who was that?" Wyatt asks from the door, breaking the tense silence.

"My neighbor," I say, still not facing him.

He chuckles lowly and shakes his head when I turn to face him. "The boy next door. How cliché."

My gaze narrows as he leans his body against the doorframe of my bedroom. I know what he's getting at, and frankly, he has no place in being smart with me. Jealousy is out of the question. We broke up years ago. He was over it, and now, he's not?

I cross my arms against my chest. "Why do you care who I see? We haven't been together for ages."

He shrugs and avoids my gaze. "I don't care who you see. Trinity, even though we broke up, that doesn't mean I don't care about you. But that guy ..." He stops mid-sentence. "He just seems weird. He gives me a strange vibe. Yet I think I know him from somewhere."

"You think everyone is weird," I point out, knowing Wyatt's the strange one here.

When we were together, he always saw the negative in everyone. Positivity isn't something in his mind.

"Lies. I'm always right. Don't come crying to me when he kidnaps you," he jokes but stops when he sees my unamused face. "Trin, what happened? Did you lose the humor I'm used to? I'm just playing around."

Did you lose your people skills? I long to bark back at him. I keep my mouth shut, wanting to avoid an unnecessary argument.

Instead, I tease him. "When I escape the dingy, dark basement he locked me in for ten years, I won't be coming to you. You know why?" I wait a beat for him to guess, but I continue when he keeps his mouth shut, "Because we aren't together anymore." Clapping my hands, I let out a low laugh. "What are you doing here after all this time?" Sitting down cross-legged on my bed, I stare up at him.

"You haven't been answering my calls."

"I haven't been answering anyone's calls."

He walks farther into my room. "What if you were dead? I would've never known!"

I scrunch my nose in distaste. "I'm sure you would have gotten an invitation to my funeral."

I know I should act serious, but sitting here and watching him get fired up is pissing me off. You can't walk into my life after so long and act like you have a say in who I talk to. We haven't spoken in months. Why does he care so much about me now? Nothing makes sense.

Wyatt's jaw clenches. "You're the same yet so different. The old Trinity would've never talked to me this way."

Here we go—the same pep talk, the same shaming I’m used to from everyone. Tragically losing a parent by murder will do something to you. Why does everyone expect I’d be the same after that? I make sure everything he says goes in one ear and out the other.

“You take nothing seriously. Act like an adult for once, Trinity.”

Anger flares up in my gut at his tone. “Wyatt, I owe you nothing. You’re my ex for a reason.” I continue when he lets out a scoff of disbelief, “Plus, I didn’t know I was getting a lecture. I would’ve pulled out a pen and paper sooner.”

He just stares at me with mixed emotions. Maybe a mixture of shock and anger? I think he forgot who I am. I don’t take shit from anyone, and if you throw it in my face, I’ll punch it back in yours.

Shrugging my shoulder with a sarcastic smile, I nod toward the door. “I think you should leave. We aren’t getting anywhere with this conversation.”

“I miss you,” he suddenly pleads while taking a step closer to me. “I fucking miss you, Trinity. I never got over you. I tried, but a girl like you is hard to get over.”

I shake my head in denial as my heart threatens to stop in my chest. “Wyatt, we broke up a while ago. I’m sorry—I really am—but I’m over you.”

“We’ve been through so much!” He stares at me with shock evident in his eyes.

No, we haven’t. I’ve gone through hell all alone.

“You deserve someone who wants to be in a relationship. I’m not that girl.”

“We’ve done it before.” His voice comes out rough. Gripping my face in his palms, he tries to convince me. “We could do it again. I know you love me. You always have.”

Wyatt’s arms fall to his sides as I take a step back from his body.

“I said I don’t want this, Wyatt. We aren’t good for each other. Please drop it and give me space.”

“Please—”

“Leave,” I interrupt firmly.

“But—” he protests, but I point toward the door.

“I wasn’t suggesting.”

He scoffs. “Whatever. Have fun, getting knocked up by that dick. Don’t come running to me when you’re pregnant and your mom kicks you out.”

Gripping a pillow firmly in my hand, I crave to throw it at the back of his head, yet he's too fast, making me miss my chance at revenge for his disgusting words.

He slams the door on his way out. I drop onto my bed and lie on my back as I stare up at the ceiling, wondering what the fuck just happened.



I slowly walk down the stairs, stepping side to side to avoid the creaks in the stairs I have memorized. I used to sneak out in my early years of high school. Avoiding the areas on the steps that will give me away is a flashback from my life before.

Now, my life is boring and dull. Although Leo has made my life a little more exciting—not sure if it's in a good way or the worst.

I know I'm dead the minute my eyes meet my mother's stormy ones. I might visit my dad soon. I just pray she does it fast and not painfully slow. She's never caught me with a boy in my room. The fire in her eyes when I jumped away from Leo could have scared anyone. The fact that I have to face her alone now makes me ten times more terrified. Leo put me in this position, and now, he's not here to get me out of it. Screw him.

"Trinity," Mom calls when she sees me.

Here goes nothing. Keep your head up and calm your breathing.

"Hey, Mom."

She's stirring a spoon in her steaming coffee cup. Pointing to a chair, she demands, "Sit."

Once I sit, she leans on the counter and folds her arms across her chest. She just stares at me with that scary mom look. Swallowing tightly, I glance down at my lap.

"Do you want to explain yourself?"

"I already told you." I pause and let out a breath. "I came out of the shower, and he was in my room. He climbed through the window. I didn't know he was in there, and I didn't want him in there," I plead with her.

She'll ground me for life. I know it. I can't bear it.

"You didn't want him in there, huh?" She raises an eyebrow. "If Wyatt and I hadn't interrupted, I'm pretty sure you two would have had sex."

I scrunch my face up in disgust. "I respect myself more than you give me

credit for.”

“I don’t want random boys you hardly know in your room, do you hear me?”

I want to put up a fight and tell her he’s the second boy to ever be in my room and that she’s blowing up for no reason. But I keep my mouth shut and nod.

“While you live in my home, you’ll follow my rules,” she urges before taking a sip of her coffee.

My eyes follow the steam that leaves her cup and evaporates in the air.

Frustrated, I explain myself for the hundredth time, “Mom, I didn’t break any of your rules if I didn’t sneak him in!”

“I don’t care!” She raises her voice. “He was in your room, wasn’t he?”

My body sags in my chair in response.

“I’m sure you wanted him in there, huh?” she questions me with narrowed eyes.

Wow. “You don’t know that, Mom. That’s pretty bold of you to say without actually knowing what’s going on in my head.”

“Two teenagers in a room together without anyone knowing. I wonder what was going to happen.” Mom’s tone is full of brutal sarcasm.

“I’m eighteen, Mom, not a kid anymore, and he’s nineteen,” I point out, trying to convince her.

Her mouth turns down in a frown. “As long as you live under my roof, you’ll be a kid to me.”

“Mom—” I start to say, but she cuts me off.

“When I said I wanted you to get out more, I meant, going out with Harper, going to the mall and movies. Not sneaking in a boy, who you just met, through your window at night. I’m very disappointed in you. Don’t make me lose the trust I have in you, Trinity.”

But I didn’t sneak him in!

How can you talk sense into someone who refuses to listen? No matter what I say to Mom at this moment, she’ll turn her cheek and ignore me.

This entire conversation just proves how deep down she doesn’t trust me. I see how this looks bad, but her not giving me a second to explain myself is causing my blood to boil.

“Mom, have you ever fully trusted me?” I whisper to her. “If you did, you would have let me explain instead of immediately claiming I’m guilty.”

She cocks her head to the side. “What’s your evidence?”

“I wouldn’t have had sex when I knew you were in the same house,” I bluntly point out the obvious.

Mom nearly spits out her coffee as she glares up at me, shocked. “Trinity Jones! Did I raise you to talk like that?”

“No, but Dad did.” I smirk and shrug my shoulders.

Pinching her nose, she shakes her head disapprovingly. “I’m not joking around, Trinity. Just ...” She waves her hands in the air. “Just please leave my sight right now.”

My heart practically splits in half at her words and expression. My only parent left can’t stand the sight of me. It makes me feel an emotion deep within my bones, a feeling of just letting go and saying *screw it*. The only person I have left doesn’t have faith in me, so what am I holding on to? Nothing.

Getting up just like she asked, I take each step slowly. I’m not a kid. I don’t think I live in a fairy tale or believe I’ll meet my Prince Charming. The world has thrown me too much pain. The moment I looked into my dad’s lifeless eyes, the dreams I’d once had drained from within me.

Maybe the way I used to live before was better—the partying, having too many fake friends. At least I can drown my sorrows and try to forget the thunderstorm within me. I’m not naive or stupid.

Time to bring the old Trinity back.

TEN

LEO

My pen taps away on my blank piece of paper. I try desperately to get lost in a world of music in my head. Tuning out every disruption around me, I close my eyes and focus on my thoughts.

“Alone, craving someone’s company,” I mutter slowly.

Scribbling that one line on the piece of paper below me, I place my chin in my hand and search my brain for anything creative I could make into a lyric. Just as I start to form another rhythm in my head, Elijah bursts into my room. I try to ignore him. I need to save the thought in my mind before I forget it, but it’s no use. It vanishes as I obsess over not forgetting it.

Shit.

Dropping my head in frustration, I rub my tired eyes with the palms of my hands. Why did my own brother have to do me so dirty? I actually had something, something in my mind that I knew had potential. And now, it’s gone.

Fuck.

“You got a wedgie or something?” He snorts and plops down on my bed.

I hear Amelia scream from the hallway, “Elijah, don’t bother him!”

“Oops,” he says when she storms into the room with a frown, throwing her arms up in frustration.

I match her anger with my own. “What do we always do when Leonidas’s writing?”

Glancing at me fully for the first time, Elijah suddenly slaps a hand to his mouth and eyes the paper I’m holding. I clench my fist around the edges of the notebook.

“Shoot,” he mutters.

“Continue with your writing. I’ll just be lying here, pretending that I’m dead,” he rushes out while shutting his eyes. Making him look ridiculous.

Amelia turns to me with a hopeful expression on her face.

“It’s all gone.” I sigh, defeated. I search my brain for anything, anything that could hint at what I was getting at. Yet I come up blank.

“At least you have something,” Amelia says, looking over my shoulder and eyeing my paper.

“One brief line will not make a hit,” I mutter, frustrated at myself and my brother. “I finally got something, and that dipshit had to waltz in here like a monkey.”

“I like to be called more of a chimpan—”

“Elijah,” Amelia interrupts. “Please stop talking right now. Later, when we’re out of the lion’s den, you can talk all you want.”

Raising his pinkie in the air, he eyes our sister. “Promise?”

Hooking her pinkie around his bony one, she smiles down at him.

With a sigh, I eye my brother, who acts like a five-year-old rather than a nineteen-year-old.

“What’s up?” I throw the notebook in my hand to my desk and lean back in my chair as I face Amelia.

Biting her lip nervously, she sits on the edge of my bed, facing me. “Elijah was just coming in here to tell you we have a meeting tonight with Dad and the team.”

There goes my remotely good mood.

“You need to come this time, Leo.” Amelia inhales. “He’ll get pissed. Last time, I thought he was going to come down here himself and drag you to the meeting.”

I shrug my shoulders and let out a dry laugh at the thought of pissing off my dad. “Let him. See if I care.”

She stares me down. One thing that I’ve learned over the years is not to piss off Amelia. She’s scary when she doesn’t get what she wants. Yet when it comes to my dad, I try to do everything I can to avoid seeing his face, which resembles more of a rat than a human.

“The man that we call our dad is dead to me.” My voice comes out rougher than expected. “No one who uses me for money and success should get a hint of my time.” I scoff. “Like he’s even on our team. He just sits around on his ass and bosses us around.”

“Whether we like it or not, he is on our team. Sometimes, people have to

suck up their displeasure and get things over with. Do you think I like being around Dad after all he's put us through?" She scoffs. "No one likes Dad anymore, Leonidas, but we deal with him because we have to!" Her chest rises up and down rapidly after her confession.

Swallowing hard, I nod at her. "Fine," I mutter, twirling a pen between my fingers. I see how me skipping team meetings can be frustrating, so I'll try to do better.

Key word: *try*.

Amelia smiles. "Thank you. We all appreciate it." I watch as she cuddles into my bed beside Elijah. "Hey, I meant to ask, why did you come home so grumpy yesterday? You nearly took down the door when you slammed it shut."

Shit, I should have known she would notice. Amelia's practically in everyone's head. My body tenses, which I hope she doesn't notice. It's hard to act completely normal when my brain goes straight to dirty thoughts.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I was completely fine."

She gives me a weird look but then glances out of my window when a bark catches both of our attention. Pulling the curtains back, we both gaze at Trinity below. She's holding a leash tightly in her fist. I almost smile when I see her cooing down at her squirrel of a dog. How can you call that thing a dog? It's so small and dinky. Now, call a pit bull a dog, and I'll believe you.

"It blows my mind every day that she doesn't know who we are," Amelia whispers, her eyes following Trinity's form from where she now sits on the bed.

I found it hard to believe at first. I thought she was playing with us, like many have before. Several people have pretended they didn't know who we were. They tried to hang out with us, make us take them out and spoil them. It never works, but they try so hard that it makes me want to laugh. I'm not stupid.

"Don't you think we should tell her before she finds out for herself? I feel deep down in my gut, Leonidas, that this isn't a good idea. She's going to get hurt badly."

I shake my head, still in denial. "She doesn't listen to music or even leave her house. She's the one person who hasn't used us for money. I love feeling normal for once, Amelia, don't you agree? For once, we can be ourselves without putting a mask on."

Amelia drops the curtains back in place and sits on my desk, facing me.

“She’ll hate us. Trinity has such a big heart, and we’re taking advantage of that.”

“We’re not here forever. Once we leave, we’ll probably never see her again. Why ruin this?”

“I hate lying. And speak for yourself. I hope we keep in contact with her after going back to LA.”

I point out, “We aren’t lying if we never told her anything in the first place.”

It’s true. How are we lying if she’s never even suspected it? To lie, you need to actually tell someone something. It’d be different if she asked and we said no. So, why ruin something good when we don’t have to?

“She’s my friend. I really don’t want to lie to her,” my sister pleads. She shakes my shoulder and pouts at me.

“No, we won’t tell her,” I demand. “I don’t want her to know.”

Huffing, she rolls her eyes at me. “You like her.”

I twist my head toward her and scoff. I don’t like Trinity. I just want to fuck her. There’s a difference.

“I see the way you look at her. Whenever she’s around, your eyes don’t leave her.”

She’s lying. I don’t like that girl, not at all.

“I like her ass,” I grunt out, resulting in her punching my stomach, making me hunch over in pain at the sudden stabbing feeling.

All those years of teaching her how to punch have really paid off. But I won’t admit that to her face.

Getting up from my desk, she gives me one last pointed look. “I’ve expressed my concern for keeping our identity a secret from her many times. This is a bad idea. Leonidas, if she gets heartbroken by the end of this, it’ll be your fault.”

She leaves my room with the last word, and I slouch in my seat in defeat.

My head is a mess of thoughts that all scream at me at once. *How can I hurt a girl who acts like she has no soul to hurt in the first place?*



My dad’s ugly face pops onto the screen. I frown, and Elijah kicks me under the table. I kick him just as hard, and he flinches and looks at me with shock.

What? You kicked me first.

I can't believe I'm related to my father. Is there any way I can trade half of my blood that has his DNA in it with someone else's? Nope, probably not.

"X3, how are you guys doing?" Justin, our agent, says with excitement.

I want to tell him to take it down a notch, but I keep my mouth shut, knowing I'll get scolded.

"We're great," Amelia answers for all of us. She scoots down into her chair and glances around the kitchen.

The tension is thick in the room. We all hate Dad. Even Mom has a frown on her face. She's taking it out on that poor orange she's squeezing to make fresh orange juice.

"Leonidas," Dad says.

I turn my head slowly toward the screen and listen as best I can.

"How's the writing?"

"Great," I lie, and Elijah kicks my foot again.

I clear my throat and mutter, "Could be better."

Justin and Dad lean back in their seats and cast each other concerned looks.

"The entire reason you're there is to write—" Dad starts, but I interrupt.

"It doesn't just come quickly. It takes time. I need motivation, and how can I get that in this small town?"

His fingers fold together, and his lips purse. "You really don't have a choice, son. People are getting impatient, waiting for another album."

I know my fans. Yes, they get impatient. But they can also be very understanding. We can always tell them we're in the middle of writing. Saying that would make them thrilled and also give me more time to write.

"Don't forget, we also need to record in the studio and make it perfect for the radio," Justin says, looking down at his clipboard. "Call me right away when you're finished. I've been taking care of your social media." He pauses and snaps his fingers when he remembers a thought. "You have a radio interview next week. So, be ready for that. I'll give you the list of questions that will be asked. I want you guys to answer them now, so you'll be prepared."

Casting another look at Dad, Justin clears his throat.

"We took it upon ourselves to decide that the three of you and the team will be traveling a lot once you come back to LA," Dad informs. "To get more engagement and support, you'll be having another international tour."

I swallow hard at the initial shock. A flashback of all the tiredness I remember vividly clouds my mind. The constant rehearsals, meet and greets, interviews, and talk shows. Fuck me.

ELEVEN

TRINITY

I haven't seen Leo in a week. I try to convince myself that his absence doesn't bother me. But who am I kidding? I miss seeing his grumpy, handsome face. His white G-Wagon hasn't left the driveway like it usually does on a regular basis. Maybe he left, and he isn't here anymore? Although his entire family is still here, so I don't think he would just leave without them. Would he? I really don't know.

I miss seeing his muscular, tanned arms from my window. I'm still waiting for him to come up to me and ask about the book. How does he expect me to wait this long without reading on?

"They look rich," Harper says from over my shoulder. Her eyes are trained on the triplets' luxurious cars.

We're both standing at the window, being creepers.

I nod in agreement. "They are rich. You should see the inside of their house. It's unreal."

"I wonder why they moved here." She hums, biting her lip.

"I think they love the quiet lifestyle," I muse and laugh.

Harper chuckles and hits my shoulder.

"It's actually nice here," she says and plops down onto my bed. Pulling the covers over her petite frame, she stuffs popcorn in her mouth. "I wish I could live here with you. It's so peaceful here, the air is so clean, and you're here."

"No, you really don't want to live here. The most excitement we get here

is if we see a squirrel running outside,” I deadpan.

Giving me an eye roll in response, she throws a piece of popcorn at me. I try to catch it in my mouth, but it just bounces off my forehead and lands on the floor near my toes. I think of Leo and the way his mouth caught the chocolate chip that had been in my bra. That had no reason to be as hot as it was.

The tension between us is becoming unbearable. You can slice it with a knife. The fact that he makes me angry and happy, all in one, is beyond me.

Stay strong, Trinity. Don't give in to your sexy, mysterious Greek neighbor.

“In town, everyone knows each other’s business. You can’t go anywhere without at least one person knowing what time you took a poop yesterday.” Harper shivers. “You can run out of your house naked, and hardly anyone will see,” she points out, and this time, I shiver.

I clear my throat. “My new neighbors will see.”

The smile that lifts her entire face tells me everything without her even needing to say anything. “Take one for the team and get a sugar daddy, Trinity.”

“No.” My voice is firm at the thought of using someone only for their money.

“But—” Harper stops herself mid-sentence when she sees the look I send her.

Choosing to leave the subject alone for now, she continues to stuff popcorn in her mouth. I lie next to her and dip my hand into the popcorn bowl.

“Wyatt came here the other day.”

Her head turns so fast toward me that I’m worried it will fall off. “Spill the tea, girl.”

I shrug and look up at the ceiling. “There’s nothing to say. He was actually a dick. He was treating me like he was my boss. He said he still loved me, but I don’t think it’s love that he feels.”

Silence fills the room. Glancing over at her, I find her eyes look distant.

“I know he’s in love with you.”

“What?” I breathe out in shock that Harper thinks so.

She nods. “I haven’t seen him touch another girl since the breakup, and that was a while ago. The entire time you went AWOL, he was worried sick. I can’t even tell you the number of times he asked me if you were okay.” She

laughs and rolls her eyes.

I knew he cared for me when we were together, and every normal person after a breakup would be concerned for the other. But I thought he was being nice. Not that he still loved me.

I stress and run a hand down my face. “I don’t feel the same way, Harper.”

She nods her head and gives me an understanding look. “You would be silly to after all these years.”

“What do I do?”

Shrugging her shoulders, she pats me on the shoulder. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

She nods and gives me a weird look. “Leave him alone. He’ll eventually get over you.” Her eyes narrow on my face. “Is there someone else?”

Yes? No?

My brain totally didn’t just think of Leo. He’s not good for me. Who says? Me, the overthinker ...

I gesture around me and give her a look. “How can I find a guy in my room?”

“Is he under your bed?” she asks while a smile lifts her face. Harper proceeds to bend down and look under my bed.

What I do next might be considered mean. But she’s my best friend ... and what are best friends for if we don’t do this?

My hand makes contact with her back, pushing lightly. I watch as her body tumbles to the ground. I let out a squeal and a snort when she screeches.

“You bitch!”



“I love you. Yes, I do,” Amelia sings in her awful baby voice.

Her arms extend Simba in the air. His tongue wags out in a radiant smile. Simba’s definitely loving all the attention.

“So, you have any news?” Amelia asks, placing him on her lap and facing me.

I shake my head. “You?”

“Nothing much. My life resembles a couch potato right now.”

I snort. “Welcome to the club. I’ve been a couch potato for four years

strong.”

I frown when she moves my backside up in the air with a curious expression on her face.

“What the hell are you doing?” I bark out.

“Trying to see if you grew any roots.”

My mouth twitches as I try to keep a straight face.

“I see that smile,” she teases as her blonde hair blows in the wind. “Let it shine, girl.”

Raising my middle finger in the air to her, I reply, “Suck it.”

A deep voice I know very well calls from behind me, “Trinity?”

My body tenses. Butterflies erupt in my stomach when I see his muscular form stop in front of me.

“Trinity, I need to talk to you now.” Not giving me a chance to respond, he walks away toward his house.

Well then ...

I wonder what he wants. I noticed that he sounded more pissed off than usual. Good luck to me.

“What is up with him?” I ask Amelia as I follow Leo’s retreating form with my eyes.

“I swear he’s PMSing every day,” she jokes. “But even that’s an insult to women.”

“At least we have a reason to PMS,” I point out.

She slaps my knee. “Exactly!”

Getting up from the grass, I leave Simba with Amelia. “Wish me luck. If you hear a scream, just know I want to be buried with my books.” Spinning around, I start following her brother but not before seeing the confused look on Amelia’s face.

Every step I take closer to his house, the more nerves I feel in my belly. It’s just Leo. Nothing to worry about. Yet whenever I’m around him, I lose all my brain cells and feel things I refuse to. He doesn’t bother to look back and see if I’m even following, which makes me want to turn around and not follow him, just to piss him off. I walk faster, attempting to catch up to him.

As I rush through their front door a few seconds later, my gaze roams around their home. Gorgeous but simple, as always. It has an industrial look to it—metal, exposed brick, gold, silvers. Whoever designed this house deserves a big hug from me. I love it.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I meet him in his bedroom. Oh God. He’s

standing in the middle of the room, running a hand through his brown hair. Glancing up once I walk through the doorway, he strides toward where I stand—now shocked in my place, too stunned to speak.

“Leo, what are you doing?” I squeak out when my back hits the wall and his hands cage me in.

He smells so good. Earthy, almost as if he rolled around in rosewood before coming up here.

He grits out, his eyes boring into mine, “Who was that?”

My mouth drops open. *What the hell is he talking about?*

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!” I exclaim and try to push his body away from mine. As my hand brushes against his chest, I feel him tense. I nearly swoon when I touch hard, defined abs. I need to get out of here before I do something stupid.

He’s much stronger and taller than me, as expected, so my push didn’t even make him stagger back.

His heated gaze turns a shade darker. “Who was that guy in your room the other day?”

I search my brain for a guy that Leo would have seen in my room. Wyatt. *Shit.*

“That was Wyatt,” I whisper.

Heat has taken over my entire body. If it wasn’t for Leo’s arms caging me in, I would for sure fall to the ground.

His lips pucker in distaste. “Why was Wyatt in your room?”

I glance away from his handsome face, but his finger pushes my chin back up, directing my eyes back to his.

“He’s just an old friend, checking up on me!” I rush out and push him away with both hands this time. I duck under his arm and run to the other side of the room.

I need space to breathe. His sweet but manly smell clouds my mind. Taking a deep breath through my nose, I only inhale more of him—because, duh, I’m in his room.

Which, might I add, is still filled with boxes he hasn’t unpacked.

Folding my arms across my chest, I glare at him. “What is your problem?”

Leo leans his body against the door, tucks his hands in the pockets of his gray sweatpants, and just stares at me. He’s definitely pissed. I got that when he pinned me against the wall, but why is he pissed at me? I did nothing to

him. And why does he care about Wyatt? Me and Leo are not seeing each other or even close to it. Never once did Leo hint at having feelings for me. Guys are so confusing.

“Did you at least give him a good lay?” he says effortlessly.

“Did you just ask me if I gave Wyatt a good lay?” I ask and let out a laugh. “God, you’re such a dick! Who do you even think you are?” I exclaim at him while walking closer to push his shoulder lightly.

He glances down at me and raises a perfectly kept eyebrow. “I didn’t know you had this much fight in you,” he muses.

I hold myself back from slapping the stupid smirk off his face. “Why do you care so much about Wyatt?” I ask sternly again. “Are you jealous for some strange reason?”

“Why are you so hot but so annoying at the same time?” he grumbles and avoids my question. “We all have questions in life that are going to be left unanswered.”

My fierce eyes bore into his. I won’t be the first one to look away. I won’t show him how much he truly affects me. Leo’s tatted finger comes up and twirls a piece of my hair.

“I know you think you can boss me around and that I’ll fall head over heels for you. We don’t live in a romance book, Leo. I just see you as a grumpy guy,” I grit out, tired of his BS. “I can have any guy in my room. I don’t need your permission.” Squaring my shoulders, I give him the best glare I can muster. After my rant, I slow my breathing down and immediately feel the urge to punch him in the face.

“You have a little beast in you, huh?” His hooded eyes give my body a once-over before he says roughly, “You should unleash your inner beast on me.” He nods toward his bed. “On that.”

Did my heart rate pick up? A bit, yet I hate myself for it.

Needing to get the hell out of here, I push his body to the side and rush out into the hallway. My feet pound against the staircase as I make my way down to clear my head. When I hear his own footsteps behind me, my breath quickens, and I speed up. I twist around when his hand encloses my forearm.

“I’m picking you up tomorrow.”

Electricity travels up my arm at the feeling of his warm skin against my own. “I’m busy tomorrow.”

He snorts. “Doing what?”

“Doing Wyatt,” I fire back at him sarcastically.

“I’ll make sure I throw rocks at your window.” Releasing me from his hold, he takes a step back. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” With several emotions on his face, he nods and makes his way back up the staircase.

“Go to hell,” I yell up at him, frustrated.

His husky laugh travels all the way through my body. “Bring your book, *Bella*.”



I’m in my room, fiddling with the *Twilight* book Leo bought me.

Once I exited their house, Amelia wasn’t outside. I immediately got concerned because she had Simba. What if she let him go and he ran away? But my nerves quickly faded when I opened the front door and he ran up to me.

I’m not sure where Amelia went. I didn’t hear her come into her quiet house, although Leo was pressed up against me half of the time and invaded my thoughts with his muscular body.

The look that crossed Leo’s face before he left me in the hallway replays in my mind constantly. I know that he acts tough, but in his eyes today, I saw something different. Sadness.

When I came home with my heart beating a mile a minute, I found my house empty. Mom isn’t home either. Every single day, I feel like she’s gone longer. Her job at our local bank seems to take up most of her time. She picks up extra shifts to get more income since Dad passed away.

I think it’s time I get a job. Helping to get the stress off her shoulders will hopefully make her be around more.

I’ll go sometime this week and see if the bookstore is hiring. That’s the only place I want to work. You’ll never catch me working in a grocery store. Everyone that I know has worked there.

So, first thing tomorrow morning, I’m going to apply for a job. Hopefully, while I’m gone, Leo will forget about what he has planned.

Because I’m not going anywhere with him.

TWELVE

TRINITY

I beeline to my car the next morning. My legs have never run this fast before in my life. I'm surprised I don't pull a muscle.

I'm trying to get away from the house as quick as I can, not wanting to go anywhere with Leo. If he didn't practically demand that I go somewhere with him, then I would have considered it. However, I won't let him force me to do anything that I don't want to do. Even though, deep down, I secretly crave his presence.

Yanking my car door open in a hurry, I jump in my seat and twist the key in the ignition. Placing my hand behind the passenger seat headrest, I glance back and start reversing.

I breathe out a sigh of relief as I drive down the long, twisty road. I got away without Leo seeing me. Thank God. To hell with him. I hate the fact that he expects me to follow what he says so easily. After how he acted yesterday about Wyatt, he'd probably take me to some alley and kill me.

I'm too young to die. Yet he won't catch me today.

My fingers tap my leather steering wheel as a smile lifts my face. I can't wait to see the pissed off look on his face. He's going to be so mad at me. I'm going to soak it all in and enjoy the show, just like he does. Plus, don't guys sleep till four o'clock in the afternoon? He probably won't even notice I'm gone.

Pushing the button that controls my window down, I let the cool summer breeze blow in my face. The fresh air calms my nerves and brings me back to reality.

Feeling uneasy in the pit of my stomach, I glance up at my rearview mirror.

“What the fuck?” I hiss out when I spot Leo’s G-Wagon following closely behind me.

Did he actually come after me? And how the hell did he know I left? Before I got in my car, I checked over at his house and saw no signs of life. Now, suddenly, he’s driving right behind my car.

He’s crazy. Who is this guy?

From my mirror, I can see the clear fury in his eyes. One hand is gripping the steering wheel tightly while the other is out of his window. How can he look so relaxed but pissed off at the same time?

I avert my gaze from the mirror. Looking straight ahead, I speed up. Trees blur all around me as my car zooms down the winding road. If he wants to follow me, he’d better catch me. The more my car speeds up, the more his comes closer. I know my dinky, old car can’t compete with his, but I’ll definitely push her to her limits. My knuckles turn white as I speed down this freeway. Not once do I look away from the road ahead of me. I turn the corners perfectly, but Leo makes sure he does it even more flawlessly.

Leo’s car suddenly slows down behind me. I smile in triumph. My Mini just won against a Mercedes.

If that doesn’t make this victory sweeter, I don’t know what does.

Slowing slightly down, I glance at his car again. A frown turns down my mouth when I see him flash his hazard lights at me multiple times.

What is he trying to tell me? I shrug my shoulders and keep driving.

Thinking he’s flashing his lights only so I slow down tames my thoughts as I keep speeding away. My heart drops, and dread fills my stomach as red and blue lights flash behind me.

He was warning me about a cop.

Shit.

I was practically street racing. Isn’t that illegal? Am I going to go to jail?

The palms of my hands clam up as I pull over to the side of the curb.

“Shit,” I mutter, frustrated with myself.

The cop car stops behind me as Leo drives on. As he passes, I’m surprised to see a look of concern on his handsome face. I thought he would jump in joy at the sight of me getting a ticket. Instead, he looks displeased.

I shake off the weird feeling when the cop comes up to my window. Rolling it down fully, I give him a small smile. Maybe I can use my charm to get out of this one. He’s young ... probably around his late twenties.

“Ma’am, do you know why I pulled you over?” He places a hand on the

roof of my car and peers in at me.

I shrug my shoulders and glance up at him. “Hi, Officer. I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize I was speeding,” I explain, trying to sound confused without sounding fake.

“You were going thirty above the speed limit when I caught you. Do you know how dangerous that is? Not only for yourself, but also for others.”

“I’m sorry. My mind isn’t in the right mental state right now. I was just on my way to the bookstore in town to ask for a job. My mom is a single parent, and she works horrible hours to keep us afloat.” I stop mid-sentence. This is my terrible way of getting out of a ticket. It might work because I see sympathy cloud his eyes. “I promise I won’t do it again, Officer.”

He nods his head at me and sighs, “I need to see your license, please.”

It didn’t work. Mom is literally going to kill me with her bare hands.

Reaching over, I take my license that has a horrible photo of me. Handing it over to him, I internally groan. *Damn you, Leo.* Of course I’m the one who gets caught.

The officer looks down at the photo and up at me. “Give me a couple of minutes.” He says before walking off.

This is not how I wanted to start my day. I’m going to have to pay for a speeding ticket for God knows how much. I wasn’t joking about the money part. My mom struggles every day with money. She wasn’t used to paying the bills all by herself. Telling her the money I could have put toward the electricity bill, property taxes, or our mortgage will for sure cause her unnecessary stress I wanted to avoid in the first place.

Leaning my head back against the headrest, I close my eyes and curse into my silent car. I always have to fuck up. But I haven’t recently, not for a long time. However, since Leo came to town, I feel like I’m messing up all the time. Is it because I try hard to impress him but fail? I have to admit, I’m attracted to him. I mean, what girl isn’t attracted to a hot, mysterious guy? But there’s something different about him.

He acts like he’s stone-cold, but I know he’s soft on the inside.

He’s hurting. I can see the forced smile he puts on his face. I can see the confusion and sadness in his eyes. Maybe we’re not so different after all. Maybe he actually cares about me. And even though he makes my blood boil, I love the way he makes me feel.

I love the excitement I feel when he’s around. I enjoy the fact that I never expect what he’s going to do. Whenever our gazes meet, it’s like an electric

current is running through my body, shocking me until I'm speechless and flustered.

Leo makes me feel things I've never felt before. I try to see the best in people. Even though he pisses me off until I feel like punching him in the face, I see right through him. The cockiness and rudeness are just a cover-up.

I blush at the thought of him and immediately jump in the air when I hear the cop's voice near my ear.

"Looking at your history, I see you don't have a past with us." He pauses and stares me down. "I'm going to let you off the hook, just this once. If I find you speeding again, it will not be the same result. Please be safe and don't speed. You can't help your mom pay the bills if you're dead." He hands me back my license and walks off toward his car.

Oh my God. No way.

Rolling up my window quickly, wanting to get the hell out of here, I start my car and drive off, making sure I stay under the speed limit. A laugh bursts past my lips as I drive. I can't believe that just worked. I for sure thought it wouldn't work. Yet I surprise myself every day.

One point for Trinity and zero for the cop.

As I drive farther down the road, my stupid smile doesn't leave my face. In the distance, I spot the car I've grown used to seeing on the driveway beside mine. The guy of the hour leans on the side of it with his arms crossed against his chest.

My heart skips a beat at the sight. Spotting my car, the closer I get, he gestures for me to pull over.

I stop my car in front of his and look back at him. Leo doesn't move. He just stands there with his hands in the pockets of his sweats. He leans his head in my direction, and his gaze holds mine, which has me forcing myself to breathe properly.

My shaky hand fiddles with my door. As my feet make contact with the pavement below, I hear a husky chuckle leave his throat.

"I didn't know my bad girl had a car racing kink."

My mouth drops open in shock at his blunt words. Oh God. I don't have a car racing kink. What the hell? The only reason I was racing him was because he was following me. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have been in this position.

I cross my arms across my chest and give him my best glare. "I don't have a kink for car racing, you dick."

He stands up straight and walks toward me. “Are you sure about that, darling?” He pauses and stares down at me. “I’m told I have very good eyesight. I saw the grin on your face when you were trying to win against me.”

Every word he says, he takes a step closer to me. I take one back in response and panic when my back meets the cool metal of my car. He smirks down at me with want on his face. He’s so close to me. I want to close my eyes and sink into the feeling of him. I grab the door handle beside me when he presses his defined body against mine. Holy shit, I feel every muscle carved into this man.

Leo’s head dips, and his husky voice whispers in my ear, “Can you feel what you do to me?” His lips softly brush against my earlobe.

Luckily, I’m depending on him and my car for support. If I wasn’t, I would have tumbled to the floor.

I don’t trust myself to speak, so I just nod my head in response and squeeze my eyes shut tight. The big bulge against my thigh is very clear.

“You know how turned on I am that you were fucking racing me?”

His big hand grips my thigh as he steps impossibly closer to me, clouding up my mind with want and need. I gaze over his shoulder.

“The thoughts running through my mind about you right now will send me to hell.”

Amen to that. I’ve never wanted to pull someone down by their neck so badly to slam my lips against theirs. Yet here I am, pinned against a car with Leo invading every single logical thought in me.

Both our chests rise up and down roughly as we concentrate on how the other feels.

“On a scale of one to ten, how mad would you be at me if I kissed you?” His breathless whisper makes my knees wobble.

Little do you know, Leo, I wouldn’t be mad at all.

“I’m not sure,” I answer. “My brain doesn’t work well when you’re this close. It must be the stupidity in you rubbing off on me.”

His tattooed hand comes up and cups the side of my jaw. Placing his forehead on mine, he speaks lowly and huskily. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was a straight-A student in school. Can’t say the same to you. Are you sure you’re not a blonde?” His voice is so beautiful yet so dangerous.

“Yeah, you were a straight-A student in stupidity?” I tease.

Feeling his breath on my lips, I breathe him in.

“Just making sure you won’t kick me in the dick,” he says moments before dipping his head down closer to mine.

There is nothing I can possibly do to stop him now. Leo has me in a tight choke hold. It’s just a matter of who will give in to the feelings we’re fighting first.

His long lashes brush against my cheek, making me let out a whimper at the feeling. Five minutes ago, I was cursing the ground Leo walked on. Now, all I want is for his touch and every breath and word to be mine for just a moment.

His soft, lush lips, which I’ve always wondered what they feel like, hover just above mine. Just as I feel the remaining space between our lips close, I jump away in fright.

“Holy shit!” I exclaim when someone leans on their horn.

My heart beats a mile a minute as I glance over Leo’s broad shoulder.

“Get it, man!” a guy yells from his open window.

Three other guys let out obnoxious laughs as they glance at us. I recognize them. Wyatt is sitting in the car’s backseat. He has a disapproving look on his face. I’m mortified, and I immediately want to be swallowed up. I know all of them from high school. Seeing them act like children makes me relieved I graduated. Not to mention, they saw me pressed up against a car.

Kill me now. I really wanted that kiss ...

Leo leans his head to the side and glares at them from over his shoulder. Anger radiates from his body because of the unwanted interruption. “Fuck off,” he yells at them, making them laugh even harder.

What are they, five-year-olds?

My fingers grip a fist into Leo’s T-shirt as I hide my face against his chest. *Please drive on. Please don’t recognize me.*

“Whatever, man. Have fun with that whore,” Wyatt yells, and the car speeds off, leaving me slightly hurt that he would say such a thing after confessing his “love” for me.

Leo’s body stiffens up against mine. He glares at the car as it flies down the road. I wonder how the cop didn’t catch them. Not fair.

It doesn’t surprise me that Wyatt called me a whore. I’m sure he’s told his friends countless lies about me since our last interaction.

As I feel Leo’s intense stare on my face that hides in his shirt, my cheeks warm. Moment ruined. All I want to do is hide somewhere and eat a tub of

ice cream.

I lightly push his body away from mine and let out a sigh, not taking my eyes off my feet. I whisper, “I need to get going.”

As my hand grabs on to the door handle of my car, his long, slim fingers rest on top of mine.

I can’t take my eyes off his rings. They shine in the sunlight. Maybe I have a kink for guys who wear rings ... yeah, I do.

“I haven’t known you long, but I know you’re the furthest thing from being a whore. Don’t listen to that immature dick.” He speaks smoothly, making me feel comfortable. “Wherever you’re going, let me come with you.”

I should say no, but after what just almost happened, I can’t help but nod at him.

“As much as I want to race your stunning ass again, let’s go the speed limit, and I’ll follow you.” He turns around and gets in his car.

What should be on my mind is the fact that I’ll be applying for a job in thirty minutes. But the only thing that I can think about the entire drive is how unlucky we are. That road is never busy, and the one time I was pressed against Leo and ready to feel his soft lips against mine, a car drove by.

At the moment, I feel like crying in frustration, but I know I’ll die of laughter later at the thought of Wyatt catching me and Leo on the side of the road.



“Don’t tell me you finished *Twilight*,” Leo demands accusingly when we meet in front of the bookstore. He’s wearing the same baseball cap and sunglasses as last time, which is strange.

I nod my head and reassure him, “I didn’t go past chapter five. I’m just waiting for the other slowpoke in this book club to finish. I’m here to ask for a job.”

Understanding appears on his face as he grabs the door handle and holds the door open for me. “Of course a book lover is going to work in a bookstore.” Leo rolls his eyes as a small smile appears on his lips.

Giving him a smile back, I walk through the door and into the small store I love dearly.

“Hello,” I say when I reach the lady behind the desk.

“Hello,” she grumbles and puts down the magazine she’s reading.

Well then ...

“I’m here to apply for a job,” I say, getting straight to the point. I hold up the resume I made sure to bring.

She glances at me for a long time, her eyes assessing me, which makes me shift on my feet nervously. Then, out of the blue, she snaps her fingers. “I’ve been needing help for a while. When do you want to start?”

“I’m hired?” I ask, shocked at how fast she decided.

She nods her head. “You can come in sometime next week.”

I place a hand on my chest and beam at her, relieved. “Thank you so much!”

Grunting, she waves her hand in the air.

She’s grumpy. That’s why she’s the only one working here. She’s probably desperate for another helping hand, but no one else in town wants to deal with her attitude. Whenever I come in here, I only find her behind the desk. She’s known in town to be horrible at helping customers.

Feeling a new warmth against my lower back, I hold back a yelp when I feel Leo’s finger in between my skin and my shorts. He lightly pulls me back by the material and nods his head toward the door.

What the hell? Can’t he see I’m in the middle of something important?

I look back toward the lady in concern. “Can I come in for work on Friday?”

Another tug and harder this time.

“Monday,” she says while looking up at me from her magazine.

This time, his tug is hard enough to pull me into his body. My butt grinds against him. Every bone in my body freezes as I feel his hard length against my bum.

“Shit,” he whispers.

Shit indeed. How am I not dead on the floor yet?

I pull away from him and glare. Leo’s dark eyes drop to my lips as I desperately mouth to him, *Stop*.

Turning back around, I reply to the grumpy woman, “Okay then, I’ll see you on Monday.” Dropping the resume on the counter I storm out of the bookstore, I turn quickly, and he exits behind me.

“Leo, I was trying to get a job! What was that?”

He shrugs and gives me an unbothered look. “I wanted to leave.”

“Then, why did you come?” I place my hands on my hips. “That was the reason I was there in the first place. This is important to me!”

“You already got the job.” He waves me off, pushing his sunglasses further up his nose. “Let’s go get coffee or something.” As I open my mouth to protest, he frowns at something over my shoulder.

Suddenly, Leo’s hand grips mine tightly when a voice gasps from behind me. “Trinity?”

I freeze.

THIRTEEN

TRINITY

I hate that voice. It's worse than nails scratching against a chalkboard.

Bethany—a literal devil walking on earth. She's every cliché mean girl you hear about. Bethany walks with her nose in the air as her strong perfume makes you feel high and dizzy. She acts like she's a celebrity. Sorry to burst her bubble, but she's only known in one small town for backstabbing people she "loves." She takes every girl's boyfriend and betrays all her friends. Not to mention, she's mostly hated by everyone in school, apart from her minions who follow everything she says. I can't stand her.

I glance at Leo with wide eyes, hoping he gets what I mean. *Get me away from this girl right now*, I scream in my head.

The eyes I've grown to find comfort in stare at me with understanding. I notice how his once-relaxed body stiffens when Bethany glances at him as she stops next to us with a fake smile on her face.

"Bethany," I say and clear my throat. Turning around to face her, I give her my fakest smile.

"It's so good to see you after so long!" she exclaims and flings herself at me.

I have to hold myself back from pushing her nasty body away from mine. *Kill them with kindness. Yeah, that's what I should do.*

"Likewise," I reply cheerily.

"Who's this?" Bethany asks and gestures to Leo when she pulls away from my body.

Leo glances down quickly and shuffles on his feet, nervously looking over his shoulder to where his car is parked on the side of the road. He addresses me with sympathy. "Trinity, I'll be in the car, waiting for you."

I watch his retreating back with a feeling of betrayal running through my veins. *Take me with you!*

How rude. He knew I needed him at this moment. We haven't known one another for long, but I thought he could have stayed put and shown emotions for once.

Guess not.

"That's weird," Bethany muses, crossing her arms across her chest while watching Leo slam his car door shut behind him.

Feeling confident, I say what's really on my mind. "Surprised one guy doesn't want you?"

I know I've for sure hit a spot with that one; however, I can't find it in me to care. She never has for years, so why should I?

Bethany stares past my shoulder at his car. "He's just playing hard to get." Her eyes roll.

I snort and nod my head at her. "If that makes you sleep better. I'm actually in the middle of—"

She interrupts tightly with a glare, "What's he to you anyway? I haven't seen him before."

Every guy in town has basically been with Bethany. Knowing there's a new guy in town that hasn't thrown her a second look is getting to her head.

How sad.

"He's a friend."

A laugh booms from her chest, making me cringe on the inside. "You have a friend other than Harper?" Her hand slaps her knee like she just heard the funniest thing in her life. "Girl, do you need help? Blink twice quickly if he's kidnapped you."

Anything is better than being stuck, talking to you.

"He hasn't kidnapped me." I scrunch my nose and chuckle dryly.

It's only been two minutes, and I'm done with her BS. Her goal every time we talk is to push my buttons and to make me feel below her. I won't give her the satisfaction of seeing how pissed off I am at the moment. That's what she strives for.

People like her push you down onto the ground. Sometimes, it feels like their hands are around your throat, squeezing all the life out of you until you feel hollow and weaker than ever before. That's if you let them beat you around with their sweet words that resemble venom more than anything. Rising above people who hurt others because they feel low is the greatest

victory.

I reply strongly, "I'm too busy for this." Turning around, I walk toward my car, ready to forget about this conversation.

"You know, you used to be fun," she calls out loudly.

I continue my steps, showing her that she's not affecting me. My hands sweat, but I keep my head up, looking straight to where I want to go.

"We used to get along so well."

No, we didn't.

"You used to be the life of the party. You had every fucking guy wrapped around your finger," she continues, her voice sharp and cold. "And now, you're a freak. No one ever sees you around anymore. You're fragile. I thought you were strong ... but you know what you really are?" she yells, halting my footsteps.

"You're a freak," she spits out, tearing my heart in two.

I shouldn't turn around and face her, but I do. I look her right in the eyes and push her to say more to my face. I'm aware people think I'm a freak. She doesn't have to tell me. That doesn't mean I'll let her treat me like a piece of trash. I know my worth. I also know she's so insecure about herself that she makes herself feel better by bullying people around. I'm not about to be one of those people today. I'm tired of being Bethany's doormat.

As my deadly gaze meets hers, I sense she's nervous. Not expecting me to stand up to her, she shuffles on her feet.

Taking a tense step closer to where she stands, I snap, "What did you just say?" Even though I heard her clearly. I think the whole damn town heard her.

A car door opens and shuts behind me. Dragging my attention to the noise briefly, I meet Leo's deep, velvety eyes, and I feel the confidence he normally carries seep through my bones as we gaze at one another. Leaning back on his car, he casts me a worried look.

"How does it feel to be a freak for four years?" She laughs. "What kind of person can't listen to music? It just shows that you're fragile, weak, breakable."

I know what I shouldn't do—what I always hold myself back from doing because of the consequences—but I can't help it today. She's gone too far this time. Rage takes over my body as I glare at the girl in front of me.

The next words that leave her mouth feel like a sucker punch to my gut.

"Your dad would be so ashamed of you," she sneers with a scowl on her

face.

I blink back the tears that threaten to pool over.

My hands shake at my sides. Anger toward the certain blonde makes my eyes narrow, seeing red. My legs stride toward her. I swing my fist back with all the force I have in my body and slam it hard into her face. With my knuckles screaming out in pain, I watch as Bethany staggers back at the impact. A scream leaves her mouth as she tumbles to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

“Say that again, bitch,” I yell down at her. Flexing my fist open and shut, looking for some sort of relief, I step closer to her.

“Trinity!” I hear Leo scream at me.

But his voice is distant. I can hardly hear anything but the pounding beat of my heart.

Bethany gets up and pushes my shoulder roughly. “Don’t touch me, you bitch!”

“I said, say it again, or are you too afraid of me now?”

She takes a step closer to me and wipes the blood off her lips. “You want me to say it again so badly? Fine! Your dad would be embarrassed that he was related to you—and he probably was!”

Saliva spits out of her mouth, landing on my cheek. I wipe it off, concerned I’ll now get an STD.

“You’re a letdown, Trinity, a tragedy,” she croaks out strongly with a wince.

A letdown, a tragedy. A letdown, a tragedy ...

Her body goes tumbling to the ground. I’m on top of her, punching, slapping anywhere I can. It’s like I’ve lost control of my body. I crave to make her feel what she’s done to my heart. Bethany’s knuckles make contact with my face, taking me off guard at the pounding feeling on my cheek. Feeling moisture suddenly pool at the corner of my lip, I taste blood.

Bitch.

I hold back a gag at the metallic taste.

She screams while wrestling me, “Get off me!”

Big, fat tears rush down my face. No one talks about my dad like that. I know he would have been ashamed of me. I am disappointed in myself too. Bethany has no right for that shit to come out of her mouth. She didn’t know my dad; she doesn’t know what his laugh sounded like when he hunched over, holding his stomach, or the way he used to come to my rescue with a

tissue in hand when I saw a bug.

I hate her.

I hate her for making me feel this way. Low, empty, and desperate.

My lungs scream at me to stop as wheezes part from my lips. Yet I don't listen to anything that tells me to stop as I swing my fist toward her again.

I need to hurt her the way she reopened and stabbed a scar that can't seem to heal.

"Trinity, stop!" I hear being yelled urgently from behind me.

An arm grips me around the waist and pulls my body off of Bethany. I watch as she crouches on her knees and holds her bloody nose. Both of her eyes are red.

Sneering up at me, she snaps, "Look at you. You're a heartless monster! Fucking crazy in the head—that's what you are!"

I twist around in Leo's hold. His enormous hands grip my waist more tightly as I jerk against him.

"Go to hell," Bethany barks.

"See you there!" I yell just as loud.

"Enough," Leo whispers in my ear. "Calm down. Follow the breaths of my chest against yours," his normally raspy voice pleads softly right in my ear. Still holding my body to his, he jogs effortlessly to his car.

Leo's words of encouragement do something within me. Feeling his tight grip grounds me back to reality. Following the deep, steady breaths of his muscular chest, I try to match it and regain control of my lungs.

The farther we walk, the more Bethany's screams become distant. A crowd of people stare at me and Leo.

The man himself notices and sticks up his middle finger at the gawking people. "Take a picture. It lasts longer."

Holding me with just one arm, he opens his car door and places me inside. Slamming the door behind him, he jogs to the driver's side of the car. Once seated in his seat, he throws his hat to the backseat over his shoulder. My eyes follow the way his brown locks beam, looking like the sun shining through a glass of whiskey.

Not giving a damn about the crowd staring at us like we're a funhouse, he holds the steering wheel with one hand. Speeding down the road, he lets out a deep sigh.

My hands are sore. I clench my jaw and wince when I lick my lips. Everything hurts.

I'm too embarrassed to peek a glance at him. From the corner of my eye, I notice the way one hand grips the steering wheel tightly, making his knuckles white. The other is placed on his thigh.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he whispers into the silence.

No, I really don't. But I know he won't let this go until I explain myself.

"Not here," I say finally.

He glances at me and raises an eyebrow. His wavy brown hair blows in the wind. He nods his head, his top pearly whites biting down on his plump lip. "I know where to go."

FOURTEEN

LEO

I drive to the place I know she loves best. I'm not sure why I care so much, but seeing this girl cry is gut-wrenching. To me, she's like a ball of sunshine. Seeing her with blood at the corner of her lip, her knuckles raw, and her cheeks stained with tears makes me livid. I imagine hurting Bethany one hundred times worse with my words.

Parking my car on the side of the road, I turn and face her. A frown drags down my mouth as she avoids my eyes like the plague. Trinity's glassy eyes look straight ahead at the winding road.

Unbuckling my seat belt, fumbling with the door handle, I hop out and make my way to her side. Trinity's eyes crinkle at the sides as she watches me open my glove compartment, which is in front of her, and I find the first aid kit I always leave in there. Pulling out a small bottle of hydrogen peroxide, I pour some of the liquid onto a cloth.

Meeting her soft stare, I gesture. "Can I?"

She winces in response. "That's going to kill." Trinity eyes the tissue like it's a tarantula.

"You're all cut up. This will burn like a bitch, but it will make the redness go down."

"Bethany had rings on," she sneers under her breath as she leans her head back against the headrest.

"You totally won the fight," I point out, trying to lighten the mood.

A small smile lifts her gorgeous lips as her red eyes meet mine. "Just do it quickly." She presses and shuts her eyes. "Do it fast, like pulling off a Band-Aid."

Swallowing thickly, I pause at the thought of hurting the girl I "hate."

“Leo, just do it!” she urges, tapping my leg repeatedly.

I step closer, and her sweet smell takes over every logical thought in my body, sending heat to my groin. “I’m going to place the cloth on your lip now. Please don’t bite me,” I warn.

“You’re killing me,” she groans, pinching her eyebrows together before frowning. “Quickly, Leo!”

“Okay!” I bark back.

I place the white cloth to her lip, and she moves back in shock when the liquid seeps into her bloody cut.

“Ow!” she yells. She grips on to my forearm. “Leo,” she moans in pain when I press harder against her skin.

What the hell is this girl doing to me? Is she moaning my name on purpose, or is she really that oblivious?

My dick strains against the zipper of my jeans. I quickly readjust my hard-on with my other hand when she’s not looking. My jaw tenses. Seeing her sitting in the seat of my car, mouth semi-open, while she squeezes my bicep would obviously stir something within me.

“Are you done?” she breathes out through her nose awkwardly.

Wiping for the last time and lingering slightly to feel her plump lips, I clear my throat. “Done.”

With a wince on her face, she shakes her head. “I have low pain tolerance.”

I chuckle. “I can tell.”

Suddenly remembering she’s holding my arm in a death grip, she lets go like I’m on fire and I just scarred her skin.

I busy my hands with grabbing cream out of the first aid kit because I desperately want to do other things with them. Like pull her lips to mine by her neck, tug her hips to the edge of her seat, and taste her on my tongue. God, I need to stop thinking about Trinity before I do just that.

Handing the tube over to the girl who’s starting to grip me in her choke hold, I watch as she rubs the cream into her raw skin.

“Thanks.” She hands me back the tube with a small smile.

Nodding once, I place everything back in its spot. I nudge her arm with my elbow while gesturing outside. “Let’s go.”

We walk beside each other toward the tree house I know she loves dearly. I’m not sure why though because as we climb up the tree, it looks like the wood is hanging on by a thread.

Maybe I'll find out why. Hopefully, she'll open up to me.

Hypocrite, you're hiding your entire life from her. She doesn't owe you a single thing.

I let her climb the ladder first for two reasons. One, to be the gentleman my mother raised me to be, and two, to look at her ass. Let me tell you, she has a nice ass. It looks great in those tight shorts. Not too plump, but not too flat, just the way I love it. Not to mention, her long legs, which I imagine wrapped around my waist as my lips travel down her neck.

Trinity has a killer body.

Climbing up, I sit beside her in this tiny wooden structure. I watch as she crosses her legs in front of her, but I hang mine out of the large window overlooking the forest.

"I know what you must be thinking," she starts off, not looking at me but at the earth below us.

I shrug my shoulders and reply, "Tell me what you think I'm thinking."

"That I'm a freak."

I snicker lowly and shake my head in disbelief.

Raising an eyebrow, she looks at me with confusion. "You don't?"

"I'm just like you." I pause and look away when she chuckles. "We both bottle up our feelings inside and act like we're having the time of our lives until we can't take it anymore and just explode."

Since the first day my eyes landed on Trinity, I could see the hurt in her eyes. I saw the sadness behind the layer of acting.

The first time we hung out together with my siblings, I studied her the entire night. I saw the way she forced herself to laugh and the way her sad eyes would drop to the floor after a smile left her face. When she suddenly forced them to shine with happiness when she glanced up, that hurt.

I know she's living with grief. She's holding on so tight to the feeling of sadness that she'll never be able to escape her storms.

She'll never be happy if she doesn't let go.

Little does she know, we're just two sad people, sitting in a tree house, mourning our lives.

She's mourning not only the loss of her father, but of herself too. I'm mourning the fact that I lost myself in the blinding lights on the stage and the cheers of a crowd. The lights shining down on me didn't bring me up. They

brought me down.

“You know, you could have gotten in a lot of trouble today,” I start off, and she laughs.

“So, that’s why you brought me up here? To lecture me?” She moves to get up, but I push her down again.

“No, that’s not what I’m trying to say. God, can’t you just listen?”

“The floor is yours,” she says dramatically.

She’s so stubborn. But why do I love it so much? It’s like I feed off her aggression and anger.

“There were so many people watching you attack that bitch. The police could have been called. What do you think would have happened if they had shown up?” I explain passionately. “Whatever her name was could press charges,” I urge, not liking the image I’m painting in my head.

Her body stiffens beside mine. Fiddling with the pendant looped on a necklace, she laughs. “I don’t think Bethany is smart enough to call the cops on me. She’d probably get confused midway, calling them.”

That makes me laugh. She’s probably right. Just by looking at Bethany, I know that girl’s brain is the size of a raisin.

“Why did you blow up today?”

She drops the pendant to her chest, and I watch it bounce in between her boobs.

“She was talking about my dad. How he would have been ashamed of me. In a way, she’s right.” She pauses and throws her hands up in the air in defeat. “I’m so different from the daughter he knew me as. I’m rude to people because that’s how I keep my heart safe. I stopped doing the things I loved because I was too tired to get out of my bed in the morning. I skipped school constantly because I hated the stares. And I’m so angry—” She snuffles, causing her to stop mid-sentence.

“Angry about what?” I question, too curious for my own good.

Uncrossing her smooth legs, she hangs them out the window beside mine. I hope her warm skin touches mine. However, I’m disappointed when my skin remains cold and empty.

I watch as her jaw clenches in frustration.

“My dad’s killers are still out there, walking free, living their best lives, while Mom and I live with the consequences every day.”

My body tenses, and I turn stone-cold. “He was killed?” I gasp out, shocked that a crime like murder would happen in this small town.

“Yeah.” She licks her lip but reels back in pain. “Stray bullet hit him right in the chest, died on the scene.”

I was not expecting this at all. I thought he’d died of natural causes, but this? This doesn’t seem right.

I know I might push my luck, but I ask, “When did this happen?”

She looks up at me and frowns at the memories. “Four years ago. He was at a music store, and he got shot there.”

My blood runs cold, and my shoulders sag. I turn my head, nearly giving myself whiplash, and glance at her with wide eyes.

Shit ... no.

Hiding my shock seconds later, I act like everything is okay, but inside, I’m screaming.

“You said they didn’t catch the shooters?”

She scoffs and leans back on her hands. “Nope.”

There’s really nothing I can say to make her feel any better. I won’t say the cliché things everyone usually says when you lose a loved one. Little do they know, that doesn’t help the pain. It only makes it worse.

When I place my hand over hers, she almost flinches back when electricity sparks between us. When she curiously glances down at our joined hands, a small smile lifts her once-pouty mouth.

She’s so adorable. What I would do to kiss that smile.

Grief has a funny way of working. One day, you’re happy. The next, you’re tired. And the next thing you know, you’re furious with the world.

I don’t grieve over the death of my dad like Trinity is, but I grieve over me not knowing who he is anymore. He doesn’t give a shit about me. He only cares about the money I make. He doesn’t want to see me succeed because he’s proud of me and because he wants the best for me. He just wants to be the dad of the world-famous X3 band.

I’m sick of his shit. I’m sick that he won’t let my mom divorce him. I’m sick of this world. I just want to sing. I want to sing on that stage and know who I am to myself. I want to live a life without focusing on the negatives.

The more I talk to this girl, the more the idea of a quick fuck leaves my head. I want to cherish her. Get down on my knees and worship her. I want to tell her my actual identity and tell her how fucked up my life is.

But I can’t. I think I’m keeping a bigger secret from this girl than I initially thought.

FIFTEEN

TRINITY

I'm sitting at the kitchen table with a terrible feeling in my gut. Mom is standing in front of me with her hands clasped across her stomach and a frown on her face.

She's most definitely heard the news about the fight. That's why I despise living in this small town. It's full of loudmouths who don't understand what the concept of minding their own business is. Yet I know Mom finding out was bound to happen. I mean, I attacked Bethany out in the open with many people who "love" my mom.

"I feel like we're having the same conversation again," she starts off saying.

Sighing, I rest my chin on the palm of my hand, focusing my gaze on the original lines in our wooden kitchen table. I always used to trace these lines when I was little, pointing out different shapes I found to my parents. I wish life were that simple now.

"You didn't think I was going to figure this out?" she continues. "You attacked a girl on the street, for God's sake! Everyone in town watched as you beat a girl senseless."

I stare up at her and raise my voice. "She asked for it. She was talking shit, Mom. I'm not sorry for what I did."

"I don't care if she asked for it or if she was talking shit. You could have gotten into so much trouble!" Mom rambles on, getting more furious, the more the minutes pass. "The police could have been called, and they could have charged you with assault!"

I shrug my shoulders while leaning back in my seat. "There's nothing I can do now. Plus, Mom, everyone fights all the time. If fighting made you go

to jail, everyone would be behind bars.”

Rolling her eyes at my response, she continues her rant. “Everyone in town is talking about this. I hear them. They see you as some troubled kid going through a rebellious phase. Are you trying to change your image and make people go against you?”

I sit up straighter in my seat and glare at her. “So, this is what this is about?” I let out a dry laugh. “You just care about my image, not about what happened to me—your own child.” My chair squeaks against the hardwood floor beneath me as I stand. “I’m not living my life for other people. I’m living it for me.”

I’ve never been one to care what people think about me—well, I try to not let anyone get to my head. I feel as if my own mother doesn’t care about me, which hurts way more than anything Bethany could have ever said.

“Mom, you haven’t even asked if I’m okay. Don’t you wonder what she said to make me so upset?” My voice cracks mid-sentence, betraying the hurt I feel within. At this moment, as I have a standoff with a woman I can’t even recognize, I’ve never felt more alone.

I don’t know how much longer I can stand this empty feeling inside. My heart clenches in my chest. I feel like I have to breathe harder in order to get oxygen into my lungs that want to close.

I have no purpose on this earth. I’m a letdown to everyone. I’m just a waste of space and money. I have no one left. My eyes water as I look at the woman in front of me. Dad would have been more understanding. He probably would have asked if I punched with suitable form instead of shaming me without hearing my side first.

God, I miss him so much that it hurts.

My hands shake at my sides. I feel suffocated in this home, where I don’t feel safe anymore. I walk past her and dodge her hand when she tries to grab me.

“No, Mom!” I yell out, frustrated. Without looking back, I let my tears fall freely down my cheeks. “You’ve made me feel so low. I can’t—” I stutter. “I need to be alone right now, away from this house.” Practically running to the front door, I twist the doorknob open quickly and run out of the house.

I don’t stop when I hear her yell. I don’t stop when tears rush down my face, making it hard to see what’s in front of me. I need to get out of here. This house used to be fun. But now, it’s depressing.

I look wildly around our property when I don't spot our car. Shoot, Leo drove me home. It's still in town, parked in front of the bookstore. What am I going to do now?

"Hey, Trinity!" a voice calls out from my left.

Looking over toward the triplets' house, I find Elijah playing basketball. He holds the ball to his hip, and a frown is apparent on his face.

"Are you okay?"

Knowing he can see right through me, I shake my head. He drops the ball to the ground, and I watch as it bounces twice before rolling around.

When he jogs in my direction, I plead as he reaches me, "Can you please take me into town? Leo gave me a ride yesterday, so my car is still there."

He nods his head, confusion written all over his face. "Yeah. Let me get my keys, and I'll be right out."

My legs carry me over toward the Mercedes SUV I know pretty well by now. I stand by the door, waiting for him to arrive. Elijah emerges from the house seconds later while spinning the keys around his pointer finger. A cap is on his head, matching his brother's strange behavior of always hiding his face.

"Let's go," he says, flashing me a small smile as the car beeps.

I fasten my seat belt once I'm seated beside Elijah. Leaning my head against the headrest, I try to focus on my breaths. I search my mind, trying to remember the tempo Leo's chest made when he coached me through my anger.

Breathe in and out.

Don't let panic take over your body.

You'll be fine, Trinity.

"Thank you for dropping everything to take me. I appreciate it," I whisper to Elijah.

I envy Leo and Amelia. I wish he were my brother. The thought that he cares about me fills me with hope for a couple of seconds before I realize they won't be in my life forever. I hope they are, but I'm not that lucky. I'm never that lucky.

"No need to thank me. I was just shooting some hoops." He pauses while biting the inside of his cheek before saying, "By the way, I live with a grumpy brother, so I know when someone doesn't want to talk. But I'll always be here if you ever need me."

"You do have a very grumpy brother," I agree with a small chuckle. "And

I appreciate that—you not forcing me to talk,” I clarify when he frowns in confusion. “You’re the only one who hasn’t forced me to talk. It feels refreshing.”

“Well, I’m glad to be a breath of fresh air,” he jokes, sending me a playful wink.

God, I hope this guy finds someone just like him. Elijah’s energy is the best. His heart is humongous, and his smile brightens my dim heart. I would definitely trust him with my drink.

As his fingers tap the leather steering wheel in an unfamiliar rhythm, I touch his arm, gaining his attention.

“Please stop here.”

Elijah looks over at me like I’m crazy. “You want me to stop in the middle of the road? That’s dangerous, Trinity. Let me pull over.”

The town I hate dearly is packed today. Many familiar people hustle down the streets, getting to where they need to be. I feel betrayal run through every vein in my body one hundred times harder than before. What did these people gain from telling my mom? I’m panicking in this car. I need out.

Pointing ahead of me while unbuckling my seat belt, which makes Elijah slam the brakes, I wave my hand in the air. “My car is over there. Thanks for the ride.” I open my door and hop down onto the street. Hearing a car blare its horn angrily, I stick my middle finger up high in the air.

“Trinity, are you crazy?!” Elijah yells with anger clear in his tone. “You’re going to get killed!”

I don’t glance back. I just keep walking toward where my car is parked on the side of the road. Yanking my car door open, I get in as fast as I can and speed off onto the road, leaving Elijah shocked in my dust.

I don’t know where I’m going.

All I know is, I have to get out of here.

SIXTEEN

LEO

Her gaze is like fire. I want to burn.

That's all I have so far. I have to admit, it's kind of catchy, but not really. I wish I could come up with more.

I hate the fact that she's on my mind when I write. I try to think of anything else, but she always ends up haunting my thoughts. Everything about Trinity amazes me—the way she talks, how she looks at every single detail with a slight frown, and how she fiddles with her necklace when she's nervous.

I can't help but look at her differently since yesterday. Before, I thought she had an attitude problem. Now, I see who she truly is. I see the damage her heart carries, how she pushes people back to protect what's left of it. I crave to be the one to help her regain the warm feeling she's lost within herself.

I find myself wanting to be around her all the time. Being in her presence calms me down. She opens my mind and makes me see life in a way I haven't before. I get the urge to work hard and make her proud.

Yet the other half of me wants to lock her in my bedroom and have my way with her. I want to make her feel good, worship her till I hear my name leaving her lips breathlessly. I want to know how her skin tastes, if it's as soft as it looks.

God, she's making me crazy.

I can't write when she's on my mind. My dick constantly reminds me of how I'm already wrapped around her finger. I drop my pencil to my desk below me and pick up my guitar.

Strumming my fingers lightly against the strings, I attempt to get lost in my head.

A knock sounds at my door. I turn and find Amelia staring at me.

“Trinity’s mom just came by. She asked if Trinity was here.”

I playfully look around my room. “Nope, not in here.” I wish she were.

She scrunches up her eyebrows. “That’s weird,” she mumbles to herself.

“Why is that weird? Thought I had her locked up in my closet?”

She leans against the doorframe and informs me that Trinity has been gone for over twenty-four hours.

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused.

Trinity hasn’t come home for more than a day. Why? Where is she, and is she okay?

Worry fills my gut as I get up from my seat. “Has anyone heard from her?”

She shakes her head as a distressed look crosses her face. “That’s the problem. She was upset when she left. Her mom’s worried she might do something.”

God, no. Please let it not be what I’m thinking.

“Did she tell her mom where she was going before she left?”

“Leo, aren’t you listening?!” my sister exclaims, frustrated. “No, she didn’t. If we knew where she was, I wouldn’t be in here, asking y—” She’s cut off when Elijah walks into the room.

“What’s with the glum faces?”

“Trinity’s been gone since yesterday morning. No one knows where she is.”

Elijah looks at us funny. “I saw her yesterday. I drove her into town. She was acting really strange.”

“How?” I demand.

He continues, “She asked me to drive her into town, so she could pick up her car. She literally ran out of my car with a weird look on her face. I assumed she was going home. If I had known she wasn’t ... I wouldn’t have driven her.” His jaw clenches.

“So, she was acting weird?” Amelia asks. “Like sketchy or mentally not okay?”

Please don’t say—

Elijah looks at us both, and his eyes widen. “Mentally not okay. I saw it clearly on her face. She was in a state of panic. She jumped out of the fucking car to get out faster.”

Shit ... no. I’ve been there. I’ve done that. I can’t let this girl do

something she'll regret.

"Oh God," Amelia blurts out. "What if she crashed somewhere ... or she's hurt? We need to find her." She rushes out of the room, and not a minute later, I hear the engine of her TT start and speed off.

"I'll go search too," I say over my shoulder, already walking out of the room, needing to know she's okay.

If something happens to that girl, it will destroy me.

"I'll stay here just in case she comes back home," Elijah says from the front door. "I'll call you if she comes!"

My feet pound against the pavement. Starting up my car, I speed off onto the road. I know I should slow down because of the cop lurking in the shadows, but the only thing running through my mind is her.

I really hope she's okay ... not that I care if she isn't. Who am I kidding? I care a whole damn lot. I never hated or disliked her. I pretend to be someone I'm not when I'm scared. This entire time, I've been in denial.

God, please let her be okay.

I drive randomly through the streets. I don't know this town well enough to know where she would be. I think about going to the tree house, but that's obvious. I know she's smart enough not to go there if she doesn't want to be found.

My fingers tap the steering wheel as panic consumes my entire body. Eyes wide, I feel frustration take control of my emotions. I don't know where to go, and if I don't know where to go, how can I help her?

Trinity's the smartest girl I know. She always seems to prove people wrong. If I were Trinity, where would I go?

The tree house. I'm stupid. She would go there. She knows people would think that's an obvious place and skip searching there.

Shit, I hope I find her there. Stopping my car, I make a U-turn and drive as fast as I ever have. I park on the side of the road when I reach my destination. My hands sweat, and my heartbeat picks up.

Slamming my car door shut, I decide to take my shot.

My hands grip the ladder tightly as I climb up the tree. The next thing I know, I'm frozen in my spot. There she is. Trinity leans against the tree house wall. A bottle of alcohol is clutched in both her hands. Her bloodshot eyes look distant as she hunches over.

Trinity hasn't realized I'm standing in front of her yet. Will she get mad, or will relief fill her gut at the sight of me?

What happened to this poor girl? She looks like death. I know this isn't about Bethany. She seemed okay after I dropped her off at her home.

Taking slow steps, bending down to be eye-level with her, I whisper, "Trinity, it's Leo."

Her head slowly looks up, and she closes her eyes tightly. She leans against the wall behind her.

"Trinity, are you okay?" I continue.

Worry seeps through my gut as my eyes travel around the small tree house. Two other bottles of liquor lie on the floor, empty. How did she get all of this? How does she not have alcohol poisoning? I didn't think she was the type to drown her sorrows in alcohol. That's something I would do.

"You're so drunk," I whisper when I look over at her.

A broken laugh leaves her mouth. She lifts the bottle weakly and cheers it into the air. I quickly take the bottle away from her grasp when she positions it at her mouth.

The clear liquid pours all over my hand, and I wince at the sticky feeling. Tequila.

That's why she's so out of it. She's been chugging tequila like her life depends on it.

"Trinity, I need to get you out of here. All this alcohol can't be good for you."

I brush her hair away from her face. As my hand strokes her cheek, she presses her face into it and sighs.

"I can't go home."

"Your mom is worried sick," I say lightly.

She opens her eyes and glares. "She's the reason I'm up here like this, Leo. I can't go home." Her voice breaks at the end.

Shit, what am I supposed to do? I know the right thing to do would be to bring her home.

But I'm not a good guy.



I know Trinity's safe.

So, that's why I feel comfortable leaving her. No one will come up to the tree house unless they know where it is. The past few times I've been up

there, I haven't seen another soul around.

I understand why Trinity doesn't want to go home. She hasn't told me what her mother said to make her upset. But I know her going home drunk as fuck will not help the situation.

I tell her to stay where she is, seeing as she can't even open her eyes fully. I know she's not going anywhere soon. I take the half-full bottle of tequila away and get in my car, and then I start driving home.

I would have taken her with me, but I don't want to take a chance of her mom seeing. Still, not even knowing what she said to Trinity doesn't lessen my anger. It only fuels it more. She's her mother. She's not supposed to be the reason for her tears. She's supposed to comfort her when she has them.

So, it looks like we'll be staying in the tree house overnight since I'll practically do everything to make Trinity happy now.

Parking my car in our driveway, I make my way to the front door.

"Did you find her?" Elijah says right when I step through the door.

I nod my head, but I don't stop my strides to the kitchen.

"Well ... is she okay?"

Pulling the fridge door open, I take out food I know Trinity's drunk stomach will appreciate. "She's drunk and upset, and she refuses to go home." I carry the food in my hands while walking up the stairs to my bedroom.

"Is she safe?" Elijah asks, as he follows me up the stairs.

"She will be once I'm with her," is all I say.

Why is Elijah so concerned for her anyway? The time we spend all together, the four of us, Trinity and Elijah seem friendly with one another. Like they've known each other most of their lives. In a way, I envy that. I wish I could connect with someone that quickly. Especially if that someone's name was Trinity Jones.

I always convince myself they're just friends, that they have no chemistry whatsoever between them. But what if they're not? That would sting like a bitch. I've never been this invested in a girl before. The feeling of want this intense and painful scares me.

As I glance at Elijah from the corner of my eye, I find him looking at me with a small smile. Weirdo.

Going into my closet, I dodge all my still-packed boxes. When I find my black backpack, my hands make quick work of stuffing everything inside—food, a blanket, and a hoodie for Trinity.

“What’s going on with you and her?”

That’s the same question I keep asking myself. I’m just as confused as Elijah looks. All I know is, she shouldn’t be alone in her state right now.

I shrug my shoulders and shove past him. “I don’t know, man.” I hear and feel his footsteps pound down the stairs behind me, matching my own. “Tell Amelia that she’s okay, will you?”

“Leo—” Elijah stresses, but before he can continue, I slam the door in his face.



“What’s all of this?” Her voice cracks as she rubs her sleepy eyes.

Taking out all the supplies, I set them down in front of her. Holding my hoodie in front of her, I watch as a light shade of pink rushes to her cheeks. “This is just in case you get cold.” I gesture to the food and raise an eyebrow. “And for your hangover stomach.”

She nods and smiles at me. “Thank you,” she whispers softly.

Setting all the things aside, I plop down beside her hunched-over body and lean my head against the tree house wall.

Silence.

I get why she likes to come up here. It’s very peaceful. You instantly relax at the sound of crickets.

“You know, I wasn’t always like this.” She breaks the silence.

Glancing at her, I see her gaze on her hands.

“I used to be so happy. I used to live in the moment, but now, I’m stuck in the past.”

Looks like both our lives are nightmares instead of fairy tales.

“I get that.”

Her moist eyes find mine. “You do?”

“It’s funny how life works,” I start. “You have everything, yet you feel like you have nothing.”

I don’t know what this girl does to me, but every time I’m with her, I feel like she’s prying me open. Digging out the person I had bottled up.

Even though I’m a rock star, when the lights dim and I’m left alone, I’m just Leonidas. And that’s why I feel so attracted to this girl. She doesn’t treat me as the world-famous Leo; she sees me as Leonidas.

“I don’t want you to call me Leo,” I tell her strongly and confirm when she gives me a confused look. “I want you to call me Leonidas ... my name.”

She nods and smiles. I can almost see a bit of happiness seep into her sad eyes. “Okay,” she whispers and nods. “Leonidas,” she says to herself.

My full name coming out of someone else’s mouth has never been this hot. Her tongue rolls. Her voice sounds sexy and seductive. I shift around and try to hide the bulge in my pants. Damn, no girl has ever given me a boner by just saying my name.

I clear my throat and glance ahead of me. “Why did you come up here and get drunk out of your mind?”

“My mom,” is all she gives me.

“I need more than that, Trinity.”

She shrugs her shoulders. I see a shiver jolt through her body. Picking up my favorite hoodie, I hand it to her. She takes it without protest.

“I love this hoodie,” she says. Her gaze focuses on the colorful graphics on the gray background.

Her hand travels along the black music note, making a frown appear on the face that has me whipped.

“Put it on, will you?” I laugh. “You look like you’re going to freeze to death.”

She scoffs and rolls her eyes at me. “Whatever.”

I watch as she pulls the hoodie over her head. It looks so big on her. Trinity looks like a sad puppy, drowning in my hoodie. I hold myself back from the urge to pull her body into mine, feel her against me. Knowing it would instantly relax me has my hands itching at my sides.

My clothes on a girl have never looked this good.

Her fingers pull up the hood, hiding her beautiful hair from my view. I watch with a secret smile as she sniffs the fabric and sighs.

“My mom has been really controlling since my dad passed away. She sees how much I miss him, and I know she’s trying to fill the hole in my heart. But the more she tries to control me like I’m her puppet, the more she pushes me away,” she rants. “When she found out about the fight, she didn’t even care to ask if I was okay. All she cared about was our image, how people saw me. I couldn’t care less what people think about me. They don’t matter ...” She trails off, hurt dripping from her voice.

“Fuck them,” she whispers, her voice breaking. “Fuck everyone. I fucking hate it here.” Her body shakes with silent sobs. Her hands cover her

eyes as her lungs struggle to bring in oxygen. “I’m stuck. I’m still so sad, and I don’t know why.”

I’m staring at her in shock. What the hell do I do? My heart breaks for her. I should have been nicer to her when we first met. I pushed myself to stay away. Now, that seems impossible for me. When Trinity keeps her feelings bottled up, she’s still nice. When I keep quiet and let the guilt and suffering build up inside of me, I act like an asshole. I can’t help it though. It’s who I am.

I’ve never had to comfort a crying girl before. Yet I know how she feels, and that seems more important. We’re two broken souls, hanging on by a thread.

I know whenever I break down, I just want someone to pull me into their arms and be there for me.

Since I’m the lead singer in X3, people expect me to be strong and indestructible.

I just want to be a guy for once and break down in someone else’s arms.

Opening my bent knees, I pull her in the middle of them. She doesn’t protest as she sinks into my chest. Her body shakes against mine until the sun sets, and we both fall asleep.

SEVENTEEN

TRINITY

My head pounds. My mouth is as dry as cardboard. I shift slightly, and my sore butt screams at me. It feels as if I fell down a one-hundred-story building.

Trying to find a more comfortable position, I realize my arms are being squashed together.

What the hell? Why can't I move?

I panic when I feel warmth behind me.

Please let me not be alone with a serial killer in this tree house in the middle of a forest.

I quickly glance down at the arms that are wrapped around my midsection, squeezing me. My body sags in relief when I find silver rings looped around slim, long fingers. Unique tattoos linger on veiny, muscular arms. Gosh, I've never appreciated them until this moment. The art on his olive complexion is breathtaking. Sitting here all day and looking at each one for hours sounds amazing.

Feeling his breath on my face, I finally notice after I'm snapped out of my daydreaming that his face is in my neck. The skin where his lips brush against me burns with an overwhelming amount of intensity. His deep breathing hypnotizes me into believing I'm dreaming. There's no way I'm wrapped in Leo's arms. I feel every muscle in his stomach, arms, and ... yeah, *that*.

Holy shit, someone, please get me an oxygen tank.

He mumbles something in his sleep and squeezes his arms around me. I try relaxing into the feel of him, but my body is as stiff as a board. Loving the feeling of being consumed by his scent, I attempt to flex my muscles slightly,

but I'm also careful not to wake him up. I drop my head onto his broad shoulder behind me ... and in result, his lips part on my neck. What happens next makes me want to faint and scream at the same time.

He sucks faintly on my neck, a featherlight touch. I should move away because he's deep in sleep. But my body is planted in place, frozen in time, as if someone hit the pause button on a remote control. Goose bumps rise on every inch of my skin as my breathing comes out in pants rather than the smooth, deep breaths that his chest makes.

Leo's mouth is soft against my skin. The more he mumbles into my skin, the more kisses he gives me without knowing. I try to understand what he whispers out with emotion in his sleep, but the only thing that I get is gibberish.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers next more clearly, gaining my entire attention. His voice breaks. He thrashes around lightly, bringing me with him. "It's all my fault. I ruined you."

What?

Who did he ruin?

He thrashes again, letting out a cry as his arms squash me painfully around my stomach. Turning my head around, I shake his shoulder. He's having a nightmare. I need to wake him up from this hell he seems to be in. His forehead is creased heavily as I practically shout his name, desperate for the torture to stop.

Leonidas's eyes open wildly as he sucks in a shaky, deep breath. He pushes me away from his body, making me land roughly in front of him. Both of his hands go up and grip his messy hair in a panic. Putting his head between his legs, Leo lets out a distressed cry.

Sitting up on my knees, I examine him. "Leo," I whisper.

His breaths turn rougher as he says, frustrated, "I told you not to call me that."

Right.

"Leonidas, you're okay. It was just a dream."

I know how it feels to have a panic attack. It feels like your body has been taken over, controlled by an unknown force within you. Nothing and no one will ever calm it down. It's all up to you. My heart absolutely shatters when I see him like this because this is who he truly is. A guy who hides his pain behind his frowns and sarcasm.

Leonidas lets out a laugh and glances up at me with a wild look in his

eyes. “Is it really? Is it really a dream? Because it sure as hell didn’t feel like it.”

Opening and closing my mouth, I just sit still and process the words he just spit out.

I watch as he tries to catch his breath from his panic, the way sweat rolls down the side of his face. Running his hands through his hair, he lets out a shaky sigh. He gives me a weak smile once he calms down. Ruffling up his hair, he frowns once his eyes land on my neck.

“Who the hell gave you that?” he demands and stands up suddenly.

I follow his lead. Every step forward he takes, I take one back. My back hits the wall, and his chest comes right against mine as he pokes at my neck, where his lips once used to be. My breathing gets heavier.

“Who did you let touch you?” he grits out passionately, making me melt on the spot.

Even though he did this, I don’t admit that to him. I want to get him mad. I want to see him get livid at the thought of another man touching me, pleasuring me, making me feel good.

“No one,” I say and twist my head away from his.

He pulls my chin in his direction and gives me a firm look. “Whose lips were on you?”

I raise an eyebrow, teasing him. “Why? Are you going to beat him up?”

His gaze bores into mine. He licks his lips and glances down at mine. “No one can please you as much as I can. Now, tell me, who the hell gave you that?”

Looking into his dark eyes that resemble a galaxy, I get lost. He’s perfect.

My therapist taught me a method about panic attacks. If you take your mind off the panic, you’ll eventually calm yourself down. I guess he’s okay now. Anger has overcome the panic in his mind.

I let out a low laugh and smirk at him. I don’t know where this boost of confidence came from, but I’m loving it. Placing my hands on his chest, I run them down his stomach, only stopping when I feel his defined abs.

Wow, they feel better than I thought.

Placing my lips against his ear, I whisper, “No little boy can please me. Keep dreaming.”

Leonidas stills against my hands. I can feel his jaw clench against mine, which makes me smile. Obviously, I’m just teasing him. Nothing about Leonidas is childish. He’s a stunning, jaw-dropping nineteen-year-old guy. If

I walked past him on the street, I would think he was a model who just finished a shoot. Leonidas makes looking sexy and handsome effortless, which blows my mind.

If it was even possible, he pushes me against the wall further. Every inch of my body presses against his. Heat overtakes me as a slight, low pant leaves my lips.

Now, it's his turn to whisper in my ear. "Do I feel like a fucking little boy to you?" His voice is husky and rough, making a shiver roll down my spine.

When he pushes his waist harder against mine, a squeal leaves my mouth.

Nope, definitely not a little boy.

I grip his forearm when he bites my earlobe lightly, running his tongue along my skin. Moving his tattooed hand down the length of my body. He stops at my butt and gives it a quick tap.

"Thought so." He moves away from me and walks toward the door.

Twisting around, he gives me a pointed look. "Thought I would also let you know that your mother is worried sick. Go home and show her you're alive at least."

His body disappears from my view once he climbs down the ladder.

Slumping down onto the ground, I let out a shaky breath.

Leonidas will be the death of me.



I carry Leonidas's backpack over my shoulder as I walk through the front door. If I could, I would never come back here. But I'm eighteen years old, and I would still get a search party assigned to me even though I'm a legal adult. No, thank you.

Mom is home. I can tell because her shoes are on the shoe rack. They're usually neatly placed, but today, it looks like she tossed them. My head still throbs like a bitch because of all the tequila I drank. My eyes burn. Dragging my feet to the kitchen, I lean against the wall when she turns around and spots me.

"Oh, thank God!" She rushes to me. Pulling me to her body, she cries into my shoulder.

Oh, so now, she cares about me? It looks like I have to go missing for more than a day for her to show an ounce of love to me.

That makes me want to laugh.

“Sweetie,” she says and pulls away. Gripping my cheeks in the palms of her hands, she gives me a kiss on the nose. “I’m sorry. I know how hard you’ve taken your father’s death. I should have been more understanding. I still struggle with being a single mom. Please forgive me.”

I gaze down as my eyes water with mixed emotions.

“I love you so much, Trinity. I want what’s best for you.” Her eyes find my own as she gives me a weak smile. “I know I lose sight of what’s important ... and that’s you. Please forgive me?”

One thing that I learned after the murder of my dad is that no one is guaranteed another day.

A part of me still can’t forgive her. She’s made me doubt myself countless times. She’s made me cry until I couldn’t breathe. But I think about losing her ...

She’s the only parent I have who’s still alive. So, that’s why I wrap my arms around Mom, and we both cry into each other’s shoulder.



“So, his name is Leonidas?” Harper asks over the line.

“Yeah. Sexy, isn’t it?” I reply and internally swoon at the thought of my next-door neighbor.

She sighs. “I’ve never met someone with a sexy name like that.” She pauses and gasps. “Actually, that band with the triplets, X3, the guy’s name is Leo. I would drop my pants for him any day.”

I scoff. “You would drop your pants for anyone—” I say, but she cuts me off.

“Do you think your Leonidas is Leo?”

Is she crazy? Why would a singer move into our boring small town? She’s living some book fantasy.

“Be realistic, please, Harper.”

“Yeah, true. Sorry.” She pauses. “But how amazing would that be?” she rants. “You would get free tickets all the time, get to look at him twenty-four/seven, and get that dick every girl wants.”

Harper is wild. The thought of a band living next door to me makes me cringe. Imagine how snotty they would be. I can picture them thinking

they're better than everyone in the world with their money. Besides, the triplets wouldn't lie to me like that, especially Leonidas. Over the past few weeks, we've grown closer. I would like to think he wouldn't do something like that to me.

And there's no way a band would come to live here, in the middle of nowhere. They would be in Hollywood, living their best lives at parties and getting drunk and high. Silly Harper. At least she makes my life interesting.

"We have to hang out soon," I say as I glance at my clock and find that it's five o'clock in the afternoon.

It's a few days after the night Leonidas came and found me in the tree house. I still have his backpack and stuff. I know I should give him back his hoodie, but something is holding me back. It's the hoodie I first saw him in. It's extra large on me. I love it, and I won't give it back. I'm sure he won't miss it with his deep pockets.

The smell of his cologne instantly calms me. The cozy, warm fabric feels like I'm wrapped in his arms. I smile at the thought. I still have his backpack, and I don't want him to think I stole it or something. So, today, I want to drop it off at his house before it gets too late.

"I love you, Harper. I have to go," I chime in when the line goes silent.

"Whatever, bitch," she says and laughs. "Go get some dick from that hottie, Leonidas, who you have wet dreams about," she says, and I hang up.

I wish, Harper. I fucking wish.



"Hi, love," Amelia squeals when she opens the door. She pulls me into her body and squeezes the life out of me. "Did I tell you to come over?" she asks when we pull away from each other.

"No. I just need to give something to your brother."

She nods. "He's not here right now." She frowns, but then a smile lifts her face a second later. "We should watch a movie until he gets back!"

I nod at the idea. Amelia has quickly become one of my best friends. I love the way I can be myself around her. She's so kind and caring. It seems as if she came into my life when I needed her the most.

She pulls me into her house. Flicking off the lights in the family room, I sit beside her on the couch. Grabbing the remote, she searches through

channels.

“Amelia—” I warn when she stops on a certain movie.

“What? No one is here. Girls can have fun too.” She smirks and clicks on *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Oh, damn ... we're really watching this.

“Get comfy, bitch. It’s sexy time.”

She’s right. What’s so wrong about watching a movie with a possessive man? He’s every girl’s dream guy, so why not wind down with my best friend?

Cuddling up against each other, we blush as Christian Grey pops onto the TV.



Amelia’s hand covers my eyes as a laugh booms from her mouth. A steamy scene plays on the TV, making the room feel slightly hotter than before.

“You’re too young for this,” she says, and I push her off of me.

“You’re only a year older than me!” I laugh back and go to cover her eyes.

“I’m a woman!” she screams and puffs out her chest.

I scoff and roll my eyes. “Yeah, that was a real womanly thing to do.” I gesture toward her chest. “You look like Godzilla.”

She gasps and pushes my shoulder. “Whatever, loser,” she replies and sits down beside me. I watch as she blushes at the TV screen.

“Feeling some sort of way?” I tease.

“Says you!” she yells. “I can’t help that I’m lonely. I’m too good for any man I’ve ever encountered.”

Smirking over at her, I nod my head in agreement. “Damn right, queen.”

We don’t notice the front door opening and closing until Elijah and Leonidas are standing behind the couch we’re sitting on.

“Holy cow!” Amelia screams when we both flinch, spotting the two.

“What are you watching?” Elijah’s mouth drops open as he focuses his attention on the TV.

From the corner of my eye, I see Leonidas’s eyes on my body. I’m mortified. How embarrassing. He just caught me watching *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Shuffling in my spot, I fold my hands in front of me and glance down at my lap.

“I’m getting in on this shit,” Elijah says and fist-bumps Leonidas.

They both walk to the other couch across from me and Amelia. I try not to cast my stare toward him; however, I can feel him watching me.

Elijah and Leonidas make jokes the entire time, poking fun at me and Amelia for watching TV porn. I want to throw the pillow that I’m holding against my chest at his head. He’s not even watching the movie. His gaze is set on me, and I’m actually pretending to watch the movie while observing him secretly.

He’s looking at me like he wants to eat me, like he’s a starved man who hasn’t eaten for an eternity and he needs to catch up on all the calories he’s missed out on.

“Well, I need my beauty sleep,” Amelia says once the movie is over and the credits begin to play. She gets up from the couch and gives my cheek a kiss. “Want to hang out tomorrow?”

I nod and smile at her. “I don’t want to do anything else.” *Unless it’s with your brother ...*

“I need to jerk off,” Elijah yells passionately as he leaves the room.

Running after him, she screeches, “Ew, Elijah! I didn’t need to hear that!”
Well then ... okay.

I smile as I hear the two bicker until I can’t anymore. I love them. I wish I had siblings to bicker with.

“Maybe you should go help Elijah,” Leonidas teases.

I glare over at him.

He looks so relaxed—sitting across from me with his elbows resting on his knees, his eyebrow raised sexily as he stares at me. But what makes him even sexier is his black basketball shorts. He paired it with a muscle T-shirt. His muscular, toned arms are being shown off. And not to mention, his wavy, short brown hair is tousled sexily.

“So, girl with a car racing kink, I didn’t know you enjoyed watching stuff like that.”

I playfully shrug my shoulders and smirk at him. “I watch this movie every day. Christian is amazing eye candy.”

He leans his head to the side and smirks.

My palms sweat, and butterflies immediately fill my stomach. I push off the couch, needing to get out of here, but I immediately plop down again

when he strides over to me with determination written all over his face.

“Amelia texted me. You have something for me?” He speaks lowly.

I nod up at him, and my heartbeat quickens.

“Well, are you going to give it to me? Or are you here to give me something else?”

“Like what?” I breathe out when he bends down and kneels in between my knees.

Leonidas raises an eyebrow and bites his lip. “You tell me.” He pauses. His hands hold on to my knees for stabilization, burning the skin he touches.

He’s making me go crazy. We’re in the middle of his living room, for God’s sake. One minute, he’s mad, and then the next, he’s flirty. He’s going to give me whiplash.

“What do you want?”

He licks his lips slowly as his eyes roam my entire body. Leaving a path of heat wherever they linger.

“I want a lot of things, love, but I don’t think we have that much time.”

I’m going to have a heart attack ...

His heated eyes find mine. A mix of confusion, confidence, and nerves invades his beautiful eyes. Squeezing my knees tighter, he rises higher onto his knees. “Fuck it.”

My breath is knocked out of me when his lips roughly slam against mine.

EIGHTEEN

TRINITY

Fireworks.

His arm finds its way around my waist, and he drags me closer to him with it as he sits on the couch beside me, moving my face with his motions. I sink deeper into his embrace, and his arms tighten around me, gathering me over his lap.

The sudden flare of electricity seeps through every single bone in my body. Leonidas's soft, warm lips move against mine. He angles slightly to one side to deepen the kiss, and his tongue slowly teases its way into my mouth.

At this moment, it's just him. He consumes me. How he feels, the smell of his cologne, and the little noises he makes at the back of his throat.

My arms slip around his neck, and his fingers dig into my hips. A low, raspy moan leaves his lips as we part for a second to change angles. I kiss him like my life depends on it. Because right now, it does. The way his lips feel against mine sends shivers throughout my body. I feel heat rise in my stomach as Leonidas brings his hands up to my cheeks, holding my face in place as he devours the remaining oxygen I have left in me. His kisses are raw, full of passion and aggression.

My skin feels warm as his body presses against mine everywhere. He lifts me up, grabbing my thighs, and pins me under him on the couch. When he pops his mouth off mine, I inhale as much oxygen as my lungs allow.

Leonidas's lips attack my neck. Gripping my thigh, he hoists it over his hip. "You drive me insane," he rasps.

I sigh when I feel his hot breath against my neck.

"I've been dreaming about this since the moment I laid my fucking eyes

on you.”

Arching my neck up, I let him explore my skin more. “Me too,” I whisper.

“The things I want to do to you,” he grits out.

I gasp when he sucks on the base of my throat and then licks it slowly with a deep hum of satisfaction.

One second, I’m on the couch, nearly having a heart attack, and then the next, I’m in the air. With my legs wrapped around his defined waist, I tighten them when he continues sucking, kissing, and biting my neck. Gripping my butt hard, he makes his way up the stairs.

God, I hope Amelia and Elijah don’t hear us. But at this moment, I don’t care. Leonidas is all I can think about—the way he kisses me deeply, how his tongue battles mine for domination, the way my thighs instantly clench together when his teeth graze against my collarbone while I feel his breath on me.

Slamming his door shut, he drops me onto his bed and hovers over me. I wrap my hands around his neck, and he deepens the kiss and slows it down.

God, I can’t believe I’m doing this right now. I’m in the middle of having a make-out session with the guy I’ve been secretly crushing over. I’m in his bed. I know what it feels like to have his body overtop mine, and, yes ... his lips are as smooth as they look.

Leonidas lifts his hand to cup my face, and his lips work smoothly against mine, causing me to melt.

His touch feels like electricity. His lips taste sweet. With his thumb, Leonidas strokes my cheek.

I kiss him back with just as much intensity. I move my hands up and grip his shoulders tightly, telling him with my touch how much I love what he’s doing.

This kiss is everything I dreamt of and more. My eyes open slowly at the loss of sudden contact. When I meet his gaze, his eyes blaze with mischief.

Holy shit.

Gripping my cheeks, he looks at me with a certain gaze that I can’t put my finger on. We did nothing, yet he’s in awe of me.

“Sorry if that was too much,” he finally whispers after a couple of seconds of just staring at me with a smile.

“It was perfect,” I reply, running my hands through his soft locks.

I’m glad we stopped there. I would have regretted having sex with him

now. I want to get to know him first. I want to know what pet peeves he has, his favorite color, if he loves or hates watching sports.

I want to know it all.

The world has proven that Leonidas is not just a one-night stand. He's way more than that.

He jokes while fiddling with a piece of my hair, "If this felt so good, I can't imagine how good it will be when I get your clothes off."

I raise an eyebrow. Placing my hands on his broad shoulders, I feel his muscles immediately tighten under my touch. "Who said you're going to see me naked?" I tease.

He hums and smiles. "I just kind of got the impression when you were attacking my mouth."

Excuse me? I'm not the only one who made us get here.

"How about you on the couch?"

He shrugs his shoulders and gives me a lazy smile. "What is pointing fingers going to do?"

"You started it."

"Really?"

"Yes!" I whisper-shout.

He cuts me off with his lips. Biting when he pulls away, he mutters, "Shut up, will you? Amelia and Elijah will hear you."

I will if he does that every time to make me.

"I think they heard when you slammed your door like the Hulk."

"I always slam my door," he points out with a cocky smile.

While he's still above me, I eye the chain that hangs in the air, begging for me to yank it.

"Now, hearing a very feminine voice yell in my room ..." Leonidas trails off with a shrug. "What's more concerning?"

I pretend to think about my two options. "I think your anger issues," I say with a snap of my fingers.

Scoffing, he playfully rolls his eyes. "I need to go to the bathroom." He gives me a firm look. "Stay here."

He turns around and jogs to the bathroom. I let out a sigh while closing my eyes.

Well, that was interesting. I can't believe that even happened. I know he's experienced. I know the mouth that was on mine has been on many others.

That bothers me slightly, but what am I supposed to do?

Dwell on the past?

No.

I won't judge someone for their past. That never ends well.

Opening my eyes, I jump in shock when I find Leonidas standing over me. He has an eyebrow raised as he watches me.

Creep. The butterflies in my stomach disagree.

He lets out a low laugh. Twisting his arm over his shoulder, he pulls off his shirt in one fluid motion. My eyes widen when I look at his chest. He's carved to perfection. God really took his time on him. His chest is beautiful. His olive skin tone makes me want to drool. His abs are to die for and defined perfectly. His broad, muscular shoulders have so much muscle that I'm taken aback. Not to mention, his arms, veins that pop ... God, those alone have me drooling.

I watch closely as he messes with his wavy hair. He licks his lips and throws his shirt across the room; it lands in the hamper perfectly. All the basketball he's been playing is paying off. I'm impressed. He looks over at me and gives me a smile that makes me want to smile back.

Sitting up, I scoot toward the end of the bed when he pulls the bedsheets open.

"I should go. It's getting late," I quietly say and point toward the door.

"Fuck no," he grumbles. He settles in his bed and leans his back against the headboard.

I instantly heat up when he grabs me by the thighs, lifting me up and settling me on his lap. I stare at him, shocked, and place my hands on his shoulders.

I guess I'm straddling him again ... but this time, he doesn't have a shirt on, which makes it ten times hotter. As we stare at each other, small smiles grace our lips.



My head lies on his chest. We haven't moved since he pulled me onto his lap. For an hour, we've just been sitting here in each other's presence. I've enjoyed every second.

His arms are wrapped tightly around my waist, hugging my body closer to his. I listen to the beat of his heart. When my fingers brush up and down on

his arm, I notice his heartbeat speeds up, making me smile.

“This feels nice,” he whispers softly.

“What feels nice?”

“Us”—he pauses and chuckles—“not bickering all the time.”

I nod against his chest. “Yeah, it does.”

Glancing up at him, I find him already looking at me. A thoughtful expression crosses his face. He leans in close, and his lips brush against mine slowly, a featherlike touch so gentle that it makes my toes curl. His hand cups the back of my head as he deepens the kiss.

“You make me question everything,” he mumbles against my lips.

“I can say the same about you,” I say while pulling away. “I know nothing about you.”

He shrugs his shoulders. I can feel as he fiddles with his fingers behind my back. “I’m not really that interesting. There’s nothing to say.”

I let out a low laugh. He must be joking. I can’t figure him out for the life of me.

And not to mention, when I look around his room, it’s bare. Packed boxes that I saw weeks ago are still lying around. He has no pictures in his room. I know Leo has a personality, but why doesn’t he show it?

“We’re not staying here forever,” he explains, seeing my eyes roam around his room. “It’s just for a few months. I have to go back home to L.A.”

My heart drops.

He’s leaving. I knew this would happen I just hoped I was wrong.

I want to grab his face and beg him not to go. I shouldn’t have let myself get this close to him. I curse myself. I catch feelings way too fast and get attached. Leonidas has been a part of my life for weeks now. He crawled his way into my heart when I felt absolutely dead inside. Yes, I feel something for him, something that feels so strong already, and it makes me scared shitless at the thought of heartbreak. And now, he’s going to leave.

I’ll be all alone again. The number of times I catch myself gazing at their house, looking to see life, is embarrassing. I can’t imagine how upsetting it will feel when I look over and find nothing.

“You didn’t think I was staying here forever, did you?” he asks. Concern fills his eyes.

“I suspected you wouldn’t be staying. When are you leaving?”

He flinches. “Two months.”

“That’s eight weeks. How come you didn’t tell me it was that soon?”

Tears pool in my eyes, but I blink them away quickly before he notices.

“I didn’t think it was important at first.”

I lean back against his knees and glare at him. “And how about now?”

I watch as his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows hard.

“It’s important.”

“Why?” I question.

“Because I like you,” he states, and I freeze at his boldness.

Thinking he likes me is one thing, but him actually saying it out loud with determination is different. It makes it more real.

“Why do you think I bought that stupid book? You think I enjoy reading?” His finger pushes my chin, making my eyes meet his. “I did it because I wanted to spend more time with you.”

This is too much. He’s leaving soon. My heart can’t handle more pain.

“You’re never this quiet,” he notes.

“I just don’t know what to say.”

He pulls me tighter into his chest. “Let’s just see where this goes. Now that you’re in my arms, I don’t want to let you go.”

I shake my head, and he frowns.

“Why not?”

“If you want to try this out, I need to know more about you.”

“Ask.”

“No, you tell” I demand.

He needs to be open with me. I told him about myself. Now, it’s his turn. How can we form a relationship when I know nothing about him? I need to know he trusts me. A relationship without trust is like boxing with one hand behind your back.

I watch as he bites his lip and sighs. I frown and immediately feel guilty when I see in his eyes the battle he’s going through. When he places his hands on my hips, they shake slightly.

“I’m nineteen, born and raised in LA. I’ve always struggled with myself. I get anxious a lot. My favorite color is black. I used to have a pet dog named Charlie, but he died a while ago. My favorite food is pasta. I don’t really have friends. The only people I really hang out with are my siblings and you. I hate people. They’re so annoying. I have anger issues, and it controls me most of the time. I love going on adventures. I have trust issues, but when I let someone in, I love them with everything I have.”

As he speaks, he focuses on the ceiling above us. His voice is like poetry.

I sit in my spot on his lap and listen intently to him.

“I hate my dad. He doesn’t love me for who I am. He just likes me for what I am. He’s always working, and he’s a shit husband to my mom. She’s trying so hard to divorce him, but he’s fighting it. Many people take advantage of me, so maybe that’s why I don’t let people in. I get nightmares at night, I hate the color green, and I love playing basketball,” he finishes, lost in thought and almost out of breath.

I stare at him, shocked. That’s a lot of random information to take in. But what makes my blood turn cold is when I look into his eyes and find tears in them.

“And I fucking hate myself. I don’t know who I am. Everyone else does, but I don’t even understand myself.” His voice cracks, and he shuts his eyes tightly. He lets out a cuss and bites his quivering lip. “I wake up every night from memories I wish I could bury. But no matter what I do, they keep coming. I go insane. When I try to escape those visuals and thoughts by sleeping, they just slam into me harder. They feel so real,” he stammers out, panicked. “Then, everyone around me expects me to act perfect. I’m never allowed to mess up. I’m sick of living for the world, Trinity, but if I don’t, what do I have left?”

I knew he had nightmares. I prayed it didn’t happen regularly; however, it seems as if his nightmares control him. Leonidas is lost, a walking body that believes he has no purpose in the life God gave him. I won’t push him for answers until he’s ready. I understand how it feels to talk without being ready.

“Leonidas, you’re asking the wrong girl. Every day, I live and secretly hope it’s my last.”

He stills under me.

“My old life looks like a dream right now. I dream of waking up in the morning and being happy to be awake. I forget the feeling of being excited about doing something. I hate everything I once loved.” My fingertip trails along his bare arm as I let my depressing thoughts consume me. “I’m tired of stashing tissues in my pockets because I know I’ll need them later. I want to smile a genuine smile. I don’t want to be fake anymore. Life is a joke. But I don’t give up for my dad because I know that would sadden him. I would let him down, and that’s what scares me.” I pause when my voice cracks with emotion. “So, whenever I get these feelings, which is every day, I think about what I want to accomplish in my life.”

I grip his cheeks in my hands and meet his teary eyes with my own. “We’re living in the past. It’s time we both live right here, right now, together.”

“You and me?” he says as a single tear trails down his left cheek.

I nod and kiss the skin above his heart. “You and me.”

NINETEEN

TRINITY

My eyes blink open. I'm cuddled into a warm blanket of clouds that feels like heaven. My head rests on a soft, squishy surface. I feel the urge to stretch my bones, but I can't. I look over my shoulder and find Leonidas behind me. His arm is wrapped around my waist tightly, and his face is buried in my neck. Our legs are tangled up under the sheets.

I could get used to waking up like this. Being in his arms makes me feel loved and the safest I've ever felt. A smile lifts my face when I hear his soft snores. Reaching behind me, I play with his hair, twirling it around my finger, feeling the silky-smooth locks between my fingertips.

He hums in my neck, and I feel his mouth smile on my skin. Pulling me back closer to his chest, he leaves no space between our bodies. Placing a kiss on my bare shoulder, he mumbles, "Good morning."

"Morning." I twist my body around and face him.

Even in the morning, when he's just awoken, he looks so handsome.

"What a magnificent sight to see in the morning," he says, his voice husky from sleep. His eyes are dark with a half-awake look. His hair is messy, tousled back roughly from his face.

"The best," I say before he pecks my lips.

"Stunning," he replies.

Another peck.

"Handsome."

Another peck.

"Beautiful."

Another peck.

"To die for."

Leonidas pulls my body on top of his and kisses me deeply. I don't even care about our morning breath. He's just on my mind. And that's all I care about. He looks at me like I'm the sexiest woman alive, and he makes me feel like it.

Our kiss is slow and steamy. I'm getting so worked up, and it's only the morning. Butterflies take flight in my stomach. His tongue plays with mine. I don't want to listen to my brain that's telling me to stop. I listen to my heart. I kiss him the way I know drives him mad. He makes a throaty noise and grabs my ass. When he pulls me closer to him, I let out a moan. His lips leave mine and travel down to my collarbone.

Suddenly, I'm flipped under him. He continues to attack my body with his mouth, tongue, and teeth. The feeling of pure pleasure takes control of my entire heart and soul, making my eyes roll back. I haven't been touched in so long. Placing a hand to my mouth, I moan. He's making me feel things I've never felt before. I see stars in my eyes; I hear buzzing in my ears. I tug his hair when he bites down softly.

"Leonidas, we should stop," I moan, not wanting what I just claimed.

"Uh-huh," he murmurs and continues to devour me.

Oh my gosh. I need to be quiet, but I'm finding it difficult to muffle the noises that want to come out of my mouth. The things his mouth can do ...

Then, the door opens.

"Leonidas, what the fuck is all that noise?" Amelia pauses and lets out a scream a second later. Running out of the room, she slams the door.

We freeze.

I look at him with panicked eyes.

He yanks the sheets over us and whispers, "Shoot."

My breaths are heavy and shaky, matching his. I hear Amelia's disgusted gags in the distance. There's a bang.

"Elijah, don't go in there!" she screams.

The door busts open, and I panic even more. I cling on to Leonidas harder when I hear pounding footsteps striding to where we lie.

"Motherfucker, I told you that Trinity likes you, and you're in bed with someone else."

The covers are thrown off of us. Letting out a squeal, I hide myself as best I can under Leonidas's body. He pulls the sheets up again until they're above our shoulders.

"Get the fuck out of here!" he booms, pushing Elijah's body away from

the bed.

He lets out a screech. “Oh my God, that is Trinity. Sorry, man. I thought it was a random chick. Get some.” With that, he turns around and runs out of the room.

I have to hold back a laugh when he slams into the wall beside the door because his hands are covering his eyes.

“Shit,” he swears and rubs his face. “Bye, guys. Have fun,” he whispers while rubbing his forehead with a scowl.

I’m immediately mortified when I hear him scream to Amelia that it’s me.

Leonidas drops his head on my shoulder and lets out a groan. “Why would that only happen to us?”

I chuckle and grab the back of his head, running my fingers through his silky hair. I let out a sigh while massaging his skin.

“That doesn’t sound good,” he mumbles against me.

I know this might be too soon to ask, but we’ve spent weeks arguing and, in our own way, getting to know each other. I want to know what he thinks this is before I interpret it for something else. “What are we?”

He lifts his head off my shoulder, making my hand fall to the bed below us. “I would love to call you mine.” He raises an eyebrow at me and shakes his head. “You know what? I don’t even need to ask. I’m claiming you.”

Excuse me? No.

“Nope,” I say with a shrug.

He stiffens above me. “What do you mean, nope? This doesn’t seem like something friends would do,” he notes, looking down at our bodies.

Giving me a look like I’m crazy, he gestures with his hand around us. Leonidas is lying on top of me. My shirt was thrown off last night mid-make-out session, and his chest is also bare, shining in the bright sunlight beaming through the curtains we forgot to close last night.

“You need to ask me,” I clarify. I want him to put effort into asking me to be his girlfriend. I don’t want to be claimed like I’m a dog.

Giving me a blank look, he replies sternly, “I don’t ask. I get.”

“Not with this girl, you don’t.”

Rolling his eyes, he drops his head back onto my forehead.

I win.

“You know what?” he asks after a while.

I hum and continue trailing my hands up and down his muscular back.

“No girl has ever made me this horny,” he says randomly.

Moment ruined.

Placing my hand on his chest, I push up with all my strength. He falls beside me, and I get up from the bed. His hand reaches out to touch mine, but I slap it away.

“This isn’t just sex and make-out sessions for you, right?”

Leaning on his elbow, he shakes his head with a frown. “Of course not, Trinity. I was just playing.” His eyes fill with concern as he stares at my tense body.

I know he’s joking ... but when you have trust issues, it makes you question everything.

“Come here,” he says and pulls me back onto the bed. When I get on top of him, he gives my nose a peck. “I like you, okay? Please never doubt that.”

I nod my head and smile down at him, glad he understands me so clearly.

“Can I take you somewhere tomorrow?”

I sigh, disappointment filling me instantly. “I have my first day of work tomorrow.”

“I’ll pick you up after,” he says. Patting my thigh, he gets up from the bed, making me almost fall to the floor.

“Douche,” I remark up at him.

He stands over me with a sexy smirk on his face. Pushing his hair out of his eyes, he extends a hand down to me. I wrap my hand around his, and he yanks me up and pulls me hard into his body. His arm wraps tightly around my waist, and mine go around his neck for stabilization.

“But I’m your douche,” his husky voice whispers.

Lips brushing against mine, he gives my butt a pat with a wink.

Okay, yeah ... he is my douche.



I spent the entire day with Leonidas. We talked until there was nothing to talk about. He took me out to lunch and held my hand the entire time. I caught him smiling at me when I wasn’t looking. When our eyes locked, he wouldn’t break the stare after being caught. He would just intensify his gaze before calling me beautiful. The tiny strokes his finger would make on my skin drove me crazy.

It's always the little things that make my heart pound harder than before.

But I have a dilemma. The entire night and day I spent with him, I forgot about Mom. I didn't come home last night or this morning. Texting or calling her never crossed my mind. I know I'll be in trouble when I walk through that door.

I shouldn't even bother sneaking in because she'll definitely know I was gone for hours. Especially since I haven't been out in years. When I got back to Leonidas's house, I checked my phone for any messages. But I got nothing from her. Maybe she knew I was here, and she wasn't worried.

For all she knows, I was with Amelia. I'll just tell her we were watching a movie and fell asleep. Problem solved. That doesn't mean I need to tell her whose bed I actually slept in last night.

But as I walk through the house, it's quiet.

Her shoes aren't on the front mat like they usually are. Mom isn't here.

My gaze roams around the dark house, trying to find signs of life. I frown when I find nothing. I wonder where she is. She's never gone AWOL before.

Walking over to the fridge, I look for a note.

Nothing.

Maybe she's working late. Yet I know work never keeps her that late. It's ten o'clock at night. Worry fills every bone in my body. My gut tells me there's something wrong.

I guess I'll be the one staying up late, waiting for her to come home.



She walks through the door with dark bags under her eyes. Her hair is a mess. Her red lipstick is smudged on the corners of her lips. Her tight black dress is wrinkled, fitting like a second skin on her. I know she doesn't dress that fancy to go to the bank.

When I watch her feet stumble, my stomach drops.

She came from someone's house. A man's house.

Mom drops her purse on the kitchen table with wide eyes when she sees me. "Trinity. Hi, sweetie. I didn't see you there."

No duh.

I lean against the counter and stare her down. "Hi. I've been waiting to make sure you got home safely. I didn't know where you were. I called you,

but you didn't answer."

Stepping out of her black heels, she smooths down her dress with her hands. "I know this must look bad."

All I can seem to do is nod my head at her. I know she's my mother, and I should treat her like it. But it's very weird, seeing your mom come home, knowing she was in a man's bed. In a childish way, I thought she wouldn't get in another relationship again after my dad. The thought that she might be seeing someone has my blood boiling.

I mean, who would want their parent replacing their dead parent? I know I don't like the sound of that.

"I was at the bank late tonight," she rambles, but I cut her off.

"I'm not a child. Be straight with me because I know you weren't at the bank."

She sighs. Pulling out a wooden kitchen chair, she plops down onto it. "I met someone."

My heart splits in two. I knew it. Feeling confused and overwhelmed at the idea of Mom seeing someone, I jump and sit on the countertop behind me.

"One day, he came into the bank and wanted to make a new account with us. He'd just moved into town with his son. He's actually your age. For a month, he would come and visit me. Sometimes, he would bring me flowers and chocolates. He won my heart immediately with his charm. We've gone on a couple of lunch dates. And last night, he asked me to be his girlfriend." She pauses and casts me a nervous glance. "And I said yes."

Hurt bubbles inside of me. Why didn't she talk to me about this? Keeping secrets is never a good thing. I would have been more open and happier for her. But knowing she kept this secret from me for weeks hurts. It hurts that she didn't trust me, that she knew I wasn't ready, and I'm not. I'm not ready to see my mom in love with another man.

Her heart should belong to my dad, not a man who buys her chocolates and flowers.

It shouldn't be this way.

She leans forward in her seat and pats my knee. "Trinity, honey, say something."

"I just wish you had been honest with me." I have to stop my voice from cracking. "It's hard enough, finding out that you're moving on, but you keeping it a secret from your only daughter? Not cool, Mom. I guess I'm

happy for you, but this is too much for me right now, Mom.” I shake my head.

Jumping down from the counter, I stride out of the kitchen, needing space from my mother once again.

I want her to be happy; I do. But this hurts so fucking much. I hate the thought of my family changing. Dad died four years ago. Even with all the time that has passed, it feels raw. The gash is still open, wounded deeply, gushing out one of the main things I need to survive. Blood.

There’s so much going on in my life. I didn’t expect to add a new stepfather to the list.

I hate secrets; they destroy people.

I stop at the doorway and spin around on my heels. My temperature rises as I glance at her. She’s always been hard on me about boys. Whenever I used to go out and come back home with one wrinkle in my shirt, she would scold me. Yell at me until I felt like being buried alive. Now, here she is, looking like she didn’t sleep a wink last night. It pisses me off that she didn’t think of fixing herself before coming home to her grieving daughter.

“And you know what?” Dark humor is thick in my tone. “I don’t appreciate you coming home, looking like that. Maybe have a little respect. I’d rather not know my mom was up all night while I didn’t sleep a wink, worried sick about you! I would never come home, looking like that. You know why?”

She meets my eyes.

“Because I have respect for you. You’ve just shown me you have no respect for me. That kills.” My throat closes up, making me hold back a sob that threatens to break loose.

What hurts more is that she didn’t even realize I was gone. No calls or texts. Nothing. I could disappear, and it seems no one would notice. I storm out of the kitchen. Simba loyally follows me with his tail wagging back and forth. He can sense tension in the air because as he passes Mom, he growls at her.

Good boy.

I look over my shoulder as I walk up the staircase and see her hunched over with her head in her hands. The most heartless thing that I could feel is nothing.

I feel *nothing*.



I wore black leggings and Leonidas's hoodie to work. I've been here for two hours. Linda, my boss, showed me around the store. She taught me the computer system, the phone, how to stock the shelves, and she even gave me a key. I'm surprised at how quickly I picked it all up. I could see the impressed look on her face. She even cracked a smile or two. I know by the end of this month, I'll have a special spot in her heart.

After all, I'm the only employee she has. I'm going to save her so much time.

I hum as I push the cart full of books down the romance aisle. Linda left ten minutes ago for her lunch break. I love the freedom I feel here. I place the crisp, new book on the empty shelf with a small smile on my face. There's nothing better than the smell of a new book.

As I position another book on the shelf in front of me, the door chime rings, indicating my first customer. My stomach turns anxiously as I walk toward the front of the store.

Please don't mess up. Please don't mess up.

Linda says if I'm the only one working in the store, I should always be at the front when someone's here. She informed me it's for my safety.

"Hi, can I—" I stop when I see him.

He leans against the counter with a frown on his face.

"What are you doing here, Wyatt?" I sigh and cross my arms across my chest. "I'm working."

A scowl is clear on his face when he sees me. "Don't twist your panties. I'm here to pick up an order for my sister."

I can't even call Wyatt a big dick because that would be false news.

Giving him a sarcastic smile, I imagine dragging my long nails down his face. Getting behind the counter, I bend down to look in the bin that's full of orders. "Is it under your name?"

He hums and taps the counter with his knuckles.

Picking up a book, I raise an eyebrow at him. His sister is twelve years old, and she's going to read this book? I hand him the first book in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series.

"Are you sure this isn't yours?" I ask as I scan the book's barcode.

He makes a weird face and snatches the book from my hand. "Funny."

"Twenty dollars is what you owe," I say while holding out my palm to

him.

Slapping the bill in my hand, he turns around and storms out of the store. I hold up his receipt and mumble, “Do you want the receipt?”

Guess not.

My hand crunches the paper, making it into a ball before throwing it into the trash can. I watch as it bounces off the ledge and falls to the floor.

Sighing at the slight inconvenience, I make my way to pick it up. As I bend down, hands find my waist, and I squeal at the sudden contact. Turning fast, I swing my hand back and slap the person in the face. My hand burns, but panic overcomes any other feeling deep within my body.

“What the heck?” the familiar voice strains out as he stumbles back.

Shit, I thought it was Wyatt, but it’s actually Leonidas.

He holds his now-red cheek. Gritting his teeth, he looks at me blankly.

“What was that for?”

Feeling bad for slapping him for no reason, I rush over to him and rest my hand on his cheek. “I’m so sorry. I thought it was someone else.”

He casts me a confused look. “Who did you think it was?”

I shrug my shoulders and wave him off. “No one. Don’t worry about it.”

There’s no point in telling him about Wyatt. Since the day he caught me and Leonidas in my bedroom, he’s been rude to me. He might be pissed off with me for moving on, but I don’t care what he thinks. I don’t like him anymore.

“Tell me.” He follows me toward the shelf when I take a step back.

“Nope.”

Twisting my body fast, he traps me against the shelf, placing his lips centimeters from mine. He whispers huskily, “Tell me who you had to slap that hard, so they wouldn’t hurt you.” He pauses and looks at me sternly. “And don’t even deny that you were scared. I saw it in your eyes.”

Gazing into his powerful eyes that have me compelled, I whisper, “My ex.”

“Name?”

“Wyatt,” I breathe out.

He takes a step away from me and pulls up the hood of his black hoodie.

“The guy from your room,” he states.

I nod my head.

“Are you trying to get back together with him?”

Why are guys so stupid?

My hands rest on my hips, and I raise an eyebrow at him. “Would I be wearing your hoodie if I were trying to pick up guys?”

He looks me up and down slowly, his dark eyes making me feel like a prize. “About that,” he mumbles and walks my way.

Leonidas’s hands drag me into his body. Positioning my hand on his chest, I lean my head back.

Looking at me blankly, he moves his head closer to mine.

“Nope, you can’t kiss me.” I dodge his lips.

“Why the hell not?” he muses, glancing down at my lips with want.

“I’m at work,” I say simply.

All I need is for Linda to come back and find me making out with Leonidas. How embarrassing and unprofessional.

Not a moment later, his hand goes to the back of my head, strongly pulling me into a long and lingering kiss that melts me on the spot with my heart in my hands, begging him to take it and be wise.

“When do you finish work?” he asks against my lips.

“An hour,” I say, pulling away.

He nods his head and smirks.

“What are you up to?”

“I’m taking you somewhere I know you’re going to love.” He winks at me and walks backward toward the door.

“Where?”

“Let’s just say, I got some information from Amelia about you, and I’m going to blow your mind.”

TWENTY

LEO

I could watch her all day. She consumes my thoughts twenty-four/seven. She makes me want to do stupid things I would never have done before. The plan was never to fall for her. But she crawled into my black heart and added color to my life. I connect so well with her because I feel like she knows me in and out.

Other than that I'm a famous singer ...

If Elijah heard my thoughts, he would laugh in my face. Heck, I would laugh at myself too. I would have never thought I would feel this type of longing for a girl before.

I want to be around her as much as I can. I want to see the smile she tries to keep off her face. I want to smell her pineapple-coconut perfume.

I love the fact that she's fallen for who I am and not what the world sees me as. I know telling her about my identity is the right choice, yet I don't want to change what we have when we just gave in to our feelings.

For the longest time, I felt nothing inside. I didn't love myself. I always saw the negatives in life and not the positives.

Trinity has brightened my life. She goes through struggles just like me. I know they're not the same as mine, but she's a genuine person who doesn't pretend she's perfect.

Trinity understands when I'm in a foul mood; she doesn't question me. She just sits there and holds my hand until I'm ready to talk.

The past few weeks that I watched her from afar, I wanted one thing from her. Sex. Now, I want to cuddle with her and buy her as many books as she wants.

Damn, I would buy an entire fucking library for that girl.

She's done so much for me, and it's just been a month. It breaks my heart, knowing after I go back to LA, I have to get ready for the tour. My idiot dad decided that for all of us. I don't want to go on a tour right when we arrive at home.

I can't see Trinity when I'm traveling the world. The thought pains me.

My head is spinning in circles. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm so into her that it hurts.

I want her so bad; I'm afraid I'll lose her over this shit.

The next few weeks I have left in this town, I'll be spoiling her. Showing her my appreciation and love.

As for my writing, I came up with a couple of lyrics last night. I strummed my guitar as I hummed the new lyrics. So far, I have a quarter of a song done. Usually, when I write one song, the rest come easy. Trinity has already given me all the motivation I need.

When she finishes work, I plan to blow her mind. My goal is to make shock fill every bone in her body. She won't know what hit her until she's standing in front of one of her dreams that I plan to make come true.

I hope I don't overstep, resulting in her getting pissed off. I'm not known to move fast, but when I see an amazing opportunity in front of me, I take it.

Perking up when I hear the doorbell ring, I run down the stairs, racing toward the door. Elijah gives me a funny look when I run past him.

I take a deep breath and open the door calmly.

"Hey," I mutter.

I'm stunned. She looks absolutely amazing. A black sundress blows in the light wind. Her long hair is in two French braids. And a pair of sexy black sunglasses are hiding her beautiful eyes from my sight.

She gives me a small smile. "Hi."

"You're droolworthy," is all that comes out of my mouth.

Shit, that's what I came up with? I need to get better at these sweet nothings people always rave about.

She chuckles, a faint blush coating her cheeks.

"He would eat you for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and dessert," Elijah yells from inside the house, clearly eavesdropping on our conversation.

Damn that kid. He always has to embarrass me in front of her.

Gripping the doorknob behind my back, I slam the door shut.

I send a silent *fuck you* to Elijah.

Trinity covers her mouth with her hand and laughs. "Would you?"

I mean, he's not wrong, so why lie to the alluring girl in front of me?

"He forgot about a snack too."

Scarlet covers her entire face, and she immediately looks down at her feet.

I swoon internally at the sight. *Did I just swoon? What the fuck is happening to me?*

Shaking off the weird feeling, I extend my arm out to her, and she puts her arm through mine. I lead her to my car.

"Where are we going?" she asks from beside me once we buckle our seat belts.

I pull onto the road, tapping my hands on the steering wheel. I give her a smirk. "It's a surprise."

She looks at me blankly. "I hate surprises."

"Doesn't everybody?"

She pulls down her sunglasses just to roll her eyes at me. "I hate you."

"You hate that you love me?"

"I'll make you crash this car, and I'll jump out the door before the impact."

She's adorable. She makes me want to laugh at her silliness.

"Where are we going?" she whines and taps my knee.

"Shut up," I joke as a smile lifts my face.

And she does.



"We've been driving for two hours, and you bring me here?" she asks while looking out the window.

Seeing disappointment on her face makes me feel slightly bad. However, she still doesn't understand why she's in the middle of nowhere. People can't be around us today. I can't let anyone recognize me and ruin the surprise. So, I drove her to a deserted, abandoned town. I'm shocked that I don't see ghosts since it's a ghost town here.

My gift has two parts. A big part of it needs a vacant parking garage.

Pulling into the garage, I park my car in one of the many empty spots. My hands sweat from the nerves I feel as she glances at me in confusion.

"I know life has hit you pretty hard lately, and I want to apologize for

how I treated you when we first met.” I pause and let out a chuckle. “I saw a confident girl who didn’t put up with my shit, and it bothered me that you didn’t want me. But now, I realize that you’re more than a pretty face. You make me feel things I’ve never felt before.”

Her hand pulls mine into her lap, squeezing it as she smiles at me.

“I know we just started getting along with each other. But what’s the point of waiting when you only live once and we know life can be taken away too quickly?” I nod my head to the door, telling her to open hers.

She meets me at the hood of my car, and I take a deep breath before walking forward.

I hear her lighter footsteps behind me as she follows. I don’t know why I’m so nervous. I’ve stood onstage in front of thousands of people, yet I’m more nervous with her than I ever have been before.

Because she matters more.

Nothing matters more than this moment.

My eyes spot her gift, and my heart skips a beat. I suddenly stop, making her bump into my back.

“Leonidas,” she mutters. Halting beside me, she waits for me to continue with an eyebrow raised.

Digging into my pocket, I pull out a pair of keys and a key chain that reads ...

Will you be my girlfriend?

TWENTY-ONE

TRINITY

I know he didn't take me here to kill me. But I'm puzzled. What are we doing in the middle of nowhere? This part of town is empty. Not a single soul lingers in these streets.

Leonidas seems confident as he hands me a set of keys. Car keys. To my dream car. I told Amelia once over the phone when we were talking. I didn't think she would remember and tell Leonidas.

As the keys sit in the middle of my palm, all I can seem to do is stare. What the hell? This must be a joke. My heartbeat unhealthily pounds in my chest as I look up at him in confusion. He stares back at me. Biting his lip, he leans his head to the side and gives me a slow smile.

"What is this?" I croak out.

"Exactly what you think it is."

"I'm so confused," I stutter, gripping the keys harder.

He chuckles and grabs the keys out of my hand. He nods his head to the car, and the lights flash as he presses the unlock button.

I can't help the shake in my hands as I stare at the one thing I've always wanted. The one thing that's always been a goal of mine to have.

"Go check out your new car." He hands me back the keys and lightly pushes me forward.

I can't move. My entire body feels like it's paused in time.

"No way," I breathe out.

He laughs a laugh that sends electricity throughout my entire body. "Are you going to go up to it, or am I going to carry you?"

"I don't think I can move right now," I mutter, staring wide-eyed at the beauty in front of me.

Bending down, Leonidas throws me over his shoulder. I let out a squeal when my face smashes into his back.

“Leonidas!” I laugh as he runs toward the car with incredible speed with me being on his back.

He’s such a dork.

My feet hit the pavement as he drops me on the ground a couple of seconds later. I stare at my black Camaro.

Holy shit.

I’ve wanted this car for years. It’s more stunning in person—slick, full of muscle and sexiness. No matter how flattering this is, I know how much this car costs, and it’s too much. I get anxious, just thinking about how much he’s spent on me. I hate when people buy stuff for me. Even a water bottle makes me uncomfortable.

Leonidas just bought me a damn car!

“I can’t take this,” I say, not taking my eyes off my dream car. “This is way too much, Leonidas.”

He shrugs his shoulders and crosses his arms across his chest. “I don’t take no for an answer, and I already bought it.” His voice is demanding. His hair blows in the wind as he smiles toward the car.

“I’m not a gold digger.” My fear is him thinking I’m just with him for his money.

Pulling me into his body, he kisses my forehead. “I know you aren’t. I wanted to get you something you’ve dreamed of. Please, just take it, for me?” He pauses and licks his lips. “I’d rather spend all my money on you than on anything else.”

Someone, catch me. I’m going to fall.

The way his eyes bore into mine with determination makes me melt into the pavement beneath my feet. My mind can’t wrap around what’s happening right now.

The guy that I couldn’t stand a week ago, who I’m now obsessed with, just bought me my dream car.

“Plus, I know how much you hate sharing a car with your mom. And to be honest, I’m afraid it’s going to break down any minute.” He laughs, and I chuckle. “So, here’s your very own car. If you don’t take it, you’re going to leave me stuck with a car I don’t want.”

I’m not sure how to act. Should I leap in joy or cry? How about I do both?

“Thank you,” I let out while tears cloud my vision. “This is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. I don’t know what to say.” I wipe the tears trailing down my face with a smile.

“Don’t say anything. Drive it. If anyone deserves this, it’s you,” he says strongly.

As I step closer toward the door, he puts a hand on my shoulder.

“There’s one more thing.” Leonidas looks nervous. I’m afraid he’ll vomit on my shoes. I raise an eyebrow when he nods to the keys. “Read the key chain.”

I glance down and notice a silver key chain. Bringing it closer to my face, I read the words that are engraved in beautiful cursive.

Will you be my girlfriend?

Yes. My heart fills with joy as my fingertips tingle in anticipation. Although I want to jump in his arms and say yes a thousand times, I keep my feet rooted to the ground.

When I glance up at him, nerves and self-doubt are clear on his face as he waits for my answer, which makes me feel awful. Why would he even doubt my feelings when I’ve opened up so much? I’m absolutely head over heels for him already.

“How do you say yes in Greek?” I ask, making his mouth lift into the most breathtaking smile.

“*Nai*,” he says proudly. His tongue rolls sexily as he pronounces the *N*.

What did I do to deserve a sexy Greek guy like him? Nothing, but I’m not complaining.

He pulls me by my hips, and I whisper against his mouth, “*Nai*.”

Our lips connect in a slow, passionate kiss. My hands entangle in his silky hair, and his lay tightly on my hips. He drags my body into him, and I melt into his arms. I can’t help but feel like the luckiest girl in the world. I’m in a relationship with the most caring and understanding guy I’ve ever met.

“Thank you,” he whispers against my temple when we pull away.

“What are you thanking me for? I should be doing all the thanking,” I claim, leaning my chin on his broad shoulder.

“Thank you for liking me for me.”

I pull away from his body and frown at him. “Of course. That’s never something you need to thank me for.”

What’s going on inside his head?

He smiles sadly at me. A second later, he replaces his sad smile with a

brighter one. “Let’s race.” He winks at me and runs back to his car.

“Look who has a racing kink now,” I joke, poking fun at him.

Shrugging, he screams hotness as he takes steps back toward his car.

“Won’t deny that you racing my car turns me on.”

Cue the thousand, million, billion butterflies in my stomach.

Game on.

“You’ll regret this,” I yell back at him.

Getting into my new car, I squeal at the interior. It’s amazing. With real black leather, it smells like a new car. It’s in perfect condition, and what makes me laugh—and miss that Leonidas has zoomed out of the parking lot—is the picture of Elijah’s head taped onto a hula girl dancer that rocks back and forth on the dashboard.

After our race, which I totally won—well, not really—we stop in front of Leonidas’s house. He drops off his car and climbs into mine.

“Let’s hear this bitch roar,” he says before I slam my foot down on the pedal.

The trees and clouds around us blur as we fly down the road. It seems as if Leonidas and I couldn’t care less about the cop who could be hiding to catch me speeding.

All I seem to notice is the feeling of his hand in mine and the way he smiles down at me.



I hate myself.

I despise the position Mom has put me in.

I’m being forced to meet her new boyfriend and his son today. Mom invited them over for dinner. To say I’m nervous is an understatement. I’m not good with new people. I never know how to act and what to say.

Mom didn’t give me a heads-up, which I would have appreciated. She just walked into my room last night—and thankfully didn’t see Leonidas hiding in the closet. She informed me with a firm voice that she wanted me to meet him. I wanted to argue, but I saw the fire in her eyes.

Our relationship since the day she came home late has been super tense. I know she doesn’t love the fact that Leonidas bought me a car. We don’t talk much, and when we do, it’s full of awkwardness.

Once she shut my door, my eyes watered over with tears. Leonidas opened the door and didn't even ask. He just knew I wasn't ready for this. Walking over to me, he pulled me onto his lap and kissed my forehead. We sat in silence after that, just listening to each other's heartbeats and breaths. Before he climbed out of my window for the night, he told me he'd be up in my room while I was downstairs tomorrow. It comforted me, knowing he would be near if I needed him.

At first glance, he looks like a guy who belongs in an underground fighting arena, but as soon as he opens up to you, you can see the layers he's built peel away. His smile radiates like the sun. It brings a warm aura to him. He makes me smile. He makes me feel something.

I want to spend every single second with him before he leaves, which is sooner than I ever expected. We haven't talked about what will happen once he moves back to LA. And frankly, I don't want to know what he'll say. I just want to be with him.

I took him up on his offer of him staying in my room. At least if I panic, I'll have him upstairs to keep me calm.

My palms sweat, and my head pounds due to my anxiety.

"What should I wear?" I ask him.

Opening my closet doors, I stand in front of all my clothes and think.

Fancy? No.

Casual? Nope.

How I usually dress? Yes.

I pull out a pair of black ripped mom jeans and throw them on my bed, where Leonidas lies. He lets out an *oof* when they land on his face. Oops. I pull a burgundy bodysuit off a hanger and throw that at him too.

Walking over to my door, I twist the lock closed as Leonidas holds up the suit.

He stares at it in confusion. "You're going to wear a bathing suit to meet the new douche?"

Guys ... I swear.

I walk over to him and snatch it away. "Think of it as a shirt. It's like this to make it tight." I gesture to the bottom.

Letting out a laugh, I muffle the sounds with the palm of my hand. Leonidas makes my life interesting. I never would have thought I would have to explain this to anyone.

Closing his eyes, he nods, fiddling with his chain as he smiles.

“What?” I ask, watching him with a careful expression on my face.

His hands pull me down onto the bed beside him. With his finger, he motions for me to lean down. Placing his hot lips against my ear, he whispers hoarsely, “I’m imagining you out of this.”

Deep breaths, Trinity. Don’t let him affect you right now.

I slap his toned stomach, feeling his muscles tense under my touch. He lets out a chuckle.

“I’m going to go change in the bathroom.”

Getting off the bed, I begin to walk away but stop when he grabs my hand.

“Change here?”

Gripping his hand in both of mine, I look down at him with sarcasm. “Dream about it.”

“Why dream about it when I can live it?” he taunts and jumps up from the bed.

Shoot, I gotta go.

Running toward the bathroom door, I slam it before he can get in. Never underestimate Leonidas. He’s fast as fuck. However, I still won.

Laughing, I speak through the door. “You’re going to have to be faster than that.”

“I’ll be out here, waiting for you,” he demands from the other side of the door.

I know he’s not joking. I would love to spend time with him right now, but sadly, I can’t because of Mom’s boyfriend. Putting on the jeans and bodysuit, I open the door and find him lying on the bed again.

I raise my eyebrows as a smirk lifts his handsome face.

Later, he mouths, and I instantly blush.

I cross my fingers. *Forgive me, God, for my sinful thoughts.*

Walking over to my makeup, I sit at my vanity and start applying my foundation.

“You don’t need that,” Leonidas grumbles from the bed. Getting up, he makes his way over. Standing behind me, he takes the beauty blender away from my grasp. “Trinity, you’re beautiful. You should wash it off. You’ve never worn makeup around me.”

I look at him with wide eyes. I can’t wash my makeup off. What is this guy talking about? Looking presentable when I meet Mom’s boyfriend for the first time is a must. I can’t look like a drowned cat with dark bags under

my eyes.

His hands pull me out of the chair. Sitting on it, he pulls me down onto his lap. “You have skin that glows, a natural pink to your cheeks.” He pauses and kisses the tip of my nose. “Why do you want to cover up the few cute freckles you have?” He grabs the back of my head and places my forehead down onto his. “Why would you want to hide your natural beauty?”

Wearing makeup is normal for girls; it’s expected. Yet Leonidas makes me think of things on a deeper level.

Why do I really wear makeup? Is it because I like it?

Yes, I kind of do. It’s a pain to do every day though.

But do I wear it because that’s what society expects?

Yes, I wear makeup because it’s expected of me.

Fuck society and their beauty standards. If I’m feeling lazy, I shouldn’t put makeup on. I need to do stuff for myself.

I’ll just put on a bit of mascara, lip gloss, and I’ll be good to go.

Plus, it’s just Mom’s boyfriend. It’s not like I’m meeting the Prince of England.

“Okay, you’re right,” I say to him and find him smiling at me.

Washing off the foundation, I rub cream on my face and apply the sheer lip gloss to my lips. I’m ready ... but am I really? No.

“I’ll be right up here if you need anything,” Leonidas says. “Text me if you want a distraction,” he says and pulls me into a lingering kiss.

I nod against his forehead and give him an encouraging smile.



He’s okay, I guess.

He seems friendly. I look closely to spot if his smile is forced. It isn’t.

Mom’s boyfriend is a good-looking man. He’s tan, his body is well built, and his Spanish accent seems to make Mom swoon. His son looks like a younger version of him. He’s quiet, and he only glances up when Mom asks him a question. He looks just as unhappy to be here as I am.

I study him. I know Mom said he’s my age, but he looks older. Black glasses sit on his nose. He wears a dark blue button-up shirt. His curly black hair bounces as he glances up and down. I watch as he pushes his peas back and forth on his plate with his spoon. He’s interesting, definitely not what I

expected.

“So, Trinity, what career do you want to pursue?” Rodrigo asks, gripping my mother’s hand tight in his.

“Seeing as my grades last year dropped dramatically, being a stripper is my only option,” I say with a straight face. Obviously, I’m joking. I just want to see him uncomfortable.

Diego, the mute, chokes on his food. Grabbing his water bottle, he gives me a concerned glance after taking sips. “What happens when you turn wrinkly and old? What will you do for money then?” he jokes.

“I’ll still shake what my mama gave me. Age doesn’t define sexiness,” I note simply, forking a piece of steak.

“She’s joking,” Mom butts in, dropping her fork to her plate. “Trinity’s grades are amazing. She’s attending college. Right, Trinity?”

Nodding my head, I grind my back teeth softly.

Diego gives me a knowing smile. I like him. He has humor that I can work with. Who would have thought? Definitely not me five minutes ago.

My phone buzzes on my leg. Glancing down, I find a text message from Leonidas.

Leonidas: Wanna practice your dance on me later? ;)

I shuffle in my seat and glance back down when two more vibrations catch everyone’s attention at the table.

Leonidas: We could play that slow music.

Leonidas: I’ll even throw my entire bank account at you.

“Trinity, not at the table, please,” Mom scolds and gives me a disapproving look when she hears the multiple vibrations.

Swallowing tightly, I nearly choke when an image pops onto my screen. Leonidas will be the death of me.

“Can I be excused?” I ask Mom faintly.

She nods, confused.

I walk calmly out of the room. My feet pound up the stairs as I race to my room. Opening my door fast, I spot Leonidas packing a bag.

“Leonidas, what are you—” I say, but he places a finger to my lips.

“I’m taking you somewhere tomorrow.”

Since when?

“Why?” I watch him hold up a lacy red bra.

Snatching it away with a frown, I put my hands on my hips.

“I want to get away with you.”

I don't want to argue. Escaping this town with him seems amazing. But what will I tell my mom? She'll never let me go somewhere overnight, especially with Leonidas.

"Mom will never let me leave with you," I voice out my concerns to him.

"Tell her you're having a sleepover with your friends. You're eighteen, Trinity."

I nod my head. She'll believe that. I'll tell her I'm staying at Harper's. I make a mental note to call Harper before I leave with Leonidas, so she doesn't blow my cover.

"Okay." I smile, loving the idea of being alone with Leonidas.

He winks and snatches the bra from my hand and throws it in the bag. "It's a date."

TWENTY-TWO

TRINITY

After Rodrigo and Diego left, Mom asked me how I liked him. I said they were nice ... and that was all she got from me. I could tell she wanted to pry but didn't, which I appreciated.

The next morning, I told her I was going to Harper's house for the entire day. She showed little emotion other than a small, forced smile and a nod. A tiny part of me feels bad. Then, I remembered how she'd hidden Rodrigo from me.

I went through the overnight bag Leonidas had packed for me. I was surprised at how well he had done. Two bras—the lacy red one he'd picked out and a black one. The matching underwear to go with them. Sleeping shorts and a tank top. Socks, leggings, and his sweatshirt. A hairbrush, toothpaste, a toothbrush.

He's precious. He acts tough around everyone else, even his own siblings. But with me, he's a teddy bear.

Mom leaves early for work today. Meaning I can leave with Leonidas. I'm glad because I didn't want to drive down by myself or leave my car anywhere for her to see. Plus, I'm lazy ... and he hasn't told me where he's taking me yet.

Yay, I love surprises. Note the sarcasm.

I pull on a pair of gray sweatpants and a cropped white hoodie that shows off my stomach. After straightening my long brown hair, I yank on a pair of sneakers. Grabbing my bag, I meet Leonidas in his car, where he's waiting for me.

He staggers back in his seat when I close the car door behind me.

“What did you just do?” I ask him when he lets out a laugh. *He's crazy.*

“I just got stunned by your beauty.”

Handsome dork.

I copy his actions. My back hits the door as I place a hand on my chest. “Sorry, you just shocked me by your sexiness.”

Leaning in close, he places his lips against my ear. “*Your gaze is fire. I wanna burn,*” he sings. His voice is velvety smooth and husky.

I freeze, and he leans back with wide eyes.

My heart doesn’t pick up its pace because of old memories; it quickens because Leonidas’s voice relaxes me. I feel safe while listening to him. The thought scares me. I’m getting attached too quickly.

“Shit, sorry.” He clears his throat and looks straight ahead. His hands shake slightly as he moves to grip the steering wheel tightly.

I whisper, “Your voice is mind-blowing.” Peering at him from the corner of my eye, I find him biting his lip nervously. “Do you sing?”

“Sometimes,” is all he says, making me question if I overstepped on something personal. Clearing his throat before glancing over at me, he pats my thigh. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

I slowly nod my head, confusion evident on my face. That entire conversation was weird.

Why did he suddenly become so closed off and distant?



We’ve been driving for two hours. I fell asleep twenty minutes into the ride. There’s something relaxing about Leonidas’s hand in mine as his thumb brushes up and down my knuckles. His touch calms me. My breaths turn deeper and less forced. My eyes clear, making me see the color in the world better.

He makes me want to live.

He also makes me feel uneasy—in a good way. He makes my cheeks turn a shade of pink whenever he looks at me with his dark eyes. The way he squeezes my thigh when he drives sends heat throughout my body. His lip between his mouth whenever he looks me up and down makes me want to give up everything I have left for him.

I’m falling for him quickly.

It’s like I’m falling off a cliff, hands in the air, grasping the breeze, trying

to find something to hold on to, but all I clasp is wind. I feel like I'm falling, falling so hard, at an incredible speed, hoping Leonidas catches me and is careful with my heart.

We just started dating. Time proves it doesn't take long to care deeply for another. He holds my heart in his hands, and here I am, trusting him with it.

I hope he doesn't break it.

He hasn't noticed I'm awake yet. He looks deep in thought. One hand is tightly clenching my own. If I wasn't pretending I was sleeping just to watch him, I would wince. His other hand holds the steering wheel in a death grip. Teeth bite his lower lip—that's something I've observed he does when he's nervous. The foot that he presses down on the gas pedal is straight and stiff, and the other taps the ground.

I avert my gaze from him and let my eyes follow the path the car is making. It looks like we're in another small town. I've never been here before. History seeps through the architecture of these classic buildings. A water fountain lies in the middle of the town square. One or two people walk on the sidewalks.

Opening my eyes fully, I look over at Leonidas.

Feeling my stare on him, he smiles down fondly at me. Squeezing my hand tighter, he nods to the surrounding landscape around us. "Surprise."

"It's nice," I say. "But I'm still confused."

He nods and looks ahead with a proud smile on his face. "I wanted us to get away without going too far. I did my research and found this small town. I swear their population is a thousand here."

We both chuckle at that.

"They have this spa, which I thought you would love. It's perfect for us, quiet ... and we can be alone." He wiggles his eyebrows up and down.

I slap his thigh playfully. "Tell me more."

"One room for two—a Jacuzzi, a king-size bed, and soundproof walls."

I poke fun at him, "Is that where the lace comes in?"

Leonidas's dark eyes find my own as he licks his plump lips. "Don't tease me, Trinity Jones. It's dangerous while I'm trying to drive."

Swallowing hard, I blink several times.

He continues on with his driving. I stare straight ahead, clenching my thighs slightly. His foot continues tapping against the floor mat.

"Quick flash?" he blurts out jokingly.

"Go to hell."



The hotel is pleasant. Not too fancy, but not run-down. It's clearly run by a family.

An old man sat at the front desk. He asked us for our credit card information. Leonidas quickly handed over his card. When he dragged his glasses slightly down his nose and winked, I chuckled.

Now, we stand in a hotel room I never imagined myself to be in. It's stunning with clean, crisp white walls. My eyes focus on the statement wall behind the bed. It's black. The lobby of this hotel didn't do it justice.

Leonidas closes my open mouth with a finger and laughs. "Why do you look so shocked?"

Stupid rich people ...

I gesture around with my hands. "This room looks like it belongs on Pinterest!"

His arm wraps around my waist, pulling me to his side. He kisses my temple. "I'm glad you love it." He pulls back and gives me a panicked look. "You like it, right?"

"What's there not to like?" I reply strongly.

I lean my head to the side and catch his gaze. His once-miserable eyes are shining with happiness.

"I don't want you to spoil me," I whisper up at him.

I wrap my arms around his neck, and he pecks my nose.

"I want to."

Letting out a laugh, I playfully roll my eyes at him. "I know you do, but spending your money on me makes me uncomfortable. I don't want you to think I'm with you for your money."

He smirks. Bending down, he throws my body over his shoulder.

"Leonidas!" I yell when my face slams against his back.

A smile lifts my face when I feel his deep laughter against my cheek.

My body lands on the bed with a bounce.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers from above me. Brushing a strand of hair away from my face, he smiles at me. "I'm so lucky I found you."

His bottom lip is slightly sucked into his mouth in a nervous gesture. As my eyes bore into his, I wonder how I can care for someone this deeply and so fast.

I hope we're not a losing game—two people finding comfort in one

another for just the time being. Yet it seems like that. He's leaving. I'll be stuck in my town with so many terrible memories.

I find myself in him. He has scars, and he's not afraid to show them to me. Since the moment Leonidas moved into town, he's shown me that my life is worth living. Even though my father passed away in the most brutal way anyone could die, I know he's in a better place. Leonidas is the first person to not pity me, to not tiptoe around me like I'll break.

He sees *me*.

How can you not get attached to a person who makes you feel alive?

Not only do I believe I have an angel on earth, watching over me, but I also now realize that I have him up there with the big guy, watching me too.

Leonidas makes my hands shake in excitement and replaces the jolts of anxiety.

My heart aches at the thought of losing him. I can't imagine my life without him. The idea scares me. Leonidas has carved his way into my heart. People might say we're moving fast, but I don't care. When you're in love with someone, you feel it in an instant. We've argued and teased back and forth for weeks.

I know what my heart wants; it wants him.

"How did I get so lucky to call you mine?" I whisper up to him. "I don't deserve you, Leonidas, but I'll try with everything in me to be better for you." A tear trails down my right cheek.

His eyes follow the path the moisture takes. Leaning down, he kisses my salty tear away. "My love, you deserve everything this life offers. You don't see that yet, but I'll make sure you do by the end of this," his voice whispers against my cheek.

Laughing softly, I cup his face. "You make me want to live." The words come out of my mouth without my head processing them, but I'm not ashamed. I'm telling the truth, which is always best.

Leonidas says nothing because he doesn't have to.

He saved me, and he knows it.

TWENTY-THREE

TRINITY

I practically begged him. I didn't want to go to the spa by myself. Leonidas demanded that the hotel room was where he belonged, not some spa. He hates the idea of having cucumbers over his eyes. One look, and he could tell I wasn't happy. My frown immediately vanished when he declared in his husky voice that the only woman's hands on him should be mine.

I was surprised the butterflies I felt in my stomach didn't take flight, bringing me in the air with them.

He informed me the directions to where the spa was in the hotel and gave me a pat on the butt.

Now, here I lie, on a massage table. A kind, beautiful Korean lady has been massaging me for an hour, loosening out all the knots in my shoulders and my back. She's also taught me a few words in her language. A smile immediately lifts my mouth when she praises and says I am a natural. She also informs me that the pretty girl sitting at the front desk is her daughter. Her shiny, stunning, pin-straight black hair screams health.

I bite my lip, trying to stop the moans from coming out of my mouth. Her fingers massage and relieve me from the tension I've felt for years. I instantly notice the difference when my shoulders drop and feel lighter. Leonidas would have loved this, if only he wasn't such a party pooper. I've been paying attention to her—what positions her hands are in when she massages. She uses her fists, palms, and her fingers. I'm definitely trying this out on Leonidas since he didn't come.

Giving me a friendly hug good-bye, she sends me on my way. I'm going to miss her. Is it weird that I want her to come home with me and massage

me every day? Yes. Yes, it is.

Leonidas was wrong. They don't put cucumbers on your eyes here. All the movies and books I've watched and read lied to me.

As I walk up to the hotel room, I can't help but notice how clean I feel. My skin has a fresh glow to it, my hair has volume, and I feel more relaxed and confident. I'd never been to a spa before. I'm grateful Leonidas thought about this.

Gripping the cool metal of the hotel doorknob, I pull open the door. I drop my purse on the floor and let out a sigh. I hear the distant noise of the TV playing in the background. Walking toward the sound, I find Leonidas lying on the couch, watching the television intently. Time to ruin that peace with my new massaging skills.

As I walk into the room, his eyes land on me. His mouth turns up into a smile. Whistling, he motions for me to walk over to him. Taking my steps slowly, I add a sway to my hips, making his eyes darken.

"How was your massage?" he asks as I climb onto his lap.

I wind my arms around his neck, and he places his hands on my thighs.

Leaning his head to the side, he bites his lip as I stare at him.

"Amazing," I breathe out. "I wish you had been there though. Your muscles could use some relaxing."

I grip his broad shoulders and massage the muscles slowly. Groaning softly, he nods, clearly enjoying my "skills."

Running his hands up and down on my thighs, he smirks. "I wouldn't have been able to keep my eyes off of you while you wore a white robe with hardly anything underneath." Placing a kiss on my earlobe, he bites slightly.

His words shouldn't affect me this much, yet here I am, nearly swooning.

Leaning back, I meet his darkened eyes. "You feel super tense, sir. I'll massage you."

He smirks. "Is it free?"

"It'll only cost you a kiss," I reply while running my hand through his hair.

"I would give you a million kisses if that was the charge." Grasping my neck tightly, he angles my head back and attaches his lips to mine furiously.

He kisses me hungrily. Running his tongue along my lips, he begs for entrance, and I open up to him. Our tongues battle for dominance as he grips my face tightly with his other hand, holding me in place. Compelling my entire body to give in to the pleasure it craves.

I pop my lips off of his, needing air desperately, and he leans forward, trying to find me again, but then he opens his eyes seconds later with a hazy expression.

“Only one kiss, remember?” I whisper, focusing my hooded gaze on his slightly swollen lips.

“I’m for sure remembering that now,” he mumbles, dropping the back of his head to the couch behind him.

I hop off of him with a clap, and he raises an eyebrow, clearly in pain, seeing as his hard-on is straining against his gray sweatpants.

“Let me give you a back massage.” Taking his tatted hand in mine, I pull him up.

As we walk to the bed together, I hear him mumble under his breath, “You can massage something else, but it’s definitely not my back.”

Pushing him on the back, I direct him to lie on his stomach.

Doing as I said, he glances over at me with a smile that instantly brightens my face. “Don’t do it.”

My hands itch to do it. The opportunity is right in front of me.

“Trinity, don’t do it!” he playfully yells out.

Winding my hand back, I slap his butt so hard that my palm stings from the impact.

“Fuck, shit,” he groans, muffling the sounds of pain into a pillow. “You have so much power in that skinny body of yours.”

Scoffing, I settle myself on his ass, so I can massage him easier. “My muscles are bigger than yours, buddy.” My tone is serious, not hinting that I’m joking.

Leonidas’s biceps alone are bigger than my head.

His body vibrates due to his laughter. Snorting once, he nods, agreeing sarcastically, “Yeah, sure. Keep lying to yourself.”

When I knead my fingertips into his back, he lets out a sound of appreciation. “Is this heaven?” Leonidas’s voice speaks into the pillow. “Because it feels like it.”

Continuing my handiwork on his back, my hands grow tired, but hearing the sounds that come out of his mouth becomes worth the pain. Ten minutes later, when silence fills the room as I scratch his back, I decide to make things interesting. There’s nothing better than a good prank on your overprotective boyfriend.

“Is now a bad time to mention that it was a man massaging me?”

He stills under me. His head turns to glance over his shoulder at me, and his face twists angrily. “A man massaged you?”

Cold, furious eyes cause goose bumps to rise on my skin.

I nod my head innocently. “They were double-booked, so I had no choice. I was scared to tell you, but I can’t keep secrets for the life of me.”

“Tell me you’re joking,” Fire blazes in his eyes as he glares at me. “Tell me another man’s hands weren’t all over you.”

“Lying is a sin.”

Suddenly, I’m in the air and then settled on his lap, straddling him with each of his hands on my ass.

“Dry-humping me is a sin, but you had no problem with that,” he demands, reminding me of the time we got a little too carried away.

My chest slams against his, creating no space between our bodies.

Leonidas’s lips brush against my ear. “Tell me you’re lying.”

“I’m not lying.” *I’m a liar.*

“Tell me, or I’ll end up in jail after doing what’s running through my mind right now.”

Please do, Leonidas.

I cock my head to the side in a teasing manner. “Care to enlighten?”

“I’ll make the entire hotel hear you coming again and again,” he whispers huskily in my ear. “I’ll then walk down to the hotel’s front desk, find the man who touched you, and beat the living shit out of him. No one touches my girl.”

“Your girl?” I hum when he places his lips to my neck.

He bites down on my skin, which makes me wince.

I nod, agreeing with him, and he smiles against my skin. If I’m his girl, then he’s mine. All mine.

“Look what I do to you,” he rasps out against my skin. His dark eyes find my own. “Every inch of skin I can see has goose bumps. You’re breathing hard. I know you want me to show you your mine, just as much as I want to.”

Yes, he’s right. Gosh, he’s making me crazy.

“The number of cold showers I’ve taken because of you is ridiculous,” he grumbles, which makes me smirk.

Arching my neck, I let him explore me even more. I wind my hands through his hair. The ache between my legs intensifies, making me look for some sort of relief. My hips grind on his lap. He swears under his breath and grips my hips tightly.

“Trinity, you’ll be the death of me.”

My shorts rub against the bulge in his shorts. Not knowing where I got all this sudden confidence from, I grind harder, feeling him swell underneath me.

“Holy shit,” he rasps. Gripping my hips, he bounces me faster, harder. “You’re a goddess,” he breathes.

His fingers move in between my shorts and skin. I flinch when his finger rubs against my core, sliding against my wetness easily.

“Look how much you want me,” his husky voice grits out as I continue my movements. “Baby, tell me to stop. Tell me to stop because if you’re not ready for this—”

My breath hitches when he applies pressure to my sensitive spot. “I want this. I want this, Leonidas.” Moving against his finger, desperately trying to get rid of the tension.

Leonidas practically growls with approval. He reaches for the waistband of my shorts and pulls them down along with my underwear. Pulling off my shirt, he helps me unclasp my bra—the red one.

“Holy shit,” he groans, cupping a breast in his hand and slowly squeezing it once, making me throw my head back at the sensation. He attaches his mouth to one of my nipples, and his tongue swirls around my bud.

As I move my core against his clothed dick, I moan. “Leonidas, please, I need—”

“What do you need?” he demands in a rougher voice.

I see stars when he pinches my bum, making me look at him.

“I need you,” I whisper breathily.

“You need who?” he taunts sexily, hearing what I just said moments ago.

Frustration bubbles in my stomach. “I need you!”

He plunges a finger into me just as I finish my last words, hitting my core. Gripping his shoulders tightly while arching up, I widen my legs for him, allowing him more entrance to the spot I need him dearly.

“You’re so wet for me already.”

The pleasure makes it hard for me to hear anything around me. His thumb rubs circles around the bundle of nerves just above my entrance.

I turn into a mess when he adds another finger, pumping in and out.

“It feels so good,” I moan. “Please don’t stop, Leonidas.”

I just sit there, straddling him, with my hands to my sides, finding it difficult to breathe as Leonidas fingers me.

“Yes, baby. You look so hot, riding my fingers,” he grits out, watching me bounce up and down on his fingers.

Looking down, I watch my wetness shine on his fingers.

Placing his mouth to my boob, he kisses and sucks the skin before moving to the other. Plunging his fingers harder into me, he curls them, which makes me see stars. Curving my back, I grasp his hair as the tension builds up.

When I feel so close to my release, he rasps, “Give it to me. Come on my hand.”

That does it. My eyes close, and I come all over his fingers, which are going at a slower pace than before. Collapsing onto his chest, I ride the high, listening to his fast heartbeat pound inside his chest.

“That was amazing,” Moving back, I glance down at his clothed body. “Why do you still have clothes on?” I hum.

Leonidas’s swollen lips grin. “Take care of that problem, will you, love?”
God, please forgive me.

As my hands travel down his body, he watches as I reach for the waistband of his shorts, pulling them down his long, toned legs. I leave him in his black boxer briefs. Reaching down, I touch him through the material.

“Holy shit,” he whispers and moves against my hand slightly. His breaths are deep.

I pull down the last remaining material separating us.

God, he’s going to split me in half.

“No, not today. I won’t last. I want to come inside of you,” he chokes out when I reach out for him. Pulling back, he sucks in a painful breath. “Are you sure?”

I nod my head and squeeze my eyes shut. “I haven’t done it in years. I’m a little nervous. But I trust you.”

He flips me so that I’m lying flat on the bed, and his jaw-dropping body hovers over mine. Smiling down at me, he nods, kissing me harshly. His chain falls on my chest since he’s leaning over me, making me feel more excited for what’s coming. Gripping the chain in a fist, I yank him down, forcing him to press his lips harder against mine.

My lips kiss his chest once he moves back to reach over to the nightstand to grab the square package. My chest rises up and down faster as I watch him slip on the protection. I feel hot and exposed as I watch his eyes explore my body.

“Relax,” he says when my body tenses.

Oh God.

He glances down at me with so much emotion that it almost makes me want to cry. I’ve never had someone look at me this way.

He brushes the hair off of my face and raises his eyebrow. “Are you sure?” Concern drips from his voice. “I don’t want you to feel obligated to do this.”

As my answer, I smile and connect our lips in a kiss.

Immediate tension builds in my stomach while our moans fill the air as he sinks down into me. I bite my lip when I adjust to him.

God, he’s so big.

This feels like my first time. Tears leak out of my eyes as I feel the intense pain.

Why does it hurt this much? I’m not even a virgin.

“Fuck, I’m so sorry.” His whisper comes out strained. His head lowers, and he kisses my tears away. “We can stop.”

Even though I feel like I’m being ripped open, I want to continue. My eyes glance down, and I let out a strained breath. He isn’t even in me fully.

“I want this.” I kiss his lips softly.

He still looks hesitant but nods. “I’ll go slow.”

He eases his hips forward. I gasp deeply and let out a shaky breath.

“You feel incredible.” He buries his face in my neck. “Trin, are you okay?” he asks as he moves.

Nothing can seem to leave my mouth. I nod my head, but he stops his movements.

“I need to hear you say you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” I whisper up to him. I’m more than fine.

His fingers brush over my cheek as he lets me adjust to his size. I take deep breaths and relax into him. Leonidas moves his hips, pulling almost completely out of me before pushing in again. The waves of pleasure make the pain ease.

“Yes, Trinity,” he breathes against my lips.

I clasp my hands around his neck as breathy whimpers leave my mouth. I lose myself in the crashes of pleasure. I flex my hips up and hold my weight on my legs. Every nerve in my body sings. Our moans echo in the quiet room as he pounds into me more roughly. I see stars, and my ears buzz.

His hands touch all over my body, sending shivers down my spine.

Gripping on to his hair, I tug. A moan leaves his lips, which drives me crazy.

He moves his hips carefully. He intertwines our fingers and places them above my head. "You're so beautiful."

As I tighten my legs around him, he drives his hips forward.

"All mine," he whispers against my lips.

I nod and meet his thrusts. "All yours."

My hands travel down his broad shoulders and chest. His nose brushes against mine, and his lips part as he fills me completely until there's no space between us. I'm unable to contain my moan as I flex my hips up.

"Fuck," Leonidas moans out deeply. His lips slam down onto mine, and he sucks my bottom lip.

I squeeze his hands when my walls tighten against Leonidas's dick. My lips pop off his when he moans my name again. My hips meet his, and he glares down at me. It seems as if he wants to be the one in control.

I let him.

He thrusts himself into me, hitting my G-spot repeatedly. I wrap my legs around his hips tightly and push him down further with my feet. Pressing my face against his neck, I suck and mute the sounds coming out of my mouth.

"God, you feel so good, baby," Leonidas breathes out.

The headboard slams against the wall as he pounds into me. Letting one of his hands go, I cup the back of his neck.

Our tongues tangle together, and he swears, "Fuck, I've never felt this good."

He looks at me with so much intensity; all I can do is stare back at him. I can't control myself anymore, winding my fingers through his hair as we go harder and rougher.

"Yes, baby." Leonidas strains.

Heat takes over every single bone in my body as I arch up and go crashing down when my body sings while my orgasm travels throughout me. Leonidas comes a minute later and lets out curses while he does. His sweaty body drops onto mine. My body relaxes into his as I close my eyes.

Holy shit.

That just happened.

I can't believe I had sex with Leonidas. That was the best thing I've ever experienced in my life. Every touch and look has ruined me forever. His head rests against my chest as I try to catch my breath.

He hums when he kisses the side of my boob. "I love these babies."

I let out a laugh and playfully pull his hair. I've figured out another one of his kinks—hair pulling. Who would have known?

Leaning on his elbows above me, his face inches away from mine, he whispers down, "I'm so glad I moved into your stupid small town."

"Me too."

I watch with heavy eyes as he moves off of me and walks over to the bathroom. He comes back a minute later with a towel and a fresh pair of boxers on. Scooting me to the edge of the bed, he cleans me up, which I find comforting because no one has ever done this to me before.

Throwing the towel to the floor, he pulls me to his side. "You amaze me."

At this moment, I feel my happiest.

Tears blur my vision as I glance at the guy I know I'm not good for because my heart is not filled with what he needs, but he's falling for me regardless. "You amaze me too."

TWENTY-FOUR

LEO

My finger skims along her bare back. I watch with tired eyes as her chest moves up and down from her deep slumber. Her straight hair is spread out on her pillow, bringing a peaceful aura to her. I watch as she mumbles something in her sleep. It's slurred, so I find it difficult to understand her beautiful voice.

Last night, I experienced something I never had before. I shared a bond so special and heartwarming with the girl I'm falling for quickly. She filled my soul with passion, a passion I'd thought I would never get to feel.

The way her eyes lingered on every movement I took made my need to please her increase.

Love is scary. I'm giving Trinity my entire heart, trusting that she won't absolutely crush it.

Trinity has shown me she's a down-to-earth person with an open heart once she lets you in. Since the day I asked her to be my girlfriend, she's given everything she can give me and more—happiness. I'm the one who should send her texts in the morning and before she goes to sleep for the night. But she always beats me to it. She truly is my angel. I just moved into her small town more than a month ago, and she's already changed me. I feel like a different guy. More confident, passionate, and compassionate. I can pick up a pen and write without cringing.

Yes, I'm scared, but that doesn't mean I should run away from it.

I always used to describe myself as a person who lives without a beating heart. I didn't feel how I wanted to. I was a ghost, living in my own body. Trinity has shown me I'm not the only person going through shit. Even though some days, I feel lonely and like my life will never get better, she

reminds me constantly with her words and her touch that I've already hit rock bottom. It can't get any worse than it already has.

That night four years ago is not something I like to talk about. It makes my skin crawl. No matter how much I try to move forward and forget, the feeling within me never leaves me at peace. Four years ago, I had the worst day of my life. That was the day the light drained out of my once-bright eyes, the day I clenched my hands into fists when someone made eye contact with me, hating the fact that I was seen when all I wanted to do was disappear.

I started hating the world. I committed sins and hated God for not listening to my prayers. The times I got down on my knees, pressed my forehead to my bed, and begged him to listen to take away the pain I was feeling stabbed away my heart. When I knew our rental place was empty, I screamed and begged, felt my throat grow raw. The feelings of guilt, sadness, and emptiness wouldn't go away. I had no one else to go to. I was so desperate.

I was young, stupid, and dumb. The only way I thought about escaping was to simply not exist anymore. To give in to what my head was telling me to do. My shaky hands gripped the pill bottle as I shook on the floor uncontrollably. It seemed the river of tears wouldn't stop running down my face. I prayed one last time with a broken whisper to the sky to relieve me from my pain, to send me happiness.

When I didn't get it, I opened the pill bottle, tipped it against my mouth, and swallowed a handful of pills all at once.

As I lay there on the floor, my body shaking and me gasping for breath, I realized I didn't want to die. I didn't like the feeling of dying. That it was a mistake that I would never get to reverse. I didn't want Amelia and Elijah finding me on the floor—white, blue lips, with no heartbeat. I didn't want my fans who found us on our YouTube days, who loyally listened to my music to escape their own struggles, to never hear from me again and to realize I had done the one thing I always told them not to do—give up.

With all the strength I had left in my broken body, I called Amelia. She answered on the second ring. And that was when I collapsed. I remember waking up and hearing sirens. Blue and red flashing lights blinded my hazy eyes. An oxygen mask was over my mouth, making me feel like I was suffocating. My blurry gaze landed on my broken sister. Black mascara ran down her face as her swollen red eyes never left my form.

I watched as she tried to enter the doors leading to the emergency room

once we arrived at the hospital. I watched as she broke down onto the ground and called my name once they shut them in her face and a nurse pulled her back. That day, as a bunch of doctors were hovering over me, I realized I had a life to live, and I'd hardly lived it. The world just heard who I was.

I didn't want my name to be a memory that faded eventually with time. I hated thinking about how Mom would watch her son being buried into the ground. How people would come up to a piece of rock shaped in a cross with my name engraved on it to see me.

I was more than that.

Since the night I almost died from an overdose, I haven't touched a single pill. I haven't even touched a baby aspirin. I take every day one at a time. I breathe in and out, like my mom taught me to. I write when I feel anger rise in me and take frustration out on my music. And when I feel the sadness come over and scream at me, I go outside and play basketball. No matter the weather—sunny, raining, snowing—I go out there and pound the ball against the pavement.

I sit in my room—which is always different, depending on where we are—in the dark and just stare. I let my thoughts consume me until I think the only way out is to take those white pills.

Yet my mind drifts off to what I have and what I would lose.

I would lose my family. Amelia and Elijah would open my bedroom door and find an untouched bed every day. Mom wouldn't hear my steps as I raced my siblings to the dinner table when it was fried chicken night. My dad wouldn't hear me whining when he demanded I practice my vocals.

People would think my siblings were twins by just looking at them. Not triplets.

Not to mention, I wouldn't be lying here with a beautiful girl next to me. She wouldn't have fallen for me.

If I'd died that night, she wouldn't have known who I was. That thought terrifies me.

So, even though I'm still distant and cold and I still struggle to let people in because I can't go through any more pain, the thought of ending my life to finish a problem that won't last forever never crosses my mind. I don't want to cause someone else's pain ever again. I watched my family grieve over me before life even drained out of me.

I can't do that to them anymore. I can't do this to myself.

“Hey,” I hear the angelic voice whisper from beside me, instantly calming

me.

Her face comes into my view. I watch as she leans her arms flat against my chest and stares at me with worry. Her hand wipes a tear I didn't notice running down my face.

“Why are you crying?”

As her eyes bore into mine, a new form of guilt and pain rises in my stomach. I'm giving my heart to this girl and trusting that she won't break it. But she expects the same. I'm keeping the biggest secret from her. I'll destroy her. She'll hate me. She'll leave me empty and cold again.

Losing her dad and hating everything she'd once loved has already destroyed her. Not to mention the fact that her mother is seeing another man. That must kill. I need her to fall in love with who I really am until I tell her. I want to be sure that there isn't something like my stupid identity between us. I have everything to lose but everything to gain. Trinity's my escape, my distraction from this horrible world.

If she's my addiction, call me an addict.

Her arms fall to her sides as I lean against the headboard. Pulling her onto my lap, I tell her about my past, how I almost took my life and how deeply I regret it now. As we sit here, wrapped in each other's arms, tears roll down my face. I cry and match her own sobs as they rack her body. Our arms wrap tighter around each other as we realize we wouldn't be where we are now if I hadn't been saved that night.



I park my car in front of her house. Silence fills the air.

“You know ...” Trinity breaks the silence and trails off. “The day we first met, your name really intrigued me. I never met someone with the name Leonidas before. It's so unique and beautiful. So, curiosity got the best of me, and I searched for the meaning of it on Google.” She pauses and turns her body toward mine.

Her eyes, full of emotion, find mine, and I don't look away.

“Leonidas is a Greek name, meaning lion strength.”

I watch as she gets lost in thought.

“I think the meaning of your name fits so well with your story. They made the name Leonidas for you, whether you think you're strong or not. My

father used to tell me when I was young that God picks the hardest fights for his strongest warriors.”

Grasping my face in the palms of her hands, she smiles sadly at me. “No matter how much you try to convince yourself that you’re weak, Leonidas, knowing you’re sitting right here with me means you’re tough. You’re a warrior. The pain will never go away. You’ll get numb and get used to it. But it’s how you go on with your day. Are you going to let the painful thoughts win? Are you going to lose the war of your life?” She leans in and brushes her lips over mine delicately.

“You’re strong, Leonidas. Don’t let the devil win.”

As I pull her head toward mine and connect our lips in a passionate kiss, I realize that my prayer came true. Even though it took a few years, I smile at the thought of my happiness sitting right beside me.

TWENTY-FIVE

TRINITY

Something snapped me back into reality when Leonidas confessed he'd almost died due to an overdose four years ago. Watching the tears roll down his face as he replayed what had happened that night terrified me. I wanted to hold on to him and never let go because the thought of never meeting him destroys me.

No wonder why when we first met, he was so closed off and rude. He was hurting. Living with the weight of almost killing himself.

I can't imagine the feeling of knowing you're dying and wanting to stay alive. The way he explained the entire situation of him taking the pills and feeling the life drain out of him was too overwhelming for me. Leonidas made me realize that there's so much life I haven't lived yet.

I want to move out of this town and go to school somewhere. I want to hopefully get married to Leonidas and have kids. I want to watch them run around the house, giggles filling the air as they chase each other around our lawn.

I want to impact the world.

What I said to Leonidas in the car is true. In fact, I live by this. The pain never goes away; it just dims, and eventually, you get used to it. Even though some days, I want to throw in the towel and just give up, I know that isn't the right thing to do. I need to live for not only myself, but also for my dad, whose story was cut short.

Mom hasn't been the most understanding person for a while. She pushes me away and makes me question myself constantly. She's changing. Mom is no longer the woman I grew up loving. I know the guilt of losing another family member will eat her alive, so that's why I keep pushing through the

depression.

With one last lingering kiss from Leonidas, I leave his peaceful presence and enter the home I'm growing to hate.

"Trinity?" Mom calls out when I shut the door softly. Anger and tension are thick in her voice.

I drag my feet up the stairs in dread. Every bone in my body immediately tenses when I find her sitting on my bed.

I stop in the doorway and drop my overnight bag on the floor. My hands sweat as she clasps her hands in front of her body. Her frown deepens as she opens her mouth, but she immediately closes it. Not knowing what to say, she lets out a laugh that has no humor in it.

"Can you guess how shocked I was when I found out you weren't at Harper's house?" she starts off. "I was so happy that you two had finally patched things up and started talking, so when I called her mom to catch up with her, you can't imagine how surprised she was to learn that you'd told me you were there."

I'm rooted to my place. Harper knew about our plan. She told me she would back me up and make sure Mom didn't know I'd left with Leonidas. She's always had my back. It seems as if she didn't follow through. Even though I want to blame this on her, I can't. Harper's mom wasn't in on our plan.

"As your mother, I'm responsible for your safety. I can't have you lying to me about your whereabouts. What if you were in trouble and you needed me? I wouldn't know where to find you!" she exclaims. Her arms wildly gesture toward where I stand. "Trinity, you're making it very difficult for me to trust you."

I try my hardest to say something, to stick up for myself. But I can't seem to form words. I'm shocked at the way she's looking at me ... like I'm a disgrace. It's not like I committed murder. I was just with my boyfriend for a night. She always leaves me now, alone in a dark, empty house.

"How many times can I sit back and watch you mess up?"

My heart stops.

"What's wrong with you, Trinity? You've never acted like this!" she yells. Her face turns a shade of pink as she grits her teeth together. She takes a deep breath as she prepares to continue. "I heard what Bethany said to you that day, what made you so angry. You might hate me when I say this, Trinity."

No.

Please don't.

Please don't say it.

I want to run away before the strong, heartbreaking statement leaves her mouth. But I stand here, planted in my spot, daring her to say more.

Tears fill her eyes as she shakes her head. "Your father would be disappointed in you. This isn't how he raised you to be. We didn't teach you how to lie and run away with a boy who isn't good for you. It seems as if you're throwing the entire life we gave you away."

My heart has been ripped out of my chest. It's being stomped on ruthlessly. I try to comprehend that my own mother just told me I would disappoint my dead father.

I feel betrayed. I want to scream at the top of my lungs. Is this a joke? Is my life a joke?

I stare at the woman in front of me. The thoughts I had earlier leave my mind. I don't owe her anything. Not after the words that just left her mouth, leaving me skinned, raw, and absolutely heartbroken. She really doesn't care about me. She would have never said that if she did.

I would have thought she out of everyone would understand ... but I guess I was mistaken. She has a new man now. My dad is forgotten, and so am I.

"I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment to you, Mom. Maybe you should go live with your other family." Sarcasm drips from my tone as she glares over at me.

Crossing her arms across her chest, she raises an eyebrow. "What other family?"

Is she dumb or stupid? She must be playing dumb because who else would I be talking about?

"Your picture-perfect family."

She frowns.

"Rodrigo, Diego!" I exclaim.

"How are they my family?" She reaches over from where she sits and tries to grab my arm, but I dodge her.

"All you've been doing is spending time with them. You leave me here alone all the time. I wait up at night to make sure you come home safe, but then you show up in the morning, looking like you just got out of his bed!" I yell.

A stream of tears rushes down my face as I look at the woman I used to find comfort in. When I find nothing but pain in her eyes, the same as mine, my chest squeezes.

Gasping, she leans back in shock.

Did that hurt, Mom? Good. You've just ruined all the progress I made.

She's made me feel heartless once again.

"Don't bring me into this. This is about you!" she exclaims back. "I want my daughter to be honest with me. I want you to behave appropriately."

"People change," I reply. My voice is flat. "I want a mother who loves me, a mother who's around more and who shows some damn support!" I yell. "But I guess life is tough."

"Yeah, I guess people do change." She rolls her eyes and keeps her heated gaze on me. "I don't want you to leave this house, you understand? You're grounded until I say so." She points and glares at me. "That boy isn't allowed here. If I find him here, I'm calling his mom to come drag him back to where he belongs."

"You know, Mom"—my voice is strong—"Leonidas makes me feel happy. That's not a feeling I've felt in years. All you seem to do is make me sad. I can't believe you said that about Dad. You're supposed to be my support system." I pause, taking a deep breath. "I know Dad would be ashamed of me, but I can say the same about you. You've replaced me like I'm nothing." My voice cracks as my eyes water over with tears.

Swallowing tightly, she rolls her eyes. "Stay in your room for the day. I don't want to see your face." Striding to the door, she slams it before I get the chance to protest.



I sit on my bedroom floor. My hands fiddle with an old Polaroid photo I had stashed away in a box.

I always dig under my bed to find these whenever I feel sadness consume me. My dad brings peace to me. Looking at these photos, seeing a smile on his face, gives me strength. My fingertip rubs over Mom's face. She looks just as happy as I remember her to be.

What happened to her? She's changed so much, and it makes me sick to my stomach.

How can someone change so much this fast? She isn't the mom I used to know. She used to be the best, but now, she's the worst. A good mother doesn't bring down her own daughter to make herself feel better.

Our family used to be so happy. I never thought I would be someone who lives in a toxic household. But life changes. It feels I'm constantly reminded of that. All I need from her right now is her support. I want to know she's there for me through thick and thin.

I shouldn't have to stay up at night, wondering where she is and if she's okay. That should be her job. I'm the eighteen-year-old. I'm allowed to mess up.

Resting the back of my head on the wall behind me, I whisper, "I wish you were here." My voice cracks as my hand shakes the fragile photo. "Everything would be different. I would have a mom." Glancing down at my lap, I frown. "I would be happy, but you took that all away when you left. I know you're at peace, I just wish I was too."

Placing the photo down, I cover the box and slide it under my bed.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I wipe the tears rolling down my face. "Please help us, Dad."

TWENTY-SIX

LEO

Trinity's mom grounded her because of me. I scold myself. I should have been more considerate and careful. Our days together are limited. Now, many will be wasted due to the fact that she lied to her mom. Which is my fault. But Trinity is eighteen years old, yet her mom treats her like a five-year-old.

It's funny how Trinity's mom thinks she can keep me away from her. I always get my way. If I have to sneak my way through her bedroom window to see her each day, then I will.

I would do anything for that girl.

I see the sadness in Trinity's eyes when she thinks about her mom. I long to take away her hurt, but all her mom seems to do is hurt her even more. What will keeping her away from me do? That will only fuel Trinity's anger more.

I want to see her so badly. It's been three days since I dropped her off at her house. The next thing I knew, she was calling me, and I instantly heard the emotion in her voice. When she informed me she was grounded, I hurt for both Trinity and me. Nothing and no one will keep us apart. I'll be the best ninja anyone has ever seen.

"Leonidas, focus!" Mom snaps and points to the paper in front of me.

I hold myself from snapping back. Can't she see I'm lost in thought? Never interrupt a songwriter when he's thinking. What if I was pulling ideas together?

I roll my eyes and glare at the paper below me. The team listed questions for us to fill out before our radio interview coming up. I hate doing stuff like this. They treat us like dogs, like they need to tame us. That's what pisses me

off. Singing with Amelia and Elijah was fun until we signed that record deal. Now, we don't have freedom. We have to follow what they say, and if we don't, we're screwed.

I know Elijah and Amelia feel the same way. I see the frowns on their faces. The pen in Elijah's grip is being squeezed as he rushes through the questions. Amelia writes neatly but slowly. I just stare down at the blank piece of paper, twiddling the pen between my fingers while cursing everyone back at the office in LA.

"The faster you answer the questions, the faster you can leave," Mom says and sighs. Walking over to me, she brushes hair out of my eyes.

Mom has voiced her opinion to the agency. She agrees that we're being pushed too hard. She hates watching us get stomped on. Pleading to my dad got us nowhere. The only thing he cares about is money. Not us.

My fingers grip the pen tightly, turning my skin pink.

"I know, Mom." I sigh and give her a sad smile.

Glancing down, I read the first question.

How's your love life?

I scribble down, *Nonexistent*.

The last thing I want is for the world to figure out about Trinity, not only for her sanity, but also because she doesn't even know who I am yet. Don't even get me started on the fans. They'll go crazy, attack the shit out of her until she feels nothing but insecurities and sadness.

My eyes roam over and read the rest of the questions below.

I can easily answer most of these questions on the spot. I don't give a fuck if the agency doesn't trust me. I'm not finishing this. This is bullshit. Why am I wasting my time on this when I could be writing?

Pushing out of my seat, I throw the pen onto the table. "I can't do this," I mutter out, getting frustrated.

Amelia and Elijah both glare over at me and cross their arms across their chests.

"You're not ditching us again," Elijah pleads.

They both look at me with anger. Their noses flare as Mom walks into the room again.

"Leonidas," she breathes out in frustration and pinches the bridge of her nose. "Please sit down and finish. This isn't something you can choose to do. You must answer these questions."

I can't do this. I can't finish. My brain is screaming at me. I'm antsy. All

I want to do is scream. “If I sit in that chair, I’ll go insane,” I grit out to her.

My fists clench at my sides as she points over my shoulder toward the work.

“I know you hate it. So do your brother and sister, but they do it because they know they have to. You’ll get in trouble, Leonidas. Be smart this one time and finish, please.”

No one understands that I’m not the same as my siblings. We have different triggers and attention spans. Sitting down and doing stupid work the agency makes us do pisses me off. Me being in the band X3 and making money that they get a large percentage of should be enough.

Plus, I know how to answer simple questions to the press. I’ve been doing it for years now. Walking past my family, I dodge Mom’s hand when she tries to grab me by my shoulder.

“Leonidas Drakos!” she yells my full name, her voice stern and demanding.

I know Mom means serious business when she calls me by my full name. I hate my last name. Anything that only comes from my father gives me the creeps.

I pick up my pace when I hear her fast footsteps behind me.

I feel her hand on my shoulder, and my body twists around.

“Leonidas, go back, please?” Mom questions tiredly.

Guilt fills my entire body as I see the tiredness in my mom’s eyes. Though she doesn’t understand how frustrating this is.

“I’ll go insane, Mom. I’m sorry. I can’t. You always tell me to do what’s best for me. This is best for me. I’m not walking away because I’m lazy. I’m leaving because I’m angry,” I stammer.

Tears fill her eyes, which splits my heart in two. “Your father will get very upset.”

I delicately place my lips on her forehead. Pulling back and gripping her arms, I state, “I’ll deal with him. This isn’t your fight.”

“When it involves my kids, I’m always concerned,” she butts in firmly.

Nodding my head, I drop my hands and take a step back. “That’s what makes you the best mom. I just can’t do this right now.”

Understanding fills her eyes, and she pats my cheek. “Go, my love. I won’t keep you here unwillingly. You’re nineteen. You make your own choices now.”

As I make my way to the door, I grab my car keys. Every bone in my

body immediately relaxes when I hear my car unlocking. A cool brush of wind passes through the air, rocking the tree branches. Inhaling deeply, I stride to where my car waits for me.

As I walk past the piece of land where I've made so many memories already, I can't help but look over at her house. Is she feeling suffocated in the walls of the house she's supposed to feel comfort in? I wish I could help her escape. But I don't want to cause any more problems and make matters worse.

My feet halt suddenly when I spot a shadow. The curtain is pulled back, and there she is.

My rock star.

From the distance between us, I see a small smile lift across her face. Her delicate hand rises and waves at me. I want to run up to her house and give her a hug, repeatedly tell her I love her. But I need to get away. My body is tense with anger. The last thing I want is for her to see me like this.

Ripping my gaze from hers, which is extremely painful, I glance down to my feet and continue my steps to the car. Slamming the door behind me, I look through my rearview mirror and watch a frown appear on her face. She stares at my car, and then seconds later, she drops the curtain back in place. Leaving me watching a curtain sway at the sudden loss of contact.

Letting out a shaky breath, I slam my hand down onto the steering wheel hard. "Shit." Pain immediately travels up my arm as I unclench my fist.

I upset her. I saw the confusion in her eyes. She probably thinks I'm mad at her. I'll call her later and explain *almost* everything to her.

As I drive away from Trinity, I can't help but think I'm driving away from what I'm trying to seek at this moment. My source of peace.

TWENTY-SEVEN

TRINITY

As my hand drops the curtain back in place, I immediately frown while dread fills my stomach. I know Leonidas has anger issues. I saw the way his tense body walked over toward his car and only stopped when he spotted me. I've seen the way his eyes flare with anger when he's deep in thought.

I know he struggles a lot, so I don't push him to tell me anything. I know how difficult it can be when people pry. They make you feel like an animal, like they need to stand back with their hands extended just in case you attack.

This is the first time he's been cold with me since he asked me out. I rack my brain for something that I must have done to him, but I come up with nothing. He must be having an off day. It's best if I leave him alone and give him the space I know he needs.

Walking over to my bed, I stare down at my fuzzy, colorful socks that I got last Christmas from Harper. As I pull my sheets over my body, I pat Simba's furry head once he lays it on my legs.

"Hey, boy," I say, looking down at him. "Bad day?" I ask softly, knowing he won't answer because he's a dog. "Me too, bud," I reply when he sinks his head into my palm.

Glancing at my nightstand beside my bed, my eyes land on the book Leonidas got me. I haven't opened it since the night I finished the first five chapters. I'm tired of waiting for him to finish. Picking up the book, I run my fingertip over the dark apple.

I'm sure Leonidas wouldn't mind if I moved on to another chapter. I have nothing better to do anyway since I'm grounded.

Placing a finger to my lips, I shush Simba. "He'll never know."

Opening the book, I sit back and start where I left off.



It's been two hours, and I'm halfway done with the book. I know I should have stopped at chapter six, but reading for five minutes did nothing for me. My fingers were anxiously flipping the pages as I got lost in the world of vampires and werewolves. The number of times I felt the need to throw this book across the room and scream in my pillow is endless.

I'm Team Edward, definitely not Jacob. The kid annoys me. He's so clingy. I shiver at the thought of Leonidas being clingy. I'm glad he understands that when two people date, it doesn't mean they need to be with one another all the time. Don't get me wrong; I love spending time with Leonidas. He's becoming my favorite person. However, sometimes, I feel like I need to be left alone. I want to cuddle in my bed alone with Simba at my hip.

A knock sounds on my door. Placing my macrame bookmark in my book, I rest it on my bed and wait for the person to come in. Obviously, it's just my mom. Who else would it be since I'm grounded?

She steps into the room and closes the door softly behind her. As she leans her body against it, her eyes roam around.

Dirty shirts, pants, and socks litter the floor. I have a tendency to throw my things and not pick them up. I should get up and throw them in the hamper, but I can't find the energy today. All I want to do is lie in my bed and read.

"Soon, ants are going to be crawling in here," Mom says, her mouth turning down in a frown.

She leans down and picks up a shirt. Placing it at her nose, she sniffs it.

Ew.

Her eyebrow rises as she glances up at me.

I tense when I see my mother holding the shirt I wore when Leonidas took us out of town. I remember the entire drive back home. I was secretly sniffing it because it brought me comfort. At one point, I thought Leonidas caught me. I saw the small smile on his face. His hand just tightened around mine, and I got a kiss on the cheek.

My mind goes back to those several make-out sessions, the way he felt

inside of me. God, that was out of this world. I hope Mom can't see the tint of pink on my cheeks.

She sighs and throws the shirt back onto the floor. "Do I even want to know?"

I shake my head as she raises an eyebrow.

"Afraid someone's in here?" I ask her, my voice full of tension.

"I trust you," is all she says.

Bullshit. She screamed at me the other day that I'm a disgrace, and now, she trusts me?

I lean my head to the side. "I know you feel the urge to look under my bed and in my closet ... so look." I sit against the headboard and gesture around my room. "I'm afraid you're going to waste your time since there's no one here."

Her nose twitches, and she scoffs, "Please lose the attitude. I'm your mother. Have some respect."

One thing Dad taught me is that you don't let anyone walk all over you. Blood sometimes means nothing. I won't hold back my feelings. I've learned how it feels when you keep all the aggression and anger in you. You'll eventually explode.

"My dad said you can't show respect to someone when they don't give you the same in return." I glare at her when she laughs.

"How do I not show you respect?"

Always playing the victim. She knows what seeing her fool around with Rodrigo makes me feel like. Seeing the way she giggles around him, how she twirls her hair around her finger—it makes me want to vomit.

I truly never thought she would move on, and maybe some selfish part of me hoped she wouldn't ... but seeing her fall for another man is suffocating.

"Mom, I can't do this today." I sigh, picking up my book and groaning when she interrupts.

"Tell me how I don't show you any respect."

Glancing up at her fiercely, I rant, "I've told you this multiple times before. I hate seeing you come home, looking like you didn't sleep a wink. How do you honestly think that's affecting me, Mom? I shouldn't have to see my parent moving on from the other. Dad should still be here. It's already hard that I see you falling in love with someone else. I would appreciate it if you didn't show up, looking so messy from you know..." I trail off.

She just stares at me. Her eyes are wide in shock. I won't be the first to

look away. I want to win this staring contest.

She purses her lips and looks down. “Fine, I’ll be more considerate. I just came in here to tell you I’ll be away for the weekend.”

“Rodrigo?” I interrupt.

Hesitantly, she nods her head. I gesture with my hands for her to explain further. I want to get this conversation over with as fast as I can.

“I’ll be back Monday morning. I want you to stay in this house. You are grounded—don’t forget that. I’ll be calling Athena to monitor you.”

I hold back my smirk. Mom doesn’t realize that Athena, Leonidas’s mother, has a liking toward me. That lady is full of sweetness. She won’t feel the need to watch over me. I’m glad Mom is leaving me alone. Maybe that will give me more alone time with Leonidas.

It definitely will.



I watch from the same place on my bed as the sun goes down. My window is open a crack, filling my room with cricket noises. God painted a beautiful sunset today. The yellows, pinks, oranges, and the blues of the sky mix perfectly together.

I’m not one of those girls who whips out her phone to take a picture. To me, it’s not the same when you look back at it. I’d rather soak in the feeling while gazing at it in the moment.

My phone vibrates against my leg. I look down and see a picture of me and Leonidas. I took this photo when we were on our little getaway. I’m straddling his lap. I stuck out my tongue, and he did the same. I remember squealing when I felt his tongue touch mine. This picture describes our relationship perfectly. Unplanned, snapped at the perfectly imperfect time.

My hands shake as I pick up my phone.

Swiping my fingertip against the screen, I whisper into the phone, “Hello?”

“Trinity?” His voice is urgent over the line. “I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He knows.

Others can’t even tell the difference between my forced smiles and my real ones. I can’t hide anything from this guy.

“It’s okay, Leonidas.” I sigh as I hear static over the line. “Where are you?”

Our connection is poor. He cuts in and out, but I hear the sound of crickets on his end as well.

“Listen,” I say strongly into my phone. “Mom is gone for the weekend. Come over tomorrow with Amelia and Elijah,” I demand more than I ask.

I hear the joy in his voice faintly as he replies with, “Yes.”

We hang up, and I place my head on my pillow to rest for the night. I can’t stop the smile from spreading on my face.



I’m sure my smile brightens my entire face. Mom has finally left for the weekend. She looked hesitant before she left, especially since our relationship is so tense. You can practically feel the anger and awkwardness in the air.

If she wants to fix our relationship, she’d better start trying. I’ve expressed countless times what’s pushing me back, but all she seems to focus on is Rodrigo. Sure, that makes me angry ... but one positive is that I get time to spend with Leonidas. As soon as I saw her car leave the driveway, I gave the all clear to Leonidas. We’re having a movie night, and hopefully, we’ll get a little tipsy along the way.

“Hey, bitch,” Amelia yells when I open the front door. She pulls me into her body tightly.

“Hey, bitch,” Elijah mocks his sister and kisses my cheek. He gets pushed away by my boyfriend.

“Don’t kiss my girlfriend,” he grumbles. His big hand wipes his brother’s kiss off my cheek.

Waving him away, I wink over my shoulder to Elijah. “There’s enough of me to go around.”

Elijah places a hand on his hip. “Yeah, Leonidas, share.” He tenses when Leonidas takes a stiff step forward. “Never mind,” he stammers. “She’s all yours. Have fun.” He turns around and runs toward the kitchen.

I watch him with amused eyes and squeal when Leonidas places his hand between my legs. “You’ll see what I’m going to do to you later.”

Why does he do this to me?

“I missed you,” he mumbles against my skin.

Sighing, I close my eyes. “I missed you. It feels like forever since I’ve seen you.” I lean my back against his chest as he places a passionate kiss on my neck.

“Trinity, where are your spoons?” Amelia yells from the kitchen, making me jump away from her brother.

Straightening out my shirt, I clear my throat. “The cabinet under the sink,” I yell toward her.

When she yells, “Thank you,” I turn around and glare at my boyfriend. “Don’t do that when they’re around.”

He’s such a child.

Leonidas sticks his tongue out at me. “Can’t keep my hands to myself,” he sings.

I want to tell him to continue when he halts.

“Forgot, sorry,” he rambles and shuffles on his feet.

His voice is flawless. It’s addictive. It makes me want to pull up a chair and listen more intently. His voice is velvety smooth and rich. He sings slowly and makes sure every high note is hit perfectly. If whatever he plans on doing in the future doesn’t work out, he’ll make a damn excellent singer.

“Let’s go before they come looking for us,” he says as he places a hand to my lower back.

He guides me toward the kitchen, and we find his siblings sitting on the kitchen barstools.

“Quick fuck?” Elijah asks and raises his eyebrows up and down once he spots us.

“If I had been inside my girlfriend, you would have heard her screaming,” he replies nonchalantly, and I gasp in horror. “So, no—not yet at least.”

I slap his bicep and glare over at him. “Shut up, you pig.”

He holds up his hands in surrender and raises an eyebrow.

Amelia makes a gagging noise and covers her ears. “Elijah, we didn’t even bring our earplugs.”

Reaching over the counter, I pull a lock of her blonde hair. “I won’t torture you like that.”

Her innocent eyes glance up at me. They shine with happiness. “That’s why I love you!”

I laugh and hug her back when she pulls me to her side.

“She’s mine.”

“I saw her first,” Amelia snarks back.

“She’s my girlfriend,” Leonidas argues.

“I don’t care.”

Gosh, these children ...

“Foursome?” Elijah says and then staggers off his chair a minute later. “God, no!” he screams and smacks his forehead. “I forgot you guys were my siblings.”

Tears leak out of his eyes. From laughter or mortification? I think both.

I hold back a laugh when I look over at Amelia and Leonidas. They look scared. Their eyes are wide with disgust.

Shifting in his spot, Leonidas grumbles, “I think he’s adopted because no sibling of mine can be that stupid.”

“God, kill me now,” Elijah rambles and bangs his head face-first on the counter. Sticking his hand straight in the air, he begs, “Please send a lightning bolt right to the tip of my finger. I’ll go into cardiac arrest and die, hopefully.”

Glancing at the poor boy in front of me, I want to laugh. I give Leonidas a look and walk over to Elijah. I rub circles on his back, and he relaxes.

“From another person who has a donkey brain, I understand your brain farts.”

He nods his head and lets out a laugh. “I’m so stupid.”

“Amen,” we all say.

“Well, on that note, time to get drunk!” Amelia yells and holds up a bottle of vodka.



Leonidas is the only one who has drunk nothing. I sit on his lap with a blanket over our torsos while I cuddle into his warm chest. Elijah and Amelia are getting close to being hammered. I only drank one shot and called it quits. I don’t feel like getting drunk tonight. I want to remember every second I have with Leonidas.

“He’s so hot!” Amelia grumbles as she stares at the TV in front of us.

My back straightens. I rock my hips excitedly and clap my hands. “He’s droolworthy!”

Leonidas bucks his hips a little and places his lips to my ear. “Stop

wiggling your hips.”

His breath is hot on my skin, which makes my skin tingle. Leonidas knows I enjoy teasing him. Seeing the way he reacts to my touch is better than any high.

While Elijah and Amelia focus their attention on the TV and the vodka, I lean my back straight against his chest and wiggle my ass on his groin. His hands slam on my hips. He pinches my skin and gives me dagger eyes.

“Look at his abs.” Amelia sighs.

“To die for.” Another wiggle.

“I bet you would leave his sorry ass for that.” Amelia glances over at us, and I stop my movements.

Leonidas curses and places his forehead against my back.

“Nope, I’m into brunettes,” I clarify and wave her away.

She gives me a disapproving look and laughs. “Liar.”

Another wiggle.

He sucks in a breath and coughs. I laugh and feel satisfied when I notice how hard he is under me.

“Stop, Trinity,” Leonidas grits out behind me.

I don’t.

I feel his lips turn up into a smirk against my neck.

“You want to play? Fine.”

I’m lucky we’re surrounded by darkness because when Leonidas’s hand goes into my pants and in between my legs, I can’t help but lean back and place my hand against my mouth.

“Stop,” I whisper back at him. Yet I move against his finger.

“Don’t like to be teased?” he breathes out while biting my ear.

We both stop suddenly when Elijah and Amelia glance over at each other and laugh at something said in the movie.

He resumes teasing me when they both look away in their drunk state. I move my hips in circles, and he pushes two fingers inside me.

“We need to stop,” I rasp, and he nods.

This is the wrong place to be doing this.

Especially in front of his siblings.

But we can’t seem to stop. We continue our teasing. He places his lips on my neck and sucks.

And what happens next nearly stops my heart.

Elijah looks over at us and pukes all over the floor.

Great.



Damn, I didn't think he drank that much. If I had known he would make himself sick, I would have taken the bottle away from him.

Amelia giggles and points to Leonidas. He's currently picking up Elijah in his arms.

"You threw up." Chuckles leave her lips.

"Shut up, Amelia," my frustrated boyfriend grumbles.

He takes Elijah up to my room, where I have air mattresses on the floor for them. When I invited them over, I pulled those babies out. We haven't used them in years. I didn't want them sleeping in Mom's room, which was the only room left. So, this will do. And I would feel horrible if they slept on the couch.

I watch as Elijah cuddles under the blankets and mumbles a slurred, "Thank you."

Leonidas glances down at his brother in amusement. "Idiot."

I slap his bicep and scold him, "Be nice."

"Nah, I don't do nice."

"Yes, you do," I say and place my hands on my hips.

"Only to you," he grumbles as I walk away to find Amelia.

I find her in the same place we left her.

"Time for bed, Amelia," I say happily.

"What? Noooo," she whines.

"It's four o'clock in the morning," I say and pull her up with so much effort.

Placing one of her arms around my neck, I guide her upstairs. All her dead weight on me makes the task ten times more difficult.

I lay her down beside her brother and build a pillow wall between them, knowing they'll appreciate that later.

"I'm only going to bed if you go too," Amelia whispers, glancing up at me.

I nod my head at her. "I'll be on my bed. Go to sleep."

She watches as I walk over to my comfy-looking bed. Shivers travel up my spine when I find Leonidas lying down in only his black boxers, waiting

for me.

He smirks at me. Sending him one back, I turn off my lamp, surrounding the room in darkness and silence. Lifting the sheets up, I lie down, my back facing him, and snuggle into my sheets. My body stiffens when I feel his body come closer to mine from behind.

I arch my back when I feel his soft lips against my neck. He nips and grips my hip firmly. Looking over my shoulder, I find him leaning on his elbow. His body hovers over mine, making my heart skip a beat. I want this ... I really do, but Elijah and Amelia are in the same room. It seems disrespectful.

“They’re drunk,” he whispers. Looking over at them on the floor, he nods. “They’re out. They won’t hear. They’re deep sleepers, I promise.”

I bite my lip. I want Leonidas. We haven’t seen each other since Mom grounded me. This is the first night we’ve been alone together. We’ll be quiet. We have to be.

He sees the smile on my lips. “Come here.” He jerks me against him. His eyes are full of desire.

He takes my mouth with his, kissing me deeply and passionately. I feel his member pressing against my thigh, and I groan lowly into our kiss. As I pull my lips apart from his, he sits up against the headboard. I place myself in his awaiting lap. When I wrap my legs around his hips, he presses our bodies together.

His firm hand caresses up the side of my body. “So alluring,” he whispers before pulling me into him.

Our lips delicately touch, and it makes me wild. My hands grip his shoulders, desperate for something to hold on to. I rub my lower half against his, and he curses against my lips.

The last time we had sex, he took full control. I loved the alpha male look on him. But now, I feel a certain hunger to be the one in charge.

The sheets rest below my butt. I crawl slowly down his body, and he watches me with intense eyes.

“What are you doing?” he demands.

I don’t answer him because I know he’ll refuse. As I kneel between his legs, my lips press gently against his bare skin. Each kiss is slow and lingering as I make my way down the dips of his abs.

He props himself up onto his elbows and gives me a wild look. “Trinity, stop. You don’t have to.”

Looking up at him through my lashes, I find him sexy, his wild hair doing something to me. His eyes travel my body, leaving a path of heat wherever they linger. My hands slowly slide his boxers down. I tease him with my eyes and wandering hands.

My lips press a kiss firmly below his sexy V-line. God, this guy is so defined. He makes me want to drool. I glance up at him and find his jaw clenched tightly. His chest rises up and down fast as he stares at me.

I look down at the stiff member in front of me. When I wrap my hand around him, Leonidas lets out a groan. I keep my focus as I slowly move my hand up and down his shaft. Leonidas swears when my lips wrap around his hard erection. I suck, running my tongue over the tip. He tastes salty, a familiar taste.

“Trinity,” he breathes out.

His eyes don’t leave my body as I lean forward to take him deeper into my mouth.

My lips stretch around his hardness. I want to take as much of him as I can. My tongue grazes along the bottom as I pump the base of him with my hand. I have to force myself to slow down at the feel of him in my mouth.

Leonidas is losing control, flexing and unflexing his body. Seeing the tortured state he’s in urges me to go faster, harder. His entire thickness fills my mouth until he hits the back of my throat. His warmth and hardness make me feel like I’m losing control. Leonidas grunts as I drive my head forward, down his entire length.

“Just like that, baby,” he groans, breathing hard. “Fuck, don’t stop.”

I know he’s close when his hand in my hair tightens. A low growl leaves his lips, and he throws his head back. He’s hard in my mouth, rocking slightly. He searches for a release. With one final gentle stroke of my tongue against his tip, he jerks as his erection twitches before he releases, riding the wave while I keep moving over him, loving the sounds he makes just for me.

Popping my mouth off his semi-hard erection, I swipe a hand across my face with a smirk. I let my hands travel up his chest. Leonidas takes a sudden sharp breath in as I take off my shirt, revealing the lacy red bra he loved the night he packed my suitcase.

“Holy shit,” he grunts and reaches for me. My hands push him away, and he frowns. “Let me touch you.”

Placing my ass on his groin, I grind slowly. “Nope. It’s my turn today. I’m in charge.”

“To hell with that,” he grumbles and grabs my hips firmly.

Placing my lips against his, I whisper, “You want me or not?”

“Keep it on.” He nods toward my bra.

I nod and reach over toward my nightstand. Pulling my drawer open as quietly as possible, I let out a quiet pant when Leonidas’s hot mouth travels to my chest. He grips my covered breast and kneads his thumb over my hardened nipple.

Grabbing the small square package, I rip it open with my teeth. Scooting down his body, I slip the layer of protection on. Moving toward him, I secure my legs on either side of him. Looking down at our bodies, he presses a thumb against my clit. Moving like a tease around me as he watches my expression. Reaching out a hand, I grip his hardened dick, needing it inside me now. His erection rubs against my heated softness, making me jerk. Leonidas makes me breathless—the way he looks at me, the way his hands linger on my body, and his strained voice. He consumes my thoughts, and I know he feels the same.

My lips connect with his again as I place my hands on his broad shoulders, and I lower myself onto him. I groan as I feel my walls being spread and stretched. An intense pleasure fills me when I take in Leonidas’s full length. Leonidas relaxes his hips back down when he lies flat on the bed with me on top of him. His fingers quickly pull the sheets up to my shoulders, hiding me.

I’m nervous. The last time we had sex, he had full control. Now, it’s me on top of him. I can’t help but feel insecure when he’s below me, looking all sexy. Sensing my anxiety, he grabs my bottom to drive my hips forward. Groaning softly, he throws his head back while I rock against him, finally finding a rhythm. I gasp into his shoulder every time he thrusts against me, pushing our groins harder together. Easing my pace, I watch as his thickness reappears below me, glistening in my wetness.

Leonidas’s fingers tighten on my hips. “You’re going to kill me, going that slow.”

Pushing back down on him, I take him deeper, harder, faster. My eyes roll to the back of my neck as he hits my G-spot.

His lips suck my neck as he tries to muffle the sounds coming out of his mouth. Getting lost in the feeling of him, I let out a moan. I open my eyes in confusion and spot the smile on his face. He has his hand covering my mouth.

“Baby,” he says sternly, “we have to be quiet.”

He lifts his face and covers my mouth with his lips. I cling to the back of his neck as Leonidas moves my hips faster.

“Fuck,” Leonidas mumbles, shutting his eyes. His forehead deeply creases while he sucks on my bottom lip.

A mumble from across the room makes us freeze. His hands clasp my hips down when I try to move them.

Shit.

“Leo?” Amelia groans.

“Shit,” he grumbles into my chest.

My chest moves up and down. I sink down into the bed further and balance my weight on my forearms. Getting low, I continue to ride him. I can’t stop. He’s making me crazy.

“Trinity,” he breathes out, strained. Gripping the globes of my butt, he moves me against him.

“Trinity?” Amelia asks.

“Keep going,” he whispers huskily in my ear. Clearing his throat, he speaks through gritted teeth. “Yes, Amelia?”

A second later, her soft voice mumbles, “Just making sure you’re still here.”

I stop my movements against my boyfriend and listen for any other sounds.

Hearing only my and Leonidas’s shallow breaths, I sit up and clutch his shoulders. I flex my hips, moving up and down at a pace I know drives him crazy. The mattress squeaks slightly every time I pound down on him. But we don’t seem to care. The only thing consuming my mind is Leonidas.

“You feel so fucking good.” He buries his face in my neck.

A small moan leaves his lips as he bites my skin hard, for sure leaving teeth marks. My pace speeds up. I’m unable to control myself any longer. Leonidas can’t either because his teeth clench together tightly.

“Yes, baby.” Closing his eyes again, he grinds into me.

Feeling him come beneath me only pushes me harder. He connects our lips when I release quietly. My entire body relaxes into his. We ride our high together until we’re left a sweaty mess.

My cheek meets his chest. Letting out a sigh, Leonidas chuckles and kisses the tip of my nose.

“I’m obsessed with you,” he whispers after a few minutes.

His hand smooths down my hair as I peer up at him from his chest.

“I’m obsessed with you.”

He glances over at the ground and smirks. “See? Out like a light.”

I eye his siblings and laugh when I find them cuddling.

“Our secret,” he whispers.

“Our secret,” I chuckle and squeal when he rolls on top of me and sends me into bliss with a passionate kiss.

TWENTY-EIGHT

TRINITY

I wake up to whispers. I don't open my eyes, but I listen intently to them. They're rushed and confused.

“Are they not wearing any clothing?” Elijah whispers to his sister.

When I hear movement, my heart stops. Footsteps tiptoe toward where we lie, and I hear a gasp.

“They're fucking naked, Elijah!” she whisper-yells. “They had sex in the same room as us!”

I hold back a laugh when I hear Elijah gag.

“I breathed in their sex air.” His footsteps differ from his sister's light strides.

He stomps into my bathroom, making as much noise as humanly possible. A second later, I hear him blow his nose—very loudly. I'm afraid the roof will collapse on us.

“Shh!” Amelia says, and the bathroom door closes, muffling their voices.

“They're freaking out, aren't they?” his voice, husky and rich with sleep, says from beside me.

Nodding my head, I smile when he kisses my forehead. “Your brother is currently in the bathroom, blowing his nose, because he breathed in our sex air.”

Leonidas muffles his laugh in his pillow, which speeds up my heart at the sight. He's so adorable.

I run my hand through his messy, sexy hair as he jokes, “That weirdo.”

Moving closer to him, I rest my head against his forearm. “To be fair, if I found out someone had sex in the same room as me, I would freak out too. We probably shouldn't have done that.”

Leaning on his side, he mumbles against my temple, "Ditto."

Leonidas is silent for a moment and then lets out a deep breath. "I can't say I regret it. Watching you take control like that? I'll forever remember that." He has a stupid smirk on his face as I slap his side.

"Shut up," I mumble, embarrassed by my action.

Leonidas pecks my bare shoulder with a shit-eating grin. "I'm just teasing you. I love seeing you blush."

I glare at him. "Want me to punch you in the face?"

He bursts out laughing, showing off the dimples that I love dearly.

"I love these," I say and place my finger where one indent lies.

He stops smiling on purpose. My hand lightly slaps his cheek, and I smile in response. He laughs softly.

"Why are you so cute?" His hands find my hips as he smiles fondly at me.

"I fucking hate you," Elijah yells before I can respond. "I blew my fucking nose until it started bleeding because you horndogs couldn't keep it together for a night."

I lie there, still against Leonidas. The covers hide away anything that Elijah and Amelia shouldn't see.

Smirking over at his brother, he shrugs his shoulders. "I had to make love to my girlfriend, Elijah. That's what you do when you love someone."

Amelia runs into the room, her mouth dropped open in shock. Her messy blonde hair falls in her face, blocking her beautiful eyes. "Did you say *make love*?" Squealing, she runs over to my side of the bed. Gripping my face in the palms of her hands, she jumps up and down. "My brother is capable of loving! Let's throw a party, everyone!"

If I wasn't naked under these sheets, I would laugh and tease Leonidas along with her. But I'm one hundred percent naked and feeling really exposed with the two of them in the room.

I glance over at Leonidas while his sister jumps in joy.

He interrupts Amelia's party when he sees the discomfort in my eyes. "Mind getting out, so we can find our clothes?"

A laugh leaves my mouth as Amelia glares over at her brother. Giving him the finger, she scolds, "Now, whose problem is that?"

I love her.

Elijah follows her out of the room, but not before copying his sister's lead and sticking up his finger as well. I flinch when I hear the door slam.

Leonidas's finger hooks around my chin, lightly pulling it in his direction, and my eyes find his.

"He's playing. You know that, right?"

I nod my head. "I know, Leonidas," I confirm when I see he doesn't buy my bullshit. Sitting up, I grip the sheets as I pull them over my body, hiding me from Leonidas's view. "The anxiety makes me take everything worse than it actually is. I overthink all the time."

Anxiety sucks. It never truly goes away. It's like a shadow. It's always there, but it dims at times. When it comes, it comes full force. So, I can't help but look at situations differently than other people.

He pulls my head down by the back of my neck and gives me a slow kiss. "I know, my love. Don't worry. I understand you. Just know that Elijah would never yell at you. He loves you."

A few moments later, we get out of bed. I wrap my black bedsheets around my body as I walk toward my dresser. My hands fiddle with my clothes, but I turn when I don't hear Leonidas moving around anymore behind me. I watch him with curious eyes as he stares down at the bed.

"Leonidas?"

He snaps out of his thoughts and looks up at me. Biting his lip, he mumbles, "I have one question."

I nod my head, and he continues, "Did you wear this ...?" He pauses and holds up my lacy red bra in the air. My cheeks immediately turn a shade of pink when his heated eyes find my own. "Because of me?"

I would be lying if I said no. I know Leonidas loved it when he first saw it before he took me away for the weekend. Swallowing tightly, I nod my head. No words can seem to leave my mouth as he just stares at the lingerie. Biting his bottom lip, he lets out a curse lowly. With just his black boxers on, he strides to where his backpack lies on the floor. Pulling the zipper open, he stuffs the bra into his backpack and closes it fast.

What did he just do? I stare at him, shocked.

When he looks up, he acknowledges my confusion. "What? Another reason for you to come over to see me and get it."

That's it. I'm going to cry a river of happy tears.

"I don't need a silly reason like that to come and see my boyfriend." A breathy laugh leaves my mouth as he smirks at me.

"Maybe I just want it, okay?" Leonidas whines like a four-year-old even though he's a nineteen-year-old guy.

Gasping, I run over to him, slapping his broad shoulder as I scold him, “You’re so nasty! I love that bra.”

“I bet I love it more, and I’m only dirty for you.”

“You’d better be,” I mumble, walking toward my dresser again. “Or else I’ll haunt you,” I joke but keep my voice painfully serious.

“Noted,” is all my boyfriend replies with.



I watch the boys play outside. They kick a soccer ball around my backyard, yelling and jumping on one another. I can’t help but say I’m surprised that Leonidas is beating Elijah. It seems as if that guy is good at everything.

“So ...” Amelia comes up beside me and trails off. I look over and find her staring at her brothers, a small smile gracing her lips. “Did you really do the deed last night?”

Feeling extremely guilty, I turn with a frown. “I’m sorry. We got carried away. It was a shitty thing to do.”

She pushes my shoulder and laughs. “I know my brother. He gets everything he wants. Plus, he can be pretty convincing.”

“You got that right. He’s pretty convincing.”

We both chuckle.

“Do you love him?” she whispers a few moments later, breaking the silence.

I try to keep the emotion out of my voice, but as I look at Leonidas score a goal and throw his hands up in victory, I find it difficult. “He’s amazing. Leonidas is the most caring person I’ve ever met. I haven’t felt this happy in so long. I’m definitely falling in love with him.”

“He loves you too.” She pauses. “I’ve never seen him this invested in a relationship. You can tell he cares so much by just looking at his eyes when you’re around.”

Curiosity gets the best of me, so I ask the question that’s killing me. “Has he been in a relationship before?”

She nods her head, and a frown makes its way to her face. “A while ago, but they didn’t last that long. The breakup definitely messed him up. After, his trust issues soared above the roof.”

I wonder what happened and what his ex-girlfriend did to make him have

trust issues. Obviously, I'm glad they ended. I know that makes me sound selfish, but I don't care. I wouldn't have met him, and I wouldn't be in a relationship that not only is strengthening him, but me as well.

"I can't believe we're going home soon. I feel like we just arrived here. It's been nothing but peaceful. It's going to hurt, going back, especially without you," Amelia says. Her eyes water as she looks over at me. "What are you guys going to do? Are you going to do long-distance?"

Sadly, I shrug my shoulders at her. I have no idea what we're going to do. I don't want him to leave me, but I can't hold him back. I know long-distance probably won't work. It never does.

"We haven't talked about that yet, which I'm slightly grateful for. When we do, it's just going to feel so"—I gesture with my hands, frustrated—"real, like time is just ticking down faster at every given moment."

"You guys can't break up!" Amelia exclaims, gripping my shoulders tightly while giving me a firm look. "Leonidas and you are endgame. I won't believe in love anymore if this doesn't work out."

Me too, Amelia. Me too.

Just talking about me and Leonidas not working out sends a painful shock to my heart. I can't imagine my life without him. The thought terrifies me.

I change the topic as silence fills the room. "Do you dye your hair? I've been meaning to ask since your brothers and mom have brown hair," I point out, looking at her blonde hair.

"Do you like it?" she asks while twirling a piece around her finger. She glances down at her finger, and I see her frown. "I dyed it for a change before we got here. I'm not sure how I like it though."

I have to admit, Amelia looks beautiful with her blonde hair, but I know if she goes back to her natural brown hair, it will make her facial features stand out even more.

"I love your hair, Amelia. Each time I see you, you look amazing. But it only matters if you like your hair. Who gives a shit what anyone else thinks?" I say sternly, trying to get the insecurity out of her eyes.

"Thank you, Trinity. You're right. Sometimes, it's just harder to train your mind to not give a fuck what people around you think."

Once you let society in, it kills you. It claws its nails into you unexpectedly until you bleed out. All you're going to be left with is the memory of who you used to be.

Fighting those feelings will feel like a sucker punch to the gut at first, yet

with a little time, the urge to constantly bully yourself will dim.

“Everything with practice gets easier,” I say, picking at a loose thread on my shirt.

Amelia and I both take a peek at the window when we hear screams. I let out a booming laugh when I find Elijah on Leonidas’s back. The glass window prevents us from hearing properly. But Leonidas doesn’t look happy as he yells over his shoulder at Elijah.

“They’re crazy.” I scrunch my nose, loving the energy they bring.

“Amen to that. The number of vases they’ve broken ...” She shivers at the thought.

As I cast my gaze away from my boyfriend and his brother, I see something at the back of Amelia’s ear that I haven’t noticed before.

A delicate, small black tattoo that says X3.

TWENTY-NINE

LEO

I walk into Trinity's kitchen, all sweaty due to my brother jumping on my back like the crazy fucker he is. Panic takes over my body, as I walk into Trinity questioning Amelia about the tattoo we all have.

A tattoo that says X3. Our stupid fucking band name.

Shock fills Amelia's eyes as she tenses. She opens her mouth to say something, but nothing comes out other than a stammer.

Amelia and Elijah have wanted to tell her about us. I've heard their arguments many times, but I can't seem to find it in me to tell her. At least, not yet. She's falling in love with who I am. What if that all changes when she finds out my identity? I can't have her slip between my fingers when I just got her, when I've just felt my heart lighten with happiness.

"I didn't know you had a tattoo. What's the meaning behind it, if you don't mind me asking? I just love learning people's stories through art," Trinity asks, smiling softly while keeping her gaze on the tattoo.

My sister looks between me and her with a complicated battle in her eyes.

Please lie for me.

Just once more, so I can continue to be happy with the only girl who's ever liked me for me.

Please, I can't lose her. I know I will.

I'm addicted to lies, like an addict depends on drugs.

"You pronounce it as *times three*," Amelia begins to explain. "It stands for us." Amelia gestures to me and Elijah, where we stand in the doorway. Guilt is layered in her voice. But only Elijah and I would know.

It hurts that I'm keeping an enormous secret from my girlfriend, but this is the most normal I've felt in a long time.

Trinity's bright smile kills me. It's like a knife stabs me from all different directions. Her smile isn't bringing me happiness at the moment, only a cold shiver throughout my entire body.

"I love that!" She looks over at me. "Do you have one?"

Nodding once, I walk over toward her. I show her the inside of my wrist. In delicate cursive, our band name is written out. She stares at it for a few seconds with wonder, placing her fingertip over my black tattoo. My skin tickles when I feel hers against mine.

I watch her intently, and her eyes seem distant.

"I've never fully looked at this tattoo. All the others on your arms stand out. Tattoos fascinate me. The fact that they're all unique to the person is incredible."

As she continues to glance at my other tattoos I have on my arms and fingers, Amelia and Elijah give me a death glare behind Trinity's back.

They're sick of my bullshit. I would be too.

"You should get one." Elijah breaks the silence.

I look up at him with an eyebrow raised.

"Me, get a tattoo?" She shakes her head quickly and bites her lip.

"You're a badass, but to make you a total badass, you need ink," my brother states while crossing his arms across his chest.

Trinity bites her lip and glances up at me. Her eyes bore into mine, secretly asking me a question.

"You don't have to, babe," I softly reassure her.

Her slim fingers fiddle with my rings. "To be honest, I kind of want one."

I straighten up and give her a smile. "Really?"

Nodding her head, she explains, "I've wanted one for a long time. But my mom wouldn't allow me to get one."

"You're a grown-ass person," Elijah chuckles. "You don't need her permission."

"I don't want to go alone," she grumbles and gives him a look.

I crack a smile and pull her body into mine. "Well, if you want to get one, you have us now."

While her front teeth bite lightly on her pinkie nail, Trinity questions herself out loud, "Should I do this? Should I get a tattoo?" After thinking in silence with me and my siblings just staring at her, she blurts out, "Yes, I should! I only live once, so fuck it."

That's my girl. Time to get some ink on her.

“You got that right.” Amelia scoffs and starts peeling a clementine.

After she peels the orange skin away, Elijah snatches the fruit from her and stuffs the entire thing in his mouth.

“Hey!” she yells and pushes his shoulder.

As he staggers back, he bites into the orange, and the juice sprays all over Amelia, making her flinch back as the sticky liquid lands all over her face.

Better her than me ...

All Elijah can seem to do is laugh around the fruit stuffed in his mouth. Hunching over, he grips his stomach. “What are brothers for?” he wheezes out at her and playfully shrugs his shoulders as they still shake from his laughter.

Like I said before, he’s a donkey.



I’m standing in a tattoo parlor with Trinity by my side. The grungy, dark place causes her hand to tighten in mine.

I made sure to call Mom before we left. Telling her about my whereabouts calms the panic she feels when she thinks I’m not safe. It surprised me that she’s supportive of Trinity’s decision. I even heard a hint of excitement in her tone. Even though Mom will never admit this, I know she secretly hates Trinity’s mom. As long as Trinity’s mom doesn’t find out about this tattoo, we’ll have no problems.

I wear my usual hat and sunglasses, providing me with comfort that people won’t recognize me. The moment we walked into the parlor, Trinity tensed when she saw the man behind the counter. A mixture of black and colorful tattoos covers every single layer of his tan skin. He has arms the size of my fucking head. He’s dressed in all black, which I pull off better, obviously. Multiple piercings—his eyebrow, his nose, lip, and his ears—shine in the faint light coming from a desk lamp. If I didn’t work out five times a week, I’d be scared out of my fucking mind.

I thank Mom in my head for making me take self-defense classes three years ago. She was worried we might encounter crazy people with messed up minds when our fame escalated quickly. I took the stupid classes to make her feel more at ease. What can I say? I’m a mommy’s boy.

“Would you like to search through the pamphlet for any ideas?” He hands

her the book once she's filled out a piece of paper.

Trinity respectfully shakes her head. "I already know what I want."

I raise an eyebrow in surprise. She didn't tell me she had something in mind.

The guy nods his head and claps his hands together. "Let's go in the back. I'll draw up the idea before I ink you."

She nods her head, shifting from one foot to the other as her hands slightly shake. You wouldn't notice unless you were looking closely.

I grip her hand, steadying it in mine, and squeeze. "You don't have to do this. You can back out now."

"I want this." Her voice is filled with determination. Squaring her shoulders, she looks me straight in the eyes. "I can do this."

"Okay, love." I kiss the tip of her nose before we walk toward the back, where the tattoo artist waits for Trinity.

I sit in the corner on a chair as Trinity explains what she wants in a hushed voice. My eyes stay on the tattoo artist the entire time, making sure he does everything she could ever want and more.

I watch as he shows her the final drawing. Smiling brightly, she gives him a thumbs-up. I try peeking over, but she slaps me away and scolds.

She wants it to be a surprise. I hate surprises.

I nearly let out a scream when she tells the tattoo artist she wants it right under her boob. That's hot. I can't wait to kiss it when she's all sweaty under my sheets, breathing out my name.

Stop thinking of your girl naked. Getting a boner here is the last thing you need.

However, I hate that another man will touch my girl's goodies. My jaw clenches.

Trinity gives me a nervous smile as she lies down on the chair, extending her hand out to me. I grip it tightly and kiss her knuckles. When the tattoo artist first glides the needle across her skin, she stills and lets out a painful breath. Her eyes water as she grits her teeth.

"Shit, this hurts. How come you didn't warn me?" she rushes out, pressing her eyes shut tightly.

Gliding my thumb across her knuckles, I urge, "I thought that was obvious information you already knew yourself."

"I hate how smart you are sometimes," she jokes over the light buzzing. "How did you get all those?" she says, nodding down to my hands and arms.

I laugh lowly and glance down at the art on my skin. “Some parts didn’t hurt as much, but others were traumatizing.”

After I almost died from the pills, I went to get ink every Friday for four years. It was a way to cope and deal with my shit. The pain helped my head wander off from the mental pain I was experiencing. Every single one of my tattoos has a meaning behind it. I have tattoos on my back, wrists, forearms, knuckles, chest, and on the side of my ribs.

The only pet peeve I have with tattoos is when they’re in color. I like when they’re black. They’re more dramatic and clean-looking. Tattoos with color look to me like drawings from a child.

“Which ones hurt the most?” Trinity’s gritty voice cuts me out of my thoughts.

I gaze into her eyes. “Definitely the knuckle ones and the one on the side of my rib.”

The guy scoffs and nods while he works. “Those hurt like a motherfucker because they’re right on bones.”

I nod in agreement with him and watch as he continues to work on Trinity.

“Are you done yet?” her soft voice whispers into the silence.

“I just started.” He laughs.

With my thumb, I continue to stroke her hand as she groans.



The lights are dim in her room. I follow her as she walks into her bathroom, facing the mirror. Flicking on the lights, she pulls up her shirt and exposes the clear plastic wrap bandage. Her hand covers the tattoo from my view.

I sit on the counter beside her and place my hands behind my hips. My hands grip the sink as I wait for her to show me. “You need to keep that on for a couple of days and add that”—I nod with my head toward the cleanser that’s in her hand—“on it every day to clean it.”

She nods and bites her lip. Her eyes have a faraway look to them as she gazes at herself in the mirror. “Can I look at it without the plastic wrap?”

“Of course. Just cover it back up after,” I reply, eager to see her tattoo.

She swallows tightly and gives me a small smile. Her fingers grip the bandage, dragging it off her skin. I watch as she winces.

“It’s so sore.”

I chuckle and nod in agreement. Tattoos are not for the weak. I watch intensely as she peels off the entire thing, revealing a piece of her I know is special. Turning her body sideways toward where I sit, she smiles.

My eyes take in the two beautiful birds. One is larger than the other. It looks distant, as if it’s flying away. The other is smaller, and it seems to be forgotten by the other.

“This one”—Trinity points to the larger bird—“is my dad.” Her finger points to the smaller one. “And that’s me.” Her eyes tear up. “My dad and I used to bird-watch when we were up in the tree house. It was our thing besides singing together.” She shrugs. “This way, he’ll be with me forever.”

When I lightly touch the raw skin, she flinches.

I breathe out, “Why did you choose to get it here?”

“Because it’s the closest place I could get to my heart.” She looks in the mirror. “My dad’s not here with us anymore, but he’ll always be in my heart. You’ve made me realize that, Leonidas, and I’ll forever be grateful.”

I watch the strong, stunning girl in front of me. My eyes roam over the new art on her body. I love it; the birds are small, not very overwhelming, which I like. I want to look at it for days, knowing I’ll find more unique details each minute. The most beautiful thing about it though is not the art itself; it’s the story behind it.

Pulling her body in between my legs, I place my forehead on hers. “Your dad would be so proud,” I whisper, holding her tighter as she registers my words before her body shakes as she cries.

THIRTY

TRINITY

I feel like a true rebel now. Mom came home yesterday morning, not noticing a thing.

Getting inked yesterday was one of the best decisions I've made this year. Having a piece of Dad forever on me makes me happy. The thought of having something that reminds me of him brings peace to my mind. I have Elijah to thank for that. I instantly liked the idea of getting something, but I wanted it to be important ... special.

I thought about a music note but winced. I then remembered our special, peaceful days when we would bird-watch in the tree house. We would sit side by side and lock both of our gazes on the woods in front of us. I would call out in a whisper-shout when I saw a blue jay. They're my favorite. I love the vibrant blue color of their wings, how their chirp is unique.

So, I saw the opportunity and took it. The best part was Leonidas staying by my side and distracting me from the pain. Getting a tattoo hurts—the constant stabbing feeling, like sandpaper being rubbed on your skin in just one area. My skin under the bandage feels burned and crispy. Yuck.

I know I'll eventually have to tell Mom about the tattoo, but not right now. She'll murder me with her bare hands. I can't leave Leonidas alone in this cruel world.

“When are you ungrounded?” Harper asks over the line.

Sighing, I lie down on my bed and snuggle into Simba's body. “Ask my mom that question because I'm just as clueless.”

“What about that guy, Leonidas? You only have the summer with him, right?”

My mood immediately drops. Why did she have to mention him moving

away?

“Yeah ... we only have the summer.” I sigh and kiss Simba on the head when he licks my hand.

I hear movement on the other line.

“There has to be something you can do,” she states strongly.

I hum and let out a laugh. My mom is very hardheaded. When she wants something, she gets it. And if me being grounded is what she wants, then that’s what she’s getting.

“Fight for what you want.”

“I don’t want to start a war in my house, Harper.” I scoff and shake my head.

“But didn’t she already start one?” she presses. “There’s nothing wrong with voicing your concerns, Trinity. Be the strong person your dad raised you to be.”

What would my dad want? I know he would have been upset that I lied to Mom. I know he would understand the dilemma I’m going through.

Leonidas makes me feel alive. He’s moving away in a couple of weeks. Every second I’m with him, I can hear the time ticking by. I want time to stop, to get lost in the moment with him. My mom won’t keep me apart from the one person who makes me happy. Especially since she’s never home.

Fight for what you want.

Fight for what you believe is right.

What I believe is right is not being grounded for nothing at the age of eighteen.

“I know what I need to do. Thanks, Harper. Love you!” I practically yell into the phone. Throwing it somewhere behind me, I jump out of my bed and run down the stairs. I hear Simba’s light footsteps as he follows me.

My eyes spot Mom as she sips her coffee on the patio swing.

She’s on my and Dad’s swing ... with Rodrigo and Diego.

My blood turns cold as I spot the happy family. Simba stops by my feet and growls at the sight of the two new men he’s not used to.

Guilt fills Mom’s eyes as she spots my shocked face at the door. “Trinity, dear, Rodrigo and Diego stopped by as a surprise.”

“I can see that.” Sarcasm is thick in my voice as I glare at her.

Who the hell does she think she is? She knows how important that swing is to me. I haven’t sat on it in four years, and neither has she. It hurts so fucking much. All the countless nights we sat there. She couldn’t even bear

the sight of it at first. I fought for the swing's life when she tried to take it down. Now, here she is, with her new boyfriend and his kid.

My heart breaks into a million pieces.

One step forward, two steps back.

I can't stay here and hear their laughs of happiness when all I want to do is cry. Twisting around, I stride into the house.

I look around for Simba's leash, spotting it hanging on the back door. I bend down and clasp the metal ring around his collar. Grabbing my phone, I jump around in a frenzy while putting on my shoes. Pushing the front door open, I stride down the front steps. I don't peek at the happy family. I don't look back when Mom calls out to me.

"You're grounded, Trinity! Get back here!" she yells and follows me. Leaving a confused Rodrigo and Diego behind.

"I'm going to go see Dad. Is that fine with you? Or should I ask your new boyfriend for permission?"

She stares at me with her mouth agape.

I nod at her and scoff. "How could you be so insensitive when I'm still stuck, grieving like he died yesterday? Do you not care about me anymore, Mom? Because I feel like I'm just forgotten now." I tug Simba's collar and stride to my car.

I refuse to blink my eyes. I won't let them see the tears that are begging to be let out.

My lungs can't get enough air. Gasping, I let all my emotions crash down onto me.

"Trinity!" I hear being called from across the yard. It's a different voice, not the one I wanted to hear desperately.

My hand grips my car door handle, and a hand lands on top of mine. Looking up, I find Elijah.

"Hey, hey. You okay?" he mumbles.

"Girlie, what's wrong?" Amelia says while jogging up to us. "Love." She sighs when she sees my face.

"Guys, please let me go," I say, stressed.

I look over my shoulder and find the lovely family gone. I must have embarrassed Mom so much that she moved them inside. *Good.*

"Trinity, you're not in the right state of mind to drive," Amelia presses and sends a gaze at her brother.

They share a worried glance with each other.

“Where’s Leonidas?” I ask.

“He’s busy, doing some work for my parents,” Elijah stutters and fidgets with his fingers. “Where are you going?”

The only person who I know will calm the panic that consumes my entire body isn’t available.

I breathe out, “I’m going to the cemetery.”

They both nod.

“We can take you,” Amelia pipes in. “We won’t get out of the car. We’ll just wait for you.”

I know these two won’t give me a break until they know I’m safe. No matter how hurt I feel right now, they warm my heart. Knowing how much they deeply care for me is comforting. Even though we aren’t related by blood, these two feel like family.

I once heard the saying, *Blood doesn’t define family*. At this moment, I couldn’t relate more to it. The people I share blood with don’t do half of what they do for me.

I nod and see relief fill their brown orbs. Elijah grips the driver’s door. Opening it, he gestures for Amelia to hop in the back. I pick up my pup from the ground and jog to the other side. Pulling the door open, I place Simba in my lap.



I didn’t spend as much time as I would have liked with Dad. Knowing Elijah and Amelia were waiting for me made me antsy. I introduced Simba to him and placed the flowers I’d bought for him on our way to the cemetery on the ground in front of his stone.

I prayed that he would help build our family up again and that the hurt I felt within me would dim.

Amelia and Elijah both look at me with pity as I enter the car. When I slam the door a bit too hard, they wince.

“Sorry,” I mutter, and they nod.

Simba lays his head on my lap.

Looking down at his restful body, I break the silence I know they’ve created for me. “You guys must think I’m a baby.”

Leaning forward, Amelia frowns. “Why would that even cross your

mind?”

“Because I just had a mental breakdown about a swing.” I laugh at myself. I sound so stupid.

“That’s not just any swing, Trinity,” Elijah butts in. “You’ve told us what that swing reminds you of. There’s nothing to be ashamed of when you grieve. You’re allowed to hurt, Trinity. Memories hurt the most. They’re constant reminders. You. Are. Strong,” he says, gripping one of my hands in his.

“And your mom was wrong. She should have been more sensitive,” Amelia grumbles, and Elijah slaps her. She slaps him back, and they scoff at each other.

I love these two.

“You know,” I say as my fingers wind through Simba’s soft fur, and the two look at me with curiosity, “I never asked if you guys were okay with me and Leonidas dating.”

“Why would that be a problem for us? I haven’t seen my brother this happy in a while,” Amelia says. “You know I call you guys endgame.”

“Plus, I want you as my sister-in-law. Think of how much trouble we’ll get into,” Elijah says proudly. A shit-eating grin brightens his face.

I laugh and raise my eyebrows up and down.

The three of us lift our fists in the air, and they connect.

Watch out, world. We’re coming for you.

THIRTY-ONE

LEO

I stop the strumming on my guitar. My voice echos till silence invades my room. Placing my guitar down, I run a hand over my face. I stare at the paper below me; it taunts me. I should have come up with an entire song by now. But I can't wrap my head around any words. My brain is swarming with ideas that don't mesh together well.

Dad keeps calling and texting. He never asks how we are. He just gets straight to the point and asks about my songwriting. I only answer him bluntly, giving him less information, the more he calls. The guy gets on my nerves. He's only around when he benefits from it. Father of the Year goes to him.

Placing my elbows on my desk, I lean forward and hold a pencil in front of me. Gripping it in both of my hands, I snap it, imagining my father's face. The wood breaks in the middle. I watch as it falls to the desk below me. Leaning back, I cross my arms across my chest.

My eyes immediately focus on Trinity's house. The only person who makes me feel safe is in there, and I can't even see her. It's getting severely aggravating that her mom is still keeping us away from each other. What a childish thing to do.

I can't handle this bullshit. At this rate, I won't see her until I leave for LA. I'm leaving very soon. Our time together is flying by so fast. I wish I could slow down time. But that's impossible. I need to be with my girlfriend before I leave or else what's the point of dating one another?

I perk up in my chair when I notice a guy exit Trinity's front door. Narrowing my eyes, I grip the edge of my desk tightly. I can't see him clearly. No matter how much I squint, he still remains blurry. My eyesight is

getting bad. Yet from my bedroom window, I can tell he's young.

Is it her ex? No, no, it can't be. Trinity's the most loyal person I've ever met.

"Honey?" Mom's soft voice says from behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I find her by my bedroom door. "Are you hungry?"

I eye the food in her hands. Clapping my hands, I rub them together with a stupid smirk on my face. Mom walks over to me and places the plate full of Greek food in front of me. I watch as the steam travels up in the air before evaporating.

"How's the writing going?" she asks and peers over my shoulder at the lyrics.

Her hands grip the notebook tightly. I watch anxiously as her eyes take in my writing. Mom is the only one I let read my writing before I send it out to the team. I trust her input; I know she wants only the best for me.

"What's the problem?" she asks a minute later and drops it in front of me.

I glance up at her blankly. That's all she's got to say?

"You don't like it?"

"It's amazing." She beams down at me. Running a hand through my hair, she pinches my cheeks.

"Mom," I whine and move my face away from her.

"What?" she asks and tries to grab my face again.

"Mom, stop," I yell playfully and push her hands away from me. "I'm not a baby."

"You're my baby," she replies and places her hands on her hips, giving me the classic mom look.

"You talk as if I were five."

"You have the brain of a five-year-old."

Touché.

She laughs and points toward the food. "Eat your food before it gets cold."

Picking up my fork, I stuff a cucumber in my mouth, chewing slowly as I process her words. I guess she's right. I'm not okay in the head. Ever since that night, Mom has been watching over me like a hawk. She treats me as if I were a baby, like I might explode and turn to pills any second. I've explained countless times that I would never try to overdose again. For God's sake, I haven't touched a single pill in four years. Yet she still doesn't believe me fully. I can see it in her eyes.

Mom shows us every day how much she truly loves us. She's the best mom I could have ever asked for. At the end of the day, when I get frustrated, I tell myself she comes from a place with love.

Making her way to the door, she halts suddenly, gaining my attention. Turning around, she stares at me with a motherly look. "I need to ask you something."

Crossing my arms, I nod at her.

"When are you going to tell that poor girl who you really are?"

My body sags forward as I run a hand down my face. "I'm not sure, Mom. I'm going crazy in here." I tap my head with my index finger.

"This will end badly if you don't tell her," Mom points out, voice loud with authority. "You'll lose the one thing you've been trying to avoid. Keeping secrets is never good, especially if you love someone."

There's a constant battle in my head every day about Trinity. As I think deeply about telling her about myself, I realize there will never be a good time to tell her. I've already kept this too long. I'll break her heart into millions of pieces. She'll want nothing to do with me, and I'll be left all alone.

My heart aches at the thought of losing her.

Mom walks up to me and bends down, so she's eye-level with me. "Stop pretending to be such a tough guy and own up to your mistake. If she finds out some other way, Trinity will never trust you again. If it comes from you, she might forgive you." Giving my cheek a kiss, she sends me a sad smile. "I know you love her, Leonidas. Love breaks people."

"What if things change?" I pipe up.

"What if what changes?" she asks softly.

"Our relationship."

Standing up straight, she glares down at me. "If I know that girl, I know she won't love you for being in X3. She fell in love with this." She pokes me in the chest, right above where my heart lies.

Sitting there, I repeat what she's said thousands of times. I watch as she finally leaves the room and closes the door softly behind her.

Fuck, I don't know what to do. I can't lose this girl. I refuse to let go of her. I know I'll lose her.

Fear is pulling me back. It's gripping me like I'm its hostage.

Whenever I'm around Trinity, I always obsess over her laughs. I love them. I know if I don't tell her about my identity, my favorite melody will

disappear into thin air. I place my forehead on my cold desk, and my food that was once warm turns ice cold as I do what I'm best at.

Think.

THIRTY-TWO

TRINITY

Simba's gone. I failed again.

The one thing that was trusted in the palms of my hands is gone. My heart aches, races, breaks in half. I can't think clearly. My hands shake. I've run around my entire house, looking for him. I searched every single damn nook and cranny. No matter where I look, he's nowhere to be seen.

I grip my hair tightly as I stand in the middle of the kitchen, and my eyes wildly glance over everywhere. If he's not in here, he has to be outside. That's my only option left.

I run out the back door, not even caring that I don't have shoes on. The tiny pebbles of cement dig into my soft flesh, and pain shoots up my body, but it doesn't compare to how heartbroken I am at this moment. Nothing hurts more than the growing ache in my chest.

I look all around our backyard. I try calling out his name, squeezing his favorite noisy toy, clapping my hands, and whistling. Yet his small golden body doesn't emerge from the bushes like it usually does, like I hoped.

My eyes cloud over with tears as I sink down onto the grass, clenching my chest as my breathing feels more forced, rushed. This can't be happening. He's only a puppy. Simba's lost. He could be anywhere in these woods. He could have gotten hurt, stolen, or—God forbid—eaten.

How the hell did he get out? He's always attached to my hip. Nothing makes sense anymore.

Not wanting to waste another minute of crying on the ground and not doing anything about my current dilemma, I get up, using so much energy, and run toward where the mature, thick trees are bunched together.

My eyes roam the forest floor. I listen intently for a sound, a bark, or a

damn doggy pant. Nothing. I feel tension build up in my chest.

Please don't have a panic attack, Trinity. Not now.

The surrounding forest is what a forest looks like in a horror movie. The sky is glum and gray today, casting a dark aura in here. Branches lie on the floor. My foot steps on one, and it cracks under the pressure, making me flinch back in fear.

Even the birds are silent. Their usual chirps of happiness are not occurring today, leaving the forest in a quiet, freaky hum.

I look over my shoulder and find the house I grew up in and used to find comfort in, but now, it feels like a cold hug.

It's far away from where I stand, looking miles away. How long have I been searching? I'm not an idiot. I know I should go back. I don't feel like dying this way. Who knows what can come out of these woods? As far as I can see from here, my puppy is nowhere to be seen.

Letting the tears that are begging to roll down my face out, I run back to where I came from. I'm careful where I step, watching my surroundings.

I can't believe I fucking lost him.

I woke up an hour ago, and there was no sign of him. The house was too quiet. I didn't hear his usual footsteps. I walked over to his doggy bed and found it empty and cold.

My heart completely shattered when I found the back door open. Mom forgot to close the door before she left for work. I checked the house first in hopes that he was hiding somewhere, but nothing. Not believing he was gone, I checked another four times.

I don't know how I'm going to find him all the way out here. He's gone. He's really gone. He was just a puppy. Simba was the sweetest puppy. He was scared of his own shadow and hardly ever barked. How will he survive out in the forest? If he doesn't get hurt or taken, he'll die of hunger.

As a sob racks my entire body, I hear my name being called out. My eyes find my boyfriend in only joggers, running up to me. His wavy brown hair blows in the wind wildly. If I wasn't so panicked right now, I would stop and admire his natural beauty.

"What's wrong, Trin?" he asks when he sees my distressed face. Gripping my cheeks in both of his palms, he stares at me with concern.

"Simba," I stutter, panic taking over my body. "He's gone. He got out of the house. I don't know where he is."

His eyes widen. Swallowing tightly, he nods and looks over my shoulder

toward the woods. “Are you sure he’s not in the house?”

I nod. Tears fall down my face like a river.

“Go in the house, and I’ll look for him,” he says.

I butt in strongly, “No, I’m not going back. I have to look for him.”

He frowns. “It’s creepy in there. No place for you to be.”

He pushes me toward the house, but I clasp his arm.

“I need to look for him.”

He eyes my face, biting his lip as he nods.

His hand grips my own tightly as we walk back toward the woods I just emerged from.

“Leonidas!” Elijah’s voice screams from his lawn.

He stops and turns toward his brother.

“What’s wrong?” he calls out to both of us.

Amelia emerges from the door a moment later and eyes the two of us.

“Simba’s gone,” Leonidas calls back. His voice trails off at the end in sadness. He looks back at me and pulls me to his side.

In shock, Amelia grabs on to Elijah’s arm as he stares, stunned.

“Do you need an extra pair of eyes?” Elijah yells loudly.

They love Simba as much as I do. He has everyone wrapped around his little paw.

I nod my head, needing as much help as I can get.

Elijah runs toward us while Amelia yells, “I’ll stay here just in case he comes back!”

The three of us make our way back into the gloomy forest. Being in here with Leonidas and Elijah helps. I feel less scared and uneasy.

The bottoms of my feet ache. It feels as if I were being pricked rapidly with tiny knives. Leonidas’s hand is still tightly clenching my own. Glancing over at him, I notice goose bumps cover his entire toned chest due to the strong, cold wind. The poor guy doesn’t even have a shirt on, but he ran out here to help me anyway. He must be freezing—another reason for me to feel guilty.

Elijah wanders through the forest like a madman, looking behind bushes, in streams. He screams out my boy’s name but drops his head in defeat a couple minutes later when we get no results.

Leonidas’s sad eyes focus on me. “He’ll be okay,” he breathes.

“He has to be,” I grit out. “There’s no way I can lose him too.”

He says nothing after that.

I find it difficult to see through the thick tears in my eyes. I pause and let out a cry of frustration. The stabbing feeling in my flesh is getting worse each second. Hissing, I halt my steps. Bracing a hand on my knee, I try to fight through the pain.

Leonidas drops to his knees in front of me and panics. “What’s wrong?” he rushes out and holds my thighs.

My forehead creases as I close my eyes tightly. “My feet hurt. I forgot to get shoes when I rushed outside.”

He eyes my feet. When he pulls one up, I brace a hand on his shoulder as he looks at the damage.

“Fuck,” he swears under his breath. “I need to take you home. This looks painful, Trinity! You destroyed your feet.”

“I can’t,” I argue, yanking my foot back.

“Please?” he presses. “I’ll continue to look for him. You need to go home and rest.”

I can’t stay home and wait for news. I’ll go insane. I’m better off out here, knowing I’m at least doing something.

He sees the look on my face and rolls his eyes. Turning his body around, he hunches down. “Climb on.”

I stare at his muscular back and swallow hard. I wrap my legs tightly around his waist, and he stands up straight. Gripping my thighs, he walks through the forest furiously.

Even with me on his back, his strides don’t slow down. It seems as if he walks even faster now.

The birds chirp suddenly, mocking me. I look everywhere. I call out Simba’s name repeatedly until my throat feels dry. Leonidas’s lips delicately kiss my arm as I let out a sigh.

The more ground we cover, the more defeated I get.

I lose hope.

Until I see him ...

Elijah hovers over him with his head down.

That’s when my heart completely shatters into a million pieces.

THIRTY-THREE

LEO

As her body stumbles off of mine, I can't wrap my head around what I'm seeing.

Shit.

This girl doesn't deserve this kind of pain. Every day, it seems as if she gets slapped in the face harder. I watch the love of my fucking life stagger over to her dead dog.

Her cries echo in the forest as she drops in front of Simba's body. Her torso shakes as she cries into her hands. Elijah takes a step back and places a fist to his mouth. He shakes his head and stares wildly at me.

My body is rooted to its spot. I watch the girl I've grown to love sob her heart out.

World, why? Why did you have to do this to her?

My hands sweat as I stride to her. I want to pull her away from his body and take her home. Tucking her into bed and cuddling seem like good ideas right now. Bitter vomit rushes up my throat as I look down at his golden fur, which is not so golden anymore. I try so hard to spot his chest rising up and down, but I see nothing. Just a dead body.

I feel like falling to the forest floor, joining Trinity in her crying session, but I know I need to be strong for her and hold in my emotions. That's what she needs right now—a strong boyfriend to pick up the crumbling pieces of her heart.

Guilt consumes my body as I glance at the puppy I loved. I know I made fun of him, called him a squirrel, and rolled my eyes at him in the beginning. But I now realize that we shared something together—we both loved Trinity. Even though he was a puppy, he protected her with his entire life, and now,

that's all gone. In the blink of an eye.

"Why?" Trinity sobs out in her hands.

Her hands grab her puppy, and his body is limp in her arms as she cradles him helplessly.

"Simba? Boy, please wake up." Grief is thick in her voice.

His tiny head drops backward in response.

Everything about him looks lifeless; there's nothing left in him. Trinity's chest rises up and down roughly now. She's panicking right in front of my eyes, and I don't know what to do. I can't think straight. My vision blurs as I drop beside her, knowing she needs me close.

I scan her face desperately, collapsing completely when I find big tears full of emotion running down her cheeks.

"Why?" she breathes out. Her voice cracks in a broken whisper. She tilts her head to the sky and croaks out, "Why?"

Elijah comes up beside her. Tears stream down his own face as he takes Simba away from her arms. She drops her arms in defeat when he staggers back with the pup.

"I'll take him home for you," he whispers. "You shouldn't have to see this."

Turning around slowly with the pup in his hands, he winces when the deep color of scarlet covers his hands, arms, and shirt.

It looks like something bit him. Poor Simba. What a way to die, all alone in silence, hoping someone finds you.

Looking over at Trinity, I find her still crying in her hands. Her brown hair drapes around her in a canopy. What scares me the most is her once-brown eyes look black, and the white orbs are red.

She looks drained of life.

Licking her lips, she lets out a laugh that screams pain. "What did I do to deserve this?" She gestures with her hands wildly. "How come another thing that I love died? He was murdered," she stammers loudly. "Just like my fucking dad, killed right under my nose. All alone."

My hands shake as I watch her break down.

She swears up to the sky countless times. "God, just kill me already."

Every bone in my body freezes, blood turning ice cold. I stare at her.

God, no. Please no.

That one sentence breaks me apart. I pull her into me and hold on tight, as if she were being taken away from me because it feels like it right now. She

cries into my chest, shaking me as I stare straight ahead, shocked.

“Why?” she whispers repeatedly, her voice muffled by my chest. “Leonidas, why?”

How am I supposed to answer this poor girl? I don’t know the answer myself. Why does the world do the things that it does? It’s cruel—that’s why. It watches as it tortures us. Laughs as we drop onto our knees and give up.

I won’t let this girl give up. If she does ... then I do. Simple as that.

She gently pulls away from my body. I watch her intently. Her red eyes meet my own.

“Why do I feel like I’m dying? It’s like I’m grieving my own death. Why does awful stuff keep happening to me?” she stammers. “Why can’t I have things I love? Why do they always disappear, leave me behind?” Every word that leaves her mouth gets louder.

“Leonidas ...” Trinity trails off softly. Her sad eyes find my own, and I look wordlessly over at her. “I’m scared.” Her hunched-over body shivers. Wrapping her arms around her torso, she cries harder now.

I’d rather die than see anything bad happen to Trinity. I might not love a lot, but when I do, I give everything I have.

“Why are you scared? I’m right here with you. I won’t let anything bad happen to you,” I say strongly and wipe a tear off her face.

She leans her cheek in the palm of my hand and shakes her head, which leaves me in confusion. What is she trying to say?

“I’m afraid of myself.” A broken whisper leaves her lips. “I’m afraid that I’m going to do something to myself.”

It seems as if I were paused in time, like someone would have to pinch me to awaken my senses. Trinity’s words are like a bucket of cold water thrown over me. She’s having suicidal thoughts. Nothing is stronger and more consuming than that. I know how that feels—an endless tunnel of nothing. Dark that you can hardly see. Your thoughts scream at you, and you’ll do anything to escape them.

I won’t let this girl hurt herself. I’ll protect her with everything I have in my life.

“He was just a puppy, Leonidas. He had his entire life ahead of him.”

“And so do you,” I interrupt. “Don’t do anything rash right now, Trin.” A tear trails down my cheek. “God, don’t make the same mistake I made.” My voice cracks. I pull her into my body again. “Trinity, I can’t lose you. Call me selfish, but you’ll kill me inside if you leave me.”

“I’m scared,” is all she says in response. Gripping on to my shoulders, she places her cheek against mine. I feel her wet tears against my own. “He died. He’s dead. I’ll never see him again.”

“I know. I’m so sorry, Trinity.”

Death is an evil thing. It takes away a bond that will never be replaced. When someone grieves a death, nothing you say will take away the pain. A sudden death is the worst. You don’t have those last few moments that you’ll cherish and remember for a lifetime.

As we sit on the forest ground in each other’s arms, looking at one another, I watch the remaining light in her eyes drain out.

And the worst part is, my light disappeared a long time ago, and now, hers match my own.

THIRTY-FOUR

TRINITY

Nothing. I feel absolutely nothing as Leonidas carries me back home in his arms. My heart is completely empty as I stare straight ahead. My hands don't even shake from my usual anxiety. I'm just still. A lifeless soul—alive, but not really.

I feel stupid that I thought I could have something that gave me happiness. I was naive to think I could take care of anything. I was an idiot to think I could be loved me.

What if Simba ran off to get away from me? Was he happy? I tried my best every day to make him the happiest pup ever.

The thought of him being terrified in his last few moments makes the pain ten times worse. Maybe I'm the problem. Everything around me dies. I cause destruction in my life—even Mom thinks so. I'm a disappointment.

The one thing I was responsible for is dead.

Something bit my baby, and he died from the blood loss. I wasn't there to take him to the animal hospital. I wasn't there to hold him while he left. My head screams at me that I'm absolutely nothing.

No one would notice if I was gone.

Simba didn't deserve to die, but I do.

What's left for me? My dad was killed, now my dog. Is the world going through everyone in my life and killing them as a joke? I can't take this anymore—the constant stabbing feeling in my chest. It takes effort to breathe. For four years, I've had this weight on my chest, and now, it's just gotten heavier.

Guilt will eat me alive until there's nothing left of me. Why isn't Dad helping me? Why am I being tortured like this? What else will happen to me?

When will I wave the white flag, throw in the towel, and run? Absolutely disappear from this joke called life.

Leonidas carries me all the way to his house. Blood stains his chest from my shirt. I was so consumed with my own feelings that I didn't even consider his. I glance up at him and wince. My eyes hurt like a bitch. They feel small and puffy. I'm definitely swollen and red in the face from all the crying I've been doing.

I watch him. His eyes are distant. Even though he was crying earlier, it doesn't look like it. His bottom lip slightly quivers. That's why he bites it and squeezes his eyes shut tightly for a second. He doesn't stop his powerful strides. I can tell he's trying to keep his feelings to himself. If I wasn't in so much pain, I would run my hand through his hair and say it's okay to cry. I know how it feels to keep your emotions in. It's suffocating.

He supports my body in one arm as he opens their back door. It slams shut against the frame behind us. As we enter the kitchen, I place my cheek against his hot chest.

I spot Amelia at the kitchen table with Elijah standing in front of her. They're both silent until they see us. Amelia stands from her seat quickly, almost making her chair fall to the ground.

"Trinity," she croaks out. Her hand touches my arm. It takes everything in me not to pull away from her. But I stay still as her icy hand rubs my warm one. "Love, I'm so sorry."

I hate sympathy. I don't want people to look at me with pity. Elijah and Amelia look at me with sadness in their eyes. Leonidas doesn't. He doesn't pity me, and that's what I love about him. He understands when someone has lost something they love, the last thing they want to do is talk about it. I want to sit somewhere in darkness and just be left alone.

But it's different this time. When Dad died, I felt like I had a mother, a mother to hug and cry on. This time, all I have is myself, for God's sake.

The boy I fell in love with is leaving in a couple of weeks. How will I be then? Will I become numb to the pain and be okay? Or will the thoughts consume me until I do something he'll hate me for?

This is the first time I fear myself. Like Leonidas said, I don't want to make the same mistake he made.

"I'm going to clean her up." Leonidas breaks my thoughts. He gestures down to the blood on my body and his.

They both nod. Amelia squeezes my arm supportively, and Elijah places

his lips on my forehead and gives me a delicate kiss.

As Leonidas takes me upstairs, I ask him the question I've been obsessing over since Elijah took Simba out of my arms. "Where did he take him?"

Glancing down at me, he licks his lips. "I don't know, maybe Elijah put him in our garage."

I nod against him.

He opens his mouth to say something else but immediately closes it. "I know you don't want to talk about what just happened," he starts off slowly. "I understand that one hundred percent. But I would feel better if I stayed with you to make sure you're okay," he stammers at the end tensely.

I'm more than okay with that. Frankly, I need him near me.

"I don't want to be alone right now," is all I say.

I feel him place his chin at the top of my head and nod.

He walks into his room and dodges the packed boxes. Kicking the bathroom door open with his foot, he places me on the cool counter.

Placing his hands flat on my thighs, he stands between my legs. "I'm just going to get you some clothes, okay?" Concern drips from his voice as his eyes bore into mine.

I nod my head weakly and lean my head against the mirror behind me.

I watch with heavy eyes as he rushes out of the bathroom. I hear him dig through different cabinets ferociously. A minute later, he's back with two different sets of clothing. He places his clothes on the counter next to me.

"I hope these are okay." He holds up a large pair of sweats to me. "I have nothing else that's your size."

I'm going to drown in those. "Do you have an extra pair of boxers?"

He nods and turns around. Walking in with a pair of black boxers, he sets it on the counter.

"Do you want to have a bath?" He looks down nervously at all the blood on my clothes.

Yes, I want to scream. I want to get this deep shade of red off me as soon as possible.

He sees my eagerness and closes the door. Locking it, he helps me pull my shirt off, trying to avoid getting more blood on me.

He turns the shower on. I'm glad he knows I hate baths. Adjusting the knob, he glances over his shoulder at me.

"You want me to wait outside for you?" He places his hand on the doorknob.

Panic consumes my body. I grip on to his arm furiously. “Please don’t leave me,” I cry out.

His brown orbs widen. “I won’t leave you, baby.” He pulls me by the back of the neck and places his forehead on mine. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I cling on to his body like my life depends on it. Because truly, it does. He’s the only thing keeping me sane right now.

“Go have a shower. I’ll be right out here, waiting for you,” he whispers softly in my ear.

His hands help me off the counter, and he walks me toward the hot water. I take off my remaining clothes. Leonidas looks away in respect. Why is someone so damn perfect with someone so messed up like me?

He knows how sad I am, so he doesn’t look at the body he’s seen naked multiple times. I know him. I know he doesn’t want me to think he’ll take advantage of me. He has the same anxiety inside of him that I do.

“Leonidas,” I whisper.

He looks me straight in the eyes. I see them glistening with tears. He quickly blinks them away and smiles sadly at me.

“Thank you,” I try to say strongly.

“Don’t thank me for my love,” he replies softly.

I watch as he sits against the wall.

As I climb into the shower and pull the shower curtain closed, the last thing I see is him running a hand down his face in distress.



The entire time I was in the shower, he stayed with me.

It seems taking a hot shower, scrubbing all of my baby’s blood off of me, has drained all the remaining energy I had left.

“Can you help me, Leonidas?” I ask and gesture to the towels.

He looks over at me and nods in understanding. His tall, muscular frame stands up. Gripping the towel in his hands, he pats me down gently. I watch the entire time as he tenderly wipes me down with a frown. Once I’m all dry, he places his enormous shirt over my head. It falls mid-thigh. Bending down, he places his boxers near my feet. I place a hand on his broad shoulder as I step through the legs. After he drags them up my legs, he pulls my shirt down to cover me.

Leonidas leans in close and gives my nose a peck.

I lean against the counter as he digs around for something. Finally pulling out a brush, he turns me around. He runs it through my hair. Every movement is delicate and full of love.

“Thank you,” I whisper when my eyes meet his in the mirror.

Dragging my body into his, he nestles his face in my neck. “I told you not to thank me.”

“But you deserve it for putting up with all my problems. Just throw me out,” I reply, and he glares at me.

Too soon? I deal with my sadness with dark humor.

“You should have a shower.” I glance at him and instantly feel sadness consume me again.

Seeing the look in my eyes, Leonidas nods. Stripping right behind me, he hops in the shower.

Just as his hand grips the curtain to shut it, I rush out, “Can I sit on the floor here and wait for you?”

He nods. “Of course.”

I sit on the hard floor. Placing my head in between my knees, I let out a shaky breath. My head pounds, my eyes kill because of all the crying I’ve done, and my heart clenches. Simba dying hasn’t even hit me full force yet. Just like my dad, when he died, I needed to see him to believe it. Now, with Simba, I saw him, but I can’t wrap my head around what happened.

I sit on the floor the entire time and wait for my boyfriend. He gets out of the shower ten minutes later. My eyes watch his olive skin shine with wetness. He dries his hair with a towel before putting on a pair of boxers, black sweatpants, and a black T-shirt.

Turning around, he spots me on the floor. His eyes dampen. He extends a hand down to me, and I grip it. He pulls me up. His lips place a delicate kiss on my cheek. A second later, he guides me out of the bathroom.

“Stay here. I’ll be back in a second,” he says softly before jogging out of the room.

A protest makes its way up my throat, but I stay rooted to my spot.

My eyes find his desk. It’s messy, filled with sheets of paper and different colored pens. Walking over to it. I know I shouldn’t snoop, but he’s my boyfriend, and if he didn’t want me in here, he wouldn’t have left me alone.

My eyes trail to the ground and spot a beautiful wooden guitar propped on a stand. I didn’t know Leonidas played the guitar. That’s never something

he told me. My hands grip the notebook on the desk that looks like it's been through hell and back, but as his door swings open, I drop it and stand up straight in embarrassment.

Leonidas eyes me carefully and tenses up. "Did you read that?" He looks over at the notebook.

I shake my head, and he relaxes.

"You play?"

Swallowing tightly, Leonidas nods.

"How come you didn't tell me?" I ask him, feeling defeated.

"You don't like music. I didn't want to be something you don't like," he says sternly and changes the subject. "This doesn't matter. Don't think too much about it, okay? Let's get you back home, Trinity."

Here we go. I hate closed-off Leonidas. It makes me wonder if I even know him at all. I've told him everything, yet he still feels like a mystery to me.

Nodding, I follow him out of his room. Gripping my hand in his, he kisses my knuckles. As he walks me down the stairs, I keep my eyes on the floor, not wanting to see Elijah's and Amelia's pitiful gazes.

The pressure immediately rises in my chest as he walks me back home. I want to stop in the middle of the yard and throw a tantrum like a damn baby. I don't care. I don't want to go in there. Everywhere I look will remind me of Simba. But I know he's taking me back home because his heart is filled with gold. He doesn't want me to create more tension with my mom.

But as we walk through the back door, my mood gets worse.

Mom is standing in the middle of the kitchen with her hands folded against her chest. "Where were you? How many times do I have to tell you that you're grounded?!" Her eyes land on Leonidas. She turns a scary shade of red. "Out! Right now!" she booms and points toward the door.

She strides toward us, and her hand painfully grips my forearm. She yanks me out of his grasp, her nails digging into my skin.

"Ow, Mom!" I exclaim and jerk my arm away from her.

My skin immediately burns and turns pink as I look up at her in shock. My mom just hurt me for the first time. Pain shoots up my arm, making me rub it in response.

"Don't touch her like that!" Leonidas says sternly. His voice is deep. Filled with tension and warning. He pulls me back against his body and glares over at her.

“Don’t tell me what to do, you little punk.” Mom seethes.

She advances to grab me again, but Leonidas pushes me out of the way.

“Don’t hurt her. One call is all it takes, and I’ll sue your ass for touching her,” he grumbles and takes a stiff step forward.

Oh no, here come the anger problems he told me about. I can practically see fire coming out of his ears.

Gripping the back of his T-shirt in warning, I tensely whisper, “Please don’t do anything.”

“I won’t hurt my daughter.” Mother gasps in horror, ignoring me altogether.

Rude.

Leonidas turns his body around and gently holds up my arm. “Then, what’s this?” He gestures to the red skin and glares at her.

“Do you blame a mother for getting worried when seeing her daughter in a guy’s clothing?” She laughs and rolls her eyes at my boyfriend. “She’s in your boxers, for God’s sake! Are you kidding, Trinity?!”

If only she knew why.

“You want to know the reason?” Leonidas grits out. He stands in front of me, his body protecting mine from my mother.

“What else could be the reason than what I’m thinking?”

“Where’s your dog?” he says bluntly.

A look of confusion crosses Mom’s face as she glances back at me. “What is he getting on with?”

“Your daughter found her dog dead in the woods because someone forgot to close the door this morning before she left for work.”

Harsh but true. Simba wouldn’t be dead if Mom hadn’t left the door open.

A gasp leaves her lips. “Is this true, Trinity? Simba is dead?” She stares wildly at me.

Nothing can seem to leave my lips as I nod. She staggers back in horror and places a hand to her mouth.

“And the reason she’s in my clothes is that he bled all over hers.”

Tears pour down Mom’s face as she glances around the house. “I’m so sorry, Trinity. I didn’t mean to leave the door open, I swear.”

“I know,” I say and grip Leonidas’s shirt tighter. “But that doesn’t mean you didn’t do it. He was bitten, Mom, killed, just like Dad.”

Distress clouds Mom’s face. “Trinity I’m—” she starts off, but I interrupt.

“Leonidas is going to stay the night. Nothing will happen between the

two of us. I don't want to be alone right now, so I would appreciate it if you didn't fight me on this, given the circumstances."

I walk around her quickly, and Leonidas does the same, following closely behind me. Yet he's more intimidating and scarier due to the anger running through his veins.

All I feel like doing is cuddling in my bed and letting out all the tears that are begging to roll down my face. Pulling my sheets back, I snuggle in them as Leonidas shuts the door and joins me seconds later.

Pulling me against him, he kisses the top of my head. "I'm sorry for being so rude to her. She gets on my nerves."

I let out a soft laugh. "I'm glad you did that. If you hadn't, I would have let her walk all over me."

"I hate seeing her bully you around like that. You need to stick up for yourself more. Show her you're not a stupid, naive little girl."

She's my mother. I know I have to be respectful, but something always holds me back. It's because I love her, and I know I don't want to hurt her like she hurts me.

When I hear a car ignition start, I sit up, peeking out the window. I find Mom pulling out of the driveway in a hurry. When she disappears down the road, a low scoff leaves my throat.

She left. That doesn't surprise me. She always runs away when times get hard.

I place a hand on my temple when I feel a sudden throb in my head.

Leonidas grips my wrist. "What's wrong?"

"My head kills." I look over at him and point to the dresser beside him. "Can you grab me some painkillers from that drawer?" I point, and he nods.

He slowly reaches over and opens the drawer. His hand shakes as he picks up the white bottle. As he faces me, I see his face turn a shade of white. Frowning, he drops the bottle in my lap like it's on fire.

As I twist open the cap, he swallows tightly as he watches me. I see the battle he's going through. Leonidas bites his lip in distress when I swallow two dry.

Shit.

His overdose.

I gasp and hide the bottle under the blankets. "Shoot! Leonidas, I'm sorry!"

I totally forgot about his problem. How inconsiderate. He looks like he's

struggling, and I hate myself for causing that pain.

“It’s okay,” he says and shifts in his spot.

Lying down on the bed, he pulls the pillow down to cover his face. Leaning over his body, I throw the bottle back in the drawer, slamming it shut. I let out a sigh. I’m the worst girlfriend in the world.

“I try not to even look at those. It doesn’t help the desire,” he explains. His voice is muffled because of the pillow.

I nod even though he can’t see me. “Are you addicted?” I blurt out and slap a hand to my mouth.

Idiot.

Moving the pillow off of his face, Leonidas smiles sadly at me. “I wouldn’t say I’m addicted, but I get sudden urges to take them.” He pauses, looking for the right words. “Think of it as withdrawal.”

Poor guy ... that must be terrible.

“I’m sorry.” My eyes tear up as I realize the damage I’ve caused him right now. “I didn’t mean to make you feel this way.”

Pulling my body onto his, he lets out a sigh. “Don’t be. You didn’t know. Your mind is in shock, so it’s totally understandable.”

He connects our lips in a passionate kiss, and I melt into his body. His hands grip the back of my neck. I feel extremely guilty that I stirred up his addiction, and Leonidas is too nice to even say so to me. That was the first time he probably even touched a damn bottle since that night. All because of me.

So, if kissing and getting lost in each other helps us get rid of the pain for a little while, then I’ll be damned if I stop this.

As his tongue invades my mouth, I hear a gasp from somewhere in my room. I slowly pull away from him, thinking it’s Amelia. His eyes are closed. Looking over to my door, I sit up straight when I see her.

Harper.

She stares at Leonidas in shock.

When his eyes land on her, he shoots up in panic, and his body tenses as she screams out in excitement.

What the hell?

THIRTY-FIVE

TRINITY

Leonidas's eyes are wide with panic.

Harper's screams fill the room as he jumps up from the bed, placing his hand out in a frenzy.

Why is he telling her not to talk? And why the hell is my best friend screaming over my boyfriend?

"Holy shit, Trinity! Were you just in bed with—" she exclaims, red-faced, but Leonidas cuts in.

"Please don't!" he yells and sends her a look.

I sit up on my knees and eye the two. "Harper, why are you freaking out over my boyfriend?"

I watch as she bounces up and down in excitement. "Who wouldn't be excited when the one and only L—" she exclaims, but Leonidas interrupts her again, frustrated.

"Shut up, will you?!"

I look over at him, questions written all over my face.

How can Harper know who he is? He's never met her before. Who is this guy?

"Harper, please finish your sentence," I demand and glare at Leonidas when he tries to butt in again.

As Harper opens her mouth to explain, Leonidas drops to his knees in front of me, so he's eye-level with me. His eyes plead with mine. Shock, sadness, and fear fill them. "Trin, baby, please let me explain," he stammers.

My best friend places a hand to her mouth when he says *baby*. "Did Leo just call you baby?!"

"He's my boyfriend ... the guy next door."

Tears cloud Leonidas's eyes now. As the seconds tick by, he grows more nervous and panicked. His hands shake as they go to grip my legs. Rocking my bones.

"He's the guy you've been talking about all this time?" she says and runs up to us.

He places a hand out to stop her, but she bumps into it and squeals seconds later after the contact.

"I just touched Leo!" Tears drip down her face as she touches the skin his hand skimmed.

"Can you please leave?!" he yells, throwing his hands up in the air while looking at her like she's a wild animal.

I stiffen. I've never seen him this mad before. My head is spinning around in circles, and I'm severely bewildered by this weird interaction.

I watch the two with wide eyes as they have a stare down.

"She doesn't know, does she?" Harper asks him, and he says nothing in response.

"Know what?" I ask, frustrated at the two.

He gives her wide eyes, but she glances up at me with confusion.

"He's a world-famous rock star."

Say what now?

I can't help but let out a gasp of horror.

He's a rock star? This has to be a joke. Please, God, let this be a joke.

He's kept this hidden from me the entire time, like it's something I wasn't supposed to know.

I stagger back from him on the bed and find tears rolling down his face. "What?" My voice comes out in a broken whisper. "What is she talking about, Leonidas?"

He bites his lip in defeat as Harper continues, "He's in a band named X3 with his siblings, Amelia and Elijah. Every other song on the radio is by them. They're killing it."

My heart shatters as I focus my gaze on the tears pouring down his face. I try to spot his usual smile to see if this is a joke they're playing on me. But all I see is pure distress.

Harper isn't lying.

He's been lying to me this entire time.

"Get out," he says, not looking back at my best friend, only staring deep into my soul. "Get the hell out. You've said enough."

Staring at the back of his head surprised, Harper replies, "I don't think I have actually. It seems she's frozen in shock."

His eyes burn with hate. Turning toward her, he grits out, "Get out!"

My best friend's eyes find mine, asking me a silent question, asking whether I want to be left alone with him.

Yes or no?

Do I trust that Leonidas will tell me the truth?

No, I absolutely don't.

I now realize that he's given me no reason to trust him. Yet I don't want to hear the truth come from my best friend when he's standing right here. All the secrets that he's been keeping under my nose need to come from him.

"Harper, don't worry; you can leave. I need a moment alone with him, so he can explain."

She nods and shoots me a sad smile. After she closes the door behind her, I wait to hear the front door close. I don't meet his eyes until I hear her car drive away.

"Trinity," he pleads, "I can explain."

"Start," I demand, glaring over at him.

I watch as he swallows tightly and braces himself.

"Four years ago, Elijah, Amelia, and I got an offer with a record label. Obviously, we took it because singing had been our dream for the longest time. Our band's name is X3. I guess you can say we're a big deal now. I couldn't write any songs. So, my dad made us move up here, so I could get the motivation I needed," he stammers. "When I first met you, I thought you were playing dumb, but then I quickly realized that you really didn't know who we were."

Tears cloud my vision as I look at the liar in front of me.

"You're a breath of fresh air, Trinity. You love me for who I am. I haven't felt normal in years, and you gave me that feeling. I know I should have told you about my identity, but I didn't want to ruin what we had. I wanted you to love me for my heart and not for being the world-famous Leo."

He quickly gets up from the ground when I stand straight. I take steps backward, and my back meets the wall as he stares at me with longing.

How could he do this to me?

Tears roll down my face as I realize I fell in love with a liar. This isn't something you keep from your girlfriend. Someone you hold on to like

they're your lifeline ... someone you gave your heart to.

"Please say something," he pleads and moves toward me.

I place a hand out to stop him. Someone pinch me because this is not happening right now. The one person I felt pure happiness with has been lying to me for weeks. He's the person I found comfort in, and as I glance at him, I don't see the guy I fell in love with.

I just see a playboy who toyed with me so hard.

"What was your end goal?" I croak out.

Tears pour down his face at a faster rate. "To make you fall in love with me! The real me, not some bullshit you see on the news and tabloids!" he yells desperately when I shake my head.

"I feel so played by you."

I try to walk around him when he strides over to me.

"I wasn't playing you. I really like you, Trin. My love isn't a lie. I didn't mean for this to get so out of hand. I wanted to tell you before we got serious, but I got so lost in you, and I didn't want to ruin what we had!"

He grabs my hips. Where his skin meets my own, I don't feel the usual electricity. I feel a deep sting of betrayal. It runs through my veins all the way to my heart, which aches. Aches so bad that my chest hurts.

Leonidas's face is so close to mine. Feeling his breath on my face, I want to push him and yell at him.

"How could you do this to me?" I whimper. "How could you break my heart like this, knowing how broken I already was?"

I push his body away from mine. His body stumbles away while I run toward the door, letting out a yelp when I feel his hand on my shoulder. He spins me around, and I glare at him.

"Don't touch me."

He extends his hands out, a sign that he won't be touching me. Sagging in defeat, he replies shakily, "I won't touch you, but please let us talk this out."

"What is there to talk about?" I snap coldly. "You kept the biggest secret from me."

All I see is red. He lied to me. He's a liar. I'm a joke to him. All the things he said, all his touches, advice, and sweet nothings—they feel like lies. I fell in love with a liar, a person who isn't real.

Fuck love. I hate the word *love*.

And it's all because of the guy in front of me. I hate him for breaking me like this. I hate that I fell in love with him.

No wonder why people's eyes would linger.

Why they would turn their heads around and do a double take.

I was naive.

I was blind and stupid.

I was in love.

"I love you, Trinity, so damn much!"

The more the word *love* comes out of his mouth, the more I want to run away. You don't lie to the person you love.

I take steps back from him. The endless river of tears stream down my face. I want them to stop, show him I'm strong and he didn't break my heart.

As I look at him, I feel a tremendous amount of pain.

My chest aches, and my hands sweat. He's made me into an idiot.

"Love shouldn't make me feel this way, Leo!" I say harshly.

As the word *Leo* leaves my mouth, his face falls with heartbreak.

A broken whisper comes out of his lips. "Did you call me Leo?"

"Is that even your name?" I laugh, and my hands gesture toward him. "Or did you lie about that too?"

"Of course it's my real name!" he yells out passionately, turning a shade of red. His eyes blaze with determination. "You're the only one who knows my full name, Trinity. Don't call me Leo. I only didn't tell you about being in a band!"

I reel back, curling my lip back in disgust. "Don't act like that isn't a major part of who you are. You lied about everything. How could you not tell me that when we were in a relationship?"

He says nothing. His tall body hovers over mine. Eyes full of sadness, a sadness that would break me if he hadn't already done so.

I watch as his world crumbles, and so does mine.

"I told you everything," I start off but stop when my voice cracks with emotion. "I told you things about myself that even my mother doesn't know. You just sat back and watched as you completely played me like a damn TV show. I know you didn't want to move into this stupid town. Did you not tell me because you wanted entertainment? Did I keep you busy?" Every word that leaves my mouth gets harsher, louder.

I want the boy who completely shattered my heart to know how much he truly hurt me.

"Did you use me for inspiration? Did you write any excellent songs while lying to me? Will your next album be called *The Stupid Small-Town Girl*?" I

spit out at him, and he staggers back.

“I told you my reasoning for not telling you,” Leo adds. “I wanted you to love me for who I actually am! I wanted to have my person, Trinity. You’re my person. My favorite person!” He sobs and tries to grab my face.

I dodge him. “How am I your person if you’re not mine? I can’t be with a liar. I don’t even know who you are!”

“Don’t say that,” he pleads. His voice cracks. “Please don’t leave me, Trinity.” The most heartbreaking cry I’ve ever heard leaves his mouth.

“I gave you everything. I gave you my heart and soul, Leo! I told you I have fucking trust issues, but I trusted you! I put them aside for you because I loved you!” I yell, and my voice echoes in the room. The only thing I can seem to do is scream.

He flinches when I say *loved*.

“And you know what the saddest thing is?” I pause, and his red eyes find my own. “I would have loved you regardless if you’d told me your damn identity! This just proves how you don’t trust me. You could have told me after asking me out, when you knew how I felt at the beginning. What good is a relationship if you can’t trust one another?” I choke back an emotional sound. “I thought you out of everyone would have understood that. That I wouldn’t love you for your money or fame.”

“I gave you everything too,” he explains with urgency. “Just like you, I gave you my entire fucking heart and soul. You think my fans see that side of me? I’m so different from the person the world sees. I didn’t want you to see that person.” He grips my cheeks in the palms of his hands. “This is me, the real me.”

“I can’t trust you right now.”

He says nothing. My own words feel like bullets to my chest.

“Even after knowing I hate music, you pretended that your entire life didn’t revolve around it. You lied to me even when I showed you I cared for you. Was that funny? Did you get a good laugh?”

“You know that’s not my reasoning,” Leo says sharply.

“Was it worth it?” I ask him, suddenly needing space.

“No.” His voice comes out torn. “It wasn’t worth it. I’m an idiot.”

The face I grew to love drops into his hands as he lets out a breathy sigh. I can’t be around him anymore. I’ve never felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest this brutally. The pain is as if I were being run over by a car, but Leo was at the wheel, laughing, enjoying the fact that he’d demolished

the already-broken girl he moved next door to.

I bolt when he tries to grab for me. I can hardly see through the thick tears in my eyes. I run down the steps, not even bothering to hold the banister.

I speed up when I hear his heavy footsteps following my own. Running toward the door, I grip the doorknob.

“Trinity, baby—” he pleads.

I whip around and burst out, “Just go, Leo. I need to be alone to think.” I swing the front door open, and my eyes narrow.

Painful, thick silence consumes the air as he stands, rooted to his spot.

“Get out!” *Please, just get out.*

I need to be alone. I feel like I’m being ripped apart, eaten alive. I still grieve the death of my dad, my mom kept secrets from me, my dog died today, and now, this. I can’t be around a guy I love but only see as a traitor now.

When I see that he won’t listen to my desperate pleas, I move behind him, and my hand connects with his chest lightly, and he trips out the door due to my slight push.

The door slams shut on his face before he can say anything else. But as I lean on the door and sink down onto the ground, I hear his fist pound on the wood.

“I fucking love you, Trin. I fucking love you. I’m nothing without you.”

I cry harder as he places his forehead against the door and cries. His deep sobs echo in the fresh night air.

I stay there until I hear him leave.

My body feels weak. I feel absolutely nothing as I walk slowly toward my bedroom. I end up grabbing a pillow and a blanket to sleep on the couch. Because everywhere I look in my room reminds me of him. As I glance straight ahead of me, my eyes burn with dryness. I can’t even seem to cry anymore. I’ve run out of tears.

I’m absolutely empty inside.

Absolutely shattered.

Who can live a happy life if they hate having to wake up and take on another day?

THIRTY-SIX

LEO

I knew this would happen.

She slipped between my fingers, right when I just felt like I'd regained some of my happiness. I lost Trinity. The love of my life, the woman I saw myself marrying in the future, hates me. The way she looked at me would make Jesus cry. Betrayal, sadness, anger, confusion were mixed in her eyes.

I'm the devil to her. She's convinced that everything was a lie—every touch I gave her, every word that left my mouth, every feeling I felt within. She's so damn wrong.

Everything she said felt like a slap in my face, like soap in my mouth.

Everyone around me had told me to tell her, to reveal the truth, but I wasn't able to. Her best friend took that away from me. I was too late for the words to come out of my mouth. Maybe if I'd told her myself, the end result wouldn't have made me feel so fucking heartbroken. I wouldn't have stayed on her front porch with my head pressed against the glass, crying because I knew I'd lost her.

I lost the one girl who had seen me for who I was. She'd heard my real laugh and seen me at my lowest. That's all gone though. In the blink of an eye, the world swept her away from me. Leaving me cold and alone.

I lost my entire world.

She trusted me with her heart, and I broke it. Completely shattered it into a million pieces.

I stayed on her front porch for a while. I could feel her presence behind the door as I cried my heart out, maybe just hoping that she'd open the door like she usually did when I came over. She didn't. I sat on the steps with my

head in my hands and listened to my heartbeat. It was beating hella fast. I'm surprised I didn't have a heart attack.

I get why she feels betrayed. Trinity finds it hard to open up to people and to be emotionally vulnerable. She put herself in a situation where she opened up her heart to me. Which ended up just reminding herself why she can't trust anyone.

Because of people like me. I'm a liar.

I'm the villain in her story, but I used to be her hero.

It's only been two hours, and I'm struggling without her. If someone could read my mind, they would laugh at me and wonder how a nineteen-year-old could love someone this deeply. And the truth is, anyone can love, no matter how old or young they are. Everyone loves. It's just a matter of when you find your person.

I found mine.

But I broke her. She trusted me. I showed her I didn't trust her to love me for me. She trusted me with her life. She cried to me, let me take her in ways she hadn't let others. I experienced it all with her—the tears, happiness, passion, and comfort. She gave me everything, yet I gave her nothing.

Now, I'm just left with emptiness in my heart that I know only belongs to her. No matter who tries to fulfill it, it will always be sad and cruel without her. I keep myself from climbing through her window, from banging on her door until she's forced to answer. I need her in my life. I will simply forever live in guilt if I don't have her. I feel like I've let go of an angel on this earth without a fight.

But would I have forgiven her if she had hidden who she was to me? Probably not.

I would have probably thrown a tantrum and screamed at the top of my lungs.

I saw the way her heart broke when she found out, how her face fell to the floor. I can't get the image out of my head, no matter how hard I try.

When you love someone, you want to protect their heart. You crave to make them laugh and see the beautiful smile that you fell in love with. Even in my own sick way, that's what I was trying to do. I wanted to protect her from the life that made me feel so low. It will beat you down into the ground if you let it.

I was sucker-punched into the dirt of Hollywood. I haven't been able to get out since the age of fifteen. So, even though I made a mistake and kept

the biggest secret about myself from her, I did it out of love.

That won't be good enough now. I lost her. The woman I always praised like a goddess.

This entire situation just proves how weak and cruel I am. I break everyone that comes into my life. I'm a tornado, a violent mess that takes down everything in its path, leaving nothing for others but destruction and ashes.

I didn't deserve Trinity in the first place. Maybe this entire time, God was playing a joke on me. He gave me the girl of my dreams, who loved me for me. And now, she's snatched away, leaving me absolutely crushed on the inside because that's what I deserve.

He's showing me that I'm a disgrace, a laughingstock to the entire world.

The soles of my shoes crush the cement pebbles under my feet as I stride my way home. I curse the entire world with every step I take.

I wish to disappear, knowing the girl I'll forever love will never heal unless I'm gone.

My thoughts eat me alive as I swing the back door open roughly. It bangs against the wall, creating unwanted attention my way. Just what I didn't want.

My eyes spot Elijah as he sits at the kitchen table with Amelia. I see them in the same spot every day for hours. Amelia cries into the palms of her hands, refusing to eat the food as Elijah pushes it toward her. Amelia has had an eating disorder for three years. The more fame we got, the more brutal people became toward her appearance. Every day, we have to do the same thing. If I didn't hate the world right now, I would give her a hug. Seeing my sister cry wrenches something in my gut every time.

Though the only person I want a hug from wants nothing to do with me. And that fuels my anger one hundred times more.

"What the fuck is your problem?" Elijah sighs and runs a hand down his face in defeat. Making Amelia's red eyes find mine.

Leaning against the wall, I glare while shaking my head. "Oh, you know, just the love of my life breaking up with me because she found out I'm a rock star."

I laugh, and Elijah and Amelia sit still in their seats.

"She looked at me like I was a stranger and literally threw me out of her house." Every damn word that leaves my mouth gets louder.

My siblings flinch, their eyes growing with sadness. I know Amelia and

Elijah just lost a best friend. They love her almost as much as I do.

“How did she find out?” Amelia croaks out.

In the perfect way. Note the sarcasm.

“When I had my tongue down her throat, her best friend walked in on us and proceeded to yell and jump up and down like I’m Jesus.” My hands clench at my sides at the horrible memory. The anger in me is overpowering the sadness, making me ruthless.

“What if I go talk to her?” my sister says, getting up from her seat.

I stop her by suddenly yelling, “Sit down and eat your food, Amelia, or so help me God.”

She staggers back in shock.

“Hey, man, watch it,” Elijah presses, giving me a glare in warning.

Guilt immediately fills my gut. Why do I always take out my anger on the people I love? I would die for my siblings, and I just attacked my sister.

Sighing out in defeat, I walk over to her, pulling her to me. I hold her as she cries into my chest.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for not being able to eat and for being a burden. I’m so sorry about Trinity,” she says, and I pull away.

Gripping my arm tightly in her hand, she says, “I know how much you love that girl, and if I know one thing about her ... I know she’ll come around. You know why?” She pauses.

All I can do is shrug my shoulders in reply.

“Because she loves you.”

“I made her hate love. She wants nothing to do with me,” I say and gently pull my arm out of her grasp.

Elijah just stands to the side. He’s hunched forward as he gets lost in his thoughts. A minute later, he looks up and rapidly blinks the tears in his eyes away.

That kills.

Looking pointedly at our sister, he nods at the food and demands in a firm voice, “Just a little more, okay?”

I walk away from the two as I hear my sister let out a broken whimper.

As I slam my bedroom door behind me, I sink down on the floor with my head in my hands. I feel empty.

I’ve let secrets define me, and love has absolutely broken me.

THIRTY-SEVEN

TRINITY

It's been days since me and Leonidas's fight. My days are mostly spent in bed. Forcing myself to use the bathroom is a chore. Food feels like thick chalk in my mouth. I wince after I swallow every bite. My room is dark, creating a depressing look, matching my glum mood.

A couple hours ago, I threw my phone across the room. I haven't gotten up to go check if it's cracked. Who cares if it is? I know the only people who would call me are the triplets and Harper.

If Harper hadn't told me about his identity, Leonidas probably would have never told me. That stings more than getting lemon juice in your eye.

I would have understood in the beginning. We were just getting to know one another. I still would have loved him for who he truly was. Yet why didn't he tell me after he asked me to be his girlfriend or when I showed him every day that I loved him? There's no excuse. I see him differently now, and nothing can change that. I'm frustrated with myself. My thoughts eat me alive.

I love him so much, and I hate that I still do.

I hate after all that he's kept from me, I still love him. I hate the fact that I want him to come up to my window and try to come in. I hate wanting to know how he looks onstage. I hate how he opened up my heart to him and destroyed it like it was a toy.

I feel so lonely without him. He made my days brighter when they were dark and stormy. He made me smile when I didn't want to wake up and see another day.

I want to punch but kiss his face at the same time.

Even though it killed me to see the way he dropped to the floor in agony

when I told him I didn't love him, I wanted to hurt him. I wanted him to feel even a small percentage of the pain I was feeling.

I think I accomplished my goal, but why do I feel so shitty about it?

I can't help but think I fell in love with someone else. How will I know the difference between the truth and lies? How will I look at him the same?

I know how it feels to get attached to someone. You feel like you're nothing without them. That's the look I saw on Leonidas's face. I saw him crumple before my eyes. I saw the remaining happiness drain out of his eyes as he pleaded with me to forgive him. I can't. Not right now. I need time to think.

Not to mention, Elijah and Amelia. They all lied to me too. They knew how heartbroken I was about my father. I told them how I hated music, and they just sat there and pretended their entire life didn't revolve around melodies.

I feel like a fool. They probably got a good laugh out of the whole situation.

Most of all, I feel stupid. How did I not know? For sure, there were signs. How did I not see them and pick up on them? It's because I trusted them and didn't suspect a thing. Look where that got me. Alone in my dark room, starving and drained.

I physically can't cry anymore. I lost my dog and boyfriend all in one day.

I'm so lonely.

My thoughts are screaming at me, laughing like I'm a comedy show.

In my head, I do believe I am.

Surprisingly, Mom tried to come in my room. With the door locked, I weakly told her not to come in. I heard faintly as she lingered by the door and ran to the stairs a minute later. I'd bet a million bucks that she's going to go see Rodrigo. Always picking him over her own blood.

I need to leave and never look back. I can't wait till I get out of here.

I have nothing left here.

Just a town that screams misery, death, and lies.

No matter what I do to get my mind off the rock star that I fell in love with, nothing works. I can look at the damn color white and think about him. How he looks droolworthy in the color that brings out his skin tone.

He's consumed me.

I hate the feeling when I move toward my window to spot him. The

thought of him going to the pill bottle again in guilt worries me. I'd be absolutely destroyed if something happened to him. I know Amelia and Elijah are watching over him. They had to have seen him that night, how destroyed he looked. He definitely wasn't quiet either.

My eyes glare over at my nightstand, and my eyes land on the *Twilight* book Leonidas bought me. A knock sounds at my door. But it's definitely not the person I expect to be here.

"Trinity, can you please open your door?" Harper's voice whispers on the other side.

Do I really want to talk to her? Nope. But I know she probably has tons of questions for me.

My weak body gets up from my bed. Wrapping my fuzzy blanket around myself, I slowly walk toward the door. Turning the lock, I open the door a crack. Seeing as Harper is the only one there, I open the door wider for her.

She carries a grocery bag and two spoons in her hand that I know came from my kitchen. Plopping down onto my bed, she pulls out two tubs of ice cream. One is cotton candy—Harper's favorite, definitely not mine. And the other is cookie dough. Bingo, just what I need.

I sit beside her and grab the spoon she extends out to me, flipping the cap open and not caring if I dirty my bed. I scoop out a spoonful of heaven and stuff it into my mouth.

Harper cuddles under my blankets and begins eating hers. "So, you're telling me, Leo from X3 is your boyfriend?" she says into the silence.

I have to keep myself from being sarcastic to her. It's so hard because I see how she's trying.

"Yes, but I'm not sure if he's my boyfriend now," I correct her.

She glances at me sadly. "He really didn't tell you he's one of the most well-known celebrities in the world?"

"Would I be in my room, eating ice cream in the dark, if he had?"

She snorts and bumps her shoulder into mine. "Touché."

Awkward silence fills the room as we continue eating.

I drop my spoon in the container and glare at her. "Say it. I know you want to freak out." My voice comes out meaner than I would have liked. Oops.

Dropping her own spoon, she faces me with a smile. "I can't believe you were dating the guy that I dream about every day." She squeals, making me want to gag.

It's weird, thinking about how many girls would die for Leonidas, that I'm not the only girl who loves him. He could do so much better than me. He could have different girls who were singers, actors, or models.

Why would he want a small-town girl like me? I know the answer to my question because I fell in love with him.

"I can't believe he didn't tell you his identity. That's a dick move." She scoffs.

"Yeah." I sigh and rub my tired eyes. "I feel played."

Picking up her spoon, she sends me a glare. "He's a douche. I can't believe I liked the guy. I used to listen to his music all the time," she rants. "Now, knowing he lied to my best friend—not to mention, how rude he was"—she gags and rolls her eyes—"I'm deleting him off my playlist ASAP."

Leonidas was vulgar to her. But under the circumstances, I understand. He was panicking.

"He's actually really sweet, Harper," I grumble, and she looks at me, confused. "Just because he lied doesn't mean I don't love him."

She snorts and pushes my shoulder. "How can you love someone after that? Your heart is too big for your own good." Her eyes suddenly sadden. "I'm sorry about Simba. I heard about the terrible news. That's why I came to see how you were doing, and then I saw Leonidas." She fiddles with the spoon between her fingers. "Look, I never wanted to hurt both of you. I didn't want you to hate him. That wasn't my intention. But I saw a singer I always looked up to and freaked out."

I reply strongly, "You don't have to apologize to me. I understand. If I saw a celebrity that I loved, I would freak out too."

"Are you guys going to get back together?"

I shrug my shoulders in reply. "The reason he didn't tell me who he was, was because he didn't trust me enough to love him for him. That's what hurts the most—him thinking he couldn't trust me," I mumble. "What's a relationship without trust?"

"Did things blow up badly after I left?" Harper asks.

I nod into my hands and let out a shaky breath. "I said some things I shouldn't have said. I was mad."

"You have a reason to be mad, and I'm sorry you found out through me. That wasn't fair."

My eyes find hers. "I'm not sure he would have told me himself if it

wasn't for you." I glance down and blink rapidly.

I won't cry right now. I can't cry in front of people. It shows weakness, and I'm not weak.

"They still have Simba's body at their house. Do you mind going to get him for me?" My voice cracks as I remember my pup.

I want to bury him here, right in our backyard. I don't know if that's allowed, but frankly, I don't care. I want him close.

Harper nods. Placing her carton down on my bedside table, she gets up. "I'll get him for you, and I'll also kick Leo in the dick for you."

I smile and chuckle. Tears rush to my eyes when I think about him.

Running out of my room a minute later, she leaves the door wide open.

Damn ...



I throw the shovel to the ground once I dig the hole deep enough. Dusting off the dirt from my hands, I look at Simba. I found the perfect box to put him in. It'll protect him from bugs and other animals.

Wiping away the small tears that run down my face, I glance down at my boy. Bending down, I touch his golden fur for the last time. "I'm sorry I failed you." My voice cracks. "You're at peace now. Say hi to Dad for me."

My hands shake as I take in the last sight of him before I cover the box with the lid. Crying silently, I place him in the ground. Standing straight up again, I bury him with the soil I dug up.

Feeling absolutely drained, I slump down and stare at the one source of happiness that I would have had left if only he'd survived the evils of this world.

THIRTY-EIGHT

TRINITY

It's been days.

Days since I found out about Leonidas and the band.

Days since Simba died and I buried him.

Days since I was happy.

Days of me missing Leonidas.

Days of me sitting in my room with my curtains pulled to block the sunshine.

I wish he'd told me about himself. I know why he didn't tell me. He wanted me to fall in love with him. But he had so many chances to confess. Yet I heard it from Harper.

I couldn't care less that he's a rock star. Deep down, I think it's hot. I'm just hurt, and I'm going through thousands of battles in my head.

I've been holding back from searching for him on the internet. Do I want to see him like that? Something he expressed he's not proud of? Yes and no.

I want to see what he looks like when blinding lights hit him from all directions, the way his voice sounds in a crowded stadium. I crave to see his sweaty body strumming a guitar, looking like a rock star. I shouldn't be thinking of forgiving someone so easily. But I guess that's what love does to you. It ties you with its ropes and never lets you go.

My head is a mess of questions, questions that only he'll be able to answer.

I don't want him to think I'm a girl who will crawl her way back to him after a couple of days. He needs to know I'm strong. However, I wish I could take back some of the words I said that night. I was angry, and I feel so guilty. I hurt him badly, and I regret it now.

I'm sick—sick in love.

I place the book I'm reading down on my bed and sigh.

"I'm so fucked up," I grit out to myself. "I can't still be in love with him after all this." I can't. I would be naive and stupid.

I know myself. I'm not a girl who cares about fame. I like the idea of Leonidas not being famous more than knowing that he is. The thought of him thinking I would love him any less or use him makes me sick.

I always trusted him.

I hate the way I feel. Loneliness takes over my entire body as I just sit in my bed.

He made me so happy. I got used to that feeling. I got used to him being in my life. Now that I don't have him, all the sadness I felt before him has come back full force.

At least then, I had Simba, but once again, the world loves to laugh at me.

My fingers fiddle with the edge of my book as I stare straight ahead at a dark corner of my room.

I flinch suddenly on my bed when a knock sounds on my window. "Holy shit!"

Eyes wide with shock, I place a hand on my chest. *What the hell? Why have I been so jumpy lately?*

I swear my heart stopped beating for a minute. Did I just see the heavens? I look around my room and laugh softly at myself. Nope, still down here.

I know it's him. Who else would it be? No one else would be as crazy as Leonidas. Nobody has ever climbed a two-story house to see me. When I move the curtain back, I'll see him for the first time in days.

Am I ready to see him, knowing I'll leap into his arms?

No.

Another knock vibrates off the glass.

My hands sweat as nervousness takes over every bone in my body. Wiping my clammy palms against my legs, I swallow hard, shuffling closer to the window. My hands move aside my curtains. I know he won't go away until I do so. I squint my eyes when the sunlight beams into my room.

I feel disappointment when I see Amelia and Elijah perched on my roof. They look at me like lost puppies. Making praying actions with their hands, they beg me with their eyes.

Damn, that always gets me.

"Please talk to us," Elijah pleads through the glass.

I hold back a laugh when they press their faces against the glass, making their noses squish and leaving oil marks on my window.

If I leave them out there any longer, I'm afraid they'll fall off the roof. I twist the lock, and my window pops open. Elijah and Amelia both let out sighs of relief when they step safely into my room. They stand in the corner of my room, and the air is tense and awkward. I back away toward my bed and freeze in my spot as they share a knowing look with one another.

"We love you, okay?!" Amelia practically yells, making me jump.

I look at her, wide-eyed, not expecting her to burst out like that.

"We didn't tell you because we love you and we didn't want to lose you."

"You make us feel normal, and I know you probably don't understand that, but we need you in our lives ... especially Leonidas," Elijah says. "You're our best friend, and we wanted to protect you from our lives. Hollywood is not fun and games, Trinity. The last thing we wanted to make you feel is stupid. We didn't laugh at you. We all love you for you," Elijah says fast, and I have to pay attention to catch what he says. "We did what we did out of love."

"Please love us back again," Amelia says and pushes off the wall. She walks over to me and drops onto her knees. She whistles over to Elijah. His eyes widen in surprise. Getting down on his knees, they both plead, "Please forgive us? We love you."

As I glance down at them, I have to fight the smile that's begging to lift my face. They look so funny. For some reason, I feel I can find it in me to forgive these two easier. They were my friends. I wasn't in a relationship with them. I didn't give them everything I had to give.

I gave Leonidas my entire heart and soul, told him things that my mother would hate me for. I gave that all to him and nobody else. When I think about it, I always saw Amelia and Elijah glaring at Leonidas, like when I saw their tattoos. I know they wanted to tell me because they had nothing to lose. And Leonidas had everything to lose.

I'm so confused. I have no idea what I'm doing.

Glancing at the two, I sigh. "I can't believe you guys didn't tell me." I pause. "How would you react if you were in my position?"

"Probably like an animal," Elijah replies nonchalantly.

I snort and punch his shoulder.

"So ... will you forgive us?" Her voice trails off with excitement.

Yes or no, Trinity? I really want to say yes to these guys. But I'm afraid I

don't know the full story.

"Maybe," I stutter. "Sort of, not fully yet."

Elijah and Amelia bounce up in joy. High-fiving each other, they glance down at me with an evil glint in their eyes.

A second later, I land on my bed with a squeal. Their arms squeeze me as they let out laughs.

"We love you, Trinity. Thank you, thank you!" Amelia rushes out.

"Fuck, I missed your ugly face," Elijah mutters in my shoulder.

When he stuffs his face in my neck, I die from both their weights combined on my body.

"She has the face of an angel," Amelia snarks back at her brother.

These two will drive me insane, but I love them ... and their stupid brother. My mind immediately goes back to him. Wrenching my heart into two once again.

As they pull away, my gut swirls with dread as I spot the frowns on their faces.

"What?" I eye the two.

"It's Leonidas," Amelia says. "He's not well."

THIRTY-NINE

TRINITY

“**W**hat do you mean, he’s not well?” I stutter, staring at them in shock. “Is he sick? He’s dying, isn’t he?” I panic, jumping off my bed.

I wasted so much time, so much time overthinking. What if Leonidas is sick? Is he going to be taken away from me too? My life is really a cruel joke.

“He hasn’t come out of his room in days. I don’t even think he’s eaten, Trinity,” she explains. Concern dripping from her tone. “Who knows what he has in there? Please help him.”

“What would I be able to do?” I ask.

We’re not exactly on good terms.

“Trinity, we haven’t heard his voice in days. You need to come over and see if he’ll talk to you,” Elijah practically begs and takes a step closer to where I stand. “I’m not telling you to get married to him. Just please see if he’s okay and get some food in his stomach.”

It’s a straightforward decision that I’m going to Leonidas. I love him and wish nothing but the best for him. That doesn’t mean I’m getting back together with him. I just need to know if he’s okay. Or else I’ll be obsessing over it all night.

I nod my head at the two, and instant relief crosses their faces.

“You’re the best, Trinity,” they both say.

“I know,” I joke.

Running down the stairs with the two of them right behind me, I wince when my eyes land on Rodrigo practically dry-humping Mom on the couch.

Ew. How can a mother be disrespectful? Never sitting on that ever again.

Elijah senses my anger. Walking toward the sofa, he grabs a pillow and walks back toward me.

“What are you doing?” I hiss and eye him carefully.

“Watch and learn.”

I hide behind the wall and eye the pillow that’s in his grip. Winding his hand back, he throws the pillow in the happy couple’s direction. I watch and hold back a laugh when it smashes into their faces. They break apart in a frenzy while we rush out of the house. The three of us don’t bother to muffle our laughter. We run as fast as we can across the lawn.

“Hey!” Rodrigo’s whiny voice yells, vibrating in the thick summer air.

As we all run toward the Drakos’ house, we stick our middle fingers up high in the air for him to see.

Suck it.

Elijah takes the stairs two at a time, swinging his back door open. He holds it open like a gentleman to me and his sister. I enter their house. It’s usually lively and full of joy. But now, it’s dark, and it has a depressing feeling to it. The blinds are pulled down, making dread immediately fill my stomach.

God, please let him be okay.

Following Amelia and Elijah, I trudge up the stairs. Nervousness takes over my body at what I’m about to see. I know he’ll be bad; I feel it within me, but am I ready to see it? No.

I never will be because I’m in love with him. I know when I leave here today, a part of my heart will be left behind, no matter which direction today takes us.

I stop in front of his closed bedroom door.

Amelia casts me a worried glance as her fist raps against his door. “Leonidas, someone’s here to see you.”

Mini tornadoes bounce in my stomach as they look at me.

What the hell do I even say? The last time he was at my house, I told him I didn’t love him anymore.

What if he’s mad at me and he doesn’t want to see me? I never thought of that before.

Maybe this is all a mistake.

I wipe my sweaty palms on my legs and swallow hard. Walking closer to the closed wood door, I knock. “Leonidas, it’s Trinity. Let me in, please.” My voice cracks at the end.

No answer ...

Nothing.

“I’m about to bust open his door,” Elijah mutters and cracks his knuckles. “He’s making me crazy.”

I watch carefully as his body slightly shakes.

“Leonidas,” I say louder and bang on his door. “Open up. We’re worried.”

Dead silence.

I press my ear against his door and hear no movement.

“Leonidas, Elijah is about to kick down your door if you don’t open up,” I warn. Nodding, I step back and prepare myself for Elijah.

“I can’t believe he didn’t open up for you,” Amelia mumbles and runs a hand down her face. “There must be something wrong.”

We press our backs into the wall as Elijah takes a step forward. Taking a deep breath, he winds his leg back before banging his foot against the wood. The door doesn’t fall off its hinges, but it smashes loudly against the wall. I know if I look, I’ll find a hole in the wall from the door handle hitting it. Oops.

Taking a deep breath before I walk into his room, I try to mentally prepare myself but fail.

Leonidas’s room looks scary. Not even a hint of light shines in here, and what makes me even more nervous is seeing his bed perfectly made. Not a wrinkle is in his sheets. His pillows are fluffed and not slept on.

Where is he?

Walking around the packed boxes in a frenzy, I whisper-shout, “Leonidas?”

Hearing no movement behind me, I look over my shoulder and find two of the three triplets standing near the door. I motion with my hand for them to come in, but they wave me off.

“You’re the one he wants to see,” Elijah whispers from across the room.

Or I could be the last. It depends on how you look at things. My breaths turn shaky as I nod at them. It’s all on me now.

A lesson I learned a while back is to listen to your gut because it’s always right. Right now, my gut is screaming at me that something is wrong. I have that feeling in my stomach when you know something bad will happen before it actually does.

When I walk around the bed and spot him crouched on the floor, time stops while my heart falls to my feet.

I run over to his side and drop to my knees in front of him. Leonidas's body is hunched down, leaning against the wall. His arms are on his bent knees, and his face is pressed against them, hiding him from my view. What scares me the most is how he hasn't flinched. I have seen no movement come from his body.

"Leonidas?" I say in a serious tone.

Please look up.

Still nothing, not even a slight squirm. My heart that fell to the floor now feels like it is being stomped on as I eye the pill bottle that lies next to him.

No.

No, no, no.

Please don't tell me he took pills because of me, because of everything I said that I regret astronomically.

Gripping the orange tube in my shaking hand, I peer into it as tears fill my eyes. It's almost full. It doesn't look like he's taken anything.

Thank God.

Why is it lying next to him then? If he didn't take any, was he going to?

I raise my hand in the air, and my fingers become numb due to the anxiety possessing my body. Swallowing hard, I place my hand against his hot skin. It's practically burning. Sweat covers his skin. Leonidas's eyes still don't meet mine.

"Leonidas, I know you can hear me. Tell me if you're not okay. Tell me if you need anything." My voice is slow and thoughtful.

My hand slowly runs through his hair. Gripping the back of his head in my palm, I turn his head up.

I nearly flinch back when his eyes find mine. His once-beautiful brown orbs are now glassy and red. Leonidas's face is pale and shines with sweat. His plump lips, which I've touched against mine many times, are cracked. Not to mention, the hair I love is a mess, sticking up in all different directions.

What scares me the most is how he still says nothing to me. His eyes just bore into my own. They have a faraway look to them.

"Leonidas," I say shakily. As I hopelessly clasp his cheeks in my hands, tears full of fear trickle down my face.

"Get those away from me," he croaks out suddenly.

His voice is thick with desperation, hoarseness, and sadness. I can tell by the way he winces that he hasn't spoken for days.

I look down at my hand and find the pill bottle. Knowing that's causing his distress, I throw it at Elijah. He catches it easily and gives me a thumbs-up. I watch as Amelia nudges him with her elbow. They back away from the door. Giving me and Leonidas the space we both need.

Deep breaths, Trinity. Deep breaths.

"What happened to you?" I stress. I grip his face harder. "What did you do to yourself?"

He relaxes his cheek into my palm. "Nothing," he whispers.

Not even a child would believe that he didn't do something stupid. He looks close to death.

"Leonidas, why are you in here like this?" Emotion takes over my voice as I stare at the guy I love in front of me, so broken, small, and vulnerable. It makes me want to cry.

"Because of me. I'm in here because of me," he mumbles.

Because of both of us, he means.

"So, you're going to kill yourself over what happened?" My voice rises. "You're going to do the one thing that you told me not to do—give up?" I scoff and tap his cheek softly.

"I broke your heart."

"Nothing would break me more than losing you like this." I grip his face harder, and his glassy eyes find my own. "You can't just want to give up on life because of a girl like me," I say softly down at him.

I can't think straight, knowing he starved himself to death in here because of his guilt. I know deep down, no matter what he does, I'll always love him.

Love is a game. Either you get broken, the other person does, or you both get lucky and get your happily ever after together.

Leonidas is my happily ever after.



I'm getting déjà vu.

I stare at Leonidas in front of me. He's sitting on his bathroom counter, exactly where I was a couple of days ago.

I got him to come in here a couple minutes ago. He started coming back

down to earth when I ran my hands through his hair.

It instantly relieved me when he told me he didn't take any pills. He was having withdrawal problems on the floor. He was struggling and said I came in at just the right time before he took any.

Thank God.

Putting a washcloth under cold water, I squeeze it. Standing in between his legs, I bring it up to his face. I wipe the sweat off his skin. Running the cloth over his skin makes me want to sigh. What a joke we are. Both living, but hardly.

"Why are you doing this?" his deep voice mumbles.

I meet his intense eyes and shrug. "Because no matter how much I tried to convince myself to not love you, it didn't work."

"You still love me?" he remarks back. "After I didn't tell you who I am?"

Throwing the cloth in the sink, I place my hands on his thighs. "People call me crazy for a reason."

His lips turn up slightly. "You are crazy for loving me."

"I can say the same to you," I point out to him, and he frowns. "I messed up in my own way, said things I shouldn't have said and didn't mean, but me being here doesn't mean I forgive you fully."

"Shit, I wish I'd told you. I was scared, Trin," Leonidas pleads. "It scared me—the thought of losing you. I know you probably don't trust me, and I understand if you don't."

In my own silly way, I do trust him. I know his intentions were good, but why keep that a secret in the first place?

"What makes me angry is the fact that you didn't trust me," I say strongly. "I can't believe you thought I would love you for fame and money." I stop when my voice gives away my hurt within. "That's what hurts most because I thought you trusted me."

"I do trust you." He holds my cheeks in the palms of his hands. "I didn't trust myself."

What does he mean? This guy spins my head in circles.

He sees the confusion on my face and explains, "I didn't trust that I was lovable and all that shit."

"You're the stupidest person I've ever met in my life," I joke, making him chuckle.

Leonidas is deep in thought. I can tell by looking into his eyes, which fill with moisture as he glances down at me.

“Trinity, the only part of myself that I love is you.” He pauses and shakes his head in denial. “You’re my person, but it kills me to know I’m not yours.”

“You are my person,” I butt in. “I was just mad, and I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth.”

His hands find my waist, pulling me closer to his body. He drops his forehead on mine.

“It still stings that you never told me though,” I admit, and he sighs in defeat. “I feel like a laughingstock, the girl who hates music falling in love with a rock star. You probably thought I was a freak!” I exclaim at the end, making him shush me.

“The thought of you being a freak never crossed my mind. I understood why you didn’t like music.”

“I still feel played,” I mutter lowly.

“I know nothing I say will convince you I won’t lie to you again, but I’ll live all my days proving it to you.” Leonidas pauses nervously. “I want to help you.”

I arch an eyebrow up in question.

“Let me help you fall in love with music again.”

FORTY

TRINITY

“**L**et me help you fall in love with music again,” replays in my mind for a good hour.

I sit on Leonidas’s bed while he takes a shower and start obsessing over what he claimed.

He’s going to help me love music again.

My hands shake at just the thought.

I don’t know if I’m ready. That’s a big step. I haven’t even listened to a damn lyric in years. Diving right into it after all that time seems like a nightmare, impossible to overcome.

No matter how long I wait, I know I won’t be ready. Singing and listening to melodies were my dad’s things with me. We escaped reality on the front porch swing. It just seems wrong to do all of that without him.

Especially the way he died at the music store—brutal and alone. He was going to get me my first guitar. As he placed the stunning oak musical instrument in the trunk safely, that’s when he fell to the ground and never got up. In a way, I feel guilty, like it’s my fault. If I hadn’t wanted a guitar of my own, he wouldn’t have been there.

For years, I blamed myself for his death, that I’d caused it.

My therapist is the only one who knows my thoughts, the only person who knows I blamed myself and tried to change my mindset. I stopped going to him a couple of months ago. I got tired of the looks of pity and ditched.

He would always tell me I wasn’t holding the gun, that my finger didn’t squeeze the trigger. Meaning I didn’t kill my father.

I never believed him until Leonidas came into my life. I hadn’t been there to kill my beloved father. I can’t dwell on the sins of another wicked man. I

need to heal. I can't think of a better person to do it with than Leonidas.

We'll get stronger together.

"You there?" Leonidas's deep voice asks and snaps me out of my thoughts.

I find him standing near the foot of the bed in only sweatpants.

"Sorry, deep in thought," I reply quietly.

"About?" He sits in front of me on the bed.

I run a hand down my face and let out a shaky breath. "What you said earlier about helping me fall in love with music again. I'm just thinking."

"If you're not ready, I understand. I don't want to push you into anything."

"I'll never be ready," I explain, and he raises an eyebrow. "But that doesn't mean I can't try."

His face lifts with a smile as he gazes at me with pride. "This will be good for you, Trin. It'll probably be hard at first, but at least I'll be here with you."

I nod at him and tap his leg. "If you're by my side, doing it with me, then that's all that matters."

Cupping my cheek in his palm, he runs his thumb along my skin. "Plus, think about how proud your dad would be."

Swallowing thickly, I whisper back, gazing into his eyes that hold so much love, "So proud."

I'm so in love with you, I whisper in my mind.

I feel an intense need to admit my feelings to him. I've never just said those three specific words to him before our fight. Now seems like the perfect time.

"I love you, Leonidas Drakos."

His hand drops from my cheek as he processes my words with wide eyes.

"I love you more than the world loves the sun, more than plants need water, more than children who love Christmas, more than any romance book that's ever been written, more than anything in this world that needs another to function. I love you so much that it physically hurts me to be apart from you."

He pulls me to his body, tears shining in his eyes. Leonidas holds me tightly by my waist as he stares at me with awe. "Say it again."

I brush my lips against his as I whisper, "I love you."

His lips capture mine in a heart-wrenching kiss, a kiss that rocks my

bones. I need to clench on to his shoulders for support.

“I love you so much, Trin. I love you more than all the love in the world combined.”

His words make my heartbeat pound wildly in my chest.

Winding my hands through his hair, I show him all my emotions through a kiss. When our bodies beg for oxygen, unfortunately, we stay wrapped around in each other’s arms. Protecting each other from the evils of the world.

I don’t know how long we sit here, listening to our breaths and heartbeats, but a thought crosses my mind. Leonidas needs to eat. That was the entire purpose of me coming here. I have the brain of a donkey or a fruit fly. I can’t decide which one is stupider.

“You need to eat,” I blurt, pulling away from his warmth. “Amelia and Elijah told me you haven’t eaten in days.” I jump off of the bed in a frenzy and pull him up with me.

He wobbles a bit, sending me a shy smile. “I need a burger.”

“I think you need five,” I snark back while we walk down the stairs, and I hear him mock me under his breath. I wind my hand back and hit him.

“What the fuck?” he wheezes and staggers back a second later.

I turn and notice him holding his dick through his pants. He bends down and swears under his breath. Standing in front of him, I let out a chuckle. Watching guys freak out when they get kicked in the balls is the funniest thing.

No wonder God gave women children to birth. If men had to birth out a damn baby, our population would stop. They can’t handle a single tap.

“It’s not funny,” I hear Leonidas grit out at me through my obnoxious laughs.

“It really is,” I gasp out and find his heated gaze.

He stands to his full size and crosses his arms across his chest. Damn, he looks sexy.

“Not funny. Not funny at all,” I reply quickly when he leans his head to the side. I twist around fast and run down the remaining steps.

Hearing his heavy footsteps behind me, I squeal when I feel his hot breath against my neck.

“I’m taking you to dinner this week, and then I’ll take you shopping. Go on as many adventures with you as my sorry gift. Whatever you want, I’ll get it for you.”

He twists me around by the waist, and I shake my head.

“I told you, I hate gifts, Leonidas. I want nothing but you.”

“I’m not giving you a choice.”

I stare at him with a straight face, forcing back my smile. “Fight me,” I say jokily, but my voice stays serious.

“I will—in bed.”

My mouth drops open in shock after the strong statement leaves his mouth. The little—but big—shit walks past me with a smirk.

That dick. I’ll show him the tease I am if he wants to play. I love the games we play with one another.

Game on, bitch.

I walk into the kitchen with powerful strides, full of confidence. Walking past my boyfriend as he stuffs his face with food, I wink at him. Smirking, he raises an eyebrow.

Glancing around the kitchen, I find it empty. *Perfect.*

Leonidas leans against the fridge. Walking over, I press my body against his.

I brush my lips against his ear and murmur, “Can I tell you a secret?”

He hums in response and places a hand on my butt.

“Us in a bed in the near future isn’t looking good.” I admit and smirk when I feel him go still against my body. “I don’t want to sleep with a guy who isn’t my boyfriend.”

Against my own throat, I feel when he swallows his food tightly. His hands find my hips.

“I love your standards,” he hoarsely grits out. Looking like he’s in pain.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” I breathe out.

In response, he slams his hips against mine. “Be mine again?”

“Let me think about it.” I place a hand on my chin. “I guess I’ll be your girlfriend again if I have to.” I poke fun at him with a smirk.

“Fuck eating.” He drops his food on the counter. “Let’s go, girlfriend.”

When he bends to pick me up, I hurry away from him.

I wave my hand in the air. “Nope. Sorry, I can’t.”

Leonidas stares at me with hunger and confusion. “Trin, come here.”

What goes around comes around.

I shrug my shoulders sadly at him from across the counter. “I’m currently unavailable,” I tease even though I’m not.

“BS,” he grumbles and rolls his beautiful eyes.

“Did you see your brain?” I ask casually, pointing out his rude eye roll.

Picking up his food again from the counter, he dramatically bites into his hamburger, and sticks his finger up at me.

“That’s right.” I tsk and slap my forehead playfully. “It’s empty in there, isn’t it?”

“Yours is filled with shit, right?” he snarks back while readjusting his dick in his sweatpants.

I scrunch my face. “Yeah, full of shit you’ve put me through.”

I watch with a small smile as he slightly chokes on his food. He lets out an obnoxious laugh that makes me want to cover my ears because he’s so loud.

“Touché, babe. Touché.”

We stand on either side of the counter and just smile at each other.

“I missed you,” he whispers into the silence. “God, I missed you so much.”

The smile lifting my mouth hurts my cheeks. “I missed you too, goof.”

“I’m never letting you go ever again,” he says and walks toward me. Reaching for my hips, he pulls me into his body. “You’re stuck with me forever.”

“Forever and ever,” I say before he connects our lips in a delicate kiss.

“I love you,” he mumbles against my lips.

I hum back. I’m addicted to him and the way he makes me feel. At this moment, I feel whole again.

“Thank God the lovebirds are back,” Elijah grumbles, making us pull apart suddenly. He has a relieved smile on his face. Not even a second later, he frowns when his stare lands on Leonidas. “What the fuck did you think you were doing? Scaring me like that?”

My boyfriend leans against the counter. His eyes glare over toward his brother. “Elijah, just drop it.”

“Nah, I’m good,” Elijah says strongly.

“You don’t understand.” Leonidas shakes his head. “I don’t want to talk about it, okay? Drop it,” he grumbles. His body is stiff and defensive.

I watch, surprised. This is my first time seeing them argue, and I’m shocked.

Elijah strides out of the room. A moment later, I hear a door slam in the distance.

“I say we get drunk together,” Leonidas whispers under his breath.

I give him a frown.



I sit by myself in X3's backyard.

Leonidas is currently inside, having a chat with his mom. She looked very upset when she saw him finally out of his room. I didn't want to fuel her fire, so I stepped back and came out here for some quiet.

Sitting at the edge of their pool, I soak my feet in the cold, glistening water. My eyes focus on the crystal-clear liquid, which takes my mind to traveling the world. It saddens me to think I've never been out of the country before. I'm just a Canadian girl who's never left her province. How boring.

I want to travel the world and see history. I crave to sit on the beach and soak in the sun and swim in the Mediterranean Sea. But I don't have the money for that, and neither does Mom.

"I would love to see you in a bikini."

I whip around in surprise and find Leonidas standing behind me.

He looks so damn droolworthy.

I still can't believe he's mine.

"Funny," I mutter up at him.

The weeks that I've been with him seem to be an endless blur of pure happiness. He's made me blush more in my life than I ever have.

"You seem like you're deep in thought again," he says while walking to where I sit.

How is it possible for this guy to know everything? Is he a mind reader?

"Just thinking about who you really are and traveling." My feet lightly sway in the water.

Pulling my chin up with a finger, Leonidas looks down at me sternly. "I told you, this is the real me. The Leo that everyone sees is the imposter."

"I feel like I know nothing about you," I argue, and he sighs.

"Ask away, and I'll answer."

"No, you tell," I press.

This feels like the first time he opened up to me. I want him to tell me things.

He sits beside me and grips my thigh in a tight hold. "We were known for our music on YouTube. We signed a contract with a record label when we

were fifteen. The siblings and I got famous around four years ago.

“Our songs are a mixture of everything really. We don’t like putting boundaries on ourselves, but my favorite music to sing is pop. I write all the music since I’m the lead singer. Amelia is the drummer, and Elijah plays the guitar.

“We always sell out when we have concerts. The first time I sang in front of a crowd, I almost shit my pants. I always meditate before going onstage. It helps me control my anxiety.

“I hate going to meet and greets and having to do talk shows, and interviews make me sweat.

“We live in this really damn big house back at home. I wish I could live in our small little house we grew up in; that’s where all the wonderful memories are.”

I watch as his eyes dampen with sadness.

He stares into the distance while he speaks. “I have over fifty million followers on Instagram, mostly all girls who send me awful things if I don’t see their messages, so going on Instagram sucks.”

He shudders, and I fill with slight rage.

I mean, who wouldn’t be angry over the fact that millions of people are after your man?

“I used to write when I felt angry, but you’ve made writing easier. I’m actually able to write now because of you,” he stammers.

“I hate having to hide everything from the world. I can’t go anywhere without being followed and photographed. The label has stolen my freedom. I can’t even go on my damn social media without their permission,” he blurts out fast, like vomit.

“Why can’t you go on your social media?” I ask, stunned.

“Because it’s their job to post stuff on there as me.”

What? That’s bullshit.

He suddenly looks at me, an evil glint in his eyes. “I have an idea.”

I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Come inside,” he says.

Getting up in a hurry, he helps me with a hand. Running after him, I follow him to his room.

Locking the door behind me, he looks down at me with a smirk. “Strip your bottoms.”

Pardon?

“What?” I ask as my mouth drops open in shock.

I watch him with wide eyes. *Excuse me, sir.*

“What for?”

Leonidas looks at me from over his shoulder. “I’m about to rock the world.”

I’m still in a daze of confusion when I pull down my shorts. My lacy black underwear is now exposed to Leonidas’s hungry gaze. Walking over to his bed, he sits, tapping away on his phone. I look over his shoulder and find him on his Instagram page.

“I’m just changing the password,” he mumbles.

I gaze with eager eyes as he successfully changes it.

“Now, they won’t be able to access my account and stop what I’m about to do.”

“And what’s that?” I get excited.

He looks up at me and eyes the black lace. Biting his lip, he swears under his breath. His fingers find the globes of my butt. “The record label doesn’t want us to post anything about being in a relationship. Apparently, it brings down girls’ fantasies and makes them go shit mad.”

He snorts, and I chuckle.

“I want the entire world to know only one girl has my heart.”

My blood turns cold as my mind races with what-ifs. I love Leonidas, but I’m not ready for the attention I’ll get. I’ve heard way too many horror stories about celebrities’ partners getting hate thrown toward them. I don’t want that right now, not when I just found out he’s a singer.

Seeing the look on my face, he reassures me the picture won’t show our faces. It will be our lower halves.

Holy shit, that’s hot.

He lies on the bed. “Hop on.” Leonidas winks at me.

Smirking as I straddle his lap, I notice he’s fully clothed, which isn’t fair since I’m in just my underwear. My fingers make quick work of stripping off his shirt.

“That’s better.” I nod, and he smiles.

“Go lower. Place your bum right on my dick and lean into my body.”

I turn a shade of pink as I almost choke on my saliva.

Is it getting hot in here, or is it just me?

Placing my butt right where he demanded, I suck in a breath when I feel him hard against my core. Leonidas closes his eyes and lets out a shaky

breath.

He grips his phone tightly with his jaw clenched, and I watch as he snaps a photo of me sitting on his ... yeah.

That's going to be sexy. After he's snapped a few, he looks through them and shows me.

My stomach and thighs look perfect around his body. His abs look strained and so sexy. His lower half is hidden behind me.

This photo will make news.

We'll shock the world ... together.

I lie down next to him as he hovers his finger over the Post button.

"I don't need to write anything as a caption because this picture speaks for itself." His eyes bore into mine. "You're the only girl for me. It's time to stop hiding." He pauses. Right before he clicks the Post button, my heart skips a beat when he says, "You're my rock star."

FORTY-ONE

LEO

I've created a lot of shit. My phone has been blowing up with messages from the record label, Dad, and fans.

My rock star and I have broken the internet, just like we meant to do. Tabloids, gossip magazines, news channels, and fan pages are freaking out over my secret girlfriend.

They call her The Girl in Black.

After we posted the photo, we didn't check the internet at all for hours. All the information we know is from what Elijah and Amelia tell us. We just desire to disappear, not wanting to hear anyone's whines and complaints.

Every call I receive, I leave it for my voice mail, and every text message that pops onto my screen, I block.

I'm tired of following rules like a damn puppet. I'm going to do whatever the hell I want. If that means posting a sexy picture with my mystery girlfriend, then I'll do exactly that.

What created even more confusion and chaos is the fact that there isn't a caption to go with the picture. Just my sexy girlfriend straddling me.

Trinity looked nervous most of the day after posting the photo. She kept biting her long nails and running her hands through her hair. I told her not to fear anything.

No one knows it's her. How can they hurt her? I'll keep her anonymous for however long she wants. I understand why she's nervous. Heck, I would be too.

People are cruel when they're jealous. To be honest, I am nervous to look at the comments myself. If I see one negative comment about her, I'll lose it. I'll say something I'll regret and get myself and the band in trouble.

When Trinity goes home, I open my Instagram account and start scrolling through the comments. I tend to not look through them because of all the bullshit people say, but fuck it. This time, I want to see what people are saying about her. Luckily, this post didn't attract haters. They're just mostly panicked about me not being available anymore, like they ever had a chance with me.

I am just lounging on my bed, scrolling through my phone, when my siblings barge in. I'm not in the mood for company, but they couldn't give two shits.

"So, you want to talk about what went down last night?" Amelia says in front of me.

"What's there to talk about?" I shrug and keep my stare on the bright screen ahead of me. "I posted a picture of me and my girlfriend."

"How is it still up?" Elijah's voice drips with wonder.

I drop my phone on the bed beside me and let out a sigh. Looks like I'll have to continue my reading later. "I changed my password, and now, the team isn't able to access it."

"You're too smart for your own good," Amelia muses. "We should make our own Instagram page that we run by ourselves," she says, thinking out loud.

I perk up at the sound of that.

"We could post a bunch of shit on there," Elijah adds in. He voices his excitement. "We could have all the freedom we crave!"

I like the sound of that ... just us three siblings goofing off and showing the world who we really are.

"Let's do it," I say to the two.

"Yay! This will be so fun. I'll make it right now!" Amelia squeals before tapping rapidly on her phone.

"That picture, bro," Elijah mumbles to me. Smirking, he punches my shoulder. "That was fuckin' hot. You got the entire world screaming."

It was the hottest thing I'd ever done.

I fiddle with a ring around one of my fingers. "People are going crazy, huh?"

"You got girls shitting bricks. If you thought they tried hard before, you should see all the pics that you're tagged in now." He laughs and slaps my knee. "Don't know how they're not getting taken down. Let me just say that ___"

“Is Trinity freaking out?” Amelia grumbles while she works, ignoring our brother. “People are like detectives. They’ll find her eventually and break her down into the ground.”

That day will be hard. I never want that negativity to go to Trinity. I know the hate will get to her. It even gets hard for me sometimes. But you eventually get used to it and tune out the hate. Her face will be on every single tabloid and news article. They’ll call her names and hate her stunning body.

I don’t think she’ll ever be ready for that, but it’s bound to happen if she’s in my future.

“She’s nervous, but I told her she’ll be fine for now.”

Nodding, she continues to work. “Just made the Instagram account,” Amelia says before showing us her screen.

She set the profile picture to a photograph taken by our mom one day. The three of us sit on a roof, looking up at the sky. I remember that day like it was yesterday. We were trying to hide from the team. The only place where we could find peace was on the roof. Mom found us a couple minutes later. I swear that lady has some sort of tracker in our brains ...

“What picture should we post?” Elijah asks.

I immediately think about the picture Mom took a couple months ago. The three of us were running onto a stage. It doesn’t show our faces, only our backs. It describes us perfectly.

It’s the best Instagram picture of us rebelling, running free with no care in the world.

I want to get our trashy team pissed. I want them so mad that they’ll have fucking nightmares. Nothing will compare to how horrible they’ve been treating us.

I show them the picture I have in mind. They both nod impatiently with a clap of their hands.

Yet, as I was searching through my pictures, I realized something about myself. I never smile in pictures unless it’s with Trinity. That girl makes me fucking giggle like a schoolgirl. I’m doomed for life.

“Perfect,” Amelia says once she’s set everything up.

Immediate pleasure takes over every single bone in my body when she presses the Post button.

“I love causing chaos,” all of us say at the same time.

My eyes glare at the two of them. *Stupid triplets shit.*



It's been a couple of hours since the gang and I uploaded the picture on Instagram. We've disconnected ourselves from the internet once again, and we have been enjoying time to ourselves.

That is, until she texts.

Excitement shoots up my spine, making me sit up straight as my heartbeat quickens. Only she can do that to my body. I love it.

Trinity: Come to the tree house. I'm ready.

FORTY-TWO

TRINITY

Looking at the white clouds above me, I can't help but relate to them. One moment, they can be peaceful ... and in a flash, they're dark and stormy. Sounds like my life. Everyone says after a storm, there's a rainbow. He makes me feel like I'm close to my rainbow.

Thinking about Simba hurts so much. I try to stop the sadness from consuming me, but it's hard. Leonidas helps me though, and even though we've just gone through a rough patch in our relationship, it will only strengthen us in the end.

My dad made me into the person I was before he passed. I changed after he died and hated everything and everyone around me. I want the old Trinity back. I want to smile and be able to dance to my boyfriend's songs. I want this more than anything. I need to move on.

I want to make Dad proud.

I turn my head toward the tree house door fast when I hear rapid footsteps pounding on the forest floor. Seconds or maybe even milliseconds later, Leonidas's head pops into my vision.

His eyes bore into mine. As I stare back equally hard, his mouth lifts into a smile. "You sure?"

I nod my head in response. I'm ready.

His entire body comes into my view. I watch as he slowly walks toward me, plopping down beside me.

He grips my thigh in his hold. "Where do you want to start?"

To be honest, I have no idea. I never thought about this so deeply. *Where do I want to start?*

"What do you think?" I ask him softly.

Biting his lip, he stares straight ahead. “How about I sing you a song?”

I watch as his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows tightly.

I caught snippets of his voice when he sang by accident. It was always velvety smooth and deep. A richness that’s thicker than the darkest dark chocolate out there.

“Okay,” I whisper. My fingers nervously pick at my sundress. “Sing for me, Leonidas.”

I look up and find him with his eyes closed. His chest rises up and down. He’s anxious.

“I have to admit, I’ve never been this nervous to sing before,” he mumbles and laughs at himself.

I place my hand on his knee. “Why?”

“Because you’re the only one who matters. The only opinion I care about. I want to help you, but what if I just make it worse?”

I lean over and place my lips delicately on his cheek. I give him a peck. “You’re overthinking things. Just sing.”

I trust him. I really do. It looks as if I’m not the only one who needs to work on things. We both need to heal together. I’ll be there, holding his hand, when he gets sudden urges to take pills, and he’ll be there for me when I get random flashbacks of my past.

We’re a team. The best team out there.

I let out a surprised squeak when Leonidas’s gigantic hands find my waist. Pulling me onto his lap, my back to his chest, he breathes out a sigh of relief. I settle into his lap when he winds his fingers together in front of my waist.

“This is a song I wrote about you,” he explains. His chin rests on my shoulder. “If you hate it, please tell me.”

I nod even though I know I’ll hate nothing he’s written. He’s always so poetic with his words, and it’s no wonder why. I feel like laughing at myself for not catching onto the signs.

My body freezes as he takes a deep breath and starts singing lowly, and I immediately zone in on his angelic voice. Leonidas’s voice is husky. Filling my soul with something I can’t place my finger on.

How can his voice be as smooth as butter but then rough at the same time? It makes a beautiful and engrossing combination.

I take in every high note, low note, pause, and tap that his hand makes on my leg. I breathe in and out while I close my eyes, leaning my head back on

his chest. I enjoy what's only meant for me.

His voice drops huskily as he finishes the last lyric. I open my eyes and stare straight ahead of me, shocked. Leonidas tenses against me as he waits for a reaction.

The song he just sang is beyond words. Knowing it was about me has me appreciating it even more. His voice is as sweet as honey. And damn, if that doesn't make me want to listen to his voice on repeat for the rest of my life, then I don't know what will.

My body didn't panic when he began singing. I felt at ease, like everything that had ever stressed me out evaporated out of my body and left to the hell it had come from. My hands didn't start shaking, like they usually do. The thoughts that haunt me didn't cross my mind once.

I don't know whether I should cry or jump up and down in happiness.

Maybe both.

Leonidas is quiet behind me. He hasn't uttered a single word since he stopped blessing me with his voice.

I let out a breathy sigh. "You're amazing." My hands grip his, which are wound together in front of my stomach. "I've never heard a voice so captivating."

"You really mean that?"

"Of course. I didn't even get sad. I'm actually the opposite. You're fantastic!" I reply and turn around. My legs straddle him. "Maybe I didn't panic because it's you. You always seem to calm me. Or maybe I'm getting over it."

My eyes bore into his, and the brown orbs that I've fallen in love with fill with pride.

"I'm so proud of you. Look how far you've come. You being able to listen to my voice has nothing to do with me. You did that all on your own."

"I guess." I shrug my shoulders, placing my cheek against his chest. I listen to his fast heartbeat. "But you helped."

He's helped me more than my therapist that I had for years. Leonidas is helping me face my greatest fears. I couldn't be more thankful.

"I never thought it would feel this easy." My fingertip trails along a lion tattoo Leonidas has on his forearm. "Do you think it would have been this easy a couple months ago?"

"Every bruise takes time to heal," he admits. "So, no, I don't think it would have been this easy, but you've grown, and that's what made it easy."

It always amazes me how he can be so wise, that makes me love him even more. That's the thing about love. When you find it, you want to grip on to it and never let go. A couple months ago, I never thought positive thoughts. I always dwelled on the past. I was stuck. Since the first day I saw Leonidas, I was intrigued. He riled me up and made me angry; he fired the spark back into me I used to have.

He brought back the best of me.

He's showing me it's normal to feel sadness after a loved one passes away, and if you don't grieve, you simply don't have a heart.

No one is perfect, and us being able to share a connection together so strong is rare.

Leonidas has made me love myself again.

He's right. It's been four years, and even though I've struggled to listen to the one thing Dad and I adored together, something inside of me tells me it is time to let go. If I don't fight for my happiness, the pain will always hold me as its prisoner.

My life is worth fighting for.

I have a purpose.

I'm stronger than I think.

I haven't felt this specific feeling in a while. I'm hopeful. Even after all the pain I went through for years, I did it today. It relaxed me when my boyfriend sang to me. That might sound silly to some people, but it's huge for me. I'm so glad I did it with Leonidas. I wouldn't want to be here with anyone else.

"You're a poet," is all I can seem to say. I lift my face from his chest and peer into his beautiful chocolate-brown eyes. "You always seem to say all the right things at the right time."

"Only for you."

Chuckling, I grip his chin. "It's true. Your voice is like gold."

"Baby, I'm not gold. I'm coal," he bluntly jokes, squeezing my sides.

"You're gold to me, and that's all that matters."

His forehead drops onto mine. "You'd better damn remember how fucking proud of you I am."

Our noses brush against each other as I whisper, "And you'd better not forget I'm your biggest fan. I'll always be number one."

FORTY-THREE

TRINITY

My eyes stare at the white door.

It usually haunts me, taunting me to step inside to be reminded of all the things I've tried to forget. This time, I don't feel the usual dread. I'm braver now, and I mock my fears back, edging them on until they dim and I'm left with peace.

I have to understand that Dad isn't coming back. Some silly part of me hoped he still would even though I had seen him being buried in the ground. I hoped that this was just some cruel dream that I would wake up from.

After years of sadness, constant grief, and trauma, I need to fight hard for my life and be the girl my dad raised me to be. I've now realized that the memories of him will not always cause me pain, but I'll find comfort in them.

My hand slightly shakes as I place it on the gold door handle. Turning it softly, I push the door open. My eyes roam around the room that Mom and Dad used to share. Now, his side of the bed is always cold and empty.

Mom never brings Rodrigo around here to stay the night. I know she does that for me, and some part of me appreciates that because I know deep down, she cares for me. She just has a bad way of showing it. She runs away from her problems. But I know I was guilty of doing that before I met Leonidas.

If her being with Rodrigo makes her happy, then who am I to ruin that for her? She needs happiness in her life. I won't be the evil one to take that all away from her.

My feet slowly step into the room. It feels weird, being in here after years. I haven't stepped foot in their room since that day. I didn't want to look around his room and see his stuff lying around, untouched. I was able to listen to music for the first time. If I can do that, then walking around his

room will be a piece of cake.

My footsteps are slow. I roam my eyes over every inch of his room. Pain immensely consumes every single bone in my body when my eyes land on a picture perched on his bedside table.

My hands shake as I pick it up. This photograph was taken years ago. I study Dad like I'll be having an exam on how he looks. I forgot Mom took this photo. I remember the awe in my dad's eyes when he looked at it after Mom took it. We're sitting on our swing. Dad has his signature wooden guitar on his lap. I'm beside him, holding his arm like my life depends on it. We both smile at my mom. My eyes immediately go to the gap where one of my two front teeth should be.

I was around seven when this picture was taken. Pure bliss was written on both of our faces. From the moment my dad played his guitar, I fell in love. I loved the thought of creating art with music. Telling a story, but not writing a book to be read.

I place the photo down in its place and take a step back. Dad isn't with me anymore. He's not here to hold my hand and let me cry on his shoulder when I'm having an awful day. The love of music I have buried deep within me is something he gave to me. So, even though he's gone and I'll never see his bright smile, I'll always have that thing in common with him.

"Trinity?"

I turn toward the door and find Mom. She stands there with a confused look on her face.

Great.

"What are you doing in here?" Her eyes fall over my shoulder.

I know she's looking at the picture frame I just picked up. I'm surprised it's still displayed. I thought she would have shoved it into a box.

I swallow tightly. "I was just looking at that photo."

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

I nod my head. Awkwardness is thick in the air. It's suffocating, making me want to run away from her the first chance I get.

"It's my favorite photo." My fingers fiddle together as I feel my heart beating at a fast rate.

I watch as she walks into the room farther. Her eyes suddenly fill with sadness. "There's not a single day that I don't miss him."

"You have a funny way of showing it."

She slowly lowers her body onto the bed, staring forward. I inch closer to

her when she continues, “Every morning, I always look over to his side of the bed. You would think after all these years, I would get used to not seeing him beside me. But I always still expect him there. I want to wake up to his smile again. I want to sit on the front porch and have our morning coffee. We both used to smile when we heard your tiny footsteps pounding down the steps in the morning.” Mom’s voice cracks, and she’s forced to stop.

When she glances down at her lap, I spot one tear slowly drip down her face.

“When you lose your partner, it’s like a part of you goes with them. I feel incomplete without him.”

Mom is breaking down before my eyes. By looking in her distant eyes, I know she’s reliving the years she spent with her husband. She’s never been this open with me. She’s always been the strong one, but she stopped being the mother I grew up with when Rodrigo came around.

“When he died, it was so unexpected. I didn’t have time to process it. Not being able to say good-bye was the hardest pill to swallow. But the one thing I knew he wanted of me was to be there for you.” She grips my hand in hers and squeezes it. “I started hiding my tears and put on an act for you. That’s the worst thing I could have done because behind closed doors, I was so sad. I showed you I wasn’t grieving, and that’s not fair to you.”

My eyes fill with tears as I listen intently to Mom. Her hand tightens around mine, and I give her a soft smile to continue. “I didn’t know how to be a single mom. I always had your dad beside me. We always decided decisions together about you. We both picked you up when you fell. But out of the blue, all that pressure was placed on my shoulders. I didn’t know how to be the best for you when I didn’t feel the best for me.”

“Mom—” I try to cut her off, but she waves me off with a hand.

“I then started losing myself. I didn’t mother for the longest time. I left you home alone at night, wondering where I was. And that’s not fair. I should have been home with you because you’d lost your dad. Instead, I started acting selfish.” She pauses and scoffs at herself. “When Rodrigo first showed interest in me, I thought he would let me forget the pain. But he only put me through more because I now see what I’ve done to you. I was so blinded by him that I forgot about you. I know that makes me a shitty mother, but I’m here now to make up for it.” She moves closer to where I sit on the bed, and her hand goes up and brushes a lock of my hair behind my ear while the other grips my hand. “Will you forgive me?”

Pushing past the pain people have caused you is hard. For months, Mom has been a mom that you see in horror movies. She neglected and forgot about her own daughter. That sends thousands of bullets to my chest because I was replaced with a man who wasn't my father.

Yet everyone grieves differently. I, for one, closed myself off to people. I never left my room. I hated the things I used to love and started hating myself. So, even though Mom has treated me terribly, that's her way of grieving. She didn't sign up to be a single parent, and I need to understand that.

In life, you truly have only two parents.

I learned the hard way to treasure what you have in life because it can be taken from you in a heartbeat.

I have one mom, one person who's left to be my support system. If I'm moving on and becoming a better version of myself, I need to forgive Mom first.

"I never stopped loving you," I mumble and smile up at her.

I feel her hand leave mine. Not even a second later, I'm in her arms, and she's squeezing me in a tight grip.

"I'm so sorry for not being the mother I was supposed to be. I'm sorry for leaving the back door open, causing Simba's death. I'm so sorry, my love."

Her hand runs through my hair as a sob racks her body. My heart shatters as I feel Mom sobbing against me. Her grip doesn't loosen; it only tightens. It's like she's afraid that I'll vanish before her eyes.

I pull away from her body and clasp her hands in my own. "I'm going to be honest. It's going to be hard to forgive you fully for how you've been treating me. But I'm going to try because I can't imagine losing a husband."

"Thank you. I'll take what I can get." Her fingers fiddle with her wedding ring that she hasn't taken off yet. "I have something for you."

She walks toward Dad's side table. Slowly pulling the drawer open, she bends down. I watch with curiosity as she rummages through his stuff. Her hands enclose around a black ring box. Pulling it out, she walks back over to me. "This was your dad's wedding ring."

Her fingers pull open the lid, and I immediately zone in on the ring in front of me.

"It's beautiful," I say in awe when she turns her back on me.

"It's very special to me," she explains while pulling her jewelry box open.

My eyes land on the thin silver chain she grasps.

“I want you to have it.” Her hands take back the ring from my hold, looping it through the chain. She places it around my neck.

I smile at the feeling when the cold silver lands on my hot skin. Reaching down, I hold the ring and peer down at it more. Even though it’s simple, I adore it. It was my dad’s, and that makes it special.

“Are you sure you want me to have this?”

She cups my cheek. “I couldn’t think of anyone else who deserves this more than you.”

In this moment, the smile that lifts my face couldn’t be more real. I think I finally have my mom back. The thought of that couldn’t make me happier.



“I got a job,” I say to Mom.

She glances at me, surprised. “You did now? Where?”

A while ago, Mom and I came out to the front porch steps to catch up. She’d made us steaming hot cups of coffee, and now, here we sit, watching the sunset.

“At the bookstore. I took some time off though because of everything that’s happened.”

She nods and takes a sip of coffee. “How are you doing without him?”

I know she’s talking about Simba. I glance down at my lap and shrug my shoulders in defeat. “I’m living with it, I guess. It’s shitty, what happened, but I can’t be stuck anymore.”

“That’s good. I’m proud of you.”

“How are you doing?” I ask her.

I know she didn’t mean to leave the door open. She loved Simba just as much as I did. He helped her throughout her own struggles.

“I feel guilty. He died because of me, and it hurts to know that I took something away from you that had brought you happiness after your dad.” She runs a hand down her face and sighs.

Moisture fills my eyes, making it hard for me to see clearly. “At least he’s with Dad now.”

I smile when I watch her smile. My hand goes up and brushes a tear away from her cheek.

Silence fills the air as we both look ahead. The sky is a beautiful pink. It creates a natural glow.

“You love him, don’t you?” Mom breaks the silence.

I find her nodding her head toward the triplets’ house.

“More than anything,” I reply strongly. I don’t doubt my love for him for a second.

“As a mother, you always have to watch over your children.” She pauses and playfully nudges my shoulder with hers. “I would be lying if I said I don’t like him. I saw the fire in his eyes when he stuck up for you. That’s a good sign.”

I smile at the thought of my goofball. “He’s everything that I could have ever asked for.”

She smiles sadly at me and bites her lip. “I’m happy for you.”

As the day fades before our eyes and we’re soon surrounded by darkness, I tell her about Leonidas and the triplets and how they’re famous. Her mouth drops open in shock, and I have to hold back a laugh when she almost chokes on her coffee.

I guess I surprised her.

FORTY-FOUR

LEO

I'm in a lot of trouble. I've caused more chaos than I intended to, and now, I'm going to ruin everything.

It was one damn Instagram post, one post that has the people in LA who watch over me pissed. I didn't follow their rules. I posted on Instagram without their permission, and now, they can't trust me.

I mean, how could they trust me from the start? I've always hated the industry. They control you like they own you. But in reality, in a way, they do own me. I signed my name in cursive on the black dotted line four years ago. I was a naive little boy who sold off all his rights to them. My life has come to the point where I can't be on social media without them peering over my shoulder and asking me what I'm doing.

They expect me to be single all my life. If I'm taken, the female population will explode with anger. How the hell is that my problem? How do they expect me to base my life on what my fans want? I'll never be happy like that. I refuse to let someone else write my story.

When I first started getting flooded with calls and text messages, I turned my phone off. I thought they couldn't reach me if I didn't know they were calling. But I didn't know this would happen.

They sent my father.

The moment I saw the black limo pull into the driveway, I knew something bad was going to happen. The bitter frown on my dad's face when he exited the limo could kill. I saw the way his stare roamed around Trinity's small house, and he laughed to himself. He's used to the rich lifestyle, so the sight of Trinity's house amused him. It took everything in me not to run down the stairs and slam my fist right into his cheek. I crave to see his body

stagger back in pain. Knowing my father, I would get a punch back, and I'd rather not explain that to Trinity.

She's built with a fire in her. I know she'd definitely go after him herself, which would be a sight to see. My father isn't someone I want her to meet. I want to protect her from the man who causes me so much pain. The minute he walks into the room, he casts a depressing aura. I'm not ready for her to meet him. I don't think I'll ever be ready for the moment her gaze meets his.

She's filled with hope and longing. He's filled with the opposite. A snake that will take you down at any given opportunity. He'll wrong you and laugh in your face while you cry.

The look Mom gave me, Elijah, and Amelia when Dad knocked on the front door was very obvious. She pleaded with her eyes for us to go upstairs. I know she tries to protect us from him, but we're not five. We know he's a monster who has trapped her in a marriage that she doesn't want to be in. And, shit, if that doesn't irritate me, then I don't know what does.

I'm a mommy's boy, and I will do anything to protect her.

I hate sitting up here in my room, knowing my mom has to deal with him alone. It's not fair. She did nothing wrong. We're the ones who fucked with the label. My fingers shake as I think about Mom having to stand up by herself down there. I know my father. He's crazy. He craves to see people down on their knees in pain.

I can't let Mom burn in his path when I'm the one who should. I started all of this. I'm not sure what's going to happen, but I'll own up to what I did.

I'm not a baby. It's time she realizes that.

I stride to my bedroom door. It swings back widely behind me, and a loud bang echoes in the house as it slams into the wall. I don't stop my steps to the stairs when I hear Amelia's door open.

"Where are you going?" she whisper-yells and pulls me back by my shirt.

My steps halt, and I glare at her from over my shoulder. "Let go of me, Amelia."

"You heard what Mom said. She wants us to stay up here."

"Does it look like I care?"

"You should," she points out and glares. "You being down there might make it worse."

I shake my head. "I'm not letting Mom take the punishment for what I caused."

I won't let anyone stop me. Amelia can say anything she wants, but I'm

still going down there, and I'll deal with the bastard myself.

Squeezing her eyes shut tightly, she sighs. "Fine, go. I'll be down in a second with Elijah."

Her hand drops from my shirt, and I'm practically running down the steps. I hear my father's disgusting voice in the distance. It's sour and full of distaste. It makes me angrier than a few seconds ago. I don't keep my steps quiet. I want him to know I'm coming. I want him to have slight fear. Anything is better than nothing.

"Leonidas Drakos." He hums in amusement when I enter his line of vision. "So nice of you to join us."

"Father, always a displeasure." My voice is flat.

Crossing my arms across my chest, I glare at the man in front of me. He stands in the middle of the living room with his usual suit on. I haven't looked at Mother yet. I know she's glaring at me. I can feel the heat of her eyes on every inch of my skin. If my dad didn't get me so riled up, I would run away from her in fear.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" He tsks and places his hands in his pockets.

"Seeing you is worse than getting cockblocked," I mutter.

My mother gasps lowly and grips my forearm.

"Leonidas, that is not how I raised you to talk." She tries to talk boldly, but her voice cracks at the end.

My sperm donor raises an eyebrow in amusement. "Athena, please let him continue. I want to hear what he has to say."

My hands clench into fists. "How about you get on with why you're here?"

He barks out a laugh, and Mom pulls me closer to her body.

"Why am I here?" His smile immediately drops, and he takes an intimidating step closer to me. He sneers in my face. "What have you done? You know the chaos you've caused? Your ugly-ass face is on every damn magazine, talking about your secret girlfriend."

Seeing Dad this way used to bring me down. I would wonder what I did wrong. I would pray that my real dad would come back, but no matter how hard I prayed, he didn't change. That was a hard pill to swallow. With time, you get used to the pain and questions. I'm numb to him now. His words don't cut as deep as they used to.

"I don't understand why I can't post on my own Instagram account," I

argue back.

“The Leo that everyone sees should always be available. That’s what the female population likes!” His voice booms, and I nearly flinch back.

“Does it look like I give a fuck what they want? I don’t give a damn if I make them tear up because I have a life.”

“Maybe it’s time you care.” He points his finger in my chest and stares wildly at me. “You’ve caused so much trouble for nothing. The team is pissed off at you. I’ve told you countless times to never disobey them!”

“I want my freedom.”

I watch as his chest rises up and down because of his anger.

His brown hair falls in his face. Pushing it back, he laughs. “All this for just a girl who has stretch marks on her hips? Thought you could do better, son.”

The moment that disgusting statement about Trinity leaves his mouth, I see red. I can’t hear anything, just the fast heartbeat in my ears. I stride to him. When my fist slams into his left eye, Mom lets out the loudest scream I’ve ever heard before.

I don’t care that she’s begging me to stop. I don’t give a shit if he’s my dad. No one talks about Trinity like that.

They’ll be eating their own teeth if they do.

“You bastard,” I grit out. My fist wraps around the collar of his dress shirt, pushing him up against the wall. I knee him right in his dick. “I never want to hear a single thing about Trinity leave your fucking mouth again. You’d better give me one good reason why I shouldn’t punch out all your teeth and make you swallow them.”

“Her pussy is that good, huh?” he taunts me in my face, ignoring my question. “Is it that good to ruin your damn career?”

I would give up my heart for Trinity. I would rather suffer than see her suffer. I would climb mountains or swim the entire fucking Atlantic Ocean for that girl.

I wouldn’t even give a second thought to quitting what I just started because I know without her in my life, I’ll never be happy. Hearing Dad talk about Trinity like she’s a damn piece of meat makes me feel the angriest I’ve ever felt.

I’ve never looked at her stretch marks in distaste. They’re beautiful. They’re a reminder of her growth and how tall she’s become. No woman should be embarrassed or insecure about that. As my fist meets his face, I

think about how he probably thought about Trinity's pussy. I bet he would get with her, and that makes me want to hurl.

I want to hurt him, hurt him so badly that he'll have to get plastic surgery to fix his face.

"Bro!" I hear Elijah yell somewhere behind me, but I focus my attention on the devil in front of me.

He fights me back. His fists punch my face and stomach. No matter how hard he throws, I'll always be stronger, and I'll always cause more pain.

"Stop!"

Hands grip my arms, and they pull back. I fight back. When two pairs of hands pull, I stagger back from Dad's body. He falls onto the floor and groans. His face is a mess with his own blood.

"What the fuck was that?" Amelia asks, shocked. Her eyes are wide with terror as she glances down at Dad.

"Showing that piece of shit what happens when he talks bad about my girlfriend," I spit out more for Dad.

I can't control my anger. I need to get out of here. I'm afraid I might say something I'll regret to someone who doesn't deserve it.

Pulling back from my sister, I spin around and stride to the door.

"Before you go, Leonidas, I have news I need to share," his voice practically growls.

I don't meet his glare; I give him my back. He doesn't deserve shit, and that also includes my attention.

"You've caused so much trouble that the label can't trust you anymore. They expect you back in LA in a week. Pack your stuff and be ready to go."

My stomach turns. What will happen to Trinity? This wasn't supposed to occur.

"If you don't come, they'll come to get you, so I suggest you follow their orders."



My eyes glare at the paper clutched tightly in my hand. I think about the first day I came into this town. How I hated it and wanted to escape. Now, I would do anything to stay. I want to live a normal life with Trinity, but an Instagram picture has taken that away.

I want to laugh. This is just my luck. I didn't think the label would want us back in LA. I didn't think they would be this mad. Most of all, I don't want to leave Trinity here all by herself. It pains me to think about her always looking toward my house and finding it empty.

It looks like our hearts will be filled with emptiness for a long time until I figure my shit out.

FORTY-FIVE

TRINITY

The moment I see Amelia, I know something's wrong. She leans against my doorframe with a grim look on her face. Dark bags invade the skin under her eyes, making her look skinnier and tired.

I've never seen her like this. She's usually happy. Bouncing around and laughing about everything. But as she stands in front of me, I don't see the Amelia I'm familiar with. Something is definitely wrong because when tears coat her brown eyes, I fill with sadness.

"What's wrong, Amelia?" I pull her body into mine.

I tighten my arms around her when I feel her body shake against mine. Amelia's face presses against my shoulder as she lets out a sigh.

"Amelia, you're scaring me."

She stays quiet against me for a while. I listen as her breaths slow down, and she's left sniffing. When she pulls away from my body, my eyes find hers.

"Something bad has happened, Trinity. Something terrible."

My body stills. "What happened, Amelia?"

Shaking her head, she licks her chapped lips. "I think Leonidas should be the one to tell you."

I nod my head. Confusion is written all over my face.

My hand finds the doorknob. Pulling the front door shut behind me, I follow Amelia all the way across the lawn to her home.

"He's in his room," she mutters to me.

Her head is turned downward. She doesn't meet my stare, which scares the hell out of me. I miss the Amelia I've grown to be best friends with. She's fun and outgoing. Now, she's upset, and she looks nervous. I nod at her even

though she's not looking at me. I rush past her, striding up the stairs two at a time to get to my boyfriend faster.

I don't know what happened, but the glum feeling in the house is suffocating. I don't knock on his door. I push it open in a hurry and spot him at his desk. He stares forward. His finger taps the desk. I smile softly when he glances over his shoulder. I've never seen someone get up from a chair faster before in my life than Leonidas. He practically runs to me. Scooping me into his arms, he lets out a relieved breath.

"Leonidas, what's the matter?" I mutter into his shoulder. Cupping the back of his head, I fiddle with his silky hair.

"I'm so sorry," he mumbles into my hair, and I frown.

I try to pull away from his body, but he doesn't let me. I want to see his face. I'm so lost. What happened overnight that has him completely freaked out? I know whatever it is, it isn't good. Leonidas is usually calm, cool, and collected around me. Now, he's the absolute opposite.

"Leonidas, take a deep breath and explain what's panicking you."

He nods his head against me, which makes me sigh sadly. "It's a nightmare," is all he says.

A nightmare? God, this suspense is killing me.

I muster up all my strength and lightly pull away. My eyes find his, which are glassed over in sorrow, and mine dull in response.

"Leonidas?"

"I'm leaving."

I didn't know one line could break my heart more. I stare at him in shock. I knew he had to leave; he told me when we first kissed, but I didn't think it would be this soon.

"I thought we still had time," I whisper up to him, not bothering to hide my heartbreak.

His arms drop from around my waist. Taking a few steps back, he runs a hand down his face. "The label is pissed about the picture. They can't trust us, so they're forcing us to go back to LA."

"This is all about me?" I ask, shocked at the idea of one silly picture causing so much chaos.

"Like I said before, they're controlling."

"You can't leave yet!" I plead. "You should be able to stay the time they said you would. This is too soon."

"There's nothing I can do, Trin." He bites his fingernail and curses lowly.

“Trust me, I don’t want to leave, but they always get their way.”

This isn’t fair.

This isn’t fair to Leonidas and me. We just got each other. I finally found out the truth, and now, he’s being taken away from me early. I would have spent every single given moment with him if I had known he’d be pulled from my grasp. I would have hugged him tighter and told him I loved him.

But the label has taken that all away because of one stupid picture. I know deep down in my heart that I can’t say anything to make him stay. The label will fight ten times harder than I will. They have much more money and amazing lawyers.

Our hourglass has filled up.

“Say something.” Leonidas grabs my shoulders, making me look into his eyes.

There’s nothing to say. We both know what’s going to happen. Dropping my forehead onto his, I close my eyes.

“You need to go back, Leonidas. You can’t stay here when we both knew this was temporary.”

He nods his head against mine and lets out a strained breath. “What about us?”

That’s the big question I’ve been asking myself since the moment this began. I’ve feared asking him the entire time I gave him my heart. Now, here the day comes, where we have to discuss it, and all I want to do is run away. Call me a coward, but I love him too much to let him go.

What happens when he leaves and I’m left empty, knowing he’s out there in the world and I’m stuck here?

I’ll always be stuck here. This town is suffocating, but Leonidas makes it better. He makes everything better.

“I love you, Leonidas.” My hands fist his T-shirt in a death grasp. “I love you so much that sometimes, it’s painful. I just got you ...” I stutter. “I can’t lose you.”

“You’re not losing me, Trin. Just because I’m leaving doesn’t mean we’ll end,” he says with a heavy sigh.

I pull away from his body. I need space while I think. Walking over to the bed, I sit down on it and place my head in my hands. My foot taps the ground as I think about every likely outcome of us.

“I know a lot will change with me being gone, Trinity. The one thing I know will never change is my love for you.” His tone is stiff. “I won’t let the

record label take you away from me even though I know you won't be able to come to LA," he says.

I interrupt strongly, "Who says I won't be able to come?"

"What about school?" he demands and gives me a pointed look. Bending down, he grips my knees. "Your education is important. You need to go to college for the spring semester, Trinity. You can't delay school more than you already have. I'll be damned if I take that away from you."

Screw in-person school. There's always online school. I'm eighteen. I'm a legal adult, and I can do whatever I please.

"I can do it online," I voice out my thoughts, which he shakes his head at.

Does he not want me to come? Why?

He looks determined to make me stay here, and that kills.

I thought he wanted the same things as me?

He sees the hurt on my face and grasps my cheeks. "Trust me, I want you to come with me, but it would be selfish of me to pull you away from your life. When you're done with school, then you can come. I don't want to ruin your future," he says in a calm, unhurried voice.

Is he not hearing me? No matter what I say, it feels as if it's going in one ear and out the other.

"I'm scared," I finally say into the silence.

"What scares you?"

He stares into my eyes deeply, swallowing tightly as I sigh.

"Of us not working out. Most long-distance relationships don't. I don't want to take that risk."

"We're not like most relationships."

I understand the point he's trying to make. Yet most girlfriends don't have to worry about their famous boyfriend in another country.

Fiddling with a ring around his finger, I speak my thoughts. "We live such different lives, Leonidas. Doesn't that worry you?"

He frowns. "Sure, we have different lives, but our lives don't define who we are together. Yes, I'm a singer ... but I'm a singer who's in love with you and only you."

I smile while blinking back tears. I believe him, but the constant self-doubt and overthinking overpower any sensible thought within me sometimes.

Nonetheless, Leonidas is right. This has to work. We'll make it work. We'll fight for this, like we do every day with the demons that control our

lives.

“Remember,” Leonidas says with an unhappy smile, “we’re forever and ever.”



My head lies on his outstretched legs as he strums his guitar. I have exactly a week left with him ... a week to make all the memories that will make me smile when I miss him. Usually, one hundred sixty-eight hours would seem like a lifetime to me ... but now, it’s like seconds.

I think about how shitty Leonidas’s life really is. It’s cruel how the label treats them. It makes me want to go down there and beat them up. That would be a sight to see ... I almost laugh at the thought.

My finger lightly traces his bruised eyelid. After Leonidas and I figured out all our problems, he confessed about his dad coming here. With a few details, he explained his fight. I asked what it was about, but he waved me off with a glum look on his face. Guess I’m not getting anything out of him today ... but I will eventually. I listen intently to his breathy voice as he sings above me. His voice is as soft as butter. He whispers the lyrics, which makes them ten times hotter.

He opens his eyes, and they’re dark and moody. Meeting my gaze, he bites his lip. “This week, you’re all mine. Every second of the day, you’ll be with me.”

I stare up at him, shocked. I don’t know where this possessiveness came from, but I’m loving it.

He grips my jaw, which quickens my heartbeat. “First, I’m taking you to that dinner. I’ll buy you a three-course meal, but not a four-course meal. You know why?” He raises an eyebrow.

I shake my head and cough awkwardly.

He smirks slightly and places his lips against my ear. “Because you’re dessert,” he whispers huskily, making me see stars.

Actually, I see the entire fucking galaxy.

FORTY-SIX

TRINITY

Have I ever confessed how I hate dressing fancy? I hate the expectations of looking perfect. I'm not perfect, and the way my stomach feels nauseous right now proves that.

Growing up in a family that made minimum wage, I never got to eat at fancy restaurants. Ordering in food and lounging on the couch while stuffing my face sounds better than wearing a tight dress to just eat.

I begged Leonidas to chill with the fancy stuff. Cuddling up with him on the couch would be the best date to me. No matter how hard I begged, he refused. He can be pretty stubborn when he wants to be, but I love him regardless.

It's the day of the dinner, if you couldn't already tell by my freaking out.

I have no idea what to wear and how I should style my hair. You know those cliché movies where it shows girls stressing out before a date in the middle of their rooms? That's exactly me right now. Everything I look at, I hate. I criticize every detail of myself when I try on every single damn piece of clothing in my closet. Now, here I sit, on my bedroom floor, out of breath.

Is it too late to cancel on Leonidas?

Yes. Yes, it is. I know he won't take no for an answer.

Letting out the most dramatic, loudest sigh I've ever mustered, I lie on the floor. Grabbing my phone, I flinch when it immediately rings. Am I a witch? I hate when that happens.

I raise an eyebrow when I realize it's the man of the hour. I wonder what he wants. Swiping to accept the call, I see his handsome face pop onto the screen.

"Hey, rock star," he says with amusement. "Should I even ask why you're

lying on the floor?”

“I’m having a dilemma because of you,” I snark back, which he scrunches his face at.

“What did I do to you?”

I throw my hand up in the air and sigh. “I have no idea what to wear, and it’s all your fault.”

I watch with squinted eyes as he laughs. He places his fist against his mouth to mute himself. If I wasn’t pretending to be mad at him, I would tell him how breathtaking he looks, lying on his bed with no shirt on, talking to me.

“I knew this would happen,” he points out after he settles down.

I scoff. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you overthink everything, and I knew you would never make it out of your room tonight.” He pauses and smirks. “That’s why I took styling you for the night in my hands. You’ll find a box at your front door. In there is an outfit I picked out for you.”

Okay, sir.

Leonidas is always one step ahead. It doesn’t surprise me he bought something for me tonight. People spending money on me makes me slightly uncomfortable, which he doesn’t care about, but deep down, it feels good to be cared for.

“See you tonight at six.” He hangs up the phone before I’m able to say anything.

God help me.

I rise from the floor and practically run to the front door. Swinging the door open, I eye the black box that lies on the ground. It has a dark purple bow on the top. I run my fingers over it and look toward his house. I know he’s watching me, so when I lift my middle finger in the air to him, a giggle escapes my mouth.

Slamming the door behind me, I look at the box in my hands. It’s big. I shake it but hear nothing. Shrugging my shoulders, I walk back upstairs. Once I’m back up in my room, I lock my door. My hands fiddle with the ribbon. I untie it, and I open the lid. I stare at white tissue paper. Gripping it, I fling it behind my back, eager to see Leonidas’s taste in clothing.

My eyes land on a dress. It’s tight and black with a sweetheart neckline. Elegant, long sleeves stand out while I inspect the dress. I love how simple it is, and knowing he picked this out for me makes it even better.

I look at the clock that's perched on my bedside table. Reading that it's four forty has me rushing in a panic. I thought I had more time to get ready. *Shoot.*

I race toward my bathroom. I take the fastest shower I've ever taken in my life. After I moisturize my skin, blow-dry and straighten my hair, I slip on my dress. It fits like a second skin. I spin around and eye myself in my floor-length mirror while dragging a hand down the length of my body.

Leonidas has amazing taste.

After looking at myself for a couple more seconds, I apply my makeup for the night. I add a very light layer of everything on me. To end off my outfit, I wear some jewelry, not a lot, but something to add more sexiness and bling.

I tense when the doorbell rings. It's just five fifty. He can't be early when he just lives next door. I needed more time to prepare myself for what's coming. Taking a deep breath, I head for the front door, twisting the doorknob.

I frown when I meet her eyes. "Harper, what are you doing here?"

She smiles brightly before pulling me into a tight hug. "You look stunning." She stares down at my body. "Are you going somewhere?"

I squeeze her hand in response to her compliment. "I'm going on a date."

Her eyes widen. "You move on fast."

How awkward. I want to excuse myself from this conversation as quickly as possible.

"It's with Leo."

A certain look crosses her face, but I can't place my finger on it.

"You guys are back together? After everything he kept from you?"

Harper knows nothing about our relationship. She doesn't know his secrets and what he's really like behind closed doors. And she most definitely doesn't know what we share. It's special and filled with so much love that could make an outsider puke.

"He's going to be here soon," I say impatiently, not liking where this conversation is going. "Did you come by to just say hi?"

She looks down at her feet. Shuffling, she reaches down and hands me a small box. It's packaged in pink wrapping paper. I stare down at it in confusion. Two presents in one day? I understand Leonidas's, but what has she gotten me?

Taking steps back while she extends it to me, she sends me a smirk. "I

thought you were going to be alone for a while, so I thought this would help you out a bit.”

I frown while Harper laughs in response.

“Have fun with that bitch.” She grips the door handle of her car. Pulling it roughly open, she disappears from my sight.

I stare at her car until it drives down the road and disappears from my vision.

“Well, I think I just got fucking whiplash,” I hear a voice say from my right.

That voice ...

I meet Leonidas’s stare. He steps close to my body. I nearly drool at the sight of him in a suit. I thought casual wear looked too sexy on him, but as I look him up and down, I have to catch myself from fainting. He brings a certain elegance with him. His tight white shirt strains against his broad chest. His slick black suit jacket is not buttoned up, and his slacks hug his long, muscular legs. I’m glad to find his hair in its usual messy, boyish style. The same rings and chain he wears every day are in place. His tattoos stand out on his fingers, giving him an edgy look.

He looks so sexy.

Someone, give me a fan because I’m burning the hell up.

“It looks better on you than I imagined,” he says while pulling me closer to his body.

The pink box that Harper gifted to me is between our bodies like a barrier. He doesn’t give it a second glance as he stares into my eyes.

“I didn’t think you could get any hotter, but I guess we both have dilemmas.”

His eyes flash with desire as he bites his lip, cursing. He stares down at the box in my hand. “What’s that?”

I shift on my feet nervously. Since the day Harper exposed Leonidas, we haven’t talked about her. This might be a sore subject for Leonidas. I don’t want to put him in a grim mood right before we leave for dinner. Yet the last thing I want to do is lie.

Little white lies are the worst. They pile up and eventually become worse than a big one.

“Harper dropped this off.” I stiffen when his face frowns.

“Why did she get you something?” His voice is clipped with anger.

I’ve found my answer. Harper is in fact a sore subject. Note taken.

I shrug my shoulders. “She said I’ll be needing this since I’ll be alone for a while.” I extend the box out to him when his frown deepens. “You can open it.”

He grabs the box. It looks so small in his hands compared to mine. It’s not my fault he’s a giant. His fingers rip the bubblegum-pink wrapping paper off of the box, throwing it behind him. I frown as I peek at the paper. I have to pick that up later. If I wasn’t so interested in what he was holding, I would scold him and slap the back of his neck for littering.

I glance at him and find him staring down at the box, wide-eyed. When I peek over, my jaw drops as I stare at my present.

What the hell? I’m mortified. I feel like running away while screaming. Why the hell did this have to be opened with Leonidas around?

Please, someone, dig my grave. I’m coming in earlier than expected.

I’ve never seen someone focus harder on an object than Leonidas is at this moment. He stares down at the vibrator with confusion, lust, and denial.

“Why would your best friend buy you a vibrator?”

I snatch it away with a squeak, hiding it behind my back. I swallow hard. “How am I supposed to know what possessed her when she bought this?” I stutter.

He takes a step closer. “You would have had to say something,” he replies strongly.

I shake my head rapidly, and he runs a hand down his face.

“I wasn’t supposed to get a boner right before we left for dinner,” he mumbles more to himself, and my eyes shift downward.

He’s definitely right. The bulge that is strained against the material of his pants is huge. It makes me swallow hard.

He curses under his breath while turning his back to me. I watch as his hands readjust himself.

“I’ll meet you in the car, Trinity. Just need to take care of something real quick.” He groans before walking back toward his house.

Okay then ...

I lock the front door with my purse over my shoulder. I walk over toward his car. Opening the door, I wait for him. He comes back outside five minutes later. As he enters the car, I can’t help but stare at him with amusement.

“What?” he questions while putting the car in reverse. Placing a hand on the back of my headrest, he stares behind him as he presses the gas pedal.

I tap his thigh once we’re driving down the road at a fast pace. “Good to

know your right arm is stronger than your left now.”

He sends me a glare that makes me chuckle.

I shrug my shoulders with a smile and look straight ahead.

“Trin, I would stop if I were you,” he warns. His voice deep with authority.

I don’t know what this guy does to me, but whenever he’s around, I get confidence. I want to tease him and rile him up, just like he does to me.

“You were probably jacking off to the thought of me.” I hum and laugh softly. He doesn’t utter a single word as I keep teasing. “Did you moan my name while coming?”

His knuckles turn white due to his death grip on the steering wheel. He flexes his jaw and stares straight ahead. As I’m about to open my mouth to tease him further, he beats me to it. “This street seems pretty quiet. Don’t make me pull over. Or do you want me to make you loudly scream my name in the town center? Knowing everyone’s watching you come beneath me in this car?”

I clench my thighs together and glance out of the window. Damn ... he’ll always win verbal fights.

His husky, deep chuckle makes me nervous.

Placing his hand on my thigh, he squeezes. “Cat got your tongue now?”

Yes, Leonidas ... are you happy? You won.

I’ll never admit that to him. His ego is big enough.

“One look at your face, and I can tell you’re trying not to jump me right now,” he points out, and I roll my eyes.

“Keep your eyes on the road, mister,” I mutter when I look over and find him glancing at me.

“Ow!” I squeal when his hand slaps me lightly. Smirking, I flip him off.

What makes my heart flutter like a fucking butterfly is when he grips my hand and kisses my finger with a wink.



Dinner was nice. We sat in a secluded area in the semi-packed restaurant. The elderly man who was serving us kept peeking at Leonidas from the corner of his eye. We both knew he recognized him, but he was definitely too shy to ask for a picture.

We ate our dinner, which I hate to say was amazing. I still prefer takeout though, but Leonidas doesn't need to know that. We talked the entire time, which was refreshing. I learned new things about him that surprised me. Like when he confessed he doesn't like sweets—criminal. After finishing our meal, I saw the look on the server's face when we got up from our table to leave. I elbowed Leonidas in the ribs and nodded over toward the man. He let out a quiet sigh and waved the man over.

He did in fact know about my rock-star boyfriend. He looked pleased and asked for a picture for his daughter, who's a big fan of X3. After taking the photo, Leonidas begged him not to spill the beans on his whereabouts. Thankfully, he waved us off with a smile.

Now, here we are, driving back home to Leonidas's place which is empty because Athena took Amelia and Elijah out for dinner. I bite my lip as my eyes wander the quiet forest around us. Music is playing lightly from the radio. Leonidas looks ravishing while driving. One hand tightly grips the steering wheel while the other is placed on my bare thigh. His eyes gaze at the dark road ahead of us. I crave to reach over and run my finger over his jawline. It's razor sharp. Life is not fair.

Parking his car in front of his house, with a quick glance toward me, he exits the car. I follow him to the front door. As I walk through his house and up the stairs, I feel slight excitement run through my entire body. Sending electricity up my spine.

After he walks into his bedroom, he goes straight to his bathroom. The last thing I want to do is stand awkwardly in the middle of his room, so I choose to walk to his window. I smile as I gaze down at his large pool. The lights shine, making it look like the Mediterranean Sea. I would love to feel the cold water on my hot body.

"Do you want to go swimming?" I hear Leonidas's deep voice ask.

I look over and find him standing behind me. My mouth lifts in a small smile, and I shrug my shoulders. I let him decide.

He nods to the window. "Let's go. I love night swimming."

I nod but immediately stop in my tracks. "I have to change into a bathing suit."

"Just wear whatever is underneath your dress."

I nod slowly while a blush coats my cheeks.

Clasping my hand in his, he leads me down the stairs. Once we're outside, he takes off his shirt, revealing his perfect chest with random tattoos

lingering on his tanned skin. He watches me through his long, thick lashes while he drags down his pants. Leonidas's tall, muscular frame strides to the pool. I watch as he strolls to the steps. Not even a second later, he disappears under the water with a splash.

Walking to the edge, I peer into the water. "Here goes nothing," I whisper to myself.

Stripping down, I jump in the pool. I'm having a hard time holding back the scream that wants to leave my lips. The water is so damn cold; it might as well have given me whiplash.

My fingers clutch the pool's ledge tightly when I see his blurry body swimming underwater, coming right toward me.

I can't help but let out a squeal when his teeth lightly bite down on the inside of my thigh. As he emerges above the surface, he sprays water right in my face and laughs.

Douche.

My hands splash water in his direction, but the water doesn't faze him. He just stares at me with amusement.

"You care about me after all," he teases and pulls my body into his.

Wrapping my legs around his waist tightly, I wind my fingers together behind his neck. Humming, I lean my head to the side in a thinking motion. "I'm not sure how I feel about you yet."

He bites his lip. "Yeah?"

I nod my head innocently. "Sorry to break the bad news to you."

"I know you secretly love me," he grumbles while gripping my bum.

Placing my lips to his neck, I peck his wet skin. "Nope. I totally hate you, mister."

His laughs vibrate against my chest as he kisses my temple. "I hate you too."

Hearing the crickets around us while darkness surrounds us, I tighten my legs around him and relax. Right now, these moments are what I love the most. Just us in each other's arms.

"Thank you for the wonderful night, Leonidas," I whisper, feeling my heavy eyes close.

"It's my pleasure, rock star. Anything for you." A couple minutes pass before he breaks the silence. "By the way, I'm throwing out the gift Harper gave you."

I can't help but laugh against his skin. "Who needs that when I have

you?”

“God, I love you,” he whispers while chuckling. “How is it possible to love someone this much?”

Running my hands through his hair, I shrug my shoulders. “Love is a scary thing.”

As we sway slightly in the water together, his voice rasps out, “Love might scare the shit out of some people, but whenever I’m with you, I don’t feel the least bit scared.”

FORTY-SEVEN

TRINITY

I have exactly three days left with Leonidas. It physically pains me to think of how I won't see him every day anymore.

I'm so used to having him in my life. I depend on him ... and now, that's all being taken away from me suddenly. I don't know whether to cry or yell up at the sky.

We've spent every single second of each day together. I finished *Twilight* while he read at his own pace. We made love under the stars—that was a dream of mine. I played basketball with him and slam-dunked a ball with his help. Yesterday, he took me out for ice cream. I looked around the parlor with tears. Thankfully, the table we'd first sat at was available. I ran over to it with him in hand, and we relived all the memories we'd made there.

The thought of him being a jerk to me now makes me laugh. Who would have known the mysterious guy who acted all tough and cool at first loves getting his hair played with?

I never used to believe in soul mates. But as I stared at him in front of me, I realized no one could make me this happy. He's the only one who's ever made me feel total bliss, happiness, and love, all at once. His gaze radiates like the sun. He fills my heart and feels like a warm hug on a chilly day.

I live and breathe for this guy.

Tears cloud my vision as I think about how many miles we will have between us. I don't know how I'll be able to live normally without him by my side. He keeps me going and encourages me throughout the day. I don't want to live a single second of the day without him, but I guess I'm being forced to. I know I'll feel absolutely empty inside. I'm preparing myself for what's coming in three days.

I wipe the moisture from my eyes when a knock sounds at my door. “Come in.”

Mom pokes her head into my room and frowns when she sees my face. Opening the door further, she eyes me carefully. “I was just coming in here to tell you I was leaving for work.” She pauses. “Why are you crying?”

I let out a shaky sigh and glance down at my lap. “Leonidas has to go back home in three days.” I almost break down at my own words. They hurt even more when I say them out loud.

Realization crosses her face as she strides over to me. Gripping my face in her hands, she whispers, “I’m sorry, love. That must be very hard.”

Tears trail down my face at a fast pace now. I would usually feel embarrassed, crying in front of Mom, but under her motherly gaze, I feel a sense of comfort.

“It hurts, Mom.” My voice breaks with emotion. “It hurts so much, and he hasn’t even left yet.”

Wiping a tear away, she glances at me with sadness. “Knowing something that will upset you is coming closer and closer is the worst. You try to make yourself ready, but no matter what you do, you can’t prepare yourself.” She pauses and lets out a sigh. “You have to come to terms with it all. I know it’s going to be hard. Everything in life is hard, but if you two are really meant for each other, then everything will work out in the end.”

I hope Mom’s right. I can’t afford another heartbreak. I know we’ll work out. I usually get a gut feeling if something doesn’t feel right. Right now, I have no doubts we’ll survive the long-distance ... but it’s scary, thinking I won’t be there for him if he needs me.

What if he gets random urges to take pills? Will he be able to fight off the addiction without someone there, supporting him? I know he won’t be alone. He’ll have Athena, Elijah, and Amelia, but sometimes, you put on a face for your family. I, for one, know he doesn’t share his feelings with his family because he’s told me so.

I’ll drive myself crazy with all these questions. I just need to chill out until he leaves.

“What are you doing here?” Mom asks with a small smile. “Go be with him before he leaves.”

Not even giving it a second thought, I jump up at her words. I’m going to Leonidas. I don’t care if he’s tired of seeing my face every single day, which I know he isn’t ... but I’m still going to bother him.

Grabbing my phone before I leave, I smile over my shoulder at Mom.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I slam our front door closed once I'm through. I run across our lawn to his with a sudden smile on my face. Whipping his back door open, I scare Amelia and Elijah, where they sit at their kitchen table. Jumping out of their seats with mouths wide open in shock, they place their hands on their chests.

"I think I just pooped my pants," Elijah grumbles under his breath while rolling his eyes.

Amelia smiles sadly at me before she frowns down at the bowl of cereal placed in front of her. Weird ... the last couple of times I've seen her, she's looked paler and more fragile. Is she eating? Her body moves slower, and there's bags under her eyes.

"Are you okay, babes?" I walk over to her and twirl a piece of her hair between my fingers.

Nodding her head, she sends me a smile over her shoulder. "I'm great now that you're here."

Nodding down to her cereal, I rub my tummy. "That looks good. Lucky Charms is the greatest creation out there."

"I prefer Cinnamon Toast Crunch," is all she says with a shrug of her shoulders.

My instincts are right. There's something wrong.

"Leonidas is in his room, sulking," she says and nods toward the stairs. "You should go see him before he mourns up there all day in misery."

Nodding, I pat her shoulder as I walk past her. "Wish me luck."

"You'll need it. He's like a lion," Elijah yells from behind me. Not even a second later, I hear him sigh quietly at Amelia. "Just a few more bites?"

My heart breaks. I continue my steps. The only thing I crave to do is turn around and give her the biggest hug. I know she must have an eating disorder since she looks at food like it's the enemy. Amelia is so beautiful. She has a natural prettiness to her that most people strive to have. It hurts to think she can't see how perfect she is. If only she could see herself through my eyes.

My mood immediately turns sour as I walk up the stairs to Leonidas. Gripping his doorknob in my hand, I twist it without knocking. My steps halt in his doorway when I find him sitting cross-legged in the middle of his room. The still-unpacked boxes are around him in a circle.

What the hell did I just walk into?

His muscular back is facing me. Judging by the way he doesn't notice I'm

here means he's deep in thought. I wonder if he's thinking the same things as me. I knock my fist on the wall beside me, and his head turns in my direction.

Anger fills his expression until his eyes find my own. A small smile lifts his face as he gets up from the floor. Jumping over the brown cardboard boxes, Leonidas walks over to me. "Thank God you're here," he mumbles into my shoulder once he pulls my body into his own.

My hand runs through his hair as I let out a relieved sigh. It's good to be back in his arms even if it was just a few hours ago when I left them.

"Should I even ask why you were sitting in the middle of your room like that?" I tease and jump when he bites lightly on my shoulder.

"I'm driving myself insane," he replies.

Pulling away and gripping his forearms, I raise an eyebrow. "Care to tell me why?"

Moving away from my body, he glances down at all the boxes with a frown. "I've been avoiding going through these for a while—well, actually, since we came here." Turning his back to me, he walks toward them and kicks one.

Following him, I watch the same box he's glaring at. "What's in them?"

I've asked myself this question since I first came in here. I thought it was so weird that he still hadn't unpacked, but as he glares down at them like he wishes they'd die, I realize it's more than I initially thought. I see the internal battle he's going through. Whatever he needs to face, the only thing he needs is support.

Placing a hand on his stiff shoulder, I whisper, "Can I look inside one?"

Biting his lip, he nods.

Bending down, I grab a semi-large box that lies untouched in front of me. My fingers eagerly pick the tape off from the top. Once that's off, I open the lid and peer into the box.

What the ...

My eyes stare down at a bunch of X3 merch. Countless shirts, rolled-up posters, guitar picks, bucket hats, and little mini guitar key chains. Why has a bunch of X3 merch been lying around his room for weeks? I glance up at him in confusion.

Seeing the look on my face, he runs a hand down his face. "I have to sign these before we go back to LA."

My mouth drops open in shock. You mean, he has to sign all this merch in these boxes before he leaves? If I were in his place, I would be running

around like I was a chicken with its head cut off.

“Like I said, I’ve been avoiding this,” he grumbles. Sitting down beside me, he stares at me. “I don’t have the energy to sign all this merchandise.”

“Did Elijah and Amelia have to do this?”

He nods and licks his plump lips. “They finished already.”

“And you have to do this? You don’t have a choice?” I ask, feeling slightly frustrated at the label for overworking him.

“Fans already bought these products. I have to sign these, so they can send them out.”

I’m shocked. No one deserves to sit through almost a hundred boxes of products, filled to the rim, and sign them.

“I have to start this before I don’t finish in time and get beat,” he whines and throws his body back dramatically on the ground. Leonidas’s arms and legs spread like a starfish. He’s such a goofball.

Straddling him, I kiss his jaw playfully. “Teach me your signature, and I’ll help you with all that.”

He mutters against my neck, creating goose bumps, “I would get in so much trouble.”

“No one needs to know.”

His fingers grip my jaw, pulling my face down. He stares deeply into my eyes. “You’re such a bad girl. I fucking love it.”

The way he’s looking at me makes me want to melt, but I’m a woman on a mission. “I guess you’re rubbing off on me.”

Grinning, he places open-mouthed kisses on my neck. I frown in confusion when his lips stay in that area for a while without moving.

What is he doing?

I try pulling away, but he holds me in place by the neck.

“Don’t move,” he mumbles against my skin.

“Why?”

“I can feel your heartbeat on my lips.” He sighs, making butterflies take flight in my belly.

What did I do to deserve this guy? His soul is sweeter than the richest chocolate.

I stay in place as long as Leonidas wishes. I smile when I feel him smirk as his lips brush against my skin. I lean up and find him with his eyes closed.

His voice is hoarse as he whispers up to me, “I’m playing dead.”

I have to hold back a laugh. “Dead people don’t talk. You know that,

right?”

“There’s a first for everything.”

I slap his shoulder when he comes back alive.

“Oh my God, he’s alive. He’s been brought back from the dead!” I whisper-shout dramatically while fanning myself. “I think I’m going to faint.”

“Shut up.” He smiles.

A few minutes later, when we collect ourselves, he teaches me his signature. It’s pretty simple. I get the hang of it after practicing multiple times. The both of us sit cross-legged on the floor beside each other. We each start with a box of our own. He shows me where to sign and where not to. I sign almost hundreds of hoodies that read *Drakos Addict* with a guitar. I’m definitely stealing one of these later.

After a couple of hours of signing, my hand cramps up. My body is begging for me to get up and walk around. I can tell just by looking at Leonidas that he feels the same.

“Thank you for doing this for me. I really appreciate it,” he mutters as he focuses down on the hat he’s signing.

“You don’t need to thank me. It’s not a big deal.”

I watch as the Sharpie in his hand drops to the floor.

“Yes, I have to thank you.” His voice is sharp and intimidating. “We only have a couple more hours left with each other. I know you would rather spend the hours doing something else. But here you are, helping me with my problems.” He uses the hand that he was signing all the merchandise with to brush a lock of my hair away from my face. “You truly don’t know how much the little things matter to me.”

Love is all about sacrificing yourself for them. Sure, I would rather cuddle in bed with him, but seeing the relief on his face and the tension lift from his shoulders as we get through all the merch makes it all worth it.

“And you need to understand that I love you, and when you love someone, you give them your all. You don’t need to thank me for helping you.” My fingers fiddle with a ring around one of his fingers.

The look Leonidas sends my way almost makes me crumple. “I love you.”

My voice stays strong as I glance at the guy I have grown to love tremendously. “I love you.”

His lips brush over mine in a featherlight touch, and I wrap my arm

around his neck. I get lost in the feeling of his lips.

“Stay the night?” he mumbles against my lips.

I nod, and he picks me up from the floor before throwing me on the bed.

We do the one thing I’ve craved since I first came here.

Cuddle.

FORTY-EIGHT

TRINITY

Here I am, wrapped up in my favorite place—Leonidas's arms. I've never felt more relaxed than I do at this moment. As his arms tighten around my fragile body, I feel protected. We both want to hold on, but we know what must happen.

He's leaving in the morning ...

Yes, in exactly eight hours, he's leaving. I want to cry and hold on to him forever. I want to beg him to not leave me because without him, I'll feel so lonely. But I can't hold him back. This is what he's meant to do. I won't be a girlfriend who keeps her boyfriend close for only her benefit.

He's a singer. I have to let him shine.

Even if it means breaking my heart in return. If I had known I was falling in love with a world-famous rock star, I would have protected my heart more. I would have prepared myself for the heartbreak I'll feel when he leaves. The world needs him back. I didn't fall in love with Leo, the famous rock star everyone else sees. I fell in love with Leonidas Drakos, the broken guy who wants to be heard and understood.

I truly feel that he is a blessing, put into my life to beam his bright light down on me. I just want him to stay.

He didn't even let me argue my point in going back with him. In a way, I understand. I know he'll feel like he's taking me away from my life. Isn't that the same reason I'm not holding him back? Yes. But our lives are so different that it's incomparable.

I'm just a normal girl, living in a small town in Canada, and he's a big-time rock star that the world loves. People scream when they see him. Anyone would do anything to be with him or be him. Just the thought of that

makes me laugh. Since I've found out about his identity, he's begged me not to look him up. I have to admit, I had to stop myself twice from doing so, but at the end of the day, I have to respect his wishes.

He explained passionately that most of the things said about him online are lies. If they see him walking out of a grocery store with a bag in hand, they make some bullshit up about him buying condoms to hook up with a girl. When in reality, he was just buying butter.

Leonidas scolded me when I laughed uncontrollably. I hate being socially awkward because I always laugh at the wrong times, but I couldn't stop. People think I'm crazy, but I promise I can't help it.

My finger lazily traces his tattoos. I focus my attention on following the lines of the designs. I love his tattoos. I know they're all meaningful to him, and the thought makes me smile.

"People are freaking out," Leonidas grumbles from above me.

He posted another photo of us on his Instagram. I refused, but he claimed the label couldn't get any madder at him, so I just said fuck it. It's a simple picture, much more innocent than the last. You see Leonidas's beautiful profile as he kisses my neck. You can't see my face, which still leaves me a mystery ... just the way I like it.

The caption for this picture is, *My rock star*.

I'm not sure what people are saying about us this time, but judging by his face, it's entertaining.

I continue the path my finger makes on the art on his skin when I feel his eyes land on me.

"The meaning behind that one is my name," he points out quietly to me.

Glancing up at him through my lashes, I find him staring at the delicate lion head tattoo on his forearm. I nod, remembering the time I first searched for his name. I've never met someone who suits their name more than Leonidas. His name screams strength. If Leonidas isn't tough, then I don't know what he is.

My finger points to a small dragon head slightly beside the lion.

"My last name means dragon," he shivers in distaste.

I lean up on an elbow and eye him. I obviously knew his last name was Drakos, but I didn't know what the meaning behind it was. This guy is full of surprises.

For a good hour, he tells me the meaning behind his tattoos, and I love every second. I didn't think I could get any closer to him than I already was,

but as he points out each piece of art on him, I soak in every word and see him clearer.

“I have a confession to make,” I mumble slowly.

My heavy eyelids are beginning to close. It’s late at night. I know we should be sound asleep, but as the hours tick away, all I want to do is be with him. I want to talk the night away, hear his laughter as we tell each other stories. Yet, every minute that passes, it’s harder to stay awake. No matter how much I force my vision to be clear, my body is stronger.

In the end, I know it will win. I just don’t want it to.

He hums against my cheek.

“Remember the time you found me in the tree house, drunk?” He nods, and I continue on, “I still remember when you found the hickey on my neck and how mad you got.” Amusement is thick in my voice as he tenses. “Do you finally want to know who gave me that?”

He groans and puts his face in my neck. I swear this guy acts like a puppy.

“Sure, but I’ll be having dreams of killing him in my sleep tonight,” he grumbles and bites down softly on the sensitive skin on my neck.

Running my hand through his hair, I place my lips against his ear. “It was you, you goof.” I muffle my laughs with my hand when he shoots up and looks down at me, shocked.

“How the hell was that me? Stop lying, Trin. Tell me.”

I nod and let out a chuckle. “It was you. I swear I’m not lying.”

I wish I had my phone on hand because I would love to take a photo of how shocked his face looks right now.

He slaps my bum playfully when I roll onto my stomach. My laughs jolt through my whole body.

“I’ve been keeping that in for so long; it feels good to let that out,” I say against his chest after my laughs settle down.

He picks at my shirt with his fingers. “Should I even ask how the hell I did that?”

“You were sleeping and started talking against my neck. Next thing I knew, you were sucking.”

He groans and runs a hand down his face. “That’s mortifying. Shit, I’m sorry, Trin.”

The thought of Leonidas sucking my neck then made me blush red, so scarlet that firefighters should have come to hose me down. But as I look

back at the moment now, it only makes me want to pee my pants from laughter.

“I’m really going to miss you,” Leonidas’s strained voice blurts randomly.

His sudden confession has my eyes burning with tears. I force my eyes to stay open. I refuse to remember this night by breaking down on Leonidas. I have to show him I’m okay because I’m afraid he’ll stay if he sees my pain.

Keep it in, Trinity. Do what you’re best at. Acting.

“I’m going to miss you too.”

He grabs my face in the palms of his hands and glances at me with so much sorrow. “Remember, we’ll be okay. Nothing will get between us.”

I nod, not able to form words.

I don’t want him to leave. I can’t stand the thought of not being able to listen to his heartbeat when we cuddle. I feel suffocated, knowing I won’t have him in a couple hours. Yet I have to stay strong for him.

“We’ll FaceTime every night,” I demand, and he nods quickly. “We’ll text throughout the day. We have to update each other on everything, and most importantly, we have to take care of ourselves,” I whisper while looking into his eyes.

Leonidas pulls my lips against his as he speaks. “Make sure you eat and drink every day, and you need your rest.” His lips brush against mine as a single tear trickles down my cheek. “I need you to be okay, so I’ll be okay, Trin.”

I kiss his lips as my answer. “The same goes for you, mister.”

Silence consumes the air as I place my cheek on his warm chest.

“Stop fighting to close your eyes, Trin. Go to sleep,” he whispers. “I’ll still be here when you wake up.”

I can’t go to sleep and miss our last moments together. I can’t ...

His hand runs through my hair. “I’ll be right here the whole night.”

I nod, the stubbornness overtaking the logical part of me.

Leonidas kisses my temple. “Let’s close our eyes at the same time.”

I run my finger up and down his muscular chest. My gaze focuses on the defined dips. I try to keep my tears at bay, but they betray me. Misery invades his beautiful orbs as he follows the trail my tears make. My body melts into his as his lips kiss away the salty moisture.

“Go to sleep, Trinity,” he says hoarsely, which makes my heart ache uncontrollably.

Why does love have to hurt this much? I feel like I'm rapidly getting stabbed in the chest. You know those movies where the person watches their loved one fade away before their eyes, and they reach out and try to stop them, but they still disappear, and they're left empty and cold? That's how I feel regarding Leonidas leaving town.

Leonidas wants us to go to sleep, so we'll both temporarily get rid of the pain we currently feel. I want to argue back, but I do as he said, knowing he has a long day ahead of him.

I drift off into a deep slumber by hearing Leonidas's steady heartbeats.



Normally, waking up next to Leonidas in the morning would feel like total bliss. But as my eyes open and I'm met with the blinding sunlight, I dread what's coming.

My back is tightly pressed against Leonidas's front. His muscular arms make it hard for me to breathe. I feel his steady breaths on my neck as he relaxes in his sleep.

Soaking in this feeling that I won't feel in a while makes the waterworks come again full force. Today is officially the day he leaves. He won't be here tomorrow. He'll only be a phone call and a text message away.

God, why did I have to fall in love with a boy that you would take away from me?

I stay still in his arms until I feel him awaken. Turning around, we stare at each other until the other looks away with moisture in their eyes. An hour later, we sadly pull away, knowing we have to get on with the day ahead. Every movement we make is slow, hoping to drag on the moments we have with one another.

Both of us walk down the steps toward his kitchen, hand in hand. As I spot his siblings sitting around the kitchen table, Leonidas turns my body toward his.

"I'll see you in a few minutes."

As he turns around for the front door, I grip his hand, stopping him in his tracks.

"Where are you going?"

Biting his lip, he shuffles on his feet. "I need to discuss a few things with

your mom.”

The serious look on his face tells me not to argue, so that’s why I watch him leave.

Why would Leonidas have to talk to my mom?

Joining the others at the table, I meet my best friend’s gaze.

“Don’t make me cry, bitch,” Amelia sneers at me from across the table.

I stare at her and blink when she threatens me with her spoon. I glare at her.

“Tell Elijah to stop looking at me like a lost puppy then,” I argue back, and he flinches dramatically.

I’m going to miss these two. They’re my best friends. I’ll miss Elijah’s humor and his slight protectiveness. I won’t hear Amelia’s laughs of joy, and my venting system will go away.

“I’m an emotional guy. What can I say?” he mumbles under his breath and sinks down into his chair further.

“No one cries today,” Amelia argues sternly. Yet I know she’s talking more to herself than to us. “We’ll all be okay. We’re still going to remain close.”

“Speak for yourself,” he whines and runs a hand down his face. “I love Trinity. She’s my teddy bear.” He pauses and gasps suddenly. “Not to mention, how miserable Leonidas will be now without her!” Dropping his face in his hands, Elijah lets out a groan.

“Kids.”

We all turn our attention to Athena.

She stands at the kitchen doorway with a frown on her face. “Our ride has arrived.”

Panic consumes me as I glance around the room. *Where is Leonidas?* I need a moment alone with him before he leaves.

Athena’s gaze falls on me, seeing the look on my face. “He’s outside, waiting for you.”

I practically jump out of my chair, running to the door. I whip it open. As I make my way down the front steps, I hear a whistle to my right. Turning, I spot Leonidas sitting on his veranda railing. He straightens when I walk toward him.

“I have something for you.” When I glance at him in confusion, he explains, “It’s not big, but it is to me.” Gripping both my hands in his, he stares deeply into my eyes. “I love you, Trinity. We’ll be okay.”

I nod my head because I know he wants me to.

Letting go of my hand, he reaches into his pocket. I eye the delicate piece of jewelry as he holds it in front of me. I'm in awe of the bracelet made with black string. Four small beads are spaced out perfectly in between a braided pattern. This is definitely handmade, which makes me smile.

"A couple of years back, Amelia taught me how to make bracelets. I know you don't like when I spend too much money on you, and I understand that. So, I made this for you."

My eyes water as I glance down at the piece of jewelry, made with so much love.

"Think of this as a promise bracelet. As long as we wear these on our wrists ..."

He pauses and shows me his own.

God, he's wearing the same bracelet he made for me on his wrist. We're going to have matching bracelets.

Cue in the tears.

"We'll be fine," he finishes off.

Grabbing my wrist, he tightens the bracelet around me. I eye it with love while running a nail over a bead.

"I know the four beads are just blue, but I put them there to stand for, *You're my rock star.*"

God, he thinks about everything. It makes it harder to let him go.

"This means so much," I whisper and wipe a tear off my face. "I can't believe you made us matching bracelets."

"Anything for you, rock star."

I pull him into my body, wrapping my arms tightly around his neck. Our lips smash together with fondness. Our tongues fight for dominance as we try to make up for all the time we'll lose. I pour every emotion I feel into this kiss, telling him everything I can't express through words.

My lips part from his when I feel his tears against my skin. Seeing him cry breaks my heart into pieces. I know he's not happy. That stings. If it wasn't for the stupid label, he would have his freedom while pursuing a passion he loves.

"I love you," I mutter as he places his forehead against mine.

Kissing my nose, he whispers back brokenly, "I love you."

My heart breaks out of my soul when Athena and the siblings walk

through the door with their luggage in hand.

It's time for him to go.

I grip Leonidas's hand as we walk down the steps together toward the black limo, which is waiting for him.

"Keep rocking on, Trin," Elijah mumbles into my shoulder when he pulls me into a tight embrace.

I smile sadly and pat him on the back. "Love you, goof."

Amelia is next. Our arms wrap tightly around each other.

Putting my lips near her ear, I whisper, "Watch him for me."

She nods, saying nothing.

"You take care of yourself. I'll call you," she says sternly.

The two siblings blow me a kiss with sad eyes as they disappear into the car.

Athena is next. She kisses me on the cheek with a smile. "Thank you," she whispers to me.

When she clasps my hands in hers, I glance at her in confusion.

"Thank you for bringing my son back."

I nearly break down in a sob. As she walks away from me, I watch as she joins her children in the car. My breath increases rapidly as I turn toward the one person I'm dreading to let go of.

Please don't leave me ...

Tears stream down my face as he strides over toward me.

Gripping my cheeks in his hands, he looks down at me passionately. "Never forget, I love you. Nothing will change. I'll never stop loving you."

He pulls my lips into his roughly. All the pain we feel is in this one kiss that I'll feel on my lips until I see him again.

Forcing his lips apart from mine, he staggers back. Leonidas's face frowns in pain as he kisses his matching bracelet.

"It's not good-bye, rock star. It's *see you later*," he croaks out.

Grasping the door handle of the car, he pulls it open.

I take in every detail of him before he leaves my vision. I take in the way his body's hunched down in pain and how his fists are clenched at his sides.

My body shakes in a sob as the door closes behind him. As he drives off, I feel incomplete.

Half of my soul is in that car, driving away.

FORTY-NINE

TRINITY

Every day feels the same without him.

I wake up and immediately think of him. He consumes my thoughts. Nothing I do can take him off my mind.

No amount of FaceTime calls and text messages will repair the bleeding gash in my heart. I notice the way he tries to cheer me up, but seeing the sadness in his eyes that he tries to hide from me betrays him.

The 2,500 miles between us feels like a lifetime. Not to mention, the time difference. Everything will change when he goes on tour. Multiple time differences will cause our relationship to tear apart slowly. I know he said it wouldn't, but the pain inside me isn't normal.

Mom tries to make me smile. But no one will unless it's a certain rock star. Sometimes, I catch myself thinking he'll walk through the door with his signature smirk on his face. Disappointment fills me entirely when I realize he's miles away.

He's not coming back soon. I keep telling that to myself, and every time, my frown deepens. Yet I have to move on with my life. I'm focusing on my mental health right now.

The love we share is still as strong as ever. It might get even stronger now, hopefully.

I need to go back to work and make some money to help expand my book obsession. I have to go to the college I picked yesterday when I was bored and alone in my room. I know Leonidas would be proud of my plans. He would encourage me, and that comforts me.

Right before I leave for work, I rest the *Twilight* book Leonidas gifted me on my shelf. The black and red stands out on my aesthetically pleasing shelf.

I've read a lot to grow my collection. Just looking at the wall, filled head to toe with books, rewards me with warmth within.

Walking down the stairs, I see Mom and Rodrigo in the kitchen, chatting. My steps halt while I take a deep breath in. Over the past couple of days, Mom has been trying. I know she's made mistakes—everyone does. I need to understand that she's grieving as well, and everyone grieves differently. If Rodrigo makes her happy, then I guess I'll have to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Continuing my steps, I lock eyes with Mom. She glances at her boyfriend with a certain look while he sips his coffee, leaning against the counter next to Mom.

“Good morning, Trinity. How did you sleep?” Mom asks.

“Okay. How about you?” I ask her while I grab a banana.

She places her steaming cup of coffee on the counter next to her. “I couldn't sleep very well. Kept tossing and turning.”

All I can do is nod. I feel Rodrigo's stare on every inch of my body. I hold myself back from giving him the finger, but I keep my back to him and respectfully answer Mom's questions.

“Have you talked to Leonidas today?”

Taking a bite of my banana, I mumble, “He's probably still sleeping. The time difference is terrible.”

She nods sadly, and I eye Rodrigo when he butts in to our conversation. “Who's Leonidas?”

“My boyfriend,” is all I give him.

“What's he doing away from here?” he presses and frowns.

“He's a singer,” Mom says and slaps a hand to her mouth in shock.

Damn, leave it to Mom to spill his one secret he wished her to keep.

She sighs in defeat and shrugs her shoulders. “Sorry, Trinity, it slipped.”

It's not okay, not okay at all. There's nothing I can say to take away Rodrigo's memories.

Putting down his coffee next to Mom's, he crosses his arms across his chest. “He's a singer?” Questions linger in his voice as he raises an eyebrow.

No, dipshit ... he's an accountant.

I answer bluntly, “He's in a band with his siblings.”

His eyes widen. “Do you mean X3? My son, Diego, has heard of them. He's a big fan.”

How did he know?

Throwing my banana peel in the garbage, I smile my fakest smile in his direction. “Cool. I’m glad to hear that. I have to head to work now. See you later, Mom.”

I rush out of the room before the two of them can add anything else in the conversation I want to be over. To be fair, I could not care less if he knows about X3. He only sees what the world sees. I see so much more.

My mood immensely turns even more sour than it was moments ago when I spot my car—the car Leonidas got me. He’s only been gone a week, yet it feels like a lifetime. He’s everywhere I gaze. I think about him when I look at everything. The thought of him is driving me crazy. I didn’t know love could drive you mad.

Slamming the door behind me, I head off to work.



The bookstore is quiet today. When I say it’s quiet, I mean, only one person has stopped by today.

Linda, my boss, was happy to see me again after my much-needed break from work. She filled me in on everything that I’d missed and immediately sent me off to stock the shelves.

My hands shake as I grip the new, crisp *Twilight* paperbacks. I can’t help but let my mind wander off to the time we first came in here. I’m standing in the very spot where Leonidas pinned me against the shelf and was being his flirty self. I would do anything to have that right now.

With a frown on my face, I place the books where they belong and move.

“What the hell?” I hear Linda’s confused voice gasp from across the store.

I peek out from the aisle and see her locking the store door in a frenzy.

Walking toward her, I eye the swarm of people outside. “What’s going on?”

She shrugs in frustration and sighs. “I don’t know! All these people with cameras just came running here out of nowhere!”

My face scrunches up, and I stand there in place, confused. *Did word get out that X3 was here?* That’s the only potential reason that I can think of. Nothing juicy happens in this small town of mine.

Walking over to stand behind the counter, which is right beside a massive

window, I listen intently to their screams outside.

“Have you spotted them?” one of them snaps at the other.

A bald man shrugs his shoulders and fiddles with his camera. “I’m just as confused as you are.”

“These X3 kids are driving the media crazy. They disappear for multiple weeks, and when they’re finally spotted, they disappear again!”

Shit. My heart races. The paparazzi found out the triplets were here. *Who the hell told the media?*

I don’t want to believe it was Harper. She wouldn’t do that to me.

But would she?

The last time I saw her, she was weird. It looked like she wanted to say more, but she kept her mouth shut. I want to laugh in the paparazzi’s faces. They won’t be finding X3 anywhere around here.

By all means, spend all night searching, but you’ll come out, wondering what you’re doing with your life.

Following people and taking pictures is a shitty job, not only for the people like X3, but also for them. It must be tiring and boring. The things I’ve heard from Leonidas about them make me hate them. They’ll say anything to anyone for a good story. For a big, fat check, they could not care less about ruining lives.

“I can’t open the store with those hooligans out there, pulling that nonsense!” She flicks her middle finger at one of the paparazzi.

I freeze when my eye meets his, but I sigh when he just glances away.

“Take the rest of the day off, Trinity. If they’re not gone by the end of the day, I’m calling the police.”

“Are you sure?” Don’t get me wrong; I want to leave, but I’ve taken more than enough sick days. It feels wrong to just leave on my first day back.

She waves me off with a small smile. “Go, dear. I don’t want you here with all those jackass men out there.”

Smiling at her and bidding her good-bye, I leave through the back door. The entire time I walk to my car, my anxiety creeps in and tells me they’ll find me. Yet I hear Leonidas’s voice in the back of my mind, telling me to fight them back ten times harder. So, that’s what I do. I stride to my car like the bad bitch I am and push my thoughts somewhere I can’t hear them.

The moment I smell the clean leather scent of my car, I calm down. My nerves settle down as I spot the hula girl on my dashboard with Elijah’s face taped to it. I miss them, all of them, so much. Life sucks without the people

who make you happy. It seems as if I'm getting reminded of that constantly.

I glance down at the promise bracelet Leonidas made me. Knowing he has the same piece of cloth around his wrist brings me comfort. My finger grazes over the four beads.

"I love you," I whisper out in the silence of my car.

FIFTY

LEO

Eat, practice, write, eat dinner, sing, go to sleep—that's the daily schedule the label has put me, Elijah, and Amelia on. I feel so fucking blessed to be at their services, to be worked as their slave and not as their equal. Note the sarcasm.

I forgot how much I hated it here until the moment I arrived in LA. Back in the town where Trinity lives, the air is fresh and clean. Here in LA, it reeks of gasoline, cigarettes, and fake people.

I know I'm lucky to have the opportunities I have, but I want to play video games in the afternoon because I'm bored. Under Dad's heated gaze, that's not possible. You would think we'd killed his cat with the way he treats us. In Canada, I felt like I was living my old life. I was still singing and doing what I loved, but not under the watchful eyes of the label. They constantly bully us down and peel our layers away until we have nothing left.

I feel drained here, working so they're only satisfied, but what happens when I'm not and I feel empty? What will be left for the fans to see? Nothing.

With Trinity, I felt pure happiness. My smiles weren't forced, and I laughed. Since I've been here, I've done nothing but frown, to the point where Amelia warns me about wrinkles. I always snark back and tell her she needs to worry about herself.

Harsh but true. I see the way she struggles every day to put food in her stomach. Amelia's eating disorder is not something she likes to talk about. Scratch that. She hates when people talk about it. It's a secret that's literally eating her alive. I hate watching her cry over her food. No matter how much I tell her she's beautiful, nothing gets through her thick brain.

She's built a wall higher than the Great Wall of China, and the scary part

is, no one even knows it.

Elijah, Mom, and I try to help her overcome her struggles as much as we can, but it gets harder every time we hear her throwing up in the bathroom after she gets something in her stomach. The harder we push, the harder she pulls away from us.

This just proves how life down here is suffocating.

Not to mention, Elijah's depressed out here. He doesn't smile or joke anymore. Sadness has taken over him.

The funny part is, we're the best actors out there. Society suspects nothing. They don't see our forced smiles. I beg that one person notices, but I'm disappointed every time.

People are truly blinded by Hollywood's lights.

The only good thing I can say right now is that we still have our Instagram page up and running. They tried to take it down, but that's when Mom got involved. She gave them her mother-bear eyes. They backed off after that, but they didn't look happy about it, like I care.

Screw them and their perfect expectations.

I'll rock their world until they won't be able to hold on. I'll make them realize who's really in charge here, and that's us. Without X3, what do they have left? An empty stadium. If they piss me off further, they'll have a rude awakening.

"Good job on that radio interview!" Justin, my shitty agent, exclaims from where he sits in the limo.

He always has that damn clipboard in his hands. The number of times I've had to stop myself from grabbing it and throwing it across the room is embarrassing.

"You have a talk show tomorrow morning. I want you guys to read the list of questions to prepare yourselves," he says while flipping through papers with a lot of shit written down. "Then, you have to go to the studio to record. After that, you have your vocal lessons."

"What's after that?" I hum in false amusement, and Amelia jabs me in the ribs with her bony elbow. "Want me to walk across the entire country for you, like Terry Fox?"

He raises an eyebrow. "That would make a wonderful story. Sadly, your schedule is jam-packed right now, but I'll definitely add that into my notes."

I watch as he scribbles the idea down with a smile. Can these people not understand sarcasm? Shit, if my withdrawal from pills doesn't drive me

insane ... he will. Justin's so naive that it makes me laugh. If I said I wanted to get tattoos on my face because fans would like it, he would drive me himself to get it done.

A curse leaves my mouth in a breathy whisper as I hold back from punching him in the face. I focus my eyes on the world outside of us. I watch as people hurry to work, school, or somewhere else that us humans waste our lives on.

"You guys get half the day off." He glances at my mom with a nasty look. "A request from your very persistent mother. At six o'clock, you have to work with the team. They'll tell you all the tour dates and what you should expect." His black pen scribbles on the paper like there's no tomorrow.

A sigh leaves my body as the car pulls in front of our home that feels like anything but that. My leg bounces up and down as I wait my turn to exit the car that's like literal hell. My family and I stride our way inside the house and don't stop until we get away from their stares.

Elijah lets out a sigh. "How am I supposed to do this for years?"

He plops down onto the couch and pulls a pillow down on his face. When he groans into it, Mom flinches.

"God, that's the same question I ask myself every day." Amelia sits next to him and cuddles into his body.

I watch them from my spot. Those two have always been closer. I don't envy their relationship because I know why Amelia feels closer to Elijah. He's understanding and friendly. He's a good person to talk to, and I'm the opposite. I've always been distant, closed off, and snarky.

Elijah is more patient with her. He'll sit at the table for hours to help her eat. I just sit to the side and wonder how our lives got to where she can't even eat yogurt.

One word, seven letters—society.

Society ruins everything valuable in life. It takes your happiness, and it controls you. It's even harder when millions of people watch you. God forbid you make a mistake ...

"Get some rest while you can." Mom sighs and runs a hand down her face. "Make sure you eat. I'll be resting in my room until you guys have to leave."

I watch with a frown as she walks out of the kitchen.

When she's out of my view, I turn to Elijah and Amelia. "What's wrong with her?"

They both send me pitiful gazes.

“I think Dad has been getting to her more,” Amelia whispers up to the ceiling.

“There has to be something we can do,” I say out loud, and they frown.

“She’s been trying for years. We get the same result every time, Leonidas,” Amelia explains.

“So, we’re just going to give up because it’s hard?” I let out a laugh.

That’s not what I’m about, especially when it comes to my mom. She doesn’t deserve what Dad puts her through. She keeps strong for us, but deep down, I know she’s angry for what Dad has become. Heck, I’m angry. I can’t imagine being married to a totally different person and not being able to get out of it when you want to.

“I won’t stop helping Mom fight against these damn courts. We all know Dad has done some dirty work to get on their good sides.”

“I’m not telling you to give up. I’m just saying we should let her handle it herself.” Amelia shrugs and bites her fingernail. “It doesn’t seem like she wants our help.”

Is she joking?

Mom needs help. She needs to part from this man who I don’t consider to be my father anymore.

I glare at them. “Where has that gotten her, fighting all on her own?” They stay quiet, and I hum in amusement. “Thought so.”

Getting up from my chair, I storm away and stride all the way to my room. Slamming my door behind me, I nearly punch a hole in the drywall. I’m so fucking miserable without Trinity. I swear to God I’m going insane without her. Everything that would slightly bother me is ten times worse because I’m not complete without her.

That sounded so cringe. But it’s true. I’m better with her and worse without her.

Knowing she’s by herself makes me anxious. How am I supposed to know that she’s all right when I only see her through a screen? What happens when she hangs up and she’s left alone?

My biggest fear is her thinking I left her behind. She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. She’s more valuable than anything I can buy or even my career. I used to hate the thought of loving a girl again. After my first relationship failed because of my career, I ran away from love. Now, all I want to do is be surrounded by her.

When you fall in love with someone, not only do you love them, but if you find the right person, they make you love yourself again.

Without her, my life feels bland. I don't feel the course of electricity run through my veins.

I'm definitely going insane.



“The tour will begin in Europe,” an old man who works for the team says from across the conference table. “Greece is first.” He pauses and licks his lips. “That’s the big show because that’s where you’re from, and your fans know that, so we need to make it special.” He flicks through his papers and reads for a couple of seconds. “It’s also huge because it’s your first concert in a long time, so we need to make it a hit.

“To make things more interesting for that concert, you’ll have background dancers. They’ll dance a little more ...” He stops mid-sentence and coughs awkwardly. “They’ll dance a little sexier around you, Leo. It gets the females more excited and takes the attention away from the girl you’re seeing.”

Yeah, no.

I snort. “Hell nah.”

There’s no question about it—I won’t be doing that. I’ve never had girls grinding on me onstage before, so I definitely won’t be doing that now that I have Trinity. No one but her touches me. I consider that cheating. If I wouldn’t like a guy touching her—which if it did happen, I know I’d go insane and end up in jail—then I know I shouldn’t do the same.

“Sadly, that’s what the team wants,” he grits out.

I interrupt him, “Then, I won’t be attending the show.”

I know there won’t be a show without me, so I smirk at him.

Test me.

The only reason they’re throwing that idea out there is because of Trinity. They want people to forget that I’m not available anymore.

News flash: I’ll scream to the entire world that one girl only has my heart.

His eyes twitch, and he opens his mouth to argue. He shuts it and pinches the bridge of his nose. He, out of all people, should know not to push me.

“I’ll have to talk to the team about this later, so this discussion isn’t

over.” He clears his throat and pushes his glasses up his nose. “You’ll then come back here and tour America and then Canada.”

I perk up in my chair. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears. Canada is where she is ... where I crave to be right now. Hope fills me at the thought of seeing Trin. I stay quiet as he continues to bash us with tour details, songs that we’ll sing, and cities that we’ll visit.

Everything he says goes in one ear and out the other because the only thing that’s on my mind is a certain girl who has stolen my heart and is keeping it hostage until we reunite.



I cover my eyes with a hand as the building lights flash all around me from different directions. Voices roar as I shove my way through the crowd. See, this is the thing I hate about being famous. People have no respect for your space and privacy. They thrust their expensive cameras in my face as I barge past them.

“Leo, care to share your girlfriend’s name?”

“When is the new album coming out?”

“Are you in a relationship? Is she here in LA with you?”

“Why were you in Canada, X3?”

“Look at the camera, Leo!”

“Are you in love?”

“Who’s The Girl in Black?”

Their yells are being thrown at me from everywhere. My hands shake as my lungs find it hard to take in air. I keep my eyes straight, just like Mom taught me. I don’t give them the attention they seek. If I meet their eyes, they’ll keep pushing until I want to scream. The last thing I want to do is lose my temper and be on every damn tabloid. Not only will I get unwanted attention, but the team will also be even more pissed off at me.

But as they throw questions out about Trinity to me, the anger I had bottled up rises. Deep down, I know if she’s going to be in my life, she’s going to get exposed as my girlfriend. But as her boyfriend and lover, I want to do everything to protect her from my life.

Does that include protecting her from me?

“Everyone wants to know who The Girl in Black is, Leo!” a man screams

in my face as I push past him.

The buff bodyguard in front of me practically growls at him, which makes me snort. Amelia is squished behind me in a human sandwich with Elijah right behind her.

The limo that's parked beside the curb looks miles away when I'm being suffocated by paparazzi. I grit out in frustration when we halt. I look over my bodyguard's shoulder and find him trapped in. He pushes and shoves against the frantic bodies, who stick cameras in our direction.

He yells out, "Move right now!"

"X3, look here!"

"Leo, what do you have to say to all the heartbroken girls out there?"

I raise my hand to stick up my finger in response, but Amelia captures it right in time.

"Don't," she croaks and whines when she's pushed into.

The guard's hand shoves against the human wall of bodies. "The police are on their way!"

As the bodies skitter at the mention of police, one brave man stays.

He holds up his camera as he stares at us through the lens. "Amelia, I can't help but notice that you're looking on the thinner side. Are you letting yourself go?"

I feel my sister tense against my back, and she gasps quickly to herself.

I hear their screams behind me. They only motivate me more to do what I desire. Striding over to the stupid man who has a big mouth, I grasp his camera in my hand. Winding my hand up, I watch with a sneer as it smashes against the ground. Pieces of the once-expensive camera fly in the air as I grip the man's collar.

"I dare you to repeat yourself." My voice is deadly flat. If I wasn't so pissed off at the man in front of me, I would frighten myself.

I push him against the wall of a store, and he stutters while his face turns red as white lights flash all around us in a circle.

"What the fuck did you just say to my sister?" I grit out only for him to hear.

He only stutters again, which raises my anger.

"You're a little bitch. Can't say anything now that you got the attention you wanted?" I hum in amusement and look down at him like he's the scum of the world.

“Leo, back away now, son!” I hear being rushed out from behind me.

Two pairs of hands grip my shoulders and pull me away from the man. I don’t put up a fight as I watch him slide down the wall and gasp for breath.

I yell at the man, “Don’t talk about my family poorly, motherfucker.”

“Shut it, son,” one of my “protectors” says from behind me in a growl.

They push me into the open limo door. I stagger inside and almost land on Elijah.

He pushes me aside with a scowl. “That was the last thing we needed, Leonidas!”

I see my sister crying in the corner of the limo. Her body doesn’t shake with sobs. She just silently cries to herself and casually brushes the tears off her face. That’s the reason I did what I did. I couldn’t give two shits that I made a grown man pee his pants today in fright and smashed his expensive camera. When you come after my family, I’ll show you how weak you truly are.

Haters are the weak people in this horrible world. They thrive while watching people burn out from the pain they caused. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, they’re just as sad and alone.

“It was needed.” I tap my fingers against my bouncing knee. I glare at the empty seat ahead of me.

“You know how many problems you just caused?”

“I really don’t give a fuck.”

He says dryly, “Well, give a fuck. Guess who’s going to be on every paper in the morning? I can already see the shit they’ll say about you.”

In all honesty, I could care less if they call me disgusting names. I won’t cry.

This will just show other “brave” people what will happen when they step out of line. Insult my family, and I’ll fight you ten times harder.

“I don’t care what people say about me. You know why?” I grit out and meet his hardened gaze. “Because I’ve never cared, and I never will.”

“How about us?”

I raise an eyebrow. “What about you?”

“News flash: you’re not the only person in X3. You have two other bandmates. What you do affects us. The team is going to go crazy, Leonidas!”

Since the first day we signed with the label, Elijah has followed every damn rule they’ve given us—until the Instagram post. He’s always treated

them like they're kings. Yet Elijah doesn't realize that he's the king.

"Without us, they're nothing." I smirk. "Do our fans love them or us?"

"Us, but—"

I interrupt, "We'll always have the upper hand."

I eye Amelia where she sits. Her hands are covering her face as her chest moves at a slower pace now. I hit my brother in the shoulder, and he tsks while rubbing the skin I slapped lightly.

"That's why I did it. She doesn't deserve that."

His eyes soften. "That was a great brother move, but not so great as a bandmate move."

Deep down, I know he's right, but I don't admit that to him. When we arrive back home, I'll definitely hear it from the team. I'll do what I always do when they yap in my ears—ignore them, tune them out, daydream about Trinity ...

He taps my knee. "Good luck. You're going to need it."

Amen.



Not only did the team tell me off, but they also yelled at me. Justin's face looked red as a tomato. If I wasn't so amused, I would have told him to calm down, afraid that he might explode. The look on my dad's face shut me right up.

He wasn't even glaring at me. The neutral expression said enough. I was dead. Completely and utterly dead after the conversation with the team.

Now, here we sit, talking about more tour details, but the entire time, I can't focus because I can feel his stare.

I keep my head turned in the other direction from him. I don't want him to see the fear in my eyes. I always try to hide it as best I can, but I know deep down, he can see it. My father is a monster. He scares me. He's not the media, who only knows me through photos and songs. He's my dad. He knows my darkest secrets. He knows my biggest struggle. My greatest weakness.

Pills.

No one but my family and Trinity knows about my overdose story. That's a story in my life I wish to be buried deep into the ground, where no one can

find it. He'll always have the upper hand, knowing my story. The thought makes me want to pee my pants. One word, and he'll expose me and show the world how weak I truly am.

What singer has anxiety? Me—that's who.

I'm the singer who almost killed himself because he was so lost that he thought he would never see the top again.

The thought of pills runs electricity through my veins. Swallowing tightly, I squeeze my eyes shut. My hands tremble more as I fight to get air in my lungs. The buzzing in my ears makes me panic on the inside because I can't concentrate on anything the team is saying.

The bright walls around me feel like they're closing in and trapping me, crushing me alive until I'm left not breathing. I have to get the hell out of here because I can't have an attack in front of all these people.

My seat rolls behind me as I jump up suddenly, startling some people. I stride to the door with a firm look on my face. My shaking hand trembles against the doorknob as I twist it open. I don't give them a second glance as I exit the conference room, tuning out their yells from across the hallway. I shut myself in the bathroom. Locking it, I sink down onto the ground and place my head in my hands.

My brain only goes to one solution when I get attacks like these. Pills.

It would be so much easier if I could calm my nerves with a pill that serves as magic in my eyes. Magic that's so dangerous that it threatens to take my life because I know I wouldn't only take one.

The only person I know who can pull me out of this is miles away. I didn't have an attack in months because of her. Just the smell of her pineapple-coconut perfume would calm me down.

My hands tightly grip my phone as I search through my Contacts. Finding her name, I press the Call button quickly. I hope to God she answers. I need to hear her voice to soothe the storm inside of me.

As I run a hand down my face in distress because I know I've almost reached her voice mail, I perk up when she answers.

"Hello?"

"Trin?" I sigh desperately into the phone.

"What's wrong, Leonidas?" she rasps.

I lean my head on the wall behind me. Swallowing feels harder as I listen to her intense breaths.

"I'm having an attack."

Shuffling is heard over the line as her voice whispers into the phone, “You’re going to be fine. Where are you right now?”

“Bathroom.”

“I need you to walk over to the sink and place me on speakerphone. You need to wash your face with cold water. It’ll help, babe,” she says desperately and passionately.

I don’t have the energy to stand on my two feet. Trinity knows everything. Somehow, she’ll know if I haven’t gotten up. I pinch my nose when I stand in all of my tall glory. Hitting the speaker button, I place my phone down, turning the knob to the coldest it can go. I glare at myself in the mirror.

“Did you do it, Leonidas?” Trinity’s soft voice says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

My hands cup the freezing cold water that is pouring out of the tap at a fast pace. Somehow, when the water splashes on my face, it shocks me out of my thoughts. The only thing I pay attention to is how cold the water is. The way it freezes my face, making me wince back.

Wow, this worked. I didn’t even need to take pills.

Who would have known? Definitely not me.

“Leonidas, talk to me,” she says.

I sit on the floor where I once was. “I’m good.”

Trinity’s shaky breathing is the only thing I focus my attention on.

“Does that happen often?”

“Only when you’re not around.”

She rasps, “So, this wasn’t the first time?”

There’s no point in lying to her.

“No, it wasn’t.”

The line is quiet, too quiet.

“My life is shit without you in it. Everything is automatically harder.” My voice is rough as I expose myself to the only one I crave.

“I know exactly what you mean.”

I stay quiet because I know she has more to say.

“What triggered it today?”

“My father, the team, something shitty I did,” I say, listing them off.

“What did you do?” Authority is in her voice, which makes me flinch.

I tell her the truth because I’d rather her hear it from me and not through the news. She stays quiet as I rant to her. She only butts in when she offers

me a piece of advice. The one thing that stays in my mind the entire time I face my demons outside is hearing Trinity say this one line.

“Keep rocking on.”

FIFTY-ONE

TRINITY

It's been three weeks without him, weeks of feeling miserable. I thought I would feel more heartbroken, yet as the days go on and I'm left alone to only hear my thoughts, I'm more lonely than anything. Loneliness is like feeling a loss of direction. You want to reach out to people, but you don't know how. I feel like someone spun me around in the dark with a blindfold over my eyes and told me to walk in the right direction. Which direction is right?

Not only was I used to having Leonidas around, but I also loved Amelia's and Elijah's company.

They sparked a happiness in me I hadn't felt for years. They're real people who only want to see you shine with happiness. How am I supposed to cope when I just got better? The three people who changed my life and guided me to have a better lifestyle are suddenly gone.

At night, the loneliness is the worst. I stay up, deep in thought, wondering what he's doing. The thought of him is so strong when I'm engulfed in darkness, staring at the wall ahead of me. Everywhere I look, I see his face, even when my eyes are closed. I blink back tears when I'm in public and pass happy couples.

When Leonidas left, he took a piece of my heart with him. That empty, cold spot makes my breaths come out shaky, and I try to force myself to calm down. I let out fake laughs that feel like punches to my gut.

Is he hurting as much as I am? You can't see how someone's truly doing in just an hourlong phone call.

Every time we bid each other good-bye, my finger always hovers over the red End button. As I push it and lock eyes with my home screen, the feeling

of being lost comes back full force. That's what happens when you get attached to someone. You rely on them to make you happy. I can't decide if that's good or bad.

I miss him like the sun misses the darkened sky at night.

The old me before I fell in love with Leonidas was addicted to the feeling of sadness. I isolated myself until I felt like the only person in the world. I would sit in my room with the lights off, my covers thrown over me as my tears stained my pillowcase. I would wonder where I had gone wrong, why my chest felt such intense pain that it was hard to breathe.

Now, he's my addiction, the only thing I can possibly think about. The only person who can lift my face up in a smile with just a glance. The person who can make my heartbeat quicken with a single featherlight touch.

I hate talking about my feelings. I know Mom means well, but when she constantly brings up Leonidas, I get pushed farther and farther into my mind and become someone I fear being again.

The mind is a dangerous place. You either get the life sucked out of you until you're left as a lifeless shell. Or you fight against your demons until they're the ones on their knees, begging for mercy. I'm not sure who's winning my battle. Is it me or my thoughts?

I sit at the front desk at work on this cloudy day. Linda is away for her lunch break, and she left me in charge. If she were here to see me lost in thought, she would scold me to pay better attention to her shop. Rapping my knuckles on the wood, I stare out the window. I see different people running out in the rain. Some walk slowly and smile up at the sky. Children holding hands with their mothers jump in the puddles with their large rain boots on. Others glare up at the sky. They hold their umbrellas over their heads as they curse the ground below them.

I would be the latter. The dark, stormy clouds match the way my heart feels on the inside. The damp air makes me feel cold and uncomfortable.

My eyes slowly turn when the door chime rings. My back straightens when Diego walks in. What is Rodrigo's son doing here? I've never seen him step foot in here before. He doesn't look like the type to read, but I also had the same thought about Leonidas, and he proved me wrong.

My eyes harden when he closes his red umbrella inside the store. "You know, they say that's bad luck."

"I was born on January 13, so I guess my entire life is bad luck." His eyes meet mine as he turns his head toward me.

I watch with curiosity as he leans his umbrella against one of the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Diego looks around the store with interest. With an amused smile, he finds my gaze. “You have a boring job. What happened to the idea of being a stripper?”

“Someone reminded me I’d turn wrinkly and old, so I thought of a better route.”

I bring up the first time we met, and he lets out a husky chuckle.

He nods, and his curly black locks bounce on the top of his head from the movement. Walking closer to where I sit, he leans in front of me.

“What are you doing here?” My voice has an edge to it, but I didn’t mean for him to notice. When his body tenses, I scold myself.

“I thought you could use some company since your boyfriend left,” he mumbles and shrugs his shoulders.

I try to read his expression, but all I get is a blank face that looks like someone forced him to be here. My fingers fidget with a plastic bookmark in front of me. “Why would I need company while I’m at work?”

“Most people don’t leave their houses while it rains. Especially people who read. They’re home right now in their beds, reading while drinking something hot,” he points out like he’s telling the daily news.

“What should you be doing on a normal day?” I ask him while glancing up at him through my lashes.

Turning his head to the side in a thinking motion, he bites his lip. “Playing a video game that does nothing but melt my brain.” He chuckles, the rough sound rumbling out from his chest.

I let out a laugh that I meant to keep in. “True that.” My hand drops the bookmark I was fiddling with to the table as my mind registers something he said moments ago. “How did you know my boyfriend left?”

“My dad brought it up in conversation when he said you looked down.” He shrugs his shoulders and eyes me with pity.

I hate pity, especially from people who don’t understand. He walked into the bookstore I work at like we’re old friends, catching up. News flash: I’ve only had one brief conversation with this guy, and that was forced. Why is he storming in here like we’re buddy-buddy?

“One thing you should know about me—and tell your dad too—is that I hate pity. I’ve been through worse and come out alive,” I explain and glance back out the window.

“I can imagine.”

“Really?” I rasp and laugh. “Please don’t humor me.”

He slams his hand on the table in front of me, causing me to jump in my seat. “I might not know the feeling of losing a parent, especially from being murdered, but I’m far too familiar with feeling alone.” His eyes burn with hate as he glares over at me.

“Then, you, out of all people, should know not to bring up others struggles,” I argue back. My voice wants to crack, but I beg it to stay strong.

“Look, I just thought you could use a friend. It would also make our parents happy if we got along since they’re getting serious.”

How is it possible that people can be so clueless? My mood is already sour, but it’s fucking on fire now that he added Mom into our conversation. I don’t enjoy getting lectures from a guy who’s the same age as me ...

Thankfully, a woman and her little girl enter the store in a frenzy. I watch as they laugh at each other as the rain soaks their hair.

“Welcome,” I mumble to them as the mom waves over at me.

“Trin—” he starts, but I stop him with a hand.

“I’m at work. This is unprofessional, so please leave.”

He lets out a frustrated sigh. “This is important.”

“Not more important than my job, which is helping my mom. So, if you care that much about her, then leave,” I whisper-shout to him under my breath so the customers won’t hear.

His lips frown as he shakes his head in disbelief. Storming to the window, he grips his umbrella in a tight hold. I hear him laugh lowly as he opens it on purpose in the store.

“That’s bad luck for you, not me,” I point out before he exits, knowing he’s trying to be smart.

I don’t get a response as he slams the door on his way out.

I know I was rude to him, but I couldn’t stand the way he was talking to me, like I was a damn child. I’m not someone who will bow down to whatever he says. I’ve been through hell and back. I get bounced around like the basketball Leonidas loves dearly. I don’t show remorse or let people in because every single time I do, I always come out damaged in the end.

My fingers tap the tune of Leonidas’s song as I smile to myself. This interaction with Diego is the most exciting thing that has happened since Leonidas sucked my neck in his sleep in the tree house.

FIFTY-TWO

TRINITY

“No use in coming here today.” Linda sighs from the front counter when I enter for my shift.

Frowning, I glance at her with hesitation. “Why shouldn’t I be here?”

That’s when I notice all the books are gone, and my mouth drops open.

She beams at me. “Because we hardly have any books to sell.” She sees the confusion on my face and gestures with her hand. “Go look for yourself.”

Dropping my bag on the counter, I walk toward the shelves. All the books that once filled the tall bookshelves are now empty. Rows and rows of shelves are missing the one important factor in a bookstore—books.

“Someone called in a couple of hours ago. They said it was important. The next thing I knew, they ordered the entire romance selection we had,” Linda says from behind me.

I’m slightly jealous. Who am I kidding? I’m really jealous ...

Whoever this person is, is pretty damn lucky. Buying an entire library is my dream. Unfortunately, I’m too poor for that to become a reality. Whoever he or she is must be loaded. This must have cost thousands of dollars.

This is the type of crazy I love.

“What’s going to happen to the customers who come to shop?” I laugh out loud because this is hilarious. I never thought I would witness this. I guess life is full of surprises.

She giggles. “I’m not worried about them. I just made more money than I’ve made this whole past year.” Pure happiness flashes in her eyes as she glances around.

Clapping her hands together, she turns toward me with authority. “I

actually do need you in today. You, missy, need to make some calls to get our shipment of books here faster.”

I nod, feeling slight pressure. Walking toward the counter, I spend my entire afternoon on the phone.



“Mom?” I call out once I slam the front door behind me closed.

I’m rewarded with silence back, proving to me that Mom isn’t home. It’s pretty early in the night. She must still be at work.

Looking down at the floor mat, I find Mom’s shoes missing. If Mom isn’t home in an hour, I’ll send her a text. Yet I love the quiet. It’s calming and relaxing, just how I like it.

Taking the steps to my room slowly, I suddenly think about him. Of their own accord, my fingers fiddle with the bracelet he made for me.

Sighing out, I push my bedroom door open.

My mouth drops in shock as a gasp leaves my mouth.

What the heck did I just walk into?

Tears stream down my face as I look at my new setup in my room. Where my queen-size bed used to lie is now a king. The tall bookshelf I used to have against the opposite wall is way bigger. I now have a bookshelf that you see on Pinterest. It wraps around and covers the wall beside it. The rows are filled head to toe with books that I didn’t have before. Book carts are filled, and boxes lie on the floor, filled with my “therapy,” as I like to call it. Thousands of dollars’ worth of books are in my room now. New floating shelves are on my walls. Guess what they’re filled with. Books.

Everywhere I look, I get more emotional. The entire romance section of the bookstore is now in my room. I place a hand to my mouth as I let out a cry. Spotting a note on my new bed, I walk over to it. I sit down and immediately sink down into the cloud. Gripping the note in my hand, I try to read through my thick tears.

Hey, rock star.

I know you don’t like surprises, but surprise! I wrote this note before I left for LA. As you can now tell, I’ve transformed your room into one of your dreams. When I first realized that I loved you, I told myself that I wanted to buy you

an entire damn library. I knew that would bring a smile to your face since you love books more than me ... just joking—I hope. So, I said fuck it, I bought you a shit-ton of shelves because your room is massive and it can fit them, and I stocked them with different books—but of course, only Romance because I know you hate anything but that. I wish I could see the smile on your face—or maybe your frown. But if I know you as well as I think I do, you might be crying.

I then got you a new bed because I know how much you loved my king. I want you to have the best sleep possible when I'm not around.

I never believed in fairy tales before I met you, but if I had to pick our story, I think we would be Beauty and the Beast. The princess saves the beast, right? And from a source I've heard, the beast gave the girl a library.

Thank you for being the beauty in my life. Nothing I could buy or tell you will measure up to how I feel about you.

I love you. Maybe call me before you finish half of the books on the shelves?

Xoxo,

Leonidas

Holding the note that's handwritten in cursive to my chest, I let out a shaky breath. He's right. Nothing I could say would measure up to how much I love this guy. I will forever cherish this note like my life depends on it. Placing his beautiful words that resemble poetry in my side table, I pick up my computer to FaceTime him. I don't care if he sees the tears running down my face. I want him to know how loved he is.

The several packed boxes in my room are the reason the bookstore is empty. He bought me the entire library because he knew that was a dream of mine.

He might think he's the beast, but he's truly the beauty in my life.

FIFTY-THREE

LEO

“**B**uckle your seat belts. We’re taking off in a couple minutes,” the flight attendant in our private jet says while walking past me.

Her voice was muffled due to the earbuds in my ears. But I’m pretty damn talented at reading lips.

Snapping my seat belt on, I rest my head against the headrest and close my eyes. If we weren’t going to Greece, I would be pissed. One, I hate plane rides; two, I’m tired as fuck; and three, being stuck in a plane with the team is terrifying for many reasons that I don’t wish to explain. Yet something I’m not proud of is my dislike toward plane rides. The worst parts are the takeoff and landing. I’d rather have my stomach intact than feeling like I left it below, thank you very much.

My foot bounces on the ground nervously as I think about doing my first show in months. The pressure of making it perfect is making my skin itch. Performing in the country where your roots are is important for people like us. We crave to hear their screams louder than they normally are. They crave to be surprised and see something other countries don’t. I want them to enjoy their night and remember it for a lifetime.

I wish the team had a little more faith in us; they need to realize that we know what we’re doing. I’ve been doing this for years now. I was practically raised singing in front of crowds. They need to have faith in us.

When the engine roars and the ground lightly vibrates, my palms sweat, and I wipe them on my sweatpants. My stomach immediately drops when I feel the plane speed off into the air. Squeezing my eyes tightly, I try to keep my breathing steady. Nothing beats having a panic attack on a plane. Mom told me to chew gum before the takeoff. Apparently, it helps with your ears

popping. Add that to the list on why I hate plane rides.

A frown turns down my face when one of my earbuds is ripped out. Looking over, I find Elijah glancing at me with a smirk.

“What?” I grit out.

“Let’s play a game.”

Who does this guy think I am?

“Hell to the no.”

He yanks both of my earbuds out and tosses them to Amelia. I watch, defeated, when my phone goes with them and crashes onto the floor.

He mutters, “Shit,” knowing he’s going to get beat by me after this plane ride ends.

“If that’s cracked, you’re paying for the repair.”

Elijah taunts, “We’re rich. You can just buy another one.”

I inspect my screen once it’s back in my hold. Lucky for Elijah, I don’t spot a single crack. “Just because I’m rich doesn’t mean I want to blow all my money on phones.”

“You’d rather spend it on cars? Like that’s better?” Elijah points out and rolls his eyes.

I love the thrill of speeding down a winding road with my window down. The wind blowing through my hair and feeling it on my skin gives me a sense of joy. Sometimes, it provides more relief for my stress than singing. So, yes, buying a car is worth it. Now, I think not only of myself when I buy a car, but I also think if she would approve. I even think about if her shopping bags would fit in the trunk. For however long she’s with me, which I hope is forever, I plan on spoiling her. I know she doesn’t like it, but I really don’t care. I wouldn’t want to spend my money on anything other than her.

“Comparing cars to phones is ridiculous,” I say blankly to my stupid brother.

“Cars are more expensive,” he argues like he’s a fucking genius.

No shit, Sherlock. I thought they were cheaper.

“You’re going to give me a headache.” I groan and run a hand down my face. “Give me back my earbuds.”

From where Amelia sits in front of us—looking very comfortable, might I add—she glances at Elijah, unsure.

“Don’t look at him, Amelia, just give me back my stuff.”

As she leans forward with my stuff in hand, Elijah scolds her, “Don’t. We’re going to play a game. I’m bored.”

“We just took off,” Amelia corrects him.

“I have a short attention span.”

Damn right. I could agree with that. I thought I could catch up on all the sleep I’d missed while on this plane, but that idea is out of the question now, seeing how annoying he’s already acting.

Amelia lets out a sigh and cuddles into her blanket. “What game do you want to play?”

Elijah snaps his fingers with a bright smile. “Let’s list off things we love about Trinity.”

I can’t help but glare over at him. “You want to play a game about my girlfriend?”

He shrugs. “She’s my best friend.”

“Same,” Amelia pipes in.

“Watch what you say. I know where the plane door is,” I warn him stiffly, and he swallows tightly.

“You know I don’t love her like that.” He sighs.

Elijah means no harm—I know that. Elijah and I are tight—obviously, he’s my brother. Amelia and Elijah are close to Trinity as well. A part of me is possessive of her. I can’t help it. When you have something you treasure with your life, all you want to do is protect it. That’s Trinity to me.

“I’ll go first,” I say and glance up at the plane’s ceiling. “I love how she can make me feel alive with one look.”

Elijah fake gags and pushes my shoulder. “Someone, get me a barf bag. The chicken I ate earlier is coming back up,” he yells and laughs once an attendant runs to the back of the plane in a hurry.

“That’s mean,” Amelia whispers when she hands him one with a grim look.

Through his obnoxious laughs, he wheezes out. “I didn’t think she would actually run to get me one.”

If I told them to jump out of the plane, they probably would. Either these people are terrified of us or the team.

Seeing the opportunity to get my earbuds back because Amelia’s distracted in conversation with Elijah, I lean forward like the ninja I am and swipe my belongings from her grasp.

“Hey!” She jumps in her seat and glares over at me.

Elijah whines, “We’re playing a game.”

Untying the minor knot in the cords of my earbuds, I mutter to them both,

“I don’t want to play a silly game. Be children without me.”

My ears are immediately filled with rhythm. Placing my head back, I close my eyes. The only thing that’s on my mind is a certain small-town girl.



The house we have here in Greece is one hundred times better than the one in LA. It’s home. The moment you walk through the door, you feel welcome. It’s not massive, but not small. Perfect for a family of three.

The house in LA screams loneliness. Don’t be fooled when you see the expensive designer furniture. No family pictures lie anywhere, leaving every wall and table bare. My father lives there full-time. I guess he would rather not be reminded about us. I could not care less.

It’s quiet in here. The team isn’t allowed in here. Mom told them this was our space, our family home. They’re staying in a rented apartment for the time we’re here, and Dad has tagged along with them. A part of me is glad he did, but you would think he would stay with his family.

He’s a lost cause, Leonidas. Get that in your damn head. He’s not the father you grew up with. He’s now just a part of the team. That’s all he’ll ever care about.

Mom designed this place in Athens, Greece. The moment I walk in, I want to jump on the couch and take a yearlong nap. Fluffy pillows, carpets, blankets, pictures of us are all over the place. Not to mention, the beautiful view of Acropolis from our balcony.

I love it here. Being surrounded by my people brings me peace. The air here is fresh. The sound of children’s laughter makes me want to sit outside and listen more. I know Trinity would love it here. I’ll definitely have to bring her one day.

I sent her a text that we arrived safely. It’s late there, so knowing she’ll see it in the morning makes me smile.

My hands grip the balcony railing as I lean forward. Closing my eyes, I mentally prepare myself for my first live performance tomorrow night. Today and tomorrow will be filled with people running around, freaking out, us constantly practicing, and not to mention, meet and greets. Hate to break it to all my lovely fans, but the Leo they love won’t be in a good mood. He’ll be mentally counting down the days until he arrives in Canada.

FIFTY-FOUR

TRINITY

“**Y**ou knew about this?” I ask over my shoulder to where Mom lies on my bed, watching me sort through my books.

She nods with a smile. “He talked to me about it before he left.”

So, that’s why he talked to Mom. Silly old me prayed he was trying to convince her to allow me to leave with them.

“This is very overwhelming.” I laugh, gesturing to all my books.

I’ve counted hundreds of books in the boxes, not including the bookshelf he filled. My room looks like a library threw up, and I’m not complaining.

“He’s a very sweet boy,” she mumbles while reading the back of a book. “This sounds good. Mind if I borrow it?”

I let out a laugh. “No need to ask. I think I’m good for a couple years. My TBR list is gigantic.”

“I think you’ll be good for eternity.” She giggles.

Yes, I’ll never have to buy books for a while because of him. Leonidas is so thoughtful; it makes me want to cry. But today is not about crying. It’s all about sorting through the amazing gifts he gave me.

“How’s work?” I ask Mom, wanting to make small talk instead of sitting in awkward silence.

She shoots me a beaming smile. “I was meaning to talk to you about that. The bank was very impressed with my work. They gave me a raise and a higher position in the firm.”

A smile lifts my face. I’m happy for her. She deserves it. She’s been trying so hard, and I appreciate it so much. Actions speak louder than words, and she has proven herself.

Maybe Dad is listening to my prayers? The thought feels like a warm

hug.

She sits up from my bed and eyes me from where I sit on the floor. “How’s work for you?”

Nonexistent.

“Since Leonidas bought all the books, I haven’t gone in. Linda says there’s no point when we’re waiting for shipments.”

Sitting at the counter all day and counting the ceiling tiles doesn’t sound fun to me, so I don’t disagree.

“I’m very proud of you,” Mom says suddenly.

My hands freeze as I meet her gaze with shocked eyes.

“You’re such an astonishing girl—better than me and your father could have ever hoped for. I wish I could love and forgive like you do.”

Tears cloud my eyes as I hear the only thing that I’ve wanted to hear from my mother in a long time.

“You’ve grown to be an amazing young woman. I’m so happy I’m your mother.”

I somehow find my voice despite my throat closing up. “You really mean that? You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?”

Getting off the bed, she kneels down beside me. Gripping my cheek, she smiles sadly down at me. “I couldn’t be prouder of you, and I know Dad feels the same.”

My fingers grasp his ring that’s around my neck. Tears trail down my face as I take in her words. Nothing is better than this feeling.

My voice is thick with emotion. “Thank you, Mom.”

I melt into her motherly embrace as she pulls me into her body. I wrap my arms around her and breathe in her sweet smell.

At this moment, I couldn’t be more grateful to have my old mother back. I love hanging out with her again. Every night, we catch up on all the stories we’ve missed. I would think after all the strains we’d put on our relationship that it would never be the same. Though, I feel closer to her. I tell her things I wouldn’t have dared to before Dad’s passing.

Grief either distances you from your loved ones or it brings you closer. In our case, it was both. Where we are right now is perfect. I love having a best friend in Mom.

She pulls me further into her side and kisses my temple. “How are you really doing without him?”

I brush my sweaty palms on my legs. “He makes me love myself. He

taught me to move on from the past. I've never been happier. I feel like my old self again. But I miss him so much, it hurts."

Mom sighs and glances down at the floor. "I know how it feels to have your loved one far away. Dad used to go on a lot of business trips. Every time he left, I felt like he took a part of me with him." Grasping my cheek in her hold, she smiles sadly down at me. "I know this might be hard, especially when you love him, but you need to learn how to move on without actually moving on. Soon, you'll get used to the feeling. The one thing you'll be thinking about is how it will feel to see him again for the first time."

I know Mom's right, and, yes, I'm trying to move on. I hate change. Leonidas moving away suddenly was devastating. But I am doing better than I was, and that's a big step. I could say that I don't depend on anyone but myself. Just because you love someone and feel whole with them doesn't mean you depend on them to live.

Mom smiles. "Since I'm very proud of you, I want to give you something."

"I don't need anything, Mom. You know I don't like gifts."

"Trust me, you'll adore this gift."

Reaching over to my nightstand, she picks up an envelope. Smiling, I watch with curious eyes as she extends it to me.

"Open it."

Taking it from her grasp, I hold the white envelope, and my fingers rip eagerly at the paper. I frown when my eyes land on a card.

"Don't just stare. The suspense is killing me."

As I unfold the card, my fingers halt.

Holy ... am I dreaming right now? Please, someone, pinch me.

My heart speeds up at a concerning rate when I find a plane ticket. Let me clarify ... a plane ticket to Greece.

"I'm going to X3's concert in Greece, aren't I?" Emotion is thick in my voice as my eyes water over with tears. My hands shake with excitement.

"Better pack because we're leaving in exactly four hours," she taunts with a smirk. "Surprise!"

I can't help but jump up and throw my arms around her waist. I bury my face in her neck as she laughs.

"You deserve to see him, and Athena has been telling me about his mood swings. It will be good for both of you."

My body shakes as I squeeze her tight. This is the best gift I could have

ever received. At this moment, I feel excitement run through my veins. I've never been this eager to hop on a plane, but slight nervousness fills the pit of my stomach. I've never left home before. Going on a plane will be a whole unique experience for me. Knowing I'll be in Leonidas's arms will be worth it. Not to mention, I'll visit Greece! That's somewhere I've wanted to go for a while.

"Can we surprise him?" I ask, pulling away with a giant smile.

"Yes, Athena and I planned out the entire thing. You'll surprise him before he goes onstage."

I watch as she walks to my bedroom door.

"We should be out of the house in two hours. Pack like your life depends on it!" she shouts over her shoulder.

Slamming my bedroom door shut, I lean on it before doing a stupid happy dance.

To Leonidas I go.



I feel like I'm in a zoo.

With my suitcase beside me, I wait in customs as I watch people run around to their gates. I almost laugh when grown people rush around. They all remind me of chickens with their heads cut off.

Mom and I left the house two hours ago. She said we needed enough time to get through customs and the endless lines. I thought she was being silly until I saw the lines ... and I immediately started to sweat when I saw all the people.

My anxiety tells me we are going to miss our flight, that I will lose the one chance of seeing Leonidas. Yet I hear his rough voice in my head. "*Fight them ten times harder with a smirk on your face.*"

So, as I stand in line, my foot tapping on the tiles, I watch the line get smaller and smaller, and I fight my thoughts until they were a dim whisper.

Getting to the front of the line feels like I just won a marathon. I don't break down in tears and start shaking like I usually would. I beat my thoughts exactly how Leonidas told me.

I'm so proud of myself. Facing my struggles feels like I've won gold.

Before, my life resembled more of a withered flower, just a thin stem that

hardly stood up. With a little water and sunlight, petals and color formed. The green of the stem got richer and more vibrant. I feel like that's the story of my life. Once you get stomped on, you can always get back up with a little help and love.

Now, here I sit in a sitting area, waiting to board the plane with a book in my hand. Out of the thousand books Leonidas gave me, I only gravitated to one.

My *Twilight* book.

It holds a very special place in my heart. I feel like a piece of him is with me as I travel to him. I wear his bracelet on my wrist. I never take it off. I sleep with it on, shower, basically everything. No matter how far away he feels, knowing he has the same book and bracelet against his skin brings me comfort.

"I never see that book leave your hand." Mom laughs from where she sits beside me.

Shifting around in the hard airport seat, I eye the book resting in my lap. "I love it."

"You must have finished it by now," she muses while fiddling with a magazine she bought at a local shop.

"I'm rereading it," I state with a proud smile.

She hums and smiles. "Maybe I should pick that up sometime and try it. I heard it's amazing."

I nod and agree with her before staring at a little girl ahead of me. Her tiny legs can't reach the floor as she sits between her parents. They look down at her with love. I miss the feeling of seeing my parents happy together. A smile lifts my face as her big chocolate-brown eyes find mine. Her eyes roam across my body before she smiles at me. Her little hand waves, and I do the same. I laugh as she looks down with shyness.

"I love kids," I mumble lowly to Mom when I catch her smiling at our interaction.

"I can tell."

Kids give me a feeling of playfulness. Their souls are filled with innocence that I envy. In a way, I also feel bad for them. They have no idea how cruel this world can be. I pray to God this little girl will always be filled with light and happiness.

Mom bumps her shoulder into mine. "Have you accepted any colleges yet? You haven't told me yet."

I have. She might think I'm weird for wanting to pursue a career like this. But deep down, I feel that I'll do well. I hate the thought of sitting at a desk all day in a business company. I want to help people. I crave to see people move on from their thunderstorms, just like how I am.

"I accepted a college for psychology a while ago," I say with a proud smile.

Mom opens her mouth to say more when a lady's voice suddenly announces that the plane is to be boarded. I glance at Mom with excitement. Seeing the look on my face gets a laugh out of her.

"Let's go."

Giving the lady my boarding ticket, I walk into the plane and find my seat in a matter of minutes. Mom can sense my nerves as she grips on to my hand when the safety video plays. I wish I had earplugs with me because this video is traumatizing before taking off into the air.

Is this really necessary?

Yes ... yes, it is.

It doesn't mean I like it though. God forbid if anything happens, I wouldn't remember this video; I would follow what other people were doing while crying.

No, full-on sobbing.

My stomach feels like it's been left on the ground as the plane catches height and it takes off. I breathe in and out as I close my eyes. The horrible turbulence makes me want to pass out. I relax and let go of Mom's reddened hand when the trembles die down. She shakes it out while whimpering, and I eye the raw skin. Oops. I guess I had a better grip than I thought.

A few hours into the plane ride, they serve dinner. I learn a new lesson today. I hate airplane food. The combination of all the different foods mixing together in this plane makes me queasy. The only good part of dinner is the bread roll with butter. After dinner is cleared, I open my *Twilight* book and start reading.



"And I thought Canada was hot in the summer," Mom says while fanning herself.

The air here is fresh. The horns of cars blare all around us. The bright

blue sky that I adore is free of clouds.

The hour we've been here, I can already feel warmth of welcomeness from the locals. They smile brighter and treat you like ... family. Maybe that's why Leonidas is who he is—so loving and understanding. I've wanted to go up to several people and hug them for their kindness.

We got through the airport here in Athens, Greece, in good time. Now, here we stand, burning under the scorching sun, waiting for a taxi. We're failing. Every taxi we wave over with urgency is taken and doesn't stop—or for that matter, slow down.

“Hey, please stop!” Mom whispers to herself when a yellow car comes into our vision.

We both wave but come out again with no luck. My forehead is wet with a light layer of sweat forming. God, if a taxi doesn't stop now, I'm going to melt.

“Do it like this,” a man says from my right. His voice is rich with an accent that sounds like pure gold.

I love when Greek people speak in English. He looks to be in his mid-thirties. His body is built strong and tall. Just by looking at him, I already know he's a heartbreaker.

He walks onto the road and whistles when he sees a taxi. Waving in the air, he passionately yells something in Greek. “*Elate edo. Min kanete aftes tis kyries na perimenoun pia!*” The man's voice is loud and high-pitched in his mother tongue—and I mean, loud. I can feel it in my soul.

I look over at Mom in confusion. In response, I just get a shrug and a frown from her.

I'm dying to know what the man said, but I guess it will forever be a mystery.

A grateful smile graces my lips as a taxi pulls up next to us. A Greek man with a freshly shaven face gets out and helps us with our bags. Before getting in the car, I look over at the man who still stands near us with a smile on his face.

“*Efcharisto,*” I say confidently to him, for sure butchering the word.

One of his brown eyebrows rises up in shock.

Leonidas taught me a few words. *Thank you* was one of them.

Nodding his head with a smile, he gives me a thumbs-up. Slamming the door shut behind me, I watch as the surrounding city blurs around us.



Leather pants cover my long legs as I fix the black lace cropped top on my torso. I can't believe I'm going to see Leonidas. Why am I so nervous? I shouldn't be nervous. It's just him, the guy I'm in love with.

When I secretly meet Athena at the back entrance, she pulls me into her body. "I'm so happy you're here."

Athena smells like honey, a comforting scent to calm the tornadoes bouncing around in my stomach.

Breathe in and out. Fight your thoughts ten times harder with a smirk.

"I'm happy to be here as well, Athena."

A while after just standing there and stressing over every possible outcome, I place the backstage pass around my neck and let out a shaky breath as the door opens.

Following Athena and mom through the hallways, I eye all the people running frantically. Some have clothes in their hands, and others have makeup, shoes, cameras, lights, or microphones. It's dark in the hallways, setting a vibe down here that I like. It's not gloomy. It screams X3.

Athena stops abruptly before we round a corner. "He should be in his dressing room. It's the last door on the right. I'll take your mom away, so you'll have privacy."

I watch as they disappear the way we just came. Taking a deep breath in and out, I mentally prepare myself for what's coming. Fiddling with the bracelet Leonidas made me, I round the corner.

My steps halter as our gazes connect.

FIFTY-FIVE

TRINITY

Closing the door to his dressing room, which he just walked out of, Leonidas suddenly halts. My hands tremble as he takes a step closer to where I stand, disbelief written all over his face.

I feel like I'm frozen in place, like someone's pressed the pause button and I'm left standing, amazed. I knew I was going to see Leonidas, but seeing him in person is a shock. He's standing right in front of me. As his intense eyes bore into mine, I feel an entire swarm of butterflies flying in my belly.

He stares at me as if he feels the same way. From the opposite side of the hallway, his eyes shine with astonishment. Leonidas is looking at me like I'm the most amazing thing he's ever laid his eyes on.

In this moment, I feel an intense need to touch his skin, to have his arms around me as I breathe in his comforting scent. I've missed him so much. My life without him is so boring. I was worried our relationship would strain because of the distance, but as we smile at each other from across the hallway, the thought immediately vanishes.

Nothing and no one can break us.

The surrounding people blur as we stride over to each other. Leonidas drops everything in his hands as he makes his way to me. People rush around to collect the stuff he dropped with a glare. They whisper while looking at me with distaste.

"Trin?" he croaks out and yanks me hard into his body.

As his arms, which I've grown so familiar with, wind around my waist, I feel like nothing could ever feel this good. The feeling of reuniting with him sparks a new energy between us.

My face presses against his hot neck as he whispers, "Oh my fucking

God, no way.”

I laugh into his neck as my legs wrap around his waist. We couldn't care less if people are watching. The only thing that matters is that we're together again. Walking backward toward the door he came out of, he kicks it open and then shuts it to get us away from everyone's prying eyes.

Pinning me against the door with my legs still around him, he stares at me with wonder. “Am I dreaming? Please pinch me.”

Sliding my hand down from where it was placed on his neck, I lightly pinch the skin on his muscular forearm. “This seems pretty real to me.”

A shaky laugh escapes me as he pulls me tighter into his body. When he pushes his face in my neck, I shiver at the feeling of his hot breath.

“I can't believe you're here.” Emotion is thick in his voice as I wind my hand through his wavy locks.

“I can't believe I'm here either.”

My feet hit the tiled floor as he pulls away. He still has a shocked look on his face, and it makes me want to laugh.

“What are you doing here?” he rasps out and grabs my hips.

Leaning my head to the side, I tease him, “This backstage pass was left on my doorstep. I was going to throw it away because who would want to see Leonidas?” The smirk he sends me sparks something inside of me. “But then after some thinking, I decided it was worth the flight.”

“That guy must be super special for you to fly hours to get to him.” He hums and grips my face in both of his large, tattooed hands.

“I love him a lot, I guess, but don't tell him that ... it's a secret.”

“Your secret is safe with me, but I'm pretty sure he would be a fool if he didn't love you back.”

“He is a fool for loving me,” I whisper back as his lips come within centimeters of mine.

His dark eyes are hooded with desire as he focuses on my lips. “Then, let us be fools together.”

His soft lips capture my own. His touch is gentle yet firm. The warmth of his chest against mine is something I've missed dearly. I wind my hands around his neck as we get lost in one another. Our first kiss was pretty freaking memorable. I still remember the feeling of butterflies in my stomach. I thought nothing would top our first kiss.

His lips move against mine in a passionate kiss that makes my toes curl. Nothing could be better than this.

The entire time he was gone, I could only focus on how I missed him. I never thought how it would feel to be reunited. The passion and love feel ten times stronger as we pour our heart and soul into one another. I feel every deep breath he takes against my chest. The feeling of his hand gripping me is something I'll never get used to.

I'm not ashamed to say I'm my happiest when I'm with him. But isn't that what love is? Being completely and utterly lost in someone?

Leonidas's teeth lightly bite down on my lip when he pulls away. "Thank you for being here." His voice is a soft whisper.

Leaning my forehead against his, I smile.

After a while of us just standing there and smiling at one another, he pulls me by my hand to a couch. My eyes roam around his dressing room. It's clean with nothing out of place. The walls are dark with the classic dressing room mirror with big bulbs sticking out. I stop to admire his couch before I sit on it. It's a dark purple velvet couch. As I cuddle into his side, my fingers skim the soft material.

"You know, when I first got here, I immediately thought about how I wanted to take you here someday," he explains.

Glancing up through my lashes, I smile fondly up at him. "Yeah?"

"Greece is where my roots are. No, I was not born here, but it feels like home." He shrugs. "LA isn't home."

One thing I still love about Leonidas is his Greek heritage. I love the way his voice has a slight accent when he speaks certain words. I love his olive skin tone and the way it shines.

Resting my legs on either side of him, I straddle him. "Will you take me on a mini tour while I'm here?"

Gripping my thighs, he leans the back of his head on the couch, his eyes still burning into mine. "For you, anything."

Putting my head on his shoulder, I take in the feeling of him. I try to engrave it in my mind forever. Being in his arms is my favorite place.

"I missed you so much." He breaks the silence suddenly. His fingers run through my hair as his chest heaves. "I was so miserable without you, and that scares me."

"What scares you?" I ask because I truly don't know what he means.

"Everything feels harder when you're not by my side." His voice comes out rough.

Turning my head, I find his gaze. "I hate not being with you, too, but the

good thing about long-distance is that it's only pushing us closer."

I've had to repeat that to myself several times since he left. The more I chanted that to myself, the more I believed it. He's a singer—a rock star, for God's sake. He can't live in a small town with me.

Leonidas and I don't have what most couples have at our age. We both struggle with our demons that threaten to haunt us. Leonidas is a singer that the world loves. The only thing I'm famous for is losing a parent by murder in a town full of assholes.

We're complete opposites, but so similar.

Both once broken but currently healing. Check.

Both addicted to the feeling of pain. Check.

Most of all—and the most special one out of them all—we're in love with each other.

"I love the positive side of you," he urges. "I think my positive side has been rubbing off on you."

Yeah, sure, bud ...

As I raise an eyebrow at him, he throws his head back and laughs. We both know that's the complete opposite of what he is, but I wouldn't want him any other way. I adore his black attire, his tattoos are breathtaking, and his jewelry would have any girl on her knees.

As our lips brush delicately together, the door is slammed open. I can't help but let out the squeal that leaves my lips. Both of our bodies flinch before we look over at whoever ruined our moment.

Elijah stands at the door with his mouth dropped open in shock. He stares at me like I'm a ghost. "Amelia, come over here!" he suddenly screams over his shoulder before running over to me.

When he yanks me off of Leonidas's lap, I laugh as he pulls me into his body.

"Trinity, I missed you so much!"

"I missed you, goof." I squeeze him just as hard.

I pull away from him when I hear a gasp from the doorway. Amelia stands at the door with a hand covering her mouth.

"Trin!"

I run to my best friend and squeeze the living shit out of her.

"I can't believe you're here right now," she whispers out, amazed. Pulling away, she frowns at me.

"Ow!" I exclaim when she punches me in the shoulder.

“How come you didn’t tell me you were coming?” she grumbles.

Note to self: Amelia also hates surprises.

I roll my eyes. “Duh, it was a surprise. It wouldn’t have been one if I’d told you.”

Rolling her eyes back, she pulls me into her body again. “I’m so glad you’re going to watch our home show.”

Feeling a hand on my shoulder, I see Elijah smiling down at me.

“Leonidas will definitely sing better today, knowing his girl is watching him.”

I hear the guy of the hour laugh. When I raise an eyebrow at him, he blows me a kiss.

“He’s right. I’ll only be singing for you tonight.”

There goes my heart, beating at an unhealthy rate.

The room is filled with silence as soon as an employee walks in.

She carries a clipboard. “Found them. I’ll get them out right away.” She speaks into an earpiece that is attached to her ear. Glancing up at the band with firmness, she states, “You guys are on in five minutes. Get going now.”

She disappears out the door, but not before giving me a glare. Judging by the look she sent me, I’m going to guess she doesn’t like me.

How rude ...

I can’t imagine dealing with people like this every day. No wonder why X3 hates it here. I would too.

The triplets all let out groans. As they glare at one another, I chuckle.

“Triplets shit,” I remark for them.



I hold Leonidas’s hand the entire time we walk toward where he’s needed. The farther we walk and the closer we get, the more his fingers tighten around mine. Amelia and Elijah walk in front of us. They talk quietly while shaking their bodies slightly to ease the stiffness.

“You’ll do great,” I whisper up to him when I find a frown on his face.

Biting his lip, he stares straight ahead. “This shit never gets easier. I’m scared until I’m out there.”

We enter a dark room, and many people run around, doing tasks with urgency. I gulp when I spot the stage, hidden behind a huge black curtain.

Well, that's intimidating.

I know I would pee my pants if I had thousands of people watching me. Props to the triplets because I wouldn't be able to do what they do. Leonidas's firm hand grips me to a halt. Standing in front of me, he taps his foot on the ground.

I beam. "Go kill it out there, rock star."

His eyes darken. He pulls my face closer, and his lips capture mine in the most possessive way. I let him pour all his nerves into this kiss. I open my mouth and allow his tongue to fight mine for dominance. Leonidas makes a small sound from the back of his throat, which makes me want to go wild.

I grow uncomfortable, knowing many people are watching us. I'd rather save this for later. Pulling away, he kisses my nose.

A man's voice suddenly announces over a speaker, introducing X3. Screams fill the arena.

I give Elijah a fist bump, and he runs onstage with a smile. Amelia is next to follow suit, and she blows me a kiss over her shoulder. I smile when I hear the fans' screams go slightly higher for the two. Leonidas is next.

Before he goes on, he pecks my cheek and whispers, "This is for you."

My lips twitch in a smile as he runs toward the blinding lights. As Leonidas runs onto the stage, the fans' screams turn into roars. The stadium practically vibrates. Fans jump up and down while he grips the microphone in a palm.

"Athens, how are you doing?" his voice yells into the mic.

If I didn't think the fans could yell any louder, I was wrong. I might need hearing aids after this because it looks like Leonidas has all the girls' hearts.

Bad news for them: I'm the only girl who owns it ...

I find Mom a couple minutes later. Athena guides us into the arena. She shows and explains that family and friends have a special spot in the front row. Fans are far away, leaving me still a mystery in the dark.

I am The Girl in Black ...

For a good twenty minutes, I stare at the guy I've fallen deeply in love with. His skin glows under the lights that beam above him. His rough yet smooth voice hypnotizes me. I'm zoned in on the way his body sexily hunches over as he hits a high note that rocks my bones. The black shirt that goes well with his ripped black jeans make him droolworthy, almost untouchable. The red classic rock-star guitar that's around his shoulder makes desire fill my heart. This look matches him perfectly.

My heart flutters each time he looks over at me and smiles against his mic.

Our relationship isn't a secret, but it's private. I love the way he makes me feel loved, even from down here. Fans scream as he gets closer to them at the edge of the stage. He grips their hands as they try to touch him everywhere. My heart swoons as I watch him give a little girl his guitar pick. Her pigtails bounce as she jumps in excitement.

Elijah and Amelia kill it. Elijah strums a guitar similar to Leonidas's, and Amelia plays the drums like a badass. Her drums sparkle under the lights as she dances in her seat to the beat with a smile. I understand why X3 is famous for what they love to do. They put on a wonderful show. I want to record this and watch it forever. Seeing your man onstage for the first time is jaw-dropping. I can't wait to catch up with them later. I'm dying to just sit down and talk like we used to.

My attention immediately shifts from the triplets as I hear screams—not screams of excitement, but screams of terror.

I'm pushed onto the ground roughly when shots are fired.

FIFTY-SIX

TRINITY

My body hits the ground hard. Every bone within me aches as pure terror unfolds around me. People run from their seats. Some duck on the ground behind chairs while others climb over one another to escape this nightmare we didn't expect.

I look up frantically. My heart beats wildly in my chest as I find a security guard over me. Mom and Athena are also being protected by two other men.

People's screams fill me with pure panic. My chest heaves as I try to fill my lungs with oxygen.

My mind travels back to four years ago. My dad was shot by a devil, a pure demon that walked this earth. Pain consumes me as my trauma unfolds again right before my eyes. I feel like I'm reliving the time we got that phone call, which made me drop down onto my knees and wish to never get back up.

My hands shake as I grip my chest. I'm not my dad. I will not die. I can't break down here, not after everything I've worked so hard for. I'm in the same position as how my dad lost his life. The difference is, I know mine will be spared. My hair blows in my face as I cough. A wheeze escapes my throat as my chest burns.

The once-peaceful arena around me is now a zoo. I hear distinct wails from all directions that shake my bones. My cries squeeze my chest as I glance up at the stage and find the triplets gone. Worry fills the pit of my stomach. Whoever shot the gun was trying to kill them. I can clearly see the gunshot hole in Amelia's drum.

Oh God, please no.

Hands grip both of my forearms roughly. I stiffen from the unknown body behind me. I'm too young to die. I beg God to spare me. I've finally found happiness. I beg him to understand that I no longer want to leave this world.

I know, God, you heard me beg you on my awful nights to take me, that I didn't want to see the sunrise again. But I do now.

I'm almost truly healed. Please spare me.

"Ma'am, I need to get you to safety," a male's voice roars from above me.

From the darkness that surrounds us, I see his security badge on his chest. I let him pull my body up. He shields me as we run to the backstage door.

Thank God.

I can't think about anything. The only thing I can concentrate on is the way the gun sounded before I lay on the cold, hard floor.

Once I enter the backstage area, I find Mom pacing with tears streaming down her face. My own watery gaze meets hers. Letting out a relieved cry, she runs up to me.

"Thank God you're okay!" She pulls me into her body and cries into my shoulder hysterically. "I tried to wait for you out there, but they wouldn't let me! I promise I didn't leave you, sweetie."

I'm shocked. All I can do is stare straight ahead of me. My body is stiff and feels unfamiliar. Pulling away, she assesses my body from head to toe.

"You're okay, right? Do we need a doctor?" She cries. Her eyes wide with worry.

Not being able to form any words, I shake my head. Other than feeling absolutely terrified, I'm fine. I probably got some whiplash from the push and landing on the floor, but nothing too serious, so I don't mention anything. Knowing she's perfectly fine, I watch the team panic around me. People run around, yelling, while others carry supplies. People still scream outside as cops arrive. Several paramedics enter the arena as they take away the injured.

My heart speeds up at a concerning rate when I see Athena walking through the crowd. "Are Leonidas, Elijah, and Amelia okay?" I rasp when she walks over to me.

Are they hurt? God, I would be destroyed if anything happened to the three of them.

They don't deserve this. First, a bad label, and now, a shooter at their first concert, which meant so much to them. Athena's body looks weak. Tears still

trail down her face as we stand off to the side.

“They’re not hurt, just shaken up.” Her wide eyes are nervously looking around the jam-packed backstage area.

“The police have the shooters arrested. They killed no one. We only have injuries, which aren’t life-threatening,” a police officer informs a worker beside me. He sticks his hands in his pockets. “The building is safe. Make sure you announce on the intercoms to all the remaining bystanders that care by the paramedics will be given out to people who are scared. Now, if you’ll direct me to the security cameras to gather evidence, that would be great.” His voice lowers, the farther he walks in the opposite direction.

The only thing I want right now is to see Leonidas. I need to know he’s all right. “Please take me to Leonidas,” I croak out and clasp Athena’s hand. “I need to see him.”

Understanding clouds her vision as she guides me away from this crowded mess that’s only causing me anxiety. The hallways that Athena first dropped me off at are dead quiet. Not a single soul is lingering in the halls. I walk toward the door I know he’s behind. I don’t glance if Athena and Mom are behind me as I open the door.

I need to be alone with him.

I nearly crumple at the sight of him in the corner of his room. He’s slouched on the floor with his head in his hands. His chest heaves from his short, panicked breaths. I step toward him slowly, not wanting to scare him. I look behind me and find the room empty with the door closed.

Amelia and Elijah aren’t in here. They must be okay, right?

“Leonidas?” I whisper, making sure my voice is soft.

I halt my steps when he glances up at me quickly. With a face full of distress, he jumps up. He strides over to me, and his sweaty body slams into mine. My body almost tumbles to the ground, but his arms around my waist prevent that.

“They wouldn’t let me see you. They said it was dangerous. I told them you weren’t a danger to me, but they didn’t care,” he stammers, pained.

His fingers dig into my hips painfully, yet I don’t admit that. Not when he looks so fragile.

Placing my face in his neck, I grasp the back of his head tightly. “The last thing you need to do is apologize.” I tighten my hold when his breathing turns faster. I won’t ask him if he’s okay because I know he’s not. I just hold him in my arms to show him I’m here and I’m not going anywhere.

“Are the others okay?” I ask what I’ve been dreading.

He winces. “Elijah is okay, but Amelia tripped when she was running off the stage. She fractured her ankle.”

Shoot. Poor Amelia. At least none of them got the bullet ...

“The bullet came so fucking close. We could have died.”

My body stiffens in his arms as he breaks down after the words leave his mouth.

The thought of Leonidas and the triplets almost getting shot raises my anxiety. I want to shove them in a room and lock it. The air in my lungs doesn’t seem to want to cooperate as I hold him like my life depends on it. Every time I breathe in, a sob breaks through.

I would have lost him and my best friends to a bullet, like I lost my dad

...

What is my life? A bloody joke.

“You could have died,” I croak out. “I wouldn’t have had you anymore.” Tears stream down my face as I shake my head against his chest in denial. “You would have been killed, just like my dad.” My chest trembles due to my sobs.

I completely breakdown in his arms. The thought of knowing I could have lost him after all we’ve shared terrifies me.

He says nothing as he pulls me closer. I don’t know how many minutes have passed, but when he pulls away, his face glistens with tears.

“Trin.” He pauses and runs a hand down his face. “I’m so fucking scared.”

Walking away from me, he paces the room, pushing his hands in his sweaty locks as he stresses. “What if someone had died? They would have died at my concert. How the hell would I have lived with that too?” Every word that leaves his mouth gets louder. His brown eyes are wild.

“It wouldn’t have been your fault—”

He interrupts loudly, “They were at my concert. That means they trusted my team that they were safe.”

“You didn’t pull the trigger,” I grit out, not liking the way he’s beating himself up for what just happened.

“That doesn’t matter when a bullet goes through you.” Falling onto the couch, he places his head in his hands. “I was terrified, Trin. The entire time, I wanted to know if you were okay. But no one knew a damn thing! I thought you got hurt. For God’s sake, you were standing right in front of me! I looked

over in your direction and didn't find you there." His reddened eyes find mine.

Taking slow steps toward him, I clasp his chin in my grip. "We're fine. No one got hurt badly. That's the only thing that matters."

Placing his forehead on mine, he breathes out a heavy sigh. "I don't know what I would have done if you weren't here."

"I could say the same."

He rubs his eyes. "How did this even happen?"

I shrug my shoulders as my response. I constantly question why bad things happen. I always come up blank.

Life is like standing in the middle of an ocean. Either you drown from the ruthless waves or you float. But with a little help from a life jacket and a boat, you'll be able to touch land again.

With Leonidas, everything feels a little less terrifying. He brings my body a calmness I haven't experienced yet in my lifetime. His smile brightens my days. I love him more than jelly loves peanut butter. Cringe, I know. I just wanted to say that once.

"Think of all those people who could have been killed! How will they ever trust us again? How will I ever be able to show my face again?" Leonidas's voice is muffled because of his hands.

No, not these thoughts ...

As I open my mouth to say something, a knock sounds at the door. Leonidas's and my bodies stiffen up.

Don't let fear overcome you. Show Leonidas how to be strong.

Clearing my throat that feels like closing up, I call out softly, "Come in."

Mom's distraught face pops through the door. "Trinity."

I frown. "What's wrong, Mom?"

The feeling of dread pools in my gut. I'm familiar with it, knowing something bad is going to happen. Walking over to where she leans against the door, I place a hand on her shoulder. I eye the way her body shakes slightly. She stares down at the floor like she's just seen a monster. Her big brown eyes are distant. Her usual smiling mouth is turned down into a frown.

What's happened now? Please let it not be something bad. I beg you, God ... please.

"Mom—"

She shakes her head and places a hand in the air to stop me. "Trinity." Her voice breaks as a cry leaves her mouth. Placing a hand to her mouth to

muffle the heartbreaking noises, she takes a step back in the hallway. “I don’t know how to tell you this.”

“Tell me what?” I ask in confusion.

I want to reach out and touch her. The way her body is hunched in and far away from mine looks like she doesn’t want that.

I haven’t seen Mom look this heartbroken since the day Dad died. She looks like she just got run over by a truck. She doesn’t have to say much next because I know whatever leaves her lips will feel like knives straight through my chest.

“It was them,” she croaks out. “It was them.”

I frown. Taking a step closer to her, I question, “Who are you talking about, Mom?”

I look back and find Leonidas getting up from the couch, standing by my side.

He eyes her carefully. “Come in. It looks like you need to take a seat.”

He guides her over to the couch, and I sit beside her. Gripping her hand in my own, I glance at Leonidas. He sits on the armrest of the couch. When his hand lands on my shoulder, I immediately feel a sense of calm.

“You’re going to hate me.” Mom’s whisper pulls me out of my thoughts.

Meeting her gaze, I shake my head. “I would never hate you. Tell me what’s going on.”

Her fingers tighten around mine. If she wasn’t in so much pain, I would wince at the stabbing feeling.

Mom looks away, her brows pinching together. “There’s really no easy way to say this.”

“Rip it off like a Band-Aid,” I interrupt.

She purses her lips, and delicate tears stream down her pale complexion. “They found your dad’s killers.”

My breath hitches as my body straightens. “How?” I croak out.

I’ve been waiting for this day since he died. I felt such an intense pain in me. Not to mention, how mad I was that they were living freely. But as the words leave her lips, all I want to do is run away and cry. After four years of pure sadness, harmful thoughts that could make angels cry, the words that I’ve been waiting to hear feel like bullets to my chest.

“They were the shooters tonight.”

From behind me, I feel Leonidas’s body stiffen. His hand slides off my body, causing my frown to deepen. I turn my head around to look at him.

Finding horror on his face makes my hands sweat.

“How did the police find them tonight after all the years they’ve been searching?” I whisper to her, not making sense of anything.

Dropping her face in her palms, she nods. “Because I walked past them before I came here. They were being taken outside in handcuffs.” A drained laugh leaves her mouth.

Leonidas gets off the couch and grips his hair with both of his hands. His eyes are full of sadness and realization.

“Just by looking at them, how did you know they killed Dad?” I scrunch my nose, getting impatient.

This makes little sense ...

“They told me.”

“So, they recognized you?” A gasp leaves my mouth as I realize my mother made eye contact with my dad’s killers. A shiver travels up my spine.

“Yes, they recognized me because we know them.” Looking over at me, she grips my hands. “Diego. It was Diego and Rodrigo. They killed your father.”

Time stops. My world falls apart.

My mouth drops in horror.

I feel like my body is on fire, like someone is laughing at me while watching me burn down until there’s nothing left. My dad’s killers, the people who shot my dad with no remorse, were in my house. They ate dinner at the table he used to sit at. They drank out of the cups he used. Rodrigo touched my mother, knowing my dad’s scarlet blood was on his hands. They acted like they cared, like they had hearts.

The entire time, we were probably their entertaining television show. They sat there for months, twirling their thumbs together while watching us get fooled.

The man I looked up to every single day, I saw him as a king. I acted like he was my trophy. I mourned his life until I felt like I was mourning my own. I was healing, finally seeing the light, until I was slapped in the face.

I feel like I’ve finally reached the edge of a cliff. The heels of my feet are only left supporting me as I look down at the roaring ocean below me. I don’t hear or see anything around me. All I can think about is how stupid I really am.

I thought Leonidas not telling me his identity was extremely painful. But knowing that I’ve betrayed my dad is like someone is stabbing me ruthlessly

in my chest multiple times. I can't catch my breath as I come to terms with the fact that whenever I let someone in my life, they always betray me somehow.

My sobs echo in the quiet room as I let everything out. There's no use in hiding how broken I feel. Tears stream down my face at a fast rate. I can feel Leonidas still standing beside me. Mom stays silent. She just stares in front of her without blinking. We're absolutely broken. Mourning the person we hurt the most by not knowing.

"I need to say something," I hear being whispered above me.

What now? How much can I take?

My blurry gaze sees Leonidas's stiff posture.

Sitting down next to me, he faces me and Mom with a frown. "Trinity, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me," he starts off.

Why the hell is he making a love speech to me in front of Mom? And why now?

"The last thing that I want you to feel toward me is hate. Fear runs my life. It controls me until I'm left with nothing. I'm ashamed to say that it's won again. I understand if you hate me, if you never want to look me in the eye, but just know how much I love you."

He grips my hands in his own, tears rolling down his face. Biting his lip, he takes a shaky deep breath in. "Four years ago, when I signed the contract with the label, I was so excited that my siblings and I got a deal. As we were about to party, we got a call. My grandma was sick. She had dealt with the battle of cancer for many years. She wasn't well that day. She was actually at her worst. So, we got on a plane to Canada and took care of her for a while. She lived in this small town that I hated. Only a couple hundred people lived there.

"One day, my siblings and I were bored. All the stores in the local town were all odd stores we had no interest in. A couple of towns away, we found this music store. We begged Mom to take us. She didn't want to leave my grandma, so we walked." His voice hitches as he glares down at the ground.

"We bought a new guitar that day. It was a treat from our mom for signing with the label. But as we were walking through the door to get out, a man was in front of us. He was carrying this beautiful wooden guitar. As I was walking past his car when he was placing the instrument in his trunk, that's when I saw *them*. I saw the gun being pointed in our direction. The only thing that I could think to do was jump out of the way. I watched as the

man got shot in the chest, and the two shooters drove away immediately.”

My breath gets caught in my throat. My hands turn cold in his hold.

“I watched the man being carried away on a stretcher, dead.” His voice fails him as he lets out a broken cry.

His face is damp because of his tears, matching my own. Mom just stares at him in disbelief.

“I realized that the man died because of me. I figured out everything after the shooting. The two shooters had followed me because they thought shooting me in a small town was the perfect opportunity to gain their revenge on not getting the deal.”

“Rodrigo and Diego?” I interrupt, confused how they know Leonidas and why they would want revenge.

All he does is nod his head.

God, this must be a joke. Please wake me up from this nightmare.

“Diego is our age. He was the other qualifier for the spot on the label. Obviously, Elijah, Amelia, and I got it, but he wasn’t happy that his dream had been crushed. The only way he thought of getting what he wanted was by killing us off. He was wearing a mask, so I couldn’t see his face, but I’d know those black eyes from anywhere.

“Their plan was thought out perfectly. They ditched their car, leaving no handprints anywhere. They then disappeared. I tried to tell the cops who they were. I described how they looked, but they never could find them. It’s like they were never there.

“But please don’t think I knew this all along. I never saw Diego and Rodrigo at your house. I only once saw a man on your front porch, but he was blurry because my eyesight sucks, but I swear I didn’t see him clearly. If I knew your dad’s killers were in your home, I would have told you and reported them. The only connection that I made until tonight was that I was the real target to your dad’s death. I just didn’t know how to tell you that. But I promise—” Leonidas’s voice cracks. “I promise I didn’t know it was them. I would never do that to you. I wouldn’t want you around killers and the people who tried to kill me.”

My heart feels like it’s being squeezed by a hand. My delicate-healing heart feels like it’s crumbling after each word he says.

“That night, I went back to our rental place that we’d moved into a couple days before because Grandma’s place was becoming too small. Everyone stayed with her that night, but I needed to get away. The entire night, I was

left all alone to suffer the thoughts of knowing someone had died because of me. So I did what almost killed me because I should have been the one to die that day.

“God, I’m so sorry,” he pleads. “I’m so sorry that your dad died because of me.” He looks wildly up at Mom. “No words can express how sorry I am, Ms. Jones.”

Nothing can come out of my mouth as I stare straight ahead. The shivers that run throughout my body scare me. Vomit makes its way up my mouth, but I force it down.

“Please say something,” he begs.

Instead of voicing my thoughts, I keep quiet. Getting up from my seat calmly, I walk toward the door without a backward glance and make it to the toilet just in time to empty my stomach.

FIFTY-SEVEN

TRINITY

I'm not sure how long I've been lying here.

My eyes burn, begging to be shut so they can rest. I'm scared of what I'll see if I do. Will nightmares come again? Will I wake up, screaming, while tears run down my face as I stare at the wall ahead of me in terror, afraid that Diego and Rodrigo will come and find me?

The wall in front of me turns blurry in the darkened room as I lick my dry, cracked lips. The blanket wrapped around me is so tight I'm nervous I'm cutting off blood circulation. After hours of crying, I physically can't cry anymore. I've run out of energy. The scariest part is, I feel a sense of calm within me. My body doesn't shake with anxiety. I'm just lying here, as still as a corpse.

Mom has come in here a few times. She lies beside me silently as we both get lost in thought and question why we deserve this pain. I cry over losing my dad, my killers being in my home like family, and my boyfriend being their target.

They came to X3's show to finish what they'd started. They wanted the record deal so bad that they would kill for it, even after so many years. Did I give Rodrigo information when I told him about Leonidas in the kitchen? Is that how they knew everything ... from me? The two probably knew to go to Greece because of me and Mom. The thought stings. They could not care less who else they shot as long as they got revenge. If Leonidas hadn't been in my town for his grandma, I would still have a dad.

I cry over him lying to me again, but this time, it's a thousand times worse. I sob over the fact that everything in my life seems to be a lie. The more I feel like I'm finally reaching the top, the more I'm kicked to the

bottom.

No one other than my mom has tried to contact me, which I appreciate. I need to think. I crave to be in the comfort of my own bed. Instead, I'm here in a random hotel suite in Greece.

My thoughts these past couple of hours are about Leonidas. A part of me feels guilty of feeling this way, but I can't find it in me to be mad at him like I should be. I know that's fucking terrible of me to think because I lost my dad and my mother lost her husband. But he didn't pull the trigger. He didn't know that Diego and Rodrigo were coming after him. He didn't know Rodrigo was dating mom in the first place.

All these years, I blamed myself for Dad's death. He was at the music store for me. I lived with the sadness of thinking it was my fault.

After many sessions, my therapist taught me I hadn't killed my father because my finger hadn't pulled the trigger; I hadn't filled the gun up with ammo and aimed it at him. That's someone else's crime. It took me so long to realize that, so who am I to blame Leonidas?

Leonidas didn't wish my father dead; he didn't want any of this to happen. He almost killed himself over the guilt because he should have been the one on the ground, not breathing. I can't blame him for a crime he didn't commit. That wouldn't be wise of me. He suffered just as much as me—in a way, maybe even worse.

I can't imagine another human dying, getting a bullet straight through the chest, because of me. The only part of me that's mad at Leonidas is the fact that he hid yet another secret from me. But he's never seen Rodrigo and Diego; they were never introduced. The only time they were in the same space is when Leonidas was up in my bedroom for the entire night while I met them for the first time.

Nonetheless, secrets really control Leonidas's life. It's like he's wrapped up in ropes. As he tries to pull away to get free, he gets burns and stops struggling to relieve himself. Not only is he being held hostage by the label, but also by his thoughts.

His anxiety.

I have so many questions that I want to ask him, but I don't have the energy. I'm scared.

The only good part out of this entire situation is that Dad's killers are finally placed where they belong. Behind metal bars. I hope they never get a peaceful sleep on their rock-hard beds. I hope they wake up with nightmares.

I hope they feel sadness. I know that won't be possible because their hearts are filled with evil, darkness, sin, and no remorse or feeling. I hope one day, they hit rock bottom. Just like I have.

Call me evil. I don't give a fuck. They don't deserve a single thought from me again.

Feeling Mom move behind me has me shifting over to look at her. Her eyes are probably just as red as mine are. Her hair is a mess, and her day-old makeup looks like a Halloween costume. She hasn't uttered a single word to me. We just lie here, face-to-face, looking at one another. My body jumps slightly from surprise when I feel her warm hand grip my fingers.

"Seems like we're God's favorites, huh?" she croaks out suddenly, her voice rough with dryness.

Swallowing tightly, I lick my lips while speaking from my heart. "God never gives you a bigger cross than you can carry."

It's the saying I live by. God will never give you a cross he knows you can't handle. People might think I'm silly after all the world has thrown at me, but I believe God doesn't cause those moments in life. I believe he gives us hope, that he's the one blessing us with happiness after the storm.

That's what keeps me going. That's why I'm still here today, and that's how I'm able to be strong for Mom. She can't always be the one to hide her tears. I know she relies on me. That means, I need to be strong. For her ... for my dad.

"I kept telling myself that Dad would be so disappointed in us, that he would hate us. But deep down, I truly know he would say that we couldn't have known the cruel jokes of this world. He would tell us instead of lying here in pain, we should go party because we've finally found his killers. He would also say that he's in a better place," I whisper softly over toward her. My eyes follow the path a tear makes on her face.

"I think we always pay attention to the bad thoughts, but what about the good ones? I think they're always forgotten, left in the dark." I speak with passion. "I think they need to be shown love. Because they're abandoned." I grip her hand tighter in my own as tears fall down my face. "Let's both list off three positive things in our lives right now." I pause and watch her frown. "I'll go first."

Licking my dry lips, I focus my gaze on the wall over her shoulder. "I have an amazing mom, we're both blessed with health, and we have a bed to sleep in and a roof over our heads."

Silence fills the air. She's not going to say anything ... is she? She just stares at me. No emotion crosses her face as I feel her thumb brush against my skin.

"I'm thankful for you, my job that enables me to support you, and coffee." She smiles after that and chuckles to herself.

I joke, "Don't forget romance books."

"And British men," she adds playfully.

Our laughs fill the room as we think about how stupid we are. Moments like this are my favorite, just me and Mom joking around like schoolgirls. I'll forever cherish these memories, just like how I look back at moments with my dad.

"You shouldn't be mad at him," she suddenly says after our laughter dies down. "Leonidas has a heart filled with gold. He didn't cause your father to get killed. I'm sure he lives with the consequences every day. The thoughts in his mind must be terrifying." Her hand lightly trembles as she tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. "I know you must be thinking very hard about this. Even though I lost a husband, I don't for a second blame his death on Leonidas. It was the man behind the gun, not an innocent bystander."

As I try to respond, a stutter leaves my lips. Why do I always find it hard to open up? I have so much to say, but as I open my mouth to do so, nothing comes out.

Her glassy eyes assess me. "What are you afraid of?"

"Dad being mad at me for being with him," I say as my throat threatens to shut.

I watch as she sits up from the bed. Crossing her legs, she lets out a defeated sigh.

"The one thing your father would ever want for you is to be happy. He would want to see you shine with complete happiness. What happened that day ... if he had known what was going on around him and he wasn't in the way, he probably would have jumped in front of Leonidas to protect him. Everyone knows and everyone can see that Leonidas makes you happy. Don't let go of that feeling just because of this. I would do anything to feel what your father made me feel again." Patting my knee, she kisses my forehead. "He would want you two together."

Cuddling into the blanket, I watch as she leaves the room. I fiddle with the bracelet around my wrist.

Normal eighteen-year-olds would laugh at the thought of being in a

serious relationship at this age. Many say teenagers can't love, but I disagree. I know I love him when my heart clenches in my chest, just thinking about him. That means love. Love is willing to lose your life for the other.

Being in a serious relationship and loving someone deeply, it doesn't need to be scary. It's not like I'm going to marry him tomorrow, but it means I'm going to bring out the best in him.

Lies control Leonidas's life. I won't let fear control mine.

I always listen to my gut, but now, it's time to listen to my heart. Mom is right. I just needed someone to tell me my thoughts out loud. Leonidas didn't kill my father, so why should I be treating him like he did?

Getting untangled from my blankets, I get ready for my mission—to show Leonidas that even though there isn't a ring around my finger, I'm in this through thick and thin.



Never interrupt a woman when she's on a mission. As I walk the quiet streets of Athens, I glare over at the men who try to stop me. A group of teenage losers catcall me. In response, they get my middle fingers.

Yes, not one, but two.

My eyes focus on Leonidas's shared location down at my phone. The red pin is placed in the middle of the city. I would have taken a car. It would have been a lot less tiring than all this walking, but I'm embarrassed to speak a language I'm not fluent in.

So, I decided walking twenty minutes away was worth the trouble instead of having to speak Greek.

A thick layer of sweat lines my skin as I stride down the street. The number of times I've almost tripped because I'm focusing on getting closer to my destination and not my path is concerning.

My hands shake as my anxiety comes full throttle. The thoughts scream at me from all directions as I walk.

He's behind you!

You're next, Trinity!

He'll never be gone!

Run! Run! Run!

As much as I want to run, I won't. I won't run away from my fears. The

bad thoughts in my head will truly never go away. It's my job to ignore them. I keep my steps strong and my head held high like the bad bitch I am.

Leonidas is just as bad as him!

My nose scrunches up. Licking my lips, I shake my head slightly to get rid of the horrible thoughts that I don't agree with.

Remember, Trinity, he didn't pull the trigger. His heart is made of gold. Dad was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He's the killer of your dad!

My chest heaves as panic overtakes the sensible part of me. My eyes glaze over with tears as I chant to myself, *Fight them. You'll always be stronger.*

A sudden blow to the chest has me falling down onto the ground. My palms scrape against the sidewalk, and the burning feeling makes more tears come to my eyes.

"I'm so sorry!" a feminine voice chokes out.

I find a girl around my age on the floor opposite of me. Her wavy black hair flows down her back messily. Her eyes are big, innocent-looking. She looks to be on the shorter side.

Dusting off her hands, she lets out a chuckle. "I'm so clumsy. Are you okay?" Her voice is soft-spoken.

I know she's not from around here. She has a Canadian or American accent.

I wave her off and frown at my red palm. "Don't worry about it. I was a little distracted anyway."

She offers me a smile as she rises from the floor. I grip her hand as she helps me up.

"I'm Lily," she says with a smile as I smooth down my shirt.

"Trinity."

"You're not from around here," Lily states more than points out.

I shake my head while looking around. "No, I'm not. I'm here with my boyfriend." I raise an eyebrow. "You're not from here either."

"I'm Greek," she says with a proud smile. "But I was born and raised in LA."

So, she's American. Huh, I knew it. Well, I half-knew it ... whatever.

"Where are you from?" she asks as we drift off to the side of the sidewalk, letting people pass.

I lean my back on a storefront's glass window.

“I’m from the land of maple syrup, moose, and igloos,” I joke with her. She nods in understanding.

She snaps her fingers. “I’m taking a wild guess. You’re Canadian.”

I laugh while nodding.

I hate the typical stereotypes of Canadians. News flash: I only eat maple syrup with my waffles and pancakes in the mornings, I’ve never seen a damn moose in my life, and I live in a house.

She raises an eyebrow. “It must be freezing there all the time?”

I punch her shoulder lightly.

“I’m just joking. I know it doesn’t snow all the time.”

I mutter, “Thank God.”

She might be clumsy, but at least she’s educated.

Standing here, in the middle of Greece, talking to this girl I just met is refreshing. She has an easygoing smile, and the sparkle in her eyes proves to me we’re probably not that different from one another.

Curiosity gets the best of me. “If you don’t mind me asking, what are you doing here?” I ask her.

“I’m just visiting some family before I go back home.” She fiddles with a chain around her neck.

Weird ... she’s not meeting my gaze. A sign that she’s lying. I won’t press like a creep, so I just nod like I understand.

Lily suddenly gasps. I follow where her gaze lands. The store window I’m leaning on gives us a clear vision of a TV. A news reporter explains the shooting that happened at X3’s concert. They show clips of people running, crying, and hugging. Someone also caught the triplets running offstage. I wince when I see Amelia trip and land on the floor roughly right before she disappears behind the curtains. A hand drags her the rest of the way to safety.

Rodrigo’s and Diego’s pictures are displayed on the screen as the shooters. It says they’ve already been taken to a jail in Canada by an airplane.

Good riddance.

I find Lily frowning as she watches the terrible news. She staggers back from the glass suddenly while stuffing her hands in the pockets of her jean shorts.

“It was really nice meeting you, but I have somewhere to be.” With a forced smile, she walks away with her head turned down.

What the heck was that?

I said nothing to make her suddenly closed off. The moment X3’s story

finished, she ran off in distress. Maybe there's more to her story than I know.
After all, everyone has their own story to tell ...



I should have thought this through. My stupid brain that's the size of a fruit fly didn't take this into consideration. I wanted to surprise Leonidas, but this big iron gate blocks me from doing so.

Opening my phone, I text Athena to open the gate. A moment later, I run by when it opens at a snail's pace. Just as my hand lands on the doorknob, the door is thrown open, and my face is grabbed.

Elijah's worry-filled eyes assess my face. "Do you know how worried I was this entire time?" he grumbles. His hands move my face in circles as he eyes me carefully for any injuries. "You look like your usual ugly self," he jokes.

My fist punches his shoulder playfully. "Jerk. And it looks like you're still your donkey self." I hold my stomach as I hunch over. My laughs cause him to laugh after he snorts like a pig loudly. "That's a pig, you bozo, not a donkey."

He shrugs and mutters, "Oops. I daydreamed in kindergarten a lot."

Oh, Elijah. I missed this guy. Thank God he isn't hurt.

Hugging him once more around the waist tightly, I hurry past him when I find a struggling Amelia attempting to walk over toward me. The two crutches under her armpits look extremely painful as she walks slowly. Her right foot is big, as it's covered in a white cast.

"Amelia." I grip on to her shoulders, stopping her.

Her bottom lip wobbles as she tries to pull me into a hug. She cries in frustration when she almost topples over. Elijah catches her just in time.

"I hate these things already!" she yells out and hops around on her good foot.

She runs a hand through her hair, and I send her a small smile.

"Let's get you to a couch."

As I advance to help her, she stops me with a hand. "Elijah can help me. Go talk to Leonidas."

As she wobbles away from me, I meet the worried glance Elijah sends me from over his shoulder.

Upstairs, he mouths and then hurries to help his sister.

Taking a much-needed deep breath, I turn toward the staircase. My hands grasp on to the railing like my life depends on it, and I take the steps slowly. I'm met with a long hallway with four doors. If I know Leonidas as much as I think I do, I think his room is the farthest one. I walk toward my guess, before my knuckles make contact on the wood, I lick my lips anxiously.

When his door opens, I try to keep an emotionless face.

His face drops with shock and disbelief. "Trinity, you came to see me?" he chokes out. He brings his hand in the air to reach my face but decides against it.

My hand touches his, bringing it up to my face. I let him cup my cheek. "I don't blame you."

He looks at me like I'm the stupidest person in the world. "Why? You should just run, run away and never look back."

No, I won't run. I ran for years, which made me miserable. I refuse to lose something that I love.

I glare at him, raising my chin. "You know why I don't blame you? I don't blame you because you weren't holding that gun. You didn't fire that shot. You almost killed yourself out of grief." I speak passionately. "The only reason I'm slightly mad is because you kept this from me."

He stutters, "I didn't know you were his daughter until we were in deep, I swear, so if you think that's why—"

I interrupt, "I know you didn't use me, but I know fear was pulling you back. You can't keep lying to the people you love because you're scared." I grip his black T-shirt in my fists. "How much do you think I'll be willing to take?"

Thinking about how Elijah and Amelia kept the secret from me also stings a bit. Why didn't they tell me about this? But Leonidas is my boyfriend. He should have been honest.

"You deserve so much more than me. You lost your father because of me —"

I interrupt again, "I know I should be furious with you. I would be with anyone else but you. So, please stop trying to make me hate you."

He leans against the doorframe. "You deserve someone better than me. Someone who doesn't keep secrets from you, someone who lives close to you." As he throws his hands up in the air, his forehead creases.

My hands push his firm chest. He staggers back as I slam the door behind

me.

“Why are you saying everything to push me away? I’m standing right here, right now because after finding out you kept the biggest, most horrible secret for me, I still love you. My heart still hurts because I know that if I booked a plane ticket home, I wouldn’t have you in my life anymore.” My voice breaks as moisture gathers in my eyes. “I don’t care if people call me stupid for going back to you. They don’t know you like I do. They don’t know how hard you love.” My voice gets louder as I take a step closer to him.

“No matter how much you tell yourself that you killed my father, I won’t believe it. Why do you think he was there?” I question him. “He was there, buying me a guitar. That beautiful guitar that you saw is mine. I’d told him I wanted it, so he had gone that day. So, if you blame yourself for being there the same day, an innocent boy excited to get a new instrument, then my dad’s death is on me too!” My chest heaves up and down as he looks at me brokenly.

Closing the space between us, I jab my finger in his chest as I whisper, “That fifteen-year-old boy didn’t commit murder. He was a witness to one.”

His body shakes as he glances away. Gripping his chin, I pull his face down, so my eyes meet his own.

“You’ve had to live with this burden for years. I can’t imagine how hard this has been on you. The entire time, I thought Mom and I were the only ones grieving, but you were too.”

Rising on my tippy-toes, I place a delicate kiss on his forehead. He shudders at the feeling, gripping my waist lightly.

He mumbles, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for all the pain I caused you. I regret not telling you. I stayed up at night when I wasn’t in your arms, questioning why I couldn’t muster up the courage.” His broken voice has me placing my forehead against his.

“I would have been terrified if I were in your position.”

“But you would have said something to me. You’re full of bravery and courage. I hate to admit this, but I’m jealous of that,” he bites out.

“I wasn’t always like this,” I say back to Leonidas. “I worked to get where I am, so who says you can’t be as brave as me?” Running my hands down his tense back, I smile up at him. “By the way, I think you’re pretty brave and strong. The more you tell yourself that you are, the more you’ll believe it.”

He stays quiet. I know he's confused and hurt. His head must be a mess of thoughts. Not to mention, a shooting took place at his concert. I would have been terrified if I had been up there with them.

His glassy eyes look everywhere but my face. "Why? I still can't believe you're here, giving me another chance after this," he breathes out.

Leonidas is too hard on himself. He'll convince himself that he's worthless and he deserves nothing but the worst. He's so wrong. I look up to people like him—broken but slowly healing. After all that he's been through, he's still standing with his head held up high.

He needs to realize that he's one of a kind.

I drop my hands from his back and take a few steps back. "Do you want me to leave right now and never look back—"

"No. God, no," he interrupts strongly. Closing the remaining distance between us, he stares down at me with confusion. "You amaze me every day. I wouldn't be able to forgive like you."

All the pain in my life that I've experienced makes me appreciate the little things in life. You never know when happiness will be taken away from you. So, that's why I hold on tight with both hands because I can't afford to lose him, the guy who makes me laugh, even on my rainy days.

FIFTY-EIGHT

TRINITY

The surrounding air is peaceful. The sun is setting in the distance as I sit on Leonidas's lap on his balcony. The sky is a beautiful blush pink. The fluffy white clouds in the sky look magical.

The entire time we've been out here, he hasn't uttered a single word, which I understand. Sometimes, silence speaks volumes. Right now, being in each other's presence after everything that happened is refreshing. If he needs time to think, then I'll give him that. But just being in his arms is more than enough.

"I think after everything that happened, I need to talk to someone," he says, breaking the silence.

Damn, he just blurted that out suddenly.

"A therapist?"

He nods and bites his lip. "Is that a stupid idea?" He curses under his breath. "Forget I said that. It sounded smarter in my head."

My hands run through his silky locks as I study his face. He doesn't meet my gaze. His glare focuses on the city in front of us.

It's not a ridiculous idea at all. Knowing I could vent to that one person with no one finding out is something I miss now that I don't have it. Maybe I need to talk to someone too?

Staring straight ahead, I reply honestly, "I don't think that's silly at all. I want to talk to someone too."

"You had one before, yeah?"

I nod. "I did, but I was fourteen and hated the idea at first. I was stubborn and didn't want to leave my bed."

Stupid fourteen-year-old Trinity ...

“I think it would be good,” I continue. “Looking back, it helped.”

“It just feels awkward, thinking about exposing myself to someone.” He shivers at the thought.

I laugh. “Oh, it is. But once you get used to it, it’s not bad.”

“Says the therapist dropout,” Leonidas remarks.

Ouch. Used that one against me, I see ...

“I swear if anyone finds out I’m going to see a therapist, I’m going to sue,” he grumbles and squeezes his arms around me.

“I bet the person you hire will have to sign a ten-page contract,” I tease him.

I peck his cheek while he smiles to himself.

“Damn right. I’ll find the best people for you and me, baby.”

Baby. That never gets old.

“I’ll have Mom look into it. Right now, I want to focus all my attention on you.”

He moves his lips closer to mine, but I lean away. As much as I would love to make out with Leonidas, I have to get something off my chest before I explode.

“Why do you think Rodrigo started dating my mom?”

His eyes widen at my question. Leonidas’s Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “I think he was using you guys to get closer to me, but didn’t your mom meet him before we met?” he asks, confused.

My eyebrow rises. Yes, he started dating Mom a few weeks before Leonidas came to town. Weird. This is creeping me out.

“Maybe they knew we were going to Canada. I wouldn’t put it past those bastards to have been spying around. They probably found out the location of the house we’d bought, and they befriended the neighbors to spy. It makes sense. I just can’t believe I didn’t know they were in your lives.” he shakes his head in denial.

I wish Leonidas had met Rodrigo and Diego. He could have saved us so much heartbreak. But he never got the chance. The only time Leonidas was in close distance with them was when he was in my room when they came over for dinner.

I shrug my shoulders. “You didn’t know. Can’t dwell on the past anymore.”

He taps my thigh once. “Look at my girl, going all positive on me.”

“Someone has to be,” I mutter as I lay my head on his chest.

“Don’t act like you’re all sunshine and I’m all grumps. We ain’t that cliché book trope,” he says lowly. When he places his lips to my ear, I shiver at the feeling of his hot breath. “Our story is chaotic, full of surprises and never-ending steam.”

God, the feeling of his lips traveling down my neck, leaving passionate kisses, makes me sigh. I arch my neck, letting him explore me even more. I close my eyes, loving the feel of his soft lips. A distant honk makes us jump away.

“Shoot, that scared me,” Leonidas grits out and runs a hand down his face. His face scrunches up in frustration.

This isn’t good. He’s very jumpy.

“Can I ask you something really personal?” I softly ask him as I cuddle into his body, comforting him.

He places his chin on the top of my head, and I feel him nod.

“Are you scared to perform after what happened?”

His body stills against mine, making me instantly regret asking him.

“Yes and no,” he answers stiffly after a few seconds. “The team will hire extra crew. I’ll make sure the stadium is safe before going in. They will check people hard core—I mean, the full works,” he grumbles. His fingers pick at my jean shorts. “I know I need to face my fears head-on, no more running.”

“Sounds like a brilliant plan to me.” I smile fondly at the strongest man I know.

Leonidas breaks the silence again. “I have something to confess.”

Oh God, what now? Don’t tell me he’s secretly my stepbrother. I wouldn’t put it past the world to put us through that shit. I nearly gag at the thought.

He takes my silence as a go-ahead. “I posted a photo of you on Instagram.”

Say what now?

Jumping off his lap, I glare at him. “Let me see it right now.” I place my hand in front of me and the other on my hip.

Never post a picture of a girl before she approves it. He has millions of followers. What if I look so ugly that I break people’s screens?

Fishing out his phone from his pocket, he hands it to me. I almost swoon at his lock screen picture. It’s me and him. If I wasn’t pretending to be mad at him, I would totally melt. I press the Instagram logo on his phone and go to his pictures. I frown when I click on the latest one.

It's a picture of me lying on his bed from earlier today. After our long conversation, we cuddled on his bed. After a while, I got bored. While he was playing video games, I read a book. I didn't know he had taken a picture when I had the book pressed against my face, laughing when I read something funny. I love the little things in life. The thought of him wanting to take a picture of me makes my heartbeat quicken.

Gosh, every day, it seems like I'm falling in love with him all over again.

"Read the caption."

Scrolling down, I read what he wrote. "*The Girl in Black has a heart full of gold.*"

God, can he get any more perfect?

"I love you. I love you so much," I mutter when he rises from his chair.

Wrapping my arms around him, I kiss his bare chest.



"Hey, Mom," I say once I enter our hotel suite.

I find her sitting on the couch with her computer on her lap. When she places her finger on her lips, I notice the phone against her ear.

Dropping my bag on the floor, I plop down beside her. Like the creep I am, I try listening in on her conversation, but I can't understand a thing. I close my eyes and wait for her conversation to end.

"So, it's possible?" she asks the person over the line, surprised. She nods her head even though the other person can't see her, and a smile lifts her face. "Yes, this is splendid news. Thank you!" Glancing over at me, she taps my knee in excitement.

What the hell has gotten into her?

I'm not complaining at all. Seeing the smile on her face is relieving. I try to peep at her computer screen. Maybe I'll get a clue as to why she's freaking out. When she slams the screen shut and sends me a glare, I frown.

Damn ... that hurt. Okay, let's be real. It didn't really. I'm just exaggerating.

"Yes," she says. "I'll call you tomorrow to find out the details." Ending her call, she throws the phone beside her. Turning toward me, she claps her hands. "I have something exciting to tell you."

Sitting up straighter, I give her my full attention.

“I hope you love this.” She pauses and fiddles with the bun on top of her head. “Well, I know you’re going to love this. I just hope this works out.”

I raise an eyebrow. What is she getting at?

Taking a deep breath, she grips my hands in her own. “How do you feel about traveling the world?”

I freeze. Seeing my shocked state, she laughs. Is she saying what I think she’s saying? Judging by the gigantic smile on her face, I’d say yes.

“Don’t tell me—”

She interrupts, “I can’t see us going back home. We need a fresh start, away from that town. Athena invited us to join them on tour. You can do your college courses online while I work online as well. I contacted my office, and they gave me a new position that would allow me to. The two of us will still have responsibilities.” She gives me a pointed look. “If Leonidas distracts your focus, I’ll have to cancel our plans.”

My heartbeat speeds up—in a good way. My hands sweat as I nearly start jumping in my seat.

I voice my questions, rushed and excited, “So, I’ll be doing online school. How would that work?”

“The courses that you chose for the spring semester are available to be taken remotely. Every day, you’ll be expected to log on at a certain time. It will be noted if you don’t. You still have to finish work by the deadlines.”

I can totally do that. It doesn’t seem too hard.

“So, we’ll travel around the world with X3?” I perk up with a smile.

“I’ll be paying for everything, but, yes, if you want.”

I don’t know if I should cry or laugh. Both seem like pretty good options. But I just sit here, shocked, trying to process everything.

“What about the house?” I ask. “Will you sell it?”

She fiddles with a ring around her finger. “No, I’ll still own the house. Think of this as an adventure. It’s not permanent.”

“How will we get our stuff?”

“I’ll hire a company to get our clothes. They’ll ship them over to an address once I get one from Athena.”

Wow, she’s really thought this through.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask her.

I hate to think Mom is doing this all for me. The thought of her leaving behind her life scares me. What if things don’t work out and she loses her job?

“This will be good for both of us. Traveling the world and moving on, all in one, seems more fun than staying at home and being reminded of everything.”

My eyes water. The thought of looking forward to my future makes me smile. I haven’t felt that in a while.

“Thank you, Mom.” I wrap my arms around her and breathe in her motherly scent. “There’re no words to express how thankful I am for you making this happen.”

“You deserve it, honey.”

“You too, Mom,” I demand in a soft tone. “You’re the best mom ever. Not only are you making it possible for me to see the world, but you’re also allowing me to be around the people who make me happy.”

“Never thank me for being a wonderful mom. That’s my job, which I failed at for a very long time. I need to do what’s best for you and me. Because if I’m not well, I’ll be no good for you.” She pulls away from our embrace. “I know we can do this. It will be fun.”

Traveling the world with the triplets and Mom sounds more than fun. The thought of exploring different cultures with Leonidas makes my heart happy. We’ll learn so much together. Not to mention the fact that we won’t be long-distance anymore.

“Do the triplets know about this yet?” I ask Mom.

I want to tell Leonidas; I want to see his face in my mind forever as I look back at this moment in a memory.

“No. That’s your job to do.”

My hands grip her arms, pulling her body into mine again. I squeeze for dear life. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” I chant under my breath.

Kissing my cheek as we pull away, she pats my shoulder. “How are you thinking of telling him?”

I go into detail about how I’m thinking of telling Leonidas about his new travel buddy.



A smile lifts my face as I finish the surprise I have planned for Leonidas. I wanted to tell him in a special way, not just words that came out of my mouth. I crave for him to remember this day for years. After getting all the

information from Athena, I went to a local shop and got all the supplies I needed.

I texted Amelia and Elijah to make sure they got him out of the house before I arrived. Once I entered the dead-silent house, I got to work immediately. On pink sticky notes, I scribbled down where different clues could be found. I left them all around his house after asking Athena's permission to do so.

When I was finished placing the clues around the house, I waited in the area he should be led to.

My hands shake as my foot taps on the ground nervously.

I'm wearing a T-shirt that says *Travel buddy?* Cringe, I know. But I had to think of something fast.

I'm also holding up a medium-sized poster of a world map. Instead of the usual red pins that you place on a country you've visited, I've drawn mini pink hearts.

Gosh, I hope he's as excited as I am. If he isn't, I know that would kill me.

It's just your anxiety talking, Trinity. You know how much he loves you.

My heart rate goes through the roof when I hear the door open and slam shut.

"Mom?" he calls out to the empty house.

Athena told me to place the first clue in the fridge because that's where he always goes first when he comes home. Leonidas's Mom was right because I hear the fridge door open. A couple seconds go by, but I hear nothing. Then, I hear his heavy footsteps throughout the house as he follows my scavenger hunt.

My breath hitches when he enters his room. His steps halt as he eyes me, surprised from the doorway. His eyes drop to the world map and my T-shirt.

"Travel buddy?" he questions out loud, confused.

I stand there, not offering him any help as he processes the information. He eyes the pink sticky notes in his hands.

Suddenly looking up at me, he raises an eyebrow. "You'll be traveling? Where? Why?"

Men ...

"Did you not read the notes I wrote on those?" I point over to the sticky notes.

"First Greece, then the City of Love, next Rome. Fourth stop is where the

Queen lives ...” He trails off as he reads every note.

When everything clicks together, his mouth drops open in shock. He walks up to where I stand and looks at the map I’m holding.

“These are all my tour stops.” Ripping the map out of my hands, he grips my arms tightly in his hold. “Are you traveling around with me?” My boyfriend looks at me with hope. He eyes me with longing as a smile slowly lifts his face. “You are traveling with me!” he exclaims.

I let out an *oof* when he yanks my body into his. You know those movies where the guy spins the girl around in happiness? That’s us right now. My arms are wound around his neck. He spins us around in a circle as I laugh up at the ceiling.

“My day couldn’t have gotten any better than this.” His plump lips kiss my entire face, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

“So, I take it, you like the idea of having a new travel buddy? Hate to inform you, even if you don’t, you’re stuck with me,” I tease him with a smirk.

He sends me a smirk of his own. “Damn, how do you think I should tell you I’m dreading all the long plane rides and the endless nights of sleepovers and cookie-making parties?”

How is it possible that this guy can make my heart flutter with one sentence?

“Be gentle. I’m pretty sensitive at the moment.”

“Oh yeah, I’d better buy you some chocolate—but dark because that’s your favorite,” his husky voice whispers against my lips.

“The darker, the better.”

My lips brush against his. Every word that leaves my mouth teases his lips, making him crave me. Our lips connect in the most toe-curling kiss I’ve ever experienced. Every stroke his tongue makes against mine isn’t filled with lust. It’s love. He shows me with his mouth how it feels to be loved.

This is a feeling I’ll never get used to. I hope the butterflies in my belly never go away.

As we pull apart, I tell him all the information Mom informed me about. To say he’s happy is an understatement. He’s ecstatic.



I watch behind the scenes as the triplets make an apology video due to the unfortunate shooting that occurred. I keep my gaze on Leonidas. He sits in the middle of Elijah and Amelia. The two of them do most of the talking.

These three people are incredible. I'm so glad they came into my life.

After they finish filming, the crew takes it to edit. Justin, X3's agent, notifies the three that it will air tomorrow morning. The triplets just nod their heads and keep quiet.

I had my first interaction with the triplets' dad while they filmed. The frown he sent my way made me want to shrivel up. He's not happy that I'm joining them on tour, the band was brutally honest with me once he left the room. I couldn't care less what he wants. He's a horrible father. The triplets informed me he wasn't even concerned for them after the shooting. Nothing. No emotion.

Leonidas's body is stiff. He glares ahead of him. Amelia's fingers pick at her jean shorts nervously, and Elijah's face is pale. He looks like he's about to throw up everything that's in his stomach. With help from Elijah, Amelia stands up on one foot. I watch her as she leaves the room with her brother. My frown deepens.

An hour after the triplets film the video, Leonidas and I cuddle in the family room.

"I've been thinking about something," Leonidas says suddenly into the silence.

My head rests against his chest as we lounge on the couch.

"Uh-oh, that's never good," I joke and squeal when he tickles my side.

He shakes his head. "Anyway, I was thinking about what you said—"

I cut in, "I talk a lot. You need to be clearer."

"I was just getting to that!" A beautiful smile lifts his face.

I place my hands up in surrender. "Okay, mister, talk."

"You told me to stop running, to face my fears head-on because they control my life. One fear that constantly runs through my mind is you." He pauses when he sees my frown. "That sounded bad. What I meant to say is, how the world would react if they knew about you. Having a fan base can be a blessing, but a curse at the same time. They'll make you feel worthless."

Thanks for that, Captain Obvious. Where is he going with this exactly?

"I want to make you proud of me. I want to show you I'm worthy of you."

I'm done running. I want the world to see the face of the woman who has my heart. What do you say?"

He just dropped a bomb on my lap. What do I even say to this? Just thinking about all the attention I'll get makes me want to puke all my nerves up. The last thing I want is a bunch of girls coming after me for stealing their man.

I know he wants this. I see the way his eyes light up when he thinks about showing everyone his girlfriend. If this will help him step up to another level from where he is right now, how can I say no? Being in love means you have to make sacrifices. If showing the world that I'm dating the rock star that they all love puts a smile on his face, then I'll do it for him.

Mostly everything is for him, Trinity. You're obsessed with him.

"If you don't want to do it, that's fine," he stutters.

Lifting my face from his chest, I let out a deep breath. "No, this is important to you." I nod seriously. "I'll do it. Let's do it. I said no more running away from fears. This is one that you need to face."

Cupping my cheek in his palm, he looks at me fondly. "You know what this is going to bring on—paparazzi, new followers, hate—"

I interrupt with a laugh, "I know, but I need to follow my own advice."

Putting myself out there as his girlfriend terrifies me, but I can't be a hypocrite.

We're a couple who faces our fears together.

Giving him a smile and being rewarded with one back, I clap my hands. "Let's do this."

I don't believe there's such a thing as a flawless picture to come out as a couple. What is perfect though is us. A picture that describes our relationship in just one glance from an outsider. We stand in front of his mirror with him behind me, holding my chest. I place a hand against his. As he leans his head toward my neck, he bites my skin playfully. I let out a laugh.

"Stop that," I squeal, squeezing the hard muscles on his forearm.

A moment later, he shows me his phone.

"Look how perfect this is," he says.

I eye the photo in front of me. It is amazing.

My heartbeat speeds up when I see my face clearly. My neck is leaning to the side as I laugh. Leonidas's chin is resting against my skin as he smirks.

Sneaky guy ... he took it when I wasn't expecting it.

We give nothing away, but at the same time, we tell the world everything.

That we're a team.

Gripping my hand in his, he smiles. "You'll be okay. We'll be okay."

Bringing my hand up, he kisses the bracelet around my wrist. I do the same with a smile. Following him to his bedroom, I watch as he gets ready to post the picture.

My hands sweat as I swallow tightly.

My mouth drops open in shock when I read the caption. "That's a lyric in your song. Are you allowed to do that when it's not out yet? And won't the team try to take down the photo?"

"This is one step closer to getting what we want—freedom. They've tried to access my account, but they weren't successful."

My eyes water as I grip his knee, watching his phone.

"To me, this quote describes our relationship. It's perfect, crazy, and unpredictable."

He pulls me into his body as he presses the Post button. Our lips smash together as I realize my life will completely change with just one push of a button. The world can now put a face to The Girl in Black.

As his tongue strokes mine and our hands roam one another like we've been doing this our entire lives, I repeat his caption over and over in my head.

If she's my addiction, call me an addict.

FIFTY-NINE

LEO

Step one of healing: go to a therapist. Now, that's a hard one because of the obvious problem—I'm traveling the world. How the hell am I going to drag a therapist around with me? Well, I do exactly that. I hire this guy who's supposed to be the best of the best. His name is Andrew.

He agreed right away when he saw the big, fat check he'll be receiving every month for a year.

Having a therapist is something I never wanted to have. If talking to this man, who's way too happy for his own good, will help me get there faster, then I might as well talk to him for an hour.

I know Trinity is proud of me. I see the way her eyes sparkle after I finish a session. She always rewards me with a blissful kiss and a massage.

She talks to Andrew too. Everything that we say to him is private unless the two of us bring up the topics we share with him. The stubborn part of me doesn't want to admit this, but having someone to rant to takes weight off my shoulders. It makes me feel lighter and happier. This stuff works, and it's only been a week.

I tell Elijah and Amelia to talk to him. I see the way they're different after the shooting. Amelia agrees and talks to him regularly, but Elijah is a different story. He waves me away with a tight smile. I won't push the guy, but I know it would be good for him, especially since he's extremely jumpy.

Amelia's foot is healing slowly. She's now walking on a boot. She threw those crutches as far as she could when she heard the news.

As for me, I'm doing good. I assumed I would be shaking in my boots when I just thought about going onstage again to perform. I won't let fears and evilness consume me. When I'm onstage, I hear the roar of the crowd as I

strum my guitar; I feel electricity run through my veins. I'm living, and that's proof.

Now, it's even better with my girl watching me.

Our team is making sure that we have top-notch security. No one with any weapons will get in. My mind travels to Trinity and her dad. That day left a gap in my heart. The gap just got bigger when I realized I was falling in love with the daughter of the man who had died that day.

I wanted to run, run so fast that people would think I was the Flash. But no matter how hard I tried to move, I stayed rooted in my spot. Trinity pulled me in the first encounter we had. The way she flirted with me without even knowing it. The secret looks she would send my way.

I loved every single moment I spent with her. There was no way I could have let her go after that. I held on to the girl I fell deeply in love with, with both hands because no one could make me feel the way she made me feel.

The more time I spent with her, the more my love grew for her. She started filling that emptiness in me. Every night, I would be wide awake, wondering what I was doing. Why the hell I hadn't told her about her dad. The genuine answer was, I was afraid to lose her.

So, when she came to me that day, saying I didn't kill her father, I couldn't believe what I was seeing or hearing. I stood there with my mouth open, like a damn fish, because after everything I'd kept from her, she still wanted me. She found it in her own heart, which had been through so much damage, to forgive the one guy who'd kept hurting her.

Every day, she amazes me. The way her presence feels like the sun when it finally peeks out of the clouds on a rainy day. Her laugh is the only melody I crave to hear, and seeing how close she is to my siblings makes my heart warm.

I know ... who would have thought? Not me, of course.

So, from the days when I thought I was better off dead to all we've been through, life really does get better with time. This proves how much I would have missed. I would have never met my rock star. All the *good morning* and *good night* kisses would have been given to another guy. I wouldn't have memorized the way her arms felt around my body. Most importantly, I would have let my thunderstorms win. I wouldn't have felt the happiness I feel in this moment.

I almost ended my life for a temporary problem. Nobody deserves that pain. So, that's why I've donated a shit-ton of money—with no one knowing

—to suicide awareness. I want people like me to get the help they need.

Pain should end no life. Everyone has their story to live out. I hate to think that people's stories would end early because of sadness and loss of direction.

"I'm almost out of space," Trinity mumbles down at her plate, breaking my thoughts.

If someone saw me right now, doing what I'm doing, I would get laughed at. When I'm with Trinity, nothing matters. As long as she's happy, that's all I care about. If doing this makes her happy, then so be it.

Speaking of Trinity, the picture I posted on Instagram gained a lot of attention. When I say a lot, I mean, millions of people were invested. Radio stations, news stations, gossip magazines, paparazzi, and fan pages. If it had anything to do with the media, you name it, they were talking about her.

She took the attention well. I told her to delete social media for a while until all the frenzy calmed down. She followed my suggestions after all her classmates started texting and calling her.

Harper has been really supportive throughout this. The more she and Trinity talk on the phone around me, the more I like her.

Yet knowing people were trying to use her to get to me pissed me off.

As for the hate, it came. Comments about Trinity's body and how she was a gold digger popped up frequently. My blood boiled as I read every comment. It looks like the comments affected me more than it did her. She just brushed off the comments with a smile on her face.

My girl, so strong. I couldn't be prouder of her.

"I'm all filled up," I reply to her. My fingers close the marker in my hand as I eye the plate in my grip.

Trinity and I came out here an hour ago. Andrew told us to write all our frustrations, terrible memories, basically anything that has kept us away from happiness over the past couple of years on a plate. After we write everything down, we're supposed to smash the plates on the ground. That's our way of letting everything go after all this time. Smashing something sounds pretty therapeutic.

Closing her own pen, she turns her now-black plate full of letters around in her hand. She eyes it carefully.

Standing up together, I watch our surroundings. This is our last day in Greece. The weather could have been nicer. The gray clouds in the sky show the storm that is brewing. A little rain doesn't stop us from what we're about

to do.

“Ready?” she asks me.

After quickly casting a peek at my plate, she looks away politely. I’m grateful for the privacy she gives me. It only makes me respect her even more than I already do.

Swallowing tightly, I glance down at the plate full of everything that’s kept me back. My father, the team, Trinity’s dad’s death, overdosing ... secrets. It’s all written in black. I’m ready to smash all these worries away. I’m ready to fully move on and only focus on my future and not the past.

“Three,” Trinity says slowly.

“Two,” I grit out.

“One,” we say together.

I watch as our plates smash against the pavement. Pieces of our plates go everywhere. The powerful swing my arm made feels exhilarating.

“Opa,” Trinity jokes as she glances down at the broken pieces.

“Look at you. Your inner Greek is coming out,” I tease her.

She brushes me off. “You’ve rubbed off on me.”

Damn right I have.

Kicking the broken pieces on the ground with the toe of my shoe, I let out a relieved sigh.

“Only moving forward from this point on,” Trinity says to me while wrapping her arms around my neck.

Gripping her hips in my hands, I pull her until she’s flush against me. “I didn’t know you had that much power in you.” My lips brush against hers as I play with her.

Her swing was pretty powerful.

Note to self: don’t get on her bad side again.

Her fingers fiddle with the hairs at the nape of my neck. “Never underestimate a girl’s anger.”

She bites her lip, which makes me wild. That’s how fucking whipped I am for her. Just one bite from her teeth on her plump pink lips has me itching to have her.

“Sing me the song?” she mumbles as she focuses her gaze on my lips.

My mind comes up blank.

When I raise an eyebrow, she continues, “The song you sang me in the treehouse. The one you wrote about me.”

Placing my lips against her ear, I whisper huskily the words I wrote just

for her.

I watch with love as she throws her head back and laughs up at the sky. She grips my neck tightly as I nibble at her neck.

Turning my head up to the gray sky, I feel light raindrops fall. “Let’s go inside.” Pulling away from her body, I wind my fingers through hers and tug. My steps halt when I don’t feel her following me.

“What are you doing?” I laugh out loud when I find her still smiling up at the sky.

This is a stunning sight. Watching the love of my life, the one girl who has ever made me giggle, spreading her arms open wide, letting the now-heavy rainfall soak her body.

The water makes her face shine.

Squeezing her eyes shut tightly, she laughs. “I’m trying to be one of those people who likes the rain,” she yells out to me.

My hair falls against my forehead, blocking my vision, and I push it back. My T-shirt is tight against my body. It’s uncomfortable, but I won’t miss this sight for anything.

Gripping her hand in one of mine, I twirl her body around. The laughter of joy that escapes her is the best melody I could ever hear. Pulling her flush against my body, her back against my chest, I sway us slightly in the rain.

A smile lifts my face as I dance with the only girl who would ever make me stay outside during a storm. Our hair sticks to our foreheads along with our clothes on our bodies. We look like drowned cats. But we don’t care.

Her hair fans out beautifully when I twirl her around.

“You’re a dream,” she says hoarsely when her forehead touches mine.

“You’re my prayer,” I whisper back just as quietly.

I don’t know how long we stand out here, but we continue to dance in the rain.

Before I met Trinity, I thought true love didn’t exist. I would laugh at the idea. Now, I crave her love. I’m obsessed with the way she makes me love myself again. I wouldn’t want this with anyone else. Trinity brings out the best in me.

She’s filled that hole in my chest that I always thought would be empty and dark. She’s shown me that life is worth living.

She’s the color in my pictures, the sugar in my candy, the words in my books, the sunshine on a sunny day, the star in my midnight sky ...

The blood running through my veins.

My rock star.

SIXTY

TRINITY

The City of Love.

I've heard tons about this place—the people, the accents, the food, the architecture. I never thought I could visit Paris. I always dreamed of seeing the Eiffel Tower from a hotel window.

As I stand in front of the window, the cool breeze hitting my face, I feel like I'm living in a dream. I'm staring directly at the Eiffel Tower. Not to mention, it's not far; it's right in my face. This top-floor hotel room must have cost a fortune. The red geraniums resting in a window box below me is exactly how I imagined Paris to be.

Grand, peaceful, and expensive-looking.

I've been here for two hours, and I already love it. I can imagine myself here in the future, walking down the sidewalks with an iced coffee in my hand. Hearing French people talk gives me butterflies. Their fashion sense is immaculate, like expected. I haven't seen one person wearing sweatpants. They all wear well-known designer brands.

Maybe I should buy nicer clothes while we visit Paris. Otherwise, I'll definitely stick out like a sore thumb.

Tonight, X3 has a concert in Paris. That's why we're here in the first place.

At first, I was worried about them. I hate the thought of them being a target up on that stage. Leonidas constantly told me I had nothing to worry about, that they had top-notch security. That made the butterflies in my stomach go away, but not fully.

See, Leonidas has no problem going onstage, but I see the way Elijah reacts. His face turns white; his fingers fiddle with one another. He frankly

looks sick to his stomach at just the thought.

I want to give him a hug, but I don't think that would help him. The last thing I want to do is embarrass him.

Plus, it might just be a fear he needs to fight at his pace.

"Daydreaming about your long-lost love again?" Leonidas's husky voice speaks lowly from behind me. His chest leans against my back, and his arms cage me.

Leonidas ... we're right in front of a window. That thought repeats constantly in my head as his lips brush against my neck.

Do I really care at this exact moment? Yes and no.

Yes, because I really like privacy.

No, because I love the way his lips feel.

"I just saw him," I whisper, arching my neck as he smirks against my skin.

Who would have known a single smirk would be so hot? Me.

"That's good. What was he doing?" he mumbles, and his hot breath gives me goose bumps.

"He was riding his bike. He nearly fell off when he saw me up here." I play along breathlessly.

"Well, what did you tell him?"

His fingers arch my neck further to him by turning my chin up.

"I yelled that I was practically married. You should have seen the look on his face. I was afraid he was going to cry."

My chest heaves as I nearly have a heart attack when I feel his tongue travel down the length of my neck. Stopping at my collarbone, he gives it a slight bite.

"Jerk." I jump at the sudden pain.

He chuckles as he backs away from me.

"Come here. Let me bite your collarbone," I joke and advance toward him.

Trinity, what are you doing? Stop, girl. You'll get drop-kicked all the way across the city.

Leonidas's muscles are really a sight to see. They strain against his muscle shirt. His hair is a wavy mess, just the way I like it. He lets out a roar of laughter when he stops me by placing a hand on my forehead. My feet slide on the ground as I push my hardest into his hand.

"Douche," I grit out as I swerve around his hand.

He almost topples to the ground at the sudden movement.

Yes, Trinity, you just did that.

When I jump on his back, he lets out an *oof*.

Winding my arms around his neck in a choke hold, I yell jokingly, “Say it.”

He shakes his head.

I won’t let go until I hear the words leave his mouth.

“Say it.”

The heels of my feet dig into his stomach. He tries to bite my arms, but I place them under his chin.

“I will not,” he breathes out.

My body clings to him tightly. My arms don’t truly hurt him—my spaghetti arms aren’t capable of that. He just likes to give me more credit than I deserve.

“I’ll haunt you in your sleep.” I have to hold back the laugh that threatens to break through my mouth. The weird sound I make at the back of my throat definitely gives me away.

He drops to his knees dramatically. “Mercy. You hear that? Jesus! I call mercy.” His voice booms.

If singing doesn’t work out long-term, acting is a great replacement.

I untangle my arms from his neck, pecking his cheek and resting my chin on his shoulder. “That’s all you needed to say,” I tease him.

Getting up from the floor, he glances down at me. “A man doesn’t give up easily.” Leonidas flashes me a shit-eating grin.

“Oh, you call yourself a man?” I tsk while he raises an eyebrow. “The way you cuddle me at night isn’t manly.”

He staggers back with a hand on his chest.

My eyes travel downward. Damn, I’m a sucker for gray sweatpants.

Keep it together, Trinity. You must win this battle.

“The way you burp is not girlie,” he snarks back.

“At least I don’t take half an hour in the bathroom like you.” My finger points in his chest.

“At least I don’t leave my clothes lying around the room like you do.” He grips my finger and points it in my chest.

“Well—” I’m cut off when his lips slam against mine.

Our kiss is full of passion. His tongue runs along my bottom lip. I allow him access to my mouth. His touch sends electricity up my spine. He kisses

me raw. Cupping my cheek, he leans my head to the side to deepen the kiss.

Time slows when his lips are on mine. Leonidas's lips move against mine as if he needs this contact to live. Forget about being an actor if singing doesn't work out for him. He should be a professional kisser—but only my professional kisser.

The first kisses were slow, but now, they're fast, desperate. My body against his is hot. I'm afraid I'll swoon at this feeling.

My fists clench his T-shirt as I let out a tiny moan when he makes a sound from the back of his throat. I feel Leonidas smile against my lips as we both come up for air.

Holy shit.

Licking my swollen lips, I meet his stare. His eyes darken as he glances at my chest that's moving up and down at a fast rate. Kissing him feels like I just ran an entire marathon.

“Was that your way of making me shut up?” My eyes narrow.

“It worked, didn't it?” He shrugs. “Plus, I had to make out with my girlfriend in Paris. Apparently, it's the City of Love. Who would have known?” He sends me a wink in my direction.

“Now, get ready. We need to leave soon.” he demands.

As he walks toward the door, I follow him in the room. I find the perfect opportunity to throw a pillow at the back of his head.

It bounces and lands on the ground with a thud.

“Oops. It just slipped out of my hand.” I fake gasp when he rolls his eyes at me.

“Get ready now.”

“Yes, Dadd—”

He swerves around and points a finger in my direction. His eyes darken as he interrupts me. “Don't you dare finish that sentence.” Taking a step back, even though I know it takes everything in him to stay, he slams the door behind him.

I muffle my laughs with the palm of my hand.

“Trinity Jones, I swear to God!” he barks from somewhere.



I slowly flip through a magazine as Amelia runs around her dressing room.

“I like that jacket,” Elijah says from beside me.

His finger points to a model. Nodding, I hum.

“That costs more than I could ever afford.” I laugh.

Leonidas turns around from where he sits at a desk. As he opens his mouth to disagree, I place a finger on my lips.

Shutting his mouth, he turns back around.

He knows how much I despise him wasting his money on me. He doesn't like the fact that I always argue with him, but I don't care.

“Where are my sticks?” Amelia blurts out.

She dashes around the room in a frenzy. I watch with shocked eyes as she throws pillows across the room to search behind them.

As if it were Leonidas's lucky day, one smacks into his head. He turns around with a glare. Holding it up by one corner, he throws it back at his sister. Amelia catches it with no problem, giving her brother a sarcastic smile as she continues her search.

“Might want to watch how fast you walk,” Elijah points out, nodding toward her boot.

“There they are.” She bends down and holds them up. Her eyes assess them carefully in the light. Seeing no problems, she plops down beside me.

Now, I'm in a sandwich in between Elijah and Amelia.

“I like that jacket.” She points with a stick to the same one Elijah did.

Gasping, he high-fives her. Their hands almost smack me in the face, which makes me flinch. The two proceed to laugh. Elijah's giant hand grabs my face and squeezes.

“Ow, she's a biter,” Elijah grumbles when I bite his palm.

Wiping his hand on my bare leg, he flicks my ear. The heel of my foot kicks him right in the butt when he gets up from the couch. Wheezing, he gives me the finger.

“I'm going to go take a poop before we go onstage,” he yells over his shoulder. His tall frame disappears from my sight when he exits the room.

“Very blunt.” Amelia laughs down at her lap.

“Amen, sister.”

Laying my head on her shoulder, I glance down at her phone. She swipes through her Instagram page. Her thumb hovers over the screen when she stops on three guys. They look to be another band. Frowning, she clicks on their page.

“Never heard of them before,” she muses and continues scrolling down.

Weird. I saw the way her eyes lingered.

“X3 is to go onstage in five minutes. I repeat, five minutes,” a female voice says over the intercom.

Leonidas drops the pen from his hand. When he rises from his seat, I watch as his shirt pulls up while he’s stretching. His sexy skin display is a moment too short. Amelia snorts beside me when she catches me ogling her brother.

“I think you guys will forever be in the honeymoon phase.”

I laugh when I meet Leonidas’s heated gaze through the mirror he’s standing in front of. He winks at me as he bites his lip.

Turning toward his sister, he demands, “Let’s go.”

With Leonidas’s hand in mine, I walk toward the stage. As usual, a bunch of people are running back and forth, getting ready for the start of the concert. He kisses me on the nose before he goes. Blowing out a breath, Leonidas walks away from me when someone calls his name eagerly.

“Do I look all right?” Amelia says to me suddenly.

Where the heck did she come from?

She looks hot. A short, glittery pink skirt covers her bum, and a matching crop top on her torso. They tied the front pieces of her hair up like mini pigtails. The rest of her blonde hair falls down her back in messy curls. The pink eye shadow contrasts beautifully with the dark black wings she made with eyeliner. This girl is breathtaking—everything that you might imagine when you think of a girl drummer.

“Stunning,” I reply.

Leonidas wears his usual black muscle shirt with ripped black jeans. Elijah surprisingly dresses similar to his brother, but instead of a black shirt, his is burgundy.

“X3, take your places onstage.” A lady motions to the roaring stadium.

Amelia plants a kiss on my cheek and slaps my butt playfully before she leaves my side. “This is for you,” she yells over toward me, pointing her stick in my direction. She smiles.

The stupid idiot that Elijah is pushes his nose up and acts like a pig. Snorting before he follows his sister, he makes a peace sign.

My boyfriend comes up to me, holding my arms in his gigantic hands. He places his lips against my forehead. “Every melody, every breath, every high and low note is for you.” His lips brush against mine in a featherlight touch. “I love you, rock star.”

Kissing my lips one more time with adrenaline clear in his eyes, he runs onstage, leaving me teary-eyed.

Like expected, the triplets do amazing. They jump around onstage, singing and strumming. I feel Leonidas's rich, deep voice in my bones as he sings his entire heart out.

He's a natural up there with the lights beaming down on him, his vibrant red guitar around his shoulder. He's jaw-dropping. Not only that, but you can also feel the happiness radiating off him. His smiles are genuine, and his dimples highlight his cheeks many times as he interacts with his fans.

He's definitely not the same closed-off guy who opened the front door the first day they arrived in town. His aura doesn't scream dark, mysterious, and moody. Now, all I see is the way he loves, the shine in his eyes, and a guy who's as strong as the man he shares the same name with.

Leonidas, the famous soldier of Sparta, led his men into victory.

Leonidas is my soldier. He made me realize that even though the sky is blue, it can also be pink, yellow, orange, and purple.

He's made me love myself again. He showed me that fitting in is weird. When you're different, it doesn't mean you're strange; it means you're unique.

Leonidas has taught me to find comfort in the thoughts of my dad. The aching pain that I used to feel isn't there anymore. It's gone, just like the sadness.

My hands shoot up into the air as I dance to the melodies I used to shy away from. I now live and breathe to hear Leonidas sing up onstage like he owns the place.

Leonidas's voice vibrates through the entire stadium, rocking my bones. I don't care that my dress flares all around me as I watch the rock star I've fallen madly in love with. I've never felt this alive.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

My entire goal throughout writing this book was to create perfectly imperfect characters. Fictional characters you could relate to, displaying that no one's perfect. I didn't want *Identity* to be some sweet love story—because that's not the real world. People struggle, cry, overthink, have anxiety attacks, and mourn. That's what I wanted to capture.

Leonidas and Trinity's messy, beautiful love story talks about topics that are usually kept in the dark. I hope you connected to my characters like I intended you to. Yes, you must have gotten frustrated, wondered why she couldn't let go or why he took the pills.

All the mental illnesses I put in the story were to convey the message I hope you realized throughout reading. No matter how sad you are, you will beat your battle. I hope I gave some people the courage to keep going if they've had enough of their thunderstorms.

You matter.

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THANK YOU

If you enjoyed *Identity*, please consider leaving a review! Support from readers like you means so much to me and helps other readers find my books. I love hearing from my readers so make sure to follow my Instagram page at [alexiamantzouranisauthor](#)

This is not the end of X3's story

Imposter

Amelia and Levi's enemies-to-lovers story

Infinity

Elijah and Lily's friends-to-lovers story